

# Communicating Friendship to Jewish People

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## REASON FOR THIS MESSAGE

We often chaff at the Rabbinical Community's assertion that Jews who come to believe that Yeshua is Messiah are no longer Jews and are therefore no longer part of the Jewish community. How prejudiced we think they are and how ill-informed of the Scriptures. Don't they know that a Jew is any person who is descended from Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob in an unbroken covenant of circumcision?

The fact is, many of us treat the Rabbinical Jewish Community exactly the same way that we complain they are treating us. Because most Rabbinical Jews do not believe that Yeshua is Messiah, we sometimes act toward them as though they are defective Jews, or even no longer Jews at all, and we may justify that thinking by quoting Romans 2:28-29 which says:

*“For he is not a Jew who is one outwardly, nor is circumcision that which is outward in the flesh; but he is a Jew who is one inwardly; and circumcision is that of the heart, in the Spirit, not in the letter; whose praise is not from men but from God.”*

Armed with that Scripture, some of us declare that we who believe in Messiah Yeshua are the real circumcision and are therefore the real Jews. The others are branches that have been broken off of the Romans 11 tree and are lying quite dead on the ground, their only remaining function being to get grafted back onto the tree by accepting Yeshua. If they do, we are willing to receive them as brothers and as part of OUR Jewish community but, until they do, they are strangers to both us and to the true Judaism of Yeshua, and our sole reason for having anything to do with them is to evangelize them to faith.

Now not all of us think that way, but some of us do because we have been brought up in a Christianity that has taught it that way and is still teaching it. And it doesn't matter if we are Jewish or not Jewish; if we have been taught that kind of reasoning in our formative stages of spiritual development, we are likely to be harboring prejudices that even today keep us from hanging out with, befriending, and otherwise having normal relationships with Jewish people.

I am not saying that ministering Yeshua to Jews is unimportant, and I am not saying that Jews are okay without Yeshua; far from it! What I am saying is that the Jewish people remain a special covenant people of God, with a God-given role in world restoration, notwithstanding the current reality that the majority of the Jewish people do not believe in Yeshua.

## THE BIBLICAL CASE FOR FRIENDSHIP

Let's remember that this message is about communicating friendship to the Jewish People for friendship's sake – not about having an agenda of evangelizing them. Of course there is nothing wrong with sharing the Gospel outside of a friendship relationship, but that is not the subject of this talk.

The Bible has many positive things to say about friendship, so let's be reminded that even God called two men His friends:

Exodus 33:11: *"So the LORD spoke to Moses face to face, as a man speaks to his friend."*

James 2:23: *"And the Scripture was fulfilled which says, 'Abraham believed God, and it was accounted to him for righteousness.' And he was called the friend of God."*

Well, that is not hard to understand because both Moses and Abraham were friends to God. But today, most Jewish people are not friends to Yeshua, so why ought we be friends to them? Well, let's consider these other Scriptures:

Job 6:14: *Job: "To him who is afflicted, kindness should be shown by his friend, Even though he forsakes the fear of the Almighty."*

Leviticus 19:18: (which is the basis of Yeshua's teaching): *"You shall not take vengeance, nor bear any grudge against the children of your people, but you shall love your neighbor as yourself: I am the LORD."*

John 15:13: *"Greater love has no one than this, than to lay down one's life for his friends."*

Romans 11:28: (where Paul is speaking to Gentiles when he says of the Jews): *"Concerning the gospel they are enemies for your sake, but concerning the election they are beloved for the sake of the fathers."*

And according to Scripture, we are to love even those whom we consider our enemies:

Matthew 5:43-44: *"You have heard that it was said, 'You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' But I say to you, love your enemies, bless those who curse you, do good to those who hate you, and pray for those who spitefully use you and persecute you,"*

Well, if we do those things for Jewish people without regard for how we are treated in return, we are acting toward them as friends.

Before I leave this particular point, I want to deal with a Scripture that is often misapplied to Jewish people, and is the cause of some of us not being willing to have normal fellowship with them:

2 Corinthians 6:14-15: *"Do not be unequally yoked together with unbelievers. For what fellowship has righteousness with lawlessness? And what communion has light with darkness? And what accord has Messiah with Belial? Or what part has a believer with an unbeliever?"*

To begin with, individual Jewish people are no different than any other people in that they can choose to believe in God or not or to believe in Yeshua or not, and, in either case, to conduct their lives in either godly or ungodly ways. The way that the above Scripture is often misapplied

to Jews is to assume that the term “unbeliever” means unbeliever in Yeshua, and that the expression “light with darkness” is endeavoring to equate belief in Yeshua with “light,” and unbelief in Yeshua with “darkness.” That is not its meaning, and I believe I can prove it from the Scripture itself.

