

Have You Hugged a (Messianic) Jew Lately?

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The rabbi sat across from me in his overstuffed leather armchair, his library of Jewish learning surrounding him like an ancient fortress. “You are *meshumed*—one who is spiritually destroyed as a Jew!” he declared. “Just as Adolph Hitler sought to destroy our people physically, you, by your conversion to Christianity, are helping to destroy our people spiritually.”

I had come to the rabbi’s office at my parents’ request. You see, I had done the unthinkable: I had received Jesus as my Messiah. In my naivete, I had thought my parents would be happy to hear I had turned away from drugs, Eastern mysticism and the occult. They weren’t—because I had turned to Jesus.

Many Jewish believers have had similar experiences. They suffer rejection and ostracism from family, friends and the mainstream Jewish community. Some Jews who accept Jesus are disinherited; others are treated as outcasts. In extreme cases, Orthodox Jewish families actually hold funeral services to declare the spiritual death of their heretic child. Occasionally, Jewish “anti-missionaries” are dispatched by desperate parents to “rescue” their children from the “cult” of Christianity.

Such treatment is nothing new. The apostle Paul faced hostility and even persecution from his Jewish brothers (see 2 Cor. 11:22-26). Today, we Messianic Jews have come to accept this kind of rejection for our faith in Jesus.

What is more difficult for us to accept, however, is the lack of understanding and affirmation we sometimes receive from our

Gentile brothers and sisters in Christ.

It's important for Christians to understand the pressures Jewish believers face as we make the choice to follow our Messiah, Yeshua (Jesus' Hebrew name), and try to navigate our way forward in our newfound faith. Often, we experience an identity crisis as we try to integrate our new beliefs into the context of our Jewish heritage.

Jewish people are raised with what I call an "us and them" mentality. Growing up, I was taught that we Jews—"us"—had our God, our Judaism, our synagogues, our rabbis, our traditions and holidays (Passover, Rosh Hashanah, Yom Kippur), our patriarchs, our Torah. Anyone who wasn't a Jew was a "them"—a Christian or a Gentile (we made no distinction between the two). "They" had their God (Jesus Christ), their Christianity, their churches, their priests, their holidays (Easter, Christmas, Lent) and their New Testament.

We were taught that Christians blamed us for killing their Savior, Jesus Christ. And it was Christians, we were told, who had persecuted Jews through the centuries. The Crusades, the pogroms of Russia, the Spanish Inquisition and ultimately the Holocaust all were done in the name of Christ and Christianity.

We understood that we were born Jews and that we should die as Jews. And Jews did not believe in Jesus!

In fact, I had no idea that Jesus was Jewish. I thought that Jesus Christ was the son of Mr. and Mrs. Christ. I thought he was born in Rome and grew up in the Vatican. I didn't know that the apostles were Jews who were born and raised in Israel or that Paul had been a Jewish rabbi. I was shocked to learn that Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Moses and the other great patriarchs of Jewish history were mentioned in the New Testament. I had no idea how Jewish the New Testament was.

I was taught that to believe in Jesus a Jew had to convert to

another religion and abandon his people. In reality, this is not the case. When Jews believe in Jesus, they are not converting to another religion. Rather, they are returning to the God of Israel and the promised Messiah of the Jewish people.

“A tenet of messianic Judaism,” writes Paul Liberman in *The Fig Tree Blossoms*, “asserts that when a Jew accepts a Jewish Messiah, born in a Jewish land, who was foretold by Jewish prophets in the Jewish Scriptures, such a Jew does not become a Gentile. In fact he becomes a messianic Jew—a Jew who believes Jesus is the Messiah.”

Unfortunately, messianic Jews have more to deal with than misunderstanding from other Jews. They also face unnecessary pressure from some Christian leaders who teach that a Jew who has found his Messiah must forsake his God-given identity as a Jewish person, since he has now become a Christian.

This view springs from a misunderstanding of the relationship between law and grace. When Paul addresses this issue in Galatians, he makes it clear that no one can obtain salvation through the works of the law (see Gal. 2:16). He is not condemning all Jewish observance and practice, only criticizing a “righteousness based on works” mentality—a pattern of thinking that is a potential danger for anyone, not just messianic Jews. Any believer can begin to trust more in his own religious behavior than in God’s forgiveness through faith in Jesus.

