

## WHO IS A JEW?

We've been studying through the Epistle to the Ephesians, and what we have learned so far has overturned the conventional reading of the epistle. In the conventional reading of the epistle, readers assume that Paul's objective involves an erasing of distinction between the Jewish disciples of Jesus and the Gentile disciple of Jesus. That reading dominates both mainstream Christian interpretation of the epistle and the One Law Hebrew-roots type of interpretation of the epistle. It assumes that Paul intended to discount Jewish identity by homogenizing it with Gentile Christian identity to create a new third identity which supersedes former categories: namely the One New Man in Christ:

For he himself is our peace, who has made us both one and has broken down in his flesh the dividing wall of hostility by abolishing the law of commandments expressed in ordinances, that he might create in himself one new man in place of the two, so making peace. (Ephesians 2:14)

We have already looked at this passage and spent time sorting it out. In short, the gist of the passage is not an erasure of distinction at all. The One New Man is the body of Messiah which Paul describes in various passages as one metaphysical collective entity composed of various body parts with distinct identity and function. Eye and ear, hand and foot. The eye is not the ear, the hand is not the foot. But every member of the body is essential. His point being that Jews and Gentiles constitute the collective body of Messiah without losing their differentiation. When it says he has "made us both one," that does not mean "he has made us both identical," and when it says "he has broken down the dividing wall of hostility by abolishing the law of commandments expressed in ordinances" it does not mean he has cancelled the Torah. It means he has removed the barriers to social interaction that previously separated the Jewish people from the Gentile disciples, as is explained in Acts 10, Acts 15, and Galatians.

Rather than supporting Replacement Theology (which posits that Christian identity replaces Jewish identity for Jewish disciples) or One Law theology (which posits that Jewish identity replaces Gentile identity for Gentile disciples), the epistle to the Ephesians supports Distinction Theology (which posits that Jewish disciples retain their Jewish identity and Gentile disciples retain their national identity). If you miss that point, you miss the main thrust of the Epistle to the Ephesians and, to be fair, you miss the premise upon which Paul builds all of his teachings.

To me, that's tremendously exciting. Distinction Theology is the secret key to unlocking Paul's epistles. Once you see it, you can't unsee it, and once you understand it, you understand Paul. It makes the New Testament make sense, and it brings all the prophecies of the Messianic Era into focus. If you are a Bible nerd like me, or just someone who wants to understand what God is doing in the world, understanding Distinction Theology is enormously helpful.

But for some reason, it also seems to be tremendously difficult for the average New Testament reader to comprehend. And that is why it seems like we are constantly talking about it and trying to sort the meaning of Jewish identity and Gentile identity. Why is that? Why is it so hard to effectively communicate? If you have ever tried to persuade someone who subscribes to Replacement Theology (on the one hand) or to One Law Theology (on the other hand), you have probably been frustrated by a seemingly impenetrable wall of incomprehension. This impenetrable wall of incomprehension has puzzled me for more than a decade. I've been teaching Distinction Theology for close to twelve years, and it's been nearly impossible to

communicate it to Gentile disciples. Jewish people, on the other hand, seem to grasp it quickly. Why is that?

I think I've realized the problem. The problem is that most Gentile Christians don't know what Jews are. We assume that we do, but we don't. And if we can't answer this basic question, "Who is a Jew?", then we can't answer the question, "Who is a Gentile?". So today, we are taking a little short break from Ephesians to resolve a question of great significance: "Who is a Jew?" Once we resolve that mystery, we will be able to answer the corollary question, "Who is a Gentile?".

### **Who is a Jew?**

Why is this an important question for Messianic Judaism? It's important on a personal level. Am I Jewish? Or not? It's important on a local community level. Is this a Jewish community? Or not? It's important on a worldwide level. Is Messianic Judaism Jewish? Or not? Let's take a look at each of these.

### **Personal Jewish Identity**

In Messianic Judaism, it's important to know if I'm Jewish or not because that's going to determine my level of responsibility to certain commandments in the Bible. This is not a light question. If we lived in biblical times, some commandments carried severe consequences if violated. For example, a Jewish believer in biblical times was liable to the death sentence for violating the Sabbath. So it would be important to know if you were Jewish or not and liable to the death sentence or not. And this pertains to the question of how Torah observant should I seek to become? Do I need to have a kosher kitchen or not? If I'm a woman, do I need to visit the mikvah every month or not? Do I need to get Shavuot off from work or not? These type of questions.

Moreover, the question of whether I am Jewish or not is going to impact my interactions within my spiritual community and with other social groups. Should I seek to join a Jewish community with other Jews? Then there's the question of finding a compatible marriage partner. Should I marry a Jewish person, or is it OK to marry a non-Jew? What should I do if I am already married to a non-Jew? What does my mixed marriage imply about my children? Are they Jewish? Should my spouse seek conversion to become Jewish? Or not?

In short, figuring out if you are Jewish or not has serious personal implications.

