

Toward a Messianic Jewish Moral Vision
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Prolegomenon

A funny thing happened on the way to the forum. No, not this forum, but one I attended the end of November. Every year for the past several, I have attended the joint conference of the Society of Biblical Literature and the American Academy of Religion, which is held just before Thanksgiving. To my knowledge it is the largest gathering of theologians and biblical ethicists anywhere in the world. Each year that I have attended I have had enlightening encounters, both planned and serendipitous which, along with stimulating sessions and discussions, have proved helpful in reshaping and refining my theological and religious paradigms. This year I went hoping to attend sessions and be engaged in conversations that would lend clarity to ideological ambiguities I have encountered while considering what it means to have a moral vision for Messianic Judaism. Though I did indeed have some very positive experiences along these lines, I also had two non-academic encounters that proved both disturbing and revelatory to me.

First, I happened to be checking into my hotel at the same time as one of the most celebrated ethicists of the past half-century and was taken aback not only by his rather grouchy demeanor, but also by his very rude treatment of the hotel clerk. Not that I wasn't able to sympathize with him. The flights were overcrowded, the hotels were administratively challenged by a conference of over six thousand, and I realized that this particular man would undoubtedly be stretched between his university responsibilities, the multiple presentations he would be involved in at this conference, and the endless

demands on his time and for his attention, all affected by his unique notoriety. In fact, it was precisely this sympathy, this unchallenged willingness to cut him some slack that was most disconcerting to me. Upon later reflection I realized that at some levels this educator, whose writings have become standards of ethical thought, represented to me a distorted reflection of my own ethical inconsistencies.

The second event did not involve any observations; rather, I was disquieted by my own presumptions. I was attending a session on Midrash in Jewish and Christian thought, and was taking notes with an expensive pen that had been a gift from a good friend. Near the end of the session my phone began to vibrate indicating that my daughter was trying to reach me from college and, not knowing the urgency of her call, I decided to leave the meeting room immediately, return her call and get an early start to my next session. In my haste and concern with leaving as inconspicuously as possible, I left my pen with my notes on the chair next to me. It was not until well into the next session that I realized what I had left behind. I waited until its conclusion and returned to collect my pen, only to find it missing, though my notebook was intact. I was severely disappointed that in a room filled with those who should be exemplars of ethical behavior, my pen had “grown feet.” Of course there could be other explanations. Perhaps someone had picked it up to use and inadvertently placed it in his/her pocket, or had recognized its value and picked it up to bring to a lost and found that I was subsequently unable to locate. Of course one could rationalize that in a group that size it was lost to the owner anyway, so why just leave it for the next, no more deserving recipient of providence. Or, maybe the maintenance staff simply found it. Perhaps I had actually taken it with me and dropped it

along the way, despite my certitude that I had left it on that particular chair. Whether I was correct or not in my assumption that it was stolen, I felt like Diogenes the cynic who hopelessly walked the streets of Ancient Athens with a lantern in search of an honest man. To add insult to disappointment though, metaphorically speaking, I had my lantern stolen.

Communal Ethics in an Age of Individualism

These two experiences were self-revelatory in that I have come to some awareness of my own discomfort over moral obtuseness and, in the process, have learned a little bit about the process of ethical discourse. I had somehow imagined that those involved in such a discourse would operate in accordance with a certain irreducible set of absolutes, such as ‘Thou shall not steal’ or ‘Thou shall not heap crap on the proletariat’. What I failed to account for was the number of contingencies that could be involved in the individualized encounter of a dispossessed pen or a hospitality miscue. My real discomfort, which I believe I share with most people, is my inability to manage the moral chaos about me, and even more so in my inner world. Why do I think most people share this feeling? Beside my inherent need to project my own neurosis, I believe there is an observable pervasive attitude that we live in a morally bankrupt age. James Q. Wilson, professor of Management and Public Policy at UCLA, comments on this, echoing the literary voices of the past century:

If modern man had taken seriously the main intellectual currents of the last century or so, he would have found himself confronted by the need to make moral choices when the very possibility of making such choices had been denied. God is dead or silent, reason suspect or defective, nature meaningless or hostile. As a result, man is adrift on an uncharted sea, left

to find his moral bearings with no compass and no pole star, and so able to do little more than utter personal preferences, bow to the historical necessity, or accept social conventions.

Countless writers have assumed that man is in precisely this predicament. Recall the phrases with which writers and poets have characterized our times. We have been described as “hollow men” living in a “wasteland” or the “age of anxiety,” from which there is “no exit,” part of a “lonely crowd” that seeks refuge in either “possessive individualism” or “therapeutic individualism.” To escape from the emptiness of being, we either retreat inward to mystical or drug-induced self-contemplation or outward to various fanatical ideologies.¹

In an age of unrivaled pluralism in the western world, people have more choices than ever, while apparently being less equipped to make those choices. In fact, the freedom to choose has become the very foundation of our ethic in this country. According to Stanley Hauerwas, a Professor of Theological Ethics at Duke University, each of our claims to freedom appears to be on a collision course with the choices that others make.

The modern assumption that freedom is the necessary and sufficient condition of morality is not easily changed, for it also determines how we govern our social relations. Our society seems generally to think that to be moral, to act in a responsible way, is to pursue our desires fairly – that is, in a manner that does not impinge on anyone else’s freedom. We assume we can do as we want so long as we do not harm or limit anyone else’s choices. A good society is one that provides the greatest amount of freedom for the greatest number of people. Although such an ethic appears to be highly committed to the common good, in fact its supporting theory is individualistic, since the good turns out to be the sum of our individual desires.

Even more troubling than this individualism is the price we pay in holding this view of ourselves and others; the price is nothing less than a systematic form of self deception. Insofar as we are people who care about anything at all, we necessarily impinge on the “freedom” of others. But we act as if we do not, thus hiding from ourselves and others the truth that we are necessarily tied together in a manner that mutually limits our lives. We have taught ourselves to describe our moral convictions as “our personal desires,” implying that they need not significantly affect others. In fact, however, there is *no* morality that does not require others to suffer for our

¹ James Q. Wilson, *The Moral Sense* (New York: Free Press, 1993) p.5

commitments. But there is nothing wrong with others to share and sacrifice for what we believe to be worthy. A more appropriate concern is whether what we commit ourselves to is worthy or not.²

The implications are clear, not only do people think what was previously unthinkable, but society has now unfettered us to do what was previously unthinkable. Anecdotally, the following letter to the editor appeared in the December 13, 2004 Hartford Courant.

We could solve the capital punishment dilemma just as we have the abortion issue. The present law legalizes abortion, making those wishing to have an abortion happy while also maintaining the right of those opposed to abortion to not undergo the procedure. Of course, those opposed are not completely happy, but they are not forced to have abortions if they do not want them.

With the capital punishment issue, we could appease those opposed to that form of punishment by allowing them to opt out. There could be a check box on the driver's license application indicating whether an applicant is opposed to capital punishment or for it. Those opposed would not have to live with the thought that if they or a member of their immediate family were brutally murdered, the perpetrator might face the death penalty. Life in prison would be the maximum sentence.

For those not opposed to capital punishment, the murderer of them or their family member would be subject to the possibility of death by lethal injection. In those cases where the husband and wife differ, the law would defer to the no capital punishment for the parent opposed or to any children involved.

Of course as with abortion, those opposed to capital punishment will not be happy, but at the very least they can die knowing that no one else will be put to death for ending their life.³

When I read this I was not certain whether it was a hoax, tongue-in-cheek or a genuine appeal to be heard. The effort to express a compromise to the dissenting spouse convinced me that, sadly, it was no hoax. Whether or not it is written tongue-in-cheek, the letter exposes widespread societal pathos. As a result of our self-deception concerning

² Stanley Hauerwas, *The Peaceable Kingdom: A Primer in Christian Ethics* (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 1983) p.9

³ A letter to the editor submitted by Fred S. Jarvis, *The Hartford Courant* (Hartford: A Tribune Publishing Company, December 13, 2004) Section A page 18

how our choices impinge upon the “freedom” of others, we become unrelentingly manipulative. Though manipulation is older than capital punishment, what is historically unique is that it is now postured as the best in moral wisdom, rather than what it really is, a power play to promote our own self-interests. Compromise is no longer viewed as a process of determining common convictions that all involved are willing to suffer for, rather it is at best an appearance of leveling the field while positioning our own agenda. That is why the author of this letter can offer a “check-off box” for those who wish to “opt out” of capital punishment. Apparently this option is not available either to the convicted murderer or the unborn child, who have apparently each forfeited his/her right to choose life. So at this juncture we are presented with at least two circumstances by which someone is stripped of the ultimate ethical pearl, the right to choose. But how these exclusions are arrived at is never explained, they are just assumed as though they are stitches in an inherited moral fabric.

The contemporary dilemma that is often described as a “lack of morality” is, in fact, a surplus of ethical choices, which are foisted upon individuals. In an age where so many options are available, we are asked to solve moral quandaries without clearly understanding the convictions that should properly inform each of those choices. Each person becomes a moral agent detached from the historical contingencies of community and unaware of the ethical systems, which have left us with our fragmentary understandings and moral assumptions. Yet, we cling to these assumptions, because without them we feel morally adrift in a sea of uncertainty. In the opening of his seminal

work *After Virtue: A Study In Moral Theory*, Alasdair MacIntyre uses the following elaborate analogy to describe this problem.

