

Intermarriage – Its Positive Effect on Messianic Judaism

Intermarriage between Jews and non-Jews in the Messianic Jewish movement is a hotly debated issue, not only because of its social and theological implications, but also because of the emotion that surrounds it. Some leaders decry intermarriage as an agent of assimilation and an impediment to generational continuity. Other leaders contend that intermarriage can make a positive contribution to Messianic Judaism, and that we need not fear adverse consequences if Scriptural standards are maintained. The latter position, being the author's view, is advocated in this essay.

The Permissibility of Intermarriage

Scripture is the yardstick of faith and life for Messianic Jews. It is highly significant therefore that Scripture not only permits intermarriage, but also sets forth restrictions for its governance. Shaye Cohen, Professor of Judaic Studies at Brown University, concurs:

A general prohibition of intermarriage between Jews and non-Jews does not appear anywhere in the Tanakh. Leviticus lists numerous sexual taboos (Chapters 18 and 20) but fails to include intermarriage among them. Exodus 34:15 and Deuteronomy 7:3–4 prohibit intermarriage with the seven Canaanite nations, and Deuteronomy 23:2–9 prohibits four additional nations from *entering the congregation of the Lord*—perhaps (but probably not) a prohibition of marriage. But neither Exodus nor Deuteronomy prohibits intermarriage with all non-Israelites, and both of them prohibit intermarriage with Canaanites only because it might lead to something else that was prohibited (idolatry). [Shaye J. D. Cohen,

The Beginnings of Jewishness: Boundaries, Varieties, Uncertainties, Berkeley:
University of California Press, 1999, pp. 260–261]

As an example of divinely sanctioned intermarriage, the book of Numbers records that, on one occasion, 32,000 virgins from among the Midianites were added to Israel's number by the Lord's command (Num. 31:25–47; cf. Deut. 21:10–14). The Scriptures generally permit intermarriage as long as the spouse in question is not from a forbidden nation or Canaanite-like (Ezra 9:1–2). [Cohen, 243–244, 261]. This was the difference between Moses' intermarriage with Zipporah and Ahab's intermarriage with Jezebel. The Gentile spouse was expected to live in accordance with the laws of Israel (Num. 15:15–16).

Caveats to Intermarriage

To the above, I would add three qualifications in light of the Messianic Jewish context under discussion:

1. Intermarriage is not preferable to marriage between two Messianic Jews. The Scriptural witness is that intermarriage is the exception and not the rule in Israel. Sharing in common a Jewish heritage and family goes a long way toward maintaining the chain of Jewish identity.

2. Knowledge of the pros and cons of intermarriage is insufficient to guide Messianic Jews in deciding whether or not to intermarry. Personal prayer and the leading of the *Ruach HaKodesh* (Holy Spirit) are essential.

3. Not all types of intermarriage are beneficial for Messianic Jews, and two types are especially problematic. The first of these is the marriage of a Messianic Jew to a Gentile who is not a follower of Messiah Yeshua. This is prohibited by New Covenant *halakhah* (applied law) because the deepest loyalties of the couple will be divided (2 Cor. 6:14). The second of these is the marriage of a Messianic Jew to a Gentile follower of Yeshua, who prefers a church environment to a Messianic synagogue, and a Christian lifestyle to a Jewish one. This kind of intermarriage places Jewish continuity at risk.

Conversionary Intermarriage

I believe that only two kinds of intermarriage are beneficial for Messianic Jews; they are (1) marriages in which the non-Jewish partner has a formal conversion, and (2) marriages in which the non-Jewish partner has an informal conversion. A formal conversion is one in which a non-Jew joins the nation of Israel through a course of study culminating in a conversion ceremony. An informal conversion is one in which covenant words are spoken or even prayed privately where, like Ruth, the intended convert declares: “Your people will be my people and your God will be my God” (Ruth 1:16). What makes these two kinds of intermarriage appropriate for Messianic Jews is that the non-Jewish [Footnote: Throughout this essay, I continue to refer to the converted spouse as “non-

Jewish" or "Gentile" to emphasize the intermarriage aspect.] spouse has committed to live in accordance with the laws of Israel.

