

THE PLACE OF RABBINIC TRADITION IN MESSIANIC JUDAISM

DR. MICHAEL. L. BROWN, 1988 UMJC CONFERENCE THEOLOGY FORUM

Every one of us involved in Messianic ministry has thought long and hard on the question of the place of rabbinic tradition in Messianic Judaism. My own thinking has developed gradually over the last few years, but I would like to share with you why I have come to the conclusion that rabbinic traditions have little or no place in our private lives or public services. Let me say first, however, that even though I have given myself to much prayer, study, and discussion over this very issue, I want each of you to consider the arguments I present and then to arrive at your own conclusion.

I'm going to divide this talk into three main areas: Biblical Truth, Spiritual Life, and Integrity of Witness.

I. Biblical Truth

It is important to understand that the word "tradition" can have at least two different connotations, one positive (in the sense of "divinely transmitted truth"), the other negative (in the sense of "man-made religious institutions or regulations"). An example of the positive sense is Paul's exhortation to the Thessalonians to keep the "traditions" which he delivered to them (2 Thes. 3:6); an example of the negative sense is Yeshua's warning in Mat. 15:3 that the Pharisee's broke God's commandments for the sake of their traditions, that is, "the traditions of the elders" (v. 2).

Let me state clearly that the very best rabbinic traditions are still man-made, and as far as man-made religion goes, Yeshua spoke with unmistakable clarity: "That which is born of the flesh is flesh; that which is born of the Spirit is spirit. . . . And the flesh [i.e., human effort] profits nothing. It is the Spirit that gives life" (John 3:6, 6:63). If we are going to worship and serve God in the Spirit, flesh-born traditions can only get in the way. It is in this vein that Paul asked the Judaized Galatians: "After beginning with the Spirit, are you now trying to attain your goal by human effort?" (Gal. 3:3b). And so Yeshua contrasted the Pharisee's humanly derived authority with His own divinely ordained authority by saying: "God said *this* . . . but you say *that*." (Mat. 15:4-5).

Now the point I am making is simple: If we think that we are entering into spiritual life by means of man-made traditions, then we are sadly wrong. While it is one thing to follow the rabbinic calendar as a matter of convenience, it is another thing entirely to pray the prayers of the rabbis or utilize their varied religious expressions and methods.

Although the Siddur may be filled with much beauty, it is utterly devoid of New Covenantal truth. The Siddur gives no hint of the fact that we are *already* forgiven, that Messiah's healing blood has *already* been shed, and that He has *already* risen from the grave, ascended to heaven, and sent the Spirit to dwell within us and empower us. Its prayers speak nothing of our personal and intimate relationship with *Abba*, and their high and lofty tone is often equal to distant and far off.

Frankly, when I pray the Siddur during worship services, or when I intensively study the Talmud or the Legal Codes from which many of the traditions come, I am keenly aware of the fact that rabbinic Judaism is a religion alien to the New Covenant faith. Also, the exclusive emphasis on the chosenness of Israel through the Torah to the exclusion of the Gentiles is certainly inappropriate in a New Covenant community of believers.

I would also note that very little of the Siddur can be positively dated to the first century, and much of it, excluding of course, pure biblical material, is very late. Yet even if it could be argued that there are in fact some pre-Yeshuaic prayers, the point is still the same. None of these prayers reflect the new spiritual realities brought about by Yeshua's death and resurrection and the subsequent outpouring of the Spirit. As for the prayers written by the later rabbis, and in consideration of the fact that prayer is the most intimate thing that a human being can do with God, how can we pray the prayers of men whose very faith presupposes that Yeshua is *not* the Messiah?

Yeshua taught that new wine could only be contained in new wineskins, since if it was poured into old wineskins it would break them and be spilled out onto the ground, ruining both the wine and the wineskins. The nineteenth century rabbi Moses Sofer, nicknamed the Hatam Sofer, coined the phrase *hadash 'asur min-hattorah* - "Anything new is forbidden by the Torah," thus the older a thing is, the better it is (see his response, *Yoreh Deah*, no. 19; *Orah Hayyim*, no. 28; *Even HaEzer*, no. 29; cited by Louis Jacobs, *A Tree of Life*, 255f.). I believe that this phrase, although of relatively recent date, accurately reflects the spirit of rabbinic Judaism, setting it in stark contrast to our Messianic faith. Our emphasis on the *new* covenant, the *new* creation, and the *new* song that God has put in our mouths bursts out of the bounds of the old wineskins of tradition.