### **Jewish Identity in the Local Community**

In Messianic Judaism, the question of "who is a Jew" should obviously be pertinent on a community level. For example, suppose we wanted to start a religious fellowship of Jesus disciples in my hometown of Cottonwood, MN. A population of 850 Norwegians. Is it a Jewish community or not? That depends on how we answer the question of Jewish identity. Do we start a Messianic Jewish synagogue? What form should the congregation take? Should it look like a traditional synagogue, such as we have done here at Beth Immanuel, or should it accommodate the surrounding culture and reflect their needs? If we do start a synagogue, but there are no Jews, is it a Messianic Jewish synagogue? Or is it a Gentile synagogue? And should such a thing exist? These are questions that cannot be resolved if our definition of "Who is a Jew" is loosey-goosey. Suppose that we determine that we do want to start a traditional synagogue, as we have done here at Beth Immanuel. Now the question becomes even more urgent, because it's going to impact who can take on various roles within the community. If it's a traditional halachic

synagogue, only a Kohen can offer the priestly benediction in the Amidah, and only Jewish males above the age of 12 can be counted in a minyan or receive an Aliyah to the Torah. Maybe we want to start a synagogue with different rules, but that would be a different thing. We could make up new rules, but it would not be a traditional Jewish synagogue.

### **Jewish Identity on a Worldwide Level**

On a worldwide level, beyond the local concerns, the question of “Who is a Jew” is pertinent for Messianic Judaism because we purport to be a Jewish-led movement. If it should turn out that all of our leaders are non-Jews, can we rightly call it the “Messianic Jewish” movement?

And it’s important for the church too. It’s important for Christianity to realize that Jews still exist, and some are followers of Yeshua. But you can’t establish that if Jewish identity becomes blurry or diffused. A clear definition of Jewish identity is critical for fighting anti-Semitism in the church and critical for countering Replacement Theology. It’s also important for helping Jewish people within the church (Jewish Christians) rise to their calling and take back their Jewish identity. There’s no point to that if we don’t have a clear notion of what makes a person Jewish or not.

It’s also important for us to determine “Who is a Jew” for the sake of our witness to the broader Jewish world. Whatever the truth might be in regard the case of Dovid and Rivka Costello in the Chicago Jewish community (2019) and the case of Rabbi Michael Elkohen in Jerusalem (2021), the international scandal generated by both of those situations illustrates how offensive it is to Jewish people when Gentiles misappropriate Jewish identity. It robs Messianic Judaism of credibility in the eyes of the broader Jewish world. It’s important for the Jewish world to realize that not all followers of Jesus are Gentiles. But if Messianic Judaism can’t even answer the question, “Who is a Jew,” how can we call ourselves a Jewish movement?

### **One New Man: “There is no difference”**

So let’s see if we can answer the question, “Who is a Jew?”. I want to start by dispelling some popular misconceptions that one sometimes hears in the Hebrew Roots Movement and in the Church. I have already mentioned the One New Man explanation which misinterprets Paul’s epistles to teach that there is no distinction between Jews and Gentiles in Messiah. There are numerous Pauline passages that, at face value, seem to say that there is no difference between Jew or Gentile, male or female, slave or free, but that we are all one in the Messiah. But Paul does not mean that Jewishness no longer exists once a Jew becomes a believer in Yeshua, and he does not mean that Gentile national identity no longer exists once a Gentile becomes a believer in the Messiah.

Again, Paul speaks of both Jewish and Gentile believers becoming members of one new metaphysical being, the body of Messiah, but this does not imply a homogenization of identity. Instead, the point of the metaphor is to illustrate the idea of distinction. If all the members of a human body were identical, the body would not function.

If it’s no longer possible to answer the question, “Who is a Jew” and “Who is not a Jew”, then Jews are no longer Jewish after they become disciples. If Jewishness does not exist, Jews do not exist. If that is the case, it completely invalidates the Bible and the message of the Gospel. The Message of the Gospel is, in its essence, good news for the people of Israel and the realization of Israel’s prophetic, national destiny. The promises made to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, confirmed by Moses, and expounded upon by all the prophets, can only be fulfilled through a physical, identifiable people group distinct from the nations, that is, through the physical, national Jewish

people. To deny the existence of Jews is to give up on the fidelity of God to fulfill his promises to Israel.

Moreover, if Jewish identity in Messiah does not exist, then Gentile identity in Messiah does not exist, and therefore, God cannot fulfill the numerous prophetic promises about the nations in the Messianic Era. Because there will be no nations. Without distinction in the kingdom, we will not see the nations saying, “Come let us go up to the mountain of the LORD, to the house of God of Israel.” Nor will the Messiah be able to settle disputes between the nations. Nor will he be a light to the nations. Nor will the Torah go out from Zion to the nations. Because the elimination of Jewish national identity means we must also eliminate non-Jewish national identities.

Accordingly, people are neither Jewish nor non-Jewish. Thus all the prophecies and promises about the Jewish people and all of the prophecies and promise about the nations become irrelevant. In short, if there really is no difference between Jewish identity and Gentile identity for believers in Messiah, then there is no point to the revelation of God in the Bible or to this entire religion.

