

A Messianic Yeshiva

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One would think that with all the different institutions of higher learning that exist within the framework of Evangelical Biblical Faith, we would not need a hybrid referred to by nature and by name as a messianic yeshiva." However, the need for a messianic yeshiva arises intrinsically from two basic presuppositions:

- (1) Jewish people who accept the Brit Chadasha and Yehoshua as their personal Moshi'a (Savior) need to study the Good News of the Brit Chadasha in a Jewish setting.
- (2) The traditional interpretation and approach to the Brit Chadasha Scriptures has not taken sufficiently into account their Jewish background. Granted, in the last two thousand years, the study of Biblical hermeneutics has taken into account the Greek, the pagan, the mystery religion background of the Brit Chadasha texts. However, we must not forget that the Brit Chadasha Scriptures were written in the main by Jews and for Jews in a Jewish context (namely, the conflict between the Jewish believers and the synagogue). A messianic yeshiva would be a fertile academy for further study in this area.

Returning to the first presupposition, within the traditional Jewish upbringing, the educational method of learning has been a dynamic and a Socratic method of learning. Learning in the rabbinical colleges (which are called yeshivas by the Jewish community) was and is today basically according to the Socratic method of questions and answers. This aspect will be expanded later in this article, but first let us define and understand the concept of "yeshiva."

"Yeshiva" basically comes from the Hebrew word for "sitting, sitting and meeting together." This concept is derived from the fact that people gathered, usually on the Sabbath day, to study together at their leisure the tradition and the law. Originally, in the First Century context, there was no term as "yeshiva."

The term used for the rabbinical schools was Bet Midrash, "the house of learning." In these institutions, the pupils gathered together to discuss and to define the Jewish law mainly by reflecting it one from another. This method was called "chavruta" which means "get together of friends." It comes from the root of the word "chaver" and means "to join or to become friends." This is clearly defined in the tradition of the early Tannaitic rabbis that were called the "zugot" or the "pairs," because the great rabbis were "paired" in polemics. From their polemics came the great teachings of the Scriptures. This, then, is the yeshiva method, which comes from questions and answers.

If one will forgive the over-generalization, there is within our Jewish character a certain argumentativeness, an impetuosity. I would offer the theory that this quality of character has developed as a result of the traditional yeshiva method of study, which was designed to be a mind-sharpening experience by the questions and answers.

Now, what advantage would such a thing be for people who are reborn believers? The first advantage

that we have in using the yeshiva method to train men of G-d is to understand the Jewish background of the Brit Chadasha and at the same time be effective witnesses of Yeshua as our personal Saviour even within the Jewish setting of our studies. In the messianic yeshiva we would learn to encounter in a very Jewish way the questions and the objections the Jewish people have to believing in the Brit Chadasha.

The second benefit that such a method of learning would have is in the materials that would be learned in the yeshiva. We are not talking about a place in which only the Bible would be learned. We are talking about a place in which the traditional Jewish body of literature would also be given general attention, with special emphasis of how to use this Jewish literature to present a better and more Jewish approach to win to the L-rd the Jewish people cognizant of this literature. The objective of a traditional Jewish yeshiva is what is called "Talmud Torah." Talmud Torah, "the learning of the Torah," is considered an end in itself. However, as a messianic Jew, I don't see in my vision room for an institution of higher learning that would delve strictly (for the sake of intellectual exercise only) into this vast body of Jewish tradition. But I do see that, because of two thousand years of the wrong kind of Biblical witness to the Jews, we need to revise our witness and use good sense and tactics in preaching the Good News to the Jewish people from within the structure and the tradition which they are well acquainted with. In addition to this, I feel that through the study of this Jewish literature and the use of it for witnessing, we can get a better grasp of certain of the issues and relationships of Biblical doctrine that would not only enable us to witness, but also give us a deeper understanding and a closer walk with Yeshua.

Now, what do people study in an Orthodox Jewish yeshiva normally? In an Orthodox yeshiva, first of all, in the early ages, emphasis is put on the Mishnah, mainly on memorizing the Mishnah and not really delving in depth into every possible interpretation. In the higher classes and high school, emphasis is put on the Talmud and mainly on the passages of the Talmud which deal with halakhah. Not a great deal of emphasis is put in the beginning years of Talmudic study on the subject matter itself but mainly on the method of study.

