

A Response to Russ Resnik's
Hesed and Hospitality: Embracing Our Place On the Margins
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The Hashivenu Forums from the beginning have challenged us to be contemplative, critical and coherent, reevaluating, reassessing and reordering the Messianic Jewish world that we have inherited. This year's forum though is unique in that it demands that we continue this process of self-searching while somehow reversing or at the very least minimizing our levels of self-absorption, which are the normal result of ongoing internal scrutiny. Our association with Yeshua, who is said to fill the center of our world, all the while accepting a position at the margins of the present social structure, suggests this dialectic task. It is more simply communicated by the oft stated yet rarely actualized platitude, "we must diminish so that he might increase." All too often though, this plays out with religious groups actually hiding behind the fifty foot Jesus crafted out of their own worst fears and most militant ambitions, not unlike the giant Stay Puff Marshmallow Man in Ghostbusters. Russ Resnik, though, has truly understood the task, identified the general nature of the dialectical tension, and suggested practical steps toward a goal that I would like to call a "Yeshua synthesis".

I find myself, not surprisingly, in agreement with Rabbi Resnik's concerns and most of his assumptions. I was very impressed with his use of diverse scholarship, mining from a few prominent Catholic, Protestant and Jewish, New Testament scholars. I am equally impressed with his thoughtful and creative identification of parallels that exist between the Hebrew Scripture and Besorah narratives concerning Hesed and Hospitality. I was also extremely pleased that he took a brief moment to consider the deleterious effects of consumerism on sacred community (p.17) though I wish he had parked there a bit longer. If there was a single shortfall to this presentation, I believe it is in the failure to fully communicate the true radicalism of Yeshua's marginality and therefore the radicalism of following him. After all Yeshua did not get spurned at the water cooler, rather he was beaten and crucified, which Resnik did communicate, but moreover Yeshua willingly abandoned stature to which we are told he was entitled, an idea to which I believe we do not give enough credence. I think properly observing the radical nature of Yeshua's marginality may lead us to a few more radical, and certainly uncomfortable suggestions than those Russ Resnik has offered concerning our own relationship to the larger culture. I therefore am going to attempt to build upon his well-crafted paper, by presenting some more radical conclusions that might come from his work. To do so I think it will first be necessary to examine the dialectic that he has constructed more carefully. Resnik begins by stating his thesis well.

This picture of Yeshua's marginality is consistent with the Gospel accounts. What is more striking there, however, is Yeshua's embrace of the margins to reveal the God who is at the center of Israel's story. In a culture infected with materialism and self-seeking, the margins are a prophetic location where one can protest yet not disappear. Yeshua's example beckons us to the margins as well. Perhaps it is fitting that the

Messianic Jewish community, which sees itself at the center of God's redemptive purposes for both the church and the Jewish community, finds itself marginalized by both. (p.2)

While Resnik recognizes that Yeshua embraces his marginality, he fails to articulate that Yeshua had a choice in the matter. One can willingly except their plight whether or not they have any viable options. But the Apostolic Witness states that Yeshua abandoned the privileges of deity and did not claim or exploit his status (Phil.2: 6-8). His role is not passive; rather he actively undertakes the role of a servant. So for Yeshua the incarnation in and of itself is a position of marginality. We intuit that far more is lost when he enters the created order than we are capable of comprehending, or that the biblical authors are able to adequately convey. While perhaps this is what Resnik means by Yeshua's embrace of marginality, clearly articulating this concept might help clear up some of the confusion that I believe exists in his attempt to separate inherent and incidental marginality.

