

# Fellowship Affairs

containing:

Speaking Hurtful Words  
Group Bible Study Keys  
Resolving Disputes in the Assembly  
Calendar Chaos

by  
Dean & Susan Wheelock

But avoid foolish disputes, genealogies, contentions,  
And strivings about the law;  
For they are unprofitable and useless.  
*Titus 3:9*

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PO Box 400  
Lakewood, WI 54138

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## ~ Introduction ~

For where *there are* envy, strife, and divisions among you,  
Are you not carnal  
And behaving like *mere* men?  
I Corinthians 3:3



One of the major challenges facing the Messianic Movement today is how to come to terms with the various disputes over scriptural and doctrinal issues. Many people have come to a new understanding of the Scriptures through the teachings found in the Messianic world, only to have their hearts rent by other people who refuse to fellowship with them because they hold to a different opinion concerning some doctrine.

Let us be clear about one thing, there are doctrines which are very important -- one of the most important (in our opinion) being that *Y'shua* came to this earth as the only begotten Son of God to live a perfect life, offer Himself on the Crucifixion Stake, and thereby take away our sins so that we may be given the gift of eternal life. Certainly, it would be difficult to continue to be in intimate fellowship with someone who has rejected that great truth. This might well be in the category of a "damnable heresy:"

**"But there were false prophets also among the people, even as there shall be false teachers among you, who privily shall bring in damnable heresies, even denying the Lord that bought them, and bring upon themselves swift destruction."**  
(II Pet. 2:1 KJV)

However, the Apostle Paul said there must be other types of heresies which are not as serious:

**"For there must be also heresies [*differences of opinion*] among you, that they which are approved may be made manifest among you."**  
(I Cor. 11:19 KJV)

The problems found in our fellowships are not that differences of opinion exist within the members of the community but that some cannot seem to dwell in peace with those who disagree with them. This is primarily a Western

Civilization problem and is not generally found within the Jewish culture where differences of opinion are not only frequent but expected.

The purpose of this booklet is to explore some of the topics relating to this problem. The first chapter, *Speaking Hurtful Words*, shows how words which inflict hurt upon other members of the fellowship must be avoided. The Hebrew name for this type of speech is *Lashon Hara* (Lah-shone' Hah-rah' = the Evil Tongue). By guarding our tongues, many of the problems which occur in Messianic fellowships can be averted.

The second chapter (*Group Bible Study Keys*) is designed to encourage interactive Bible study sessions where all are invited to participate without being made to feel humiliated because they are not as knowledgeable as some others. It has been our experience that all members of the Body of Messiah have worthwhile understandings and experiences which can benefit other members of the Body if they are allowed to express themselves in a non-threatening venue.

The third chapter, *Resolving Disputes in the Assembly*, is very important, for no matter how hard people try to avoid disputes they will arise. This chapter takes a close look at what *Y'shua* was really teaching in Matthew chapter 18.

Finally, the last chapter, *Calendar Chaos*, examines one of the most divisive issues facing the Messianic Movement today -- the many different calendars being promulgated by various factions. Here we examine the major calendars being used today and why we have chosen to follow the Traditional Hebrew Calendar.

We hope this booklet will be of use to each one who reads it. However, remember one thing: do not blindly accept what is taught herein but instead:

**"Test all things; hold fast what is good."** (I Thess. 5:21)

Shalom!

Dean & Susan Wheelock

Beit Shalom, 2010

~ ~ ~ ~ ~

## ~ Speaking Hurtful Words ~

The righteous will never be removed,  
But the wicked will not inhabit the earth.  
The mouth of the righteous brings forth wisdom,  
But the perverse tongue will be cut out.  
The lips of the righteous know what is acceptable,  
But the mouth of the wicked *what* is perverse.  
*Proverbs 10:30-32*

**S**ticks and stones may break my bones, but names [or words] will never hurt me."

So goes the old nursery rhyme which children recite when someone insults them by calling them names, or other types of words, which hurt to the core of a child's heart. Yet even as children bravely recite this rhyme against their tormentors, they know that it is not really true. Oftentimes words can be very hurtful and names do carry a stigma that may torment a child for many years to come.

