

Advanced Discipleship Course: Session 6

March 10, 2020 Part 1

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Kehillat Eytz Chaim/Tree of Life Congregation invited a number of local Messianic leaders from the Toronto area to join a public panel discussion on issues related to Messianic Judaism and Rabbinic tradition. In response, about 18 participants gathered at the Toronto Messianic Centre in late November 2011. A lively exchange ensued on many points including *kashrut*, liturgical practice and concerns framed by questions such as this one: “How much tradition can a Messianic congregation keep before it loses sight of freedom in Yeshua?” Many Messianic Jews who find that they are caught between Christian fears that they are “living under the Law” and the disdain of relatives that they are “not Jewish enough.”

Our current context for the emerging relationship between Rabbinic tradition and Messianic Judaism relates directly to these essential issues of identity and how we address them based on these principles:

- a) Messianic congregations in North America are expected to have a distinctively Jewish character and also bring meaningful depth to the Jewish life of their members.
- b) Messianic Jewish believers—especially those raised in non-believing families—often need and expect to have an authenticity in their lives as followers of Yeshua and as Jews, one that seriously reflects their life-long commitment to Israel, Jewish causes and concern for the well-being of the larger Jewish community as well as their witness of Yeshua as Messiah.

The historical context of Rabbinic tradition and its relationship with Messianic faith exists within the paradoxical nature of that discussion in its Christian context.

A considerable challenge for many within the Messianic movement is not to overcome the limitations which the Jewish community has placed on us, but responding to the censure of Christian and Messianic Jewish colleagues and collegial organizations that do not understand why we would choose to bridge these two communities that, as Mark Kinzer says, “have been locked in conflict and defined themselves over against one another” (Voices, 33).

The historic origins of Rabbinic Tradition

- Rabbinic tradition identifies its roots in the events recorded in Scripture by Ezra and Nehemiah during the return of Israel to Jerusalem after the Babylonian exile which led to a new focus on Torah-based community religious practices with the rebuilding of the Temple.
- At that time and in that setting, the Scriptures indicate a widespread acceptance of the need for a stricter, unified community adherence with public declarations and pledges made such as this one: “Now therefore, let us make a covenant with our God...and let it be done according to the law...” (Ezra 10:3). [Ed. Note: This and all other Scripture references are taken from the NKJV.]
- By the early first century CE Israel’s religious communities had calcified into polarized factions, each one claiming to represent the ultimate spiritual authority of the nation including Essenes, Zealots, P’rushim (Pharisees) who emerged within the last two centuries before Yeshua and the Ts’dukim (Sadducees, who oversaw the Temple worship).

- *P'rushim* with their focus on Torah, was only one of a range of opinions. After the destruction of the Temple, the Zealots, who were held responsible for the Jerusalem disaster and the Sadducees, who no longer had the Temple to sustain their position in the community, were marginalized and the *P'rushim* emerged as the *de facto* leaders of the surviving communities.
- Their emphasis on the study and practice of Torah stood them in good stead to take up the task of reforming Judaism in the post-Temple era, a project which took about a century and half to codify into what is called the Mishnah (c. 200 CE), the first written compendium of Oral Law, followed by the Gemara (c. 500 CE), which is additional commentary (both of which usually appear on a single page of the Talmud surrounding a few verses of Scripture to which they make direct or indirect reference).
- During this period of re-visioning a Torah-based Judaism with no Temple, there was still continuous contact between those in mainstream synagogues and Messianic Jews, who were seen as a rival or alternative sect within Judaism. As Michael Brown points out: "Messianic Judaism is older than Rabbinic Judaism in terms of *some* [his emphasis] of the latter's more important developments." Brown, *Answering Jewish Objections*, Vol. 1, p. 213, n. 4.

Extinction of the Messianic communities, which slowly took place over the next two centuries, did not come because of their rejection by the larger Jewish community, but rather as a result of being ostracized and finally declared heretical by the state-sanctioned Gentile Christianity of the Church Fathers.

How do we approach a discussion on Rabbinic Tradition?

If this paper was promoting the superior nature of Messianic teaching to Rabbinic tradition, we would proceed to a series of confrontations on topics such as:

- the human origins of the "Oral Law,"
- the unbiblical distortions which have been applied to dietary laws,
- the strict *halachic* requirements and compare these to the principles of freedom in Messiah and the believer's rejection of any restraints that are not based on Biblical teaching or practice.