While it is possible that the very first disciples lived in harmony with some customs of their people, this really has nothing to do with a believer today following rabbinic tradition. Although some of rabbinic Judaism's roots are pre-Yeshuaic, for the most part it is a religion developed after the destruction of the Temple in 70 C.E., and more particularly, after the expulsion of the Jews from Jerusalem in 135 C.E. Since that time the rabbinic expression has gone its own way, with its Talmud-centered life orientation and its massive legal system. Because the early Mishnaic sages were *not* the true heirs of the biblical-prophetic faith, it was inevitable that, as the Messianic faith began to flourish, a split would have to come.

While we have much common ground with our people today (as Jews in a largely non-Jewish world), we must never forget that, as far as our walk with God goes, life in the Spirit is not consonant with expressions of the flesh. There is a *qualitative* spiritual difference between the Messianic faith and the Rabbinic faith.

II. Spiritual Life

Let me move on to the subject of spiritual life. First I must say that before I had ever attended a Messianic service of any kind, I was warned by the Spirit of God that "the whole Jewish temptation is in the soul realm. It will *fascinate, stimulate, complicate, suffocate.*" Of course, you are free to accept this or reject this as a word from the Lord, but I have seen many dear believers fall into this very trap. It may begin with a fascination with midrashic stories or rabbinic sayings, or it may take on the form of a soulish affectation for the Siddur or for some rabbinic Shabbat customs. But soon life is not as simple as it used to be! Questions of Messianic halakha seem to dominate, and side issues like how we can incorporate rabbinic traditions in our celebration of the Feasts become central. Pretty soon the believer finds himself spiritually stifled,

praying less in the life of the Spirit, witnessing less to Jewish souls for fear of saying the wrong thing in the wrong way, and praising Yeshua less and less.

What has happened? We have gotten our eyes off of Yeshua and onto religious forms. And for many, the problem has been an overemphasis on the mind and academic study coupled with an under-emphasis on prayer and life in the Spirit. Rabbinic Judaism, with its stress on study and intellectual prowess, and with the soulful beauty of many of its customs, has lured some believers away from the simplicity of their faith in Yeshua.

Of course, I recognize that there are many challenging problems for those of us who understand our need to recover our true biblical roots, and I myself have spent many hours pursuing issues such as Messianic halakha and the like. Yet what I am saying is extremely important to hear: **To the extent that we do not draw our nourishment and life from the true vine, we are going to die.** As Yeshua said: “NO BRANCH CAN BEAR FRUIT BY ITSELF; IT MUST REMAIN IN THE VINE . . . APART FROM THE VINE YOU CAN DO NOTHING. IF ANYONE DOES NOT REMAIN IN ME, HE IS LIKE A BRANCH THAT IS THROWN AWAY AND *WITHERS*” (John 15:1-6).

Please understand this. As I began to attend Messianic services, and then as a member of Beth Messiah Congregation in Rockville, I was decidedly *neutral* on the whole question of rabbinic tradition in our services and personal lives. In fact, I was ready and willing to embrace these things to the extent that they were not in clear opposition to faith in Yeshua. And in times past I have argued for our right to observe these customs and pray these prayers if we so desired. However, I am now certain that in our emphasis on solidarity with the Jewish community (and that has unfortunately meant to many of us, solidarity with rabbinic traditions), we have retreated from emphasizing the centrality of the True Vine and our uniqueness in Him. It is one thing to have our faith grounded in Torah and focused on Yeshua; it is another thing to follow rabbinic traditions.

Let me be more specific. Why is there no evidence of real spiritual revival in most all of our congregations? (And when I say revival, don't think that I mean some kind of worked up Pentecostal Charisma. What I mean is a major influx of Jewish men and women into the Kingdom, and a powerful evidence of the Spirit's work in our midst.) Why are there churches with thousands of solid believers, and in some cases, hundreds of Jewish believers, while the biggest congregations we can speak of have only several hundred? If you say, “Mike, you're being unfair. We're still brand new, in our infancy,” then I would respond by saying that this is the very time that we should be showing our greatest signs of vitality and life!

Our movement has written almost no new songs that exalt the finished work of the Messiah or the power of His blood. Simply stated, we have had a Jewish fixation instead of a Jesus fixation. In fact, I have been in numerous Messianic worship services where Yeshua was not mentioned in song even once. I have counted the choruses found in some of our Messianic songbooks and discovered on occasion that while songs about Jerusalem and Zion are commonplace, songs exalting Yeshua have numbered as few as one in ten!

