

What is our relationship with the wider Jewish community?
by Tuvya Zaretsky

I'd like to begin with thanks to the Borough Park Steering Committee for the gracious invitation to participate in this discussion. I want to commend you all for providing an opportunity to consider the topics at hand and a forum based on a respectful discussion. I'm grateful to be a contributor.

So, to the question, "What is our relationship with the wider Jewish community?" The plural pronoun in that sentence, "our" is understood as referring to the Messianic Jewish community. In my view that is a bit like asking the proverbial fish, "How does it feel to swim in water?" Organizational anthropologist, Caroline Turner observed, "The fish is so IN the water that he can't see it or describe it. It's all he or she knows; the fish doesn't know there is anything else."ⁱ We are, after all, members of the same tribe – that wider Jewish community. So, if our belief in Messiah Yeshua is a true, then our voice is needed within twenty-first century Jewry.

All culture is composed of things that we learn. At descending levels of meaning those are behaviors, authority standards, the accumulation of personal experiences and eventually the core beliefs that order our world. My cultural perception says, I am Jewish and I am of the Jewish community. Like the fish in the water, Jewish culture has had a major role in defining my perception of the world. As such, I see Messianic Jews as one facet of world Jewry whether here in the US, in other Diaspora regions or in Israel. We are of the Jewish community.

Jewish history and studies of developments in Jewish religious thought present a surprisingly diverse gallery of portraits depicting "who is a Jew."ⁱⁱ Jewish cultures have been shaped by a multitude of historical, biblical and trans-national experiences. So, we should expect that Messianic Jewish identity would be just as diversified and no less an aspect of world Jewry.

I grew up in California in a post-World War II, post-Holocaust Jewish experience. That included immigrant grandparents; personal encounters with anti-Semitism, a synagogue community, assimilationist tendencies and an anti-Christian secularist outlook. It was a pretty plain vanilla, baby boomer Jewish experience. Like the fish in water, I was just part of the American Jewish community.

After coming to faith in Yeshua in my early 20s, I wondered how I would deal with Jewish attitudes towards the “J-word” – attitudes that I had expressed before coming to faith. Then, it occurred to me that if other Jewish people knew what I had learned about Yeshua, they would embrace Him too. So, Yeshua-phobia by some in the wider Jewish community had to be culturally acquired. If an argument is to be engaged, it is not with me or with you – with our Jewishness or biblical scholarship - but with the Messiah Yeshua. HE is the issue that rocks the survival instinct in contemporary Jewry.

The next generations of Messianic Jews are growing up in a very different cultural environment. The American Jewish Diaspora is now characterized by intermarriage, secularism, disaffiliation and religious ambiguity where discussion about God is real a source of embarrassment.ⁱⁱⁱ Our children, who share faith in Yeshua, will define their Jewish identity according their own experience. They, like the majority of American Jewry, will likely grow up in Jewish-Gentile families. They find broad-spectrum Jewish culture to be more comfortable, with greater vagueness about religious practices and more emphasis on finding meaning. They are discovering their messianic identity as part of a new American Jewish community.

We might ask, “What is the wider Jewish community’s relationship to us - as Messianic Jews?” No doubt, there are Jewish community activists and religious stakeholders in the

institutions of American Judaism who prefer to set boundary for Jewishness in such a way as to exclude Messianic Jews.

Southern California conservative pundit, talk show host and Jewish educator, Dennis Prager has spoken out against Messianic Jews for a long time.^{iv} His declared aim is to divide and conquer Messianic Jews.^v He wrote, “We have labeled them as a cult and fought their methods of luring Jews to Christianity. We have denied that even Jews-for-Jesus born-Jewish are Jews. We have, for all intents and purposes, put them in *cherem* (excommunication). I have long subscribed to this approach.” Still, he acknowledged, “They are also not disappearing and our unrelenting war against them has not been particularly successful.”^{vi}

Jewish opinion leaders, like Prager, appear to speak with malicious intent. I think, more often they are motivated by fear: an instinct for Jewish survival that we understand and share. Their understanding of “Who is a Jew?” can be inconsistent and self-serving.^{vii} I suggest we listen to their arguments for the sake of engagement while rejecting Prager’s right, or anyone else’s to judge or nullify Jewish identity.

No one has the right to “validate” your or my Jewish identity. I was born a Jew and I’ll die a Jew. No pronouncement or symbolic action of a *beth din* (religious court of Judaism) will ever change that. Only God adequately defines who is a Jew or the Jewish community.

The Apostle Paul rightly said that not even every physical Jew is a Jew in God’s reckoning.^{viii} I suggest that we embrace the biblical theology of a remnant [Hebrew *she’arit*]. The Lord is calling to Himself a faithful remnant from every nation, including our Jewish people.^{ix} That provides a new perspective of the “wider Jewish community.”

