

# The Messianic Hope: A Case for an Identifiable Messianic Jewish Community

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Messianic Jewish communities have been around in somewhat their current form for well over 100 years. Through the efforts of a few courageous visionaries, they were established first as places of spiritual refuge for Jewish people who had come to faith in Messiah Yeshua, and then secondly as places to gather Jewish believers for the purpose of maintaining and transmitting Jewish identity, both for them and their children. As a physical community they also served as a physical and ongoing communal witness for faith in Messiah Yeshua to the greater Jewish community.<sup>1</sup> These early Messianic Jewish communities were considered radical, but in reality they were nothing new; the early Jewish believers recorded in Acts 21 had set the pattern in Jerusalem, and those following maintained it despite war and opposition for at least the first three centuries of the Common Era. Because of the efforts of a predominately Gentile Christianity to distance itself from the Jewish roots of faith in Messiah Yeshua, as well as rising anti-Semitism within the emerging “State” Church, by the 4<sup>th</sup> century Jewish believers were first slowly encouraged and then later forced to assimilate within the normative “Christian” community.<sup>2</sup>

G-d has always had His remnant of faithful followers within the House of Israel. He has relentlessly sought out and brought into relationship with Himself Jewish people who have come to believe in the Messiahship of Yeshua. Yet, in the last 17 centuries, almost all Jews who have come to accept Messiah Yeshua inevitably have resigned their unique relationship with G-d, assimilated into the greater Christian community in which they lived, and disappeared without a Jewish trace within three generations, except for very few exceptions. Today G-d has allowed an opportunity for Jews who follow Messiah Yeshua to again build communities for spiritual encouragement and as a communal witness to the greater Jewish community.

The purpose of this presentation is to provide one **perspective on how a clearly identifiable and tradition respecting Jewish community of Jewish Yeshua followers can help partially fulfill the Messianic Hope of G-d’s Redemption of his creation through effective witness and discipleship within the Jewish Community. My proposition is that this kind of Jewish Yeshua faith community is uniquely relatable and naturally attractive to Jewish people for two reasons: as communal space for members of the Jewish community expressing spiritual curiosity regarding the person of Messiah Yeshua, and for Jewish believers in Messiah Yeshua who desire normative Jewish community to actively live out their lives as Jewish people according to tradition, to find and marry a Jewish spouse who shares their faith and to help them transmit Jewish life, values and culture for their children and grandchildren. This proposition is**

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<sup>1</sup> Sevener, P. 3 & 30 to read of early efforts by Jacob Freshman and Leopold Cohen; Kjaer-Hanson’s book on Joseph Rabinowitz efforts in Russia; Ariel, P. 165 and following regarding “The Convert’s Community”; Glaser, P. 418-422 Mitch’s work is invaluable for gaining insights into Jewish outreach and Messianic Jewish community development in Europe before World War II. He also offers a reality check regarding our over-blown sense of accomplishment.

<sup>2</sup> Pritz, P. 44-45 regarding the issue of the Law of Moses; Fishman, P. 36-39 for the unique perspective of a non-Messianic Jew regarding the split between the “Church” and its Jewish roots; Skarsaune, P. 198-199 discusses this development in light of the development of the believing community in Rome

therefore consistent with G-d's promise in the Messianic Hope of bringing redemption for the individual Jew, and the Messianic Hope of bringing redemption for collective Israel.

### **Background and Definitions**

**Jewish identity** is sociological, and can best be understood practically as an identity of unique communal distinction based on the understanding of a common peoplehood, and observance of and loyalty to the Mosaic Covenant (Torah) preserved within the Scripture and applied by the traditions of the Jewish people. G-d called Abraham to separate himself from his land and family to become the father of a unique nation, the Jewish people. Jewish people have kept their identity and peculiarity based on this understanding: that G-d selected them to be set apart from the other nations as the special Chosen People of G-d, physically speaking, in order to bring blessing to the nations. The Scriptures record this: *"There is a people that dwells apart, not reckoned among the nations"* (Numbers 23:9 JPS). This desire to maintain the "Peoplehood of Israel" has led to the development of close Jewish communities, the traditional definition of "Who is a Jew", the emphasis of Jewish continuity through marriage between Jews alone and the Jewish education of children. This same pursuit of communal distinction from the other nations has often been the reason for the persistent anti-Semitic persecutions endured by the Jewish people through the ages, many times at the hands of those who profess themselves as "Christians".

