

A DIFFERENT KIND OF DIALOGUE?

Messianic Judaism and Jewish-Christian Relations

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In the 1970s, both Jews and Christians were surprised to see the rise of a vigorous movement of Christian Jews. Messianic Jews embraced the evangelical definition of Christians as people who undergo experiences of conversion or being born again, as well as evangelical manners of reading the Bible and evangelical codes of personal morality, but wished to maintain a measure of Jewish culture and identity. The same years were the heydays of Christian-Jewish dialogue, which brought about a breakthrough in the relationship between the two faiths. Situated in a very different cultural and theological climate, Messianic Jews have engaged in a very different experiment in Christian-Jewish relations that also signified a new understanding of the relationship between the two faiths, albeit in a very different manner than liberal Christians and Jews envisioned. Students of Christian-Jewish relations in our time should therefore pay attention to the Messianic Jewish movement, which, like the dialogue, also signified a change of heart in relation to the Jews, this time among conservative Christians.

Historical background and early years

The roots of the new movement can be traced to Pietist and evangelical missionary ideology in the modern era that advocated the position that accepting the Christian faith did not stand in contradiction to Jewish identity but rather made it more complete. The evangelical premillennialist view that has considered the Jews to be the Chosen People has also served to offer justification for maintaining Jewish identity, customs, and symbols. There were attempts at creating communities of Jewish-Christians

in the nineteenth century, but such experiments were short-lived. “Judaizing” had traditionally been considered heresy, and many expressed suspicion toward the idea of separate Jewish congregations. Converts too were often afraid of arousing suspicion that their conversions were not genuine and, as a rule, chose to join non-Jewish churches.¹ Attitudes gradually changed, and in the 1920s, the Presbyterian Church, USA, initiated the establishment of Jewish-Christian congregations, intending them to serve as centers of evangelism among the Jews as well as communities where being ethnically Jewish was normative.

The more assertive and independent movement of Messianic Judaism that came on the scene in the 1970s represented a new generation that possessed unprecedented freedoms of choice, including the amalgamation of traditions, which previous generations had considered alien to each other. This offered Messianic Jews a sense of mission as they felt that they were healing historical injuries. The new movement has attempted to create a young and exciting vision of Christianity that worked around traditional views of a faith alien to Jews. Evangelical Christian attitudes also changed and became more accepting toward ethnic pride and incorporation of symbols and customs from other traditions, such as Native Americans, although an amalgamation of the Christian faith and Jewish identity was, perhaps, even more daring. The war in June 1967, between Israel and its neighbors, also affected the manner in which evangelical Christians had come to view the Jews and their role in history, boosting the converts’ status, their pride in their roots, and their desire to maintain Jewish identity.²

In the first phase of the movement, Jewish converts to Christianity established congregations on their own initiative, which were largely independent of the control of missionary societies or Christian denominations. An early and central congregation, within the larger movement, has been Beth Yeshua in Philadelphia. In the late 1960s, Joe Finkelstein, a chemist and a Jewish convert to Christianity, gathered a group of Jewish teenagers who were looking for an alternative to their parents’ middle-class environment, as well as a haven from the more dangerous aspects of the counterculture. The Christian-Jewish communities demanded abstinence from drugs, alcohol, and premarital sex and encouraged their members to obey the law and work hard toward careers. Finkelstein initially brought the new converts to the Presbyterian-sponsored Hebrew

Christian center in downtown Philadelphia, but the young converts did not take well to the older Jewish-Presbyterian congregation, viewing it as lacking in Jewish atmosphere, and they decided to establish their own congregation, which grew considerably.³ Messianic congregations serve as centers of evangelism with sermons promoting the Christian evangelical creed, striving to inspire the non-converted in the audience to convert.

