

# YOM KIPPUR & THE MESSIANIC BELIEVER

notes by Tim Hegg

The Messianic movement today is, in many ways, an expression of a dilemma that faced the early communities of believers in Yeshua and, to one extent or another, has faced believing communities throughout the centuries. This dilemma may be couched in various ways, but the essence of it may be summed up in two primary questions:

- 1) What relationship do the followers of Yeshua have to the Torah (the five books of Moses)?
- 2) What relationship do the followers of Yeshua have to the accumulated Jewish traditions that have defined and characterized Torah life among the Jewish people since the rise of rabbinic Judaism?

In essence, these two questions may be stated more succinctly: What is our relationship to the Written and Oral Torahs? For the Messianic, the Written Torah is defined as foundationally the five books of Moses (Genesis – Deuteronomy) but fully as the whole of the Scriptures—the Tanach and the Apostolic Scriptures. The Oral Torah consists primarily of the Mishnah and more fully in the evolving rabbinic traditions and *halachah* as expanded in the Talmuds (*halachah*), midrashim (*aggadah*), and other legal treatises such as the *Shulcan Aruk*.

The question of our relationship with the Written Torah has been fairly agreed upon by most Messianics (though this is becoming more and more questioned by some groups), namely, that the Scriptures form the primary basis for our beliefs and our living out of these beliefs, or to put it more conventionally, for our faith and *halachah*. We have rejected the Christian doctrine, that the Apostolic Scriptures have, to one extent or another, cancelled or replaced the Tanach as an authoritative standard for faith and *halachah*. But having received the Torah as the viable, eternal revelation and will of God for His people, we often struggle to know *how* we are to obey the commandments of God in light of the fact that there is no functioning Temple or priesthood, and most of us reside in the diaspora outside of the Land. Many of the commandments found in the Torah are attached in one way or another to the Temple, priesthood, and the Land.

Of course, this same dilemma faced the communities of The Way. There was no question about receiving God’s Torah—the Scriptures—as the very revelation of God and the basis for one’s faith and practice as a follower of Yeshua. After all, Yeshua Himself had explicitly taught that even the smallest stroke and letter of the Torah and the Prophets were eternally established as God’s will for His people (Matt 5:17–20). But in just as explicit words, Yeshua had denounced some of the Pharisaic *halachah* as placing an unnecessary burden upon people, a burden that resulted not only in the neglect of biblical commandments, but in some cases even invalidating and setting aside the word of God (Mk 7:8–9, 13).

Given this teaching of Yeshua, it is clear that the communities of the The Way were apparently “mixed” in their acceptance of the rabbinic authorities. For instance, the scenario portrayed by Paul in Rom 14, where some (apparently) remained under the authority of the Great Sanhedrin in Jerusalem regarding which days were appropriate for fasting and which were not<sup>1</sup> or whether secondary and tertiary separation of foods (particularly meat) were required to make them kosher for consumption. Eventually, it would seem, the expulsion of Yeshua followers from the traditional

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1 Cp. *Didache* 8.1.

synagogues<sup>2</sup> made it evident that they could not fully submit to the rabbinic authorities and maintain their allegiance to Yeshua as the Messiah. The fact that Paul continued to give his back to the whip of the synagogue officials<sup>3</sup> in order that he might continue to be received within their circles and maintain the opportunity to speak of Messiah to them,<sup>4</sup> shows that increasingly the traditional synagogue had no place for those who were openly followers of Yeshua.

This may be the point the author of Hebrews is making when he writes:

For the bodies of those animals whose blood is brought into the holy place by the high priest as an offering for sin, are burned outside the camp. Therefore Yeshua also, that He might sanctify the people through His own blood, suffered outside the gate. So, let us go out to Him outside the camp, bearing His reproach. (Heb 13:11–13)

As followers of Yeshua, we therefore find ourselves in a position that has often been difficult to define. We affirm the ongoing viability and value of the Torah (the Scriptures) as the basis for our faith and *halachah* as we seek to walk in the footsteps of the Messiah. We also appreciate many aspects of traditional Judaism, seeking to maintain our own Jewish identity and thus our connection with the broader Jewish community. At the same time, we are unwilling to compromise in any way our open confession of Yeshua as our Messiah and Savior, and our willing worship of Him as Immanuel, God with us. Moreover, we accept without reservation that all who are truly followers of Yeshua, whether of Jewish or non-Jewish lineage, have equally received the gift of the Spirit and are therefore members of the body of Messiah without distinction.<sup>5</sup>

Now this perspective, which we believe is based squarely upon the Scriptures themselves, impacts us in regard to our *halachah* and particularly in matters relating to how we celebrate the appointed times of the Lord.<sup>6</sup> And this may be particularly true in our observance of Yom Kippur. Some messianics wonder whether our observance of Yom Kippur should be a solemn time of reflection, confession, and seeking repentance (in line with the manner in which rabbinic Judaism observes the day), or whether we should dispense altogether with the solemnity associated with Yom Kippur and turn it rather into a day of joy and happiness in light of the atonement secured for us by the death, resurrection, ascension, and intercession of our Messiah, Yeshua.

