

Martin Chernoff: The Father of 20th Century Messianic Judaism

Any student of Israel knows that Theodore Herzl is the father of modern Zionism. His book, *The Jewish State*, called for the creation of a Jewish homeland as the only safe haven for the Jewish people.

Eliezer Ben Yehuda is considered the father of Modern Hebrew, a dead, unspoken language in 1880, now spoken by over 10 million people.

But equally impressive as the rebirth of the Jewish nation and the language of Hebrew is the rebirth of the Messianic Jew—the Jew who professes faith in Yeshua, and, like the first believers, continues to live as a Jew. There are many men and woman who were influential in the Messianic revival.

Moishe Rosen birthed *Jews for Jesus* and raised up an army of Jewish emissaries. Joseph Rabinowitz started the First Assembly of the Israelites of the New Covenant in 1885. Our own Ari and Shira pioneered spirit-filled Messianic Judaism in Israel with their first house congregation in 1977 and then by birthing the first Hebrew only spirit-filled congregation in 1995. As far back as 1959, Victor Smadja started *Keren Ahava Mishihit* in Jerusalem. My spiritual father, Dan Juster has also played a major role in shaping Messianic Jewish expression through the Tikkun Network and the UMJC.

Martin Chernoff

However, if there is one figure who stands out as the father of Modern Messianic Judaism it would have to be Martin Chernoff. His father, Solomon, fled the Russian army in the early 1900s in order to give his family a better life in

America. But, after arriving in Amsterdam, he was broke. For three years he worked and saved in order to buy tickets to cross the Atlantic. However, thinking he had arrived in New York, he was shocked to find himself in Argentina!

After another three years, he and his family took a train through South America to New York City. However, when he got off at the last stop he was in Toronto, Canada, missing New York for the third time! This time, Solomon settled his family in Toronto, as there were already 4,000 Russian Jewish immigrants living there, and continued his trade as a tailor.

A Secret to the Grave-Almost

One day Solomon heard a Jewish believer preaching. He sat down to listen and secretly professed faith in Yeshua. He knew this would send shockwaves through his orthodox Jewish family so he decided he would never tell a soul.

Many years later, their son Martin would make a similar decision, embracing Yeshua as His Messiah, but instead of keeping it to himself would seek to bring as many Jewish people as he could to faith in Yeshua. On his deathbed, his father confessed his secret faith to his son.

Assimilation vs. Jewish Identity

Martin and his wife, Yohanna, worked for many years for an organization seeking to bring Jewish people to faith. He was constantly at odds with them, as he began to realize the need for Jewish believers to have their own meetings in a Jewish context. The organization emphasized winning Jewish people to the faith and then funneling them into local churches to be disciplined (where they would often lose their Jewish identity).

Martin was told he was not qualified to disciple "Hebrew Christians," as they were called then, and once, when he immersed several new Jewish believers in water at a conference, the leader of his organization saw red, as he

rebuked Martin, telling him again that it was beyond his scope of authority.

“The Jesus Revolution and the Jews’ is the biography that Martin’s wife, Yohanna, wrote.

In the midst of a prayer meeting in 1963, just after the assassination of President Kennedy, Martin had the second of three visions. He saw, in addition to scores of Jewish people coming to faith (as in his first vision) a group of unkept and shabby young people—dressed in rags. He had no idea that the coming years would usher in the hippy phenomenon and that God would use his wife, Yohanna and him to bring many of these young Jewish people to Yeshua.

In addition to ushering in the sexual revolution, psychedelic rock and popularizing LSD usage, the hippie movement revealed a deep spiritual hunger inside that generation. In April 1966, *Time Magazine* ran the headline: *Is God Dead?* However, only five years later, after this massive revival, their headline in June 1971 was, *The Jesus Revolution*.

Scores of young Jewish people came to faith in Cincinnati forming the nucleus of the Chernoff’s home congregation. Thousands more Jews embraced Yeshua all across the U.S. as God raised up a leadership for a new thing he was about to do.

From Hebrew Christianity to Messianic Judaism

In 1970 Martin had his third open vision. “*Two electrifying simple words stretched across the sky in the form of a banner.*” He saw the words: Messianic Judaism.

