

## 2017 - POSITION PAPER FOR TALMIDEI YESHUA MESSIANIC MINISTRY OF NZ

Wednesday evening 29<sup>th</sup> March will be the beginning of the new scriptural year. Not only is it the beginning of yet another scriptural cycle, **but will also be the beginning of perhaps the most important year in the history of the whole of mankind.** Astronomers are predicting signs in the heavens amidst the movement of stars and planets in patterns that have never occurred before in recorded history and will not occur again for at least another thousand years.

Not only will there be significant astronomic events occurring throughout the year, it will also be the scriptural year that completes one yovel cycle since sovereignty of Jerusalem was returned to Isra'el in June 1967. Then, if we count back 2300 years from 1967, it brings us to yet another significant event, the conquest of Persia by Alexander the Great in the year 332 BCE. That event was foretold by the prophet Daniel in Chapter 7 and was the first time in the history of Isra'el that they were ruled by a Japhetic Empire from the West. Finally, this coming scriptural year is also significant for an even greater reason, it will be the 120<sup>th</sup> yovel since Adam and Eve were thrown out of the Garden of Eden. It will mark the end of 6000 years of human history in a state of separation from our creator.

As all the above events are profoundly significant, it is beholden upon us to once again affirm who we are as Talmidei Yeshua. Further, we need to remember once again, that our title 'Talmidei Yeshua' in English means – 'Disciples of Salvation' and that the word for salvation in Hebrew is – Yeshuah.

Recently, I was presented with a 14 page essay written by Rabbi Dr Richard Nicol, a highly esteemed Messianic writer, who since 1981 has served as the Rabbi of a Messianic community called "Congregation Ruach Israel" situated in Needham Maryland, USA. Back in 2003 he was a source of inspiration for Caroline and myself, when we set about writing our Shabbat Siddur for the Auckland Kehilah. In 2002 he wrote an essay, entitled - 'Shabbat Services as a Sacred Drama.' We agreed whole heartedly with it's content and adopted his principles as we wrote our original Shabbat Siddur, which is the same one we are still using fourteen years later. Having said all that, it was his latest essay, which he has entitled - 'The Case For Conversion: Welcoming Non-Jews into Messianic Jewish Space' which prompted me to speak on the matter of who we are as Talmidei Yeshua in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

As we are now just four days away from the beginning of such a significant scriptural year, it is vitally important that we clearly understand, who we are and where we stand in our relationship with YHVH. I say this because, I often hear people coming into the Modern Messianic Movement expressing a deep personal concern over their identity with so many differing voices via the Internet and on Social Media regarding what it means to be 'Messianic'.

### **“Am I a Messianic Jew or am I a Messianic Gentile or am I something else?”**

That question is considered in great detail in Richard Nicol's essay.<sup>[1]</sup> So, under the leading of the Ruach HaKodesh, I want to address what could be possibly the most perplexing issue of today. It seems fitting to look at this matter ahead of the new scriptural year, because as this new year unfolds, there are likely to be many more people asking us to give a justification for why we stand apart from the teachings of mainstreams of Churches of Christendom and many traditions of Orthodox and Liberal Judaism.

In his introduction to 'The Case For Conversion' - Richard Nicol says:-

"The passing of time often changes a person's perspective. Several years ago I was privileged to be asked to draft a proposal for the Union of Messianic Jewish Congregations Theology Committee on the subject of the conversion of Gentiles to Messianic Judaism. At that time I took a strong position against the practice. Since then I have re-evaluated the issues. This essay will detail why I and a growing number of Messianic Jewish leaders have come to believe that offering a formal conversion is essential for the future health and vitality of our movement, the spiritual and emotional well-being of the people in our care, and the good of the Jewish people."

In response to Richard's comments, I question whether he was right in changing his mind regarding the conversion of Gentiles. As he says in the past he has always been strongly against Gentile conversion, so what has happened to change his mind? Further, the fact that Sha'ul said Gentiles were not to convert to Judaism. Have Sha'ul's words somehow changed in the 21<sup>st</sup> century? I think not.

Today in USA, Canada and Isra'el; and to a lesser degree in the UK and Europe, the majority of members in Messianic Kehilot are natural born circumcised Jews, who refer to themselves as Messianic Jews. Therefore, Messianic Synagogues and Congregations reflect either Orthodox or Liberal Judaism, while also recognising Yeshua as their Mashiach.

