

Messianic Jewish Communities by Design: Open Doors and Reserved Seating

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Rethinking Community

Discussing community definitively within 21st century Western culture is both an elusive and daunting task. Narrowing this exploration to Messianic Jewish congregational structures feels almost insurmountable. To do so will require an approach that is both descriptive and prescriptive. It must consider the host culture, the unique historical time, the nature of the constituency, while never losing sight of the unique vocations of this community.

Prior to conducting any conversation concerning Messianic Jewish community though, it will be imperative to reach some common understanding of what we mean by community. Though most Western academic and religious disciplines recognize that humans are social beings that band together in social groupings for the purpose of physical and emotional survival, a precise unambiguous working definition of community is very difficult to arrive at. For instance we speak of the towns in which we reside as communities. While it is true that these are geographic collections of people with common political and governance structures, perhaps even some common educational and recreational goals in most cases there is precious little that relates the municipality's constituent members. In fact most have never met or spoken to each other!

Though somewhat simplistic it is helpful to remember that the word community shares a common linguistic root with the word communication. I mention this since I hold interpersonal communication in the highest regard, and consider it not only one of the most difficult skills to master but an eroding value in contemporary culture. At a time when the internet has provided an

increased number of vehicles to be heard through blogs, social media, and increased news venues, I believe our capacity for listening has suffered, and less people actually feel truly and deeply heard. True communication like the community it can engender must be disciplined, unselfish, and charitable, and like all charity should start at home. Therefore I believe the truest forms of community in the most general sense must start in the smallest most localized nuclei and emanate out in concentric and intersecting circles.

Over the past several years I have had the opportunity to visit a number of “Tea Party” meetings as well as several “Occupy” encampments. The differences in philosophy, values and political orientations notwithstanding, I found a common element in both groups; a strong desire to build pseudo-communal structures in which they might feel understood, purposeful and empowered. Though we often bandy around the term community in shallow meaningless ways, many people today long for a more serious notion of community whereby common commitment and shared suffering are offered up on the altar of shared values, goals and purpose. Some may even long for a romanticized notion of the “good old days” when frontier neighbors raised each other’s barns, yet trying to protect the overinflated American preferences for personal freedom, privacy, self-determination and choice. One of the real challenges then to true community is building together intimately all the while maintaining and modulating our contemporary notion of individuation.

While my notion of community is admittedly difficult to define, I know it when I see it and also recognize that which falls outside of its pale. Eleven years ago when my wife was returning to

work a little less than a year after the birth of my youngest daughter, we were looking for a daycare facility for two to three hours a day. Since I would normally drop her off on the way to the synagogue and my wife would pick her up after school school we decided on a facility halfway between the two locations. The price for this convenience was steep. Though our daughter was there only a few hours a day we paid a full weekly tuition and also paid for the weeks that my wife was on school vacation. We accepted this cost as necessary and unavoidable. What surprised me though were the frequent requests from the daycare to participate in “community” activities. These included meetings, socials and workdays to add rooms and build playgrounds. We politely excused ourselves from these activities since to our minds we had made a sizable financial investment to guarantee a safe and positive experience for my daughter; we had never agreed to join a community! Still the newsletters that came weekly, as well as the daily conversations at drop off and pick up reminded us that this daycare considered itself a community and whether intentional or not made us feel as though we were not pulling our weight. In a meeting with the directors I explained that though we were pleased with the care that our daughter was receiving we had entered into a business arrangement, not an intentional communal arrangement. Furthermore we explained that any expectations they had for us should have been stated up front, just as the fifty-two weekly timely payments were. In other words community should be mutually beneficial and intentional. They told us they understood, but their young faces betrayed their disappointment. It became apparent that though we were taken by surprise by their communal orientation, they had in fact intended this type of relationship from the outset, even if they failed to communicate it from the beginning. Some parents seemed to

have similar boundaries to ours, yet others fully participated, and seemed happy to serendipitously fall into this community. I learned an important lesson from this experience. Community can happen unplanned, but when it is by design it is best for all parties to be as fully informed as possible.

Therefore not all synagogues are truly communities and not all who join them naturally share the same expectations. When I was a boy growing up in Mount Vernon, NY, my family was involved with two synagogues. The first was an Orthodox synagogue on the south side of town bordering the Bronx. My family was truly attached to this *shul* and its members. So much so that they continued to belong long after they moved miles away, certainly an inconvenience when attending an orthodox synagogue. It had a *haimish* atmosphere and my parents always seemed comfortable there. They established strong relationships that continued for years after the synagogue merged with another. They had a deep respect for the rabbi and though he was more *frum* than they wished to be, they were glad that he set that boundary. I do not know what membership fees were, but I never heard my parents ever mention or complain about them. The same could not be said of the other synagogue. It was a conservative synagogue only blocks away from our apartment in Mount Vernon, walking distance on Shabbat, though this was not the reason for our joining it. The primary reason for belonging here was that it boasted a superior Hebrew school that I could walk to after my normal school day for religious training. Both membership and tuition must have been very expensive since I would frequently hear my parents discussing these with considerable resentment. They never felt completely at home in this

conservative synagogue, not because it was not *frum* enough, but because it did not feel like real community. It was large and impersonal, and though the worship was done with excellence, it was distant and not at all engaging. If the first synagogue felt like someone's home, vis-à-vis a rundown old home, the second was like a museum where you paid to see the exhibits. It was the friends from the first synagogue who cooked meals for my family when my parents sat *shiva*, and helped to celebrate our *simchas*. When I was Bar Mitzvah at the second synagogue along with family it was friends from the first synagogue who were mostly in attendance. My parents maintained their Brotherhood and Sisterhood affiliations, filial relations and burial plots with the first synagogue, while they merely paid for the conveniences of the second. Though I was there four days a week, the second synagogue hardly became a religious community for me and never for the rest of my family.

