

## Conversion of Gentiles to Messianic Judaism

(by Rabbi Michael Wolf)

Some in our Messianic Jewish Movement have been considering a process for the conversion of Gentiles to Messianic Judaism. My response when I hear such discussion is to wonder what needs to be discussed. There is no basis in scripture for our Messianic Jewish institutions to even entertain such an idea. Furthermore, the practice would bring great confusion to our movement and accusation from those we are seeking to reach.

Nevertheless, since the issue of conversion is being seriously considered by some in the Messianic movement, these points are worth expanding in some detail.

Other writers on this subject have often offered ambiguous observations and conclusions, shifting back and forth between the subject of a Messianic Jewish conversion process and Gentile Christian conversion to Judaism in general. One writer starts advocating a Messianic conversion process and then switches subtly to a defense of any kind of Jewish conversions, calming [imagined] fears that Christians will be forced by Jewish *bet dins* to renounce Yeshua as Messiah. I must make it clear at the outset that the primary focus of this chapter is not the wider subject of conversion to Judaism. While I will point out that the biblical foundation for full conversion to Judaism might be questionable, that is not the controversial issue which concerns me. Simply put, the issue under discussion is not conversion of Gentiles to Judaism but conversion of Gentiles to Messianic Judaism facilitated by Messianic Jews.

### The *Ger* in the Torah

A reasonable place to start when discussing the foundation or lack of it for a Messianic Jewish conversion process is the Jewish scriptures. The Torah provided no means for the conversion of Gentiles to Judaism. Though some have contested that intermarriages after

the Exodus resulted in de facto conversions, there is no evidence for this in the scripture. Even Ruth was identified with Moab throughout the book. Her children were fully Jewish, but not Ruth herself. This same principle would apply to the “mixed multitude” that left Egypt. The Torah provided no way for the Egyptians who left with the Israelites to become full citizens as Jews. However, by the time the people enter the Promised Land, there is no reference to a mixed multitude. This does not imply a process of conversion for the Gentiles. All it implies is that the children of the original mixed marriages were recognized as Jews. The word *Ger* always designated a foreigner who joined himself to the peoplehood of Israel.

Options concerning observances seem to have existed, even in biblical times, for Gentiles living amidst Israel, so that some participated in all Torah observance, beginning with circumcision, and some elected not to (though the basic laws of justice applied to all living in the land). However, there is no evidence that the individual *Ger* ever lost the identity of the *Ger* or took on the complete identity of an Israelite.

Later the rabbis made a differentiation between the proselytes (*Gerim*) of the gate who were not circumcised and did not fully participate in Torah observance, and the proselyte of righteousness who was circumcised and adhered to all of the Jewish laws. (Note, the word *proselyte* is simply a translation the word *Ger*.) To the *Gerim* of the gate they applied the verse from Deut. 14: 21.

Ye shall not eat of anything that dieth of itself: thou shalt give it unto the stranger that is in thy gates, that he may eat it. (KJV)

The circumcised proselyte was referred to as *Ger haTzedek*, a righteous alien. This formal differentiation went beyond the intent of scripture and established the foundation for formal conversion to Judaism.

In fact, the term *Ger haTzedek*, righteous alien, hints at some disagreement between the rabbis during the Second Temple period concerning the standards for accepting a full conversion. There is actually much discussion about this subject in the Mishnah. The term implies both respect and acceptance, as well as the acknowledgement that the *Ger* is still “outside,” distinguished from the native-born Israelite.

Nevertheless, a process for conversion did develop amidst the struggle for agreement concerning standards. This biblical choice was seen by some leading rabbis during the Second Temple period as the difference between a stranger in the midst of the people and a full Jewish citizen.

An alien living among you who wants to celebrate the LORD's Passover must have all the males in his household circumcised; then he may take part like one born in the land. No uncircumcised male may eat of it.” Exodus 12:48 (NIV)

Although this passage shows that gentiles could choose to observe Jewish life, they were still called *Gerim*.

