

Unusual Perspective from an Unusual Source

# Re-Contextualization: Restoring the Biblical Message to a Jewish-Israeli Context

by Gavriel Gefen

**T**he biblical message tells us of the brokenness of creation. It shows us of our need to be restored as part of creation in right relationship with our Creator. It invites us to be co-laborers in bringing wholeness, complete healing, proper balance, and the restoration of all things. Scripture teaches us this message through and within the context of the Creator in covenant relationship with the nation of Israel.

The uniqueness of this relationship between Israel and the Almighty is partially found in its being an exemplary relationship through which other nations would see a reflection of themselves and of their own brokenness. More than this, the uniqueness of this relationship with Israel is in that she was being groomed as the nation through which Creator would send the Anointed One. This Messiah (anointed one in Hebrew) came to restore humanity in right relationship with one another and in right relationship with the Creator Himself. In so doing, the Anointed One empowers us as co-laborers in restoring creation.

The Messiah was born a son of Israel and lived among my people as one of us. He so lived out the message of restored creation that we say He was the message made flesh. He gave life to that message in Jewish flesh, as a son of the tribe of Judah. The actualization of creation being restored came to humanity first through the history, language, traditions, land, and very flesh of Israel. Israel was chosen as a nation of messengers, called first to live out the message within our own land and then to take the message to all nations. The biblical message was first consummated in the Jewish Israeli context.

The Anointed One was first received in the Jewish Israeli context, as of course both He Himself and also His first followers were Jewish Israelis. The Anointed One was also first rejected in the Jewish Israeli context by many of those He was sent to, as of course they were also Jewish Israelis. The Jewish Israeli dimension here is so much a part of the story, that it is almost inseparable from it. Even so, only a minority of my people received the Messiah, and very few took His message to the nations. Only a remnant of Jewish Israelis followed Him who came to us as one of us.

*Editor's note:* This article originally appeared in the *Journal of North American Institute for Indigenous Theological Studies*, Vol. 4, 2006. Reprinted with permission.

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The first Jewish followers of Yeshua the Messiah soon began hearing of Gentiles embracing faith in the same Messiah. They heard that these non-Jews were claiming to be Messiah's servants, yet remained uncircumcised and unconverted to Judaism. How could this be? How could Gentiles possibly follow the Messiah who is one of us, without also becoming one of us? What we did not yet understand was that Creator was calling forth servants from the nations to follow His Anointed One as one with us and not as one of us. He was calling us into unity, and not uniformity. He expected us to remain distinct and diverse, but to become of one heart.

Within a few short generations, the vast majority of the followers and messengers of Yeshua the Anointed One were from among the nations. As it was meant to be, these new communities of the faith did not adopt the expressions of Israel's land and history. Yet, a problem arose later when these non-Jewish communities eventually went so far as to forbid the expressions of Israel and severed all relations with the Jewish people. Israel's Creator-given traditions came to be declared forbidden not only for non-Jews but even for Jewish Believers living in their midst. This was done as an attempt to invalidate Israel's heritage as an expression of New Covenant faith. By de-legitimizing Israel's traditions, the nations violated the oneness of heart that Creator intended for there to be between Israel and the nations.

The emissary (Apostle) Paul taught clearly against the need for Gentiles to embrace Israel's traditions. Yet, he never taught Jews to violate their own heritage. Those who sought to impose Jewish traditions on Gentiles were called Judaizers. Early Church leaders inferred from this that teaching Jewish traditions is inherently wrong. Yet, Jews who teach other Jews to uphold their own heritage are not Judaizers. They are honorable in faithfulness to their own heritage and teach others to also be faithful to what is already theirs.

### *Exile*

My people were exiled from our Land by the Romans. Although there always remained a Jewish remnant in the Land of Israel, the Jewish Israeli context of life lost its national dimension and soon became regarded as a relic of the past. We were deemed as only a footnote of history and no-longer relevant. Yet, we never lost hope. There remained many promises recorded in our sacred text (the Bible) of what Creator would do among us in the Land He covenanted to us. This assured us of a return to and restoration of the Land.



As our captors continued in their attempts to steal our heritage from us, they came to believe that they had replaced us. They thought they were the new Israel. They missed that they were called to be heirs together with us, and not instead of us. They took our book as their own, and then turned around and told us that we were no longer allowed to do what the book told us to do. These new teachers of our book in the nations soon came to acknowledge that the promises to us in our Land had not yet been fulfilled. They put this understanding together with their teaching that they had replaced us, and then attempted to bring these promises to fulfillment by force. They orchestrated the Crusades and attempted to steal our inheritance of the Land by conquering and occupying it. They sought to restore the Israeli context, but without the Jewish people.