### ~ Lashon Hara ~

Judaism has a Hebrew expression for words that hurt. It is called *Lashon Hara* (Lah-shown' Har-rah'), and it literally means "Tongue Evil." In English we express it the other way around, by calling it "The Evil Tongue."

Several years ago *Hebrew Roots* ran two articles on this very important subject. These articles have since been combined into a booklet entitled *Guarding the Tongue*. They cover the rules of *Lashon Hara* in great detail, as developed by a famous Jewish Rabbi, Yisroel Meir Kagan. Rabbi Kagan was better known as *Chofetz Chaim*, a *nom de plume* (pen name or pseudonym) given to him because of his pioneering work on *Lashon Hara*. In Hebrew *Chofetz Chaim* means "Desires Life" and it comes from the following Psalm which equates the person who does not speak evil as one who "desires a good life;" that is, one who wishes to live a good or righteous life before God and man:

**"Come, you children, listen to me;  
I will teach you the fear of the LORD [YHVH].  
<sup>12</sup> Who is the man who desires [Chofetz] life [Chaim],  
And loves many days, that he may see good?  
<sup>13</sup> Keep your tongue from evil,  
And your lips from speaking deceit.  
<sup>14</sup> Depart from evil and do good;  
Seek peace and pursue it."** (Psalm 34:11-14)

Righteousness begins at home.

The main purpose of this chapter is to look more closely at what motivates people to speak *Lashon Hara*, and determine what steps we can take as individuals to remedy this problem in our own lives (for we are all guilty of speaking *Lashon Hara* from time to time). Those who wish to revisit all of the rules

concerning *Lashon Hara*, may refer to the booklet *Guarding the Tongue*, which is still available from *Hebrew Roots*.

The goal is not to condemn others for their *Lashon Hara* (as evil as that might be), but to examine ourselves first, and by so doing obey the commandment given to us by our Lord and Savior *Y'shua HaMashiach* (Yeh-shoe'-ah Hah Mah-she'-ahk = Jesus the Messiah):

**"And why do you look at the speck in your brother's eye, but do not consider the plank in your own eye? <sup>4</sup> Or how can you say to your brother, "Let me remove the speck from your eye;" and look, a plank *is* in your own eye? <sup>5</sup>Hypocrite! First remove the plank from your own eye, and then you will see clearly to remove the speck from your brother's eye."** (Matt. 7:3-5)

By examining our own Evil Tongue and doing something about it, we will have a better testimony among friends and family (not to mention community) and place ourselves on the righteous road which *Y'shua* set for us:

**"Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect."** (Matt. 5:48 NIV)

### ~ A Review ~

For those who are not familiar with the principles concerning *Lashon Hara*, a brief review of its main concepts is in order, before delving into the root causes.

There are times when the speaking of *Lashon Hara* is very evident to all who hear it. However, many times what passes for ordinary everyday speech is also, in fact, *Lashon Hara*. If a person is not aware of what constitutes *Lashon Hara*, it will be difficult, if not impossible, to stop speaking it.

The overall guiding principles which define *Lashon Hara* are:

- ◆ Making a remark which in any way puts down or belittles another person.
- ◆ Making a remark which causes another person to feel bad or be hurt physically, mentally, emotionally, spiritually, or financially.

### ~ Lashon Hara Defined ~

Listed below are some important points about *Lashon Hara*:

- ◆ A statement is *Lashon Hara* if it hurts the feelings of the other person, even though nothing actually derogatory was said.
- ◆ *Lashon Hara* is not confined to the spoken word. Writing, hinting, or even facial expressions can all be used to communicate *Lashon Hara*.
- ◆ A story about another person can be *Lashon Hara* even if we do not mention any names, for someone may be able to figure out to whom we are referring.
- ◆ We may not belittle another person even if no damage would be caused because we know the listener would not believe our report.