Inclusivism and Commitment

Clearly not all synagogues are communities and not everyone who attends or joins a synagogue does so seeking an extensive communal experience. The traditional models of synagogue as *beit kneset*, *beit midrash* and *beit tefillah*, can be viewed as segregated experiences, which can often be shopped and promoted within the contemporary American religious market. Anecdotally both my last as well as my present homes faced across the street from the parking lots of a reform and conservative synagogue respectively. Interestingly both parking lots were and are filled to overflowing each week for drop-off and pick-up from Sunday school, while only partially filled on Shabbat. This would suggest that children's education in Judaism might be viewed separate

from the family experience of Judaism and separate from the family immersion in the full complement of synagogue experience.

If not all synagogues are truly communities, then by extension not all Messianic Synagogues are truly communities. Of course the challenge is creating community when community is just so difficult to define. There is something profoundly mysterious about true community because it is larger than ourselves and in many ways it defines us, yet if it is truly effective community we in many ways help to define it. I have found the following analogy by well-known psychiatrist and author M. Scott Peck to be helpful in getting my mind around community development.

The seeds of community reside in humanity – a social species – just as a gem originally resides in the earth. But it is not yet a gem, only a potential one. So it is that geologists refer to a gem in the rough simply as a stone. A group becomes community in somewhat the same way that a stone becomes a gem – through a process of cutting and polishing. Once cut and polished, it is something beautiful. But to describe its beauty, the best we can do is to describe its facets. Community, like a gem, is multifaceted, each facet a mere aspect of the whole that defies description.¹

Following this analogy it is more productive to speak of the process of developing community and observe its attributes than it is to try to define the community as a whole. Communities are not merely joined, they are shaped and they shape, they are continuously transformed and they transform. It is attention then to each individual and to every relationship within our Messianic synagogues that might enable us to mature them as communal structures. What I am describing then are communities by design. I have purposely avoided the term intentional community.

While the term has reemerged in the last several years, “intentional community” usually

¹ M. Scott Peck, *The Different Drum : Community-Making and Peace* (New York, N.Y., Simon & Schuster, 1988), 60

describes more insular and often exclusive groups than the communities that I am proposing. In fact I believe exclusivity is generally destructive to community development. In the example I gave of the two synagogues that my family belonged to when I was a boy, my family could never properly embrace the second as community. Given the undependability of childhood and adolescent understandings and memories I am uncertain as to where the blame lies. I was and am aware that the second synagogue was more expensive, refined and had a more wealthy membership. What I am unsure of was if my family's alienation was due to self-exclusion or the exclusivist vibe in the air. The likelihood is both.

I believe true communities are inclusive and our synagogues must struggle to be so. Scripture strictly forbids exclusion or favoritism based upon wealth, education, social status or perceived notions of personal piety. (James 2:1-13) This is not to say that inclusion is an absolute. Sometimes defining the normal boundaries of community can limit inclusion. Our nomenclature, Messianic Jewish in and of itself creates such limits, but even these boundaries must be semipermeable, an idea that I will develop later. The immediate issue is avoiding the justification for exclusion. Private clubs, corporations and gated communities give little thought to being exclusive unless they are compelled to by the often too short arm of the law. Communities must be different. We should not normally ask whether we can justify taking a person in based upon their personal status or ideas, but rather is it at all justifiable to keep them out. It is also incumbent upon our communities to create environments where all people feel welcome. This does not mean that all people are immediately received as members with the same

responsibilities and privileges, but rather that all people are afforded respect and dignity and are welcome guests. It is at this point that I find both significant agreement and discomfort with an idea expressed by Bruce Stokes at the 2011 Hashivenu Forum. Concerning the Disciple Center, the faith community that he pastors, Dr. Stokes states,

The stability of the congregation is maintained by two dynamics. The congregation is private and we do not have visitors. There are often guests, hosted by members and family members who come occasionally but the focus is on the congregation as household. Secondly, we are covenanted together. Membership is slow to receive and requires testing over time. Our pattern is similar to that of St. Benedict requiring time and relationship building. Membership is renewed each year at Pentecost and leaving before the year is out must be addressed formally. In a culture where people come and go as they want, this sounds odd, but it creates a sense of belonging. We discourage joining to test intent and commitment. We slow the membership process to test character and stability. The result is that membership means something. It means one belongs.²

I could not be in stronger agreement with the concept of covenant relationship as the foundation of community, or that membership should be slow to be received and requires time testing. But how does such a testing occur if visitors are only welcome occasionally, and whose commitment is being tested? If it is the members' commitments which are tested, then doesn't this require a continual test over time, and isn't this testing the very process by which both community and its members are refined? In fact it is a high level of commitment on the part of the membership that allows for difference and distinction within the communal structure. Exclusion is not only based upon wealth or social status, but often is based on conceptual thinking, political affiliation and human emotional range. I was once told by an established Messianic leader after our first

² H. Bruce Stokes, *Establishing a Relational Community: A Theology of Community*, (Hashivenu Forum, Agoura Hills, CA, 2011).

conversation, “I don’t quite understand you, sometimes you sound like a believer and sometimes you sound like a liberal.” Though I hope this statement was at least partly tongue in cheek, it had the effect of placing me outside the pale based upon my ideas regarding the poor, ideas I thought I shared with Yeshua, but apparently there was room for disagreement. As a caveat to this story this person and I have had many subsequent conversations and have not only come to understand each other, but may have in fact influenced one another to some degree.

The process of working toward, rather than reaching consensus is the realistic basis of community. Healthy community should be highly effective at consensus building, but consensus does not always happen immediately if at all. Often consensus will happen over time, and in the interim some will have to acquiesce to accommodate the majority of the communal conscience. At other times a group will have a thoughtful and time tested transition or even a reversal of thinking that will produced new or adjusted vision and values. In a diverse community this process requires high levels of commitment. Therefore the exclusion of those who may think somewhat differently than the group may create the appearance of protecting the stability of the congregation, but may also have the effect of stifling the testing of commitments and maturation of the community. This type of exclusion may be active or passive. It can occur actively by dismissing the ideas of others or nurturing an environment that presumes certain entrenched thinking as absolutes. It can exist passively by only “inviting” those who already think in step with the group. I think it can be questioned whether this is truly a communal formation or a defensive bastion against genuine community.