### **I’m Grafted In!**

What about when Paul says that Gentile disciples are grafted into the olive tree of Israel? What about when Paul says that Gentile disciples are part of the commonwealth of Israel? These are both valid concepts which Paul uses to illustrate to his readers how former-idolaters can be plucked up out of their national allegiances to their idolatrous gods and attached to the God of Israel and the hope of the kingdom and the world to come—that is, the faith of Abraham. But attachment to the messianic hope and theological convictions of Israel does not make a person an Israelite. Not in any legal sense. That’s a spiritual bond, not a legal identity.

You might object that, in Romans, Paul says, “A Jew is one inwardly, and circumcision is a matter of the heart” (Romans 2:29). But that does not mean that Jewish status depends upon your personal inner convictions or that a person can undergo a private self-made conversion. Instead, in the context of the Epistle to the Romans, these words are written as a condemnation of insincere conversions to Judaism. Paul is rebuking Gentile converts who have become Jewish outwardly but do not heed the Torah inwardly.

There are other misconceptions out there. Maybe you have heard the explanation that the word Jew just means “Praisers of God,” therefore, anyone who praises God is a Jew. That’s the etymology behind the name Yehudah (Judah), but it’s not the definition of Jewish identity. My name is Daniel. The etymology of the name means, “God is Judge.” It doesn’t mean that I’m God or that I’m a judge. So there’s a difference between the etymology of a name and the identity to which the name is assigned.

Another misconception: The Two-House Movement and Ephraimite Movement posit that the question of “Who is a Jew” is irrelevant because so-called Gentiles are probably the lost tribes of Israel. No, they’re not. Even if they were, they would no longer be Israel. The lost tribes are lost tribes, meaning that they have lost their identity. So you can’t base Jewish identity on a supposed lost identity. Even if it could be proven, they would still need to undergo conversion before being included in the national identity of the people of Israel again.

### **Three Different Answers**

So I’ve now made the case for defining Jewishness and answering the question, “Who is a Jew?”. But it’s not such a simple question to answer because it depends on the purpose for which one is asking. There are three reasons that a person might be asking that question, resulting in

three competing answers. It might be a halachic question, it might be a religious question, or it might be a cultural question.

If it's a halachic question, it has a lot of very practical legal implications. From the halachic perspective, that is to say, from the perspective of Torah and Jewish law, we are asking questions like this: "Should I be counted in a minyan? Does my son need to be ritually circumcised on the eighth day? Must I observe the 39 Shabbat prohibitions?" These type of questions are legal questions that leave no room for ambiguity. It requires a yes or no answer. Not "sort of" or "if you feel led by the Spirit" or something like that. This is like being pregnant. You are or you aren't. No one is sort-of pregnant.

But not every form of Judaism is halachic. Reform and Conservative Jews are not always concerned with legal ramifications of being Jewish because they no longer accept the Torah as literally incumbent upon them. From their perspective, it's a religious question. After all, Judaism can be rightly called a religion. I agree with that. I would argue that Judaism is a religion. I argue that Messianic Judaism is a religion. If I'm just asking religious question, the question, "Who is a Jew?" means "Do you adhere to norms, values, and beliefs of Judaism? Do you believe the things Jews believe? Do you identify with the religious symbols of Judaism? Are you involved with a synagogue or a rabbi? Do you worship in the way Jews worship? Do you follow a special Jewish diet? Do you want to take Jewish holy days off from work?" Questions like these are religious questions and not strictly legal. Obviously, there's a lot more ambiguity when we are talking about Jewish identity as an expression of religious faith. A Messianic Gentile could easily answer yes to all of these questions. Does that make him or her Jewish? This is where the confusion starts to come in.

It gets even more confusing when Jewish identity is defined as a cultural question. This is an important point because a lot of Messianic Judaism, both in the UMJC and the MJAA, puts the primary emphasis of Jewish identity on identification with Jewish culture. In this case, we might be asking about your ancestry. Do you have a Jewish forebear somewhere in your genealogy? Do you have Jews on one side of your family or the other? And then we are asking, did you grow up celebrating Hanukkah instead of Christmas? What type of social groups do you affiliate with? Do you have a JCC membership? Do you eat gefilte fish, listen to Klezmer music, tell Yiddishkite jokes like Jackie Mason, or have a Brooklyn accent? Do you know Yiddish phrases? Do you dress Jewish? Obviously, there's a lot more ambiguity when we are talking about Jewish identity as a cultural question. A messianic Gentile might easily answer yes to all of these questions. Does that make him or her Jewish? This is where the question of "Who is a Jew?" becomes hopelessly murky. Ironically, this is also the place from which most of the Messianic Jewish movement has attempted to answer that question. Hence the immense confusion. It quickly becomes a house built on sand.