Some may argue that Jewish/convert marriages are not intermarriages at all, since a Jew-by-birth marries a Jew-by-choice. What must be appreciated, however, is that marriage is not only a joining of individuals, but a joining of two families; the convert brings into the marriage his or her non-Jewish family and non-Jewish cultural upbringing. Looking at it in this way, marriages between Jews and converts are certainly intermarriages. [Judy Petsonk and Jim Remsen, *The Intermarriage Handbook: A Guide for Jews & Christians*, New York: Arbor House, 1988, p. 10. See also Susan W. Schneider, *Intermarriage: The Challenge of Living with Differences Between Christians and Jews*, New York: The Free Press, 1989, pp. 4–5]

Because of the ongoing debate in the Messianic Jewish community over formal conversion, the vast majority of conversionary intermarriages are presently informal. While these Gentile spouses may lack official recognition as converts they, nevertheless, are converts to Judaism in every sense of the word. They pray as Jews, keep Jewish households, and raise their children as Messianic Jews. Given the opportunity, they would not hesitate to formalize their commitment to their adopted people Israel.

My opinion, having been part of the Messianic Jewish community for over 25 years, is that informal conversionary intermarriage can be as successful in perpetuating Jewish identity as its formal counterpart, or even Jewish-Jewish marriages. It all depends on the

degree to which the couple is spiritually motivated, active in their local Messianic synagogue, involved in the broader Jewish community, and committed to Jewish education. Jewish-Gentile couples who are serious about these areas will make a far greater contribution to the future of Messianic Judaism than Jewish-Jewish couples who attend services once a week but are apathetic about Messianic Jewish life in the home.

Intermarriage Benefits the Messianic Jewish Community

Intermarried couples already exert a profound and positive impact on the Messianic Jewish movement in a variety of ways.

1. Enhanced Numbers and Resources

The vast majority of Messianic Jews in the United States are intermarried. If all of these couples (and their children) were suddenly transported to heaven, the Messianic movement would shrink to less than half its present size. Such is the numerical priority of intermarried couples in the Messianic Jewish community. They represent the core of the movement at the present time and their significance will surely increase in the future.

Two reasons can be given for this: (1) The American Jewish intermarriage rate has risen to 52 percent and shows no sign of abating [Barry Kosmin, Sidney Goldstein, Joseph Waksberg, Nava Lerer, Ariella Keysar and Jeffrey Scheckner, *Highlights of the CJF 1990 National Jewish Population Survey*, New York: Council of Jewish Federations, 1991, pp. 4, 13–16]; (2) Messianic Judaism is an attractive option for intermarried couples.

Dan Cohn-Sherbok links the growth of Messianic synagogues with the growing interest of intermarrieds in the Messianic Jewish option:

...no doubt the high rate of intermarriage between Jews and Christians in contemporary society has greatly contributed to such growth. Messianic Judaism provides a home for those couples who seek to integrate Jewish living with belief in Jesus. [Dan Cohn-Sherbok, *Messianic Judaism*, New York: Cassell, 2000, p. xii]

Carol Harris-Shapiro concurs in her book *Messianic Judaism: A Rabbi's Journey Through Religious Change in America*. In it, she states that the Messianic Jewish community is attractive to intermarried couples because it provides them with "a place where both their faith and cultural needs are fulfilled." [Carol Harris-Shapiro, *Messianic Judaism: A Rabbi's Journey through Religious Change in America*, Boston: Beacon Press, 1999, p. 183] Intermarried couples bring to the Messianic movement their enthusiasm, spirituality, wisdom, creativity, time, and material resources. The Messianic Jewish community benefits from all of these contributions.

2. Jewish Continuity

In contrast to the mainstream Jewish community where intermarriage usually leads to assimilation [Elliot Abrams, *Faith or Fear: How Jews Can Survive in a Christian America*. New York: The Free Press, pp. 8–10, 109–112.], Messianic intermarrieds are generally successful in perpetuating Jewish heritage. This is not to say that every

Messianic Jewish marriage is a success story, but relative to the Jewish world, Messianic Jewish intermarried couples excel in commitment to their Jewishness. A principal reason for this is that intermarried Gentiles in a Messianic Jewish congregation are committed to living a Jewish life.

Messianic non-Jewish spouses in the movement often times demonstrate far more of a commitment to Jewish life than Jewish unbelievers. Furthermore, their children, by and large, are expressing an interest in maintaining a Jewish heritage. [Seth Klayman, "The Messianic Jewish Youth Experience: Our Past, Present and Future," *Kesher: A Journal of Messianic Judaism* 11 (2000): 134]

Similarly, Rich Nichol, a former president of the Union of Messianic Jewish Congregations, maintains that "often, the most committed, hard-working members of Messianic Jewish synagogues are non-Jews." [Rich Nichol, "But Will Your Children Be Jewish?" *Boundaries* March/April (1999): 23]

Why are non-Jewish spouses of Messianic Jews so committed to living out and conveying Jewish identity? An important contributing factor is that the Gentile spouse finds spiritual fulfillment in the Messianic Jewish faith and lifestyle. This enables the spouse to be an advocate of Messianic Judaism. Also, since Messianic Judaism is faith-based, intermarried couples are typically motivated by spiritual zeal in expressing Jewish life.