I would suggest that our observance of Yom Kippur should be both. Here is why. First, the Torah instructs us that on this day, the day of Yom Kippur, we are to afflict or humble our souls.

This shall be a permanent statute for you: in the seventh month, on the tenth day of the month, you shall humble your souls and not do any work, whether the native, or the alien who sojourns among you; for it is on this day that atonement shall be made for you to cleanse you; you will be clean from all your sins before the LORD. It is to be a sabbath of solemn rest for you, that you may humble your souls; it is a permanent statute. (Lev 16:29–31)

If there is any person who will not humble himself on this same day, he shall be cut off from his people..... It is to be a sabbath of complete rest to you, and you shall humble your

2 Cf. Matt 10:17; 23:34; Mk 13:9; Lk 12:11; 21:12; Jn 9:22; 12:42; 16:2; Acts 13:49–51.

3 2Cor 11:24.

4 This is my understanding of 1Cor 9:20. See my paper, “All Things to All Men: Paul and the Torah in 1Cor 9:9–13,” available at [www.torahresource.com](http://www.torahresource.com).

5 Acts 15:9.

6 Lev 23:1–2.

souls; on the ninth of the month at evening, from evening until evening you shall keep your sabbath. (Lev. 23:28, 32)

This commandment was given to Israel as a whole, which included those who had genuine faith in the coming Messiah, and who understood that God had removed their transgressions from them. Thus David writes in Psalm 32:1–2,

How blessed is he whose transgression is forgiven, whose sin is covered! How blessed is the man to whom the LORD does not impute iniquity, and in whose spirit there is no deceit!

So even before the coming of the Messiah, those who like Abraham were reckoned as righteous by God on the basis of their faith, observed Yom Kippur as a solemn day in which they humbled their souls.

What does it mean to “humble” or “afflict” one’s soul? The Hebrew word used in the Yom Kippur texts is עָנָה, *‘anah*. This cluster of consonants apparently has a number of different Semitic roots. One root has the idea of “to answer” or “give a reply.” Another means “to be wretched” or “to be bowed down,” “to suffer” or “to be troubled.” Yet another root means “to sing” (perhaps in the sense of antiphonal responses in song). Quite obviously, in the Yom Kippur texts of Leviticus, the meaning of the verb עָנָה, is “to be bowed down” (thus the English translations that use “humbled”) or to “be afflicted.”

In the poetic lines of Is 58:3, 5, the verb עָנָה is parallel to fasting:

Why have we fasted and You do not see? Why have we humbled ourselves and You do not notice? (v. 3)

Is it a fast like this which I choose, a day for a man to humble himself? (v. 5)

The same parallelism is seen in Ps 35:13,

But as for me, when they were sick, my clothing was sackcloth; I humbled my soul with fasting, and my prayer kept returning to my bosom.

Here we have a good indication that one way a person may humble or afflict one’s soul is through fasting, and this became the traditional understanding of what the Torah commandment requires: that a person fast on Yom Kippur in order to humble or afflict one’s soul (oneself).

So humbling or afflicting our souls on the appointed day of Yom Kippur is first something we do in obedience to God’s commandment. We do it because our King told us to.

Second, Yom Kippur affords us a set time to stop and make an honest assessment of our own faith and progress in sanctification. Paul admonishes us to test ourselves to see if we are in the faith:

Test yourselves to see if you are in the faith; examine yourselves! Or do you not recognize this about yourselves, that Yeshua Messiah is in you—unless indeed you fail the test? (2Cor 13:5)

Among popular Christianity, testing oneself in regard to one’s faith is not often emphasized. Some would even say that such an exercise brings doubting, and that this is contrary to faith. But the Apostle tells us to do so. Yom Kippur, a day that incorporates a solemn reflection upon one’s own

soul, affords the opportunity to take a more complete inventory of one's own walk with the Lord, and to affirm a genuine faith in Yeshua as the only way to the Father (Jn 14:6).

Paul likewise exhorts us that “each one must examine his own work” (Gal 6:4), by which he means that each one should take stock of how he or she is bearing the burdens of others and thus fulfilling the Torah of Messiah. In other words, each of us is to examine how we are loving our neighbor—how we are progressing in the “law of love.” Once again, a traditional theme for Yom Kippur is that it is a time to make sure we have repaired relationships with others, paid our debts, and sought forgiveness from those against whom we may have sinned. This yearly appointed time helps us keep short accounts with others, and to not allow breaches in our relationships to fester into an incurable wound. But this also requires a humbling of our souls. Perhaps nothing is more humbling than to admit that we have been wrong and to seek forgiveness from the one against whom we have sinned. But doing so moves us forward in becoming holy, to becoming conformed to the image of the One we confess to be Messiah and Lord.

