

My Time with Israeli Messianics
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One week before the Judaic holiday of Rosh Hashanah, or, as most Americans understand, the harvest season, I went to Israel to pick grapes. I was there for ten days, all of which prove to be some of the most memorable days of my life. Amongst the many places I saw, I went to various vineyards, Jerusalem, and Shiloh (pronounced “Shee-low” in Hebrew), in the Ephraim mountains. My primary goal in visiting these places, of course, was to work. Every day, I, along with a group of two hundred and fifty Messianics, began picking grapes around four o’clock in the morning, and often did not stop until night. It was a sweaty job, in which I was coated with grape juice, sunburns, and dirt. Everyone performed happily. I was not paid; in fact, about four thousand dollars were funded from my congregation so I could attend for ten days. For me, this was a spiritual journey. My mother was a direct descendent from the tribe of Levi, a “Nathanson,” a descendent of the prophet Nathan, according to family tradition. In some ways, being in Israel was an ultimately satisfying event. Perhaps some of the best memories are seeing dividing lines between Messianics and Jews slowly being erased, as the two peoples are becoming unified in Israel.

My first day of work in Israel, Sunday, right after the Sabbath, was memorable from the beginning. Never before have I seen so many people wearing *tallitot* [prayer shawls] or *kippot* [skull caps], traditional Jewish wear, nor have I seen anyone before who owned the blue *tekhlet* [blue thread], made with an ancient dye only rediscovered in recent times (Ninan 48-64). A rabbi was there, giving commentary on Joshua, explaining that a battle was once held where we stood. This crowd, despite initial appearances, was not a traditional Jewish gathering, but a Messianic one. When the rabbi finished, Mike Green, the man who organized this opportunity to work in Israel, gives instructions about the day’s work. He is a muscular, broad man with a wild beard, but gentle personality. For decades, he has come to Israel, planting vines and fig trees, only to harvest them in the fall. He, as with anyone else in the group, receives no pay. In fact, just to work in Israel for more than two months, a foreigner must have representatives in the nation, and a source of money to provide for any needs that might arise. Working the vineyards is entirely a service on his part. The owner of the vineyard is Jewish, a follower of *Torah* and the *Talmud* his entire life. The caterers, those who took care of the vineyard workers, are Islamic, and many of the harvesters were Christian. It was said only in that one nation, could all these people live together so peaceably. While that may not be true, on that particular mountain, one can see all three faiths thrived together; no animosity held against one or the others. This is particularly strange, since most of them are “messianic,” an unpopular belief system amongst many faiths.

Messianicism is an ancient religion. There are a mere two thousand Messianics in Israel, but they have nonetheless been the center of much controversy. It would be easy to simply call them a branch of Christianity, as many have done. This would be far from the truth. If anything, Christianity is a branch of Messianicism, since the Messianic faith preceded the rise of Christianity by a few years. The reason for this false assumption comes from Messianics believing Yeshua [Jesus in Hebrew], is the Jewish messiah, or “Anointed One,” which most consider a Christian idea. Along with this belief also comes an adherence to the New Testament, a text usually considered a Christian document. Many consider Messianics a culturally oriented sect of Christianity, which may seem understandable initially. Contrary to the traditional Christian belief which has developed over the past two millennia though, Messianics fully

embrace the Torah as authoritative, adhere to a great deal of rabbinic commentary, and often embrace extra-Biblical texts such as the Talmud and Midrash as sources of wisdom. While the reasons for choosing this lifestyle vary from person to person, one often hears a Jew is more fully embracing Judaism, since Yeshua is a Jewish messiah, come to a Jewish nation, as foretold by Jewish prophets in the Jewish Scripture. It is ironic that during the time of the early church, when there were between 250,000 to a million Messianics, the greatest debates revolved around whether or not gentiles should be allowed to follow Yeshua at all (Chernoff 70-80). When the gentiles were allowed in, they were dubbed, "Christians," a Greek word, not a Hebrew one. For this reason, many consider it Jewish to believe in Yeshua. In the modern world, a gentile reason for accepting a Messianic lifestyle usually stems from the desire to embrace the Jewish roots of their Christian faith, since in the early days, all Christians were Messianics. Many non-Messianics, such as Paul Jonson, author of *A History of the Jews*, note the deep connections between the two faiths' early days. In Jonson's case, he originally planned on writing about the history of the Christian church, but after beginning his research, learned that to understand anything about Christianity, one has to understand the culture of the Jewish people (1). Even Yeshua himself is heavily influenced by the theology of his own day (126). Jonson's resulting 644 page long manuscript is widely recognized as a brilliant piece of scholarship by both Jewish and Christian scholars.