Once again, though there may be evidence for an historic rabbinic halachic conversion process, there is no clear Biblical process for making a *Ger* into a former *Ger*, outside of the assimilation of the children and grandchildren of an intermarriage. This is a very important point for the Messianic Jewish movement to consider. Our movement lacks any Biblical precedent or authority to perform conversions.

Book of Esther 8:17 as an exception?

In the book of Esther, reference is made to Gentiles becoming Jews.

And many people of other nationalities became Jews because fear of the Jews had seized them. Esther 8:17 (NIV)

Some use this one verse to prove the existence of a conversion process known to the Persian Jewish community prior to the Babylonian Captivity , or at least to give evidence that a process developed that early. However, the text reveals no process for conversion. Did the people merely identify as Jews in order to avoid being slaughtered by that community, which had been given the sword to deal with their enemies? The part of the verse that deals with the fear of the Jews suggests this as a motivating factor. There is no evidence that the Jewish religious authorities did anything to make them Jews. In fact, some rabbis in the Mishnah questioned the legitimacy of their conversion. An example is given in Yevamot 24b.

...nor the proselytes of Mordecai and Esther are proper proselytes unless they become converted at the present time.

Perhaps these Persians entered the community and eventually assimilated through the next generation or two. That would follow the same biblical pattern that had existed since Mount Sinai. Were they instead received through some kind of formal conversion process? We do not have enough evidence in this one verse to conclude that they were.

## Traditional Jewish Conversions

At this point someone might ask, “Are you saying that Messianic Jews don’t accept conversions done by the traditional Jewish community?” First, there is no consensus in the Messianic Jewish community on traditional Jewish community conversions, whether orthodox or otherwise. While the International Messianic Jewish Alliance and its affiliated national Alliances do not accept converts to Judaism as full Jewish members (the Gentile spouse of a Messianic Jew can be a member of the Jewish membership organization, however), other Messianic organizations do.

Second, it bears repeating that this is a bigger issue than this format allows for, and so the main focus of this chapter is not the wider subject of conversion to Judaism. Our discussion will be directed to the conversion of Gentiles to Messianic Judaism facilitated by Messianic Jews.

Third, I honor traditional Jewish conversions in my synagogue. This is because these converts are embraced by the Jewish community, and so I embrace them too, even if the process was never outlined or sanctioned in the Torah. This brings me to my main concern about Messianic conversions: the resulting break with the Jewish community, which we can also call peoplehood of Israel. This argument will comprise the rest of the chapter.

## Authority to Convert

Sometimes fairly strong language is used to support a conversion process in the Messianic Jewish community. One interesting argument likens a conversion-less Messianic Judaism to a mule. With similar language to what one might use to describe the unnatural beliefs of the Shakers, who forbade marriage, a Messianic movement without a conversion process is seen as sterile, stunted, and unable to reproduce itself. These same conversion proponents hold very high standards for candidates, which would result in only a sprinkling entering

into full Jewish status, even over a long period of time. Yet their language implies that the whole future of the movement is at stake here.

In addition, they state that no true legitimate Judaism exists without the authority to convert. This argument implies that Messianic Judaism without a conversion process is contrary to the standards of God for Judaism. Yet, as we have shown earlier, God did not provide a law or process for conversion in the Torah, when he had every opportunity to do so. Such strong language about this controversial issue may make good rhetoric, but its dire predictions about a Messianic Judaism without a conversion process have no basis in fact.

### The Peoplehood of Israel

The peoplehood of Israel is a theme that runs through not only the Bible (both Old and New Covenants), but also through writings and discussion in the modern era. Basically, the concept speaks of a distinctive community that has in common a Jewish identity and calling.

