

**Helsinki Consultation on Jewish Continuity in the Body of Messiah
The Torah & Jews in the Christian Church –
Covenantal Calling & Pragmatic Practice
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Differentiated Discipleship & Covenantal Calling

In *Postmissionary Messianic Judaism (PMJ)* I argued that Jewish believers in Yeshua have a covenantal calling to observe the basic practices of the Torah directed to Jews, including circumcision, Shabbat, holidays, and kashrut (the Jewish dietary laws). While discipleship to Yeshua fulfills the core intention of the Torah for both Jews and gentiles, according to apostolic teaching and precedent discipleship to Yeshua takes different forms for Jews and gentiles. This thesis of differentiated discipleship for Jewish and gentile followers of Yeshua is relatively uncontroversial in the Messianic Jewish congregational movement, but in almost all other ecclesial settings an homogenous pattern of Jewish and gentile discipleship goes unquestioned.

Fr. Levy directs his argument – as I did mine in *PMJ* – to the Church and its leaders, and aims to generate a new discussion within the life of the Church. He proposes a pastoral and ecclesial vision in which the Church intentionally carves out communal space for Jewish life. Fr. Levy seeks to open an ecclesial conversation that is of vital importance for the Church as a whole. However, we must recognize that this thesis of differentiated discipleship concerns not only Christian pastors, but also – and primarily – the vast majority of Jews who (like Fr. Antoine) have found their place within Church settings. If the radical vision enunciated by Fr. Levy is to gain traction in the life of the Church, it must win the assent of an influential core of both bodies – the pastoral leadership of the Church, and the Jews residing in its midst. In this short essay I will address the latter group.

For Jews in the Christian churches this issue involves far more than assessing the truth-value of theoretical doctrinal propositions. It is loaded with existential challenges, and normally evokes

intense resistance. For some, Jewish identity was never of great significance, and their initial attraction to Yeshua reflected their alienation from the Jewish community and the Jewish tradition. For others, Jewish identity was always important, but was understood in strictly secular and cultural terms, divorced from its covenantal moorings in the Torah. In either case, the thesis proposed in *PMJ*, and reiterated in a different form by Fr. Antoine, suggests that Yeshua-faith calls such Jews to re-think their Jewish identity and practice. Ironically, for those who hear this call, Yeshua-faith reverses its past function in the history of the Church: instead of signaling the doorway out of Jewish life, it serves as the portal back to robust commitment to the Jewish people and its spiritual heritage.

Like all divine calls, this one entails both responsibility and opportunity. As responsibility, it opens our eyes to the enduring mission of the Jewish people in the world, and of our particular role as Jewish disciples of Yeshua in carrying out that mission. From this perspective, the call to follow Yeshua *in a Jewish manner* is a gift to the Church and to the world, regardless of the benefit it brings to us as individuals. As opportunity, however, the call to a distinctively Jewish form of discipleship opens for us new avenues to the realization of our own particular identity in the Messiah. As the Hasidic tradition has recognized, there is such a thing as a *yiddishe neshama*, a Jewish soul, and that soul requires a certain type of nutrition if it is to flourish. The Torah, and the Jewish practices it inculcates, provide nutrition for the Jewish soul awakened by the call of Messiah Yeshua.

But it is exceedingly difficult for Jews in the Christian churches to hear and discern this call to a distinctively Jewish form of following Yeshua. As they mature theologically and spiritually, they may come to recognize the enduring importance of the Jewish people in the divine economy, and to rejoice in the privilege of being born a Jew. Upon further study and reflection,

they may even develop an appreciation for the spiritual heritage of the Jewish people, and for the Torah which is central to that heritage. But formidable obstacles stand in the way of adopting the distinctive practices of Jewish life rooted in the Torah. These obstacles are not abstract and theoretical in nature, but concrete and practical. They result from the fact that the churches currently contain no communal space that nurtures and sustains Jewish life.

