

# Messianic Jews as Mirror

BY CAROL HARRIS-SHAPIRO

Not since the proliferation of Jewish religious sects two thousand years ago have we been so uncertain about the meaning and boundaries of Jewish identity. In the United States we have long struggled with our self-definition: is Jewishness an ethnic identity, a religious identity, or both? Conversion and descent standards that make one a Jew in one movement are not accepted in another. Increased intermarriage complicates matters even further. When can non-Jews be part of our ritual and communal life and when can they not? What about children whose parents are raising them as "both Jewish and Christian"? As we enter the twenty-first century, our sense of where the Jewish community begins and ends, our Jewish self-definition, is profoundly called into question.

Every group at some time or other responds to a challenge of inclusivity with, "This is not who we are." Only through intelligent standard-setting can a social organization maintain a sense of purpose and foster a sense of commonality. Such standards function as boundaries, distinguishing

between "what we are" and "what we are not."

An ongoing test case for Jewish boundary-setting, that of the "Messianic Jews," more commonly known as the "Jews for Jesus," demonstrates the difficulty of our task today. While the Jewish community has emphatically ousted Messianic Jews from our congregations and communal organizations, I contend that we have inadequately answered their challenge, "Why shouldn't we be included in the Jewish community?" As we face ever more complex decisions of "who is a Jew?" and "what is a Jew?" in the everyday lives of our synagogues and communal institutions, examining our response to the Messianic Jews might prepare us better for what is to come.

## What is Messianic Judaism?

Messianic Judaism emerged from the Hebrew Christian movement, a Protestant missionary effort of the nineteenth- and twentieth-centuries that targeted Jews using Yiddish-speaking pastors and services on Saturdays. Its goal was to join new Jewish

---

Rabbi Carol Harris-Shapiro received her doctorate from Temple University and ordination from the Reconstructionist Rabbinical College. She has taught at several universities and served as rabbi of Temple Beth Sholom in Salem, OR.

converts to existing Gentile churches, but recognizing levels of anti-Semitism in those churches, some missions would hold special services for Hebrew Christians alone. Until the 1960's, the content of such services was almost wholly devoid of Jewish referents, save for the occasional Jewish star at the front of the room.

This changed dramatically in the 1960's and 1970's. As young Jews rediscovered the joys of Jewishness, Jews coming to Christianity through the Jesus movement demanded that they be able to express their ethnic pride by wearing *kipot* at services, singing Hebrew songs and Israeli dancing. Their impetus changed the name to Messianic Judaism, reflecting the belief that Jews who accept Yeshua/Jesus as their Messiah are in fact returning to "true Judaism." As of 1991, there were approximately 120 Messianic synagogues in the United States, where worship is conducted with various symbols of Jewish identity. These congregations are reserved for Messianic Jews and "Messianic Gentiles," Christians who are supposedly in solidarity with the Jewish people.<sup>1</sup>

Long aware of the existence of Jewish-Christian groups, I was always fascinated with the amount of fury they seemed to provoke from my local Jewish community. "Nazi! Traitor! Brainwashed!" are but a few of the epithets hurled at the Messianic Jews. Why, during the 1970's and 1980's, did a large Jewish community demonstrate against this group in huge numbers, allegedly threaten members with vio-

lence, accuse them of cult practices and worse?<sup>2</sup> Why is there still an intense fear and anger emanating from the Jewish community? Given the large numbers of born Jews who have converted to Christianity as adults (estimated at 210,000),<sup>3</sup> why all the vitriol toward a group that may number, at most, 10,000 born Jews?<sup>4</sup>

To answer these and other questions, I chose a highly controversial Messianic Jewish community for my dissertation research during the years 1990-1991. I spent that year in field research, going to their services, sharing in their social and life cycle events, conducting interviews. While I wish to make it clear that I do not accept Messianic Jewish theological claims, nor their energetic approach to proselytizing, I am more convinced than ever that our outsized reaction to this group has more to do with our own uncertainties and uneasiness about our Jewish identity than it has to do with any specific activity in which this group is involved.

I found little basis for the most extreme accusations against the Messianic Jews. To my knowledge, no child has ever been "snatched" by this group. While they engage in intensive proselytization, almost every Protestant denomination does the same to some degree. Moreover, their members are far from the glassy-eyed zombies one imagines when the word "cult" is used. Their leadership structure is strong and authoritative, and they believe in an active God that intervenes directly in their lives, but this structure and these beliefs are the

same as those of many evangelical churches across the country. Unless we are willing to call millions of such Christians "brainwashed," that term does not describe Messianic Jews either. Interestingly, Messianic Jews promote activities long associated with loyalty to the Jewish people--they support the State of Israel and frown on intermarriage between born Jew and born gentile!

