
Messianic *Moments*

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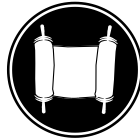
Baptism (Tevila, Immersion) in a Messianic Jewish Context

BY RABBI J. MICHAEL TERRETT

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The pupose of this material is provide educational material to Messianic Congregations in Alberta which will promote and teach a Messianic understanding to the Hebrew Roots of our faith.



Council of Messianic Jewish Congregations of Alberta

A little explanation, pronunciation guide: In Hebrew dialect there is no phonetic use of “ch” as in the English word ‘chapter’. English transliteration of the Hebrew letter “Khet” or “Het” commonly uses “ch” to represent the Hebrew guttural sound, like the German “ach”, and is a guttural or back of the mouth vocalization that is a type of sliding “x” which is not a common sound in English vocabulary. While there is no standardized transliteration for this guttural sound, either the two letters “ch” or “kh” are used to express it. If you are unable to pronounce the guttural sound, it is acceptable to pronounce it as an “h” sound if it is at the beginning of a word and as a “k” sound, if it is in the middle or at the end of a word.”

Baptism (Tevila, Immersion) in A Messianic Jewish Context

by J. M. Terrett

26 Tevet, 5777 (24/1/17)

I want to outline what the Bible teaches about Baptism (Tevila, Immersion) from a Messianic Jewish context and

I want to do it in two sections:

A. Meaning and

B. Mode (method).

A. Lets look at Meaning first:

1. Immersion (baptismos in Greek or tevila in Hebrew) in Judaism usually occurred in a ritual bath called a mikveh, which was a pool where water has gathered – and where the water enters naturally and exits naturally. A Mikveh has to have living water (versus stagnant or sitting water). Mikvehs are part of most synagogues and were also used in the temples. The mikvehs were the tevila occurred were used for spiritual cleansing and not a kind of bath for physical cleansing. A baptismal tank or even a swimming pool is an acceptable venue.

Immersion (tevila, baptism) in a mikveh occurs for various reasons in traditional Judaism.

- (i) Women after childbirth or menstruation
- (ii) A bride before her wedding
- (iii) Priests (in the Temple) before divine service
- (iv) Men on the eve of Yom Kippur (also optionally, before the Shabbat)
- (v) For converts to Judaism
- (vi) In preparation of a dead person's body for burial
- (vii) For new kitchen utensils (not to clean them, but to ritually purify them)

John the Baptist (Yochanan ha Matbil – In Hebrew, a matbil is one who immerses or baptizes) practised a tevila of dedication and purification where people came to him to be cleansed of their sins and to become a living offering to G-d (1 John 1:9; Romans 12:1).

2. In the Gospels, the ritual of tevila (immersion, baptism) was a ritual burial and resurrection of someone who was making a profession of faith. The ritual immersion was a transition out of the world as a symbolic death to the world and to sin and an entrance into fellowship with the L-rd. It was a symbolic resurrection, an act declaring that you belonged to Him and would be empowered to live a new life in Him by the power of His resurrection.
3. In the New Testament, it is considered the equivalent to circumcision as a ritual of separation and consecration (Col. 2:11-15). It is an outward, public physical ritual to testify to an inner private spiritual change. It symbolizes the breaking of all former bonds and allegiances and declaring oneself to be the sole property of G-d as a living sacrifice.
4. Tevila (baptism, immersion) is like a ritual rebirth to symbolize entrance into a new community (citizenship) and a legal transfer from one community to another. In Protestant and Catholic churches, when this is done for babies or for converts, they are given a new (Christian) name. As a symbol of rebirth, it also symbolizes a totally new beginning.
5. It is a public declaration of discipleship – of being washed (freed) from all former connections and being set free to take up our cross and walk the straight and narrow and to live fully and solely for the one who called us out of darkness and into His wonderful light.
6. It is also a symbol which recalls the Sea of Reeds (Red Sea) where the Children of Israel crossed out of slavery and into freedom. With baptism (tevila, immersion), believers are set free from the slavery of this world and from the power and influence of this present age. They are leaving the Egypt of this world behind.
7. Baptism (immersion, tevila) is also a symbol of the crossing of the Jordan River where believers are leaving the wandering in the wilderness behind and entering the Promised Land to take possession of our lives and throw down all and any pagan fortresses in our lives as we drive out all and any Canaanite habits and break all and any Canaanite allegiances which would prevent us from walking with the L-rd as disciples according to the Scriptures.

