

A New Covenant Jewish Vision

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Part I: Introductory Remarks

We're at year's end, and one thing that strikes me as I reminisce over my few years here, is that Ohev Yisrael is truly a congregation of friends. I know that because, while we have experienced much disagreement over what the character of our congregation should be, I have also experienced true love, affection, and care, one for the other among all. The way you see it is – let a person get sick or fall on hard times, and watch how everyone rallies around to pray and help.

The disagreements I referred to have been mainly around the Jewish character of Ohev, and how it impacts our New Covenant beliefs. I can ask certain questions of anyone in Ohev and get everyone to give me the same answers, like:

- Should Ohev be culturally Jewish? Yes.
- Should Ohev actively seek the Holy Spirit in the midst of its worship and in the privacy of our lives? Yes.
- Should Ohev reach out to Jewish people with the truth of Yeshua and the *B'rit Chadasha*? Yes.
- Should Ohev also reach out to Gentiles with the truth of Yeshua and the *B'rit Chadasha*? Yes.

Not only that, but most everyone at Ohev will agree on basic doctrines of the faith such as:

- The assurance of Salvation through faith in Yeshua.
- The deity of Yeshua.
- The triune nature of God.
- The supremacy and inerrancy of the Scriptures (in their original texts).
- The power and work of the *Ruach Kodesh* – the Holy Spirit – for communicating with God, for convicting of sin, and for physical healing.

All these things, and many others, we have in common.

The disagreements that have caused a lack of unity have mostly been regarding the particulars of how the broad principles with which we mostly agree should be manifested among us. Things like:

- If this particular Jewish thing has its origins in Rabbinical Judaism, is it spiritually tainted because today's Rabbinical Jews reject Yeshua? I say no, but some say yes.
- If I adopt a Jewish thing – let's say a prayer – and change it to bring into it something New Covenant, is the thing still Jewish? I say yes if it is sensitively done, but some would say no because you've tampered with its Jewish authenticity.

- If contemporary praise and worship includes Vineyard music, is it an offense to an otherwise Messianic Jewish service? Some would say yes categorically, but I would only say yes if the words were blatantly non-Jewish.

Okay, it's easy to see how there can be differences of opinion and preferences regarding such particulars, but why the emotion? Why the angst? I believe it is due to identity insecurity vis-à-vis Messianic Judaism.

We all come from places that are not Messianic Jewish. Some of us come from churches, some from synagogues, some from elsewhere, but most of us come from either Christian churches or Jewish synagogues; even Jews who are secular can often trace their childhood to a synagogue experience.

Most churches proclaim Jesus (did I say "most?" Yes, I said "most"). Most churches proclaim Jesus, and some of them the Holy Spirit as well, but many are doctrinally opposed to *Torah* observance. There is a word for that, which is "antinomianism;" they teach that a believer in Jesus who studies God's commandments with the intent of complying, puts him back under the Law from which he has been released. And everyone from such a church probably has it ingrained that Jews are *Torah*-observant as a works-righteous substitute for not believing in Jesus.

So those of us who came from such churches may know that God directed us here, and we appreciate many things about Jewish life, but some of us can't quite reconcile who we are as New Covenant believers, with leading a *Torah*-observant life – particularly when the Ohev community adopts a rabbinic way of observance. The result is, that sometimes we cannot get comfortable with Jewish practices which are liturgical, and we begin to see them as competing with Holy Spirit freedom and expression which we value highly, and rightly so. On top of that, some of us who came to Ohev from churches, experienced rejection from our friends and our families, who perhaps still fear for our salvation, as they see us being be back under the Law.

Now others of us have our backgrounds in synagogues, most of which are Non-Messianic. These synagogues can be quite different from one another, but they have things in common, and three of those that they have in common are (1) they reject Yeshua as being the Messiah, (2) they reject Jews who believe in Him – that's us, and (3) their theologies and observances do not recognize the Holy Spirit's place in Jewish life. Although the Holy Spirit is prophesied in the *Tanach*, typical Jewish practice does not recognize it.

So those of us whose background and upbringing are in the synagogue, while we know that Yeshua is the Messiah and we fully embrace the Holy Spirit in our personal relationship with God, some of us struggle with rejection from our families and Jewish friends, and some of us also struggle with community practices that are New Covenant and Holy Spirit oriented. This is because these practices come from the church, and they remind us of the rejections and warnings we received that we have joined the persecutors – that we are no longer Jews, but have become Christians. Some of us get over this in a short while, but for others of us it takes longer. We are caught in this dilemma that our New Covenant faith and its related practices did indeed come to us from the contemporary Christian Church because the Church took it from the Jews early on

and preserved it. But today hardly anyone thinks of ancient Judaism, so New Covenant faith is commonly called Christian, and it is hard to forget that the Christian Church has historically, so often, been associated with persecuting Jews.

Both kinds of insecurities – those fostered by the Church and those fostered by the synagogue – are challenges to our identities, our sense of who we are and where we belong. And these insecurities and fears are, in my opinion, the source of why we sometimes struggle with each other.