Messianic Jews do not make us uncomfortable for who they are, so much as for their symbolic import to the Jewish community. When thinking about or talking to Messianic Jews, we can become aware just how fragile our own Jewish identity-constructions are. Demonizing the "Jews for Jesus" helps us to focus our attention away from the real boundary issues we face as a community.

## Redrawing the Map

Continually delineating Jewish boundaries is nothing new in Jewish history. Through a slow process over the centuries, lines were drawn and redrawn. These were Jews; those were "Others." For those remaining inside the Jewish community in premodern times, Jewish identity was fairly uniform; one was part of a people chosen by God, living under the system of Jewish religious law.

All this changed with Emancipation in the nineteenth century. Under the laws of European nations and removed from the corporate jurisdiction of the rabbinate, Jews discovered new ways to be Jewish--by faith alone, and without observing the full spec-

trum of traditional *mitzvot* (Reform movement), by nationality (Zionist movement) and by culture. These trends, remarkable in the speed with which they altered the Jewish community, have accelerated further in the twentieth century. The State of Israel made secular Jewishness acceptable, and as some secular American Jews made Israel their "religion," they demonstrated unimpeachable Jewish loyalty without religious affiliation.

Thus, Jewish life in America, despite its religious veneer, has seemed to be more about peoplehood than religion.<sup>5</sup> This emphasis on ethnicity took an interesting twist, as the Baby-Boomers of the 1960's and 1970's experimented with new religions. As Jewish parents learned to say, "My son, the Zen master," we learned to accept that some Jews, while not rejecting their ethnic ties to the Jewish people, might also engage in Buddhist, Hindu or New Age forms of worship--and, with rare exceptions, the Jewish community did not reject them as "lost to the fold."

The 1990 National Jewish Population Survey reflects this pluralism by including all possible definitions of Jewish households, including "Jews by religion, Jews by choice, Jews of no religion, Born Jews raised in another religion, Raised Jewish but converted out, and Gentile Adults in a household with one Jewish individual."<sup>6</sup> Our notion of Jewish identity clearly has broadened considerably over the last two hundred years, if "Jewish identity" can be found even among Gentile people with one Jewish fami-

ly member! Given this environment, is it any surprise that a group such as the Messianic Jews can also claim Jewish identity?

### "We are not Christian"

Our first reaction to the Messianic Jewish claim of shared peoplehood is that Messianic Jews are Christian, not Jewish. After all, if there is one thing American Jews are certain of, it is that we are not Christian. The most marginal Jews may not celebrate Jewish holidays or have any connection to Jewish communal life, but they know that they don't believe in Jesus and don't go to church. Our clinging to this boundary, firm for fifteen hundred years, is often done less for theological reasons than for sociological ones. Because of the imperative of Jewish survival, we feel we must remain distinctive and unique, not assimilating into the Christian majority. For some, lingering elements of our blood-soaked history with Christianity make the eradication of this boundary unthinkable. Old stereotypes that describe the "*goyim*" as violent, brutish, stupid, and plain inferior reinforce the belief that they are the enemy. None of this is "us," can be "us."

And yet, even as "Jews have tended to elevate the denial of Christian doctrine to a paramount element of their self-definition,"<sup>7</sup> intermarriage and increased interaction have decreased the level of historically-based suspicion and fear once marking Jewish-Christian relations. Non-Jews are no longer the "enemy" for many of us. In

fact, they are likely to be our spouses, in-laws, children, grandchildren. We can no longer take for granted the sociological barriers that once divided Jews and Christians. And that is not necessarily such a bad thing. It does a disservice to Judaism to maintain our distinction from Christianity only because of what has become a knee-jerk taboo. To know one is a Jew only because one is not a Christian is a terribly weak and hollow form of Jewishness, a minority identity that is difficult to transmit from generation to generation.

### New Wine in Old Wineskins

Perhaps the issue is not so much that we see Messianic Jews as Christian. The real rub is that they behave Jewishly. The Messianic Jews use our rituals, our sacred language, but transform our *sancta* to reflect a Christological message. For example, they light candles on Friday night, but invoke Yeshua as the light of the world.

When a "*landsgman*" turns out to be not a "*landsgman*," when we are having a conversation with one of "us" and it turns out to be one of "them," there is an intense sense of betrayal. This religious version of the "Invasion of the Body Snatchers" can elicit strong reactions. The Jewish community accuses the Messianic Jews of deliberate deception: "You pretend to be Jewish just to get converts." And they reply: "But we feel we are Jewish. We are members of the Jewish people. We have every right to use the symbols of our Jewish identity just as you do."

But this answer is often too threatening for us to accept, for it muddies that thin line between "us" and "them," which is so determinative of our identity.