A Progressive, Pragmatic, Personal Approach

This brings us back to the paper of Fr. Levy, and its summons to Christian leaders to rethink the relationship between Jewish identity and Christian identity, between Jewish life and Christian life. Clearly, until such a rethinking occurs, it will be difficult for Jews in the Church to respond to their covenantal calling in accordance with the basic practices of the Torah directed to Jews. Nevertheless, “difficult” does not mean “impossible” – at least as long as we understand basic Jewish practice in *progressive, pragmatic, and personal* terms, rather than as an abstract all-or-nothing categorical imperative. Jews within the Church should not wait for their ecclesial authorities to act institutionally; within the limits imposed by the teaching and order of their church bodies, they should take initiative and seek to respond to the divine calling.

What do I mean by a *progressive, pragmatic, and personal approach* to Jewish practice?

- By *progressive*, I refer to a dynamic approach which emphasizes learning and growth rather than perfect conformity to an absolute standard. From this perspective, a Torah-observant life is not so much a settled state that one attains but a continual process, like the imitation of Yeshua which is its Messianic fulfillment. The question for those taking a progressive approach to Torah practice is not, am I keeping all the *mitzvot* related to Shabbat? Instead, the question is, am I growing in my observance of Shabbat? Am I keeping more of the *mitzvot* today than I was a year ago?

- By *pragmatic*, I refer to a realistic approach which takes account of all the circumstances and responsibilities of life, and then aims to follow basic Torah practices within the constraints imposed by those intractable realities. The question for those taking such a pragmatic approach to Torah practice is not, am I scrupulously following all the traditional rules of Kashrut? Instead, the question is, am I following as many of the traditional rules of Kashrut as I can without failing in my duty to love my family, friends, and fellow-parishioners, and without bringing my household to financial ruin?
- By *personal*, I refer to a relational approach which treats the *mitzvot* not as abstract laws or principles but as practices expressing the relationship of a Jew to God and to fellow Jews.¹ The question for those taking such a personal approach to Torah practice is not, am I achieving my goal of complying with an ideal standard of observance? Instead, the question is, am I responding appropriately to God's gracious gift to me as a Jewish follower of the Messiah? Is my Jewish observance drawing me closer to Yeshua, and enabling me to know him better? Am I drawing closer to other Jews through my practice, and in a way that does not endanger my existing relationships with non-Jewish brothers and sisters in Christ?

As soon as we adopt a *progressive, pragmatic, and personal approach* to Torah practice, Jewish life within the Church becomes a possibility – though still a daunting task.

The difficulty of the task might also be thought to derive from confusion about what the Torah actually teaches about Jewish life for believers in Yeshua. After all, we cannot simply adopt the Shulkhan Aruch as our template for Torah living, nor even the more flexible halakhic

¹ I am using the term “personal” here with its classical theological sense in mind. The Greek word *hupostasis* was employed in Nicene theology to refer to the three persons of the Triune God. The personal or hypostatic identity of each of the persons of the Triune God are entirely determined by their relations to the other two. Thus, personal identity is equivalent to relational identity.

standards of the progressive Jewish movements in the West. Surely our faith in Yeshua and our consequent commitment to a multi-national people of God defined in relation to him must shape our interpretation of Torah observance? True enough – but also largely irrelevant for most Jews within the Christian churches. When one’s normal pattern has been to eat without any reference to Kashrut or to treat Saturday as a day for work, errands, chores, or shopping, as is the case for most Jews in a Church context, questions about the applicability of particular rabbinic ordinances are beside the point. We do not know for sure whether Yeshua and the Twelve mixed meat and dairy; we do know for sure that they did not eat pork or shell fish. We do not know for sure whether Yeshua would consider electricity equivalent to fire, and prohibit initiating its use on Shabbat; we do know for sure that Yeshua set aside his hammer and saw on Saturdays, and devoted the day to study, teaching, prayer, and synagogue attendance. For beginners in Jewish practice, the first steps – indeed, the first miles – lack ambiguity. Halakhic controversy concerning the outlines of the path only develops as one walks a healthy distance beyond its starting point.

