

## **Great Diversity: Authority, Freedom, and Tradition in the life of Jewish Disciples of Yeshua**

by

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In keeping with Jen Rosner's approach, this paper will expand the context of statements coming from within the contemporary Messianic Jewish movement, the ecclesial community to which I belong. Her paper discussed the role and views of the Messianic Jewish Rabbinical Council. I will introduce views of some other bodies represented in the movement. My paper will be an overview of a limited selection of additional positions from within the Messianic movement. I will pay particular attention to issues of authority, freedom and tradition.

### **International Alliance of Messianic Congregations and Synagogues (IAMCS)**

The vision statement of this alliance says: *The IAMCS is not designed to be a denominational structure, but rather to be an instrument in promoting Messianic revival and to provide for the needs of its members, whatever their affiliations.*<sup>1</sup>

The fact that the IAMCS does not attempt to be a "denomination" is a commonality for all the organisations of which I am aware in the Messianic Movement.

At the beginning of IAMCS' Statement of Faith we read - *that the BIBLE, consisting of the Tenach (Holy Scriptures) and the later writings commonly known as the B'rit Hadasha (New Covenant), is the only infallible and authoritative word of God. We recognize its divine inspiration, and accept its teachings as our final authority in all matters of faith and practice.* The clear emphasis is that the Bible is the final authority in all matters of faith and practice.

*We recognize that Jewish people (physical descendants of Abraham through Isaac and Jacob, whether through the mother's or the father's blood-line) who place their faith in Israel's Messiah, Yeshua, continue to be Jewish according to the Scriptures.*<sup>2</sup>

The emphasis is that "born a Jew – die a Jew" is also applicable to those who believe in Yeshua, and assumes a certain affiliation with Jewish lifestyle. This statement is immediately followed by some of its practical implications.

*We observe and celebrate the Jewish Holy Days given by God to Israel, with their fulfillment in and through the Messiah Yeshua. We believe that true "Biblical Judaism," the faith of first century believers, which we seek to practice, acknowledges the continuity of faith in the one true God, revealed throughout the Scriptures, and ultimately manifested in God's Son, Yeshua the Messiah. We believe that salvation has always been "by faith," and that works of law, or righteous acts, have never saved anyone (Gen. 15:6; Rom. 2-6; Eph. 2:8-9; Heb. 11:6, 39).*

The IAMCS is attempting to return to the practice of the first century believers, with an emphasis on salvation "by faith" only. Later Jewish and Christian traditions seem to have a secondary value, if at all. The major distinct observance highlighted in this Statement is the observance of Jewish Holy Days.

### **Messianic Jewish Alliance of America (MJAA)**

The Messianic Jewish Alliance of America is considered to be the largest association of Messianic Jewish believers in the world.

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.iamcs.org/#/about-us/our-vision>, accessed 18.06.2014

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.iamcs.org/#/about-us/what-we-believe>, accessed 18.06.2014

Explaining Messianic Judaism, the website of MJAA says: *Messianic Judaism is a Biblically based movement of people who, as committed Jews, believe in Yeshua (Jesus) as the Jewish Messiah of Israel of whom the Jewish Law and Prophets spoke. This statement makes the Bible foundational, while emphasising Jewish "commitment."*

This commitment is further explained: *The "Messianic Jewish identity" is wholly dependent on the person of Yeshua. ... The foundation of Messianic Judaism, therefore, is each individual's personal relationship with the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob through Messiah Yeshua. ... Another important aspect of the Messianic Jewish movement is Jewish congregational worship. Yeshua is foundational and Jewish congregational worship is considered to be important.*

*Should Jews really attempt to assimilate into churches and forego their Jewish identity when they choose to put their faith in the Jewish Messiah? Messianic Judaism answers, "No!" As Yeshua Himself embraced His Jewishness, Messianic Jews seek to embrace theirs, by meeting in congregational communities with other Jewish believers and by maintaining a Biblically Jewish expression of their faith. Every congregation is different, but this expression often means worshiping in Hebrew, following Mosaic Law, dancing as King David did before the Lord, and keeping Biblical holidays such as Pesach, Sukkot, or Shavuot.<sup>3</sup> This statement speaks clearly against assimilation but advocates for Messianic Jews to embrace their Jewishness. However, this Jewishness is to be practiced within distinct messianic congregations with various Jewish expressions.*

