

**The 2003 Hashivenu Forum**  
**Messianic Judaism and Jewish Tradition in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century:**  
**A Historical Perspective on “Oral Torah”**  
© Hashivenu

**By Michael Harris Schiffman**

What has it meant to be Messianic? Since the 1970s if a person was Messianic, they could have attended worship services on Friday, Saturday or Sunday. They could have attended wildly Charismatic services, Baptist or Pentecostal type services or Orthodox Jewish services, or anything in between. They could have kept dietary restrictions as prescribed in the bible, or traditionally kosher, or might have gone out for bacon and eggs for breakfast. They might have prayed in the name of Jesus or Yeshua and spelled it with an E or an apostrophe. They may have celebrated Jewish holidays, or Christian holidays, or both. They may have had a Christmas tree and a Chanukah Menorah. They may have worn a *chai*, or a star, or a cross or a star on a cross or a cross on a star. They may have prayed from a siddur, or prayed in tongues, or prayed extemporaneously. They may have danced the *hora* or the charismatic shuffle. They may have fasted on Yom Kippur, or feasted to show they had atonement. They may have had a bar mitzvah or a bar *Khein*. They may have worn a *kippah* or fought with Messianic Jews who did. They struggled between being too Jewish or too Goyish. Messianic Jews have been all over the map. There was no Halacha.

To consider the place of Jewish tradition for Messianic Jews in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, it is essential to understand the place of Jewish tradition historically in the Jewish world. Tradition is not static, but diverse and ever changing, corresponding to the life and events within the Jewish community. For this reason, Jewish tradition needs to be understood both horizontally and vertically; from a chronological perspective, as well as considering

the various applications Jews from different parts of the world have employed in Jewish practice.

The Jewish tradition is based upon the teachings of the ancient Rabbis, as recorded in the Mishnah and Gemarah, having been adapted and interpreted in later writings such as the Shulchan Oruch. While it is argued in the Messianic community that these writings do not have the level of authority of Holy Scripture, it should be noted that they have formed the basis of Jewish definition since the Second Temple period. The Talmud discusses Jewish praxis for the common activities of daily life, for proper as well as forbidden activity on Shabbat and Yom Tovim, and appropriate behavior in prayer and ritual. Historically, Jewish life whether Ashkenazic or Sephardic, has been defined and regulated by these writings. Put plainly, the boundaries of Jewish life find their root in the Talmud.

Prior to the Talmudic period, Jewish life centered around the Temple service in Jerusalem. Many people practiced Pharisaic Judaism, while others followed one of the other various sects in existence at the time. Messianic Jews look back fondly to the Second Temple period with its pluralistic and more diverse forms of Judaism and identify themselves with a pre-Talmudic, allegedly more “biblical,” and therefore, more pure form of Judaism as did the Karaites in earlier centuries.

It is worth noting the history of the Karaites. They called themselves *Ba’alei ha-Mikra*, “people of the scriptures”. They were a movement that began in the period of the great Talmudic schools of Babylonia in the 7<sup>th</sup> century. They rejected Jewish tradition, claiming to follow only the Holy Scriptures, but in the end, they borrowed from aspects

of Islam, and fashioned for themselves more difficult traditions than that of Talmudic Judaism. Speaking of its founder, the Encyclopedia Judaica notes,

“Far from easing the yolk of traditional law, he made it more difficult to bear; he did not recognize the minimum quantities of forbidden foods fixed by the rabbis; he introduced more complicated regulations for the circumcision ceremony; he added to the number of fast days; he interpreted the prohibition of work on the Sabbath in stricter terms; etc.”<sup>1</sup>

Fanaticism has been said to be “doubling the effort when you lose sight of the goal,” and there are many examples of this to this day. Non-Jews seeking to compensate for the accident of birth that rendered them Gentiles in our midst become the most observant among us, wearing black and white, and becoming indistinguishable in their appearance from Hasidim. A Messianic Jewish leader in Eastern Europe had his leadership challenged by a Gentile who went to the synagogue and learned all the prayers in Hebrew, and wore black and white, and had himself circumcised, and claimed he was more fit to lead the congregation than the Jewish leader. In the end, having done all these things, and trying to force everyone else to do them, he was expelled from the congregation. This misuse of tradition does not negate the value of the tradition, but illustrates that fanaticism should be avoided from all quarters.