I have already stated that I believe exclusivity is destructive to community, but I would like to add that it takes two forms, exclusion of the other and exclusion of oneself. Often those who have agreed to be part of a community disagree with the direction the community has taken. As a result they just pick up and leave, requiring others, often the children to deal with the feelings of abandonment that occur. About fifteen years ago near the inception of Shuvah Yisrael the congregation where I am the rabbi, a woman who was a charter member left because “we were becoming too Jewish.” I agreed that in the process of development we were emerging as a different kind of community and “our vision and values were in transition.” She snapped back that “it is not about vision and values but what is biblical.” How does one challenge such a set of immovable absolutes? She was a woman by most measures of great commitment and conviction, a rugged individual who could not commit though to the kind of flexibility necessary to support dynamic long term community and the vicissitudes that come with inclusivism.

I agree that “in a culture where people come and go as they want” we must nurture a different kind of commitment; I just happen to believe that such a commitment is strengthened in members and learned by visitors when the door is kept open. I also understand the felt need to maintain the stability of the community, and especially protect the most vulnerable among us. In 1995 while having lunch with new congregants, a wonderful affable couple with children, my eldest daughter suddenly blurted out, “you aren’t going to leave are you?” I had to explain that in congregational life children too often see people leave. They responded by smiling and saying, “we are ‘stickers’; you won’t be able to get rid of us.” It was true, almost seventeen years later

they are still an active part of the community. But the incident made the need dramatically real to me. I was determined to make the culture of community and commitment palpable and teachable. The congregation adopted the idea of a Newcomers Havurah that I had observed several years prior at Congregation Ruach Israel in Massachusetts. These are conducted in three sessions, A History of Messianic Judaism, The Vision and Values of Shuvah Yisrael and finally a Saturday evening havdalah followed by dessert and questions and answers at my home. We conduct these three to four times a year still. The first two sessions are didactic and thorough and allow newcomers to learn what is most important to us and dispel many misconceptions upfront. The classes establish several of our boundaries and explain why these exist. The informal final session at my home demonstrates these values. In all of my years of synagogue affiliation both through adolescence and adulthood I was never invited to any of our rabbi's homes. The interaction, our hospitality and most importantly my reaction to differences of opinion set a tone for the inclusive value of our group.

I also added two sessions to our membership classes that addressed the issue of inclusivism and commitment. The first is an interactive session we call "Enhancing Relations in the Kehilah." This is really a conflict management class that lays out principles for dealing with interpersonal disagreements in the congregation. It also involves group problem solving, working through a series of vignettes. The second class is based upon a sermon that I heard Rabbi Rich Nichol give in 1994 entitled "How to Leave Your Congregation." When I first heard it I was shocked since this is just the kind of topic most preachers try to avoid. It addressed the reality that people leave

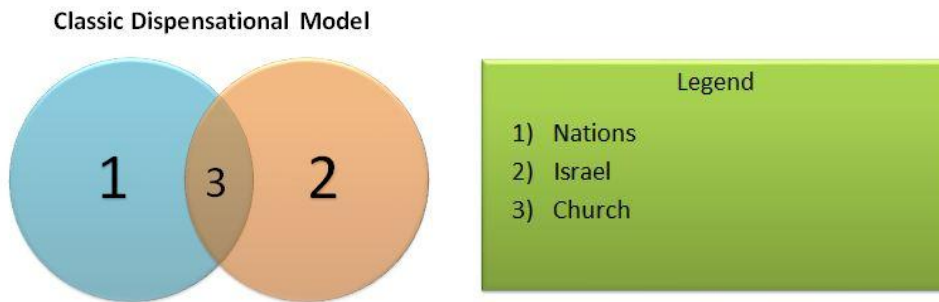
congregations and acknowledged that often for good reasons, relocation, health, family demands and even changes in perspective. The sermon challenged those considering leaving the congregation to begin appropriate steps such as opening communication with leadership, attempting to resolve any misunderstandings or misgivings, and if leaving was unavoidable saying goodbye without slander or disruption, while also fulfilling any open commitments. Leaving of course is not the ideal and in fact the conclusion of the sermon was “if you learn to leave properly, you’ll probably learn how to stay.” Though there is no way to empirically measure the results of these classes, I believe they have helped to limit the disruption that can occur in community without rolling up the welcome mat. Perhaps even more importantly we have not cut off our capacity to grow and mature in an effort to balkanize the community, and have maintained the process of inclusivism and commitment that I believe is essential to healthy community.

Rethinking the Ecclesial Models

Even though I consider it imperative for communities to be open and dynamic I do not want to give the impression that I believe our Messianic Jewish synagogues should be unstructured and lawless. In fact it is my understanding that communities are lawful by nature. By this I mean that the self-definition of a community cannot avoid establishing limits and boundaries that determine to some degree community composition, governance and process. Even *Alcoholics Anonymous*, which boasts an all-inclusive nonhierarchical membership and governance, is defined by a membership of alcoholics and prefers that the sober ones run the show one day at a time. As

religious communities, Messianic Jewish synagogues must be defined to some degree by ecclesial models, which help determine ideal community composition, relationship to other communities and groups and also project community purpose. Just as community must be dynamic and open to adaptation and self-understanding, so these models should be evolving.

My first encounter with such a paradigm is the Classic Dispensational model which many of us have cut our teeth on. Usually represented by a simplistic Venn diagram, the dispensational model as represented in the following diagram establishes a new eschatological reality, the church, inclusive of membership that has come out of Israel and the remaining nations. The establishing sets 1(the Nations) and 2 (Israel) are equally sized and betray the primary intention of the model, to eliminate any distinction in set 3 (the Church) members with the exception of their set of origin. This model ignores all other relationships and in fact renders them irrelevant. Israel has no other relationship to the remainder of humanity with the exception of those who have also melded into the Church. As such neither Israel nor the nations have any explicit ongoing purpose in this ecclesial model outside of the establishment of the Church. It is no wonder that the mission organizations that used this model to establish Messianic Congregations understood the primary purpose of these congregations as “missions in miniature” and the Universal Church as their communal locus of identity. Jewish identity within this model can only be preserved within set 3 individually and often valued for a single missiological purpose, to convince others that they could also make the jump into the new communal identity.



