

A Survey of the Messianic Congregational Movement: The Whys, Hows, and What-nows

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Lausanne Consultation on Jewish Evangelism

CEO Conference

Lumières, 18-22 May 2009

Messianic Congregations – and their fruit

It is generally accepted that the history of the modern Messianic Congregational Movement began with Rabbi Joseph Rabinowitz in Kishinev in 1884. In that first year Delitzsch wrote that ‘There are now said to be more than 200 families who have joined the new Hebrew Christianity...’ (Kjær-Hansen 62). By July of 1886 the new community had its own special burial ground (Kjær-Hansen 64), and in December of the same year it received permission to hold public gatherings (Kjær-Hansen 65). One event that illustrates the extent to which the movement in Kishinev drew attention (and maybe emulation) is the telling questions that Shabtai Rohold had to answer to the Toronto Presbytery in 1915: ‘Have you anything peculiar in your “Christian Synagogue”?’ and ‘Are you advocating what is called the “Messianic Judaism?”’ (Nessim 92). As can be seen from this question, not only were there more synagogues than the one in Kishinev, but, as today, they were viewed with suspicion within polite society.

Regardless of the semantics bandied about between ‘Hebrew Christianity’ and ‘Messianic Judaism’ there is no doubt in my mind that these early Messianic Synagogues are at one with the Messianic congregational movement that would later spring forth from their dormant roots. Nevertheless, it is fair to say that by the end of the 1960s the Messianic Congregational Movement had virtually ceased to exist, save a few pockets in North America. It would not be until the period between the Six Day War and the Yom Kippur War (1967-1973) that this would change. The change came with a move of God. Along with exhilaration at Israel’s stunning military success in 1967 came a post-Holocaust resurrection of Jewish dignity and self respect. In conjunction with the cultural revolution of the 1960s came a surge of new Jewish believers in Yeshua. With numbers came mutual affirmation. With self-respect came a desire to maintain Jewishness – personally and communally.

The 'WHY' of the Messianic Congregational Movement

At the core of the Messianic Congregational Movement is the conviction that Jewishness and faith in Yeshua are fundamentally compatible. This gives rise to its primary motivation: A desire to maintain the Jewish identity which history has proven is impossible within the greater body of Messiah.

Identity

There are few values more important to the Jewish community than that of survival. This needs no justification or explanation to those who know Jewish people well. Is this value compatible with faith in Yeshua the Messiah? Is it compatible with the idea of distinctly Jewish congregations in his Body? Many Jewish Believers in Yeshua (JBY) of the 1960s and 1970s said yes. The time had come to put an end, even if only partially successfully, to 2000 years of cultural and ethnic assimilation.

The Church's Ministry among Jewish People has just celebrated its 200th anniversary at its birthplace in Spitalfields, London. I felt honoured to be invited. Jewish believers world over owe much to this venerable organisation. To it belong some of the most luminous personalities and accomplishments in the history of Jewish evangelism. Nevertheless, the inevitable question must be asked: After years, decades and even centuries, where is the fruit? The answer is that the fruit of centuries' work has assimilated to the branches of the church that it has been grafted into. Its seed has been *cross-pollinated*, and its descendants are no longer recognisable. The 'fruit' has not reproduced after its own kind as it did not retain its identity. Rather than being grafted back into the root, it has been grafted into the branches. JBY in days past generally accepted not only the Gospel – but the Gospel as it had been contextualised into the cultures of the missionaries. Unfortunately, by the time Roland Allen wrote his seminal work on missions and there was the potential for mission approaches to change, the curtain was already closing on the stage of Jewish missions in Europe, to deadly effect.