Christian and Jewish reactions

While Messianic Judaism represented Christian evangelical theology and morality, it struggled in its early years to secure its legitimacy within the larger evangelical movement, on the whole very successfully. One of its defenders, James Hutchens, wrote his doctoral dissertation “A Case for Messianic Judaism” at the evangelical Fuller Theological Seminary in 1974. Hutchens, who converted to Judaism while holding on to his belief in the Messiahship of Jesus, advocated Messianic Judaism as a means for Jews to accept the Christian faith while retaining the cultural components of their Jewish heritage. Beyond “the core faith,” the cultural dresses were variable and open for choice, he contended.⁴ Attempting to advance the cause of evangelism among Jews, missionary groups, such as the American Board of Missions to the Jews, and denominations, such as the Assemblies of God, began sponsoring Messianic congregations, often more moderate in inserting elements of the Jewish tradition. In a manner typical to many ethnic evangelical communities, a number of Messianic Jewish communities share buildings with non-Jewish congregations, signifying the affinity in faith. It was, perhaps, not a coincidence that when the evangelical group, the Promise Keepers, launched a major rally in Washington, D.C., in 1997, two groups of born-again Christians were particularly visible. Messianic Jews came to the gathering dressed with *talitot*, prayer shawls, and holding *shofarot* and rams horns, and Native Americans came dressed in their traditional attire and decorated with American Indian symbols.

Liberal Protestants have looked less favorably upon the new movement than their conservative counterparts. The years in which Messianic Judaism made its debut were the heyday of the Jewish-Christian Dialogue. From the liberal point of view, there was no necessity any more for Jews to turn to Christianity, certainly not to conservative forms of Christianity, which liberals cared little for anyhow.⁵ The liberals were interested in

speaking with “real” Jews, and in learning from a “sister religion,” not from Messianic Judaism, which they did not consider to be a valid form of the religion they were now looking at in a new light. Both liberal Christians and Jews considered Messianic Judaism to be a bizarre fringe group and did not take it very seriously. And those engaged in dialogue were well aware of the negative reaction of Jews to all forms of evangelism and their concern over Jewish continuity.

While not unified or consistent, Jewish reactions to the new movement demonstrated what Jews considered the legitimate boundaries of Judaism as a religion and as a community. In general, Jews did not take seriously the Messianic Jewish belief that one could embrace Christianity and remain Jewish and considered the groups to be either fraudulent or bizarre. “Beth Yeshua,” wrote Michael Mach about the Messianic Jewish congregation, “is part of...an Orwellian world of Jewish-Christian confusion where things are never as they ought to be, and rarely as they seem...”⁶ Rabbi Ronald Gittelsohn wrote “Jews for Jesus is only one of several aberrant religious or psuedoreligious cults flourishing today on the American scene.”⁷ Jewish Orthodox activists founded organizations to fight groups such as Messianic Jews, whom they considered to be in essence Christian missionaries. In Israel, the ultra-Orthodox organization *Yad L’Achim* (A Hand for the Brethren) has made a name for itself in combating missionaries and congregations of Jewish believers in Jesus.⁸ The rise and further spread of Messianic Judaism stirred also liberal Jews to action. In the 1980s, Jewish leaders and organizations thought that they should prepare Jewish youth for a possible encounter with the new rhetoric of Christian evangelism and the option of Messianic Judaism, by publishing “know what to answer” books. These tracts did not speak in one voice, each book representing a different Jewish point of view. Lawrence M. Silverman, a Reform rabbi, demonstrated a progressive Jewish opinion declaring that in contrast to evangelical Christian and Messianic Jewish beliefs “The messianic age will come to pass in this world!” and “We do not believe that personal salvation and eternal life should be overriding concerns in one’s life.”⁹

While many Jews have continued to look upon Messianic Judaism suspiciously as an alien and bizarre development, some have reconsidered their position. Messianic Judaism grew and has turned into a permanent feature of the religious and cultural scene in Jewish population centers around the globe, and some Jews began looking at them in a new manner.

Articles on Messianic Jews in Jewish periodicals, such as *Moment* and the *Jerusalem Report*, appearing in 1990–2010, treated the converts more respectfully and presented their case in a surprisingly impartial tone. In 2000, Dan Cohn-Sherbok, a Reform rabbi, published a book on Messianic Judaism, which in essence called for an inclusive definition of Judaism and the acceptance of the movement.

