

Reaching Out from the Fringes to the Core!

Joseph Shulam

A certain Rabbi in Nashville, Tennessee was very worried about one of the main families in the synagogue because they had stopped coming to the services, The children stopped coming to the community center and they were for months and months out of contact with the congregation and with the community. But, the rabbi did not know exactly how to deal with this separation from the community, and because this was a very influential family the Rabbi didn't want to offend them.

So he waited a long time for them to come back to the congregation, but they didn't come back. After a lot of prayer he decided to go visit the family. So, he came and knocked at the door and the father of the family welcomed him in and invited him to the living room. It was a cold winter day and the fireplace was going. Like two typical Jews they sat across from each other and looked at each other. They looked at each other, and looked at each other with nobody saying a word. The man said to himself, "I wonder what the Rabbi came for. I don't want to offend him so I'm not going to say anything." The Rabbi thought to himself "Listen, he probably already knows why I came, but he is too ashamed to open the discussion and tell me why he's not coming". So they kept looking at each other.

Finally the Rabbi stood up and walked to the fireplace with the nice fire built up with red hot coals. He took the fireplace tongs and pulled out a big, red hot piece of coal and put it aside. After a few minutes that red hot coal became black and cold. And then the Rabbi got back up and he pushed that piece of coal back into the fire. It didn't take long until that piece of coal got red hot and glowed again. The Rabbi then sat back down in his chair. After a few long minutes, he said "Thank you very much for the hospitality, but I have an appointment and I must go." As the man walked the Rabbi to the front door, he exclaimed to the Rabbi: "Thank you very much, I learned the lesson that you came to teach me. I shall return back to the congregation because I don't want to be like that red hot coal that became cold and dark out of fellowship with the other red hot coals."

The situation of the Messianic Movement

The situation of the Messianic Jewish Community in Israel is very similar to this. We must be a part of the fire of God that is burning in the heart of the Jewish nation. We must not separate ourselves from what God is doing to Israel as a whole. Because the promise of God is that all Israel shall be saved. It's wonderful to have congregations and communities and it's wonderful that these congregations are diverse and have different backgrounds that are natural after 2000 years of exile. The progress that we have seen in this land in the last 20 years is a phenomenon that is hard to believe.

For over a hundred and fifty years, there were Jews who believed in Yeshua but did not want to be "Christianized" and give up their identity as Jews. They suffered a lot and prayed continuously, waiting for a day when they would not be on the fringe of the missionary Christian communities. They were alienated,

rejected, made to feel shame because they wanted to be Jews and live a Jewish lifestyle as believers.

Let me pause and tell you how Netivyah started. I was a member of a community called the Messianic Assembly in Jerusalem. One Shabbat, I was going to the congregation with my wife and entering the congregation just in front of us walked an elderly Orthodox Jew with his wife. As he entered the congregation, one of the elders of the congregation was standing at the entrance, and a Polish couple hit the old man in the head, took his kippah and threw it down, stepping on it and saying "You don't come into the church with a hat!". The old man started to cry. I didn't know who he was at the moment but I hugged the old man and we walked outside to Prophet Street. We sat on a bus station bench with our wives and we decided to start a home Bible study, and never to return to that congregation. I realized that in Jerusalem 1971. there was no place for Jews in this Messianic Assembly or any other Christian mission. You had to eat bacon for breakfast in order to become closer to God. (But, I have to confess that at that time this was the reality, but since then things have changed and improved greatly. Praise be to God!)

There is a huge improvement. Many congregations in Israel are buying Torah scrolls, reading from the Torah, using part of the traditional prayers of the siddur, teaching their members to respect Jewish traditions. But the reality is that we are still a part of a movement that sociologically can be defined as part of the fringe. Messianic Jews are Comfortable in the Fringe .

"Fringe movement" is not how others look at us, but how we looked at ourselves. We as Messianic Jews still feel and want to remain basically in the fringe even though we use a language that indicates that we want to be in the core, or in the center. What makes us feel more comfortable in the fringe?