Messianicism has often proven to be an unpopular faith. It was the next day, while in a vineyard near the ruined city of Ai, some Hasidim came, and began speaking angrily in Hebrew with the vineyard owners. Hasadic Jews, Jews who stress the mystical aspects of Judaism, are easily recognized by their clothing; they typically wear black suits, similar to those worn by their ancestors in Europe. There are many variations of Hasidic Jews, and, while there are not many in the world, their opinion is often well known due to their petitions and missionary tactics. They also express intense hatred for Messianics. Ben Green, Mr. Green's son, was praying with a group of Messianics when he noticed the Hasidim behind him. He knew the Hasadim cause problems for his family, and pictures of the Green family often appear in their anti-missionary newspapers. If he was recognized, it could hinder the day's work. After finishing his prayer, he quickly snuck away, refusing to turn around, and busied himself amongst the vines. All through the day, I would see the Hasadim inspecting the vines and workers. Once, one of them even spoke to me. It was during lunch that I saw them, and wasn't sure how to react, or what to say. One of the workers then told me, to my relief, the Hasidim I saw simply wanted to buy grapes. It was mere coincidence Ben never saw these particular buyers before, who were not coming against him or his family.

Ben's initial fear is entirely understandable. Even the home of a fellow Messianic was in a secret location, since the rabbi of the region hated the Green family. Indeed, one does not need to travel far to see where the differences between faiths arise. I only walk to my bookshelf, pick up my Siddur, a Jewish prayer book all devout Jews and Messianics alike own, and read "The Thirteen Principles of Faith," as written by the great rabbinic sage, Rambam. On page 179, I read that God, "is not physical, and is not affected by physical phenomena..." This one line alone, in varying degrees, opposes some foundational doctrines in Christianity and Messianicism alike. While Messianics and traditional Judaism may disagree at times for obvious reasons, there are those who would argue Messianics are nothing more than undercover missionaries, donning Judaic fashion and customs, simply to convert all Jews to Christianity. One such group, Outreach Judaism, even offers phone conversations, in which a Jewish individual may actually speak with a company representative pretending to be a Messianic. This is to improve one's skill

for arguing against Christians as well as Messianics, who are dubbed, “missionaries.” There have also been many attacks on the Messianics, socially and physically (Jerusalem Institute for Justice). Such victims may even be young, such as Ami Ortiz, who was bombed by a Jewish radical Yaakov Teitel (Mitchell). While violence of this degree is rare (this one story was reported worldwide), it does show there is still plenty of mistrust between the Messianic and traditional Jewish communities.

Ultimately, however, one need not find ancient texts to find why the two faiths remain largely separated. Persecution, and years of faith have done this. When Mike Green first came to Israel, freely volunteering, he was instead led to a wall covered in photos of dead relatives. All of these people died in the Holocaust. Many people, it was explained, volunteer to help, but leave quickly. The vineyard owners also said Christians are Nazis, and Christians are responsible for the death of his family. I, myself, have similar relatives. I am, however, often disgusted when discussing Judaism, to hear how many Westerners do not know anything about Jewish persecution before the Holocaust. Truth be told, the Holocaust was a sort of climax, like acne when it finally reaches an ugly zenith, revealing to the whole world just how ugly treatment of Jews in Europe is. Brown, in his book, *Our Hands are Stained with Blood*, gives an overview of persecution of this race from the fourth century to the modern day. He states, as a Messianic, that “the church that butchered Jewish men, women, and children could only be a thoroughly apostate church (xiv). In *A History of the Jews*, one may easily argue every page between 81 and 517 is a list of Jewish persecutions. This includes five of the seven chapters. Amongst the persecutions performed on the people, there were forced conversions and baptisms, and often chased out of towns or entire nations (Answering Jewish Objections to Jesus 126). Johnson writes, he explains that in an Islamic land, Jews could be murdered at any time as part of their law, but was not often carried out. In Europe, no such law was in place, but the persecution was so entirely intense, it was often better for a Jew to live in Egypt, under Islamic rule, than in Europe (176). Michael Brown disagrees with this idea (Answering Jewish Objections to Jesus 145), but both agree the treatment of Jews by Christians was entirely unacceptable. It was genocide and a refusal to acknowledge basic human rights for nearly two millennia. Is it any wonder the Hasadim, the most traditional of all Jewish systems, hate Messianics? It has everything to do with history.