8. It is a symbolic throwing down of the gauntlet and saying that there is no retreat, only victory or death – as for me and my house, we will serve the L-rd. Among the Sioux, during a battle, if the tide was turning against them, warriors would tie a leather thong around one of their legs and attach it to a peg which they would sink into the ground.

The battle would either bring them victory or death because they would not fall back from their current position. Baptism likewise fixes us in a position of standing firm and immovable as disciples in the L-rd (I Corinthians 15:58)

9. The story is told that in the old Roman province of Dacia (modern Roumania), early Christians faced severe persecution and had to meet secretly in the hills. They met after dark in the only safe place they could find – graveyards, and superstitious pagans would sneak near to observe what they were doing. The early Christians hollowed out an unused grave site and filled it with water and immersed new converts, saying: you are now dead and you shall rise and have everlasting life. They greeted each other with a holy kiss and the pagans thought they were biting each other on the neck. They took communion and the pagans thought they were drinking real blood. They dispersed while it was still dark, to avoid being recognized and the pagans thought they took refuge in tombs to avoid the rays of the sun.

They were all martyred during a persecution and when Christians moved back into the region, the pagans told them about strange blood sucking monsters who lived in the hills and the legend of the vampires was born. Christians added the use of holy water to burn them and the sign of the cross to overpower them and the stake through the heart to kill them.

During the time of the Turkish invasions, a Transylvanian Prince called Vlad Tepes (the impaler) or Dracula was an inhuman fighter who would impale his enemies alive on long spears and watch them slowly die. He also kidnapped young ladies for the Turks and he was so evil and blood thirsty, that people said that he must be a vampire.

The ritual of tevila (immersion, baptism) is a ritual where we symbolically die to the world and resurrect unto life eternal and agree to live by the power of the blood of the One who died for us. In a sense we become vampires, because we are creatures who no longer belong to this world and who will live forever because we have died to this world.

B. Mode or method of tevila (immersion or baptism)

1. The first issue we have to deal with as we examine how baptism (tevila or immersion) is performed is to discuss infant or pedobaptism versus adult or anabaptism. Roman Catholic, Eastern Orthodox and most Protestant denominations practice pedobaptism, where children are welcomed into the community and undergo baptism to be washed of their sins to become Christians. The Orthodox Christians actually immerse their babies in water, while Catholics and Protestants usually just sprinkle them.

During the reformation, one group of believers felt that baptism should only be performed upon adults who made a profession of faith. Most of them had been baptized by sprinkling as babies and got re-baptized by immersion as adults. These evangelicals were called anabaptists (re-baptizers) and they only performed tevila (baptism, immersion) for believers who made a public profession of faith. They generally dedicate or welcome babies as new community members and will only perform baptism (tevila, or immersion) for adults or older children who are capable of understanding what they are doing and who are able to make a personal profession of faith and a personal commitment to discipleship. Messianic Jewish tevila (immersion, or baptism) follows the anabaptist model and immerses believers upon their public profession of faith.

2. The second issue we face is the difference between the baptism of John the Baptist (Yochanan Ha Matbil) and believer's baptism. John's disciples spread across the ancient world, wherever there were Jewish communities and practised a baptism of cleansing and dedication in anticipation of the soon arrival of the Messiah of promise. They would baptize people in the name of the Father, the soon to be identified Messiah the (Son) and the Holy Spirit, who was yet to be poured out. After the death, resurrection and ascension of the Messiah, early believers also spread out across the ancient world. Whenever they encountered disciples of John, they identified Yeshua of Nazareth as the Messiah and these new believers were re-baptized in the name of Jesus (Yeshua) upon profession of their faith and in order to receive the Holy Spirit, whom they were waiting for, but could only be poured out on them by the Messiah.