Roland Allen, expressing ideas that would affect missions thinking for decades after him, wrote 'We naturally expect our converts to adopt from us not only the essentials but accidentals' (Allen 8). Years later it was an innate recognition and repudiation of this that drove some of the many new JBY, mainly in the USA, to assert their own identity and to begin ferreting out the 'essentials' from the 'accidentals'. Unconsciously, maybe, the new JBY were doing what Hiebert calls 'Critical contextualization' - seeking 'to find *metacultural* and *metatheological frameworks* that enable people in one culture to understand messages and ritual practices from another culture with a minimum of distortion' (Hiebert 92). With statements of faith that were (and still are in many cases) almost verbatim adaptations of standard Evangelical creeds, they yet sought to express God's truth and faith in Yeshua in their own way, in the context of their own ethnic and religious identity.

In 1988 David Stern published a 'Manifesto' that became a milestone in the developing theology of the Messianic Congregational Movement. In 2005 Mark Kinzer's *Postmissionary Messianic Judaism* similarly became a milestone that cannot and should not be ignored. It might be comforting to know that despite its title Kinzer assures us 'this book is not an attack on the missionary endeavour in general and in every context' (Kinzer 13). In this book, Kinzer cogently sets forth his thesis that there is a unique relationship between 'Yeshua (and his ekklesia), the Jewish people, and the Jewish way of life' (Kinzer 13).

Is Kinzer right? If so, the ramifications are extensive (as well as being beyond the scope of this paper). What makes Kinzer's thesis credible today is the growing conviction among a number of Messianic congregational leaders that the Jewish people *are* unique, and that it is a disservice to both the Church and the Jewish people, not to mention JBY, to trade away or downplay this distinctiveness. The national pride and self-respect that helped give birth to the Messianic Congregational Movement have clearly given way now to a deep theological conviction that within the universal Body of Messiah, the Jewish people have a distinct role to play.

In Canada, a special variety of wheat is grown that grew from just three ears of wheat harvested in 1842. This was after decades of experimentation with grains that were native to other countries and climates that didn't succeed in the Colony's short summers. Today Canada is one of the world's great grain exporters – all from those three ears. How? The seed was preserved, and sown again in the Canadian soil so that it might multiply.¹ As Messianic Jews we have rightly questioned how we might be able to reproduce after our own kind when we are routinely transplanted into a foreign soil.

So the issue of Identity is closely related to that of assimilation. Messianic congregations formed to preserve Jewish identity – and to address the issue of Jewish survival. Increasingly, Messianic Congregations are taking active steps to encourage Jewish youth to engage with other Jewish youth, with the hope that their Jewish identity might be passed on to the next generation.²

Safety

¹ From a journal called the *Canadian Agriculturalist* comes this famous letter in 1861: 'About 1842, Mr. David Fife of Otonabee, Canada West, procured through a friend in Glasgow, Scotland, a quantity of wheat, which had been obtained from a cargo direct from ... Danzig ... at the time of spring sowing. As it came to hand just before spring seed time, and not knowing whether it was a fall or spring variety, Mr. Fife concluded to sow a part of it that spring, and wait for the result. It proved to be fall wheat, as it never ripened, except three ears, which grew apparently from a single grain; these were preserved, and although sowed the next year under very unfavourable circumstances, being quite late, and in a shady place, it proved at harvest to be entirely free of rust, when all the wheat in the neighbourhood was badly rusted. The produce of this was carefully preserved, and from it sprung the variety of wheat known over Canada and the Northern States, by the different names of Fife, Scotch and Glasgow'

² A high profile example is the recent wedding of Joel Chernoff's daughter Sharon to Paul Wilbur's son Joel.

While not the primary motivation for the establishment of the Messianic Congregational Movement, safety has nevertheless been an issue for JBY even in North America. The safety is not that of the body, but that of the soul. To become a Jewish believer in Yeshua incurs serious risks: 1) alienation from one's own family; 2) alienation from one's own community; 3) loss of one's culture; 4) loss of the right to make *aliyah*; 5) the risk of being wrong – and actually be *stepping away* from God by believing in Yeshua, and fortunately less often than in the past, 6) loss of one's income and/or inheritance. On top of all this, JBY outside the Messianic Congregational Movement are expected to acculturate themselves to a church culture that sometimes is openly hostile to various aspects of their own.