Imagine that the natural sciences were to suffer the effects of a catastrophe. A series of environmental disasters are blamed by the general public on the scientists. Widespread riots occur, laboratories are burnt down, physicists are lynched, books and instruments are destroyed. Finally a Know-Nothing political movement takes power and successfully abolishes scientific teaching in schools and universities, imprisoning and executing the remaining scientists. Later still there is a reaction against this destructive movement and enlightened people seek to revive science, although they have largely forgotten what it was. But all that they possess are fragments: a knowledge of experiments detached from any knowledge of theoretical context which gave them significance; parts of theories unrelated either to the other bits and pieces of theory which they possess or to experiment; instruments whose use has been forgotten; half-chapters from books, single pages from articles, not always fully legible because torn and charred. None the less all these fragments are reembodyed in a set of practices which go under the revived names of physics, chemistry and biology. Adults argue with each other about the respective merits of relativity theory, evolutionary theory and the phlogiston theory, although they possess only a very partial knowledge of each. Children learn by heart the surviving portions of the periodic table and recite as incantations some of the theorems of Euclid. Nobody, or almost nobody, realizes that what they are doing is not natural science in any proper sense at all. For everything that they do and say conforms to certain canons of consistency and coherence and those contexts which would be needed to make sense of what they are doing have been lost, perhaps irretrievably.⁴

MacIntyre is suggesting that what we are trying to do, as a society, is to solve the quandaries of our current social and historical situations with moral fragments which have been divorced from their original conceptual scheme. These moral parts, therefore, lack the context from which their significance is derived, and each individual is given the responsibility to construct his/her own moral significance. The parts are conceived of as being universal, interchangeable in every time, community and circumstance. In this

⁴ Alasdair C MacIntyre, *After Virtue : A Study in Moral Theory*. 2nd ed. (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1984) p.1

respect I am reminded of the universal “charbroil” burner I recently purchased to replace the rusted out part in a five-year-old gas grill from another manufacturer. Through a process of crimping and cutting, I made the part fit and, by bending and reshaping a supplied pin, I was eventually able to precariously attach the burner to the grill. Unfortunately the “universal” part did not allow for the particular mounting of my grill’s electronic igniter so I am now forced to light the grill with a match, taking a considerable risk every time I do so.

Ironically, when we deny the local historical context of ethics and attempt to universalize fragmented moral constructs, we become most subject to the particularities of the immediate situation. We might make absolute propositions of these moral fragments, but without a clear, unambiguous framework informed by a unified community identity and conceptual scheme, these propositions will always be awkward retrofits.

In this sense every ethic should be defined by a qualifier which denotes its social and historical particularities, i.e. modernist, existentialist, postmodernist, pragmatist, Christian or Jewish. When qualified in such a manner, the practitioner declares his/her subscription to a unique ethical discipline. This is of special significance in the contemporary religious landscape, where faith is now normally privatized. When a “believer” states they “do not follow man’s ways but God’s ways”, they abdicate responsibility to subordinate their own self-interests to an historical community. Random moral propositions are adopted and universalized under the rubric of “God’s ways” without regard for how they have been abstracted or ideologically transmitted. Each

individual consciously or unconsciously creates their own conceptual grid, making them boss universal over their privatized world. That such people congregate with those who espouse similar absolutes should not be confused with true religious community, their inability to abandon complete autonomy exposes their individualistic nature. I am not suggesting that we should totally abandon the pursuit of moral absolutes, but rather that they first be imagined within a conceptual framework indigenous to the community that is the qualifier of that ethic. Certainly it would be an effort in futility to expect Christians to live in accord with Jewish ethics, or visa versa. But this should not preclude nor is it less noble for each group to feel their ethical approach to be superior – in fact it is honest.

A Messianic Jewish Moral Dilemma

That to date no libraries or bookstores display titles such as *The Moral Vision of Messianic Judaism*, or *The Book of Messianic Jewish Values*, or *Messianic Jewish Ethics for Dummies* is indicative that the dilemma that I have been describing is, indeed, our dilemma. In fact, the likelihood is that a *Beatles Songbook for the Shofar* may make it to publication first. Some may argue that we have not yet gotten to it, and perhaps that is valid, but I would suggest instead that we have avoided the task for two primary reasons. First we have been largely unaware of our deficit, having stepped into the trap of self-delusion that I have already articulated. Until we become more self-aware we will continue to hide behind the unearned mask of moral superiority that is common to marginalized sectarian groups. Secondly, fear of institutionalization, authoritative structures and loss of autonomy has been debilitating. Messianic Judaism was birthed out of the Free Church movement and we have inherited its organic fear of structure and

polity. As I have also expressed, the process of qualified ethical discourse must be undergirded by the hard work and shared sacrifice that accompanies group-definition.

A case in point was the initially aggressive effort by the Union of Messianic Jewish Congregations (UMJC) to define Messianic Judaism, which has since been slowed down by alienation, defection and further threats of defection. At the UMJC 2002 National Conference, few delegates objected to *Defining Messianic Judaism* and it was accepted almost unanimously with only small adaptations. The definitional statement was somewhat opaque by design, and was crafted for broad acceptance under the “wide tent” of the UMJC. Though the primary authors, Daniel Juster and Mark Kinzer, have certain ideological differences, the document represented a common conceptualization worked through over a three-year period in conjunction with the UMJC Theology Committee. The terse statement, with its ambiguous language though, allowed diverse members to interpret it in accord with their own conceptual grids. When the statement was published little more than a month later with a commentary by then General Secretary Russell Resnik the discontent was felt throughout the organization.⁵ While it is plausible and perhaps probable that some left due to strongly held convictions, it is unclear as to what community of reference these convictions emanate from. I believe that most simply intuited that the process that had begun would require them to sacrifice autonomy.

⁵ In July of 2003 the UMJC changed the title from General Secretary to Executive Director to better reflect the responsibilities of the position. Russell Resnik is still in the employ of the UMJC as Executive Director. The UMJC published the statement under the title *Defining Messianic Judaism* with an accompanying commentary by Resnik in Sept. 2001. Only the short statement was approved by the UMJC delegation, though it had been informed of the intent to publish the commentary and had been issued copies prior to the vote to accept the statement. No strong concern was voiced during the ratification process, but strong concern was voiced after publication. Resnik subsequently issued an apology for any confusion that he may have caused, or any errors in judgment on his part.

Disagreement was not the problem, since the painful establishment of unambiguous boundaries is requisite in the definitional process, but defection over the process itself was quite telling.

What I have been attempting to establish is that the ethical practices are not derived merely from a concretized set of rules, laws or values, but from the very essence and nature of the community in which they are practiced. Since Messianic Judaism is an insipient religious community, the task of defining our practices and our moral vision is both a theological and a social endeavor. When we approach any particular moral quandary, we are not asking what seems reasonable to each of us as individuals within the community, rather what we believe God expects of us as a community in this particular circumstance and at this particular time in history. In his brief ecclesiology, *The Nature of Messianic Judaism*, Mark Kinzer discusses the definitional task for Messianic Judaism as theology.

The task of defining Messianic Judaism could be construed in various ways. One could study the question, descriptively, either from a historical perspective (e.g., looking at the communal identity of Jewish believers in Yeshua from the first century and after) or from a sociological perspective (e.g., examining the communal identity of the Messianic Jews at the beginning of the third millennium). While of value each study cannot answer our real question, which is prescriptive rather than descriptive. When we ask, “What is Messianic Judaism?” we mean, “What should Messianic Judaism be?” We are asking a theological question – what is our divine purpose and what is the purpose of our relationship to the churches and the wider Jewish community?⁶

Until Messianic Judaism can self-define, the enterprise of ethical discourse will be a far distant reality. We will continue to operate with borrowed parts fit together by varied and

⁶ Mark Kinzer, *The Nature of Messianic Judaism* (Hartford: Hashivenu Archives, 2000) p.1

unarticulated conceptual schemes. How we relate to the historical church and synagogue will determine how we relate to their ethical frameworks. As Kinzer points out, “The decision to use the term ‘Judaism’ speaks volumes.”⁷ When we say we are “Judaism”, we locate ourselves within the historical tradition and must accept the wisdom and authority of that tradition. Of course we should recognize that each particular proposition is not necessarily binding, but should not be easily dismissed either. Departures should be made with careful communal consideration, and informed dialogue with the tradition.

Our use of the adjective Messianic, on the other hand, indicates that we are a particular type of Judaism, one that acknowledges Yeshua as Messiah and, by extension, validates the church participation in the canonization process of the New Testament, which we locate within our own canon. Therefore, at some level, this tradition must also speak to us by virtue of its conceptual grid, but we cannot dismiss the problems that grid poses. Though Judaism has its own, well-defined tradition of messianism, it has been the church not the synagogue – that has identified Jesus as the Messiah, but at what cost? Over the past two millennia, the Christ of the church has been removed from his Jewish context and forced into an ethnic conversion. Even with the recent recapture of Jesus’ “Jewish Roots” by some in the church, the anti-Jewish bias is so deeply imbedded in the strata of the church’s historical faith that many of the faithful are oblivious to its existence. Messianic Jews are not necessarily immune to these systemic biases and, therefore, neither is Messianic Judaism at its foundation.

⁷ Ibid, p.4

As I had argued in my *Origins and Destiny: Israel, Creation and the Messianic Jewish Canonical Narrative*, it is absolutely imperative that Messianic Judaism develop its own narrative construal so that it can bridge the gap between faith and practice.

The dilemma for Messianic Judaism should be apparent. We are living within an historical impasse between two related yet disparate self-understandings. A wholesale acceptance of the traditional Christian reading would obliterate much of the impetus for ongoing identification with the Jewish people. The traditional Jewish reading, though, is non-Christological, as one would expect. To accept it without addition or augmentation would require Messianic Judaism to abandon its *raison d'être* and likely adopt a more passive messianism. Michael Wyschogrod has described the inherent tension in the Jewish and Christian dialogue as the “encounter of the irresistible force with the immovable object.”⁸ Ironically, this statement represents Messianic Judaism’s internal struggle for identity. To date, Messianic Judaism has allowed the Christian canonical narrative to remain its structural framework for interpreting and applying much of its theological assumptions. Yet, it has instinctively adopted normative Jewish life practices as a means of preserving continuity with physical Israel. If Messianic Judaism is to survive and become a multigenerational movement, it must develop a cohesive canonical narrative which will create a more symbiotic relationship between its faith and practice.⁹

It is only after we develop, and also normatively apply an indigenous canonical narrative construal to our ethical decisions that we can begin to speak of a qualified Messianic Jewish ethic. This will require us to make some very difficult yet fundamental hermeneutical decisions. It will also give us a conceptual scheme by which we can make such decisions. Some of the decisions we will have to wrestle with are: What constitutes the Messianic Jewish cannon? Is it really possible to exist as a Judaism without acknowledging the authoritative nature of rabbinic texts for faith and practice? What is our intertextual device for mitigating between the Hebrew Scriptures and the New

⁸ Michael Wyschogrod, Christology: “The Immovable Object,” *Religion and Intellectual Life* 3 (1986), 79.

