

RABBI'S RESPONSA

Shalom L'Kulam (Peace Everyone),

I got a call yesterday from a guy that I want to tell you about. Jayne, after all her years serving the Jewish community at Temple Sinai, can handle almost any inquiry (more confidently than most Jews) but every once in a while, she is stumped. Michael called and she "escalated" his question to me. He wanted to know if our congregation believed in Yeshua as Messiah. I told him "no, this is a Jewish congregation." "Yes," he told me, "I googled "Messianic Jewish communities" and your temple came up." (By the way, I checked it afterward and we do not). And I found myself explaining some things to him that I think would be valuable to explain to you, too.

I explained to him that Yeshua is a Hebrew name for Jesus and that a person who believes in this man as Messiah believes that he was anointed by God – he was christened as Christ...thereby making that believer, by definition, a "Christian." This belief is incompatible with the Jewish beliefs about the Messiah and so, any congregation he called that is Jewish won't believe in Jesus as Messiah and any place that believes in Jesus is, de facto, not Jewish.

Then, he asked the next questions and I get these a lot from Jews so here goes:

"So, you don't believe in the New Testament?" No, we do not read the books of the Christian Bible as sacred. We also don't call the Jewish Bible "the Old Testament" because that suggests that there is something "newer" that created an updated relationship with God and we are more than satisfied with the one God gave us.

"Why don't you believe that Jesus is the Messiah?" The answer to this one is really important – it's no fun to be asked that question and have no confident answer. Christianity has its understanding of messianic expectations just like Judaism does – in fact they come from the same sources – our Bible. We share the same prophecy about what will happen: Time will change and will be experienced in a new way (the End of Days); all who lived will be reborn and walk the earth again (resurrection); there will be an end to all wars and injustice and God's vision of perfection in the world will finally be realized.

Here's the catch: when Jesus came and went, none of those changes took place. The Jewish community of his time (who may very well have wondered if this guy was the "real thing") was left to admit after his death that nothing in the world changed. That made him, in our understanding, a "false messiah." His students, deeply disappointed by his death, searched for (and therefore found) Biblical verses that suggested he would come back to complete the work promised in the Jewish Bible but Judaism never accepted the idea that

there would be a “Second Coming.”

Jesus was only one of many false messiahs that the Jewish community encountered (the most recent being the Lubavitcher Rebbe, Menachem Mendel Schneerson, who died in 1994) and each time, we are left disappointed and we return to waiting for God to decide that it's time.

There are some fringe Christian sects who believe they get special points in God's eyes if they convince Jews to accept Jesus as Messiah and so they've developed confusing ways to obfuscate the matter and trick Jews into thinking they're doing something authentic.

Messianic Jewish websites are very difficult to discern from the real thing. Messianic Jewish prayer books have Hebrew like ours and prayers that sound just like ours but slip in statements that are very unlike ours. And Messianic Jewish groups (like Jews for Jesus) actively strategize ways to blur the differences between their beliefs and ours.

In closing my call, I told Michael that it sounded like what he was actually in search of is a warm, embracing and healthy mainstream Christian community – and not a Jewish one at all. I wished him well on his journey and I wish you well on yours, too. There are plenty of ways to honor the differences between our varying traditions without being disingenuous about it. I'm so grateful to be a member of an honest and open Jewish community like this one to call my own.

L'Shalom – In Peace,
Rabbi Jay TelRav