While the concept of Sola Scriptura may not have started with the Protestant Reformation, it has *never*, since Temple times, been accepted by the Jewish world as what defines Jewishness, and the Karaites were never accepted by the Jewish community as part of its fold. The reason for this is because Jewishness historically has not been defined merely by genealogy, but by life and custom as well.

A rabbi once remarked to me that the difference between Judaism and Evangelical Christianity is that Evangelical Christianity is a religion *based* upon the Bible, whereas

---

<sup>1</sup> Encyclopedia Judaica: Jerusalem, Vol. 10 Karaites, p.766.

Judaism is a religion *derived* from the Bible. This is an important observation. If being biblical is the means by which Jewishness is defined, then Seventh Day Adventists should be considered Jewish, or at least practicing a form of Judaism. Jewishness is not primarily about being *Biblical*. It is about family, community, peoplehood and belonging.

We can learn from the Karaites that to discard Jewish tradition does not yield a more pure Judaism, but will result in following traditions of our own making that may be more stringent and idiosyncratic than any put forth from the Jewish leadership. In addition, they may be so unrecognizable as being Jewish that we will look strange to all who see us. A number of years ago, I had a Messianic friend show me a knotted blue and white fob hanging from his belt loops. I asked him what they were, and he told me they were his *tzit-zit*. They were not tied traditionally, and he told me they were something his daughter made when she was practicing macramé. He informed me quite seriously that the Bible didn't specify *how* the *tzit-zit* are supposed to be tied, so he was free to tie them any way he wanted. He was right. He was free to do so, but whatever they may have been, no Jew would have recognized them as something Jewish. I was glad that it had meaning for him, but it meant nothing to anyone else, except possibly his daughter. I have since seen Messianic Jews wear *tzit-zit* on female head coverings, and in various colors. The more idiosyncratic we get, the less we blend with our people. From the Jewish world view mitzvot need to be practiced in meaningful relationship to the community.

After the Gaonic period, Judaism became more standardized in its practice, owing to the siddur, the order of prayer, and the teaching of the rabbis founded on a common

Halacha, yet Jewish pluralism survived. The main variation in the Jewish world existed between the Sephardic and Ashkenazic approaches to Halacha nevertheless they recognized the common basis of their traditions. Sephardim wrap their tefillin clockwise, Ashkenazim wrap them counter-clockwise. Ashkenazim do not eat rice and beans on Pesach, Sephardim do. Some communities wear only wool arba-kanfot and Tzit-zit, while others permit wool. The various communities of the Diaspora developed their own *Minhagim*, local customs, according their necessities and their need to adapt to their host cultures.

On the Lower East Side of Manhattan there was a man who was schizophrenic. People called him Crazy Joshua. He would walk around wearing blue tzit-zit tied to his belt loops, wore a big wooden cross and a Bukharan kippah. He had a large shofar and would sit in the park across the street and blow it. He told people that they had to believe in Yeshua Ha-Mashiach or they would go to hell. He was not a real Messianic Jew, but he looked like a caricature of Messianic Jews. I watched shopkeeper after shopkeeper throw him out and curse him. Then I saw Reb Yitzhak, an old sofer give him a hug and told him to be on his way. I asked Yitzhak why he treated him well when everyone else threw him out. He said “The man is ill. He doesn’t know what he is saying. You can only have pity on such a person.” He was kind to him, but he, like everyone else gave him no credence. The more *other* we appear, the more *other* we will be treated, and the less chance we have of being taken seriously.

I have heard Messianic Jews say, “We are not under Rabbinic Authority, but under Yeshua’s authority.” This statement is problematic because anyone can quote a bible verse to justify whatever they want and claim they are acting in Yeshua’s authority.

