

Planting Messianic Congregations

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Contents

1. Introduction and Definitions	2
2. The First Messianic Movement	3
a. A Jewish Movement	3
b. The Rise of Rabbinic Judaism – the Birkat Minim.....	4
c. The Bar Kochba Revolt	5
d. Anti Jewish Attitude in Early Church.....	6
3. Missiological Principles	7
a. The Principle of Cultural Embrace - 1 Cor. 7:18.....	7
b. The Principle of Empathy - 1 Cor. 9:19-23.....	8
4. Rationale for Messianic Jewish Congregations	9
a. Community of God’s People - Messianic Congregations as an expression of the Body of Messiah.....	9
b. Preserving the Fruit of Evangelism – Messianic Congregations as Mission.....	9
c. Sustaining Jewish Identity – Messianic Congregations as Community.....	11
d. Enduring Witness to the Jewish People – Messianic Congregations as an expression of Biblical Faith.....	11
e. The Abiding Identity of Israel – Messianic Congregation as “The Israel of God.”	12
5. Challenges and Opportunities	13
a. More Gentiles than Jews?	13
b. Second and Third Generation of Messianic Jews	13
c. Keep Focused on the Task	13
d. Leadership and Training	13
6. A Grafting Back into their own Olive Tree – Romans 11:23-24.....	13

1. Introduction and Definitions

My talk today is on the topic of “Planting Messianic Congregations” and I will endeavour to give a brief overview of the emergence of the Messianic Movement accompanied by a rationale for the planting of Messianic Congregations.

The growth of the Messianic movement is one of the most compelling stories in the recent history of world missions. From a total of just a half-dozen Messianic congregations almost forty years ago, there are now over four hundred around the world, with over a hundred in Israel alone (25 years ago there were probably just a handful of congregations in Israel).

We have Messianic versions of the Bible, commentaries and wonderful Messianic music. The network of alliances, multi-national fellowships, conferences, camps, publishing houses and other resources that have been developed through the gifts and commitment of so many Messianic Jewish believers is truly a blessing beyond description.

The Messianic Movement is not new but a present day incarnation of the movement started by Yeshua and his Jewish disciples in the first century C.E. The first believers were Jews and their message was about Yeshua the Jewish Messiah who had come in fulfilment of God’s promises to the nation of Israel.

The term messianic is simply a Hebraic way of saying Christian, and so, in a very real sense messianic faith is the faith of all those who follow Yeshua as Messiah and the Son of God. This is of course not confined to a particular people or culture but comprised of adherents from all peoples and cultures. It is a faith community or as the New Testament defines it, the “Body of Messiah,” which is made up of Jews and Gentiles as the Apostle Paul (Rabbi Shaul) said, "Now you together constitute the body of the Messiah, and individually you are parts of it." (1 Corinthians 12:27, JNT)¹

Today the term Messianic Movement is used more specifically to refer to the growing movement of Jews who have come to faith in Messiah and who want to emphasise their continuity with their Jewish identity and with the Jewish people. Messianic Jews are thus Jewish followers of Messiah who are inexplicably linked with both the worldwide Body of Messiah as well as the worldwide community of Jewish people.

Messianic Jewish Congregations can thus simply be defined as faith communities that provide the spiritual and cultural environment for Jewish believers and their families to grow in their relationship with God through faith in Yeshua the Messiah. A more detailed purpose for Messianic Congregations will be given later.

Messianic congregations have been planted today all around the world. It has been especially exciting to see the growth of the movement amongst Russian speaking Jews in Russia, in the Former Soviet Union states, in the United States and of course in Israel. I have been personally involved in planting messianic congregations and outreaches in the Far East of Russia and Siberia and I am the leader of a messianic ministry in Australia with outreaches amongst English speaking and Russian speaking Jews.

¹ Stern, D. H. (1989; Published in electronic form by Logos Research Systems, 1996). Jewish New Testament : A translation of the New Testament that expresses its Jewishness (electronic edition.). Clarksville, MD: Jewish New Testament Publications.