⁹ Paul L Saal, “Origins and Destiny: Israel, Creation and the Messianic Jewish Canonical Narrative.” Paper presented at the Hashivenu Forum IV, Pasadena 2001.

Testament when they appear to conflict? When discussing New Testament teaching, to what degree should Christology dominate? Does one authoritative text take priority over another in regard to moral decisions, and if so when and how? How and when should immediate social demands interact with biblical propositions? How should we interact with contemporary trends in Jewish and Christian thinking? How might we best interact with secular laws and governmental actions when they appear to conflict with our inchoate Messianic Jewish values?

I am not going to attempt to answer any of these questions in any didactic fashion; rather I am raising them for future discourse. What I would like to do, though, is to grapple with two ethical issues, approaching them both exegetically and socially, to see if we can observe any patterned answers to the above questions. In the process I hope to articulate pieces of a Messianic Jewish canonical construal that can become part of the fabric of a Messianic Jewish moral vision.

The two “test cases” I am going to discuss are women in Messianic Jewish religious leadership roles and concern for animal welfare. The first has been a concern of mine for some time, as a father of four daughters. Much of what I am going to say comes out of a presentation I did for the New England Messianic Jewish Council at a time when Congregation Shuvah Yisrael was preparing to appoint our first female *zaken* in August of 2003. My approach then as it is today was driven by a conceptual scheme rooted in the Messianic Jewish canonical narrative of scripture, as well as present social demands.

It is an enormous issue for many in the movement, and for many more who have left feeling alienated and unheard.

Animal welfare, on the other hand, is a topic that does not seem to be on anyone's radar in the Messianic Jewish movement, which is precisely why I wish to discuss it. I frankly find it a little odd that this issue appears to be of little concern to anyone today, except God and atheists. I will examine the biblical and rabbinic imperatives for humanitarian concern for animals as well as the religious landscape that has pushed these concerns into the distant vistas.

Hermeneutical Rules of the Road

Before discussing “what the bible says”, we must first visit the rules of the road. It is not my intention to lay out a complete hermeneutical perspective, but, rather to show the very difficult and thorny nature of the enterprise and to establish the various poles that must be held in tension.¹⁰ It appears to me that there are three major approaches to deriving ethical decisions from the text of scripture that are most often employed by the various individuals and groups who touch our movement. These approaches need not always be distinct disciplines, and are often co-mingled to varying degrees. In fact, I recommend that some degree of each of these philosophies be applied to the process in order to give adequate attention to the triangulation that must exist between the text, the community that produced the texts, and the history behind the texts.

¹⁰ For a fuller treatment of my proposed Messianic Jewish hermeneutical approach I recommend reading *Re-Imagining of the Canonical Text*, a paper I presented at the 2001 Hashivenu Forum.

The first of these positions takes the Scripture as a unified book of laws or a summation of codes for human conduct. It argues that God has given prescriptive laws in the form of commandments and ordinances, which can be found in both the Hebrew Scriptures as well as The New Testament. If people want to know what they should do, the laws of God stand objectively before them in written form, and they have only to refer to them. While I would, of course, agree that there is a great deal of didactic material in the Scripture, I would also posit that this approach avoids at least three major factors.

- 1) A major portion of the scripture is neither didactic nor explicitly instructive, rather is either poetry or narrative prose meant to paint a broader picture of the highest standards of God as understood through His community of faith.
- 2) Many of the laws, statutes and ordinances recorded in the bible are neither timeless nor universal, rather are time bound and occasional. Therefore, only the broadest of commands such as the Decalogue, or Yeshua's command to "love one another" can be internalized and performed without an accompanying body of tradition. For this reason, the more narrow and specific the stipulation, the more likely it is to be time bound and subject to reinterpretation and application. Who among us would consider it meritorious to stone a rebellious child or to instruct women to leave the community boundaries during menstruation?
- 3) Specific stipulations from scripture often conflict with each other and cannot be mediated without a derivative tradition. Yeshua, for instance, affirms the Pharisaic tradition of circumcising on Shabbat while validating his own acts of healing performed on Shabbat (John 7:23).

The second way the Scripture is used for ethical guidance is by placing all of the emphasis on the universal principles that can be found to underlie the accounts of Scripture. In this approach, it is not the particular statements or practices that are considered binding but, rather, the greater principles behind them. According to this perspective, the onus is on the interpreter to look at the broadest representation of canonical accounting to derive the most universal of principles. I also see in this approach at least three areas of concern.

- 1) The narratives themselves are often difficult to apprehend. What ethical principle can we derive from Lot offering his virgin daughters to the oversexed mob in Sodom? Kindness to strangers?
- 2) The tendency toward subordinating the voice of scripture to the echoes of pop culture should be avoided. Additionally, biblical ethics should not become a subset of natural law, with the moral imperative of life rooted solely in human reason.
- 3) The principles derived from scripture using this approach should not become such hard propositions that they merely replace the rigid structure of the law approach.

A third way of approaching the text for ethical guidance is by the principle of perspicuity, a recognition, that by the power of the Spirit of God, the true believer should be able to ascertain understanding and guidance on ethical matters directly from the text of scripture. This approach in isolation also offers certain challenges.

- 1) The emphasis on each person's encounter of God is highly individualized and culture-driven in its approach. It is not always helpful, therefore, and is often counterproductive when making the type of community decision that is before us. Neither the historical leadership of the synagogue nor the church placed as much emphasis on the individual encounter as on the Spirit of God working within the group encounter.
- 2) While this approach can be a breath of fresh air to the arid formulations and withering regulations of traditional theology, it also runs the risk of replacing the propositions and principles of the bible with momentary encounters.

As I stated earlier, it should be our desire to mediate between all of these approaches, recognizing that both the laws and stipulations of the bible, as well as the narrative flow, suggest precepts by which we should be guided as a community of faith in making ethical decisions such as the role of women in leadership. I believe it is equally important for us to be guided by the Spirit of God in this process, remembering that it is a process and that the Spirit may well be encountered in the thorny moments of implementation and adjustment as much as or more than in the momentary epiphany. In this way the tradition and revelatory process of scripture is continued in the midst of our faith community. The community then that interprets the text is also the qualifier of the body of ethics and the moral vision that gives structure to the ethical decisions.

Case Study #1 – Women in Messianic Jewish Leadership Roles

I believe that no single issue has loomed larger on the world scene this past century than that of equality for all people. It is a multi-faceted concern, diverse and wrought with potential disruption to the status quo of any community, nation or institution. In fact, equality as a practical social concept is not a single issue at all, rather a multitudinous complexity of independent causes which must each deal with its own set of unique circumstances, community boundary questions, imbedded traditions and societal interdependences. Yet as we deal with the complications and messiness of each of these independent equality issues, there is an overriding sense, which, as a religious community, compels us to respond to the divine beckoning to treat all people as equals.

The concept of equality, therefore, requires its own set of qualifiers. What do we mean by equality? To what degree can equality be assumed without granting universal access to everyone at every occasion? To what degree can distinction be celebrated without nullifying equality?

The applications of such qualifications to certain issues are more complex than others since they are somewhat unique to the Messianic Jewish community. For instance, while recognizing the equality of all people and the symbiotic relationship of all believers in Yeshua, is it appropriate for non-Jews to be full members of a Messianic Jewish synagogue given the institution's particularity? Moreover, should gentiles serve in leadership in the same congregations, especially as *zakenim*? I am not raising these

questions for present discussion, rather to demonstrate the difficulty in drawing boundaries when mediating between equality and sameness, and to demonstrate the emotional response that is elicited when inviting people only part way into the family.

What I am suggesting is that declaring the equality of women in Messianic Judaism, while concurrently limiting the level of their participation or potential for leadership can and does elicit similar emotional response. Yet, in many ways the role of women in our synagogues is easier to mediate than the aforementioned issue since our larger community of reference, the Jewish community has already dealt with such issues, increasing the participation of women in leadership and even extending ordination to women. This is not to say that such broadening is true in all quarters of Judaism; certainly the various forms of orthodoxy have not fully increased the leadership possibilities for women, but even among the less insularly branches of orthodoxy these issues are being discussed and experimented with. Still, the conservative and reform movements with which Messianic Jews share the most common social ground have already recognized that the time has come for such changes.

It has been my contention for some time that extending greater leadership opportunity to women poses little risk to Messianic Judaism, except the safety of the status quo. I am not, however, minimizing the immediate sense of disruption that some will experience in the process. I am aware that those who defend the present practice of limiting female participation do so based upon “biblical grounds.” I believe, though, that such interpretations and applications of predominantly Pauline scripture are based on

institutionalized readings that fail to take into account the occasion and cosmology surrounding Paul's writing, and on traditional assumptions which themselves are conditioned by biases no longer upheld or tolerated in the greater western society. For this reason I will first approach the question from the hermeneutical perspective, before dealing with the social implications.

Making sense of the "Texts of Terror"

As I mentioned previously, the ethical value of scriptural narrative can often be difficult to apprehend. Explanations for God's instruction surrounding the wars of Israel can often be as slippery as the theodicies used to alleviate our discomfort with the omnipotent and omniscient sovereign's apparent silence during the Holocaust. But none of the narratives are as tough a pill to swallow as those dubbed by feminist theologian Phyllis Trible as the "Texts of Terror." These are the biblical narratives that describe the regular and dehumanizing rape, mutilation, and general bartering of women as commodities. Though polygamy is a common occurrence on the pages of the Hebrew Scriptures, women never possess more than one husband. The woman in scripture is completely dependent upon a man for her sustenance and survival. Of course the biblical narrative is a product of its time and accurately portrays the events within their historical setting. What is striking, however, is the apparent silence of the text concerning any condemnation of these practices. In fact, the program of God seems to be advanced through these events and normative practices. If we were to derive any precepts concerning the treatment and role of women solely from the narrative and explicit prescriptions of the law books, they might be as follows.