Many Ohevites have been members of this community for years – some even as far back as its first leader. The congregation was different back then, and those who were part of it liked it very much, which is reasonable, since it was founded and built with the membership of those who liked and acquiesced to the original pastor's vision. It's the same with anyone who founds a congregation. When Scott became the leader of Ohev, for a number of years things remained mainly the same, but eventually Scott called for certain changes that some liked and others resisted. There were good reasons for each of the points of view, but Scott was the leader, and I can tell you from experience that it's hard to lead people from a vision they have already bought into, into another vision. Scott himself changed his vision midway, but he was not just expressing his own preference against everyone else's; there were some who were solidly onboard with him, but others who were not. And, in defense of those who were not, they had a variety of good reasons also, and it's unsettling, and in a way unfair, to have to endure change in one's congregation when one has gotten used to the way it is and likes it. But I can tell you, also from experience, although part of leadership involves leading people to where you think you they should go, in the end, if you can't, a leader can only lead effectively in the vision that he has, that he believes God has given him.

I have said all this because it is the same with me. I have come into leadership at Ohev with the same issues in play, and just as with Scott, I can only lead in the vision that I have been given. And just as when Scott was the leader, some of my ways are pleasing to some and not to others. But there is no one right way that a Messianic Jewish congregation should be, as is clearly evident when you look at the variety of congregations in Tikkun and the UMJC. So I do the best I can to understand the needs and desires of Ohev's members, seek the Lord for guidance, set a direction, and take steps to implement that direction. And what is needed for a congregational leader to be successful, is an eldership and a membership that stand with him. I know that the eldership is with me, and they are today, much more in unity than they were in the past. I also know that most of Ohev's members are with me also. Standing with me doesn't mean you are elated by everything I do; what it means is that you believe I am here because the Lord put me here, and you trust that God gave me competence, wisdom, and ability were for the task. Nevertheless, this is not only my congregation – it is yours also, and it is also God's, and so today I want to share a part of my vision for Ohev – not the whole vision, but a very important part of it, and one that has prophetic implications for the future.

Part II: The Vision

I believe that a Messianic Jewish congregation such as Ohev should structure itself today to be a model for how we expect all Jewish congregations to be in the future, when Romans 11:26 is fulfilled, and all Israel is saved. Romans 11:25-27 states:

“For I do not desire, brethren, that you should be ignorant of this mystery, lest you should be wise in your own opinion, that blindness in part has happened to Israel until the fullness of the Gentiles has come in. 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.’”

I believe that God has spoken to me about what it will be like in that day. What I believe will happen is that Jews throughout the world will repent, call for Yeshua’s return, and seek for how to lead New Covenant *Torah-observant* lives in the context of what they understand to be Jewish ways of living. They will have to adopt some new practices related to their new-found faith in Yeshua but, by and large, they will continue in Jewish life in the ways of their fathers because that is the identity that they will have started with, that is the identity they will know, and that is what they will perceive their continuing identity to be. Please understand that when I speak like this about the future, I am telling you what I believe will happen.

Just like today, not all Jews will be alike. Jews who receive Yeshua amidst synagogue life will undoubtedly reconcile their synagogue to New Covenant realities by making needed changes, but they will, for the most part, continue in their accustomed synagogue practices insofar as they do not offend the supremacy of Scripture and the New Covenant. Why? Because that is the kind of Jewish life they will have known. Secular Jews, on the other hand – those who receive Yeshua amidst an assimilated life – will not want to continue in their God-deficient lifestyle, so they will be looking to re-order their lives among believers. But God will see to it that their deeply preserved knowledge that they are Jews will come to the forefront, and they will be looking for Jewish fellowship to help them fulfill their covenantal Jewish responsibilities. And where will they find such Jewish fellowship? More than likely in one of the newly-awakened synagogues who will by then be glorifying Yeshua in the Holy Spirit and in the context of Jewish life and practice. There will probably also be Jews who will come out of Churches to regain their Jewish identities, and there will be Jews like us, from Messianic Jewish congregations, who will be rejoicing and eager to help our Jewish brothers find their way in New Covenant Jewish practice. And the reason we will be able to do it, is that, by that time, we will have our gotten our own act together to the point that Ohev and all other Messianic Jewish congregations will be God’s example that the others can, and will, follow. Of course, we won’t be calling ourselves Messianic Jewish anymore; we’ll just be Jewish because all Jews will have become believers.

Modeling our congregation today to be like the synagogues of the future is a daunting task because none of us have come from the future to bring back the precise plan; nevertheless, I believe that God is, even now, giving the plan to us, and it is stretching us in uncomfortable ways as I described before. Those of us in Ohev who came to faith from a synagogue background may struggle against making New Covenant changes they don’t perceive as being Jewish, and those of us who came to faith from a Christian Church background, may struggle with synagogue culture, and long for Christian Holy Spirit expressions they remember as being so freeing. What we are is experiencing the pains of being pioneers. We are the first of our kind in modern times. I don’t believe any of us, as yet, has God’s complete plan for how to make a synagogue New Covenant and, at the same time, thoroughly Jewish. But I do believe, if we relax and let God mold us, we will come to that place. One thing I am sure of is that we must be promoters of the

Holy Spirit and everything He has to offer us and, at the same time, we must be Jewish in ways that are recognizable by a wide swath of the Jewish world.