**Messianic Faith** is theological. It is the belief that G-d sent the Messiah of Israel in the person of Yeshua, and that based on one's personal faith in him and the atonement for sin he has provided through his death alone, G-d grants grace and forgiveness for the consequences of one's sin. Adherents to this belief in Messiah come into full relationship with G-d, whether Jew or Gentile, thus "Messianic Faith".

**Messianic Communities** (local physical gatherings) are places where individuals professing faith in Messiah Yeshua grow in their relationship with G-d together with others, forming a communal testimony to live out their faith; they also serve as a support for passing down that faith to the children of these believers. These communities vary greatly from group to group based on local, national, political, ethnic & cultural values and traditions.

Messianic Faith is therefore **not a physical, ethnic heritage or culture**; instead it is simply a spiritual community comprised of adherents from all the world's peoples who have come to personally believe in the G-d of Israel through faith in the Messiah of Israel. Both Jews and Gentiles of Messianic Faith continue to live out their uniquely different national roles, while at the same time standing individually as spiritual equals before G-d.

The Statement of Faith of the Union of Messianic Jewish Congregations clearly supports this understanding:

*G-d poured out the Divine Spirit on the community of Yeshua's followers, so that they might be joined intimately to the Messiah as His Body and become the preliminary representation of the New Covenant fullness promised to Israel. To this early Jewish community G-d added partners from among the nations, who heard the news of G-d's work in Yeshua and responded to the good news with faith. (Isa. 66:20-21; Acts 2:1-21; 10:44-48; 15:8-9; Eph.1:13; 2:11-22)*

*Messiah's community is a single community expressed in diverse forms within the Jewish community and among the nations. All are called to a dedicated life of worship, neighborly service, and public testimony to Yeshua. Unity and love throughout the entire community confirm Yeshua's role, as the One sent by the Father, and G-d's purpose in Messiah for Israel and the Nations. (John 17:20-21; Acts 21:20; Gal. 2:7-8)*

Over the centuries, misinformed Christian theologians proposed the belief that G-d rejected the Jewish people and His unique relationship with them, and replaced Israel with a new "Israel": "The Church". Unfortunately, the political, social and cultural impact has been far reaching at times, manifesting anti-Semitism and sadly also forcing Jews who did come to accept Yeshua as Messiah to give up their adherence to their Jewish distinction and to assimilate within the greater Christian community. As a result, Jewish believers have had almost no remnant testimony due to assimilation under such social pressures. Usually by the time a first generation Jewish believer's grandchildren are born, the Jewish identity of those grandchildren has all but disappeared. This is also hastened due to intermarriage where, unlike Ruth, most Gentile spouses are reluctant to set aside their own heritage to become a part of the Jewish people. Children from these families are therefore raised in a "mixed" world of different cultures and traditions which dilutes any practical connection with the Jewish Community at large. Inevitably, most children from such families feel incapable of living as Jews within the greater Jewish community and so, tragically, choose to forsake their Jewish identity.<sup>3</sup>

### **Messianic Jewish Communities and Identity Confusion**

Messianic Jewish communities, as we have discussed above, were conceived to be places where Jewish believers in Messiah Yeshua could grow in their relationship with G-d as a communal testimony and live out their unique G-d given identity as Jewish people; they were to also serve as a support for passing down Jewish identity to the children and grandchildren of these believers.

