

## Hesed And Hospitality: Embracing Our Place on the Margins

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On a recent Shabbat morning, after the Torah reading, the rabbi opened his d'rash by saying: Judaism is a religion of law. In Judaism, we ask the question, 'What does the halacha say I should do?' Christianity is different. It likes to ask, 'What would Jesus do?' But we already know what Jesus would do—he would keep the halacha!

We Jews, the rabbi seemed to say, understand Jesus better than do his Christian followers. Jesus is one of us and would live accordingly. Thus, the rabbi managed in one stroke to both reclaim Yeshua as a great Jewish figure and to marginalize him and his adherents. He was following a long tradition among American Jewish leaders who “extracted Jesus from his Christian milieu, relocating him inside their own religious world, and then drawing on his cultural authority to criticize the very Christians whose favor they were supposedly currying.”<sup>1</sup> Unlike the Christians, the rabbi's Jesus would certainly not expect his fellow Jews to “get saved” or to acknowledge him as the divine Messiah. Indeed, this Jesus is just trying to be a good Jew and does not belong at the center of anyone's story.

The rabbi's words reminded me of the scene in Yeshua's home synagogue in Nazareth, where he rises to read the announcement of the eschatological jubilee in the scroll of Isaiah. When he returns to his place among the congregants, he declares, “Today this Scripture is fulfilled in your hearing” (Luke 4:14–21). The congregation seems impressed with Yeshua's words at first, but ends up asking, “Who does he think he is anyway?” Yeshua's marginalization

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<sup>1</sup> Stephen Prothero, *American Jesus: How the Son of God Became a National Icon* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2003), 251.

in this episode is quite literal; he is driven outside of town to the brow of the hill on which it is built, where he barely avoids being thrown down the cliff.

Yeshua is indeed “The Misunderstood Jew,” as [described](#) in a recent title by Amy-Jill Levine, Professor of New Testament Studies at Vanderbilt University.<sup>2</sup> Levine and the rabbi both imply that Yeshua is misunderstood first by his own followers, including, in Levine’s view, the writers of the New Testament, who already began to rework Yeshua’s Jewish message into something that would appeal to the growing contingent of Gentile followers. We can trust in the reliability of the apostolic writings, however, and still recognize Yeshua as a misunderstood and marginalized figure. In the words of John P. Meier, he is “a marginal Jew from a marginal province at the eastern end of the Roman Empire [who] left no writings of his own ... no archaeological monuments or artifacts ... nothing that comes directly from him without mediators.”<sup>3</sup> This sort of marginality complicates the quest for the historical Jesus in which Meier’s multi-volume series, *A Marginal Jew*, is engaged, but is only part of the story. The title of the series is also “intended to signify such things as Jesus’ insignificance and socially marginal position in his own time as an itinerant prophet executed by the state, as well as Jesus’ dissonance with teachings and practices more characteristic of Jewish religion of his time.”<sup>4</sup>

This picture of Yeshua’s marginality is consistent with the Gospel accounts. What is more striking there, however, is Yeshua’s embrace of the margins to reveal the God who is at the center of Israel’s story. In a culture infected with materialism and self-absorption, the margins are a prophetic location where one can protest yet not disappear. Yeshua’s example beckons us to the margins as well. Perhaps it is fitting that the Messianic Jewish community, which sees itself at

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<sup>2</sup> Amy-Jill Levine, *The Misunderstood Jew: The Church and the Scandal of the Jewish Jesus* (New York: HarperSanFrancisco, 2006).

<sup>3</sup> John P. Meier, *A Marginal Jew: Rethinking the Historical Jesus. Volume One: The Roots of the Problem and the Person* (New York: Doubleday, 1991), 25.

<sup>4</sup> Book review, Larry W. Hurtado, *Journal of Biblical Literature*, Vol. 112, No. 3 (Autumn, 1993): 532–34.

the center of God's redemptive purposes for both the church and the Jewish community, finds itself marginalized by both.

This paper considers both the inherent marginality of following a cross-bearing Messiah, and the incidental marginality that has resulted from the historic rift between the Jewish Messiah and the Jewish people, and between Jews and Christians. Inherent marginality is part of loyalty to Yeshua. Incidental marginality may change with time and circumstance, and the boundary between incidental and inherent marginality is often not clear. I conclude that we are to embrace marginality, even as we seek to reverse our incidental marginality within Israel. We embrace marginality, whether inherent or incidental, as a platform for the practice of *hesed*, deeds of loving-kindness, including hospitality as a communal expression of *hesed*. Such expressions of *hesed* directly counter dominant cultural values to display the character of the Messiah whom we profess to follow.

### **Messiah on the margins**

Before we embrace our place on the margins, however, we need to consider how Yeshua embraced his. Levine interprets the story of the woman at the well in her chapter on "Stereotyping Judaism." The story has been read by feminists as an example of Yeshua's reaching out to women, even outsider women, in a radically new way. So far so good, but such interpreters, as Levine points out, have often gone on to portray Yeshua as defying the whole allegedly oppressive, misogynist system of Judaism in order to bring hope to women. Levine suggests that in the story itself, "it is Jesus, the Jew in the Samaritan area, who is the 'outsider,' who behaves in a shameless way, and who is marginal to the community."<sup>5</sup> Time will not permit a response to Levine's claim that Yeshua was behaving in a shameless way, by exchanging

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<sup>5</sup> Levine, 135.

suggestive banter with this flirtatious female stranger. Nor can I agree with Levine's claim that the woman is not an outsider in the story.<sup>6</sup> But Levine's central point, that Yeshua comes as an outsider and willingly inhabits the margin in this encounter, is well taken.

The woman at the well, of course, reminds us of a series of similar encounters in the Torah, as Levine notes.<sup>7</sup> First, in Genesis 24, Abraham sends his unnamed servant back to the ancestral homeland to find a bride for Isaac. The servant arrives at the outskirts of Nahor in the evening, and pauses at the well. He prays that the young woman who responds to his request for a drink by offering to water his camels as well will be the one the Lord has chosen, and so it comes to pass. The servant, and through him Isaac, is a marginal figure in this setting, an outsider subject to the kindness of the insiders. But he is a well-stocked outsider, with a whole caravan of gifts to bestow.

