

Messianic Judaism is an expression of Jewish faith built upon the essential truth that Jewish people who embrace the risen Messiah of Israel, Jesus, are obliged to partner with God in securing the ongoing existence and vitality of the Jewish people worldwide while simultaneously upholding Jesus' message of love and redemption for the entire world.

Let's look at this definition more closely:

Messianic Judaism is a expression of Jewish faith...

First and foremost, Messianic Judaism is essentially a Jewish faith. This may surprise some readers, but at root, our faith is a recapitulation of the First Century reality. Peter, Paul, James, John, Miriam (Mary) and the many thousands of other Jews who lived in Israel and embraced Jesus did so as Jews. In a day when there were many competing "Judaism's," theirs was the one which saw God's highest work expressed in the words and work of the Risen One.

Imagine this: you hop into your time machine, set the controls for Jerusalem in the year 40 CE. Upon arriving you encounter Peter on a busy street in Jerusalem. Through a translator you ask him a simple question, "Peter, now that you believe in Yeshua, is the faith you teach a Judaism or is it something else?" Peter would likely think for a brief moment, raise both palms in a questioning manner, get up close and personal, and answer you with a mixture of disbelief and benign ridicule:

"What do you think, we became Episcopalians after the resurrection? Baptists? Catholics? Of course we teach a Judaism -- one with an understanding that Yeshua is at the heart of it. And it is our hope that one day our people will understand this truth as well.

Pharisees understand the Torah their way, Sadducees their way and we Nazarenes our way. But we are all Jews. As for us, we are trusting in Messiah Yeshua. Say, would you like to hear about some of the things he did while my friends and I spent time with him?"
Would you ever!

Back to the 21st Century. Two thousand years have passed. History has brought us new realities like the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem and rise of a majority position among Jews which has come to be called Rabbinic Judaism and the development of the Church. Despite the time lapse and all the development, modern Messianic Jews none-the-less understand our faith as a Judaism --a minority view, but the only view which accounts for the sublime truth concerning Israel's greatest Son.

Is such a "time machine faith" really possible today? Yes, but with qualifications.

Many Jewish believers naively think that God's ideal would be for us to return to the ways things were in Bible times. They reason, "if only we could recapture the way things were among the earliest believers, Then we could just live biblically. Our faith would seem so much more real than it does today."

This is not true, nor is it even remotely possible. The cultural gap between then and now is just too great to ever go back. And even if we could transcend the differences, we would still be seeking a world that never really existed. That is to say, even in the First Century there was no pure, universally accepted "biblical" faith. Even in the days immediately after God's mighty acts in Yeshua, there was plenty for believers to fight about.

Still, certain rock-solid points of identity modeled and taught by the people who gave us Scripture can profoundly inform our sense of who we are. The self-understanding of the Apostles as Jews and as followers of Jesus is a case in point. History moves on, but identity-shaping eternal covenants are just that...eternal. So, just as the constitution of the United States, a 200 year old human document, circumscribes the foundational identity of the modern American citizen, so the 2,000 year old Bible confirms the legitimacy of modern Messianic Jewish identity. And that identity is first and foremost, Jewish. Just ask Peter!

Let's move on the second feature of our definition of Messianic Judaism:

...built upon the essential truth that Jewish people who embrace the risen Messiah of Israel, Jesus, are obliged to partner with God in securing the ongoing existence and vitality of the Jewish people worldwide...

As a Jewish faith, Messianic Judaism necessarily concerns itself with Jewish survival. Profound theology undergirds this claim.

The key phrase is "partner with God." We contend that He has structured the way he relates to the world in such a way all of life is a divine/human partnership. Nothing much happens in our world of lasting noble character without that partnership.

Doing our part is the key here as we seek to define Messianic Judaism. "He that keepeth Israel neither slumbers nor sleeps," but we are his junior partners in the process.

