

Messianic Jewish Life Together:
Covenant, Commission and Cultural Brokerage

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With regard to the tensions between her various theological and ideological commitments, Orthodox Jewish feminist Blu Greenberg writes the following: “So I live with the conflict. I live with it every day, in a thousand ways that pull me in one direction or another. I have come to realize that the conflict is a sign of my health, not of my confusion; the tension is a measure of the richness of my life, not of its disorderliness.”¹ Our thoughts about or perceptions of feminism aside, Greenberg’s quote is equally applicable to our life as Messianic Jews and the inherent (and often painful) tensions involved in our identity. We do not easily fit into preset and historically entrenched categories. At the core of who we are, we are related to both the Jewish people—our people—and the Christian church. Both of these distinct communities constitute the unique texture of our identity. It goes without saying that our relationship to these two communities is difficult to navigate; as Mark Kinzer has remarked, one community does not want us, and the other wants to absorb us.

It is for this reason that a substantive discussion about Messianic Jewish community is so vital. Last year’s forum began such a discussion, and I was thrilled to hear that the Hashivenu Board decided to address the topic of community once again this year. I was also honored and a bit overwhelmed at the invitation to be one of the keynote presenters. While my deep passion and enduring need for meaningful and committed community resides at the very center of my life, the thought that I might have something to add to the conversation is indeed humbling, especially considering that many of you in this room have literally spent decades pioneering and

¹ Blu Greenberg, *On Women and Judaism: A View from Tradition* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1994), 168.

shepherding Messianic Jewish communities. Those in my generation are indeed reaping the benefits of your sacrifice and vision, and it is my hope that we will continue to courageously take up the mantle and build upon the firm foundation that you all have laid. In the spirit of furthering your rightful legacy, I want to thank you for the opportunity to contribute my voice.

In what follows, I would like to discuss some of the key elements that constitute our relationships with one another as Messianic Jews, as well as explore Messianic Judaism's posture vis-à-vis the two wider communities from which we have come and to which we still in a deep sense belong. While these wider communities have nurtured our movement in significant ways, our connection to them is complex, and their misunderstanding of us has—for better or worse—been a driving force in our own self-definition. My remarks will be prefaced by and offered within a covenantal framework, which necessarily informs the type of communities we seek to build and of which we are existentially a part. This paper will therefore have four parts: Touchstones of Covenantal Community, Messianic Jewish Community and *Am Israel*, Messianic Jewish Community and the Christian Church, and finally, Messianic Jewish Life Together.

Part I: Touchstones of Covenantal Community

Covenant lies at the heart of the identity of the people of God, and our conversations about Messianic Jewish community must be built upon the foundation of our inclusion and participation in the contours of covenantal life. While covenant is far too broad a topic to exhaustively cover in one presentation, let me briefly describe a few covenantal distinctives that will be significant throughout the rest of this paper.

1) **The reality of the divine-human covenant is inherently communal.**

While modernity would have us believe in the primacy and supremacy of individual identity and unbridled self-determination, we cannot properly understand God's covenant with Israel (or humanity more broadly) if we take the individual person as the starting point. In the words of David Novak, "the core of the covenant is not the relationship between God and the individual human person; it is the relationship between God and the community he has elected for this covenantal relationship."² It is *within* this overarching communal context that individual relationships and claims (both human and divine) find their rightful place. This proper ordering is crucial.

The inherently communal structure of the covenant by no means eliminates or nullifies the individual and personal aspects of covenantal relationship with God and one another; rather, it upholds them. In fact, according to Jonathan Sacks, Judaism was the first religion to insist upon the dignity of each individual and the sanctity of every human life. The communality of its covenant notwithstanding, Judaism refuses to sacrifice the individual for the collective.³ In fact, it is Israel's status as the elect community that undergirds Judaism's insistence upon the dignity of each individual. The individual's status—though secondary to and subsidiary of the community—emerges from and is enhanced by a covenantal framework rather than being diminished or eclipsed by it. To think covenantally is to understand individual identity within the larger framework of the covenant community.

With regard to God's covenantal promises to human beings, these promises are almost always communal in nature. God's promises to the elect community are far more specific and

² David Novak, *Covenantal Rights: A Study in Jewish Political Theory* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000), 78.

³ Jonathan Sacks, *A Letter in the Scroll: Understanding Our Jewish Identity and Exploring the Legacy of the World's Oldest Religion* (New York: The Free Press, 2000), 75.

concrete than God's assurances to individuals.⁴ Perhaps the most basic of these divine covenantal promises is the communal survival of Israel. While individual members of the covenant community have no rightful claim upon God to sustain their life (and death is built into the fabric of human existence), God has pledged himself to the survival of Israel. While the Jewish claim upon God for survival is rooted in God's covenantal purposes and promises and not ultimately dependent upon the virtue or obedience of the Jewish people, God's promise notably has as its subject Israel as a whole, not individual Jews. Novak sees this promise as one interpretive grid for understanding the Torah blessing in which Jews praise God for "planting everlasting life in our midst."⁵ According to one strand of Jewish tradition, this everlasting life refers to the Jewish people's guaranteed perpetuation in *this world*, not merely in the world to come.

2) Covenant is two-way. While the divine-human covenant is initiated and ultimately upheld by God, its very construct requires human response.

By entering into covenant relationship with human beings, God has inexorably bound himself to humanity and the terms of the covenant he has established. The binding nature of God's covenant means that God's character and faithfulness are revealed in his upholding of covenant promises. These promises thus entail rightful human claims upon the divine; because God has bound himself to human beings, human beings have the right to claim God's fidelity to this covenant.⁶

However, the covenant by definition requires the obedient response of human beings. God's election makes a demand on humanity, claiming human beings for covenantally determined life. In short, God's election must be actualized in and reciprocated by the covenant

⁴ See Novak, *Covenantal Rights*, 100.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 102.

⁶ Among these human claims upon God, David Novak lists the right to depend upon God, the right to divine justice, the right to God's continued presence, and Israel's right to exist. See Novak, *Covenantal Rights*, esp. chapters 2, 4.

community. As the climactic moment in Jewish worship, the liturgy of the *Shema* illustrates this covenantal reciprocity. In our recitation of the *Ahavah Rabbah*, we declare that God has sovereignly chosen us and compassionately loved us, that the covenant rests upon God's power to reveal himself and enable us to respond. Here we beseech God to instill in us the desire to understand and perform the *mitzvot*, to enlighten our eyes and unite our hearts, to effectually create in us the capacity for loving and faithful response. Here we recognize that the covenant's continuation ultimately rests upon divine favor and faithfulness.

