

# **The Ideal Messianic Jewish Congregation**

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Each new calendar year, some of us make resolutions to change or improve something about ourselves. That's not a bad tradition if the resolutions are kept, but sadly, many times they are not. Now in order for us to want to change something, we have to self-assess, and then have a direction and a goal. And it is the same for congregations; it is the same for Ohev.

Now Ohev's government is such that most major changes are made by the elders, although some can be made by the congregational leader. However, the rank-and-file members of Ohev are not unable to effect change; "not unable" means that members ARE able to effect change. Because members have access to their leaders, they have the ability of persuasion. And good leaders appreciate input from members because none of us leaders have all the wisdom all the time.

As the Congregational Leader of Ohev, it seemed right to me to use the occasion of this New Year to assess where we are at, where we want to go, and how we want to get there. I had a head start in the assessment by having already compiled a list of our activities, leaders and participants for "Ohev Day," a few weeks ago. Perhaps Ohev Day was more for me than for you, because I found the list sobering in how many areas of ministry we had, and how many people were involved in making them work successfully. The sobering part was that Ohev had become more multi-faceted than being able to function with the help of only a few elders and deacons. No, Ohev may not have great numbers, but it has crossed a threshold of complexity, and has become healthfully dependant on the time, effort, and participation of its members.

So it occurred to me, and I said to myself "Michael," (I always call my self "Michael" when I talk to myself). "Michael" (I said), you and the elders need more input from the members in the idea department. The members see things that the leaders do not necessarily see, and experience things in a way that they do not necessarily experience. On the other hand, if we have 150 members we probably have 300 good but different ideas that could take us in too many directions. So how to handle this?

Now I had been working on a short paper entitled "My Ideal Messianic Jewish Congregation," and I said to myself "Michael," (I always call myself "Michael" when I talk to myself). "Michael" (I said), Why don't you finish up the paper and present it to the congregation as a model – a basis for them to channel their own creative thoughts toward a defined goal. So that's what I did, and the paper you have been given is the result. My prayer is that you will find this "ideal" congregation the kind of congregation you would like Ohev to be, and that you will feel a sense of ownership, and share your wisdom and advice with the elders and with me, as we move forward in God's Messianic Jewish work in 2008.

There are nine paragraphs in the paper and each paragraph contains several points. I wrote this on the premise that if my description of a Messianic Jewish congregation were truly ideal each element ought to be explainable by Scripture or by some other legitimate means. That is the reason for the large number of endnotes, most of which are references to Scripture. None of the nine paragraphs in the paper stand alone as complete; all nine must be read together, and the

paragraphs are not in order of their importance. We will not have time to cover all nine paragraphs today, but we'll cover what we can, and continue on another Shabbat.

All this has been preliminary, so let's now begin. Please read paragraphs 1 and 2 to yourselves as I read aloud:

1. A *Torah*-oriented, Yeshua-centered, New Covenant faith community, ideally consisting of both Jews and Gentiles who worship, serve, and live together in unity and spiritual equality, and which provides a congregational home for Messianic Jewish believers.
2. A faith community, as previously stated, that worships the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, that believes in the supremacy and inerrancy of Scripture (*Tanakh* and *kitvey B'rit HaChadasha*), in the leading and power of the Holy Spirit (*Ruach Kodesh*), and in walking out *Torah* in a New Covenant way.

I think being Yeshua-centered is a clear-enough concept, and so is the idea that Ohev should consist of spiritually equal Jews and Gentiles who worship, serve, and live together congregationally, are in basic unity, and provide a congregational home for Messianic Jewish believers. Let's, however, examine what it means to be a *Torah*-oriented New Covenant faith community that walks out *Torah* in a New Covenant way.

If we were the Israel of old, I would not be saying *Torah*-oriented; I would be saying "*Torah*-obedient" because during the days of the Tabernacle and the Temples, every word contained in *Torah* could be complied with literally, and all Israelites were expected to walk it out literally. That was being "*Torah* obedient." Today, however, we cannot be *Torah*-obedient to all of *Torah* for several reasons. Reason 1: We have no Levitical priesthood to officiate over animal sacrifices, and no Temple in which to do them anyway. That eliminates probably  $\frac{3}{4}$  of *Torah*'s instructions. Reason 2: We are in the New Covenant where Yeshua is our sin sacrifice, so logically, animal sacrifices for sin are no longer needed or authorized. Reason 3: The government of Israel has changed for us in that we are no longer under civil elder rule. That eliminates our ability to comply with several of the more interesting Commandments such as stoning rebellious sons at the City gates. Reason 4: We who are members of Ohev Yisrael are not living in the Land of Israel, so for us, that eliminates a number of other Commandments that are authorized only in the Land.

