



Season of our Joy...and some confusion?

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We are nearly there ...to this year's annual rehearsal of the Season of our Joy! It has been a wonderful time for us, especially these last 8 years that we have gone away as a community for the entire week plus. Locally, we are preparing diligently for our time away, with the theme this year of Psalm 51: *a broken spirit and a contrite heart will never be despised*. It may seem like an unlikely follow up to last year's theme of "Come Away My Beloved" but as we understand more and more deeply how much we need to be clear and clean before Him, with clean hands and a pure heart in order to approach Him it becomes more understandable that He led us to this theme. Our prayers and thoughts have often been with others around the world who are making similar preparations for the return of our Messiah!

As an equipping ministry and Life Model™ community, we understand and practice this Feast, and other things, in a little different ways than may be common to Messianic communities. Our differences have led to misunderstandings at times. Recently it became apparent that since a set of assumptions is carried by either of two labels, people need to hear us declare that we are neither a church nor a synagogue, but an equipping ministry. We are not bound by traditions of either structure. Being an equipping ministry rather than either entity affects our *halachah*/the way we walk. Patterns of relationship, identity and boundaries are established in ways that are not common for small home fellowships and even for some larger congregations. Some may understand more effectively if we used the term "a healing community" yet this term also carries baggage and is associated with some pretty fraudulent behaviors, so even there we could easily be misunderstood. We have applied both vertical and a horizontal aspects to our community and celebrations that others often do not recognize or understand the importance of for YHWH honoring life. As I write this, I fear it may sound presumptuous yet I know it is a fact that there are a number of people who would be happy to witness to the fact that they do not understand why we do what we do!

These comments are not intended to be a condemnation for those who view things differently, or to speak against groups that are structured after either church or synagogue practices, but perhaps as a counterpoint or alternate understanding. In order to discuss the differences, I will first provide a short summary of our background and a few experiences over the years that have helped shape our identity and practices. I will next describe a few specific experiences related to *Sukkoth*/Tabernacles and would very much like to hear feedback from our readers!

- Is this perspective helpful to you?
- Do you see any way in which it is not consistent with Scripture?
- Does it fulfill or abolish the Torah?

Brief Summary of Set Apart Ministry (SAM) History

Our ministry came into being originally to provide care and support in a Biblical way for those coming out of occult practices or severe spiritual trauma, a discipleship and spiritual formation community. It is more directed toward those of “Ephraim of the House of Joseph” learning how to return to the ancient paths of the Word than directed toward becoming like “Judah.” This aspect alone is challenging for some people to recognize and accept. There are several articles on our site that address various aspects of this matter.

After working many years in my private mental health outpatient clinic with dozens of survivors of satanic or ritual abuse, I was aware that all I could do in that setting was simply not enough. Though I never advertised for such clients, they seemed to find me! Searching area churches for support people to come alongside these survivors routinely resulted in more people in need of help rather than helpers. A season of prayer and fasting led to the understanding that I was to birth Set Apart Ministries with Hebrews 10:32-39 as our mission statement. In January, 2000, my husband, Bob, and my prayer partner, Janell Schroeder, incorporated as a non-profit ministry to do so. We were anticipating the freedom to provide additional prayerful support with clear Bible study and personal care that could not happen under the authority of a state certified clinic. We knew we would be offering Life Model™ groups and individual work as well as regular Bible study and worship that many traumatized people could not tolerate in a church setting. Truthfully, many church settings couldn’t tolerate them and their needs either. We had already begun to study from a Hebraic perspective so that it soon became apparent that it wasn’t only the clients who were “coming out” from various pagan practices but also we, ourselves, needed to do so. At that point, we understood that our “territory had been enlarged.” Soon thereafter, it became clear to me that we would become a community, though the understanding of the meaning of this continues to grow. We were given wise counsel from others already walking after Messiah Yeshua and His Torah as to what materials to begin with and did so. Since then, it has been a walk of faith and listening to the *Ruach haKodesh*/Holy Spirit as we have chosen our study materials. (A listing of what we have studied together over the years will be found at our www.PlantandGrowMessianicFellowships.org website.)