Our declaration of God's oneness and lordship (Deut. 6:4) is immediately followed by an exhortation to obedience (Deut. 6:5ff). In the *V'ahavta*, we accept upon ourselves the "yoke of the kingship of heaven," pledging (both individually and corporately) to order our lives according to the commands that constitute our covenant relationship with God. Here we commit ourselves to reciprocating God's loving election of Israel by lovingly observing the *mitzvot*. Though it is only by God's gracious enabling that we are able to obey his commandments, obedience requires our active, continual and ongoing commitment. It is this obedience, predicated upon and made possible by God's faithfulness, that we pledge each time we recite the *Shema*.

3) Covenant is intimately tied to commission, and carrying out our covenantal commission constitutes our faithful response to God.

We spoke above about the requisite human response to the divinely initiated covenant; we now must be more specific in terms of God's purposes for the covenantally elect community. A discussion of covenantal commission requires that we take note of an important distinction between the Jewish community and the Christian community, between Israel and the church. While both of these communities exist in covenantal relationship with God, there is compelling

theological precedent to conceive of these two covenantal communities as both united with and distinct from one another. Franz Rosenzweig’s model, which posits the prescribed inwardness of the Jewish people and the necessarily missionary posture of Christianity, has gained substantial traction in subsequent Jewish and Christian theology and offers ample resources for theological reflection from a Messianic Jewish perspective.

At last year’s forum, Kinzer expanded upon the relevance of this model for our own understanding of Messianic Jewish community, pairing Rosenzweig’s bilateral redemptive scheme with the ecclesial affirmation of the Nicene Creed. According to Kinzer, the Jewish community is properly described as and called to be “one” and “holy” while the descriptors “catholic” and “apostolic” apply most fittingly to the life and commission of the Christian community.⁷ Kinzer’s proposal affirms Rosenzweig’s contention that the distinct vocations and redemptive trajectories of Judaism and Christianity together build toward final redemption, giving expression to both the sustained particularity of God’s covenant with Israel and the universal scope of God’s election of humanity in Yeshua.

For our purposes here, it is important to bear in mind that Israel’s unique covenantal obligations preserve Israel as a nation set apart, yet are ultimately in the service of all nations. From its very inception, Israel’s existence and call is, in an important respect, *for* the nations. Even—and perhaps especially—at its most particular moments, the universal significance of Israel’s election is always in view. While Rosenzweig’s model suggests that Christianity is

⁷ Mark Kinzer, “Messianic Jewish Community: Standing and Serving as a Priestly Remnant,” 5ff. While Kinzer does not use the term “Christian” in his explanation, he seems to include Messianic Jews within Israel’s calling, thus implying that his description of the “community of Messiah” most fittingly refers to the Gentile wing of the *ekklesia*. In Kinzer’s words, “the Jewish corporate expression of the Messianic *ekklesia* lives as a sub-community within the wider Jewish world, and there bears witness to Israel as a people chosen by God in Messiah Yeshua for an eschatological destiny under his headship” (14-15).

Interestingly, while Rosenzweig himself does not engage the Nicene Creed directly, it is possible to detect in his thought a latent overlay of some of these ideas. For Rosenzweig, Judaism as the “eternal people,” bound together by its ability to bridge successive generations (i.e., time), properly reflects apostolicity, while Christianity as the “eternal way,” bound together by its ability to transcend geographical distance (i.e., space), reflects catholicity.

ultimately responsible for the outward expansion of Israel’s covenant with God, in this paper I will suggest that the very nature of Messianic Judaism does not allow us to assent to the strict duality of Rosenzweig’s model. We will explore the contours of covenantal commission more fully in our reflections below.

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These three distinctives of covenant—communality, reciprocity and commission—will frame our discussion of Messianic Jewish covenantal life. Cutting against the grain of modern individualism, the inherently communal nature of covenantal relationship reminds us that the health of our communities is only as strong as the weakest bonds of love, support and mutual regard. That the covenant established by God claims the obedience of God’s covenant partners requires us to reflect upon what faithful covenantal response entails. Finally, the intimate connection between covenant and commission should define the very core of our identity as Messianic Jews. With these important covenantal distinctives in place, let us now examine in turn each of the various spheres of covenantal community to which we as Messianic Jews belong and by which we are collectively constituted.

Part II: Messianic Jewish Community and *Am Israel*

It is difficult to find an identity marker analogous to being Jewish. While Jewishness means different things to different Jews, maximally it makes an all-encompassing claim upon one’s identity. Judaism is not simply a culture or a religion; it is these things, but it is also a familial lineage, a shared history, a political reality, a unique heritage and a distinct way of life. Though I am only comfortable using this term in a very qualified sense, the Jewish people are indeed called to be a “sanctified ethnicity,” as Kinzer suggested last year.

To draw upon the covenantal distinctives outlined above, it is the corporate reality of the Jewish people that defines the particular identity of each individual Jew. We make sense of our own unique stories within the context of the larger story of the Jewish people; their story is our story in a profoundly determinative sense. Jonathan Sacks offers a moving metaphor for the reality of Jewish identity and its distinction from modern Western conceptions of identity.⁸ Sacks illustrates modern notions of identity construction by asking us to imagine ourselves standing in a vast and expansive library with endless rows of bookshelves lined with books on every conceivable topic. We are given the freedom to pull any book we choose off the shelf, to browse endlessly and read widely. Each page of each book we read adds something to our understanding of the world around us and therefore ourselves, but we are free to reshelve the book at any point; it makes no claim upon us.

Alternatively, Sacks paints a scenario in which one book in particular catches our attention, for the name of our family is written on the spine. We open the book only to discover that it tells the story of our ancestors, one generation at a time, and that the book was expressly written for the sake of subsequent generations. When we come to the end of the book, we find a blank page with our name written at the top. This is the book that writes our identity as Jews and whose story we continue to tell with our lives, which constitute the next chapter in this unfolding family history. According to Sacks, each of us comprises a letter in the living scroll that embodies the ongoing corporate reality of the Jewish people.

Sacks' description is fitting because it reminds us that this identity—Jewish identity—demands something of us in return; in fact, it demands everything of us. It is not something we maintain by passively receiving. Rather, it is only preserved by actively forging the next chapter in loyalty and faithfulness to the inherited narrative contours. And the story itself is no arbitrary

⁸ See Sacks, *A Letter in the Scroll*, 42ff.

story—it is the story of a people whose existence and obedience uniquely reveal God in the world, whose commission is to create a society in which God is rightfully exalted as King and each individual is given the honor and dignity due to those bearing God’s image. To live in accordance with this holy commission, to write the next chapter of this revelatory story, is not a casual choice; rather, it is a matter of covenant faithfulness. While the Jewish people’s election by God is not contingent upon their obedience to this unique commission, neither is it complete without it. To be Israel is to be tasked with a particular vocation in the world, a vocation made manifest through concrete daily practices infused with holy meaning whose significance ultimately affects all of creation. It is through these distinctive Jewish practices that we find God and make him known in the world. Rosenzweig’s description of the rhythm and ritual of Jewish life with its imbedded redemptive import captures this reality with exceptional poignancy.