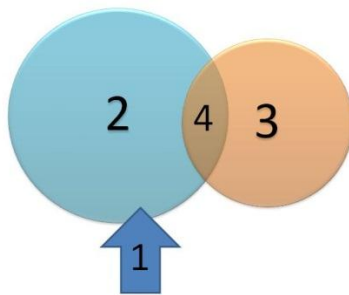
A newer ecclesial model and the one that many of our synagogues have adopted is bilateral ecclesiology, defined by Mark Kinzer in his ground breaking book *Postmissionary Messianic Judaism*. In Kinzer's model the character and calling of the Christian Church and the Jewish people cannot be discussed separately since they are indelibly bound together, and the Messianic Jewish synagogue becomes an historical connector. Kinzer expounded on this in his presentation on Messianic Jewish Community at the 2011 Hashivenu Forum.

In *Postmissionary Messianic Judaism (PMJ)* I argued that the Messianic *ekklesia* should exist in two interdependent and united corporate forms, one Jewish and the other multi-national. The Jewish corporate expression of the Messianic *ekklesia* lives as a sub-community within the wider Jewish world, and there bears witness to Israel's identity as a people chosen by God in Messiah Yeshua for an eschatological destiny under his headship. Through its unity with the multinational *ekklesia*, the Jewish body of Yeshua-followers also enables its non-Jewish partner to share in the eschatological riches of an expanded commonwealth of Israel without falling prey to supersessionism.³

³ Mark Kinzer, *Messianic Jewish Community: Standing and Serving As a Priestly Remnant*, (Hashivenu Forum, Angoura Hills, CA, 2011)

Mark Kinzer never attempted to demonstrate these relationships in a diagram and I am sure he would have preferred if I did not either given the simple limitations of such figures. I am doing so first to demonstrate the strength of this model over the Classic Dispensational one for the development of Messianic Jewish communal development, and second to progressively develop a new model to understand the present relationship of our synagogues to other identity structures they interact with. As seen in the following diagram the Messianic Jewish synagogue (4) is located firmly within the Jewish people (3). They share set members and the Jewish people are not complete without them. Nonetheless the Messianic Jewish synagogue also completes the Church of the Nations making them the ecclesia of Yeshua. Without the intact communal identity of the Messianic Jewish synagogue, the incarnate presence of Yeshua, the quintessential Israel, is not fully manifest in the witness of the Church. It fails to be the expanded multi-national Israel. Therefore bilateral ecclesiology unlike the dispensational paradigm designates an ongoing priestly role for the Jewish people and a “special” role as “priestly remnant” for the Jewish followers of Yeshua. This distinguishes both a purpose and an identity which can be used to create communal distinction and boundaries.

Bilateral Ecclesial Model



Legend

- 1) Ecclesia of Yeshua
- 2) Church of the Nations
- 3) The Jewish People
- 4) Messianic Jewish Synagogue

While this model in my opinion is vastly superior to the dispensational model for the support of community formation, Mark Kinzer admittedly has a very high eschatological horizon which focuses on the representative holiness of all Israel demonstrated in the existence of the “priestly remnant.”

The logic of Paul’s argument in Romans 11 suggests that the term “first fruits” refers back to the Jewish Yeshua-followers of verses 5-7. In halakhic terms, the offering of first fruits does not sanctify the remaining dough but instead releases it for secular use. However, the offering of first fruits fits into a wider pattern within the Torah according to which a part is devoted to God as representative of the whole. The Aaronic Priesthood constitutes a prime example of this pattern in which the holiness of the representative part actually secures and sustains the holiness of that which it represents – the entire people of Israel. Similarly, Jewish Yeshua-followers perform a priestly service on behalf of their fellow Jews by representing them before God. As a consequence, all Israel retains its sacred status, in hope of the day of redemption when in fullness it will acknowledge its returning Messiah.⁴

Kinzer’s focus throughout his 2011 paper and *PMJ* is on the primary responsibility of Messianic Jews as “first fruits” of a people who as the *Alenu* expresses, has a duty to the world that is in fact its inheritance. While bilateral ecclesiology acknowledges this responsibility to both the cosmos and the larger humanity, it places most of the emphasis upon the Church, the “enlarged multi-national Israel” to fulfill much of this task. As I expressed in the above diagram, bilateral ecclesiology places most of its emphasis on the relationship between the Jewish people and the Church. Although acknowledging a larger purpose, its high eschatological focus defines little of the Jewish people’s specific on the ground responsibility beyond an expression of its ongoing testimony of existence and fidelity. At this point I would like to offer an expanded bilateral

⁴ Ibid 16

model, which is in fact a multi-concentric model which acknowledges not only the relationship between the Church and Israel, but also Yeshua and humanity in an ordinal arrangement.

The strength of such a model is that it is in fact not a bilateral paradigm, but rather demonstrates the greater complexity of relational purpose at which the bilateral model hints at. The enlarged multinational Israel can only be so if it contains, or is built around the original structure. As this diagram shows, the Jewish people (3) maintain their own unique bounded subset, while being fully enveloped, not absorbed by the enlarged multinational Israel (2). To clear up any confusion neither the numbers nor the placement are meant to suggest an ordering based upon either linear chronology or hierarchal position, but rather ordinal priority. Moving toward the center each group represents a smaller subset that lends identity, definition and purpose to the larger group. I was hesitant to place Yeshua on this diagram in fear that it might cause some to imagine that I am suggesting that Jews hold a hierarchal rather than a definitional priority. But it is Yeshua's incarnation as Israel's greatest son, the ultimate high priest and the perfect sacrifice for all humanity that further defines Israel by not only his Jewish followers but all of his followers and inevitably all of humanity.