Unfortunately the latter part of this purpose hasn't occurred with much success. Somewhere along the way the leaders and members of Messianic Jewish Congregations became confused as to their purpose. More often than not these congregations became places for Gentile Christians to come and learn about the Jewish roots of the Christian faith. This has brought great confusion in many cases for the children of Jewish believers who in time came to find that many of the children in their communities were not actually Jewish by birth, but Gentile, and that these Gentile children would often confuse themselves as being Jewish simply because they had been raised in a Messianic Jewish community. The Union of Messianic Jewish Congregations (UMJC) has sought to clarify this purpose in its Defining Messianic Judaism Statement by stating that it "*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. We are committed to embodying this definition in our constituent congregations and in our shared institutions.*"

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<sup>3</sup> This is a chronic problem with intermarriage in general. See my paper: *Jewish Children and Messianic Jewish Identity* for more insights into this.

Unfortunately, few demonstrate a confirmed call to the Jewish people. Instead demographic realities and pervasive philo-semitism are working against a multi-generational Messianic Jewish testimony within most Messianic Jewish congregations. It has become very difficult, if not impossible, for Jewish believers to encourage and expect their children to marry other Jewish believers. Today it is reasonable to argue that the overwhelming majority of children born to Messianic Jewish parents within the American Messianic Movement of the 70's and 80's have gone on to complete assimilation within the greater American Christian community. My personal experience has also shown me that an unfortunately sizable percentage of this second generation also demonstrates a nominal commitment to personal faith in Messiah Yeshua and very little passion and personal vision for their own Jewish identity, the Jewish community at large or even Israel as a nation.

Much of the confusion within Messianic communities has to do with Gentile believing involvement. Certainly G-d does give at times a unique call to certain Gentiles to attach themselves to the Jewish people for the sake of service and witness, but not in the way and in the numbers currently represented within the worldwide Messianic Jewish Community at this time. Many of the great, early efforts in outreach and discipleship of Jewish people were developed and supported by Gentile believers with a vision and passion to see Jewish people come to faith in Messiah. Many of these same people properly understood that their job, like that of the great Missionary pioneers in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century working in Africa and Asia, was to begin a work, raise up Jewish believers through discipleship and training, and then to turn over that work to these Jewish believers. Many of the historical research referenced in this paper reflects these efforts and this approach. Unfortunately, that is not the case today. During my seven years of service on the Executive Committee of the UMJC, first as Vice President and then President, I came to find that on average only 15% to 20% of the individuals in our congregations were actually born Jewish, with most of these being older adults. I found very few Jewish children or young adults. Today most of the Gentile believers involved in the "Messianic Jewish Movement" are focused on much more than seeing Jewish people come to believe in Messiah. The interests in Jewish traditions, holidays, music and unique theologies are far more important to the average Gentile believer in the typical Messianic Jewish community than actually proactively looking for ways to effectively communicate the Good News to their local non-Messianic Jewish community. Instead of being a blessing and a boost to the efforts of Jewish believers who gather as a communal Jewish testimony for Messiah, most often they are a distraction and a source of confusion.<sup>4</sup>

This same confusion also seems to be promulgated by the mission agencies, who on one side often turn a blind eye to the confusion their own gentile workers cause when they take on use Jewish identity stereotypically simply for evangelistic purposes, while on the other side, they discourage Jewish identity, culture and tradition in the lives of the Jewish people who do come to faith in Israel's Messiah.

Coming into right relationship with G-d through one's personal decision to trust in the efficacy of Messiah's death for the forgiveness of one's sin has nothing to do with the living out of traditional Jewish values and culture, even religious vales and culture. Yet I have seen wellmeaning Christian missionaries take a religious Jew from kosher to tref eating for no good

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<sup>4</sup> Harris-Shapiro, P. 88-89, 94-96 gives a unique perspective on this confusion from a Non-Messianic Jew; Wasserman, P. 156-157 gives his own unique perspective as a Jewish believer.

reason, expect to remove them from their community, and in doing so strip them from their people and identity.