Some Christian leaders maintain further that Jewish believers, by holding on to their Jewish heritage after embracing Jesus as Messiah, are rebuilding the “middle wall of partition” removed through the atoning work of Christ (see Eph. 2:14). Others believe that in order to truly express the “one new man” of Ephesians 2:15, all Jewish people must fit into local churches like theirs.

I can't deny that some Jewish believers have isolated themselves from other parts of the body of Messiah and inadequately identified themselves as members of the "universal church." At the same time, I am thankful to note that new bridges of cooperation and unity are being built daily between messianic and Gentile believers.

Unity does not necessarily require assimilation. When local messianic Jewish congregations are relating well to other local congregations in their cities, then we can experience true unity within the universal body of Christ.

Another major obstacle Jewish believers face is the reemergence of "replacement theology," or the doctrine of "Spiritual Israel." This doctrine teaches that God has rejected the Jewish people and replaced them with the church. Thus all the curses of the Old Testament remain in force against the Jews, while all the blessings and promises are now spiritualized and given exclusively to the church.

This theology is actually nothing new. Paul had to contend with it in his day (see Rom. 11:1-2). Yet the Scriptures are abundantly clear that God will remain faithful to the Jews until He fulfills all He has ordained for them.

So what—or who—is Israel? Good question.

In the early 1980s, a tour group I was leading drove through the Golan Heights, near the northern border between Israel and Lebanon. As our guide explained the history of the state of Israel, someone blurted out, "Why do they call it the state of Israel and not the nation of Israel?"

To this day, I have never forgotten his reply: "Because the nation of Israel is scattered throughout the whole world. Only when they return to the land of Israel will the state of Israel be called the nation of Israel once again."

It is essential for Christians to understand the distinction

between the people Israel and the land Israel. Most of the occurrences of the word “Israel” in the Bible, particularly in the New Testament, refer to the *people* of Israel—the physical descendants of Jacob known today as the Jews. Although there is nothing wrong with being excited about and supportive of the land called Israel, we should not stop there. We must be dedicated to the people of Israel also.

Many Christians who are fervent supporters of the state of Israel (sometimes called Christian Zionists) have dedicated themselves to Jewish causes, aiding and assisting in particular with the massive *aliyah* (immigration) of Jews from the former Soviet Union to Israel. I applaud their efforts and commitment; they are demonstrating Christian love for Israel in deed rather than just in word.

It is critical, however, that we don’t neglect God’s full plan of restoration for His ancient people. The Torah asserts a dual promise: physical restoration to the land of their forefathers and spiritual restoration to the God of their forefathers (see Deut. 30:1-5).

Only when the Jewish people return to the Lord with all their hearts through recognition and acceptance of their Messiah will their physical restoration as a nation be fully realized. If we are truly to love Israel and be a blessing to her, we need to aid Jews not only in their physical return to the land but also in their spiritual return to the Lord.

Here are some practical things you can do:

1. Pray for Jewish friends, family members and co-workers. I believe everyone who has been born again had someone praying for him before his conversion. Most Jewish people have no family members or friends who are committed believers, dedicated to intercede on their behalf.

Why not stand in the gap and pray for the ultimate “peace of Jerusalem” (Ps. 122:6), which can come only through the

dwelling of the Prince of Peace in our hearts? Ask God for specific Jewish people to pray for.

2. Take time to appreciate the Jewish roots of your faith. The Jewish holidays are rich with meaning not only for messianic Jews but also for Christians because they lay a foundation for understanding the life, teaching and atoning work of Yeshua. Take time to learn about and participate in the Jewish holidays. For example, why not hold a Passover Seder in your church? I guarantee it will enrich your spiritual understanding.

3. Understand and support God's prophetic calling and plan for Israel and the Jewish people. The Scriptures promise a great revival of the Jewish people preceding the return of Jesus to this earth. There is an ordained time in history, Paul says, before the Messiah comes back, when the Jewish people will experience the removal of the blindness that has plagued them spiritually for more than 2,000 years (see Rom. 11:25-27).

Some teach that God blinded the Jewish people because of their rejection of Jesus as their Messiah, but I think it is more accurate to say that many among the nation of Israel did not recognize Him as Messiah because they were already blind.

