

Yeshua VS. The Hasidic Tsadik

An Exploration into the Theology of the Tsadik

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Within our modern culture and societies there are a plethora of different beliefs. Christianity has many different branches, and even within those branches we see offshoots. A Baptist is no longer just a Baptist, but must define what type of Baptist they are. Southern, reform, seventh day, etc. While many people in our western culture understand this break down within Christianity, it seems to be lost when speaking about Judaism. Even those that understand the four major branches of Judaism (reform, conservative, orthodox and Hasidic) consider the identity lines within this religious structure to all fit within these definitions. Now, to muddy the waters even more we have seen the rise of “Messianic Judaism.” Even within this title we begin to see numerous issues that need to be addressed. The word “Messianic” stems from the word “Messiah”, and denotes one “who is inspired by hope or belief in a Messiah.” (Definition taken from the *Oxford American Dictionary*) With this definition we could rightly say that almost all Judaisms today are Messianic. Beyond this, with such a definition, every branch of Christianity today falls under the title “Messianic”. Perhaps this is fitting as Messianic Judaism tends to have one foot in both camps. But the real trouble comes when we attach the word “Judaism”.

While I don't believe I will give the ground breaking definition that will answer the age old question of “who is a Jew”, I will attempt to give a definition of what “Judaism” is, and in so doing will attempt to show that “Messianic Judaism” is not in fact a part of Judaism as can be defined today. I will then attempt to demonstrate similarities between Hasidic Jewish theology and Messianic Judaism in an effort to show that both of these groups took some specific theology from the the followers of “The Way”, i.e., first century Messianic Judaism. My contention is, while Messianic Judaism does not fall under the modern definition of “Judaism”, Hasidic Judaism has borrowed theological beliefs (even if unknowingly) from Messianic Judaism, thus challenging the concept of Judaism as a whole within our modern times.

What is Judaism?

I am not attempting to define what makes a person a Jew, or Jewish. Rather I am

attempting to define a religious order to which one holds, i.e., how do we know if a person is practicing Judaism? This short definition is nothing more than a summary of thought, as I don't believe I will give such a mountain of a topic the justice it deserves in such a short exposition. Others such as Michael L. Satlow, in his article "Defining Judaism: Accounting for 'religions' in the study of religion", as well as Michael Fishbane in chapter three of his book *Judaism: "Revelation and traditions"*, have given a much more in depth look at this topic and the theological implications that come when answering such a question. My definition is an attempt to define Judaism as those, in our modern time, who practice "Judaism" might see it, also giving consideration to the scholarly view of Judaism by weighing both Satlow and Fishbane's work (cited above). In so doing I hope to formulate a broad understanding of Judaism as it is today. Both Satlow and Fishbane would most likely disagree with my minimal description of Judaism, yet with respect to the discussion of defining this religious order in our modern times, I am only trying to present a bare bones definition.

One thing I believe Satlow has shown within his work is that the definition of Judaism has changed throughout time and geographical location (Satlow, p. 10). Thus, a definition of Judaism in 1CE, is going to be different than the definition in 101CE (perhaps even more so within this specific time frame as the temple was destroyed). Likewise, defining Judaism in the 4th century CE. is going to be different than defining Judaism in our current time.

With this in mind, I agree with both Satlow and Fishbane that those who practice Judaism consider specific writings to be authoritative. Even within the different levels of halachic observance, certain books are held by those who practice "Judaism" as authoritative. In our modern time those that hold to Judaism affirm, at the very least, the Torah, Mishnah and Talmud as carrying divine authority. Those that practice Judaism are required to observe the five high holy days, as well as keep a kosher diet. Yet, since the seventh century (and perhaps even later) a kosher diet has grown to encompass the separation of milk and meat. What is more, those that practice Judaism believe that anyone who claims to be divine is a heretic, thus Yeshua, according to modern Judaism, was a heretic and the belief that He was the Messiah goes contrary to the very beliefs of this religious order. Therefore, according to my definition, those that practice Judaism in our modern time hold to a dietary standard (even if this fluctuates between different groups), authoritative books (even if various groups accept

certain parts of these books as authoritative over other parts of the same book), and adherence to specific Jewish holidays (and traditions).

I am fully aware that this definition brings its own set of problems, however, the task of defining “Judaism” is one that is much easier said than done. From the outset of this definition, we may notice a specific issue. Those who say they practice Judaism but are not as “orthodox” as others are left outside my definition. Some within the Conservative tradition and almost all of the Reform sect are now placed outside this description of Judaism (something with which many orthodox would happily agree). While some within the Conservative sect might be walking the line of Judaism, they might better be considered a fringe group, much like the Seventh Day Adventists within Christianity. However, if given this definition, those within the Reform and Messianic sects might better be likened to the Mormons within Christianity. They hold to some of the same basic teachings, but they have rejected some fundamentally core beliefs, and therefore, have gone off the proverbial deep end. Although many within these sects consider and call themselves part of Judaism, the majority of Torah observant Judaism do not. Perhaps more important to note is the fact that anyone who affirms Yeshua as the Messiah is then left out of such a tradition, making the term “Messianic Judaism” an oxymoron in and of itself.