- ◆ Repeating a story that belittles another is *Lashon Hara* even if the story is public knowledge.
- ◆ Even if the words we speak are not technically *Lashon Hara*, if the result of those words have a negative effect on another person it may be classified as such.
- ◆ It is even wrong to say something derogatory about another person in a joking manner.

#### ~ Listening to *Lashon Hara* ~

With the exception of rare occasions, it is not only wrong to speak *Lashon Hara*, it is also a sin to listen to it. Remember this principle: Anything that is forbidden to say is also forbidden to hear! Even if the *Lashon Hara* being spoken is true, we are not to listen to it because it may cause us to lower our opinion of the person about whom it is being spoken.

Sometimes it is very difficult to refrain from hearing *Lashon Hara* due to the particular circumstance in which we find ourselves. In such cases the *Lashon Hara* being heard may be rejected as untrue on the basis of a number of points:

- ◆ The story may be exaggerated.
- ◆ The person telling the story may have misunderstood or misinterpreted it.
- ◆ The person being spoken of may have acted unintentionally.
- ◆ The person being spoken of, for some unknown reason, may have been justified in what they did.

It is always best to give the object of the story the benefit of the doubt. This principle is based upon the following *mitzvah* (meets'-vah = commandment or good deed):

**"You shall do no injustice in judgment. ... In righteousness you shall judge your neighbor."** (Lev. 19:15)

We must learn to judge our neighbors righteously; not on the basis of *Lashon Hara* we may have heard.

#### ~ Willing to be Shamed ~

Sometimes people speak *Lashon Hara* in order to protect themselves from being ridiculed by others, and not primarily for the purpose of putting down another person. According to the traditions associated with *Lashon Hara*, this too is unacceptable.

Speaking *Lashon Hara* is unacceptable:

- ◆ No matter what pressure is brought to bear on us.
- ◆ No matter what we stand to lose personally.
- ◆ No matter what other people will say about us.
- ◆ No matter how people will feel about us personally.

In other words, it is a *mitzvah* (good deed) to allow people to think poorly of us, rather than for us to bring shame or ridicule upon another person, even if they have done something wrong! It is better to suffer the arrows of shame for another person rather than put them to shame, especially if that person is a brother or sister in the Faith, for it is written:

**"A friend loves at all times,  
And a brother is born for adversity."** (Prov. 17:17)

If we are willing to take on adversity for the sake of protecting another person, then we truly are that person's brother.

#### ~ Tale Bearing ~

There is another form of evil which proceeds from the mouths of men which is even worse than *Lashon Hara*. It is called *Rechilus* (Reh-kee'-loose). Literally, *Rechilus* means "a peddler," like a traveling merchant selling his wares throughout the countryside. *Rechilus* is when a person hears someone else speak *Lashon Hara* about a person and then goes to the subject of the *Lashon Hara* and tells them what was said about them. It is talebearing. In other words: Frank tells George some *Lashon Hara* about Bill. George then goes to Bill and tells him what Frank said.

All of us have had *Rechilus* spoken to us and, sad to say, probably all of us have spoken *Rechilus* to others. It is one of the most hurtful things a person can do. Often, people speaking *Rechilus* approach someone by saying: "I think you should know what so and so said about you."

Talebearers have usually convinced themselves that they are operating from the highest of motives. After all, wouldn't you like to know what people are saying behind your back so you can defend yourself? The Scriptures warn about the unrighteous act of talebearing:

**"You shall not go about as a talebearer among your people; nor shall you take a stand against the life of your neighbor: I am the LORD [YHVH]."** (Lev. 19:16)

Talebearing can and does ruin relationships for life.

