



Rabbi Carol Harris-Shapiro



Rabbi Carol Harris-Shapiro received a Ph.D. in religion from Temple University in 1992. She received rabbinical ordination at the Reconstructionist Rabbinical College in 1988 and works as Assistant Professor of Contemporary Jewish Studies at Gratz College (Melrose Park, Pennsylvania). In her book *Messianic Judaism. A Rabbi's Journey Through Religious Change in America* she adds new insights into the varieties of the Messianic movement. She lives in Elkins Park, Pennsylvania.

S *habbat Shalom:* You have written a significant book about Messianic Judaism. What are the reasons which motivated your interest in that movement? Did your enquiry about Messianic Jews change your mind about them? Have you reached different opinions since the time you wrote that book?

Rabbi Carol Harris-Shapiro: There were several factors that piqued my interest in the topic of Messianic Judaism. The first was the brief encounter of an older cousin with a Messianic Jewish congregation before she gave up her Jewish identity entirely and joined a nondenominational evangelical Christian congregation. As a young graduate student, I also found studying a group that combined seemingly polar opposite religious outlooks and histories into one movement quite fascinating. How did these individuals and congregations manage to weld together such an

oxymoronic identity in a way that felt authentic to themselves and their children? How did they cope with their taboo position, claiming both Jewish and Christian identity and being shunned by Jewish and Christian denominations alike? Finally, what does the existence of Jewish Christianity say about contemporary American religion and the breaking down of normative religious boundaries in favor of creative reconfigurations and recombinations? These were the questions that motivated my research.

I can't say that my study changed my mind about them, because I had few preconceived notions of what I would find. I did discover that the Messianic Jews did manage to establish a religious movement that was both dynamic and stable.

Shabbat Shalom: The phrase Messianic Judaism seems to be self-contradictory; if the word "messianic" is the translation of the word "Christian," how could

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Judaism be Christian? Or is Christianity Jewish? Could you elaborate on this paradox?

Harris-Shapiro: Here I need to differ with the question. “Messianic” is not a translation of “Christian”; rather, it is the other way around. The “Christ” means “the anointed one” in Greek, but this concept is taken from the Hebrew “mashiach,” from which the English word “messiah” derives. In the Hebrew Bible, “mashiach” refers primarily to kings, who were routinely anointed as part of their inauguration into office. Even non-Jewish kings (such as Cyrus of Persia) were referred to by that name. Because the prophets envisioned a future of peace and prosperity where a kingly descendant of David, a “Messiah,” would rule, Jews since that time have looked for the Messiah to bring about just such a paradise on earth. It was this expectation that led to the acceptance of Jesus of Nazareth by his first disciples; when he died before such a kingdom could be established, Paul and the early Christian church newly interpreted the task of the Messiah as dying to save a sinful humanity, and the Messianic figure as divine rather than human. Now both communities look toward their respective Messiahs (in the Christian second coming and the Jewish first coming) to establish that long-awaited peaceable kingdom.

Thus, as Jewish counter-missionaries proclaim, “We are all Messianic Jews”—that is, traditional Judaism also speaks about a Messiah to come and expects great things of him at the end of days. However, the question is correct to this extent—it is true that Messianic Jews are referring to Jesus of Nazareth when they

use the word “messianic.”

For Messianic Jews, belief in Jesus as Lord and Savior was originally a Jewish faith, rejected wrongly by Jesus’ Jewish brethren and tainted by Gentile Christians who imposed the rituals of Rome and forbade Jewish observances. Messianic Jews believe that the Hebrew Bible, especially in the Book of Isaiah, clearly foretold Jesus; they emphasize Jesus’ and Paul’s Jewish origins and Jewish observances, and they note that the first disciples around Jesus were all Jewish. While Messianic congregations accept that Gentile Christians are their spiritual brethren, Gentile believers are only the branches grafted onto the original tree, the tree of Israel and the Jewish people, using Paul’s evocative image. For Messianic Judaism true Christianity is Jewish, and their own form of observance, following a Jewish holiday calendar infused with Christological content, is far superior to following the rites of Christmas and Easter taken from pagan cultures. Messianics would also argue that true Judaism is Christianity, because Jews for two thousand years, in their view, have been blinded to the reality that Jesus was their Jewish messiah, and that without Jesus (or Yeshua, the Hebraized version of the name that most Messianic congregations adopt) one is unsaved, not spiritual, and liable to end up in hell. While traditional and modern Judaism have their good points, Messianic Jews believe that the path they offer to God is at best incomplete and at worst untrue if it is without the saving power of Yeshua.