It would be wrong to end the interaction between Christians and Jews entirely on this one, negative note. In the past century, especially in America, Jews have prospered, and often been fully supported by Christians. Often, Theodore Herzl is accredited with creating modern the Zionist theory, an ideology modern Israel is largely founded on. Truthfully, it began in a church in the United States, where a man named William E. Blackstone saw the sufferings of Russian Jews, and began the movement to ship them back to Israel. Because of him, Israel became a nation in 1948 (McTernan 77-82). There is also Edmund Allenby, a British General, a devoted Christian, who believed Israel must belong to the Jews, and conquered the city, without destroying it, for the English nation, and the Jewish people. There are too many of such people to record them all, and while persecution has been horrific in the past, it is being intentionally countered with growing Christian and Messianic communities in the modern world.

Regardless of this ugly and strange history between the two faiths which did not start off too differently, my trip was not sustained by a constant fear of persecution. Instead, I found it to be one of the best times of my life. As one would expect, Mike Green and his family eventually became trusted by the vineyard owners, and has brought volunteers for years. Furthermore, while the Rabbi in Shiloh is against Messianics, David Rubin, the former mayor of Shiloh, is

not. The day after this drama involving the Hasidim, we met with Rubin so he could give us a tour of Shiloh, particularly an ancient mountain which was once home to the Mishkan, an important structure in Biblical times. He led us up the mountain, before opening up the Tanakh, the Hebrew Scriptures, and reading Jeremiah 31: 6, “There will be a day when watchmen cry out on the hills of Ephraim...” He explained that there has been a great deal of debate about this particular passage. His interpretation was that the word, “נֹצֵר” (Netzar), may be translated as “watchmen,” as seen in most copies of the Tanakh. It could also be translated, he said, as “Messianic,” or, “Christianized.” Because of this, he always insists Messianics come to Shiloh, so that they may worship on the mountains of Ephraim to fulfill prophecy. That’s exactly what we did.

David Rubin is far from the only one in Israel who loves Messianics and Christians. In light of harassment on a Messianics household, a citizen of Ashdod, writes “We live in a state which upholds the freedom of religion and observance, and a demonstration against believers such as these or others is illegal and dangerous – and may very well come back to bite its instigators...” This was then quoted by the Jerusalem Institute of Justice, a group which has fought violence and protests against Messianics for years. For me, the mere thought of this people taking such strides to be a tolerant, accepting nation is inspiring. While there will always be the Yaakov Teitels in the world, it is encouraging to know that such people are frowned upon not only by the majority of Israelis, but the court system, and all who want peace and democracy in the Middle East, as well. There is something particularly powerful about watching these faiths, which for millennia have largely hated each other, coming together under a single flag. In regard to Teitel, he is now being tried by the Jerusalem District Court, and may very well face prison or a psychiatric facility for the rest of his life (Glickman). Terrorist behavior cannot be tolerated by any democracy, no matter who is being attacked by whom.

When the ten days were finished, and I was flying back to my home in America, I considered Israel’s obsession with being a true democracy. In a mere ten days, I recorded over a hundred pages worth of notes regarding what I observed, and some of my notes were so crammed together, my writing was little more than a series of dots. I was reminded of America’s own struggle for equality, and I considered all those nations which have not begun to move toward any form of a rights movement. Israel has done an excellent job at being fair to its people, and we have a lot to learn from them about forgiveness.

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