Isaac's son Jacob returns to the same land and comes upon a well (Gen 29), as a far more marginalized figure than his father. Unlike Isaac, he has no proxy, but must make the long journey himself. Indeed, he arrives at the well because he is fleeing for his life from the wrath of Esau, and he arrives empty-handed. Isaac, through the servant, can offer abundant gifts as a bride price. Jacob has only his own body and labor to offer. But his descendant Moses, in the third well-encounter in Torah (Ex 2) is even more marginalized. Like Jacob, he is fleeing for his life from the wrath of a powerful figure, and he arrives empty-handed. Jacob, however, has at least returned to the homeland of his mother's family; Moses does not return to any ancestral homeland. Indeed, even after he reveals himself as a hero and marries his bride, he declares, "I have been a stranger in a strange land" ([Exod 2:22](#), AV).

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 137.

The trajectory is clear: the outsider who arrives at the well becomes more and more marginal in each successive story. In all three stories, however, the outsider reveals himself as a heroic figure as well. At the well, Isaac's servant shows a hint of his riches to Rebecca ([Gen 24:22](#)). At the well, Jacob rolls away a massive stone to enable Rachel to water her flocks ([Gen 29:10](#)). At the well, Moses stands up to defend the seven daughters of Reuel the priest, including Zipporah his bride-to-be, against the abusive shepherds ([Exod 2:17](#)). And in each story, after this initial revelation at the well, the protagonist meets the family and wins his bride.

Yeshua enters this ongoing story by coming to Samaria as an outsider. Just as the Jews marginalized Samaritans, so did Samaritans marginalize Jews,<sup>8</sup> as the Samaritan woman points out in what seems to be a mocking tone: "How is it that You, being a Jew, ask a drink from me, a Samaritan woman?" (John 4:9). Traditional commentaries tend to miss Yeshua's marginality here and focus on that of the woman. Thus, Raymond Brown summarizes the exchange:

Vs. 7. *Jesus* asks the Samaritan for water, violating the social customs of the time.

Vs. 8. *Woman* mocks Jesus for being so in need that he does not observe the proprieties.

Vs. 9. *Jesus* shows that the real reason for his action is not his inferiority or need, but his superior status.<sup>9</sup>

True, Yeshua does reveal his "superior status" in a sense, just as Abraham's servant, Jacob, and Moses reveal their superior status through heroic deeds at the well. Like his ancestors, Yeshua performs a heroic deed there, in his case by offering living water to the woman. Like the servant of Abraham, Yeshua bears abundant gifts, speaking of the "gift of God" that he has to offer ([John](#)

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 36.

<sup>9</sup> Raymond E. Brown, "The Gospel according to John I-XII" in *The Anchor Bible* (New York: Doubleday, 1966), 177. Brown gives only passing reference to the connection with the well encounters in the Torah (Ibid., 170).

4:10). He then shows his supernatural insight into the woman's personal life. But the outcome is more nuanced than Brown suggests; it is precisely within his perceived marginality and need that Yeshua is able to reach this woman. When he asks her to return with her husband, it is not merely to "uncover her evil deeds,"<sup>10</sup> as Brown says, nor to remind her "of her many disappointments in personal relationships in order that she may appreciate the more deep and lasting satisfaction that Jesus brings,"<sup>11</sup> as F.F. Bruce more kindly suggests. Rather, Yeshua continues to follow the pattern set in Torah in which each hero, after encountering the woman at the well, must meet the folks.

It is impossible to overlook the contrast between the Samaritan woman with five ex-husbands and a current paramour, and the beautiful Rebecca whom the text describes as "a virgin; no man had known her" ([Gen 24:16](#)). Within her questionable situation, however, the Samaritan woman ends up introducing Yeshua not just to her family, but to the entire city. Like the servant of Isaac, Yeshua has abundant gifts to offer. Unlike him, he gains not one bride, but a multitude of Samaritans.

It is no accident that in John's narrative the fruitful encounter with the Samaritan woman comes right after the more ambiguous encounter with a Jewish man in chapter 3. There too, Yeshua is a marginal figure, approachable only at night, but the non-marginal Nicodemus seems unable to embrace him as such. As Levine points out, "The unnamed Samaritan woman understands Jesus, while Nicodemus, the elite teacher, fails to get the point, and the unexpected result provides satisfaction to those outside the academy and the institutional church,"<sup>12</sup> a category that would include much of our Messianic Jewish constituency.

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 177.

<sup>11</sup> F.F. Bruce, *The Gospel of John*. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1983), 107.

<sup>12</sup> Levine, 138.

## On the Jewish margins

Yeshua is in no hurry to reveal his “superior status.” Rather, he willingly inhabits the margins to reveal his true identity. This strategy has particular relevance today, if we understand marginalization as an extreme form of our modern disease of hyper-individualism and the social fragmentation that it carries. In more traditional cultures, those on the margins are doomed to a sort of imposed hyper-individualism that leaves them isolated from the community. Today, we can see the marginalized as those for whom individualism has gone amok, those who must live among the ruins of the social fragmentation that affects us all in more subtle ways. Yeshua takes on this marginalization, embraces it, most completely in his cross, and there reconciles us with God. Yet, even though our marginalization from God has been overcome, in following Yeshua, we often find ourselves on the margins of our culture.

In the context of Jewish history, this irony is most pronounced. Aligning with Yeshua, at least outwardly, was a way for Jews in Christendom to escape the margins and move toward the mainstream of Gentile culture, which is precisely why we Messianic Jews are suspect to the Jewish community today. Only in recent decades has the social advantage of loyalty to Yeshua disappeared, and we can understand why the Jewish community remains suspicious of us. Confessing faith in Yeshua was once a key to escaping the margins of the wider Christian culture. We all remember the story of the Jewish convert who is a professor in Tsarist Russia. He is asked if he converted out of conviction, or for convenience. “Out of conviction,” he replies. “The conviction that I’d rather be a professor at the St. Petersburg academy than teach the *yeshiva boochers* in my home *shtetl*.” Today, at least in the West, such compromise is unnecessary, but faith in Yeshua remains suspect, and therefore marginal within the Jewish community. This is an incidental marginality, shaped by history and culture, rather than the

marginality inherent to the gospel. Nevertheless, the margins may be a prime position from which to express something of the reality of the Messiah whom we profess to follow.

I opened with a reference to a *d'rash* that I heard at a local synagogue I occasionally visit. The doors of this synagogue would normally be wide open to a nicely dressed Jewish man who seems to know his way around the service. After I had attended a few services, however, I felt that as a Messianic Jewish leader I needed to let the rabbi know who I was and even to gain his approval for my continued attendance, which I did via email. The rabbi responded graciously, but still seems a bit nervous whenever I attend. At one point in our correspondence he said:

Christianity defines who is a Christian. America defines who is an American citizen. Judaism defines who is a Jew, and the acceptance of Jesus as one's messiah puts them outside the walls of Judaism. So, while I respect the rights of those who wish to meld the two traditions into their own faith customs and beliefs, calling themselves Jewish in any way is, to me, inappropriate.

