

The Role of Torah and of Jewish Tradition in the Messianic Jewish Community

By Baruch Maoz

Presented to the Borough Park Symposium on Messianic Judaism
La Guardia Airport Hotel, New York, USA
October 2012

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I commend the initiators and organizers of this Symposium. The concept of a symposium in which varying positions are aired, scrutinized and sharpened on the whetting stone of scripture and careful thought is extremely helpful. I am grateful to the organizers for the invitation to think and pray with you over matters relating to our movement. Whether we prefer to describe ourselves as Messianic Jews or Jewish Christians, so long as we share the same faith, we belong to one another. We should, therefore, be eager to learn from each other, because that is how we grow. That is how we improve our ability to address both the world and our nation with the good news of God's grace and covenant faithfulness. I am eager to think and learn with you.

We are Jews and will remain Jews. This is a real part of our calling and is not called into question in this Symposium. The question is how to be such in full accordance with Scripture. I propose some definitions to help us think through that question with reference to a course of action chosen by a minority of Jewish believers, and which I believe should be revisited.

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I never enjoy flying: there is but sparse wriggle-room. By the end of the flight, I feel cramped, barely able to walk. My assigned title is The Role of Torah and Jewish Tradition in the Messianic Jewish Community; such a title provides necessary room to stretch comfortably.

The title, The Role of Torah and of Jewish Tradition in the Messianic Jewish Community serves well as a map for our discussion. My purpose in this short paper is to present the right, no – the necessity – of a distinct Messianic identity within the nation of Israel, and therefore of maintaining the Jewish identity for those of us who are Jewish and who belong to the body of Christ. At the same time, I shall seek to present a case against maintaining our Jewish identity as an element of our relations with God or with others in the body of Messiah.

We commence with the last word of my assigned title, the term **community**. How that term is used will define the contours of everything I wish to offer for your consideration.

Second, we discuss **Torah** in its various facets, seeking to define which facet is pertinent to which context.

Third, we attempt to clarify what is meant by **Jewish tradition**, adding a caveat or two.

Fourth, we discuss **the role** of the Torah and of Jewish tradition.

We finally close by returning to our starting point, with a difference and a brief discussion of the term "**Messianic Jewish Community**".

The proscribed scope of this paper will not permit extensive discussion, nor proof of most statements. This is a position paper, not a work of research. Please forgive me, therefore, if I forbear to quote a plethora of scholars or discuss conflicting views. Others will take up different positions. Their contributions will compensate for the lack of discussion in this paper.

One final note: I prefer "Jewish Christian" to "Messianic Jew." My reasons will, I believe, become clear as I proceed. However, in deference to the context in which the

Symposium is being held, and in the interest of being heard, I am happy to make a concession and will, therefore, use the parlance most acceptable to my presumed audience. Forgive me if I state that this concession is merely verbal, in the interests of discussion, not of principle.

Community – Ecclesia Versus Koinonia

There are at least two ways we might use the term “community.” One is synonymous with the New Testament Greek term *ecclesia*, which, in brief, serves in the NT primarily to denote a fellowship of saints gathered for the worship of God according to his word. The second way we might use the term denotes a society of individuals who share a complex of substance, which may be made up of common history, goals, concerns and interests, culture, language and preferences. Thus, the Ephesian gathering described in Acts 19:39-41 is likewise referred to in terms of an *ecclesia*.

Ecclesia Koinonia

In an *ecclesia* of believers in Messiah, God’s word is authoritatively preached, he is worshipped according to his word, the sacraments and discipline are administered, all conduct is organized according to scripture and the body’s officers are appointed and function by the same standard,

to which nothing may be added and from which nothing may be subtracted. In the context of *ecclesia*, members are united by the finished work of Messiah and his presence through the Holy Spirit. *Ecclesia* has the glory of God as its primary goal.

Community – *koinonia* in Greek – is an important aspect of the life of an *ecclesia*. One cannot be a faithful member of the *ecclesia* without sharing *koinonia*. Membership in the *koinonia* of an *ecclesia* is by grace through faith. We relate to one another on the grounds of grace, not on those of ethnic or cultural identity, of personal achievement, or of shared interests and purposes; nothing more than a living faith in God through Messiah, the product of the grace of God and regeneration by the Holy Spirit, is necessary. God as he is known in Messiah is all in all. He is the ground, goal and focus of all that is done in *ecclesia*. He is the one and only legitimate distinctive, and he shares this central role with no one and with no other issue.

In the *ecclesia*, we meet other brethren to whom we have been united into one new man: Jews and Gentiles, males and females, bond and free. The *ecclesia* does not consist of Jews and converts to Judaism, but of Jewish and gentile sinners converted to God, between whom there was **no difference** in sin and there is **no difference** in grace.

Nor may we establish any difference. All sinned and came short of the glory of God. All are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Messiah Yeshua. The same God is rich toward all who call upon him. The middle wall of partition has been broken down.

This lack of difference constitutes an important aspect of the Gospel, and is the logic behind Paul’s repeated and sacrificial insistence that Jews and Gentiles should live, worship and serve together on the same grounds on which they were justified, and within the same congregational context.

Any erosion of that unity is an erosion of the Gospel because it is tantamount to attributing spiritual standing to something other than God's amazing grace.

We are not, therefore, entitled to insist on national, gender or social distinctions with regard to our communal worship, our walk with God, our obedience to him, our spiritual advancement or fellowship and shared service in the body of Messiah. The same kind of obedience is required of all; the goals and duties of all are identical; no spiritual advantages or disadvantages are attached to culture or to ethnic identity. In Messiah, we are all one, one in the *ecclesia*, which is his body.

Our oneness does not consist merely in that we are spiritually equal, but also in that we are spiritually identical. In Messiah, that is to say, in the context of *ecclesia*, there is neither Jew nor gentile, male nor female, freeman nor slave. Wherever else differences may legitimately exist, in Messiah they have been done away with and a single identity is shared by all: we are followers of Yeshua.

In the *ecclesia*, Messiah – not our distinctions – has pride of place. His primacy outshines the differences between us. He is the Alpha and Omega of salvation history and of all we do in the context of *ecclesia*. His saving work is sufficient for every aspect of our salvation: in him we are circumcised with a circumcision not executed by human hands, sanctified by grace, forgiven, secure, complete. Nothing is obtained in Messiah but by his virtues and his accomplishments. However much we may differ in gifts of function and ability, no spiritual advantages, no spiritual privileges, are accorded to one individual in Messiah and not to another.

This is in accordance with the hope inculcated by scripture. We would do well to remember that our Hebrew Bible does not begin at Genesis chapter twelve but at chapter one; not with Abraham but with creation as a whole and, more specifically, with Adam and Eve; they, not Abraham, were the beginning of humanity, created in the image of God. God did not begin history by creating Jews but by creating humanity, and his purposes of blessing and salvation neither began nor ends with the Jewish people. Scripture goes on to speak of the nations, indicating Israel's essential relationship to them, indicating that Israel's calling had the blessing of the nations in view.

Of course, this is not to deny that Israel differs from the nations. But it does so in a manner that was ultimately intended to characterize all nations, so that Isaiah could speak of the day when "all nations will stream" to the worship of God, saying one to another, "come, let us go up to the mountain of the Lord, to the house of the God of Jacob. He will teach us his ways, so that we may walk in his paths."

After all, is God the God of Israel only? Is he not also the God of the Gentiles? Indeed, he is the God of the Gentiles as well.

Abraham's call entailed Gentiles as well as Jews. God's promise through Isaiah goes so far as to put Egypt and Assyria – Israel's traditional enemies – on a par with Israel when the prophet says that the Lord will speak of Egypt as "my people" and of Assyria as the product of his creative activity in history, just like Israel. Even when God works his terrible work through and on Gog and Magog, he describes his purpose in universal terms: "I will bring you against my land *that the nations might know me.*"

There is no room within the *ecclesia* for ethnic or cultural boundary markers, and we must not nullify the grace of God by asserting distinctions that formerly played a

role in our thinking. Whatever we formerly viewed as gain we now consider loss for the sake of Messiah. Everything is a loss compared to the surpassing worth of knowing Messiah Yeshua, our Lord, for whose sake we have willingly lost all things because we consider them no more than trash, so long as we are found in him, not claiming any advantage of our own but that which comes from God through faith in Messiah. The one aspiration that now drives us is to know him whom to know is life eternal, to experience the power of his resurrection and to participate in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, so as to attain to the resurrection from the dead.

We recognize that the attribution of any spiritual gifting to anything but the work of Messiah is to imply that he **died in vain**, an implication from which we shrink in horror. In the past, we related to people in terms of a spiritual walk according to their national identity, gender and social standing, but we do so **no longer**.

The primacy and sufficiency of Messiah's finished work are the grounds of our unity, which unity is a testimony to that primacy and that sufficiency. We have turned our eyes upon Yeshua, looked full on his wonderful face, and the things of the earth have grown strangely dim in the light of his glory and grace. Any weakening of the unity he has created threatens the clarity with which we testify to Messiah's place in our lives. We must, therefore, maintain the biblical tension between the Bible's particularity and its universalism. For that reason, any role our ethnic and cultural identity, or the Torah or tradition may be allowed to play in our private and communal lives must be visibly, overtly, very clearly subordinate to Messiah.

We are one in Messiah with those of all nations, however much we may differ from them due to our Jewishness. That oneness must find practical expression in the context of local *ecclesia* life; there should be neither Jewish nor Gentile *ecclesiae*. Our congregations should reflect the essence of the Gospel. Ethnic and cultural differences do not distinguish us in the context of local congregations. We relate to one another on the grounds of the grace that purchased our salvation, and on no other grounds.

We would do well to remember that most of the conflicts Yeshua had with the synagogue had to do with what has become fashionable to describe today as "boundary markers" such as the Sabbath and dietary laws, that distinguished Jews from Gentiles, and faithful Jews from others. Most of Paul's conflicts had to do with those markers *in the context of ecclesia*, with the addition of circumcision. The reason for the addition lies in that fact that Yeshua's audience was comprised primarily of circumcised Jews, while many of Paul's converts were uncircumcised Gentiles.

Contrary to much of modern practice, there is no biblical legitimacy for ethnically-based, culturally-orientated, or linguistically focused congregations, any more than it is legitimate to separate into white and black churches, blue or white collar churches, or churches for the young and for the elderly, for men or for women.