At one point, a deep and difficult discussion ensued among all of us, leaders and participants alike, as to whether we were to be primarily about trauma restoration or primarily about following after Yeshua as a Torah pursuant community. Hands down, it was clear to all that pursuing Torah was to be the primary focus with restoration from trauma recognized as a need for both those of severely traumatic background as well as many from more “normal” backgrounds. The Life Model™ maturity and recovery materials were a primary resource, secondary to the Scriptures, for us as we developed our understanding of how to help all grow in faith and joy to overcome the fears of our past. We all need to

learn how to be more like Messiah and live from the heart He gave us, as well as learning and then doing what it is “like us” to do in many situations.

We understand that walking after Messiah Yeshua, the Living Torah, is something that the Scriptures indicate can really only be done in community. We are sad for those who remain alone without community and try to provide what encouragement we can to them, while also still encouraging them to find local community wherever possible. We have a relational Elohim who created us for relationship with Him and with one another and with the creation. Our community members live far enough apart that it is not practical for us to be together on a daily basis and sometimes is even a challenge to gather on a weekly basis for Shabbat. Yet, we view these gatherings as not only a fulfillment of the need to gather for His *moedim*/appointed times but also our best opportunities for learning to be together while learning to become more like Messiah as we mature in Him. Our definition of our Messianic community is found [here](#) and there are many articles on our site about relationships and community to further establish a picture. It is in the context of iron sharpening iron that we can best grow. This includes awareness that seeking knowledge alone, outside the context of relationships can lead to various problems; see related articles [here](#) and [here](#). We do understand that we are a part of the working of the *Ruach haKodesh* in calling His people back to the ancient paths, but do not see that this means that we are to automatically emulate Judah or Judaism, any more than we would continue in practices from our traditional Christian walk that we now understand are not consistent with *Torah*. See related article [here](#). Note that we do not think this matter needs to come from an adversarial position but one of mutual respect!

We have never publicized our community meeting place or time though we **have** publicized our presence in the local community and events to which the public is invited. We have learned to be cautious about opening the doors to the public without some screening for several reasons. It is simply that we prefer to meet people before they attend a SAM gathering, preferably in person but by phone if that is the only way to do so. Having many members who have been involved in cults at one time or another in their lives means that we need to be discerning and protective. This is less so now as our people have either healed and matured very much or chosen to leave, but we remain somewhat cautious. Guests we do not know at all may bring similar backgrounds with or without their own knowledge. The intricacies of mind control and programming issues which I am prayerfully screening cannot be explained briefly.

Though we seldom would refuse to include someone, we would be prayerfully alert to anything inappropriate when we suspect or know someone has this history. As difficult as it is, such “triggering” events cause upheaval and disruption in the gathering but may also expose another area of weakness or fear with opportunity to bring resolution and greater joy. Before we instituted this screening we had a number of situations that brought chaos into our worship and study times. You may recognize similar events in your history. One example was a newer member inviting someone they just met at a store to a worship time, without realizing that they were only interested in the cultural aspects of Hebrew dance and were in fact, member and pastor of Reverend Sun Yung Moon’s church. Several times we had guests who came with the intent to sell their products, rather than for worship or study. One individual came presenting himself as married to a woman we later learned was not legally his wife, but one of a

succession of women he had convinced they were spiritually married. We have also experienced requests to attend simply because someone is interested in the cultural aspects or the use of flags or banners with no desire to worship the God of Israel. We have experience with people who want the social opportunity to share their cooking skills more than they want to honor our Elohim. Even since instituting the simple practice of meeting people first, we have had some strange situations we wouldn't have thought to ask about first. One individual who had studied alone for years was horrified that everyone in attendance didn't wash the outside of their shoes at the door or that we did not practice washing off the exterior of all packages of food purchased and brought home. One individual was exuberant about attending worship time but refused to use any study materials, saying that he only needed the Holy Spirit and there was something wrong with us if we needed anything else. Someone wanted to bring a lamb for sacrifice and then require everyone to remain on the property overnight. We were glad we learned about that intent ahead of time! It has been a challenging process but we have learned much along the way and recognize the need to protect our identity and boundaries as a community that first honors Messiah above all else.