So, I am welcome to attend, but not as a Jew. I received a similar response from another rabbi in town, when I asked for permission to attend services occasionally, "simply as an individual Jew who wants to worship within the Jewish community."

Dear Russ,

While you are correct as to my opposition to so-called "messianic" Judaism, anyone of any faith is welcome to pray/visit our congregation – so long as they do not proselytize. We have many Christians who visit us.

Both rabbis presented marginalization as the cost of attending services. I can accept such marginalization because I understand its source, and because it may provide a unique opportunity for following Yeshua. This does not mean I can never become more involved in the local Jewish



community, but I must start on the margins and prove myself, perhaps mostly by embracing that position. The warning not to proselytize means that we come in suspect and will be under some sort of surveillance by the gatekeepers. But accepting these conditions seems like a fitting posture for a follower of the Messiah who abandoned the center to reveal himself at the margins.

A colleague from South Africa demonstrates this embrace of the margins much more effectively than I have been able to do so far. He writes:

Recently, I attended a Yizkor service with my brother-in-law on Shavuot. I was the only cohen [priest] present and the gabbai asked me if I would be willing to make an aliyah. I concurred, he took my Hebrew name, and then, in front of the whole shul, the rabbi waved his finger and said no! (somehow, although he was new to the community, my “reputation” had preceded me). And let me tell you, I keep *shtum* [quiet, low-key]. I’m not out on the streets wearing “Jesus made me kosher” t-shirts. But, in such a small community, everyone knows everything about another!

I had to leave the congregation for a few moments so that they could announce “eyn cohen” [no priest is here]. Only then could I reenter and continue with the service. This, ten days after my father’s burial. The gabbai came and apologized. Nu, “for I am not ashamed of the ....” would have been my response, but I held my peace.

This story illustrates a vital reality of life on the margins. Those who are marginalized are tempted to respond by marginalizing others. Thus, the Samaritan woman responds to her marginalization by mocking Yeshua the Jew when he asks her for water. Embracing our place on the margins, rather than merely enduring it, means that we resist this temptation. Though it would

doubtless embarrass my South African colleague, he serves as a model for us. South Africa has a significant Jewish community, but it is much smaller and more vulnerable than the Jewish community in the USA. As a more marginalized community, it has perhaps more need to marginalize Messianic Jews. My South African friend accepts his humiliating marginalization with no attempt to marginalize the synagogue. Instead, he leaves the service so that the gatekeepers can announce that there is no cohen present and move on with the service without him. Then, when the presence of a cohen is no longer an issue, he rejoins the congregation for the rest of the service! What irony. He cannot fulfill the role of *cohen* by coming up for an aliyah, but he is still recognized as a *cohen* and must leave the room so that they can declare that there is no cohen present and call someone else to Torah. This local Jewish story provides a symbol for Messianic Jewish marginality and illustrates the guiding ethic on the margins, *hesed*, meaning compassion, faithfulness, and kindness.

### **Hesed: the ethic of the margins**

In one of his encounters with his religious critics, Yeshua tells them, “Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick. But go and learn what this means: ‘I desire mercy and not sacrifice.’ For I did not come to call the righteous, but sinners, to repentance” ([Matt 9:12–13](#)). Messiah is citing Hosea 6:6, in which “mercy” is *hesed*. He employs the term to characterize his whole ministry of reaching the marginalized—the sick and the sinners—which he sets forth as a model for any who would seek to follow him: “Go and learn what this means: ‘I desire *hesed* and not sacrifice.’”

*Hesed* has been the subject of biblical and theological study for decades. In his watershed 1927 book *Hesed in the Bible*, Nelson Glueck emphasized the connection between *hesed* and

*covenant* and portrayed *hesed* as an obligatory part of a covenant relationship. More recently, other scholars have challenged that view. Katherine D. Sakenfeld, for instance, “held in general that *hesed* denotes free acts of rescue or deliverance. . . . ‘Freedom of decision’ is essential. The help is vital, someone is in a position to help, the helper does so in his own freedom and this ‘is the central feature in all the texts’ (p. 45).”<sup>13</sup> *Hesed* as an act of moral freedom is especially significant for our theme of marginality, as we can see in a number of passages.

At Jacob’s well in Samaria, Yeshua initiates an encounter by asking the woman for a drink (John 4:7), just as the servant of Abraham seeks the chosen bride by asking for a drink (Gen 24:14, 17). The servant begins with a prayer:

*ADONAI*, God of my master Avraham, please let me succeed today; and show your grace [*hesed*] to my master Avraham (Gen 24:12, CJB). God is the source of *hesed*, but it will be revealed in a human act of kindness freely given. I will say to one of the girls, ‘Please lower your jug, so that I can drink.’ If she answers, ‘Yes, drink; and I will water your camels as well,’ then let her be the one you intend for your servant Yitz’chak. This is how I will know that you have shown grace [*hesed*] to my master (Gen 24:14, CJB).

In the event it is an unmarried young woman in a patriarchal society, a woman assigned to the mundane task of drawing water for the household, a woman on the margins who exercises the limited freedom, she has to become the instrument of *hesed*. In doing so she gains tremendous power, becoming the channel of divine choice that will shape the destiny of Abraham’s entire line.

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<sup>13</sup> “Hesed” in Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament . . . citing Katherine D. Sakenfeld, *The Meaning of Hesed in the Hebrew Bible: A New Inquiry* (Scholars Press, 1978).

When the servant learns that this maiden is of the household of Bethuel, the kinsman of Sarah and Abraham, he says, “Blessed be the LORD God of my master Abraham, who has not forsaken His grace and His truth [*hesed v’emet*] toward my master” (Gen 24:27, NKJV). To underline the divine origin of *hesed*, the text links it with *emet*, here and again in 24:49, as it will be linked later and famously among the thirteen attributes of Exodus 34. *Hesed* is displayed at times by human beings, even those on the margins, but it is ultimately a divine attribute.