So by now we have eliminated about  $\frac{4}{5}$  of *Torah*'s commandment and we have a problem. The problem is that [Jeremiah 31:33](#) DOES NOT SAY:

*"I will put 1/5 of my Torah in their minds, and write it on their hearts;"*

The Scripture says:

*"I will put my Torah in their minds and write it on their hearts .."*

That means all of it – not  $\frac{1}{5}$  of it! What's more, [2 Timothy 3:16](#) tells us:

*“All Scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness, ..”*

“All Scripture” means “all Scripture.” Not 1/5 of Scripture. So, if we cannot obey all of *Torah* literally, the inference must be that the part we cannot obey literally must still be profitable for us in some way. In what way? And how do we know in what way? Well, that brings us back to where we began – saying that we are a “*Torah*-oriented New Covenant faith community,” rather than saying “*Torah*-obedient,” and not mentioning “New Covenant.” The “New Covenant” and the Holy Spirit it brought us are the keys to how we can comply with the Jeremiah Scripture, the 2 Timothy Scripture, and the entire *Torah*! The key is – now get this – the key, when it seems that applying the Commandments of *Torah* is difficult or impossible is to CONSULT THE *RUACH KODESH – THE HOLY SPIRIT*!

Now the statement I just made is a profound one because consulting the Holy Spirit means conversing with God – not only talking to Him, but also hearing Him talk back to us. And because our ability to comply with *Torah* in a New Covenant way requires this level of intimacy, we cannot say we are *Torah*-anything without it. The fact is, conversing with God through the Holy Spirit should be a personal goal for all New Covenant believers, but especially for us – Messianic Jews and Gentiles – whose calling it is to be a light to the nations regarding the walking out of *Torah*.

Now permit me a word about the supremacy and inerrancy of Scripture. First the inerrancy.

None of the originally written-down Scriptures have come down to us today. Perhaps they are hidden and will someday be found, but perhaps they were destroyed. What has come down to us through the centuries are copies – some in the original languages and also translations. When we say that Scripture is inerrant – in other words without error, we mean the originals – not what we have available to us today, because errors have been introduced through imprecise copying and faulty translations. How do we know? Because when we compare the earliest texts of Scripture that have been found, we find that there are small differences. Yet the texts of Scripture in the original languages that have been found archaeologically and in ancient libraries, are remarkable in how few and insignificant their differences are. In fact, they are so similar, that it is not an exaggeration to say it hardly matters which of the texts we adopt – God’s Word comes through loud and clear. And how do we know that the Scriptures came from God in the first place? Well, ultimately, it is a matter of faith, but I believe Paul when he wrote:

*“All Scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness, <sup>17</sup> that the man of God may be complete, thoroughly equipped for every good work” (2 Timothy 3:16-17).*

And I often think of something I once heard Radio evangelist Sid Roth say. He was debating with a Jewish man who believed in God but denied the inspiration of the Scripture. Sid asked the man: “So you believe in God?” The man said “yes,” and Sid followed up by asking him: “Do you believe that God created the world?” The man responded “yes.” Then Sid asked him: “Don’t you think that if God could create an entire world He can write a book?” That has always been very convincing to me!

Now let's talk about the supremacy of Scripture. During the reformation, when the protestants (today we refer to them as Protestants) separated themselves from the Roman Catholic Church, one of their declared differences from the Roman Church was their doctrine of *Sola Scriptura*, which means "Scripture only." In declaring *Sola Scriptura*, they were breaking with the Roman Church's belief that its tradition was inspired by God, similar to and on the same level as the inspiration of the Scriptures. The protestants insisted that henceforth, only Scripture would be held to have that high level of authority. Over the years, the doctrine of *Sola Scriptura* remained strong within the Protestant churches, including those termed fundamentalist and evangelical. And it is from these two Christian traditions that *Sola Scriptura* found its way into, and influenced modern Messianic Judaism.