They were not baptized in Jesus' name only, the original trinitarian formula which we find in Matthew 28 would have been repeated, only the identity of the Son was given and the Holy Spirit was poured out. This does not mean that you can only receive the fullness of the Holy Spirit upon being baptized. In Acts 10:47 Peter said they could not refuse to baptize those who had received the Holy Spirit. None of the 120 people who received the Holy Spirit in Acts 2 had to be baptized in order for the Spirit to land on them.

Any formula we use in performing tevila (baptism, immersion) should reflect both our faith in the Messiah as part of the trinity of G-d and our commitment to die to our old self and walk in the newness of life and discipleship. The Jesus only movement misunderstands the one time correction where disciples of John were re-baptized when they acknowledged the identity of the Messiah they were waiting for. The trinitarian formula remains the scriptural norm.

3. Tevila (baptism, immersion) is a ritual which is performed in three stages:
 - (i) The one being immersed is asked to make a personal profession of faith in the Messiah of Israel and to make a commitment to walk in discipleship by taking upon themselves the gentle yoke of Yeshua (which is the yoke of the Torah, the Psalms and the Prophets.) This can be done by simply answering yes to a series of questions or, optionally, giving a small testimony. I usually have them respond "yes" or "I do" to two questions.

First, I ask them if they believe in the Messiah who died on the cross, rose from the dead and ascended into Heaven and who will one day return (to which they answer "yes" or "I do"). Secondly, I ask them if they intend to die to their old life and walk in a new life discipleship by taking upon themselves the yoke of the Messiah and His Word (to which they answer "yes" or "I do")
 - (ii) Then a trinitarian baptismal formula is used which identifies the One G-d in whose name the candidate is about to be immersed. Because some people have a concern with needing to use the name of Yeshua along with the trinitarian declaration, I am willing to say "in the name of Yeshua" after the trinitarian declaration. I do it first in Hebrew, then in English.

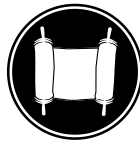
Here it is: B'Shem Ha Av, v'Ha Ben' v'Ha Ruach HaChodesh (in the Name of the Father, and the Son and the Holy Spirit), with the option of adding: B'Shem Yeshua Ha Mashiach (in the Name of Jesus the Christ).

- (iii) The candidate is then fully immersed under the water as a sign that they are undergoing a symbolic death and resurrection and are entering into a new life of biblical discipleship under the lordship of the resurrected Messiah from Nazareth. The candidates are being immersed as a sign that they acknowledge that their sins have been forgiven and they have received everlasting life by placing their faith in the Messiah who is the Saviour. The ritual itself does not wash their sins away, nor grant them everlasting life. It remains a public profession of faith which welcomes new believers and adult believers into full participation in the community. We must never confuse a symbolic public act and an actual private reality. Salvation comes solely by faith in the grace of G-d according to the Scriptures. Catholics, Eastern Orthodox and many Protestants believe that *tevila* (immersion, baptism) is the sole means of receiving G-d's grace for salvation and the forgiveness of sins.

They may even go as far as to restrict the taking of the L-rd's Table to those who have received what they consider to be an acceptable baptism performed by an authorized *Matbil* (baptizer). This use of a symbol as a means of salvation (called Sacerdotalism or salvation by the sacraments) is not taught in the Scriptures and it not the practice of Messianic Judaism nor of most Bible based Evangelical groups.

Baptism (Immersion, *Tevila*) is a joyful time of personal commitment and community celebration which is usually followed by a snack or a meal and the candidates may also be provided with a certificate to commemorate this special day of transition in their spiritual life.

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Material provided in this booklet was authored and provided
by Rabbi J. Michael Terrett
Spiritual Leader of B’nai Chayim



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CMJC of Alberta (Council of Messianic Jewish Congregations of Alberta)
2635 - 32 Street SW
Calgary, Alberta, Canada
T3E 2R8