

## Our Relationship as Messianic Jews with the Wider Jewish Community from my Perspective

By Diane Cohen

I am a Jewish woman, born Jewish, all Jewish ancestors, married to a Jewish man. I can't speak from any other perspective and I do not discount any other approach. I can only speak to what I know based on my personal experiences.

Having served as president of Congregation Ruach Israel in Needham, MA for the past 6 years, I have had the privilege of being able to interface with leaders of the Boston Jewish community as an ambassador on behalf of Messianic Judaism. At this point in the road, I would say the journey has been two steps forward, one step back, on the subject of advancement of understanding by these Jewish leaders, at least in the Boston area, of who we are and what we are about. I have had much more success on a one-on-one basis in dialoguing with Jews in non-Jewish community leadership positions regarding their understanding Messianic Judaism as a denomination of Judaism rather than it being a form of Christianity. I have experienced over the last eleven years, since the time I first became a believer in Yeshua, what I perceive as a softening of the hearts of our Jewish brethren, a work I believe is of HaShem and one which makes my role increasingly easier, and encouraging.

Many of you may have heard about the Moshav Band concert that occurred at our synagogue in December 2009. When I had the idea to invite them to perform, it probably was very naïve of me since I did not anticipate the extreme negative reaction this seemingly simple plan would generate in the wider Jewish community in Boston. In a way, my being somewhat of a new "believer" is a blessing. I just ask and talk and don't have much defensiveness or fear of the consequences that would temper such requests from someone more experienced in our movement. Even though I'm no longer a newbie, my innocence has been replaced with a strident voice against the injustice we often experience as Messianic Jews and motivates me to continue my goal of educating the Jewish community about Messianic Judaism. The reasons for this are several, as will be developed in this paper.

When I contacted Yehuda Solomon of the Moshav Band, I was very direct with him that our synagogue is Messianic Jewish and sent him the link to our website. Although I didn't think it would be a show stopper (as it literally almost was), I did know we were controversial. From the time of his acceptance of our offer until about a month before the concert, there were some adverse reactions in the Jewish community including his manager quitting, but nothing too difficult for either Yehuda or me to handle. However, once we began to publicize the concert, the band's fan base which is primarily Orthodox, became very vocal.

Hebrew College, Brandeis University, the Newton JCC, and local synagogues had not hesitated to put up our flyers. Another obvious place to advertise was in Brookline, the heart of the Boston Orthodox Jewish community where most of the band's local fan base lives. The Israel Book Shop is a landmark in Brookline, MA, a popular Jewish shopping spot, and therefore, an obvious choice in addition to Kolbo's, another nearby shop that had no problem posting our concert flyer. I looked at the bulletin board at the

Israel Book Shop and noticed that there were postings by secular organizations, so I asked the sales person if I could put up our ad for the concert. The flyer on its face did not designate us as Messianic.

A short time later, a posting appeared on a Jewish Boston listserve which seemed to be a posting by the Israel Book Shop. The post was very condemning of Messianic Judaism and stated that the concert was obviously a sham since there is no way the Moshav Band would ever do a concert at our synagogue. The post stated, "These organizations use very deceptive tactics to attract our fellow Jews into their lairs."

Needless to say I was horrified. I went to the office of the Orthodox attorney next to mine who I thought might help me get to the bottom of this. He helped me get onto the Jewish Boston listserve where I posted the following:

First, let me fully disclose that I am a Messianic Jew. I am president of Ruach Israel and I put up the advertisement for the Moshav Band at the Israel Book Shop on Sunday, November 15th. I did so with the permission of the person who was working at the counter. I showed her the ad and she helped me put it up. I had noticed there was an ad for an event at Home Depot so I concluded that the location for the ad was not just for religious organizations.

In fairness to the salesperson, we did not discuss the type of synagogue that was hosting the concert. Since it is not a religious service, but rather, is a concert, the religious denomination of the venue is not relevant to the ad. I don't see many concert ads at synagogues that start with "Temple Whatever, a Conservative shul, is having a concert." However, I apologize for any embarrassment this may have caused the Israel Book Shop. They absolutely did not know that Ruach Israel is a Messianic synagogue when they helped me post the ad.

As for the Moshav Band, I informed them up front who we are, that we are a Messianic synagogue, and what we believe. They rightly are not interested in our religious beliefs since, after all, we are having a concert, not a service.

I do take issue with the statement, "These organizations use very deceptive tactics to attract our fellow Jews into their lairs." I'm just a Jew observing my faith; may you be well as you do so too.