The first person called upon in Scripture to practice this attribute is, like Rebecca, a woman in a state of vulnerability. Sarah goes into exile with her husband Abraham, who tells the locals that Sarah is his sister. She is taken into the household of the king. Before the king can touch her, however, God reveals to him in a dream that Sarah is really Abraham’s wife. When the king demands an explanation, Abraham claims that Sarah is actually his half-sister, and goes on, “And it came to pass, when God caused me to wander from my father’s house, that I said to her, ‘This is your kindness [*hesed*] that you should do for me: in every place, wherever we go, say of me, He is my brother’ ” (Gen 20:13, NKJV). Abraham’s request is highly questionable, but he is right in noting that Sarah, in her position of weakness, still has the powerful option of practicing *hesed*.

The prime example of *hesed* as the virtue of the marginal comes in the Book of Ruth. The midrash says, “This scroll tells us nothing either of cleanliness or of uncleanness, either of prohibition or permission. For what purpose then was it written? To teach how great is the reward of those who do deeds of kindness [*gemilut hasadim*].”<sup>14</sup> *Gemilut hasadim*, of course, employs the plural of *hesed*, so that we might translate it as “bestowals of *hesed*.”

Naomi attributes *hesed* to Ruth, along with her sister-in-law Orpah, at the beginning of the book: “And Naomi said to her two daughters in law, Go, return each to her mother’s house:

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<sup>14</sup> Midrash Rabbah, Vol. 8, 35.

The LORD deal kindly [or “in *hesed*”] with you, as you have dealt with the dead and with me” (Ruth 1:8, NKJV). Later, Boaz says: “I have been told of all that you did for your mother-in-law after the death of your husband. . . . May the LORD reward your deeds” (2:11, NJPS). He too comes to describe these deeds as *hesed*, when Ruth presents herself as a marriage partner to him: “Be blessed of the LORD, daughter! Your latest deed of loyalty [*hesed*] is greater than the first, in that you have not turned to younger men, whether poor or rich” (Ruth 3:10, NJPS).

Christians do not ask why the Book of Ruth is in the Scriptures, but rather why Ruth appears in the genealogy of Yeshua (Matt 1:5), which generally follows normal usage and traces Yeshua’s descent through the males. Perhaps Ruth is there because she exemplifies *gemilut hasadim*. If so, this links even more strongly the practice of *hesed* with the marginalized. Furthermore, Ruth is not the only woman mentioned in Yeshua’s genealogy. There are four others, all marginal figures: Tamar the daughter of Judah, who had to reclaim her neglected rights by posing as a prostitute and enticing her father-in-law to do the right thing (1:3); Rahab (1:5; assuming this is the Rahab of the Book of Joshua [2:1, etc.]); the unnamed wife of Uriah who became the wife of David and bore Solomon (1:6); and Miriam of whom was born Yeshua (1:16). Luke Timothy Johnson summarizes, “[Jesus’] birth to a woman who has conceived by the Holy Spirit (1:20) continues a pattern of God’s work among outcast women in Israel.”<sup>15</sup>

In his classic work *The New Testament and Rabbinic Judaism*, David Daube demonstrates another connection between Ruth and Miriam. When the angel tells Miriam that she will conceive and bear a son, she asks, “How can this be, since I do not know a man?” The angel replies, “The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Highest will overshadow you. . . .” (Luke 1:34–35, NKJV). Daube explains “overshadow” here as an echo of Ruth’s request to Boaz: “Take your maidservant under your wing” (Ruth 3:9), showing that the terms for shadow

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<sup>15</sup> Luke Timothy Johnson, *Living Jesus: Learning the Heart of the Gospel* (HarperSanFrancisco: 1999), 147.

and wing overlap in the targums and early rabbinic literature. The same literature treats the Ruth-Boaz relationship as a metaphor for the human-divine relationship, as Ruth the Gentile comes in under the wing of the God of Israel.<sup>16</sup> Daube continues:

It only remains to add that Mary's words, 'Behold the handmaid of the Lord,' are still from the same source. 'I am Ruth thine handmaid; spread therefore thy wing over thine handmaid,' says Ruth to Boaz. This designation of Mary . . . has its ultimate origins in the Book of Ruth.<sup>17</sup>

The word "handmaid" accentuates Ruth's marginal position, and therefore Miriam's as well. It is *amah* in Hebrew, maidservant, or perhaps even female slave, one needing the protective covering of a powerful male. From this constrained position, Ruth exercises her limited freedom to practice *hesed*, and lays claim to be its prime exemplar in the *Tanakh*.

The practice of *hesed* is not limited to the marginal, of course, but it stands out most dramatically among them. Thus Yeshua calls upon the insiders to learn the practice of *hesed* specifically in [the](#) context of his work among the marginalized. Further, Yeshua often practices *hesed* in ways that marginalize him. Thus, he first cites Hosea 6:6, as we have seen, in response to criticism that he eats with tax collectors and sinners. As with the Samaritan woman, Yeshua visits the marginal, and thus marginalizes himself, even drawing the accusation that he is a glutton and a drunkard (Matt 11:19).

We can see *hesed*, then, as the guiding ethic of the marginalized, which we embrace as we embrace our marginalization. The practice of *hesed*, *gemilut hasadim*, reverses the hyper-individualism of our times—the extreme expression of which is marginalization—and hence becomes its cure. Marcus Borg ties Yeshua's instructions on compassion to the Hebrew

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<sup>16</sup> David Daube, *The New Testament and Rabbinic Judaism*. (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1956), 32–35.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 36.

*rachamim*, rather than *hesed*, but his summary of Yeshua's ethical instruction is apt to our whole discussion:

Jesus speaks of compassion not only as the primary quality of God, but also as the primary quality of a life lived in accord with God. In remarkably few words, theology and ethics are combined: 'Be compassionate, just as your Father is compassionate' (Luke 6:36). Found in slightly different form in Matthew 5:48, the passage affirms an ethic known as *imitatio dei*, 'imitation of God.'<sup>18</sup>

A midrash on Deuteronomy 13:5 explores the imitation of God in terms of *gemilut hasadim*.

What does it mean, 'You shall walk after the Lord your God'? Is it possible for a person to walk and follow in God's presence? Does not the Torah also say 'For the Lord your God is a consuming fire'? (Deut 4:24). But it means to walk after the attributes of the Holy One, Blessed be He. Just as He clothed the naked, so you too clothe the naked, as it says 'And the Lord made the man and his wife leather coverings and clothed them' (Gen 3:21). The Holy One, Blessed be He, visits the ill, as it says, 'And God visited him in Elonei Mamreh (Gen 18:1); so you shall visit the ill. . . .' [Sotah 14a].