We have a different basis for defining Messianic Jews. Only God sets the norms for “authentic” and “valid” Jewish identity. In my view, wider Jewish community opinion leaders

misappropriate the right allocated to God alone for validating who is within or outside of the boundaries of Jewish identity.

Therefore, the Messianic Jewish community is already one unique facet of the wider Jewish community. With all of our diverse cultural expressions, Jews are an internationally scattered, multicultural people. Jewishness cannot be defined in ethnocentric terms like *Yiddishkeit* without denying *Sephardi* or *Mizrachi* cultures. Modern Judaisms do not even properly define Jewishness when the majority of world Jewry is secular or moderately traditional.

Our Messianic faith is the untold Jewish perspective. A rich multidimensional contemporary Jewry is portrayed with surprising variety in a collection of essays titled, *I am Jewish: Personal Reflections Inspired by the Last Words of Daniel Pearl*.^x It offers complex cultural reflections on identity, heritage, covenant, ethnicity and purpose. If you are Jewish, you see elements of yourself in the lives of others. Yet, that collection needs at least one more essay - from a Messianic Jew. To use the metaphor one last time: we are many fish in one tank of water.

I am Jewish. We are of the wider Jewish community. And the Messianic perspective has a critical message for the wider Jewish community. That is not regarding our Jewishness, but through our claim that the Messiah has come and He is Yeshua. They need to know that God has said, through His Son, "I Am the way, the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father but through Me."^{xi}

I want to conclude with an encouraging observation by Israeli scholar Yaakov Ariel.^{xii} Ariel is an assistant professor of Religious studies at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. He is not a Messianic Jew. However, he carefully researched spiritual developments in the American Jewish community and in particular Christian mission efforts that have been in practice among them. His report is fair-minded and may be surprising at some points.

Ariel observed, regarding the modern Jewish mission movement, “For the first time in American Jewish history, propagation of the Christian gospel among Jews proved successful and captured the souls of tens of thousands of young Jews.”^{xiii} And of the messianic congregational movement he said, “These congregations proved to be effective in evangelizing Jews, as they demonstrated both the spiritual and communal merits of the Christian evangelical faith and were particularly compelling for those Jews who wished to retain their Jewish identity and continued to identify with Jewish causes.”^{xiv} Yaakov Ariel recognizes Messianic Jews as part of the diversity in American Jewish communal life and, in fact, also in Israel. Not only that, he sees positive and effective methodologies that are making the Gospel known to Jewish people.

Messianic Jewry is already in relationship to the wider Jewish community. That is already an existential reality. The question is not about Jewish identity, or the authenticity of Messianic Jewish culture. The wider Jewish community needs more experience of a uniquely messianic spirituality, expressed as a relationship with the God of Israel and found in Yeshua.

I believe that the Messianic Jewish component of the wider Jewish community ought to be serving our own people. In my view the most substantial contribution that can be made is by communicating the Messiahship of Yeshua. That needs to be done in a manner whereby the audience can hear the message and perhaps investigate it further if they choose to. There are lots of methods by which to do that. And it is compelling to consider implications of a wider Jewish community that understands the uniqueness of Messianic Jewry.

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Endnotes

ⁱ Caroline Turner, “Organizational Culture as the ‘Water’ We Fish Swim In: What’s the ‘Water’ Like in There?,” posted at [www. http://difference-works.com](http://difference-works.com) on October 27, 2010.

ⁱⁱ Some references: H.H. Ben-Sasson. *A History of the Jewish People*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press) 1976; Cohen, A. Arthur and Paul Mendes-Flohr. *20th Century Jewish Religious Thought*, (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society) 2009; Fishman, Sylvia B. *The Way into the Varieties of Jewishness*, (Woodstock VT: Jewish Lights Publishing) 2007; Johnson, Paul. *A History of the Jews*, (New York: Harper & Row) 1987

ⁱⁱⁱ See for example Schiffman, Lisa. *Generation J* (NY: Harper Collins) 2000

^{iv} Denis Prager, “Is the Such a Thing as “Jews for Jesus?” in *Ultimate Issues*, Oct.-Dec. Vol. 5:4, 1989

^v Dennis Prager, *A New Approach to Jews-for-Jesus*, June 2000

^{vi} *ibid.*

^{vii} For a thoughtful essay see “Who is a Jew – Questions of Religion, Ethnicity and Identity” by Michael L. Brown, at http://realmessiah.com/read/who_is_a_jew

^{viii} Romans 2:28-29

^{ix} Isaiah 10:20-22; Romans 9:27 and 11:5

^x Judea and Ruth Pearl, editors. (Woodstock, VT: Jewish Life Publishing) 2004

^{xi} John 14:6

^{xii} Ariel, Yaakov. *Evangelizing the Chosen People: Missions to the Jews in America, 1880-2000* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press) 2000

^{xiii} *ibid.* P 211

^{xiv} *ibid.* P 243