Chosen People Ministries have held conferences in Germany and in Israel over the past couple of years for Russian Jewish believers planting and leading messianic congregations. These conferences were attended by over 120 leaders of messianic congregations representing over 100 messianic congregations—from Russia, the Ukraine, Israel, Canada, Australia, the United States and many other countries. The most remarkable thing was that not one of these congregations existed before 1989. The program provided excellent training taught by Russian Jewish leaders in the Russian language. This is truly remarkable and inspiring.

And of course, in Israel today, there are congregations of every stripe—Hebrew-speaking, Amharic-speaking, Russian-speaking and also French- and Spanish-speaking.

Some people would argue that more Jewish people come to faith in Jesus through the witness of Gentile Christians and through local Christian Churches. That may be true; however, it is without doubt that there is a growing need for the planting of messianic congregations to be places where Jewish believers can continue to express their Jewish identity as I will continue to stress in this paper.

To understand the modern messianic congregational movement, one needs to look at the first messianic movement and see what caused the split between Messianic Jews and the rest of the Jewish community.

2. The First Messianic Movement

a. A Jewish Movement

As I said in my introduction, the modern Messianic Movement, which has been around in various forms for over 100 years², is a present day incarnation of the movement started by Yeshua and his Jewish disciples in the first century. The original “church” was made up of Jewish people who had come to faith in Yeshua as Messiah and who continued to express their faith communally as part of the Jewish community.

In the first century it was clear that individual Jewish identity was strongly associated with communal Jewish identity. Thus we see that the first messianic Jews continued to express their faith as Jews within the Jewish religious framework, worshipping in the Temple and gathering together for Jewish Festivals. The Book of Acts recalls how these early messianic Jewish believers gathered together as one people for corporate worship and teaching, for fellowship in their homes and for the distribution of wealth to the needy, thus expressing a distinct version of the first century synagogue system (cf. Acts 2:44-47). These faith communities were the first messianic congregations.

² David Sedaca in his paper “Outreach through Messianic Jewish Congregations. A History and Insight for Today” notes: Noticeable progress in Jewish outreach didn’t actually occurred until Jewish believers themselves established missionary societies. Joseph Samuel Frey (1771-1837) and Ridley Herschell (1807-1864) were the driving forces behind the founding of London Society and the British Society for Promoting Christianity among the Jews. By the end of the 19th century there were almost one hundred missionary societies working among the Jewish people in different parts of the world. It is worth of special note the Hebrew Christian Testimony to Israel, founded in 1893 by David Baron and C. A. Schönberger in London. What makes this ministry different from others is the fact that this work wasn’t associated to any Christian church or denomination, rather it stressed the testimony of Jewish believers who had accepted Yeshua as their Messiah.

These early Jewish believers saw themselves as continuing traditional Jewish forms of worship and community. Andrew Sparks in his paper "Modern Messianic Identity and Practice," points out that this is demonstrated, for example, in the letter of James to the 12 Tribes of Israel in the Diaspora. James, an elder in the Jerusalem Church and Yeshua's brother used the word *synagogue* (Gk *sunagoge*) and the word "church" (Gk *ecclesia*) interchangeably in two instances - James 1:1-2 and James 5:14.³ In both instances he was referring to the messianic community of believers thus showing the continuity between the synagogue and the assembly of believers in the mind of the Apostle.

Another important and defining characteristic of this first messianic movement was that they openly and boldly proclaimed the Gospel. The message that they proclaimed was a Jewish message of redemption and forgiveness of sin through the long awaited Messiah of Israel. This message was believed by thousands of Jews, men, women, including many Pharisees and Sadducees (cf. Acts 5:14, 6:7, 20:21). Some writings say that there were up to 150,000 Jewish believers in Yeshua over the span of the first two centuries. With the initial response we read of in the book of Acts (Acts 2:41, 4:4), this seems accurate.

These Messianic Jews saw themselves as part of the Jewish people. The only difference was that they believed in Yeshua as the Davidic King Messiah of Israel. It must be stressed that they remained an organic part of the nation of Israel. They continued to observe Jewish customs and Temple worship even though they did not compromise the proclamation of their belief in Yeshua as Messiah.

b. The Rise of Rabbinic Judaism – the Birkat Minim

Even though these Messianic Jews saw themselves as part of the Jewish community, the Jewish leadership moved to isolate and then excommunicate them from the Jewish community. This had already begun during the time of Yeshua's ministry as John records "... the Jews had decided that anyone who acknowledged that Jesus was the Messiah would be put out of the synagogue." (John 9:22). The Book of Acts recalls describes how persecution against Messianic Jews continued and then escalated in the late first century and early second century.

