



Messianic
Unity

messianic unity is it finally happening? by Aaron Trank

This past April, thirty-one key leaders in the Messianic movement convened in an upper room in Dallas, Texas. Each of us, representing a broad spectrum of congregations and missions, had taken time out of our busy schedules to attend a “Fireside Chat” that would last less than eight hours. Most of those in the room knew one other. Some had been co-workers; some had personally experienced a “falling out” with others present. As we sat in a large circle, Marty Waldman, Rabbi at Dallas’ Baruch HaShem Messianic Synagogue and host to the meeting, took the floor to explain his heart in asking us to come: unity.

Marty articulated what all felt, but few spoke of: there has been a striking level of disunity within the Messianic movement. Yet the presence of these thirty-one leaders spoke of our hope for something better. Though the tension was palpable at times, we all listened as Marty spoke his heart.

Boarding my plane to return home the next morning, I pondered what had been accomplished. Though we hadn’t come up with any sort of comprehensive solution, we had left the meeting with a renewed commitment to building relationships.

An Answer to Prayer

At the meeting, a few of us had looked at each other with knowing smiles. This fireside chat not only represented a step toward unity among the senior leaders of the Messianic movement, but it was also an answer to the prayers of the younger generation.

Less than a month before Dallas, a group of about 70 young Jewish believers in Jesus had met together for a similar purpose in Seattle. That gathering was part of a larger movement called Grassroots. Grassroots has no organizational oversight, but is steered by a core group of

young leaders from various organizational affiliations. I was invited into the core group last year, and have served as an advocate for the Grassroots movement within the Jewish missions world. The gatherings, which have taken place annually over the past nine years, are an attempt to restore unity in the Messianic movement on a grassroots level through developing intentional relationships with one another.

Both gatherings were characterized by diversity, including people from a broad spectrum of Jewish Y’shua-believing expressions. Had they been theological forums, we might have stressed our disagreements. But at these meetings there was no debate. We came together as fellow disciples, in the belief that the pursuit of unity is vitally important to the future of Jewish ministry.

Why Work for Unity?

There is good reason to make unity one of our goals. Jesus taught us to love one another; he told us that the world would know that we were his disciples if we did so. I wonder if our disunity has kept us from being truly effective in our role as witnesses within the greater Jewish community. Paul commended the importance of unity to the Christians in Ephesus:

As a prisoner for the Lord, then, I urge you to live a life worthy of the calling you have received. Be completely humble and gentle; be patient, bearing with one another in love. Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace. There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to one hope when you were called; one Lord, one faith, one baptism; one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all. But to each one of us grace has been given as Christ apportioned it. (Ephesians 4:1-7)

Paul enumerates the characteristics of unity-fostering relationships: humility, gentleness, patience and loving longsuffering (“bearing with one another in love”). These characteristics should impact our attitude toward others, especially those with whom we disagree, and our willingness to forgive and bear with those who hurt us.

Humility

We can’t be unified if we think we are better than others. This is why Paul commanded us to “do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit. Rather, in humility value others above yourselves” (Philippians 2:3). Humility requires us to lay aside our pride. This is challenging once we consider the implications!

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For example, are we so convinced that our theology is correct that we cannot relate with those who have different theological notions *without arguing our point?*

Are we so convinced of our methods that we cannot relate with those who do things differently *without trying to convince them to change?*

Are we so convinced of our own spiritual maturity that we *look down upon those who are still struggling* against sin or immaturity?

Pride comes easily, especially for those of us raised in an individualistic society that focuses on personal accomplishment and gain over teamwork. Yet even the disciples, living in a more community-minded society, argued about who would be greatest in the kingdom. Jesus’ response to his disciples is the same as it is for us

today: “Whoever humbles himself like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven” (Matthew 18:4, English Standard Version).

Gentleness and Patience: Approaching Those We Disagree With

Proverbs 15:1 says “A gentle answer turns away wrath, but a harsh word stirs up anger.” This is common wisdom, equally applicable whether approaching our brothers in Messiah or speaking to others.

Once on a sortie¹ at Grand Central Station in New York City, I had two very different interactions that illustrate this principle. First, a Jewish lady, who looked like my grandmother, walked

by and said, “You should be ashamed of yourself!” I was thinking on my feet and came back with a quick retort: “No, I shouldn’t. Jesus is the truth, and I am not ashamed of the truth!” The lady turned around, came back to me, and began yelling about all the terrible things that had been done in the name of Jesus. I couldn’t get a word in edgewise. Once she stopped talking, she gave me the finger, spat on the floor and walked away. This time I *was* ashamed of myself. Because I hadn’t been gentle or patient with her, she wouldn’t allow me to explain myself. I was reminded of an old quote from *How to Win Friends and Influence People* by Dale Carnegie: “You can’t win an argument. You can’t because if you lose it, you lose it; and if you win it, you lose it.” I promised myself that I would never respond in kind on the street again.