## **Did Israel's Messiah Yeshua really come to Terminate the Mosaic Covenant?**

As a new believer at Moody Bible Institute I was repeatedly taught the classic dispensational approach to understanding Biblical covenants. Its been a few years since I graduated Moody, so I am not familiar with Dispensationalism's current development, but I know one thing for sure: I no longer believe in the termination of G-d's Mosaic Covenant with the Jewish people. I find no Scriptural support for such a view. Instead I believe this view to be the result of early Christian theological elitism and supercessionism; I think its also a reaction and response to cut off influence the Jewish community was having through its traditions and practices on some within the Christian communities. Let's remember that Marcion, Chrysostom and Augustine were early Christian theologians with a negative view of the Jewish people because of their influence. Promoting a theology that G-d had terminated the Mosaic Covenant naturally would mean that G-d ended his relationship with the Jewish people, and remove the potential for what they felt was Jewish negative influence upon Christians through their continued traditions and practices.

I believe the Mosaic Covenant, *as clarified within the New Testament*, still serves as the practical guide to Jewish life and identity, for Jewish people in general and for Messianic Jews in particular. Again, our UMJC Statement of Faith succinctly says this well:

*The Torah is G-d's gift to Israel. It serves as the constitution of the Jewish people and thus also of the Messianic Jewish community, which comprises Israel's eschatological first fruits. The Torah does not have the same role for Messianic communities from the nations, though it does provide spiritual nourishment as a witness to the Messiah. The Torah also provides universal norms of behavior and practical life teaching for all. The Torah is to be applied anew in every generation, and in this age as is fitting to the New Covenant order. (Matt. 5:17-20; II Tim. 3:16-17; I Cor. 7:17-20)*

I believe there are several key points based on Scripture specifically to support Messianic Jewish loyalty to the Mosaic Covenant. **First**, G-d made the Mosaic Covenant as a contractual agreement specifically between Himself and the Jewish people, and no one else. I am speaking here of more than just the moral and theological teachings of the Torah, which are universally valuable for all people, but specifically the legal responsibilities and codes which were to specifically set Israel apart from the nations, i.e. Shabbat, Kosher, etc....<sup>5</sup> The text is clear in this regard, ***"Now then, if you will obey Me faithfully and keep My covenant, you shall be My treasured possession among all the people."***<sup>6</sup> The word *treasured possession* in Hebrew is תרומה which means *peculiar property*, and denotes G-d's unique relationship with the Jewish people; it also articulates the ongoing unique role Jewish people play in G-d's program to redeem the world even after Messiah's arrival, as Shaul states, ***"...for G-d's free gifts and his calling are irrevocable"***.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> See Exodus 31:16-17, Leviticus 20:22-26

<sup>6</sup> Exodus 19:5 JPS

<sup>7</sup> Romans 11:25-31

**Second**, G-d's commitment to national Israel is secure, despite Israel's failing. (failing to keep the Covenant, live as a light, greet Messiah Yeshua with acceptance, accept the Apostolic teaching). Some Christian theologies teach that Israel forfeited their "Choseness" through disobedience, yet G-d's capacity to forgive Israel is without measure. After repeated disobedience the text still states, ***"And the L-RD has affirmed this day that you are, as He promised you, His treasured people who shall observe all His commandments ... you shall be, as He promised, a holy people to the L-RD your G-d"***.<sup>8</sup> Throughout the Prophetic books we see G-d judge Israel, but also maintain His commitment to them as His Chosen People. The promise of a New Covenant in Jeremiah 31:30-36 is not just meant to be a prophecy in regards to Messiah Yeshua's work, but also a reminder of G-d's covenant promise to Israel and His willingness to provide a new and improved Covenant to deepen His relationship with His physical people Israel, not end it: ***"See, a time is coming – declares the L-RD – when I will make a new covenant with the House of Israel and the House of Judah ... For I will forgive their iniquities, and remember their sins no more ... Thus said the L-RD: If the heavens above could be measured, and the foundations of the earth below could be fathomed, only then would I reject all the offspring of Israel for all that they have done – declares the L-RD"*** (JPS).