In reality it is their own interpretation that is their authority and not Yeshua's. Better Yeshua's authority than all the Rabbis, but better the Rabbis authority than our own. It is not for nothing that II Peter<sup>1</sup> teaches that Scripture is not a matter of private interpretation.

A rejection of rabbinic authority is not something unique to Messianic Judaism. Arthur Hertzberg, writing about immigrant Jews from Eastern Europe in the last century observed,

Jews ... could not wait to free themselves of the authority of their rabbis.

The angers did not begin in America. For two generations deep and unparalleled hatred had been growing among the Jewish poor in Czarist Russia against the Jewish elite. This was caused by a tragedy which took place in the middle of the nineteenth century, when the leaders of the Jewish community sold out the children of the poor in order to protect their own. In 1827 the Czar decreed that young Jewish men of eighteen (much younger were often taken) would be forced into the army for twenty five years. None was stationed near their homes, for the clear intention of the Czar was to convert their young people to Christianity. Each Jewish community was assigned a quote of how many such children it had to provide. It was all too human for members of the communal elite to protect their own children and to send the children of the poor. Since the quota had to be met, even as mothers and fathers hid their children, the authorities of the Jewish communities employed *chappers*, grabbers, people who roamed the streets and grabbed any teenage boy they could find to give him to the Russian military.

Before this episode ended in 1856, at least forty thousand, - and by some estimates nearly one hundred thousand – Jewish children had been forced into this slavery. Many of these recruits were the uncles of those who, twenty years later, were to leave for America. Such immigrants had been raised on heartrending tales of communal leaders who refused to relent and return children who had been seized by the *chappers*. They had sung bitter folk songs about the selfishness of the rich and of the alliance of many of the rabbis with the powerful.<sup>2</sup>

Distrust for rabbinic authority may be part of our heritage and not just a Messianic distrust over the rejection of Yeshua.

---

<sup>2</sup> New York: Simon & Schuster. The Jews in America, by Arthur Hertzberg, 1989, p. 163

It can be argued that the medieval church understood the importance of the Oral Law to Jewish Identity and life. Their belief that Jews needed to convert to Christianity may have been behind the Church's program of burning all copies of the Talmud in their jurisdiction in an attempt to separate Jews from the strictures that kept them from accepting Christianity. While this was an extreme measure, the idea that the Jewish religion is a barrier to belief in Yeshua still exists among many people. The difficulty with this view is that it makes the assumption that Judaism was created as an antithesis to faith in Yeshua. It fails to realize that Judaism is a religion that seeks to worship the G-d of Israel, and express faith in Him. It has integrity in its own right.

Consequently, one of the major mistakes of Evangelical Christianity has been to assume that all meaningful Jewish life ended in 70CE. Messianic Jews would do well *not* to adopt that assumption. Jewish life developed, progressed and adapted, and found meaning to its existence throughout the 20 centuries of the dispersion. It is anti-Semitic to dismiss Jewish existence as meaningless and futile during the last 2000 years. It is just as big a blunder to assume that Jewish life is limited to the texts of Scripture. Jewish scholarship, wisdom, spirituality, and contributions to the arts and sciences are well known and beyond question.

This does not mean that historically all Jewish people have lived in perfect obedience to Talmudic teaching. Jews live in relationship to the community whose foundation is defined by Rabbinic literature, but the degree to which Jews have lived in accordance with those traditions vary greatly from one Jew to another. This can be observed on many levels.

Within mainstream Judaism there are the main denominations of Hasidism, Orthodox, Conservative, Reform, Reconstructionist, and Humanistic. All of these differ to a great extent, yet they all relate from one degree or another to the Halachic tradition.

