

Matthew Day

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English 1113 125

10/21/08

Sukkot

“Speak unto the children of Israel, saying, On the fifteenth day of this seventh month is the feast of tabernacles for seven days unto the LORD.” (Lev 23:34 RV) Every year hundreds of people come together in Chandler, Oklahoma to celebrate the Feast of Tabernacles (known among Messianics as “Sukkot”). It is not just an event or a gathering. When these people come together, they form a community. What is this community and who are the people who form it?

The people who take the time to come out to the Feast of Tabernacles have one thing in common: They have a love for God and they express that love through the keeping of His commandments. For lack of a better word I will call them Messianic.

If one spent much time with someone who is Messianic, he would begin to notice that this Messianic person does some strange things. There are certain foods that a Messianic will not eat, such as pork and shellfish. Messianics will not work on Saturday. Most of them do not celebrate Christmas or Easter. And a few wear a kippah (a type of head covering). These are things that one would expect from someone who is Jewish. However, most of the Messianics I know are not Jewish¹.

Everyone has a different testimony as to how they came to be Messianic. Ultimately, each of them came to the conclusion that God desires that His people keep His commandments and follow His Torah (literally “teaching or instruction”; used to refer to the law of Moses). So they began eating kosher and resting on the Sabbath. Many gave up Christmas and Easter because of

¹ That is not to say that there are no Jewish Messianics. In fact, the name Messianic was first used to refer to Jews who had placed their faith in Yeshua (Jesus). However, in recent years the number of Gentile Messianics has increased dramatically.

their pagan backgrounds. They began tying tzitzit (fringes) to the corners of their garments and celebrating the Moedim (appointed times; festivals such as Sukkot) of God.

When asked how becoming Messianic changed his life, Eliseo Pena said that it was a complete “three-sixty”. His whole life is focused on the Torah and away from self. Larry Wilson said that it changed him “to the core.” Indeed, my own experience in starting to keep the Torah was life-changing. It affects every area of life from how one works to what one eats. It gives a sense of direction and purpose to life.

Now that we know who these people are, what is this Feast of Tabernacles that they all gather together to celebrate every year? When Larry Wilson was asked this question, he answered that it is one of the Biblical festivals that people from all over the nation come together to celebrate. Jean Wilson explained that this festival has both historical and present day significance. Historically, it is a remembrance of the Israelites wandering through the wilderness. Today, it is a time for Messianics to come together as a community and fellowship.

During the Feast of Tabernacles, Messianics will set up a temporary dwelling (such as a tent or rv) and live in it for eight days. Some do this on their own, but most get together with other Messianics. The community formed in Chandler is one of the largest gatherings of Messianics for Sukkot. During the week, different speakers will come and give teachings on the Bible. There is time for praise and worship and time for prayer. It is a time of joy and fellowship.

I asked several people what Sukkot meant to them. Larry said it was a time to fellowship with like minded believers. It was affirming in that it showed that he and his family were not the only ones walking this path of Torah. When I interviewed a group of young adults, they gave a similar answer. For many of these people, there are very few (if any) others in their hometown that follow the Messianic path. By coming to Sukkot they get a chance to meet others who believe the same way they do. This is one of the things that makes this gathering a community.

People from all different backgrounds come together because of a common calling to Torah and they become a community.

This community only starts with the eight days of camping. Lasting friendships are made there. Even I, who was only there for the weekend, made sure to get email addresses from friends that I had acquired. Camping is one of the best ways to get to know someone.

When there was not teaching or some other activity going on, I would spend time talking to other campers. We would talk about a variety of topics, but one that seemed to come up over and over was our testimonies. Many people were curious as to how I came to start keeping Torah. I had a chance to share my story with several people. I also had the opportunity to listen to their stories. It is always exciting to hear the different ways that God drew us to Torah.

I also included this as one of my interview questions. “What is the reason you joined the Messianic movement?” I asked. Larry Wilson said he “didn't join anything.” Rather he “unjoined religion” and found truth. Eliseo Pena said that he didn't really join the Messianic movement, but God brought him into it. This is one of the pictures shown by Sukkot. God called His people out of Egypt and into the wilderness where they dwelt in booths. In the same way, God calls Christians out of religion and brings them into His Torah.