**Third**, when we look at the Post-Exilic literature within the Tanakh we do not find any hint of an anticipated termination of the Mosaic Covenant or of any cessation in expected observance of the Covenant in the lifestyle of the restored Jewish nation. Instead there is a clear emphasis regarding the people's obligation toward the teaching and observance of the Mosaic Covenant as seen in the historical books of Ezra and Nehemiah. The purpose of this is two fold from the text: first the obvious concern about religious apostasy, but also secondly there was a clear concern about the assimilation and ultimate dissolution of the people. We find the repeated challenge for Covenant observance as well in the prophetic literature.<sup>9</sup> Citing just one example, in Malachi 3:22 we read, ***"Be mindful of the Teaching of My servant Moses, whom I charged at Horeb with laws and rules for all Israel."*** (JPS) These words are reminiscent of Messiah Yeshua's statement in Matthew 5:17-18, ***"Do not think that I came to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I did not come to abolish, but to fulfill. For truly I say to you, until heaven and earth pass away, not the smallest letter or stroke shall pass away from the Law until all is accomplished"*** (CJB).

**One final point** in regards to the Mosaic Covenant and Israel's unique relationship to it needs to be made from the New Covenant text. Acts 15 relates the dispute between Jews who believed that Gentiles must essentially convert and adopt Jewish practices, meaning an adherence to the Mosaic Covenant, and Jews who opposed this. Kefa (Peter), Yaakov (James) and the entire Leadership of the Messianic Jewish Community in Jerusalem came to the understanding that the "yoke" of the Covenant was their responsibility to keep as Jews, and that since the new Gentile believers had already obviously come into relationship with the G-d of Israel by their faith in Messiah Yeshua without needing to become Jews, it therefore was unreasonable to expect that they should become obligated to the Mosaic Covenant now and required to live Jewish life. They also realized that the purpose for the freedom which G-d had granted the Gentile believers was

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<sup>8</sup> Deuteronomy 26:18-19 JPS

<sup>9</sup> See also Ezekiel 36 and 37

so that these Gentile believers could live out the truth of their faith in Messiah Yeshua among their own people.

In contrast, Acts 21 narrates the zeal of the Israeli Jewish believers for keeping the Mosaic Covenant. They continued observing the Torah that G-d had given to Israel because they saw it as G-d's gift and the proper guide for living out their distinct identity as Jews. They also recognized that faithfulness to the Covenant was the sign of spiritual renewal for Israel, thus validating their testimony and Yeshua's Messiahship within the greater Jewish community.<sup>10</sup>

Throughout the New Covenant text never is a word spoken against zealous Jewish identity or Torah observance by Jewish believers except when either Jews or Gentiles tried to impose Jewish observance and/or the Mosaic Covenant on Gentile believers in Messiah. In these instances the text is bluntly and ferociously opposed to such practice!<sup>11</sup> Paul clearly teaches that Jewish people should maintain their identity.<sup>12</sup> Paul circumcises Timothy because he is a Jew, and he doesn't circumcise Titus because he isn't a Jew.<sup>13</sup> As within the First Century community of Messianic Believers, there is still today a unique ongoing role for Messianic Jews, and as then, this identity needs to be encouraged, nurtured and even enhanced.<sup>14</sup>

## **Did Israel's Messiah Yeshua come to Assimilate His Jewish Followers into the Nations?**

- **Stats show clearly that Jewish Jesus faith historically leads to loss of Jewish identity and not necessarily leads to generational Jesus faith**
  - Intermarriage among Jesus believing Jews is over 90% (in Israel its 30%)
  - Hyper Assimilation of the children of Jewish believers into cultural Christianity is pervasive (often without actually forming them into solid Yeshua believers)
  - There may be approximately 800,000 Evangelical Christians with at least one Jewish grandparent according to Pew, but do they have any actual connection with the Jewish community, live Jewish life, even live out a relevant testimony to any Jewish or Christian people?
- Well meaning Churches, Missions and Christians often continue to believe and teach that Jewish people need to be set free from the burden of Jewish religion and cultural practices, forgetting that this is ethnocentric, religious arrogancy, supersessionist and elitist!

## **Of course not!**

The Messianic Hope includes Israel's national fullness under Messiah's Reign, so encouraging and strengthening Jewish identity in Jewish followers of Messiah Yeshua just makes sense!