Our Savior *Y'shua* was not worried about defending Himself against false accusations:

**"Now Jesus [Y'shua] stood before the governor. And the governor asked Him, saying, 'Are You the King of the Jews?' So Jesus [Y'shua] said to him, 'It is as you say.'<sup>12</sup> And while He was being accused by the chief priests and elders, He answered nothing. <sup>13</sup> Then Pilate said to Him, 'Do You not hear how many things they testify against You?' <sup>14</sup> But He answered him not one word, so that the governor marveled greatly."** (Matt. 27:11-14)

#### ~ Permissible *Lashon Hara* And *Rechilus* ~

There are some cases where it is permissible (sometimes even necessary) to speak *Lashon Hara* about another person, or to carry a tale to someone. One such case is when a person is a known *rasha* (rah-shah'); someone who does not try to follow God's way of life and tends toward the practice of evil. Another is when someone has caused another person physical or psychological pain, has stolen something, embarrassed another person, or has damaged someone's property.

If the offending person does not repent and try to rectify the problem, it is permissible to speak *Lashon Hara* about them in order to warn others of the problem and possible danger. However there are cautions:

- ◆ We must not jump to conclusions, but must be absolutely positive that the person in question actually acted inappropriately.
- ◆ We must speak to the sinner before spreading the story. If they agree to make restitution, we must not speak *Lashon Hara* about them.
- ◆ Our personal motivations must be absolutely pure. (Revenge is not a pure motive.)
- ◆ We must not cause them to suffer in excess of what they actually deserve.
- ◆ The *Lashon Hara* that is spoken must be stated publicly and not as a 'whisper' campaign behind their back.

### ~ Required *Lashon Hara* ~

There are two cases where it is required to speak *Lashon Hara* about another person. If we know something about someone's future mate or business partner, and we are positive it is not already known by the individual entering into that relationship. By relating what we know, we may be saving that person from great emotional trauma or financial loss.

However, if the marriage has already taken place, or the business partnership has already been formed, then one should refrain from telling the person, since it is already too late. Such information, given late, could ruin the already established relationship.

### VERY IMPORTANT!

Never speak permissible or required *Lashon Hara* or *Rechilus* without first going to God in deep and heartfelt prayer. Always seek His will in matters of this kind before speaking out.

### ~ The Outcome of *Lashon Hara* and *Rechilus* ~

The following story shows the reason why *Lashon Hara* is one of the most grievous of sins, for once spoken, words can never be completely retracted. This story is famous in Rabbinic teaching. This particular version comes from a book by Rabbi Joseph Telushkin entitled, *Words That Hurt, Words That Heal*:

"In a small Eastern European town, a man went through the community slandering the Rabbi. One day, feeling suddenly remorseful, he begged the Rabbi for forgiveness and offered to undergo any penance to make amends. The Rabbi told him to take a feather pillow from his home, cut it open, scatter the feathers to the wind, then return to see him. The man did as he was told, then came to the Rabbi and asked, 'Am I now forgiven?'"

"'Almost,' came the response. 'You just have to do one more thing. Go and gather all the feathers.'"

"'But that's impossible,' the man protested. 'The wind has already scattered them.'"

"'Precisely,' the Rabbi answered. 'And although you truly wish to correct the evil you have done, it is as

impossible to repair the damage done by your words as it is to recover the feathers.'" (p. 3)

How many times have we said something to another person and then wished we could "take back" our words so it would be as though they were never spoken. Yet, once spoken, words have a life of their own and no matter how hard we try, the hurts that we have inflicted on others can never be fully repaired.

### ~ The Fire of the Evil Tongue ~

*Ya'acov* (Yah ah'-cove = Jacob or James), the brother of *Y'shua*, devoted an entire chapter of his epistle to a discussion about how dangerous the tongue can be to human relationships within the Believing Community. He began by saying that if a man can learn to control his tongue, he can control his entire body, directing it instead to a life of righteousness:

**"For we all stumble in many things. If anyone does not stumble in word, he is a perfect man, able also to bridle the whole body."** (James 3:2)

The tongue is a very small member of the body, but it is capable of creating huge amounts of trouble:

**"Even so the tongue is a little member and boasts great things. See how great a forest a little fire kindles! <sup>6</sup> And the tongue is a fire, a world of iniquity. The tongue is so set among our members that it defiles the whole body, and sets on fire the course of nature; and it is set on fire by hell."** (James 3:5-6)

Man's tongue is so unruly that no one is able to control it perfectly:

