

What Are Messianic Jews?

by Shmuel Wolkenfeld, Messianic Rabbi

Or HaOlam is a congregation that is called a Messianic Jewish Synagogue. We use that term because we worship the G-d of Israel and Yeshua the Messiah of Israel. Yeshua is the original name of the individual that is now called "Jesus" by many Gentile people. The apparent name change is because the name has gone through several languages. The Greek form of the name had to have an "s" at the end to be masculine in Greek. The "Y" changed into a "J" for similar reasons. When He was on earth, He was Yeshua to his parents, family, and friends.

Furthermore, in Israel 2000 years ago, all His followers were Jews. They considered themselves as Jewish, and so did their families and communities, and they continued their observance of the Torah and the traditions of our people. There is a conversation recorded in the New Testament, in about 60 C.E., between a man named Yaakov, who was the head of the Jewish believers in Yeshua in Jerusalem, and Paul, the emissary who had taken the faith of the Jewish Messiah to the Gentiles, and just returned to Jerusalem for a visit. Yaakov said to Paul, "You see, brother, how many tens of thousands of believers there are among the Judeans, and they are all zealots for the Torah." Paul was further instructed to do certain things at our Temple so that "everyone will know that there is nothing to these rumors which they have heard about you; but that, on the contrary, you yourself stay in line and keep the Torah." [This is in the book of Acts, chapter 22: 20 - 24] So, the first followers of the Messiah were Torah observant Jews.

Eventually, many Gentiles (Romans, Greeks, Parthians, etc.) came to faith in the Jewish Messiah. These Gentile believers were not required to keep all the commands of Torah. After a while the majority of the believers in the Jewish Messiah were Gentiles, and the whole community of faith took on a non-Jewish appearance. Furthermore, about the time that many Gentiles came to faith there were two bitterly fought rebellions by our people against Rome. These wars made the Jewish nation social outcasts in the Roman Empire. After the Bar Kokhba revolt, if a Gentile believer identified with the Jewishness of the Messiah, there was an implication they were identifying with enemies of the emperor. So, Gentile believers in the Jewish Messiah started to distance themselves from the Jewish people.

In addition, some Gentile leaders in the faith came to think that the Gentile believers had replaced Israel as G-d's people. Anti-Semitism and other anti-Biblical ideas crept in from Gentile culture, and the community of faith in the Jewish Messiah became corrupted. Eventually, it became almost impossible to believe in Yeshua and identify as a Jew. The Rabbis, leaders of our own people, wouldn't allow it, and neither would the Gentile leaders of the community of the Messianic faith, who should have been our brothers in faith. So, about 300 C.E. (common era or A.D.) an identifiable community of Jewish believers in the Jewish Messiah ceased to exist.

In the last 30 years there have been a great number of Jewish people becoming Messianic believers, about 200,000 in the United States. We in Messianic Jewish

congregations are like those Jewish people of the first century who believed that the man Yeshua, born in the Jewish homeland of Israel, fulfilled the prophecies of the Tanakh, [the Old Testament], and is the Messiah of Israel. There are 81 Messianic congregations or home study groups in Israel, and at least two thousand believers.

The Basis of Our Faith

Actually, the fact that one man was able to so live as to fulfill all the things written about him is a great mathematical proof of the existence of G-d, and the truth of the Bible. That is, most of the prophecies were completely out of Yeshua's control to fulfill, and it is a mathematical improbability of the highest order that they could have all converged on one man. Statisticians place the odds of such occurrence as one in 10^{157} . For example, the place of his birth is named at Bethlehem. [Micah 5:2] The destruction of our Temple, and of the city of Jerusalem, is predicted to be shortly after his death. [Daniel 9: 26] He is described as having a forerunner who would designate himself as "a voice crying out in the wilderness" [Isaiah 40: 3]. The means of his execution is given [Ps. 22: 16]. Many details of his execution are given. [Ps. 22].

There are many other prophecies about the nations surrounding Israel, and of our own Jewish history, that have incredible statistical improbability. All these prophecies, are what brought me, personally, to faith in Yeshua as the Jewish Messiah in 1969.

