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Negotiating a Messianic Identity Through the Use of Space and Art

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At the intersection of contemporary Christianity and Judaism, Messianic Jews are challenging the established religious boundaries and are negotiating an identity that tries to balance a Jewish heritage with faith in Yeshua. Messianic Judaism is often seen as “a hybrid blend of Judaism and Christianity,”¹ and has fascinated and infuriated Jews, Christians, and scholars, whether Jews or Christian. Jewish followers of Yeshua, today more commonly referred to as Messianic Jews, are not a new phenomenon. Most of Yeshua’s first followers were Jews. Throughout history, they have taken various forms, like the Ephraimites, the Nazarenes, Jewish Christianity, and Hebrew Christianity. The group of Jewish Yeshua-followers challenges the boundaries of contemporary Judaism and Christianity by mixing elements from both traditions. This raises questions about the development of group identity and who or what is shaping identity, as well as about what role out-groups and society play in the development of group identity.

It is easy to assume that Jewish believers today belong to a single group, but by looking at various Messianic congregations in Jerusalem, and maybe more importantly, in conversations with Jewish believers, it becomes clear there are various Messianic identities being negotiated simultaneously.

When entering into a congregation, the internal architecture is the first thing people interact with, but what can one learn from studying the use of space and art in connection to identity? In this article I will look at how Messianic identity is being negotiated through the use of space and art in modern Israel.

This article is based on research conducted on two Hebrew-speaking Messianic congregations in Jerusalem in connection to my master thesis “Negotiating a Messianic

¹ Patricia A. Power, “Blurring the Boundaries,” *Nova Religio: The Journal of Alternative and Emergent Religions*, Vol. 15, No. 1 (2011), 70.

Identity — The Formation of Messianic Identity through Space, Art, and Language in Modern Israel.” To be able to discuss the diversity within the movement, I choose two congregations that are very different in style and form. The first congregation leans towards evangelical congregations in form and style, and will for the purpose of this article be referred to as the Messianic congregation. The other congregation in many ways resembles a synagogue both in its form and style, and will be referred to as the Messianic synagogue. Both congregations own the space they use. The selection of congregations was made not to reflect the Messianic movement as a whole, but to be able to discuss the diversity within the movement in Israel.

There are many aspects that could be reflected on in connection to space and art, but for the purpose of this article I will focus on the congregational hall and its internal architecture, the use of symbols, and the idea of safe space.

What Can the Use of Space and Art Tell Us?

Entering into a congregation, a church, or a synagogue, the internal architecture is one of the first things people experience and interact with. Gail Ramshaw argues that “the theology of a church ought to be apparent by the layout of its ritual space and altering the interior of a church building may have a considerable effect on the community.”² The relation between theology and layout of ritual space may be argued to be present at both contemporary Christian congregations and synagogues. Ritual space, in this case, the congregational hall, is an integrated part of the community. The layout of the room is created for the service and may, therefore, reflect how the group views themselves in connection to one another and God. It may also indicate how people relate to other groups; in this case, the broader Jewish and Christian community.

The congregation hall at the Messianic congregation is, overall, simplistic. There are no imagery or symbols. At the end of the room there is a stage with two note stands and some musical instruments. There are rows of removable chairs facing the stage. The structure of the room and its simplicity resemble some evangelical congregations, which are more like conference halls than a traditional church. The pastor expressed his vision that “no one will enter into the church and find something more interesting than listening

² Gail Ramshaw, *Christian Worship – 100,000 Sundays of Symbols and Rituals* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2009), 47.

to the person.” Members noted that simplicity was valuable because it created no interference or distraction when listening to the preacher.

Entering into the Messianic synagogue is quite different and feels like entering a Jewish synagogue. The room is centered around the bimah. The seating area faces toward a raised semicircle platform, the bimah, which creates a focal point in the room. On the bimah, there is a desk used for reading the Torah. Next to the desk is a stand for the siddur. On the back of the bimah is an integrated wooden cabinet. Inside the cabinet is the aron kodesh, the ark, which is covered with a *parochet*³.

The presence of Jewish elements and features make the Messianic synagogue quite different from many other Messianic congregations in Jerusalem. When asked if the Jewish elements were a big part of the identity of the congregation, one member said:

It is a big part of the identity [of the congregation]. It is part of what separates it [from others] and makes it special because it keeps and preserves the traditional aspects of Judaism and that is something that has been important to me.

The Jewish aspects of the congregation were essential to most of the members and were one of the main reasons why they chose to be part of the congregation. The focus on Jewish elements such as the aron kodesh indicate that the Jewish aspect of their identity is important and something they want to highlight. While the pastor at the Messianic congregation said that the simplicity of the congregational hall was to help people focus on the teaching, the internal architecture of the Messianic synagogue focuses on the aroh kadosh, in which the Torah scrolls are stored. Both congregations use their internal architecture to highlight scripture or the use of scripture, but in different ways.

