

# *What Does It Mean to Live as a Messianic Jew?*

## **The Mosaic Covenant and Messianic Jewish Life**



*Part of a Topical Series by  
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G-d has always had His remnant of faithful followers within the House of Israel. He has relentlessly sought out and brought into relationship with Himself Jewish people who have come to believe in the Messiahship of Yeshua (Jesus). Yet, in the last 20 Centuries, almost all Jews who have come to accept Messiah Yeshua inevitably have resigned their unique relationship with G-d, assimilated into the greater Christian community in which they lived, and disappeared without a Jewish trace within three generations. This is because too often Jewish believers accept the traditional Christian understanding that the Scriptures teach against Jewish identity and that the Mosaic Covenant has been terminated. The purpose of this pamphlet is to challenge that thinking. It has always been G-d's plan for Messianic Jews to intentionally live Jewish lives and to actively build Jewish communities for spiritual encouragement and as a communal testimony, both for the greater Jewish community as well as for the encouragement of Gentiles believers in the name of Messiah Yeshua, and that the ongoing Jewish obligation toward the Mosaic Covenant is the critically important requirement for the fulfillment of this purpose.

### *Definitions & Background*

**Jewish identity** is sociological, and can best be understood practically as an identity of unique communal distinction based on observance of and loyalty to the Mosaic Covenant (Torah) preserved within the Scripture and applied by the traditions of the Jewish people. G-d called Abraham to separate himself from his land and family to become the father of a unique nation, the Jewish people. Jewish people have kept their identity and peculiarity based on this understanding: that G-d selected them to be set apart from the other nations as the special Chosen People of G-d, physically speaking, in order to bring blessing to the nations. The Scriptures

record this: “*There is a people that dwells apart, not reckoned among the nations*” (Numbers 23:9 JPS). This desire to maintain the “Peoplehood of Israel” has led to the development of close Jewish communities, the traditional definition of “Who is a Jew”, the emphasis of Jewish continuity through marriage between Jews alone and the Jewish education of children. This same pursuit of communal distinction from the other nations has often been the reason for the persistent anti-Semitic persecutions endured by the Jewish people through the ages, many times at the hands of those who profess themselves as “Christians”.

**Messianic Faith** is theological. It is the belief that G-d sent the Messiah of Israel in the person of Yeshua, and that based on one’s personal faith in him and the atonement for sin he has provided through his death alone, G-d grants grace and forgiveness for the consequences of one’s sin. Adherents to this belief in Messiah come into full relationship with G-d, whether Jew or Gentile, thus “Messianic Faith”. Messianic Faith is therefore not a physical, ethnic heritage or culture; instead it is simply a spiritual community comprised of adherents from all the world’s peoples who have come to personally believe in the G-d of Israel through faith in the Messiah of Israel. Both Jews and Gentiles of Messianic Faith continue to live out their uniquely different national roles, while at the same time standing individually as spiritual equals before G-d.

Over the centuries, misinformed Christian theologians proposed the belief that G-d rejected the Jewish people and His unique relationship with them, and replaced Israel with a new “Israel”: “The Church”. Unfortunately, the political, social and cultural impact has been far reaching at times, manifesting anti-Semitism and sadly also forcing Jews who did come to accept Yeshua as Messiah to give up their adherence to their Jewish distinction and to assimilate within the greater Christian community. As a result, Jewish believers have had almost no remnant testimony due to assimilation under such social pressures. Usually by the time a first generation Jewish believer’s grandchildren are born, the Jewish identity of those grandchildren has all but disappeared. This is also hastened due to intermarriage where, unlike Ruth, most Gentile spouses are reluctant to set aside their own heritage to become a part of the Jewish people. Children from these families are therefore raised in a “mixed” world of different cultures and traditions which dilutes any practical connection with the Jewish Community at large. Inevitably, most children from such families feel incapable of living as Jews within the greater Jewish community and so, tragically, choose to forsake their Jewish identity.

### *The Torah is the Guide for Jewish Life*

With this in mind we now consider Scriptural support for Messianic Jewish loyalty to the Mosaic Covenant (Torah). **First**, G-d made the Mosaic Covenant as a contractual agreement specifically between Himself and the Jewish people, and no one else. I am speaking here of more than just the moral and theological teachings of the Torah, which are universally valuable for all people, but specifically the legal responsibilities and codes which were to specifically set Israel apart from the nations, i.e. Shabbat, Kosher, etc....<sup>1</sup> The text is clear in this regard, “***Now then, if you will obey Me faithfully and keep My covenant, you shall be My treasured possession among all the people.***”<sup>2</sup> The word *treasured possession* in Hebrew is **סִגְלָה** which means *peculiar property*, and denotes G-d’s unique relationship with the Jewish people; it also articulates the ongoing

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<sup>1</sup> See Exodus 31:16-17, Leviticus 20:22-26

<sup>2</sup> Exodus 19:5 JPS

unique role Jewish people play in G-d's program to redeem the world even after Messiah's arrival, as Shaul states, "...for G-d's free gifts and his calling are irrevocable".<sup>3</sup>