A subculture of their own

While struggling to be accepted, Messianic Judaism has, throughout 1970–2010, developed its own subculture, complete with conferences and organizations, youth movements and summer camps, prayer books, hymnals, theological tracts, periodicals, and web sites. By the early 2010s, there were about 300 Messianic Jewish congregations in America with a noticeable presence in evangelical life going beyond those numbers. There are about 100 communities in Israel and dozens more in Europe, Latin America, and the former Soviet bloc. Messianic Jewish communities follow mainstream conservative evangelical social and cultural norms. For example, all Messianic rabbis or ministers are men. However, Messianic Judaism is not a unified or uniform community. A major division between Messianic congregations is between Charismatics and non-Charismatics, reflecting a division within the larger evangelical community. Another difference is over Jewish tradition and rites. On the one end of the spectrum stand those who have been very hesitant to observe Jewish rites and customs and have adopted a liturgy close to that of non-Jewish congregations, and on the other end, those who advocate extensive incorporation of Jewish rites, including reading from a Torah scroll, wearing *yarmulkes* during services, and placing an arc of the covenant in the sanctuary. None, however, have made the claim that there is a requirement to observe Jewish rites in order to be justified in the eyes of God.¹⁰ Many Messianic congregations have compiled or adopted Messianic Jewish *siddurs* (prayer books), which pick and choose elements of the traditional Jewish prayer book, coupled with prayers that give expression to faith in Jesus and his role as the Redeemer. Almost all congregations celebrate Jewish holidays, such as Passover, reading the liturgy from Messianic *Haggadot*, which similarly pick elements of traditional *Haggadot* with prayers that give expression to the members' faith in Jesus.¹¹

In spite of their promotion of Jewish identity, symbols and cultural elements, Messianic Jewish communities have attracted non-Jewish members, who often account for a large percentage, and at times the majority, of the participants. The percentage of intermarried couples within the congregations is also high.¹² In essence, Messianic congregations serve as meeting spaces for Jews and non-Jews holding to a conservative Protestant faith as well as to the idea of the role of Jews and Israel in God's plans for humanity.¹³ Messianic Jews, like conservative evangelicals in general, subscribe to conservative social and political views, seeing themselves as patriotic Americans or Israelis. Messianic Jews support Israel, along similar understanding as those of many premillennialist evangelicals. Their relation to Israel serves to re-affirm their Jewish identity at the same time that it carries the theological perceptions and political agenda of the evangelical camp.

The Messianic Jewish messages and vocabulary had a dramatic effect in Israel in the last three decades. Previously, the number of conversions to Christianity in Israel was small, but the tide changed. Faith in Zionism as an all-encompassing ideology, providing hope, meaning, and a sense of purpose, weakened considerably, leaving plenty of room for alternative faiths to gain followers in the Israeli spiritual and communal market.¹⁴ Young Israelis began joining new religious movements and thousands became "returnees to tradition," while others accepted the Christian faith in its Messianic Jewish form. The community of Messianic Jews in Israel grew from no more than a few hundred people in the mid-1960s to over 15,000 by the 2010s.¹⁵ Much of the stigma surrounding conversion to Christianity has faded, at least in the non-Orthodox community, as Israeli culture became more inclusive and diverse. For many Israelis, the image of Christianity, particularly in its Western European or American form, has changed dramatically, turning from a hostile faith to the religion of friendly visitors, volunteers, colleagues, friends, and supporters. A public opinion poll in the late 1980s discovered that most Israelis were willing to accept Messianic Jews.¹⁶ This is not to say that Messianic Jews did not encounter opposition and even occasional harassment.

Messianic Jewish theology

Struggling for acceptance as both Jews and Christians, Messianic Jewish thinkers have produced a series of theological tracts that have come to

define and defend the movement's unique path. Their work has not been uniform and has given voice to a spectrum of opinions, although almost all thinkers have contended that Jews who have embraced Christianity were following in the path of the original Christians, making Messianic Judaism a continuation of the earliest form of Christianity. David Stern, a leader and thinker in the Messianic Jewish movement in Israel, translated and edited a Messianic Jewish New Testament. In it, he changed the traditional translation of Paul's *Epistle to the Hebrews* into a *Letter to Messianic Jews*.¹⁷ Another trend in Messianic Jewish thinking has been a gradual move into a more independent form of Jewish-Christian identity. This development has manifested itself in the work of Arnold Fruchtenbaum, a relatively moderate Messianic thinker. In the 1970s, Fruchtenbaum defined himself as a Hebrew Christian, a more moderate form of Jewish-Christian identity, and was skeptical about the more assertive forms of Messianic Judaism.¹⁸ In *Hebrew Christianity: Its Theology, History and Philosophy*, Fruchtenbaum declared that "the Hebrew Christian should be a member of the local church along with Gentile believers."¹⁹ Fruchtenbaum modified his views a number of years later, and Ariel Ministries, which he founded and led, has been instrumental in the establishment of a number of Messianic Jewish congregations. In 1985, Fruchtenbaum defended the right of Jewish believers in Jesus to establish congregations and observe Jewish rites if they so wished, as long as they looked upon it as an option and did not consider it a requirement toward salvation.²⁰ David Stern's *Messianic Jewish Manifesto* has been one of the better known Messianic theological tracts, in which he presented the merits and goals of the movement as he understood them: "By providing a Jewish environment for Messianic faith, Messianic Judaism is useful in evangelizing Jews."²¹ And: "It is useful in focusing the Church's attention on the Jewish people."²² Stern's declaration that Messianic Jews are not half Christian and half Jews, but rather fully Christian and fully Jewish has become a cornerstone of Messianic Jewish self-understanding at the turn of the twenty-first century.