On a personal level, some Jews are *Reformadox*, *Conformadox*, etc. Some Jews are Orthodox, but don't believe in G-d. Some keep kosher in their homes, yet will eat in non-kosher restaurants although abstaining from forbidden meats, while others will eat forbidden meats even though they keep a fully kosher home. Some call it hypocrisy, while others call it levels of observance. Some Jews walk to *Shul* on Shabbat, others drive and some pass the *shul* on their way to the shopping mall. The issue is not how observant a person may be, but whether or not they identify themselves within the general principles upon which the community exists. Their praxis may vary greatly, and they may attack each other's approach to living out their Jewishness, yet they recognize each other as Jewish, albeit errant from the proper path.

In the poorer communities of Eastern Europe, a community might pool their resources and get a cow for meat. When the animal is slaughtered, its internal organs are examined to see if there were tumors on them. If, for example, the lungs were smooth (*glatt*), the animal was kosher. If they had lumps they were still kosher. But if they had tumors, they were considered non-kosher. In these poor communities, if the lungs were found to have tumors, even though the meat was technically non-kosher, because it would cause a hardship on the community, it was declared kosher. There was room for flexibility within the halachic world.

The real challenge to halachic lifestyle came about during the Napoleonic era. This was known as the enlightenment or Haskala. Napoleon offered the Jews a deal that



was too tempting to refuse. If they would give up their desire for a national homeland, and the notion of being a particular people, he would give them full citizenship and open society to them. Prior to Napoleon, when Jews were confined to life in the ghetto, they were not considered citizens and had few civil rights. Eventually they received emancipation throughout Western Europe. This offer posed a serious challenge to the Jewish world. The ghetto was opened. For the first time in two Millennia, Jews could choose between being part of the Jewish community and being part of the larger community of Europe without having to convert to another religion. This led to secularism, assimilation and intermarriage.

In this same period, Judaism witnessed the rise of Hasidism as well as the Misnagdim who opposed them. Jews could choose between the dry academic Judaism of the Misnagdim, and the lively spirituality of Hasidism, or they could choose to be secular citizens of European society, or anything in between. Reform Judaism developed as a response to secularism and the Conservative Movement developed as a response to the “too liberal” Reform Judaism. Meanwhile, in the Sephardic world, a Jew was either religious or non-religious, but he was still a Jew.

America was probably the most serious challenge to Judaism. The pull of American society led to assimilation and intermarriage in record numbers, so much so, that today it is considered the major crisis of world Jewry. Elliott Abrams made the following observation:

- Jews, who once comprised 3.7 percent of the U.S. population, have fallen to about 2 percent.
- One-third of all Americans of Jewish ancestry no longer report Judaism as their religion.
- Of all Jews who have married since 1985, the majority have married non-Jews, while the rate of conversion of non-Jewish spouses is declining.

- Only 28 percent of the children of intermarried couples are raised as Jews.
- Demographers predict a drop of anywhere from one million to over two million in the American Jewish population in the next two generations.<sup>3</sup>

The Reform movement responded by reaching out to non Jewish intermarried partners by actively seeking to convert them. The Orthodox world objected emphatically because Reform conversions were not fully halachic, and they feared it would lead to further intermarriage. They chose instead to boycott intermarriage.

In America, where anyone could do whatever they wanted as long as their actions didn't impose on another person's rights, Judaism became a do your own thing religion. This approach is seen in the most clearly in the Reconstructionist movement, where they insert poetic readings and instrumental music in their worship service and use sections of the traditional order of prayer but do not follow it closely. In the opinion of Elliott Abrams this approach, does great harm to the Jewish people.

... The very individualism of the Enlightenment philosophers subverted the spirit of Jewish peoplehood. The free individual choice of which those thinkers wrote, and which was sanctified in the U.S. Constitution, was absolutely contrary to the Jewish idea of covenant and commandment. Jewish law was about the collective, inherited obligation to G-d of an entire people. Could anything have been further from the modern notion that each individual must freely choose his faith?<sup>4</sup>

The function of the oral tradition evolved from having a defining influence in the case of Orthodox, Hasidic, and Conservative and to some extent Reform, to being a resource among Reconstructionist Jews. The question facing Messianic Jews is what place should the Oral Tradition occupy in Messianic Jewish life and praxis?