- A man can have multiple wives and concubines so long as he can support them adequately.
- Actually if a man's wife is unable to have children it is laudable for him to sleep with her personal attendant.
- Should a woman's husband die, it is incumbent upon a righteous relative to take the poor woman in as his own wife.
- It is better for a woman to enter into an incestual marriage than for her family inheritance to pass to another tribe.
- If a man takes a woman as a spoil of war, he should give her a place in his harem rather than merely discarding her, in this way domesticating and systematizing war rape.

Of course, none of these practices would be deemed acceptable anywhere in the civilized western society, and though it may sound ludicrous on the surface, the biblical narrative and stipulations do describe a process of taming an already chaotic world. Torah describes the entrance of God's cosmic ordering into the socio-moral plane in which we begin to encounter it. Israel acts as the conduit of God's principles to a world filled with disharmony, violence and inequality. Israel and its law system are radical and transforming to the ancient world of the bible, but they do not immediately overturn the entire social order of the existing world system.¹¹ The men of Israel are told how to treat women captured in war, but are never told to keep their hands off, instruction which, from our ethical vantage point, would be considerably more acceptable. But within a world system where women were considered weak and inferior, valued only for their physical appeal and procreative abilities, the laws of Israel provided much greater

¹¹ I explore this concept more fully in "Origins and Destiny: Israel, Creation and the Messianic Jewish Canonical Narrative." A paper presented at the Hashivenu Forum IV, Pasadena 2001.

protection. To say they did not go far enough might seem accurate from our perspective, but in the larger scheme the role and treatment of women in the laws of Torah and the principles revealed in the biblical narrative have evolved through the pages of scripture and into the progression of post biblical history to where we are today.

My main point here is that each of these laws and stories must be viewed through the lens of progressive revelation, revelation that continues to be advanced into this world through the body of faith. Narrow biblical stipulations should not be taken as the last and final word. They are part of the divine transformation of humanity and the full restoration of relational harmony that Peter describes as “the salvation that is ready to be revealed” (1 Peter 1:4). Therefore it is not productive to attempt to see most of these laws, including those in the New Testament, as unchanging, timeless, and universal prescriptions; rather they should be viewed as part of a trajectory in scripture leading toward a final goal.

The Trajectory of Scripture

Though this presentation does not afford me the time to progress through the entire canonical narrative, examining the origin of the human enterprise from a biblical perspective may be helpful since origins often portend destiny. In Genesis 1:27 humankind is created male (zachar) and female (nēkavah). Phyllis Bird has contended that these are biological rather than sociological terms, and that the male and the female are distinguished by their sexuality, not by their social status. They are accorded what Bird has called an “ontological equality before God.” Both are created equal in the “image of God” and are included in the creational command to “be fruitful and multiply”.

But, according to Bird, the human relationship is envisioned somewhat differently in Genesis 2. Here humankind is again created with internal distinction, but the differences are now more relational. This time the terms man (ish) and woman (ishah) are sociological rather than biological designations. The woman is taken from the side of man, and man is to leave his parents to be reunited with that which makes him whole. The biblical language is of course poetical, not empirical, but as in Genesis 1 it communicates a unique relationship whereby humanity is represented by a unity of opposites, differentiated but equal parts composing an ordered relational whole for the sake of creational blessing.¹²

Almost from the outset of the biblical account, the delicate relationships between God and humanity as well as human relationships are subverted. Both male and female have violated the boundaries set forth by the Creator and, as a consequence, are estranged from God and, therefore, from the source of harmony between them. For the man (adam) this is manifest in his separation from the ground (ha'adamah) from which he was taken and upon which he relies for his livelihood (3:17-19). The woman (ishah) is estranged from the man (ish) from whom she was created and upon whom she relies for her work of procreation (3:16). The relational equality is severed and the male is portended to rule over the female, an abolition of the distinctive equality intended in the created order. The cosmic rift, which is often mistakenly apprehended in metaphysical terms, enters into the socio-moral structure of the Divine-human and human-human relationships.

¹² Phyllis A. Bird, "Male and Female He Created Them": Gen.1: 27b in the Context of the Priestly account of Creation," *HTR* 74 (1981) 129-159; "Genesis I-III as a Source for a Contemporary Theology of Sexuality," *Ex Auditu* 3 (1987), 35-39 both are reprinted in *Missing Persons and Missing Identities*, Overtures to Biblical Theology (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1997).

In the simplest of terms, the chaos placed in abeyance by God when he orders creation, becomes unleashed. The dominance, which the male has over the female, is viewed in the creation narratives as a “curse”, not as part of the creational order. From the outset the priority of the male is viewed as ordinal rather than hierarchal in the creational order. Therefore we can conclude that the ideal for a restored humanity will be the removal of such a hierarchal subversion of the human relational balance. It is my contention that any restatements of the male priority in the creational order that appear in the New Testament, especially in the Pauline writings, must be assumed to be concessions to the times, and still distant from the greater eschatological reality of true relational equality without hierarchal male hegemony.

The most forthright and positively eschatological statement of social ethics in the New Testament is Galatians 3:28, *“There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female, for all of you are one in Messiah Yeshua.”* Here Paul observes the internal evolution of revelation concerning the relationships between Israel and the nations, between men and women, and between the existing social-economic strata to derive ethical standards for contemporary social interaction. I do not believe that Paul is advocating for the complete eradication of distinction; rather he is pronouncing a greater reality whereby hierarchal ordering is dissolving. But the inspired writer is nonetheless human and an influenced product of his times. According to New Testament scholar Richard Hays,

If we approach Paul's letters a priori as Scripture in their own right, we run the risk of distortion through a hieratic reading that loses sight of their historical contingency and hermeneutical innovation. Paradoxically, we learn how rightly to read Paul's letters, as Scripture only by first reading them as not-Scripture and attending to how he read the Scripture that he knew.¹³

So, it is incumbent upon us to attempt to understand the grid through which Paul saw the emerging Kingdom of God. When Paul says "There is no longer Jew or Greek. . . no longer slave or free,. . . no longer male and female,. . ." the ideal human being is indeed not somewhere halfway between each of these conditions. There is no such thing as a human essence that is truly universal, because such essences are always envisioned with some particular template of what constitutes a human being. Paul is not simply mentioning complementary pairs of equals. One term in each pair represents the ideal, the desired status for the believer, which, from Paul's perspective, is Jew, free, and male, which, not so coincidentally, equals Paul! For Paul, the free Jewish man best represents the prototypical human ideal. When Paul juxtaposes "Jew" and "Greek," he means that the *Jew* possesses the preferred condition. As Paul says in Rom. 3:1-2, "What advantage has the Jew? Or what is the value of circumcision? Much in every way." It is the Greeks who are underprivileged. Being "in Messiah" allows Gentiles to be part of the people of God, a privilege Jews already hold. However, he affords them full membership in the family without reservation of privilege, and moreover he places some restraint on entrance requirements.¹⁴

¹³ Richard B. Hays, *Echoes of Scripture in the Letters of Paul* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989), 5

¹⁴ For this insightful reading of Galatians 3:28 I am indebted to Pamela Eisenbaum, "Is Paul the Father of Misogyny and Anti-Semitism?" *Cross Currents* Volume 50, no. 4 (Winter 2000-01).

The historical church, though, began to interpret Paul quite differently. The misconception that equality is synonymous with sameness in Gal. 3:28, became a pathology in Christianity, which came to understand religiousness as faith in Messiah, which was not concretized in the kinds of prescriptions Jews followed. In other words, Christianity began to see itself as a purely spiritual religion able to encompass all the diverse peoples of the world, while it saw Judaism as inordinately preoccupied with its peculiar ways of doing things and thus devoid of the spirit. Similarly, women became associated with the material body, and men with the transcendent spirit. Daniel Boyarin, a Jewish scholar of early Judaism and Christianity, has provided the most incisive critique of this problem in his book, *A Radical Jew: Paul and the Politics of Identity*. Boyarin argues that Paul marks the beginning of the dominant male, Christian perspective of Western culture. This perspective imagined human essence as the white civilized Christian male and viewed both women and Jews as, at best, limited kinds of persons farther removed from the ideal human essence and, at worst, as the particularized "other" in relation to the universal human being (in other words, the opposite of the ideal). Thus, Boyarin thinks Paul is the father of misogyny and anti-Semitism.¹⁵ While Boyarin's impressive body of work has profoundly influenced me, his reading of Paul here appears to me to be aimed at countering a tradition of Pauline interpretation in the Christian West more than it addresses Paul's own biases. Still it evokes the question, to what degree is Messianic Judaism still reading the apostle anachronistically through the lens of Christian tradition?

¹⁵ Daniel Boyarin, *A Radical Jew: Paul and the Politics of Identity* (Berkeley: University of California, 1994).

Getting Honest With a Few Propositions

Having taken a cursory look at Scripture's trajectory toward the empowering of women, I feel we must stop briefly at those passages most often used to support by proposition the silencing and subordination of women. Most prominently but not exhaustively these are 1 Corinthians 11:2-16; 1 Corinthians 14:26-35; 1 Timothy 2:11-15; and 1 Timothy 3:1-7.

Volumes have been written on these texts refuting the limitations they have traditionally placed on women based upon lexical, contextual, grammatical, and cultural evaluation.¹⁶

At present I would prefer to approach these passages from the path that I laid earlier, recognizing that the more specific the proposition in scripture, the more likely it is to be time bound and occasional. Our tendency, though, which we have inherited from the Church tradition, is to privilege Paul's writings as universally and timelessly applicable, regardless of their circumstance. But, in fact, the epistles in general are more susceptible than other scripture to the conditions that occasioned their writings, and Paul's epistles are the most vulnerable. Again Hays comments on Paul's writings,

Paul did not think of himself as a writer of Scripture; he was writing pastoral letters to fledgling churches, interpreting Scripture (by which he meant the texts that Christians later began to call the "Old Testament") to guide these struggling communities as they sought to understand the implications of the gospel. It requires a disciplined effort of historical imagination to keep reminding ourselves that when Paul wrote there was no New Testament...¹⁷

So, when Paul wrote to the fledgling congregation he did so with specific concerns in mind which, in the case of the Corinthian congregation, was order and propriety in

¹⁶ For those who are interested in a more technical exegetical approach I would highly recommend reading the *Priscilla Papers*, a journal published by Christians for Biblical Equality, an Evangelical think tank devoted to this issue.