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<sup>10</sup> Malachi 3:19-24

<sup>11</sup> Galatians 3:1-5

<sup>12</sup> 1 Corinthians 7:17-20; Romans 8:1-3; Ephesians 2:8-9

<sup>13</sup> Acts 16:1-3; Galatians 2:1-4

<sup>14</sup> Romans 3:1-4; Romans 11

## **A Call for Clarity in Messianic Jewish Community Development**

I would like to present our unique approach to Messianic Jewish community development, based on our personal experience at Devar Emet Messianic Synagogue. Below are our guiding documents:

### **Our Vision**

A Jewish Community that believes and teaches that Yeshua (Jesus) is the promised Jewish Messiah

### **Our Purpose**

To **grow** in our love for G-d as followers of Messiah Yeshua by our **worship** and **study** so we can then **serve** and **encourage** others both in our Synagogue and our greater Jewish Community.

### **Through this Messianic Jewish Congregation We:**

- 1) **Grow** spiritually into fully committed followers of Messiah Yeshua through active participation in Services, Studies, Synagogue Activities and Community Accountability.
- 2) **Worship** the G-d of Israel through the service of our hearts and personal strengths.
- 3) **Study** to know, defend and practice G-d's Scripture in our lives and to better educate ourselves to live out the traditions of our Jewish people as taught by our Messiah Yeshua.
- 4) **Serve** within both our Synagogue and the greater Jewish Community to meet the physical, spiritual and emotional needs of others in the name of Messiah Yeshua.
- 5) **Encourage** in love the truth of who Messiah Yeshua is within our greater Jewish Community and affirm in love one another toward a maturing Messianic Jewish faith.

### **Our Values**

#### **Dedicated Yeshua Faith**

- Bold public testimony
- Disciplined study and obedience to Scripture
- Continuous personal and communal prayer
- Selfless giving of abilities, time and resources
- Active faithfulness to the Torah of G-d

#### **Active Jewish Identity**

- Practicing Jewish tradition in our daily lives, both religious and cultural
- Facilitating the use of Hebrew, both in our synagogue and homes
- Valuing Jewish art and literature, both religious and cultural
- Engaging in the life of our wider Jewish Community, both to serve and connect
- Utilizing traditional Jewish prayer and practice in our communal worship



## **Intentional Community Life**

- Supporting intergenerational growth and relationship
- Encouraging transparency and accountability
- Building community through hospitality in our synagogue and homes
- Prioritizing congregational activities in our daily lives
- Residing in proximity to our community

### **Evaluating our Synagogue Commitment Levels:**

- 1) **Community** – We consider all Jewish individuals and their family members who live on the north side of Chicagoland within a 20 minute drive of our Synagogue, with special emphasis on Skokie, Lincolnwood, Evanston, Morton Grove, Glenview, Wilmette and the north side of Chicago as potential members of our Synagogue and people to lovingly reach out to.
- 2) **Crowd** – Individuals who sporadically attend Shabbat services, Wednesday Night Studies or Special Events, whether they are followers of Messiah Yeshua or not, are considered within our Synagogue to be guests who, although curious, are at an initial interest level.
- 3) **Congregation** – This level is reached when individuals commit to regularly attending our Shabbat morning services, adjusting their own schedule in order to prioritize their Synagogue’s primary community gathering, and who state their intention to actively grow in their commitment to following Messiah Yeshua. People are expected to pursue Membership at this level; Membership is a Pre-requisite for Synagogue service.

*Note: Moving into Levels 4 & 5 require spiritual pre-requisites as listed*

- 4) **Committed** – Individuals at this level are active in the community life of the Synagogue beyond just Shabbat morning, including a commitment to attending the Synagogue’s monthly Meeting for Prayer, participation in a regular Synagogue Scripture Study, active involvement in a Synagogue Role of Spiritual Service, and show a clear commitment to practicing personal spiritual disciplines: Scripture Study & Meditation, Prayer, Accountability, Outreach, Financial Giving, and Commitment to the Synagogue through ministry service. The Spiritual Pre-Requisite is Humble Teachability!
- 5) **Core** – Individuals at this level are those who actively use their gifts and abilities to lead others within the Synagogue community, including encouraging others involvement in the Synagogue’s monthly Meeting for Prayer, active Leadership over a Synagogue Role of Spiritual Service, and active leading or participation in a regular Synagogue Scripture Study. The Spiritual Pre-Requisite is Humble Leadership!