Historically, Messianic Judaism was birthed out of Evangelical Christianity. Most Messianic Jews had some Jewish education and upbringing, but were indoctrinated

---

<sup>3</sup> Abrams, Elliott, Faith or Fear: How Jews can survive in a Christian America. New York: Free Press, 1997, pp. 1-2.

<sup>4</sup> Abrams, p.19.

by Evangelicalism. They used what they learned in Evangelical worship and added a Jewish style to otherwise Evangelical worship services. Some have called Messianic worship “kosher style”, as opposed to “kosher”. Worship services have been described as Jewish, Baptist, or Charismatic, depending on the quantity of each element in their services.

Entering the 21<sup>st</sup> century, Messianic Judaism faces the same challenges posed to the rest of the Jewish world. We worry about assimilationism, intermarriage, the faith and Jewish identity of our children, and living a Jewish lifestyle that will be meaningful to our children. And like our counterparts in the larger Jewish world, many of our children are walking away from those deeply held beliefs and convictions to which we have pledged ourselves.

As I look at mainstream Judaism today, amidst the confusion, there are several things worthy of notice. First: the growth of the Jewish day school movement. Jewish parochial schools are bursting at the seams. In addition to the secular subjects taught in public school, students are being taught Jewish religion and life as part of the curriculum. Kosher food is exclusively served in the cafeteria. Students are taught Jewish life and history and to *daven*, pray. Statistics show that among students that attend a full-time Jewish day school, intermarriage and assimilation is very low.<sup>5</sup> This indicates that Jewish tradition has a positive effect in imparting and reinforcing a strong Jewish identity.

Second, the advancement of Reform Judaism to a more tradition oriented platform. For a long time, Reform Judaism has been considered the last stop before assimilation. At one time, in Germany, this was even advocated by assimilationist Jews

---

<sup>5</sup> Abrams, pp.170-171.

who proposed merging with the Lutheran church if only they did not have to accept Jesus. The result in America has been that many who were brought up Reform now consider themselves former Jews, or non religious Jews.

At one time, Reform Judaism was the largest and fastest growing form of Judaism. Its success lied in its embracing of modernity and simplicity. Jews who otherwise might have dropped out entirely, found a Judaism that was relevant for the times and presented a form of Judaism that was not intimidating. People felt they could do these things without having to go to a yeshiva. While these were good things, this type of Judaism was not able to keep the next generation. People brought up as Reform Jews had an alarming rate of attrition. In an effort to stem the tide of assimilationism, Reform Judaism changed their platform to advocate the use of more Hebrew in their services and observance of traditional dietary laws. They recognized the importance of these ancient parameters in maintaining Jewish identity.

Third, according to statistics, the only branch of Judaism that is growing rather than shrinking in America is Orthodox Judaism. Their refusal to acquiesce to American culture and hold fast to Jewish tradition has drawn many Jews from non religious backgrounds.<sup>6</sup> Some are attracted to the insular community, while others to the commitment to Jewish life. Elliot Abrams observed,

... Acknowledging Orthodox success does not imply that all American Jews, if they are serious about the survival of their community, must instantly become Orthodox. That would not be a serious proposal ... But an open-minded look at Orthodoxy does mean that those Jews who are struggling unsuccessfully to keep their communities faithful to Judaism should listen carefully to those who are succeeding and try to understand the secrets of that success.

They are succeeding no only by the virtue of their acts ... but also because of their conception of the Jew's place in our open society. They have created what is in

---

<sup>6</sup> Abrams, pp.165-168

essence a “counterculture,” and they are seriously resistant to the prevailing trends in American social life.<sup>7</sup>

While Abrams is saying we need to give credit where credit is due, he does not see Jewish Orthodoxy as the answer. He sees the need for a community wide change in our approach to America:

More broadly, the community must shift energy from its efforts to promote a secular society and to ensure that individual Jews can succeed in America, and focus instead on the goal of sustaining Judaism here.<sup>8</sup>