Most of the history of our exile was among European Christians. Over

time, the theology and practice of both Judaism and Christianity developed each in reaction against the other community. The difference was that we, the Jews, were always a small minority who suffered violence as a result of the Church's anti-Semitic teachings. Aside from the Crusades, there were many other attempts to annihilate us as a people: the Spanish Inquisition, the Holocaust, and untold numbers of pogroms. All of these massacres were carried out falsely in the name of Jesus —of Yeshua the Anointed One who Himself was one of us.

### *Missions to the Jews*

Two hundred years ago, Protestants in England began teaching of an eschatological (End Times) need for the restoration of the Jewish people to the Land of Israel. They believed that the Messiah could not return until the Jewish people were back in their homeland. As this teaching spread, organizations of Protestant missions to the Jews were founded across Europe. Before long, they began establishing local churches specifically for Jewish converts to Christianity. The new converts were still required to leave behind most of their Jewish heritage and separate themselves from their communities. But, now at least they were assembled in quasi-Jewish communities of converted Jews. They had fellowship with others of similar background, yet lived with limited expressions of Jewish life and were severed for the most part from relationship with their families and the larger Jewish community.

It was only near the end of the 1800s that we as Jewish followers of Yeshua began establishing our own indigenous autonomous communities. In the 1880s, Joseph Rabinowitz in Kishinev, Moldova, erected the first synagogue built specifically for Believers in Jesus. Over the course of the next two generations, there were efforts to create a broader cohesive movement of Jewish Believers, but these resulted in little more than isolated individual congregations, with nearly all of them

still under the oversight of Protestant denominations. Even so, there began to be a greater public affirmation of Jewish heritage among those Jews in churches. They began calling themselves by names such as Israelite Sons of the New Covenant, Christian Jews, Christ-Believing Jews, and Hebrew Christians. The Christ-Believing Jews were a group in Hungary that refused baptism because they did not want to change their registration with the State government from Jewish to Christian.

Historic research has shown that more than 200,000 European Jews embraced faith in Yeshua between the first and second world wars. In Hungary alone, there were 90,000. Tragically, most of the 200,000 were killed in the Holocaust. This put an end to what was on the brink of becoming the indigenous autonomous movement that so many had been seeking to establish. Most European missions to the Jews ceased operating. Some organizations no longer existed because everyone including the missionaries had been killed. Others closed down out of shame over the Holocaust.

### ***Nation of Israel Re-born***

Following WWII, the State of Israel was established in 1948. A few leaders from the emerging Hebrew Christian movement in Europe had survived the Holocaust and escaped to Israel. They worked to establish a community of Jewish Israeli followers of Yeshua, but those early years were a long, hard, lonely road. Six million Jews had been exterminated by the Germans, a full one-third of the Jewish people. In the aftermath of this tragedy, belief in the God of Israel became more difficult for many Jews. Many asked the question, "Where was God?" Even just the thought of accepting Jesus was out of the question. He was the one so many Germans claimed to believe in. Many Jews began defining themselves not by what they were but by what they were not, "Whatever we are, we are not Christians. There may or may not be a God, but one thing we know is that Jews do not believe in Jesus."

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### ***Modern Messianic Jewish Movement***

The United States then had the largest Jewish community in the world. A few American Protestant missions to the Jews continued to operate, but with little success. In the 1960s, masses of American youth rose up across the United States in what came to be known as the hippie movement. They led a revolution of counter-culture in defiance of mainstream American society. Equally ripe for this uprising, the Jewish youth of that generation played a prominent role as instigators and organizers. Out of that hippie movement came the Jesus movement in which vast numbers of young people embraced faith in Jesus. Among those who accepted Jesus were also many thousands of Jewish youth. This critical mass of new Jewish Believers became the nucleus of a new indigenous autonomous movement of Jewish followers of Yeshua.

The common designation for Jewish Believers at that time was Hebrew Christians. In this new modern movement, the term Hebrew Christian was soon replaced with the designation Messianic Jew. We have since developed into a comprehensive, worldwide movement of Jewish followers of Yeshua called the Messianic Jewish movement. Messianic Judaism exists not only to allow Jewish followers of Yeshua to remain Jewish and part of the Jewish community, but also to allow other followers of Yeshua to be "other" and to remain part of their communities.

There are now approximately 14 million Jews in the world. There are just-under six million Jews in Israel and just-under six million in the United States. In fact, the number of Jews in Israel only recently surpassed the number of Jews in the U.S. This marks the first time since the destruction of

the first temple and the Babylonian exile that there are more Jews in the Land of Israel than any other place in the world. Most of the remaining two million Jews reside in only half a dozen other countries.

The Messianic Jewish movement is divided mostly between Israel and the U.S. The American movement is, for the most part, attempting to create a Jewish context for New Covenant faith. In Israel, there are two streams. The older and larger group is seeking to establish congregations of New Covenant faith within an Israeli context, but with less emphasis on Jewish tradition. In fact some are even hostile to Jewish tradition. A growing number of these congregations are beginning to call themselves Messianic Israeli congregations, dropping the designation of Jewish. They seek to affirm a nationalist political Israeli identity, but not a Jewish one. There is now also a smaller emerging segment of the Messianic Jewish community in Israel that is becoming established within the wider, traditional Jewish Israeli context.