Just 30 minutes later, a middle-aged Orthodox man walked by me and said the exact same words: “You should be ashamed of yourself!” This time my

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Jews in the grass

personal reflections on Grassroots 2013

by Arielle Rothbard

Grassroots 2013 was an event that almost was not. A self-proclaimed “nonference” (“it’s not a conference”), Grassroots curates interaction between 80–100 young Jewish believers, with an emphasis on Messianic leadership. I attended my first nonference in August 2012 after the Asheville Music Festival, Grassroots’ auditory offspring. Grassroots was to conclude at that concert, yet it has continued.

As in past years, Grassroots 2013, which this time met in Seattle, pooled an assemblage of Messianic congregations in the area. In addition there were young Messianic Jews with various associations spanning both coasts and the midwest. We bonded over Shabbat services, meals, worship sessions and generous helpings of free time.

During the final evening, a late-night worship session brought attendees into a special place of openness before the Lord. Matt Rosenberg, the weekend’s master of ceremonies and rabbi at Seattle’s Beit Messiah Messianic Synagogue, shared about the life and recent passing of Jhan Moskowitz.¹ Matt’s words made way for reconciliation between congregational and mission-affiliated attendees. Hugs, prayers, tears and more worship followed.

Over the years, splits have developed among several camps of the Messianic movement. Chasms have widened over time by lack of commitment to narrowing them. This has been true of both congregations and Jewish missions.

But relationships heal. Growing up, I attended Beth Messiah Congregation in northern New Jersey, planted by Chosen People Ministries. Many in that congregation alongside whom I grew in faith wanted to distance themselves from association with “Jews for Jesus.” This breach was largely mended when Josh Sofaer, then Jews for Jesus branch leader in New York City, made our house of worship his home. Recently, I ended up joining the communications team at Jews for Jesus in San Francisco.

And critically, for the first time Grassroots’ leadership included a non-congregational member, Aaron Trank, who is Minister-at-Large for Jews for Jesus. Though Aaron is

chiefly involved with the Messianic Jewish missional world, he also grew up in a Messianic congregation. His involvement in Grassroots is another example of the healing taking place.

Grassroots attendee and Messianic leader Aaron Kasdan likened Messianic unity to being fingers of the same hand rather than limbs of the same body. As the Messianic Jewish component of the greater church body, we need to keep our fingernails and skin cells clean and healthy, bearing one another’s burdens. As a product of a Messianic congregation and serving with a Jewish mission, I am exceedingly grateful for the evolving, unified Messianic community.

As believers, we are called to be both missional (Romans 1:16) and congregational (Hebrews 10:25). This means that sharing our faith with the unsaved Jewish community has a dual nature. First, congregations deliberately reach Jewish people. Sometimes this comes through partnering with Jewish missions, augmenting their programs and events with congregational volunteers and trainees. Second, all Jewish believers should know how to consciously explain what it means to them to be a “Jew” and “for Jesus,” whether they have a personal connection to a particular organization or not.

I see the fingers—our organizations—
together touching the Jewish community with the message that Y’shua is our Messiah. Grassroots has brought about unity and renewed spiritual energy in the rising Messianic Jewish generation. My involvement in Grassroots now influences my work in San Francisco. Let’s pray that this fresh life drives a second wave of Jewish revival in which God calls many of our lost people back to himself.

Space does not allow us to include other such gatherings, such as Muchan (www.muchanconference.com) or the Young Harvest Passover seders in the Chicagoland area. For a partial listing, see Dan Tasman’s blog at www.risenmessiah.com/one-in-messiah-219. And let us know about similar gatherings out there!

1. Jhan’s significance in the Messianic world was addressed two editions ago in *Havurah*.



When unity fails

a quick primer from the Apostles

We can find examples of disunity among God's people throughout the Bible. But the apostles' experiences can be particularly relevant for us. The following examples speak of three kinds of disunity:

- **The disunity that results from *overzealous, prideful loyalty to our leaders.***

I appeal to you, brothers, in the name of our Lord Jesus the Messiah, that all of you agree with one another so that there may be no divisions among you and that you may be perfectly united in mind and thought. My brothers, some from Chloe's household have informed me that there are quarrels among you. What I mean is this: One of you says, "I follow Paul"; another, "I follow Apollos" another, "I follow Cephas"; still another, "I follow the Messiah" (1 Corinthians 1:10-12; see also 1 Corinthians 3:5-7).