Similarly to IMACS, the MJAA asserts that the Bible is the final authority in all matters of faith and practice. Among Jewish practices, biblical feasts and holidays assume a major role for the Alliance. Observance of Jewish traditions is possible if they do not contradict the Bible. *The most distinct difference between Messianic Judaism and Christianity is our expression of faith. Messianic Judaism is a return to the Jewish roots of the faith. This takes the form of observance of Biblical feasts and holidays, and other traditions not in conflict with Scriptures.<sup>4</sup>*

### **Young Messianic Jewish Alliance (YMJA)**

The Young Messianic Jewish Alliance (YMJA) is a Messianic Jewish youth organization for young people, ages 13-30, and is a branch of the Messianic Jewish Alliance of America (MJAA).

*Messianic Jewish believers are Jewish people who have accepted Yeshua (Jesus) of Nazareth as the promised Messiah of Israel and the Saviour of the world and maintain a Jewish identity. They worship on Shabbat (the Sabbath) and celebrate the holidays that Jewish people have celebrated for thousands of years.<sup>5</sup> Maintaining Jewish identity is emphasized but not specified except for the mention of Shabbat and holidays.*

### **Association of Messianic Congregations (AMC)**

The Association of Messianic Congregations is *formed by leaders in the Messianic Jewish Movement<sup>6</sup>* The purpose of the Association is: *"The Association of Messianic Congregations exists to strengthen Messianic Congregations by providing resources, teaching and fellowship*

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<sup>3</sup> [http://www.mjaa.org/site/PageServer?pagename=rd\\_messianicmovement\\_messianic\\_judaism](http://www.mjaa.org/site/PageServer?pagename=rd_messianicmovement_messianic_judaism), accessed 18.06.2014

<sup>4</sup> [http://www.mjaa.org/site/PageServer?pagename=rd\\_messianicmovement\\_faq](http://www.mjaa.org/site/PageServer?pagename=rd_messianicmovement_faq), accessed 18.06.2014

<sup>5</sup> [http://ymja.org/?page\\_id=2](http://ymja.org/?page_id=2), accessed 18.06.2014

<sup>6</sup> AMC Consists of 13 congregations according to the website. <http://www.messianicassociation.org/directory.htm>, accessed 18.06.2014

*that promote Biblical values, proclaims personal faith in Yeshua as the one Atonement for all humanity, and encourages worship through the diversity of Jewish expressions of faith.”<sup>7</sup>*

The Association’s Statement of Faith states:

*We believe that the Scriptures, both the Tenach (Hebrew Scriptures) and the Brit Hadasha (New Covenant), are fully inspired and are God’s complete and final revelation to man until the Messiah returns....*

*Jewish believers in Yeshua have a unique twofold identity. They are the spiritual remnant of physical Israel and at the same time are part of the body of Messiah....*

*We believe the Law of Moses as a rule of life has been fulfilled in the Messiah and therefore believers are no longer under its’ obligation or condemnation. While the Law of Moses is no longer obligatory for believers, the Law has much to teach us regarding a joyfully Jewish way of life. Both Jewish and non-Jewish believers have the freedom in Messiah to maintain any aspects of the Law of Moses which do not violate the entirety of the rest of scripture.<sup>8</sup>*

Thus we see that for the AMC, the Bible is the final divine revelations and the ultimate authority. Belonging to the Jewish people is emphasised. While the “Law of Moses” has something to teach regarding a “joyfully” Jewish way of life, it is no longer authoritative.

### **British Messianic Jewish Alliance (BMJA)**

The British Messianic Jewish Alliance understands itself as “*an association of Jewish people who have found the Messiah Yeshua as our Saviour and Lord.*”<sup>9</sup> The Jewish identity is a part of the definition.

In the Statement of Faith we find: *Declare our allegiance to the Holy Scriptures of the Tanach and the Brit Chadashah as the supreme rule of faith and life.*<sup>10</sup> The Bible is the supreme authority for the BMJA.

### **Kiev Jewish Messianic Congregation (Kievskaya Evreiskaya Messianskaya Obshina – KEMO)**

The Kiev Jewish Messianic Congregation is considered to be the largest messianic congregation in the world with a membership of 1600 people (2013). This congregation has planted a number of congregations in Ukraine and in some other parts of the FSU. It impacts the messianic movement among certain streams within the Russian-speaking Messianic movement.