### ***The American Movement***

Most of the American Jewish youth who accepted Yeshua during the Jesus Movement initially joined churches. Before long, Jewish Believers began seeking fellowship with other Jewish Believers. We gathered in houses, while remaining members of churches. Eventually, many of these fellowship groups grew and came to separate as self-standing congregations of Messianic Jews. As the movement developed, we introduced more and more Jewish traditions into our gatherings. Yet, there were two missing elements. One was relationship with the larger Jewish community and the other was fluent knowledge of our tradition.

We were trying to create our own Jewish context, divorced from rela-

tionship with the larger Jewish community. Also, we were beginning to celebrate some of our tradition, but without any contact with those who actually live it out as a way of life on a daily basis. We were creating an artificial Jewish context.

In ignorance, we began appropriating Jewish symbols and customs and using them however we liked, often making a mockery of the tradition. We dishonored our heritage and deeply offended the traditional community. We were not seeking to be faithful in covenant relationship with our people and our God. Rather, we were using Jewish things for the sake of missionary expediency, underhandedly seeking to convert more Jews out of the traditional community.

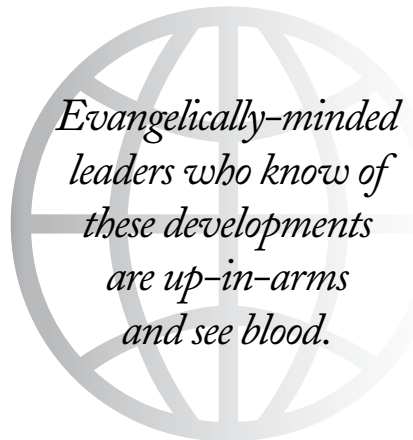
Many Messianic Jewish congregations outside Israel today begin their services on Shabbat (Saturday) by lighting a seven-branched menorah (candelabra) and blowing a shofar (ram's horn). These are two things that Jewish tradition actually forbids on Shabbat. We thought this made a service more Jewish, when it actually just made it more offensive to traditional Jews.

### *Messianic Jewish Theology*

In 1979, the Union of Messianic Jewish Congregations was founded. Although a number of Messianic Jewish organizations existed before this, it was within the UMJC that the Messianic Jewish movement truly began shifting from a movement of individuals to a movement of congregations. Other associations of congregations were later also founded. Within a few years, the leaders of the UMJC began talking about doing Messianic Jewish theology. It soon became popular for congregations and organizations throughout the movement to write their own statements of doctrine and theology. Yet, nearly all of these documents were simply evangelical Protestant statements re-written with Jewish terminology to look and sound Jewish. It was more of an exercise in

semantics or creative writing than actually doing theology.

There is now a group of about fifty leaders, mostly from within the UMJC, who are just beginning to seriously do Messianic Jewish theology. This was initiated by Stuart Dauermann through an organization he founded called Hashivenu. A theological forum is convened every January behind closed doors in Pasadena, California. The presentations are neither recorded nor published. Also, everyone is committed not to quote each other outside that circle of people.



It is a safe-zone for the exchange of controversial theological ideas and discussions of challenging issues. It is always an inspiring time and a forum long-overdue for our community.

### *Conversion*

A number of the Hashivenu leaders are also involved in another forum of leadership dealing with issues of congregational life. Over the last few years, they have been discussing the controversial topic of conversion to Judaism. In our tradition, there are covenantal expressions of life that members of the community share. To fully participate publicly in these expressions, one is expected to have entered the community through a life-long covenantal relationship. These leaders desire to uphold some semblance of credibility for those partaking in Jewish life-cycle ceremonies in their congregations. Thus, they have begun discussing the possibility of establishing an official

process for non-Jewish Believers to covenantally give their lives to the Jewish community in a way that includes upholding the basic guidelines of traditional Jewish conversion.

Evangelically-minded leaders who know of these developments are up-in-arms and see blood. They are irate over the possibility of Christians converting to Judaism. They are making accusations of heresy and apostasy.

Those leaders considering the issue of conversion are facing real-life issues involving families of mixed marriages who want to fully participate. The pressing matter at hand is finding a traditionally acceptable way to welcome non-Jewish spouses to fully engage in Jewish life on an equal level, and to better give their children a clear distinct communal identity among the Jewish people. It is intended to solidify family identity and relationship with the wider Jewish community.

Non-Jewish members of Jewish families would be encouraged to convert. Non-Jews without any Jewish family would initially be turned away, as is the Jewish tradition. One would have to show evidence of serious personal commitment to life-long covenantal relationship with the Jewish people in order to be considered for this process of conversion, which is a process of physical adoption into a physical family.

