

The Status of Gentiles in Messianic Judaism

New Covenant Halacha of Tikkun America

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Derivatives of the word “convert” are used in English translations of the Scriptures and by religious communities in different ways. Some English versions describe sinners being “converted” to God. Others use the term “convert” or “conversion” with the implication that a person has faith in Yeshua. Today’s Jewish and Christian communities also speak of “conversion” of the heart and the soul, as well as “conversion” in the sense of switching from one religion to another.

The word “conversion” has a particularly onerous meaning in the history of Judaism because of its association with persecutions of the Jewish people, and attempts to force Jews to abandon their Jewish identity and assimilate into the Christian Church. That notwithstanding, the American Jewish community describes the incorporation of Gentiles into the Jewish people (especially in the intermarriage context) as “converting” Gentiles, thereby making them fully Jews, or Jewish “converts.” Note that the modern Church and Synagogue have, generally speaking, come to view “conversion” more as a rite of passage in which the converted person becomes one of their own, rather than as a conversion of the heart or soul. This is evident when some Christian denominations do not recognize other Christian baptisms, and when movements within Judaism decline to recognize conversions conducted by other (usually less observant) sectors of the Jewish community.

It was inevitable that the matter of “conversion” would make its way into Messianic Judaism. It has always been an issue among us because of desire for unity in mixed marriages, because there are Gentiles within our congregations who perceive that they are called to become Jewish for various reasons – some good and some not so good, and because some congregations limit certain aspects of synagogue life to Jews. The first (and at this time the only) mainstream organization in Messianic Judaism to formally adopt standards of conversion is the Messianic Jewish Rabbinical Council (MJRC). According to the MJRC’s statement, “It consists of a group of ordained Messianic Jewish Rabbis and associated leaders who share a common vision for Messianic Jewish practice rooted in Torah, instructed by Tradition, and faithful to Messiah Yeshua in the twenty-first century.” In 2001, this group began to study and deliberate over the various areas of practice that would comprise a basic “Standards of Observance.” These norms would apply only to its members and to new converts. These standards were not considered *halakhah* but voluntarily-accepted norms; therefore they are not considered binding on others. The group officially incorporated in 2006 and, as one of its main functions, began to establish “Standards of Observance,” basic ones of which are binding on those who subscribe as members; one of its promulgated standards affirms conversion. The

MJRC's project has not been endorsed by the UMJC but, because it is an historic first in our movement, its reflections and published standards are likely to impact us in Tikkun, even though we are not members and are therefore free to either affirm or disagree with its conclusions.

Although, strictly speaking, the MJRC does not consider its "Standards of Observance" to be *halacha*, Tikkun's *shaliach*, Dan Juster, believes that making *halacha*, in the New Covenant, is valid and useful – especially if promulgated within an apostolically led community of congregations such as Tikkun. He says, however, that we cannot make *halacha* in the New Covenant binding in the same way as it is understood in historical Judaism because New Covenant believers rely on the *Ruach HaKodesh* to direct them individually. Consequently, any *halacha* made by Tikkun should be viewed, not as law, but rather as apostolic guidance. That notwithstanding, we can and we do bind ourselves institutionally to the teaching of the Bible, and to standards of conduct and practice that we believe should be required for Tikkun membership; in this we are similar to the MJRC.

As previously said, the MJRC made acceptance of the practice of converting Gentiles to Jews one of its defining standards. This is a very controversial matter in the broader Messianic Jewish world, much of which rejects such conversion as being biblically unauthorized. For example, the leaders of the Messianic Jewish Alliance mostly reject such conversion, and Tikkun's *shaliach*, Dan Juster, is also against it, except in cases where a non-Jew is married to (or is betrothed or engaged to marry) a Jew, or where a professed Gentile has a Jewish grandparent, and wishes to re-acquire his or her Jewish identity.

Dr. Juster presents his reasons for rejecting the general practice of Jewish conversion in a paper entitled "Joining Israel without Becoming a Jew." In it, Dan argues that the warnings in Galatians 5 with regard to circumcision, and the teaching in I Corinthians 7 concerning remaining in one's calling, seem to speak against conversion. In addition, he contends that opening the floodgates to Gentiles wanting conversion due to their eschatological fervor for Israel and for Jewish practice, could be a significant problem for our Movement's Jewish authenticity. He argues that the wider Jewish community's established tendency to reject even those Messianic Jews who can prove their lineage would be exacerbated by a flood of Messianic Jewish converts, thus causing it to be even more difficult for Messianic Jews to make *aliyah* to Israel than is now the case.

In the process of developing his paper, Dr. Juster found that some within Tikkun were in favor of Jewish conversion, and offered arguments to mitigate his concerns. Dialogue on the subject began and is still ongoing, as we try to come to a mediated position to guide Tikkun and others regarding such conversion. We ask the question: "Is there a recommendation we can make together despite our different views?" Tikkun's "Committee on New Covenant Halacha" believes there is a consensus understanding on some issues, and we are therefore recommending the following to Tikkun congregations as a path for Gentiles who desire, and are called,

to be fully joined to the Jewish community and to Messianic Judaism as a lifetime commitment.

1. Gentiles who are “born again” in Yeshua are grafted into the olive tree (Romans 11), and are equal citizens in both the Body of Believers and in the “commonwealth of Israel” (Ephesians 2:12) which includes all Jews, and all believers in Yeshua. This commonwealth denotes the larger circle of those who are joined to Israel and the Jewish people from all nations through their faith in the Messiah Yeshua.
2. Some Gentile citizens of the commonwealth of Israel may be called by God to have a unique and permanent joining to the Messianic Jewish community and the wider Jewish world – to live among Jews and Messianic Jews where possible, to maintain a *Torah-observant* New Covenant lifestyle, to marry Messianic Jews or Gentiles similarly called, to raise their children in Messianic Jewish life, and to participate in Messianic Jewish responsibilities. We are designating Gentiles who are so called and live out this calling, to be known as *k’rovei Yisrael* – those who are closely related to Israel (see *A Place in the Tent; Intermarriage and Conservative Judaism*, Oakland: EKS, 2004). The singular is *k’rov Yisrael*, and we use this term instead of “proselyte,” “convert,” or other such terms so as to avoid misunderstanding.
3. *K’rovei Yisrael* Messianic Gentiles who wish to formalize their *k’rov* identity and commitment to the Jewish people and to Messianic Judaism may do so by engaging in a public ceremony that includes declaration or oath, and *tevilah* (ritual washing).
4. Conversion is considered an acceptable option only for those *K’rovei Yisrael* Messianic Gentiles (whether their *k’rov* identity has been formalized or not) who are either already married to a Jew, betrothed or engaged to a Jew, legally adopted by a Jew, or who have a Jewish grandparent and wish to re-acquire their Jewish identity. Conversion should include declaration or oath before witnesses, and we recommend *tevilah* in keeping with the custom of our people. For men, conversion requires *brit milah* (covenant circumcision).
5. Tikkun does not preclude or oppose the self-description of “Jew” by those who have been converted under reputable Jewish auspices; some in our midst have *already* undergone such conversions. While we discourage conversions under non-Messianic auspices for a number of reasons, if such a conversion has occurred, we will not object to calling such a person in our midst a Jew if he or she so desires. No Tikkun congregation is obligated to participate in the conversion of Gentiles, but we should respect the status of persons who have received conversion under any reputable and suitable Jewish authority.