

Doing Messianic Jewish Halacha

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The word "Halacha" comes from the Hebrew word, - "to walk." It is a technical term used for the rules that govern Jewish religious life. The term "Halacha" is an ancient term that is already reflected in the New Testament especially in Paul's letters. Paul uses the word, "walk" in some form in almost in every one of his letters. The word "walk" introduces practical instructions as to the way that the "Christian" should walk and conduct his life. Following will be a few examples of this point:

Luke 1:6

"And they were both righteous before God, walking in all the commandments and ordinances of the Lord blameless."

Acts 21:21

"And they are informed of thee, that thou teachest all the Jews that are among the Gentiles to forsake Moses, saying that they ought not to circumcise their children, neither to walk after the customs."

Romans 13:13

"Let us walk honestly, as in the day; not in rioting and drunkenness, not in chambering and wantonness, not in strife and envying."

I Corinthians 7:17

"But as God hath distributed to every man, as the Lord hath called every one, so let him walk. And so ordain I in all churches."

There are many more examples of the use of this term "walk" in the context of Halacha, but I will satisfy myself with those listed above. For the more diligent they can check their concordance or look up the list of passages listed in the footnote.

From these passages there seems to be a clear indication that in the First Century Church there was a Messianic Halacha being made, and that it was even to some degree even referred to as a "walk." We find ruling made by Apostles that are not identified as "walking." Even in these it is clear that a "rule" or an "ordinance" is being legislated for the churches to observe. The Apostles understood from the words of Yeshua in Matthew 16:19, that they have the right to "bind" and "loose" on Earth. The words of Yeshua are clear only in the context of Jewish "making of Halacha." The authority is given here by Yeshua to the Apostles that whatever decisions they will make on Earth will be acceptable and would become "bound" in Heaven. This is the exact same authority that the Rabbis took upon themselves. There is a famous statement in the Talmud that, "Whatever the Rabbis bind will be bound in Heaven, and Whatever the Blessed be His name

binds on they Rabbis they have the authority to loose." Although in this case the Rabbis seem to have taken their authority a little too far, the principle is the same. Yeshua seems to give the Apostles the right to make "Halacha" by His authority.

This principle was the guiding principle that led to the establishment of "Canon Law" which is just another name for "Halacha." And, of course, this is what led to the establishment of the Holy Catholic Church in Rome.

One of the major principles of making Halacha in Judaism was lacking seriously when Christians made "Halacha," and that is the strict adherence to the text of the Torah according to the exegetical rules for interpretation. The battles between the Rabbis on every point and, in fact, on every letter, kept the making of Halacha a very serious and laborious task and away from a dictatorial "ex-cathedra" attitude that prevailed in the church.

This brings me to the discussion of the Messianic Jewish movement today and the need for Messianic Jewish Halacha.

1. At this time in our history as a Movement we do not have either the heritage nor the equipment to do Halacha. Doing Halacha is something that we will have to develop with a lot of care.
2. We are still divided according to the traditional Christian denominational lines. Doing Halacha might serve to divide us even more if we it is done to fast.
3. We have very little integrity in both the eyes of the Jewish community and in the eyes of our Christian brothers.
4. We do not have men who have a wide respect in both the Messianic and the Christian communities that could pull behind them a wide acceptance of Halachic decision that might be made. We do have man who think that they are qualified, but that is not enough.
5. We have very little knowledge of the Torah and Judaism, and our integrity as a Jewish movement is in question by both Jews and Christians. Taking upon ourselves such a task as doing Halacha would be seen by many as one more blow to our integrity and theology.
6. We still receive money from the Gentile Churches and that makes us suspect of being "un-objective" and "bribed" in our opinions.
7. We have needs that are too hot, and the situation is an infected tooth. One does not make Halacha in the heat of an infection. We have to make Halacha when we are as detached from internal politics and power plays as possible.
8. We do not want to be more divisive by making "rules of conduct" that only a very small minority will observe and keep. The others will go on merrily doing what they please.
9. The majority of the members of the Messianic Jewish Movement do not care for Judaism and much less for a what is already clearly "halacha" written in the Scripture why should they care about what some leaders have decided to bind on them.

10. We do not want to make our own rules and regulations that will take us out of the fellowship of the people of Israel. There is nothing that will turn us into a sect faster than to make our own "rules and regulations" in either a conflict or in opposition to the Jewish Tradition. We can not start binding them upon people, both Jews and Gentiles, in the Messianic fellowships things that might widen the divide between us and the Jewish community. In fact the majority of the Messianic Fellowships in the United States are non-Jews, what kind of Halacha will you make that will be bound upon these people?

Halacha and God's Grace

A follower of Yeshua must always take into account the principles of God's grace. In doing Messianic Jewish Halacha we must stay as close to the Word of God as possible, but at the same time remember that our judgment will not be on the basis of what kind of toilet paper we use on Sabbath, but on the Grace of God through Yeshua's sacrifice. This Grace of God, however, can not be taken as an a-priori consideration for making Halacha, it can only come into consideration as a post-priori extenuation of circumstances.