### *Postmissionary Messianic Judaism*

One of the prominent leaders in Hashivenu is Mark Kinzer. Mark is also the president of the Messianic Jewish Theological Institute which is being developed into the rabbinical seminary of the Union of Messianic Jewish Congregations. This last year, Mark wrote a book called Post-missionary Messianic Judaism. It is a controversial work that many in our movement are taking a strong stand against. Mark Kinzer advocates a form of Messianic Judaism that will no longer serve as the agent of a foreign community into the Jewish community—missionaries of the Church—but

will naturally be part of the Jewish people. Following is an excerpt from the new book:

Postmissionary Messianic Judaism embraces the Jewish people and its religious tradition, and discovers God and Messiah in the midst of Israel. Messianic Jews with this orientation discern the hidden sanctifying reality of Yeshua already residing at the center of Jewish life and religious tradition. They understand their inner mission as the call to be a visible sign of this hidden Messianic presence. Postmissionary Messianic Judaism does bear witness, but not to a reality external to Jewish life. It testifies to a reality already internal to Jewish life, existing independent of its witness, but manifested and confirmed through its witness. It believes that the mysterious Messianic reality at the heart of Israel's life will one day be acknowledged by the community as a whole, and that this acknowledgement—set within the context of a national movement of revived fidelity to the ancestral covenant—will prepare the way for the final redemption. Because it discovers God and Yeshua within the Jewish people and its tradition, postmissionary Messianic Judaism feels at home in the Jewish world.<sup>1</sup>

As messengers of Yeshua living within our heritage, we do not need to win more of our people to Yeshua than outside missionaries in order to validate living in our heritage. It is already valid to begin with. The greater issue should be one of faithfulness in relationship with our people rather than missionary effectiveness. It is more important to be true living witnesses of the message ourselves than it is only to convince others to have correct belief. If, in giving the message, we teach others to violate their heritage, we have not actually given them the message.

### *Messianic Gentiles*

By the late 1980s, Messianic Judaism began growing in popularity within the Church, in particular among Evangelical, Charismatic, free-churches. Up until that point, most growth in our movement had come from Jewish Christians joining the

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movement out of Evangelical churches and from new Jewish Believers entering the movement directly. Throughout the 1990s, most growth came from non-Jewish Christians entering our movement. With this came a new problematic dimension.

Most members of the Messianic Jewish movement today are non-Jews. One real problem is that many of them left the last church they were members of on bad terms. They have broken relationships there that have still not been restored. They now somehow feel that participation in the Messianic movement validates them and excuses how they left the last place. They think they have found the “true” church in the Messianic movement and that the place they left is full of “pagan” Christians. To them, Israel's traditions are now “God's” expressions and the only “biblical” ones.

As a side-note, with this influx of non-Jews into the movement, more and more of them call it the Messianic movement, leaving out the designation Jewish.

As leaders in indigenous ministry, we would do well to uphold a standard of insisting that those participating in our communities do so on the basis of having left the last community they were part of on good terms. In cases where people have not done so, we should encourage them to at least attempt to restore the broken relationships and offer to accompany them when they do so. In cases where they may have behaved poorly and divisively on their way out, we should counsel them to return and ask forgiveness. Again, this is something we should offer to accompany them on.

It is true that there are leaders out there who are so opposed to even the very concept of indigenous ministry that they will turn down the offer of reconciliation. Yet, it is important for

us to expect the members of our communities to at least seek restoration and to help guard their hearts from any unforgiveness. We cannot build healthy communities that consist of bitter, broken, and unforgiving people.

The latest trend in the Messianic Jewish movement is for non-Jewish members to leave our congregations and set up what some of them call Hebraic communities. These are congregations of non-Jews teaching and practicing their own versions of Jewish tradition. They call it “biblical” tradition, implying that the traditions of other people are inherently unbiblical and ungodly. They refer to their interpretations as true Torah, and teach what some of them call all Torah for all people—recently dubbed the one law teaching.

### *Continuum of Covenantally Commanded Culture*

Torah was given to a specific people in a specific land. Most of the commandments of Torah are culture-specific. They are cultural, yet simultaneously commanded of Israel in a national covenant relationship. The expressions of Torah are covenantally commanded culture. Jewish traditions that developed later, as a result of this covenantal relationship, could be called covenantally spawned culture, expressive of a particular covenantal history with God.

The culture of each people in the world includes covenantal expressions of shared life with their people and their land. When you separate those traditions from the community they come from—when you separate them from the people and land that they represent—they lose their meaning. When someone appropriates a tradition belonging to another people from another place and uses it in their own way, separate from that people



and their land, it no longer has the same meaning.