The most significant reason is a majority of the leadership of the so-called "Messianic" movement in Israel, not to mention that of the United States and many other countries, were born first from a very secular background. That's a fact, not a criticism. We didn't grow up within the traditions and the practices of Judaism, whether in Israel, or in the gallut (diaspora). We didn't get a Jewish education. The Messianic Jewish leadership and communities were basically led by people who were not accustomed to Jewish culture and Jewish community. We were educated in the West, in a Christian environment. If we had any education it was a Christian's Biblical education. We were disciplined by Christian denominations. In Christian schools, we Jewish believers were "fringe elements" socially, educationally and financially. This was the case in both Israel and in the United States.

A large number of the Messianic Jewish leadership in Israel suffered from Judeophobia. When I was growing up in the congregations in Jerusalem, it wasn't unusual for one of the elders to get up on Shabbat and say "Praise God that we don't have to wait to have 10 minyan here in order to worship God!" I am sure they wished to have 10 Jewish men in their community, though.

Of secondary importance, in many Messianic Jewish communities today, the leadership did not grow up and live in Israel. They did not serve the army. They don't speak good Hebrew. And, a large number of congregations are still very much tied to foreign organizations, missionary organizations, or Christian denominations. These two issues together make us fringe communities. When I say "us", I don't fail to include myself, I include everything that I know about our organization, Netivyah, or anyone else that I know in the Messianic body. As I say, this is not a criticism. These are facts.

God Wants Us to be in the Core

The big questions before us now are do we want to stay in the fringe, or, do we want our position to change? There is a certain degree of Christian mentality that says we should feel it is good to be on the fringe. The core is the world. We don't want to be like everybody else. We want to be different. And the weirder we are the better. For instance, if the majority puts on a tallit in the morning, we are not going to do it this way, we are going to put a tallit on at night. If the majority circumcise their children by inviting a Rabbi with a sharp knife, we are not going to do it this way. In no way will others make a mistake and think that we really want to be in the core of Israeli society. This situation is changing, but still there are some "old timers" that would be very upset that I say that Yeshua was the Son of God and the Messiah and God, but also a "Rabbi." That kind of mentality still exists but its diminishing gradually.

I think it is time to start looking for a paradigm change and being creative in how we can speed up the process of going from the fringe to the core.

I think God wants us to be in the core. Our movement in actuality is the core. When the Messianic Movement started in the United States the motto was "We want to be the Fourth Branch of Judaism, after the Orthodox, the Conservative, and the Reform." However, that was the "fringe mentality" and I am happy that that era is over.

I declared at Messiah College, "We are not the fourth branch, but we are the ONLY TRUE branch of Judaism." But we have to claim it and do it and live it. This is God's will for us to be the core. But in order to be the core, we have to continue the process that we have already started with God's help and with the guidance of the Holy Spirit. The process started a long time ago, and we just have to keep it up and finish the job.

The strategy - from the fringe to the core

Now the body of the Messiah in Israel is moving from the fringe to the core. One of the reasons is that our youth is serving in the Israeli Army. It is very important and very positive development. If you look at our Messianic soldiers, you will see that many of them excel in their service. Many of them serve in the best units. Even those who are immigrants, serve in the Army. They enter Israeli society through the Army. They don't hear proper Hebrew in the home and not even in the congregations often times and they speak it in the Army. The Army is a melting pot and has a very positive influence on the body of Christ in Israel. It's a place where a believer can really shine and make a difference. From our congregation in Jerusalem we had close to 20 kids who served the Army. Most of them received the Presidential Award of Excelling Soldier. The Presidential award is given every year to 120 soldiers who excelled. It is a good witness. I think that as congregations and as leaders of congregations we need to encourage our kids to go to the Army. Encourage our kids to excel in the Army. Encourage our kids to go to the university. Encourage our kids to find good jobs, not only in the ministry, but in the market place.

These are areas in which we leave the missionary mentality and go into the core of Israeli society where we can be light and salt to others the way God designed for us.

I mentioned attending university, I believe that if we want to shake off the mentality, of victims and of poverty that missions and missionaries have instilled in the congregations and the body of Christ in Israel,

we've got to encourage our kids to excel in the university and in the workplace and everywhere else.

In Romans 12, Paul says that let all that you do, be done as to God, with the love of God. In other words, if we are shoe maker, be the best shoe maker because you are expressing your place in the kingdom through your shoemaking. We have to restore this doctrine of excelling for God in whatever we do. Whether sweeping the streets or being a high school teacher, whatever you do, do all for the glory of God, because essentially we are going to remain in the fringe if we don't rise up economically and sociologically in our society of Israel. Otherwise, we are going to remain on the fringe for ever.