While we may be confronting rabbinic and anti-missionary attitudes that reflect the contempt of Yeshua as recorded in the Talmud and the *Toldot Yeshu*, and while we may find the Talmudic literature largely impenetrable to the untrained eye and its emphasis on minutiae exasperating we must note:

- Rabbinic tradition has become the repository of Israel's ongoing spiritual discussion with Torah. It has also been the framework in which the Jewish community has conveyed to succeeding generations its knowledge of God and the essential practices of adhering to Israel's faith.
- This material is not unimportant within a Messianic framework where we are using such visible Rabbinic identifiers such as *kippot* and prayer shawls, reading synagogue prayers in our liturgy and trying to affirm the continuity of our faith with its Jewish roots.
- The Rabbinical traditional roots are, as Dr. Michael Schiffman points out, too closely intertwined in Jewish cultural life to be extricated:

“We are not under law, and consequently compelled to observe its precepts, but are over law and under grace, and have the freedom in Messiah to celebrate his faithfulness through the rich heritage God has given. It is important for Messianic Jews to point out to Jewish people that we may indeed be practicing the same customs and celebrating the same holidays, but for different reasons.” (Schiffman, *Return From Exile*, 90).

Nevertheless, there is a significant chasm between classic conservative Christian theology and traditional Jewish thought, even when we are using the same words and quoting the same Scriptures.

Rabbinic Judaism has defined the priorities and perspectives of Judaism for the past two millennia. These views have both a Biblical and an extra-Biblical basis—particularly addressing aspects of community life that required further explication or “fencing of the law”—expanding Biblical prohibitions to make them more comprehensive as circumstances changed and the Jewish community became more entrenched in the *Diaspora*.

Additional teachings were based on the Rabbis’ claims of an authoritative Oral Tradition going back to Moses which referred to those areas not specifically addressed by Biblical texts. The two contexts remain closely linked and often equated within Rabbinic thought; the Biblical component does not always take priority. Here are a few areas where we have differences with Rabbinic thought.

- 1) The Jewish conception of humanity: Judaism promotes a profoundly optimistic and idealistic humanism based on human potential: “Be ye holy...” (Lev. 19:2). In contrast, a Messianic perspective would stress human depravity and the need of a savior. Martin Buber makes much of this difference (*Two Types of Faith*) suggesting that Judaism believes in a path from earth to heaven; a moral way defined by Torah which leads to God. Messianic believers view all such efforts as ultimately futile which is why God has provided hope through the incarnational presence of Messiah: “For God so loved the world...” (John 3:16).
- 2) The Jewish conception of salvation: Judaism posits national redemption and redemption from sin, understood as forgiveness by atonement. The Jewish holy days and seasons of life (particularly death) are depicted as the means of Israel receiving atonement, most specifically through repentance, which is sufficient to cover our sins and the cornerstone of Jewish piety. In Judaism, humanity is responsible for taking the first step toward reconciliation with God. The bedrock of Messianic faith is the atoning sacrifice of Messiah on the cursed tree; it is the ultimate and final sacrifice for humanity’s salvation from sin. The LORD God of Israel initiated this act, which was prefigured in other sacrifices beginning with the *Akkeda*, or so-called “Sacrifice of Isaac,” including the Levitical sacrifices and acts of worship given as covenant promises through His Word (Juster, *the Irrevocable Call*).
- 3) The Jewish conception of sin: The covenantal responsibility of the Jewish person to obedience to the Torah is rooted in the command: “I have set before you life and death...therefore choose life...” (Deut. 30:19). The Messianic believer focuses on Messiah as the answer to “original sin,” based on the Psalmist’s challenge that we are “conceived in sin.” A doctrine of predestination is foreign to

Jewish thought. The Rabbis teach that the soul given to each person at birth is pure and holy. This perspective also emphasizes an absolute freedom of will in which, as the philosopher Hermann Cohen says, “Man’s task is to choose the good.”