In other words, it is uniquely pleasing to God when any people in the world uphold those expressions of life from their own tradition which acknowledge the Creator as having brought them to their land, and that honor His hand in their history. Faithfully maintaining Creator-given expressions that are history-specific and land-specific is to uphold a covenantal dimension of relationship existing uniquely between God and that people.

The Christian Bible is divided into what are called the Old and New Testaments. This gives the impression that the Old Testament is an old covenant that has now been replaced by a new covenant, the New Testament. But, this is not the case. The Old Testament is a collection of books that include many covenants. Most of these covenants were made by the Lord with Israel. Some of them are between the Lord and other peoples in the Middle East. Most of these covenants are related to national purpose and calling, and have little or no bearing on issues of “personal salvation.”

The many covenants made with Israel are progressive, and the New Covenant adds to and builds upon them. Each new covenant is made in addition to the previous covenants. It does not replace what came before, but is added to it.

There is in fact a New Covenant, and it is indeed a better covenant. Yet, it does not replace the numerous previous national covenants that were made with Israel. It adds to and builds upon them. The New Covenant does not cancel God’s covenantal promises to our people, nor our national callings or distinct expressions. The New Testament criticizes Israel’s lack of faithfulness to the covenants, and then welcomes her into an additional covenant of relationship with the Messiah and all other nations. It is a covenant that connects us in relationship to one another as different

peoples while enabling us to remain faithful to our distinct callings.

As a Messianic Jew, I see the coming of Yeshua as part of a continuum of our Jewish heritage. His arrival did not cancel who we are. He brings fullness and completes us. In a similar way, the coming of Yeshua to each people must be recognized as part of a continuum of who they already are. His arrival must bring wholeness to their heritage, not replace it. Yeshua completes a relational history already existing with that people and the Creator.



### *Emissaries to the Nations*

As a young teenage boy, I became convinced that there was a calling on my life to go to many nations with the message of Yeshua. Shortly after arriving in Israel as a new immigrant, I realized that missions from Israel to the nations had not yet been re-born. I soon recognized the calling to be not only one of going to the nations myself, but of raising-up a whole movement of Israeli emissaries.

In 1999, that vision was born with the establishment of Keren HaShlichut, an Israeli association of Messianic Jewish emissaries. Since then, we have consistently sent Israeli emissaries with the message of Yeshua to more than twenty nations each year.

On my own journeys, I have focused mostly on going to indigenous peoples. My experiences of ministering to 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 naturally within the traditional community of my people, the more I have learned about ministry to indigenous peoples. When I am with indigenous people, I am inspired to be more faithful to the heritage of my own community. When I am at home among the religious Jewish community, I am inspired as to how I may more effectively reach other peoples, through affirming who they already are. These parallel walks in my life are synergistic, each one propelling the other forward.

This is the beauty of indigenous ministry. We must first embrace who we and our people are, and live within it, before we are able to competently release others to do the same. If we have no respect for our own heritage, we will not be able to fully respect another. So, faithfulness to our own tradition is not only for the sake of our own people, but for the sake of the nations.

### *New Jewish Israeli Context*

At the beginning of this paper, I mentioned two of the unique dimensions of Israel’s covenantal relationship with the Creator. I then said that the Jewish Israeli context of the biblical message is so much a part of the story, that it is almost inseparable from it. There is, though, a third aspect that touches on the inseparable dimension. This is the fact that when the biblical message is delivered to each new people, the original context of Jewish Israel invariably enters the telling of the story. The Bible is, of course, the document of historic record of that original context. This sacred book served to preserve us as a people throughout our exile. It was not only because we never lost hope in its message, but also because even our sworn enemies never lost hope in its message. Both in hope and hate, they never let us forget who we were. Today, the biblical message as recorded within its original context is the most known message to humankind.

We then must ask the question, “Can the original Jewish Israeli context be restored?” No, it cannot. Far too much has happened since then. To restore the biblical message today to a Jewish Israeli context is to restore it to a new and different Jewish Israeli context. It is part of a continuum of the heritage of that original context, but with an understanding that history has changed our people and the world around us irreversibly. The human condition is the same, but our people’s collective memory is not. We have suffered far too much. Our traditions have also changed immensely, aside from the fact that we no longer have the Temple. To read ancient manuscripts detailing our tradition is to be amazed at the degree to which it has been preserved. Yet, it is also the case that our tradition has been heavily influenced by 1900 years of exile.

### *Personal Journey*

The most effective way for me to conclude the last third of this paper, is to give you part of my own story of rediscovery.

I am a Messianic Jewish Israeli. This means that I am Jewish by birth and Messianic by re-birth in the Messiah. I am Israeli but was born in the United States.

As a young boy, my family was part of the American hippie movement. We lived on one of the more radical hippie communes in the mountains of northern California. In 1973, many members of our commune suddenly began coming to faith in Yeshua as the Messiah. Well, back then we knew him as Jesus Christ. In quick succession, one person after the other professed faith in Jesus and left the commune to live in Palo Alto and join churches. This included my parents, aunt and uncle, and most of the Jewish residents of the commune. It was a modern-day revival of wandering Jews converting to Christianity.