Many might disagree with this assessment by stating that the followers of “The Way”, i.e., “Messianic Jews” in the first century were certainly a viable sect of Judaism. To this I fully agree. Those that practiced Judaism in the first century while fully affirming that Yeshua was the Messiah were indeed a sect of Judaism... in that time. According to my definition, there was no such thing as “Judaism” as we know it today, within the first century. The Mishnah and Talmud both had yet to be written. Separating milk and meat was not even considered in the 1st century, and many within Judaism were still waiting to see if Yeshua was the long awaited Messiah. This however, has changed. Judaism is not what it once was.

The Theological Formation of the Tsadik

I will now turn my attention to a specific theology that is held by many sects that fall under my definition of Judaism and the more specific title “Hasidic”.

Joseph Dan in his article titled *Hasidism: Teachings and Literature*¹ in the Yivo Encyclopedia (from now on abbreviated “JDYE”) states that the concept of a leader being responsible for the spiritual life and acting as the intermediary between such a community and God, was first taught by the Ba’al Shem Tov. This teaching was later formulated by Elimelech of Lizhensk and Ya’akov Yitshak Horowitz, the Seer of Lublin, as the theology of the “tsadik”. JDYE states that the “conception of religious leadership that resulted came to dominate – and distinguish – Hasidism.” Dan goes on to say, “Without adherence to a leader and his dynasty, there is no Hasidism.” Thus the theology of the tsadik within Hasidic communities is foundational, as well as a necessary identity marker for groups labeled as such. While this foundational belief was formulated for Jewish communities in the later half of the 18th century, it is my belief that such a doctrine was alive and central for observant Jewish believers of Yeshua since the first century. While the Hasidic wings of Judaism would strongly object to the notion that any of their theology stemmed from some form of “Christianity”, the similarities between the Hasidic belief in a tsadik, and the Messianic Jewish role of Yeshua within believing communities are striking (Christianity not excluded).

The Tsadik in Hasidic and Messianic Belief

The core of the theory of the *tsadik* maintains that there is a pact between the leader and his community, which exists on two levels, spiritual and physical. On each level, the duties of the leader and those of the community are clearly specified. On the spiritual level, the community owes the *tsadik* complete faith and loyalty. It has to perceive him as the intermediary between themselves and God—as the divine representative in their midst—and their worship of God is to be directed through him. Complete loyalty to the *tsadik* and his dynasty on the part of the Hasidim and their families is demanded, and a Hasid identifies himself according to this dynasty. (JDEY)

From the outset of this description, we see parallels between the theology of the tzadik and the relationship that Yeshua has with his followers. A Hassidic community “owes the tsadik complete faith and loyalty.”

For God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish, but have eternal life. He who believes in Him is not

1. http://www.yivoencyclopedia.org/article.aspx/Hasidism/Teachings_and_Literature

judged; he who does not believe has been judged already, because he has not believe in the name of the only begotten son of God. (John 3:16, 18)

But the Scripture has shut up everyone under sin so that the promise by faith in Yeshua the Messiah might be given to those who believe. (Gal. 3:22)

And Yeshua cried out and said, “He who believes in me, does not believe in Me but in Him who sent Me. (John 12:44)

“It has to perceive him as the intermediary between themselves and God”

Yeshua said to him, “I am the way, and the truth, and the life; no one comes to the Father but through me. (John 14:6)

But now He has obtained a more excellent ministry, by as much as He is also the mediator of a better covenant, which has been enacted on better promises. (Heb. 8:6)

For there is one God, and one mediator also between God and men, the man Messiah Yeshua. (1 Tim. 2:5)

“as the divine representative in their midst”

He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation. (Col. 1:15)

I and the Father are one. (John 10:30)

“and their worship of God is to be directed through him.”

Yeshua answered him, “It is written, ‘You shall worship the Lord your God and serve Him only.’” (Luke 4:8)

After coming into the house they saw the child with Mary His mother; and they fell to the ground and worshiped Him... (Matt. 2:11)

And he said, “Lord, I believe.” And he worshiped Him. (John 9:36)

“Complete loyalty to the *tsadik* and his dynasty on the part of the Hasidim and their families is demanded, and a Hasid identifies himself according to this dynasty.”

The concept of loyalty to a dynasty is not lost within Messianic Judaism (or Christianity and traditional Judaism). Yeshua was to come through the line of King David (2 Sam. 7:16-19), and the writer of Matthew begins by showing that Yeshua has come through this dynasty. Thus, the kingly dynasty that has been maintained by Judaism and Christianity since the time of David, is the same loyalty that Messianics have, and therefore, translates to direct loyalty of the Messianic Jewish *tsadik*'s dynasty, i.e. loyalty to Yeshua's dynastic line. Beyond this, those that follow Yeshua as the true Messiah, and the leader of their sect, (i.e. their *tsadik*) find identity within Him.