Looking at the internal architecture at both congregations, they demonstrate how Jewish believers continuously balance their Jewish identity and their faith in Yeshua and that there are various ways of interpreting a Messianic identity. The physical space of the two congregations shows how differently a Messianic congregational space can be created. Members of the two congregations have different ways of looking at the space they use. While the Messianic congregation focuses on taking away distractions and trying to help people focus on what’s being said in the front, the member from the Messianic synagogue focused on Jewish elements and how it is a big part of the

³ *Parochet* is the name of the curtain that covers the ark.

congregation's identity. While these elements can be argued by both congregations as being important parts of the congregation's identity even if they are not present in the physical space, the internal architecture may indicate some aspects that are more important to them.

The Use of Religious Symbolism

In both Christianity and Judaism, religious symbols have been used throughout history to express one's identity. While *the Magen David* is a commonly used Jewish symbol today, the *menorah*, a seven-branched candelabrum, is a symbol with longer roots in Judaism. In Christianity, the cross has become one of the most commonly used symbols but it is often challenging to Jewish believers, due to the historical relations between Jews and Christians.

One of the challenges with the use of symbols is that they are often layered with meaning that is continually negotiated and even redefined through interaction between people and societies. Symbols are therefore not stable entities, but can change through time and have different meanings in various contexts. Symbols are also in many cases soaked in historical connotations, and one's background and worldview may influence how one interprets them. Gail Ramshaw wrote that "a symbol not only is something, it does something."⁴ It is an active category and needs to be addressed as such.

When asked about the absence of religious symbols at the congregation hall, the pastor at the Messianic congregation said:

The reason is that we wanted people to focus on Christ and it does not matter what I put on the wall. It will never make everyone happy. I decided to reduce the level of arguments and keep it as empty as possible. The presence of God in this place will be seen in the born-again believers and not in any symbols.

The modern state of Israel is a multicultural state. Jews made aliyah from various parts of the world. Not only that, in many Messianic congregations there are also a significant number of non-Jewish believers and Christian tourists. This is reflected in the statement from the pastor. Due to the various backgrounds people at the congregation have, and the

⁴ Gail Ramshaw, *Christian Worship – 100,000 Sundays of Symbols and Rituals*. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2009), 16.

fact that the congregation often have Christian tourists who visit, symbols can be an obstacle since symbols can be interpreted very differently. One of the members noted that he did not feel comfortable with images of Jesus or the cross. While he said it was acceptable in other settings, he would not like to have it at his congregation. Another one said that she had no problem with the cross, but rather images of Jesus on the cross. Most of the members explained that while they do not mind other Christian denominations having religious symbols in their space, they prefer not having any themselves. Some went so far as to say that they understood why some congregations outside Israel use symbols, like the cross, but argued that it was problematic in an Israeli/Jewish context.

Looking at the Messianic synagogue, it is difficult for an outsider to interpret the space as anything other than a Jewish space. At the center of the bimah cover is a lighted menorah, which is a commonly used Jewish symbol and the symbol is also found on the parochet. When asked if there were any connection to Yeshua in the physical space, one member referred to the lighted menorah and said:

We would say 'yes' because the curtain on the Ark and the bimah, we have lighted menorahs, and we understand him [Yeshua] to be the light of the world and living Torah incarnate. In that sense, yes, but the menorah obviously is a widely used Jewish symbol, and many non-believing Jews would not automatically make that connection as they would with a cross or something like that, but that [the cross] is seen as an offensive symbol with baggage connected to it.

At the Messianic synagogue, the Jewish symbols become an integrated part of the congregation's space. What the member says points out some of the challenges with symbols. Firstly, that the congregation have incorporated Yeshua in a common Jewish symbol which makes it difficult for people outside the group to interpret. Secondly, there are challenges with the use of Christian symbols such as the cross because of the historical connotations it has, which was also expressed at the Messianic congregation.

Most Messianic congregations in Israel today have none or limited Jewish or Christian symbols present at their congregation hall. When religious symbols are used, they are more likely to be Jewish symbols than traditional Christian symbols. More often

than not, the congregational hall is built around simplicity and practicality.⁵ Then how can we learn something about how identity is being negotiated through space and art?