- 4) The Torah: The rabbis have no conception of Torah and Law as being synonyms; the term refers to the full nature of Jewish faith in practice and in thought. As one Jewish commentator notes: Judaism insists on orthopraxy as Christianity insists on orthodoxy, i.e., the rabbis are more concerned with “right actions,” particularly moral actions rather than “right doctrine.” **It is Torah which is the true guide for Israel with the purpose of elevating humanity through purity and sanctity of deeds.** Indeed, the ultimate act of Judaism is not obedience out of conformity to Torah, but the willing “circumcised” heart of a worshipper to choose righteousness, wisdom and lovingkindness by studying Torah. This priority remains evident in the most “Rabbinic” of *B’rit Chadasha* writers, Yeshua’s brother, Ya’akov, who says: “...be doers of the word, and not hearers only” (James 1:22).

Christian understanding of the significance of Torah as Scripture has been problematic and its contents are often misunderstood as simply those ancient laws which are no longer in effect since they have been “fulfilled” by Messiah.

- 5) The Messiah: Rabbinic thought has largely retreated from engaging the Messianic vision of Torah and the prophets.” Four main points comprise Rabbinic thought on the topic, though these are rarely expounded publicly: 1) Messiah is the Son of David who will restore the kingdom of Israel and extend it globally; 2) He will defeat and destroy the enemies of God in a final great battle; 3) Messiah’s kingdom of true Shalom will assert the spiritual supremacy of Torah and extend over the nations; 4) the Messianic age will end suffering, bring universal happiness and health; the dead will rise and all death disappear, although the Messianic kingdom will be of this world and precede the end of human history. The Rabbis rarely engage the contrasting images of Messiah both as One suffering for his people and as a triumphal coming King. Ultimately, this topic is where our Messianic discourse is most confrontational because of Judaism’s firm rejection that Messiah may be in any way “divine.” (Jocz, *Jewish People and Jesus Christ*, pp 264-284)

As we examine these views and note how profoundly our views differ—and here we have only scratched the surface—we can better appreciate that Yeshua not only confronted the differences between his own teaching and the Rabbis, he actively engaged in discussions about such wide-ranging topics as:

- the nature of Messiah (Matt. 22:41-46);
- the priorities of Torah (Matt. 22: 34-40)
- the hope of salvation (Luke 10:25-37),
- *kashrut* (Mark 7:1-23),
- Shabbat (Luke 6: 1-11),
- prayer (Matt. 6: 9-13),
- divorce (Mark 10:1-10),

He further privately gave his disciples further extensive elucidation on topics like managing private disputes (Matt. 18: 15-20) and observing the Passover.

Based on his example, we should not simply be able to appropriate the language and authority of the Rabbis, but be able to elucidate the differences effectively as we prepare ourselves, our congregations and Messianic Jewish disciples to be effective witnesses of our faith. **This engagement was not extraneous to the vision and ministry of Yeshua, it was part of it.**

The ministry of Paul reflects a similar critique of authorities that originally empowered him to attack Messianic believers. Unfortunately, his engagement with Torah-based Judaism in the context of the first century has largely formed the apologetic for the Gentile Christians to reject any adherence to Jewish authorities and traditions, including those that Yeshua taught his followers to respect.

A more thorough examination of Paul's writings, particularly the *Epistle to the Galatians*, a Gentile congregation experiencing undue influence from those Jewish teachers who promoted orthopraxy (if not conversion) from Gentile followers of Messiah, makes it clear that the language and instruction of this epistle was not meant to be a foundational, comprehensive text for all believers in New Covenant congregations.

There is a distinct continuity between the messages of Yeshua and Paul concerning the Torah and the Rabbinical authorities of their day:

- They pursued passionate battles against false legalism masking as authoritative Torah;
- They shared a mutual emphasis seeking the leadership of the Ruach HaKodesh;
- They emphasized the heart faith of Israel rather than ritual: a circumcised heart, not simply to be circumcised;
- The refusal to be intimidated by rabbinical or secular authorities who demand that they conform to tradition.

The Current Messianic Theological Landscape

Within the past decades, we have been watching the rise of an energized and visionary Messianic Judaism with a growing, distinctive voice within Christianity and raising difficult questions for the larger, mainstream Jewish community. Richard Harvey's introductory quote to his chapter on "Torah in Theory" captures the spirit of that budding excitement:

"Let us now attempt to do what no other generation has ever done. Let us be the first generation of Jewish believers since the early days of our history to begin...to follow the covenant which the Holy One made with Moshe Rabbenu." Ariel and Devorah Berkowitz, *Torah Rediscovered...* (quote, Mapping, 140)

Harvey has identified four distinct streams of theological scholarship that are trying to direct the Messianic movement and its relationship with Rabbinic tradition.