However, here in NZ, because the Jewish population is very small, the Messianic Movement comprises far more Gentiles than Jews. In addition, NZ has a preponderance of Hebraic Christian groups (not Kehilot) like for example Prayer for Israel, Christian Zionist Movement, ICEJ and many other similar groups, which have almost no Jewish members. All these Christian centred groups had their beginnings overseas, but have flourished in the NZ environment over the last 40 years, being populated by people who, while having a love for Israel and it's people, wish to remain in the Christian Church of their choice.

In parallel but separate from those predominantly Christian groups there are also many Christians who seek to find the Hebraic Roots of their faith, while not wanting to align themselves with the Messianic Jewish Movement. They have become known by various names such as **British Israelism**, the **Ephraimite Movement**, **The Hebrew Roots Movement**, **Wild Branch Theology** and others. Many in these groups, claim a direct relationship with either the Ten Northern Tribes of ancient Isra'el or the Qumran Community, with the latter being brought into focus over the last decade, as a result of research into the Dead Sea Scrolls. Regarding these various Gentile groups, Richard Nicol says:-

"A growing number of Gentiles have found a way to convert themselves to complete identification with Israel. Using dubious exegesis of biblical passages they make the startling claim that they are part of historic Israel. They say they are true Jews."

This is a big subject which will be dealt with in more detail at some later date if needed. However, suffice to say, as a result of the rise of these Gentile factions within the Messianic Movement, the Messianic Jews have felt the need to defend their position in the modern day Messianic Movement.

Given what has occurred, we now need to look at why Talmidei Yeshua Messianic Ministry of New Zealand stands in the Middle Road and what that really means. Standing in the Middle Road, means there is no need for Gentiles to be circumcised and converted to the Messianic or Orthodox Judaism and no need for Jewish believers in Yeshua to convert into something called "Christianity."

Following the words of Sha'ul and acknowledging that things have remained the same since the 1<sup>st</sup> century, we who have been called by YHVH to know and have a close relationship with Yeshua, must guard against rebuilding the wall of partition.

In 1 Corinthians 7:17-20, Sha'ul explains that the wall was broken down by our relationship with Yeshua saying:-

*"Let each person live the life the Master has assigned him and live it in the condition he was in when God called him. This is the rule I lay down in all the congregations. Was someone already circumcised when he was called? Then he should not try to remove the marks of his circumcision. Was someone uncircumcised when he was called? He shouldn't undergo b'rit-milah. Being circumcised means nothing, and being uncircumcised means nothing; what does mean something is keeping God's commandments. Each person should remain in the condition he was in when he was called. (CJB)*

In these verses Sha'ul is saying a Jew should not become like a Gentile, living his life as if he were uncircumcised, because Sha'ul clearly says the Jew must keep God's commandments. Now, we know that the commands of YHVH were only ever given in the form of Torah and only ever given to Isra'el. So, Sha'ul is saying to the Jew that he must remain as a Jew. In the same manner the Gentile who is being grafted into the Messianic community should not undergo B'rit-milah (circumcision). However, he like the Jew must keep YHVH's commands – Torah, because in the words of Yeshua himself from Matthew 5:18:-

*"I tell you that until heaven and earth pass away, not so much as a yud or a stroke will pass from the Torah — not until everything that must happen has happened.."*

If both Jews and Gentiles are to walk together as one united body, they must find common ground that will foster unity between them. In the same way Talmidei Yeshua must always remain a true expression of unity in diversity.

So, what gives these two very diverse people groups the ability to work together as one, when the Tanakh says that Isra'el was always to remain totally apart from all neighbouring nations? Every time Isra'el embraced the cultural and religious practices of any other national group they fell into idolatry.