Third, whether we like to admit it or not, it is a characteristic of our fallen human nature that we tend to take for granted things of immense importance. We sometimes take for granted the love extended to us by those who confess to love. But specifically in terms of our relationship to God through Yeshua, we even may take for granted the infinite price that was paid for our atonement. Our confession of faith in Yeshua may sometime become perfunctory, so that we can, almost nonchalantly, say “all my sins are forgiven” without being moved in our souls at the wonder of such a great salvation that we have been given. In many ways, the appointed times of the Lord safeguard us from such a detached, purely intellectual perspective of our faith, and Yom Kippur perhaps most of all. On this day we stop and contemplate, even as we fast and do a thorough soul inventory, the atonement made for us by the death of Yeshua, and are once again given the time to consider what riches He forfeited to make us rich.

So in these ways, we are right to adopt the traditional perspective of Yom Kippur as a solemn day in which we rightly afflict our souls and consider most deeply our relationship to God through Yeshua, the cost of our redemption, and even to sorrow over our lack of love for God and our puny efforts to express our love in obedience to Him. In so doing, we seek a renewal—a rededication through repentance—to be true sons and daughters of the King whose lives express the glory of His greatness.

But there are surely aspects of the traditional observance of Yom Kippur which we reject, and we should not hesitate to do so. In rabbinic Judaism, the affliction of one's soul on Yom Kippur is, in some measure, considered to effect one's own atonement before God. Besides fasting, other aspects of self-affliction (no bathing, combing of hair, wearing of leather shoes, etc.) have become traditional. The more one denies oneself on the day, the more one is assured of forgiveness. The question of whether one's name is written in the Book of Life hinges, according to rabbinic Judaism, on what one does or does not do in the days preceding Yom Kippur, as well as on how one afflicts one's soul on the day itself. The controversial *kapparot* ceremony<sup>7</sup> is proof that there exists in rabbinic Judaism the very real sense that atonement for sin is effected by one's own acts of penitence or one's own piety.

These added measures to make Yom Kippur a most solemn day are predicated on the notion that the more one is afflicted, the more one has properly observed the day, and thus the more one

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7 The waving of a live chicken over the head and then declaring that the chicken acts as a substitute “sacrifice of atonement” for one's sins, is practiced by some within Orthodox Judaism.

may be assured of acceptance by God. Such a notion should rightly be rejected by those of us who confess Yeshua to be the One Who has obtained eternal redemption on our behalf. Even in the midst of our own solemn reflections, and our own repentance before God, we hold firmly to the truth that we are already accepted by Him, and that our names have been written in the Book of Life because of what Yeshua has done for us, not because of our sorrow over sins and failures. Indeed, our repentance before God and our willingness to seek forgiveness from our fellowman is proof of our changed heart, not the means of obtaining acceptance before God. Thus, even in our fasting on Yom Kippur, and our sober inward reflections, we have a deep settled joy as we are constantly reminded that God's forgiveness in Yeshua is assured (1Jn 1:9) and His love for us is never failing (Rom 8:35–39).

Some might question the use of the Kol Nidrei Service for Messianics. The Kol Nidrei (כּוֹל נִדְרֵי, “all the vows”) service, which takes its name from the central liturgy that begins with these words, is a request to God that vows we may have taken in the past year, which have become impossible to fulfill, be forgiven and no longer held against us. Such a request in no way seeks to nullify vows which we can fulfill, even if in fulfilling them it means personal sacrifice. In asking for such nullification of vows, we are expressing a correct perspective about vows, namely, that vows are important and that God considers them to be binding. By the Kol Nidrei, we agree with God that it is of utmost importance that we fulfill our promises. In asking God to nullify a vow which we are no longer able to fulfill, we cast ourselves upon His mercies. Instead of disregarding our vows or simply considering them to be non-binding, we take seriously what our Lord Himself taught, that “every careless word that people speak, they shall give an accounting for it in the day of judgment” (Matt 12:36).

Moreover, in the Kol Nidrei service, there is a general confession of sin in a corporate sense. Some individuals might rightly protest that the sins for which we are asking forgiveness do not apply to them specifically. And this is doubtlessly the case. But the confession is viewed as pertaining to one's solidarity to a larger community or entity. This is seen as well in the confession of Ezra on behalf of the returning exiles from Babylon (Ezra 9:4–15). This confession is a corporate one, even if it did not apply in every sense to each individual. Thus, the corporate confession of the Kol Nidrei service reminds us that we are members of a collective whole, and that in some measure, we bear the responsibility for the actions of the collective whole. This corporate solidarity may be in terms of the congregation, or even national and semi-national entities. In this prayer of confession, we seek God's mercies upon our communities, our cities and even upon our nation. We recognize that as members and citizens, we are in some measure identified with the actions of the collective whole.

But in the end, we return to the settled conviction that our sins have been paid for by the precious blood of Yeshua, as of a lamb without blemish or spot (1Pet 1:19). We rest in the promise of God, that as far as the east is from the west, so far has He removed our transgressions from us (Ps 103:12). And we never lose sight of the eternal salvation that is ours:

Now to Him who is able to keep you from stumbling,  
and to make you stand in the presence of His glory blameless with great joy,  
to the only God our Savior, through Yeshua the Messiah our Lord,  
be glory, majesty, dominion and authority,  
before all time and now and forever. Amen.

(Jude 1:24–25)