By condescending to practice acts of kindness among humankind, God makes the practice of kindness available to all of us, even those on the margins. He also goes out to the margins to practice it, out to the naked, the ill, the bereaved, and the dead. This midrash understands that Torah reveals a God who is not remote and inaccessible, but one who is intimately interacting with human beings. We should not be surprised that this revelation reaches its climax as God comes fully onto the human scene in the person of Yeshua the Messiah. Nor should we be

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<sup>18</sup> Marcus J. Borg, *Jesus: Uncovering the Life, Teachings, and Relevance of a Religious Revolutionary* (HarperSanFrancisco, 2006), 175.

surprised that Messiah is constantly among the sick and needy, embodying acts of kindness in his own ministry and bidding us to follow him in these same acts of kindness, often from his place on the margins. Such practice reverses our marginalization, for we no longer position ourselves among those seeking compassion for themselves (although we can always use it), but as those in a position to provide it.

In recent years the Messianic Jewish community has deepened its practice of *gemilut hasadim* to become involved in humanitarian aid projects within the wider Jewish community, especially in Israel and the former Soviet Union. By practicing *hesed* from the margins we transform our marginality into a position of strength, perhaps more surely than we could through protest or political action. For example, I spent some time on a recent trip to Israel with Avishalom Teklahaimanot, who bears a double marginalization in Israel as a Messianic Jew and as an Ethiopian. Avi is a veteran of several years' service as a social worker and is connected with Ohalei Rachamim congregation. For several years the congregation sought unsuccessfully to work with the local government in providing relief to impoverished Russian and Ethiopian immigrants in the area. During the 2006 war, the municipality asked for help with water supplies, particularly for this needy population. Avi coordinated the congregation's response without making any demands and the municipality soon expanded the cooperation to include help with food and other needs. Thus, this marginalized group, represented by a doubly-marginalized individual, became a provider of resources to those in need.

## **Return to the Core**

### **A. Reducing incidental marginality**



We cannot practice *hesed* in isolation, but only within community, in the context of social relationships where issues of power and status so often prevail. In this setting, as Luke Timothy Johnson reminds us:

To ‘learn Jesus’ . . . is not to confuse the present power of the resurrected Jesus with a realized Kingdom in which one deserves a place of authority and privilege. It is instead to learn how to be little and weak, a servant who in the pattern of Jesus gives one’s life as a ransom for others.<sup>19</sup>

“Little and weak” is an apt description of today’s Messianic Jewish community, even if we would rather be able to describe ourselves as big and strong. Outward circumstances may vary, of course, but marginalization is inherent to life in Yeshua, or to “learning Jesus” as Johnson describes it. We may contrast this inherent marginality with our incidental marginality within the Jewish community, as we have discussed, or in relationship to the Christian community, as we shall consider shortly.

Inherent marginality is most fully expressed in the cross to which Messiah calls his followers, which in the words of John Howard Yoder is “the price of social nonconformity . . . the social reality of representing in an unwilling world the Order to come.”<sup>20</sup> Yoder argues throughout his seminal work, *The Politics of Jesus*, that social marginality—not disengagement from society, nor accommodation to it, nor violent resistance against it, but “vulnerable enemy love and renunciation of dominion in the real world”<sup>21</sup>—is essential to the message of Yeshua. Yeshua is announcing a new social order that puts his followers on the margins of the existing order.

Eugene Peterson, writing from a rather different perspective, makes a similar claim:

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<sup>19</sup> Johnson, 143.

<sup>20</sup> Yoder, *The Politics of Jesus*, 96.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 132.

North American Christians are conspicuous for going along with whatever the culture decides is charismatic, successful, influential—whatever gets things done, whatever can gather a crowd of followers—hardly noticing that these ways and means are at odds with the clearly marked way that Jesus walked and called us to follow. Doesn't anyone notice that the ways and means taken up, often enthusiastically, are blasphemously at odds with the way Jesus leads his followers? Why doesn't anyone notice?<sup>22</sup>

We are not North American Christians, but we too must embrace our inherent marginality in Messiah as an antidote to the cultural blindness of our day. We are to be countercultural, not in the 60s sense of dropping out, but as a prophetic community that lives the message of Torah, particularly as embodied in Yeshua, and particularly as it is at cross-currents with contemporary trends. Something is gravely amiss when the professed followers of Yeshua become the institutional or cultural mainstream.

The Messianic Jewish community's marginality may help us reexamine our relationship to the religious establishment, both Jewish and Christian, and regain the prophetic marginality inherent in following Yeshua. At the same time, we can legitimately seek to reverse our incidental marginality. In a recent paper, Dr. Mitch Glaser defends the return to Jewish identity, in other words the attempt to reverse incidental marginality, in missiological terms.

We should encourage this return to the core on the part of Messianic Jews. Why?

Not simply because it is normal and natural, but also because we hope to reach

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<sup>22</sup> Eugene H. Peterson. *The Jesus Way: A Conversation on the Ways that Jesus is the Way* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2007), 8.

people in the “core” of the Jewish community – who will only be reached by those Jews returning to the core after being saved on the fringe!<sup>23</sup>

Likewise, Glaser speaks of marginalized groups in terms of mission:

Is it wrong to focus on Telling the Story to these more marginalized groups? No. We should be looking for Jewish people who have not yet found meaning and purpose in life, and might therefore be open to Yeshua. Jesus Himself went to the “lost sheep of the house of Israel” and found greater success among the poor and non-religious than among the “core” members of the Jewish community.<sup>24</sup>

As followers of Yeshua, we embrace our place on the margins, not only because it is inhabited by folks more likely to respond to our message, but because Yeshua is uniquely present there. At the same time, we also need to embrace the possibilities of return to the core—of decreasing our incidental marginality. Indeed, maintaining an identity within Israel is essential to the eschatological role of Messianic Jews as the remnant of Israel, which must exist in relationship to the whole. If the remnant becomes completely detached, it ceases to be a remnant. Likewise, the margins only exist in relationship to the core. Even if we remain marginal, we do not disappear. We continue to have a position within the wider sphere of community.

## **B. Ethical guidelines**

Nevertheless, a return to the core raises ethical issues of its own. As we become more involved in Jewish communal activities, attend services and events at local mainstream synagogues more frequently, and learn and pray with other Jews, we need to develop clear standards for how to engage in the right way. If we consider *hesed* as our guiding ethic, how will it help us participate

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<sup>23</sup> Dr. Mitch Glaser, “To Whom Are We Telling the Story?” Paper presented to the Lausanne Consultation on Jewish Evangelism, Hungary, August 2007, 7.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., 5.

in the wider Jewish community with wisdom and integrity? We can distill at least three guidelines from our discussion so far.