Lifestyle at home

The next thing that will take us out of the fringe and bring us closer to the core, is our lifestyle at home. What we do in our home, not in the congregation, will be the factor that determines how we are going to get into the core and out of the fringe of Israeli society.

If we keep a genuine Jewish lifestyle, our children at home will know how to say kiddush. They will know what it is to put on teffilin, they will know what it is to live a Jewish lifestyle. When they go to the army they won't feel strange when the whole group goes into the corner and prays shacharit and they will know where to open the siddur. People who don't know the siddur feel very uncomfortable and it push them more to the fringe. Life at home has to be consistent with what we say. We say to the Israeli community that we are Jewish disciple of Yeshua, we are Messianic Jews. That Jewish part has to be expressed in our home and in our lifestyle. If we are inconsistent, people will see we are hypocrites and are not consistent with our "mission statement."

I don't want you to feel I am condemning people. I have a lot of praise for the progress going on in congregations, but we still have much left to learn. We are still in the process of developing. Some in our congregation, some younger people, want us to speed up the process of progress, to get closer to becoming more authentically Jewish.

I have to confess, that I never thought that I would be on the side of those that say "hold back, slow down!" But, as I get older, I find myself surprised that I advise this action. It's good that a younger generation wants to progress. They want to advance. I guess that it is the job of the older wiser people to say "slow down, be more careful, don't alienate people," But, ultimately we have to progress in this direction. If we are not authentic and led by the spirit of God, we are going to remain on the fringe.

Some months ago, an old orthodox Jew came into our congregation on Shabbat in the middle of the service, He asked, "What is this? What is this? Is this a church?" I replied, "Come in and look!" He looked around and he picked up a siddur out of someone's hand and said, "This is an orthodox siddur? Are you an orthodox synagogue?" I said, "Look and judge for yourself!" After about 15 minutes after he was had seen and heard what people were saying and worshipping, he said, "Oh, I see that you guys are okay, you have only one weird thing and that's men and women are sitting together." I was pleased with his comments.

We were fortunate as he found only one weird thing. If he had stayed another five more minutes, he would have seen more weird things. But at least we are beginning to look like something Jewish. For me looking Jewish is not a goal, but an instrument, or a tool, to fulfill the words of Isaiah the prophet that says "Make a highway, make a road, remove the stumbling blocks, remove the rocks from the way, make a way for my people"

For me personally, I did not grow up in Jewish tradition. I grew up as a Bulgarian Jew. My father would fight with my mother if there was not a piece of good bacon in the refrigerator everyday. No joke! That's how Bulgarian Jews are. My parents ate matzah only one night, for Passover, and maybe ate it with pork chop. But, I do believe our job as Messianic Believers is to be a lighthouse and to remove stumbling blocks so that our people can receive Yeshua.

The Youth Movement

Programs like Lech-Lecha and other youth activities are dominated by immigrants from the United States or non-Jews who have very little if any experience in the Israeli youth movements like the Shomer HaZair, Ha Noaar HaOved, HaZofim, or Beni-Akiv. One more important thing that moves us from the fringe to the core, is teaching our children to be a part of the youth of Israel, by joining one of the main youth movements in Israel. We should not be afraid to send our children to regular Israeli schools instead of Christian schools. We should send them to the local schools, and be part of the youth movement, School is where you form the friendships and the relationships for life. We will eventually have the Messianic Youth Movement, but for now, we need to send our children to the youth movements that are clean and wholesome, and teach our children the love of the land, the love of Israel, The love of our homeland.

I think that is the teaching of the passage in Hebrew 10:25 – as translated into English, “don't forsake the assembling of yourselves together.” It is a very bad translation into English. In my opinion it is a quotation from Hillel who said “Do not forsake nor separate yourselves from the public”. Literally in the Greek itself it says “don't leave the synagogue”. Literally the word there is synagogue in Greek.

Therefore, in my opinion, we should not forsake the community, the assembly. We should not become weird or be on the fringe. It is a command of the Holy Spirit for us not to be In my opinion it is God's will after 2000 years of exile. It is a mitzvah for us to coagulate together in a core of people who believe in God's promises, in our destiny here in this land and as a people to be a “nation of priests.”