It is true that currently there is hot disagreement about conversions in the Jewish community itself. Some of this controversy has recently reached even secular news audiences in the form of items on the Israeli Orthodox exclusions of certain non-Orthodox conversions. In fact, we probably would not be considering a conversion process so seriously in our movement if there was unity in the mainstream Jewish community about conversion -- if there were a process that was agreed upon by all of the mainstream branches of Judaism.

Are we perhaps using the lack of unity on this issue in the mainstream Jewish community to our own advantage? Are we saying, "We have a conversion process too, just like the Reform movement does. We don't need everyone to accept our converts."

It is true that the Jewish community is in crisis precisely because there is no agreement on which conversion process makes legitimate Jews. But this crisis is not an open door for us. We must remember that all of the Jewish community sees Orthodox conversions as legitimate. And though some of the Orthodox do not consider Conservative, Reform, Reconstructionist or Humanistic conversions to be legitimate, *no one* in the mainstream Jewish community would consider our process legitimate. The *Messianic Jewish converts* would never be considered Jewish by any branch of Judaism.

If one allows for this fact, and therefore considers Messianic Jewish conversion to be a limited conversion for the Gentile candidate -- a conversion not to Judaism, but merely to the particular Judaism called Messianic Judaism -- then we are creating a new entity. And, in doing so, we confirm that we indeed are not part of the historic Jewish people, but rather, part of a new and previously unknown entity called Messianic Judaism. This is a very important point and should be underscored. There are some things we cannot and should not undertake to do on our own apart from our connection to our people as a whole.

Some argue that even those in the Messianic community who are born Jewish are often not seen as Jews -- so why let the non-acceptance of these Messianic Jewish converts stop us from declaring them Jews. But those who argue along these lines forget the importance of Biblical definitions, especially to the Messianic Jewish community which upholds the scripture as the final arbiter of our identity. The point is this. When certain segments of the Jewish community say that they do not consider Messianic Jews as Jewish any longer, we know that the scripture and our hearts teach contrary to that. For the same reason, we can embrace patrilineal Jews though a large segment of the Jewish community does not.

Many Jewish leaders do recognize that the teachings of the Bible, and even rabbinic writings, do not exclude Messianic Jews from being Jews. These may say that we are traitors (meshumeds) but not ex-Jews. However, the utter lack of acceptance in the Jewish community of the Gentiles we would convert, added to the lack of a clear scriptural model for our authority to convert Gentiles, produces a disassociative factor vis a vis the Jewish community. In other words, there is no touchpoint of commonality or understanding anywhere in the Jewish community concerning these Gentiles.

In short, conversion of Gentiles to Messianic Judaism does not confirm our belonging to the peoplehood of Israel (as some may suggest) but, instead, further distances us by creating a distinct entity not connected with the rest of the people. In fact, for me, the strongest argument against Messianic Jewish conversion is that this practice would be counterproductive to our unity with the whole peoplehood of Israel. And that unity is a spiritual reality that our Messianic Jewish community must affirm and be committed to no matter what the response of the Jewish community at large. We are, from God's point of view, part of the peoplehood of Israel, no matter what some in the mainstream community may say.

In closing, let us consider the example of a Gentile leader of a Messianic congregation who is converted through a Messianic Jewish conversion process. Some, in fact, have suggested that Gentiles in Messianic leadership would be prime candidates for conversion. Say this man attends a Jewish function and introduces himself as a Messianic Jewish rabbi. The community does not necessarily know that he is a convert because he appears to be Jewish. The experience of many Messianic Jewish leaders has been that they find themselves accepted as individual Jews at various Jewish functions, even though some members of the Jewish community often have trouble accepting the validity of Messianic Judaism as a movement. In our imagined scenario, after accepting this man as a Jew, the Jewish

community discovers that this person has no Jewish blood on either his father or mother's side, and that his whole claim to Jewishness is through a Messianic Jewish conversion. At this point, all areas of unity and agreement fade away. The old charge of deception gains credence. The link, the connection, to the rest of the Jewish people dissolves and, in many circles, we would be seen as a cult.