Lets first examine the second comparison – “righteousness with lawlessness.” Could the Scripture possibly be saying that a Jew who believes in Yeshua is counted as righteous, while a *Torah*-observant Jew who does not believe in Yeshua, yet believes in God and seeks to fulfill all of Gods commandments in the best way he knows is lawless (remember, we are comparing righteousness with lawlessness)? How can a person be lawless whose entire approach to God is attempting to fulfill God’s Law?

Now let’s look at the third comparison – “Messiah with Belial.” Who is this “Belial?” He is a demon referenced in the apocryphal Book of Jubilees, where uncircumcised heathen are called “sons of Belial.” He also appears in the Latin Vulgate and the King James version of the Bible as a personal name symbolizing the personification of evil.

So now the meaning of 2 Corinthians 6: 14-15 should be clear. It is not comparing Jews who believe in Yeshua with those who don’t. It is contrasting the light of those who believe in the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob with the darkness of heathens and doers of evil. It is for this reason that I do not refer to any *Torah*-observant Jew as an “unbeliever.” I may say that he is an unbeliever in Yeshua, but I never just call him an unbeliever.

## **UNDERSTANDING OUR OWN IDENTITIES**

Before we attempt to befriend a Jewish person or anyone else, we ought to understand and be at peace with our own identities.

Some of us are Jews, carriers of the Abrahamic Covenant, and therefore brethren with all other Jews on account of that covenant. Although we are at odds with many of our Jewish brothers regarding the identity of Yeshua, we are, nevertheless, family, and our family attitude toward one another ought to come through. Some of us are Gentiles and, although we have joined our lives with Jews, worship as Jews, and are members of a Messianic Jewish community, we nevertheless are not carriers of the Abrahamic Covenant. Yet, as grafted-in believers in Yeshua we are beneficiaries and participants in the Covenant, and we have become equal members in what Ephesians 2:12 refers to as the Commonwealth of Israel. So we may not be quite family with Jews who do not believe in Yeshua, but we are certainly fellow citizens, and that ought to come through.

The reason it is important to take stock of and be at peace with our respective identities is that our identities as Messianics are likely to surface as an issue in our attempt to be friends with Jews. If we ourselves are Jews, we will almost certainly be asked why we have abandoned Rabbinical Judaism and the beliefs of our fathers. And if we are Gentiles, how can we give assurance that we won’t turn against and persecute Jews whom we call our friends today, as Gentiles (even so-called Christians) have so often done in the history of the Jewish people?

## UNDERSTANDING JEWISH PEOPLE

There is much to understand about Jewish people and our time is much too short to address the subject completely. I will, however, try to hit some important points that can be expanded upon in our personal studies.

A first important thing to understand is that there is no universal characteristic of a Jewish person. Jews come in all colors, all languages, all cultures, all citizenships, and all beliefs. Not far from the truth is the Chinese Jew who greets the Ashkenaz Rabbi from New York by saying: “Funny, you don’t look Jewish!” Being a Jew is defined by nothing more than our physical lineage and circumcision (Genesis 17:4, 6-7, 19-21; 26:1-4; 28:10-14; 35:9-12; 48:3-4; 50:24-25); although God desires much more from the Jewish people than that, after all, it was He who determined who was to be considered a Jew.

It is also important to distinguish between who is a Jew and what is “Jewish.” Although God never defined “Jewish,” it is what many Jews base their identity on, and so it cannot be disregarded by any of us who want to understand and befriend Jews. A Jew does not recognize another Jew by his genotype or by demanding to see evidence of his circumcision. He recognizes him by his history and his culture. Where did he come from? Does he claim to be a Jew? Did his parents claim to be Jews? Does he attend a synagogue? Does he pray the siddur? Has he a connection to Israel or to the Holocaust? Does he speak or understand Yiddish? Hebrew? Ladino? Is He Torah-observant? Does he keep the Feasts? Keep the Sabbath? Keep kosher? Does he resonate with Jewish humor? Recognize Jewish foods? Is he Ashkenaz or Sephardic? Does he affiliate with one of the branches of Judaism? Is he a *Chassid*? A *Charedi*?

Despite our considerable diversity and at the risk of generalizing, I admit that we Jews are known for having a few characteristics in common. We argue a lot – particularly with other Jews – and some of us mistrust Goyim. We hate being looked down on by Christians, and we also hate being “missionized” to Yeshua. We value family, education, intellect, and professional achievement. We fear assimilation, and we value being Jewish even if we don’t understand what that means biblically.

