

What Does It Mean to Participate in a Messianic Congregation?

Many of us have been told, in our spiritual experiences, and rightfully so, that “There are no Lone Ranger Believers!” Each one of us needs to be in regular fellowship and accountability with fellow brothers and sisters in the Lord, to whom we are not familiarly related. By being in weekly fellowship with other Believers, be it during a congregational *Shabbat* service, and/or some other weekly gathering for prayer or Bible study, we can more consciously appreciate the thrust of Proverbs 27:17: “Iron sharpens iron, and one person sharpens the wits of another” (NRSV). It was actually reported of the first Messianic Believers in the Book of Acts, that “all who believed were together, having everything in common” (Acts 2:44, TLV). The first Messianic Believers, in the emergent Body of Messiah, were a very tight knit group of people—so much so that others generously provided for the needs of those who were lacking. Due to the relatively small size of today’s Messianic movement, Believers functioning in closer quarters, being aware of the life activities and pursuits of others *for certain*—and able to be there as spiritual support mechanisms during times of difficulty—are dynamics that we frequently encounter.

Each one of us, who find ourselves attending a Messianic congregation or assembly, brings our own series of expectations, needs, and wants. Jewish Believers in Israel’s Messiah have certain needs—and indeed requirements—as they involve the local Messianic congregation not only being a “safe space” for them to maintain their Jewish heritage and traditions, not assimilating into a non-Jewish Christianity, **but most especially as a place where they can bring their non-believing family and friends to be presented with the good news of Yeshua.** Non-Jewish Believers called into today’s Messianic movement, from evangelical Protestant backgrounds, bring a selection of needs as they become involved in Messianic congregations. Some of these concern a genuine, supernatural compulsion to reconnect with their spiritual heritage in Israel’s Scriptures, participate in Jewish outreach and evangelism, and to some degree reproduce the First Century experience of Jewish and non-Jewish Believers fellowshiping in one accord in mixed assemblies. Other non-Jewish Believers entering into the Messianic movement, do so only for a season, usually being attracted to Messianic congregations because of the music, Davidic dance, intriguing teaching, or the food—but then later move on to something else.

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Toward the Restoration of Israel

Today's Messianic congregations actively pray for, and participate in, the restoration of Israel. A self-obvious component of this is how a Messianic congregation is uniquely suited to serve the interests of Jewish evangelism, particularly where Jewish people, who do not recognize Yeshua as Israel's Messiah, can hear the good news presented in a Jewish sensitive manner. Messianic congregations also contribute to Jewish outreach by participating in the affairs of the local Jewish community, and likely also by supporting different endeavors in modern Israel. Messianic congregations certainly make it a regular practice to publicly pray for the salvation of the Jewish people, anticipating what is prophesied in Zechariah 12:10: "Then I will pour out on the house of David and the inhabitants of Jerusalem a spirit of grace and supplication, when they will look toward Me whom they pierced. They will mourn for him as one mourns for an only son and grieve bitterly for him, as one grieves for a firstborn" (TLV; cf. John 19:37; Revelation 1:7).

What is also important to remember, when Messianic congregations serve as outposts for the restoration of Israel, is that we are—to some degree—participating in future prophesied realities, to be consummated at the return of the Messiah. The Disciples' question to Yeshua, as He was preparing to ascend into Heaven, was, "Lord, are you at this time going to restore self-rule to Isra'el?" (Acts 1:6, CJB/CJSB). The Disciples were anticipating Yeshua to restore the Twelve Tribes of Israel, end the Jewish Diaspora, defeat the Roman occupiers of Judea, and establish a permanent Messianic Davidic Kingdom. Yeshua the Messiah hardly dismissed the idea that He would one day restore Israel in all of its intended, Davidic fullness—but the Apostles' assignment was to serve as His witnesses in the whole Earth (Acts 1:8). The salvation of Israel proper *and* the nations were both to be important parts of the anticipated restoration of Israel's Kingdom, as the salvation of the nations was predicated on the raising up of David's Tabernacle, as attested by James the Just at the Jerusalem Council (Acts 15:15-18; Amos 9:11-12). **So, it can be legitimately concluded that we all have a stake in seeing Israel restored!**