As Messianic Jews, the Jewish story is the story of our identity, and the chapter we have been called upon to write represents the great challenge and the great joy of our collective life. The work those of you in this room have done to move Messianic Judaism toward embracing the all-encompassing claim of Jewish identity and accepting the task of writing a daring new chapter in Jewish history is absolutely invaluable. Though I am a relative newcomer to the Messianic Jewish movement, the arduous and painstaking steps that you all have taken toward Judaism have enabled me to in effect discover the depth and richness of my own Jewish identity from largely *within* the Messianic movement. This is a remarkable thing that simply was not possible in the same way fifteen or twenty years ago. Today, we can increasingly affirm as a lived reality and not merely an optimistic ideal that the Jewish people are “us,” not “them.”

As Messianic Jews committed to Judaism, we are learning what it means to take up the mantle of Jewish identity and existence, to embody and promote God’s unique calling upon the Jewish people. As we increasingly discover and embrace our priestly calling, we are discerning

how to live a sanctified life that discloses God in the world and points toward his ultimate redemptive purposes. In obedience to this unique covenant, we are discovering what it looks like to live into the communal reality of the Jewish people even in the face of ongoing suspicion and marginalization.

Equally significant has been Messianic Judaism's acknowledgment and affirmation of what claiming one's Jewish identity entails practically. The pioneers of organizations like Hashivenu and the MJRC have insisted that being Jews entails living as Jews, that Jewish identity is inseparable from Jewish practice. Our movement is increasingly able to offer a passionate defense of the value and legitimacy of oral Torah and rabbinic tradition, and we are more and more committed to building and inhabiting Jewish spaces and living according to Jewish rhythms of time. This is indeed one of postmissionary Messianic Judaism's greatest growing legacies, and its impact and effects reach far beyond our own communities. I was surprised to discover that the overarching theme of this year's Borough Park Symposium is "How Jewish Should the Messianic Jewish Community Be?" with subtopics addressing the role of Torah, relationship to the wider Jewish community, and the role of Gentiles in the Messianic Jewish movement. Additionally, the annual Helsinki Consultation that gathers together Jewish believers in Yeshua from all over the world and all across the religious spectrum (including Jewish Catholic monks and Jewish Russian Orthodox priests as well as Messianic Jews) is beginning to address these very same questions. In fact, the theme of this year's meeting centers upon the relevance of Torah observance for Jewish believers in the body of Messiah.

I believe that these are just a few signs of the long-term fruit that your vision and efforts will continue to bear in the lives of those of us committed to the Messianic Jewish movement, as well as those Jewish believers in Yeshua who are just starting down the road of self-discovery and are now able to journey along a well-trodden path toward Jewish observance in a Yeshua-

believing context. These are the concrete manifestations of what you all have spent years dreaming about and have sacrificed time, energy, relationships and much more to pioneer. While it may be a longer road yet before we are able to understand and embody this commitment in its fullness, and while the wider Jewish community may never fully accept our claim to be and to live as Jews, the growing impact of this vision should be at least enough to keep us going.

On the topic of Messianic Jewish community and *Am Israel*, much of what I have to contribute to the conversation is gratitude to those of you in whose courageous footsteps I hope to follow and upon whose sturdy shoulders I proudly stand. Your dream is increasingly becoming our reality, and I can only exhort myself and my peers to carry both the burden and the torch forward and to support and encourage one other when we doubt our own ability to sustain this still fragile vision that is gradually becoming our responsibility.

Part III: Messianic Jewish Community and the Christian Church

Even as we are growing in our knowledge and practice of the richness of Jewish life and Jewish community, it will always be the case that our Judaism is—and should be—distinct from any other branch or version of Judaism. As Kinzer has explained, “Messianic Judaism involves more than the subtle tweaking of an existing form of Jewish life and thought—adding a few elements required by faith in Yeshua and subtracting a few elements incompatible with that faith. Instead, the Judaism we have inherited—and continue to practice—is entirely bathed in the bright light of Yeshua’s revelation. In a circular and dynamic interaction, our Judaism provides us with the framework required to interpret Yeshua’s revelation even as it is reconfigured by that revelation. In this way our Judaism and our Yeshua-faith are organically and holistically

‘integrated.’”⁹ We are Jews, but we are *Messianic* Jews, and we would be loath to allow the significance of this fact to be diminished by our enthusiasm for the Jewish life we have come to cherish.

Amidst the move toward Judaism that continues to define the movement we are both shaping and shaped by, we cannot lose sight of what it means that we also hold firmly to the confession of Yeshua as the Messiah of Israel and the King of all nations. In this regard, we cannot allow the pendulum to swing too far in the other direction. While we indeed must step away from the “evangelical matrix” out of which Messianic Judaism was born and carry forward a Messianic Judaism that is distinct from evangelical Christianity, we cannot acquiesce to defining ourselves—even in part—by what we are not. Psychology has shown the instability and shallow-rootedness of a negatively defined and reactionary identity,¹⁰ and family systems theory demonstrates that the child who runs away and cuts himself off from the family is just as deeply imbedded in the family dynamic as the child who never leaves home.

There are Messianic Jews who recoil at the sound of words like sacrament, Trinity, salvation, atonement, Eucharist, etc. The sting of Christian history and the painful echo of Christian hostility to the Jewish people burn in our ears. Without denying or brushing aside this history, we must acknowledge that the words I have just listed represent the realities that constitute the very lifeblood of Christian existence, and we should not allow ourselves to disavow the fact that these realities run in our veins as well. We cannot endorse a twisted and

⁹ Mark Kinzer, *Israel's Messiah and the People of God: A Vision for Messianic Jewish Covenant Fidelity* (Eugene: Cascade, 2011), 63.