Abrams concludes his study by saying,

What the Jewish sage Saadia Gaon said a thousand years ago in Babylonia remains true in America today: Jews are a people only by virtue of their Torah. They will decline if they are driven by fear of their neighbors, fear of their own traditions, and fear of the distinct identity that their covenant imposes on them as an article of faith. They will survive if they cling to their faith – to the Torah. It – and it alone – is for the Jews just what the Book of Proverbs calls it: a tree of life.”<sup>9</sup>

It is important to note that the American Jewish community has undergone a polarization that had not existed 50 years ago. The Orthodox groups have gone more to the right, and the Reform and Conservative, to the left. The moderate, middle ground appears to have been vacated. In the past, Conservative Judaism occupied the Middle of the road position, and what today would be considered Traditional conservative was what Modern Orthodox stood for. It is this more moderate, middle of the road position that might be best for Messianic Judaism. It offers an openness and flexibility that is attractive to people and will not fracture our movement.

This information indicates that Jewish practice as defined by traditional lifestyle preserves Jewish identity. If Messianic Judaism is to exist in the world as a Judaism, it

---

<sup>7</sup> Abrams, p.183

<sup>8</sup> Abrams, p. 184

<sup>9</sup> Abrams, p. 197

needs to move, like Reform Judaism in a more traditional direction. This does not mean that Messianic Judaism needs to diminish its faith in Yeshua to accept a more traditional lifestyle. Yeshua taught,

*Then Yeshua spoke to the multitude, and to his disciples, saying, The rabbis and the Pharshim sit in Moses' seat: therefore whatever they tell you observe, that observe and do; but do not do according to their way: for they say, and do not do it themselves . For they bind heavy burdens and grievous to be borne, and lay them on men's shoulders; but they themselves will not move them with one of their fingers. **Matthew 23:1-4***

Yeshua was teaching against the abuses of power. He was not against the things taught by the Pharshim, only against their abuse. We have seen much abuse in our own time. People will kill each other for the love of G-d. All abusers justify their actions with the idea that they are being faithful to G-d. Even the Spanish inquisition was perpetrated in the name of Jesus. Jews have suffered much at the hands of the church because of the Church's misplaced religious zeal. Toxic religion is not a new concept. Just as religious abuse today does not nullify real faith and real religious life, so the rightness of Jewish tradition is not negated because some people are abusive. Many pious Jews have lived their lives by those traditions. If Messianic Judaism is to be a real Judaism, the lifestyle of Judaism should become our lifestyle. It does not need to be Orthodox, but certainly, moving in a more traditional direction.

A second reason Messianic Jews should adopt a lifestyle and praxis more consistent with a traditional Jewish life is because it is *our* heritage. It is ours, handed down from our ancestors. If Messianic Jews are always borrowing from the church, whatever we end up with, it will not be Jewish. The one new man of Rav Shaul's writings never seems to be a Jewish man. If it is our destiny to be *the head and not the*

*tail* according to prophecy, it is time we cease following the trends of contemporary Christianity and find our expression of faith in traditional expressions of faith and practice. The answer is not to be solely a more biblical Judaism, because that will only make us different from the rest of the Jewish world. It would have been fine if we lived in the first century, but all the first century Jews are dead and have been dead for 2000 years. We are 21<sup>st</sup> century Jews, having as our heritage all the things the Jewish people have gone through over time, and we need to live a 21<sup>st</sup> century Messianic Judaism. We need to be able to address the issue of the Holocaust, and Jewish suffering, and Israel and anti-Semitism. We need to be able to speak to the issues of intermarriage and assimilation and our children's Jewish identity. If we only want to be "Biblical" Jews, then we might as well become a cloistered community and live apart from the world, and never hope to have an impact on anyone. The community of Qumran tried that, and it took 2000 years for them to have an impact. We can become a society for creative anachronisms, and our conferences can become renaissance fairs or civil war reenactments. If we choose to be with our people, we need to begin to *be* our people.