Even if Messianic Jews honestly believe they are expressing their Jewish identity through their rituals, the fact that they are distorting our symbols certainly seems a powerful reason for excluding them from membership in the Jewish community. And yet, do not many Jews use Jewish ritual as containers conveying values and ideas quite different from traditional ones? For example, feminist seders, freedom seders and vegetarian seders (focusing on animal rights) can use the rituals of the Seder to express wholly new beliefs, where a cup of wine can represent menstrual blood, or salt water the tears of Palestinians. Perhaps the most traditional among us would regard this kind of ritual as illegitimate, just as most of us view the ritual innovations of Messianic Jews as illegitimate. And yet, Jews incorporating these new ideas into ritual are not systematically removed from the fold for such creativity.

## Christian Claims and Rabbinic Armor

If a sense of "otherness" is not an adequate reason for keeping Jewish Christians out of the Jewish community, what about the wide theological gulf between the two religions? The Messianic Jews would be eager to discuss this with us, claiming that belief in Yeshua is Jewish, and offering to show us Hebrew Bible prophecies that

were ostensibly fulfilled by Yeshua. Here we stand on firmer boundary-making ground, or so we believe. We look back at our rabbinic commentaries to show why these prophecies have been distorted: that Jesus cannot be both God and man; that, one cannot claim to be still Jewish, but also freed from law and covenant. "One cannot be both Jewish and Christian," we exclaim. They are two separate religions."

This is a more solid response, yet there is something off-kilter about this whole project. Most American Jews do not take most of the words of the Bible or the rabbis as authoritative guides to conduct or belief. Many have never actually read the Bible, much less the Talmud. And yet, under threat from the "Jews for Jesus," we suddenly arm ourselves with rabbinic texts to fight off the threat of the missionaries, teaching this especially to our teenagers. There is something deeply ironic about defending our Jewish borders with material we rarely see as important or binding at any other time.

More specifically, if we find Christians beyond the Jewish pale for believing themselves freed from the system of Jewish law, many liberal Jews would agree that we are in a post-halakhic era, marked by choosing our Jewish lifestyle among the available *mitzvot*, rather than submitting ourselves to the "yoke of the Law." Messianic Jews also "pick and choose" among various *mitzvot*--in the congregation I studied, more than a dozen families built *sukkot*, many kept a

form of *kashrut*, all followed the calendar of Jewish holidays (albeit with Christological interpretations of each one). Like many liberal Jews, they understand that they observe these *mitzvot* because they enrich their lives spiritually, rather than following the whole system of *mitzvot* out of a sense of obligation.

Finally, if we critique the Messianic Jews for their belief in a God-man, we need to remember that we generally include secular Jews (1.1 million, according to the 1990 NJPS) within our Jewish borders. Is a belief in a God-man better or worse than a belief in no God, according to traditional Judaism? The answers are inconclusive.<sup>8</sup>

## Heretics and Infidels

This leads us to the Messianic Jewish trump card. Declare the Messianic Jews, "You are at best inconsistent, and at worst hypocritical. You claim we violate Jewish religious beliefs by believing in Yeshua, but so do Jewish atheists, those who practice Eastern religions, and they are still members of the tribe. If one can be Jewish by secular and ethnic identity alone, if one can be an ethnic Jew and hold Eastern beliefs, why can't one be Jewish and hold Christian beliefs? Why can't we at least be Jewish, if not Judaic?"

Stuart Charme describes this issue in terms of "heretics" and "infidels." Heretics believe that they are still in the tradition, but hold beliefs quite different than the normative ones. Infidels are unbelievers, those who

have removed themselves from the beliefs of the group entirely. One source of confusion about Jewish identity in the modern world stems from the seeming paradox that the modern Jewish "infidel" (e.g. the Jewish secularist or humanist who does not believe in or practice traditional Judaism) is not only tolerated, but is possibly even normative for large segments of the Jewish community, whereas one particular type of Jewish heretic, the "messianic Jew," is regarded with great alarm by the Jewish community.<sup>9</sup> Charme asks, "Why is infidelity better than heresy?"

Even traditional Jewish sources seem to indicate that the Messianic Jews could still be considered Jews. Based on B. Sanhedrin 44a, the apostate, although she may have sinned, is still considered part of Israel. A Jew who is an apostate can be Jewishly married to a "normative" Jew, and a Jew married to an apostate needs a *get* for divorce, indicating that an individual retains Jewish status even if he or she takes on another religious belief.<sup>10</sup> At most, that individual can be barred from Jewish institutional life. It is telling that in the Beresford case of 1989, in which Messianic Jews sought Israeli citizenship under the Law of Return, the majority opinion for excluding the couple was based precisely on the idea of barring apostates, rather than denying that they still had some kind of Jewish identity.<sup>11</sup> If we were to be consistent in applying such a ruling, we would have to deny access not only to Messianic Jews, but to all those whose religious beliefs and prac-

tices make them equally "heretical" or "infidel."