A knowledge of the Talmudic method of study is very important for us as students of the Brit Chadasha, because we must realize that especially in Paul or Shaul's literature some of the same types of questions and answers in this Talmudic style were incorporated by Shaul, the student of Gamaliel. Understanding how to study First Century Jewish literature would assist us in understanding Shaul and his writings. See, for example, such rhetorical questions which betray a clearly rabbinical style in Shaul as these: "Since we have grace, shall we sin more so that grace may abound? (Romans 6:1) Is there an advantage to the Jew? (Romans 3:1) Is the law unholy? G-d forbid. (Romans 7:7) Was Israel stumbling in order that they may be lost?" (Romans 11:11) Questions like this and their answers portray a clearly rabbinical and Talmudic style.

In the higher levels and after high school the Orthodox yeshiva concentrates on what is called the Midrashic literature, the different stories and legends (haggadot) in the Talmud and in the related Midrashic literature. These very old traditions are sometimes important because they have direct applications to the Brit Chadasha Scripture and its background.

In a messianic yeshiva, I would see the main purpose of the course of our study as being to train students in how to present Yehoshua as the Moshiach of the Jewish people and as an intrinsic part of G-d's revelation to Israel. That is, to present Biblical Judaism, not as it has been presented in traditional circles as another religion, an alternative to the Jewish religion of the first century, but as an outgrowth and an

offshoot of that same root to which Abraham, Isaac and Moses belonged. In the Orthodox Jewish yeshiva, we must understand that the objective of every religious Jew is to eventually study the law. It does not make a difference if he's a watchmaker, a cobbler or a tailor. He desires to study the law and G-d's Word and his tradition. This he desires to do, at least part-time, if he cannot dedicate himself full-time to this great commandment and calling. Remember, in Tevya's song from "The Fiddler on the Roof" it says, "If I were a rich man, I would sit and study the Torah all day long.." This is the vision not only of the so-called Rabbi or Jewish clergy but of every Jew that is interested in delving deeper into the knowledge of G-d. So a messianic yeshiva could be a layman's school, as well as for clergy, and would be modified in a pragmatic way to equip the believer to give an answer for the hope which G-d has planted in him through Yeshua the Moshiach.

The teacher in any yeshiva, messianic or orthodox, is a very important figure. The teacher is important, not because he stands before the class and lectures, as professors in universities and in seminaries do, but because he is the one informed person who has the time to spent individually with people when they have questions. Basically, the teacher (rabbi) has his time multiplied by the fact that, as he presents the subjects and the difficulties and asks the questions from the students, they separate into groups of two-by-two to discuss the text, its intricacies and its solutions. Then, when they gather together again at the end of the day, the rabbi is able to ask his students the questions that would be relevant to bring forth the most dynamic and valuable lessons that they could learn from the text that has been discussed.

Now I have said this much in order to state that a yeshiva is not necessarily an institution which requires large facilities. Mainly, it is an institution which deals with a certain approach and method to learning. This is why it is important to realize that, in order to start a messianic yeshiva, the main thing one needs first is to have the people, the students who are willing and hungry to win souls for the L-rd in the most effective and in the most convincing Jewish way. I would say that this is the first requirement for a yeshiva.

The second requirement for a yeshiva is to have the basic books and works with which Jewish people are familiar, and which contain in them the material that would best relate to the Brit Chadasha Scriptures. Unlike a traditional Jewish yeshiva, I would say that studying a tractate of Babylonian Talmud Bezah is not the most important thing that a messianic yeshiva should be studying, although it is one of the tractates that is normally studied in an Orthodox yeshiva. On the other hand, a tractate like Sanhedrin has multiple passages that are dealing with the Jewish view of our Moshiach (they don't want to use the name Yeshuah but Yeshu which is a derogatory sense of the word Yeshua.) Therefore, a Talmudic tractate like Sanhedrin would yield multiple passages dealing with the person of Moshiach Yeshua. These passages have been sometimes used as a stumbling block to prevent Jewish people from accepting the L-rd as their Saviour. But, a careful analysis and study of these passages could reverse them and they could be used as an important tool to show the historicity, the validity, and the true character of the teachings of Yeshua as the Ben ha'E-lohim and as the Moshiach. (Note the short bibliography at the end of this chapter which would help the student in looking through these vast volumes of Jewish literature and finding material that could be beneficial to this kind of a learning experience.)

What else is needed to start a messianic yeshiva? We said that first of all you need the people willing to become serious students and effective witnesses, made more credible by their familiarity with this Jewish literature. Secondly, we said the yeshiva needs to have the right books. In addition, we must stress that the

learning of the Hebrew language in a messianic yeshiva would be imperative. Much of the Jewish literature we are talking about has not been adequately translated into English and is still not respected in its English version by the Jewish community. Therefore, one of the principal courses of study in a messianic yeshiva, in my opinion, would be the learning of the Hebrew and Aramaic languages to enable one to delve deeper into this vast Jewish literature.