Of course, each of these groups differs from the other. But that is the beauty of the Body of Messiah: it is a coat of many colors, in which each culture, each set of national interests clashes with others, challenges them, and thus promotes a process of sanctification in which all are made to be more like him who saved them; where human differences are put into their proper place by being made secondary to God in Messiah; secondary to spiritual and moral concerns; secondary to the unity of the body of

Messiah. We should not seek meaning in self-fulfillment – individual or communal – but in God as he is known through Messiah.

It never occurred to the apostles to form separate congregations for Jews and for Gentiles – although tensions between the two were the main source of difficulties within the body of Messiah for decades. The obvious solution would have been to divide into separate but fraternal entities, respecting each other from a distance and assisting each other where agreement was found. But such an option would have constituted a denial of the grace on which all – Jew and gentile – stood. It would have laid the grounds for elitism in the church: “You’re OK, but not like us,” thereby eroding the primacy of Messiah and the completeness of his work by allowing distinctions to divide in spite of all that unites.

Nor is there room in the *ecclesia* for the introduction of human traditions, however much we might cherish them. God’s worship is to be pure, as he has commanded it to be, with neither adulteration nor dilution. Our forefathers were forbidden to introduce into God’s worship anything but what he had commanded. Aaron’s sons were punished for offering **strange fire**, defined as fire **the Lord had not commanded**. Our worship is not to be taught us by precept of man, not even by rabbis, but by the commandment of God.

Community in a Broader Sense

At the bare minimum, community means shared concerns, interests and goals, common duties and privileges, and a common language – and culture is a language. Charles Sherlock describes language as “perhaps the most fundamental aspect of human culture.”

Community, in the broader sense, is of extreme importance. Human camaraderie, moral, intellectual and emotional encouragement is essential to mankind’s health and happiness. God is an eternal community of father, Son and Holy Spirit. Human society was designed to be a reflection of the godhead. Community is, therefore, essential to the image of God in man. Surely, this is an important implication of the divine **Let us make man in our image**.

In the Garden of Eden, man lacked nothing material or spiritual. He was in a perfect world, in intimate fellowship with his Maker. The world was his domain and mandate. Still, God described man as **alone**, and evaluated this situation as **not good**.

Worship and spiritual obedience do not exhaust man’s humanity; he was created with a need for human community in a broader sense as well as in the narrow. Man not only needs the company of peers for worship – the special domain of *ecclesia* – but he needs their company for the cultivation and maintenance of his humanity in the many God-given areas of life other than worship.

Prior to sin, at the time of man’s innocence, man needed help to be and to do what he was made to be and to do. So God created for him an *ezer kenegdo*, (עֶזֶר כְּנֶגְדּוֹ), one to assist *ezer* (עֶזֶר) him by complementing him *kenegdo* (כְּנֶגְדּוֹ). Without community both in a spiritual and in a broader sense, no individual is all he can be, all he is meant to be, or all he needs to be. However valuable *ecclesia* is, broader community is also needed. Such a community meets legitimate needs and opens legitimate vistas for

which *ecclesia* was not designed. All the more is this so since sin invaded the world. Community is now needed in areas that would not have otherwise existed.

In contrast with *ecclesia*, distinctions are valid in the context of community. People commune with some and not with others over shared interests, concerns and identities that distinguish them from others and form the rationale of each community's existence. People who meet to play chess do not meet to play basketball, Democrats are not Republicans (some might wish they were) and Jews are not Gentiles. *Ecclesia* does not exhaust our humanity. We were made for community in a sense broader than that afforded by *ecclesia*.

The broader the **sense** is, the narrower the **community**. Many who belong to the *ecclesia* do not and ought not belong to one or another kind of community. No kind of superiority is involved, but differences are acknowledged. We were made to differ one from another and thus contribute to the amazing variety involved in being human.

Community is for mutual enabling in areas designated by each community, for an ongoing contribution to specific aspects of life in exclusion of others, for the creation of a distinct sphere in which important aspects of our God-given humanity come to expression and our God-given potential is realized in other than spiritual realms. In the *ecclesia*, we are neither Jews nor Gentiles, but in community we may be – and, I suggest, we Jewish followers of Yeshua very much should be – what God has made us to be: Jews.

In community individuals are Jews or Gentiles, male or female, freemen or slaves. As such, they have differing duties and privileges. This is the primary sphere in which, if we are circumcised, we should not seek to undo our circumcision, nor seek circumcision if we are uncircumcised. Jews should remain Jews and Gentiles, Gentiles. We should each continue within the context of the social and national callings in which we found when we responded to the gospel of grace.

In this paper, I shall not use the term “community” to denote the *ecclesia*, nor that aspect of *ecclesia* life characterized by *koinonia*. I enlist the term here to describe a body of individuals – in our case, a body of Jewish believers – united by common interests and concerns that are not the domain of *ecclesia*, for the promotion and enjoyment of those interests and concerns.

Such interests and concerns may well be compatible with scripture, but they do not fit the description of *ecclesia koinonia* in important areas: Messianic community membership, for example, is contingent on ethnic and cultural distinctives; the focus is on the ethnic and cultural identity that unites the Messianic community's members and distinguishes them from others; the goals which direct and the duties incumbent on members are implied by the shared identity of the community's members. Here too, of course, members are obliged by the word of God because no area of human life is exempt from his reign. But their obligations and privileges differ greatly from those in an *ecclesia*, and are not necessarily derived directly from scripture.

The Need for a Visible Messianic Jewish Entity

God has not forsaken his people, for this is his covenant with them: A redeemer will come out of Zion and turn ungodliness away from Jacob. Their restoration will be such a

blessing to the world that Scripture compares it to nothing less than a resurrection.

Is it not yet just a little while before Lebanon will be turned into a fertile field, and the fertile field will be considered as a forest? On that day the deaf will hear words of a book, and out of gloom and darkness the eyes of the blind will see. The afflicted also will increase their gladness in the LORD, and the needy of mankind will rejoice in the Holy One of Israel. For the ruthless will come to an end and the scorner will be finished, indeed all who are intent on doing evil will be cut off.

Like Paul, Isaiah tells us that this happy event is related to another: Thus says the LORD, who redeemed Abraham, concerning the house of Jacob: “Jacob shall not now be ashamed, nor shall his face now turn pale; but when he sees his children, the work of my hands, in his midst, they will sanctify my name; indeed, they will sanctify the Holy One of Jacob and will stand in awe of the God of Israel, those who err in mind will know the truth, and those who criticize will accept instruction.

God has declared his intention to bring Israel back to himself, and to do so by means of a Jewish believing community, obviously composed of Israel’s children but no less obviously the work of his hands, bearing the imprint of the spiritual and moral transformation that the divine work of regeneration implies. The result of such a visible believing community within the nation of Israel will be that the people will stand in awe of the God of Israel, those who err in mind will know the truth they rejected and those who criticize will accept the very instruction they refused.

Paul never spoke of his Jewishness as a thing of the past. Judaism was no longer his religion, but he continued to speak of his Jewishness in the present tense many years after he turned his back on Judaism. In Gal. 1:13-14 he speaks of his Judaism as a thing of the past, and in 2:14 describes Peter as one who lived like a Gentile. Judaism was no longer Paul’s religion, but he continued to speak of his Jewishness in the present tense. He remained Jewish to the day of his death, although he knew himself to be bound no longer by the dictates of the rabbis he formerly obeyed, or by the covenant God made with his forefathers at Sinai. He exulted in the hope of God’s faithfulness to his covenant with Abraham.

The distinction Paul drew between Judaism and Jewishness needs to be maintained. Judaism is a religion rooted in Phariseism and framed in the course of many years by the rabbis. It affirms a theology that includes the denial of Yeshua’s Messiahship and divinity; it teaches salvation by human effort, regardless of modern claims to the contrary, and asserts the authority of the rabbis as authoritative interpreters of the Law of God. Jewishness, on the other hand, is an ethnic identity with cultural implications impacted by rabbinic tradition but not bound by them.

Jewishness is an intensely communal affair. It is also a calling to which we should not turn our backs. Jewishness is a wonderful thing. I am grateful to have been created Jewish, I love being Jewish, and I call upon all Jews in Messiah not to submerge their Jewishness in the context of the *ecclesia* in such a way that they *de facto* erase it. In the *ecclesia*, we are neither Jewish nor gentile, but our national and cultural identity has not been obliterated by faith in Yeshua, nor should we obliterate it. Men and women do not lose their gender following conversion. Slaves are not transformed into freemen, or

freemen into slaves when their sins are forgiven for Yeshua's sake. Jews do not cease to be Jews or Gentiles, Gentiles by virtue of their faith in Messiah.

An ongoing Jewish identity is not merely a secular matter; it has deeply-rooted theological implications. Our faith in Messiah does not conflict with our Jewish identity. It is, rather, a fulfillment thereof: the Faith of Yeshua is the true Faith of our fathers. Yeshua is the hope of Abraham, the son of David, the fulfillment of our national hopes, of the covenant God made with our fathers; in him are and will be accomplished all the promises God made to the fathers. The ongoing reality of a visible remnant that believes in Messiah and conducts itself within the context of Israel's national life is a testimony to God's faithfulness and a call to the nation to turn to God in Yeshua. It is also an expression of the confidence we have that he, who is still in covenant with our people, will yet graft them in again and render their salvation a blessing to the world.

Our continued national existence is a testimony to the gracious faithfulness of God in spite of our people's sin, and a potential instrument for the salvation of our people, whom God foreknew and chose, in whom he will yet be glorified. We are obliged by the biblical tension between the Bible's particularity on the one hand, and its universalism on the other, and must maintain that tension.

If following Yeshua entailed the obliteration of our national identity, such following would constitute a denial of the biblical covenants, promises and history that are inextricably associated with it. If one cannot be Jewish and believe in Yeshua, then Yeshua is not the promised Messiah of Israel and, if that is the case, he is no Messiah at all. That is precisely why rabbinical Judaism insists that Jews ought not believe in Yeshua; why the rabbis equate such unbelief with Jewish identity. They wish to deny concerning Yeshua exactly what we wish to affirm. There are few things a Jew may believe or disbelieve without being accused of denying his Jewish identity; believing in Yeshua is deemed by the rabbis to be a demarcation line between "us" – the Jewish people – and "them."