Diane Cohen

President, Ruach Israel

The Orthodox attorney I work with came into my office to discuss this whole situation. He explained to me that the original posting was not actually by the Israel Book Shop and he and others were embarrassed by it. He and I had some of our first very meaningful discussions about Messianic Judaism at that time. And because my colleague is also a rabbi in that community, he has shared these insights with many others there as well. I realized that concert or no concert, important dialogue was now stirring within the Orthodox Jewish community about Messianic Judaism. Rumors and stereotypes were being dispelled.

However, it was not an easy time generally. Below are excerpts of interactions on the listserve:

Diane,

Your belief that Jesus is the Messiah is completely antithetical to Judaism. Calling yourself a "Jew" is indeed deceptive.

David

David, I respect your opinion and you are indeed entitled to it. It might be hard to convince my four Jewish grandparents, my two Jewish parents, including my mother, of course, and my Jewish husband and children that we're somehow not Jewish. And each day as I pray Shachrit and each Shabbat at services, especially during the Torah portion, it's pretty hard to not feel like I'm Jewish.

I believe volumes have been written on what it means to be Jewish and I don't believe faith in Yeshua as the Messiah is a definitional standard.

Diane

Diane, You mean it must be devastating for your four Jewish grandparents, two Jewish parents and the rest of the Jewish people that you've gotten yourself wrapped up in a cult. Do you really not suspect in any way that the superficial observance of Jewish law might be a deceptive ploy to get Jews such as yourself to buy into Christianity?

David

Sorry David. We'll just have to agree to disagree.

Diane

Diane,

In that case, perhaps it would be worthwhile for you to check out <http://jewsforjudaism.org/>. Unless of course you're afraid of what you may find out.

All the best, David

Thanks, David. I am familiar with that website. I look forward to a day when we Jews can be respectful of each other's differences and truly be able to work together to address issues we face that are the real threats to our Judaism.

I appreciate your passion and I know your heart is with Adonai, our one and only G-d.

Shalom,

Diane

I received other negative e-mails and learned firsthand what many of you already know – that many in the Orthodox community have very negative impressions of Messianic Jews, to quote them, “We are wolves in sheep’s clothing trying to steal Jews” and we’re “luring Jews into churches to get them to worship Jesus” and into becoming Christians. There’s no middle ground in this thinking – a Messianic Jew is not a Jew; he or she is a Christian using deception to brainwash Jews away from their Judaism.

With that thinking as a backdrop, and Yehuda receiving even more hate mail than I, it wasn’t surprising that I received the inevitable message from him on Thanksgiving weekend that year, just a couple weeks before the scheduled concert, that the band would have to cancel. I wrote to him the following:

Yehuda: I understand completely your feelings. Yesterday was an amazing day for me as well.

For the first time, I learned about this controversy. There is a Jewish list-serve in Boston that apparently had received a letter stating that someone had put up an ad at the Israel Book Shop about the concert and it was written in a very unflattering way with lies about us and horrible accusations. This was brought to our rabbi's attention by one of our congregants.

I joined the list-serve group so that I could respond and clear the air. The result was very strident interchange from just one writer, actually, and requests from others for how to get tickets.

I would not want you to do anything to jeopardize your livelihood. And

I understand that there are some in the Orthodox community that have very strong feelings about this. However, playing a concert is not supporting a theology; it is just playing a concert.

I would urge you to reconsider. I would never expect an Orthodox rabbi to agree with our beliefs. And I respect their beliefs, as I do Reform Jews, Conservative, etc. The air of intolerance is actually what I find it harder to agree with, and the air of uninformed judgment and condemnation as well.

Due to the controversy, you received free advertising in that the list-serve readers were made aware of the concert. In addition, earlier this week, all of the Reform and Conservative synagogues in Needham and Newton asked for flyers for your concert. I don't know if you really want a vocal minority to be the last word on your decision.

And in fairness Yehuda, I can't guarantee what will happen. But this much I know: intolerance is not a part of anyone's religion.

I will await your final thoughts on this very sad situation.