In order to accomplish this feat of myth-making, however, the Messianic movement needs to ignore 2,000 years of history

in which Jewish and Christian distinctiveness decisively shaped the destinies of the two separate communities. It is this history, embedded in the vast array of theological and communal expressions in Christendom and the texts and traditions in worldwide Jewry, that makes the two religions what they are, and causes their rejection by Judaism as a whole and by some segments of the Christian world. Despite some claims of reconstituting original first-century Jewish Christianity, Messianic congregations will mix in practices from Judaism that originated as late as the 1600s with Christian theology (for example, the Trinity) that certainly was not fully developed until several hundred years after the Jewish/Christian divide. It is this amalgamation, often with no historical consciousness or concern, that encourages many Christians to label the movement inauthentic, as it is the belief in Jesus that decisively removes this group from Judaism, according to all Jewish authorities. For Jews, belief in Jesus is not just a fundamental theological error, but also a sociological betrayal; after the millenia of persecution in which the Church was the primary forerunner of vicious anti-Judaism, taking on the belief in Jesus is still seen by many Jews as psychologically entering the enemy camp. It’s fine for non-Jews, but unforgivable for Jews.

***Shabbat Shalom:* What is Messianic Judaism as a contemporary movement?**

Harris-Shapiro: Messianic Judaism is a loosely connected movement of congregations that combine evangelical conservative Christian theology with Jewish practices. There are two main congregational associa-

tions, most notably the Union of Messianic Jewish Congregations and the International Alliance of Messianic Congregations and Synagogues, each with about seventy congregations and a handful of international congregations in countries such as Brazil, the Ukraine, Canada, and Israel. A fuller list of congregations and fellowships available at www.yashanet.com lists over 400 congregations in the United States; the discrepancy in numbers is due to some congregations being sponsored by other organizations, such as independent Messianic outreach ministries, by Christian denominations such as the Southern Baptists and Assemblies of God, and some being completely independent of any larger congregational organization. The size of these congregations is often very small; a congregation containing three to four hundred adult members would be among the largest, and it is very common that a congregation only includes forty to fifty adults. Out of these members, perhaps half, on average, are of Jewish origin, and in some locations the percentage of Gentiles can climb to 80-90%. These Gentile members are either married to Jewish members or have joined to experience a Christianity that they believe is far closer to the original than in their churches of origin. Even the religious leaders can be Messianic pastors (not Jewish) as well as Messianic rabbis (of Jewish birth). The movement also has rabbinical schools, day and supplementary schools for Messianic Jewish children, fundraising arms for outreach, a book publisher, and numerous musical groups, artists, and video producers to create a veritable industry in the Messianic Jewish arts.

It is difficult to ascertain the numbers in the movement. Based on the number of congregations calling themselves Messianic and

the average size of a congregation, perhaps 20,000 Americans are aligned with the Messianic Jewish movement, out of which perhaps half or less come from families with any Jewish heritage.

Shabbat Shalom: How do Jews see this movement?

Harris-Shapiro: Jews see this movement as “blackface Judaism.” Just as white minstrel performers in the 19th century put on blackface in order to appear more

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authentic when singing spirituals from the African-American community, so too Jews see Messianic Jews sporting skullcaps and prayershawls, reading from the Torah scroll and dropping Hebrew phrases in conversation as putting a Jewish disguise over fundamentalist Christianity. Just as blackface was highly offensive to the African-American community, such a pseudo-Judaism is equally offensive to Jewish individuals and groups. “If these people are following Christ as their Lord and Savior, something that in Judaism is idolatry (making a human being into God), then they should properly be called Christians, not Jews,” goes this line of reasoning. The reason for such a disguise is even more offensive in the Jewish community’s view: using Gentile Christian monies for advertising and to fund their congregations, trying to lure unsuspecting and ignorant Jews into a Messianic setting, then convince them falsely that the best form of Judaism is really Christianity. Add the historical memory of millennia of Christian persecution, and it is clear that the existence of Messianic Judaism has engendered real anger in the Jewish population. Countermissionary organizations such as Jews for Judaism try to educate young Jews not to be fooled by Messianic Jewish or

evangelical Christian missionaries, and try to “rescue” those flirting with joining a Messianic Jewish group. Though Jews have disagreements with one another (and these are both wide and deep), all of organized Jewry has united in actively condemning Messianic Judaism.

Shabbat Shalom: How do Christians see this movement?