### **Understanding our Synagogue Integration Process:**

- 1) **Shabbat Morning Service** – We consider our Shabbat Morning Service to be where guests, new attendees and people who are not yet followers of Messiah Yeshua enter our Synagogue community. It is also our weekly time to gather together as followers of Messiah Yeshua for the purpose of drawing close to G-d through Jewish tradition, inspiring worship and dynamic

Scripture based teaching. We also facilitate relationships within our community by providing a weekly Kiddush which follows this service and select small group seminars and studies.

- 2) ***Wednesday Night Studies*** – The purpose of our Wednesday Night Studies is to provide time midweek for communal gathering, prayer and study for all ages. In depth Scripture studies and seminars are taught to strengthen and train people to practically apply their faith and develop into mature followers of Messiah Yeshua who will then make a strong impact within our Synagogue, our families, our greater Jewish Community and the community of Messianic believers at large.
- 3) ***Service Opportunities & Outreach*** – It is our expectation that members of Devar Emet Messianic Synagogue will choose to use their time, talent and treasure to serve, encourage and testify in the name of Messiah Yeshua within our Synagogue, and to reach back out into our greater Jewish Community and beyond to make Messiah Yeshua known.

Updated: 5-26-21

### **Our Focus**

- 1) **Geographically:** The north side of the city of Chicago through the near northern suburbs of Chicagoland within a 20-minute drive from the congregation.
- 2) **Demographically:** Professionals, educators, managers, and business people with a special emphasis on couples with children.
- 3) **Culturally:** Identified Jewish People who are active within the Jewish Community culturally, socially and/or religiously.
- 4) **Spiritually:** Jewish People who demonstrate a longing for G-d and have shown a willingness to explore outside the established Jewish boundaries.

### **Our Demographics**

When I speak of our Synagogue community some might wonder skeptically how many of our attendees are actually Jewish. Out of the 42 active adults in our community only five are not actually born Jewish: four are currently married to Jewish spouses (one of these formally converted through traditional Judaism before they became a believer), and one is divorced from a Jewish spouse and has Jewish children in the community. Of the 37 Jewish adults, four have not yet made a clear statement for acceptance of Messiah Yeshua, and are regularly hearing the Good News of Messiah Yeshua through both word and action within our community. 15 of these Jewish believers are first generation, most of them coming to faith and being disciplined within the synagogue. Eight are second generation Jewish believers raising children within the community with their Jewish spouse. We regularly attract non-Messianic Jews to our synagogue, including on average more than two dozen in attendance for our various Jewish Holiday services and celebrations. It is our experience that providing a safe space with familiar surroundings for Jewish people to hear the Scripture and see the lives of Jewish believers is what G-d uses to bring people to saving faith in Messiah Yeshua. Over the course of the last twenty years, we have seen 25 regularly attending Jewish adults come to faith directly as a result of our community's existence.

I believe we have been able to see so many Jewish people coming within our sphere of influence because we have a very clear purpose and focus, and because we have extensive congregational and individual relationships in our greater Jewish community. We prioritize community involvement through our local Jewish Federation for Maot Chitim Holiday Food Deliveries, the Walk for Israel and other community related functions. Our Synagogue building is our own, purchased in 2005, and is right in the middle of Skokie, surrounded by our local community of 200,000 Jewish people (within a 20 minute radius by easy driving). We follow the Jewish calendar and observe Shabbat; we require traditional kashrut in our Synagogue facility and activities and encourage it as well in the homes of our congregants. We use a copy of the Scriptures consistent with Jewish tradition not Christian, and our service worship style follows the Jewish order of service. It is our call to our people to live out authentic Jewish life, to fight the pull of American materialism and the cotton candy Christian faith of our day, and to live as identified, and easily identifiable, radical Messianic Jews, not fuzzy “Christians”. All of these values allow a first time visitor to view our synagogue as a normal and relatable Jewish space, allowing the real question to be considered: is Yeshua our promised Jewish Messiah?