There is need, therefore, for a distinct, vocal, well-organized, lively Messianic Jewish community within the nation of Israel that will prove the lie involved in such assertions. It is by way of such a community that we Jewish followers of Yeshua can and should strengthen each other, and reach out to our people, respond to their needs, and contribute to their welfare. It is by way of such a community that we can come to the defense of our people in times of distress and assert our national and cultural identity *vis a vis* the *ecclesia* on the one hand and our nation on the other. It is by way of such a community that we can address our nation as a nation, from *within*, and call it to Messiah, while the church (to which we also belong) addresses our people from without.

Such a community can provide a context in which needs rightly not addressed by the *ecclesia* may be recognized and met, in which propensities and preferences which must not be taken into account by the *ecclesia* may find legitimate realization. A Messianic Jewish community is called for and should be assiduously cultivated by those of us who are Jews, and who love and honor Yeshua.

Here I rest my case in defense of a Messianic Jewish community.

Torah

Before we discuss the role of Torah in a Messianic Jewish community, it would be helpful to define what is meant by the term in the context of this paper. I offer the following working definition: Torah is that conglomerate of commandments God gave our forefathers at Sinai as the outline of their national covenantal duties. In some circles it has been customary to divide the Torah into three distinct laws, moral, ceremonial and civil, as if one could stand without the other. The moral law is considered as having to do with issues of spiritual and moral conduct, the civil law with administrative conduct in the secular affairs of life, and the ceremonial with the conduct of divine worship. There is a measure of truth in such a division. There is, I suggest, also a large measure of untruth.

The law of the covenant was given as a unit. Israel's transgression of *any* facet of the law was to be punished (we've already had occasion to reference the death of Aaron's two sons when they transgressed a purely ceremonial restriction). The so-called civil requirement to leave the fringes of one's field for the poor had obvious moral implications. More examples could be given.

Yeshua fulfilled the whole Torah on our behalf. His sacrifice was in fulfillment of ceremonial facets of the law and, at the same time, of its moral and civil facets, for we transgressed all three, are guilty with regard to and are atoned for in relation to the three.

However, one facet of the law had prominence over the others: the moral requirements, enshrined in the Ten Commandments, were given pride of place in the Ark of the Covenant. The prophetic message had to do primarily with transgression of the moral facets of the Torah. The prophets repeatedly insisted in God's name that observance of ceremonial duties, however strict when moral duties were neglected and moral boundaries transgressed, negated the value of ceremonial observance. Israel's prophets did not hesitate to call even the gentile nations to account for their transgression of God's moral demands.

These demands are not discovered by human enterprise but are generally recognized, particularly by man's conscience. They are discovered through a reading of God's word as a whole, both Old and New Testaments, preeminently the Ten Commandments.

The New Testament recognizes this distinction within the one Torah. It repeatedly measures man's moral actions by the moral demands of the Torah and calls upon the faithful to exercise themselves in holiness in terms that sit well with Torah morality. There is not an inkling of a call to celebrate the feasts, practice circumcision or maintain the dietary laws. Quite to the contrary:

By way of example, and in the vein with Israel's prophets, Matthew informs us that Yeshua repeatedly castigated those who observed ceremony while neglecting what he described as the **weightier things of the Torah**.

Yeshua said, **Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you tithe mint and dill and cumin, and have neglected the weightier provisions of the law: justice and mercy and faithfulness; but these are the things you should have done without neglecting the others. You blind guides, who strain out a gnat and swallow a camel.**

That is the Law which, Paul insists, is inscribed on every human heart and by which all will be judged, which – obviously – had nothing to do with fringes on one's garment or dietary restrictions.

So much so that, In I Cor. 7:19, Paul juxtaposes circumcision with God's commandments when he says, "Circumcision is nothing, and uncircumcision is nothing, but the keeping of the commandments of God." James, whose dedication to the Torah is well known, speaking of the law in terms meant to bind a believing conscience, makes reference only to moral issues, never to civil or ceremonial.

Such a distinction within the Torah was known even to rabbinic Judaism, which affirmed that, with the coming of Messiah כלו מצוות (The commandments terminate). They did not mean that men would be free to lie, covet and murder. The moral facet of the Torah was not in view, but what some Christian theologians term civil and ceremonial. Moral duties remained and will remain forever.

Let it not be thought that we can better impact our people if we put on a show of keeping the law and the traditions. Remember Josephus' testimony that James, the brother of our Lord, was put to death "as an offender of the law" in spite of his strict observance of the Torah simply because he believed in Yeshua.

Our protagonists understand clearly what we are sometimes loath to recognize, namely that reliance on Yeshua for justification and for sanctification is exactly contrary to what Judaism teaches on the role of the Torah. So long as we affirm a biblical view of Yeshua, Judaism will reject us. We must, therefore, choose between Judaism and Jewishness, as well as between Judaism and Israel's Messiah.

Tendencies among us to erode a clear vision of the biblical view of the savior are the product of our backstaging him because our focus is not on him, where it should be, but on finding acceptance by affirming our Jewishness. God, having spoken long ago to the fathers by way of the prophets in many partial revelations and in many ways, has spoken to us in these last days by way of his Son, whom he appointed heir of everything that exists, through whom he also made all that exists. That Son is the radiance of God's own glory and the most exact representation of his divine nature. He upholds all that exists by his powerful word. It is he who offered the sacrifice that purifies from sin, and having accomplished that, he is now seated at the right hand of the Majesty on High. He should fill the whole of our vision.

We conclude, then, that one facet of the Torah remains man's eternal duty, being a reflection of the image of God in which we were created. That facet is moral. However, our relation to it has been fundamentally transformed by the coming of Messiah. We love God's Torah, not because it is the grounds of our standing with God, or a means to spiritual advancement. Our love of the Torah is the product of the sanctifying work of the Spirit in our hearts, an expression of our devoted gratitude and our loving obedience. In the moral facets of the Torah we discover glorious reflections of the image of God, and long to shape our hearts lives in accordance with that glory.

Such is the power of the Gospel. We do not invite the righteous to this feast of grace and glory, even as our Master did not come for the righteous; we invite poor, failing, fumbling sinners, with the promise that God will create in their hearts a longing for holiness that, in the last day, will find complete satisfaction: they will be conformed

to the image of his Son. Meanwhile, they will be empowered to struggle in confident hope of the glory of God and with the constant support of his grace. Jaroslav Pelikan put it well: “the church was not a moral all-star team for which one could qualify by being an athlete of holiness; it was a moral hospital in which ... one could be gradually healed.”

Jewish Tradition

We need not spend time on defining tradition *per se* beyond stating that tradition is the means by which any human community identifies itself. **Jewish** tradition is that living body of consensual more's, moral and cultural, by which Jews define themselves as Jews, celebrate the present, preserve the memory of their past and express their hopes and aspirations for the future. As Saadya Gaon put it, “our people the children of Israel, are a people only by virtue of our laws.”

We should pause, however, to reflect on two words in my proposed definition of Jewish tradition, *consensual* and *living*. In the interests of clarity, we view them in the reverse order. The term *living* serves to indicate what is true of any national tradition: it changes over the years, accruing new features and discarding others. Although Jewish culture is religiously orientated, it is not fossilized. The ways Jews, even Orthodox Jews, express their Jewishness today is as dissimilar as it is similar to the way Jews did so a mere 200 years ago. Many features continue through the centuries; many change. Modern rabbis determine *halacha* precisely because they realize that Jewishness needs to meet the challenges of the day.

The term *consensual* serves here to indicate that not every rabbinic dictum, not every feature handed down through the centuries, is adopted for all times by the majority of the people. There are features of Jewish tradition that are not embraced by the majority of the Jewish people, and therefore do not serve as consensual boundary markers of Jewishness. Fasting on the Day on Atonement, eating *matsa* during Passover, celebrating the biblical and traditional feasts in one way or another are part of the consensus; avoiding the use of electricity on the Sabbath (or lighting a fire) and eating kosher and are not. The consensus is that part of Jewish tradition which the majority of Jews observe, by virtue of which they consider themselves – and are recognized to be – Jewish.

A large part of Jewish tradition has its roots in the Bible. Some is directly biblical. The biblical feasts are a prominent example, while many of the dietary restrictions are not. Jewish tradition is not wholly biblical. *Hanuka* is not a biblical feast, nor do most features of the Passover *seder* have biblical authority. The *arba minim* used during *sukkot* are the product of rabbinic creative thinking, incorrect but part of a hoary tradition. The custom of men covering their heads has no biblical roots. The use of a *goy shel Shabbat* is contrary to the divine commandment. Hillel's famous *prosbul* is an convoluted attempt to resolve a difficulty which was the product of a biblical command and unbiblical selfishness: the Mishnah informs us that Hillel introduced the *prosbul* “seeing that the law which prescribed the release of debts every seventh year (Deut. 15:1-3) brought about the harmful consequence that people refused to loan one another and thus violated what was written in the law, namely, that a money loan should not be withheld because of the approach of the sabbatical year (ibid, 9-11).”

As is true of any national tradition, the roots and ground of Jewish tradition are primarily religious, both biblical and rabbinic. The extent to which this determines the ongoing authority of Jewish tradition, in whole or in part, is to be considered next.

The Role of Torah and Jewish Tradition

For obvious reasons, we begin with a consideration of the role of Torah. However valid we may deem other aspects of Jewish tradition to be, the Torah is God's word. As such, it has priority.

We noted above the three facets of the Torah and affirmed that Messiah fulfilled all three on our behalf. We also noted that Yeshua and Paul applied the moral facets of the Torah to all mankind, not by virtue of the covenant at Sinai but because it is expressive of the image of God in man and, therefore, of God's eternal will. All three facets remain, to a varying extent, part of our national tradition. The moral facet is far more than that. All human communities are bound by the will and authority of God and must, therefore, adhere to his moral demands.