Matthew 23:1-4, and what it implies for Messianic Jewish Halacha today.

Yeshua and His disciples are a part of the world of the Pharisees in the Land of Israel during the first century A.D. Yeshua was a Pharisee in His world view, and all the arguments that He had with the Pharisees were "in-house" arguments between co-religionists. The Pharisees had brought a religious revolution in Judaism in the first century B.C. That revolution was that God's will can be known and discerned by any student from the Holy Scriptures. Before this great revolution and according to the Torah of Moses the way to discern the "Will of God" was to ask the Priest or the Prophet. When these two institutions were marred by corruption and Hellenism there developed a school that gleaned from the text of the Torah the passages that justified "study of the Torah" as a way of knowing God's Will. It is with this school of thinking, the school of the Pharisees, that Yeshua and His disciples identify. This is also the reason why Yeshua is so involved and at times even angry with the Pharisees, they are the closest to Him. From the side of the Pharisees the same is true. Yeshua is considered to be one of them. That is why they come to him with accusations and questions of practice and tradition like the question about the washing of hands, and picking corn on the Sabbath. If he was a Sadducee they would not have even bothered to accuse him. We all argue with the people who are closest to us, and accuse of hypocrisy those whom we know best.

The meaning of Matthew 23:1-2, for us today can not be much different than the Apostles in the first century would have understood it. Here is my short exegesis of this passage:

Verse 1, Yeshua is speaking to both the crowds and his disciples. Why did the text see fit to mention this detail? The Holy Spirit through the text of the Gospel wanted all to know that the authority of the words of Yeshua in this case are applicable to both the crowds, in the first century context that would be "Am HaAretz," and to Yeshua's own disciples.

Verse 2, "The teachers of the Torah and the Pharisees sit in Moses' seat." Moses' seat has been found in a number of synagogues dated to the period of the Mishnah. In the Synagogue Moses' seat served as the pulpit does today. It was the place that the Rabbi would seat after the reading of the Torah and give his "Drasha" or "homily" in English. The concept behind this statement is hard to understand without remembering that the Jewish world of the second and third century B.C. underwent a great revolution.

The Pharisaic revolution in which the Tanach - God's Holy Scriptures - became the standard by which man can know the will of God. In other words the text of the Tanach became the revelation of God. So, now study and interpretation were the means for discerning God's will. Into this picture enters the Synagogue which was a place of gathering for the study and hearing of the Torah. So, the Rabbi who was in the line of authority from Moses had the right to exegete the text and draw practical or moral conclusions from the text. This was the earliest form of doing Halacha in the Jewish Community.

Yeshua is saying to the crowds and to his disciples that the teachers of the Torah and the Pharisees have the authority to interpret and make Halacha when they are explaining the text of the Torah of Moses.

Yeshua's words here do not give a carte-blanche to the "teachers of the Torah" or to the "Pharisees" to make Halacha for the disciples of Yeshua. The statement limits them to the time that they "sit on Moses' seat." In other words, when they are actually exegeting the text of the Torah in the Synagogue.

Verse 3a, It is very important to understand these words of Yeshua: "So you must obey them and do everything they tell you." In the time of Yeshua there was not teaching against Him that was official and authoritative. In the near two thousand years of "Christian" history both the situation of the Jewish people and that of Christendom has changed significantly. Jewish tradition has made many Halachic rulings that are for polemic reasons against Christianity and Yeshua himself. I think that if we put the words of Yeshua back into the first century historical setting in which they were given we can still obey them and continue to give respect to the Jewish tradition of exegesis and interpretation of the Torah.

Verse 3b, The instruction that Yeshua gives here is very interesting and it reminds us of the words of King Yanai to his wife the Queen Sh'lom Zion. Yanai said to his wife, "do not be afraid of those who call themselves Pharisees. Be afraid of those who call themselves Pharisees and they are hypocrites."

Verse 4, It is apparent that the problem was one of making many rules from the Torah and not keeping them themselves, or making demands and putting on burdens on the people without condensation for the practicality or the possibility of keeping them. The Torah was given for living not for theoreticians that live in the Beit Midrash and never have to deal with the daily and practical aspects of our faith.

Should the Messianic Jewish Movement do Halacha Now?

To answer the above question I must say both, "Yes!" and "No!" May be it is the right time to consider doing Messianic Jewish Halacha? As a movement that is still in a very transitional stage may be it is the right time to prepare for doing Messianic Jewish Halacha some time in the future? Is there a possibility for us to just accept the traditional Halacha on every subject that does not directly pertain on the person and character of Yeshua the Messiah? Since the majority of people attending and even leading Messianic Jewish Congregations are non-Jews or of questionable Jewish descent it might be that we ought to just forget about doing Halacha. It might be that we should just settle for the Protestant model and succumb to the weight of Western American Christian White Anglo-Saxon culture? We might not have the authority or the unity that is required to do a good job in formulating Halacha that will bless the Body of the Messiah and the people of Israel at this time?

