

# Fulfilling All Righteousness

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In Matthew 3:11, we read these words spoken by John:

*"I indeed immerse you with water unto repentance, but He who is coming after me is mightier than I, whose sandals I am not worthy to carry."*

Have you ever considered why John was there in the first place and by what authority? Little is known about it, except that immersion was commonly practiced in the ancient Jewish world for restoring spiritual and physical purity.

As with John's *mikvah*, ancient writings disclose that ritual Jewish washings often required a complete covering by water. The *Shulchan Aruch*, the major Code of Jewish Law teaches about such immersion (Chapt. 15, Yoreh De'ah, 198:1), and the *Mishnah* of the Babylonian Talmud tells us that the High priest immersed himself five times and washed his hands and feet ten times during the sacrifices and ministries of Yom Kippur (Moed, Yoma 3 Mishneh 3). Also, Hillel taught that immersion, as well as circumcision, was required for Gentiles to convert to Judaism, and in Isaiah 1:16, we read of a washing specifically for repentance; it reads:

*"Wash yourselves, make yourselves clean; Put away the evil of your doings from before My eyes. Cease to do evil ..."*

If one has any doubt that immersion for repentance was a Jewish practice, surely it is dispelled by Matthew 3:5-6, which shows the overwhelming response to John's *mikvah*, for we read:

*"Then Jerusalem, all Judea, and all the region around the Jordan went out to him and were baptized by him in the Jordan, confessing their sins."*

And even the religious Jewish establishment responded, for in verse 7 we read:

*"But when he saw many of the Pharisees and Sadducees coming to his mikvah, he said to them, 'Brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come?'"*

All of this has been background leading up to another Jew who responded to John's call for repentance and immersion, for in Matthew 3:13-15 we read:

*"Then Yeshua came from Galilee to John at the Jordan to be immersed by him. And John tried to prevent Him, saying, 'I need to be immersed by You, and are You coming to me?' But Yeshua answered and said to him, 'Permit it to be so now, for thus it is fitting for us to fulfill all righteousness.' Then he allowed Him."*

At first, John objected to immersing Yeshua, because he knew who Yeshua was, and that he was without sin. John's immersion was for repentance, so he concluded there was no purpose in

Yeshua being immersed. But when Yeshua said: "... *it is fitting for us to fulfill all righteousness,*" John understood and immersed Him.

Why did John change his mind? Was he merely being obedient to Yeshua's insistence? I used to think that, but God revealed something to me which I will share with you. The "fulfillment of righteousness" to which Yeshua was referring was obedience to the Jewish community's expectation that when a public call to repentance was offered, anyone who desired to repent or be seen as repentant could be expected to respond. Put another way, anyone seen not responding would have been thought of as unrighteous. The Pharisees and Sadducees whom John rebuked were, in fact, unrepentant, but did not want to be seen that way. Yeshua, on the other hand, was fully righteous, but wanted to identify with the Jewish community by doing all that the community expected of a righteous Jew.

Now mind you, Yeshua was not responding to a command of *Torah*; it would not have been sin for Him or anyone else to refuse John's immersion. He was responding to the cultural expectations of the Jewish community of that day in order to present Himself as a good witness, in furtherance of His service to the Father. And in his submitting to an immersion He did not need, He became our example and hope that as we attempt to comply with the religious and cultural expectations of our Jewish communities, we too may be seen as fulfilling all righteousness in Him.

What I am suggesting is this – that as Messianic Jews and Gentiles in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, conforming to the perceived righteous standards and expectations of the wider Jewish community, so long as they are not contrary to Scripture, may be more spiritually important to our Jewish witness than some of us have thought. In my own case, my Jewish lifestyle has done much to enhance my witness of Yeshua to Jewish brethren whom God has brought across my path and keeps bringing across my path. It might take a day of talk for me to convey my beliefs in depth. But it takes only a minute of observing me to get the point that I am a Torah-compliant Jew, and only a sentence or two for me to convey that I am a follower of Yeshua. My desire is that my voluntary compliance with Jewish norms will be perceived as non-threatening and righteous, so that my message about Yeshua may be taken seriously.

God was gracious, despite my resistance, to provide an example of this just yesterday although it was more than a brief encounter. I visited one of the Jewish bookstores near my home in Wheaton Maryland to purchase a gift for the youngster who finds the *afikomen* at our *seder*. As I was browsing, a young man dressed in Orthodox Jewish garb took notice of the blue thread in my *tzitzit*, rattled off three authorized sources from where one might procure *kosher* blue threads, and asked me from which source mine came. I was a bit annoyed by his question because I was in a hurry to get home, and figured my answer would get me in trouble and into a prolonged argument. So I decided to cut off debate by going on the offensive; I said:

"I bought these *tzitzit* from someone who made them for me; she probably got the blue threads from G-Street Fabrics. Scripture commands that I wear blue threads so I'm wearing blue threads. Do you have any other questions?"

The young man frowned and looked troubled, so I figured I was in for it. He stroked his chin and said: “You used the term Scripture. That’s interesting. Let me ask you something.” And he went on to ask me whether I thought only the words of the *Sh’ma* alone should be put in a *mezuzah* or whether the Ten Commandments should also be included. Since his question had nothing to do with the *tzitzit* he previously asked about, I concluded he was either bating me or testing me, so I gave him as complete an answer as I could and made sure to make the point that most *halachic* decisions were made for whole communities by ancient sages. Then he surprised me by candidly telling me his opinion of what he thought should be put in a *mezuzah*. So I said:

“That’s interesting. You seemed disturbed by my willingness to be non-*halachic* in what kind of blue threads I wore but you seem to be considering being non-*halachic* about your *mezuzot*. So now let me ask you a question. Do you think a modern Jewish community – say a small community like a congregation – has authority to declare *halachah* for itself?”