Curiously, not all Jews are secure in their sense of Jewish identity; I suspect that this is partly a legacy of the holocaust and our history of the Goyim telling us that we are inferior, heretical, evil, and “Christ-killers.” But it also comes from strife within our communities, where groups of Jews routinely discriminate against and reject other Jews – even to the extent of denying legitimate claims of being Jewish, and rights to emigrate to Israel. In Israel, there is enmity toward Orthodox Jews for certain reasons, toward Messianic Jews for other reasons, toward Chassidim for still other reasons, and toward Ethiopian Jews for every reason. Then, of course there is payback by the Orthodox who have significant political control over *aliyah*, and do not recognize marriages or conversions other than their own.

What this means in a practical sense is that the person who wants to have Jewish friends should look for and become familiar with his friends’ particular sensitivities, and avoid stumbling into areas of unhealed hurts and insecurities.

## **SELF-IMPOSED IMPEDIMENTS TO FRIENDSHIP**

Gentiles in our Messianic congregations sometimes think that it is easier for the Jews in their congregations to befriend other Jews than it is for them. That is very often not the case because a Gentile is expected to believe in Jesus, while a Jew who believes in Jesus is perceived as a threat and a traitor to Judaism. Whether we are Jews or Gentiles, however, there are certain presuppositions and fears that we may harbor that could cause us to draw back from pursuing friendships within the Jewish Community. I will mention some of the more common ones.

Fear of rejection is a “biggee” because we have heard that the Jewish Community is hostile both to Yeshua and to those of us who believe in Him. I am not going to tell you that your overture of friendship to a Jewish person will not be initially rebuffed, but I do assure you that if you act in faith, you will not be scarred by it, and if you persist with the same person or other persons, you will eventually find yourself with a circle of Jewish friends whom you will enjoy, and who will enjoy you.

A related presupposition is that the Jewish Community is closed to outsiders and, if you are either a Messianic Jew or a non Jew, there is no way you will be able gain access. That is hogwash. There are always going to be some people, Jews included, whose main purpose in life seems to be to exclude others. You’ll run into them, but there are many more whose nature it is to welcome newcomers of every stripe.

Let me share an anecdote of what I observed and what was told to me by an African-American member of Ahavat Yeshua. One day we met at an Orthodox-owned Jewish Bookstore in Wheaton Maryland where I am known as a Messianic Jew and am, nevertheless, treated quite well. What I noticed was that the store’s elderly Jewish owner appeared to also know my friend. When we left the store she told me that several years earlier, she had introduced herself to the store’s owner as a believer in Jesus. Instead of being put off, the store’s owner asked her if she would like to experience an Orthodox Jewish service and, when she said “yes,” he invited her to visit his synagogue on a particular Shabbat as his guest. When she arrived at the synagogue, she was greeted courteously in a way that she knew she was expected. Later, she was introduced to the rabbi as “a devout woman,” and the rabbi took time to explain many things about the service in a most gracious way. On another occasion, my friend visited the bookstore just at the time when the owner was returning from the *brit milah* of his grandson; when he saw my friend he told her: “Had I known how to contact you, I would have invited you to the *brit*.” And he meant it! I think these two examples are enough to make my point.

Another presupposition that may hinder some of us in seeking Jewish friends – and this particularly applies to Gentiles – is that Gentiles think Jews know so much more about the Bible than they do, that they will discredit themselves in any conversation that turns toward religious things. I think I already used the term “Hogwash,” so this one is “Double Hogwash!” Sure, some in the Jewish Community are scholars, but relatively few. My personal experience is that most Messianic Jews and Gentiles with several years in the Faith have a much greater command of the Bible than the average synagogued Jew and almost certainly more than any secular Jew. Still, no one knows everything; that’s why we have each other, from whom we can learn and receive advice if we find ourselves over our heads.

Another thing that can interfere with forming normal friendships is giving into a self-imposed urgency to preach the Gospel message to persons whom the Holy Spirit has not prepared. Such urgency, if not Spirit-induced, will cause us to be conscious of having mixed motives in the friendship, and our resulting behavior will be noticeably unnatural. The fix for this is to concentrate on being a friend without strings attached, and trust God to handle the rest.

### **HOW TO MEET JEWISH PEOPLE**

There are two basic things to do if we want to meet Jewish people. The first is to pray for God to arrange a meeting. The second is to be where Jewish people are.