This paper considers both the inherent marginality of following a cross-bearing Messiah, and the incidental marginality that has resulted from the historic rift between the Jewish Messiah and the Jewish people, and between Jews and Christians. Inherent marginality is part of loyalty to Yeshua. Incidental marginality may change with time and circumstance. (p.2)

Though drawing distinction between inherent and incidental marginality that is an insightful and somewhat helpful mechanism, the marginality that come from following Yeshua cannot be separated from the historical circumstance in which it occurs. That Yeshua is a "cross-bearing" Messiah cannot be understood outside of the probationary state of humanity and the social moral plane that it occupies. Yeshua enters the created order to demonstrate efficacious worship (service) of God. Self-sacrifice only requires death due to the still chaotic state of the created order, and the failures of humanity to properly bear God's image, and of Israel to fulfill its vocation as a model of renewed humanity. The crucifixion and resulting resurrection cannot be understood as ontology divorced from the social-moral realities that demand these. Though human separation from God (understand this as a kind of marginalization) is a cosmic reality (inherent), it is demonstrated every day by man's inhumanity to man, cruelty to animals and disregard for the planet (incidental). In this respect the marginality of Yeshua is both inherent to the *besorah*, and incidental to the conditions within the historical plane. By breaking the historical plane through the incarnation, Yeshua brings the promises of a perfected order inherent in the cosmos into the still chaotic circumstance of history, and all of its social and moral pathos. A world unprepared for the sovereignty of Yeshua pushes him to the margins, and by association with him those who bare his name. In this respect relational rifts that exist between the Messianic Jewish community and the remainder of institutional Judaism are incidental but are also inherent, as are those that exist in Christian/Jewish relations and the relationship between institutional Christianity and the Messianic Jewish community. This is not to say that we are absolved of any responsibility for these relationships, to the contrary I believe that the organic connection

between the inherent and incidental nature of marginality compels us to actively embrace it as Yeshua did, willingly abandoning all claims to privilege and status. Of course the best guide for our activity should be as Russ Resnik has pointed out the teachings and life of Yeshua.

Yeshua's willingness to abandon his kingdom results in its eventual establishment on earth; that those who follow in his footsteps become heirs to the kingdom is equally good news. Yeshua promises that the "Kingdom of Heaven" belongs to the meek, the merciful and the peaceable (Matt 5:1-10). That these will inherit the land suggests again an invasion of the cosmic order into the natural world, a time when the righteous standards of God will overturn the power and principalities that presently dominate this world. Yeshua's humility, sacrifice and suffering are redemptive of the cosmic order, likewise we are instructed to bring his redemptive love into the social and moral structures, forsaking power and self-protectionism. Yeshua instructs his disciples to be happy when they are insulted, while practicing radical generosity and actively pursuing peace. These are meant not merely as individual instruction, but as the representative qualities of a community that bares the image of God in and through His suffering servant.

Of course we know that the earliest congregations of Yeshua believers followed this instruction radically, sharing all things in common and providing for the most needy among them. When I was a new believer in Yeshua in the 1980's I trusted that this kind of communal living was to become a normal way of life for my family and myself. I volunteered daily at a local soup kitchen occasionally bringing home those who had nowhere else to sleep. Perhaps I was naïve, but I trusted that God would look after my family and I, our needs and our safety. I questioned the spiritual leader of the congregation I was attending at that time as to why we no longer maintained common provision for the welfare of all in the community. His response surprised me. He informed me that that was then, this was now. There was no room for negotiation, no gradual plan for implementation, not even any remorse that we had arrived at a place where the conceptual framework for the community of Yeshua had been abandoned unceremoniously for the new gospel, capitalism. It is not that I thought that we should all live on communes and abandon our jobs; I was merely looking for some guidance as to how we could bring the unselfish nature of the primitive assembly of Yeshua's followers into our present situation.

This would be the first of many disappointments as I began to realize that much of what I would intuitively recognize as principles of the Yeshua life had long since been compromised as an accommodation to the social order of the day. Nobody had to tell me that Yeshua's disciples were supposed to abhor violence. Non-violent resistance was not merely the teaching of Yeshua, it was demonstrated over and over again in his actions and the actions of his followers. Though Yeshua could have called down legions from the heavenly realm he chose to die a violent death. To understand this as a single cosmic correction which places no demands upon us would vitiate the martyrdom of his earliest disciples who followed his instruction to take up their crosses. They were not pacifists. There was nothing passive about their deaths. They chose to allow themselves to be in harms way for the sake of others and die rather than defend themselves.

