

Who is A Jew, One Perspective

In a recent conversation with a Messianic Jewish friend of mine, we dealt with the performance of Bar/Bat Mitzvoth for adult members of Messianic Jewish Congregations. While we both agree with the position that we would only perform these rites of passage for functioning members of our respective shuls, we were not as sure about what to do with non-Jewish members who wished to undergo Bat or a Bar Mitzvah.

This lead us into the hot topic of defining with clarity what it means to be Jewish, and ***if indeed it were possible for somebody not born into Judaism, to become a fully functioning member of this generational, genetic community.***

In his excellent study of the world's various Jewish communities, Howard Saachar points out that ***most, if not all, Jews who are alive today are the descendents of converts who have been mixing their blood with those members of the community who have a longer genetic link to the covenant which was struck with the Patriarchs*** (see Howard M. Saachar, ***Diaspora, An Enquiry Into The Contemporary Jewish World*** [Harper & Row, New York] 1985).

It is an unfortunate fact of history that at various times since the destruction of the second temple, large numbers of Jews have left the community of their ancestors by converting mainly to Christianity, but also to Islam and even sometimes to various eastern religions such as Buddhism.

As well, at various times in history, larger or smaller numbers of Gentiles from a number of nations and religions have joined the community of Judaism, ***even from the ranks of Christianity, Islam***

and the eastern religions. This genetic cross pollination has meant that every generation of post second temple Judaism has been composed of **genetic, generational Jews** and **converts to Judaism**. There has also been a generational attrition away from Judaism, both forced and voluntary, so that the actual genetic mix of contemporary Judaism is as varied as the nations from whom those converts to Judaism came.

It could even be suggested that there is so much Jewish blood in the European and Middle Eastern Gentile populations, and so much Gentile blood in the European and Middle Eastern Jewish communities, that ***it is more of a difference of culture and faith between the two groups, rather than a question of race.***

This is not to say that regional differences do not exist between the peoples of Europe and the Middle East. It could also be argued that segments of the Jewish community, such as the Levites and the Kohanim, have retained an unbroken genetic link with the Patriarchs.

However, Jewish communities from various parts of Europe and the Middle East have generally become indistinguishable from their Gentile neighbours, the longer they have lived side by side. ***This makes it harder and harder to argue for any kind of clearly distinguishable Jewish racial peculiarity.***

Converts in and converts out have prevented Judaism from suffering from the genetic insularity that more closed societies have experienced. And contrary to racist theories, the purer the blood, the weaker the genes, and the more varied the blood, the stronger the genes.

Could we not say then that the strength of contemporary Judaism lies in both its genetic diversity and in its rich cultural and religious traditions? While various groups inside and outside of Judaism would recoil at such an assertion, the contrary would be almost impossible to demonstrate, except as some kind of mystic identification, where the soul of a Jew would not be too closely related to their genetic make-up.

Where does this leave my discussion with my Messianic Jewish friend? As a Gentile born immigrant with a generational connection to Judaism through my mother, I accepted the L-rd and became a believer long before I had anything to do with the Messianic Jewish Movement. Also ***I see it as our primary role to reach out to those people who already identify themselves as Jewish***, whether they are observant, or entirely secular. We want to see our Jewish people acknowledge Messiah Yeshua in an entirely Jewish context, and this shall always remain the desire of my heart.

However, we also need to reach out to a **second group** of people, Jews who have converted to Christianity, and longer observe any form of Judaism, but view the faith of their ancestors as something which they were saved out of, and are no longer a part of. I have several friends in this category, and I affectionately refer to them as **Goy-Jews**, languishing far from the spiritual roots which their Christian faith sprung from. Some of them have no interest in Messianic Judaism, and feel fulfilled in a Gentile context.

There is also a **third group** of people who are looking to express their faith in the Gospel through a Messianic Jewish context. I affectionately refer to these fine folks as **Jew-Goys**, because their faith and lifestyle reflect a commitment to the generational Jewish community that they may have no genetic link with.

I am in no way countenancing the theological nonsense that wallows under the banner of a supposed “**Two-House**” teaching. There are Jews who practice various forms of Judaism. There are Gentiles who practice various forms of Christianity. ***Evangelical Christians are no not the descendents of any lost Jewish tribes who are finally coming back to their "Jewish theological" own.***

There are **two** biblically acceptable approaches to faith in Yeshua the Messiah, Jewish and Gentile. There are **two** distinct groupings of communities whom the Bible teaches how to practice this faith, Jewish and Gentile. There is a **Jewish spirituality** in the Messiah that is entirely Jewish in its approach to the generational community of which it is a functioning part.

There is also a **Gentile spirituality** which is entirely acceptable to G-d, because, instead of observing any of the covenants of Israel, they practice an **equivalent spirituality** that reflects the two pronged spirituality founded by our father Abraham: **faith** in the only true G-d and **obedience** to His Word.

Since the time when Abraham founded our community, the **survival dynamic** of accommodation which Judaism has always exercised during her various sojourns among the nations, has produced rich and varied **linguistic** and **cultural** expressions of Judaism that diverge widely from the historical antecedents out of which they sprung.

The rigid traditionalism of what is now called Orthodox Judaism is not a reaction against change and this kind of dynamic accommodation. It is more an attempt to maintain the powerful grip over the hearts and minds of the generational Jewish community that the Rabbis of Talmudic Judaism maintain as their inherited right.

They want to be in charge of any changes that are made, and can no longer rely upon the ghetto walls to keep the modern Jews isolated from the influences of mainstream Gentile culture.