¹⁰ Psychologist Erik Erikson's distinction between “wholeness” and “totality” with regard to identity makes this point well. Erikson describes this distinction as follows: “*Wholeness* connotes an assembly of parts, even quite diversified parts, that enter into fruitful association and organization... In human development as well as in history, then, wholeness emphasizes a progressive coherence of diversified functions and parts. *Totality*, on the contrary, evokes a Gestalt in which an absolute boundary is emphasized: given a certain arbitrary delineation, nothing that belongs inside must be left outside; nothing that must be outside should be tolerated inside. A totality must be as absolutely inclusive as it is absolutely exclusive” (Erik H. Erikson, “A Memorandum on Identity and Negro Youth,” *Journal of Social Issues*, 20 (October 1964), 34-35, quoted in J. Eugene Wright, Jr. *Erikson: Identity and Religion* (New York: Seabury, 1982), 79).

inverted version of “purity of blood” in which our being Jewish eclipses our faith in Yeshua and thereby our indelible connection to and ancestry from the worldwide community of Yeshua’s disciples.

Perhaps rightly, we have felt the need as Messianic Jews to make clear that we are not “Christians,” at least not according to the historically reinforced understanding of Christianity in which being Jewish *and* Christian is incoherent. But I wish to exhort us not to stay in this space of defining ourselves by what we are not. This sort of defensive posture all too often leads to disparaging and denigrating speech about that from which we wish to distinguish ourselves—in this case, the Christian church. It is my contention that a negative posture toward Christianity and the church undermines both the truth of our necessarily hybrid identity and the full impact of our commitment to bilateral ecclesiology. Let me offer a few reflections on each of these points.

First, as Messianic Jews we inescapably exist somewhere in the boundary space between Judaism and Christianity, and this is not something we should seek to hide or shy away from. I would argue that our acceptance of the liminality of our identity along with its often excruciatingly painful tensions is actually the wellspring of our rich collective life and the crux of the chapter in God’s unfolding story that we have been called upon to write. As we seek to further develop and embrace our Jewishness, this move cannot be made at the expense of our confession of Yeshua and all that such a confession entails. Furthermore, reclaiming Yeshua as Israel’s thoroughly Jewish Messiah does not obscure the universal implications of God’s incarnation in human flesh or God’s faithful preservation of the ecclesial body that has celebrated and perpetuated Yeshua-faith for the past two millennia.

While Messianic Judaism’s main struggle over the past decade has been to articulate and defend the legitimacy of rabbinic tradition and God’s providential guidance of the Jewish people, we must be able to offer an equally strong affirmation of God’s loving sustenance of and

ongoing redemptive work within the Christian community. Just as we cannot allow widespread Jewish rejection of Yeshua to lead to a wholesale dismissal of the rabbis, we likewise cannot allow the pervasive anti-Semitism and supersessionism of Christian history to blur the fact that the Christian church—alongside the Jewish people—remains the primary locus of God’s redemptive work in the world. As Kinzer helped us to see last year, Rosenzweig offers us a clear window into the divinely ordained redemptive vocations of both Judaism and Christianity. Rosenzweig’s thought makes explicit that one without the other is incomplete, and that final redemption requires the faithful obedience of both committed Jews and committed Christians. We will revisit Rosenzweig’s thought in more detail in what follows.

Second, a thoroughgoing commitment to bilateral ecclesiology *requires* a robust endorsement of the Christian church. If we seek to maintain a coherent message about the unique covenantal obligations of the Jewish people and the abiding distinction between Jew and Gentile, then we must consistently reinforce God’s continued presence in and guidance of the Christian church. To speak negatively about the church while simultaneously dissuading Gentiles from making Messianic Jewish congregations their spiritual homes is to send a message that is confusing at best, and deeply troubling at worst. If we wish to promote a vision of the Christian church as the rightful home of Jesus-loving Gentiles, then our speech and actions must consistently express our support of and regard for that church’s health and vitality.

Moreover, as Gavriel Gefen has pointed out, the term “multilateral ecclesiology” may actually be more accurate than “bilateral ecclesiology.” After all, there is not just one generic Gentile ekklesia! We worship a God who is honored by diversity, and that diversity extends far beyond the archetypal distinction between Jew and Gentile. If God delights in the multiplicity of languages, cultures and ethnicities represented by the world’s population, then each people group ought to be empowered to discern and embody an authentic expression of the Christian gospel

from within their unique cultural particularities. The richness of the worldwide ekklesia is arguably found in the diversity of global expressions of Christian discipleship. From a missiological perspective, the days of North-to-South and West-to-East Christian expansion have passed.¹¹ The missionary endeavor as the exportation of Christianity, civilization and commerce to less “enlightened” people groups has been thoroughly exposed and debunked.¹²

As Messianic Jews, we have a unique opportunity to support and enhance the rich multiplicity of the global Christian church by encouraging Christians (perhaps especially those in our midst) to discover and embrace authentic expressions of Christianity that honor their own cultural and ethnic particularity. Christians are not merely “Gentiles”—they are Africans and Koreans and Latinos who carry unique ethnic, cultural and linguistic identities. While Messianic Judaism is not directly analogous to other cultural expressions of Christianity, we are in an ideal position to serve as a model of what “contextualized Christianity” looks like. Rather than subtly implying that Messianic Judaism is superior to Christianity by touting our own significance and legitimacy, we should be empowering Christians to embody faithful expressions of the Christian gospel that reflect the unity-in-diversity upon which that gospel thrives and within which it is most fully expressed.

Gefen’s ministry focuses on precisely this type of empowerment, and he quips that his calling is to defend indigenous people groups against Western missionaries whose model necessitates stripping people of their culture in order that they might follow Jesus.¹³ While

¹¹ For further explanation of this shift, see for example Michael Nazir-Ali, *From Everywhere to Everywhere: A World View of Christian Witness* (Eugene: Wipf & Stock, 2009); Samuel Escobar, *The New Global Mission: The Gospel from Everywhere to Everyone* (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2003).

¹² These “3 C’s” of Christian mission were coined by nineteenth century Scottish missionary-explorer David Livingstone. For a survey and evaluation of Livingstone’s life and contribution to missiology and African history, see Gerald H. Anderson et. al. (eds.), *Mission Legacies: Biographical Studies of Leaders of the Modern Missionary Movement* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1994), 140-147.

¹³ Gefen describes his ministry and vision as follows: “In my travels I have mostly focused on going to indigenous tribal peoples. My experiences of serving indigenous peoples within their own cultures have inspired me to embrace more of my own traditional Jewish heritage. Also, the more I have embraced my own heritage and lived more

certainly not all of us are called to traverse the globe as long-awaited emissaries from Jerusalem, I believe that we can learn a great deal from the ecclesial model and vision Gefen carries. It seems to me that Gefen's ministry is merely the robust application of Kendall Soulen's claim that "God's work as Consummator...consistently presupposes and entails economies of mutual blessing between those who are different."¹⁴ We are wise to remember that the difference Soulen speaks of is not limited to the specific distinction between Jew and Gentile; rather, it is much broader than that.