**"But no man can tame the tongue. It is an unruly evil, full of deadly poison."** (James 3:8)

*Ya'acov* went on to lament how some people use the tongue to both praise God and condemn their fellow men:

**"With it we bless our God and Father, and with it we curse men, who have been made in the similitude of God. <sup>10</sup> Out of the same mouth proceed blessing and cursing. My brethren, these things ought not to be so."** (James 3:9-10)

### ~ The Origins of *Lashon Hara* ~

Our Lord and Savior *Y'shua HaMashiach* was very clear about where evil speech originates:

**"'Brood of vipers! How can you, being evil, speak good things? For out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks. <sup>35</sup> A good man out of the good treasure of his heart brings forth good things, and an evil man out of the evil treasure brings forth evil things. <sup>36</sup> But I say to you that for every idle word men may speak, they will give account of it in the day of judgment. <sup>37</sup> For by your words you will be justified, and by your words you will be condemned.'" (Matt. 12:34-37)**

The mouth speaks what the heart feels. Therefore, *Lashon Hara* is not just a 'speech matter,' more importantly, it is a 'heart matter.' Because it is a 'heart matter,' we must go to the

source (the heart) if we wish to eliminate *Lashon Hara* from our speech. Proverbs says that the perverse mouth (evil tongue) of a worthless person is the direct result of a perverse heart:

**"A worthless person, a wicked man,  
Walks with a perverse mouth;  
<sup>13</sup> He winks with his eyes,  
He shuffles his feet,  
He points with his fingers;  
<sup>14</sup> Perversity *is* in his heart,  
He devises evil continually,  
He sows discord"** (Prov. 6:12-14)

Time and again the Scriptures equate the evil speech of the tongue with what lies in the heart of a person.

### ~ The Evil Heart ~

The reason given in Scripture for God's destruction of the earth through the Flood waters was because man's heart was given over to evil:

**"Then the LORD [YHVH] saw that the wickedness of man was great in the earth, and that every intent of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually. <sup>6</sup> And the LORD [YHVH] was sorry that He had made man on the earth, and He was grieved in His heart."** (Gen. 6:5-6)

It is important to note the contrast of 'hearts' in this passage. The thoughts of the 'heart' of mankind were "evil continually" while God's righteous 'heart' was "grieved" by that evil. This dichotomy between God's 'heart' and man's 'heart' is what causes man's "sin separation" from his Creator, for before a man commits a sin, the evil of that sin is conceived within the heart, whether he knows it or not:

**"But your iniquities have  
separated you from your God;  
And your sins have hidden His face from you,  
So that He will not hear.  
<sup>3</sup> For your hands are defiled with blood,  
And your fingers with iniquity;  
Your lips have spoken lies,  
Your tongue has muttered perversity.  
<sup>4</sup> No one calls for justice,  
Nor does any plead for truth.  
They trust in empty words and speak lies;  
They conceive evil and bring forth iniquity."** (Isaiah 59:2-4)

The event of the Flood did not change the heart of man, it simply enabled God to start over again with *Noach* (Noh-ahk' = Noah) and his descendants. While the example of mankind's destruction in the Flood should have provided the eight surviving people with enough incentive to follow a righteous path, the Scriptures show that such was not the case for some of them:

**"Then the LORD [YHVH] said in His heart, 'I will never again curse the ground for man's sake, although the imagination of man's heart is evil from his youth; nor will I**

**again destroy every living thing as I have done.'" (Gen. 8:21)**

Much later in time, God spoke again about man's evil heart through the prophet Jeremiah:

**"The heart is deceitful above all things,  
And desperately wicked;  
Who can know it?"** (Jer. 17:9)

We cannot know with certainty what is in the heart of another person. Sometimes it is even difficult to know what is in our own heart!