In many ways we have been challenged in our outreach work by the Lubavitch Chabad and their passion for G-d, Torah and love of Jewish people. Yes, they are a fringe movement, but so are we! Yet they seem to be doing a much better job of living on the fringe of the many different societies where Chabad has sent their shlichim than the typical Messianic, all without saving faith in Yeshua! They build identifiable communities that grow with Jews, while the long term results of our efforts are often hard to find. Part of it is their priority: **they focus their outreach on Jewish people, building Jewish community and raising their children to be committed Jews.** Living in Chicagoland I am regularly asked the question, “Are you Jewish? Did you lay tefillin today?” Chabad is unashamed to focus on Jewish people because it is Jewish redemption which is their goal! Within our Messianic movement I have been maligned for trying to have such a focus. Why? Who is focusing on Jewish people? Certainly not the typical Christian in Chicagoland! Often not even the organizations who claim to be outreaching to the Jewish community! Besides this, our Messianic Jewish and Jewish Missions efforts generally suffer from the regular loss of our young people. This is a tragedy beyond all others. Is it because we have done such a poor job of articulating a clear vision? This is not a Chabad problem. “People now in their twenties and thirties who grew up in Chabad were raised with the ideal of shlichus. ‘Growing up in Chabad today, you know that the greatest thing you can do is be a shaliach,’ says Rabbi Shmotkin. ‘Those who don’t have what it takes wish they did.’”<sup>15</sup> Oh that this would be our expectation and experience! Instead we work hard for our kids go to a good college, get a great paying job, live a comfortable life and stay “saved”.

Chabad has a commitment to love their fellow Jews. “From the beginning, Lubavitchers embraced the idea of *Ahavat Yisrael*, or love of all Jews. A person’s love for his or her fellow Jew must be intrinsic, a love that transcends logic. Ahavat Yisrael demands self-sacrifice and constant exertion: one must cherish the other even more than oneself, and without discrimination. All Jews must be loved equally, no matter their level of learning or observance.”<sup>16</sup> Too often in our outreach and community development among Jewish people we grow impatient with non-responsive unbelievers. We easily develop superficial relationships, and

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<sup>15</sup> Fishkoff, P. 28

<sup>16</sup> Ibid, P. 20

then limit our time with individuals who are not “responding to the Gospel” as quickly as we might expect. Where is our love! It is interesting to note that it was love that was emphasized among the early believers, not halakah, as a sign of Covenant faithfulness and in obedience to Messiah’s teaching.<sup>17</sup> This didn’t mean people ignored Torah. It was one and the same for them.

## **Conclusion**

I desire to be an effective tool for outreach within the Jewish community; it is also my desire that the Messianic Jewish community I lead be an effective tool as well. I pray that we all see G-d’s Spirit working to bring tens of thousands of Jewish people to faith in Messiah today as was seen in the early 1900’s in Europe and in the 1960s & 70’s in the United States. Regardless, we must be faithful to the task because we have the hope that G-d will indeed work among Jewish people. Mitch Glaser has said it best in his dissertation, “We must encourage one another to keep sowing the gospel seed even where there is great difficulty and hardness of heart.”<sup>18</sup> I encourage us to reconsider our approach! Let us question whether we are **sowing smart**, producing Jewish fruit that **endures**, encouraging an **identifiable Jewish remnant**, one capable over time to reach **an even greater Jewish remnant within the Jewish community**, as we eagerly await our Messianic Hope, the return of our **Jewish Messiah, Yeshua**, to judge sin and establish righteousness, **AND** to establish his earthly Jewish Kingdom of Israel!

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<sup>17</sup> Skarsaune, P. 65

<sup>18</sup> Glaser, P. 425

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