Messianic Judaism can contribute to global Christianity *our story*, thus setting people free to discover for themselves what it means to be faithful to Christ in the midst of their own cultural particularities. Isn't this the very thing we would like the church to recognize as our right as well? By virtue of our own struggle for a sort of ecclesial freedom, we are among those who are perhaps best equipped to help Gentile Christians discover the positive significance of their identity, bearing in mind that Gentile identity is not just one amorphous generic thing. Rather, each ethnic and cultural group should be freed to discover its own unique Christian identity with its own rich texture and forms of expression. Only together can these diverse refractions of Yeshua's mission and message reflect the true depth and cohesiveness of God's coming Kingdom.

naturally within the traditional community of my people, the more I have learned how to bring Jesus to indigenous peoples. When I am with indigenous people, I am inspired to be more faithful to the heritage of my own people. When I am at home within the religious Jewish community, I am inspired as to how I might more effectively serve among other peoples, by affirming who they already are. These parallel walks in my life are synergistic, each one informing the other and propelling the other forward.

"I have discovered we must first embrace who we and our own people are, and live within that, before we are then able to truly release others to do the same. If we lack respect for our own heritage, we will not be able to fully respect the heritage of another people.

"Learning to be faithful to Jesus within our own cultural heritage is not only for the sake of effectively serving our own people, but also for the sake of preparation toward effectively bringing the message of Jesus to other nations. This faithfulness within our own cultures enables us to assist other peoples and nations to discover for themselves what it means to be faithful to Jesus each within their own heritages. This faithfulness results in the incarnation of the life and message of Jesus in the midst of their people"(Gavriel Gefen, "Jesus Movements: Discovering Biblical Faith in the Most Unexpected Places," *Mission Frontiers* 33:3 (May-June 2011), 9).

¹⁴ R. Kendall Soulen, *The God of Israel and Christian Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1996), 116.

While my goal here is not to proffer a specific model of how we might carry out such an endeavor, the point I am making is that the global Christian church must be our concern, because along with being Jews we are also members of the worldwide body of Messiah. It is not optional for us to care for and nurture this body in all of its diversity and heterogeneity. We would be wise to reread Paul's powerful reflections on the body of Messiah in 1 Corinthians 12, particularly with the distinction between Jew and Gentile in mind.

What relevance does this have with regard to our exploration of Messianic Jewish community? Fundamentally, I do not think our communities can be marked by the kind of insularity and inwardness by which Rosenzweig describes the Jewish people. In my opinion, this is merely one of the areas in which our being Messianic Jews necessitates a distinct self-understanding that does not fit into Rosenzweig's formal mold for Judaism and Christianity. I would argue that we cannot neatly identify Messianic Judaism within Rosenzweig's description (and prescription) of the Jewish people. In fact, it is difficult to read the New Testament and prescribe to any Yeshua-follower the kind of inward existence by which Rosenzweig describes proper Jewish life. I would go so far as to say that, as disciples of Yeshua, to willingly embody a posture of disconnectedness and detachedness from the rest of the world constitutes an act of disobedience on our part.

The kind of passive parallelism that Rosenzweig envisions between Judaism and Christianity, both of which usher in final redemption though not necessarily with conscious regard to or for one another cannot aptly encapsulate the unique vocation of Messianic Judaism. As Messianic Jews, our identity is not solely derived from our existence within the Jewish people. Our identity also indelibly flows from our inclusion in the worldwide body of our Messiah. The yawning historical gap between these two covenantal communities lives within

each of us, and I believe that this tension is, as Greenberg describes, among those that reflect the unique richness of our identity rather than its shattering incoherence.

At last year's forum, Kinzer contended that "the primary vocation of Messianic Jewish communities today falls within the James to Peter spectrum" while "some Messianic Jews may also be called to the Pauline task of being...[immersed] in the life of the Christian Church."¹⁵ Even if Kinzer is right about the Pauline path being the exception rather than the rule, I would add the important caveat that *all* Messianic Jews need to be deeply concerned about the health and welfare of the Christian church, and that this concern must manifest itself in our speech, prayer and action even if not in our immediate ecclesial environments. Again, it is the people of Israel *and* the body of Messiah that fundamentally inform our core identity.

Along these lines, it is worth further exploring Paul's outward-focused missionary existence. At the risk of speculatively psychologizing the archetypal apostle to the Gentiles, I would venture to say that it was Paul's unwavering security in his own Jewish identity that enabled him to preach the message of Yeshua so widely and to navigate the diverse cultural and geographical landscape of the ancient world. His firmly rooted Jewish identity was not threatened by the various Gentile cultures and lands in which he spent so much time; rather, it was arguably enhanced by them.¹⁶ Because Paul understood his own relationship to the Jewish people, and the Jewish people's relationship to the God of Israel, he was able to thoroughly

¹⁵ We will recall that Kinzer sketches a spectrum of "priestly service" according to which "James and the Jerusalem assembly of Yeshua-followers displayed an unambiguous attachment to Jewish communal life." By contrast, "Paul and his Jewish colleagues...spent substantial amounts of time with non-Jews... Their particular task consisted of carrying the message of Yeshua to the nations of the earth." Peter, who "seems to occupy a middle-ground between James and Paul...presides over the Jerusalem community of Yeshua-followers" but also "opens the door for the proclamation of the Good News to non-Jews." See Kinzer, "Messianic Jewish Community: Standing and Serving as a Priestly Remnant," 20ff.

¹⁶ In the words of Miroslav Volf, "other cultures are not a threat to the pristine purity of our cultural identity, but a potential source of its enrichment. Inhabited by people who are courageous enough not simply to belong, intersecting and overlapping cultures can mutually contribute to the dynamic vitality of each"(Miroslav Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace: A Theological Exploration of Identity, Otherness, and Reconciliation* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1996), 52).

invest himself in spreading God's gracious self-revelation in Yeshua to the ends of the earth. Paul reminds us that only a strong sense of identity opens the door to genuine encounter with the other. Had Paul's Jewish identity been less fully intact, it would have undoubtedly been eroded by the long periods of time he spent away from the Jerusalem community that remained his ultimate communal anchor and hub. According to our reading of Paul, his deep commitment to Judaism was not eroded, and the way in which his Jewishness informed his own identity and mission is at least in part what prevented this erosion.