I couldn’t believe the young man’s next response. He said it was so rare to find someone like me who was willing to discuss such things. He missed such discussions since he had come back from living in Israel and he wanted to know if I had the time to talk some more. Well it was 2:00 PM and it being *Shabbat*, the store was about to close so I told him I would pay for my purchase and then talk with him outside.

When we got outside, he looked at his watch and bemoaned that he only had a few minutes before he would have to catch his bus. I told him where I was parked and he said he had time to walk with me to my car. On the way, he asked me what synagogue I was a member of. “Okay,” I thought, “the cat’s out of the bag now.” So in my not-so-subtle way I said:

“I’m a member of a Messianic Jewish congregation. We believe that Yeshua – Jesus is *Mashiach*.”

“I thought you might be,” he said, “I’ve met a few Messianic Jews, but they all seemed to be so Christian in their life and attitude.” “You’re the first one I’ve ever met who’s clearly Jewish and can talk about Jewish things.”

I began to explain that I was not the only one, but that his experience with Christianized Jews was probably the result of many Jews who came to faith in Yeshua through Christianity because the Messianic Jewish movement is still relatively young. “We’re all very influenced by our first instruction,” I said.

Then he said: “I wasn’t going to go to that bookstore today, but something told me I should. I’m glad I did, but I have to run now. I want to give you my phone number so we can talk again after *YomTov*. Will that be okay?” Of course it was okay, so we exchanged phone numbers and wished each other “*Shabbat Shalom*.”

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Okay, so I almost blew it by my impatience in the store, but apparently God had already gotten hold of this young man so he hung in despite my initial irritated response. And as the

conversation progressed and I started warming up to him, it became clear that God had provided that meeting as a divine appointment for his benefit, and had used – not my eloquence in explaining Yeshua – but those things about me that were in compliance with Jewish culture, or even in intentional non-compliance, to cause my new-found Jewish friend to feel sufficiently at home that he was willing to receive even the few words I had to say. And notice that God had prepared him for our meeting through prior encounters with other Messianic Jews even though they were not able to carry him further.

I keep calling him “young Jewish man” so let me tell you his name so you can pray for him; it is “Ariel.”

So what has my meeting Ariel to do with my message today? It is an exhortation to all of us that our cultural identity as either Jews or Gentiles who have become part of a community of Jews is a powerful circumstance that God can use to help bring the Jewish people to faith in Yeshua or at least a step closer. God used my decision to wear *tzitzit* (albeit made by Melanie Sollenberger from yarn bought in some fabric store) and also my familiarity with other culturally Jewish things, to make me sufficiently interesting and acceptable to Ariel that he wanted to continue our conversation.

Notice that Ariel needed me – a seemingly *Torah*-compliant – Jew with whom he could feel comfortable, but the way was paved for me to speak to him about my belief in Yeshua by other Messianic Jews (and perhaps Gentiles) who were not culturally Jewish and were, in fact, culturally more Christian. So God uses us all.

Just as Yeshua’s community expected him to submit to an immersion he did not need personally, our Jewish community expects similar things that we may not think we need for ourselves, but that they need from us if we are to reach them with Yeshua. And when we are willing to comply in that way, like Yeshua, we are fulfilling all righteousness by loving our neighbor as ourselves.

Here at Ohev we have many kinds of people and we value them all. But we are particularly blessed to have a significant number of members seeking to fulfill all righteousness from a perspective understood by the wider Jewish community, and these ought to be welcomed as resources from whom we can learn about Jewish life and practice.

There are, for example, some of us whom keep Rabbinically kosher. How many of us know how to do that? Do we know about *kashering* meat with salt? What is *paravah*? Do we know about *hekshers*? How many hours must a Rabbinically *kosher*-keeping person wait between a meat and dairy meal? Suppose we want to host a Jewish person who keeps Rabbinically *kosher*. Sandy knows these things and can help us.

Do we know how to chant from the *Torah* using trop? Melanie Sollenberger knows how to teach us that.

Do we know how to lay *t’filin* and *daven shachrit*? Bob and Raphael can teach us those.

Do we want to learn more about Israel? Jonathan Moore has just begun a *chavurah* that will be focusing on life in Israel.

Please do not misunderstand me. These things do not cause us to be righteous. But, if the knowledge and practice of them is expected of members of the Jewish community and those who have joined it, being willing to either comply or give a defense for why not is a way of breaking down barriers to Yeshua and is therefore “fulfilling all righteousness” in Yeshua’s footsteps. His *mikvah* was not for Himself but was as a witness to His Jewish community. Likewise, our compliance with community Jewish practices, while not necessarily required, is a witness to our Jewish community.

The other night, a few of us gathered at Matt and Kayla’s home for Ronen’s *Pidyon haBen*. *Pidyon haBen* is a ceremony to redeem a first-born Israelite son from Temple service. But there is no Temple.

[Message finished without notes, talking about the *Pidyon haBen* and other ceremonies, related to Temple service, that we cannot perform literally. We ask guidance from the Holy Spirit on how to comply with them so as to “fulfill all righteousness.”]