If history teaches us anything, it teaches us that powerful forces have sought to

destroy the Jewish people. Who could doubt the involvement of powers of darkness energizing and motivating the Holocaust? Has not the Church itself at times made it very difficult for Jews to maintain our unique identity as a covenanted nation? And has not spiritual laziness among Jewish people resulted in a complacency resulting in assimilation into the general culture? Whether through death, conversion or assimilation the result for Israel, the Jewish people, is ultimately the same: step by step we move toward the abyss of obscurity and even disappearance.

Here is a difficult truth: within two generations of trusting the Messiah, Jewish believers in Jesus who do not partner with God in cultivating a significantly Jewish approach to life for themselves and their children are destined to cease being Jewish in any meaningful, recognizable way. There may be isolated examples where this observation is not true, but by and large (and we Jews must think about the by and large), this is the case.

Jews who make their primary home in local churches can be pretty much assured that their children (and surely their grandchildren) will not identify deeply as Jews. There may be powerful reasons for a Jewish believer in Jesus to have strong ties with a local church. However, we must not live in a fantasy land with respect to such titanicly important issues such as Jewish survival and the biblical mandate for the divine/human partnership in all life's affairs. The rhythms of church life -- ham suppers, Boys Brigade, Christmas carols and the other noble and beautiful features of the rhythm of church life cannot impart Jewish identity to a Jew who embraces Jesus. Period. Nor is it a church's primary role to do so. It's task is to share the Gospel with all who will listen and to provide a loving, spiritually ennobling environment for those who already believe. Put in positive terms, history and common sense dictate that only Jews who regularly experience Shabbat and the Jewish holidays, who relate deeply to other Jews and who seek involvement in Jewish communal activities have any hope of sustaining such an important yet difficult identity.

Intermarriage presents a related problem. Elliot Abrams in Faith or Fear, his Christian-friendly analysis of the American Jewish scene startles us with this statistic:

"Despite the hopes of many in the Jewish community, then, the effect of mixed marriages on children is evident. Only 28 percent are raised as Jews. This suggests that mixed marriages will produce more mixed marriages. A three-generational study of the Jews of Philadelphia found no grandchildren of mixed marriages continued to identify as Jews." (Elliot Abrams, Faith or Fear. New York: The Free Press, p. 111)

Note this amazing statistic: zero, zilch, nada, grandchildren in this study identified themselves as members of the Jewish community! If such is the case in a major city such as Philadelphia, what might we expect in areas with fewer Jews, say Denver or Dallas?

Some Jewish believers may answer, "I believe in Jesus and that is simply enough. God will have to see to it that the Jewish people survive without my help." But is such an approach really a viable option? Let's just say, we are glad Moses, Daniel, Judah Maccabee and the ancient Nazarenes didn't approach Jewish identity quite so casually! They all seemed to understand that sustaining the physical seed of Abraham demanded more than divine decree, but some commitments on our part as well.

So how does Messianic Judaism respond to the demands and privileges of divine human partnership? By forming Messianic synagogues as an imperfect yet meaningful answer to the question of how modern Jewish believers in Jesus can survive as Jews. Messianic Judaism is primarily a congregational movement. We say "primarily" because there are many Jewish believers in churches who deeply care about maintaining their Jewishness. They deserve to be known as Messianic Jews though they may simply have not yet faced the music of the inevitability of their and their children's path to assimilation. Or, they may have no quality Messianic Jewish synagogue nearby to attend.

Some Messianic Jews seek to solve the problem by attending both a church and a traditional synagogue.

This approach has some positive dimensions but suffers from two major flaws: . First, it is very difficult to have two congregational homes. Limits of time, financial resources and emotional energy make this a strategy few could endure long-term. Second, a profoundly confusing message can emerge. On Saturdays, the name of Jesus must be hidden, on Sundays, it is to be shouted and celebrated. The dissonance here can be deafening, especially to little minds and hearts. Children don't do well in such bifurcated situations. They are too much like divorce. And long term, adults don't do well either.