Being participants, in some way or another, in the restoration of Israel's Kingdom, the return of Israel's Messiah, and His reign over Planet Earth *is a huge responsibility*. It is probably not emphasized enough in today's Messianic congregations and assemblies, what it actually means to be involved in Israel's restoration! It absolutely involves being representatives of Israel's God and Israel's Messiah in the world: "we are ambassadors of the Messiah; in effect, God is making his appeal through us. What we do is appeal on behalf of the Messiah, 'Be reconciled to God!'" (2 Corinthians 5:20, CJB/CJSB). It also involves is joining into a narrative of salvation history, where each of us is informed—in some way or another—of Ancient Israel in the wilderness, the Kingdom of Israel at the time of David, the split of Israel, the exile of the Northern and Southern Kingdoms, the return of the Jews from Babylon, and the Jewish Diaspora in the Mediterranean. The Messiah was to certainly come to solve the issues and problems that had been caused by the exile, and bring salvation not only to just the Jewish people, but to the entire world. Messianic congregations reconnect with the Torah and Tanach *for far more reasons* than just being educated in Biblical history; Messianic congregations reconnect with the Torah and Tanach because "these things happened to them as a warning, but they were written down for our instruction, upon whom the end of the ages has come" (1 Corinthians 10:11,

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RSV). **The Scriptures of Israel record many things that the people of God today should not be repeating.**

When you commit yourself to being part of a Messianic congregation, you will naturally bring various expectations for your individual self and your family. *But you are part of something much bigger than your individual self and your family!* When you are a part of a Messianic congregation, you are part of an assembly of men and women who are contributing to the salvation of the Jewish people, and with it the inevitable return of the Messiah. A Messianic congregation is not supposed to be “Saturday Church,” where the only thing we do is corporately worship God on Saturday. On the contrary, a Messianic congregation is to be a place where we perform actions reflective of the future world to come, where the King of Israel will reign supreme.

The Place of Messianic Jewish Congregations

When identifying as a Believer in Israel’s Messiah to evangelical Christians, Messianic Jews are frequently asked that uncomfortable question: “Where do you go to church?” In the history of the Hebrew Christian movement, which preceded it in the late Nineteenth and early Twentieth Centuries, Jewish Believers or Hebrew Christians, as they were known, almost always were integrated into a mainline Protestant denominational church. Various Torah prescriptions and Jewish lifecycle events were almost always followed at home, or at various extraneous gatherings of Hebrew Christians. Fidelity to God’s Torah was mainly looked at as cultural, and not necessarily as a part of fidelity to a Jewish Believers’ Biblical heritage and responsibilities. The Hebrew Christian movement, while an important stage of development, lamentably encouraged a wide degree of assimilation on the part of Jewish Believers into Protestantism. The great-grandchildren of many of the Hebrew Christians of the last century, having been integrated into contemporary evangelicalism *and* being the product of intermarriage, can often have little or no idea—much less appreciation—of their Jewish heritage.

The previous, modern experience, of many Jewish people coming to faith in Yeshua of Nazareth, meant assimilation and intermarriage into Protestantism. It meant looking at God’s Torah as being an important part of Jewish culture only, but not as a part of the Jewish people’s covenantal relationship with God. After the rebirth of the State of Israel in 1948, and more specifically the recapturing of the Old City of Jerusalem in 1967, things demonstrably shifted with the emergence of the Messianic Jewish movement. Messianic Jewish congregations and synagogues would meet on *Shabbat*, they would have Hebrew liturgy similar to the Jewish Synagogue, the appointed times or *moedim* would be remembered, Jewish national holidays would be observed, a kosher diet would be encouraged, and sons would be circumcised. **Most importantly, Jewish people coming to Messiah faith would not mean assimilation into non-Jewish Christianity**, where one’s grandchildren and great-grandchildren would forget their Jewish heritage. Instead, with Jewish Believers maintaining fidelity to their Biblical heritage and ancestral customs, a Messianic Jewish congregation would be an ideal venue for presenting Jewish people with the good news of Israel’s Messiah. A Messianic Jewish congregation would be the place to see new Jewish Believers discipled and trained up in the ways of the Lord—*an assembly different than a Sunday evangelical church.*

