

ISSUES



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JEWISH *and* *for* JESUS

-Is separation inevitable?

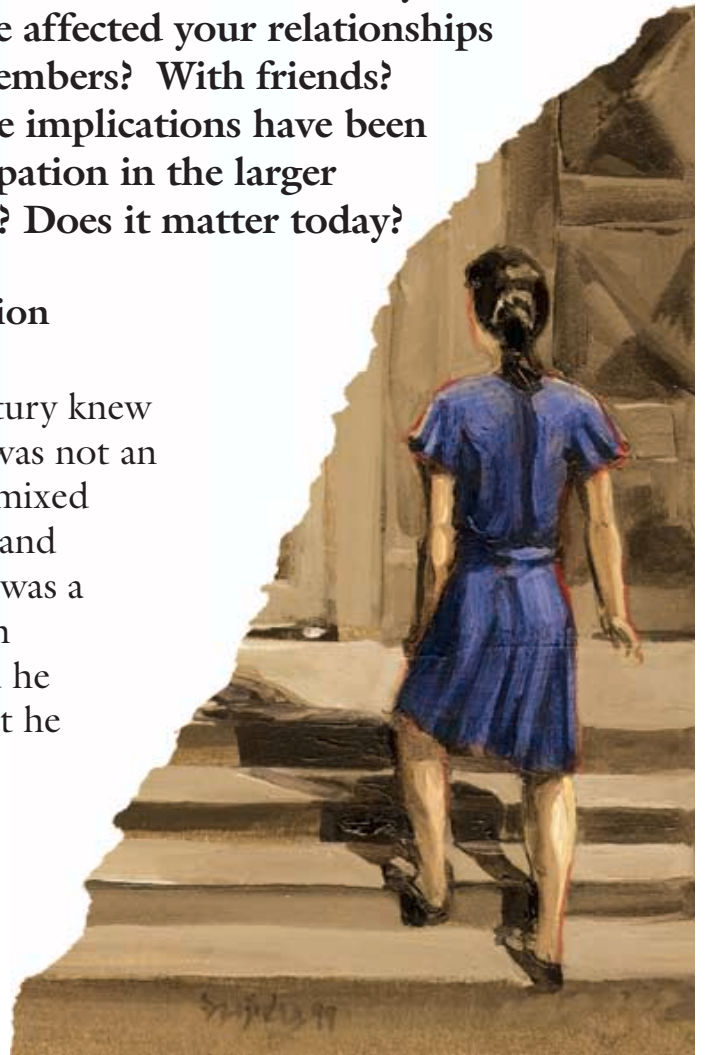
What would it be like to be a Jewish believer in Jesus in the first century? How would it have affected your relationships with family members? With friends? What would the implications have been regarding participation in the larger Jewish community? Does it matter today?

A first-century reaction to a Jew for Jesus

Every Jew in the first century knew that Jesus was Jewish. That was not an issue. And while there were mixed reports regarding his character and competency—some thought he was a troublemaker, others saw him as an ignorant Galilean, still others believed he was sent from God—most concluded that he was not the Messiah. To believe otherwise would mean exclusion from the synagogue.

“. . . for already the Jews had decided that anyone who acknowledged that Jesus was the Messiah would be put out of the synagogue.” (John 9:22)

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This exclusion amounted to more than simply social shunning. It was more like an organized quarantine. At the time synagogues were central to the fabric of daily Jewish life. Exclusion from the synagogue had an economic as well as a social impact on those first century Jewish believers in Jesus. The administrative move to “revoke the membership” of any Jewish Christian from the synagogue was only the first step. The second step came near the end of the first century when the Jewish community altered the liturgy in order to keep those Jewish believers in Jesus who might still secretly be in the synagogue from participating in mainstream Jewish life.

Liturgical changes to exclude Jewish believers

The following benediction was added to the Shemoneh Esreh and is still recited in synagogue services today:

“And for the slanderers (meaning heretics) let there be no hope, and let all wickedness perish as in a moment; let all thine enemies be speedily cut off, and the dominion of arrogance do thou uproot and crush, cast down and humble speedily in our days. Blessed art thou, O Lord, who breakest the enemies and humblest the arrogant.”¹

The above “blessing” came to be known as the “Benediction on the Minim,” which means those belonging to a sect, but was understood to mean “heretics.” An older form of the benediction used the word “nozrim,” or “Nazarenes,” which was an explicit reference to Jewish Christians. While neither term is used today, the original prayer institutionalized the elimination of Jewish believers from the synagogue. Whoever failed to recite that benediction would be removed under suspicion of being a heretic:

