What Does It Mean to Live as a Messianic Jew?

The Mosaic Covenant as the Guide for Messianic Jewish Life

Part of a Topical Series by
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G-d has always had His remnant of faithful followers within the House of Israel. He has relentlessly sought out and brought into relationship with Himself Jewish people who have come to believe in the Messiaship of Yeshua (Jesus). Yet, in the last 20 Centuries, almost all Jews who have come to accept Messiah Yeshua inevitably have resigned their unique relationship with G-d, assimilated into the greater Christian community in which they lived, and disappeared without a Jewish trace within three generations. The reason for this is because too often Jewish believers accept the traditional Christian understanding that the Scriptures teach against Jewish identity and that the Mosaic Covenant has been terminated. The purpose of this pamphlet is to challenge that thinking. I believe it has always been G-d’s plan for Messianic Jews to intentionally live Jewish lives and to actively build Jewish communities for spiritual encouragement and as a communal testimony, both for the greater Jewish community as well as for the encouragement of Gentiles believers in the name of Messiah Yeshua, and that the ongoing Jewish obligation toward the Mosaic Covenant is the critically important requirement for the fulfillment of this purpose.

Definitions & Background

Jewish identity is sociological, and can best be understood practically as an identity of separation based on observance of and loyalty to the Mosaic Covenant (Torah) preserved within the Scripture and applied by the traditions of the Jewish people. G-d called Abraham to separate himself from his land and family and become the father of a unique nation, the Jewish people. Jewish people have kept their identity and peculiarity based on this understanding that G-d chose them to be set apart and different as the special Chosen People of G-d, physically speaking. The
Scriptures record this: “There is a people that dwells apart, not reckoned among the nations” (Numbers 23:9 JPS). This desire to maintain the “Peoplehood of Israel” has led to the development of close Jewish communities, the traditional definition of “Who is a Jew”, the emphasis of Jewish continuity through marriage between Jews alone and the Jewish education of children. This same pursuit of separation from the other nations has often been the reason for the many persistent anti-Semitic persecutions endured by the Jewish people through the ages, many times at the hands of those who profess themselves as “Christians”.

**Messianic Faith** is theological, the belief that G-d sent the Messiah of Israel in the person of Yeshua and that through the shedding of his blood all people are able to receive atonement for the consequences of their sins, coming equally into a full relationship with G-d, based simply on their personal acceptance of this truth. These adherents are part of G-d’s special chosen people, spiritually speaking. We are referring here not of Jewish believers’ per se but of any person, Jew or Gentile, who comes to accept Yeshua as their Messiah, thus “Messianic Faith”. Messianic Faith is therefore not a physical, ethnic heritage or culture; instead it is simply a spiritual community comprised of adherents from all the world’s peoples who have come to personally believe in the G-d of Israel through faith in the Messiah of Israel.

Over the centuries, misinformed Christian theologians proposed the belief that G-d had rejected the Jewish people and His unique relationship with them, and had replaced Israel with a new “Israel”: “The Church”. Unfortunately, the political, social and cultural impact has been far reaching at times, manifesting anti-Semitism and sadly also forcing Jews who did come to accept Yeshua as Messiah to give up their adherence to their Jewish uniqueness and to assimilate within the greater Christian community. As a result, Jewish believers have had almost no remnant testimony due to assimilation under such social pressures. Usually by the time a first generation Jewish believer’s grandchildren are born, the Jewish identity of those grandchildren has all but disappeared. This is also hastened due to intermarriage where, unlike Ruth, most Gentile spouses are reluctant to set aside their own heritage to become a part of the Jewish people. Children from these families are therefore raised in a “mixed” world of different cultures and traditions which dilutes any practical connection with the Jewish Community at large. Inevitably, most children from such families feel incapable of living as Jews within the greater Jewish community and so, tragically, choose to forsake their Jewish identity.

**The Torah is the Guide for Jewish Life**

With this in mind we now consider Scriptural support for Messianic Jewish loyalty to the Mosaic Covenant (Torah). **First**, G-d gave the Torah as a contractual agreement specifically between Himself and the Jewish people, and no one else. I am not speaking here of the moral and theological teachings of the Torah, which are universally valuable for all people, but specifically the legal responsibilities and codes which were to specifically set Israel apart from the nations, i.e. Shabbat, Kosher, etc…. The text is clear in this regard, “Now then, if you will obey Me faithfully and keep My covenant, you shall be My treasured possession among all the people.”

The word **treasured possession** in Hebrew is וּיְנֵאֶמָּה, which means peculiar property, and denotes

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1 See Exodus 31:16-17, Leviticus 20:22-26
2 Exodus 19:5 JPS
G-d’s unique relationship with the Jewish people; it also articulates the ongoing unique role Jewish people play in G-d’s program to redeem the world even after Messiah’s arrival.