Many of us can meet Jewish people naturally through casual encounters at work, at school, at supermarket checkouts, and just about anywhere. If we have asked God to bring Jewish people across our paths, then we need to be expectant and alert for when it happens, and not lose the moment. Also, we ought to have a plan thought out for who, how, and under what circumstances we will encourage a second meeting if God provides us with a first one.

Places where Jewish people hang out are where we should be hanging out, but how many of us do? We should all be checking at least one local Jewish newspaper regularly in order to find Jewish-sponsored activities of our liking that we can attend. I stress “of our liking” because we want to meet Jewish people who have common likes and interests. The local Jewish Community Center is a great place to meet Jewish people and, by the way, JCC memberships are not limited to Jews. Are we motivated to support Israel? There are many organizations dedicated to supporting Israel, and guess what? Most of their members are Jews. If we live in a neighborhood where there are Jewish people, joining the neighborhood watch or other service organization will undoubtedly bring us into contact with potential Jewish friends. And don’t forget the local synagogue. I heard there are occasionally some Jewish people there too. The point I am trying to make is that it is not hard to meet Jewish people if we are willing to get off of our couch and go to where Jewish people are.

### **WHAT WE HAVE TO OFFER IS FRIENDSHIP**

Jewish people are no different than other people in their having needs that friends can sometimes help satisfy. Knowing about Yeshua and the good news is, of course, one of those needs, and we have to be alert for the when the Holy Spirit tells us that the moment is right. But I have noticed another need that many Jewish people have: To be told that being Jewish is important, and why.

Hearing me say that may surprise you because the Scriptures clearly explain the importance of being Jewish. The problem is that most Jewish people are not educated at all in the Scriptures, and therefore their concept of Jewish identity is a combination of culture, nostalgia, and regret. Culture, because most of us have arrived at adulthood with memories and experiences that we have been told are culturally Jewish. Nostalgia, because many of those memories and experiences are sweet to us in that they remind us of our youth and of loved ones who may now be departed. Regret, because some of the memories are also painful, as some of us have lost family members to persecutions, have experienced personal rejections, and have been denied professional, economic, and social opportunities. In general, we have always been reminded that we are different from other people, and not in a complementary way. As a result, many of us are suspicious of the non-Jewish world, and expectant of the time when our neighbors will once

again turn against us. Many support Israel, not because it is the fulfillment of God's promise to us, but because it is a place of refuge to where we can run when the pogroms start up again. And yes, we are known for being philanthropic and empathetic, but much of our money and donated time is channeled back into the Jewish community because: "If we don't care for our own, who will?"

Jewish people need to be made aware that the real value of being a Jew is being a servant of God and a preserver of *Torah*, not only for ourselves, but for the nations of the world. We need to be reminded that circumcision is more than just a custom – that it is a mark of the Covenant God made with Abraham, in order for his family, through Isaac and Jacob, to become a priestly nation, destined to bring the world its Messiah, and also destined to invite His return. We need to be urged to not turn inward but to rather turn outward, for to us is given the privilege and responsibility of leading the nations and spreading the Word of God, including the *B'rit Chadasha*, and the Good News of Yeshua to the rest of the world. We need to realize the biblical truth that to die to self for God is not defeat but great gain, and we especially need to embrace the *mitzvah* that we must forgive and learn to love those who have harmed us.

Another area in which Ohev members are uniquely equipped to contribute is providing information and advice on how to maintain a Jewish family in a mixed marriage. There are many Jews in the greater Jewish community who are married to Christians of all kinds – nominal Christians, biblical Christians, denominational Christians, cultic Christians. Mixed marriages ought to be our specialty because, not only do we have experience with mixed marriages that have successfully maintained Jewish identity, but we understand covenant and biblical history better than most, and stand theologically in a place that reconciles Judaism with most of the beliefs of Christianity. Finally, and not to be undervalued, we have a community that is ready and willing to receive mixed marriage families, and to disciple them toward fulfilling their covenantal responsibilities through their children *dor l'dor*.

If a Jewish friend who doesn't know Yeshua asks about Him, any one of us is in a unique place to answer his or her questions in a contextually Jewish way. My recommendation is that we do not hide our Messianic belief or affiliation, but that it not be the first thing out of our mouths either. Friendships most often develop on other bases, but because we know of the prevalent antipathy to Messianic Judaism within the Jewish community, it is best that our friends do not discover it from others.

Finally, and probably most important, what we have to offer a Jewish friend is friendship itself. Jews are no different than other people. Some are lonely, some are needy, and some have interests they are burning to share with others. Being a friend is both give and take. The best way to be a friend to a Jewish person is to forget about being Jewish or Gentile, and seek to relate as simply one person to another.

