

**The Nature of G-d and the New American Jew:  
A Response to Akiva Cohen and Jhan Moskowitz**

Joshua Brumbach  
Borough Park Symposium  
April 12-14, 2010  
New York, NY

*“I’m 17 now, and as lazy as it sounds, I’m indifferent to being Jewish. My mom doesn’t like the idea very much ... But what makes me a Jew? We don’t go to temple, we don’t celebrate Shabbat, and we barely talk about Judaism ... On top of [it], my family provides me with lots of reminders about how hard it is to be Jewish ...*

*As a teenager I’m deciding who I want to be, but when I think about Judaism, it doesn’t even make the list. Nor do I feel guilty about it. How un-Jewish is that?”<sup>1</sup>*

-Joshua Raifman – Youth Radio (March 31, 2010)

We now live in a world where Jewishness is no longer a given. It is a choice. And any message we hope to share must be communicated in a way that reflects this new paradigm.

Akiva Cohen suggests that a Reconstructionist emphasis on community and belonging can inform our efforts at reaching young Post-Modern Jews.<sup>2</sup> However, I’m not so sure that the message of the Reconstructionist movement is compelling to young Jews. Although there is an emphasis on community and belonging, it is missing the key ingredient.

Three of the papers in this session (Cohen, Moskowitz, and Fleischer) all reference Mordecai Kaplan. This is interesting because although Kaplan may decidedly be a resource for Boomer Jews, his writings rarely inform today’s younger engaged Jews, who look to Heschel, Zalman Schachter-Shalomi, Shlomo Carlebach, and other vibrant spiritual thinkers.<sup>3</sup> This is because the concept of Judaism as a Civilization is losing ground in America today. An ethnic Judaism of bagels and lox cannot maintain Jewish identity over time, or over the span of multiple generations, primarily because it lacks a vision that is compelling to young, Post-Modern Jews.

---

<sup>1</sup> Joshua Raifman, “Jewish Teen Considers Passing Over His Faith,” Youth Radio, March 31, 2010.  
<http://www.youthradio.org/news/jewish-teen-considers-passing-over-his-faith>

<sup>2</sup> Akiva Cohen, “Communicating the Deity of Yeshua to Postmodern Jews” (Paper delivered at Borough Park Symposium, April 14<sup>th</sup>, 2010), 6-7.

<sup>3</sup> Also note the rise of independent minyanim, Eco-Kashrut, and publishers like Jewish Lights.

“Why is being Jewish important?” young Jews ask. “Because it is,” their parents answer. The failure of this message to satisfy deeply rooted human longings for purpose and vision is in evidence in the pews of nearly every standard issue suburban synagogue – a handful of mostly retirees and Boomers, with their children in attendance only for obligatory occasions or B’nai Mitzvah preparation.

Contrast this with the growing phenomenon of independent *minyanim*<sup>4</sup> which have been quite successful in attracting young Post-Modern Jews. And these communities are deeply spiritual, expect a high degree of participation, and tend to be more observant. What many young Jews are looking for is Judaism *AS A FAITH*, and they are surprisingly comfortable with a faith that demands something of them. This is quite the opposite of Kaplan’s perspective of Judaism as a civilization.

It is clear that many in the Messianic Jewish Movement get nervous when they hear the term Post-Modern. We spend so much time wringing our hands over whether this paradigm is “a good thing,” that we fail to recognize it as simply the operative paradigm of our day. There is no sense in passing value judgments on it. Post-Modernity is neither good nor bad ... it just is. It is a particular paradigm through which we interpret the world around us. Not so different from Modernism, which preceded it.

### **The New American Jew**

The New American Jew is a category that encompasses three primary generations – young Baby Boomers, Gen X’ers, and Millennials (Gen Y). According to Rabbi Sidney Schwarz,<sup>5</sup> the New American Jew is identified by three unique identity markers: They were born after the Holocaust and the birth of the State of Israel; they were raised without significant experiences in anti-Semitism, and raised in relative affluence and prosperity. The result is that the New American Jew is less inclined to build his or her identity around Israel or the Holocaust, and the rallying

---

<sup>4</sup> See: Elie Kaunfer, *Empowered Judaism* (Woodstock: Jewish Lights, 2010).

<sup>5</sup> Sidney Schwarz, *Finding a Spiritual Home* (Woodstock: Jewish Lights, 2003), 14.

cry ‘*Save the Jews!*’ is less likely to resonate with them. Above all, remaining Jewish is no longer a given. Being Jewish is a choice.

The issue at hand is not whether Jewish people are open to spiritual dialogue, or discussing the deity of Yeshua. The real issue is that the methodology we often employ is no longer valuable in articulating our message. The reason is because most of our methods are built on Modern assumptions, not Post-Modern sensitivities. The problem is not Post-Modernism, it is our thinking. Rather than Moskowitz’s claim that “we should become students of Post-Modernity”<sup>6</sup> to reach our wider Jewish community, I propose that we should become students of our people and their current spiritual needs.

This is where I am in complete agreement with Akiva Cohen<sup>7</sup> and my fellow respondent Rabbi Ruth Fleischer that this can only take place most effectively from within the Jewish community. We will not be able to be a prophetic voice *TO* our people unless we are a prophetic voice *WITHIN* our people.