At the turn of the twenty-first century, a number of Messianic Jewish thinkers, on both sides of the Atlantic, have come up with new suggestions as to how to understand and practice a more independent amalgamation of Judaism and Christianity. Gershon Nerel, an Israeli Messianic intellectual, has advocated for a greater reliance on the sacred scriptures.

An ardent premillennialist, Nerel views Israel as fulfilling an important role in God's plans for humanity and criticizes Christians who, in his view, undermine Israel.²³ Tsvi Sadan, editor of *Kivun*, a Messianic Jewish Israeli journal, has militated for an independent understanding of the Jewish faith in Jesus divorced from evangelical conservative theology. Mark Kinzer and Stuart Dauermann are founders and leaders of *Hashivenu* ("Bring us Back," in Hebrew), a group of Messianic Jewish intellectuals who promote a more independent Jewish-Christian culture and thought, including the idea that Jewish-Christians should, at least in certain instances, look for inspiration in Jewish, post-Biblical sources and ignore post-scriptural Christian texts that may no longer be very relevant.²⁴ Using traditional Jewish language, the group has formulated its agenda: "We seek an authentic expression of Jewish life maintaining substantial continuity with Jewish traditions...It is our conviction that *Hashem* brings Messianic Jews to a richer knowledge of himself through a modern day rediscovery of the paths of our ancestors—*Avodah* (liturgical worship), *Torah* (study of the sacred texts), and *Gemilut Chasadim* (deeds of loving-kindness)." Hashivenu and its circle point to the growing diversity within the larger Messianic Jewish movement, where different communities and individuals have placed greater emphasis on varied components of the Jewish-Christian amalgam. One can also look upon the group as an avant-garde, which wishes to transform Messianic Judaism from a movement that adheres to evangelical theology into one that relies more on Jewish sources, creating a more balanced mixture of the two traditions.

Messianic Judaism has challenged traditional Christian and Jewish understandings of the boundaries between the two faiths on a number of levels. It has certainly offered an alternative to Jewish conversion to and disappearance into Christian society and culture. From its own perspective, it has also created an option of being Jewish and Christian at the same time, with some elements in the movement working on strengthening the Jewish component of the amalgam. Somewhat unwittingly, the movement has also posed a challenge to the dialogue and exchange that has developed between liberal Christians and Jews parallel to the rise of Messianic Judaism. The dialogue has been based on the existence of two separate traditions, which, while endlessly diverse, still held some clear borders. Few were willing to consider the Messianic Jewish movement as a borderline set of communities. For many observers treating Messianic Judaism

seriously, it was more Christian than Jewish, a Jewish ethnic version of evangelical Christianity. Even as such, Messianic Judaism should be seen as a different kind of dialogue—a development that signified a new chapter in the relationship of conservative Christians toward Judaism and Jews, showing greater appreciation toward Judaism and its symbols and customs. Ironically, while advocating mostly conservative views on political, social, and cultural issues, this evangelical-Jewish movement is an avant-garde form of post-modern realities, in which individuals and communities exercise their freedom to carry a series of identities and struggle to negotiate between them. Such hybrids have become prevalent in contemporary Christian and Jewish communities, which, since the 1960s, often tended toward innovation and amalgamation of different traditions and practices. One can notice that, for example, in the rise of a large movement of Jewish practitioners of Buddhism, many of whom have not seen a contradiction between their Jewish identity and their Buddhist practices. The rise of Messianic Judaism is still more extraordinary than the coming on the scene of Jewish Buddhists, because Judaism and Buddhism do not share a long history of competition and suspicion. These new movements therefore challenge long-prevailing sensitivities and will continue to do so for quite a while.