**"He who trusts in his own heart is a fool,  
But whoever walks wisely will be delivered."** (Prov. 28:26)

*Ya'acov*, *Y'shua's* brother said it is entirely possible for us to deceive our own heart so completely, that we can think the evil act of *Lashon Hara* is good:

**"If anyone among you thinks he is religious, and does not bridle his tongue but deceives his own heart, this one's religion is useless."** (James 1:26)

One of the major ways in which we can deceive our own heart is by thinking it is okay to speak *Lashon Hara* about another person. However, there is One who does know the true heart of every individual:

**"I, the LORD, search the heart,  
I test the mind,  
Even to give every man according to his ways,  
According to the fruit of his doings."** (Jer. 17:10)

King David recognized the deceitfulness of his own heart and was inspired to write:

**"Hide Your face from my sins,  
And blot out all my iniquities.  
<sup>10</sup> Create in me a clean heart, O God,  
And renew a steadfast spirit within me."** (Psalm 51:9-10)

However, this recognition by David did not take place naturally out of the recesses of his own mind. It was not until he was confronted by Nathan that David was able to understand the enormity of his own sin and how his 'heart' had led him to believe that what he had done was acceptable:

**"Then Nathan said to David, 'You are the man! ...  
'Why have you despised the commandment of the LORD [YHVH], to do evil in His sight?' ...**

**<sup>13</sup> So David said to Nathan, 'I have sinned against the LORD [YHVH].'"** (II Sam. 12:7, 9, 13)

### ~ Discord ~

Another aspect of *Lashon Hara* (the Evil Tongue), and one of the reasons that it is so hated by God, is because it often sows discord within the Believing Community. God hates discord, which among Believers leads to splits, and among nations leads to war. Is it any wonder then, that *Ya'acov* used

the analogy of war when he spoke against the discord he saw taking place in the Messianic Community?

**"Where do wars and fights come from among you? Do they not come from your desires for pleasure that war in your members? <sup>2</sup> You lust and do not have. You murder and covet and cannot obtain. You fight and war. Yet you do not have because you do not ask. <sup>3</sup> You ask and do not receive, because you ask amiss, that you may spend it on your pleasures."** (James 4:1-3)

Were the brethren in *Ya'acov's* day actually committing physical murder of their brethren? Not in the literal sense. However, in Jewish teaching, *Lashon Hara* is considered to be a lethal form of murder; character assassination which can last a lifetime.

What does God think of those who sow discord among the brethren with their *Lashon Hara*? He hates it:

**"These six things the LORD [YHVH] hates,  
Yes, seven are an abomination to Him:  
<sup>17</sup> A proud look,  
A lying tongue,  
Hands that shed innocent blood,  
<sup>18</sup> A heart that devises wicked plans,  
Feet that are swift in running to evil,  
<sup>19</sup> A false witness who speaks lies,  
And one who sows discord among brethren."**

(Prov. 6:16-19)

In fact, it is written:

**"Keep yourself far from a false matter; do not kill the innocent and righteous. For I will not justify the wicked."** (Ex. 23:7)

### ~ The Wise Heart ~

The opposite of a perverse heart is a 'wise heart.' The 'wise hearted person puts his complete trust in God while pursuing righteousness within the framework of *Torah*:

**"He who heeds the word wisely will find good,  
And whoever trusts in the LORD [YHVH], happy is he.  
<sup>21</sup> The wise in heart will be called prudent,  
And sweetness of the lips increases learning.  
<sup>22</sup> Understanding is a wellspring of life to  
him who has it.  
But the correction of fools is folly.  
<sup>23</sup> The heart of the wise teaches his mouth,  
And adds learning to his lips."** (Prov. 16:20-23)

Man cannot gain a 'wise heart' through his own efforts. One can study the so-called "wisdom teachers" of the past, with all of their various philosophies, and never come to a right knowledge of the truth:

**"Let no one deceive himself. If anyone among you seems to be wise in this age, let him become a fool that he may become wise. <sup>19</sup> For the wisdom of this world is foolishness with God. For it is written, 'He catches the wise in their own craftiness;' <sup>20</sup> and again, 'The LORD [YHVH] knows the thoughts of the wise, that they are futile.' <sup>21</sup> Therefore let no one boast in men."** (I Cor. 3:18-21)