“Said Rabban Gamaliel to the Sages: Can any one among you frame a benediction relating to the Minim? Samuel the Lesser arose and composed it. The next year he forgot it and he tried for two or three hours to recall it, and they did not remove him. Why did they not remove him seeing that Rab Judah has said in the name of Rab: If a reader made a mistake in any of the other benedictions, they do not remove him, but if in the benediction of the Minim, he is removed, because we suspect him of being a Min?—Samuel the Lesser is different, because he composed it.”²

A lesser-known liturgical change historically

attributed to the existence of Jewish Christians was the daily recital of the Ten Commandments. A common misunderstanding within the Jewish community was that Jewish believers in Jesus had contempt for the law. Therefore the recitation of it was discontinued, “because of the cavilling of the heretics, for they might say: These only were given to Moses on Sinai.”³

Altitmus test for loyalty

After the destruction of the Temple in 70 C.E., Israel was certainly in a national emergency mode. While Jewish belief in Jesus was tolerated by some up to that time, the Jewish establishment did not feel it could absorb too many defections from status quo Judaism without jeopardizing its national existence.

The tragedy of the Second Roman War of 132-135 C.E. further established the alienation of Jewish believers in Jesus from Jewish life. Rabbi Akiba, sometimes called “The Father of Rabbinic Judaism,” hailed the leader of the revolt as Bar Kochba, (meaning “son of the star”). In that act, Akiba acclaimed him as the Messiah who fulfilled the promise of Numbers 24:17:

“I see Him, but not now;
I behold Him, but not near;
A Star shall come out of Jacob;
A Scepter shall rise out of Israel,
And batter the brow of Moab,
And destroy all the sons of tumult.”

Many Jews followed Akiba’s lead, rallying around their supposed Messiah who would lead them to victory. Jewish believers in Jesus could not stand with them without denying Jesus, the one they knew to be Messiah. Thus they did not fight and die alongside their Jewish brothers and were seen as traitors which further alienated them from the rest of the Jewish community.

For 2000 years, Jewish community leaders have continued this tradition of exclusion. Despite the celebrated pluralism of today’s Jewish community, there remain tens of thousands of men and women, born of Jewish parents, who are being excluded from the rest.

Altitmus test for loyalty today

Loyalty as a Jew today rests not on whether one is ready to go to war against Jewish oppressors. It



doesn't even hinge on Zionism or agreeing with a particular brand of Israeli politics. How to live Jewishly is a question that has more than one acceptable answer for a very diverse Jewish population.

Ironically, the litmus test for Jewish loyalty rests on a theological dictum. The one unifying statement that most Jews can make is to say, "We don't believe in Jesus." Whether one is Orthodox, Conservative, Reform, or even an agnostic or atheistic Jew, there seems to be a strange comfort in that statement. If you can say it, you are "in." That is the litmus test.

Structural changes to exclude Jews for Jesus in this century

In addition to the loyalty factor, Jewish believers in Jesus have been made to feel like outsiders through some institutionalized methods. The most apparent structural block is the "Law of Return," which defines the basis for immediate citizenship for Jews wanting to emigrate to Israel. Part of the definition of Jew requires that one "does not profess another religious faith." The Israeli Supreme Court, in *Beresford v. Minister of the Interior*, 43 (iv) P.D. 793 (1989), held that "one who was born Jewish but is a member of a congregation of Messianic Jews, or Jews for Jesus, or similar groups, is one who professes another religious faith and therefore is not eligible for the benefits of the Law of Return."⁴

The law states that Jews who believe in Jesus are not Jews for the purpose of making aliyah and the implication can be drawn that they are not Jews for any purpose. This has become increasingly problematic as there are more and more Israeli born Jews who have embraced Jesus as Messiah.

An excommunication ruling by The Rabbinical Court of Justice of the Associated Synagogues of Massachusetts, made it clear that Hebrew Christians do not have the right to have their sons circumcised under Jewish law, to be married by a rabbi or be buried in a Jewish cemetery. The Court warned, it is moreover, "forbidden for any Jew, Rabbi, Cantor or Sexton, to officiate or to participate in any such religious ceremonies with such converts to another faith."⁵

How have such rulings had their outworkings in the

lives of individual Jews who have found Jesus as their Messiah? Jessica's* story might provide some insight.

Twentieth century reaction to a Jew for Jesus

When I first started attending Congregation Ner Tamid, I had been a believer in Jesus for a little over a year. I had moved from New York into a new community, and while I wanted to be connected to others who believed in Jesus, I didn't want to stop being a part of a traditional Jewish congregation. When an older believer in Jesus who was also Jewish, said to me, "If you want to start attending synagogue, just be prepared for the day when you will be asked to leave," I was indignant, "That's not so," I told him. "I have no intention of being kicked out!"