In the early years of our movement in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, *Sola Scriptura* served us well because we wanted to clearly distinguish ourselves from Rabbinic Judaism which, like the Catholic Church, embraced an extra-biblical tradition that it claimed was inspired by God. At least Orthodox Judaism did by the way it elevated the *Talmud*. But the early Messianic Jewish movement had not yet caught the fire of the 1906 Azuza Street revival that brought a new and powerful phenomenon into the mix – the Holy Spirit who performed miracles and renewed men's ability to speak prophetically as they did in the First Century. Some Messianic Jews embraced the Holy Spirit and some did not, and some still have not. But for those of us who have, we recognize two kinds of authentic communications from God – the Scriptures that remain primary, and, secondarily, prophetic revelation that comes through the Holy Spirit. So if we accept that prophetic revelation is inspired, what do we mean by "Supremacy of Scripture?" We mean two things: First, Scripture is the only written Word that we consider inspired – not the *Talmud*, not the *Midrash*, not even Dan Juster's book "Growing to Maturity." God may have (and probably did) plant inspiration in other writings, but we don't look for inspiration there, and even when we suspect it, we do not treat it as such. Second, we don't even acknowledge something as being prophetic until we have tested it against the Scriptures and discerned it to be of God.

1 Thessalonians 5:20 tells us not to despise prophecies, and verse 21 immediately after it tells us:

*"Test all things; hold fast to what is good."*

The Bereans are the quintessential biblical example of believers who did just that, and Acts 17:10-11 records it for us:

*"Then the brethren immediately sent Paul and Silas away by night to Berea. When they arrived, they went into the synagogue of the Jews. These were more fair-minded than those in Thessalonica, in that they received the word with all readiness, and searched the Scriptures daily to find out whether these things were so."*

Clearly, "the word" they received were things told to them orally and represented to be God's Word. But before they accepted it as God's Word, they searched the Written Word – the Scriptures – to find out whether what they were told was true.

I think we have time for one more paragraph from my paper on the Ideal Messianic Jewish Congregation, so let's look at number 3:

3. A faith community, as previously stated, that, as a part of the universal body of believers (*ekklesia*), affirms God's promises to the people Israel concerning the Land, and urges return of the *ekklesia* to its biblical Jewish roots.

What is so problematic about God's promises concerning the Land that we have to affirm it? The answer is contained in two words: "replacement theology." Like so many things God promised to Israel, the Jewish people had to fight to take it, and then fight to hold on to it. God's promise of Land to Israel originates in Genesis 17:7-8 where God says to Abraham:

*"And I will establish My covenant between Me and you and your descendants after you in their generations, for an everlasting covenant, to be God to you and your descendants after you. Also I give to you and your descendants after you the land in which you are a stranger, all the land of Canaan, as an everlasting possession; and I will be their God."*

But the fact that God gave the Land to Israel did not mean that the heathen who inhabited it were willing to hand it over. Some of the early accounts of how Israel had to fight for the Land are in the Book of Joshua. In many ways, today's fight against replacement theology is the same. God chose Israel to be a blessed nation to serve God, and part of that blessing was Land. Today, certain elements are seeking to take the blessings promised to the Jewish people Israel, including the Land, and call it theirs. They are not doing it by military action. Rather, they are doing it by spreading the falsehood that God has washed His hands of Israel because Israel rejected the Messiah. God, they say, has now given all of Israel's blessings and promises to the Church which is the "new Israel." When I stated in the paragraph I read you that a Messianic Jewish congregation needs to affirm God's promises to the Jewish people concerning the Land, I meant it both in word and deed. We teach the truth of it, yes. But even more, our very existence and especially our growing presence in the Land of Israel along with other Jews, puts the lie to what replacement churches teach. What's more, the very existence of the land of Israel and the Jewish people's return to the land is nothing short of a miracle that the Christian Church has to see and marvel at.

Finally, the ideal Messianic Jewish congregation has a ministry to the Christian Church in urging its return to its biblical Jewish roots. From the beginning, belief in Yeshua was a Jewish thing, and when Gentiles first came to faith, they considered their New Covenant meetings to be part of Judaism. In his letter to the Romans in chapter 11, Paul taught how Gentiles who became born again in Yeshua became grafted into Israel to form a commonwealth consisting of Jewish and Gentile believers, and how, while retaining their individual identities, Jew and Gentile became "one new man" in the faith. Unfortunately, turns of history resulted in the Gentile believers distancing themselves from their Jewish brethren and forming their own *ekklesia*, that today we call "the Christian Church." In doing so, they not only disenfranchised the Jews, but cleansed their new institution of most things Jewish which, regrettably, also meant almost all things biblical that came from the *Tanakh*, the first part of the Bible. It is part of our calling as Jewish and Gentile members of Messianic Jewish congregations to help the Church find its way back to what it has lost.

Well, time is up just as I was about to tell you why I consider Messianic Jewish congregations in the Diaspora, such as we are, to be “consulates” of Messianic Israel. I guess you’ll just have to be patient until next time.