### **1. Take responsibility for disclosure.**

Participation in the 21<sup>st</sup> century synagogue does not normally imply a particular faith commitment or theological outlook. In most contemporary synagogues it is accepted that the worshipers are there because they are Jews, regardless of their personal beliefs about the nature of God or their understanding of Scripture or tradition. There would seem to be no inherent need for Messianic Jewish worshipers to identify themselves as such in this context, much less in other Jewish communal functions in which they might participate. At the same time, we need to recognize the sensitivities the wider community has toward us and take responsibility for appropriate disclosure. We do not want to be discovered as followers of Yeshua after we have been accepted into community life under the assumption that we are mainstream Jews. We can rightly ask why the community in most aspects is comfortable with Jewish atheists, JuBus, Jewish new agers and all the variations of contemporary Jewish identity, and uniquely stigmatizes us. But *hesed* directs that we accept that reality and respond in peace.

In my case, I felt that I needed to let both rabbis know who I was early on because I am in a visible leadership role within the Messianic Jewish community. Others can go more slowly. But surely when friendships begin to develop, or when we begin to be involved in community life beyond the basic seat-warmer mode, we need to let the appropriate party know who we

are. A Messianic Jewish woman might participate in her local Hadassah chapter, for example, but she should let the gatekeepers know who she is before she gets nominated for president.

Yeshua warns us against being ashamed of him and instructs us to stand openly for him.

Obviously, wisdom is required, and we have all seen foolishness mislabeled as boldness for Messiah, but we dishonor both the wider Jewish community and our Messiah if we try to hide our loyalty to him for too long.

## **2. Honor community standards.**

This principle obviously relates to the first. Our standards might say that a believer in Yeshua should certainly be more kosher than a professed Jewish atheist, but that is not the community standard at this time. *Hesed* is willing to honor the standards of the community.

In one of my early visits to the synagogue, I was assigned an aliyah. I was eager to participate in the Torah service, but upon reflection realized that I needed to decline. The rabbi was the one who called each person up to the bema, and he knew that I was Messianic. I did not want to put him (or myself) in the awkward position of either calling me up when he did not consider me kosher, or telling me to sit back down in front of the whole congregation. A few months later, after I obtained the rabbi's permission to attend, I was invited to take an aliyah again, and this time I accepted. If the rabbi considered me unkosher, he had been warned and apparently had not seen the need to prevent my coming up.

Jewish identity, of course, is unchangeable. Someone born of a Jewish mother, or converted to Judaism under proper rabbinic authority, remains Jewish whether or not he or she practices any form of Judaism. We would argue *a fortiori* that we remain Jewish because most of us do practice a form of Judaism, and our belief in Yeshua does not change our halachic standing. Still, we need to be sensitive to the *minhag* (local custom). For example, would we want to help constitute a minyan by keeping our identity under wraps in a community that did not consider a believer in Yeshua qualified to be part of a *minyan*? We need to honor community standards, even if we disagree. There will doubtless be times for dissent out of loyalty to Yeshua, but opportunities to express our loyalty will probably come more often through humble service. This brings us to a third point.

### **3. Serve despite marginalization.**

Our South African colleague has provided the illustration for this principle: “I had to leave the congregation for a few moments so that they could announce ‘eyn cohen.’ Only then could I reenter and continue with the service.” Even though he is marginalized unfairly, he refrains from marginalizing the community in return, but instead does what he can to enable it to carry out its service.

We can practice this most simply through financial support of mainstream Jewish efforts (not at the expense, of course, of worthy Messianic Jewish efforts!), being willing to contribute even if we are not fully accepted. As appropriate, this would also apply to volunteer work, and more generally to active loyalty to the Jewish community, which leads to our next section.

These three guidelines admittedly reflect an individual return to the core Jewish community. A greater issue, however, is the communal Messianic Jewish return to the core, even if it is beyond the scope of this paper. For now, we simply recognize that these individual guidelines can be adapted to communal return as well.

### **On the Christian margins**

When I mentioned my occasional visits to a mainstream synagogue to a long-term Christian friend, she expressed some consternation that I was worshiping in a setting that did not acknowledge Jesus as Messiah. Our embrace of marginalization may involve embracing the misunderstanding and distancing of Christian, and even some Messianic Jewish, friends who do not understand our continuing loyalty toward the Jewish people. In the past, allegiance to Yeshua meant acceptance into the mainstream community of Christendom, and attempting to maintain loyalty to the Jewish people at the same time brought marginalization of the severest kind. In our more tolerant age, the marginalization is more subtle, but nonetheless present.

I occasionally meet for prayer with a group of pastors in Albuquerque. A couple of years ago we were discussing the Lausanne Covenant, formulated some 30 years earlier by the International Congress on World Evangelization at Lausanne, Switzerland, as a possible unifying document for our group. When the moderator of the discussion asked if anyone had a problem with any of the language in the Covenant, I had to respond to article 4, “The Nature of Evangelism.”

Jesus still calls all who would follow him to deny themselves, take up their cross, and identify themselves with his new community. The results of evangelism

include obedience to Christ, incorporation into his Church and responsible service in the world.<sup>25</sup>

Obviously, this language is not “Messianic,” but that was not my objection. Indeed, I was impressed by its full-orbed sense of evangelism as a call to follow Yeshua in self-denial and service to the world. My problem was with two phrases: “identify with his new community,” and “incorporation into his Church.” I tried to explain to my pastor friends that I understood the biblical significance of these phrases, but incorporation into his Church sounded to my Jewish ears like a call to abandon my Jewish identity and assimilate. Equally troubling, the phrase implies that there is no continuing role or identification as Jews for Jewish Yeshua-believers. Likewise, in article 6, “The Church and Evangelism,” the Covenant says, “the Church is at the very center of God’s cosmic purpose.” My immediate response is to ask where that leaves Israel, a question that risks marginalization in this context, even though these are generous and open-minded men.

The risk of marginalization intensifies if we actually defend traditional Judaism to our Christian friends, and this is surely an aspect of marginalization that we must embrace. Levine speaks of the “popular Christian imagination,” which sees Yeshua as the only one in the Jewish world of his day who cares about the poor and marginalized. He is not just against religious leaders who have missed the heart of Torah with their rigorous teaching; rather, in the popular Christian imagination, he is against Torah itself, and ultimately against Judaism.<sup>26</sup> Such a reading may be able to accept that Jews who have not yet found Jesus will cling to their old ways, at least until some final apocalyptic resolution. But Jews who profess loyalty to Yeshua and remain attached to Jewish tradition and community are suspect and risk marginalization.