If we look back to Yeshua's last seder with his eleven faithful talmidim, we see that he did not strip away their Jewishness, but instead he fulfilled it, which is further confirmed by what Sha'ul said in Romans 2:29:-

*"... the real Jew is one inwardly; and true circumcision is of the heart, spiritual not literal; so that his praise comes not from other people but from God."*

So, circumcision of the heart, is what Yeshua was speaking about at his last Seder. When in his own words from Luke 22:29b, he said:- *"This cup is the New Covenant, ratified by my blood, which is being poured out for you."* His words were a direct quotation from Jeremiah 31:30-34:-

*"Here, the days are coming," says YHVH, "when I will make a new covenant with the house of Isra'el and with the house of Y'hudah. It will not be like the covenant I made with their fathers on the day I took them by their hand and brought them out of the land of Egypt; because they, for their part, violated my covenant, even though I, for my part, was a husband to them," says YHVH. "For this is the covenant I will make with the house of Isra'el after those days," says YHVH: "I will put my Torah within them and write it on their hearts; I will be their God, and they will be my people. No longer will any of them teach his fellow community member or his brother, 'Know YHVH'; for all will know me, from the least of them to the greatest; because I will forgive their wickednesses and remember their sins no more."*

The promise made in Jeremiah was given to the whole house of Isra'el, before the destruction of the 1<sup>st</sup> Temple, but at the time of Yeshua's last seder it applied only to his eleven talmidim. Then starting at the next Shavuot following Yeshua's final ascension, the promise was extended to those whom YHVH was calling to become Talmidim. That same calling is still happening now in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Therefore, when Sha'ul was speaking in Romans 2:29 about circumcision of the heart, he was speaking firstly to his Jewish brothers, then also to those Gentiles whom YHVH has called.

However, until Yeshua returns, circumcision of the heart will remain the privilege of those whom YHVH has called. The promise through Jeremiah will not be fulfilled for the rest of Isra'el, until their resurrection during the thousand year reign of Yeshua.

Therefore, if as a Gentile one becomes circumcised in the heart, there is no longer any need to be circumcised in the flesh. In the same manner for a Jewish man, who has been circumcised on the eighth day and is later called by YHVH to know Yeshua, his circumcision in the flesh **no longer has the same spiritual standing it did previously**. However, he is not to try to remove that fleshly mark of circumcision, because it is part of who he is as a Jew, even though it is fulfilled by the circumcision of his heart.<sup>[ii]</sup>

So, does that mean that the Jews who have not been personally called by YHVH have been rejected by YHVH? As Sha'ul would say, **"heaven forbid"** for the people of Y'hudah have been kept together as a community through all kinds of adversity at the hands of the many nations, throughout the last 1800+ years. It was YHVH alone who made it possible for them to keep the Torah alive down through history. During that same period, the Gentiles through the Churches of Christendom, by fair means and foul spread the message of salvation ('Yeshuah') out into the nations of the world, albeit in the Anglicised name of 'Jesus Christ' and regrettably without the Torah of Moshe as the underpinning of their message.

### **Then, in 1967 three things changed:-**

Firstly, the sovereignty of Jerusalem was returned to Y'hudah;

Secondly, there was a rapid re-emergence of the 1<sup>st</sup> century Messianic Movement;

Thirdly, the influence of the Churches of Christendom began to rapidly diminish, as confirmed in the synopsis of a book by Cambridge University Press entitled – 'The decline of Christendom in Western Europe, 1750 – 2000' which says:-

For over two centuries this social and religious order has been in decline. Enforced religious unity has given way to increasing pluralism, and since 1960 this process has spectacularly accelerated.

Coincidence or the hand of YHVH? In light of these facts, many Gentile people are now answering the call of YHVH to join themselves into the Messianic Movement. Such Gentiles are confronted with the need to leave behind all the dogmas, creeds and festivals of Christendom, which do not directly accord with scripture. These are progressively replaced with the Hebraic customs and practices set forth in scripture in accordance with what Yeshua himself said in Matthew 13:52:-

*"So then, every Torah-teacher who has been made into a talmid for the Kingdom of Heaven is like the owner of a home who brings out of his storage room both new things and old."*

Regrettably, many new Gentiles who contemplate a life in the Messianic Movement are being wooed into following the teachings and pathways of peripheral organisations like the Ephraimite Movement, the Qumran Community, Messianic Israel Alliance and others, with erroneous claims that they are true descendants from one of the Ten Tribes or are aligned with the original Zadok priesthood of ancient times.