¹⁷ Hays, *Echoes* 5

worship. Though many particulars of the conflicts and the social undercurrent are lost to us, it is apparent that he was just as concerned with male improprieties as with female improprieties. The fact is we do not legislate the length of hair in our synagogues. Additionally, we encourage men to wear head coverings, a direct reversal of the 1 Corinthians 11 proposition, which would suggest that we do not really consider the legislations of this passage pertinent to our social situation. Since Paul's short discourse in this passage on the ordering of gender in creation is given only as a support for his decree concerning head coverings, not as a central thesis, it also does not stand the test of time. Paul is merely using a deeply entrenched cultural convention to support his remedial measure for social upheaval within the Corinthian congregation. Paul's insistence in 1Corinthian 14:33-35 that women be silent in the congregation and only speak at home is not only irrelevant to our current circumstance, but I would suggest dangerous for any of our Rabbis who dared try to implement such a "biblical teaching."

Furthermore wedged between these two passages is another (1 Corinthians 12) that emphatically requires the utilization of all spiritual gifts regardless of gender, no small feat for those who are also commanded to be silent. If there is a central precept that survives for us then, it is the need for propriety and order in worship, liberated from overly demonstrative egos, regardless of gender.

The one passage that is most often adduced to claim that the New Testament prohibits women to teach or to have authority over men is found in 1 Timothy 2:11-15. However 1Timothy imposes similarly restrictive leadership and ministry prohibitions on men.

According to 1 Timothy 3:1-7 the only men who may aspire to leadership within the Ephesus congregation, including the ministry of teaching and managing the affairs of the congregation, must be married and have children who are submissive and respectful and believers in Messiah Yeshua. Such requirements disqualify not only women, but also all men who are single; all men who are married but childless; all men who have only one child; all men who are married but have children too young to profess faith; all men who are married but have one unbelieving child; all men who are married and whose children are believers but are not submissive; all men who are married and whose children are believers and submissive but are not respectful. These exceptionally harsh and restrictive requirements are all the more amazing since the plain prepositional reading of the New Testament elsewhere favors singleness for both men and women, stating it as a preferred status for the execution of ministry (Matthew 19:11-12, 1 Corinthians 7:25-35).

It has often been deduced from these passages that I Timothy is establishing a remedial measure for a congregation that had fallen into a state of terminal crisis. Its underlying principle is restricting management to a few leaders of proven competency. The fact that these leaders were chosen solely from men is far more relative to the patriarchal nature of the society within which this occurs. Which women would or could have been prepared for such a position? How many could have possibly been the most prepared candidates for but a few positions when men had been granted much greater opportunity to gain practical experience within the present society? This is a vastly different situation than ours; since we have so many women who are not only spiritually mature but also qualified managers.

We should also note that in our own congregations we already subvert the strict propositions of this portion. Women already serve in most of many Messianic congregations in roles of leadership. Trustee positions of any kind are “overseers” (*episkopes*) that might fit the biblical model expressed in 1 Timothy 1-7. That we have assigned the title *zaken* (elder) to the Greek *episkopes* as a specific hierarchal position does not negate the more general meaning of “manager” or “overseer”, which may be implied by the text. Actually the term *presbeterous* used in 1 Timothy 5 is much closer in meaning to *zaken*, referring to those who are worthy of respect due to their age and stature rather than their managerial role. The fact is that Messianic Judaism has inherited a very specific sectarian Protestant tradition that has distilled the biblical *episkopes*, first to bishop, and then to elder with an established definitional set that includes the exclusion of women. What is clear from the 1 Timothy 3 passage is that no women and very few men could have become the treasurer of the Ephesus congregation.

And what about the position of *shamashot* as it is so often used in Messianic Jewish Congregations? By feminizing the plural of the term *shamash* we display our willingness to subvert the Jewish tradition of male *shamashim* only. But what does Scripture have to say to this? 1 Timothy 3:8-12 clearly disqualifies women from serving in the position of deacon (*diakonous*), using the same criteria by which they are disqualified from being “overseers” (*episkopes*) just a few verses prior. Why are we so predisposed to a rigid propositional reading of verses 1-7 only, yet considerably more flexible and principled

concerning verses 8-12? Is it possible that we are inadvertently protecting the last vestiges of male hegemony without even realizing it?

I think it also behooves us to get a little honest with traditional Jewish propositional thinking as well. The exclusion of women from leadership in the traditional Jewish community had often been tied to women's exemption from positive timebound *mitzvot*. There are no explicit reasons for these exemptions given in Talmud, but explanations abound in both modern and medieval thought. The most popular reason given, though without any textual basis, is women's busyness with child rearing.¹⁸

This no longer rings true since today many men are deeply involved in the process of child rearing. Women are active in the public sphere today, challenging any such exemption. For this reason all but Orthodox Judaism have already provided for the ordination of women. Even within orthodoxy, reevaluation of the leadership roles of women is in progress, with the exception of the most insularly of the *frum* communities.

In the Messianic Jewish community few congregations exist with the level of insulation necessary to sustain this bifurcation of mitzvot responsibilities. I know of no Messianic Jewish congregations where regular prayer or study of scripture is excluded or considered optional for women. While child rearing can certainly stand in the way of a woman being

¹⁸ Havina Ner-David, *Life on the Fringes: A Feminist Journey toward Traditional Rabbinic Ordination* (Needam: JFL Books, 2000) pp. 28-65 offers a well developed discussion of women and the tradition of timebound mitzvot. Also Judith Hauptman, *Rereading the Rabbis: A Women's Voice* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1998) p.221

an adequately involved leader, so can the diverse challenges upon the time and abilities of male candidates.

Examining the Social and Moral Implications

It would appear to me that one of our greatest hindrances to growth and advancement concerning the empowerment of women in our Messianic Jewish synagogues is an unidentified loyalty to politics of Protestant sectarianism. Though supported by biblical propositions, I have previously noted the occasional nature of such propositions.

Messianic Judaism has, often, adapted its biblical applications ad hoc, to create a more dynamic religious landscape in order to accommodate our social proclivities and to make our communities more comparable with our own sensibilities and constituencies, as well as that of our primary community of reference – the wider Jewish community – from where we expect our future growth to come. I would then propose that the time for change is already upon us.

By placing an artificial gender restriction on leadership service we are self-limiting our own potential. More than half of our membership is eliminated from the pool of potential managers. Often, under-utilized women are more talented administrators and teachers than many of the men we employ. But when women within Messianic Jewish synagogues are utilized in such capacities without being afforded the same opportunity for decision-making as men, we must evaluate both our policies and our motivations.

Furthermore, we are sending mixed signals to our children. I frequently tell my girls that I do not care what career they aspire to so long as it is moral and ethical, gives back to the larger community, and that they do their very best at whatever they choose. I would certainly not be disappointed if they became career homemakers and mothers if they were to do so with excellence. Neither would I be disappointed if they were to go into the fields of genetic ethics, cancer research, or the Messianic rabbinate. We tell our girls that “they can do anything they wish to do and work hard at” and also that “religious community is an essential part of life”, yet we send the clear signal that the one thing they cannot do is take a primary leadership role within this essential religious community.

As a result, Messianic Judaism is bleeding young people. It is incumbent upon us to develop a Messianic Jewish faith that is relevant to the concerns of our youth. In regard to gender fairness we have fallen way below the moral curve established by the larger society. Egalitarian issues and especially women’s issues are of more immediate concern to Generation X and beyond. I believe most youth view our limitations on female participation as sexist. Merely polling those who have stuck with Messianic Judaism is an example of actively gathering biased support data. The disconcerting fact is that the majority of young people leave our movement, and they are not filling out exit polls. I am not suggesting that gender roles are the sole issue for which they leave; rather it is indicative of the gap in generational thinking. Efforts to change our stand on female leadership should be a measure of good faith that might demonstrate our desire to hear the youth’s deep structural concerns, instead of merely dealing with the external surface

issues. Furthermore, doing the hard work to change in such foundational ways might help advance our thinking and ability to make meaningful room for the next generation.

In accord with the general trajectory of gender relations in Scripture, I would hope that Messianic Judaism would desire to honor equality, while maintaining the unique distinctions between men and women. But, as I have suggested, the latent ripples of historical male hegemony may well influence us. If we truly believe that women are distinct and unique, then how can we in good conscience leave at least half of our congregational constituency without adequate representation? How then can men fully understand pertinent issues from a uniquely female perspective? Unless I believe that I as a man have the innate ability to hear from women and sort through their unique perspectives, sifting through their emotionalism with my more rational approach. Isn't such an attitude of superiority one that would suggest the male is the ideal rather than the other half of a fulfilled humanity?

I can find no reason to continue to exclude women from the highest leadership positions within our congregations. Any exegetical system used to support the narrow Scriptural propositions that exclude women from being *zakenim* already fail to support most of our present practices. Furthermore the general trajectory of scripture is toward the relational fulfillment of humanity through the equal empowerment of all people, despite gender. To fail to do so, in my estimation, is to subvert our vocational calling as a community of faith. This failure is being felt, I believe, in ways that we have failed to recognize, because we have previously failed to look. To continue to be a credible communal

testimony to ourselves, our children and the greater Jewish community, we must be willing to take action now to make the necessary changes.

Case Study #2 – Animal Welfare

In as much as I consider gender roles to be a watershed issue for Messianic Judaism, one that will affect our relationship with the next generation and the wider Jewish community, I conversely consider the issue of animal welfare to have no direct relevance to the growth of Messianic Judaism. In many ways that makes this the perfect “test case” while working toward a moral vision for Messianic Judaism. Just as participating in a funeral has long been considered one of the great acts of *gemilut hasadim* (acts of loving kindness), since the dead cannot reward the participant, so the care and protection of animals offers great ethical promise since it can only limit profit and conspicuous consumption.