### **Three Types of Jewishness**

To dispel the confusion and begin to work toward a definitive answer, we are going to have to differentiate between three different types of Jewishness. By this, I mean three different ways that people legitimately identify themselves as being Jewish. Halachically Jewish (someone with legal Jewish status). Jewish ancestry (someone with some Jewish ancestors but not halachically Jewish). Or a Convert (someone who becomes Jewish through a formal legal procedure). If we get a handle on what it means to be halachically Jewish, it will make the other two categories clear as well.

The word halachah refers to the practical application of Torah law. When used as an English

adjective (halachic), it's best understood to mean "legal by the definitions of Jewish law." So someone who is halachically Jewish is someone who is considered Jewish by the definitions of Jewish law.

The key to understanding halachic Jewish identity is to understand it as a national identity distinct from ethnic, religious, or cultural identity. I can best explain this with an analogy to American citizenship. If you are an American citizen, that does not imply that you must be ethnically Native American. American citizenship is not based on ethnic or racial identity. However, it can be inherited if your parents are also American citizens. They automatically confer their citizenship status to their children. But it's not based on having American DNA. Your adopted child receives American citizenship status because you are an American citizen. The reason for this is that national citizenship is a legal category, not an ethnicity or race. It affects rights, privileges, and responsibilities.

There's a legal difference between an American citizen and a non-citizen. Both may share the same American values, ideologies, and even live in the same town and speak the same language, and celebrate the same holidays, but those things do not determine a person's citizenship. Neither does your level of patriotism. You can be a communist or an anarchist and still be an American citizen. But if you're not an American citizen, no amount of flag-waving patriotism will make you a citizen.

However, there is a process by which you can become an American citizen. You can undergo a "conversion" to become one. This is called naturalization. It is a legal process overseen by a legal court of law. The court of law, a local court, represents the interests of the entire nation. And the members of the court can decide to grant citizenship, or they can decide not to grant citizenship to the applicant.

Likewise, Jewishness is a national identity. It's not an ethnic-racial identity. It started that way, in the days of the forefathers and the heads of the twelve tribes, but it quickly ceased to be a literal tribal family of Hebrew blood relatives. It became a national identity when the nation left Egypt with aspirations to become a national state with a sovereign territory. At that point, the point of the giving of the Torah, it became a legal national identity.

After Israel became a national identity, one can become Jewish through conversion, such as Ruth the Moabitess. As a result, there are many ethnic and cultural subgroups within the Jewish world. Again, to be Jewish its not an ethnic or racial identity. It's not the same as being a Semite or a Hebrew. Academic NT scholars erroneously refer to Jewish identity as "ethnic Israel," but that's incorrect and it introduces confusion. It ceased to be an ethnic identity as soon as the nation started to receive converts.

Neither is it a religious identity. Even one who overtly denies the Jewish faith remains in the halachic category of being Jewish. That's why its possible to be a Jewish atheist. Or a Jewish Buddhist. Or a Jewish believer in Yeshua for that matter. Being halachically Jewish does not guarantee good standing with God. This was John the Baptist's point when he said, "Don't say that Abraham is our father. God is able to raise up sons of Abraham from these stones." This was Yeshua's point when he said, "You must be born again." This was Paul's point in Galatians and Romans and when he says, "For not all who are descended from Israel belong to Israel, and not all are children of Abraham because they are his offspring" (Romans 9:6-7). He wasn't invalidating halachic identity; he was saying that halachic-legal identity is not sufficient to merit right-standing with God.

Being a citizen makes you liable to the laws of the nation. Citizenship does not grant a person immunity to the laws; on the contrary, it makes a person more responsible to the laws of the

nation. In some cases, being a citizen might subject a person to additional potential crimes or harsher punishments. There are things for which a non-citizen could not be charged. All of this is to illustrate that halachic Jewishness corresponds well to a national identity. In this case, the nation is Israel. Not the modern state of Israel, but the whole national people, whether in exile or back in the land.

### **Defining Halachic Jewishness**

You might not like these definitions, and you might want to argue with them, but that's irrelevant. Neither you nor I have a vote in this matter, and it's not up for debate. In the same way, we might not like the definitions of American citizenship, and we might want to argue with those too, but that's not going to make a difference. It is what it is.

So how is halachic Jewishness defined? By traditional standards under community authority. The Jewish community has the biblical right to legally define who is Jewish. The Bible gives the judges and religious leaders over the Jewish community the right to resolve legal questions and to establish Jewish law. This is spelled out in Deuteronomy 17, but it can also be proven from the New Testament. In other words, only the Jewish people have the right to define who the Jewish people are.

Here's the definition. The child of a halachically Jewish mother is Jewish. This explains why Paul circumcised Timothy (who had a Jewish mother) but not Titus (who did not have a Jewish mother.) Why did the community decide upon this rule when, in the Bible, tribal identity is so obviously determined by the father and not the mother? It's based upon the decision of Ezra and Nehemiah who commanded the children of Israel who had married foreign wives to put away both their wives and the children born of that union (*Ecclesiastes Rabbah* 7:36). Whether we agree with Ezra and Nehemiah or not, that's the standard that Judaism uses. Tribal identity is determined by the father, but national identity is determined by the mother.