Instead, the task is daunting mainly because the Churches provide no communal space in which to undertake it, nor encouragement to do so. However, the situation is even more complicated than this way of depicting it might suggest. The problem is not just an absence of space or encouragement, but a continual conflict of calendars, priorities, and relationships. How am I to observe Shabbat when the calendar of my Church includes activities on that day (such as fasting) that conflict with its spirit? How am I to refrain from secular occupations on Shabbat and attend Jewish services when my Church expects me likewise to refrain from such occupations and attend Christian services on the Lord’s Day? How am I to celebrate Purim when it falls during Lent, or even on Ash Wednesday? How am I to rejoice on the day of Passover, and hold a

luscious fun-filled Seder, when it falls during Holy Week? How am I to avoid eating any products containing leaven during the Passover season when it falls during Easter week, and I am involved in multiple festive meals with Christian friends and family? How am I to participate in events within the Jewish community when I have so many conflicting time-commitments within the Christian community? How am I to maintain the rules of Kashrut when I am invited to meals at the homes of my Christian friends, or when I participate in communal meals at Church? How am I to do any of these things that involve my family, when my spouse is not Jewish, and has no interest in building a Jewish family life?

For Jews in non-liturgical Protestant settings, with a less densely-textured Church life, some of the above challenges will not arise. But many will remain. I have Jewish friends who are part of a charismatic Church where I live. Their teenage son was part of the church youth group, and the group held a marvelous event: they spent a day together fasting and praying for the poor. Unfortunately, the day they picked to do this was a Saturday! Similarly, it is common in the United States for churches to sponsor fundraising events of various sorts on Saturdays – a day in which observant Jews have no contact with money! It is just as common to do other work projects for the Church (or the needy) on Saturday. These examples should suffice to show that Jews in non-liturgical churches are not exempt from the sorts of impediments to Jewish practice that I am concerned with here.

The force of these practical challenges should not be minimized. They raise questions that are not only practical in nature, but also ethical. We have covenantal responsibilities as Jews, but we also have responsibilities to our immediate and extended families, and to those in our church communities whose lives are intertwined with our own. Much of the stress we experience as citizens of the 21st century results from competing responsibilities and interests – immediate

family, in-laws, work, church, school, study, exercise, recreation, engagement with the arts. Now we add Judaism to this already complicated mix! For those of us who are conscientious about maintaining our commitments, this is a recipe for anything but a tranquil life.

I do not intend here to propose a practical solution to these dilemmas. Each situation is different, each person is different, and no universally-applicable formulas for resolution exist. Instead, I want only to suggest a place to begin: *Jews in the churches should take as their starting point the frank acknowledgement of the legitimacy of the competing claims on their lives, including the call to follow Yeshua in a distinctively Jewish way.* This is a formidable challenge in itself. Faced with competing claims to our time, energy, resources, and passion, we are usually tempted to alleviate our moral discomfort by denying the legitimacy or importance of one or more of those claims. I am urging my fellow Jewish followers of Yeshua, who are loyal members of Christian churches, to resist this temptation. If we are Jews, then we have a call from God to live as Jews. But that is not the only call we have.

From this starting point, the way forward becomes a matter of gradually incorporating into our lives elements of Jewish practice. Adopting a *progressive, pragmatic, and personal approach* to such practice, our focus will be on growing into a deeper Jewish life, and on doing so in a way that is beneficial rather than damaging to ourselves and to those around us. As with all attempts at reconciling competing commitments and responsibilities, we are certain to experience frustration and feelings of inadequacy. But living fruitfully with such tension and incompleteness is a mark of spiritual and human maturity. The fragmentation of our lives is but a reflection of the fragmented world in which we live, and the fragmented people of God of which we are part. To bear that pain with patience is to share in the sufferings of our Messiah.

