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Forward

Pastors wrapped in Torah: Why so many Christians are appropriating Jewish ritual

A decade ago, I was in Israel with an evangelical tour group researching a book about American Christians when I met Carlie, a young woman who introduced herself to the group as Jewish. I was curious why a Jewish person would join an evangelical tour and we got to talking. Her family had cycled through New Age groups and churches until they found a Messianic Jewish congregation. There, her mother heard God speak, telling her the family was Jewish.

They began keeping kosher and celebrating Jewish holidays while deepening their faith in Jesus.

At the time, I assumed it was one family's idiosyncratic spiritual story. As I dug deeper, however, I realized that Carlie's experience was part of a rapidly growing trend sometimes called "Jewish affinity" — Christians who integrate Jewish rituals, cultural attributes, symbols, and liturgy into their lives.

Jewish affinity has three main attributes: it has exploded over the last two decades thanks to the internet; it is most prevalent in evangelical Protestantism, especially its Pentecostal and charismatic variants; it is made up almost entirely of people with no

Jewish ancestry.

You know you're looking at Jewish affinity when you see a pastor get wrapped in a Torah scrolls on YouTube.

Or you find Ketubahs and Haggadot marketed for Christians online. A proliferation of small churches with Hebrew names are also popping up. Join them at worship and you might find them singing Hebrew songs, blessing children under a chuppah, or performing "Davidic" dances.

More elaborate displays include building Jewish-like biblical structures; replicas of Solomon's Temple have gone up in Zambia and Brazil(for the inauguration, the Pentecostal pastor donned kippah and tallit). Perhaps the most recognizable global event is the Feast of Tabernacles celebration during Sukkot, when the International Christian Embassy of Jerusalem (ICEJ) hosts Christians from 100 countries. This year, you can watch the virtual festivities through to December.

For curious bystanders, an obvious question is what's the appeal? Based on my research in North America, I have found that it attracts two main types of Christians.

First, there are biblical literalists who view scripture as an accurate historical record and uses patterns in the Bible to interpret current and future events. They want to better access all of God's word, including the Hebrew Bible. They are drawn to a methodical analysis of the text and may even sign up for Hebrew lessons themselves.

Second, there are Pentecostal-charismatics. These Christians emphasize ecstatic forms of worship and are drawn to Hebraic rituals as an access point for God's blessings. You might see them blowing a jumbo-sized shofar to express spiritual joy or bring down healing miracles. They are the ones in the Feast of Tabernacles promo video, hands aloft and dancing exuberantly. Biblical literalists and charismatics are not mutually exclusive: most Jewish affinity Christians are both.

A third—and smaller—group of Jewish affinity Christians claim genetic links to Judaism. In North America, a few such people grew up in Jewish households and were born again as adults. A somewhat larger number has Jewish ancestry, which they came to value differently after being born again. Another subset of people believes they have

discovered a hidden Jewish lineage. In North America, Latinos who self-identify as *bnei anusim* have created significant buzz and controversyin the Jewish community. Only those who view this descent as enhancing their belief in Jesus would be considered Jewish affinity Christians, as I define it here.

Getting 'the shivers' from Hebrew

Image by IFCJ

A Christian prayer service for the Feast of the Tabernacles in Jerusalem

A cynic might point out that Jewish affinity Christians are often confused about what they view as "authentic" biblical Judaism. Jesus didn't listen to klezmer or eat bagels. Ancient Israelites didn't do Davidic dancing (styled on Israeli folk dancing, itself a twentieth-century invention). But for many Jewish affinity Christians, the details are less important than the feelings such activities generate.

Those I have gotten to know over the years describe emotional, even physical, responses to Jewish things. One talked about 'zoning out in total bliss' while listening to klezmer; another 'felt shivers' as she mouthed Hebrew words.

The uptick in Jewish affinity is directly related to the internet. But its roots go back a lot further—to a series of unprecedented shifts more than century ago.