It is not only the use of symbols that is important when reflecting on how space and art shapes and creates identity. The lack or absence of religious symbolism can tell us something about the group. John Harvey refers to two attitudes as to why people do not use religious symbols or imagery. (1) Anti-iconicism, which is a “manifestation of former attitude.”⁶ Therefore, no symbols may tell us something about how the group relates to other groups or former groups. (2) Non-iconicism reflects an “uninterested response to religious representation or the absence of a strong visual sensibility in the social and cultural context in which religion (or one of its subsets) is situated.”⁷ Harvey argues that “some religious movements, while repudiating the accessories and elaborations of worship, have developed a simple dignity and dignified simplicity, manifested in, for instance, the design and fitting of their places of worship.”⁸

Looking at the congregational halls at the two congregations, and in conversations with their leaders and members, it becomes clear that it is not only the insiders that are shaping the space. Based on Harvey’s statements, both attitudes can be argued to be useful in relation to Messianic congregations. One can argue that both congregations try to separate themselves from former attitudes, especially due to the lack of use of Christian symbols and elements, which are common in traditional Christian churches. The absence of Jewish elements at the Messianic congregation may also be interpreted as an attempt to separate itself from certain Jewish groups. On the other hand, both congregations have a simplistic style and are shaped by the social and cultural context, which is the multicultural State of Israel, and both congregations pointed out that Scripture and the teaching were important parts of the identity of the congregation, which is highlighted in the focus area at the congregational halls.

Identity Formation or Evangelism?

When reflecting on the use of symbols in the congregation, several of the members talked about how certain religious symbols could be obstacles when inviting new people to the

⁵ Another factor is the fact that many congregations do not own the building they use.

⁶ John Harvey, “Visual Culture,” in *The Routledge Handbook of Research Methods in the Study of Religion*, ed. Michael Stausberg and Steven Engler (New York: Routledge, 2014), 504.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid.

congregation, or they themselves had problems with the use of some symbols. The fact that several of the members talked about it being a space in which they could invite non-believers raised the question: is the space created to reflect identity or is it a way of evangelizing?

During the interviews with leaders and members about the congregational hall, many talked about the idea of creating a safe space both for its members but also for non-believers. The difference in opinion was, a safe space for whom? While some highlighted that they wanted it to be a safe space for everyone, others wanted it to be a safe space for Jews.⁹ Some argued that the space should be a more or less Jewish space, while others wanted a space that did not have any association to a specific group and that the people and their service should stand on its own.

In his article, "Messianic Jews in the Land of Israel," Akiva Cohen argues that Israeli Messianic Jews are to some degree different from American Messianic Jews. Israelis often have a strong national identity, but rather few embrace a more traditional Jewish identity.¹⁰ This can be seen in the Messianic congregation. The fact that the congregation is located in a Jewish state may be one of the reasons why Jewish elements are not there. Many Messianic Jews relate more to the secular Jews rather than the religious Jews. Taking away certain Jewish elements can therefore be a reaction to the society in which the congregation interacts. The Messianic synagogues, on the other hand, have embraced the traditional Jewish identity. The internal architecture of the Messianic synagogue could be seen as an attempt to create a space that religious Jews would recognize and relate to and as a way of saying: 'we are also Jewish.'

While one can argue that to some degree the congregational space is created as a space suited for evangelism by creating a space it is easy to invite new people to, it is only one part of the picture. The congregational space in many ways balances between negotiating the identity of the insider and being shaped by the context in which it lives and interacts.

⁹ This does not mean they did not want others to feel welcome, but that I focused on creating a Jewish space with Jewish elements.

¹⁰ Akiva Cohen, "Messianic Jews in the Land of Israel," in *Introduction to Messianic Judaism*, ed. David Rudolph and Joel Willitts (Michigan: Zondervan, 2013), 109.

Conclusion

When looking at how space and art is used to negotiate a Messianic identity in Israel, two main aspects arise: (1) how Messianic Jews relate to the society in which they live and interact, (2) and how they relate to each other within the framework of Jewish believers in Yeshua.

The congregational hall and how it has been created for the purpose of both congregations in some ways reflects the out-group rather than the identity of the congregation. While the Messianic congregation indicates that it is shaped by the multicultural aspects of the State of Israel, and the fact that several members of the congregations are non-Jewish, along with the continuous flow of Christian tourists, the Messianic synagogue tries to negotiate an identity that belongs within the religious Jewish community.

The fact that the two congregations are very different in style and form show that there is more than one Messianic identity being negotiated simultaneously. It may also be seen as a debate or conversation between Jewish believers on what a Messianic congregation should look like. The two congregations in many ways belong to different ends of the spectrum within the Messianic movement, but they live and interact in the same society and to some degree may give an indication of how they relate to each other.

This article only reflects the surface of the topic of the use of space and art in connection to Messianic Jews in Israel. While space and art can be misleading to study on their own, there is a lot to be learned and discovered in conversation with people that use the space.

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