It was during this time that the Jewish leadership instituted the first decrees against Messianic Jews. A **takkanot** (a rabbinic legal decree) was issued formulating a "blessing" against Messianic Jews and other "heretics." This was known as the **Birkat Minim**. It read:

May the apostates have no hope, unless they return to Thy Torah, and may the Nazarenes and the Minim disappear in a moment. May they be erased from the book of life, and not be inscribed with the righteous⁴

³ "My brothers, practice the faith of our Lord Yeshua, the glorious Messiah, without showing favoritism. Suppose a man comes into your synagogue (*sunagoge*) wearing gold rings and fancy clothes, and also a poor man comes in dressed in rags." (James 2:1-2, JNT). "Is someone among you ill? He should call for the elders of the congregation (*ecclesia*). They will pray for him and rub olive oil on him in the name of the Lord." (James 5:14, JNT)

⁴ Fragment found of the Genizah fragments -1925. Gedaliah Alon, *The Jews In Their Land In The Talmudic Age*, translated and edited by Gershon Levi. Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1980, p. 288.

This prayer (curse) was instituted in order to isolate Jewish believers in Yeshua. The rabbis believed that Messianic Jews were **Minim**, heretics, and must be identified, isolated and excluded. They probably felt that Judaism could not cope with alternative sects in its weakened state after the destruction of the Temple in 70 AD.

This strategy was pretty effective. Messianic Jews couldn't attend Synagogue any longer. If they did, they would be forced to pronounce a curse upon themselves and many stopped participating in Jewish religious life even though they continued to see themselves as part of the Jewish People.

c. The Bar Kochba Revolt

It was the Bar Kochba Revolt in 125 CE that effectively broke any remaining ties between the Messianic Jews and the Jewish community. Rabbi Akiba, head of the Sanhedrin of the time, put his full support behind a military revolt against Rome. The commander of the Jewish forces was a man called Simon Bar Kochba. Rabbi Akiva hailed Bar Kochba as the Messiah saying, "This is the king and Messiah" and Jewish people rallied to his cause.

This posed severe problems for Messianic Jews who obviously believed that Yeshua was the Messiah. They couldn't participate in this revolt. For refusing to bear arms, they were severely punished and further ostracised from the community.

After three years, the revolt was finally crushed, Bar Kochba and Rabbi Akiva killed together with thousands of Jewish people. The Romans decisively expelled all Jewish survivors and Jerusalem was rebuilt as a Roman city, Aelia Capitolina. No longer was there a Jewish homeland. Their hopes were dashed and their nation dispersed.

Messianic Jews were labelled "*meshumudim*" (traitors) for not participating in the revolt and the relationship between the Jewish believers and the Jewish community, which was tenuous at best, was further strained.

This, together with the *Birkat Mimin*, the "blessings" on the "heretics" effectively kept the two communities apart. **However, it must be said that Messianic Jews never chose to separate themselves from the Jewish community; we were forced out.**

Jacob Jocz says of Messianic Jews:

They were spiritually alive, abounding in religious zeal. They were aggressive, and above all, they were the enthusiastic bearer of the greatest Jewish heritage--the Messianic hope. They were dangerous because they had the advantage of attacking Judaism from within. It became imperative for the synagogue to isolate them.⁵

⁵ Jacob Jocz, The Jewish People and Jesus Christ, p.53.

d. Anti Jewish Attitude in Early Church

Sadly the early Gentile church did not take the Apostle Paul's admonition "not to boast over the broken off branches [the Jews]" seriously (cf. Rom. 11:18-21). It did not take long for the anti-Semitic attitude of the pervading Roman culture to infiltrate the church and by the third and fourth centuries the Early Church Fathers took an arrogant and conceited stance against the Jewish people inciting hatred and even violence against the Jewish people.⁶

This hatred of the Jews together with supersessionist theologies (Replacement Theology) of the Early Church, still prevalent in some mainline denominations today, effectively robbed the Jewish people of their position as the People of God and of their abiding election through the Patriarchs, if this indeed were possible.⁷

In 325 AD Emperor Constantine sponsored the Council of Nicaea in order to stamp out heresies in the Church and to establish true orthodox Christian faith and practice. This was important for the early church and God used this process to articulate the fundamental theological truths of the Christian faith like the Trinity and the Deity of Yeshua.