Expanded Bilateral Model



This model though shares a similar weakness with the others, which is even more apparent in this diagram. Each of these circles in the Venn lines up like a perfect array of the planets. Whenever I shop at the supermarket down the street from my home I am afforded the opportunity to play an electronic “slot machine” at the checkout. If I get three “Big Y’s” in a row I win and receive my groceries for free, an event that has not yet occurred. As a necessary precaution I continue to bring my wallet with me to the supermarket. It is not that I don’t hope to win or believe in the inevitability that I will win, but the present situation demands that I am prepared to pay the price necessary to eventually arrive at that day. This model has as high an eschatological focus as the other two and the alignment of the sets makes it even more apparent. This is more than an ideal; rather I believe this represents a reality that is greater than our present reality. The unseen presence and mediation of Yeshua from within Israel is not a distant future, nor is the actualized presence of Yeshua through the Jewish people in the midst of the enlarged multinational Israel, nor is the felt presence of Yeshua in the world through the Church. But the full recognition of these realities requires an “evangelical imagination” a term coined by Walter Bruggemann. By evangelical he is not referring to any contemporary religious movement or

grouping, rather an adjectival form of the gospel. What he describes is a capacity to see beyond the constraints of our present limitations by a reality funded by a coherent understanding of scripture.⁵

What may seem counterintuitive though is the necessity to acknowledge the present situations and context in order to shine the light of the greater reality on the present historical context. The reality that we follow a crucified Messiah who encourages us to follow his model of self-sacrifice is indicative that we operate in a world that presently can get a little sloppy. We bring an understanding of these ecclesial relationships into a world where fear, ambition and historical animosity have ruptured these relationships and make them very hard to repair the resultant schisms. We ourselves might be highly unaware of our own instincts toward protectionism and motivations of self-preservation and how much they affect our decision making and boundary setting.

The final diagram I would like to observe is a refiguring of the previous one. Here I have reduced the size of sets 2-4 and shifted them toward the margins representing the inherent marginality required to live a God centered existence in the present reality. The largest subset is set 2 the enlarged multinational Israel. While part of this set moves toward the margins, much of it settles near the center representing a communal normalizing by embracing nationalism, essential prosperity and military protectionism, values distanced by the Apostolic Witness. Set

⁵ Walter Bruggemann, *Texts Under Negotiation: The Bible and Postmodern Imagination*, (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993) 26-56

3, the Jewish people has also moved toward the margins, less by choice and more by the currents of history and the effect they have on an exilic people generally without access to large power structures. Ironically, this pattern in history has enabled the inherent call to be a people set apart. Set 4 represents a different grouping, Messianic Judaism. This grouping does not fit entirely within the Jewish people (3) as the Jewish Yeshua – followers (5) do, representing the ethnic diversity of the adherents. Only a portion, less than half of the Jewish Yeshua-believers are positioned within the subset of Messianic Judaism, yet a significant portion of the set members originate in set 2, the enlarged multinational Israel. I have also placed a significant number of Jews and a very small number of non-Jews who do not acknowledge an explicit faith in Yeshua within this set (4). The predominant reason for this is of course intermarriage, but any number of interpersonal reasons might cause the phenomena of non-Yeshua followers finding a home or spiritually seeking within Messianic Judaism. Perhaps it is the inherent marginality of this group that they find most attractive. Both sets 4 (Messianic Judaism) and 5 (Jewish Yeshua-followers) remain at the margins of sets 2 (the Church) and 3 (the Jewish People), a natural consequence of being populated by boundary crossers.



Assessing the Population

Ultimately it would be great if everyone would stay in their respective concentric circle with little or no intersection or confusion. After all “good fences make good neighbors” or so the saying goes. But is this accurate, and can too rigid boundaries be detrimental to the growth and maturation of community? I have already argued that community must be inclusive; but can full inclusivity be detrimental to community identity formation? This issue is not new to Messianic Jewish congregations. Let us look at some of the inherent problems with “open borders” and the various constituents who might try to “cross the unguarded fences.”

Non-Jewish Yeshua followers – As represented in the final diagram by the confluence of sets 2 and 4. Though certainly not uniform in perspective constituents from this group generate the most conversation and controversy. We often speak of them uniformly, yet they attend for distinctly different reasons and motivations that come from such complex motivational mixes that they might not fully understand themselves.

The most apparent and understandable participant from this group is the spouse of a Jewish person who may or may not be in attendance as well. They may also be the parent or grandparent of Jewish children and the Jewish parent may or may not be involved for any number of reasons. For the reason of welcoming and involving the Jewish children or spouses even the most guarded Messianic Jewish communities would be open to these folks. But as I already mentioned they are not monolithic. Some may reluctantly and resentfully attend with their Jewish spouses and children while others may happily attend. Still others may attend out of a desire to learn how

evangelize their families, elicit prayer and or just find a sympathetic hearing for their dilemma of unparalleled religious values within their families.

Then there are non-Jewish Yeshua followers who come having no familial relationships at all. Some may have extensive and deep friendships with many Jewish people and yet others may have little or no contact with any Jewish people. Often these people may describe their motivation as having a love for the Jewish people, but lack of real contact or knowledge could place such a love within the world of abstraction, a theological crush of sorts. This immature love though can blossom into a genuine and appropriate bond if properly nurtured. In the 2002 addendum to the UMJC definitional statement the theology committee uses the nomenclature *Ahavat Yisrael* to describe the proper bond.

But *Ahavat Yisrael* speaks not only of God's love for Israel, but also of our love for Israel, for the living Jewish people around us. Believers from among the Gentiles may share in this aspect of *Ahavat Yisrael* as well, and this share is the key to fruitful Gentile participation in Messianic Judaism. *Ahavat Yisrael*, more than any other model, describes the calling of Gentiles within Messianic Judaism.⁶

It goes on to describe these folks as evidenced by their general helpfulness. Their desire is to serve the Jewish people and the local Messianic community while acknowledging difference and distinction. Yet my experience is that others may come with a misshapen understanding of Messianic Judaism expressed in a desire to "live as Yeshua did." This can be nurtured by an honest yet simplistic desire to serve the God of Israel, or might be fueled by layers of discontent

⁶ *Defining Messianic Judaism*, Albuquerque: UMJC, 2002. The statement was prepared by the Theology committee and adapted by the Union of Messianic Jewish congregations delegate body. An attached commentary was authored by then General Secretary and now Executive Director Russell Resnik.

with previous religious experiences and /or related familial interactions. This can also lead to the importing of sectarian ideas such as Ephraimitism or British Israelism which can undermine the expressed identity of the Messianic Jewish community.