This vision would define the rest of Martin’s life and his legacy. The small group of Jewish believers in Cincinnati confessed:

“We are Jewish believers in Yeshua as our Messiah. We have our own destiny in the Lord. We will no longer be assimilated into

the church and pretend to be non-Jews. If Yeshua Himself, His followers and the early Jewish believers tenaciously maintained their Jewish lifestyles, why was it right for them, but wrong now? Gentile converts are not expected to forsake their families, culture, holidays and traditions; nor shall we do so."

No longer would they call themselves Hebrew Christians, but Messianic Jews.

Despite the fact they were seeing dozens of young Jewish people receive Yeshua, the leader of the organization who paid their salary gave them an ultimatum. They either must disband their congregation and hand over the names to the organization (so these Jews could be placed in churches), or leave.

Marty had a major decision to make: Stay with the organization, get paid, disband their congregation and funnel new believers to churches or resign his position, officially birth congregation Beth Messiah, and trust God to provide for their needs. Other than a few isolated cases, there was no example of a self-sustained, independent Messianic Congregation. It was virgin territory.

After a lengthy discussion between the leaders and the congregants, it was decided that disbanding was not an option. Martin would become their rabbi and they would support Yohanna and him. Congregation Beth Messiah was birthed.

National Influence

Soon Martin was elected to be president of the Hebrew Christian Alliance of America. More and more Jewish believers were calling themselves Messianic Jews instead of Hebrew Christians. The moniker *Hebrew Christian* emphasized that the believer was of Jewish background, while *Messianic Jew*, emphasized that the believers continued to live as Jews, after believing in Yeshua.

However, changing the name of the HCAA would not be easy. Many old-timers strongly objected to the new Messianic theme and Jewish identity. They didn't like the dancing or the singing of Klezmer (Yiddish sounding) songs with Messianic lyrics. The first vote was defeated, but not without controversy. Rather than fighting, Martin wisely put the issue to rest, realizing that it was only a matter of time.

Two years later, the young *hippie* believers far outnumbered the old guard and the name was changed to the Messianic Jewish Alliance of America (MJAA).

Beth Yeshua in Philadelphia

Eventually the Chernoffs would move to Philadelphia and take over the "Fink Zoo"—a group of young Jewish believers who met in the home of Joe and Debbie Finklestein. They called their new congregation *Beth Yeshua*.

When I first heard of Messianic Jews in 1984, the orthodox community had declared war on Beth Yeshua and they were fighting for their survival. By 1985, they were calling for a nationwide protest—with the goal of destroying the Messianic Jewish movement. Jews from all over were bussed in to protest and Beth Yeshua was their target. If Beth Yeshua could be toppled, then maybe they could crush the whole movement.

I drove right by Philadelphia during Hurricane Gloria just before this mass demonstration, as my Long Island-based Bible School released us for our own safety.

The folks at Beth Yeshua were hoping that Gloria would ruin the planned protest. However, Pat Robertson rebuked the storm just before it hit his Virginia Beach-based CBN and Gloria headed out to sea. Pat was happy; the Messianics in Philadelphia were dismayed.

However, when Beth Yeshua took their worship team outside in the midst of the anti-Messianic demonstration, the entire

protest was diffused. Some protesters ended up actually dancing with the Beth Yeshua congregants. After a short time, leaders called off the protests and fled.

Legacy

So many leaders that lead congregations today were discipled by Martin Chernoff. His legacy lives on in these many men and women, not to mention his own children Joel, David and Hope, all leaders in the Messianic Movement today.

(All quotes are taken from Born a Jew, Die a Jew, the biography of Martin Chernoff, written by his wife, Yohanna.)

Ron Cantor is the director of Messiah's Mandate International in Israel, a Messianic ministry dedicated to taking the message of Jesus from Israel to the ends of the earth (Acts 1:8). Cantor also travels internationally teaching on the Jewish roots of the New Testament. He serves on the pastoral team of Tiferet Yeshua, a Hebrew-speaking congregation in Tel Aviv. His newest book, Identity Theft, was released April 16. Follow him at @RonSCantor on Twitter.

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