

Messianic Judaism & We That Practice It

by Michael Rudolph

Delivered to Ohev Yisrael October 27, 2007

Two weeks ago was Hannah Frank's Bat Mitzvah, and so there were members of her family and friends here who may not have known about Messianic Judaism before they were invited to come. I can only imagine what some of the Jewish guests might have thought when they accepted Hannah's invitation:

“What is this *mishigas* of a congregation that believes in Jesus and calls itself Jewish? Impossible!”

And I can only imagine what some of the non-Jewish guests might have thought when they accepted Hannah's invitation; something like:

“Hannah told me she is in a Jesus-believing Jewish congregation that has both Jews and non-Jews in it. When I said to her: “So they're Christians?” She said: “Well, yes and no.” I'm glad she made this all very clear!”

Sometimes these questions even perplex our own members because most of us were not brought up in Messianic Judaism; we came from somewhere else and we came with preconceived ideas. I, for example, came from Orthodox Judaism where, even today, a Jew who believes in Jesus is considered a contradiction in terms and sometimes not anymore a Jew. And others of us came from Christian backgrounds and are equally incredulous about how non-Jews can be Jewish in their religious practice but not be Jews. Because of our preconditioning, these concepts boggle the mind and it doesn't hurt for even us veterans in the Messianic Jewish movement to review such things from time to time. In leading up to what I hope will clarify things, let me introduce you to a few folks:

First slide please!

(A man dressed in Clerical garb)

Meet the Right Reverend Michael Kane. He was born Manny Cohen – a Jew. If you ask him if he is a “Jew” he says yes, but if you ask him if he is “Jewish” he will say no. The reason is that by his inherited identity he is a “Jew,” but by his chosen religion he is Roman Catholic. He will say “no” to his being Jewish, because he doesn't practice Judaism.

Next slide please!

(An American Indian Chief)

This is Chief Zalman. His mother was Sheila Zalman, a nice Jewish girl from Brooklyn who liked to hang out with native Americans. The chief is a Jew except for one little detail. But he is not Jewish in his practice because he doesn't worship the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Another Jewish boy who is not Jewish by belief and practice.

Okay, here's one more! Next slide.

Well, we don't seem to have the slide of this one, but we do have the man himself. David Waggoner, would you please come forward?

Here is a man who looks like a Jew, talks like a Jew, dresses like a Jew, worships like a Jew, keeps *Torah* like a Jew, is Messianic Jewish by belief and practice and is a member of Ohev Yisrael. So he must be a Jew – yes? But no, he's not a Jew, because, as far as David knows, his ancestry does not trace back to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. So we won't have to ask him about that other little detail. :-)

Thank you David. All of this is pretty complicated, isn't it? So in the next few minutes, I will attempt to clarify it by giving you a short course (if you've never heard it before) or a reminder (if you have heard it) in who we are, and where we individually fit into the Messianic Jewish movement.

The first thing we have to understand is that each of us has two kinds of biblical identities; one of them has to do with our ancestry, and the other with what we believe. First our ancestry! In Genesis chapter 17 verses 4 to 10, God says this to Abraham:

"As for Me, behold, My covenant is with you, and you shall be a father of many nations. No longer shall your name be called Abram, but your name shall be Abraham; for I have made you a father of many nations. I will make you exceedingly fruitful; and I will make nations of you, and kings shall come from you. And I will establish My covenant between Me and you and your descendants after you in their generations, for an everlasting covenant, to be God to you and your descendants after you. Also I give to you and your descendants after you the land in which you are a stranger, all the land of Canaan, as an everlasting possession; and I will be their God." And God said to Abraham: "As for you, you shall keep My covenant, you and your descendants after you throughout their generations. This is My covenant which you shall keep, between Me and you and your descendants after you: Every male child among you shall be circumcised;"

Later on in Genesis we read that Abraham's descendants to whom the covenant was given had to include his son Isaac and Isaac's son Jacob. So, the first aspect of our identity – the one of ancestry – has to do simply with whether our lineage goes back to Abraham, through both Isaac and Jacob. If it does, we are a Jew, and if it does not, we are a Gentile which merely means "not a Jew."