I would add yet one more subset to this mix, those who for some mysterious reason feel compelled to become fully enfranchised within the Jewish people. The Jewish tradition describes such people as having a Jewish *neshama* (soul). I do not wish to speak at length about conversion since much has been written both warning of its dangers and encouraging a limited yet accessible process. The Messianic Jewish Rabbinical Council (MJRC) has done significant work in making this process available and responsible. Though exceptional the examples of those who have enjoined themselves to Israel as fully enfranchised members, are part of the biblical narrative and the ongoing history of the Jewish people. I believe this process must be extremely limited and time tested, but how might it happen at all if the door is slammed shut before the process even begins?

Jewish People who are not explicit Yeshua followers – How could anyone from this group present a problem? Isn't our mandate to bear witness from within the Jewish people, and don't we need Jews to do so? The problem here does not rest with them but our process of "naturalization." All too often such people show up only to feel as though they are going to a fish fry and they are the fish. I have often been turned off when professional athletes celebrate demonstrably when hitting a homerun or scoring a goal or touchdown. I have heard commentators criticize them saying that "they should act like they have done this before." The

same might be said of Messianic Jews when interacting with the “unsaved” Jew. Some act like they have never seen a Jew before, at least inside their own doors.

These people might be the spouses of Yeshua followers either Christian or Jewish, and their spouses might be in attendance or not. They may also have children, parents, or friends who have an explicit faith in Yeshua. Or perhaps they are driven by an unidentified curiosity with Messianic Judaism and or Yeshua. It is certainly alright to discuss matters of faith with them; after all they understand where they have landed. It should not be all we appear concerned with though. If we are communities we should be full orbed and developed with more to think about than a discussion of our own positions and positioning. This behavior was noted by both Carol Harris –Shapiro and Shoshanna Feher throughout their sociological studies of Messianic Judaism.⁷ Furthermore this sort of behavior unintentionally sets the boundaries sharply and uninvitingly. Upon entering a new environment most people do so with at least a little reticence, reserve and some discomfort. Drawing immediately upon distinction is more than self-involved, it is inhospitable.

There is also a problem of internal limits and boundaries with Jewish people who do not explicitly articulate a faith in Yeshua. To what degree can they participate in the decision making and governance of the congregation? Will the community members trust them to participate in

⁷ Shoshana Feher, *Passing over Easter : Constructing the Boundaries of Messianic Judaism*, (Walnut Creek, CA: AltaMira Press,1998)

Carol Harris-Shapiro, *Messianic Judaism: a Rabbi's Journey Through Religious Change in America*, (Boston: Beacon Press, 1999).

decision making for the congregation and lead in ecclesiastic functions. In many Messianic Jewish congregations and synagogues non-Jews can serve in all and any leadership role, yet fully participant Jews who cannot articulate their faith in accordance with very explicit articles of faith are denied membership.

Jewish Yeshua followers – Not surprising to any of us is the fact that many Jewish followers of Yeshua are not in regular attendance at Messianic Jewish congregations rather are fully acculturated in Christian Churches often Evangelical in orientation. In fact most studies show that the number of Christians of Jewish lineage to far exceed Jewish membership in Messianic Jewish congregations and synagogues. When they show up they are often guarded and at worse can be defensive. This is fully understandable since the very notion of a distinct community of Yeshua believers self-identified within the larger Jewish world can challenge the very constructs upon which their inner world has been constructed. The majority of their theological understandings are often well entrenched and may represent a kind of crypto-supersessionism. Additionally many of their social infrastructures are built around the Church world, their friends and often their spouses. Not surprising their children may also be deeply entrenched in a world alien to Judaism, even grandma and grandpa might be a beloved enigma. Nonetheless they show up from time to time because somehow they are drawn back to a part of them that feels a need to be associated again with their Jewish moorings. They may call on us for assistance with a wedding, a funeral or some other lifecycle event.

Though they are essential to our call as a “priestly remnant” the highly individualized faith expression of the world in which they have been oriented focuses upon their own personal witness and undermines the entire concept of communal testimony. Concepts which we accept as most elementary to our self-definition and purpose challenges theirs and can often cause a pushing back, which might manifest in withdrawal from the congregation or worse still disruptive behavior. These people may require space and a very patient acculturation. Unfortunately just as with the non-Yeshua following Jews our members may feel compelled to challenge them and their assumptions. Instead of drawing sharp boundaries, we may imply that they have to eradicate the boundaries they have set and be in full attendance as though the fence will wear out if they keep crossing over; a “become a citizen or leave” approach. The truth is that their dual allegiances or failure to commit can challenge the veracity of our own fragile member commitment.

Messianic Jews of Exotic Varieties – Why should other Messianic Jews upset the apple cart?

Really? It should not come as a surprise that to anyone that Messianic Judaism is not a monolith. Not only are we comprised of people of varied backgrounds and streams but we are made up of constituent parts in progress. Since we are just becoming a second generation movement most of the first generation has come from one of the other streams of Jewish people that I identified. Also within both of those groupings are additional subgroups and streams of thought and practice. Not to mention members of the newly arising second generation and younger segment of the member population who bring their own ideas and orientation to the table. Even when the

community is in process together and is coming to some consensus, Messianic Jews may join us from other congregations which maintain different practice and ideas. So anyone who has had the idea that a congregation made up of only acculturated Messianic Jews can be easily made into a community may want to reconsider.