Harris-Shapiro: The answer to this depends upon the Christian. There are some evangelical Christian churches who do believe that those born Jewish have a special destiny as believers, should follow Jewish practices, and will have a special role in the end-time, as do Messianic Jews. These churches not only support Messianic Jewish ministries with their dollars, but open Messianic Jewish synagogues of their own. There are other evangelical Christian churches who are just as fervent in their theological beliefs, but believe that the Church is the New Israel, that there is no role for “Israel in the flesh,” and that Messianic Jews are misguided in remaining separate and, in some views, elitist. There are some Christian churches, both liberal and evangelical, who see the Jewish practices of Messianic Jews as “ethnically sensitive,” no different than a Korean or a Liberian church. Liberal Christian churches, and in some instances the Catholic Church, have been outspoken in their rejection of Messianic Judaism, in accord with their own theological positions that affirm that Jews have an ongoing relationship to God without Jesus and don’t need to be converted.

Shabbat Shalom: What is the difference between Messianic Judaism and Christianity?

Harris-Shapiro: According to Jews and some liberal Christians, nothing. According to supportive Christians, it is a style of worship (even an ethnic style) that in no

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way affects the truth of the Gospel that is being fostered in the congregations. According to Messianic Jews themselves, Messianic Judaism is both true Judaism and true Christianity, the way the faith should have been lived before the “artificial” bifurcation in history that resulted in separate Jewish and Christian communities.

***Shabbat Shalom:* In what way do Messianic Jews regard themselves as Jews and relate themselves to Judaism or the Jewish community at large?**

Harris-Shapiro: Messianic Jews will claim that they, as well as the Jewish community at large, have tremendous commonalities. They too celebrate Jewish holidays and life cycle events (such as the bar mitzvah), support Israel, and care about their Jewish brethren overseas. They associate with suffering due to anti-Semitism; many of the congregations' featured speakers have been Jesus-believing Jews who have survived the Holocaust, and they are quick to point out

discussion of their views about Yeshua, they will be quickly escorted to the door. The same was true of contributions for Israel made to mainstream Jewish organizations. Once they learned this came from Messianic Jewish organizations and individuals, the money was returned. This is often too uncomfortable for Messianic Jews, and they don't really connect organizationally with other Jews. The children growing up in the Messianic movement, especially, may have little or no contact with the Jewish community at large except through books about Judaism and through extended Jewish family. There is truly little interaction.

***Shabbat Shalom:* How do Messianic Jews address the tension between the traditional Jewish reference to Torah and the Christian faith in God's grace?**

Harris-Shapiro: It is a mistake to assume that Judaism has no idea of God's grace. Indeed, there

enriching rather than onerous, because one's salvation doesn't depend upon them. There are those Messianic Jews who say that the commandments are still binding, because even with the grace given by Yeshua, God wants us to live good and holy lives, but these “Torah-observant” Messianic Jews are in a distinct minority (in a few celebrated cases, they've actually become Orthodox Jews, giving up their belief in Yeshua).

***Shabbat Shalom:* What is the future of Messianic Judaism? What are the challenges and tensions that threaten its existence?**

Harris-Shapiro: The biggest challenge for Messianic Judaism today is to keep their children as a strong second generation in the movement, rather than see them enter more normative forms of evangelical Christianity or “unsaved” Judaism. A second challenge is to interest “unsaved” Jews to accept Yeshua, something that has been far less successful since the first great expansion of the movement in the 1970s. Finally, they have the ongoing question of how to align themselves sociologically, politically, and theologically both with Gentile evangelical Christian churches and the Jewish community, a question that is resolved differently in each congregational movement, each congregation, and each Messianic Jewish family. This, however, does create some friction between congregational organizations and within individual congregations. Other issues are the role of the Gentile family in a Messianic Jewish congregation—can they convert to Judaism? If not, can they equally participate in all Jewish rituals (such as circumcision or bar mitzvah for their sons)? Can a Gentile become a Messianic rabbi? In a substantial number of Messianic congregations today, the answer to all three

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any incidence of anti-Semitism affecting their own congregations (such as swastika painting incidents). Moreover, they also believe that by reaching out to the Jewish community, particularly with the good news of Yeshua, they are rendering the best service they can to their own “lost” people.