Community, therefore – any community – should be concerned with the promotion and maintenance of moral law. It should pursue its common interests, promote its common concerns and forward its common goals in accord with divinely-imposed moral duties. Whether playing chess or engaging in politics, human communities should manage their affairs in light of mankind's obligation to accommodate itself to God's will. There is little need for discussion of this issue and, therefore, we will soon proceed to the next. Before doing so, there is an important point to be made:

Learning from the prophets and from our Lord Messiah, we recognize the priority or God's moral demands over all other considerations. We therefore further recognize that a community of Messianic Jews must not allow its national interests, concerns and aspirations to override the moral obligations imposed by God's law. We must not succumb to selfishness, national or personal. We are not free to ignore the interests, concerns and aspirations of others, even if they conflict with our own. We must courageously exemplify the morality of our Maker, and of the Messiah he sent for our people – his kindness, his sacrificial generosity and his surprising grace, even as we identify with our people. Eschatology ought not be used to secure us from God's call to a boldly humble kindness as we relate to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, for example. That is the burden of the prophetic message, and its accomplishment is a major feature of the prophetic view of the future.

Nor may we turn a blind eye to the moral failings of our people in the conduct of this conflict. Holiness, truth and righteousness are as much part of our duty as is any other aspect of our calling under God. As a community, we should exercise a truly prophetic ministry to our nation, putting the emphasis where the prophets put it: not in a predicted the future but in promoting righteous conduct in the present.

So much for the moral facet of the Torah. Some aspects of the civil and many of the ceremonial facets of the Torah continue to be part of our national tradition. But we no longer stone adulterers; we no longer maintain cities of refuge; we no longer hand

murderers over to be slain by the families of their victims; nor are we obliged in terms of our duties to avoid pork, attend temple worship in Jerusalem thrice a year, or offer sacrifice. However, belonging to a people entails certain obligations, including cultural obligations. Tradition is a way by which families, communities and nations identify themselves – to themselves and to others.

Of course, there are aspects of our national tradition to which we cannot adhere and, at the same time, be faithful to God in Messiah. We cannot thank God for commanding us to light Sabbath or *Hanuka* candles, because he never issued such a command. We cannot and do not share the Orthodox view of Gentiles. We also recognize that most of the extra-biblical traditions our people have embraced did not exist in New Testament times, that some of them are reactionary *vis a vis* the Gospel, and some are contra-biblical.

But where our traditions are compatible with the scriptures and form part of the national Jewish consensus, we adhere to them because they are part of our identity, part of who we are. We celebrate the arrival of the Sabbath with a festive Sabbath meal; bless God for the bread and wine, and light candles. We masquerade on Purim and have a Passover *seder*, preserving most of the elements of that tradition. We're Jews, and we love being Jewish. Maintaining our traditions in the context of our community is not a gimmick. Nor is it a means of evangelism or a way to find acceptance, a means to a greater spirituality or an authoritative grid through which we understand the scriptures. We maintain our Jewish culture because of what we are, sincerely, naturally, honestly, whole-heartedly.

At the same time, we must maintain a clear distinction between what has become national Jewish tradition, and our walk with God. We recognize that Jewish tradition, including those parts that issue directly from the Covenant of Sinai, provide no spiritual advantage and should play no role in our walk with God. They are now part of national custom and, to the extent that we practice them, we do so on a cultural basis, for cultural purposes, not as an act of religion.

Some of us might choose to maintain a kosher kitchen and prefer to wear a *yarmulke*, but we recognize that we're free to eat whatever we wish and do not pray with our heads covered so as not to dishonor him who is our head.

Nor do we separate into ethnic or cultural-based congregations. Our Jewishness is for community, not for *ecclesia*.

We insist on remaining Jews for yet another reason: we believe. Our affirmed, overt and communal Jewishness is an expression of our confidence that God has not forsaken his people, that he will yet work a work of grace among them. It is the fruit of our faith in God and an expression of the expectation his word has created in us.

A brief final point: Jewish national tradition is not only communal. It is first and foremost familial. One belongs to the community by way of practicing Jewish tradition in the context of one's home. As much would also be expected of those who belong to a Jewish Messianic community. Too much of traditionally Jewish custom has been moved by the Messianic Movement out of the family and into the congregation or the community, thereby transforming its' essence and eroding its Jewish character. We are

also engaged in too much nonsense that goes by the name of Jewishness, and that is not truly such any more than pork - or bagels- can be.

I am a Jew. I continue to be Jewish. In every area of my life – except the spiritual – I view and identify myself as Jewish. But I practice my Jewishness at home and do not impose or recommend it to those who are not of my people. At the church I attend, provision is made for those who wish to celebrate Christmas. None are required, nor is any spiritual advantage attached to such a celebration. The same holds for Jewish custom. Those of us who are Jewish, offer no apologies, while Gentiles are not encouraged to consider themselves disadvantaged. They do not need to dig into their distant past to discover some purported inkling of Jewish blood so as to be accepted as equals. They do not need to embrace our cultural distinctives; they maintain their own. Here we strongly disagree with our people’s traditional religion, expressed, for example, in Rabbi Yehuah HaLevi’s words in *The Khazari*: “Any Gentile who joins us sincerely shares our good fortune, but he is not equal to us ...we are the pick of mankind.”

We studiously avoid obscuring what God, in fulfillment of promises given to the fathers, has done for us in Messiah. Our lives, our thinking, our hoping, our praying, worshipping and celebrating are focused on Messiah, not on Torah or tradition. He is our tree of life, teaching us holiness and enabling us thereunto. What Torah could not do, God has done for us in Messiah. In Messiah we have a better covenant, a better sacrifice, better promises and ultimate fulfillment. Yeshua accomplished what the Torah could not do. The temple and its ritual have been replaced by the Son of God, who came to seek and to save that which was lost, and who offered one and final sacrifice by which he forever perfected those who turn to God through him. The Law of Moses no longer holds primary place in our lives: Messiah has come, and he is our all in all. We ought not nullify the grace of God by reestablishing Torah. Nothing need be added to Messiah’s finished work, and any attempt to do so is to diminish it. Through him we have access within the veil and discover God in Messiah to be a very present help in time of need.

The Torah no longer serves as the focus of our obedience; Yeshua is.

We are disciples of Messiah, dedicated to keeping *his* commandments and living our lives in unrestrained devotion to him. To re-establish the law as a central feature of our walk with God is in Pauls’ stark words, already quoted above, to **set aside the grace of God**. We, through the law are dead to the law that we might live for God. We have been crucified with Messiah and no longer live: Messiah lives in us and the life we now live in the body, we live by faith in the Son of God, who loved us and gave himself for us. This, as C. K. Barrett reminds us, “is not mysticism but eschatology.”

It is the future lived out in the present, for Messiah has come, and he has made all the difference: in him all the promises of God are ‘yes’ and ‘amen’! “The significance of Torah as Law and Commandment is the most characteristic feature of Judaism.”

But Yeshua is *our* distinctive. He is also the ground of our victory, for the lamb slain before the foundation of the world is the lion of Judah, conquering and still to conquer. What overcame the Roman Empire was nothing less than “adherence to the person of Jesus Christ and to the church he was believed to have established.”

Our faith is the power that overcomes the world! As Jocz succinctly points out, “What the Jew owes to the Torah, the Christian owes to Jesus Christ.” Our message to our people is that they, too, owe him what they believe they owe the Torah.

We must teach our people to distinguish between Jewishness and Judaism. Jewishness is our national identity; Judaism is that false religion created by the rabbis.

The Messianic Jewish Community

What, then, is the purpose of a Messianic Jewish community? If we agree on what I have proposed above, the answer is clear; it is also clear *whom* the Messianic Jewish community is for. The Messianic Jewish community is for Jewish followers of Yeshua, not for gentile wannabes, however sincerely motivated. Why on earth would chess players want to be members of a football club, or Democrats members of the Republican Party (a note of apology to Republicans)? There are no spiritual advantages to being Jewish. It therefore goes without saying that there are none for those who act *as if* they are Jewish.

The Messianic Jewish community is the context in which Jewish believers encourage one another as Jews in Messiah, where they share their concerns, promote their common interests, and enlist their resources for the good of their nation and the good of others. It is the context in which they can exercise an important aspect of their being, without dilution, without constituting a threat to anyone and without their identity being inappropriately impinged upon or threatened by external forces.

One of the main purposes of the Torah was to distinguish the people of the covenant from other peoples.

Torah now informs Jewish traditional culture to a meaningful extent, with the same purpose in view. After all, one of the functions of a culture is to distinguish those it unites from those whom it does not. Culture not only provides a means of mutual identification; it also serves as a means of disassociation, which is precisely why, on the one hand, there is no room for it in *ecclesia* and why, on the other, it is so necessary to community. It is an expression of our recognition that, even in an ecclesiological Garden of Eden, we would need the kind of give-and-take for which human community was intended.

Such a community does not supplant the *ecclesia*, it supplements it in areas for which the *ecclesia* was not designed. Our confusion of Ecclesian and of koinonia has led us to unbiblical thoughts as to how to reduce the number of Gentiles among us. I agree with Rich: “the very nature of Messianic Judaism demands distinctions between Jews and Gentiles.” Brethren, that needs to be amended.

Summary

Ecclesia is the context in which all Messiah’s followers gather for the worship of God and mutual edification in the things of God. In the *ecclesia*, there is no room for national or cultural distinctions.

Community, on the other hand, is the context in which Messianic Jews meet to promote interests and defend concerns that distinguish them from others, be they

followers of Yeshua or otherwise. Here, distinctions between believers are eminently valid.

There is both great need and clear justification for a Messianic Jewish community. Such a community is not and should not become an *ecclesia*. In the context of such a community, the consensus of Jewish national tradition would be practiced, barring those aspects of the consensus that contradict the word of God. Together, we would work for the salvation of our people, and for any other national need that may arise. This is the course that is most likely to appeal to the majority of us Jewish Christians, who have rightly chosen to worship God in churches rather than in Messianic synagogues.

I sincerely believe that we have mistakenly conflated the two – *ecclesia* and community – and that this does not serve the glory of God, does not meet the requirements of the word of God, and does not serve our truest interests.

It is time for us to rethink our positions, and draw closer to the standards God has laid out in his word. Surely, it is not without reason that we have been so ineffective in our calling with regard to our nation: most of those who have been impacted by our movement are Gentiles, and most of our influence is on churches, while Israel remains in darkness and in desperate need of the Gospel of Messiah. That is where our focus should be, not in affirming our Jewishness, but in affirming our Messiah's legitimate claim on the allegiance of our people, for the Gospel is God's power to save, Jews first.