In saying this, I do not mean that we should be men-pleasers, looking outside of our congregation for validation of who we are and how we choose to express our faith. It would be nice to be accepted, but the reality is that until all Israel is saved, nothing we do, no matter how Jewish we are, will likely receive the wider Jewish community's approval, and we should not expect it. But some day, perhaps sooner than we think (we see signs of it happening already), the rest of the Jewish world's eyes will be opened, and we should be ready to serve our Jewish brothers when that happens. Meanwhile, we are experiencing rejection but, despite that, we should self-identify as Jewish, and substantially incorporate into our lives, recognizable elements of Jewish culture and practice, insofar as they are coherent with the teachings of Yeshua and the *B'rit Chadasha*.

Until Romans 11:26 is fulfilled, there will always be differences between us and surrounding synagogues because we are New Covenant in our faith and beliefs, and they are not. Although there is no uniform standard of what is Jewish, because of the Jewish community in which we live and our connection to Israel, I believe Ohev should continue to exhibit a mainly *Ashkenaz* style of Jewish expression, and be open to Israeli culture as well.

Ohev has two major biblical affiliations, and we have members who link us to both: (1) we are the Messianic component of the wider Jewish Community by virtue of our Jewish members; (2) we are the Jewish component of the *ekklesia* by virtue of all of our members who follow Yeshua. We must not seek to minimize either. I suppose a congregation can call itself Messianic Jewish solely on the basis of its Jewish expression, but let's be clear – it cannot claim to be part of the Jewish Community without having Jewish members. Also, it cannot claim to be Messianic Jewish, unless its members – and particularly its Jewish members – are believers in Yeshua. Ohev can call itself a Messianic Jewish congregation because it has both – Jewish expression, and Jewish members who believe in Yeshua. Ohev's members who are lacking in biblical knowledge, spiritual maturity, or Jewish knowledge and practice, should earnestly seek to bolster the areas of their deficiencies, and Ohev's leaders stand ready to assist them.

Ohev Yisrael, like most Messianic Jewish congregations, has in it both Jewish and non-Jewish members and leaders. Ohev's leadership should include both Jews and non-Jews, but it's need to be genuinely Jewish should cause it to prefer a Jewish majority in its leadership, and it should therefore be proactive in training and raising up Jewish members who have leadership potential. That is not something we have emphasized up to now, but we will start to do so. That notwithstanding – hear me clearly – no one – Jew or non-Jew, should be elevated to leadership unless he or she is sufficiently disciplined, is of high moral character, and has the requisite level of spiritual maturity and emotional stability that is needed for the position.

Now as to outreach: For pragmatic reasons, I believe Ohev's outreach emphasis should be toward intermarried couples (i.e. Jews married to non-Jews), and also to secular Jews who need help returning to a *Torah-observant* life. These two groups have needs with which Ohev is peculiarly able to help but, to do so, Ohev's members must themselves be *Torah-observant* in the context of their New Covenant Messianic faith.

I could say more, but I'm going to have to stop now. I hope you like what you heard. If so, you can't sit back and expect it to just happen. If you are able and willing to train or disciple others, you should make your willingness known. If you can profit by being trained or disciplined, don't let pride get in your way; ask for it, and don't refuse it if it is offered. If you are a Jew at Ohev and are not a leader of something or otherwise significantly serving, we don't want that to continue, but you must be qualified beyond being Jewish. If you are a Gentile at Ohev, there is no limit on how far you can go in either leadership or service; Scripture makes it clear that Jews and Gentiles are spiritually equal. But Gentiles, if you see us paying special attention to readying Jews for leadership, rejoice in it with the understanding that that is the way it should be in this kind of a congregation; but know that it does not limit you.

Seeking specifically to raise up Jews at Ohev is justified because Scripture itself distinguishes the Jewish tribes in the last days; Revelation 21:9-14 reads:

“Then one of the seven angels who had the seven bowls filled with the seven last plagues came to me and talked with me, saying, ‘Come, I will show you the bride, the Lamb's wife.’ And he carried me away in the Spirit to a great and high mountain, and showed me the great city, the holy Jerusalem, descending out of heaven from God, having the glory of God. Her light was like a most precious stone, like a jasper stone, clear as crystal. Also she had a great and high wall with twelve gates, and twelve angels at the gates, and names written on them, which are the names of the twelve tribes of the children of Israel: three gates on the east, three gates on the north, three gates on the south, and three gates on the west. Now the wall of the city had twelve foundations, and on them were the names of the twelve apostles of the Lamb.”

There are, of course, many specifics to work out on all of this, but if we are all willing to die to self, hear the Holy Spirit, and do things God's way, there will be no limit to how far God can take us.