One of these shifts was how mid-nineteenth century Protestants developed a new interest in the Jewish context of Jesus's everyday life. It was fuelled by the invention of biblical archaeology and the popularity of novels like celebrity pastor Henry Ward Beecher's The Life of Jesus, the Christ in 1871.

Having more details about Jesus's life, and valuing them as important, had a direct impact on Jewish affinity Christians: more than other born-again evangelicals, they emphasize the particular human vessel that God chose on earth—that is, a first-century Jew. They often assume that the rituals, language, and laws that were familiar to Jesus and to his earliest followers were the purest form of faith, and should be practiced (at least in part) today. Scholars call this type of thinking Christian primitivism.

Another important trend was the wave of nineteenth-century Jewish conversions to Protestantism, usually among elite and upwardly mobile classes. These converts assimilated into churches but in the 1960s their descendants, along with newly converted baby boomers, began to think about Jewishness differently.

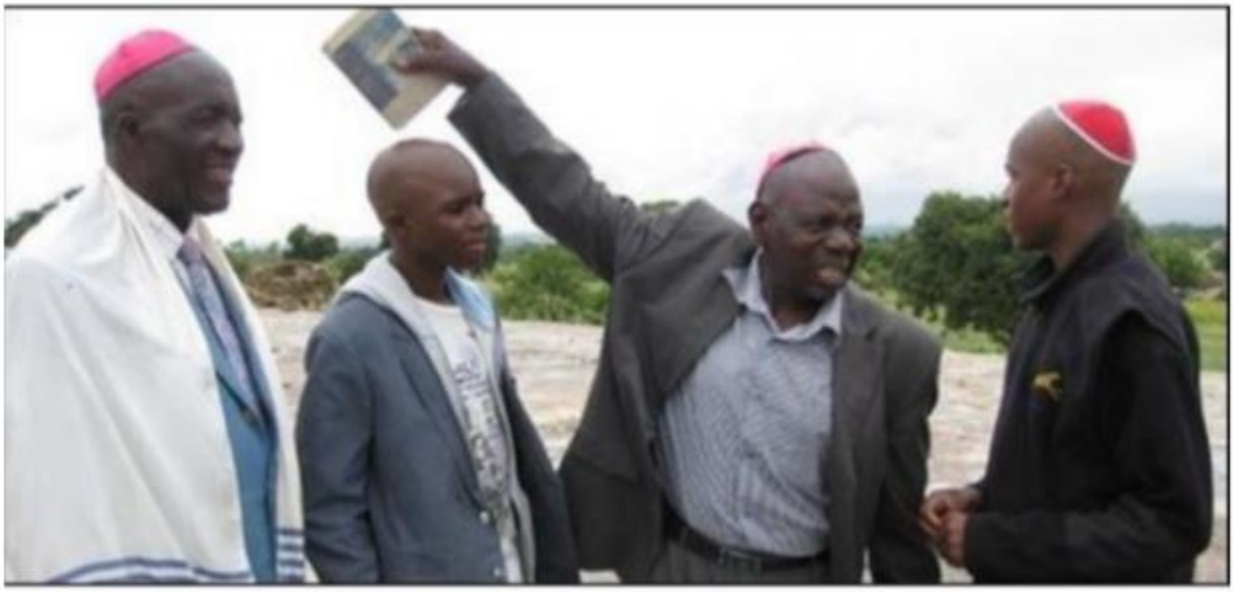
Galvanized by pride in the state of Israel, the white ethnic revival, and charismatic Christianity, they adopted the term "Messianic Jews" and created Jewish-inflected evangelical groups.

Messianic Jewish leaders generally have Jewish heritage and view the movement as by and for believers like themselves. However, its main impact has been on non-Jews: since the 1980s, its leaders have been a central hub for promoting Jewish affinity among evangelicals, while their congregations teach Jewish-like rituals to largely non-Jewish attendees. Based on my research, upwards of 70% to 80% of attendees are non-Jewish, though Messianic Jewish spokespeople usually say it's 50%.