There is only one source for true wisdom. That source is Almighty God. What a blessing that He is willing to share His wisdom with those who sincerely seek it:

**"If any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask of God, who gives to all liberally and without reproach, and it will be given to him."** (James 1:5)

The best Scriptural example, of the Godly wisdom principle, is that of King Solomon, who was considered to be the wisest man of the ancient world. His wisdom did not come from study (although his book of Ecclesiastes assures us that he did study). Solomon's wisdom was granted to him as a gift from the One who is the fount of all wisdom and knowledge:

**"Therefore give to Your servant an understanding heart to judge Your people, that I may discern between good and evil. For who is able to judge this great people of Yours?"**

**"<sup>10</sup> The speech pleased the LORD [YHVH], that Solomon had asked this thing. <sup>11</sup> Then God said to him: 'Because you have asked this thing, and have not asked long life for yourself, nor have asked riches for yourself, nor have asked the life of your enemies, but have asked for yourself understanding to discern justice, <sup>12</sup> behold, I have done according to your words; see, I have given you a wise and understanding heart, so that there has not been anyone like you before you, nor shall any like you arise after you.'" (I Kings 3:9-12)**

### ~ Why Men Speak *Lashon Hara* ~

When considering all of the hurt which can come from speaking *Lashon Hara*, one has to wonder why anyone, in their right mind, would ever do such a thing? Perhaps the answer is that our minds must be renewed so that the transformation to a "right" mind can take place:

**"And do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, that you may prove what is that good and acceptable and perfect will of God."** (Rom. 12:2)

When it comes to the carnal man, it seems apparent that one is not fully capable of recognizing the extent of the damage caused by their *Lashon Hara* speech. For this reason, *Lashon Hara* often rolls easily from their lips. This is not to say that the carnal man cannot discern the evils of the tongue, for they may well have been a victim of such evil in their own life experiences. However, it is unlikely that they can know fully the extent of the problem and therefore cannot fix it.

Based upon Romans 12:2 (above), one might think that since the Messianic Believer already has their mind renewed, they therefore should automatically cease to speak *Lashon Hara* upon conversion. While this may be true for some, it does not work that way for most Believers.

Notice that in Romans 12:2 Paul presents the concept of renewing one's mind in the future tense" (he says "be transformed"). In other words, Paul is saying that the transformation of one's mind is a process that is on going. Just because a Believer has received the gift of the *Ruach HaKodesh* does not mean they have instantly become a beacon



of righteousness. What it does mean is their sins have been forgiven and, if they will yield to the leading of the *Ruach*, they can begin their walk in the path of righteousness.

Since there has already been part of a lifetime of carnal thoughts, words, and actions to convict the heart of the new Messianic Believer so that it desires conversion; it will take time for that same Believer to overcome their lifetime of habitual sin. If this were not so, there would have been no reason for all of the admonitions given by Paul, and the other New Testament writers, concerning what constitutes a righteous life.

Therefore, we must look further into the 'heart' of the Believing man in order to discern why so many Messianic Believers seem so oblivious to the *Lashon Hara* which they speak so frequently.

### ~ Examining the Heart ~

Joseph Telushkin, in his book *Words That Hurt, Words, That Heal*, gives three reasons as to why people speak *Lashon Hara*. To his three we have added a fourth:

- ◆ To raise one's status through the lowering of the status of others. (Status Competition)
- ◆ To elevate ones self by seeming to be "in the know." (Elevation by Association)
- ◆ To exact revenge.
- ◆ To protect one's self from ridicule.

Each of these issues will be examined separately.

### ~ Status Competition ~

The first reason people speak *Lashon Hara* is termed *Status Competition*. Telushkin calls it "psychological gratification." He points out that people seldom speak *Lashon Hara* about those whom they consider to be beneath them in social status. In other words, the personal life of the cleaning lady and the gardener are not subjects that gather a lot of attention. Telushkin writes:

"The only gossip [*Lashon Hara*] that makes us feel better about ourselves is precisely that which lowers public esteem of those with whom we are in 'status competition,' our social peers and/or superiors."