- The first group is regarded as those who are "Torah Negative," refusing to allow any accommodation to a Mosaic covenant that is seen as obsolete and fulfilled in Yeshua. This view represents a familiar chord of critique on Messianic Judaism—one that hearkens back to the original conflicts between Hebrew Christians and the first Messianic visionaries at the beginning

of the 20th century, insisting that any observance of Mosaic Law represents a denial of salvation by faith alone and rebuilding “the middle wall of partition” [Mapping, 182].

- A second view promotes a Messianic Judaism that affirms the cultural and social practices of Jewish tradition rather than the religious directives. This is a Messianism that respects the Jewish holy days, dietary laws and covenant practices such as circumcision which act as identifiers for the Jewish people but dismisses rabbinical spiritual authority. As followers of Yeshua, we follow the Torah in obedience to the Spirit while trusting fully in Messiah for salvation.

We join the vast majority of Jewish people today in making accommodations around these issues. In that regard, we don't have to reinvent the Jewish re-assessments of Orthodox Judaism that have already given us the Conservative and Reform denominations which continue to be the largest contingents of Jewry in North America.

- The third major approach seeks to fully integrate the cultural and spiritual aspects of Rabbinic Jewish tradition with Messianic Judaism. This relatively recent stream of scholarship recognizes the continuing validity of Rabbinic Judaism as the standard bearer of tradition and also of Jewish Biblical interpretation. We must now bring to these issues the insights of Yeshua, who redefined *halacha* for the first community of Jewish believers. Our task is to apply the same principles in our current circumstances as we build Messianic communities and develop a new *halacha* to direct the life and practice of 21st century Jewish believers.

One of the leading proponents of this approach has been David Stern, who has been engaged on the leading edge of Messianic theology for decades since the publication of the Messianic Jewish Manifesto. Stern's emphasis in that first volume of theological exploration emphasized a Messianic perspective on Torah: “The Torah is eternal and the New Testament has not abrogated it...in its totality the Torah must be understood and interpreted in the light of what Yeshua the Messiah and the rest of the New Covenant scriptures have said about it.” [*Manifesto*, 139-40]

Dan Juster takes this exploration one step further with the comprehensive “New Covenant Halachic Approach.” it addresses the nature of the Church's relationship to Israel, the relationship of Law to Grace and suggests that we specify and expand our Messianic Jewish practices based on Torah. Juster promotes a thorough understanding of each command found in the *Tenach* and then having it applied to Israel's life and witness to create “a Jewish life in fulfilled form” with examples from a cross-section of Jewish cultural, historical, national and identity-related passages. His larger vision suggests the eventual development of an encyclopedic and authoritative New Covenant *Halacha*, although he understands that this knowledge is not static, but requires continuing reflection and relevant application [Jewish roots, 228; mapping 159].

John Fischer further outlines the principles of Messianic *halacha* and promotes a positive attitude to the Rabbinic literature. As a practitioner who has developed a Messianic *Siddur* and *Machzor*, he affirms that while the traditions are not authoritative, they are “usually beneficial and elevating. Messianic Judaism can learn and appreciate much through them...they possess a great deal of richness, beauty and depth.” (*Mapping* 165)

- The fourth stream of approach to Rabbinic Judaism is solidly based in the Union of Messianic Jewish Congregations and has the scholarly leadership of Mark Kinzer and the support of two well

organized groups strongly grounded by a well-educated corps of North American Messianic leadership: Hashivenu and the Messianic Jewish Rabbinical Council of New England, which is already active in developing a united, corporate approach applying *halacha* within a significant regional group of Messianic congregations. The ideal for these two groups and their congregations is Messianic Jews living a Torah-observant life and the development of a Torah-observant Messianic Judaism.

The hesitation and caution of other streams towards Rabbinic literature is no barrier for Kinzer or his colleagues. What impresses Harvey most about this group is their use of Conservative and Reform Jewish perspectives to create alternative readings of Oral Law which will fit the needs of North American Messianic communities.