Just last week, I received an email from a Jewish seeker who was attending an Alpha course. He wrote the following:

I attend an Alpha course at the moment my 3rd one, and heard a women saying that unless we went through Jesus then we would never enter heaven. I said to this women, so none of the Jews will go then and said no they never will, I then said but we are Gods chosen people, to which she replied that was the only mistake he ever made choosing the Jewish race! (*sic*)

Last month in Oldenburg I heard a preacher address a crowd of 3000 youth at a missions conference, telling them a 'joke' that clearly insinuated that Jewish people care more for money than anything else in the world, including their loved ones.

For a Jewish believer to be in an environment where this kind of prejudice can rear its ugly head at any time is not 'safe'. The spread of the Gospel among Jewish people is impeded by God's own people.

There is no doubt that theological and political trends both within and without the Church and the Messianic Congregational Movement are playing a significant part in the self-conception of JBY. An increase in so-called 'supercessionism' or 'replacement theology' is asking JBY to either accept its tenets – and therefore agree that God is basically done with the Jewish people – or become increasingly uncomfortable in its environment. Since supercessionism often has little place for Israel in the plan of God today, it opens the door for a negation of the Jewish people's existence and survival as well as for the significance of the State of Israel. Thus communities that subscribe to supercessionist theologies tend to alienate JBY within their midst. Sometimes, their theology and opinions verge on anti-Semitism.

Directly issuing from the need JBY have for safety is the safety that the Messianic Congregational Movement wishes to provide for its Jewish brethren who might or may be considering Yeshua's messianic claims. From the Jewish perspective, it would be better to enter a mosque than a church, since Moslems are not considered idolaters, but Christians are. To enter a church might be to take part in idolatry. Life events held in a church incur the disfavour – and disappearance - of family and friends, but the same people will often concede to celebrating these milestones in a neutral or Messianic context. Thus the

Messianic Congregational Movement provides safety not only for its adherents but for a portion of the wider Jewish community. Symbols used in Messianic congregations are uniformly Jewish symbols, to the extent that buildings that prominently display distinctly Christian symbols (e.g. crosses or statuary) are most often shunned as meeting places. In this respect, the Messianic Congregational Movement sought to be 'seeker friendly' and to operate within the Jewish community rather than without it, although with only partial success.

Often, non-Jewish congregations effectively minister to Jewish people. Both in North America and in Europe, we do not see evidence of wide scale 'defections' from mainline churches to the Messianic Congregational Movement, which implies that most Jewish believers are happy in their new communities and generally not too uncomfortable.³ On the other hand, this does not negate the concern in the Movement to provide a safe haven in an unsafe world.

Expectancy

Messianic Jews and the Messianic Congregational Movement have a vibrant expectancy that their movement has an unparalleled significance. The Movement hopes that as it grows in wisdom and stature, it will also grow in favour with God and men. As in its early days, it continues to be optimistic concerning its relevance to the Jewish people, the Church and the world. Increasingly, as Jewish people are being won directly into the Movement, both in the *galut* and in Israel, this expectancy is being rewarded.

Stern's *Manifesto* (Stern 12) proposes that there are four benefits of the Messianic Congregational Movement, arguing that it is: 1) 'useful in evangelizing Jews; 2) 'useful...that Gentile Christians may appreciate their own Jewish roots'; 3) 'useful in ministering to Jews who have accepted Yeshua as the Messiah; and 4) 'a witness to the world.' I would summarise this as saying that the MJM expects that it will be effective in Jewish evangelism, Jewish discipleship, world evangelism, and teaching the church.