However, the theologians at the Council of Nicaea had another agenda as well. They wanted to separate Christianity from Judaism effectively stripping the faith from its Jewish roots. One example is that it separated the celebration of Easter from the Jewish Passover, stating, "For it is unbecoming beyond measure that on this holiest of festivals we should follow the customs of the Jews. Henceforth let us have nothing in common with this odious people..."

From the 4th century onwards, a Jewish person considering faith in Jesus was forced to renounce their Jewish culture and heritage in order to receive faith in Jesus. Consider this profession of faith forced upon a Jewish person upon "conversion:"

I renounce all customs, rites, legalisms, unleavened breads and sacrifices of lambs of the Hebrews, and all the other feasts of the Hebrews, sacrifices, prayers, aspersions, purifications, sanctifications and propitiations, and fasts, and new moons, and Sabbaths, and superstitions, and hymns and chants and observances and synagogues, and the food and drink of the Hebrews; in one word, I renounce absolutely everything Jewish, every law, rite and custom . . . and if afterwards I shall wish to deny and return to Jewish superstition, or shall be found eating with Jews, or feasting with them, or secretly conversing and condemning the Christian religion instead of openly confuting them and condemning their vain faith, then let the trembling of Cain and leprosy of Gehazi cleave to me, as well as the

⁶ Justin Martyr accused the Jews of inciting Romans to kill Christians after having murdered God (*Nicene Fathers, Vol. 1*, chap. 16:5, pp. 202, 203). Jerome (A.D. 340-419), originator of the Latin Vulgate, although taught by a scholarly Jewish rabbi, followed the pattern set by Augustine: "God hates the Jews, and I hate the Jews" (Philip Schaff *History of the Christian Church, Vol. III*, pp. 970, 971). Chrysostom, Patriarch of Constantinople (344-407), said, "Jews are the most worthless of men—they are lecherous, greedy, rapacious ... they worship the devil. It is incumbent on all Christians to hate Jews" (*Homily 1:3-6; 4:1*). Of Cyril, Patriarch of Alexandria, it is written "In the year 415 he fell upon the synagogues of the very numerous Jews with armed force.... he put some to death and drove out the rest, and exposed their property to the excited multitude" (Philip Schaff, *History of the Christian Church, Vol. III*, pp. 942, 943).

⁷ "As far as the gospel is concerned, they are enemies on your account; but as far as election is concerned, they are loved on account of the patriarchs, for God's gifts and his call are irrevocable." (Romans 11:28-29, NIV)

legal punishments to which I acknowledge myself liable. And I may be anathema in the world to come, and may my soul be set down with Satan and the devils.⁸

Jewish people who become followers of Jesus were forced to forfeit their Jewish heritage and links to their own people. They were treated by the Church as second-class citizens and stripped of their Jewish identity. Not only that, they were outcast by their own Jewish community for being believers in Jesus.

Under these circumstances a Jewish testimony for Messiah Yeshua diminished and almost faded away. Even so there has always been a remnant of Jewish people who have believed in Yeshua as Messiah throughout the past two thousand years, however, most of them simply assimilated into the wider Christian and Gentile culture losing their effective witness amongst their own people.

