

I'm a Jew



¶ Jew {joo}

noun. [Heb. *Yehudi*, after *Yehudah*, Judah, son of Jacob and Leah] **1.** An adherent of Judaism. **2.** A descendant of the ancient Hebrew people.

I am a Jew...I think. Like most Americans of European descent, I come from a mixed bag of ethnicities. To be honest, I don't really know who or what I am outside of my identity in the Messiah. My family claims Jewish blood through ancestry on my mother's side. Some in my family have been accepted into non-Messianic Orthodox Judaism based upon this history. I suppose that anyone who knows us would say that this authenticates our 'Jewish-ness.' Furthermore, the Israeli government authenticated that 'Jewish-ness' by accepting us when we made aliyah (literally, "going up" or immigrating to the Land) and received our national citizenship.

But it is hard for me to relate to a Jewish heritage, because I was raised living a non-Jewish lifestyle. Our family connection to the Jewish community was severed generations ago. I didn't grow up in an observant Jewish household, nor did my mother. Jewish ancestry seems as remote as any of the other

ethnicities in our family tree: Polish, Swedish, Czechoslovakian, Hussar, Japanese, Cushite, German or African.

Reconciling the Past

In order to reconnect with our Jewish ancestry—and the Jewish community—my parents proposed making a radical decision. When I was in my late teens, my Bible believing parents encouraged us kids to join them in an orthodox conversion ceremony. They felt that it was an important step for us to make in re-establishing our family's Jewish heritage. My brothers and I were skeptical, but we could not deny that God's hand seemed to be leading us toward reconnecting with our Jewish heritage. Miraculous events that seemed to be from the Lord were happening around us. We felt that the Father had prepared this opportunity for us.

Before progressing further, I would like to clearly state that conversion to Judaism is not something that I would chose today, nor

do I feel it is necessary for other believers. I have since learned about the origin of the conversion ceremony and the apostolic view of it. It is a convention of traditional Judaism that Yeshua's followers rejected, since it is not biblical. The Torah never offers a means by which a non-Jew can become Jewish. In fact, arguments over ritual conversion almost split the assembly of First Century believers. Paul's opponents claimed that only Jews could find salvation, therefore it was necessary for the Gentiles to undergo conversion prior to salvation. In Galatians (and in most of his epistles) Paul argued vehemently against non-Jewish believers undergoing this ceremony. He insisted that ethnic identity was a secondary consideration—it was a non-issue with regard to one's acceptance into the family of God.

The Israel of God

The Apostolic Scriptures clearly state that acceptance into the 'Israel of God' is based upon the blood of our risen Messiah only. It makes no difference whether a person is Jewish or Israelite or Gentile—we are all one in Messiah. Yet if that is the case, then I have to ask myself, "Why is ethnicity such a big

issue?” For a lot of non-Jewish people, being part of ethnic Israel is a very big deal. I often find myself quick to judge theologies built around the issue of ethnicity. But if I am honest, I have to admit that I have struggled in this area myself.

When my family first felt called to follow Torah, the ethnicity issue arose over and over again. Questions of ethnicity were some of the first things we asked when the Father began to open up our hearts and minds to the wonderful things of His Torah. Our Jewish pedigree felt pretty thin. Christianity had taught us that the Torah, its commandments and its lifestyle were only for the Jewish people. We immediately assumed that if we were being led to keep Torah, we had to find a way to be recognized as being Jewish. I think the same thing happens for most non-Jews entering the Torah movement. They might not even have the advantage of a thin Jewish pedigree, so they begin looking for an ethnic basis for their call to Torah.

In general, Christianity, Judaism and Messianic Judaism all agree on one thing: the Torah is not for non-Jews. Therefore, if you feel called to keep the Shabbat or to eat kosher or apply any of the distinctive traits of Torah life, you need some kind of ethnic validation. I disagree. I suggest that identity within Messiah is adequate for both Jew and non-Jew alike to follow Torah.

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A Guaranteed Heritage and Inheritance

The assumption that Gentile believers are outside of Israel unless they are circumcised in a conversion or have some Israelite ancestry is a complete reversal of Paul's primary Gospel. Paul's epistles to the Romans, the Galatians and the Ephesians all argue vociferously to the contrary. According to Paul, Messiah alone is adequate for believers to be reckoned with the People of God, and there is only one People of God. Like it or not, the advancement of the Kingdom of Heaven has significantly broadened the definition of "Israel." Becoming a believer does not make a Gentile Jewish, but it does guarantee him a heritage and inheritance within the People of God (see Romans 4 and 11 for further study).