Because the Messianic Jewish movement has come so very far in terms of recognizing and embracing our own Jewishness, I believe we are now at a place where we can and must begin to re-engage with the world of Gentile Christianity, confident that that world will no longer be able to absorb or assimilate us. It is because we are firmly committed to doing the hard work of rooting ourselves in our Jewish identity with all of its richness and complexity that we can now securely both learn from and contribute to the life of our ingrafted Christian brothers and sisters. While distancing ourselves from the evangelical Christianity that gave birth to our movement may have been necessary for a time, it is my contention that this critical distance cannot be our default posture. With this being said, let us now move on to discuss the distinctives of Messianic Jewish communal life.

Part IV: Messianic Jewish Life Together

Having reflected on our relationship to both the people of Israel and the worldwide body of Messiah, what now can we say about our own unique identity as Messianic Jews and the communities in which we collectively live and express that identity? In order to address this question, I would like to return again to the covenantal distinctives outlined in Part I, particularly that of covenantal commission. Rosenzweig argues that the redemptive commission of the

Jewish people is necessarily inward-focused and categorized by self-preservation while Christianity's perpetuation and prolongation depends upon its outward expansion and universal scope. Again, it is my contention that as Messianic Jews we cannot simply identify ourselves within Rosenzweig's portrait of corporate Jewish life. Our very existence is a critique of Rosenzweig's thought on the grounds that he does not make provision for any overlap between these two covenantal communities and their respective vocations. It is ultimately incoherent for us to insist upon the significance of our hybrid theological commitments and refuse to recognize the correlative hybridity of our unique redemptive commission.

In fact, at least part of our primary covenantal commission as Messianic Jews is to concretely witness to the deep and abiding connection between these two larger communities. By confessing faith in Yeshua as Jews, we necessarily highlight the way in which the election of both Israel and the church exist *within* God's election of Yeshua.¹⁷ In his life and mission Yeshua perfectly embodies both the particularity of God's covenant with Israel and the universality of God's call to discipleship. As Jewish followers of Yeshua, we must likewise hold within ourselves and reflect within our communities the unique reality of Jewish existence as well as the universal scope of God's redemptive purposes.

Our community's specific covenantal commission is shared in part but not in full by the Jewish people on one hand and the body of Messiah on the other. Like the overlapping segment of a Venn diagram, the commonality of our respective covenantal identities and accompanying redemptive vocations is only partial. If we truly exist as a subset of these larger communities and draw our sustenance from each of them, then our unique vocation must reflect elements of each community's distinctive life and mission.

¹⁷ On this point, Karl Barth's doctrine of election is particularly helpful. See Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics* II/2 (esp. §33 and §34).

While these larger communities provide the wider environment in which we live, the depth of the bond we share with one another, at least in terms of covenantal commission, is more substantial than the bond we share with non Yeshua-believing Jews or with Gentile Christians. Therefore, deep and meaningful community amongst ourselves is that which alone can provide the vision and spiritual sustenance required to carry out our unique covenantal commission. Furthermore, this kind of committed community in and of itself constitutes our faithfulness to that commission. In other words, to abide within transparent and authentic Messianic Jewish communities is not merely that which alone will keep us going; it is also perhaps the primary mode of our faithful service to the God who has issued our unique calling.

At last year's forum, Kinzer's reflections on our priestly vocation began to spell out what this looks like. Within this discussion, Kinzer introduced us to Ralph Winter's distinction between modalities and sodalities. Let us recall Kinzer's helpful summary of these "two structures of God's redemptive mission"¹⁸:

A modality is a group comprised of a full range of human beings—old and young, male and female, married and single. It has leaders and followers, strong and weak, able and disabled. There are no membership restrictions other than a willingness to abide by the standards of the group, and the objective of the group is simply to live its life in a particular way. In contrast, a sodality is a group with a focused vocation, with membership restricted to those who will be able to contribute to the fulfillment of that vocation. Sodalities require a higher level of commitment than do modalities. Winter sees the first century communities of Yeshua-followers as modalities, while he views Paul's apostolic team as a sodality. He also argues that monasteries, religious orders, and missionary societies demonstrate the fruitfulness of the sodality model throughout Christian history.¹⁹

Using Winter's framework, Kinzer argues that "Messianic Jewish communities should be viewed as sodalities rather than modalities... They must actually be *communities*—not fluid collections of individuals and families who meet occasionally to fulfill their own needs or

¹⁸ See Ralph D. Winter, "The Two Structures of God's Redemptive Mission," available at <http://www.movements.net/wp-content/uploads/2009/04/two-structures-gods-redemptive-mission-winter.pdf>

¹⁹ Kinzer, "Messianic Jewish Community: Standing and Serving as a Priestly Remnant," 30.

perform a task, but people bound together in long-term family-like relationships.”²⁰ Kinzer’s exhortation is crucial for the structural stability and continuing longevity of Messianic Jewish communities. Building upon Kinzer’s thoughts, I would like to suggest a few exploratory ideas that hopefully serve to further flesh out what the basis of Messianic Jewish sodalities might be.

As Kinzer points out, sodalities are built upon a common mission. In fact, for Winter, they are *missional* communities—not merely marked by a common mission but characterized by the carrying out of that mission. Winter’s prototypical example of a sodality is Paul’s “missionary band,” and the examples he offers of modern sodalities are autonomous or semi-autonomous missions organizations. The common thread is that sodalities view their shared commission as residing at the center of their collective existence. In other words, sodalities are bound together on the basis of their common vocation. The suggestion that Messianic Jewish communities should be viewed as sodalities thus raises a fundamental question: What is our common purpose and calling as Messianic Jews? What vision and commission serves as the anchor of a Messianic Jewish sodality?

Kinzer outlined our priestly service as the ground of our common vocation, using Rosenzweig’s description of the Jewish people as our primary model for self-understanding. I question, however, what this vocation looks like with regard to our service to the nations and our inclusion within the larger body of Messiah. In short, I believe that our unique mission must encompass aspects of both the inward, self-nourishing life of the Jewish people *and* the expansive, outward-focused posture of Christianity. While my hope is that we can explore these issues together during our group discussion times, I would like to offer some further provisional reflections based upon what I have been saying thus far.

²⁰ Ibid., 31.