## The Reconstructionist Approach

Mordecai Kaplan recognized that Judaism has always been evolving. However, he decried the idea that this evolution consisted of rudderless drifting through time. Rather, the whole idea of Reconstructionism was to reconstruct Judaism deliberately and thoughtfully. Kaplan created a movement known for its intellectual honesty. As we look ahead to the shape of the Jewish people in the twenty-first century, we certainly need self-examination more than ever.

In the specific case of the Messianic Jews, we see that our exclusion is particularistic and inconsistent. Is it defensible to reject one group for theological improprieties, while many of us in the Jewish fold, according to tradition, also commit such improprieties? Is it defensible to claim historical animosity as the primary reason to keep our distance from Christianity, when Jewish-Christian relations have taken remarkable strides in the last twenty-five years? Is it defensible to condemn the Messianic Jews for ritual innovation when Jewish groups also create far-reaching innovation with sacred ritual?

These questions are important not because of the handful of Messianic Jews themselves, but because of the greater challenges we now face in boundary-setting. The first important

challenge raised for the rest of us by the Messianic Jews is, "Are we, in our fundamental identity, a religion or an ethnic group?" Practically, by including secular Jews as legitimate and honored members of our people, we seem to indicate that ethnicity is our bottom line. How, then, do we respond, for example, to an ethnic Jew, loyal to the Jewish people, who shares the theological beliefs of another religion? How about an atheist non-Jew who wants to become part of the Jewish people, but can't accept any idea of God? If we accept secular born Jews, should we accept a secular Jew by choice?

The second major challenge raised by the Messianic Jews is, "Why do Jews reject Christianity as a viable belief option--out of a sense of theological conviction or a sociological sense of 'otherness'?" How we answer this question might help us to come to decisions as to how much a non-Jew can participate in the life of the synagogue, or what we do with a person who has been raised to believe that she is both Jewish and Christian, and wants to belong to our synagogue.

Until we are clearer about our own core identity, we cannot begin to formulate coherent and helpful responses to these issues. We need to find some common ground as to who we are in order to set all-important criteria for determining the boundaries of our synagogues and institutions in the decades to come. ♦

1. Carol A. Harris-Shapiro, *Syncretism or Struggle: The Case of Messianic Judaism* (Ann Arbor, UMI, 1992), 25-64.

2. C. Conway, "900 Protest Efforts of Messianic Jews," *The Philadelphia Inquirer*, October 1, 1984, 1-B+; G. Silver, "Overbrook Park Under Siege," *Welcomat*, November 14-20, 1984, 1+.

3. B. Kosmin, et.al., *Highlights of the CJF 1990 National Jewish Population Survey* (New York, Council of Jewish Federations, 1991), 4.

4. The total number of Messianic Jews is difficult to ascertain. One Messianic Jewish leader claimed in 1991 that there were over 120 Messianic Jewish congregations in the United States, including Messianic congregations still affiliated with Protestant denominations. The size of each congregation varies widely, from less than 10 members in some congregations to 400 adult members in others. Taking one major Messianic Jewish congregational movement (The Union of Messianic Jewish Congregations) as a standard, in which the average size of a congregation is 75 members, 60% of whom are born Jewish, there would be no more than 6,000 born Jews involved in Messianic Judaism. Even imagining huge growth in the last three years (there has been some growth, but probably not this much), it is still probable that the number of born Jews involved in Messianic Judaism is less than 10,000. Why, then, do both the Messianic Jewish organizations and Jews for Judaism accept numbers anywhere

from 100,000 to 150,000 Messianic Jews? That figure, promoted by Messianic Jewish organizations, reflects the number of people of Jewish origin calling themselves Christian by religion, whether they belong to a Messianic congregation or are members of larger Christian denominations. See D. H. Stern, *Messianic Jewish Manifesto*, (Jerusalem, Jewish New Testament Publications, 1991), 197-198.

5. Nathan Glazer, *American Judaism*, 2nd ed. (Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1972), 121-128.

6. Kosmin, et. al., 2-3.

7. Stuart Charme, "Heretics, Infidels and Apostates: Menace, Problem, or Symptom?" *Judaism* 36 (Winter, 1987), 23.

8. In a letter to the editor, an Orthodox rabbi responds to a Reform rabbi in this way, "The Hebrew Christians believe, in error, that the Messiah has come; Reform Judaism rejects the belief in a personal Messiah, which is to my mind an even greater deviation from Torah theology." See A.J. Yuter, "Reform is told about religious authenticity," *Jewish Post and Opinion*, October 23, 1991, 3.

9. Charme, 19.

10. Charme, 22. Rashi's commentary on *B. Sanhedrin* 44a shows that even apostate Jews retained certain personal status as Jews in the community.

11. David Novak, "When Jews are Christians," *First Things* (Issue 17, November 1991. 42-46), 45-46.