Years ago I served as a teaching elder at one Messianic Congregation that had been established by Jewish mission organization that was definitively dispensational in orientation. For years an historical artifact within the constitution of the congregation was a thirteen page Statement of Faith that was so explicit it almost required a seminary education to be certain whether or not you were in agreement. Needless to say, for years prior Messianic Jews were disqualified or discouraged from membership due to positions concerning the gifts of the Spirit, understandings of the relationship between the “Rapture” and the “Millennial Kingdom”, or belief in the “Rapture” at all. Happily I can say that this congregation revamped these positions years ago, but I am certain these community deadening Articles of Faith still exist elsewhere.

Non-Christian Gentiles – I don’t know why! Is it enough to say God works in mysterious ways, or that people work things out in stranger ways? Most often this occurs do to interfaith marriage. Perhaps they are married to a Jewish spouse Messianic or otherwise. Or maybe they are just curious and intuit that we may have answers for them that they have not found elsewhere. In any event this should for obvious reasons represent the smallest subset in attendance at any time. It is impossible to know what God’s intention is for such people in our midst or for how long, but I do not think this can interfere with our responsibility to be hospitable and receptive.

I have examined each of these groups because they represent the very real subsets in attendance in our synagogues. What we do with them and how we treat them will determine whether or not our synagogues are truly a community or merely religious institutions or collections of people. I have already advocated that I believe communities must be inclusive. Exclusivity does not end with wealth, education, social status or ethnicity. I have tried to demonstrate that political ideas, theological orientation, familial health, and human emotional range can also cause both intended as well as unintended exclusion. Limiting those at the table not only affects the range of people that can be influenced by the community, but may also retard community development and transformation. Though this may palliate the congregation, I would firmly believe that this undermines the very process of community development at the same time.

Each of these groups brings a broad range of perspective that I believe is necessary for us to fulfill our calling as a “priestly remnant”. To fulfill this role we must enter into the identity of Yeshua which requires us to relate and identify with each of the concentric sets that I identified in the third and fourth models. While those sets to some degree represent identity external to our community, they also represent interrelated communities that we are called to influence and inform. To be honest our communal involvement with churches is most often limited to a rare and occasional joint service and some opportunities for our leaders to teach their classes. Inter-community opportunities are even more limited with other non-Messianic Jewish communal structures. I still believe the primary purpose of Messianic Judaism is to be a visible testimony of Yeshua from within the Jewish people. I do not think our synagogues should be principally

microcosms of the enlarged multinational Israel, let alone of the entire diversity of humanity, but I think we could and should accommodate such a microcosm to inform and project our eschatological vision.

Establishing Boundaries for the Kehilah

This of course raises concerns of not only composition but also of our prophetic role. A visible Jewish “priestly remnant” must be not only comprised of Jews but be normally recognized as a Jewish communal structure. If our constituency becomes predominantly non-Jewish then this will threaten a dilution of Jewish memory and expression. I will make some suggestions that I believe might help to facilitate this necessary accommodation, and deal with the issue of communal projection and personality, but first let’s again address the immediate matter of limits and boundaries.

First I would like to consider a suggestion made by Mark Kinzer last year concerning Ralph Winter’s missiological distinction between modalities and sodalities. Kinzer explains,

A modality is a group comprised of a full range of human beings – old and young, male and female, married and single. It has leaders and followers, strong and weak, able and disabled. There are no membership restrictions other than a willingness to abide by the standards of the group, and the objective of the group is simply to live its life in a particular way. In contrast, a sodality is a group with a focused vocation, with membership restricted to those who will be able to contribute to the fulfillment of that vocation. Sodalities require a higher level of commitment than do modalities. Winter sees the first century communities of Yeshua-followers as modalities, while he views Paul’s apostolic team as a sodality.⁸

⁸ Kinzer 30

Kinzer considers Messianic Jewish congregations by and large to be modalities not sodalities but believes that to properly model the “priestly remnant” we should somehow create Jewish sodalities within the congregations or they could even be trans-local. First let me say that I largely agree with Mark Kinzer’s perspective and find his definition of a sodality close to my own designation of true community. But I also think Messianic Jewish congregations as presently populated can constitute sodalities if there is a renewed commitment to shared purpose derived through educated and systematic consensus building. Such a shared purpose will then require communal membership to commit through subordination of privilege and duty.

Furthermore I believe the formation of specifically Jewish sodalities is a meritorious suggestion. On some level a group such as the MJRC already fills this limited trans-local role. Uniquely though the MJRC requires local affiliation and exists in part to influence and augment the local communities of constituent members. My concern is that outside of congregational life most attempts at Jewish sodalities would be either too limited in interaction or competitive with the local communities. If perceived as innately exclusive a trans-local Jewish sodality could tear at the fabric of the local communities.

I would suggest a model I find somewhat similar but more commendable to our communities. Building on the third and fourth models that I offered, I would suggest implementing internal semipermeable boundaries based upon distinct yet honored roles. This would naturally mean that some duties and privileges would not be available to all attendees or even members. The roles would need to be explicit, recognizable and unambiguous; part of an educational process that

would begin from the moment of involvement within the community. Most importantly the roles would need to be seen as definitional rather than hierarchical.

It would also require that certain functions be afforded to non-Jews that even the Jewish constituents could not participate in. Years ago we adopted a service called *Bar* and *Bat Avraham* at Shuvah Yisrael to provide an alternative to a *B'nai Mitzvah* for non-Jewish children. We added a special *maftir* from *B'reisheet* 12 to allow the children to study and celebrate their unique role in the congregation. The young people did not wear a *tallis* but at that time would be called to the Torah, a practice our community no longer supports. We did a fabulous job of training the children and all observers, even those who were skeptical at first, felt that it was a meaningful and dignified passage for these young people. It also served to create clarity of roles within the community and to those outside. After the MJRC began to authorize conversions we eliminated this entire practice. Our reasoning was that the practice was nontraditional and could be seen as contrived. Also with the process of conversion it was deemed no longer necessary. What I have observed though is that we have no such tradition for families associated or in transition. For the parents of a child nearing thirteen years of age, this can create an unnecessary pressure to convert that may not be congruent with their calling within the community. It also puts a great deal of pressure on the leadership and membership of the community to expedite the process of conversion or risk the alienation and damage to the already fragile and formative identity of the adolescent. We are considering reinstating the service, but would not call the

child to the Torah.⁹ Rather we could for instance have them read Galatians 3 in Hebrew and train them in an appropriate understanding so that they could articulate their own identity to family, friends and community. While I realize the term *Bar* or *Bat Avraham* is generally used of a convert, we would gladly consider a different terminology. In exceptional cases adults might also train for a similar rite of passage. In fact the reading of the *besorot* in Hebrew could be reserved for non-Jews, a kind of unique *Baal Kriah*¹⁰. For whatever awkwardness this creates, rites of passage solidify the identity of non-Jews within our communities and dignify an inclusive yet distinct role. While conversion may solve some problems it does not deal with the unarticulated limits of those in process, undecided, or those who respectfully choose not to undergo conversion.