Torah and Talmud are replete with commands and ordinances concerning the humane treatment of animals, or protecting them from *tza'ar ba'alei chayyim*, literally hardship to their lives. Deuteronomy 25:4 legislates, “You shall not muzzle an ox while it is threshing”, recognizing the cruelty of prohibiting an animal from eating while it labors in the presence of food. Likewise another law of Torah (Deut. 23:26-26) within the same weekly *parsha* permits a person who labors in a vineyard to eat while he works, yet prohibits him from carrying away any produce. The Talmud extends this permission and prohibition to any fields of labor where produce comes from the earth (Bava Mezia 87b).

By extension we can deduce that God extends like compassion to animals as he does to humans.

Paul evokes this passage in defense of his own rights to compensation and, like Talmud, extends this concept from animals to humans. “Who serves as a soldier at his own expense? Who plants a vineyard and does not eat of its grapes? Who tends a flock and does not drink of the milk? Do I say this merely from a human point of view? Doesn’t the Law say the same thing? For it is written in the Law of Moses: ‘Do not muzzle an ox while it is treading out the grain.’ Is it about oxen that God is concerned?”(1Cor.9: 7-9) Of course Paul is not arguing against God’s concern for the animals but creating a *kal va’homer* argument that might be stated, “If God cares so much for the rights of oxen, then how much more will he be concerned with the well-being of His servant?” It would appear from this intertextual threading that how we treat members of the animal family bears some relevance and resemblance to how we will treat members of the human family. Rabbi Joseph Telushkin draws an interesting parallel.

Perhaps the cruelest act that a parent can endure is to see his or her children being killed. The Babylonian king Nebuchadnezzar, the biblical archetype of a sadist, was so enraged at King Zedekiah for leading a revolt against him that after he captured the king, he murdered Zedekiah’s two sons in his presence, then blinded him, so that the death of his sons would be the last thing that Zedekiah would see (II Kings 25:7). In more recent times, the Nazis often delighted in murdering Jewish children in the presence of their parents.

A Torah Law prohibits treating animals in the way that people like Nebuchadnezzar and the Nazis treated human beings: Thus, Deuteronomy 22:6 rules that if a person comes across a nest of birds, he cannot take the mother bird with the young, but must send the mother away to spare her feelings. Concerning the rationale for this law, Maimonides writes, “for

the pain of the animals under such circumstances is very great” (*A Guide to the Perplexed* 3:48)¹⁹

John Wesley, founder of the evangelical movement Methodism, went even further in his empathy when he pondered whether some divine justice might await mistreated animals in the afterlife, finding a “plausible objection against the justice of God, in suffering numberless creatures that had never sinned to be so severely punished” in his sermon the “Great Deliverance.”

But what does it answer to dwell upon this subject which we so imperfectly understand? It may enlarge our hearts toward these poor creatures to reflect that, vile as they may appear in our eyes, not a one of them is forgotten in the sight of our Father which is in heaven.²⁰

The catechism of the Catholic Church recognizes kindness to animals as part of human debt to the Creator.

Animals are God’s creatures. He surrounds them with providential care. By their mere existence they bless him and give him glory. Thus men owe them kindness. We should remember the gentleness with which saints like Saint Francis of Assisi or Saint Philip Neri treated animals.²¹

Given the imperative for animal welfare in both Jewish and Christian traditions, why then does it seem that sermons are rarely spoken today on the subject and many religious people are in fact oddly hostile to the concept? I believe the reason is twofold. First, many intuit that care and concern for animals might require self-limitation. Furthermore, concern that religious and governmental polities might increase such limitations is again understood as an impingement upon the right of the individual to have unbridled choices.

¹⁹ Joseph Telushkin, *The Book of Jewish Values: A Day-By-Day Guide To Ethical Living* (New York: Bell Tower, 2000)

²⁰ John Wesley, Sermon Sixty, “The Great Deliverance,” ed. Sarah Anderson (Nampa, Ind.: Wesley Center for Applied Theology at Northwestern Nazarene University, 1999)

²¹ *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, Sec. 2415-2418 (Mahwah, New Jersey: Paulist Press, 1994) pp. 580-581

The second reason I believe is merely an extension of the first. In a society obsessed with self-gratification, the imposition or even the suggestion of limits is generally met with suspicion. Perhaps this is why limiting human consumption or use of animals has been postured as a competition for the greater good of each. The Catholic catechism goes on to state,

The Creator however, entrusted animals to the stewardship of those he created in his image. Hence it is legitimate to use animals for food or clothing. They may be domesticated to help man in his work and leisure. Medical and scientific experimentation on animals, if it remains within reasonable limits, is a morally acceptable practice since it contributes to caring for or saving human lives.

It is contrary to human dignity to cause animals to suffer or die needlessly. It is likewise unworthy to spend money on them that should as a priority go to the relief of human misery. One can love animals; one should not direct to them the affection due only to persons.²²

This statement lacks any prohibition beyond the generalizations “if it remains within reasonable limits” or “to suffer or die needlessly.” No effort is made to define the limits of use or suffering, leaving unqualified discernment to the individual. Can it not be argued that any money spent on animal care could instead go to the relief of human misery? How should these expenditures be weighed against those funds that are spent on the priority of human leisure, which is given as an appropriate reason for animal domestication? From this we can extrapolate that it is more worthy to spend money to train a horse or a greyhound for racing which is an enterprise of human leisure than it is to treat an animal for health related issues since these funds could have been used to feed the poor.

²² Ibid

The concept of competition has been elevated by many of the proponents of “animal rights” and “animal liberation.” Peter Singer, a professor of ethics at Princeton University has been one of the most outspoken and controversial of animal advocates, and has in fact become Exhibit A against animal concerns, being dubbed “Dr. Death.” In his book, *Practical Ethics*, Singer states,

If the fetus does not have the same claim to live as a person, it appears that the newborn baby does not either, and the life of a newborn baby is of less value to it than the life of a pig, a dog, or a chimpanzee is to the nonhuman animal.²³

For Singer the value of life is contingent upon its ability to experience pleasure and pain. The ultimate goal is for a life to experience pleasure. Singer, who is an adamant atheist, would not ascribe any inherent moral worth or value that is endowed by a creator. Therefore he perceives of everything as a contest for power pitting each species against the other in an assertion of self-interest. In the end it is the most powerful that ascribes the value of life in Singer’s thinking, so in this way Singer, who is motivated by his hatred of human power, steps in a trap created by his own philosophy. Though he often evokes his own family history of Holocaust survival, he cannot avoid the ideological comparisons between his own insensitivity to all human life and that of Nazi sympathizers.

The “animal rights” organization PETA (People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals) attempted to turn the table on these comparisons with the provocative 2002 advertising campaign “Holocaust On Your Plate” which equated the eating of meat to genocide.

²³ Peter Singer, *Practical Ethics*, rev.ed. (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1993) p.169

Despite the fact that key leadership figures in PETA are Jewish, they could not mollify the Jewish community, which was outraged by the diminution of the unique horror of the holocaust. Though PETA has made many important contributions toward raising the awareness of animal exploitation and abuse, the extravagances of their public persona have tended to marginalize the organization and have added to the perception of the human v. animal dichotomy. PETA and like thinking proponents have, in my opinion, jeopardized public concern for animal welfare by erroneously making it an issue of animal rights.

As I established earlier, the ethical priority of choice has made the public forum a battleground for special interests groups. Already overcrowded by the human interest, the larger public is not ready to negotiate with an animal population presumably lobbying for rights and liberation. But are they? Are animals really concerned with equality or inherent rights? Were the emphasis placed upon human responsibility to act kindly rather than on animals' rights, activists like PETA might be more persuasive.

The animal v. human dichotomy has been intensified by the polarization of the issue between political conservatives and liberals. As an example, the Boston Herald's conservative columnist Don Feder wrote of Peter Singer,

The two halves of Mr. Singer's philosophy (animal rights and the denial of rights to human "non-persons") are symmetrical – fewer people, more room for animals. A Los Angeles talk-show host Dennis Prager puts it; "Those who refuse to sacrifice animals for people will end up sacrificing people for animals." Mr. Singer proves Mr. Prager's thesis.²⁴

²⁴ Don Feder, "Professor Death takes Ideas to Princeton" Boston Herald, October 28, 1998

The political lines are clearly drawn and they have often served as religious boundaries as well. Feder and Prager are both religious “neo-conservatives” as well as political conservatives, who have equated the culture wars with the battle for faith in contemporary American society. Though neither Feder nor Prager are official spokespersons for any coalition of the religious right, both are representative of this socio-religious sub-culture and are indicative of its broad animus toward animal activism. Unfortunately, in the midst of the cross polemic the essential issues of animal and human welfare are both being subverted. Mathew Scully, a former speechwriter for George W. Bush, comments on Feder’s article in his best selling book *Dominion*.

I think from both the left and the right they are bringing to the fairly simple questions of human love, duty and kinship a preoccupation with human power. Professor Singer sees human power and he hates it. So he drags it into his bio-ethics lab and turns the terror back on man himself. Mr. Feder and Mr. Prager (a theologian) see human power and love it – a little too much. So with other conservatives they invent, as we’ll see, unfeeling creatures and “generic beings” and false dilemmas, lest any animal get in the way of man’s designs, caprices, or commercial aims. Fixation on power, they would all abuse power, in Professor Singer’s case by killing off the two things that not only infants and unborn children but our fellow creatures, too depend upon most in the human heart – reverence and mercy.²⁵

This is where I wish to return the discussion to human responsibility as image bearers of the Creator. To do so I will again first contend with the theological content, paying special attention to what we can learn from the text itself, but also to what Messianic Judaism, seeking a moral vision, might learn from how we approach the text. I will then again discuss the socio-moral implications.