What is our glory? The Cross! Where is our power? The Name of Yeshua! Where has our proclamation fallen short? **THE CROSS AND THE NAME!!**

Let me make a strong statement. If we are *spiritually* more at home with a prayer written by a traditional rabbi than with a great hymn written by a committed Gentile believer then our orientation is dangerously wrong. Isn't this why many of our congregations are spiritually anemic, because we have not cooperated with the Father's central purpose, i.e., “that in

everything Yeshua might have the supremacy” (Col. 1:18)? Didn’t Yeshua teach us that as He was lifted up, He would draw all men to Him (John 12:32)? And in the limited time that we have for our public services, can we justify the inclusion of material that *knowingly* leaves Yeshua out? In the busyness of our lives, do we have room for prayers and customs devoid of the Spirit of God?

I believe that we have been misled into thinking that we cannot identify with our people outside of rabbinic tradition. In fact, some of you listening may have already concluded that I am saying: “Throw away your Jewishness! Quit praying for Israel! Who needs Torah anyway?” But that is absolutely *not* what I intend to get across. My point instead is this: What real connection is there between our life in Yeshua the Messiah and the traditions of those whose faith is built upon His rejection? Yeshua said that His truth was from above, hidden from the wise and prudent and revealed to babes (John 3:31. 8:23; Mat. 11:25). Yet a leading rabbinic scholar said: “Let the truth emerge from the earth. The truth be as the sages decide with the human mind” (Aryeh Leib, introduction to his *Kesot HaHoshen* on *Hoshen Mishpat*, quoted by Berkovitz, *Not in Heaven*, 55). How can we harmonize these words?

I can only say that Biblical Judaism and Rabbinic Judaism are two very different faiths. One is based on the once and for all sacrifice of the Lamb of God; the other has substituted prayer, repentance, and good deeds. One is based on the witness of the indwelling Spirit and the revelation of the divine Word; the other is based on logical deduction and human tradition. One is based on the demonstration of the power of the living God; the other is based on majority rule. One releases its people into a free expression of praise, adoration, and prayer; the other legislates when and how to pray, and even what to say.

It is a plain fact that the Jewish people who have been the most devoted to rabbinic orthopraxy have been the hardest to win to the Lord, and the early rabbis associated with the beginnings of traditional Judaism were those who most clearly rejected the Messianic faith. Many of our Orthodox people who have come to know Yeshua as Lord have *first* become disoriented with their traditional faith and only *subsequently* received the Messiah. Why is this? Because the rabbinic religion is contrary to the Gospel, in content and in spirit. And if you might say, “I believe that there are features of Rabbinic Judaism which can be redeemed with some effort,” I would reply, “Why look for silver amidst the dross when there’s plenty of pure gold to be found?”

Should we wear a Tallit in our services? Obviously, this is a matter of personal and/or congregational conviction. But realize this: If we do it as a religious duty or service, remember that we are wearing a garment that does *not* fulfill the Scriptural requirements for the fringes (because it lacks the color blue and it is not part of our regular daily clothing), and we are putting on something whose intricate fabric of knots and strands reminds us of just how far the rabbis have gone in legislating religious life.

Should we light the Shabbat candles and pray the traditional prayer? Again, this is a matter to be decided individually. But I have always wondered why we have taken over a traditional custom, prayed an untrue prayer (viz., that God has *commanded* us to light the candles, although I realize that many Messianic Jews have revised that part), and then tried to fit Yeshua in as the “light of the world”! What has any of this got to do with the Sabbath? How does this highlight the true rest that we now have in Yeshua? And if we are seeking to honor Torah, why are we lighting a fire after dark on Friday night?

III. Integrity of Witness

All this leads me to my last point, viz., integrity of witness. You may say, “I agree with you completely. There is no spiritual life in rabbinic tradition. I only do this to be a Jew to the Jews.” But is it really working? Are we really doing what Paul spoke of in 1 Corinthians 9?

Over the years I have been very friendly with a number of rabbis, some Orthodox and others Conservative. Their primary complaint with Messianic Judaism was that it was deceptive and superficial. While they were willing to talk to me about Yeshua, they were deeply upset with Messianic Jews.

I believe that their charges are basically correct, although it has never been our intent to be deceptive in the least, and I am sure our motives have been pure. Let me try to explain this to you from the rabbinic perspective.