The Role of Torah and of Jewish Tradition in the Messianic Jewish Community

By Baruch Maoz

Presented to the Borough Park Symposium on Messianic Judaism
La Guardia Airport Hotel, New York, USA
October 2012

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I commend the initiators and organizers of this Symposium. The concept of a symposium in which varying positions are aired, scrutinized and sharpened on the whetting stone of scripture and careful thought is extremely helpful. I am grateful to the organizers for the invitation to think and pray with you over matters relating to our movement. Whether we prefer to describe ourselves as Messianic Jews or Jewish Christians, so long as we share the same faith, we belong to one another. We should, therefore, be eager to learn from each other, because that is how we grow. That is how we improve our ability to address both the world and our nation with the good news of God's grace and covenant faithfulness. I am eager to think and learn with you.

We are Jews and will remain Jews. This is a real part of our calling and is not called into question in this Symposium. The question is how to be such in full accordance with

Scripture. I propose some definitions to help us think through that question with reference to a course of action chosen by a minority of Jewish believers, and which I believe should be revisited.

*

I never enjoy flying: there is but sparse wriggle-room. By the end of the flight, I feel cramped, barely able to walk. My assigned title is The Role of Torah and Jewish Tradition in the Messianic Jewish Community; such a title provides necessary room to stretch comfortably.

The title, The Role of Torah and of Jewish Tradition in the Messianic Jewish Community serves well as a map for our discussion. My purpose in this short paper is to present the right, no – the necessity – of a distinct Messianic identity within the nation of Israel, and therefore of maintaining the Jewish identity for those of us who are Jewish and who belong to the body of Christ. At the same time, I shall seek to present a case against maintaining our Jewish identity as an element of our relations with God or with others in the body of Messiah.

We commence with the last word of my assigned title, the term **community**. How that term is used will define the contours of everything I wish to offer for your consideration.

Second, we discuss **Torah** in its various facets, seeking to define which facet is pertinent to which context.

Third, we attempt to clarify what is meant by **Jewish tradition**, adding a caveat or two.

Fourth, we discuss **the role** of the Torah and of Jewish tradition.

We finally close by returning to our starting point, with a difference and a brief discussion of the term “**Messianic Jewish Community**”.

The proscribed scope of this paper will not permit extensive discussion, nor proof of most statements. This is a position paper, not a work of research. Please forgive me, therefore, if I forbear to quote a plethora of scholars or discuss conflicting views. Others will take up different positions. Their contributions will compensate for the lack of discussion in this paper.

One final note: I prefer “Jewish Christian” to “Messianic Jew.” My reasons will, I believe, become clear as I proceed. However, in deference to the context in which the Symposium is being held, and in the interest of being heard, I am happy to make a concession and will, therefore, use the parlance most acceptable to my presumed audience. Forgive me if state that this concession is merely verbal, in the interests of discussion, not of principle.

Community – Ecclesia Versus Koinonia

There are at least two ways we might use the term “community.” One is synonymous with the New Testament Greek term *ecclesia*, which, in brief, serves in the NT primarily to denote a fellowship of saints gathered for the worship of God according to his word. The second way we might use the term denotes a society of individuals who share a complex of substance, which may be made up of common history, goals, concerns and

interests, culture, language and preferences. Thus, the Ephesian gathering described in Acts 19:39-41 is likewise referred to in terms of an *ecclesia*.

Ecclesia Koinonia

In an *ecclesia* of believers in Messiah, God's word is authoritatively preached, he is worshipped according to his word, the sacraments and discipline are administered, all conduct is organized according to scripture and the body's officers are appointed and function by the same standard,

to which nothing may be added and from which nothing may be subtracted. In the context of *ecclesia*, members are united by the finished work of Messiah and his presence through the Holy Spirit. *Ecclesia* has the glory of God as its primary goal.

Community – *koinonia* in Greek – is an important aspect of the life of an *ecclesia*. One cannot be a faithful member of the *ecclesia* without sharing *koinonia*. Membership in the *koinonia* of an *ecclesia* is by grace through faith. We relate to one another on the grounds of grace, not on those of ethnic or cultural identity, of personal achievement, or of shared interests and purposes; nothing more than a living faith in God through Messiah, the product of the grace of God and regeneration by the Holy Spirit, is necessary. God as he is known in Messiah is all in all. He is the ground, goal and focus of all that is done in *ecclesia*. He is the one and only legitimate distinctive, and he shares this central role with no one and with no other issue.

In the *ecclesia*, we meet other brethren to whom we have been united into one new man: Jews and Gentiles, males and females, bond and free. The *ecclesia* does not consist of Jews and converts to Judaism, but of Jewish and gentile sinners converted to God, between whom there was **no difference** in sin and there is **no difference** in grace.

Nor may we establish any difference. All sinned and came short of the glory of God.

All are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Messiah Yeshua

. The same God is rich toward all who call upon him.

The middle wall of partition has been broken down.

This lack of difference constitutes an important aspect of the Gospel, and is the logic behind Paul's repeated and sacrificial insistence that Jews and Gentiles should live, worship and serve together on the same grounds on which they were justified, and within the same congregational context.

Any erosion of that unity is an erosion of the Gospel because it is tantamount to attributing spiritual standing to something other than God's amazing grace.

We are not, therefore, entitled to insist on national, gender or social distinctions with regard to our communal worship, our walk with God, our obedience to him, our spiritual advancement or fellowship and shared service in the body of Messiah. The same kind of obedience is required of all; the goals and duties of all are identical; no spiritual advantages or disadvantages are attached to culture or to ethnic identity. In Messiah, we are all one, one in the *ecclesia*, which is his body.

Our oneness does not consist merely in that we are spiritually equal, but also in

that we are spiritually identical. In Messiah, that is to say, in the context of *ecclesia*, there is neither Jew nor gentile, male nor female, freeman nor slave.

Wherever else differences may legitimately exist, in Messiah they have been done away with and a single identity is shared by all: we are followers of Yeshua.

In the *ecclesia*, Messiah – not our distinctions – has pride of place. His primacy outshines the differences between us. He is the Alpha and Omega of salvation history and of all we do in the context of *ecclesia*. His saving work is sufficient for every aspect of our salvation: in him we are circumcised with a circumcision not executed by human hands,

sanctified by grace,
forgiven,
secure,
complete.

Nothing is obtained in Messiah but by his virtues and his accomplishments. However much we may differ in gifts of function and ability,

no spiritual advantages, no spiritual privileges, are accorded to one individual in Messiah and not to another.

This is in accordance with the hope inculcated by scripture. We would do well to remember that our Hebrew Bible does not begin at Genesis chapter twelve but at chapter one; not with Abraham but with creation as a whole and, more specifically, with Adam and Eve; they, not Abraham, were the beginning of humanity, created in the image of God. God did not begin history by creating Jews but by creating humanity, and his purposes of blessing and salvation neither began nor ends with the Jewish people. Scripture goes on to speak of the nations, indicating Israel's essential relationship to them, indicating that Israel's calling had the blessing of the nations in view.

Of course, this is not to deny that Israel differs from the nations. But it does so in a manner that was ultimately intended to characterize all nations, so that Isaiah could speak of the day when "all nations will stream" to the worship of God, saying one to another, "come, let us go up to the mountain of the Lord, to the house of the God of Jacob. He will teach us his ways, so that we may walk in his paths."

After all, is God the God of Israel only? Is he not also the God of the Gentiles? Indeed, he is the God of the Gentiles as well.

Abraham's call entailed Gentiles as well as Jews.

God's promise through Isaiah goes so far as to put Egypt and Assyria – Israel's traditional enemies – on a par with Israel when the prophet says that the Lord will speak of Egypt as "my people" and of Assyria as the product of his creative activity in history, just like Israel.

Even when God works his terrible work through and on Gog and Magog, he describes his purpose in universal terms: "I will bring you against my land *that the nations might know me.*"

There is no room within the *ecclesia* for ethnic or cultural boundary markers, and we must not nullify the grace of God

by asserting distinctions that formerly played a role in our thinking. Whatever

we formerly viewed as gain we now consider loss for the sake of Messiah. Everything is a loss compared to the surpassing worth of knowing Messiah Yeshua, our Lord, for whose sake we have willingly lost all things because we consider them no more than trash, so long as we are found in him, not claiming any advantage of our own but that which comes from God through faith in Messiah. The one aspiration that now drives us is to know him whom to know is life eternal, to experience the power of his resurrection and to participate in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, so as to attain to the resurrection from the dead.

We recognize that the attribution of any spiritual gifting to anything but the work of Messiah is to imply that he **died in vain**,

an implication from which we shrink in horror. In the past, we related to people in terms of a spiritual walk according to their national identity, gender and social standing, but we do so **no longer**.

The primacy and sufficiency of Messiah's finished work are the grounds of our unity, which unity is a testimony to that primacy and that sufficiency. We have turned our eyes upon Yeshua, looked full on his wonderful face, and the things of the earth have grown strangely dim in the light of his glory and grace. Any weakening of the unity he has created threatens the clarity with which we testify to Messiah's place in our lives. We must, therefore, maintain the biblical tension between the Bible's particularity and its universalism. For that reason, any role our ethnic and cultural identity, or the Torah or tradition may be allowed to play in our private and communal lives must be visibly, overtly, very clearly subordinate to Messiah.

We are one in Messiah with those of all nations, however much we may differ from them due to our Jewishness. That oneness must find practical expression in the context of local *ecclesia* life; there should be neither Jewish nor Gentile *ecclesiae*. Our congregations should reflect the essence of the Gospel. Ethnic and cultural differences do not distinguish us in the context of local congregations. We relate to one another on the grounds of the grace that purchased our salvation, and on no other grounds.

We would do well to remember that most of the conflicts Yeshua had with the synagogue had to do with what has become fashionable to describe today as "boundary markers" such as the Sabbath and dietary laws, that distinguished Jews from Gentiles, and faithful Jews from others. Most of Paul's conflicts had to do with those markers *in the context of ecclesia*, with the addition of circumcision. The reason for the addition lies in that fact that Yeshua's audience was comprised primarily of circumcised Jews, while many of Paul's converts were uncircumcised Gentiles.

Contrary to much of modern practice, there is no biblical legitimacy for ethnically-based, culturally-orientated, or linguistically focused congregations, any more than it is legitimate to separate into white and black churches, blue or white collar churches, or churches for the young and for the elderly, for men or for women.