And so I became a faithful member of my Conservative congregation. I approached the rabbi early on to let him know exactly who I was and what I believed. He listened and said, "Jessica, you are welcome here as long as you don't use this place to proselytize." I told him that I respected the synagogue and that I was not intending to use it as a platform for evangelism. I also told him that if people asked me what I believed that I would not refrain from telling them. We had struck a bargain that was agreeable. My membership dues were accepted, and one by one different members of the congregation got to know me as a Jewish believer in Jesus. But of course, not everyone knew. I spent some time with the rabbi and his family. I suppose he thought he would bring me back to his brand of Judaism, and in my own naive way, I thought I might help him discover Y'shua (Jesus).

I remember being glad that my friend who had cautioned me about "being thrown out of the synagogue" was wrong. The High Holidays were approaching, and I was looking forward to the special services at my congregation. And then it happened. My photo appeared in the local paper. I was taking part in an evangelistic event on a local campus, and the caption beneath my punim made it clear that I was standing for Jesus. When I entered the synagogue that Saturday morning, the president of the congregation and the cantor both met me at the door.

**not her real name*

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“Meshumad,” they cried out. “We don’t want traitors like you here; you don’t belong in this place!” I could feel myself shaking. The entire synagogue was in an uproar, and the rabbi had not arrived yet.

Moments later he walked through the door and he understood at once what was going on. He called me aside. Before he could speak, I said, “Rabbi, this is a time for people to worship and not a time to have this kind of a dispute going on. I’ll leave now and we can talk after Shabbat.”

He was relieved, and I walked out the door. I managed to make it about 20 yards before the tears started flowing. How could this happen? I thought. “I was a good member of this congregation. I had friends here. I was part of this community. What was my crime? I believed in Jesus.”

The rabbi and I talked later that night. It seemed that both the cantor and the president of the congregation threatened to resign if I remained a member. I remember the rabbi’s words to me: “I’ll withstand them, even if they quit, if you promise me one more thing—that you will not share your faith anywhere in the county where we’re located.” I was saddened by the rabbi’s words. He knew that I could not agree to such a demand and be faithful to the teachings of Y’shua. I had to resign. I received a refund of my membership dues in the mail, and I was never welcome to return from that day on.

It hurt a lot. I never tried joining a synagogue again.

What does this all mean today?

It has been said that Jews who believe in Jesus have abandoned the Jewish institutions and separated themselves from the Jewish people, but isn’t it the other way around? Ancient and even recent history seem to bear out the fact that Jewish believers in Jesus were intentionally isolated from mainstream Judaism. Today, Jews who believe in Jesus are told they have abandoned their Jewish roots and will eventually cease to be Jewish. Lionel Koplowitz, president of the Board of Deputies of British Jews is typical of Jewish leadership in this analysis:

“It is a fallacy to suggest that one can be both a Jew and a Christian. Throughout history those who have become converted to Christianity have, immediately, or after a lapse of time, ceased to be Jewish. The separation of Christianity from Judaism in the first century may have been a tragedy; it was, alas, inevitable.”⁶

Not only is their future as Jews denied by those representing the Jewish institutions, but their motivation for accepting Jesus is seen as less than honorable. Eugene Borowitz, writing in *Reform Judaism*, points out,



“The demographic precariousness of the Jewish people and the reality of anti-Semitism taints every convert-out as one who seeks self-gain by joining the oppressors, casts aside the proud record of Jewish accomplishment, and makes it more difficult for others to carry our traditions forward. In the post-Holocaust era, converting out is in Emil Fackenheim’s luminous phrase, giving Hitler a posthumous victory.”⁷

Such rhetoric seems self-serving at best since such leaders appoint themselves judge and jury in excluding Jewish believers from the community.

What is fair?

In today’s pluralistic society, Jews of every theological and philosophical stripe are included within the community in celebration of Jewish diversity. It would seem that at least some elements



Son of Man is?’ They replied, ‘Some say John the Baptist; others say Elijah; and still others, Jeremiah or one of the prophets.’ ‘But what about you?’ he asked. ‘Who do you say I am?’ Simon Peter answered, ‘You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God.’ Jesus replied, ‘Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah, for this was not revealed to you by man, but by my Father in heaven.’” (Matthew 16:13-17)

What about you?

If Jesus is who he claimed to be, then it is right and good for Jews and everyone else to believe in him.