As we can see from their description of their goal, this congregation shows little respect for traditional Judaism: *The goal of KEMO is revival among the Jewish people that includes ... restoration of the Jewish part of the Body of the Messiah, ... leaving behind unbiblical extremes of Christianity and Judaism.*<sup>11</sup> Jewish identity is essential for the congregation.

### **Fellowship of Messianic Jewish Congregations and Ministries in Germany**

This informal Fellowship was formed a couple of years ago to provide a common platform for Messianic congregations and ministries in Germany. It includes most of the almost 40 Messianic congregations and groups in Germany. To make unity within the fellowship possible, we have tried to simplify the Statement of Faith and Goals to provide the broadest

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<sup>7</sup> <http://www.messianicassociation.org/believe.htm>, accessed 18.06.2014

<sup>8</sup> <http://www.messianicassociation.org/believe.htm>, accessed 18.06.2014

<sup>9</sup> <http://www.bmja.net/www.bmja.net/Welcome.html>, accessed 18.06.2014

<sup>10</sup> [http://www.bmja.net/www.bmja.net/What\\_We\\_Believe.html](http://www.bmja.net/www.bmja.net/What_We_Believe.html), accessed 18.06.2014

<sup>11</sup> It is taken from <http://kemokiev.org/aboutus>, accessed 18.06.2014, and translated from Russian (by the author).

possible framework of common ground for our diversities. In such very basic statement, similarly for the groups mentioned above, the Bible has the highest authority. These Messianic Jews strongly identify themselves with the Jewish people and their spiritual-cultural heritage.

### **Overview's Summary**

As we can see from the above overview, Jewish identity is essentially important for the Messianic Jewish believers of all the various streams mentioned above. I would say it is the key thing that distinguishes the movement from Christian denominations and churches. Jewish identity is seen as divinely ordained and biblically supported.

Congregational worship and community life are intended to support this identity. Shabbat and other Jewish Biblical holidays are to be observed in some way, partially for the reason of living out the Jewish identity.

The Bible, consisting of TaNaKh and the New Testament, holds the ultimate authority.

Jewish Tradition is generally respected (if it does not contradict belief in Yeshua) but it is not considered authoritative. In fact, it is noticeable in the overview that Jewish tradition is approached with much freedom and flexibility. The extent to which it is kept and followed is determined by each particular congregation or individual.

### **The Path of Diversity**

In the contemporary Messianic Jewish movement, we see diversity not just regarding the role and authority of the Jewish tradition; but also the extent and the ways of following this tradition. At the same time, Jewish identity and the explicit belonging to the Jewish people is an essential identity marker of the movement. The diversity applies to the way of living out this identity in (or in connection to) the contemporary Jewish community. Surprisingly for outsiders, this diversity is natural for the Jewish people. The “orthodox” Jewish life-expression, which is primarily seen by outsiders, is not homogeneous, is not the only expression and is not even the dominant expression today. The Messianic Jewish movement follows the patterns of diversity that exist in the contemporary Jewish community and Judaism. Even more - the views we have seen above are also found among many Jewish people in different parts of the world.

If we believe that God is working in the Jewish people, their history, worldview and traditions as the chosen people in some way (something that probably no one in the Messianic movement would deny), we also need to recognise his working in their diversity. The contemporary situation is not unprecedented in the history of the Jewish people. In the time when the first “messianic” congregations appeared in the first century AD, the Jewish people lived and believed in diversity, while having commonly accepted markers of their Jewishness. Many historians consider that unity, (based on the common general identity markers), in diversity helped Jewish people to survive the destruction of the Temple and to survive in the Diaspora.

Therefore, possibly, instead of struggling with or complaining about the diversity in the Messianic Jewish movement regarding authority, freedom and tradition, the movement should stop fighting against this but rather embrace it. This diversity makes the movement more dynamic and, as strange as it may sound, more contemporarily “Jewish.” Certainly, the movement needs the common markers of our Jewish identity and life. But should the movement zealously attempt to develop them? Instead, besides consulting with the Scripture, perhaps it would be better to learn the common identity markers from the general Jewish

community in its historic, geographical, cultural and even religious diversity. I would also apply this to the Jewish followers of Yeshua in Christian churches. It could be that this approach would help them live out their distinct Jewish identity for the advantage of the churches and the Jewish people.