### **DO'S AND DON'TS OF JEWISH FRIENDSHIP**

The most important part of developing Jewish friendships is to be genuine. We ought not talk down to, nor unduly raise up any friend merely because he or she is Jewish. As with most nationalities, events of history and human conflicts have produced fears and sensitivities among Jewish people of which we need to be aware. From antiquity, but especially since the middle

ages, Jews have been called “Christ Killers,” been accused of causing the bubonic plague, were reputed to have ritually killed Christian children for their blood, been said to have seized control of the world’s economies, and on and on. In Spain and Portugal many were killed for their Jewish beliefs, some exiled, and others forcibly converted to Catholicism. Even Nazi Germany cloaked itself with the trappings of Christianity through their use of iron crosses, twisted crosses, and with the complicity of several mainline Christian churches.

What definitely does not help a Jewish friendship is employing the common evangelistic expression “convert” to become a “Christian.” By common definition, the word “Christian” merely means “believer in Yeshua the Messiah,” and the word “convert,” in the Bible, means to change our nature and embrace God. To most Jews, however, the term “convert” means to stop being a Jew and become a “Christian,” and the word “Christian” means “not a Jew,” and possibly the kind of “not a Jew” who killed and tortured our people. Things like these are so deeply ingrained, that in relating to Jewish friends (even Messianic Jewish friends), terminology becomes very important. On the American Jewish scene, “Christ,” “cross,” “baptize,” “church,” and “convert” are not favorable terms because we associate them with being “not Jewish,” and with those who have persecuted us. That is why most Messianic Jewish congregations ask their members to use equivalent terms such as “Messiah,” “execution stake,” “immerse,” “congregation,” and “receive Yeshua.” That is also why we do not display the cross or wear it as jewelry. Please take this seriously. It is egregious to the Jewish ear – even to my Jewish ear – to hear a member of any Messianic Jewish congregation say he is “going to church” when he means his congregation or synagogue.

There are several other “Don’ts” I can mention, but let me give you just one more. Don’t refer to a Jew who does not believe in Yeshua but believes in God as “unsaved” or an “unbeliever.” I mentioned the term “unbeliever” earlier, but worth saying again. If a Jewish person believes in God he is not an “unbeliever” – he or she is a “believer” in God, but possibly not in Yeshua. It is insulting and wrong to call a person who believes in the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob an “unbeliever” without qualifying what we mean. As for calling such a person “unsaved,” that, in my opinion, is a judgment none of us is entitled to make, for only God can read hearts and minds. When we label a person “unsaved,” we are dealing them the ultimate judgment by inferring that they are not worthy in God’s eyes; this expression, if it gets back to your Jewish friend, will result in him being your former Jewish friend.

Now for some “Do’s.” As a Messianic Jew or Gentile, DO keeping a “Jewish” home. Keep some level of *kashrut* even if it is limited just to abstaining from pork and shellfish. Maintain a small Jewish library for your reading and reference; even one shelf will do. Display Jewish artifacts, and DON’T display crosses and pictures of Jesus.

DO have Bible knowledge, and at least a conversational knowledge of Rabbinical Judaism. Know the basics of Jewish history and its intersection with Church history, and be conversant with the most obvious and convincing of the Messianic prophecies (e.g. Isaiah 53 and Psalms 22).

DO know your way around the *siddur* – particularly those prayers commonly used on the Sabbath. And use it!



DO develop a vocabulary of Jewish terms – terms like *Tanakh*, *mashiach*, *Torah*, *mishpocha*, etc. This will help your understanding in conversations and in communication.

DO be prepared to explain why you believe in Yeshua, and to give an account of your life both before and after you came to faith in Him.

DO be prepared to answer typical Jewish questions about Yeshua, such as “How can I believe in Him and still call myself a Jew?” Also be prepared to answer common objections such as “If he is *Mashiach*, why do we still have wars?”

DO show hospitality by inviting your friend to your home, and DO accept invitations to his or hers. Plan to share meals together, and know how to conduct an *Erev Shabbat* table service.

DO look for non-religious activities to enjoy together; normal friendships include sharing hobbies, entertaining events, family celebrations, and so forth.

DO invite your Jewish friend to your *chavurah* or your congregation’s Shabbat service once your identity a Messianic Jew or Gentile is known. If your friend desires to attend, describe the meeting to him in advance so he will be prepared him for what he will experience.

FINALLY, DO pray for your friend, and act toward him with confidence that he or she will one day come to faith in Yeshua. In this regard, trust God, and stand on Romans 11:26-27 which states:

*“And so all Israel will be saved, ...”*