**Second**, G-d's commitment to Israel is secure. Some Christian theologies teach that Israel forfeited their "Choseness" through disobedience, yet G-d's capacity to forgive Israel is without measure. After repeated disobedience the text still states, "*And the L-RD has affirmed this day that you are, as He promised you, His treasured people who shall observe all His commandments ... you shall be, as He promised, a holy people to the L-RD your G-d*".<sup>4</sup>

Throughout the Prophetic books we see G-d judge Israel, but also maintain His commitment to them as His Chosen People. The promise of a New Covenant in Jeremiah 31:30-36 is not just meant to be a prophecy in regards to Messiah Yeshua's work, but also a reminder of G-d's covenant promise to Israel and His willingness to provide a new and improved Covenant to deepen His relationship with His physical people Israel, not end it: "*See, a time is coming – declares the L-RD – when I will make a new covenant with the House of Israel and the House of Judah ... For I will forgive their iniquities, and remember their sins no more ... Thus said the L-RD: If the heavens above could be measured, and the foundations of the earth below could be fathomed, only then would I reject all the offspring of Israel for all that they have done – declares the L-RD*" (JPS).

**Third**, when we look at the Post-Exilic literature within the Tanakh we do not find any hint of an anticipated termination of the Mosaic Covenant or of any cessation in expected observance of the Covenant in the lifestyle of the restored Jewish nation. Instead there is a clear emphasis regarding the people's obligation toward the teaching and observance of the Mosaic Covenant as seen in the historical books of Ezra and Nehemiah. The purpose of this is two fold from the text: first the obvious concern about religious apostasy, but also secondly there was a clear concern about the assimilation and ultimate dissolution of the people. We find the repeated challenge for Covenant observance as well in the prophetic literature.<sup>5</sup> Citing just one example, in Malachi 3:22 we read, "*Be mindful of the Teaching of My servant Moses, whom I charged at Horeb with laws and rules for all Israel.*" (JPS) These words are reminiscent of Messiah Yeshua's statement in Matthew 5:17-18, "*Do not think that I came to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I did not come to abolish, but to fulfill. For truly I say to you, until heaven and earth pass away, not the smallest letter or stroke shall pass away from the Law until all is accomplished*" (CJB).

**One final point** in regards to the Mosaic Covenant and Israel's unique relationship to it needs to be made from the New Covenant text. Acts 15 relates the dispute between Jews who believed that Gentiles must essentially convert and adopt Jewish practices, meaning an adherence to the Mosaic Covenant, and Jews who opposed this. Kefa (Peter), Yaakov (James) and the entire Leadership of the Messianic Jewish Community in Jerusalem came to the understanding that the "yoke" of the Covenant was their responsibility to keep as Jews, and that since the new Gentile believers had already obviously come into relationship with the G-d of Israel by their faith in Messiah Yeshua without needing to become Jews, it therefore was unreasonable to expect that they should become obligated to the Mosaic Covenant now and required to live Jewish life. They also realized that the purpose for the freedom which G-d had granted the Gentile believers was

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<sup>3</sup> Romans 11:25-31

<sup>4</sup> Deuteronomy 26:18-19 JPS

<sup>5</sup> See also Ezekiel 36 and 37

so that these Gentile believers could live out the truth of their faith in Messiah Yeshua among their own people.

In contrast, Acts 21 narrates the zeal of the Israeli Jewish believers for keeping the Mosaic Covenant. They continued observing the Torah that G-d had given to Israel because they saw it as G-d's gift and the proper guide for living out their distinct identity as Jews. They also recognized that faithfulness to the Covenant was the sign of spiritual renewal for Israel, thus validating their testimony and Yeshua's Messiahship within the greater Jewish community.<sup>6</sup>

Throughout the New Covenant text never is a word spoken against zealous Jewish identity or Torah observance by Jewish believers except when either Jews or Gentiles tried to impose Jewish observance and/or the Mosaic Covenant on Gentile believers in Messiah. In these instances the text is bluntly and ferociously opposed to such practice!<sup>7</sup> Paul clearly teaches that Jewish people should maintain their identity.<sup>8</sup> Paul circumcises Timothy because he is a Jew, and he doesn't circumcise Titus because he isn't a Jew.<sup>9</sup> As within the First Century community of Messianic Believers, there is still today a unique ongoing role for Messianic Jews, and as then, this identity needs to be encouraged, nurtured and even enhanced.<sup>10</sup>

### ***A Final Challenge For Jewish Living***

How are you living out your faith in Messiah Yeshua as a Messianic Jew? Do you accept your unique responsibility toward the Torah and appreciate G-d's calling for you to live as part of the Messianic remnant of Israel? Prayerfully and thoughtfully accept and live out the Torah that G-d has given to us as Jewish people. It is G-d's gift and our obligation!

**Want to talk more? Contact Rabbi Gliebe at:**

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<sup>6</sup> Malachi 3:19-24

<sup>7</sup> Galatians 3:1-5

<sup>8</sup> 1 Corinthians 7:17-20; Romans 8:1-3; Ephesians 2:8-9

<sup>9</sup> Acts 16:1-3; Galatians 2:1-4

<sup>10</sup> Romans 3:1-4; Romans 11