Diane

The result was that Yehuda called me and we discussed the issue at length. He was frankly shocked that I “turned the other cheek” instead of threatening to sue him (a thought which never crossed my mind, of course.) We discussed theology. His and his rabbi's issues concerned the resolution of these two questions: first, since the New Testament contradicts the Old Testament (his words), does the NT supersede the OT in importance? And what is the rank of Torah in importance? I explained to him that we look at the New Testament as a continuation of the Old Testament and we look at Yeshua as the living Torah. We discussed the many passages of the NT that are interpreted as anti-Semitic and contradictory. It was a fascinating discussion. I explained to him our understanding of Isaiah 53 . He probed whether we pray to Jesus as Lord (his words.) I told him we do not pray to Jesus/Yeshua as separate from God, that HaShem includes Yeshua as part of Himself. I discussed how God somehow put Himself physically on earth to live with us for awhile and somehow in a way we can't truly comprehend, Yeshua is God. We discussed the trinity (his words.) He shared stories of studying Yeshua in school. It was a great conversation.

Afterwards, he and his rabbi studied Ruach Israel's website (for an hour)! At the end of the day, they concluded the Moshav Band could do the concert at our synagogue, which in my opinion, was a pivotal moment in Messianic Jewish and mainstream Jewish relations, a day which brought the Jewish community suffering from such a schism over millennia together for an evening of music by a musician of great courage and integrity, one who would even jeopardize his own financial wellbeing in order to do the right thing. A man of God. A quote from my journal:

One by one they came through the door, and finally Yehuda. We hugged and smiled. I asked him if things had calmed down a bit with the complaints, and he said, “ Shlomo [Carlebach] taught me that if you’re about to do something really good, often times really bad things come at you, evil to pull you away from the good. Every time I get another one of those complaints, I know even more that what I’m about to do is really good.”

The concert was amazing beyond words. Yehuda’s heart for kindness, his understanding that love is what brings down the barriers, rang out in words and song. My favorite song had words about love breaking down barriers and standing firm. He shared words of insight, how the moshav he grew up on is very close to where the Maccabees stood their ground. He suggested we remember they were a small minority, but because of them we even have Jews today. How that lesson resonates to us as Messianic Jews. (My observation.)

The concert generated front page coverage in “The Jewish Advocate”, one of if not the largest Jewish newspaper in circulation which featured interviews of Yehuda and me. Although the story was not unbiased, the fact that the concert had occurred and that so many Jewish organizations allowed advertising was definitely a step forward in normalizing our relationship with the greater Jewish community. It was a breakthrough in the process.

The Moshav Band experience presents a microcosm of the issue, that is, mainstream Judaism generally does not consider Messianic Judaism as a part of Judaism. There can be Jew-Bhus, secular Jews, even Humanistic Jews who may not even believe in God, but these fellow Jews would still be part of the Jewish family and welcome in the local community mikvah (where we are not). We Messianic Jews, however, have somehow crossed the religious identity barrier by our embracing of Yeshua, and therefore, have become Christians. So you may ask, so what? After all, the Church has been our brother in this walk and integrally a part of our identity, our nurturing partner to whom in many ways through its support we owe our very existence today.

From my perspective as a Jewish woman who came to know Yeshua after many years being a part of the Jewish community, the answer is obvious. I am Jewish. I did not convert to Christianity just because I came to a fuller understanding of the Messiahship of Yeshua. Judaism is our common ground. By normalizing the relationship between Messianic Judaism and mainstream Judaism, I, and other Messianic Jews like me, have the ability to dialogue with Jews about our religious beliefs. Our disagreements about Yeshua become infighting and a discussion we can have without threat of assimilation. And as we have these amazing discussions, hearts are softening, minds are opening, dialogue is occurring which otherwise would not be possible. As I talk to other Jews, I retain my Jewish identity which overcomes the barrier they may otherwise feel by discussing the subject of Yeshua. We discuss Him as fellow Jews.

My experience with the Jewish community has been quite different depending on whether I am dealing with the gatekeepers or the lay people. I sometimes analogize this to how it must have been in

the time of Yeshua, i.e., His experiencing very different treatment from the Jewish leadership as compared to the Jewish people, generally. Although I continue to have meetings with Jewish leaders, the ability for our synagogue to advertise in Jewish media, for example, has been very limited. When we have had successes in that area, they don't last long as most likely negative feedback from Jewish readers forces those with whom I've interfaced to remove our listings.