3. Missiological Principles

It is helpful to briefly articulate a couple of missiological principles that has much bearing faith and culture.

a. The Principle of Cultural Embrace - 1 Cor. 7:18

The first principle is what Sparks calls cultural embrace. Sparks says that “everyone who comes to Jesus should be willing to leave all for the Gospel, including culture and custom, if necessary.”⁹

However, the issue is why create a cultural stumbling block in the way of someone coming to faith in Messiah that is not demanded by the Gospel itself. In the first Jerusalem Council in Acts 15 the Messianic Jewish leadership decided not to place any stumbling block in the way of Gentiles coming to faith in Yeshua the Jewish Messiah. In the same way today, the predominantly Gentile Church, should not discourage Jewish people from receiving Jesus by placing unnecessary cultural stumbling blocks in their path. The ruling of the Jerusalem Council remains in effect, i.e. culture must not hinder the Gospel.

Sparks argues that obviously a first century Jewish person did not have to reject Jewish religious practice in order to receive Jesus as Messiah. That would be ridiculous to consider. In the same way a twenty-first century Jewish person should not have to reject his or her Jewish culture in order to follow Jesus. After all, was not Jesus the Jewish Messiah? What kind of Jewish Messiah would want to make Gentiles out of Jews?

Rather, the New Testament provides a model for handling cultural diversity and inherent principles can be applied. For instance the Apostle Paul says: "Was a man already circumcised [a Jew] when he was called? He should not become uncircumcised [a Gentile]. Was a man uncircumcised [a Gentile] when he was called? He should not be circumcised [a Jew]." (1 Corinthians 7:18, NIV). Rather Paul teaches that “Each one should remain in the situation which he was in when God called him.” (1 Corinthians 7:20, NIV).

⁸ Profession of Faith, from the Church of Constantinople: From Assemani, Cod. Lit., I, p.105

⁹ Andrew Sparks - “Modern Messianic Identity and Practice,”

Paul fought hard throughout his ministry maintaining that Gentiles did not have to become Jews in order to follow Yeshua. So too he maintained that a Jew should not become a Gentile. This is the principle of cultural embrace.

b. The Principle of Empathy - 1 Cor. 9:19-23

The Apostle Paul also taught another principle, the Principle of Empathy. Empathy can be described as “the intellectual identification with or vicarious experiencing of the feelings, thoughts, or attitudes of another.”

"Though I am free and belong to no man, I make myself a slave to everyone, to win as many as possible. To the Jews I became like a Jew, to win the Jews. To those under the law I became like one under the law (though I myself am not under the law), so as to win those under the law. To those not having the law I became like one not having the law (though I am not free from God's law but am under Christ's law), so as to win those not having the law. To the weak I became weak, to win the weak. I have become all things to all men so that by all possible means I might save some. I do all this for the sake of the gospel, that I may share in its blessings." (1 Corinthians 9:19-23, NIV)

Some people, including Jewish people today, criticise Paul saying that he is a hypocrite, pretending to be someone he is not in order to win them to Messiah. However, we must remember that Paul never stopped being Jewish.¹⁰ In Romans 11:1 he says that he continues to be Jewish, a descendant of Abraham from the Tribe of Benjamin. His Jewishness was not something that he put on or took off to suit his circumstances. Paul never played any charade. Rather, he put himself in their position. He vicariously entered into the feelings, thoughts and attitudes of the people he was endeavouring to engage for the sake of the Gospel.

He also made a point of doing nothing that would offend them. He worked hard to establish common ground with those he was trying to reach. Understanding their culture and religious practises. It was this platform that gave him the right to communicate the Gospel in a way that was culturally relevant.

And so to his own Jewish people, he entered into their world, expressing messianic faith in ways his people could understand, eliminating unnecessary cultural barriers to faith in Messiah.

This, I would suggest, is foundational principle for the rationale for Messianic Congregations.

¹⁰ Stern, D. H. (1992; Published in electronic form by Logos Research Systems, 1996). Jewish New Testament Commentary : A companion volume to the Jewish New Testament (electronic edition.). Logos Library Systems (1 Co 9:21). Clarksville, MD: Jewish New Testament Publications.

4. Rationale for Messianic Jewish Congregations

a. Community of God's People - Messianic Congregations as an expression of the Body of Messiah

As I said earlier, Messianic Congregations are local Jewish expressions of the worldwide Body of Messiah that seeks to worship Messiah Yeshua in a way that is culturally consistent with their ongoing Jewish identity. Like early New Testament congregations there is often a mixture of Jews and Gentiles in their membership. This in itself is a wonderful expression of the Body of Messiah and a powerful testimony of the power of the Gospel to break down the wall of partition between Jew and Gentile (cf. Eph 2:11-22).