My grandparents were not very happy about our newfound faith, to say the least. Even so, Grampa tried very hard to be supportive and finally told Dad,

**E**ven so, Grampa tried very hard to be supportive and finally told Dad, “If Jesus got you off drugs, then I’m for Jesus.”

“If Jesus got you off drugs, then I’m for Jesus.” Another Jewish friend of ours who came to faith at the same time was told by his parents, “We’d rather have you back on drugs.” As with many of our friends, this was the beginning of our journey as Jewish followers of Yeshua stuck between Christianity and our Jewish families and friends.

Over the next ten years, our family celebrated Jewish and Christian holidays sporadically, attempting to navigate our way through a maze of community and family relationships. One year we would celebrate Christmas, and the next year Hanukka. One year both, and one year neither. One year Christmas would be accompanied by a Christmas tree, and the next year by a Nativity scene. The same was the case in our alternate celebrations of Easter and Pesach. Each year, we somehow felt that we had finally arrived and had found the proper “balance”. We were still misguided in attempting to balance our Jewish identity against something else.

Some of this came to an end for us in 1983 when we immigrated back to Israel as a family. As we became Jewish Israelis living back in the Land among our own people, some things were suddenly no longer issues. The rest of it has taken many more years.

An early stage in this journey included five months in the Arava desert at Kibbutz Ir Ovot. During that time, our family became completely observant of Shabbat (Sabbath), Kashrut (dietary guidelines), and many other Jewish traditions for the first time in our lives. The traditional experiences that we lived through during this period were very fulfilling. On the other hand, the relational things that we lived through with the leader and his family were cult-like and very troubling.

In 1986, as a student at the Hebrew University in Jerusalem, I began celebrating Erev Shabbat (Sabbath Eve) meals in the homes of different Orthodox families each Friday night. This was arranged by one of the Orthodox Jewish outreach organizations working on campus. Through that same outreach, I also began to study in the afternoons in the Old City at Aish HaTorah Yeshiva, which is primarily for ba’alei tshuvah (those who have returned to religious Jewish life). This led to studies at Ohr Someach Yeshiva, a more serious place of rabbinic study.

During this time, I went one night with my roommate Evan to hear a lecture by Meir Kahane, a member of the Knesset, founder of the radical Kach party, and founder of The Jewish Defense League in the United States. Rav Kahane gave a very moving presentation that night of his extreme and racist views, which included a proposal that Israel become a Torah-based state. He spoke of a theocracy where Jewish tradition would be the law of the state.

At the end of his lecture, he received questions from the audience. A Christian tourist stood up and asked what he would do in his Torah-based state with Messianic Jews. He responded that he didn’t really care who Jews believed the Messiah is, as long as they lived as Jews. I laughed to myself and said, “Yeah, right!”

Afterwards, I accompanied Evan to the front to speak to Kahane personally. When he heard we were students at Hebrew U., he immediately asked for our help. He said that, even though he was a Knesset member, the Hebrew University had recently banned him and his party from campus. He was now looking for students who would start a new

student party on campus to promote his causes. Evan quickly agreed to help him. I hesitated and said that I didn't support some of his views but that I might be willing to participate on a cause-by-cause basis.

In the following months, I became embroiled in militant nationalist politics. It was a very misguided time in my life that ended with the need for much soul-searching. Yet, one thing of value comes back to me from that time. During my five months of association with Meir Kahane it became thoroughly evident to me that he was honestly far more concerned with whether or not I lived as an observant Jew than he was with my belief that Yeshua is our Messiah. For me, it put a crack in the myth that the broader Jewish community will always reject us as Messianic Jews no matter what we do, simply because of Yeshua.

Following this, I walked away from much of my traditional Jewish observance. This was part of the soul-searching I went through upon leaving behind militant politics. During this time, I met my wife Tzofia. The following year we were married and began the slow process together of taking up Jewish tradition as a couple.

### *Raising Jewish Children*

The first major crossroads in this process came when our son David was born in 1990. Within a day of his birth, we began talking about the heritage that we would give our children. We were in complete agreement that the only tradition in our home would be Jewish tradition. This was not to take a stand against the tradition of any other people or community, but simply to affirm what was our own and that of our children.

We decided that this would also include raising our children completely within Jewish community, both Messianic and non-Messianic Jewish community. This meant that we would invest our lives in the lives of our Jewish friends and neighbors.

This decision on our part was a social and cultural one. Understand that Jerusalem is an international city. There is an overwhelming Jewish majority, yet there are also many other religious and ethnic communities including a large expatriate Evangelical Christian community. We had already clearly seen many Messianic Jewish youth who had grown up in Israel and yet were socially and culturally foreigners in the very land of their birth. Therefore, over the years we have chosen to socially and culturally invest the life



of our family in the lives of other families living within a completely Jewish Israeli framework.