As long ago as the prophet Isaiah, it was revealed that the children of Israel "had ears but could not hear and eyes but could not see" (see Is. 6:9-10). The blindness however, will continue only until a period in history called "the fullness of the Gentiles" is concluded.

In Luke 21:24 we see this period in history mentioned in connection to Jerusalem: "And they shall fall by the edge of the sword, and shall be led away captive into all nations: and Jerusalem shall be trodden down of the Gentiles, until the times of the Gentiles be fulfilled" (KJV). I believe that time has come.

In 1967, after almost 2,000 years, the ancient city of Jerusalem once again was restored into Jewish hands through the supernatural victory of the Israeli Army in the Six-Day War. This marked a transitional time in history, a shift that signaled the end of the times of the Gentiles.

Notice again the dual theme between the people of Israel and the land of Israel, the spiritual restoration of Israel and the physical restoration of Israel. Before 1967 Jewish believers were as rare as unicorns, and there were only a handful of messianic Jewish congregations in the United States. Today there are more than 200 congregations in the United States alone and hundreds more in Israel, Canada, Mexico, Europe, South Africa, Central and South America, and even Russia.

And though estimates vary, it is certain that more Jewish people have come to the Lord in the last 19 years than in the last 1,900 years of history combined. In the three short years between 1993 and 1996, I personally had the privilege of watching some 45,000 Jewish people in the former Soviet Union respond to altar calls at our Messianic Jewish Outreach Festivals.

Countless thousands of others have watched these festivals on television, with hundreds writing to us to tell of their newfound faith in Yeshua. Is this all a coincidence, or is God's timetable for the Jewish people upon us?

4. Share your faith with Jews. Many Christians sincerely believe it is better not to share the gospel with Jewish people. There are even some well-meaning, born-again, Spirit-filled Christian leaders who have embraced, and now teach, a "dual covenant theology." This false doctrine, popularized in an atmosphere of post-Holocaust guilt within mainstream, institutional Christianity, espouses the idea that the Jews do not need personal salvation because God has a separate plan for them through the Mosaic Covenant.

Though I'm sure these leaders are sincere and inspired by a love and dedication to the Jewish people, the doctrine is nevertheless a deception. Both the Old Testament and the New are absolutely clear that there is only one gospel (Gal. 1:6-8), one Messiah for all people (I Tim. 2:5), one name given under heaven by which we must be saved (Acts 4:12). Not only is this gospel for the Jewish people, but the apostle Paul declares that it is "to the Jew first" (Rom. 1:16).

Paul's burning concern for the Jewish people was for their salvation: "For my heart's desire and prayer to God for Israel is, that they might be saved" (Rom. 10:1). True love for the Jews must include sharing the gospel with them.

5. Publicly stand with messianic Jewish believers and ministries, and support them financially. One of the most painful things we experience as messianic Jews is the criticism and condemnation of evangelical Christian leaders who have befriended an unbelieving rabbi or Jewish leader. These unsaved Jews often have a hostile attitude toward messianic Jews and Jewish evangelism that influences the Christians. I urge Christian leaders not to abandon their messianic brethren in order to appease and accommodate an ongoing relationship with a rabbi.

Furthermore, be aware: Some well-intentioned Christian churches, in an effort to express their love for Israel, have sent large sums of money to support hospitals, educational institutions, and even secular and government organizations such as the *Sachnoot* (the Jewish Agency in Israel). Yet the Jewish Agency often works together with Jewish anti-missionary organizations to keep messianic Jews out of Israel because of their belief in Yeshua as Messiah. Giving money to the Jewish Agency and some other mainstream Jewish organizations means that Christians are actually supporting groups that oppose messianic Jews and deny their rights in Israel.

Many Christians need to rethink what it means to be a true

blessing to Israel and the Jewish people. Pray for their salvation and return to the land of Israel. Share the good news with them in word and deed. Stand with your Jewish brethren.

Ask God to give you a greater love and appreciation for the Jewish roots of your faith. Let's work hand in hand to build further bridges of reconciliation and mutual understanding between us.

May we all be provoked and inspired by the words of the psalmist, who wrote in Hebrew: "*Hiney ma tov uma nayem shevet acheim gam yachad*"—"How good and how pleasant it is for brethren to dwell together in unity" (Ps. 133:1).