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Messianic Jewish congregations and synagogues were planted throughout North America, in the 1970s and into the 1990s, in places where there are large Jewish populations. The mid-to-late 1990s saw a wide influx of non-Jewish Believers into the Messianic movement, many of whom wanted to substantially connect with their faith heritage in Israel's Scriptures, support Jewish outreach and evangelism, and be in an assembly similar to what would have been seen in the First Century Diaspora. The place of non-Jewish Believers in today's Messianic Jewish congregations varies from assembly to assembly. Many Messianic Jewish Believers, including congregational leaders, have non-Jewish spouses—and so the Messianic community is considered to be ideal for intermarried families, who do not wish to see half-Jewish children assimilate into Protestantism, or worse yet, leave the faith entirely. In more Messianic Jewish congregations than not, non-Jewish Believers are welcomed as fellow brothers and sisters, and co-participants, in the restoration of Israel. Many Messianic Jewish congregations strongly adhere to a philosophy that without Jewish and non-Jewish Believers fellowshiping together in one accord, that some rift in what is intended by the Ephesians 2:15 "one new man" or "one new humanity" can be unnecessarily created. Many Messianic Jewish congregations encourage non-Jewish Believers to embrace their Jewish Roots, provided they guard against legalism, and not pretend that they are somehow ethnically or culturally Jewish.

Congregational Life in a Messianic Jewish Assembly

No two Messianic congregations or assemblies are going to be alike—a partial testimony to the diversity of the worldwide Jewish community. But while there are going to be differences determined by geography and demographics, there are still going to be various constants when you participate in congregational life. **Most Messianic congregations require those who are regularly attending to become formal members.** Much of this involves not only making sure that people are fully committed to the local assembly, but it helps to see that different people—with their gifts and talents and resources—can be best employed to edify the local assembly.

Your Messianic congregation or synagogue may have different expectations for congregational life, than a congregation or synagogue in another city or town. While we are all agreed that the Messiah "loved His community and gave Himself up for her" (Ephesians 5:25, TLV), there are some more specific reasons to be considered by those who are members, or are contemplating membership, in a Messianic congregation. The authors of *Messianic Judaism Class* offer five specific reasons in support of formal membership in a Messianic Jewish congregation:

1. **Biblical reason** (Ephesians 5:25): "The Messiah is committed to the congregation."
2. **Cultural reason**: "It is an antidote to our society...We live in an age where very few want to be committed to anything...a job...a marriage...our country. This attitude has even produced a generation of 'congregation shoppers and hoppers.' Membership swims against the current of America's 'consumer religion.' It is an unselfish decision. Commitment always builds character."

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3. **Practical reason:** “It defines who can be counted on...Every team must have a roster. Every school must have an enrollment. Every business has a payroll. Every army has an enlistment. Even our country takes a census and requires voter registration. Membership identifies our family.”
4. **Personal reason:** “It produces spiritual growth...The Scriptures place a major emphasis on the need for Believers to be accountable to each other for spiritual growth. You cannot be accountable when you’re not committed to any specific congregation family.”
5. **Legal reason:** “It enables formal discipline...We can be sued if we discipline a person who is not a member.”¹

These are all important reasons to reflect upon, if you are presently a member of a Messianic Jewish congregation, who has gone through formal membership procedures—and especially if you are considering becoming a formal member of a Messianic Jewish congregation. **Congregational membership is not a light commitment, but is something to be taken very seriously.**

One of the major differences between today’s Messianic congregations, and a wide number of evangelical Protestant churches, is that Messianic congregations tend to be much smaller, and as such they do have some sense of “family” or *mishpachah* (משפחה) to them. But does one’s participation in a Messianic congregation as “family,” mean that an individual or family of persons, have little or no privacy? Or, does it mean that the congregation serving as a wider “family” of sorts, is there to help and support members of the local faith community, being with them through thick and thin? For certain, most of today’s Messianic congregations and fellowships are communities where more people than not, know one another personally, they are involved in the life activities of others, they socialize together, and they are indeed aware of others’ life challenges and problems. What this can and does mean, is that various people in the congregation *implicitly trust* others in the congregation, and vice versa. Trust and reliance upon people is not a high commodity in today’s religious world; in fact, trust and respect of others is on the considerable decline. *Loyalty to one’s own is a virtue that you almost hear nothing about.* While everyone in a Messianic congregation or assembly should be encouraged to participate and socialize with one another—do be aware of the tensions that can be caused by the Messianic movement being relatively small as well, and in some cases demographically imbalanced.