First, though this term undoubtedly requires further refinement and a more precise definition, I wonder what it might look like for us to conceive of “missional Messianic Judaism.” At the outset it must be noted that missional theology is not primarily concerned with evangelism, much less a model of evangelism that seeks to draw people away from their cultural context, as if becoming a disciple of Yeshua requires jettisoning one’s cultural identity. While our community has understandable baggage associated with the word “missionary,” it is important to distinguish between a *missionary* posture and a *missional* posture. The missional theology movement²¹ bases its ecclesiology on the *missio Dei*, the mission of God in the world that is fully revealed through God’s sending Yeshua into the world, and Yeshua sending out his followers to live into and proclaim God’s rule and reign.²² Missional ecclesiology emphasizes that the main commission of the people of God is to be a living model of God’s redemptive mission in the world. Missional communities embody life in God’s Kingdom and bear witness to the inbreaking reality of that Kingdom. From this perspective, mission can be defined as “the good news of God’s love, incarnated in the witness of a community, for the sake of the world.”²³ While as Messianic Jews we can be proudly postmissionary, faithfulness to our covenantal vocation as Yeshua-followers does not permit us to be postmissional.

To explore the idea of missional Messianic Judaism presses further the question of how we are to understand our unique contribution to and expression of God’s redemptive work in the world. Again, it is my contention that while our covenantal commission as Messianic Jews is distinct from both the wider Jewish community and the wider Christian community, it

²¹ For more on missional theology, see especially Darrell L. Guder (ed.), *Missional Church: A Vision for the Sending of the Church in North America* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998); Lesslie Newbigin, *The Open Secret: An Introduction to the Theology of Mission* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1978); David J. Bosch, *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1991); Christopher J.H. Wright, *The Mission of God: Unlocking the Bible’s Grand Narrative* (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2006).

²² In Yeshua’s words, “as the Father has sent me, so I send you”(John 20:21).

²³ Bosch, *Transforming Mission*, 519.

necessarily derives from and includes elements of both of these communities' vocations. Along these lines, perhaps the idea of "cultural brokerage" can serve as a guiding metaphor for missional Messianic Jewish life.²⁴ While cultural brokerage has taken on different meanings in different contexts, it almost always involves a group of people who are capable of bridging, linking, or mediating between persons of different cultural contexts.²⁵ As one scholar has pointed out, cultural brokers are defined less by what they do than by who they are. A person's ability to serve as a cultural broker invariably stems from their unique cross-cultural identity.²⁶

Missiologist Jehu Hanciles points to Paul as a cultural broker *par excellence*. Hanciles' portrait of Paul highlights his dual citizenship (as a member of the house of Israel and a Roman citizen) and his transnational identity.²⁷ As pointed out above, Paul's deep-rooted Jewishness and passionate commitment to the universality of God's inbreaking Kingdom funded his dual identity as a faithful Jew and powerful emissary of Yeshua's outward-spiraling message. His vocation was built upon these two parts of his own identity that mutually reinforced one another and informed the contours of his understanding of God's call to both Jews and Gentiles.

²⁴ According to one definition, "a cultural broker is one who thoroughly understands different cultural systems, is able to interpret cultural systems from one frame of reference to another, can mediate cultural incompatibilities, and knows how to build bridges or establish linkages across cultures" (Geneva Gay, "Building Cultural Bridges: A Bold Proposal for Teacher Education," *Education and Urban Society* 25:3 (May 1993), 285-299).

While the idea of cultural brokerage offers substantial traction and conceptual yield, it is just beginning to appear on the scene of missiological literature. While the number of missiologists who employ this term is increasing, literature on cultural brokerage remains scarce and the term has yet to be precisely defined in a missiological context.

²⁵ See M.A. Jezewski, "Culture brokering in migrant farm worker health care," *Western Journal of Nursing Research*, 12:4 (August 1990), 497-513.

²⁶ One could say that the entire history of the Jewish people has been an ongoing example of and exercise in cultural brokerage. The Jewish people have almost always existed as a minority subculture within a dominant host culture, yet their contribution to that host culture (and to world history more broadly) continues to be astonishingly disproportionate to their small numbers. Navigating the clash between the particularly Jewish culture to which they adhere and the larger dominant culture in which they have most often lived has been a continual challenge for the Jewish people, but this constant tension has arguably been one of the key wellsprings of distinctly Jewish creativity, innovation and imagination. Examples of this phenomenon at work abound in almost every epoch of Jewish history.

²⁷ Jehu J. Hanciles, "Every Foreign Country a Native Land: The Migrant Factor in the Making of Global Christianity," paper presented at the Religion and Ethnicity Workshop at Minzu University in Beijing, China, September 7, 2011.

Again, I am not arguing that each of us and each of our communities ought to embody Paul's specific missionary mandate to the Gentiles. This seems to be the calling that Gefen has, and his ministry serves as a reminder to all of us that this particular vocation indeed fits within the Messianic Jewish commission. However, even for those Messianic Jewish communities and individuals who are called to faithfully preserve and maintain the "James to Peter" end of the spectrum, I would contend that Messianic Judaism across the spectrum should reflect the same dual foci of Paul's person and vocation, embodying a commitment to the life of our specific communities while remaining actively invested in and shaped by God's broader redemptive mission.

To illustrate this point, let us further reflect on what cultural brokerage might entail for Messianic Jewish communities. In missiological contexts, cultural brokerage seems to have a primarily *transmissional* quality. The history of Christian expansion points to cultural brokers as strategic ambassadors of Christ's message whose multilingual cultural fluency enabled them to envision how the gospel could take root and find expression within particular cultural environments. In a Messianic Jewish context, I would argue that our cultural brokerage has a primarily *representational* quality. While we do wish to transmit the values and vision we embody to other Jewish believers in Yeshua (and the Jewish people more broadly), our primary commission is to act as intermediaries who faithfully represent Jewish life to Christians and Yeshua-faith to Jews. As those who existentially dwell in the boundary space between Judaism and Christianity, our role as cultural brokers can be conceived as bearing witness to the fundamental connection between these two traditions and faithfully presenting each to the other. We reveal in the life of our communities that Judaism and Christianity are not properly two realities but rather two sides of one reality.

At best, our communities should demonstrate to the Jewish people that Jewish covenant fidelity is not only compatible with Yeshua-faith, but that it is ultimately grounded within the redemptive life Yeshua definitively brought. Our communities should likewise demonstrate to the Christian ekklesia that Judaism and faithful Jewish practice has found a home within that ekklesia, and that churches need not view the Jewish people as targets for conquest and colonization. Finally, our communities should be the place where each of us finds restorative reassurance offered by those in whom these two religious traditions also coexist. As a concrete manifestation of God's sustaining hand, our mutual support and encouragement is the only thing that will enable us to stay the course of our difficult and largely unchartered covenantal commission.