“For his part, the *tsadik* uses the faith that the community puts in him in order to focus the spiritual power of all of them together; he aims to employ it, on earth and in the divine world, to protect and advance the spiritual needs of the community. The *tsadik* uses this power in

order to uplift his followers' prayers to the divine world, pleading that their sins be forgiven and their repentance accepted and that divine providence be perpetually extended to them.” (JDYE)

Once again we see parallels.

Who is the one who condemns? Messiah Yeshua is He who died, yes, rather who was raised, who is at the right hand of God, who intercedes for us. (Rom. 8:34)

But so that you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins. (Matt. 9:6)

And Yeshua seeing their faith said to the paralytic, “son, your sins are forgiven.” (Mark 2:5)

...The *tsadik*'s role as an intermediary requires him to move, spiritually, from the divine realm to earth and vice versa, in a constant rhythm. (JDYE)

For Messiah did not enter a holy place made with hands, a copy of the true one, but into heaven itself, now to appear in the presence of God for us. (Heb. 9:24)

lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age. (Matt. 28:20)

The doctrine of Messianic Judaism has always held that the Messiah Yeshua sat down at the right hand of the Father in the heavenly places (Acts 22:33, Rom. 8:34, Eph. 1:20, Col. 3:1, Heb. 1:3 and more), yet is in the midst of His community always. Thus the notion that the head of a community can move from the spiritual throne room of God, to the physical world of his people, is one that has been established since the ascension of Yeshua.

“The *tsadik*, in turn, had three primary material obligations relevant to each of his adherents. First, it was his responsibility to endow every one of his believers with sons, health, and livelihood. Throughout the history of Hasidism, extending to today, the *tsadik* has used all of his powers to ensure that each adherent will have at least one male offspring. Second, the *tsadik* prays, and sometimes intervenes with regard to medical treatments, for the health of his Hasidim and their families. Finally, he gives detailed advice, direction, and assistance concerning choices of employment and business, so as to make possible at least a modest standard of living.” (JDYE)

While this might seem out of the realm of possibility, Yeshua's followers are even more specific, saying that their Tsadik is in control of every aspect of their lives. The idea that Yeshua has complete control over His followers lives and their well being, and will give or withhold whatever He deems in their best interested is established within the Apostolic

Scriptures.

And Yeshua came up and spoke to them, saying, “all authority has been given to me in heaven and on earth” (Matt. 28:18)

For by Him all things were created, both in the heavens and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers of authorities – all things have been created through Him and for Him. (Col. 1:16)

Messianic Judaism has always taught that Yeshua is the one who has the power to produce offspring for His followers, as well as direct them in their daily lives. Beyond giving these things to His followers, it is He that provides these things for the entire world. Thus, from a Messianic Jewish perspective, it is our Tsadik that grants blessings to the tsadiks of other communities, and ultimately to their followers. There is nothing that the tsadik of a community can do to help their followers, but rather, it is our Tsadik that grants such blessings.

Beyond all this, the first citation of anyone calling their leader a tsadik is in the first-century work by a follower of Yeshua.

My little Children, I am writing these things to you so that you may not sin. And if anyone sins, we have an advocate with the Father, Yeshua the Messiah, the Tsadik. (1 John 2:1)

Conclusion

We have seen that the term “Messianic Judaism” carries a set of problems from the outset. Many Christians would say that a belief in Yeshua as the Messiah brings us under the umbrella of Christianity, even if we are practicing things that “look Jewish”. On the reverse side, many non-believing practicing Jews would take great offense at the idea that those within Messianic Judaism are claiming to practice some form of Judaism. Groups such as the Breslov, Bobovers, Satmars, and the very vocal Chabad Lubavitch might claim that Messianics are borrowing practices and rituals that are not rightly ours. However, it is my belief that if modern Hasidism can say that Messianics are wrongly taking ritual and tradition from the ancient religious order known as Judaism, then it should just as well be said that Messianics and Christians are rightly the first “Hasidic” order and that modern Hasidism has borrowed our theology of the Tsadik.

I have no problem giving up the term “Messianic Judaism”, and would just as well call myself a “Messianic Believer”, a “Messianic” or perhaps we should simply call ourselves what the Messiah told us to be, “Disciples of Yeshua.” It is my contention that the religious order that now identifies itself as Messianic Judaism originally formed out of a Judaism of the first century. Yet Hasidic Judaism simply borrowed a theology that, at the time, had been held by believers in Yeshua for almost 1800 years. But perhaps what should be even more apparent to those of us who do believe in Yeshua, is that we have the true Tsadik leading our communities on a daily basis. He is our mediator between this world and the throne room of God. He oversees our well-being, and our daily lives. We place total faith in Him and have complete loyalty to Him and His dynasty. He is the true Tsadik.