However, it's possible to convert and to legally become part of the national identity, as we saw in the case of Ruth, the ancestor of King David. How is this done? The conversion is conducted by a local Jewish court of law, i.e. a *Beit Din*. The Beit Din is a court consisting of a minimum of three Jewish men who are also Sabbath-keeping and Torah observant by halachic standards. They don't need to be rabbis, but they need to be learned. They guide the process and oversee it. There are four essential steps to the process:

- a. Acceptance of yoke of Torah
- b. Circumcision or Hatafat Dam Brit (for males)
- c. Immersion in a mikvah
- d. During Temple times: sacrifice

The process was in place in the days of the apostles and the apostolic community utilized it (Acts 15). The Apostle Paul, on the other hand, prohibited Gentile disciples in his communities from undergoing the process. His prohibition affirms that the conversion is a real, valid process with serious ramifications. He states this in no uncertain terms in Galatians 5:3, "I testify again to every man who accepts circumcision that he is obligated to keep the whole Torah."

So that's it. You are either born into it with a Jewish mother, or you undergo a legal conversion to obtain halachic status as a Jew. That's the traditional halachic legal standard. In short, it's a national identity. It's not about your soul, your spiritual status, your salvation, your standing with God, and it's not even necessarily about your ethnicity, race, or ancestry. It's a legal question.

## **Patrilineal Descent**

But what about patrilineal descent? In other words, what if it's your father that is Jewish? In some liberal forms of Judaism, the definition of "Who is a Jew" has been broadened to include people with a Jewish father but a Gentile mother. It's not accepted in the Orthodox Jewish world. In the Orthodox world, a person with a Jewish father or some other close Jewish ancestor is called "*Zera Yisrael*" which means "Seed of Israel." To put it in English terms, such a person is ethnically Jewish but not halachically Jewish. Such a person is often encouraged to reconcile his or her Jewish ancestry by undergoing a conversion through a Beit Din. Until then, they will be likely welcomed and included in Jewish life, social circles, religion and culture, but not obligated to keep the mitzvot that apply only to Jews. They are ethnically Jewish, which is seriously significant, but simply not halachically Jewish. They will be encouraged to rectify their ethnic identity with their halachic identity by going through a conversion.

Patrilineal descent is accepted as sufficient to qualify a person as fully Jewish in some liberal branches of Judaism like Reconstructionist. Reform Judaism also began to accept patrilineal status in 1984 (with the added qualification that one maintains a Jewish identity—eliminating the inclusion of just anyone with a distant Jewish ancestor). However, Patrilineal descent is not accepted in Conservative Judaism. In Messianic Judaism, Patrilineal descent is accepted by the Messianic Jewish Rabbinical Council (MJRC), but it's not universally accepted by all Messianic Jews. Apart from the MJRC, it's not accepted by any other Jewish group that accepts the Bible as literally true or the concept of the obligation of the Torah for Jewish people. Nevertheless, since the MJRC has made this decision, it needs to be respected as a special category of Jewish identity that exists within Messianic Judaism. Yes, I realize that it creates confusion and ambiguity, but it needs to be respected because *we are Messianic Judaism*. I'm not saying it needs to be accepted in every legal sense, but I am saying that, within Messianic Judaism, it's wrong to tell someone with a Jewish father, "You aren't Jewish," when our rabbis have said that such a person is Jewish. Again, I realize that this creates some halachic confusion and ambiguity, but you have to understand the perspective of the MJRC. The MJRC does not distinguish between *Zera Yisrael* and halachic Jewishness because they are not advocating full halachic observance. Since they are not advocating the full authority of Jewish law, it makes no sense to exclude people who don't meet the full criteria of Jewish law. They are looking at the situation in sociological terms and trying to deal with the reality that most Jewish believers are intermarried. Remember that the first Messianic Jewish conversions took place only about fifteen years ago, meaning that there was no solution available for mixed families. It's a new thing for Messianic Judaism to even be sorting through these categories.

## **Jewish Objections to Messianic Jewish Identity**

The quest to establish a solid sense of Jewish identity within Messianic Judaism seems to have one major obstacle. Other Jews, outside of Messianic Judaism, are apt to discount a Messianic Jewish identity. What does it mean if our Jewishness is not universally accepted by non-Messianic Jews? For example, if a person underwent a conversion conducted through a Messianic Jewish *beit din*, it will not be accepted by orthodox communities or the State of Israel. How does this impact Messianic Jewish identity?

Before we address this objection and answer these questions it will be helpful to understand two things about the broader Jewish world. First, Messianic Jews are not the only marginal group within the Jewish people hampered by a disputed identity. Second, Messianic Jewish conversions are not the only conversions within the Jewish world rejected by other branches of Judaism.