Before we can ever speak to our fellow Jews about the deity of Yeshua, we first need to be able to relate and engage them on a general spiritual level. Otherwise, we are just speaking past them ... or worse, down to them. Abraham Joshua Heschel reminds us, “Judaism ... is a way of thinking, not only a way of living.”<sup>8</sup> We need to begin to think in Jewish Spiritual terms. Because the roots of the Messianic Movement run deep in Evangelicalism, what our Movement desperately needs most is a *Jewish* spirituality and ethos. The most effective way to communicate the deity of Yeshua is by remaining Jewish. After all, a witness apart from our people is no witness at all.

The key is relationships - but relationships that originate from within, not from without. As Akiva Cohen emphasized, “we cannot compartmentalize the communication of a belief apart from connection with a *community*.”<sup>9</sup> And this communication of belief is best accomplished

---

<sup>6</sup> Jhan Moskowitz, “How to Effectively Communicate the Deity of Yeshua to a Jewish Post-Modern Community” (Paper delivered at Borough Park Symposium, April 14<sup>th</sup>, 2010), 4.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid. Cohen., 6.

<sup>8</sup> Fritz A. Rothschild, *Between God and Man* (New York: Free Press, 1997), 35.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid. Cohen., 8.

through our story(ies). “Since our faith is based on *stories* about Yeshua, I believe that the Gospels are as relevant as ever as literary vehicles to communicate the truth of our faith.”<sup>10</sup>

Our social fabric is bound together by stories. Stories are powerful because they are embedded in the Jewish psyche ... from our Scriptures, our Prayer Book, to our Passover Seder. However, our stories cannot be just a telling ... they must be stories with intimate details of our lives, our struggles, and how it all inter-connects to G-d, the Jewish People,<sup>11</sup> and the world around us. The New American Jew is craving something deeper. We are longing for meaning.

### **Communication and Connection**

Rabbi Lawrence Hoffman, in his book, *ReThinking Synagogues*, recalls a particular experience from a weekend retreat that is helpful to this discussion:

“A couple at the back of the room stood out. As the only people under forty, they had sat quietly for all of Shabbat, somewhat ignored by the others ... Hesitantly, one of them raised a hand ... ‘We came here not knowing what we would find ... but it seems to me that none of the questions asked so far has any relevance. The only question that counts for us is ‘Why be Jewish?’ That is what we came to find out.’

After a momentary hush, the room erupted in one denunciation after another – all quietly delivered, as if the crowd of older attendees were disciplining children. How could these young Jews be so callous ...? The reason for being Jewish is self-evident, isn’t it? How dare they even question that, [especially] after what happened in Europe?”<sup>12</sup>

For far too long the question of “Why be Jewish?” has remained largely unanswered and primarily dismissed within both the wider Jewish community and the Messianic Jewish Movement. However, if we are to have any sort of impact on a new (and ongoing) generation of Jews, we must recognize this as a legitimate question. Before we can communicate the deity of Yeshua, we must first be able to address this initial deep-felt spiritual need.

---

<sup>10</sup> Ibid. Cohen., 7.

<sup>11</sup> For more on this see: Rachel Wolf, “What is Our Message?” (Paper delivered at Borough Park Symposium, 2007)

<sup>12</sup> Lawrence A. Hoffman, *ReThinking Synagogues* (Woodstock: Jewish Lights, 2007), 60.

We often spend too much time trying to come up with answers to questions most Jews are not really asking. Our ability to reach our people depends solely on our ability to relate and engage them spiritually. In reality, the particular question of why be Jewish happens to be far more pressing for most American Jews than their questions about the deity of Yeshua. We do not have to see this as a threat, however, but rather a challenge. When we can engage our fellow Jews spiritually, and provide meaningful dialogue to the question “Why be Jewish?” only then can we engage them more particularly on the deity of Yeshua.

## Conclusion

This discussion is not an issue of Modernity verses Post-Modernity. A great number of our people are currently moving toward a spirituality that can answer their deep-felt spiritual needs. It is really no secret. What we Jews are seeking today is really the same thing Jews have always sought – **to simultaneously connect with G-d and to find our place within thirty centuries of Jewish history.** Because Jewishness is no longer a given, and viewed as a choice, the New American Jew is seeking a spirituality that is compelling. If we want to communicate to these new generations we’ll need to think out of the box, considering multiple “entry points” into community life and into faith. Our people are looking for something to believe in. Although many may not recognize it as such, they are looking for faith. But, they are seeking a faith that can engage them spiritually, intellectually, socially, and Jewishly. Our ability to reach our people, and ultimately communicate the message of Yeshua depends largely on our ability to communicate from within our community, and through a vibrant Jewish Spirituality, infused and renewed by our Divine Messiah.

*Joshua Brumbach recently relocated to Washington, DC where he and his wife are the founders of Yinon, an effort to re-imagine congregational life and develop innovative and creative programming for young Jewish professionals. He additionally serves as Young Adult Liaison for the UMJC. He previously served as the Assistant Director of the MJTI David Stern Center, and as the Assistant Rabbi of Beth Emunah Messianic Synagogue, both in the Los Angeles area. He holds degrees in Anthropology and Biblical Studies, and is currently completing a graduate degree in Jewish Studies at Towson University. He is married to Monique, a human rights attorney.*