

When Our Identity Is Important and When It Is Not

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I would like to begin by asking a question: “When is our Jewish identity important?” No, let me rephrase that because there is nothing God has given us that is unimportant. So perhaps a better question is: “When is our Jewish identity most important?” And now I will answer my own question by saying: “It is most important when it is being used to serve God’s purposes and, a corollary to it, that it is least important when it is being used to serve our own purposes. This is not only true of Jewish identity, but of any identity that God has given us; however, this being a Jewish congregation, I will talk about Jewish identity, and let those of us who are not Jewish, interpret accordingly.

I think we can learn something about this subject from the *shaliach* Sha’ul (in English “the apostle Paul”) as we read in 1 Corinthians 9:20-22:

“... and to the Jews I became as a Jew, that I might win Jews; to those who are under the law, as under the law, that I might win those who are under the law; to those who are without law, as without law (not being without law toward God, but under law toward Messiah), that I might win those who are without law; to the weak I became as weak, that I might win the weak. I have become all things to all men, that I might by all means save some.”

Paul has been criticized for taking this position because, to some, it seems like he is making little of his Jewish identity, and merely using it as an expedient to preach the Gospel. A chameleon of sorts. A Jew one day and a Greek the next. Actually, from other biblical accounts, we know that Paul took his Jewish identity very seriously but here, his situation was indeed one of wanting to get Gospel truth across to those to whom he was preaching. Presumably, when being a Jew was relevant to the conversation at hand he spoke as a Jew would speak to another Jew and, when he deemed it not relevant or minimally relevant, he changed his way of speaking. The biblical principal Paul was using was recorded in Philippians 2:3-4:

“Let nothing be done through selfish ambition or conceit, but in lowliness of mind let each esteem others better than himself. Let each of you look out not only for his own interests, but also for the interests of others.”

What made the deciding difference for Paul on how he held himself out to others and the words he used to do it, was what he knew God wanted him to accomplish at that moment. Paul took his own feelings about his identity out of the situation as being unimportant compared to the other person’s needs.

There is an occasion in Scripture that comes to mind when, in order to make his point; Paul emphasizes his Jewish identity as being very important in Philippians 3:4-6:

“... though I also might have confidence in the flesh. If anyone else thinks he may have confidence in the flesh, I more so: circumcised the eighth day, of the stock of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of the Hebrews; concerning the law, a Pharisee; concerning zeal, persecuting the church; concerning the righteousness which is in the law, blameless.”

Now my reason for this message is not to dwell on Paul, but on us here at Ohev – all of us presumably called here by God to participate as Messianic Jews and Gentile affiliates of the wider Jewish community. Paul’s example is instructive to us because just as with him, our lives have components of both mission and identity, and they are not unrelated. Our special mission derives from our identity as Jews, an identity that was created by the covenant God made with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob – an identity that carried with it, a calling to be a nation of priests to the world. And when, in history, the mainstream of Israel rejected its Messiah but a remnant of us believed, it fell to those of us who now call ourselves Messianic, to add an additional function to our national priesthood, and that is to serve the rest of our own people as individual priests of Yeshua. Those responsibilities are our mission, and they derive from our identity as Jews.

But using Paul as an example has its limits for us because Paul’s world is not our world, and that is where the Holy Spirit has to give us understanding to close the gap. No one in Paul’s day accused him of being a goy as a way of detracting from the Gospel he was proclaiming. A misguided Jew yes, a cultic Jew yes, but a Jew nonetheless because, at the time of Paul and before, no one thought it even possible that a *Torah-observant* Jew could become a goy merely by proclaiming an unpopular Messiah. Paul himself argued in Acts 24:14:

"But this I confess to you, that according to the Way which they call a sect, so I worship the God of my fathers, believing all things which are written in the Law and in the Prophets."

That, of course, is not the case today, where Jewish opponents of Yeshua do an end run around the Gospel and, instead of attacking it directly, try to discredit us who are its Jewish messengers, by doing everything possible to convince the wider Jewish community that we are no longer Jews.