Jews and non-Jews alike are adopted as God's sons. Regarding ethnic Israel, Paul says that to them "belongs the adoption as sons," (Romans 9:4). In other words, those ethnically descended from Israel have been 'adopted' into God's family also. They are made a part of Israel. But regarding non-Jewish believers, Paul also says that God has "predestined us to adoption as sons through Yeshua the Messiah," (Ephesians 1:5). Both 'ethnic Israel' and the broader 'spiritual Israel' are adopted sons in God's family. After all, God has only one natural begotten son, and that is Messiah. Ethnicity is no guarantee of standing among the People of God. Paul says,

For they are not all Israel who are descended from Israel; nor are they all children because they are Abraham's descendants. (Romans 9:6-7)

According to Paul the criteria defining Israel is neither physical descent, nor circumcision, nor Torah observance—it is faith.

Please don't misunderstand me. I'm not saying that there is no difference between ethnic Israel and non-Jewish believers. Paul asks us, "Then what advantage has the Jew? Or of what is the benefit of circumcision?" (Romans 3:1) He goes on to answer his own question saying, "Great in every respect! First of all they were entrusted with the oracles of God!" (Romans 3:2)

Of the House of Israel


The Torah is every Jew's inheritance and possession. It does not intrinsically belong to the Gentile believer as it does to the Jew. It is not given to the nations. Rather it is given to Israel, and the nations are invited to join Israel and learn of it and practice it.

To be sure, ethnic Israel (i.e. the Jewish people) are the inheritors of a unique and precious identity. They are the physical descendants of the Fathers. Non-Jewish believers entering the ways of Torah need to recognize that they are honorary members of the covenant, guests in the House of Israel. But their membership in Israel is not a 'second class' thing. The spilled blood of Messiah is a stronger token of belonging than the thimble-full of Jewish blood I have inherited from my great grandmother. I'd rather rest my identity in Yeshua than in my 'Jewish-ness,' and I hope the same for every Jewish and non-Jewish believer alike.

Even if I didn't have a drop of Jewish blood in my veins, even if in my youth my family

had never made a formal conversion, even if I had never been deemed Jewish enough for the Israeli government, I would still keep God's Torah. I would still regard myself as a member of the covenant people of Israel, grafted in and adopted as a son. I would still live a life of radical discipleship to the Jewish Messiah, because I find my identity in Him, not in my remote Jewish pedigree or in a rabbinical conversion ceremony. Through the years of living out God's commandments, keeping His calendar and observing His instructions, the Torah has taken such deep root in my life that it is now a natural part of me and my family. I no longer struggle with those issues of identity as if my ethnicity or 'Jewish-ness' is what gave me permission to keep the Torah.

My wife and children and I are Sabbath Keepers. We are Torah people. We are Yeshua's disciples, and that's enough reason for us. We don't point to ethnicity as if it was the thing that made the Torah life accessible for us. Instead, the Torah life is simply what we do. It's a part of who we are in Messiah.

I am a Jew... I think, but that isn't the reason that I keep God's Torah. This is why it is disheartening for me to hear that so many predicate their observance of Torah and participation in Israel upon something as obscure, elusive and uncertain as ancestry in the Ten Lost Tribes. It seems to me that believers who embrace Torah based on their lost Israelite ancestry as a source for their identity should rather be encouraged to more fully embrace Messiah as their claim to Torah lifestyle. The point is not whether or not you are Jewish or Israelite. The point is that there is a Jewish Israelite living within you. 

Additional Note on Further Study Resources:

I highly recommend two new position papers by FFOZ. These essays are companion documents that clarify FFOZ perceptions on current trends in the greater Messianic and Two-House movements.

1. **The Two-House Metaphor** is a concise overview of some of our theological conclusions and understandings of the Two-House movement.
2. **Encounters with an Ephraimite** is a general overview of the differences and similarities between FFOZ, the Messianic movement and the Two-House movement.

Both these documents are available in PDF format on our website at www.ffoz.org/download.