In addition to the learning of the Hebrew language, the messianic yeshiva should offer its students a very close spiritual pattern of life. Messianic spiritual warriors have to have a very living faith which expresses itself in a devotional life that is unequivocally dedicated to Yeshua as the Moshiach and to the discovery and the preaching of the Brit Chadasha Scriptures as a Jewish book! A messianic yeshiva would not survive and will not succeed if there is no rich exercise of all the fruits of G-d's Spirit in prayer and in fasting and in a dedicated life that would be an example to any Orthodox Jew that would stumble upon such a yeshiva.

Some of the practical technicalities of the yeshiva as they are expressed in the messianic Jewish cultural context are these. First of all, an orthodox yeshiva is usually open from Yom Rishon to Friday at noon. The study hours are twice during the day-time, when the rabbi addresses his students, once in the morning when he presents to them the chapter or the page in which they will be studying (and gives some direction to it), and once in the evening when the rabbi of the yeshivah gathers his talmidim to find out what they have learned (and to redirect their thinking in case they have strayed from what is right).

The messianic yeshiva, depending on where and when it is started, would probably have to make some adjustments because of the cultural difficulties in daily life. We in Israel have found that because of the fact that believers are scattered over a large part of the country and their numbers are limited, it is only possible for us to meet one day a week with three, four or five hours in straight intensive study. However, I realize that in a different context in America, it would be possible to give more time for such an endeavor. The question would be left to the local needs of the students or congregations participating. In addition, I would say that a messianic yeshiva ought not to appear as a cultural-theological mongrel but ought to be authentically a messianic Jewish expression. This can be achieved by decorating the place, or in the clothes that we wear, the yarmulke or kippah, the tallis, the fringes, which provide the feeling of being inside the community and an authentic yeshiva. Now I realize that these are only outward, but atmosphere is important for our credibility.

In all the discussions of a messianic yeshiva we are talking as if we are ignoring our Gentile brothers and sisters. It is true that a messianic yeshiva would be primarily designed for training Jewish believers to be better witnesses to their fellow Jewish brothers and sisters, but I would say that a messianic yeshiva is not only for Jewish believers but any believer, be he Gentile or a Jew, that has a burden for Israel and desires to see Jewish people saved and wants to understand the Jewish background of the Brit Chadasha. Any such believer would find interest and spiritual edification in studying in the same way that Shaul studied from Gamliel, and with the same method, and even some of the same materials.

It is important for us to know that the Jewish people who have been educated in the Orthodox tradition are well aware of many of the passages in the Talmud dealing with Yeshua. These passages reverberate over and over again in the mind of the educated Jew preventing him from seeing the Brit Chadasha as the Word of G-d. The average Jew looks at the Brit Chadasha as the "Christian Bible." It is important for us in our

witness to the Jewish people to establish not only the divinity of Yeshua and his office as Moshiach, but also to establish the very deep Jewish roots in the writings of the shlichim of the Brit Chadasha. For this reason, I feel that anyone who wants to be more effective as a witness to Israel would by necessity have to deal sooner or later with some of this yeshiva material. Therefore, where is there a better place than with the chavurah of other Jewish and Non-Jewish brothers who want to see the people of G-d return to their true spiritual heritage in Yeshua the Moshiach?

Now let us delve into the curricula and into the material that is actually studied in the yeshiva. First of all, let us deal with the curriculum of a messianic yeshiva. Every yeshiva, whether it be that of believers or of the Orthodox Jews, starts with the studying of the basic mishnaic literature. I would think that in order to interest the students initially it would be important to study a tractate that has connections and implication to their faith. That, of course, is different than the average Orthodox yeshiva. The average yeshiva starts with the tort laws and the agricultural laws. But the messianic yeshiva, in my opinion, ought to start with something like Pirkei Avot, "the sayings of the Fathers," in English, or another tractate that would generate the initial interest and zeal required to attack this material.

After one learns the character of the Mishnah and its background I would think that it would be time to delve into how to analyze and study the arguments of a Talmudic page. In Israel the yeshiva regularly started with Tort laws (which are usually found in Baba Metzia or Baba Kamma of the Babylonian Talmud) or in Kiddushin, "marital laws." But any one of these tractates would be sufficient to teach a student how to study by himself a page of Talmud.

After the understanding and the analysis of this methodological application, I think it would be time to start to deal with some of the passages that touch on Yeshua and to see if one could understand them. One should attempt to understand their background and their literary character, not only in order to refute them but in order to gain an insight into the minds of the Rabbis who actually thought that they would have an impact on the Jewish people and would serve as contraceptives to the powerful message of the Besuras Hageulah. After a course of dealing with the passages throughout the Talmud that touch on Yeshua, I would think that it would be right for the believer to delve into some of the messianic concepts and problems that are discussed in tractates like Sanhedrin and Hagigah and in separate incidents in the different tractates of the Talmud. I think that the course of study of such dimensions would probably take as long as a year.

