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ON MESSIANIC JUDAISM

by Marc H. Tanenbaum

It will strike some as paradoxical or bewildering that Jewish religious thinkers and leaders find it more compatible to dialogue with authentic Evangelical Christians than with so-called Messianic Jews.

That is not a matter of elitism nor social etiquette. Rather it derives from profound theological conviction as well as from prudential considerations.

Jews and Evangelical (and other) Christians share a rich inheritance of Biblical beliefs, values and ideals about God, man, nature, society, history, and the Kingdom to come. At the same time, Jews and Christians differ over critical affirmations about the divinity of Jesus, the Trinity, the Virgin Birth, the Incarnation, and the forgiveness of sin. (For an excellent discussion of the Jewish theological reasons for these differences, read Jews and Jewish Christianity by David Berger and Michael Wyschogrod, KTAV Publishing, N.Y.)

Jews stake their existence on the truth of their 4,000 year-old belief in ethical monotheism. "On the day when the Lord spoke to you out of the fire on Horeb, you saw no figure of any kind; so take good care not to fall into the degrading practice of making figures carved in relief, in the form of a man or a woman," declares Deuteronomy 4:15. As formulated by the great scholar Maimonides in 13th Century Spain, Jews believe that the God of Israel "has no corporeal image and has no body." Judaism is incompatible with any belief in the divinity of a human being.

While Judaism believes that all Gentiles are obligated to observe the seven Noahide principles of moral and ethical behavior in order "to be assured a place in the world to come," Jewish tradition allows that Gentiles can believe in the Trinitarian concept of God, termed in Hebrew as shittuf (partnership.) Belief in shittuf, Judaism affirms, does not constitute idolatry for Gentiles but does so for Jews.

Jews, born of a Jewish mother, who become so-called Messianic Jews, are bound by the Covenant of Sinai, which explicitly excludes the possibility of any belief that God shares His being in any partnership with any other being. (Exodus 20:2-6; Deuteronomy 4:15-21.)

It is the faith of Israel that God's election of His holy people is eternal and irrevocable (Deuteronomy 7:6-9; "He is God, the faithful God which keepeth covenant and mercy to a thousandth generation.") God's law remains binding for all Jews for all times. A Messianic Jew can stop obeying the Law, and usually does. He can marry out of the faith, so that in two or three generations the golden chain of Jewish continuity is broken. Throughout the centuries, this is exactly what happened to Jews who left the Syngagogue and entered the Church.

While humanly one might empathize with Messianic Jews who nostalgically wish to retain some cultural linkages with the Jewish people - whether for guilt or other emotional reasons - in point of fact reenacting Jewish rituals of the Sabbath, Passover, Bar Mitzvah, without commitment to the convictions they symbolize soon make a mockery of their sacred meanings.

When those rituals are employed as a device or ruse to trick other Jews into believing they can remain both authentic Jews as well as authentic, believing Christians, that is nothing less than deception - which is not worthy of any high religion such as Christianity.

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