How much importance then can we put on the Feast of *Sukkoth*/Tabernacles, the time when we come away from the cares of the world to focus on daily worship and study while in daily relationship with one another! This past year was the first year we also were away together over *Pesach*/Passover, *Hag haMatzot*/Feast of Unleavened Bread and *HaBikkerim*/First Fruits. Not only are we fulfilling His commandments to observe the Feasts but we are also honoring our commitment to one another in community to do so together as an opportunity to grow. Close daily collaboration will always bring out differences and opportunities to learn to manage conflict well. It is inevitable so we might as well learn! Though much can be learned in a gathering with people over a short time period, it is also true that many people are able to act in a more socially acceptable manner for a short time than may be the case for their usual behavior. When gathering with people with whom one has a long term covenant connection, what is learned can be deeper and more lasting, as well as more challenging for all.

For us coming together for the full Feast celebration is an opportunity

- For daily worship, prayer and study in topics too large for weekly time together,
- to further develop relationships,
- observe the growing maturity of everyone involved, or the lack of it,
- learn more about how our community and leadership can be of encouragement or exhortation for both personal and corporate growth,
- to work together to develop our Sukkoth campus,
- And have some fun and recreation together.

Over the years I have observed that many people who lead a local fellowship leave that group in order to attend a Sukkoth gathering in a regional or national setting. Though there is much to be gained from coming together and learning from one another, I have long felt that a *moedim* is not the time to do so. If the leadership departs, what are the members of the group who are unable for one reason or another to also leave, to do at home? To my eyes, this seems like a shepherd who would leave his sheep alone. I

can't help but wonder if allegiance to a regional or national setting precludes or negatively affects the development of local community.

A secondary concern is that my impression is that our Abba often allows things to happen during His appointed times so my anticipation is that when the expected events prior to the return of our Messiah occur, the feast times may well be times of chaos. What better time for judgment to fall on the world system than when His people are away from the cares of the world, together, focused on Him! If leaders or even segments of a local community are accustomed to gathering elsewhere, what will happen to them all if chaos ensues in the world during that time? Messiah was also concerned that sheep without a shepherd are harried and helpless. My impression is that we are to be established in knowing "our place" to be for the *moedim* so that the rehearsing we are doing will be a part of our preparation for what is to come. Yes, I do understand that our Abba may also choose to supernaturally move us as He chooses.

We also see that a number of people seem to view Sukkoth as a time for spending one or two days here and there at various Sukkoth locations. This may be for many reasons, among them a desire to see friends in various places, a desire to connect their children with more children of like mindedness, and even a sense that this time is like a vacation. Many people do make friends and look forward to their yearly time together. This is not a bad thing, however, one concern is that as noted above, many people are capable of behaving well for a short period of time that is not really representative of their normal functioning. When situations change, perhaps leading to remaining far longer than expected at such a gathering, I can't help but be concerned for their ability to remain in harmony! As one nationally known Messianic leader wrote: "Our iron sharpening iron process too often looks like a brawl with lead pipes."

Review of literature from various organizations practicing one form or another of Judaism do seem to promote the idea of a "vacation atmosphere" though I see that it comes from tradition and Talmudic teaching more so than from the Torah. We also have people who grew up attending the Worldwide Church of God Tabernacles gathering at a site here in Wisconsin in which literally thousands of people from all over the world participated. Local restaurants changed their menus during this week to accommodate them. Their practice, too, included daily worship, study and activities as well as the practice of inviting people to your location for shared meals, a cherished memory for many.

I wonder as I write this, if those who host large gatherings have preparations should it be necessary for guests to remain! Yes, we can look to YHWH for His provision and grace, but it is also true that He expects us to behave prudently. A secondary concern is that these gatherings, when people come and go, and sort of mix and match, represent a more casual level of community, not one in which people can really experience iron sharpening iron. *See the article on ["social-ship vs. fellowship."](#)* There is no opportunity to learn to function well in tandem with and under the authority of one's home fellowship, or local shepherd leader(s). "As we train, so will we perform" is a military axiom that Mike Clayton, among others, has attached to our preparation as part of Messiah's Bride and army.