It is easy to ask the above questions and point out the problems and the pitfalls or shortcomings of the Messianic Movement specially in respect to our Jewishness and Halacha. It is much harder to give concrete

and positive instructions as to “how to” do Messianic Jewish Halacha while guarding against some of the pitfalls and problems.

Some suggestions and rules for doing Messianic Jewish Halacha

The first rule for doing Halacha for today’s Messianic Community has to be, in my humble opinion, the acceptance of all the Halachic rulings and Apostolic examples and inferences that we find in the New Testament. One of the basic rules of doing Halacha is that you must build on what the previous generations handed down as authoritative. We can not do new Halacha by ignoring or outsmarting the Apostolic writers of God’s Inspired Word. Ignoring the rulings of the Apostles will make the Messianic Movement live up to the accusation of our Jewish brothers that we are a cult, and with them the Christian world will join with the same refrain. Signs of such trends are apparent when one looks at the way that such direct Apostolic commands as 1 Timothy 2:9-12, have been treated, ignored, and stumped upon by the leadership of the Messianic Movements in the United States. Doing Halacha can not become a tool for resolving political problems in the Messianic Movement. Doing Halacha has to be a sincere search for doing God’s will today in the Spirit and in the Truth of His Living Word.

The place to start doing Halacha today has to be Yeshua’s own instruction to His disciples recorded in Matthew 23:1-4.

If I am right on the above point it would imply that we must make a very serious effort to know and study and understand what do the Pharisees who sit in Moses’ seat say and teach on a variety of issues that we all face as Jews living in a post-modern world. How can we make Halacha that is Jewish if we, as the leaders of the Movement are connected by our umbilical cord to the Christian denominations. Many of us would be considered un-kosher to even be witnesses in court relating to matters of Jewish Law because we would be “Meshuchadim” (Bribed) in our thinking.

I realize that these words cut deep and hurt, but the first step for doing Halacha that would be valid and have credibility has to be an honest assessment of who we are today. Without this kind of honesty that hurts any Halacha that the Movement leaders would make would be short-lived and divisive to the Body of the Messiah and to Israel as a people.

The second step that we need to take as individuals and as a Movement is to explain or reason out the Biblical stance about “commandments” in relationship to God’s Grace and our unity with the rest of the Body of Christ. We do not want to alienate our non-Jewish Christian brothers who are still stranded on the unbalanced shores of Martin Luther’s understanding of God’s Grace. We want to present a good reasoned out theology and also a loving and friendly attitude without compromising the Word of God, or the Jewishness of the New Testament.

The third step that the Messianic Jewish Movement needs to take in order to do a credible Halacha is a commitment to unity and fellowship vis-à-vis all the arguments and disagreements that might arise during the process of doing Halacha. In doing Halacha all the possible disagreements and personality clashes that can arise do arise. There are vested interests and temperament issues that come up during such strong discussions and deliberations. The Messianic Jews must show at least the degree of tolerance and civilized behavior that the Pharisees showed to each other. We must remember that doing Halacha is working

toward unity in both actions and doctrine. If doing Halacha will estrange us from each other, or from the Jewish community let us forget it, and just keep on doing each what is right in his own eyes.

The fourth step that the Messianic Jewish Movement must take in order to do Halacha is to recommit that the Word of God, and the Word of God alone, is the authority for our teaching and action. I have heard in a number of forums of Messianic Jews that through messages supposedly from the Holy Spirit they were given direction to do things diametrically opposed to the clear instructions of God's Word. I believe that there has been a very bad influence on the Movement from certain movements in Christianity who have made the Holy Spirit of God "a dog that any one can go hunting with." If the final authority for our actions is some supposed feeling, that one receives after a good pizza dinner, let us forget doing Messianic Jewish Halacha.

Fifth need for doing Messianic Jewish Halacha is time. It takes time, years, to develop the kind of respect and prestige that is necessary for the community to abide by the rulings of a committee. If we are going to have a Messianic Jewish Halacha in the future, which I hope we will have, it will take much time, some people who will work hard to gain the respect and the authority of God, and of the Movement. It will take scholarship and scholarship takes time to build and develop.

I have been negative enough in this article! It is time now to take the positive attitude. It is my firm conviction that with much good will from the part of the movement, and a broad enough base of people who are not rubber stamps of policy decisions made by the UMJC or the MJAA leadership, Biblical and Jewish Halacha can be built up for the future generations of Messianic Jews. Start by preparing a sufficient moral and financial support for those who will do the task, and than choose the people not according to their political affiliation in the Movement, but according to their spiritual and intellectual qualification as honest students of God's Word.