There are several marginal groups within world Jewry who are confident of their own Jewish status but are viewed with suspicion by mainstream Judaism. For example, the Falasha Jews of Ethiopia had been out of touch with the rest of Judaism for so many generations that the rabbinic authorities in Israel required them to actually undergo conversion before granting them halachic status. Similar questions are posed about the halachic status of Bnei Menashe Jews from India, Abayudaya Jews from Uganda, Marrano Jews and Conversos from Spain and Latin America, and crypto-Jews who have concealed Jewish identity. Other examples could be cited. Jews from all of the aforementioned groups identify as Jewish and function as Jewish even though their Jewish status is not universally recognized by the entire Jewish world. In many instances, such people might be required to undergo a conversion to firm up Jewish identity before being granted full rights and privileges within other Jewish communities. Yet the dispute over their Jewish identity in the broader Jewish world does not delegitimize their Jewishness within their own communities.

Messianic Jews are in a similar situation. Other Jewish communities might discount their Jewish status on the basis of their allegiance to Yeshua, but the dispute over Messianic Jewish identity within the broader Jewish world does not delegitimize the Jewishness of Messianic Jews within their own communities.

Within the broader Jewish world, there is no universal standard for the acceptance of conversions. It's routine for segments of the Jewish world to refuse to accept conversions conducted by other sects of Judaism and to require converts to re-convert under their sectarian authorities before acknowledging their halachic status. For example, an Orthodox Jewish *beit din* will not accept a non-Orthodox conversion. Conversions conducted in Reform Judaism are not accepted by Conservative Judaism, and conversions conducted in Conservative Judaism are not accepted by Orthodox Judaism. Even within Orthodox Judaism, conversions conducted by competing sects and rabbinic courts are often rejected for sectarian or political reasons. It's completely normal for converts within the Jewish world to have their Jewish identity disputed by other sects of Judaism. This can be compared to the how one denomination within Christianity might reject the validity of a baptism performed in another denomination. Nevertheless, converts to Judaism do not depend upon the unanimous consensus of Jewish opinion for their Jewish identity. It is sufficient that the community under which they converted accords them Jewish status. If they should wish to transfer to another sect of Judaism or intermarry with someone from another sect, a reconversion might be required. Likewise, intra-Jewish disputes over the status of a Messianic Jewish conversion does not delegitimize the Jewishness of Messianic Jewish converts within their own communities.

As a sidenote, it should be pointed out that the secular State of Israel is not a halachic authority, and their standards determining Jewish status and eligibility for Aliyah change depending upon the ministers appointed under various administrations. Since the religious courts in Israel have heavily influenced the government's standards, most American conversions are not accepted—much less Messianic Jewish conversions. According to the State of Israel, even those Messianic Jews born halachically Jewish are considered to have forfeited their Jewish identity by becoming members of a non-Jewish religion. But the State of Israel does not have the authority to determine who is a Jew and who is not Jewish, and their qualifications for citizenship are irrelevant to determining Jewish status.

## **Messianic Objections to Messianic Jewish Conversions**

Within the Messianic Jewish movement in North America, conversions are conducted under the authority of the MJRC. Those conversions are accepted broadly within the Messianic Jewish community, but not by everyone. Some object that all Messianic Jewish conversions should be considered illegitimate because Paul seems to forbid disciples from undergoing conversion. Others object that, because the conversions are not deemed legitimate by broader Judaism (as explained above), neither should Messianic Judaism deem them legitimate. We will consider both of these objections after briefly summarizing the process established by the MJRC and how it functions here at Beth Immanuel.

When a gentile within a congregation associated with the MJRC seeks conversion, he or she must first find a sponsoring rabbi affiliated with the MJRC to sponsor the conversion. The sponsoring rabbi interviews the candidate and determines whether or not the applicant has a legitimate reason to seek conversion. If the reason seems legitimate and the applicant seems like a sound candidate for conversion, the sponsoring rabbi recommends the applicant to a panel of the MJRC. The applicant must submit an exhaustive application which is reviewed by the officiating panel. If the application is approved, the MJRC will direct candidate to complete a course of study pertaining to Jewish identity and culture. This process can take several months or years. When the candidate has successfully completed the prescribed preparations, a *beit din* is convened to induct the candidate, males undergo a circumcision or its equivalent, and, finally, the candidate goes through an immersion. After that, the candidate is to consider himself or herself legally Jewish. The Messianic Jewish conversion is broadly accepted within the Messianic Jewish community.

### **Conversion at Beth Immanuel**

At Beth Immanuel, the process has a few more steps. An applicant seeking conversion must first consult the eldership of the community to attain our endorsement before we will recommend the person to the MJRC. We consider conversions to be exceptional and unusual. We will grant endorsement only if the applicant presents what we deem to be a legitimate and compelling reason for the conversion such as significant Jewish ancestry or marriage to a Jewish spouse. As an added redundancy measure for the sake of local concerns at Beth Immanuel, we assign an additional *beit din* to oversee the matter on behalf of the community. The Beth Immanuel *beit din*, composed of three Jewish men, ensures the conversion meets the halachic scruples of Jewish law. Despite the additional *beit din*, we do not conduct conversions independent of the MJRC's authority or without the MJRC's cooperation. They hold the keys to the process. Our local *beit din* only functions to endorse the MJRC process and firm it up for the sake of our local community standards.