Is it possible that your thoughts about him are primarily reactions shaped by concerns over being excluded from what is considered mainstream Judaism? Have you struggled with the notion that following Jesus would make you a disloyal Jew, an outcast?

If you had to choose to close your mind to the possibility that Jesus might be true in order to be considered a good Jew, would you do it? Or would you be willing instead to ask the creator of the Jewish people what a good Jew should think about Jesus?

—this article compiled by
several authors



Editor’s note: If you’d like to answer the question, “Who do you think Jesus is?” online, why not take our electronic survey at www.jews-for-jesus.org/survey.htm. Also online:

- “Who do you say that I am?” at www.jews-for-jesus.org/whosay.htm, which offers Jesus’ own words on his role as Teacher, Prophet, Brother, Messiah and Miracle Worker.
- “That Man,” a RealAudio pop-rock exploration of Jesus as a sabra by Israeli singer/songwriter Shmulik Nessim.

of the Jewish community might find room in their hearts for Jews who believe in Jesus. After two thousand years of exclusion, such Jews are as prevalent as they were in the first century. Yet it seems that the polarization we see in politics and between races has been rooted in the Jewish community for a very long time. Jews who believe in Jesus may not be able to hope for acceptance and inclusion, but they can try to focus on the real issue at stake. If Jesus is the Jewish Messiah, believing in him is not only right, it’s the most Jewish thing one can do. Jesus did claim to be the promised Messiah. Responding honestly and openly to that claim is the real and only way to deal fairly with the issue. It is the way Jesus himself asked his followers to respond:

“When Jesus came to the region of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, ‘Who do people say the

End Notes

1. *Hertz’s Authorized Prayer Book* (New York: Bloch Publishing Co., 1961), pp. 142-45.
2. *Soncino Talmud*, Berachot 28b-29a.
3. *Soncino Talmud*, Berachot 12a.
4. Menachem Elon, *Jewish Law, History, Sources, Principle*, (Jewish Publication Society: Philadelphia, 1994), p. 1690.
5. *The Jewish Times*, “Rabbinical Court Rules Against Jewish Christians,” 3/20/72.
6. *The Times*, London, “Evangelism and Jews,” by Lionel Koplowitz, President, the Board of Deputies of British Jews, February 22, 1991.
7. *Reform Judaism*, “Are We Too Soft on Apostates?” by Eugene B. Borowitz, Summer 1996.



In The Little Shtetl Of Vaysechvoos

Everyone in Vaysechvoos said that they remembered Yossele. Most didn't. Nevertheless, Yossele had lived in Vaysechvoos for a time, so each villager could claim an opinion, if not an acquaintance with this rabbi who was called a miracle-worker. Whereas nobody quite knew where he was born or where he came from, his mother, a young widow, brought him to live with a cousin who lived in Vaysechvoos. How long they stayed, no one knew.

On one point, however, there was no argument. Everyone agreed that Yossele was an unlikely miracle-worker. As a boy he was not particularly noticed for any special qualities. On the contrary, he was rather ordinary.

"Miracles? Yossele?" Zlata the baker's wife exclaimed. "He couldn't even wash his face. I'll tell you, I had to stop him on the way to the *Talmud Torah* just so that he wouldn't be an embarrassment. I washed his face with my own dishrag. A miracle-worker? Ha!"



The *melamed* also had an opinion. "Yossele? He wasn't a bad student and he wasn't a good student. He was a boy who liked to daydream. If he hungered and thirsted for learning, I could understand why heaven might grant him the power to do miracles, but that boy? Nah, he was just a dreamer."

Yosef the dairyman added his two kopeks. "Yossele? I remember his mother. It was all she could do to pay for the milk; and when she couldn't, my wife was kind enough to let her do laundry. Maybe her son should have made a miracle and filled their dairy can with milk. Surely that would be a simple task for a miracle-worker, wouldn't it?"

Shimmon the butcher perhaps remembered him best since they were in Talmud Torah together. "He was as good a student as anybody. He learned as much as the teacher could teach, which between you and me was not a whole lot. And when we played, he could toss more walnuts into the hole outside the *cheder* than anyone. He won so much and so often that we stopped playing with him and we called him 'Nutty Yossele.' But as for miracles? Listen, nowadays we have so many people working miracles. Even I do a miracle—I earn a living every day."

Never mind that Yossele was two years older than Shimmon and attended the Talmud Torah before Shimmon started. Shimmon had a miraculous memory where the impossible happened often.

