

# First Fruits: The Head and Not the Tail

by Michael Rudolph

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Sundown marked the end of the Sabbath that fell within the Feast of Unleavened Bread. This makes today the biblical feast of *Bikkurim* or Firstfruits, for we read in Leviticus 23:9-12:

*“And the Lord spoke to Moses, saying, “Speak to the children of Israel, and say to them: ‘When you come into the land which I give to you, and reap its harvest, then you shall bring a sheaf of its firstfruits of your harvest to the priest. He shall wave the sheaf before the Lord, to be accepted on your behalf; on the day after the Sabbath the priest shall wave it. And you shall offer on that day, when you wave the sheaf, a male lamb of the first year, without blemish, as a burnt offering to the Lord.’”*

To be usable, fruit must be harvested, and firstfruits are those fruit that ripen first and are harvested before any other. But fruit referred to in Scripture is not always agricultural produce, for we read in 1 Corinthians 15:20-23 about how Yeshua was the firstfruit of the resurrection:

*“But now Messiah is risen from the dead, and has become the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep. For since by man came death, by man also came the resurrection of the dead. For as in Adam all die, even so in Messiah all shall be made alive. But each one in his own order: Messiah the firstfruits, afterward those who are Messiah’s at His coming.”*

So, although *Bikkurim* (which is today) was given by the Mosaic Law as a celebration of the agricultural harvest, we see how God timed Yeshua’s death and resurrection so that He would rise from his tomb on this very day – the firstfruit of many more resurrections to come:

Mark 16:2-6: *“Very early in the morning, on the first day of the week, they came to the tomb when the sun had risen. And they said among themselves, “Who will roll away the stone from the door of the tomb for us?” But when they looked up, they saw that the stone had been rolled away -- for it was very large. And entering the tomb, they saw a young man clothed in a long white robe sitting on the right side; and they were alarmed. But he said to them, “Do not be alarmed. You seek Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified. He is risen! He is not here. See the place where they laid Him.”*

And in Acts 26:22-23, Paul explained Yeshua being the firstfruit of the resurrection this way:

*“Therefore, having obtained help from God, to this day I stand, witnessing both to small and great, saying no other things than those which the prophets and Moses said would come -- that the Messiah would suffer, that He would be the first to rise from the dead, and would proclaim light to the Jewish people and to the Gentiles.”*

There are other fruit and firstfruit mentioned in Scripture as well. For example, Galatians 5 speaks of “Fruit of the Spirit” which are godly characteristics that the Holy Spirit produces in us. And in Genesis 1:28 we read that God commanded man to “be fruitful and multiply” – “fill the

earth and subdue it.” So Cain may be thought of as the firstfruit of the union of Adam and Eve, and from him we learn that not all fruit – even firstfruit – is necessarily good fruit.

Now I want to use this occasion of *Bikkurim* to discuss another firstfruit. When God commanded the Israelites to keep *Bikkurim*, He also told them:

*“Now therefore, if you will indeed obey My voice and keep My covenant, then you shall be a special treasure to Me above all people; for all the earth is Mine. And you shall be to Me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.” These are the words which you shall speak to the children of Israel.*” (Exodus 19:5-6)

God also told the Israelites in Deuteronomy 28:9:

*“The LORD will establish you as a holy people to Himself, just as He has sworn to you, if you keep the commandments of the LORD your God and walk in His ways.*

And in Deuteronomy 28:13 He said:

*“And the LORD will make you the head and not the tail; you shall be above only, and not be beneath, if you heed the commandments of the LORD your God, which I command you today, and are careful to observe them.”*

The fulfillment of God’s promise to Abraham that he would be the father of many nations began with Israel – the firstfruit of nations whose destiny it was, and continues to be, a kingdom of priests and a servant leader of all the other nations – “the head and not the tail.” Now we know that the firstfruit nation that is Israel has substantially rejected the firstfruit of the resurrection who is Yeshua, and so the majority of the Jewish people cannot yet take the place of their destiny, which is to be the head of nations. Yet Romans 11:5 makes it clear that:

*“Even so then, at this present time there is a remnant according to the election of grace.”*

And that remnant is, of course **us** – the Jewish followers of Yeshua. And since we are the first among our Jewish brethren to embrace Yeshua, we are the firstfruit of the firstfruit, and that means that we Messianic Jews, rather than the non-believing Jewish community, are positionally the head and not the tail of the Jewish people. Although they and we are joined covenantally as fellow Jews through circumcision, Romans 11:25-26 teaches that it is their destiny to join us – not ours to join them. Let us not be smug though, for while the greater Jewish community may currently be disabled from being the head due to its rejection of Yeshua, we who believe in Yeshua can also be disqualified if we do not walk with God in all the other ways He requires of us.