### *Secular and Religious*

Allow me to divert here and interject that there is not just one Jewish community in Jerusalem, but many very different Jewish communities. These sometimes divide along the lines of the national origins of immigrant Jewish communities, along linguistic backgrounds, economic status, levels of education, and various levels of rabbinic observance. Among all of the various ways that Jewish communities in Israel can be defined, the two most common designations today are secular and religious (meaning Orthodox).

Twenty years ago, a good percentage of Israelis could have been called traditional—meaning not-exactly secular nor Orthodox but somewhere in-between. They were people who lived their lives throughout the week

without much religious tradition on a daily basis, but who were still respectful of tradition and regularly upheld much of it. Today this is not so much the case. Most Israelis can now be defined as being either secular or religious. And, there continues to be a widening of the gulf between these two communities, with a growing suspicion and mistrust of each other.

As the gulf between secular and religious continues widening, the Messianic Jewish community in Israel has shifted for the most part with the culturally secular divide. As a result, we now have the oxymoron secular Believer.

Some of you may be hearing reports that excite you of hundreds of Israelis coming to faith in Yeshua within the last year or two. Personally, I am less excited about the hundreds of Israelis professing faith in Yeshua than I am concerned for the hundreds of thousands of Israelis who are turning their backs on the faith of our Fathers. The observant Jewish community in Israel is still growing faster than the secular Jewish community. Yet, it is saddening to see those who turn away from our heritage to seek meaning and fulfillment in other things.

### *Shabbat*

A milestone for Tzofia and me in our spiritual journey was embracing Shabbat (the Sabbath). We had always begun Shabbat by lighting candles at sunset and beginning our meal with Kiddush and Hamotzi (Jewish tradition of blessing the Lord over a cup of wine and bread). What would then happen after dinner was not very consistent. Occasionally, we would observe Shabbat all the way through to the following evening, but most of the time we didn't. We were still so willing to make exceptions to keeping Shabbat that it was yet unable to become part of who we were.

Only nine years ago, we finally crossed the line of committing to keep Shabbat in a credible way. During those first few months, making this possible included needing to unplug our phone.



It was the only way to break the cycle of constant interruptions serving to draw us away from that day. We now keep the phone plugged-in, but our friends and family have come to understand not to call us on that day unless it is urgent.

The process of lifestyle change, of internalizing Shabbat observance as an integral part of who we are, took a few months. Within a year, it was so much a part of us that we simply could not imagine ever going back. Even just the thought itself became foreign.

Over the years, many comments have been made to us about the observance of things like Shabbat bringing us under “the curse of the law”. Shabbat is not a curse or even a burden, it is a blessing. It is a precious gift that we cherish and look forward to each week. As a family, it is our favorite day of the week that we all anticipate and long for. We never think of it as a day on which there are so many things we are forbidden to do. For us it is a day on which there are so many things we are freed from having to do. It is a day of liberation, not of bondage. On the very rare occasion that we allow ourselves to be prevented from keeping it, we do not feel the weight of condemnation. We feel rather a sense of loss and sorrow over a gift that slipped through our hands.

I recall a Messianic Jewish friend who was confronted by a Christian with those same condemning words that he was bringing himself under a curse for keeping Shabbat. He responded to the accusation by asking if he thought that God would forgive him even if he broke Shabbat. The Christian replied, “Of course.” My friend answered, “I somehow think that I will also be forgiven even if I should happen to keep Shabbat.”

### *Prayer*

Six years ago, the dynamic of my participation in prayer with the traditional Jewish community was transformed. For years, I had regularly visited synagogues throughout Jerusalem,

**W***ithin a year, it was so much a part of us that we simply could not imagine ever going back. Even just the thought itself became foreign.*

especially on holidays. I floated around from place to place visiting a different one each time. When attending a prayer service, I would follow along with some of the prayers, but not consistently. I was very liberal in my habit of interjecting my own Messianic prayers under by breath.

One Yom Kippur (Day of Atonement), I was praying in the Great Synagogue. In the midst of what is a long day of fasting and prayers of repentance, I found myself drifting into one of my own spontaneous Messianic prayers. I caught myself praying under my breath, “O God, forgive them. Lord open their eyes to see Yeshua. Lift the veil of blindness that they might see their redemption.” It suddenly struck me as arrogant. Who did I think I was to separate and exalt myself above the assembled and pray down at them? Did they need Yeshua? Yes. Did I hope that they would come to know Him? Yes. Was there something wrong with the content of what I was praying for the others? No. On the other hand, was there something wrong with the content of what the assembled were praying? No. So, why not pray repentance together with my people? Why the need for distance? Why not cry as well, “God forgive us! We have sinned”?