It should be interesting to members of the LCJE that two of these 'uses' of the movement have to do with evangelism. In practice this has generally consisted of evangelising through congregational programmes, services, and the personal relationships that members have with Jewish people. Most members of the Messianic Congregational Movement would probably agree heartily with Newbigin, who asserted that 'Jesus... did not write a book but formed a community.' (Newbigin 227) It is the expectant

³ Interestingly, safety has not only become an issue for JBY, but there are a significant number of Gentile believers who similarly feel alienated from their churches ideals, customs, and leadership because their theologies of Israel and the Jewish people cut across the grain.

aspiration of the Messianic Congregational Movement that its congregations might be an effective, if not the leading, agent in bringing Jewish people face to face with their Messiah.

The Messianic Congregational Movement is more than ever sure of its significance as its goals are increasingly being realised. It increasingly expects to play a growing role in the Church and the Jewish world. This expectant conviction is the underlying stimulus that has led increasing numbers of JBY to give their lives and talents to the advancement of the movement.

In addition, there is little doubt that the Messianic Congregational Movement believes that the promise of Romans 11:15 ('what *will* their acceptance *be* but life from the dead?') is directly pertinent to itself. As a form of first fruits, the Messianic Congregational Movement sees itself as having eschatological significance. Being overwhelmingly premillennial, the Messianic Congregational Movement also looks forward to the day when 'all' the Jewish nation will 'be saved.' This is in part the Movement's relevance to worldwide evangelism.

The 'How' of the Messianic Congregational Movement

Early Theology, Praxis, and Growth

As the Messianic Congregational Movement began to establish itself, one of the first feet across the threshold into the uncharted territory ahead was Philip Goble, with his handy workbook *Everything You Need to Grow a Messianic Synagogue* (Goble), published in 1974. By 1979, the Union of Messianic Jewish Congregations was formed in the USA. Today the Messianic Congregational Movement traverses the Jewish world. In every country with a significant number of Jewish people, Messianic Congregations have established themselves. Major movements within the movement have been instituted. Some are affiliated with the Messianic Alliances of various countries; others such as the Union of Messianic Jewish Congregations and the Union of British Messianic Congregations are more independent. In what I view as a sign of health, most sizeable affiliations contain within themselves a diversity of practical theologies of Messianic Judaism, most notably typified by groups in the UMJC known as '*Hashivenu*' and '*Dayenu*'.

In Israel, by the 1980s Israeli congregations were making the sometimes painful transition from being largely ex-patriot, foreign-language meetings to Israeli, Hebrew-speaking assemblies. There may be some question as to whether Israeli Hebrew congregations should be considered part of the Messianic Congregational movement. These congregations typically exhibit a different adaptation of the ramifications of Jewishness and belief in Yeshua than congregations in the *galut*. Nevertheless, the recent moves of congregations in the *Galil* and in Netanya to purchase Torah scrolls for use in their services points to what is really a rapid development towards accommodating traditionally Jewish forms of worship. It could be argued then that the differences in style inside and outside Israel are decreasing.

Initially, the Messianic Congregational Movement had to break considerable 'market resistance.' Most commonly, this resistance came from the church at large as well as from those most involved in Jewish evangelism. As a result the Movement had to provide a rationale for its existence particularly in the light of Ephesians 2:14⁴ and Galatians 3:28.⁵ Immediately, the early movement had to theologise and begin to grapple with the ecclesiological issues involved in establishing distinctly *Jewish* congregations. The presence of many non-Jewish 'cheerleaders' in the movement both simplified the task of answering charges of exclusivity and complicated the task of maintaining a Jewish identity in Jewish congregations where the majority was often not Jewish.

Challenges that Lie Ahead

Needless to say, not all of those who know the Messianic Congregational Movement well are impressed by its distinctives. Most notable among these are Baruch Maoz and Stan Telchin. In what could be viewed as a sign of maturity, the Messianic Congregational Movement is now developing its own critics from within. What this points to is that theology and praxis within the Messianic Congregational Movement is far from universally accepted or uniform, and still open for debate.