Now here is something that sometimes escapes us. By God telling Abraham that he would "be a father of many nations" and that nations would come from him, God's focus at that moment was on the future and blessing of those destined not to be Jews – in other words, most of the people in the world. Yes, God blessed the Jewish people also, but their lot was to be God's servants to bring His light to those who were the primary recipients of blessing – the Gentiles. The blessings bestowed on the Jews were not to remain with them, but were to be passed along. And

we know that the greatest of those blessings to be passed on to the world by the Jews, was one of their sons, Yeshua, the savior of all.

Now it happens that this congregation, like most Messianic Jewish congregations, pays a lot of attention to and does a lot of talking about its Jewish identity and, as a result, the Gentiles among us who perhaps should know better, sometimes forget their own special identity both as recipients of blessing and as full partners with the Jewish people in worldwide ministry. Gentiles called to Messianic Judaism as a life's work are part of both the Messianic Jewish Community and, by extension, part of the greater non-Messianic Jewish Community as well. According to Romans 11, all believers in Yeshua are grafted into the Olive tree and thereby have membership in the Commonwealth of Israel; we call the non-Jewish ones of these "Christians." But we don't usually use the term "Christian" for Gentile believers who are specially called to Messianic Judaism because they have the same blessing of covenant and responsibility in ministry as their Jewish brethren, the one exception being that they cannot convey the Abrahamic Covenant to their offspring through inheritance.

Now let me get back to talking about Jews. It is true that God chose Abraham's descendants, the Jewish people of the future, to have a very special relationship with Him – one of service so that through them the whole world could come to know God and be blessed. But it is also true that throughout recorded history, the Jewish people time and again did not obey God, and therefore did not fulfill the calling of their covenant. Nevertheless, in terms of physical identity, one was a Jew who was born a Jew, and he remained so his entire life provided that some time during his life he received the sign of covenant circumcision. Such a person could believe in God, in pagan gods or in no god at all, yet he was a Jew if he was descended from Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.

And it is the same today and in this very congregation. Those of us who call ourselves Jews are carriers of the Abrahamic covenant, along with all of its responsibilities, because we are descended from Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob and for no other reason.

So this part of our identity that has to do with ancestry is not difficult to understand. Individually we are either Jews or Gentiles but, as equal members of Ohev Yisrael, we work together to help the Jewish people fulfill their covenant responsibilities to both God and their fellow man.

Page 2:

There is another part of our identity that has to do with what we believe, and that is independent of whether we are a Jew or a Gentile. It is the part of our identity that enables God to forgive our sins, to grant us eternal life with Him, to join us as equal citizens in the Commonwealth of Israel, and to make us joint heirs to all His promises whether or not we are Jews. It is the part of our identity that is premised on our belief in the inerrancy of the entire Bible (both Old Testament and New), our faith in God the Father, and our faith in Yeshua the Messiah. In the first part of our identity that we spoke about – the inherited part – we are either a Jew or a Non-Jew. In this other part of our identity, we are either a Bible-believer and believer in Yeshua, or we are not. Here and eternally, whether or not we are a Jew makes no difference whatever because we can serve God in either identity. But whether or not we are a believer in Yeshua does make a difference. It is the difference between eternal life and eternal separation from God.

The *Torah* says in Deuteronomy 30:19:

"I call heaven and earth as witnesses today against you, that I have set before you life and death, blessing and cursing; therefore choose life, that both you and your descendants may live..."

And in John 5:24, Yeshua promised:

"Most assuredly, I say to you, he who hears My word and believes in Him who sent Me has everlasting life, and shall not come into judgment, but has passed from death into life."