Sukkoth Experiences

A number of years ago our entire community traveled to spend Sukkoth with another community. It was quite an event, traveling across several states, caravanning in several vehicles with camping equipment for all and accommodating the needs of those with various disabilities as well as small children! We were welcomed and treated well by this long established community but saw some aspects with which we were not comfortable.

Though there was a full schedule of events there was very little participation of local members, leaving our small community in majority attendance at most events throughout the week. We do understand how difficult it is for all to obtain leave from employment or school obligations yet as a community, we do encourage all to prayerfully do everything in their power to free up this time as a part of being a committed community of Believers who give Messiah ...and our community...priority in our lives. (We understand that those very new to the celebration haven't yet had opportunity to begin to structure their schedules in advance and so may not be able to fully participate as they first come in. We try to accommodate them while also encouraging them to make arrangements in advance for the next season.)

A second situation there was more difficult. This community practiced invitations to community members for the purpose of reaching out to the nations to draw them in to learn about the Feast. We understand and appreciate such a desire, but when an occult practitioner, a shaman, was among those invited to present and teach their beliefs, we took exception and did not participate. It is our understanding that inclusion would be based on their desire to come into the sukkah and learn of the ways of our Elohim. With that perspective, we would have no trouble welcoming even an occult practitioner! However, in this case, the practitioner was not interested in learning from the hosts but rather focused on attracting people to their belief system. This willingness to include a teacher with this goal was puzzling to us.

More recently, we ran into opposition to our *halachah* that we meet people, in person if possible or at least by telephone, prior to including them in any of our community gatherings. Since a Sukkoth gathering is quite an extensive time commitment and very important to our community growth, we do also practice this at such times. An individual known to me expressed interest to attend and was welcomed to come. Without notice, this individual invited someone unknown to us. When our policy of meeting people first was brought to their attention and they were asked to have the guest contact us, the response was immediate and negative. Apparently the assumption was made that it was for the purposes of determining whether or not the person was acceptable enough to attend. Comments were made in regard to our enjoyment of the movie, *Ushpizin*, that we should learn from it and welcome even criminals or other so-called undesirable people without question. An effort to address the misperception was not accepted, and I now see some evidence that this negative assessment has been passed on to others.

This really was a very sad occasion for us, and somewhat ironic in that the individual involved probably doesn't realize that we are affiliated with a local Prison Aftercare Network and so far have helped 3 male

sex offenders return to life on the outside as part of our community. We are told by those most closely associated with services for released prisoners that we are the only Messianic organization in our state that has made ourselves available to support ex-offenders, though we know others that provide educational materials to many while they are incarcerated.

This experience led me to look more closely at the traditional aspects of “Ushpizin” in order to better understand this very strong negative reaction and assessment. In the process, light was shed on the previous experience as well.

I was challenged by this most recent incident to look more closely at the traditions around Sukkoth as it pertains to “Ushpizin.” Upon reviewing materials available online, both directly from several sites of various sects of Judaism, it became clear that these traditions have far more to do with Talmudic teachings than they do the Torah. I will list several of these resources at the end. There is an almost magical aspect of the teaching that if we tolerate any kind of guests, that we merit the presence of the founding fathers, and will receive a blessing.

And so we come to the ushpizin. As we fill our sukkah with earthly guests, we merit to host seven supernal guests, the seven “founding fathers” of the Jewish people: Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Moses, Aaron, Joseph and David.² While all seven ushpizin visit our sukkah on each of the seven nights and days of Sukkot,³ each supernal “guest” is specifically associated with one of the festival’s seven days, and is the “leading” or dominant ushpiza for that night and day.⁴

Translated into English, the word loses some of its mystery and otherworldliness. The Kabbalists teach that these seven leaders—referred to in our tradition as the “Seven Shepherds of Israel”—correspond to the seven sefirot, or divine attributes, which categorize G-d’s relationship with our reality, and which are mirrored in the seven basic components of our character (man having been created “in the image of G-d”).