The problem was not the leaders themselves, but that people treated them like celebrities. The surrounding culture encouraged this way of thinking; philosophers asked their followers to be loyal as a way to achieve moral improvement. Rabbis had their "schools" of rival interpretations. Indeed, Paul had to admonish the Roman church about what he called the "pattern of this world," which we might translate as "cultural trends":

Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is—his good, pleasing and perfect will. (Romans 12:2)

- **The disunity that results from *showing favoritism.***

My brothers, as believers in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ, don't show favoritism. Suppose a man comes into your meeting wearing a gold ring and fine clothes, and a poor man in shabby clothes also comes in. If you show special attention to the man wearing fine clothes and say, "Here's a good seat for you," but say to the poor man, "You stand there" or "Sit on the floor by my feet," have you not discriminated among yourselves and become judges with evil thoughts? (James 2:1-4)

James speaks to the socioeconomic differences among believers. Rather than showing hospitality to all, some believers were treating the poorer worshippers as second-class citizens in the kingdom of God. James minces no words when he calls this behavior "evil."

- **The disunity that comes from *focusing inward instead of outward.***

Paul warned the Philippians, "Each of you should look not only to your own interests, but also to the interests of others" (Philippians 2:4). Paul knew that self-centeredness and parochialism cause disunity. This is still true today. For example, organizations that are overly focused on their own programs or funding can end up building boundaries that exclude. Paul was glad to commend churches that looked beyond their own borders:

"I am on my way to Jerusalem in the service of the saints there. For Macedonia and Achaia were pleased to make a contribution for the poor among the saints in Jerusalem." (Romans 15:25-26)

God's path to achieving unity begins with first *looking to the example set by our Messiah, Y'shua:*



Your attitude should be the same as that of Messiah Jesus: Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself and became obedient to death—even death on a cross! (Philippians 2:5-8)

Second, we are to *look at ourselves for a reality check.* There are no celebrities in the kingdom of God. Rather,

Brothers, think of what you were when you were called. Not many of you were wise by human standards; not many were influential; not many were of noble birth. But God chose the foolish things of the world to shame the wise; God chose the weak things of the world to shame the strong. He (Continued on page 6)

(Continued from page 3) response was different. “Sir, can you explain why you think I should be ashamed of myself?” The man stopped. I don’t think anyone had ever challenged him to explain his words. He looked me in the eye and began listing all the things that had been done in the name of Jesus, and then began calmly explaining how frustrated it made him to see “Jews for Jesus,” since he couldn’t understand how any Jew could align himself with the anti-Semites who persecuted our people. I listened to him and nodded my head. “I can see why you are upset, and I am sorry if I have offended you. But did you know

thank God that we have Jesus’ perfect example of forgiveness to strive toward.

that Jesus himself was a Jew, that he claimed to be the Jewish Messiah, and that all of his original disciples were also Jewish?” For the next five minutes I was able to share the gospel with him.

Proverbs 15:1 also applies to our relationships within the Messianic community. Without gentleness, we drive people away without giving them a chance to consider our words. Without patience, we demand immediate change and are unable to sustain the gentleness we need over the long term when those who take issue with us continue to do so.

Unity and Forgiveness

Within our movement, there is often a history of hurting and being hurt by others. How do we achieve unity in those kinds of situations? The answer lies in Paul’s fourth point in Ephesians 4:2—we must bear with one another in love. In Colossians 3:13, Paul adds, “Bear with each other and

forgive one another if any of you has a grievance against someone. Forgive as the Lord forgave you.”

We are not simply called to be patient with our brothers, but to *forgive* them. In situations of long-standing disunity, we often see relationships saddled with resentment that stems from genuine hurt. This is perfectly understandable. Yet the Lord calls us to forgive for the sake of unity.

Thank God that we have Jesus’ perfect example of forgiveness to strive toward. Consider Peter, one of his closest disciples and friends, who abandoned Jesus in his moment of need, going so far as to deny the relationship between them. Yet Jesus, the one who was hurt, took the initiative to forgive and restore Peter. Jesus asks no more of us than what he demonstrated throughout his life.