Also, in Acts 4:10-12 we read:

"let it be known to you all, and to all the people of Israel, that by the name of Yeshua of Nazareth, the Messiah, whom you crucified, whom God raised from the dead, by Him this man stands here before you whole. This is the 'stone which was rejected by you builders, which has become the chief cornerstone. Nor is there salvation in any other, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved."

Now I am going to say a very hard thing. While we who are Messianic Jews and Gentiles and practice Messianic Judaism are part of Israel and part of the wider Jewish Community, we are not part of the wider religion of Judaism. I am going to say that again in another way so there will be no misunderstanding. Messianic Judaism is not just Judaism with Yeshua tacked on. It is indeed a Judaism (by virtue of it being a religion of Jews), but it is one with a fundamentally different approach to God than all other Judaisms today (and there are several); the reason for this is that the covenant on which Messianic Judaism relies for its relationship with God is different from the covenant relied on by the others.

To understand this, let's analyze Romans 7:1-4:

"Or do you not know, brethren (for I speak to those who know the law), that the law has dominion over a man as long as he lives? For the woman who has a husband is bound by the law to her husband as long as he lives. But if the husband dies, she is released from the law of her husband. So then if, while her husband lives, she marries another man, she will be called an adulteress; but if her husband dies, she is free from that law, so that she is no adulteress, though she has married another man. Therefore, my brethren, you also have become dead to the law through the body of Messiah, that you may be married to another -- to Him who was raised from the dead, that we should bear fruit to God."

Here, Paul refers to statutes of the Mosaic Law having to do with marriage and remarriage, and constructs an analogy to teach an entirely different lesson. He begins by showing us that, by law, a woman is bound to her husband for the duration of the husband's life; but, if the husband dies, she is released from her former marriage, and is able to enter a new marriage relationship. The analogy is that we were married to the Law (i.e. maintained our relationship with God through obedience to the Mosaic Law) until Messiah came. When Messiah came, we died to the Law,

meaning that the Mosaic Covenant of Law no longer held us as in a marriage, and we switched our marriage affiliation to Yeshua who became our bride. Explained another way, before Yeshua came, died and was resurrected, our covenant relationship with God was through obedience to the Commandments of the Law. Now that Yeshua has come, our relationship with God is through Him – not through obeying the Law. Notice that this does not release us from our obligation to obey God’s Law or excuse us if we do not. It merely shows that the Law is no longer the vehicle of our relationship with God; Yeshua is now the vehicle, and our obedience to the Law is a product of our relationship.

Perhaps now you understand why I said that Messianic Judaism has a fundamentally different approach to God than all other Judaisms. By not recognizing Yeshua and the New Covenant, the other Judaisms are still operating on the assumption that their relationship with and path to God are through the *mitzvot* – the Commandments of the Mosaic Law. We obey the Mosaic Law, as well as other law found in Scripture, as the Holy Spirit of God puts the desire in our minds, writes it on our hearts, and shows us how to accomplish it. And we do it, not to gain or enhance our relationship with God, but because we already have one through Yeshua.

I ask you, then, which is the true Judaism of God? The one that received God’s Messiah, or the one that rejected Him and continues to rely upon the Law for its relationship? The answer for me is plain – ours is! Notice I didn’t ask: “Which are the real Jews?” because all who are descended from Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob are real Jews. I am speaking now to not only the Jews in our congregation, but also to the Gentiles. Jew and Gentile alike, we are all practitioners of Messianic Judaism – the true Judaism into which all Jews everywhere will one day come. As Paul says in Romans 11:26-27:

“And so all Israel will be saved, as it is written: “The Deliverer will come out of Zion, And He will turn away ungodliness from Jacob; For this is My covenant with them, When I take away their sins.”

Don’t be intimidated by anyone who calls Messianic Judaism inauthentic because our faith is in the minority among today’s Jews. Don’t be intimidated by anyone who calls Messianic Judaism inauthentic because Gentiles practice it as well as Jews. And don’t be intimidated by anyone who calls Messianic Judaism inauthentic because we reject the Jewish oral tradition as having compulsory authority over us.