Notes

1. Cf. Elias Newman, "Looking Back Twenty Five Years," *The Hebrew Christian Alliance Quarterly*, 25 (1940): 24.
2. Louis Goldberg, *Turbulence Over the Middle East: Israel and the Nations in Confrontation and the Coming Kingdom of Peace on Earth* (Neptune, NJ: Loizeaux Brothers, 1982).
3. Cf. Carol Harris-Shapiro, "Syncretism or Struggle: The Case of Messianic Judaism," a Ph.D. dissertation (Temple University, 1992), 44.
4. James Hutchens, "A Case for Messianic Judaism," Ph. D. Dissertation, Fuller Theological Seminary, 1974.
5. cf. James k. Wellman, *Evangelical vs. Liberal: The Clash of Christian Cultures in the Pacific Northwest* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008).
6. "Jews for Jesus Is New Freak Group," *Jewish Post and Opinion*, May 14, 1971.
7. Ronald Gittlesohn, "Jews for Jesus: Are They Real?" in Gary D. Eisenberg ed., *Smashing the Idols* (Lanham, MD: Jason Aronson, 1988), 171.
8. On ongoing activities of *Yad L'Achim* cf. www.yadlachimusa.org.il
9. Lawrence Silverman, *What to Say When the Missionary Comes to Your Door* (Plymouth, MA: Plymouth Lodge—B'nai Brith, n.d.).
10. See *Sheelot ve Teshuvot* [in Hebrew] (Rischon Letsion: Hagafen Publishing House, 1986), 17–8; Frequently asked Judaism question about Messianic covenant and love messianic outreach. <http://www.teshuvah.com/tomj/index.html> March 21, 1995.

11. See, for example, Eric Peter Lipson, *Passover Haggadah, A Messianic Celebration* (San Francisco: JFJ Publications, 1986); Ron Tavalin, *Kol Hessed Messianic Haggadah* (N.P.: Dogwood Press, 1993); Harold A. Sevener, ed. *Passover Haggadah for Biblical Jews and Christians* (Orangeburg, NY: Chosen People Publications, n.d.).
12. Cf. Michael Schiffman, *The Return of the Remnant*, 126, and Sidney Goldstein, "Profile of American Jewry: Insights From the 1990 National Jewish Population Survey," *American Jewish Year Book* (1992): 124–28.
13. On non-Jews versus Jews in Messianic Congregations, see Shoshanah Feher, *Passing Over Easter: Constructing the Boundaries of Messianic Judaism* (Walnut Creek, CA: Altamira Press, 1998).
14. Benjamin Beit-Hallahmi, *Despair and Deliverance: Private Salvation in Contemporary Israel* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1992).
15. Kai Kjaer-Hansen and Bodil F. Skjott, *Facts and Myths About the Messianic Congregation in Israel, 1998-1999*, *Mishkan* 30/31 (1999). This special issue examines the demographics of Messianic congregations in Israel in the late 1990s. The authors promoted a conservative estimate of the number of Jewish members in such congregations.
16. "Dahaf Report on Israeli Public Opinion Concerning Messianic Jewish Aliyah," (Jerusalem: David Stern, 1988).
17. David H. Stern, *Jewish New Testament* (Jerusalem: Jewish New Testament Publications, 1990), 295.
18. Arnold G. Fruchtenbaum, *Hebrew Christianity: Its Theology, History and Philosophy* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1974).
19. Fruchtenbaum, *Hebrew Christianity*, 88.
20. "An Interchange on Hebrew Christian/Messianic Jewish Congregation," Appendix 3, in Arnold G. Fruchtenbaum, *Israelology: The Missing Link in Systematic Theology* (Tustin, CA: Ariel Ministries, 1983), 917–49.
21. David H. Stern, *Messianic Jewish Manifesto* (Jerusalem: Jewish New Testament Publications, 1988).
22. Stern, *Messianic Jewish Manifesto*, 12.
23. I am thankful to Gershon Nerel for sharing his thoughts with me. On Nerel's ideas, see Richard Harvey, "A Typology of Messianic Jewish Theology," *Mishkan* 57 (2008), 15–6.
24. The group's website: www.hashivenu.org