On the other hand, Ruach Israel has been a regular supporter of the Boston Jewish Music Festival without repercussion. This result started with my contacting the organizers who initially had many questions about us and the usual reservations. Ironically, the very band manager who had resigned from the Moshav Band was now sitting on the board of the BJMF! I had decided to contact the organizer based on a quote on their website about the diversity of Judaism. I called him to probe this point and ask whether Ruach Israel could participate as a supporter of the festival as a synagogue. This suggestion really stretched the fellow's thinking, but as we talked he couldn't help but hear the merits of the argument, i.e., what does diversity really mean? At this point I was much more savvy about consequences so I warned him that if they accepted us, our meager \$500 donation would be nothing compared to the potential loss of big Jewish donors and Jewish organizations that may be offended by our participation. Nevertheless, he was a man of integrity and took us on. We are now in year three of this relationship and he and I continue to dialogue.

Similarly, I have participated in the Hebrew College Salon Series discussing in seminars the plight of Messianic Jews vis-à-vis discrimination at the hands of their own people. I find the raising of this awareness in Jewish circles has been met with great openness and often the same surprise that I first experienced, i.e., how can Jews known for their acceptance of diversity be so judgmental of Messianic Judaism? Again, the rank-and-file Jew rather than Jewish leadership is much more open to this dialogue.

As suggested, one might ask why such connections with mainstream Judaism are so important, despite the obvious one of the ability to educate others about who we are. It's not about acceptance. It's about normalization. Messianic Jews are Jews. At this point in the history of our movement, we are fortunate to be able to reclaim this truth and to be able to live it out in synagogues such as Ruach Israel, and others. By the normalization of Messianic Judaism within mainstream Judaism, over time the result should be more Jews coming to faith in Yeshua since there is more day-to-day opportunity for dialogue on the subject. As hard as this may be for the reader to believe, in my experience, most Jews still believe Jesus/Yeshua started a new religion, i.e., Christianity, even if He at one point was Jewish. Add to that 2,000 years of anti-Semitism. The result is a huge emotional barrier – called "fear" (of assimilation and persecution)- that prevents most mainstream Jews from possibly considering Yeshua, and Messianic Judaism, as part of Judaism, let alone Yeshua as part of the Godhead. On the other hand, once the relationship between mainstream Judaism and Messianic Judaism is normalized, the emotional wall which prevents the majority of Jews (in my experience) from even discussing Yeshua will come down. After that, it is just a matter of time before hearts are softened and beliefs are changed.

I know that in the late 60s and early 70s many Jews came to faith in Yeshua. It must have been a powerfully moving time to be in our movement. Today, at least from my perspective, it seems it's one person at a time, more from the ground up than from the top down. But there is movement. And times,

they are a changin'! Recently JewishReviewofBooks.com did a review of three books about Yeshua in an article entitled "What a Friend We Have in Jesus" which included review of some New Testaments as well as Rabbi Boteach's "Kosher Jesus". Are these reviews great on the theology? Of course not. But get Jews talking about Yeshua as a starting point instead of fear of the entire subject, well, that's a good start in my opinion. We crawled before we walked before we ran.

Another good example of the power of normalization is Surprise Lake Camp, the oldest continually running Jewish camp in the U.S. Several summers ago we approached this organization about holding our Messianic Jewish teen camp, Camp Or L'Dor at their facility. The looks on their faces were amazing, like not positive! However, we were able to spend an entire day there to meet the rabbi, the camp director, various staff, and talk, and talk, and talk, and listen as well. There is no doubt, at least in my experiences with the camp personnel as well as with the Jewish community generally, that their main perception of Messianic Jews was that we are judgmental of them if they don't believe in Jesus and that we no longer follow Torah. Many of them were unfamiliar with the existence of Messianic Jewish synagogues, or ones with Jewish-type services, but rather, they assumed we now go to churches. I listened to their experiences with Messianic Jews and they listened to my description of Messianic Judaism. Thankfully we were given the opportunity for them to let us come and try it, i.e., to hold our camp there at the same time that they would be running their regular camp for the several hundred Jewish campers also there during the same week. There is no question in my mind that if we were not able to interface with them in a way consistent with traditional Jewish practices, we would not have had the opportunity to utilize those facilities. Thankfully, the vision of our particular camp fits well with a traditional Jewish camp. And as you will see, we did not hide our belief in Yeshua!!

We just completed our third summer there and all I can say is that Surprise Lake Camp can't wait to have us back. We have formed deep and meaningful relationships with the camp rabbi and staff. They have attended our Messianic Jewish services and continue to tell us how beautiful they are. They have had our rabbi co-lead services with their rabbi for all the campers, theirs and ours. We have led music and dance for their campers. We have had countless opportunities to share our testimonies with so many people. I arrived this year and our camp liaison, a Jewish former camper greeted me with, "We're so glad you're here!! I can't wait for you to tell your story to Neil!! He's really open to Messianic Judaism."