Page 3:

In the 20th century re-emergence of Messianic Judaism, we who are Jews fumbled when we tried to reconcile our Jewish identity with believing in Yeshua. Now it is the Gentiles among us who are having the greater difficulty so, in the time remaining, I would like to offer the following as a guide for you to use in explaining to others (and perhaps even to yourselves) your identity and calling as a Non-Jew in a Messianic Jewish Congregation:

Guide for Messianic Gentiles

1. I am a Gentile and not a Jew because my physical lineage, so far as I am aware, does not go back to Abraham Isaac and Jacob.

2. I have been born-again through my faith in Yeshua; that means I was given a new spirit and eternal life with God when I confessed my sins and asked Yeshua into my heart. That also means that I have been grafted into the Olive Tree of Israel (Romans 11:17-19) and have thereby become a citizen of the Common-wealth (Ephesians 2:11-13).

3. In addition to being born again, I have chosen or been called by God, to live out my faith in the same way and in the same congregational community as Jews who believe in Yeshua as I do.

4. The Jews in my congregation call themselves Messianic to distinguish themselves from Jews who do not believe in Yeshua, so I also call myself Messianic although I remain a Gentile.

5. Both Messianic Jews and Messianic Gentiles such as I am, consider ourselves members in both the Jewish community and in the universal body of Yeshua.

6. Both I and the Jews in my congregation practice a Judaism called “Messianic Judaism.” It is a faith, a form of Jewish practice, and a way of life that looks exclusively to the Bible – both the Old and New Testaments -- for final authority on God’s Word, and looks to the Holy Spirit for interpretation, application, and guidance.

7. Both I and the Jews in my congregation consider that whatever the Scriptures had to say to the ancient communities of Israel, they are saying to our community today as well, and so we seek to interpret and apply the Scriptures as literally as seems reasonable and as the Holy Spirit directs.

8. Because my congregation and I practice what we call Messianic Judaism, we call our congregation a Messianic Jewish Congregation. This name reflects our belief in Yeshua as well as our *Torah*-oriented practice that is often (but not always) expressed in similar ways as in non-Messianic Jewish Communities. By “*Torah*-oriented practice” we mean that we seek the Holy Spirit for understanding of how to obey God’s Law in the New Covenant and in our individual and corporate circumstances. Our desire to obey *Torah* comes from our love for God and Messiah; we do not consider it the source of our relationship, nor do we seek our relationship through it.

9. The Jewish practices of my congregation establish its primary culture and lifestyle, but we also incorporate practices that come to us from other traditions. These include contemporary praise and worship with instruments, dance, the bread and wine of Yeshua, speaking and receiving prophetic words, and spontaneous vocalized prayer. Because we do not accept outside Rabbinic authority over us, we freely adopt certain cultural Jewish practices and not others.

10. My congregation’s mission is several-fold: First, we are a family of Jews and Gentiles who are committed to being an example of faith in Yeshua and in holy New Covenant Jewish living. Second, we are a community that is dedicated to upholding, strengthening, praying for, discipling, protecting, and providing for each other as each of us has needs, and as the Holy Spirit directs. Third, we are a community that seeks to pass on our faith and traditions to our children and their children. Fourth, we seek to provide a congregational home for Jewish believers in Yeshua and for believing Gentiles called to serve Yeshua within our Messianic

Jewish community. Fifth, we seek to reach out with the Word of God to all who do not yet know Yeshua – first to the Jew, but also to those of the nations. Sixth, we seek to help the Christian Church understand its connection to Israel and return to its biblical Jewish roots.

The list I have given you is not perfect, and perhaps some of you here today will improve on it. Still, it is tool that I pray will be useful. If time permitted, we could construct a second parallel list for the Jews in our congregation, since most of what has been stated applies to both. Perhaps I will do that, or perhaps one of you will. Anyway, time is up.