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<sup>25</sup> “The Lausanne Covenant.” Online: <http://www.lausanne.org/lausanne-1974/lausanne-covenant.html>.

<sup>26</sup> Levine, 19.



In response, as always, Yeshua provides our model. He meets the Samaritan woman on the margins, and in some aspects of his conversation with her transcends Jewish-outsider categories, but he also reminds the woman that “Salvation is from the Jews” (John 4:24). Brown interprets this as an expression of Yeshua’s loyalty to his people:

The Jews against whom Jesus elsewhere speaks harshly really refers to that section of the Jewish people that is hostile to Jesus, and especially to their rulers. Here, *speaking to a foreigner*, Jesus gives to the Jews a different significance, and the term refers to the whole Jewish people. This line is a clear indication that the Johannine attitude to the Jews cloaks neither an anti-Semitism of the modern variety nor a view that rejects the spiritual heritage of Judaism.<sup>27</sup>

This, of course, is only one example of Yeshua’s loyalty to his people, an example we are to follow in our interactions with the Gentile Christian world, as well as with the secular world. Such a stance, despite the tremendous progress in Jewish-Christian relations in recent years, may threaten our standing or credibility in some Christian circles. It illustrates, however, that *hesed*—loyalty and kindness—characterizes our life on the margins.

Brown’s comments hint at a great irony. The Jews, who are often portrayed in the gospels as the gatekeepers and the marginalizers, become the outsiders within Christendom and, as we are often reminded by current events, within modern post-Christendom as well. The Jewish gatekeepers who would marginalize us are acting in part out of their own marginalization, as my friend’s experience in South Africa illustrates. Hence, as we embrace our inherent marginality, we must stand in loyalty with the very community that tends to incidentally marginalize us.

### **Hospitality: communal practice of hesed**

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<sup>27</sup> Brown, 172. (Emphasis added.)

## A. Synagogue on the margins

Our place on the margins is not just an individual place, but also a communal one, which will be reflected in our congregational polity and culture. This institutional marginality has some advantages. Dr. Ron Wolfson, co-founder of the Synagogue 2000 project, now Synagogue 3000 or S3K, writes about what he terms the “cathedral” synagogue of the past few decades:

The traditional configuration of synagogues with the Torah reading table in the center of the space was replaced by high pulpits, imposing arks, and regal furniture. Pews were arranged in rows and fixed to the ground, focusing attention squarely on what was happening in the front and reducing the chance for interaction with others. This created distance between the congregants and the clergy, between the people and each other, between the people and their God. In fact, these ‘cathedral’ synagogues reflected a view of God as transcendent, distant, unapproachable.<sup>28</sup>

The Messianic Jewish community, of course, has not been plagued with imposing arks and regal furniture. Rather, our challenge is to develop meeting places that can be taken seriously by the people we are trying to serve. Still, Wolfson reminds us that limitations can be keys to effectiveness. Indeed, a major premise of S3K has been the need to re-imagine the synagogue, fostering a “paradigm shift away from corporate synagogues as enclaves of ethnicity,” and toward synagogue as “a spiritual center for all those who set foot inside it,” or a sacred community.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> Ron Wolfson, *The Spirituality of Welcoming: How to Transform Your Congregation into a Sacred Community* (Woodstock, VT: Jewish Lights, 2005), 18–19.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 19.

In our contemporary secular age, all congregations—church and synagogue—are marginal. Membership in mainstream groups is declining. It is no longer conventional, that is, expected and beneficial for social standing, but indeed can be a stigma. Borg writes:

The ‘good news’ in this decline is that, very soon, the only people left in the mainline congregations will be the ones who are there for intentional and not conventional reasons. This creates the possibility for the church once again to become an alternative community rather than a conventional community. . . .<sup>30</sup>

Borg limits his observation to mainline congregations, but the conventional-intentional contrast applies to more conservative groups as well. Intentional membership means that people join out of conviction, expecting membership to reflect faith and commitment. Messianic Jewish groups have never become established and normative enough to provide conventional reasons for people to join us. Hence, we can embrace our place on the margins of the culture of consumerism and hyper-individualism to become intentional congregations in the best sense.

Rabbi Lawrence Hoffman, co-founder with Wolfson of Synagogue 2000, contrasts the dominant market community with sacred community:

The everyday is what we use as means to ends. The sacred exists as its own end. . . . Sacred community . . . is devoted to certain tasks, but these can be realized only in a sacred ambience, not in a market community where people weigh value by the list of limited liability deliverables that they think their dues are buying.<sup>31</sup>

Much good may proceed from a sacred community, but it is not constituted just to get a job done or to provide a collection of programs, projects, and benefits for dues (or tithe) paying

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<sup>30</sup> Borg, 302–303.

<sup>31</sup> Rabbi Lawrence Hoffman, *Rethinking Synagogues, A New Vocabulary for Congregational Life* (Woodstock, VT: Jewish Lights, 2006), 140.

consumers. “Congregation” is not a means to an end, but a gathering under Hashem in a shared vision of his holiness and purpose. When a member begins to ask, “what’s in it for me?” he or she is already turning back from sacred community into the realm of consumerism.

Within our consumerist culture, sacred community is inherently marginal and this is a marginality that we can embrace. Messianic Jewish marginality is not always a good thing, and does not always arise from sacredness, but neither is it something to be overcome at all costs. Wolfson and Hoffman both spend considerable effort in articulating their vision of sacred community as the goal of synagogue life. Within the Messianic Jewish community, we certainly have not attained such sacred community, but we do not need to be convinced that that is what synagogue life is all about. Put another way, we do not seem to be greatly tempted by the “limited liability” approach that Hoffman decries. Indeed, we probably need to develop more in the direction of offering programs and benefits to members, but we already seem to have accepted the paradigm of congregation as sacred community. In our corporate return to the Jewish core, we need to guard against seeking to become more like the normative synagogues of middle America. Instead, we enter the stream of synagogue renewal from a different point on the shore.