It is not easy to say what Messianic Judaism will look like in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, as it is hard to say what anything will look like in the future. In a sense it is like asking what a Biblical Jew looked like. A person would have to ask what kind of Biblical Jew, from which period? The patriarch's religion was not the same as the religion in King David's time and it differed still from the time of the Second Temple period. They dressed differently, they worshipped differently. The same can be said of the Messianic Movement. It is in process. What Messianic Jews were a hundred years ago is not what Messianic Jews were 25 years ago, and this is not what Messianic Jews are today. As we

enter the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the real question is what trajectory should Messianic Judaism be following? Should we be looking to Christianity, and take our cues from the latest trends, or should we be looking at what is going on in the Jewish world, and how it affects us.

An important concept not to be underestimated is the concept of community in the Jewish world. This involves the concept of *Ahavat Yisrael*, the love for all Jews. It involves helping all Jews in need. The Jewish community has many organizations for Jewish benevolence. No stipulations are placed upon the recipients. They are Jewish and in need, therefore they receive help.

In a similar way, in Jewish prayer, there is very little that is individual. When prayers are made, they are plural, because we pray for ourselves, and for all Israel. For this reason, even though people may be of different subgroups within the Jewish community, and may disrespect the other's viewpoint, they are still part of the whole. The whole Jewish world is shaken when a suicide bomber strikes Israelis. Even Hasidic Jews, who disdain secularism, get angry when they hear of Israeli casualties. When the Haredim in Israel pray, they pray, not just for themselves, but even for the secular Israelis who are not observant. When the secular Israelis fight, they fight not just for themselves, but even for the Haredim. It is all one community. The Jewish people are us and not them. For Messianic Judaism to be Judaism, it needs to value all Jews as part of us, and we as part of them. To do less is to relegate Messianic Judaism to the status of a belief system, and not a sub-community of the Jewish world. David ben Gurion, when asked after the creation of the State of Israel if he saw himself as a Zionist or an Israeli said, "first of all, before anything else, I am a Jew".



In some respects Messianic worship has something in common with most types of Judaism. Messianic worship is an integration of various elements of Jewish ritual, as well as elements more reminiscent of the church. Some congregations have dancing, musical accompaniment, and non traditional songs. In this sense it is similar to a Reconstructionist service. They are innovative, more interactive, and personally meaningful. On the other hand, they can be so innovative and interactive that the link with traditional worship becomes minimal at points.

Innovation can be good, but too much innovation is not. In the 1970's I had a friend who belonged to a very innovative Presbyterian church. Every week the service was completely different than the last. It attracted a lot of former hippies. They worshipped G-d's holiness and expressed their *grooviness*. After a year or so, my friend told me they went back to having traditional Presbyterian services. He said the new got old, and they longed for something that would be the same from week to week. One of the great values of a traditional service, with the same prayers week after week, and day after day, is that they don't change. They can be comforting, and reminds us that G-d Himself does not change.

A further problem is that in the Reconstructionist service, G-d seemed to be a side issue to the service, not as central as in the other branches of Judaism. This is problematic for a faith community, but Reconstructionist Judaism understands Judaism to be an evolving civilization more than a religion.

On a different level, the direction of Reform Judaism is a good one. Having their service mostly in English was an attempt to make it user friendly. Moving away from

kosher observance was an attempt to embrace the larger culture of America. Speaking of its early American proponent Isaac Meyer Wise, Arthur Hertzberg observes,

Wise was even more the representative figure of his generation as religious reformer. He was never ideologically consistent. At various times, he accepted and then rejected the religious authority of the Talmud and other rabbinic writings; he maintained that he subscribed to the divine origin of the Bible, without being particularly obedient to its culinary injunctions. Like the laity, his central objective was to ***rearrange Judaism to be at home in America*** (*sic*). In the late 1840's, near the beginning of his years in the United States, Wise began to work toward defining a *Minhag America*, a liturgy and set of practices which would belong uniquely to the New World. The older Judaism in which he and the other immigrants had been raised was full of the sorry of being Jewish in an unfriendly world. Here in America, so wise insisted, the time had come for Judaism without tears.<sup>10</sup>