Whatever the people of Vaysechvoos thought about Yossele, they all said the same thing. "No miracles *in* Vaysechvoos, no miracle workers *from* Vaysechvoos. Our town is a humble town. Mystical things happen elsewhere."

Then one day, a rather elegant-looking man came to town in a carriage with a driver and two fine-looking horses. He asked to talk to the rabbi. At first, the rabbi was concerned—what could it mean for such an elegant-looking man with such citified manners to want to talk to him? But when the rabbi met the stranger, he could sense the nobility of the man. The rabbi wanted to accord

him every honor, but the visitor declined, saying that he really came to represent another who had made it his holy intention to visit Vaysechvoos.

“And who might that be?” asked the rabbi. The visitor replied, “Yossele the Miracle-Worker wants to pay a visit.” The rabbi was electrified. “Such a famous person wants to come here?”

“Yes,” explained the visitor, who was one of his many secretaries. “As you know, he once lived in this town. He has fond memories of Vaysechvoos. He wants to come and bring God’s blessings.”

The rabbi was stunned. “When will he arrive?”

“Yossele the Miracle-Worker never comes unless he is announced by someone like me. Now that the announcement has come, I cannot say when he will arrive. It might be in an hour or it might be in weeks; certainly not more than months, but he will surely be here.”

With that, the elegant stranger said the blessings on departure and went to his carriage, at which time the driver turned around to go back the same way that he came.

The rabbi hardly knew what to think. And being a small village, all the men of the town who had seen the carriage made their way to the shul to inquire of the rabbi regarding the elegant stranger.

“Well . . .,” they asked in almost one accord, “What is it, rabbi?”

“The man was an emissary from Yossele the Miracle-Worker, who is going to come here.”

“When?” they cried in unison.

“We don’t know. It could be any time or it could take a long while. He is coming to bless our city.”

“We sure could use some kind of blessing,” the butcher grumped.

“From Yossele?” the melamed humphed. “I’d be happy if he could make the dogs stop barking so much every time they see a bird go by.”

“Well, he’s obviously a wealthy man, by the looks of his secretary,” Shimmon commented. “He probably just wants to come and lord it over us.” Then he added sarcastically, “If I see him, I’ll ask him to fix my daughter’s cold; her nose runs more than the new pump we just installed.”

Only Feival the tanner seemed serious. “Well, my business hasn’t been so good lately. My wife can barely afford to pay the milkman. I’ll take whatever blessings Yossele might have to offer.”

Even those who didn’t believe in his miracles were excited that such a well-known, wealthy

person was coming. Most of the men spent a fair amount of their time looking down the road. “How will he come?” they asked each other. Some said that he would come on a white horse with an entourage of secretaries and scribes. Others talked about a train of carriages.

Everyone looked over each stranger who came to town, but hardly anyone paid attention to the shabby man with a pack who walked as though he had traveled far. And when he came into the village, because it was almost Shabbos, he asked if there was a place where a Jew might wash up. “Of course,” said Chaike the tanner’s wife. “We have a mikvah in Vaysechvoos.” And so the stranger was shown to the mikvah where he took a bath. That evening he was in the synagogue. But there was nothing in particular to distinguish him. A Jew, an ordinary Jew, with an ordinary name, Yossele. As is the custom, some invited him home with them to stay the Sabbath. He chose to stay with Chaike, her husband and their three sons.

The following day, the poor man participated in the worship services. When the Sabbath came to a close, Yossele blessed the tanner’s household and then said, “I must be on my way; I have far to travel.” He went outside and raised his hands, uttering the priestly benediction and other prayers, and then he went back the way that he came. It was not until afterwards that it occurred to the townspeople that this was indeed Yossele the Miracle-Worker. They hadn’t expected much by way of miracles, but hoped at least to see some fine clothing. It seemed they were to have neither. Though some thought it strange that after he left, the dogs didn’t bark quite as much, and Shimmon’s daughter finally got over her cold. Oh, and one other thing. For some mysterious reason, after Yossele’s visit, the tanner’s milk can was always full—whether he could afford to pay the milkman or not.

GLOSSARY

<i>Talmud Torah:</i>	religious elementary school
<i>melamed:</i>	teacher
<i>cheder:</i>	school



Call Me

by Susan Perlman

"Call me," he whispers.
"I'm in the book."
But he isn't.
It's just a line.



"Call me," she insists.
"I want to hear from you."
But she doesn't.
She's changed her mind.

Life can be cruel.
Filled with empty words and half-hearted promises.
Or can one hope for more?

"Call me,"
another voice invites.
"I'm waiting.
I've been waiting
all your life.
I'm in the book.
Really."