Summary of Our Relationship with G-d

To summarize our faith we believe that Yeshua, depicted in the New Covenant scriptures, is the Messiah of Israel. When an individual realizes that the Bible is true, then that individual understands that he or she has sinned against G-d, and violated G-d's commandments, and is therefore separated from, the Holy One of Israel. That person realizes that he or she needs forgiveness and spiritual healing. The Yom Kippur holiday is about finding forgiveness, but our Jewish people don't experience a sense of forgiveness from G-d, because we are not following the steps given in our Bible. The Torah teaches that forgiveness in Judaism come by tshuvah, repentance or turning from our sins and guilty ways, and trusting in the Yom Kippur sacrifice.

Messianic Jews believe that forgiveness is obtained by trusting in the Messiah and his atoning death, and sincerely doing repentance of our sins before the Holy One of Israel. This spiritual healing as a result of the Messiah's atonement is a concept taken from the Tanakh, the Jewish scriptures. For example:

Isaiah 53:5 But he was wounded because of our transgressions, he was bruised because of our iniquities; his sufferings were that we might have peace; and by his injury we are healed.

The Talmudic tractate Sanhedrin 98b, and the Midrash Rabba on Ruth 2:14,

interpret this scripture as applying primarily to King Messiah's suffering, not to the sufferings of Israel.

Our faith centers around the promises of the prophets of Israel. One that is most important to understanding us is in Jeremiah, "

Jer 31: 31, 33, 34 "The time is coming," declares the L-RD, "when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah. This is the covenant I will make with the house of Israel after that time," declares the L-RD. "I will put my law in their minds and write it on their hearts. I will be their G-d, and they will be my people. For I will forgive their wickedness and will remember their sins no more."

That is, when a person confesses his sins to G-d, and trusts that G-d will forgive him because of the atoning death of the Messiah, a wonderful experience of forgiveness follows. This new spiritual walk with HaShem effects our character and attitudes, and begins a process of radically changing the way we relate to G-d and to the people around us. We have a joyful new life, of humility, prayer, and Torah observance, as the prophets foretold.

However, we do not consider ourselves subject to all the dictums of the Talmud and the halakhah of Rabbinic law, because we believe that the rabbis misunderstood some things about the Messiah and His Spirit. For example, we follow Biblical kashrut, not traditional or rabbinical kashrut. We abstain from pork and seafood without scales or fins. Few Messianics have two or three sets of dishes, as required by the rabbinic expansion of the command, "Do not cook a young goat in its mother's milk." [Exodus 23: 19] So, we consider ourselves Torah observant, while not Orthodox. We keep the holy days in the Tanakh, and have great joy in the Ruakh, the Spirit, being Jewish followers of the Jewish Messiah.

Messianic Jews and the Larger Jewish Community

Our relationship with the larger Jewish community has a few aspects. We fervently love Israel, and we work and give substantially to help accomplish its re-forestation, to abet its status in the views and actions of American legislators and United Nations resolutions, and to assist its impoverished immigrants. Our congregations in the Land proudly send their sons and daughters to serve in the Tsahal, Israeli Defense Forces. Locally we participate in Israel Independence Day celebrations, the Jewish Arts festival, and other community events. We receive varied evaluations from the Jewish community. We are sometimes viewed as traitors and imposters by those who say that it is impossible to believe in Yeshua as the Messiah and also be Jewish. More recently, some scholarly Rabbis have lived among us, observed us, and written books. Most

noteworthy of these are Carol Harris Shapiro, a Reconstructionist Rabbi, and Daniel Cohn Sherbok. Rabbi Sherbok is a professor of Judaism at a university in the United Kingdom. He concluded that Messianic Judaism should be considered as one of the branches of the Menorah of diversity among the Jewish people. May it be so, "speedily, and in our days."

At Our Messianic Synagogue

We are an assembly of both Jews and Gentiles who believe the scriptures, and take very literally the promises in Ro. 11 that the "natural branches [will] be grafted back into *their own* olive tree." That is, the Jewish people are the natural, original, branches [recipients and messengers] of G-d's salvation, and they will yet enjoy and bear the light of redemption through their Messiah. That redemption will be expressed in the context of "their own" Jewish identity and culture, which, in fact, was formed by Gd's Word to them, as recorded in the Bible.