Of course, each of these groups differs from the other. But that is the beauty of the Body of Messiah: it is a coat of many colors, in which each culture, each set of national interests clashes with others, challenges them, and thus promotes a process of

sanctification in which all are made to be more like him who saved them; where human differences are put into their proper place by being made secondary to God in Messiah; secondary to spiritual and moral concerns; secondary to the unity of the body of Messiah. We should not seek meaning in self-fulfillment – individual or communal – but in God as he is known through Messiah.

It never occurred to the apostles to form separate congregations for Jews and for Gentiles – although tensions between the two were the main source of difficulties within the body of Messiah for decades. The obvious solution would have been to divide into separate but fraternal entities, respecting each other from a distance and assisting each other where agreement was found. But such an option would have constituted a denial of the grace on which all – Jew and gentile – stood. It would have laid the grounds for elitism in the church: “You’re OK, but not like us,” thereby eroding the primacy of Messiah and the completeness of his work by allowing distinctions to divide in spite of all that unites.

Nor is there room in the *ecclesia* for the introduction of human traditions, however much we might cherish them. God’s worship is to be pure, as he has commanded it to be, with neither adulteration nor dilution. Our forefathers were forbidden to introduce into God’s worship anything but what he had commanded. Aaron’s sons were punished for offering **strange fire**, defined as fire **the Lord had not commanded**. Our worship is not to be taught us by precept of man, not even by rabbis, but by the commandment of God.

Community in a Broader Sense

At the bare minimum, community means shared concerns, interests and goals, common duties and privileges, and a common language – and culture is a language. Charles Sherlock describes language as “perhaps the most fundamental aspect of human culture.”

Community, in the broader sense, is of extreme importance. Human camaraderie, moral, intellectual and emotional encouragement is essential to mankind’s health and happiness. God is an eternal community of father, Son and Holy Spirit. Human society was designed to be a reflection of the godhead. Community is, therefore, essential to the image of God in man. Surely, this is an important implication of the divine **Let us make man in our image**.

In the Garden of Eden, man lacked nothing material or spiritual. He was in a perfect world, in intimate fellowship with his Maker. The world was his domain and mandate. Still, God described man as **alone**, and evaluated this situation as **not good**.

Worship and spiritual obedience do not exhaust man’s humanity; he was created with a need for human community in a broader sense as well as in the narrow. Man not only needs the company of peers for worship – the special domain of *ecclesia* – but he needs their company for the cultivation and maintenance of his humanity

in the many God-given areas of life other than worship.

Prior to sin, at the time of man's innocence, man needed help to be and to do what he was made to be and to do. So God created for him an *ezer kenegdo*, (עֵזֶר כְּנֶגְדּוֹ), one to assist *ezer* (עֵזֶר) him by complementing him *kenegdo* (כְּנֶגְדּוֹ). Without community both in a spiritual and in a broader sense, no individual is all he can be, all he is meant to be, or all he needs to be. However valuable *ecclesia* is, broader community is also needed. Such a community meets legitimate needs and opens legitimate vistas for which *ecclesia* was not designed. All the more is this so since sin invaded the world. Community is now needed in areas that would not have otherwise existed.

In contrast with *ecclesia*, distinctions are valid in the context of community. People commune with some and not with others over shared interests, concerns and identities that distinguish them from others and form the rationale of each community's existence. People who meet to play chess do not meet to play basketball, Democrats are not Republicans (some might wish they were) and Jews are not Gentiles. *Ecclesia* does not exhaust our humanity. We were made for community in a sense broader than that afforded by *ecclesia*.

The broader the **sense** is, the narrower the **community**. Many who belong to the *ecclesia* do not and ought not belong to one or another kind of community. No kind of superiority is involved, but differences are acknowledged. We were made to differ one from another and thus contribute to the amazing variety involved in being human.

Community is for mutual enabling in areas designated by each community, for an ongoing contribution to specific aspects of life in exclusion of others, for the creation of a distinct sphere in which important aspects of our God-given humanity come to expression and our God-given potential is realized in other than spiritual realms. In the *ecclesia*, we are neither Jews nor Gentiles, but in community we may be – and, I suggest, we Jewish followers of Yeshua very much should be – what God has made us to be: Jews.

In community individuals are Jews or Gentiles, male or female, freemen or slaves. As such, they have differing duties and privileges.

This is the primary sphere in which, if we are circumcised, we should not seek to undo our circumcision, nor seek circumcision if we are uncircumcised.

Jews should remain Jews and Gentiles, Gentiles. We should each continue within the context of the social and national callings in which we found when we responded to the gospel of grace.

In this paper, I shall not use the term "community" to denote the *ecclesia*, nor that aspect of *ecclesia* life characterized by *koinonia*. I enlist the term here to describe a body of individuals – in our case, a body of Jewish believers – united by common interests and concerns which are not the domain of *ecclesia*, for the promotion and enjoyment of those interests and concerns.

Such interests and concerns may well be compatible with scripture, but they do not fit the description of *ecclesia koinonia* in important areas: Messianic community membership, for example, is contingent on ethnic and cultural distinctives; the focus is on the ethnic and cultural identity that unites the Messianic community's members and

distinguishes them from others; the goals which direct and the duties incumbent on members are implied by the shared identity of the community's members. Here too, of course, members are obliged by the word of God because no area of human life is exempt from his reign. But their obligations and privileges differ greatly from those in an *ecclesia*, and are not necessarily derived directly from scripture.

The Need for a Visible Messianic Jewish Entity

God has not forsaken his people,
for this is his covenant with them: A redeemer will come out of Zion and turn
ungodliness away from Jacob.

Their restoration will be such a blessing to the world that Scripture compares it to nothing less than a resurrection.

Is it not yet just a little while before Lebanon will be turned into a fertile field, and the fertile field will be considered as a forest? On that day the deaf will hear words of a book, and out of gloom and darkness the eyes of the blind will see. The afflicted also will increase their gladness in the LORD, and the needy of mankind will rejoice in the Holy One of Israel. For the ruthless will come to an end and the scorner will be finished, indeed all who are intent on doing evil will be cut off.

Like Paul, Isaiah tells us that this happy event is related to another: Thus says the LORD, who redeemed Abraham, concerning the house of Jacob: "Jacob shall not now be ashamed, nor shall his face now turn pale; but when he sees his children, the work of my hands, in his midst, they will sanctify my name; indeed, they will sanctify the Holy One of Jacob and will stand in awe of the God of Israel, those who err in mind will know the truth, and those who criticize will accept instruction.

God has declared his intention to bring Israel back to himself, and to do so by means of a Jewish believing community, obviously composed of Israel's children but no less obviously the work of his hands, bearing the imprint of the spiritual and moral transformation that the divine work of regeneration implies. The result of such a visible believing community within the nation of Israel will be that the people will stand in awe of the God of Israel, those who err in mind will know the truth they rejected and those who criticize will accept the very instruction they refused.

Paul never spoke of his Jewishness as a thing of the past. Judaism was no longer his religion,

but he continued to speak of his Jewishness in the present tense many years after he turned his back on Judaism.

In Gal. 1:13-14 he speaks of his Judaism as a thing of the past, and in 2:14 describes Peter as one who lived like a Gentile. Judaism was no longer Paul's religion, but he continued to speak of his Jewishness in the present tense. He remained Jewish to the day of his death, although he knew himself to be bound no longer by the dictates of the rabbis he formerly obeyed, or by the covenant God made with his forefathers at Sinai. He exulted in the hope of God's faithfulness to his covenant with Abraham.

The distinction Paul drew between Judaism and Jewishness needs to be

maintained. Judaism is a religion rooted in Phariseism and framed in the course of many years by the rabbis. It affirms a theology that includes the denial of Yeshua's Messiahship and divinity; it teaches salvation by human effort, regardless of modern claims to the contrary, and asserts the authority of the rabbis as authoritative interpreters of the Law of God. Jewishness, on the other hand, is an ethnic identity with cultural implications impacted by rabbinic tradition but not bound by them.

Jewishness is an intensely communal affair. It is also a calling to which we should not turn our backs. Jewishness is a wonderful thing. I am grateful to have been created Jewish, I love being Jewish, and I call upon all Jews in Messiah not to submerge their Jewishness in the context of the *ecclesia* in such a way that they *de facto* erase it. In the *ecclesia*, we are neither Jewish nor gentile, but our national and cultural identity has not been obliterated by faith in Yeshua, nor should we obliterate it. Men and women do not lose their gender following conversion. Slaves are not transformed into freemen, or freemen into slaves when their sins are forgiven for Yeshua's sake. Jews do not cease to be Jews or Gentiles, Gentiles by virtue of their faith in Messiah.

An ongoing Jewish identity is not merely a secular matter; it has deeply-rooted theological implications. Our faith in Messiah does not conflict with our Jewish identity. It is, rather, a fulfillment thereof: the Faith of Yeshua is the true Faith of our fathers. Yeshua is the hope of Abraham, the son of David, the fulfillment of our national hopes, of the covenant God made with our fathers; in him are and will be accomplished all the promises God made to the fathers.

The ongoing reality of a visible remnant that believes in Messiah and conducts itself within the context of Israel's national life is a testimony to God's faithfulness and a call to the nation to turn to God in Yeshua. It is also an expression of the confidence we have that he, who is still in covenant with our people, will yet graft them in again and render their salvation a blessing to the world.

Our continued national existence is a testimony to the gracious faithfulness of God in spite of our people's sin, and a potential instrument for the salvation of our people, whom God foreknew and chose, in whom he will yet be glorified. We are obliged by the biblical tension between the Bible's particularity on the one hand, and its universalism on the other, and must maintain that tension.

If following Yeshua entailed the obliteration of our national identity, such following would constitute a denial of the biblical covenants, promises and history that are inextricably associated with it. If one cannot be Jewish and believe in Yeshua, then Yeshua is not the promised Messiah of Israel and, if that is the case, he is no Messiah at all. That is precisely why rabbinical Judaism insists that Jews ought not believe in Yeshua; why the rabbis equate such unbelief with Jewish identity. They wish to deny concerning Yeshua exactly what we wish to affirm. There are few things a Jew may believe or disbelieve without being accused of denying his Jewish identity; believing in Yeshua is deemed by the rabbis to be a demarcation line between "us" – the Jewish people – and "them."