Two Practical Steps for Pursuing Unity

There are many ways to pursue unity. Here are two steps I’ve found most relevant in my life:

- *Be intentional about maintaining relationships.* One key thing I’ve learned through my involvement in Grassroots is that it is impossible to have unity with those with whom you have no relationship! In order to pursue unity, we must be intentional about pursuing and maintaining relationships with those we intend to be unified with. Otherwise, disagreements cause us to talk *about* each other rather than *to* each other. By being intentional, disagreements cause us to dialogue with each other in a way that strengthens rather than tears down.

- *Speak well of others—or at least don’t speak ill of them!* I once heard that a person with whom I had no relationship was speaking poorly about me. I felt angry

and resentful, tempted to “return the favor.” But in the spirit of unity, I checked my anger, prayed for the person, and gave them a call. It turned out that he had heard something third-hand that I had said in a particular context, and on the basis of that report he had become offended. He thought I had been speaking poorly about *him*. The phone call proved a great opportunity for both of us to humble ourselves, affirm each other, and commit to a relationship that would invite dialogue in the future. What a reminder it was of the power of gossip, which Jewish tradition refers to as *lashon ha-ra*, evil speech. I still struggle to bridle my tongue, but I have resolved to speak well of others, to try to understand their point of view, and to keep disagreements between us from spilling over into other relationships. When we see gossip as sin and prayerfully commit to ridding it from our lives, God empowers us to recognize it when it rears its ugly head.

Conclusion

Perhaps God is calling you to seek unity with those from whom you have become alienated. As we work toward unity, we are *motivated* because of Jesus’ command and Paul’s commendation. We are *empowered* by the Spirit as we continue to strive to be more like Jesus, forgiving our brothers in humility with gentleness and patience. We are *rewarded* in our efforts as the power of the gospel is demonstrated and the world knows that we are truly Jesus’ disciples. Let’s pray together as we seek unity within the greater body of the Messianic community.

1. A time of distributing evangelistic literature and engaging people in conversation on the streets.

(Continued from page 3) chose the lowly things of this world and the despised things—and the things that are not—to nullify the things that are, so that no one may boast before him. (1 Corinthians 1:26-29)

Moreover, we are all members of the same body:

The eye cannot say to the hand, “I don’t need you!” And the head cannot say to the feet, “I don’t need you!” On the contrary, those parts of the body that

seem to be weaker are indispensable. (1 Corinthians 12:21-22; see the full passage, vv.12-27)

Following the “simple” path to unity is easier said than done! Much more could and should be said about the practical ways to unpack all this. This article is meant only to focus on pitfalls that lead to disunity and principles that will help us avoid those pitfalls. By God’s grace, let’s encourage one another in learning ways to put Paul’s and James’ words into practice.



Havurah
interview:

Paul Liberman

Paul Liberman has been a Jewish believer in Y’shua since 1971. He has had extensive leadership involvement with the Messianic Jewish Alliance of America, for which he currently serves as president, the International Messianic Jewish Alliance, and Messianic congregations in the U.S. and Israel. He has served as publisher of *The Messianic Times* and is the author of *The Fig Tree Blossoms*.

In many ways you have dedicated your life to encouraging unity among Messianic Jewish brethren. Why has this been such a priority for you?

Some people think Abraham Lincoln was the first to say that a house divided against itself cannot stand. Actually, it is a Biblical precept from Mark 3:25. Being one with another is a source of power to get things done and our movement needs this improved enablement.

Why has the Messianic Jewish movement perhaps seen more than its share of disunity?

The modern-day Messianic movement is being pioneered by many individuals with very independent streaks. We have many people with dynamic leadership abilities and we are also pulled in different directions by many traditions in both Judaism and Christianity. Naturally “iron sharpens iron” (Proverbs 27:17) in this process, as we have been sorting things out during the last 45 years. Jews and Gentiles partake of the same fallen human nature. So we should expect the same unity or lack thereof, whether in Messianic Judaism or church communities.

What encouraging signs of unity are you seeing?

At different times the emerging institutions in the Messianic community have had disrupted fellowship. However, in more recent years, many of these issues have been amicably resolved. Perhaps there has been some growing maturity. We increasingly realize we are more alike than we are different.

Are you optimistic for the future of the Messianic movement?

Our gracious Lord is optimistic about the future of the Messianic movement. We believe the Scriptures predict it. We are being abundantly blessed. Y’shua our Messiah has put it in our hearts to work together toward the expansion of his kingdom. So, it’s “push from the bottom and pull from the top.” Yes, we’re working hard, but it seems more like fun!



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