Paradoxically, the congregation, which is inherently marginal within the dominant market community, becomes the place where marginality is overcome. In congregation as sacred community, we both embrace marginality and help others to overcome it—again following the model of Yeshua, who embraced his place on the margins to bring us into the core of God’s family. In congregation, we overcome the hyper-individualism of our day, and ironically of much of the religious teaching of our day, which Yoder describes as “radical personalism.” In contrast, he writes, “The personhood which [Jesus] proclaims as a healing, forgiving call to all is

integrated into the social novelty of the healing community.” Yoder continues with words that are particularly relevant to the Messianic Jewish community:

The idea of Jesus as an individualist or teacher of radical personalism could arise only in the (Protestant, post-Pietist, rationalist) context that it did; that is, in a context which, if not intentionally anti-Semitic, was at least sweepingly a-Semitic, stranger to the Jewish Jesus.<sup>32</sup>

In the congregation, welcome, as in the title of Wolfson’s book, *The Spirituality of Welcoming*, provides the transition from margins to core, from individualism to community. The Jewish Jesus teaches us how to welcome not only by welcoming us, but also by needing a welcome himself. He says, “Foxes have holes and birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head” (Matt 8:20). This vulnerability positions him to accept the hospitality of a wide array of folk: sinners and tax collectors, unattached women like Marta and Miriam, Pharisees and even leaders of the Pharisees. The opportunity to welcome him draws out the best, and occasionally the worst, of these people. He teaches welcoming, hospitality, by showing up at their door.

At the same time, however, Yeshua does welcome us, for he opens the way into the father’s house, which is his house. Thus, he calls us out of the culture of individualism into the “social novelty of the healing community,” providing the example for us: “So welcome each other, just as the Messiah has welcomed you into God’s glory” (Rom 15:7, CJB). Welcoming, like *hesed*, is inherent to life on the margins. Indeed, welcoming within the congregation is a bestowal of *hesed*<sup>1</sup> on the communal level.

## **B. The welcoming synagogue**

<sup>32</sup> Yoder, 108–109.

Radical hospitality characterizes Yeshua's entire way of life. In the Messianic Jewish community, we face the dilemma of practicing such hospitality at the same time as maintaining a legitimate Jewish distinctive. When Wolfson speaks of the synagogue as "a spiritual center for all those who set foot inside it," he can hardly imagine the wide range of those who might set foot inside a Messianic synagogue. Because Yeshua is the focal point of our communal life, our congregations attract many more Gentiles than do mainstream synagogues, sometimes even Gentiles hardly familiar with Jewishness at all. How do we respond to such individuals without violating radical hospitality on the one hand or Jewish values and priorities on the other?

Resolving this dilemma is beyond the scope of this paper and may indeed be the task of a generation to come. For now, I offer three suggestions. First, we must be careful not to invalidate the attraction that these Gentiles feel toward the Messianic synagogue. They may misconstrue it as a restoration of the true, first-century congregation, a place where they can reconnect with the "Jewish roots" from which the church became tragically detached. But often at the heart of their attraction is a yearning for God and Scripture that we should honor, even if we need to redirect it. Second, we can build alliances with a few churches that have a healthy attitude toward Jewish roots and Israel and could provide a good home for Gentile believers disenchanted with other sorts of churches. We can welcome them as visitors to our congregations, and provide helpful direction in finding a permanent home. Third, we can affirm *chavurot*, which inherently have a more defined welcome than a larger, public gathering, that are committed to an intentional Jewish focus. Such *chavurot* might even be connected to a larger Messianic congregation that practices a broader and less qualified welcome, and therefore has a more diverse membership.

Organizing our congregations so that hospitality does not threaten distinct Jewish calling should help us to practice a more radical hospitality. Wolfson asks, "How can a synagogue love

guests? The single most important way is for the congregation members themselves to express their personal welcome when they see a stranger.”<sup>33</sup> This is most likely to occur in a congregation that has learned hospitality as a core value, and that has developed ways not to become overwhelmed by the strangers.

Beyond these concerns, hospitality provides an alternative to the dominant values of individualism and consumerism. Just as hospitality is “not about me,” but about the stranger who shows up at the door, so it reminds us that the congregational gathering is not about me. Worship is not another commodity to be experienced and enjoyed, but the activity above all others that is about God. Our congregational services and structures need to reflect this renunciation of consumerism and individualism. They should not be designed to serve the religious needs of members, as much as to inspire members in worship, outreach, and redemptive social engagement.

Radical hospitality requires not only welcoming the marginalized through our doors, but extending ourselves to the margins where they live. Welcoming the visitor, then, is not about congregational growth, even if this is a worthy goal, but, as David Rudolph states, “is an ethic that is central to the character, shape, and calling of our community.”<sup>34</sup> Indeed, we need to guard against developing the congregation as a place of welcome in ways that would exempt us from practicing hospitality in our own homes and personal lives. Instead, the individual practice of hospitality is essential to overcoming deeply rooted sins of our culture such as materialism, consumerism, and exaltation of self. Likewise, we need to guard against thinking that outward practices of welcome can alone address the issue. Welcome must be a part of the radical

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<sup>33</sup> Wolfson, 52.

<sup>34</sup> David Rudolph, “Abraham, Hospitality Man” in *Kesher: A Journal of Messianic Judaism* 21 (Summer/Fall 2006): 2.

otherness of Yeshua's community, a contrast with the dominant response to the outsider based on status, power, and image.

The paragon of hospitality in the Torah, of course, is Abraham, whom Rudolph labels "hospitality man."<sup>35</sup> In the paradigmatic story of Abraham's hospitality, he sees three men standing before him as he sits in his tent door in the heat of the day. One of the three turns out to be the angel of the LORD, indeed the LORD, Hashem, himself, for this story is announced with the words "Vayera—And the LORD appeared to him . . . ." ([Gen](#) 18:1). When Hashem appears, he is in need of hospitality. He teaches us to welcome by leaving his central place to appear on the margins, just as the Son of Man appears to tax collectors, Pharisees and marginal women in need of hospitality.

The Son of Man is also prefigured in this story by Abraham. Like Messiah, Abraham is both central to the whole story and positioned on its margins. He lives in the land of promise, but he is a sojourner there, dwelling in tents that have no permanent foundation. By renouncing the present-day center, he declares his hope in the future fulfillment of all God's promises. Marginality is not a tactical maneuver to enhance our effectiveness in today's world, but a position of protest and hope. It is inherent to walking with Messiah away from the values and means that dominate the age in which we live for the sake of something better.

Abraham reminds us that welcome may entail an encounter with Yeshua, who often shows up among those who appear at our doors. From the margins, Abraham welcomes the divine presence and from the same margins, Hashem reveals himself and his purposes to his faithful servant. May such encounters be ours as well!

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<sup>35</sup> Ibid., 3.