Congregational Purpose in a Messianic Jewish Assembly

When many of us consider what the purpose of a local congregation or assembly may be, we are likely to think that (1) it is to serve as a local support mechanism for brothers’ and sisters’ spiritual growth and maturation, and (2) to serve as a beacon of God’s love and light to a hurting world. Messianic Jewish congregations and synagogues have a certain mandate to be local support mechanisms for the unique needs of Jewish Believers, and non-Jewish Believers specifically called by God into the Messianic movement at this time. Messianic Jewish congregations and synagogues also have a definite mandate to

¹ *Messianic Judaism Class, Teacher Book, 101.*

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reach out with God's love and goodness to members of the local Jewish community, to support Israel, and to stand against anti-Semitism in the world.

Different Messianic congregations will understandably have different mission statements, or varied credos, as they concern the assembly's internal ministries and external outreaches. The authors of the workbook *Messianic Judaism Class*, at one time having been leaders of Congregation Shema Yisrael in Rochester, New York, offer the purpose statement:

"To proclaim Messiah Yeshua (Jesus) to Jewish and non-Jewish people, connect them personally with the God of Israel through prayer and worship, draw them into fellowship, lead them to spiritual maturity, equip them to serve, and inspire believers everywhere to reconnect with their Jewish roots."²

My local congregation, Eitz Chaim of Richardson, Texas, includes the following purpose statement in its weekly bulletin:

"Eitz-Chaim is called to be a Messiah centered, Spirit-empowered, disciple-making community that reveals the truth of Yeshua (the Jewish Jesus) to both Israel and the nations. We are committed to making Yeshua the L-rd of our life, faith and ministry. Our community seeks to be like the first Jerusalem congregation where both Jew and non-Jew function as one new man, equal before G-d (Acts 2)."

The authors of *Messianic Judaism Class* will then go on to list a number of critical areas where its congregational mission sees some practical, on the ground, activity:

- evangelism
- fellowship
- worship
- prayer and spiritual warfare
- discipleship
- service
- restoring the Body of Messiah to its Jewish Roots³

It is possible that your own local Messianic congregation, or fellowship, has these exact same ministry activities, or some variation of them. Each Messianic congregation, while tending to reach out and assist with the purposes of Jewish outreach and evangelism, and seeing non-Jewish Believers properly exposed to their faith heritage in Israel's Scriptures and Judaism, can accomplish these tasks any number of useful ways. Much of what takes place in the spiritual development of Messianic people, understandably occurs in association with the weekly *Shabbat* service, and activities which are scheduled either sometime before or after. Likewise, depending on the demographic makeup of your congregation, there might be some sort of mid-week activity, like a prayer group and/or Bible study, that meets, or there might be various home groups or cell groups that meet outside of your congregation's facility. The available programs and activities accessible via your Messianic assembly—and their

² Ibid., 103.

³ Ibid., 104.

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related demographics—is almost entirely determinant on the direction of your congregational leadership, in association with the needs of congregational members.

Leadership Structures in a Messianic Assembly

While there are an array of Messianic denominational organizations which exist, such as the International Alliance of Messianic Congregations and Synagogues (IAMCS) and the Union of Messianic Jewish Congregations (UMJC), among others—which do ordain and license Messianic rabbis, pastors, and teachers—the specific leadership structure of one’s own local congregation or assembly, is widely going to be determined by the leadership and membership of the local faith community.

The First Century *ekklēsia* inherited a congregational leadership structure, largely from the Second Temple Jewish Synagogue. The requirements issued for elders and deacons by the Apostle Paul, to Timothy in Ephesus (1 Timothy 3), and for elders to Titus on Crete (Titus 1:5-9), are widely adaptations of what would have been likely seen for those in the contemporary Synagogue. Yet as the original Messianic Believers passed away, but most especially as the good news spread throughout the Mediterranean, the need to organize the assemblies in large geographic areas, became apparent. The emergent Christian Church of the Second Century, while inheriting a Jewish leadership model, had to adopt new leadership structures as it would not be as closed and isolated as the Synagogue. As Eastern Orthodoxy and Roman Catholicism would become formal institutions in later centuries, leadership structures involving bishops and archbishops over geographic areas would be established for Church governance and administration. Many of these leadership structures, given many of the complexities of the Middle Ages to be sure, were fused with political governments and European monarchies. Corruption and bribery, among other things, were rampant—and were among the significant causes leading to the Protestant Reformation.