A last historical shift of note had to do with the apocalypse. In the last half of the nineteenth century, a small group of Anglo-Protestants began to declare that God still had a use for Jews: their return to Zion would presage the return of Jesus; a select group would become Jesus believers and fight alongside born-again Christians in the Final Battle.

White evangelicals embraced this idea after the 1967 unification of Jerusalem. It motivated the establishment of the ICEJ in 1980 and is the main justification for its yearly Sukkot celebration, which is viewed as a prophetic enactment of the nations gathering in Jerusalem when Jesus returns. Christian Zionism—support for the state of Israel as a facet of this theology—is not synonymous with Jewish affinity, but the two are often linked.

'Jews' in Papua New Guinea?



Members of the Lemba tribe observe Jewish traditions but consider themselves Christian.

Outside of the United States and Western Europe, the rise of Jewish affinity can sometimes be directly attributed to missionaries from evangelical churches or from Sabbath-keeping ones, such as the Seventh-day Adventists. Since the 1970s, Messianic Jews from the United States have encouraged Jewish affinity in places from Papua New Guineato Cyprus to Ethiopia (they have also occasionally rejected local claims to Jewish genes). For many other Christians in charismatic churches, however, Jewish affinity has arisen organically from scripture reading and prophetic revelation. Through the internet, churches have found templates and groups of like-minded believers, especially in Latin America and Africa. As Jewish affinity Christians immigrate, they bring more versions of the trend to North America.

There are nearly 600 million charismatic Christians in the world. As these numbers rise, Jewish affinity almost certainly will too. Jewish people may well ask: what does it mean for them?

Some Jews view it as a definite boon. Such Christians view themselves as Jewish allies, notably because they are strong supporters of Israel. Their level of admiration and support is indeed remarkable when measured against other iterations of Christianity, historically and today. For multiple Israeli Prime Ministers, among others, this fact is reason enough to embrace the trend.

Others view Jewish affinity Christians as a solution to shrinking Jewish populations. Activist organizations, like Kulanu, work with communities that claim Jewish descent—however those ideas originated — to teach more orthodox forms of Judaism. Their goal is to foster halachic conversions and possibly aliyah to Israel. In a forum I recently edited, anthropologists suggest that Jewish affinity, and the possibility of immigration,

may appeal to marginalized Christian communities, for example in Papua New Guinea or Ethiopia.

It raises questions about the legal and political viability of Israel's Law of Return. Cases can be tricky, as attested by debates about the Lemba in southern Africa, who claim to be a lost tribe of Israel. Can DNA testing "prove" Jewishness? Did oral traditions about biblical Israel predate the spread of charismatic Christianity in the community or not? For Lemba spokespeople, this chicken-and-egg question is irrelevant: what matters is how they perceive themselves today. They can be culturally Jewish and religiously Pentecostal. Can and should the state of Israel manage such claims?

Time to accept Messianic Jews?

Image by YouTube

At a Christian prayer service, worshippers wear Jewish prayer shawls and blow shofars.

A related conversation is happening in North America, Europe, and Israel, where some Jewish leaders and pundits advocate accepting Messianic Jews, at least those of accepted Jewish heritage. They are motivated by concerns about population loss, but also by a liberal ideological position that says Judaism should be capacious enough to include believers in Jesus. Messianic Jewish leaders have long made this argument too. Could integrating born-again believers push Judaism to expand and diversify in exciting ways?

My own view is more cautious. Few Jewish affinity Christians—including those in Messianic Jewish congregations—have much contact with mainstream Jews. When they say they "love the Jews," it is an ideal based on biblical texts and cultural assumptions filtered through evangelical media. Not surprisingly, the least vexed objects of love are Jews who seem to exemplify God's prophetic plan, mainly Jewish believers in Jesus and Israeli Jews who, at the very least, live in the Holy Land.