Messianic congregations are faith communities that stress the Jewish context of the Gospel of Yeshua the Messiah. By utilizing features of the synagogue that are consistent with New Testament teaching, Messianic congregations provide a familiar environment for Jewish seekers. Messianic congregations often employ Jewish forms of worship, use Hebrew in their liturgy and stress the connection of Messiah to the Hebrew Scriptures.

b. Preserving the Fruit of Evangelism – Messianic Congregations as Mission

The Great Commission is “Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit,” (Matthew 28:19, NIV). To be sure, the Great Commission is to “make disciples” not to “make believers.” All too often we have only succeeded in making a person a believer but not a follower of Yeshua. The fruit of evangelism must be preserved by ongoing discipleship in a way that reflects the mission of Yeshua.

Alan and Debra Hirsch in their book *Untamed* assert:

We take the missional agenda of the church with utmost seriousness. You simply cannot be a disciple without being a missionary- a *sent one*. For way too long discipleship has been limited to issues relating to our own personal morality and worked out in the context of the four walls of the church with its privatized religion. In doing this, we have neglected our biblical mandate to go and “make disciples.” We have narrowed the gospel message to just being about us... The fact is that you can't be a disciple without being a missionary: no mission, no discipleship. It is as simple as that.¹¹

After 20 years of experience in Jewish missions I firmly believe that it is hard if not impossible to make disciples outside of the community of believers. And secondly I also firmly believe that discipleship of a Jewish believer in Yeshua in a messianic congregation is best done in the framework of a Messianic Congregation. A Messianic congregation provides the context and the community for Jewish believers to express their Jewish identity, bring up their children as Messianic Jews, be discipled in their walk with the Lord while being able to be a continued witness to their Jewish family and friends.

¹¹ Alan & Debra Hirsch, *Untamed*, 2010 Baker Books, Grand Rapids, Michigan, p. 29

This aspect of witness from within the context of an ongoing Jewish expression of faith is vital in demonstrating to other Jewish people that believing in Yeshua and being Jewish are not mutually exclusive terms. As in the times of the New Testament individual Jewish identity best operates within the context of communal Jewish identity. Again, it may not be impossible, but it is very difficult for a Jewish person to maintain their Jewishness in a vacuum. They need a community around them to affirm their identity, provide a context for Jewish expression of worship, festivals, affirming of culture and values and a place to raise the next generation as Jewish believers in Messiah.

History has shown that without this positive affirmation of Jewish identity assimilation into the wider Gentile culture is inevitable, possibly not for the first generation of believers, but certainly for the second and third generations. It is my strong contention that this should be avoided and is a poor testimony for the Jewish Messiah Yeshua.

Messianic Rabbi Ben Alpert asserts: "You can tell Jewish people that one can believe the Gospel and remain Jewish, but it makes a much more powerful statement to show that this is true. The Jewish character of the congregation's setting and fellowship make a world of difference. That is why presenting the Gospel in a culturally sensitive manner will help Jewish people to be more receptive to the message of Messiah."¹²

In the messianic congregation that I pastor, we do a lot of outreach during holidays such as Passover, Rosh Hashanah, Yom Kippur and Sukkot. These biblical holidays provide amazing opportunities to present the Gospel as they are all wonderfully fulfilled through Yeshua the Messiah. We have also found that one of the greatest testimonies is when a young messianic Jewish girl or boy has their Bat or Bar Mitzvah (a rite of passage ceremony) and they testify before the family and friends of their love for God and their faith in Yeshua.

As a way of illustration, this is a testimony of a Holocaust survivor who has come to faith in Yeshua as the Messiah. Her name is Netty Tepe:

I was born in Amsterdam into a loving Jewish family. When Hitler's armies marched into the Netherlands our lives changed forever. We were secretly moved from one house to the next until, on May 31 1944, my parents were taken by the Nazis into concentration camps. My mother later died in Auschwitz but somehow my father managed to escape from the "Eisenbahnkommando" concentration camp near Landshut in Germany...