²⁵ Matthew Scully, *Dominion: The Power of Man, the Suffering of Animals, and the Call to Mercy* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 2002) p.23

The World of the Torah; A Tough Place for Man or Beast

At first glance Torah can be a tough read for those concerned about animal welfare. Much of the cultic material, especially in Leviticus 1-7, concerns itself with sacrifice, which is more than occasionally of the animal variety. Similar to the treatment of women, we must understand the animal sacrifices in Torah within the cultural and cosmological context of ancient Israel and its surrounding neighbors. While it is true that many of the particulars of Israel's sacrificial cult were borrowed from the surrounding culture and parallel cultures of pagan neighbors, the sacrifices they offered are to be understood theologically according to the particular character of their God and in accord with the peculiar covenantal relationship that he enacted with them. In this respect Israel's sacrificial system is, again, a domestication of existing practices by inculcating God's highest values into a normative ritual milieu. The community of faith in the Hebrew Scriptures put incredible energy and attentiveness into these offerings as material gestures, which defined the importance of God for the life of the community. The various sacrificial practices prescribed for Israel were vehicles designed to celebrate, affirm, enhance, or repair the defining relationship between them and God.

No doubt Israel's devotion to God was of little consolation to the animal population in their camp, but it can be argued that the detailed regimen would have proved limiting and more humane than the practices of neighboring sacrificial cult. This is later understood and augmented in the derivative rabbinic tradition of *shechita* (humane ritual slaughter). Certainly the teachings of Torah were instructive to Israel regarding the value of all life,

as I pointed out earlier. But the drama of sacrifice and its ancillary teaching on the preparation of meat for consumption would prove additionally instructive. Prohibitions against eating blood (Lev.17) and “cooking a young goat in its mother’s milk” (Ex. 23:19; 34:26; Deut. 14:21) ritualize the sanctity of all life.

It should be noted that the sacrificial systems of the ancient world were threatening to human life as well. It is well documented that human sacrifice was not an uncommon practice on the Sumerian plain or the Phoenician coast. The bible also records the abominable practice of human sacrifice among Israel’s neighbors to pagan idols. On several occasions in Scripture an extreme sacrifice of a child is made to God (Jer.19:5; Micah 6:6-8; Judges 11:29-40; 2 Kings 3:26-27). These are rare occurrences that need not be explained away as an embarrassment. I think they are best to be understood, as barbaric as they seem to us, as indications of the depth of urgency that was felt in regard to ceding what is of worth over to God, in the context of a world that did not condemn, rather normalized these sacrifices. Though silent on a few occasions (Judges 11:29-40; 2 Kings 3:26-27), at other times God strongly condemned the action (Jer:19:5).

It is in the context of these human sacrifices that Torah introduced the concept of animal sacrifice as substitutionary. God’s command to offer all firstborn sons to him is ameliorated by the counter command to redeem them with an animal sacrifice (Ex. 22:28-29; 34:19-20). This can be understood in each case contextually by the divine self-attribution of compassion. In essence a compassionate God provided a way out, by concurrently engaging and reforming the abominable practices of the ancient world.

What I think is essential in understanding the impact of the ritual is that it is nullified unless the exchange of innocent life can evoke sentimentality. Though clearly the human life is valued higher in Torah, in the sacrificial cult, an animal's life is considered to be of great value to be offered as ransom for the firstborn of Israel. Torah's identification of animal life with human life, which is created in the image of God, demands that we place higher value upon these lives than mere property.

It is also helpful to understand the animal sacrifices as occurring within the confines of the *Mishkan*. The regimen of the sacrificial cult (Lev.1-7) occurred directly after the *Mishkan* was completed and filled by the presence of God (Ex.40: 34-36). The ritual of *Mishkan* building is a sacred drama of world building in which Israel participates with God, bringing His cosmic plans into their socio-moral plane. Jon Levenson describes the parallels between the construction of the *Mishkan* and the construction of the world.

The function of these correspondences is to underscore the depiction of the sanctuary as a world, that is, an ordered supportive, and obedient environment, and the depiction of the world as a sanctuary, that is a place in which the reign of God is visible and unchallenged, and his holiness is palpable, unthreatened and pervasive.²⁶

The *Mishkan* does more than complete the cosmic design; it effectively reclaims creational intentions from the disruptive forces of chaos and human sin and re-creates the primordial hopes. Since the *Mishkan* is Israel's primary locus of worship, the acts of *Mishkan* building and occupying bind together Israel's vocation with God's re-creational purposes.²⁷

²⁶ Levenson, *Creation and the Persistence of Evil: The Jewish Drama of Divine Omnipotence* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988) p. 86

²⁷ I treat this topic thoroughly in *Origins and Destiny*.

It is here in the *Mishkan*, a ritualized world that represents the consummation of God's work of creation as well as the rescue of peaceable order from the forces of chaos, that Israel is brought face to face with the horror of animal death as a conciliatory measure for human disobedience. By engaging in this sacrificial drama, Israel is urged toward contrition and is asked to assume their role as a "kingdom of priests."

It would be difficult to reflect on the sacrificial system from a Messianic Jewish perspective without taking into account what the New Testament has to say about it. While Romans and Hebrews both seem to agree that Yeshua as a sacrifice to God has replaced the obsolete system of the Hebrew Scriptures, replete with animal sacrifices, our entire understanding of Yeshua as priest and sacrifice is cast in the categories of Israel's sacrificial practices. Without taking seriously the efficacious material gesture, as well as the pure brutality of animal sacrifices, the New Testament claims simply do not work.

Like the ritual slaughters in the *Mishkan*, the sacrifice of Yeshua begs us to examine our damaged relationships with God and with man, bringing the cosmic drama of chaos versus order into the arena of the world we occupy, initiating the peaceable kingdom of God. Just as empathy with the sacrifices in the *Mishkan* caused the worshiper to be disemboweled before God, so Yeshua invites us to pick up our crosses daily. This becomes mere metaphor unless we can identify with the sacrificial death of Yeshua, informed by the historical material gesture of animal sacrifice in all of its brutality.

It is interesting to note that when Yeshua gave himself as a vicarious sacrifice, he promised the contrite thief who was crucified with him that he would “be with me in paradise (*paradeis* lit. garden)” (Luke 23:43). This allusion to *Gan Eden* begs us, along with its scriptural connections to the sacrifices in the *Mishkan*, to consider Yeshua’s sacrifice as intended for reparation of the relational disharmony wrought by human disobedience.

Eating East of Eden

By every indication, in the two “utopian” scenarios in Scripture, both humankind and the animal population are portrayed as vegetarians. The first scenario is directly after the creation when humankind dwelt in *Gan Eden*.

God said, “See, I give you every seed-bearing plant that is upon all the earth, and every tree that has seed-bearing fruit; they shall be yours for food. And to all the animals on land, to all the birds of the sky, and to everything that creeps on earth, in which there is the breath of life, [I give] all the green plants for food.” And it was so. (Genesis 1:29-30)

The second is envisioned in the prophetic mind, a reality greater than the present, a Messianic Age when all of the world will be in harmony represented by the reformed eating habits of nature’s predators.

The wolf shall dwell with the lamb,
The leopard lie down with the kid;
The calf, the beast of prey, and the fatling together,
With a little boy to herd them.
The cow and the bear shall graze,
Their young shall lie down together;
And the lion, like the ox, shall eat straw. (Isa. 11: 6-7)

But what occurs in between, the space in time that we occupy, is most germane to our discussion. As I pointed out earlier concerning the relationships between males and

females and between humankind and the earth, the cosmic rift initiated by human disobedience entered into the socio-moral plane. The severed relationship between God and humankind as portrayed in Scripture is more than metaphysical, having damaging effects upon the entire world order. As a result of human evil, the fragile harmony that exists between humans and animals, and all animal life itself is consequently threatened. Following the divine pronouncement of the ensuing curses wrought by human disobedience, God clothes the man and women with animal skins (Gen. 3:21). Apparently neither vegetation nor human ingenuity was adequate to hide the naked exposure of mankind after its fall. The implication is clear, human moral failure costs more than human lives.

As described by the first two commands given in Genesis, humankind was given the responsibility of being the image bearers of God in this world in two distinct ways. . . First, humanity is commanded to have dominion in this world. “Be fertile and increase, fill the earth and master it; and rule the fish of the sea, the birds of the sky, and all the living things that creep on earth (Gen. 1:28).” The second divine charge to humanity is to “till” (l^{av}dah, □literally to serve or to worship) the ground (2:15). While the command is very much the same as the first command, it is actualized quite differently. In the first, humans image God as kings, but in the second, as servants. Dominion or mastery does not suggest unbridled freedom to ravage, exploit and exhaust the rest of the animal kingdom, rather as the only beings created in the image of God, humans are expected to be benevolent rulers, serving the creation. This command is later replicated to Israel as an archetype of a renewed humanity when it is commanded to be a “kingdom of

priests (Ex. 19:6)” charged with the responsibility of partaking in the restoration of the relational order between God, humankind and the cosmos.

It would appear from the narratives of Genesis 1-2 and from the messianic expectations of Isaiah 11, that animals were originally intended for a more intimate relationship with humanity than a mere food source. In Gen. 2:18 God declares, “It is not good for man to be alone; I will make a fitting helper for him.” But there is a gap between this declaration and the creation of the woman from the rib of man in verse 21. In between, in verses 19 and 20 God creates the animals from the dust of the earth just as he did the man. Also the animals are brought before the man who is given charge to name each of them, “but for Adam no suitable helper was found.” From this we might ascertain several thoughts.

First, this reiterates the idea of man as the benevolent ruler. Although the animals were created much as he was, only the human is able to participate in the creative task of naming. Second there is a clear intimacy between Adam and the rest of the creatures, not only does he know the animals well enough to give them suitable names, but there is an implied potential for one of them to be his special mate. One *aggadah* goes so far as to suggest that Adam had sexual intercourse with each of the animals before determining that the chemistry was wrong (Yevamot 63a). Whatever the unstated process of evaluation was, the Torah is clear that it is only after eliminating the rest of the animal world, as suitable mates, that God provided one that Adam could say was “bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh (v.23).” Michael Wyschogrod comments on this odd narrative and its implications.