By contrast Messianic Jewish and Jewish affinity evangelicals often have mixed feelings about North American Jews. They dismiss mainstream Judaism as "rabbinic." They are often confounded by nonreligious Jews. Why don't they immigrate to Israel, as God intends? How can they support ungodly causes, like abortion, or argue against prayer in schools? Why does Seinfeld disrespect God by joking about him? (Yes, I've had that discussion). Too often, Jewish affinity Christians classify Jews as either "good" or "bad" based on their own rubric.

They also tell me that Jews are innately better at things because God has blessed them: they are warm, "book smart," or prosperous. In fact, stacks of books and videos promise to reveal Jewish secrets

for attaining prosperity. While that may set off alarm bells for Jewish readers, even positive values risk dehumanizing individuals by aggregating them into a group. Some Jews are warm and book smart, others are not. This perspective also views Jewish successes and survival as not due to Jewish efforts per se; it is the power of God channeled through them.

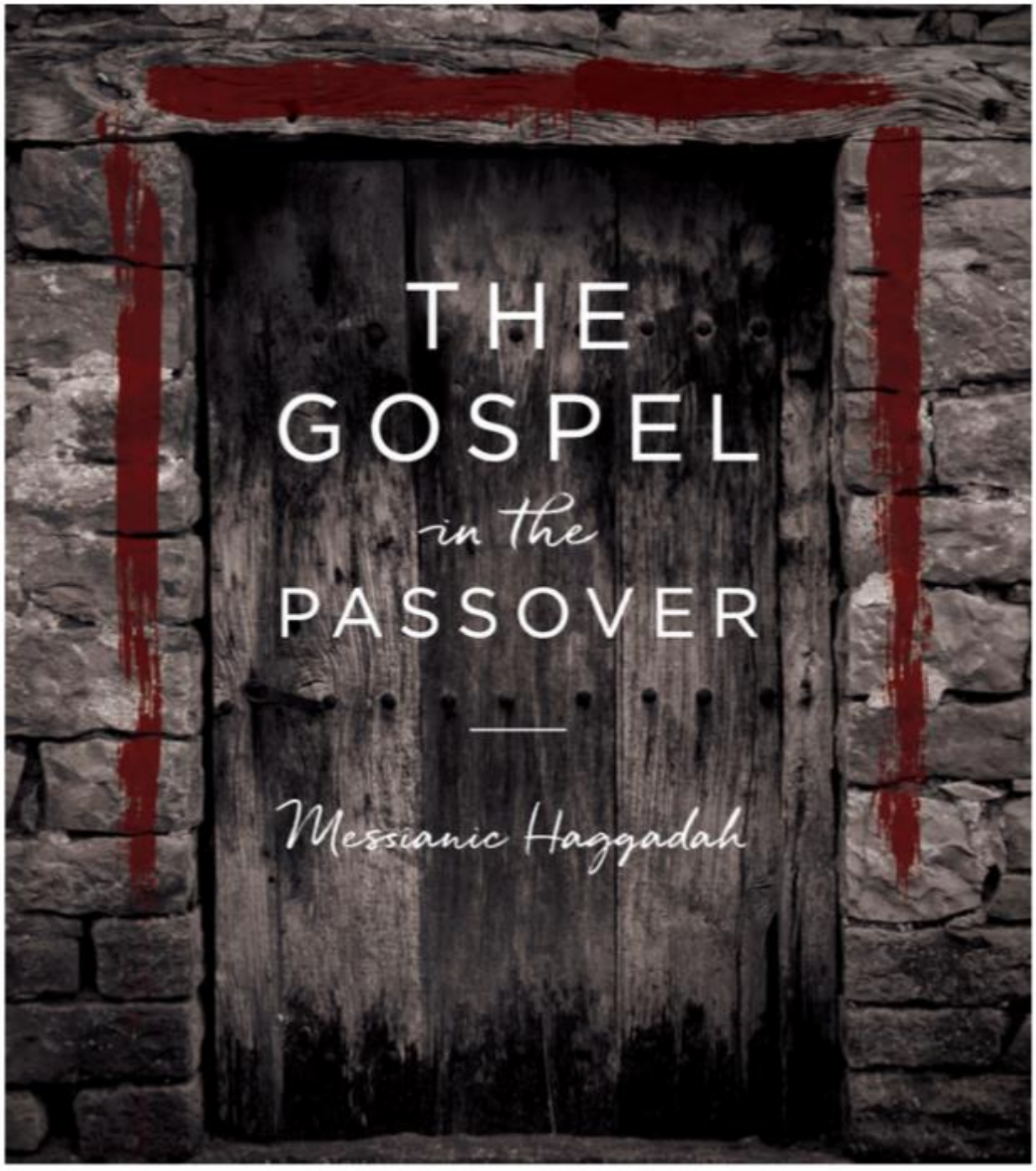
Further, Jewish affinity theology still—and necessarily—retains the basic idea that Judaism is a stepping stone to Christian truth. That's why Jewish affinity Christians describe the Hebrew Bible as "revealed" through Jesus or imply that Jews do not have enough information to understand their own rituals. Listen to Paul Wilbur, a pioneering Messianic Jewish singer, describe the Sederas containing mysteries that "are hidden from some eyes but…in plain view for those who have eyes to see and ears to hear." Quipping from Isaiah and Matthew—evangelical favorites—Wilbur means that Jewish eyes are blind to the Seder's true meaning, but born again eyes can see how rituals, such as breaking the middle matzah, actually point to Jesus. For these reasons, some scholars suggest that Jewish affinity might be considered an inverted antisemitism.