We must be separated from the world, but it does not mean we have to be weird. The point of friction between us and the rest of Israel should be only one thing and that is Yeshua Himself. The friction should not be about what we wear, what we eat, nor about the way we worship in our synagogue. Only Yeshua should be our point of conflict. I believe that the time has come that Israel will be ready to deal with us. Israel will be ready to deal with the Messianic Jews and deal with Yeshua if we take off our gallutic [Exile] jackets and forsake all these things that are weird and keep us on the fringe. The main issue of conflict is Yeshua. But as long as such things (as lighting candles on Friday night in our synagogues at 8pm at night after the shabbat has long entered), will continue to be the issues that separate us from people in Israel. Our weirdness will separate us, and Yeshua will be pushed out to the fringe in the land.

Humanitarian / volunteer societies

There are a few ministries like Netivyah and Ohalei Rachamim that do have humanitarian aid and soup-kitchens and these are good programs. Having our own humanitarian aid organizations is important, But to really have an additional push to bring us from the fringe to the core of Israeli society and give us an opportunity to “open our mouth” with the Good News, the Jewish Disciples of Yeshua in the nation need to be involved in efforts to fight poverty, to donate to good causes like Liby and in fact use the platforms

that exist in Israel to bring glory to God and to Yeshua Just think of the opportunity to use the “Shir U Trom” (Israeli Telethon for the sake of the soldiers and their comfort in their out posts) and donate say 5000 NIS and have it announced nationwide that the Netivyah congregation of Jewish Disciples of Yeshua of Nazareth have contributed 5000 NIS.

I listen to these broadcasts and I hear, for example, the workers of Bezeq telephone company contribute 5000 shekel, This amutah contributes a thousand shekel and this is all on television and radio and I’m waiting to hear one Messianic Jewish ministry contribute 500 shekel, a hundred dollars to Liby and have announced that “Messianic Jews are contributing to Liby”. We need to seek out opportunities that we have with the gifts that God has given us to pull ourselves back in to the heart of the core of Israeli society if we want to represent Yeshua faithfully.

Humanitarian work is another one of these elements that help us move from the fringe to the core. Also the use of media, that’s another one of these elements that will help us move from the fringe to the core.

There are many more possibilities and suggestions, but one of the things that I think is not to be neglected is the fact that we have to have a good witness in the land. Nothing will be more destructive to our relationship with the heart and core of Israeli society than to have a bad name in the marketplace, in the community. If people in the community say, “Oh this guy owes money and he doesn’t pay it, this guy cheated me, this guy lied to me,” that defames Yeshua. If we don’t pay attention to our morals above our worship styles then we are always going to remain on the fringe. I met Gordon Lindsey, Shila’s father him just one time. It was in the 60s near Mea Sharim in the garage of the Polish nunnery where he stored copies of the Bible. He rented the place and had many cases of bibles.. He had some leather-bound bibles with a zipper like a bible of mine, that were printed in 1957 by Oral Roberts. I heard about them and I went there to ask him to give me one of the cases of 20 bibles. He said, “This is the next to the last one that I have, I have one more in the box, still new.” Gordon Lindsey gave me a hug, although he did not know me, he welcomed me and said, “Son, you have a good name. Protect your name because a good name is more precious than oil.” This entered into my heart.

Conclusion

Messianic Judaism wants to move from the fringe of Israeli society to the core. It’s not something that is going to happen instantly. The body of the believers in Israel and in the world is progressing in that direction. But we have to continuously keep up and enhance the process, by encouraging our youth to go to the army, to participate in the good and wholesome things like the youth movements, by sending them to university, and having them learn professions that are respectable and can contribute to their lifestyle and to the lifestyle of the community, And have a good name in the community. We have to have a good authentic Jewish lifestyle at home, which includes consistency with the cultural laws and consistency with the holidays. Because to say we are Messianic Jews and do not follow this lifestyle, we will be more of a Pharisee than those Pharisees of the first century, and we will be hypocrites. People can sense that.

It’s going to happen. The Messianic Jews and disciples of Yeshua in this land are going to move from the fringe to the core eventually. All we have to do is relinquish our own wills to the will of God and to the guidance of the Holy Spirit and it is going to happen.