One of the reasons so many friendships are made at Sukkot is because the people are so friendly. When I first arrived at the campground, a young man whom I had never met before introduced himself to me and offered to help me set up my tent. Before long another man came out to help. Several people invited me to have lunch with them. According to Eva Pena “You never meet a stranger.”

Earlier I mentioned that there was a lot of teaching at this Sukkot. In addition to the traditional method of teaching where the speaker gives a presentation, Midrash was used. Midrash is a method of searching for the truth (Indeed, midrash literally means “to search out”).

It is basically an open forum. Everyone is allowed to ask questions or make comments. Usually there is a moderator who makes sure the group stays on topic. This method is effective because people get more than one viewpoint. Also, they are able to ask any questions that might not have been addressed in a traditional teaching.

Midrash continues outside of these teachings as well. Anytime Messianics get together to discuss the Bible, it is a midrash. I was able to listen to a conversation about how to keep the Sabbath. I was also able to speak with some people about Chanukkah traditions. These midrashes are fairly common among Messianics.

In their teachings, speakers will often refer to Jewish writings such as the Mishnah. While these writings are not technically part of the Messianic community, they are useful for studying the Torah because they contain ancient traditions on how to keep the Torah. They tell how the Jews view Torah, a viewpoint that is worth the attention of anyone Messianic. Now, Messianics do not always agree with Jewish traditions, but there is still wisdom in many of the Jewish traditions.

There is great diversity within the Messianic movement. People who come into this movement are from every race and every age. They come from a variety of backgrounds. I have seen more diversity within Messianic congregations than in most other groups. Within the scope of Messianic traditions, there are different interpretations of God's commands. There are those who follow the Hillel calendar and those who follow a Karaite calendar. Some embrace many Jewish traditions and others are very cautious about Jewish traditions. There are varying degrees of Kosher and different ideas as to what constitutes working on the Sabbath. These differences can make for some interesting midrashes.

Throughout, this paper I have defined several words that Messianics use such as midrash and Sukkot. These words come from the Hebrew language. Hebrew is the language in which the

Tanach (Old Testament) was written. Also, many of the prayers are in Hebrew. Many Messianics have begun learning Hebrew so that they can better understand the Tanach and the prayers.

One more thing that I must mention is Messianic dance. Ann Judah described dance as “worship from the soles of your feet to the tips of your fingers.” During praise and worship many Messianics will get out of their seats and arrange themselves into a circle to dance. At this Sukkot there were probably four or five concentric circles of people dancing. Even people who do not know the dance can join. If one learns a few basic steps, it is easy to follow along with everyone else. Both the very young and the old and gray enjoy getting up and dancing before the LORD. It is a way for Messianics to rejoice and worship God in unity as the scripture says “Then shall the virgin rejoice in the dance, and the young men and the old together: for I will turn their mourning into joy, and will comfort them, and make them rejoice from their sorrow.” (Jer 31:13 RV)

In the beginning of my paper, I said that I would call these people Messianic for lack of a better word. I said that because when one assigns a name to a group it begins to form a box around them. For example, the name American brings to mind wealth and freedom. However, not all Americans are wealthy and not all Americans are free. It is the same with the name Messianic. There is great diversity within the Messianic movement that cannot be contained in a single word. The Torah has such an effect on people's lives that to simply say one became Messianic would be an inadequate. Larry Wilson said he “didn't join anything.” I agree. I didn't join the Messianic movement, I was born again into a life of freedom in Messiah. While I have done my best to explain what it means to be Messianic here, one cannot truly know what it means until he has experienced it himself.

The same is true for Sukkot. It is a time of such joy that it is written in the Mishnah “He

that has never seen the joy of Beth ha-She'ubah² has never in his life seen joy” (197; Tractate Sukkah, Ch. 5). Monte Judah quoted a child as saying "This is a lot more fun than Christmas ever hoped to be" (Yavoh, He Is Coming). Sukkot is a community in itself. It is a time for Messianics to come together as one big family and rejoice. And through the friendships made, the community lives on past the eight days of Sukkot. One can never truly know the joy of Sukkot until he experiences it himself.

2 Beth ha-She'ubah is a ceremony performed at Sukkot

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