There is need, therefore, for a distinct, vocal, well-organized, lively Messianic Jewish community within the nation of Israel that will prove the lie involved in such assertions. It is by way of such a community that we Jewish followers of Yeshua can and

should strengthen each other, and reach out to our people, respond to their needs, and contribute to their welfare. It is by way of such a community that we can come to the defense of our people in times of distress and assert our national and cultural identity *vis a vis* the *ecclesia* on the one hand and our nation on the other. It is by way of such a community that we can address our nation as a nation, from *within*, and call it to Messiah, while the church (to which we also belong) addresses our people from without.

Such a community can provide a context in which needs rightly not addressed by the *ecclesia* may be recognized and met, in which propensities and preferences which must not be taken into account by the *ecclesia* may find legitimate realization. A Messianic Jewish community is called for and should be assiduously cultivated by those of us who are Jews, and who love and honor Yeshua.

Here I rest my case in defense of a Messianic Jewish community.

Torah

Before we discuss the role of Torah in a Messianic Jewish community, it would be helpful to define what is meant by the term in the context of this paper. I offer the following working definition: Torah is that conglomerate of commandments God gave our forefathers at Sinai as the outline of their national covenantal duties. In some circles it has been customary to divide the Torah into three distinct laws, moral, ceremonial and civil, as if one could stand without the other. The moral law is considered as having to do with issues of spiritual and moral conduct, the civil law with administrative conduct in the secular affairs of life, and the ceremonial with the conduct of divine worship. There is a measure of truth in such a division. There is, I suggest, also a large measure of untruth.

The law of the covenant was given as a unit. Israel's transgression of *any* facet of the law was to be punished (we've already had occasion to reference the death of Aaron's two sons when they transgressed a purely ceremonial restriction). The so-called civil requirement to leave the fringes of one's field for the poor had obvious moral implications. More examples could be given.

Yeshua fulfilled the whole Torah on our behalf. His sacrifice was in fulfillment of ceremonial facets of the law and, at the same time, of its moral and civil facets, for we transgressed all three, are guilty with regard to and are atoned for in relation to the three.

However, one facet of the law had prominence over the others: the moral requirements, enshrined in the Ten Commandments, were given pride of place in the Ark of the Covenant. The prophetic message had to do primarily with transgression of the moral facets of the Torah. The prophets repeatedly insisted in God's name that observance of ceremonial duties, however strict when moral duties were neglected and moral boundaries transgressed, negated the value of ceremonial observance. Israel's prophets did not hesitate to call even the gentile nations to account for their transgression of God's moral demands.

These demands are not discovered by human enterprise but are generally recognized,

particularly by man's conscience.

They are discovered through a reading of God's word as a whole, both Old and New Testaments, preeminently the Ten Commandments.

The New Testament recognizes this distinction within the one Torah. It repeatedly measures man's moral actions by the moral demands of the Torah and calls upon the faithful to exercise themselves in holiness in terms that sit well with Torah morality. There is not an inkling of a call to celebrate the feasts, practice circumcision or maintain the dietary laws. Quite to the contrary:

By way of example, and in the vein with Israel's prophets, Matthew informs us that Yeshua repeatedly castigated those who observed ceremony while neglecting what he described as the **weightier things of the Torah**.

Yeshua said, **Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you tithe mint and dill and cumin, and have neglected the weightier provisions of the law: justice and mercy and faithfulness; but these are the things you should have done without neglecting the others. You blind guides, who strain out a gnat and swallow a camel.**

That is the Law which, Paul insists, is inscribed on every human heart and by which all will be judged, which – obviously – had nothing to do with fringes on one's garment or dietary restrictions.

So much so that, in I Cor. 7:19, Paul juxtaposes circumcision with God's commandments when he says, **"Circumcision is nothing, and uncircumcision is nothing, but the keeping of the commandments of God."** James, whose dedication to the Torah is well known, speaking of the law in terms meant to bind a believing conscience, makes reference only to moral issues, never to civil or ceremonial.

Such a distinction within the Torah was known even to rabbinic Judaism, which affirmed that, with the coming of Messiah כלור מצוות

(The commandments terminate). They did not mean that men would be free to lie, covet and murder. The moral facet of the Torah was not in view, but what some Christian theologians term civil and ceremonial. Moral duties remained and will remain forever.

Let it not be thought that we can better impact our people if we put on a show of keeping the law and the traditions. Remember Josephus' testimony that James, the brother of our Lord, was put to death "as an offender of the law" in spite of his strict observance of the Torah simply because he believed in Yeshua.

Our protagonists understand clearly what we are sometimes loath to recognize, namely that reliance on Yeshua for justification and for sanctification is exactly contrary to what Judaism teaches on the role of the Torah. So long as we affirm a biblical view of Yeshua, Judaism will reject us. We must, therefore, choose between Judaism and Jewishness, as well as between Judaism and Israel's Messiah.

Tendencies among us to erode a clear vision of the biblical view of the savior are the product of our backstaging him because our focus is not on him, where it should be, but on fiding acceptance by affirming our Jewishness. God, having spoken long ago to

the fathers by way of the prophets in many partial revelations and in many ways, has spoken to us in these last days by way of his Son, whom he appointed heir of everything that exists, through whom he also made all that exists. That Son is the radiance of God's own glory and the most exact representation of his divine nature. He upholds all that exists by his powerful word. It is he who offered the sacrifice that purifies from sin, and having accomplished that, he is now seated at the right hand of the Majesty on High. He should fill the whole of our vision.

We conclude, then, that one facet of the Torah remains man's eternal duty, being a reflection of the image of God in which we were created. That facet is moral. However, our relation to it has been fundamentally transformed by the coming of Messiah. We love God's Torah, not because it is the grounds of our standing with God, or a means to spiritual advancement. Our love of the Torah is the product of the sanctifying work of the Spirit in our hearts, an expression of our devoted gratitude and our loving obedience.

In the moral facets of the Torah we discover glorious reflections of the image of God, and long to shape our hearts lives in accordance with that glory.

Such is the power of the Gospel. We do not invite the righteous to this feast of grace and glory, even as our Master did not come for the righteous; we invite poor, failing, fumbling sinners, with the promise that God will create in their hearts a longing for holiness that, in the last day, will find complete satisfaction: they will be conformed to the image of his Son. Meanwhile, they will be empowered to struggle in confident hope of the glory of God and with the constant support of his grace. Jaroslav Pelikan put it well:

“the church was not a moral all-star team for which one could qualify by being an athlete of holiness; it was a moral hospital in which ... one could be gradually healed.”

Jewish Tradition

We need not spend time on defining tradition *per se* beyond stating that tradition is the means by which any human community identifies itself. **Jewish** tradition is that living body of consensual mores, moral and cultural, by which Jews define themselves as Jews, celebrate the present, preserve the memory of their past and express their hopes and aspirations for the future. As Saadya Gaon put it, “our people the children of Israel, are a people only by virtue of our laws.”

We should pause, however, to reflect on two words in my proposed definition of Jewish tradition, *consensual* and *living*. In the interests of clarity, we view them in the reverse order. The term *living* serves to indicate what is true of any national tradition: it changes over the years, accruing new features and discarding others. Although Jewish culture is religiously orientated, it is not fossilized. The ways Jews, even Orthodox Jews, express their Jewishness today is as dissimilar as it is similar to the way Jews did so a mere 200 years ago. Many features continue through the centuries; many change. Modern rabbis determine *halacha* precisely because they realize that Jewishness needs to meet the challenges of the day.

The term *consensual* serves here to indicate that not every rabbinic dictum, not every feature handed down through the centuries, is adopted for all times by the majority of the people. There are features of Jewish tradition that are not embraced by the majority of the Jewish people, and therefore do not serve as consensual boundary markers of Jewishness. Fasting on the Day of Atonement, eating *matsa* during Passover, celebrating the biblical and traditional feasts in one way or another are part of the consensus; avoiding the use of electricity on the Sabbath (or lighting a fire) and eating kosher and are not. The consensus is that part of Jewish tradition which the majority of Jews observe, by virtue of which they consider themselves – and are recognized to be – Jewish.

A large part of Jewish tradition has its roots in the Bible. Some is directly biblical. The biblical feasts are a prominent example, while many of the dietary restrictions are not. Jewish tradition is not wholly biblical. *Hanuka* is not a biblical feast, nor do most features of the Passover *seder* have biblical authority.

The *arba minim* used during *sukkot* are the product of rabbinic creative thinking, incorrect but part of a hoary tradition. The custom of men covering their heads has no biblical roots. The use of a *goy shel Shabbat* is contrary to the divine commandment. Hillel's famous *prosbul* is an convoluted attempt to resolve a difficulty which was the product of a biblical command and unbiblical selfishness: the Mishnah informs us that Hillel introduced the *prosbul* "seeing that the law which prescribed the release of debts every seventh year (Deut. 15:1-3) brought about the harmful consequence that people refused to loan one another and thus violated what was written in the law, namely, that a money loan should not be withheld because of the approach of the sabbatical year (ibid, 9-11)."

As is true of any national tradition, the roots and ground of Jewish tradition are primarily religious, both biblical and rabbinic. The extent to which this determines the ongoing authority of Jewish tradition, in whole or in part, is to be considered next.

The Role of Torah and Jewish Tradition

For obvious reasons, we begin with a consideration of the role of Torah. However valid we may deem other aspects of Jewish tradition to be, the Torah is God's word. As such, it has priority.

We noted above the three facets of the Torah and affirmed that Messiah fulfilled all three on our behalf. We also noted that Yeshua and Paul applied the moral facets of the Torah to all mankind, not by virtue of the covenant at Sinai but because it is expressive of the image of God in man and, therefore, of God's eternal will. All three facets remain, to a varying extent, part of our national tradition. The moral facet is far more than that. All human communities are bound by the will and authority of God and must, therefore, adhere to his moral demands.