The second year I would suggest would be dedicated to the Midrashic literature and its parallels in the Biblical hermeneutics of the Brit Chadasha. The third year of the yeshiva study, I think ought to be dedicated to the text of the Brit Chadasha itself and to the application of the things that have been studied before in the direct witness of the Brit Chadasha to the Jewish community.

Of course, what I have said does not exhaust all the material that should be studied, but it would at least give to the person interested enough knowledge that he could pursue this study on his own as long as he lives.

Now, in order to achieve all this study, the yeshiva has to have some books. First of all it would be imperative to have the basic Biblical tools for study: that is, of course, the Concordances, the Dictionaries, the Biblical Encyclopedias, that are general tools for examining the Scriptures. Second of all, I would say

that the yeshiva ought to have the Babylonian Talmud, the Jerusalem Talmud, the set of the rabbinical commentaries of the Torah which are all included in Mikraot Gedolot and all the books of Maimonides. These would serve as an excellent commentary on the Talmud and the Laws.

In addition to these, one could have of course the Hebrew and the English versions of all these books that are available and then the major midrashim of the five books of Moses and the five scrolls, Esther, Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs, Ruth and Lamentations. The major midrashim can be obtained in English by the Soncino Press. A messianic yeshiva should have an Encyclopedia Judaica. If the people know Hebrew, then the Talmudic Encyclopedia, which has been published in Hebrew, is important. Also, there is Marcus Jastrow's Dictionary of the Targumim, the Talmud Babli and Yerushalmi, and the Midrashic Literature, published by Judaica Press. There is also Rosenthal's Aramaic Grammar.

Now I realize that such books are costly. What we did in Israel to help was to type out and reproduce the lessons so that students didn't have to buy all the books, but could have available to them the particular lessons that they had to study during that day. I would suggest that a messianic yeshiva save by the employ of a full-time secretary to type out these lessons, both in Hebrew and in English.

There are additional works that would be helpful to the student of the Jewish background to the Brit Chadasha Scriptures and which deal with the character of Yeshua. Let me mention a few of them. First, there is Dr. Gustaf Dalman, Jesus Christ in the Talmud, Midrash and Zohar and the Liturgy of the Synagogue, pulished in 1839 in London and republished by Arnold Press of New York in the series of the Jewish People, History, Religion and Literature. Emil Schurer, The History of the Jewish People in the Time of Jesus Christ which was published in two volumes. Also by Schurer there is The Literature of the Jewish People in the Time of Jesus Christ, and also Sefer Toldot Yeshua, (The Book of the Genealogies of Yehoshua) which was published in English. Then R. Travors Herford has written, Christianity and the Jewish Talmud. Many of these can be found in libraries, such as Hermann L. Strack's Introduction to the Talmud and Midrash, a Temple Book, Atheneum NY 1972; David Daube, The New Testament and Rabbinic Judaism; W.D. Davies, Christian Origins and Judaism, both published by Arnold Press, reprints; W. D. Davis, Paul and Rabbinic Judaism; E. P. Sanders, Palestinian Judaism and Paul; E. P. Sanders' second book has been published called, Problems of Identity in Judaism and Christianity in the Second Century. Hans Shoeps, Paul.

There are numerous other books which would be helpful to a person who is interested to know more about the Jewish background of the Brit Chadasha, but these would be some good suggestions to start with in building a proper source library for a messianic yeshiva.

In conclusion, it is clear to me that there is a real need both for the growth of the Jewish believers and for the witness to the Jews, to establish real schools of training for people who are interested in bringing the Besuras Hageulah to Israel and to the Jewish community throughout the world. In addition, I believe a model would be afforded to the non-Jewish Bible believers by these yeshivas showing the implications for cross-cultural communication of the Besuras Hageulah. This model would enhance the effectiveness of those who are interested in reaching people of different cultures, namely, by showing that not only an outward adaptation of the Besuras Hageulah but also an adaptation in the very means of communications is a healthy imperative for an effective witness. I long to see the day when one or two such messianic rabbinical yeshivas will be established in the United States and in Israel in order to train Jewish believers to give a more effective witness on the one hand, and a deeper understanding and identity with their own

heritage on the other hand, as well as an effective tool for the evangelizing of Israel that she may return to her true and natural Moshiach, the Son of David who, in the name of Israel and the Jewish people, brought salvation to all mankind.