Judaism is a community that is more secular than it has ever been, and that is melting away through assimilation faster than it ever has before. We need to see ourselves as part of the constant redefinition and accommodation that is the community's only remedy to the assimilation that is threatening to decimate it more thoroughly than any persecution or series of pogroms which Judaism has encountered thus far (see Elliot Abrams, ***Faith or Fear, How Jews Can Survive in Christian America*** [The Free Press, New York] 1997, and Bernard Susser & Charles S. Liebman, ***Choosing Survival Strategies for a Jewish Future*** [Oxford University Press, New York] 1999).

There appear to be as many proposed solutions the assimilation problem as there are Jewish thinkers, but they all appear to fall into two broad categories. There are those who are calling for a ***secular form of Jewish cultural identity***, and which we see especially in modern Israeli society.

There are also those who propose either a ***full scale return to some form of Rabbinic Judaism***, or to a modified, scaled down version, which would fit in as a sort of socio-cultural religious heritage. This approach is becoming more and more prominent in Jewish communities in North America and around the world.

Where does this leave the Messianic Jewish Movement? While many of us have returned to a socio-cultural expression of Judaism, and whereas many of us are designing various versions of a biblically based Judaism, instead of Rabbinic Judaism, I do not think we have

looked the issue in the face with enough courage, clarity and New Covenant Chutzpah.

We seem too cautious about offending the ***general Jewish community***, both secular and practicing, and, to a lesser extend, we feel the same reticence when it comes to offending the ***Gentile Christian community***.

However, with apologies to all the scribes and sages of our rich and varied history, as disciples of the Rabbi from Nazareth, whom we acknowledge as the Messiah of Promise, ***we need to proclaim with wisdom and clarity that we are not Rabbinic.***

We do feel indebted to the Jewish space, which has come down to us in the rich religious heritage of the Talmud, the halacha of the Mishnah, and the various Midrash of the Gemarah which rabbinic sources collectively consider to be *Torah she-be-alpeh*, or Oral Torah. But, ***we do not consider the Talmud as authoritative as the Scriptures.***

We may wrestle with similar religious priorities as other Jewish faith communities, but there remains a clear distinction in ***our primary frames of reference***. As Jews, we want to live holy, totally separate lives, as we wait daily and constantly for the deliverance of she who grieves deeply, and which, along with all observant Jews, we believe will only happen when the Kingdom of David's Greater Son is established on earth.

However, we do not believe that the sufferings of our people are for the redemption of the world, nor are we waiting for the identity of the Messiah to be revealed.

He came the first time as **Ben Joseph**, the suffering Messiah, and we are waiting for His glorious return as **Ben David**, Messiah, the Glorious King.

In all and any practices, beliefs, and traditions we adopt in our Jewish pilgrimage towards the Heavenly Jerusalem, we must ensure at least two things. **First of all, we are both bound to and set free by the Brit Chadashah.** Consequently all that we do must be firmly rooted in the Rock of its teachings.

Secondly, our developing halachic particularities must both be faithful to a truly Jewish spirituality, and also not become a barrier wall between us and our Gentile Christian brothers and sisters, who, with us are also equal members of the body of our Messiah, the Israel of G-d (Eph. 2:11-21).

We want to reach out to the fragmenting Jewish community and see them acknowledge Messiah Yeshua as the only true King of Israel. We do not want to force assimilated Jews to return to the practice of some kind of Judaism, in order for their faith to be meaningful and authentic.

Nor do we wish to oblige Gentile believers to observe some kind of Jewish spirituality, in order for their faith to be meaningful and authentic. We are Jews who are believers in Messiah Yeshua.

However, as Jews who endeavor to fully participate in the generational community of Judaism, ***we need to examine our need to accommodate those Gentile believers in our midst who wish to participate in our ministry by becoming full Jewish members of the generational Jewish community to which we belong.***

We will never seek to convert Gentiles to Messianic Judaism as an outreach strategy among the churches. **Believers are already converted, whether they are Jewish or Gentile.**

This means that unless we are willing to try and oblige assimilated Jewish believers to return to some expression of Jewish spirituality, we should also not forbid Gentile believers from fully adopting our expression of Jewish spirituality, as newly entered, fully Jewish members of the generational, genetic community of Israel.

Some have left the community, some want to join the community. Hopefully, some may even wish to re-join the community. We are called to be a bridge between two communities, but ***both our cultural and our spiritual home is as part of Israel.***

With wisdom and delicacy, this is what we need to help our assimilated ***Goy Jews*** understand and consider.

When we can articulate sufficient entrance requirements to make joining the generational community of Israel really meaningful, both for our children and for outsiders who want to gain entrance, then we will be doing what all forms of historical and contemporary Judaism have always done.

We will be welcoming the strangers who want to leave Egypt with us, and those we meet along the way who want to enter the Land with us as members of the covenant (Deut. 29:10-5). We may even bring some with us, when we return from exile, or welcome them into our communities during our pilgrimage in exile.

By this definition, ***a Jew is a functioning member of the generational covenant community, whether he became part of this community by birth, or by some entrance process various communities have always formulated for the welcoming of strangers into their midst.***

So, whether we use Bar or Bat Mitzvah, or some variation of the same, it is such a Jewish thing to welcome strangers who want to join the generational community. But I'm not so sure that my Messianic Jewish friend agrees with me.

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We are a Messianic Jewish congregation of Jews and Gentiles that acknowledges that Yeshua is the promised Messiah and celebrates this fulfillment of Torah in a Jewish lifestyle.