

Statement on Gentile Believers and the Torah

Today's Messianic Jewish community arose out of a move of the Spirit in the sixties and seventies that brought thousands of Jewish people into faith in Yeshua and a new appreciation of their Jewish identity and calling. As the Messianic Jewish movement grew, it attracted many Gentile members who helped it to advance and mature, and who also found deep significance in its Jewish practices and perspectives. When the representatives of UMJC member congregations approved a statement *Defining Messianic Judaism* in the early 2000s, they recognized this development:

The Union of Messianic Jewish Congregations (UMJC) envisions Messianic Judaism as a movement of Jewish congregations and groups committed to Yeshua the Messiah that embrace the covenantal responsibility of Jewish life and identity rooted in Torah, expressed in tradition, and renewed and applied in the context of the New Covenant. *Messianic Jewish groups may also include those from non-Jewish backgrounds who have a confirmed call to participate fully in the life and destiny of the Jewish people.*

In *Our Values* statement, under “Dignity and Inclusion,” we “recognize that all people are made in the image of God and therefore will endeavor to treat them with respect. We warmly welcome into our midst all who embrace our vision and core values and are committed to the success of our efforts.” While these foundational documents envision building a Jewish movement for Yeshua that includes Gentile believers as full and valued partners, our Statement of Faith also reminds us that the Torah “does not have the same role” for Jews as it has for Gentiles. How do we articulate this difference?

We believe that the Scriptures throughout maintain that the Torah applies to Jews and Gentiles in different ways. Paul's writings make clear that Gentile believers are called to worship the God of Israel and live out Torah ethics, that is, the universal norms of behavior and practical life teachings that are meant for all (Rom 13:9; 1 Cor 10:8, 14; Gal 5:14; Eph 6:2). At the same time, the Jerusalem Council and Paul's “rule in all the congregations” make clear that Gentile believers are not required to be circumcised or take on the obligations entailed in circumcision (Acts 15; 21:25; 1 Cor 7:17–24; Gal. 5:3). We interpret this to mean that it is not God's ideal for all Gentile believers to live out those aspects of Jewish life that have historically, from the time of Moses, served as boundary markers of Jewish identity (for example, eighth day circumcision, the seventh day Sabbath, Israel's festivals, keeping kosher, wearing tzitzit, laws of family purity).

What does this mean then for Gentile believers who want to practice some of these customs? Gentiles who are attracted to the Torah and its teachings should consider that one of the dominant themes of Torah is the distinct calling and role of the Jewish people. Embracing the Torah includes supporting Israel, the Jewish people, and their unique way of life as marked out and sustained by the Torah.

The Torah speaks of practices that are specifically given to Israel. By taking on such practices without careful qualification, a Gentile believer can be implying, or understood to be implying, that he/she is part of Israel. Such practices include but are not limited to:

1. Circumcision on the eighth day. “This is my covenant, which you shall keep, between me and you and your offspring after you [Israel]: Every male among you shall be circumcised . . . and it shall be a sign of the covenant between me and you. Throughout your generations every male among you [Israel] shall be circumcised when he is eight days old” (Gen 17:10–12);
2. The seventh day Sabbath, defined as “a sign between me and you [Israel]” (Exod 31:13, 17);
3. Israel’s festival cycle. “My festivals, which you [Israel] are to proclaim” (Lev 23:2, 4);
4. Laws of keeping kosher, as in Lev 11, “Speak to the children of Israel”;
5. Wearing of *tzitzit*, based on Num 15:38–41, which opens, “Speak to the children of Israel and tell them to make tassels on the corners of their garments . . .”;
6. Laws of family purity, given in Lev 15, which are explicitly directed to the children of Israel (vss. 2, 31).

Such ordinances of Torah have historically served as distinguishing marks of the Jewish people. Honoring Torah as a Gentile believer includes honoring these distinctions. This does not mean that Gentile believers can’t celebrate the Jewish festivals, for example, but how they celebrate should be informed by the identity-marking nature of these events. See “Pastoral Advice” below.

Jewish prayer is another area where we need to consider what we are communicating. Prayers in which one speaks as part of Israel, as in many of the b’rachot, may not be appropriate for non-Jewish people without modification. For example, “Blessed are you . . . who has sanctified us (or set us apart) by your commandments and commanded us.” To whom does “us” refer here? Clearly, it is the Jewish people. As another example, the Torah blessing, “Who has chosen us from all peoples and given us the Torah,” specifically refers to the Jewish people. To assume that these words can apply to Gentile brothers and sisters because of their devotion to Torah or to Messiah implies replacing the biblical definition of “Israel.”

Where do we find the balance between affirming the distinct calling of the Jewish people and affirming Messianic Gentiles in our midst (some of whom are married to Jews) who are drawn by God’s Spirit to Messianic Jewish community life? In keeping with our *Defining Messianic Judaism* statement, we welcome in our congregations “those from non-Jewish backgrounds who have a confirmed call to participate fully in the life and destiny of the Jewish people.” At the same time, for Gentile believers who feel led by the Lord to keep Jewish customs, we offer the following recommendations:

Pastoral Advice

1. Gentile believers should remember that embracing the Torah includes supporting Israel, the Jewish people, and their unique way of life as marked out and sustained by the Torah.
2. They should not assume that what God has called them to do individually applies universally to all Gentile believers (Acts 15; Rom 14:5-6);

3. They should not regard their practice of Jewish customs as a covenantal responsibility, but rather as the Holy Spirit's leading in their own life;
4. They should be respectful of Jewish community norms;
5. They should as much as possible do Jewish things (that they feel led by the Lord to do) with Jewish people. That way Jewish practice does not get separated from Jewish community and lead to cultural appropriation; and
6. They should learn about the history and theology of the Hebrew Roots/One Law movement and thereby avoid its pitfalls.

Messianic Jewish congregations should determine their own practice regarding Gentile participation in *aliyot*, Jewish lifecycle events, etc, in light of the emphasis that Scripture places on Jewish covenantal identity and calling. We believe the tension between inclusiveness and maintaining communal boundaries can be healthy and should be worked out in a spirit of love, respect, and honor.

While we seek to build a Jewish movement for Yeshua, we also support a culture in the UMJC of honoring the Gentile wing of the Church with its distinctive calendar and traditions, some of which are rooted in Judaism. Many member congregations invite local churches to Passover seders, Sukkot celebrations, etc., during these seasons. This is good, as it deepens our relationship with the wider body of Messiah and connects the Church to the universal prophetic meanings of the festivals. However, extending hospitality and providing education are one thing, and encouraging local churches to embrace the Jewish calendar over the Christian calendar is another. Let us remember that there is beauty in difference and that God has not called us to sameness.

We believe that if our Messianic Jewish congregations teach these values, it will lead to greater unity-in-diversity, and to relationships characterized by interdependence, mutual blessing, and mutual humbling between Jews and Gentiles in the Messianic movement and in the wider body of Messiah (Rom 11:11–32; Eph 2:18–22, 3:6).