Now being the head and not the tail carries with it not only a responsibility of leadership, but also of humility to remain connected to, and conduct ourselves as part of the Jewish people broadly. Furthermore, being the head and not the tail does not mean that we invent a new Judaism or that we do not receive the culture and wisdom of the ages that God has planted in the various Jewish communities. What it does mean is that we must not be mere copiers of

conventional Judaism, because we have much to contribute to the rest of the Jew world that is both good and profitable.

Our main contribution is, of course, being custodians of the truth of Yeshua and the New Covenant, but we can impact Judaism in other ways as well, and already have. We were first among Jewish groups to employ modern instruments and celebratory music and dance as part of our services; several contemporary synagogues have learned from us and have begun to do similarly. Messianic Jews were wearing *tzitzit* with blue threads long before Orthodox Judaism re-discovered the dye-producing snail and re-established the practice. We have been leaders in theological thought, in composing praise and worship music, in helping the Christian Church learn about its Jewish roots, and in offering a viable congregational option for families of mixed marriages. We have also been leaders in restoring the public's recognition of Yeshua being a Jew, in promoting the New Testament as a Jewish book, and in receiving Gentiles into our congregations as equal participants.

Messianic Judaism is a firstfruit movement and, as such, has challenged each of our identities at one time or another. Those of us who are Jews continue to be challenged by the Jewish community on one side and Christian critics on the other who disagree on most things but have found common ground in their belief that a Jew cannot believe in Jesus and remain Jewish. The Gentiles among us are challenged by this assertion as well, since the implication for them is that they have joined themselves to an illegitimate movement. The result for many of us has been that we have developed insecurities about who we really are and about the validity of our professed identities and of the Messianic Jewish movement itself. So it is no wonder that many of us do not see ourselves as “the head and not the tail.” On the other hand, if we understand and accept that Messianic Judaism is a firstfruit movement and that we are its first fruit, we will be emboldened to embrace our identities and clarify our callings.

Let's think of ourselves as fruit on a tree – let's say a pear tree. And now suppose we ripen and fall to the ground. We look around and see the fruit of other trees laying on the ground nearby – perhaps some apples that have fallen from an apple tree and peaches that have fallen from a peach tree. And, being the firstfruit of our tree, we naturally do not see any pears laying on the ground, so we conclude that we must be either apples or peaches. Logical “yes,” but untrue, and if we expect to taste like either an apple or a peach we will be disappointed and consider ourselves defective fruit.

It is the same for many of us in Messianic Judaism. We are firstfruit and therefore have few role models. Some of us may look our left, see Rabbinical Judaism before anything else, conclude that we must be them and therefore set ourselves to be like them. Others of us look to our right, see the Christian Church more clearly, conclude that we must be Christians, and set about acting accordingly. And when we find ourselves within the same Messianic Jewish congregation being advocates for these two identities we often clash.

But the truth is that neither of these identities are fully ours, for we are firstfruits in God's Messianic plan of redemption, and God expects us to be the head and not the tail. That means “yes,” we adopt certain Jewish ways but not all Jewish ways, and we adopt certain Christian ways but not all Christian ways. More important, as the head and not the tail, God gives us

unique Messianic Jewish ways that are neither Jewish nor Christian, and he expects us to lead in those ways as well.

There is always a tension in developing our congregational culture as to how Jewish we should be. Ohev's vision statement speaks of "providing a congregational home for Jewish believers in Yeshua and for believing Gentiles called to serve Messiah within the Messianic Jewish community." But we consider ourselves (at least I consider us) to be not only a Messianic Jewish congregation but also a Jewish congregation – a kind of Messianic outpost of Israel in the diaspora, and so we want all Jews to feel comfortable here and want to make it their home. We should try to provide that kind of Jewish comfort, but always as the head and not the tail.

Today is *Yom Habikurim* and we are *bikurim* – firstfruits. So, as the head and not the tail, we do not celebrate *Yom Habikurim* in the traditional Jewish way. Our celebration recognizes Yeshua's resurrection and our family connection to our brethren in the Christian churches who today are also remembering Yeshua's resurrection.

I visited our sister congregation, Ahavat Yeshua, a few weeks ago and was amazed to hear a beautiful Christian hymn woven into what was otherwise a normal Shabbat service. It was so lovely and moving that I thought: "What better way to connect with our Christian brethren during this season than to invite Ahavat Yeshua to share it with us.

<Call Ralph forward to introduce the singers and musicians>