By contrast, Jewish people entering the Messianic Movement need make few changes to their former life style. Assuming they have an earlier grounding in the religious customs and practices of Judaism, the only real change necessary is acknowledgement and acceptance of the Messiahship of Yeshua. Seldom are they drawn away by erroneous practices and alliances favoured by the Gentiles.

Since the Gentile Alliances have developed in opposition to the Jewish Alliances, the latter now lean toward insistence that Gentiles entering the Messianic Movement be converted (circumcised) as a right of passage, thus making them into 'Messianic Jews.'

However, as we are now fifty years on from the return of Jerusalem's sovereignty to the Isra'el, it is now time to set aside all divisions between Jews and Gentiles within the Messianic community. We should all be working together as one body, while we await the return of Yeshua. The dilemma over fleshly circumcision should be laid aside. The Jews should remain as Jews and Gentiles as Gentiles, without any rebuilding the wall of partition. What was spoken by Yeshua and Sha'ul in the 1<sup>st</sup> century, should be practiced in the 21<sup>st</sup> century by all in the Messianic Movement, with the real focus on unity within the community.

### **In Summary**

Looking at Talmidei Yeshua Messianic Ministry of New Zealand in contrast with all we have considered above, we walk down the Middle Road. However, in connection with the identity crisis that many Jews and Gentiles encounter when responding to a personal call from YHVH, it maybe be worthwhile to compare their situation with that of Isra'el during the departure from Egypt. Now, I do not want this to be taken as a spiritualisation of the exodus narrative, but for it to be seen as an allegorical comparison and in relation to this position paper.

When YHVH lead his people Isra'el out of Egypt he did not take them up the coast road directly to the Land of Promise. Instead he lead them along a wilderness path into a wadi on the Egyptian side of the Red Sea. The wadi was like a Middle Road, enclosed on both sides by step hills, with the sea in the front and the Egyptian army behind. Trapped on all sides, Isra'el waited in the wadi while the pillar of cloud descended between them and the Egyptians and at same time the east wind blew over the sea parting the waters.

In a similar manner, when a person responds to their call by YHVH to move from the relative comfort of synagogue or church, that person goes through a transition similar to the entrapment encountered by Isra'el on the shores of the Red Sea. During the transition phase YHVH opens their eyes to see more clearly the teachings of scripture as expressed by Yeshua and Sha'ul.

During the transitional phase, the Ruach HaKodesh moves to stand between their former religious system and their New Covenant pathway, enabling the person to move into a more tangible trust and faith in Yeshua. At that same time, the Ruach opens the way forward, similar to the parting of the Red Sea. As Sha'ul says in Ephesians 2:13-16:-

*“Now, you who were once far off have been brought near through the shedding of the Messiah's blood. For he himself is our shalom — he has made us both one and has broken down the m'chitzah which divided us by destroying in his own body the enmity occasioned by the Torah, with its commands set forth in the form of ordinances. He did this in order to create in union with himself from the two groups a single new humanity and thus make shalom, and in order to reconcile to God both in a single body by being executed on a stake as a criminal and thus in himself killing that enmity.”*

Here Sha'ul reveals that the pathway will open as if through the sea and enable the new-believers to become true Talmidim of Yeshua - Jew and Gentile one in Messiah!

In this paper I have sought to reaffirm how we must remain true to the words of scripture. As Talmidei Yeshua, we must always remain as we are when called. There are many areas where the Jewish and Gentile backgrounds will clash, because of the cultural and religious paradigms which are often diametrically opposite, yet in the body of Yeshua it is possible to walk as one, just as a man and a woman in marriage see many aspects of life differently, the bond of love overcomes those differences. So, also in the body of Messiah our differences can be set aside as we walk together, particularly as we face this new scriptural year, let's hold our heads high, knowing that Yeshua will return for us, when the time is right.

## **Shabbat Shalom**

*Written by Graeme Purdie – Nasi (President) Talmidei Yeshua Ministry of NZ – March 2017.*

i The address for Rich Nicol's The Case For Conversion - <http://ourrabbis.org/main/articles/on-conversion-mainmenu-32>

ii The term Jew is used generically to cover all natural Isra'el in these modern times, but Y'hudah at present is the only visible tribe and is also the one to whom sovereignty and kingship were given by YHVH, as expressed in Gen 49:8-12.