### **Paul's Rule Against Conversions**

One might object that such a conversion is completely invalid because Paul's writings seem to prohibit Gentile disciples from undergoing conversion. The entire epistle of Galatians is best understood as a treatise arguing against Gentile disciples becoming Jewish. The prohibition on conversion is one of the main thrusts behind all of Paul's writings. Paul's rule for all his communities prohibits Jewish disciples from abandoning Jewish identity and Gentile disciples from acquiring Jewish identity: "Each one should remain in the condition in which he was called."

Was anyone at the time of his call already circumcised? Let him not seek to remove the marks of circumcision. Was anyone at the time of his call uncircumcised? Let him not seek circumcision. For neither circumcision counts for anything nor uncircumcision, but keeping the commandments of God. Each one should remain in the condition in which he was called. (1 Corinthians 7:18-20)

Nevertheless, Paul himself acknowledges the legitimacy of conversion. If he deemed ritual conversion invalid or unreal, he would not have spent so much energy campaigning against it. In Paul's day, other apostles did accept converts and even encouraged Gentile disciples to convert. In some cases, Gentile disciples were compelled to become Jewish (Acts 15:1, 15:5). Initially, the vast majority of Yeshua followers were Jewish. Paul believed that there was a danger that, if Gentiles were compelled to convert (or even allowed to convert), there would soon be no remaining Gentile Yeshua followers. They would all become Jewish. Only in Paul's communities were Gentile disciples encouraged to remain Gentile. Paul's epistle to the Romans addresses a community of Yeshua-followers he did not initiate. The epistle speaks to converts who were also disciples of Yeshua. Paul uses the language of being "under the law" to refer to those who are born halachically Jewish or who undergo a conversion to become Jewish. This indicates that Paul considered their conversions valid, even though they were Yeshua followers.

As mentioned above, Paul states in Galatians 5:3, "I testify again to every man who accepts circumcision that he is obligated to keep the whole Torah," indicating that he believed conversion to be a legitimate and legal enterprise with real halachic ramifications for the disciples who underwent the process.

Paul objected to conversion for Gentile disciples because he understood the Messianic prophecies to depict a future utopian world which contained both Jews and Gentiles. If Gentile Yeshua-believers were compelled (or allowed) to become Jewish, there would be no Gentiles from the nations remaining to fulfill the kingdom prophecies (Acts 15:15-17). Paul ardently believed that God is not the God of the Jews only but the God of the whole world (Romans 3:29) and that the hope of the kingdom extended "to the Jew first" but also to the Gentiles (Romans 1:16). Hence his prohibition on conversions for Gentile disciples.

### **Exceptions to Paul's Rule**

Despite Paul's seemingly inflexible rule against allowing Gentile disciples to convert, there are some necessary and obvious exceptions such as a disciple with mixed ancestry, a disciple in a mixed marriage, or a disciple with uncertain halachic status. A disciple with mixed ancestry is someone who is predominantly Jewish, identifies as Jewish, but has a halachic disjuncture because of a Gentile mother or other ancestor that disrupts the legal continuity of Jewish identity. This happens routinely in the broader Jewish community. In such a case, the Jewish community rectifies the problem by passing the person through an expedited conversion ritual, thereby restoring him or her to halachic Jewish status. Presumably, the same apostle who showed such zeal to see Timothy's Jewish status rectified by circumcising him would have had no objection to a person with strong Jewish ancestry from undergoing a conversion.

Likewise, we may safely assume that Paul would not have objected to a Gentile disciple married to a Jewish believer from undergoing conversion since such a union is forbidden by Jewish law. In Paul's communities, Jewish and Gentile disciples were encouraged to worship together and socially interact, a situation which makes marital relationships between Jews and Gentiles an

inevitability. Conversions would be necessary to accommodate those relationships. Without conversions, children born of the relationships would have been considered illegitimate children by the broader Jewish community, and a Jewish man marrying a Gentile disciple would forfeit the Jewish status of his children. It should go without saying that a mixed marriage sanctions a Messianic Jewish conversion.

Finally, a disciple with uncertain halachic status is someone who presumes he or she is Jewish but cannot legally prove the assertion. Such a person has valid reasons to believe that he or she is Jewish, but those reasons are not sufficient to satisfy the local community. Rather than force the person to forsake Jewish identity and adopt Gentile identity, the local community rectifies the uncertainty by running the person through an expedited conversion. Paul would have had no objection to this type of routine legal maintenance of the local Jewish community.

There may be other valid exceptions to Paul's prohibition, but at Beth Immanuel, we will not recommend a candidate to the MJRC for conversion unless the candidate has mixed ancestry, uncertain halachic status, is intermarried, or is about to marry a Jewish person.