My perspective on Messianic Jewish prayer changed that day. When I go to the Orthodox synagogue in my neighborhood today, I no longer go to pray for my people, but to pray with my people. And yes, I still hope that each one will come to know Yeshua our Messiah.

Five years ago, shortly after our son David turned ten, I began thinking about the process of him becoming a Bar Mitzvah. It was clear to me that David could not learn the traditions within the Messianic Jewish community in Israel, or anywhere else in

our movement. The few groups of Messianic Jews pursuing traditional Jewish life were all far from able to show him the tradition in a living way. The observances were sporadic, without fluency, and in a somewhat artificial way. I understood that David was growing up too fast for our movement to teach him. I would have to take him to a traditional synagogue for him to learn the tradition in a natural environment.

I began taking David to visit Orthodox synagogues at least once a week, every week. We moved around a bit for the first year, until we fell in love with a particular congregation. We have been there ever since and are active, paying members of the community to this day. Some members know we are Messianic and some don't. Those who know us personally all do, and sometimes still view us with suspicion. But, for the most part they have come to understand through our years of active participation that when we come to pray we are there to pray with them and not for them.

### *Kashrut*

Around the time that David and I began going weekly to a synagogue, Tzofia began going to the park in front of our house every day. As our kids would play with the neighbor kids, she would talk with the other mothers, some of whom were modern Orthodox. After a few months of this, Tzofia and these modern Orthodox mothers began a routine of going home to each others houses for lunch. The only problem was that when they would come over to our house, they couldn't eat from our dishes.

For all of our marriage, we had had an almost-kosher kitchen. We had come to love that Messianic Jewish line about having a “biblically” kosher

kitchen. All of the ingredients in our cupboards and refrigerator were actually kosher, an easy feat in Israel. We also never directly mixed meat and dairy in the same meal. But, we didn't actually have completely separate sets of dishes. So, we couldn't rightly say that we had a kosher kitchen, because we didn't.

As Tzofia began bringing her new-found friends home, she had to feed them out of packages and on paper plates. If the neighbor kids stayed with us for the remainder of the afternoon, they couldn't join us for dinner. While we ate, they either kept playing in one of the bedrooms or they went home.

One day Tzofia announced that she could no longer continue. She said that she absolutely had to have an open table and be able to freely host people for meals in our home. We talked about it for a few days until we were in full agreement to make the plunge. We decided to completely kasher (make kosher) the house, replacing, purifying, and duplicating anything we had to. We made a one-year commitment to go all the way and then reassess it at the end of that year.

The next day Tzofia went to her Orthodox friends in the park and asked if they would be willing to help her kasher our kitchen. They were ecstatic. Would they be willing? They couldn't wait to begin.

This experience solidified those relationships and opened up a whole new set of others. It made us a living part of the community in a way that we had never been before. Within a couple of months, we knew that we would never go back to the way it was. As with Shabbat, it had now become part of who we are.

When we kasher-ed our kitchen, many Messianic Jewish friends made comments to us against it. They said, "It won't make any difference. Religious Jews won't eat with you any way, because you're Messianic. Don't you understand? They reject you because of Yeshua. He is a stone

of stumbling, and there is nothing you can do about it." I am happy to say that we shattered the myth. No, it is all too often not Yeshua that our people reject, but us. It is our self-righteous, foreign, non-Jewish attitudes and mannerisms that separate us from our people.

### *Acceptance*

Some friends have accused us of compromising our Messianic faith and seeking the approval of man in order to gain acceptance by the traditional community. No, it is not acceptance



of me that I seek. If anything, I seek rather to extend a hand of acceptance to the traditional people of my community, expressing my appreciation for their faithfulness to our God-given heritage. It is a welcome I wish to one-day give observant Jews into the Messianic community, not a welcome I seek for myself. More than this, I seek to be faithful in covenant relationship both with my people and with our God.

A few years ago, I attended a lecture at a prominent rabbinic institution in Jerusalem. The topic was on boundary issues and on identifying those individual issues that throughout history have singularly put a Jew outside the Jewish community. One of these was intermarriage, which was covered in-depth in the lecture. Another boundary issue was Messianic Judaism and belief in Yeshua. The lecturer made a bold prediction that within twenty years, believing in Yeshua as the

Messiah would no longer be a boundary issue that put someone outside the traditional community. The issue then would be whether or not the person sincerely lived within the community and the tradition or not. This comment received a hardy round of applause from the audience. It also served as a reminder to me that it is all too often we in the Messianic Jewish movement who put up our defenses and preemptively reject our people assuming that they will inevitably reject us. In living our lives outside of covenant relationship with our people, we reject them before they reject us.

My journey thus far inspires me to continue extending acceptance to the traditional community of my people, and I long for the day when there will be a comprehensive Messianic Jewish community ready to do the same. **IJFM**

### *Endnotes*

Mark Kinzer, *Post-missionary Messianic Judaism*, (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2005), 14.