The motivation of Reform Judaism was a good one. 150 years later, they realized they had moved too far and adopted a new platform advocating using more Hebrew in their service, and observing kosher laws as an attempt to rebuild Jewish identity and lifestyle. We can learn from Reform Judaism that in being too embracing of modern life, and being too user friendly, we can lose our own identity. We can also learn from the positive aspects of Reform Judaism. We need to be unafraid of change and admitting our mistakes. As they embraced modernity, we too need to keep up with the times and be relevant. As they developed a Judaism that people felt was non-threatening, so we need to have an entry level to our community that is non-threatening, but encourage people to grow in their practice of Messianic Jewish life.

We can learn from Orthodox Judaism that we need to live as Jews regardless of the surrounding culture. Even though there is a cost, it is worth any price for our children to have our heritage passed on to them. Even though some of our Gentile friends may not want to worship in a service that is “too Jewish”, our Jewish people will

---

<sup>10</sup> Arthur Hertzberg. *The Jews in America*, New York: Simon & Schuster. 1989 pp.121-122.

recognize that what we do is within the boundaries of Jewish life. It will say they are on home turf.

This does not mean the goal of Messianic Judaism is to become a clone of Orthodox Judaism, but it does mean we can learn from them. Their faithfulness to the tradition preserved our way of life so we could inherit it intact.

One obstacle to Messianic Judaism becoming more traditional is that most leaders were not raised in traditional households. While this may be the case, there is no sin in not knowing how to practice tradition properly. It is wrong, however, to not be willing to learn.

In the Jewish community, after the period when young Jewish children were taken from their parents to serve in the army as an attempt to separate them from their Jewishness, some Jews returned after their 25 years of military service not knowing how to practice Judaism properly. The community decided such people were considered as lost children, and not expected to take on more Mitzvot than they were able, because they were not raised with it. They learned as they were able, and applied it to their lives as they were able. This is how Messianic Judaism needs to approach tradition. It is not something that should be shunned because we don't understand. It is something that should be embraced as we are able. Some will do more, others less, but all should engage themselves in learning.

We can learn from Reconstructionist Judaism that even in our innovation, we need to make a place for traditional worship. It also serves as a reminder that G-d must never be made a side dish. Similarly, Yeshua must never be made a side issue. Some try to place Yeshua's name everywhere in the service so he would be central. That can leave

a person with the feeling I get when I see “Jesus Saves” spray painted on rocks along the highway. Even though I believe what it says, I find it out of place on natural rock formations that I would have enjoyed seeing without the graffiti. Prayer and ritual that speaks of the G-d of Israel is not less true or less meaningful because the name “Yeshua” isn’t spray painted on every prayer. Yeshua is the G-d of Israel. If we truly believe that Yeshua is the fullness of the Torah, then he is central to the service because we make him central in our focus, not because we name drop. We can add prayers that are not traditional that do speak more directly of Yeshua. An excellent example of this is in the siddur by John Fischer, where he adds Besorah<sup>11</sup> readings, as well as his composite on Yeshua. Praying traditional prayers binds us to our people and our past, in that the prayers we pray are the prayers prayed by fellow Jews for over 2000 years, and will be the prayers prayed by Jews until Yeshua returns, and perhaps, thereafter. Adding Messianic Prayer does not take away from the Jewishness of the service, and expresses Messianic distinctive. Keeping a contemporary musical section of the service does not diminish the Jewishness of the service. These things add life and joy to our worship.

Where we will end up in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, only G-d knows. Over the past 30 years we have become more cohesive in our approach. We have studied, and become more traditional than when we started. There was a time when the most traditional approach was “How to Grow a Messianic Jewish Synagogue” by Phil Goble. There was a time when Laying Tefillin was too controversial. We have come a long way. We have a longer way to go, but its ways are ways of pleasantness and all its paths are peace.

---

<sup>11</sup> Good News