I consider it essential that to fulfill our mandate as a “priestly remnant” that we must create explicit roles and limits within our communities concerning not only ritual participation but also for ecclesial duties and responsibilities of government and operation. Congregation Shuvah Yisrael was one of the first Messianic Jewish synagogues in the UMJC to recognize the service of women *zakkenim*, and yet it is not a position to be pursued by non-Jews. Both a non-Jew and a non-messianic Jew can serve on worship team, but do not serve as a *chazzan* or a *sh’liach tzibor*.

⁹ Consistent with subsequent MJRC practice adopted in 2011 we no longer call non-Jews to the Torah. At times such as the celebration of an anniversary, their child’s b’nai mitzvah or dedication, or an aufruf, we may have a non-Jew accompany their Jewish spouse or intended. This has been the practice at Shuvah Yisrael for several years now.

¹⁰ I am not suggesting that the *besorot* are not the inheritance of the Jewish people, rather that the *Besorah* constitutes a unique relationship between the Nations and the God of Israel in a way that is analogous yet not the same as the way the Torah constitutes a unique relationship between the Jewish people and the God of Israel.

For the peaceable, profitable and honorable implementation of limited roles I consider it essential that we do not regard these as enforceable boundaries but rather as cherished and celebrated distinctions that should be protected and preserved. We are not police; rather the entire community must learn to consider themselves together as custodians of a precious gift from *Hashem*. This is an attitude that must be inculcated both through education, but more importantly through a carefully guarded value of mutual respect. Honor must be regarded as limitless treasure that must be given away fully while cultivated daily.

After long and hard consideration I do not feel it is appropriate to limit the voting right of members or to have levels of membership not available to all. On the other hand as I have stated previously I believe membership should be celebrated and cherished, and should be slowly acquired and earned through time proven commitment; and the time frame might be longer for some than others. Shuvah Yisrael's membership curriculum is extensive, but didactic portions can be passed over through prior education or exempted due to recognizable life experience. Portions of our membership curriculum that deal with interpersonal relationship and community values must be completed by every applicant, even those who grew up in the community, even the adult children of the rabbi. First and foremost we covenant before God to model behavior of mutual respect, generosity and helpfulness, and to willingly grow in our modeling of the community values, beliefs and standards. We ask every applicant to be in "**significant agreement**" with the vision and values, specific purposes and articles of faith of Congregation Shuvah Yisrael. While we do not require absolute acquiescence, any articulated differences are

subject to leadership and appointed membership review. We have not perfected this, but I believe we are getting better all the time.

Final Thoughts

What I have attempted to do is to express a structure that might allow our communities to truly exemplify the life of Yeshua from the midst of the Jewish people, outward to the vacant space of a humanity that desperately needs to be reconciled to its Creator. To do so is a task that requires that we do not abandon our high eschatological focus, rather that we raise the ground of our historical circumstance to create a better view of the horizon. In other words our task is incarnational. Clearly this is the topic of another paper, a book, a library! More so this is the fundamental task of community. What I would like to do though is suggest that we use the dialectic of *chesed* and *gevurah* to shape future conversation about the nature of Messianic Jewish community and the outworking of its priestly role. According to Jewish mystical thought, these two movements were employed by the Holy One in the creation of the world. *Chesed* is the move outward toward distant horizons. For the individual this means expanding oneself and reaching out to others. *Gevurah* on the other hand is an act of inward recoil, withdrawing into the protective recess of one's own inward self. Through *chesed* souls touch each other and loving community is created, by virtue of *gevurah* self-awareness occurs and souls are also developed. Since each and all people are created in the image of the divine, much can be learned about God in the *chesed* community as well as the loneliness of *gevurah*. As I mentioned earlier for communities to mature they must abandon the rugged individuality of this age and must adapt a

soft individuality that allows each person to help shape the community and to also be shaped by the community. Our Messianic Jewish communities can also be strengthened in the recoil to *gevurah*, realizing their destiny in movements outward concentrically in *chesed*.

First we must adopt a commitment to becoming contemplative communities comprised of rigorously honest individuals. The essential goal of contemplation is increased awareness of the world outside oneself, the world inside oneself, and the relationship between the two. People or groups which become content with limited self-awareness rarely become mature, stable or healthy. The community building process requires ongoing self-examination, as well as fierce and humble honesty.

Over the past year at Shuvah Yisrael we have introduced *mussar*, a Jewish systematic practice of ethical contemplation, cognitive implementation, and supportive interaction into our community. As individuals draw into a state of *gevurah* they are strengthened, as they reach out lovingly in *chesed* the community is strengthened in *gevurah* and prepared to reach outside of itself.

Healthy communities look beyond themselves and healthy purposeful Jewish communities find their prophetic purpose outside of their own walls as an exilic people shaped by the experience of mistreatment and inhospitality, and strengthened in our own state of neediness. (*Shemot* 22:21)

As I have suggested that we must keep the doors of our communities open, we also must remember that the doors swing both ways. To become meaningful agents of God's redemptive purposes and communal models of Yeshua's life we must become willing and available to partner with those who are doing the work of Yeshua, feeding the poor, sheltering the helpless,

protecting those who cannot protect themselves and speaking out for those who have no voice.

That “there shall be no needy” is also our priestly calling (*Devarim* 15:4) and must help define the shape of our communal life until *Mashiach* returns. For our calling is our task.