Given our circumstances, the *personal* or relational aspect of our approach to Jewish practice deserves special attention. To remove Torah-based Jewish practice from its relational context in Jewish communal life is to strip it of much of its intended meaning. Yet, the absence of Jewish communal life in the Church is the greatest challenge we are facing. The conclusion I reach from this dilemma is that the first and highest priority for Jewish believers in Yeshua who are seeking to live out a distinctively Jewish form of discipleship is to build relationships with other Jews. More urgent than observing Shabbat, keeping kosher, or davening from the Siddur is to build or connect to a Jewish relational context in which these practices gain much of their meaning. Such a context might involve a small group of Jewish church members meeting regularly for study or celebration. It might involve Jewish church members developing connections to Messianic congregations. It might entail finding a setting in the wider Jewish community which is able to tolerate the respectful presence of an eccentric Jew (who also identifies as a Christian). Whatever form it takes, the road to a distinctive pattern of Jewish discipleship begins with forging Jewish relational connections, both as in itself a fundamental expression of our distinctive covenantal calling, and as the necessary context for all further Jewish practice.

My Own Experience

The subject of this paper is one that I have struggled with in my own life. For the last two decades I have participated in the Messianic Jewish congregational movement. However, for the two previous decades (from 1971 to 1993) I lived as part of an ecumenical Christian community. It was predominantly a community of families, but I was a member of an ecumenical celibate religious order within the wider family-community. The community and the religious order each involved a Catholic majority, but a substantial number of Protestants also participated. There

were other Messianic Jews in the family community – but I was the only Jew in the religious order.

The family community and the religious order each developed a rich liturgical life based on the calendar of the Western Church. Our spiritual life followed an annual cycle that flowed from Advent to Christmas to Lent to Holy Week to Easter Week to Pentecost. Similarly, our weekly pattern of life revolved around the Lord's Day, which the community honored as a day of worship, rest, and refraining from secular pursuits. Each morning our household of celibate men would rise at a common time, have breakfast, chant psalms together in a room set aside for worship, and then devote two hours to personal prayer and study. Each evening we would gather to once again chant psalms before eating dinner together. We would meet a final time to pray before going to sleep.

I was not only a participant in this life, but at the age of 24 I became one of its leaders. As an assistant to one of the community founders, I helped shape the liturgical life described above. Together we composed a ceremony for the beginning of the Lord's Day which families used on Saturday evenings, and other holiday prayers which could be employed throughout the year.² There are Christian communities around the world, including Europe, who still employ the home-liturgies that I co-authored in the 1970's.

From the beginning of my participation in this community in 1971, I knew that my primary vocation was to serve the Messiah in the midst of the Jewish people. But it took me many years to discern what that service should look like in daily practice, and to realize the complications posed to such practice by my commitment to an ecumenical Christian community. With the agreement of my religious superior, I began in 1974 to attend a traditional synagogue on

² Twenty-five years after its in-house publication a book called *Family Worship* still appears on the Amazon website when my name is entered as part of an author-search.

Saturday mornings. I would return at noon to my household of Christian brothers, and join with them for two hours of chores before beginning the Lord's Day with corporate prayer and a Saturday evening meal. It did not take long for the incongruity of this pattern to dawn on me. But at first I did not know what to do about it.

In 1978, after a period of study and prayerful reflection (under the guidance of my superior), I decided that I needed to move towards a Torah-observant life, but without any clear notion of what that would mean. I immediately refrained from all meals that contained pork products or shell-fish. I returned to the study of Hebrew which I had begun as a University undergraduate. I stopped doing chores on Saturday afternoons, and arranged to do them at another time during the week. I taught myself to lay Tefillin, and began praying the daily morning service from the Siddur. I had now begun a journey that involved the observance of two liturgical calendars and participation in two religious communities with two densely-textured spiritual traditions. It was not easy, but it was what I needed to do to be faithful to my calling.

As noted above, there were a number of Jews in the wider family community. In the mid-1970's we began to celebrate a Passover Seder together. This led to other holiday events, and eventually to a monthly Shabbat dinner. In 1981 a set of Jewish families from the community moved into a common neighborhood, and our religious order established a household for me in the same locale. To the surprise of many, a Jewish relational network began to take shape in the midst of an intensely committed Christian community.