The Jewish spouses of Messianic intermarriages are also committed to Jewish continuity. Few people realize that the 1990 National Jewish Population Survey (NJPS) interviewed Messianic Jews as well as members of the rest of the Jewish community. One of the survey questions was: "Is being Jewish very important in your life?" The results were compiled by the North American Jewish Data Bank and sponsored by the Council of Jewish Federations. Professor Sergio DellaPergola of Hebrew University tabulated the results and presented these findings.

Percent of Respondents Agreeing That "Being Jewish is Very Important in Your Life"

By Denomination, USA, 1990 (weighted sample)

Respondent's

Denomination	% Agree
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Messianic	100
Orthodox	77
Multiple denomination	61
Conservative	58
Reconstructionist	49
Reform	40
Just Jewish	29
Jewish + other religion	27
Christian	21

Don't know	21
Secular	16
Non-participating	13
Other religion	5
No answer, refuse	4
Agnostic/atheist	0

According to the above data, 100% of all Messianic Jews interviewed said “Yes” to the survey question, thereby indicating that being Jewish was “very important” in their lives. This was higher than any other Jewish group interviewed, including Orthodox (77%), Conservative (58%), Reform (40%) and Reconstructionist (49%). [Sergio DellaPergola, “New Data on Demography and Identification Among Jews in the U.S.,” *Jewish Intermarriage In Its Social Context*, Edited by Paul Ritterband, New York: The Jewish Outreach Institute & The Center for Jewish Studies, The Graduate School of the City University of New York, 1991, p. 86.]

DellaPergola sums up the significance of this data as follows:

Not unexpectedly, the perceived importance of being Jewish is highest among those who consistently manifest their identity via a religious definition and a clear denominational preference. The expected gradient among the major denominations (Orthodox, Conservative, Reform) emerges. Jews who are consistently secular display far lesser interest for being Jewish. The amount of

interest is quite variable, though generally low among other sub-groups with the survey population, including ex-Jews. *One small group with extremely high percentages of interest in Judaism is those preferring the Messianic denomination...*" (emphasis added). [DellaPergola, p. 84].

While it is not known what proportion of the Messianic Jews in the study were married, of those who were, over 70% of them were likely intermarried [Amy Adelstein, "U.S. Jewish Believers Surveyed," *Mishkan* 1 (1984): 53. See also Tony Eaton, "Forum: Should Messianic Jews Intermarry?" *Kesher: A Journal of Messianic Judaism* 9 (1999): 46]. Their commitment to Jewish identity is an important indicator of the Messianic Jewish community's success in promoting Jewish continuity.

An example of how this translates into religious practice is that Messianic Jewish intermarries are usually faithful in attending Shabbat services weekly at their Messianic synagogue. By contrast, the average intermarried couple in mainstream Judaism attends synagogue services only once or twice a year or not at all. [Steven M. Cohen, *Content or Continuity? Alternative Bases for Commitment*, New York: American Jewish Committee, 1991, Table 33, p. 79. See also Abrams, p. 111]. In ways such as this, Messianic Jewish intermarried couples exert a positive influence on Jewish continuity in the Messianic Jewish movement.

3. Compatibility of Marriage Partners

Many Messianic Jews in their twenties and early thirties face a limited pool of potential Messianic Jewish marriage partners. Compounding the problem is that it is a violation of New Covenant *halakhah* for a Messianic Jew to marry a Jew or Gentile who is not a believer in Messiah Yeshua (2 Cor. 6:14). Moreover, it is not expedient to marry a Gentile Christian who lacks Messianic Jewish convictions. What then, is a young Messianic Jewish man or woman in search of a future marriage partner to do? A hard line against intermarriage could result in their not marrying at all.

There is a second problem. The average Messianic synagogue is made up of fifty percent Gentiles [Shoshanah Feher, *Passing Over Easter: Constructing the Boundaries of Messianic Judaism*, Walnut Creek: AltaMira Press, 1998, p. 165. See also Howard Bernstein, "Evangelizing Jews: Messianic Jews Versus Jews for Jesus." Paper presented at the annual meeting of the Association for the Sociology of Religion, Toronto, August 1997], some of whom are unmarried and face the same dilemma as Jewish members in finding suitable marriage partners. New Covenant *halakhah* forbids them from marrying anyone who does not believe in Messiah Yeshua, and it is also counterproductive to their calling for them to marry Gentile Christians who do not share their Messianic Jewish vision. As posed previously concerning Messianic Jews, what are these young Messianic Gentile men and women to do? If they maintain their convictions, they may not marry at all.