For me, the most important lesson that emerges from all of this is recognition of the proximity, from God's perspective, of human beings and animals. However great the gulf may be from a human perspective, from the perspective of God who is infinitely above both humans and animals, the gulf is not as absolute as it seems to humans. It is, of course, that only the human being was created in the image of God which at the very least means that humans are closer to God than animals. But it does not mean that the gulf between humans and animals is as absolute as that between humans and God. Humans and animals are both finite creatures and while, in the final analysis, only women is the proper companion of man, animals are also companions though less than satisfactory ones.²⁸

Given the level of companionship intended between humans and animals it is understandable why, in the original scheme of creation, animals were not on the menu. Despite the implications of the animal skin clothes provided by God at the end of Genesis 3, there is no explicit mention of humans eating animals until after the flood. That God permits the eating of animals is best understood as a concession to the innately evil character of humankind. God restates the command to "Be fertile and increase, and fill the earth (Gen. 9:1)," but now it is followed by the sober evaluation of the relational disharmony

The fear and the dread of you shall be upon all the beasts of the earth and upon all the birds of the sky—everything with which the earth is astir—and upon all the fish of the sea; they are given into your hand. Every creature that lives shall be yours to eat; as with the green grasses, I give you all these. (Gen.9: 2-3).

Recognizing its ineradicably evil disposition, God acknowledges that rather than a benevolent ruler who serves creation; man has become a predatory dictator, a rather distorted image of the Creator.

²⁸ Michael Wyschogrod and R. Kendall Soulen ed., "Revenge of the Animals" *Abraham's Promise: Judaism and Jewish-Christian Relations, Radical Traditions* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: W.B. Eerdmans, 2004) p.109

Along with the permission to eat animals though, comes an immediate set of prohibitions against eating animal blood and shedding human blood (Gen.9: 5-6). It is almost as though God expects that when man kills animals, the taking of human life is a near probability. Though Torah contains a great deal of instruction concerning which meats may and may not be eaten, it seems rather easy to conclude that God would prefer His image bearers to be vegetarians.

Between the two “Utopian” scenarios of creation and consummation, Scripture establishes a trajectory whereby redemptive revelation initiates the return to *Gan Eden*, a peaceable kingdom of God’s intended order. Though he is not a theologian and his writing is non-religious in orientation, Mathew Scully has captured, I believe, the essence of Scripture’s eschatological trajectory, describing the potential relationship between humankind and animals and how it reflects upon the relationship between people.

“In a drop of rain can be seen the colors of the sun,” observed the historian Lewis Namier. So in every act of kindness we hold in our hands the mercy of our maker, whose purposes are in life and death, whose love does not stop at us but surrounds us, bestowing dignity and beauty and hope on every creature that lives and suffers and perishes. Perhaps that is part of the animals’ role among us, to awaken humility, to turn our minds back to the mystery of things, and open our hearts to that most impractical of hopes in which all creation speaks as one. For them as for us, if there is any hope at all then it is the same hope, and the same love, and the same God who shall wipe away all tears from their eyes, and there shall be no more death, neither sorrow, nor crying, neither shall there be any more pain: for the former things are passed away.”²⁹

Examining the Social and Moral Implications

²⁹ Scully, p.398 quote taken from Revelation 21:4

I strongly suspect that Mathew Scully is on to something. Concern for the welfare of animals should be a reflection of how we view all life, and the creator of life. In this respect, the way we treat animals can have the capacity to transform our relationships with men and God as well. Yeshua teaches in the Sermon on the Mount to “love your enemies (Matt.5: 43).” Torah teaches to even extend concern to the animal of an enemy. “If you see the donkey of someone who hates you fallen down under its load, do not leave it there; be sure you help him with it (Ex. 23:5).” The intention of the command is to prevent an animal from suffering due to a dispute between its owners. A third century midrash though, teaches how obedience to this command can enhance and repair your relationship with such an enemy.

Rabbi Alexandri said: Two donkey drivers who hated each other were walking on a road when the donkey of one lay down under its burden. His companion saw it, and at first passed on. But then he reflected: Is it not written in the Torah, “If you see your enemy’s donkey laying down under its burden...”? So he returned, lent a hand, and helped his enemy in loading and unloading. He began talking to his enemy: “Release a bit here, pull up over there, unload over here.” Thus peace came about between them, so that the driver of the overloaded said, “Did I suppose that he hated me? But now look how compassionate he has been.” By and by, the two entered an inn, ate and drank together, and became fast friends. What caused them to make peace and become fast friends? Because one of them kept what was in Torah. (Tanahuma, Mishpatim 1)³⁰

The point is that the bible teaches us how to treat all with dignity and compassion, friend and foe, man and beast and even our enemy’s beast. There is much that we can learn not only from Torah, but also from the rabbinic tradition that can help us to live in accord with God’s highest values as we endeavor to ascertain them. The rabbinic tradition for keeping Torah can surprisingly help facilitate living out the moral vision of the New

³⁰ Hayyim Nahman Bialik and Yehoshua Hana Rawnitzki ed.s, trans William G. Braude, *The Book of Legends = Sefer Ha-Aggadah: Legends from the Talmud and Midrash* (New York: Schocken Books, 1992) p. 459

Testament as well, if the two are understood in a comprehensive narrative scheme where the latter does not abrogate the former.

The keeping of kashrut can help to create an environment whereby compassion for life is inculcated at each meal. All of my children have grown up separating meat and dairy. In a society where meat comes in shrink-wrap and milk in a carton, awareness of milk as a picture of life and meat as a picture of death can be overlooked. But by following the rabbinic tradition derived from Torah (Ex. 23:19; 34:26; Deut. 14:21), my children have learnt a lesson in the sanctity of life every time they have set the table separating meat and dairy. By eating only kosher meats we are assured of the highest emphasis placed upon making the slaughter of the animals fast and humane. Also, the unique nature of *shechita* lowers the possibility that we are contributing to the practice of raising animals on a factory farm where they are raised in confinement and tortured for the extent of their lives, all for the sake of improved profits and lower price points. It should be easy to conclude that more expensive meat is a small price to pay for obedience to the commandments, greater identification with the community, and Godly observance of the sanctity of life. Besides, if the increase cost of meat leads to lower personal consumption, all the better.

Talmud recognizes that the eating of meat is a concession to human desire. Though it teaches that both meat and wine should be served at every festive occasion (Pesachim 109a), it also teaches “A man should not eat meat unless he has a special craving for it (Hullim 84a).” In this respect the tension between the *olam ha-bah* (age to come) and the

olam ha-zeh (present age) are upheld. I have already expressed my opinion, based on the narrative flow of Torah, that vegetarianism is God's ideal. However, if God allows for concessions so must we. Still, any efforts we can make to place limitations upon ourselves can only prove to be helpful, not only in decreasing the suffering of the animal population, but also by training us to be better stewards of the Earth's resources.

We live in an age of unparalleled consumption of the Earth's resources and the world's limited goods. Our use of fossil fuel has placed serious demands upon the fragile economies in the western hemisphere and has precipitated imperial rivalries and political unrest. This is not to mention the irreparable harm that has been done to the environment. In the U.S., where our expenditures on trash receptacles are greater than half of the world's GNP, we are often unaware of the strain we place on the world's limited goods. Restraint in regard to animal consumption can be the start of a healthy pedagogy. One of the important lessons that can be learned from Israel's sacrificial system is that observance of biblically informed ritual is instructive toward world building. As it is incumbent upon the redemptive community to be co-participants with the Creator in the restoration of cosmic and relational harmony, then compassion, stewardship and self-limiting discipline should be identifying marks of such community.

Final Thoughts

Messianic Judaism in its earliest days often postured itself as "God's end-time Jewish movement." The truth is, though, that in its infancy, Messianic Judaism concerned itself more with apocalyptic imagery and self-aggrandizement than it did with building the

peaceable kingdom of God, as should be incumbent upon a redemptive community . I suppose Messianic Judaism's divorce from the ethical responsibilities of this world has been the by-product of a very high eschatological horizon inherited from classical Dispensationalism and other sectarian Protestant groups. Those involved in social activism were always considered suspect and held at arms length, characterized as "those who thought they could earn their way into heaven" or "the deeds righteous." Truth be told, many of these religious groups with well-developed social consciousness, while exhibiting great concern for the rights of the weak and the underclass, often operate with low eschatological horizons and under-developed spiritual practice. Neither of these approaches, in my opinion, is fully adequate for Messianic Judaism.

A few years ago I was meeting with Mark Kinzer and a renowned Jewish scholar who was surprised by our commitment to Torah observance. Toward the end of the meeting he asked why we needed Yeshua since we already had the Torah. I thought about his theological proclivities while considering the most apprehensible response to his question. I was surprised how quickly and easily the response came to me. I explained that while Torah is revelatory and offered a way to live until the apocalyptic messianic age, Yeshua is the living Torah and the Messiah, both revelation and eschaton, bridging the present and the future. Our friend is living in accord with God's highest standards while waiting for the *olam ha-bah*, while we attempt to live in the reality of the coming age, having no illusions concerning the impingement of the present age upon it. I believe this is the kind of hyper-reality that must inform Messianic Judaism's moral vision.

Yeshua allows us to live as a renewed humanity within the creative tension of a world in the midst of “birth pains (Rom.8: 22).”

But more is expected of the redemptive community than passively waiting, disengaged from the societal ills of this world. Certainly it is incumbent upon us not to become passive participants in social pathologies, protecting our own self-interests with pseudo-ethical discourse, constructed from moral fragments separated from the context of their conceptual schemes. Biblical propositions removed from the historical contexts, trajectory and cosmologies can offer little help in navigating the turbulent waters of contemporary choice. Neither can we import their meanings from traditional Christian or Jewish constructs without seriously engaging or dialoguing with those superstructures.

Moral discourse should not be merely a descriptive task for us, but more so one that is prescriptive. We should be less involved with solving the momentary dilemmas that face us than with attempting to answer whom we are and who God wishes us to become. In this respect ethics, for us, must be a theological enterprise, passionately integrated with God’s concern for justice and mercy in the present world. Only then can we develop a true moral vision, only then can we truly become a redemptive community.