Acts 18:4-6: *“And he reasoned in the synagogue every Sabbath, and persuaded both Jews and Greeks. When Silas and Timothy had come from Macedonia, Paul was compelled by the Spirit, and testified to the Jews that Yeshua is the Messiah. But when they opposed him and blasphemed, he shook his garments and said to them, "Your blood be upon your own heads; I am clean. From now on I will go to the Gentiles.”*

You notice that Paul was at least heard out before his message was rejected, but we Messianic Jews of the Twenty First Century hardly ever even get the hearing Paul got, and to even be listened to, we have to first establish our right to speak as Jews.

I don’t think Paul thought about his identity very much because it wasn’t his main challenge the way it is for us. The few accounts of it that we read in Scripture may, for all we know, be the only occasions of it, but for us, wearing our Jewish identities on our sleeves is of major importance.

I may be criticized for talking too much about our congregation's need to be perceived as Jewish and for urging certain ways of speaking, dressing, and behaving, that creates an atmosphere of Jewish comfort. Now it is true that there are many flavors of Jews that range from untra-orthodox black-hats, to secular atheists, to Jewish disciples of Sun Yat Moon; and it is also true that what may be comfortable about our community to one group of Jews may be a put-off to another. There is, however, a common consensus – at least in a given geographic area – as to what “feels Jewish” to a Jew, and what does not. This is very hard to explain, but even a non-Jew can be accepted as part of the Jewish community if he or she exhibits cultural behaviors that say “I belong here, whereas a Yeshiva-trained Rabbi who refers to God with words like “my Lord” will set off alarm bells! It's a pretty subtle thing and has little to do with theology; it's culture.

I got a chance to think more deeply about this recently when, by chance, I used “*HaShem*” in a Messianic-related document and was asked: “why do you have to use ‘*HaShem*’ instead of ‘the Lord?’” I replied this way:

“Both ways of referring to the Lord have become part of my everyday speech and are comfortable for me. However, I have recently become more aware of how some of my comfortable and familiar expressions sound foreign to the local Jewish way of speaking. For example, I would not speak to the owners of my favorite Jewish bookstores in Wheaton and refer to God as “the Lord,” and they would not speak that way to me either because, in their world, people do not commonly use the words “the Lord” in conversation. There is no offense here. It is that it is an expression that labels the speaker as “not part of the Jewish community – at least the part with which I am familiar. A Messianic Jew who uses it regularly in Messianic contexts and does not hob-knob in the Jewish community from time to time might be surprised by this, because the words “the Lord” are so common in Scripture and also in Jewish liturgy. That even fools me sometimes until someone points it out to me. The fact is, I have spent so little recent time in the general Jewish community that I have lost some of the nuances of Jewish speech and have, instead, picked up a Christian-style of speech that labels who I am without my realizing it. It's not that I am ashamed of who I am as a Messianic Jew or that I want to hide it. It's that I am also a Jewish part of the Jewish community, and need to be perceived as that as well. If you still don't see it, perhaps I can make the case a little more obvious by referencing several commonly used additions to the word “Lord.” A Jewish way of praying to God in English might be to address God directly as “Lord,” but typically only Christians or Messianics would use the term “my Lord” or the even more foreign expression “precious Lord.”

Then another person who was party to the discussion asked me why it was so important to me to be perceived as Jewish. “Isn't it sufficient to be understood?” he asked. My answer was that it doesn't always matter, but sometimes it does. To go back to the Jewish Bookstore example, I had been purchasing books for Beth Messiah and Ahavat Yeshua from one of them for several years and, one day, the owner told me he would no longer give me his usual congregational and church discount because he decided that, by our calling my congregations Messianic Jewish (using the designation “Jewish,”) we were misleading and trying to deceive the Jewish community. Make note of the fact that he allowed the discount to all kinds of Christian