A surreal experience for me was winding up at a sports bar watching the first Holyfield-Tyson fight with a group of Messianic Jewish leaders. Until that time I had worked under the assumption that boxing was off limits. I was aware that football was practically a Christian sport; it was played by Christians against other Christians in a Christian country, where both teams prayed that they could obliterate the other team. Celebrity football players and coaches even made videos on how to be Christians. It could be argued (though not well), that football is a skill sport where contact is incidental. Boxing on the other hand had but one goal, beat the other combatant unconscious. I had at one time been a boxing fan but had come to the conclusion that it was far below the bar that Yeshua had established. What I was surprised to find out though is that Evander Holyfield was a Christian, fighting a holy war against Mike Tyson the infidel. I make no argument that both men fit their roles. Holyfield was infinitely more likeable than Tyson, who was a convicted rapist and a psychopath, his name was even holier, but somehow when I got past the color of the event, it was still violence for entertainment, and entertainment can be the most frivolous of consumerist products.

Not only do we accommodate violence for entertainment, but also for nearly 2000 years the Church has been complicit in the waging of war for land. The bishops of Europe devised rules of Justifiable War so as to prevent the princes of Europe from destroying the continent and killing Christian non-combatants. Of course non-Christians were fair game and the resulting Holy Wars gave license to the ambitions of the princes. Do those who claim the name of Yeshua have a better record today? We often justify pre-emptive wars, sale of arms, and collateral damage to non-combatants. Demagogues, often claiming allegiance to Yeshua use fear to sustain our support, but do we really know what we are actually fighting for, or are we more concerned what we are fighting against. How can we reconcile these attitudes with the “meek shall inherit the earth”? Yet so many within the ranks of the Messianic Jewish movement would be more prepared to align themselves with one of the political parties than to claim the radical marginality of “heavenly citizenship.”

It is not surprising that the Jewish community distrusts those who claim the name of Yeshua. The record has not been great. Rather than remain a small and marginalized movement, the Church sought power and prestige, rather than continue to embrace their marginality. The institutional Church could not tolerate the ongoing presence of the Jewish people, a reminder of the inherent marginality required of following Israel's greatest son. The Jewish people on the other hand have always been a small and marginal people. That Yeshua was rejected by the authority structures of his day should come as no surprise. That the governing structures of Rome, the dominant power and principality of this world could not tolerate an itinerant Jewish teacher who advocated a leveling of the playing field seems almost axiomatic. But Yeshua's rejection by his own, Jewish leadership attempting to sustain hegemony among the small and long dominated nation of Israel, serves to illustrate the inherent nature of our own rejection for bearing his name.

I believe it will always be incumbent upon the gatekeepers of the Jewish community to reject us so long as belief in Yeshua is non-normative in the Jewish world; a condition that I believe the scripture claims will some day be reversed. This does not mean that I believe each and every rabbi and community leader will reject us, in fact my experience is quite different. On an individual level I have known many in our congregation, and many more around the country who have found acceptance in the greater Jewish community structures and have become part of various minyanim, as well as members and leaders in Jewish organizations. Messianic Judaism though is a communal and institutional presence, in which we represent unashamedly Israel's greatest son crucified, and I believe it is antithetical to our inherent nature as the composite body of the marginalized savior to find acceptance without losing our *raison d'être* and our soul.