Today’s American Protestantism—which whether one wants to consciously recognize it or not, has at least partially affected the Messianic movement—has itself been broadly affected by how the Protestant Reformation took hold in both England and Scotland. When King Henry VIII of England broke with the papacy, because he would not be granted a divorce, he set himself up as the leader of the Church of England. While there were various institutional and theological reforms made to the Church of England, it also maintained much of the semblance of Catholicism, particularly in terms of its leadership structure of archbishops and bishops. The episcopal model of leadership, derived from the Greek *episkopē* (ἐπισκοπή), “bishop” or “overseer,” has been employed in or adapted for various Protestant denominations, which have their roots in Anglicanism (i.e., the Methodist movement). The Church of Scotland, however, employed a presbyterian model of leadership, taken from the Greek *presbuteros* (πρεσβύτερος) or “elder,” where ordained elders lead the local congregation, and regularly assemble for general sessions to discuss church affairs, with a moderator appointed. Various Protestant denominations today have adopted the presbyterian model of leadership, as it is far less organized.

Today’s Messianic congregations will frequently employ Hebrew terminology for their leaders, *zaqein* (זָקֵן) meaning “elder,” and *shammash* (שַׁמָּשׁ) being the equivalent of “deacon.” While individual assemblies may vary in terms of whom they consider to be qualified as such designated leaders, it is more frequent than not for it to be concluded

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that the requirements of 1 Timothy 3:1-3 and Titus 1:5-9 are universal prescriptions, rather than situational for Timothy in Ephesus and Titus on Crete. While a strongly discussed and debated issue in contemporary Jewish and Protestant theology, to be certain, on the whole the present Messianic movement tends to take a negative view to females being appointed to formal positions of leadership within the assembly, although the wives of male rabbis and congregational leaders may be incorporated into some congregations' decision making process. (The 2001 compilation book *Voices of Messianic Judaism* did, however, include essays in favor of women serving in leadership,⁴ and those favoring male exclusive leadership in the assembly.⁵) Ultimately, the leadership structure of today's Messianic Jewish congregations does come down to an assembly-by-assembly basis. It can, however, be generally observed that there will be three main tiers of leadership: (1) elders, (2) deacons, and (3) ministry/program leaders.

What do you want to get out of participating in a Messianic congregation?

Participation, in the life body of a Messianic congregation, is going to be different than one being a part of a contemporary Jewish synagogue or Protestant church. When one lives in an urban environment, if he or she is dissatisfied with something relatively small or minor in a synagogue or church, he or she can likely consider various alternatives. *Established Messianic congregations and synagogues are not that frequently accessible to people.* When you become a part of a Messianic congregation, there will likely be no other Messianic assembly or group available to you, in your city or town. What this means, more than anything else, is that you cannot bring the same expectations into a Messianic congregation, as you would to a Jewish synagogue or Protestant church. *You will not only have to often think differently in terms of your participation, but you may even have to be innovative.* But also be aware that you are part of a spiritual movement which is going to culminate in the return of Israel's Messiah!

What do you want to get out of participating in a Messianic congregation?

Consider this question very seriously as you proceed on the Messianic walk. There are going to be things that you see in today's Messianic congregations and assemblies that you really like, and which genuinely minister to the spiritual needs of yourself and/or your family. There will also be things that you will see in today's Messianic congregations, which you may not like, that may indeed upset and offend you, and can even be insulting at times. If not all of the congregational teaching is to your liking—or more frequently does not address various issues or subjects which matter to you—there are legitimate and approved Messianic teaching ministries that are equipped to address the topics which your local assembly's leaders are not necessarily able to.

⁴ Ruth Fleischer, "Women Can Be in Leadership," in Dan Cohn-Sherbok, ed., *Voices of Messianic Judaism* (Baltimore: Lederer Books, 2001), pp 151-157.

⁵ Sam Nadler, "Male Leadership and the Role of Women," in *Ibid.*, pp 159-168.

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