I was motivated to persevere in this difficult journey by the conviction that Yeshua had called me to it. It was a responsibility, a fundamental expression of the particularity of my discipleship as a Jew, rather than an optional extra that I could choose or ignore as I pleased. But I was also motivated by the opportunity it provided to nurture my Jewish soul. In inexplicable ways, Jewish

life touched me in my depths. When I prayed in Hebrew, I sensed my words soaring to heaven. When the Ark was opened during the Torah service at synagogue, I sensed the powerful presence of Yeshua, the Torah incarnate, along with the holy angels. When I fasted on Yom Kippur, I could almost see Yeshua in the heavenly Holy of Holies, presenting his wounds before the Father, and interceding on behalf of Israel and the entire world. I experienced Jewish practice as sacramental, as a vehicle through which Yeshua revealed himself to me, and through which he revealed to me my own identity as a Jew.

Adopting a progressive, pragmatic, and personal approach to Torah observance in the midst of a Christian community, I grew as a Jew and as a human being. I learned to live with tension and ambiguity, and came to realize through experience that as in politics, so in spiritual life, the perfect can become the enemy of the good. Then, in 1993, a split within the community brought my life to a cross-roads, and led its Jewish members to embark on a new course – the formation of a Messianic Jewish congregation. While my path diverged from that of my Christian brothers, the friendships forged within the community remain with me to this day, as does the commitment to an ecumenical vision of unity for the divided people of God.

While the shift from ecumenical community to Messianic Jewish congregation reduced some of the tensions I had experienced, I do not want to suggest that a similar move is advisable for all Jews within the Christian churches. My circumstances were unique to me, just as the circumstances of others are unique to them. I gained much in the move, but I also lost much. Others lost far more; the change in course was only possible because of a tragic crisis and rupture that damaged many lives. With twenty years hindsight, I am convinced that I ended up taking the path that was right for me. But I do not regret devoting the previous twenty years to a life of prayer, service, and community relationship in an ecumenical Christian context.

I have carried with me into Messianic Jewish congregational life the progressive, pragmatic, and personal approach to Torah observance. Every year I grow in Jewish practice. It is only in the last year that I have succeeded in incorporating all three daily services of prayer – Shachrit, Minchah, and Ma’ariv – into my normal rhythm of life. And every year I face new challenges to my ritual practice from family commitments and institutional responsibilities – challenges that must be faced pragmatically and not dogmatically.

Conclusion

Over the past decade I have been part of a group of Messianic Jewish leaders who are seeking to foster Torah observance among Jewish believers in Yeshua, and who together have adopted a progressive, pragmatic, and personal approach to achieving this end. Our association is called The Messianic Jewish Rabbinical Council (MJRC). While the MJRC mainly seeks to provide guidance for members of the Messianic Jewish movement, the materials it has produced are also relevant to Jewish followers of Yeshua in the Christian Churches who have become conscious of their covenantal call as Jews and who are seeking practical wisdom on how to fulfill that call.³

If a significant number of Jewish followers of Yeshua were to awaken to their covenantal call as Jews, and to seek ways to help one another live out that call with wisdom and compassion, this fact in itself would alert the leaders of the Christian churches of a pastoral need requiring their attention. Spurred to action, these leaders might then look for ways to nurture Jewish life in their midst. In this way the suffering perseverance of the pioneers could pave the way for future generations of Jewish followers of Yeshua to walk with less ambivalence as Jews and as disciples of the Jewish Messiah.

³ For more on the MJRC, see ourrabbis.org.

The Christian Church and the Jewish people in this world are divided, and at times opposed one to the other. This renders precarious the situation of those seeking to be loyal to both. Nevertheless, it is our conviction that Yeshua himself stands in that precarious position. His loyalty to one does not negate his loyalty to the other. As his disciples, we can do no better than stand with him, and welcome the worldly tension and eschatological peace that comes from his firm and loving embrace.