Community, therefore – any community – should be concerned with the promotion and maintenance of moral law. It should pursue its common interests, promote its common concerns and forward its common goals in accord with divinely-imposed moral duties. Whether playing chess or engaging in politics, human

communities should manage their affairs in light of mankind's obligation to accommodate itself to God's will. There is little need for discussion of this issue and, therefore, we will soon proceed to the next. Before doing so, there is an important point to be made:

Learning from the prophets and from our Lord Messiah, we recognize the priority of God's moral demands over all other considerations. We therefore further recognize that a community of Messianic Jews must not allow its national interests, concerns and aspirations to override the moral obligations imposed by God's law. We must not succumb to selfishness, national or personal. We are not free to ignore the interests, concerns and aspirations of others, even if they conflict with our own. We must courageously exemplify the morality of our Maker, and of the Messiah he sent for our people – his kindness, his sacrificial generosity and his surprising grace, even as we identify with our people. Eschatology ought not be used to secure us from God's call to a boldly humble kindness as we relate to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, for example. That is the burden of the prophetic message, and its accomplishment is a major feature of the prophetic view of the future.

Nor may we turn a blind eye to the moral failings of our people in the conduct of this conflict. Holiness, truth and righteousness are as much part of our duty as is any other aspect of our calling under God. As a community, we should exercise a truly prophetic ministry to our nation, putting the emphasis where the prophets put it: not in a predicted the future but in promoting righteous conduct in the present.

So much for the moral facet of the Torah. Some aspects of the civil and many of the ceremonial facets of the Torah continue to be part of our national tradition. But we no longer stone adulterers; we no longer maintain cities of refuge; we no longer hand murderers over to be slain by the families of their victims; nor are we obliged in terms of our duties to avoid pork, attend temple worship in Jerusalem thrice a year, or offer sacrifice. However, belonging to a people entails certain obligations, including cultural obligations. Tradition is a way by which families, communities and nations identify themselves – to themselves and to others.

Of course, there are aspects of our national tradition to which we cannot adhere and, at the same time, be faithful to God in Messiah. We cannot thank God for commanding us to light Sabbath or *Hanuka* candles, because he never issued such a command. We cannot and do not share the Orthodox view of Gentiles. We also recognize that most of the extra-biblical traditions our people have embraced did not exist in New Testament times, that some of them are reactionary *vis a vis* the Gospel, and some are contra-biblical.

But where our traditions are compatible with the scriptures and form part of the national Jewish consensus, we adhere to them because they are part of our identity, part of who we are. We celebrate the arrival of the Sabbath with a festive Sabbath meal; bless God for the bread and wine, and light candles. We masquerade on Purim and have a Passover *seder*, preserving most of the elements of that tradition. We're Jews, and we love being Jewish. Maintaining our traditions in the context of our community is not a gimmick. Nor is it a means of evangelism or a way to find acceptance, a means to a greater spirituality or an authoritative grid through which we understand the scriptures.

We maintain our Jewish culture because of what we are, sincerely, naturally, honestly, whole-heartedly.

At the same time, we must maintain a clear distinction between what has become national Jewish tradition, and our walk with God. We recognize that Jewish tradition, including those parts that issue directly from the Covenant of Sinai, provide no spiritual advantage and should play no role in our walk with God. They are now part of national custom and, to the extent that we practice them, we do so on a cultural basis, for cultural purposes, not as an act of religion.

Some of us might choose to maintain a kosher kitchen and prefer to wear a *yarmulke*, but we recognize that we're free to eat whatever we wish

and do not pray with our heads covered so as not to dishonor him who is our head.

Nor do we separate into ethnic or cultural-based congregations. Our Jewishness is for community, not for *ecclesia*.

We insist on remaining Jews for yet another reason: we believe. Our affirmed, overt and communal Jewishness is an expression of our confidence that God has not forsaken his people, that he will yet work a work of grace among them. It is the fruit of our faith in God and an expression of the expectation his word has created in us.

A brief final point: Jewish national tradition is not only communal. It is first and foremost familial. One belongs to the community by way of practicing Jewish tradition in the context of one's home. As much would also be expected of those who belong to a Jewish Messianic community. Too much of traditionally Jewish custom has been moved by the Messianic Movement out of the family and into the congregation or the community, thereby transforming its' essence and eroding its Jewish character. We are also engaged in too much nonsense that goes by the name of Jewishness, and that is not truly such any more than pork - or bagels- can be.

I am a Jew. I continue to be Jewish. In every area of my life – except the spiritual – I view and identify myself as Jewish. But I practice my Jewishness at home and do not impose or recommend it to those who are not of my people. At the church I attend, provision is made for those who wish to celebrate Christmas. None are required, nor is any spiritual advantage attached to such a celebration. The same holds for Jewish custom. Those of us who are Jewish, offer no apologies, while Gentiles are not encouraged to consider themselves disadvantaged. They do not need to dig into their distant past to discover some purported inkling of Jewish blood so as to be accepted as equals. They do not need to embrace our cultural distinctives; they maintain their own. Here we strongly disagree with our people's traditional religion, expressed, for example, in Rabbi Yehuah HaLevi's words in *The Khazari*: "Any Gentile who joins us sincerely shares our good fortune, but he is not equal to us ...we are the pick of mankind."

We studiously avoid obscuring what God, in fulfillment of promises given to the fathers, has done for us in Messiah. Our lives, our thinking, our hoping, our praying, worshipping and celebrating are focused on Messiah, not on Torah or tradition. He is our tree of life, teaching us holiness and enabling us thereunto. What Torah could not do,

God has done for us in Messiah. In Messiah we have a better covenant, a better sacrifice, better promises and ultimate fulfillment. Yeshua accomplished what the Torah could not do. The temple and its ritual have been replaced by the Son of God, who came to seek and to save that which was lost, and who offered one and final sacrifice by which he forever perfected those who turn to God through him. The Law of Moses no longer holds primary place in our lives: Messiah has come, and he is our all in all. We ought not nullify the grace of God by reestablishing Torah. Nothing need be added to Messiah's finished work, and any attempt to do so is to diminish it. Through him we have access within the veil and discover God in Messiah to be a very present help in time of need.

The Torah no longer serves as the focus of our obedience; Yeshua is.

We are disciples of Messiah, dedicated to keeping *his* commandments and living our lives in unrestrained devotion to him. To re-establish the law as a central feature of our walk with God is in Paul's stark words, already quoted above, to **set aside the grace of God**.

We, through the law are dead to the law that we might live for God. We have been crucified with Messiah and no longer live: Messiah lives in us and the life we now live in the body, we live by faith in the Son of God, who loved us and gave himself for us.

This, as C. K. Barrett reminds us, "is not mysticism but eschatology."

It is the future lived out in the present, for Messiah has come, and he has made all the difference: in him all the promises of God are 'yes' and 'amen'!

"The significance of Torah as Law and Commandment is the most characteristic feature of Judaism."

But Yeshua is *our* distinctive. He is also the ground of our victory, for the lamb slain before the foundation of the world is the lion of Judah, conquering and still to conquer. What overcame the Roman Empire was nothing less than "adherence to the person of Jesus Christ and to the church he was believed to have established."

Our faith is the power that overcomes the world! As Jocz succinctly points out, "What the Jew owes to the Torah, the Christian owes to Jesus Christ."

Our message to our people is that they, too, owe him what they believe they owe the Torah.

We must teach our people to distinguish between Jewishness and Judaism. Jewishness is our national identity; Judaism is that false religion created by the rabbis.

The Messianic Jewish Community

What, then, is the purpose of a Messianic Jewish community? If we agree on what I have proposed above, the answer is clear; it is also clear *whom* the Messianic Jewish community is for. The Messianic Jewish community is for Jewish followers of Yeshua, not for gentile wannabes, however sincerely motivated. Why on earth would chess players want to be members of a football club, or Democrats members of the Republican Party (a note of apology to Republicans)? There are no spiritual advantages to being Jewish. It therefore goes without saying that there are none for those who act *as if* they are Jewish.

The Messianic Jewish community is the context in which Jewish believers

encourage one another as Jews in Messiah, where they share their concerns, promote their common interests, and enlist their resources for the good of their nation and the good of others. It is the context in which they can exercise an important aspect of their being, without dilution, without constituting a threat to anyone and without their identity being inappropriately impinged upon or threatened by external forces.

One of the main purposes of the Torah was to distinguish the people of the covenant from other peoples.

Torah now informs Jewish traditional culture to a meaningful extent, with the same purpose in view. After all, one of the functions of a culture is to distinguish those it unites from those whom it does not. Culture not only provides a means of mutual identification; it also serves as a means of disassociation, which is precisely why, on the one hand, there is no room for it in *ecclesia* and why, on the other, it is so necessary to community. It is an expression of our recognition that, even in an ecclesiological Garden of Eden, we would need the kind of give-and-take for which human community was intended.

Such a community does not supplant the *ecclesia*, it supplements it in areas for which the *ecclesia* was not designed. Our confusion of Ecclesian and of koinonia has led us to unbiblical thoughts as to how to reduce the number of Gentiles among us. I agree with Rich: “the very nature of Messianic Judaism demands distinctions between Jews and Gentiles.” Brethren, that needs to be amended.

Summary

Ecclesia is the context in which all Messiah’s followers gather for the worship of God and mutual edification in the things of God. In the *ecclesia*, there is no room for national or cultural distinctions.

Community, on the other hand, is the context in which Messianic Jews meet to promote interests and defend concerns that distinguish them from others, be they followers of Yeshua or otherwise. Here, distinctions between believers are eminently valid.

There is both great need and clear justification for a Messianic Jewish community. Such a community is not and should not become an *ecclesia*. In the context of such a community, the consensus of Jewish national tradition would be practiced, barring those aspects of the consensus that contradict the word of God. Together, we would work for the salvation of our people, and for any other national need that may arise. This is the course that is most likely to appeal to the majority of us Jewish Christians, who have rightly chosen to worship God in churches rather than in Messianic synagogues.

I sincerely believe that we have mistakenly conflated the two – *ecclesia* and community – and that this does not serve the glory of God, does not meet the requirements of the word of God, and does not serve our truest interests.

It is time for us to rethink our positions, and draw closer to the standards God has laid out in his word. Surely, it is not without reason that we have been so ineffective in our calling with regard to our nation: most of those who have been impacted by our movement are Gentiles, and most of our influence is on churches, while Israel remains

in darkness and in desperate need of the Gospel of Messiah. That is where our focus should be, not in affirming our Jewishness, but in affirming our Messiah's legitimate claim on the allegiance of our people, for the Gospel is God's power to save, Jews first.

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