### **The Broader Jewish World**

To some, all of this might seem like a moot point since Messianic Jewish conversions are not widely accepted outside of Messianic Jewish communities. However, as we have seen, universal acceptance of a conversion is not the criteria that makes a conversion legitimate. All conversions function on a community level and are subject to rejection outside of the local community. The criteria that makes a conversion legitimate for a person is whether or not the local Jewish community you are a part of accepts the conversion or not.

At this point in the discussion, it might be useful to ask why broader Judaism would reject a convert who became Jewish through a Messianic Jewish conversion. For the sake of argument, suppose that the conversion was conducted according to the strictest interpretations of Jewish law. Even so, the majority of the Jewish world would still refuse to acknowledge the conversion as legitimate. Why is that? Only because of faith in Yeshua. It's the same criteria by which the majority of the Jewish world refuses to acknowledge Messianic Jews as being Jewish. The assumption is that one cannot be both Jewish and a disciple of Yeshua.

To deny the validity of a Messianic Jewish conversion follows the same argument as denying the Jewish identity of every Messianic Jew. It essentially denies that a Jewish person can be a Yeshua-follower and remain Jewish. According to that logic, Jews who believe in Yeshua are no longer Jews; therefore Gentile believers in Yeshua who convert to become Jewish cannot become Jews because belief in Yeshua invalidates Jewish identity.

By the same argument, there is no reason for anyone to be practicing Messianic Judaism at all. There would be no reason for Jewish believers to retain Jewish identity, and there would be no reason to form Messianic Jewish communities or conduct synagogue services. To put it in even stronger language, denying the validity of a Messianic Jewish conversion on the basis that the broader Jewish world will not accept it because of its associations with Yeshua-faith is a denial of the integrity of Messianic Judaism as a legitimate expression of faith and, ultimately, throws Yeshua under the bus.

The Torah says, "You shall treat the stranger who sojourns with you as the native among you, and you shall love him as yourself" (Leviticus 19:34). While this injunction applies to every stranger in our midst, the traditional interpretation focuses the commandment on the way that we treat converts. Jewish law understands this commandment as a prohibition on mistreating the convert. It prohibits treating the convert differently than you would treat any other Jew. The

sages say that it is forbidden to even remind a convert that he or she was not born Jewish, even if it is not a matter of embarrassment to the person. It is forbidden to tell a convert, “You are not a Jew.”

### **Ambiguity and Flexibility**

The question “Who is a Jew?” is not easily answered, but I hope that this teaching helps dispel common misconceptions, resolves some of the puzzles, and makes the matter a little clearer. At the very least, the complexity of the answer demonstrates that we have to be a little flexible around the question “Who is a Jew?” in Messianic Judaism where Jewish identity is likely to be fraught with ambiguities. In general, we need to work hard to protect people’s dignity. A Messianic Jewish community should never feel like an inquisition. When someone comes to a Messianic Community and identifies as being Jewish, it’s tempting to immediately investigate, right? But let’s not be like that. The hallmarks of a Messianic Jewish community should be our acceptance of people, to believe them and give them the benefit of the doubt, to welcome them, to love them, and to be patient with people as they themselves sort through these issues.

There is room in Messianic Judaism for some ambiguity about Jewish identity. Hopefully, in the future, those ambiguities can be resolved. But until then, there is room for people who are uncertain about their ancestry but who have valid reasons to believe that they are halachically Jewish. There is room in Messianic Judaism for people for whom conversion may be advisable, such as someone with patrilineal descent or someone with uncertain status. There is room for people who underwent a conversion which might be questionable under the scrutiny of our local halachic standards. For example, one might wonder if someone’s conversion met every traditional criterion if the person converted through Reform, Conservative, or Messianic Judaism. Maybe it did, maybe it didn’t, but we need to treat everyone with respect and accord them the benefit of the doubt. Besides, that’s a question for a rabbi to answer. Maybe that uncertainty can be resolved one day. But for now, let’s give people the benefit of the doubt.

### **Conclusion**

Nevertheless, it’s important to answer the question, “Who is a Jew?” because, ultimately, it answers the question of “Who is a Gentile?”. We have defined a halachic Jew as someone who belongs to the national identity of Israel. The corollary is obvious. A Gentile is someone who belongs to another national identity. That’s what the word Gentile means. I wish our English Bibles didn’t even use the word the Gentile. The Hebrew *goy*, the Greek *ethnos* should both be translated as “Nation,” not as Gentile. Gentile is a useless word. It semantically means “a non-Jew.” I don’t identify as a non-Jew. I am a member of the “Nations who are Called by God’s Name” (Amos 9:12, Acts 15:17-18).

Ultimately, the question, “Who is a Jew?”, is a Kingdom question—which makes it a gospel question. The good news of the gospel is, “Repent, the Kingdom of Heaven is at hand.” And all of the prophecies about the kingdom pertain to two types of people: Israel and the Nations. The prophets depict a future Messianic Era in which there will still be Jews and Gentiles. If the kingdom prophecies are to be fulfilled and for the Bible to be true, the kingdom will require both Jews and Gentiles. That’s why it’s necessary for us, even today, to answer the question, “Who is a Jew?”