If you are of Jewish background, we hope you will feel "at home," but yet energized, uplifted, and challenged by the radical message that the Messiah has indeed come!

If you are a Gentile believer in Yeshua (Jesus' Hebrew name), but new to the vitality of "rootstock life", the gospel in its native, Jewish milieu, it may take a while to learn an old/new style of worship, but it shouldn't be hard to discern and rejoice in the revival that G-d specifically describes as "much greater riches." (Ro. 11: 12)

If you are a Jewish believer in Yeshua, who have received, by means of the Gentile church, the wondrous news of forgiveness and salvation, you may be wrestling with feelings of ambivalence. That is, you love your Gentile mentors, and the spiritual good they have done you. Yet, deep within your spirit is a distinct yearning for *Yiddishkeit*. This yearning could be the "call of the covenant." What G-d promised to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, and reinforced through the prophets, is still in force, and a sense of this is in your innermost being. The New Covenant (Testament) fulfills the Old, but does not eliminate the centrality of Israel in G-d's plan. G-d wants Jewish believers to serve their Messiah *as Jews*. **עַם יִשְׂרָאֵל חַי! Am Yisrael Khi! Israel lives!** If you have this yearning to be a Jew and live for Yeshua, we understand. This is what we are all about. We might dare to say to you, "Welcome home!"

Our Purpose

The purpose of Or HaOlam Messianic Congregation is:

1. to participate in and to promulgate the covenant G-d made with Abraham and his offspring in Gen. 12:1-4, and confirmed in Jer. 31: 2-4, 31-37,

to establish the Jews as His people, redeemed by their Messiah, and energized by His Spirit to keep His Torah.

2. The outworking of this is to follow the *words* of the Tanakh and Brit Khadashah. These inspired words are summarized by the Messiah when He was asked which is the greatest commandment (Mk. 12: 29-31). He responded by reciting the **שמע** (*Sh'ma*) and the **ואהבת** (*V'ahavta*) (Dt. 6: 4-5), to which He joined Lev. 19:18. The Torah commands He cited, that summarize all the Tanakh, are that we are to love G-d with all our heart, mind, soul, and strength, and we are to love our neighbors as ourselves.
 - A. We express our love to G-d in Messianic Jewish worship and lifestyle, which reflects G-d's love of Israel (John 4:22, Ro. 11:18), and provides a spiritual home for Jewish believers in the Messiah.
 - B. We express our love for people by meeting the needs of spirit, soul, and body through the power of Yeshua, first, for our own families, then our local congregation, then of the people of Israel, and lastly of all the nations. This is primarily accomplished by sharing the life changing message of G-d's salvation.

Our Goal

Our goal is to worship G-d in Spirit and in Truth. That is, the Biblical pattern of worship includes such items as:

as banners (Ps. 20:5, 60:4)

dance (Ps. 149:3, Jer. 31:13)

reading or singing of scripture (Neh. 8:8), including honoring the Torah scroll in procession around the sanctuary (Rev. 1: 12-13)

written prayers (Acts 6:4 lit. "the prayers," also Acts 3:1)

wearing the 'fringes' of Nu. 15: 38-40, as a "garment of praise"

wearing of the kippah (the skullcap, which takes its scriptural precedent from Ex. 28:1-4, its rabbinical authenticity from the Talmud (Rosh HaShannah 17b) as a symbol of humility before G-d, and its Jewish cultural validity from I Cor. 9:20)

Hebrew in the prose and poetry, as much as possible.

These and related practices are part of the worship style that King David, the prophets, and the Messiah Himself knew and loved. It is prophesied that such ancient worship would be restored (Zeph.3:9; Amos 9:11) in the **אחרית הימים**, *a-kha-reet ha-ya-meem*, the last days. Incorporating these things into worship has been a spontaneous outgrowth of the Jewish spiritual restoration. We experience a great deal of divine joy being Biblical Jews.