It's not always wonderful. But even the challenges are encouraging. The camp director was telling me how he handled parents who were upset that we were allowed to use the camp. The director explained to them more about us and now the complaining parents no longer complain. As he so wisely told us, "Conversation leads to understanding."

Some suggested approaches:

**BE YOURSELF:** I am wired to fight injustice. I was a child of the 60s and find that mainstream Jewish prejudice against Messianic Jews offends me. It inspires me to be very direct about who I am and what I believe. I invite dialogue that challenges the listener to recognize hypocrisy:



“You’re a Jew, a liberal minded person open to diversity, and yet you discriminate against your own people.”

**BUILD RELATIONSHIPS:** I work with a good number of Jewish colleagues at my office. Just by working side-by-side with them over the past 7 years, they have come to know me, to trust me, and to respect me. I have amazing conversations with them about Messianic Judaism which has only happened due to those deep relationships. I have shared Isaiah 53 at work in a natural way that happens because we work so closely together. At work it is not unusual at this point for colleagues to ask ME about my beliefs, they want to know. I can’t help but think that HaShem is greatly at work in their hearts.

**BE PATIENT:** For many of you, it has been decades of work. And I do believe that something extraordinary occurred in the late 60s and early 70s that caused a supernatural surge in Jewish believers. Today, there are breaking barriers, increasing awareness, softening hearts, setting the stage for HaShem’s mighty hand. In my experience, recently there has been an improvement in some Jewish peoples’ understanding of us. It is not unusual for me now to talk with a Jewish person who will actually say, “What is the big deal?” about our being a Messianic synagogue. I’ve had some Jews be as outraged as I am that we have trouble advertising in mainstream Jewish media. A recent Jewish visitor to our synagogue said she had always been curious about what our services were like. She loved them and said she’d be back. We’ve had Jewish visitors at Ruach Israel who have commented that our services have something special about them, that they feel the Ruach. I believe we are living in changing times.

**PLANT SEEDS:** I love how we don’t really know how this works, and yet it does. When I first became a believer in Yeshua, I shared my testimony with one of my Jewish colleagues at work who was very shocked. At the time I was also on the board with him at my mainstream Jewish synagogue, so when I “came out of the closet” theologically, words couldn’t describe his shock. I moved from Ohio to Boston and we hadn’t communicated after that for years. Until he called me several years ago and asked if I could do a workshop on Messianic Judaism for the upcoming National Chavurah Committee meeting that summer. What an opportunity that was to demystify and debunk rumors about Messianic Judaism for Jewish lay leaders and rabbis from all around the country. At the beginning of the workshop the vast majority had stated they would not be comfortable allowing a Messianic Jew to participate in their chavurah. Their opinions were greatly changed by the end of the workshop.

**PUSH THE BOUNDARIES:** As a lay leader of my synagogue, I love opportunities to reach out to Jewish organizations and let them know who we are and explore how we can interface. I find the more I share the successes we have with some (for example, Surprise Lake Camp and the Boston Jewish Music Festival), the more that other such organizations are encouraged to give us an audience. There is leverage in relating these successes since most do not want to be at the forefront of this issue. After all, this movement is our cause, not theirs. On the other hand, even gatekeepers should be called to task if the boundaries as they are setting them are becoming outdated. Communicating that message is one that I hold dear.

TIKKUN OLAM AND MORE: The more our congregations can do to work with other Jewish organizations to support worthy causes or even socially, the more opportunities our Jewish brothers and sisters will have to understand us. "Conversation leads to understanding." It is the first step, in my opinion, in our Jewish brethren learning about Yeshua and ultimately accepting Him as their Messiah, as the cornerstone of our faith. Conversely, our interfacing with the mainstream Jewish community keeps us grounded in who we are. Repairing the world is part of our hard-wiring.

The faces of Messianic Judaism are many and I do not doubt there are other worthy perspectives. I can only speak to what I know based on my personal experiences as a Jew. The normalization of Messianic Judaism within the Jewish community will only create that many more opportunities for Messianic Jews and mainstream Jews to interface. Messianic Jews who are able to interact within their Jewish communities as ambassadors of Messianic Judaism have a unique opportunity to educate mainstream Jews about Messianic Judaism. As a result, many Jews today are losing their fear of discussing, and with God's grace, ultimately embracing Yeshua as these opportunities increase through fellowship with their Messianic Jewish brothers and sisters.