I have seen too many cases where individual Messianic Jews have become so enamored with acceptance within the greater Jewish community that they have made unconscious choices to jettison much of the particularity of their faith in Yeshua. I am not suggesting that we should cease to be involved in the Jewish community, or in fact learn from non-Messianic teachers, what I am suggesting is that without the marginality of co-crucifixion we have little to give back to the Jewish community. Artists such as Marc Chagall, writers like Scholem Asch, and philosophers/theologians such as Martin Buber, Will Herberg and Franz Rosenzweig have drawn clear parallels between the sufferings of Yeshua and the sufferings of the Jewish people. But Yeshua embraces his suffering, and while being an active participant in his own marginalization he overcomes the hegemonic powers and gives both meaning and divine purpose to the sufferings of Israel. For this reason I believe our marginalization by the Jewish community is inherent to the *besorah*, but only so if we embrace our liminal standing from within the Jewish community instead of a secure position of marginalization outside the Jewish world. For this reason our locus of identity is primary and organic to the message that we carry within us.

Though I do not agree with Russ Resnik that our marginal status in relation to the larger Jewish community is purely incidental, I understand his assertion that we may be able to reverse the marginality that is caused as a result of the historical animosity that exists between the Church and the Jewish people, and perhaps this is his only reason for creating this separate category. If we can begin to reverse these affects, which are born of fear, it might facilitate our ability to embrace our marginality from within the community. The earliest followers of Yeshua almost from the beginning were a unique and somewhat marginal group. Daily they met in the temple courts and most people feared them and kept them at arms distance. Nonetheless we are told that their numbers grew daily, evidence that they were effectively working toward the fulfillment of Israel's destiny despite, or better said due to their marginality. It is for this reason that I believe we must be willing to radically rethink our individual lifestyles and priorities, subordinating our individual desires to the active embrace of the kind of radical marginality that I described earlier. Though attending Jewish community events is a nice way to participate within the Jewish community, it is an individual participation whereby we are passively absorbed into the sea of faces. If our participation is merely to go along with the status quo, we will cease to matter. We must communicate a radical marginality both in word and action that will not only communicate a renewed sense of purpose to the Messianic Jewish

community, but will speak volumes to the larger Jewish world. As Russ Resnik described we must become a community that is willing to embrace radical Hesed, but to do so we must reject violence, consumerism and power.

Rabbi Resnik recognized that we suffer marginalization from other Yeshua believers in the Church when they discover that our primary locus of identity is within Israel. We are often an unwelcome reminder of the Church's refusal to identify with the marginality of Israel's greatest son. When the Church embraced models of domination and control the shame of Israel was covered with the mantle of Rome, and so was the light that had burned so brightly in the first two centuries. To be effective we must continue to nurture our symbiotic relationship with the Church, while refusing to hide our love for the Jewish people. We must avoid primary relationships with Christian institutions that require us to be absorbed, or worse yet to become show pieces. At any price we cannot use our rejection by our primary family as currency to purchase the affections of our Christian brothers in Messiah. As in our relationship with the Jewish people we must continue in our refusal to accept violence, consumerism and the misuse of power.

Russ Resnik has offered us a compelling and coherent model to embrace a new life in Yeshua. He has also given us some balanced and practical suggestions toward becoming welcoming synagogues. I fully endorse the direction he is headed, yet fear it is way too little if we truly wish to embody Hesed and Hospitality. The changes he describes involve the cleaning up of the Shabbat congregation, becoming less ingrown and welcoming the stranger into our synagogues at our weekly meetings. Certainly that would be a good start. But I am suggesting that we must take the concept of embracing marginalization much further and consider the development of intentional community that incarnates the spirit and the suffering of Yeshua 24/7. Are we willing to invite others into our homes and if so for how long? How do we protect the particularity of our calling to Israel while embracing the mandate to receive the stranger?

I regret that I did not have more time to offer some of the experiments that we are hoping to implement at Congregation Shuvah Yisrael or some of the ideas that I have heard of in intentional communities around the country for consideration. Perhaps in the ensuing discussions we will be able to process some of these together. Building intentional community will take a great deal of creativity in the atomized world in which we live, but if we are willing to take the risk and rethink our commitments, all things are possible.