Recently Richard Harvey completed a dissertation titled *Mapping Messianic Jewish Theology*. In that work, he surveys Messianic theology from around the world according to the Jewish convention of theologising in terms of God, Torah and Israel. A number of observations can be made on the basis of his work. First, although Harvey has surveyed a great number of Messianic theologians from around the world, he has by no means exhausted the pool of potential contributors. Secondly, despite this there has not yet been as *much* theologising as there could or should be. (Harvey 281) Thirdly, as he points out, there are yet no standards or even discussions concerning the methods to be employed in the construction of Messianic Jewish Theology. (Harvey 283)

To me these are some of the most pressing indictments of the Messianic Congregational Movement. In forty years its leadership has been too busy pursuing its own agendas and causes, no matter how worthy these might be, to exchange ideas, to confer with one another, and to work towards constructively developing a Messianic theology, or even theologies. I find it distressing how few mission leaders and those involved in Jewish evangelism, not to mention the staff in their organisations (present company excepted I am sure), subscribe to or even know about the *Mishkan* or *Kesher* journals. Here I have to point

⁴ 'He... has broken down the middle wall of separation'

⁵ 'There is neither Jew nor Greek...'

at myself too. The demands of growing a charity in the United Kingdom make it very difficult for me to carve out space – including psychological space – for study and writing.

It is careful, reflective theologising that holds the potential to provide reasonable answers and theological solutions to the issues that even today hinder the growth of the Messianic Congregational Movement. Do JBY have any obligation to retain their Jewish identity? Are they obliged by God to join their local churches, to seek out a Messianic congregation, or neither? Is the Jewish believer in the same relationship to the law as the Gentile believer? How is the Messianic Congregational Movement theologically pertinent to the church-going Jewish believer? The questions flow easily. The answers do not. MJT is only beginning to constructively engage on the academic level with either Jewish theology or Christian.

The future of the movement – partially as the fruit of two centuries' mission effort – depends on such thoughtful reflection. Without it, the Messianic Congregational Movement will condemn itself to a marginal role in the Body of our Messiah, being regarded by the majority as simply 'fruity.'

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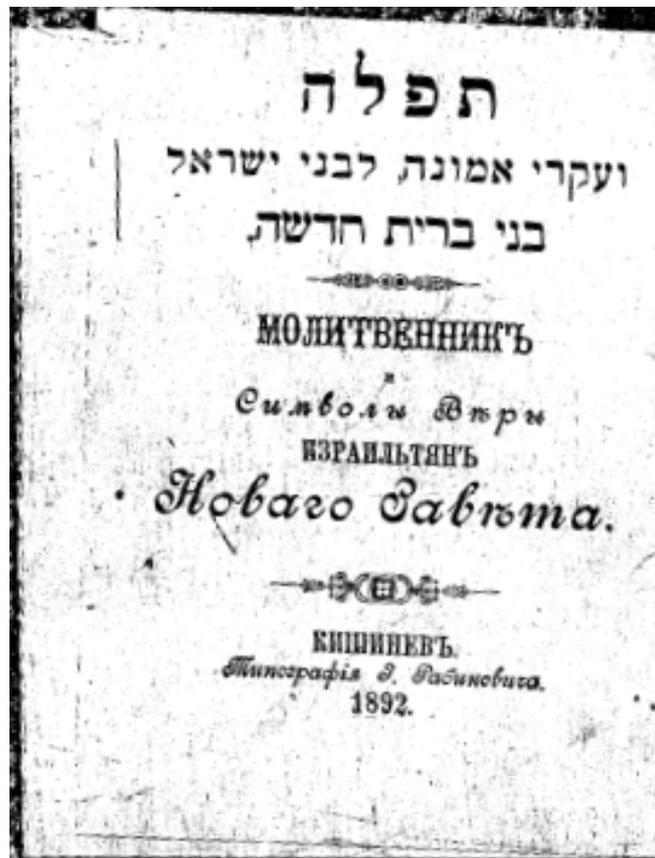


Figure 1 - Face of the Kishinev Siddur, 1892