Another subtle, but important, consideration is how appropriating a minority group's heritage causes residual damage. It's an issue that is familiar to other minority groups in North America, such as Buddhists, Hindus, and especially Indigenous people. As Jewish affinity spreads, Jews will have to decide whether they view Christian practices in this light and, relatedly, how to respond if the Christian majority begins to redefine who counts as Jewish. As Vice President Mike Pence's gaffe with Messianic rabbi Loren Jacobs shows, most Jewish Americans view it as their right to define who can and cannot represent them.

Jacobs' blessing for the Republican Party raises another point. Jewish affinity Christians often use faith commitments to bolster conservative politics and may advocate for top-down political authority of the type they associate with biblical Israel. This is evident in their support for Bolsonaro in Brazil or Trump in the United States (to whom Christian Zionists gave a Friend of Zion award in 2017 for going "above & beyond for the Jewish people"). Jews might agree with these politics or not, but they should be aware that Judaism is being instrumentalized for these ends. More pragmatically, how might

integrating born-again believers into mainstream Judaism impact Jewish social and political commitments?

All about evangelizing Jews?



A Passover haggadah for a Christian audience.

When I speak with North American Jews, their most concrete concern is evangelization: do Jewish affinity Christians spread the Gospel? The answer is complicated.

In principle, yes, and many Messianic Jewish congregations and organizations are funded by evangelistic groups. But at an individual level, I have met few Jewish affinity Christians who target Jews directly. Partly it's a lack of access: few have relationships with many or any Jewish people, even in places like Montreal or Boston with robust Jewish populations.

Most evangelicals, Jewish affinity or otherwise, shy away from Jews for Jesus's controversial street evangelism. Jewish affinity organizations that operate in Israel—like the ICEJ—are also careful not to break Israeli laws that forbid evangelism, though they do sometimes overstep and the state intervenes (see the God TV debaclein June). The issue is further complicated by how Messianic Jews, at least, refuse the idea that accepting Jesus is a conversion — they view it is a fulfillment of Jewishness.

Ultimately, evangelism is a Jewish question more than a Jewish affinity one. The trend is growing fastest in Africa and Latin America with rising charismatic populations and few Jewish residents at all. For Jewish affinity believers, the real issue is how a mix of Jewish things and biblical ideas enable them to live out their born-again faith in more visceral ways, with political, theological, and social consequences. What this means for Jewish people remains an open question.

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