Some Messianic Jews try to become members of mainstream Jewish organizations such as Jewish Community Centers or Hadassah (a woman's organization that supports Israel) and take degrees from Jewish institutions of higher learning. However, they need to keep their identity and faith under wraps. With any

is a perfectly good word used in the Hebrew Bible to express just this idea of God's unmerited lovingkindness—*hesed*. It is a distortion to assume that in Judaism one must follow all of the commandments or be rejected by God—that is where God's love and forgiveness come to the fore, and God's recognition that human beings, even at their best, are far from perfect. However, Messianic Jews do follow a Christian line of argument about Law and Grace, asserting that Judaism without Yeshua is just a religion of Law devoid of God's mercy. Only with Yeshua, they claim, can one find the commandments of God

questions is “no,” creating a kind of second-tier system that can be hurtful to Gentile families. Finally, the role of women in leadership is an active one that has not yet been resolved.

The future of Messianic Judaism is interesting. They are attempting to appeal today to the rapidly increasing numbers of intermarried families as a third alternative that honors both Judaism and Christianity. While this may be a successful strategy for some of these families, Jews who marry non-Jews tend to be far less interested in Judaism and in religion in general than those who intermarry. Thus, the Jewish partner is likely to be even more skeptical about religion than the average, and would probably not be generally attracted to such an intense form of religious expression. On the other hand, children of intermarried families raised in “both religions,” while completely comfortable in neither, may find Messianic Judaism a congenial religious home. As such children are entering adulthood in unprecedented numbers, only time will tell.

***Shabbat Shalom:* Do you think that some day Messianic Judaism will be accepted by Jews as a Jewish movement? What, in your view, would be the conditions which would lead to that recognition?**

Harris-Shapiro: Unless intermarriage rises to such an extent that belief in Jesus becomes normative in Jewish congregational settings, the answer is a clear “no.” Even for Jews of very little knowledge or faith, the one thing that makes their identity distinctive in our largely Christian nation is that they are not Christian. Other Jews, more connected to Judaism, understand that Judaism and Christianity simply affirm different things about the nature of God, of humanity, and of the world, and do not accept

Christian theology. And, as outlined above, a vast majority of Jews simply find the “blackface” of Messianic Judaism, as compared to the openness of standard Christianity, outrageous and offensive.

***Shabbat Shalom:* Do you think that Messianic Judaism could play a role in the history of Jewish-Christian relations?**

Harris-Shapiro: Messianic Judaism has already played a role in the history of Jewish-Christian relations—a negative one. Relations with evangelical Christian groups that support Messianic Judaism, such as the Southern Baptists, have gone from bad to worse over the issue, and recently the Presbyterian Church USA was lambasted soundly by national Jewish groups for their support

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of a Messianic synagogue in Plymouth Meeting, Pennsylvania. (In part because of intensive Jewish dialogue with Presbyterians on the local and national level, monies from the Presbyterian Church to support this congregation have been withdrawn.)

On a more positive note, what Messianic Jews say they are accomplishing (reducing anti-Jewish attitudes in evangelical churches through outreach and education) may actually be happening. Evangelical Christian church members learning about Jewish practices and rituals from Messianic groups, and meeting them at conventions, could indeed move individuals and groups away from a suspicion or ignorance about Judaism to a greater appreciation of Judaism and of Jesus and Paul as Jews. However, there is still somewhat of a leap from positively regarding Jesus-believing Jews to positively regarding all

Jews.

***Shabbat Shalom:* What are your criticisms about Messianic Judaism and what are your dreams for it?**

Harris-Shapiro: As a scholar, I find the movement endlessly fascinating, and my role as a scholar certainly would not be to criticize either the movement or the people in it, whom I believe to be sincere in their mission to save the Jewish people through spreading belief in Yeshua and sincere in trying to reconstruct a kind of first-century Christianity that effortlessly blends Christian belief with Jewish practice, historical glitches to the contrary. In my intensive research of one congregation, I found individuals whose lives were transformed by their new beliefs, and families simply trying to lead godly lives. I also saw abuses of power and exclusion. In short, I saw a typical congregation, both the good and the bad. I find the very existence of this movement both a tribute to the religious freedom we have in the United States, and the long road that Christianity has come from denouncing Jews as “Christ killers” to delighting in Christians of Jewish origin who follow Jewish rituals in their daily lives.

As a rabbi and an observant Jew, I think Messianic Jews are wrong about so many things—their interpretations of the Bible, their understanding of history, their assumption that traditional Judaism is “incomplete” without Yeshua. I view them as religious competition for the minds and hearts of my fellow Jews, and I actually appreciate that such competition spurs the Jewish community at large to provide more and better spiritual opportunities for its own people. The United States has proven that religious competition makes religions stronger, not weaker, and so as long as Messianic Judaism is around, it spurs the Jewish community onward to spiritual growth. Not a bad outcome.