As each supernal “guest” graces our sukkah, he empowers us with the particular quality that defines him. This is the deeper reason that they are called the “Shepherds of Israel,” for like a shepherd who provides nourishment for his flock, these seven leaders nourish us their spiritual essence: Abraham feeds us love; Isaac, self-discipline; Jacob, harmony and truth; and so on.

And while these seven great souls are our “shepherds” all year round, the seven days of Sukkot are a time when their presence in our lives is more pronounced and revealed. As we enter the “temporary dwelling” of the sukkah, freeing ourselves from the dependence we developed on the material comforts of home and hearth, we are now in a place in which our spiritual self is more revealed and accessible. In this place, the ushpizin visit us, empowering us to connect the seven dimensions of our own soul’s “divine image” with its supernal source in the divine sefirot, feeding, nourishing and fortifying our spiritual self for the material year to come.¹

There seems to be quite a lot of confusion between the supernatural qualities of our Elohim and the qualities of human beings, however important they may be in our history. This is similar to the confusion

¹ http://www.chabad.org/holidays/JewishNewYear/template_cdo/aid/571505/jewish/The-Ushpizin.htm

that exists with the identity of Messiah being confused with the land of Israel in many rabbinical teachings of more modern origin.

Having reviewed similar teachings during my review of the [Garden of Peace](#) series I recognized some elements that relate to witchcraft and being able to earn a reward. I also saw some of the same kind of comments that have led to *Purim* becoming known as a modern gathering that features dressing up in costumes and drunkenness or even beliefs that have led many to believe that the *Dreidel*, a beloved part of *Chanukah* celebrations, really has a place in a Torah pursuant lifestyle, when it is in fact, a gambling game. (Both *Purim* and *Chanukah* have great spiritual relevance to us today that is easily overshadowed by these more superficial behaviors and instructions that do not come from the righteous teachings of our Elohim.)

My understanding of encouraging guests to participate during this Feast is that we are to encourage **those who have seen evidence of our Elohim among us and who desire to learn of Him.**

Many nations will come and say, "Come and let us go up to the mountain of the LORD And to the house of the God of Jacob, That He may teach us about His ways And that we may walk in His paths. For from Zion will go forth the law, Even the word of the LORD from Jerusalem."

- New American Standard Version (1995) Micah 4:2

Then, no matter their background, we are to teach and encourage them! I do not see that it would be a fulfillment of Torah to allow or encourage them to teach their beliefs in such a setting, nor do I see that it would be a fulfillment of Torah to allow and accept inappropriate behavior with the expectation of reward. We do certainly want to and do remember those who are in need and do what we can to provide for them, though this may not necessarily involve them entering our sukkah. Now I can see what may have been at work for those who thought it was appropriate to invite a shaman into their sukkah! Now I can see why someone who thinks this kind of teaching is acceptable would be offended by a simple request to meet a participant in advance!

It felt important to share these observations for the benefit of others who may be struggling with how best to celebrate such important days! I do not intend to be disrespectful toward those who believe and practice these things, although I do intend to challenge them to examine the Word itself, rather than depending on Talmudic teachings or traditions of men.

As an equipping ministry, YHWH willing, we will continue to teach and encourage all who are willing to consider what He is showing us about how to honor Him and walk in His ways, not our own. We will continue to lift up those who do not understand our ways and prayerfully seek Abba's Hand for ourselves here and for them that we may all come together in Messiah Yeshua, especially at this wonderful time of the annual rehearsal of the Marriage Feast of the Lamb!

Resources

www.aish.com/h/su/dits/48965711.html The Seven Guests

http://www.chabad.org/holidays/JewishNewYear/template_cdo/aid/571505/jewish/The-Ushpizin.htm

http://www.myjewishlearning.com/holidays/Jewish_Holidays/Sukkot/At_Home/The_Sukkah/Ushpizin.shtml

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