Traditional Rabbinic Judaism is just that: the Judaism based on rabbinic traditions. These traditions, recognized by the Orthodox as being providentially transmitted and developed through 3500 years of Torah history, are considered to be the very essence of Jewish life. They are binding on all who recognize the authority of the rabbis. That’s why, from a traditional perspective, it is totally sacrilegious and almost blasphemous to follow one custom, revise another law, and then discard whatever other traditions we choose. Doing this violates the very essence of rabbinic halakha which seeks to legislate a Jew’s life before God from his first waking moments to his midnight meditations.

What are we saying to the rabbinic community (and let’s face it, if we want to influence our people, we must influence the rabbis) when we pick and choose from the traditional liturgy in our services, wear *talliyot* on Friday night, and walk around donning yarmulkes while eating at Macdonalds? Can’t you see how offensive this is? Instead of drawing attention to Yeshua, it diverts attention to side issues. We have unwittingly been guilty of making a mockery of the Oral Law by accepting a few of its traditions while rejecting almost all of its authority and relevance. Believe me, Rabbinic Judaism is an all encompassing religion, dealing with every possible area of a Jewish person’s life. It takes years of study for a newcomer to traditional Judaism to learn even the basics! And we’re still mispronouncing “Messiah” and “Holy Spirit” in Hebrew. Who are we fooling?

Yes, let us boldly proclaim the true Jewishness of our faith. But why run roughshod over traditional sensitivities with our piecemeal borrowing of that which is sacred to them? As for our non-traditional Jewish friends, why are we trying to win them with tradition? Why put forth mixed signals as to who we really are?

How would we feel if a new group came to us and said: “Don’t think that we don’t believe in Yeshua. We do! In fact, we sing ‘He is Lord’ in our services. Of course, we also believe that Krishna is Lord, and that Sun Moon is Lord too!” We wouldn’t be impressed! We’d say that they were a cult, plain and simple. But that’s how we appear to the Jewish community. It’s hard for them to take us seriously. Our public services give one impression and our private lives give another. What message are we conveying? And when we call our leaders “Rabbi” (and please don’t get angry with me – listen to my heart), aren’t we unnecessarily provoking the rabbinic community, especially when some of our men can’t even read and understand Hebrew, let alone identify the Six Orders of the Mishnah? But that is the very thing that “Rabbi” means to our people – the learned spiritual leader of the community, expert in all matters of Jewish law and interpretation.

It's also interesting that among the early Jewish believers, as far as I know, the title "Rav" or "Rabbi" was never used for the teaching elders, even though it was widely used in traditional circles. And, if you would like to do some research, see if you can find any evidence at all that these first Messianic Jews (generally called Nazaraeans) were ever accused by the Church Fathers of keeping any *rabbinic* traditions. This point is important! Sooner or later we will have to realize that being Jewish does not mean being rabbinic.

Let me turn closer to home. I am now the head of a Messianic Yeshiva, yet I've lost some friends in the Orthodox community because they feel that the name "Yeshiva" is deceptive. And I understand their point. In the Jewish community Yeshiva has a certain meaning. A newly saved Orthodox Rabbi from Israel came to me in Maryland and said that we didn't have a true Yeshiva. The name meant something specific to him, and if effective communication is our goal, then let's be sensitive to using words super-charged with emotion. Maybe our school should be called "Messiah Study Center", or "Messiah Training Center"? I'm open to suggestions, seriously. [In 1989, the school name was changed to Messiah Biblical Institute and Graduate School of Theology.]

But I need to close now. It will be up to all of us to work through these issues and decide for ourselves. I recognize your right to have your own definite convictions. I hope you recognize my right to have mine!

Yet my point is simple and clear: I believe that the Word of God is our Guide, that the Spirit of God is our Teacher, and that we have a huge task set before us: the salvation of our people Israel and our personal faithfulness to God's call. Rabbinic tradition can only get in the way of fulfilling that call. In fact, two of our leaders have independently come to the conclusion that the phenomenon of Messianic Jews praying rabbinic prayers is like the children of Israel defeating their enemies at war and then turning around and worshiping their idols! Strong words, for sure; but filled with truth nonetheless.

In John 16:2 Yeshua told us that we would be put out of the synagogues for our faith, and tragically this has been the case. Yet there is a change in the air and something new is happening. But it is not time for us to bring rabbinism into the Body, nor is it time for us to seek reentry into the traditional camp. Rather, as we go to Yeshua "outside the camp, bearing the disgrace He bore" (Hebrews 13:13) *it is time for the synagogue to come to us.*