Great confusion and a low grade sense of being "phony" can have a corrosive effect on the soul in the long run. No, we humans do much better in single communities which rhythmically reflect and reinforce our deepest values.

Hence, we return to the concept of the Messianic Jewish synagogue. Though painfully aware of the immaturity and current limitations of this congregational movement, twenty years of ministry have convinced me that the local synagogue is the most effective, creative and courageous dimension of genuine Messianic Judaism. It is the only context in which the sights, sounds, symbols, history and

values of the Jewish people can be experienced and reinforced adequately to perpetuate our unique identity from one generation to the next. Dor l'dor -- "from generation to generation" has always been a rock-solid Jewish concern. Dare we ignore it? Messiah may be back to earth soon and so the issue of the next generation may be academic. But he may be back in two hundred years. Does anyone want to say for sure? Messianic Judaism seeks to do its part in ensuring that the Jewish people will continue to exist. From the perspective of the biblical prophets and apostles this is important not only for us, but for the sake of ultimate destiny of the entire world.

Our definition of Messianic Judaism has one last key dimension:

...while simultaneously upholding Jesus' message of love and redemption for the entire world.

Messianic Judaism at its worst can devolve into an excuse for excessive ethnic pride and elitism. At its best, it is a New Covenant Jewish faith which seeks to protect the Jewish people from disappearing while simultaneously embracing the universal Church and the brotherhood of all mankind.

Jewish thinkers have always viewed Israel's election as a divine means to a holy end. And the Jews are the representative people through whom God would bless the entire world. Was God only interested in blessing father Abraham for his and Sarah's sake only? Certainly not! Scripture says "In you all the families of the earth will be blessed." (Gen. 12:3). God's intention has always been the well being of all the sons and daughters of Adam. Israel, the Jewish people is his chosen means of bestowing the blessing.

Further, the blessing of Israel and the nations was always intended as reciprocal arrangement. The Jews bless the world and the world blesses the Jews. Read Romans chapter 11. This message of mutual blessing rings loud and clear as it does in several passage in Prophetic books of the Bible as well as the Five Books of Moses.

Messianic Judaism seeks to bless the nations and welcomes a blessing as well. How does this find concrete expression?

Messianic Jewish leaders are sensitized to the Jewish roots of Christian faith. And many Christians have become interested in learning about the historic background of their own faith. When competent Messianic Jews teach these things in churches, the people are inspired and encouraged. Many feel the blessing of Abraham upon the congregation as the ancient roots of the faith are explained. Some Church leaders have also recognized a powerful spiritual role Messianic Jews can play as we take a symbolic mediatorial role during acts of reconciliation between antagonistic people groups. Profound theological insight suggests this role as a function of

Israel's status as the representative people among all the nations (peoples) of the world.

Reciprocally, the Church has been a great blessing to the Messianic Jewish world. In fact, it would not be an over statement to say that if it were not for the prayers, financial help and encouragement of Baptist, Pentecostals, Charismatics and other Bible believers, it is unlikely that modern Messianic Judaism would exist at all. These and other Protestant denominations have been God's tool in resurrecting the faith we call Messianic Judaism.

Messianic Judaism by definition must see itself as a Jewish faith living in right relationship with the larger, pan-cultural bodies of people who look to Jesus.

We have attempted to give some clear definition to Messianic Judaism. Our faith is most difficult to sustain in a world which for sixteen centuries, has viewed Judaism and Christianity as mutually exclusive faiths. Many in the church still retain millennia-old suspicions of Jews, including Jews who would embrace Jesus. Many in the larger Jewish community feel deeply threatened by Jews who would dare embrace "that man" -- Jesus -- and then have the audacity to wear prayer shawls and call their assemblies "synagogues." But, for a growing number of Jews and Christians the Messianic Jewish idea makes sense. And more than making sense, Messianic Judaism is increasingly understood to function as the only realistic alternative for serious Jews who name the name of the Risen One, Yeshua, our Messiah and King.