churches, but would no longer allow it to my congregations because, in his opinion, we said that we were Jewish and were not. I accepted his decision without argument and considered it one of character because he was acting on principle and risking the loss of my business; nevertheless, I continued to patronize the store for years even though I could buy the books I needed elsewhere for less. Not only did I patronize the store, but I periodically asked the owner and his son, an ordained rabbi and *Torah* scribe, scholarly and sometimes challenging questions on Jewish subjects that I genuinely needed to know about – especially subjects pertaining to Jewish concepts of Messiah – and I bought quite a few of their books with titles like “You Take Jesus, I’ll Take God.” To show respect as a Jew to a Jew, I always tried to remember to put on my *kippah* when I went into the bookstore, and I sincerely enjoyed trying out my declining memory of Yiddish expressions in our various conversations. I also introduced them to my two sons David and Brian and they became customers and, over time, familiarity among us grew to the point that the rabbi son followed David’s theological education all through his years at Gordon Conwell and Cambridge University. Then one day when the proprietor’s son, the rabbi (who knew about the discount situation), checked me out at the cash register, he rang up the discount. I thought he had made an error so I pointed it out to him, but he just waived his hand at me that it was okay and, ever since then, I have received the discount from both the son and the father. The way I see it, over time, my demeanor, way of comporting myself, and my scholarly questions – not my theology – convinced them that I was Jewish, and therefore the Messianic Jewish congregations with which I was affiliated (now Ohev added to them) must therefore also be Jewish. In the end, it just didn’t make sense to them that someone who was so obviously Jewish wasn’t Jewish. This story is not unimportant because every rabbi and every cantor from every synagogue in the Washington Metropolitan Area, as well as every Jew that has a shelf of Jewish books eventually find their way to that bookstore and may have their opinion of us influenced by a casually uttered word of acceptance from one of the store owners or employees.

I believe that many of us in the Messianic Jewish movement, even some of the Jewish members who lost out on a Jewish upbringing, do not have enough of a feel for what being and sounding Jewish is like. We’re doing pretty well in learning about Jewish things, and conducting Jewish services, but we are weak in our one-on-one relational skills and the more subtle things that show up in conversations and add to the feeling of “Jewish space.” What is “Jewish space you ask?” It is an atmosphere of Jewish comfort. If you were brought up culturally Jewish on any level, you know it when you’re in it, and the only way to achieve it later in life is to spend considerable time with Jews and participating in significant ways in the Jewish Community. Most of us have not done so for various reasons that range from “no time,” to “fear of rejection,” and there was an effort among some of the Messianic Jewish Congregations in the last century to discourage their members (which are now our senior members) from participating in the wider Jewish Community for fear of our being lured away from faith in Yeshua. It was a time when anti-missionary organizations like Jews for Judaism were in their heyday and, the fact is, some Messianic Jews did succumb and leave the faith. But our understanding has grown since then, and we no longer see it as God’s will that we keep to ourselves, aloof and separate from the rest of the Jewish Community, because we now understand that to do so denies our shared heritage and responsibility to fulfill the Covenant given to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, that joins all Jews in the world as a people.

So, with renewed zeal, I want to encourage all of us who are not already doing so, to find a way to spend some time in the wider Jewish community to absorb and learn, and as opportunities arise, to serve. We can join the Jewish Community Center to exercise, to dance, to take courses, attend lectures, or just schmooze. There are other Jewish organizations to consider as well (especially benevolence and service organizations), and we can attend occasional *Shabbat* and Festival services at one of the numerous synagogues in our area, and get to know people at their *kiddushim* and *onegs*.

I am just about finished now except for one thing, and that is to help you to see that “mission” and “identity” are motivations that exist among our members and that both are foundationally Jewish because both can be traced to the Abrahamic Covenant. The identity part comes from God creating the Jewish people by separating out Abraham’s family through Isaac and Jacob (later called Israel), and the mission part comes from the reason God created the Jewish people which was to be a nation of priests to the other nations of the world. Tragically, Israel lost its sense of mission over the centuries, so that today, many modern Jews dwell more on their culture and identity as Jews than on their mission of world leadership that is meant to go hand and hand with it. This is an area, in addition to ministering Yeshua, where I believe Messianic Judaism (including Ohev Yisrael) can contribute to the wider Jewish world because God has allowed us to see and experience both sides of it. But because a sense of mission has not yet been restored to the wider Jewish world, it is incumbent on us to deeply understand and maintain cultural Jewish identity as the chief recognizable touchstone that joins us to our Jewish brothers.