...It was later, when I had migrated to Australia and was married to my loving husband Peter that I finally came to fully understand that Jesus was God's Son, who had left the glory of Heaven to come and save me a sinner. It is such a joy to know the Lord. When I finally told my pastor that I was Jewish, he said to me "don't worry, you have now been changed, you are no longer Jewish but a Christian." I was stunned, hurt and confused. How can one forget their heritage, my mum, my grandparents, my uncles and my extended family —many who died in the Holocaust? From that time on, I kept my Jewishness a secret from everyone, including my children. Only my husband knew I was Jewish.

¹² Chosen People Ministries Newsletter, Vol XIV, Issue 5, June 2008.

Many years passed until one day, about 10 years ago, my eldest daughter Margaret, asked me to come with her to a messianic congregation that she had been attending that was run by Celebrate Messiah. I went with her to Beit HaMashiach and was so amazed to meet Jewish people who believed in Jesus. They were so happy and they loved the Lord. And the most amazing thing was that they were proud to be Jewish. Finally, I had come home!

I now continue to worship at Beit HaMashiach Messianic Congregation. I feel that it is a safe place for me where I can worship the Lord freely as a Jew who believes in Messiah. I feel at home and don't have to leave my Jewish identity at the door, as I did for so many years in other churches. It has also opened my eyes to God's Word anew, learning about God's covenants and blessings through the Feasts and getting to know Yeshua even better. I also have more confidence in sharing about God with my own Jewish people. If only the Jewish people would accept the love of God through His Son Yeshua HaMashiach! What a day that would be.

c. Sustaining Jewish Identity – Messianic Congregations as Community

This point as already been made above to some extent. Both Jewish identity and discipleship is best expressed and nurtured within community. And let me also add that community empowers mission.

However, there is another aspect of community that I would like to emphasise. Since making a faith decision to follow Yeshua may mean excommunication or isolating for a Jewish person, it is thus crucial that a messianic congregation be able to provide a caring community for that such a person. Of course this can and should be done in any church, but a messianic congregation is uniquely placed to empathise with the issues of rejection from family and friend and provide such a caring community to nurture and encourage the Jewish believer.

d. Enduring Witness to the Jewish People – Messianic Congregations as an expression of Biblical Faith

As messianic Jews we believe that Yeshua is the long awaited Messiah of Israel, the one of whom Moses and the Prophets speak about. We proclaim that he is the one who has made the way of salvation for Jew and Gentile through this atoning death on the cross. Our testimony to our Jewish people is that you can believe in Yeshua and continue to be Jewish because he is God's Anointed One.

A messianic congregation is thus an enduring witness to the Jewish people that one can be Jewish and follow Yeshua and that our faith is consistent with Biblical Judaism. As a Jewish believer in Yeshua it is impossible to demonstrate this truth while living a lifestyle of a non-Jew and without any clear references in your life to Jewish culture and practice. Of course, it is possible to have a personal Jewish identity outside of a messianic congregation, but again I emphasise, that is much more difficult to do outside of a messianic Jewish community.

Of course, there is a wide spectrum of messianic congregations with various levels of Jewish observances and practices. However, messianic congregations should be biblically based congregations, while at the same time, maintaining various aspects of Jewish traditions. In most cases, their orthodoxy is founded in the New Covenant, and their orthopraxis is rooted in the Jewish milieu from where they came.¹³

e. The Abiding Identity of Israel – Messianic Congregation as “The Israel of God.”

Another issue that related to the importance of a continuing Jewish identity that is probably best nurtured in a messianic congregation is the fact that God has called the Jewish people as a distinct people with a distinct calling. This calling of God is irrevocable as the Apostle Paul teaches; "As far as the gospel is concerned, they are enemies on your account; but as far as election is concerned, they are loved on account of the patriarchs, for God's gifts and his call are irrevocable." (Romans 11:28-29, NIV)

In Romans 11:12, 15 Paul also stresses that Israel's salvation (full return to faith in Messiah) will result in great blessing and "greater riches" for the rest of the world even "life from the dead."