Second, G-d’s commitment to Israel is secure. Some Christian theologies teach that Israel forfeited their “Choseness” through disobedience, yet G-d’s capacity to forgive Israel is without measure. After repeated disobedience the text still states, “And the L-RD has affirmed this day that you are, as He promised you, His treasured people who shall observe all His commandments … you shall be, as He promised, a holy people to the L-RD your G-d”.

Throughout the Prophetic books we see G-d judge Israel, but also maintain His commitment to them as His Chosen People. The promise of a New Covenant in Jeremiah 31:30-36 is not just meant to be a prophecy in regards to Messiah Yeshua’s work, but also a reminder of G-d’s covenant promise to Israel and His willingness to provide a new and improved Covenant to deepen His relationship with His physical people Israel, not end it: “See, a time is coming – declares the L-RD – when I will make a new covenant with the House of Israel and the House of Judah … For I will forgive their iniquities, and remember their sins no more … Thus said the L-RD: If the heavens above could be measured, and the foundations of the earth below could be fathomed, only then would I reject all the offspring of Israel for all that they have done – declares the L-RD” (JPS).

Third, when we look at the Post-Exilic literature within the Tanakh we do not find any hint of an anticipated termination of the Mosaic Covenant or of any cessation in expected observance of the Covenant in the lifestyle of the restored Jewish nation. Instead there is a clear emphasis regarding the people’s obligation toward the teaching and observance of the Mosaic Covenant as seen in the historical books of Ezra and Nehemiah. The purpose of this is two fold from the text: first the obvious concern about religious apostasy, but also secondly there was a clear concern about the mixing and ultimate dissolution of the people. We find the repeated challenge for Covenant observance as well in the prophetic literature. Citing just one example, in Malachi 3:22 we read, “Be mindful of the Teaching of My servant Moses, whom I charged at Horeb with laws and rules for all Israel.” (JPS) These words are reminiscent of Messiah Yeshua’s statement in Matthew 5:17-18, “Do not think that I came to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I did not come to abolish, but to fulfill. For truly I say to you, until heaven and earth pass away, not the smallest letter or stroke shall pass away from the Law until all is accomplished” (CJB).

One final point in regards to the Mosaic Covenant and Israel’s unique relationship to it needs to be made from the New Covenant text. Acts 15 relates the dispute between Jews who believed that Gentiles must essentially convert and adopt Jewish practices, meaning an adherence to the Mosaic Covenant, and Jews who opposed this. Kefa (Peter), Yaakov (James) and the entire Leadership of the Messianic Jewish Community in Jerusalem came to the understanding that the “yoke” of the Covenant (a common Rabbinic term) had been impossible for them to keep as Jews therefore it was unreasonable to expect that the new Gentile believers should become subject to the Mosaic Covenant since they had already obviously come to faith in Messiah Yeshua without needing it. They also realized that the purpose for the freedom which G-d had granted the Gentile believers was so that these Gentile believers could live out the truth of their own covenant relationship with G-d.

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3 Deuteronomy 26:18-19 JPS
4 See also Ezekiel 36 and 37; Micah 4:1-8
faith in Messiah Yeshua among their own people, limited only by the moral and theological teachings within the Scriptures.

In contrast, Acts 21 narrates the zeal of the Israeli Jewish believers for keeping the Mosaic Covenant. They continued observing the Torah that G-d had given to Israel because they saw it as G-d’s gift and their heritage. They understood the Torah to be the proper guide for living out their distinct identity as Jews who followed Messiah Yeshua while also understanding that to forsake it would inhibit their testimony for Messiah within the greater Jewish community.

Throughout the New Covenant text never is a word spoken against zealous Jewish identity or Torah observance by Jewish believers except when either Jews or Gentiles tried to impose Jewish observance and/or the Mosaic Covenant on Gentile believers in Messiah. In these instances the text is bluntly and ferociously opposed to such practice! Paul clearly teaches that Jewish people should maintain their identity. 5 Paul circumcises Timothy because he is a Jew, and he doesn’t circumcise Titus because he isn’t a Jew. 6 As in the First Century community of Messianic Believers, there is still today a unique ongoing role for Messianic Jews, and as then, this identity needs to be encouraged, nurtured and even enhanced. 7

**A Final Challenge For Jewish Living**

How are you living out your faith in Messiah Yeshua as a Messianic Jew? Do you accept your unique responsibility toward the Torah as part of the Messianic remnant of Israel, or do you just want to discard your Jewish identity and assimilate into cultural-Christianity? Accept and live out the Torah that G-d has given to us as Jewish people. It is G-d’s gift and our obligation!

**Want to talk more? Contact Rabbi Gliebe at:**

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5 1 Corinthians 7:17-20; Romans 8:1-3; Ephesians 2:8-9
6 Acts 16:1-3; Galatians 2:1-4
7 Romans 3:1-4; Romans 11