Second, the combined wisdom of Jewish tradition and Christian sodalities issues the reminder that our shared mission is given expression by and lived out through concrete practices, which constitute the bedrock of our common life. As Michael Fishbane explains, in Judaism “there is no simple love of God that is not concretized through some customary form of behavior and no strict observance of these behaviors that is not also to be regarded as an expression of the love of God.”²⁸ More specifically, in the words of Hayim Halevy Donin, “Torah is the embodiment of the Jewish faith. It contains the terms of...Covenant with God. It is what makes a Jew a Jew.”²⁹ From a Christian perspective, this realization is what characterizes in large part the great contribution of Dietrich Bonhoeffer's reflections in *Life Together*. From beginning to end, Bonhoeffer's account of genuine Christian community is built upon a shared life of common practices. While it is easy to be off-put by the specificity and rigidity with which Bonhoeffer

²⁸ Michael Fishbane, *Judaism: Revelation and Traditions* (New York: HarperOne, 1987), 18.

²⁹ Hayim Halevy Donin, *To Be a Jew: A Guide to Jewish Observance in Contemporary Life* (New York: Basic Books, 1972), 27.

prescribes communal Christian practices, of all people we as Jews can understand and appreciate such specificity. It is as if Bonhoeffer is developing a communal Christian halakhah.

If Messianic Judaism is to reflect the life of God's redeemed and redeeming people, our communities must be shaped by both the halakhic practices that preserve and sanctify the Jewish people *and* the ecclesial practices that mark the body of Messiah. Our commitment to carrying out the sacramental practices that mark the life of the Yeshua-believing community must be woven into our commitment to davening, observing Shabbat, keeping kosher, etc.³⁰ Because our shared practices constitute our faithful response to God's electing and covenanting love, they place God and our service to him at the center of our communal life. In Bonhoeffer's words, "not what a man is in himself... his spirituality and piety, constitutes the basis of our community. What determines our brotherhood is what that man is by reason of Christ. Our community with one another consists solely in what Christ has done to both of us."³¹

The way in which these specific communal (and individual) practices undergird Bonhoeffer's vision for Christian community issues the reminder that our communities must be based upon our shared commitments even more than upon our common affections. It is here that the logic of covenant again becomes crucial. By analogy, the covenant of marriage is not based upon whether or not one feels love and tenderness toward their spouse at any given moment. It runs much deeper than that and is built upon a commitment to the health and well being of the other even and perhaps especially when one does not feel a deep sense of concern or closeness. Likewise, covenantal community cannot be based upon our feelings for one another, which are bound to fluctuate—perhaps proportionally to how close we are to one another. Rather, our commitment to community is based upon our shared understanding that God has brought such

³⁰ The MJRC's decision to develop communal standards for the observance of Tevilah (baptism) and Hazikkaron (Eucharist) takes a substantial step toward reflecting our commitment to these practices as well as the halakhic practices outlined in the Standards of Observance.

³¹ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*, trans. John W. Doberstein (New York: HarperCollins, 1954), 25.

community into existence as both a blessing for us to enjoy and a responsibility for us to steward. God has chosen to make himself known through his people, and our commitment to one another is based upon our common commitment to God. This commitment is most visibly and tangibly embodied in the contours of daily communal life and the rhythms of shared spiritual practices.

Third and finally, as Messianic Jewish covenant communities, self-preservation cannot be our end goal. The missional nature of Winter's Christian sodalities reinforces this point. We do not and cannot live for ourselves, and our communities cannot be merely self-referential. Because it is incumbent upon us to respond to the calling that God has issued to us collectively, we must bear in mind that our communities do not exist for their own sake. Ultimately, God's purposes for our communities must inform our commitment to building and sustaining those communities. Let us hear again the convicting words of our Messiah—"whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me will save it."³² We cannot domesticate these words by acting as though they apply only to our individual lives and not to the lives of our communities.

The endurance of our communities is not ultimately dependent upon the clarity of our vision or the skill of our administrative implementation, though these things are no doubt important. If our communities ultimately stand the test of time, it will be because they serve a purpose in God's Kingdom and it will be God's gracious and life-giving hand that holds them together. The unlikely survival of the Jewish people reinforces the fact that God is faithful to his covenant and to the ongoing life of his covenant people. God's covenant with Israel is that which alone guarantees the eternity of Israel's existence and the redemption of all creation. Again, as Novak pointed out, the affirmation of this divine promise comprises one layer of meaning embedded in our liturgy when we praise God for "planting everlasting life in our midst." This

³² Luke 9:24. See also Matthew 16:25, Mark 8:35.

affirmation reminds us that we are stewards of the communities that God has brought into existence, not creators of communities that otherwise would not exist. Because this is the case, we are freed up to focus upon the ways in which our communities contribute to God's redemptive purposes in the world, rather than endlessly preoccupying ourselves with strategies of self-preservation. This shift in emphasis further reinforces and embodies what it means to be a missional community.

Again, this notion is at home in the history of the Jewish people. Beginning with Abraham's call in Genesis 12, Israel has always been called to be a blessing to all nations, not merely a people concerned with its own well-being and consumed by narcissistic navel-gazing. Jewish history likewise reveals the truth of the New Testament assurance that to be the people of God is to be a people that embraces radical dependence, finds strength in weakness and rejects self-sufficiency. As Messianic Jews, we cannot merely occupy ourselves with preserving our Jewishness, and our ascription to bilateral ecclesiology does not excuse us from our covenantal responsibility to be a light to the nations. Even as we find God and make him known in the midst of our local communities and shared halakhic life, we must be constantly inviting others into the life-giving communion of Yeshua's worldwide community. Again, to truly ascribe to bilateral ecclesiology is to see the body of Messiah in all of its diversity as the place where redemptive fellowship is to be sought and found.

* * *

Having reviewed some of the basic distinctives of covenantal life and reflected upon how these covenantal contours shape our self-understanding and life together as Messianic Jews, my hope is that the reflections offered here can spur on the kind of discussion in which "iron sharpens iron" and our existing vision can be further refined and implemented. Building Messianic Jewish communities is a passion and vocation all of us presumably share, and it is

remains my honor to be able to both learn from and contribute to a substantive exploration of this topic.

As Kinzer reminded us last year, “we can only understand the calling of the Jewish people and the calling of the Christian Church by seeing them in relation to one another,” and “we can only understand our own calling as Messianic Jews in relation to this greater two-fold community.”³³ As those who are existentially bound to both *Am Israel* and the Christian community, may God empower us to increasingly discern our unique covenantal commission in order that we may dedicate ourselves to serving God and making him known through faithful obedience. Finally, may we bear in mind that, in the words of Dietrich Bonhoeffer, true spiritual community “is not an ideal which we must realize; it is rather a reality created by God in Christ in which we may participate.”³⁴

³³ Kinzer, “Messianic Jewish Community: Standing and Serving as a Priestly Remnant,” 32.

³⁴ Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*, 30.