"But if their transgression means riches for the world, and their loss means riches for the Gentiles, how much greater riches will their fullness bring!" (Romans 11:12, NIV)

"For if their rejection is the reconciliation of the world, what will their acceptance be but life from the dead?" (Romans 11:15, NIV)

The reason that Israel will be a blessing to the whole world is clearly linked to the Abrahamic Covenant (Gen 12:1-3) where God promised Abraham that his seed will be a blessing to all the nations of the world. Paul argues that if we blessed the world through our disobedience (rejection of Yeshua as Messiah inasmuch the Gospel was taken to the Gentiles) how much more will we bless the world through our obedience (receiving Yeshua as Messiah).

This being the case, it is imperative for there to be an Israel to be a blessing the world. This touches on the importance of maintaining a Jewish identity and it part of a Jewish person's responsibility.

Today, there is a remnant of Jewish people who are believers in Yeshua as Messiah. This remnant is a growing remnant as more Jewish people come to faith in Messiah (cf. Rom. 11:1-6)¹⁴. This remnant is also called "The Israel of God" in Galatians 6:16.¹⁵

¹³ David Sedaca in his paper "Outreach through Messianic Jewish Congregations."

¹⁴ "I ask then: Did God reject his people? By no means! I am an Israelite myself, a descendant of Abraham, from the tribe of Benjamin. God did not reject his people, whom he foreknew. Don't you know what the Scripture says in the passage about Elijah—how he appealed to God against Israel: "Lord, they have killed your prophets and torn down your altars; I am the only one left, and they are trying to kill me"? And what was God's answer to him? "I have reserved for myself seven thousand who have not bowed the knee to Baal." So too, at the present time there is a remnant chosen by grace. And if by grace, then it is no longer by works; if it were, grace would no longer be grace." (Romans 11:1-6, NIV)

¹⁵ While some believe that "Israel of God" is the church, the evidence does not support such a conclusion. First, the repetition of the preposition ("upon" or "to") indicates two groups are in view. Second, all the 65 other occurrences of the term "Israel" in the New Testament refer to Jews. It would thus be strange for Paul to use "Israel" here to mean Gentile Christians. Third, Paul elsewhere referred to two kinds of Israelites—believing Jews and unbelieving Jews (cf. Rom. 9:6). Lest it be thought that Paul is anti-Semitic, he demonstrated by means of this benediction his deep love and concern for

This remnant of Israel who are messianic Jewish believers are a “down payment” as it were that God’s hand is still on the nation of Israel and that he will one day restore the rest of the nation back to God and Messiah at his appointed time through faith in Yeshua the Messiah.¹⁶

Again, the role of a messianic congregation is as a testimony of this faithful remnant of Jews who are followers of Messiah.

5. Challenges and Opportunities

- a. *More Gentiles than Jews?*
- b. *Second and Third Generation of Messianic Jews*
- c. *Keep Focused on the Task*
- d. *Leadership and Training*

6. A Grafting Back into their own Olive Tree – Romans 11:23-24

"And if they do not persist in unbelief, they will be grafted in, for God is able to graft them in again. After all, if you were cut out of an olive tree that is wild by nature, and contrary to nature were grafted into a cultivated olive tree, how much more readily will these, the natural branches, be grafted into their own olive tree!" (Romans 11:23-24, NIV)

Jewish people are “more readily” grafted into an olive tree that they recognise. The olive tree needs to be “their own” olive tree. This completely underscores the necessity of culturally sensitive evangelism and presentation of the Gospel in a relevant way to Jewish people.

Messianic congregation provide such an environment and I wholeheartedly believe in the planting of messianic congregations.

true Israel, that is, Jews who had come to Christ. Walvoord, J. F., Zuck, R. B., & Dallas Theological Seminary. (1983-c1985). *The Bible knowledge commentary : An exposition of the scriptures* (611). Wheaton, IL: Victor Books.

¹⁶ "I do not want you to be ignorant of this mystery, brothers, so that you may not be conceited: Israel has experienced a hardening in part until the full number of the Gentiles has come in. And so all Israel will be saved, as it is written: "The deliverer will come from Zion; he will turn godlessness away from Jacob. And this is my covenant with them when I take away their sins."" (Romans 11:25-27, NIV)