It is my contention that supporting intermarriage between Messianic Jews and Messianic Gentiles is an ideal solution to the above conundrum. If Messianic Jews marry Messianic

Gentiles, the marriage pool doubles, young persons have a greater likelihood of finding suitable marriage partners, and Jewish continuity is not compromised because the spouses share a common background and calling to remain in the Messianic Jewish world. Also, by marrying within the community, they strengthen it with their commitment and experience, and their children receive the benefit of having two parents with a Messianic Jewish identity. In these and other ways, intermarriage between Messianic Jews and Messianic Gentiles contributes positively to the future of Messianic Judaism.

4. Mitigation of Prejudice

Besides intermarried couples, every Messianic synagogue includes Jewish-Jewish couples, Gentile-Gentile couples, and unmarried members; the intermarried couples among them are important in forming relational links between all the other segments. I wish I could say that prejudice against Gentiles did not exist in the Messianic Jewish movement; but realistically, prejudice exists in every religious community. Recognizing this, Reform rabbi Steven Foster wrote:

All Jews still have prejudices and those negative reactions are often hurtful to others as well as to our self perceptions. We need to actively change our language that still refers to Gentiles as ‘*goyim*’ and *shiksas*’...So long as these attitudes of superiority exist, our synagogues will not be the welcoming places they need to become. [Commission on Reform Jewish Outreach of the Union of American Hebrew Congregations and the Central Conference of American Rabbis,

Outreach and the Changing Reform Jewish Community: Creating an Agenda for Our Future, 1989, p. 113]

Intermarried couples serve a vital role in minimizing prejudice within the Messianic Jewish community. This is because Messianic Jews who are intermarried are protective of their own spouses and refuse to tolerate insensitivity toward other Gentile members as well. In this way, the presence of intermarried couples helps to eliminate the prejudice rooted in ethnic pride that can arise from time to time.

5. A Broader Perspective

A final benefit of intermarriage is that it helps Messianic Jews to gain a broader perspective on the day-to-day issues that make up Messianic Jewish life. Even mainstream Judaism increasingly recognizes that synagogue members from non-Jewish backgrounds bring new kinds of creativity to the community. Gary Tobin writes in *Opening the Gates*:

Because they come from other faith traditions or none at all, they can ask probing questions and push individual Jews to think more about what it means to be a Jew. They bring into Jewish life what has worked (and what has failed) from other faith traditions and institutional venues...An infusion of new individuals who come from outside the Jewish community brings along their experience and knowledge to help build institutional strength inside the Jewish community. [Gary

A. Tobin, *Opening the Gates*, San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers, 1999, p. 140]

Intercultural marriage causes Messianic Jews to bring forth perspectives that would not otherwise be evident in an entirely Jewish community. Intermarried Gentiles help Messianic Jews see issues through different cultural lenses, and be more discerning (in an evaluative way) of traditional Jewish perspectives. Non-Jewish spouses can exhibit a unique frame of reference in their approach to Messianic Jewish history, theology and culture because they ask questions that Messianic Jews frequently do not ask. They also tend to focus on areas that Messianic Jews often take for granted, and this leads to a deeper understanding of Messianic Judaism itself.

Conclusion

The case in support of intermarriage rests on the premise that God allowed intermarriage in the first place because it could benefit his people. In the Messianic Jewish movement, this benefit is manifest in a variety of ways including enhanced numbers and resources, Jewish continuity, compatibility of marriage partners, mitigation of prejudice, and broader perspectives. On the cautionary side, intermarriage does entail certain risks that should not be taken lightly. This notwithstanding, formal and informal conversionary intermarriage has made a vital contribution to Messianic Judaism, and promises to do so in the future.

Study Questions

1. What kind of intermarriage does Scripture permit? What kind is prohibited?
2. What two types of intermarriage are problematic for Messianic Jews? Why?
3. What two types of intermarriage are appropriate for Messianic Jews? Why?
4. What four areas must be prioritized if informal conversionary intermarriage is to be successful in perpetuating Jewish identity?
5. What are the five ways in which intermarriage can benefit the Messianic Jewish movement?
6. To what extent is the Messianic Jewish community comprised of intermarried couples and their children?
7. Why are Gentile spouses of Messianic Jews generally supportive of Jewish continuity?
8. What is the marriage dilemma that young Messianic Jews face? What are the possible solutions?
9. How do intermarried couples serve as mitigators of prejudice in the Messianic Jewish community?
10. How do Gentile spouses of Messianic Jews contribute to a broader perspective in the Messianic synagogue?

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Bio

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