Think about how tantalizing it is to hear about the downfall of some famous person, especially if he/she is a high ranking religious figure or political leader. By relating the sins (especially the sexual sins) of others, it somehow makes the teller of the tale feel more justified about his or her own moral shortcomings or, on the other hand, proud about his or her moral "superiority."

In other words, instead of working on one's own personal problems, the tendency is to put psychological salve on one's conscience by thinking; "Well if they did that, then what I did is not so bad after all." Or, "Boy, I sure am more morally upright than they are." The Apostle Paul addressed this very problem:

**"You may be saying, 'What terrible people you have been talking about!' But you are just as bad, and you have**

**no excuse! When you say they are wicked and should be punished, you are condemning yourself, for you do these very same things."** (Rom. 2:1 NLT)

Rather than raising one's status, the speaking of *Lashon Hara* lowers the speaker's status.

### \* Judging \*

A key component to "Status Competition" is that the person participating in it is, in effect, setting himself up as a judge. By doing this, people put themselves on a very slippery slope, for the Scriptures say that the standard by which we judge another person will become the very standard by which we will be judged by God:

**"Judge not, that you be not judged. <sup>2</sup> For with what judgment you judge, you will be judged; and with the measure you use, it will be measured back to you."**

(Matt. 7:1-2)

*Ya'acov* related the matter of judging one another right back to *Lashon Hara*, for when one speaks evil of another person they are, in effect, judging that person:

**"Do not speak evil of one another, brethren. He who speaks evil of a brother and judges his brother, speaks evil of the law and judges the law. But if you judge the law, you are not a doer of the law but a judge. <sup>12</sup> There is one Lawgiver, who is able to save and to destroy. Who are you to judge another?"** (James 4:11-12)

Not only is the person speaking *Lashon Hara* judging his brother, he is also passing judgment upon the *Torah* by setting himself up as a *Torah* judge. It is not proper for individuals to set themselves up as *Torah* judges. According to the *Torah* that responsibility rests upon those who are duly appointed to fulfill that office:

**"You shall appoint judges and officers in all your gates, which the LORD [YHVH] your God gives you, according to your tribes, and they shall judge the people with just judgment."** (Deut. 16:18)

As individual Believers, rather than judging one another through the evil words of *Lashon Hara*, we are commanded to forgive one another:

**"For if you forgive men their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. <sup>15</sup> But if you do not forgive men their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses."** (Matt. 6:14-15)

Does this mean that Messianic Believers should turn their backs and ignore it when a brother sins?

**"What shall we say then? Shall we continue in sin, that grace may abound? <sup>2</sup> God forbid. How shall we, that are dead to sin, live any longer therein?"** (Rom. 6:1-2 KJV)

There are a number of forces at play within this whole question of sin, judging, and forgiving.

First of all, for a person to be forgiven, they must recognize that they have sinned and then they must seek

forgiveness from the person(s) whom they have offended. If such repentance is forthcoming, then the person(s) against whom the sin was committed is commanded to forgive. They are not to go out and tell the world (*Lashon Hara*) what the other person has done against them, even if it is true.

On the other hand, if someone seems to have committed a sin which has not been acknowledged, and another brother is aware of it, that brother has an obligation to seek out the offender and confront them with the condemning information. They are not to spread nasty rumors (*Lashon Hara*), for they might well be mistaken about what they think they know.

If, in fact, a sin has been committed, and the offender is unwilling to repent and seek forgiveness, there is a way to handle the situation. That procedure is found in Matthew chapter 18 (see the chapter: *Resolving Disputes in the Assembly*):

**"Moreover if your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault between you and him alone. If he hears you, you have gained your brother. <sup>16</sup> But if he will not hear, take with you one or two more, that "by the mouth of two or three witnesses every word may be established." <sup>17</sup> And if he refuses to hear them, tell it to the church. But if he refuses even to hear the church, let him be to you like a heathen and a tax collector."** (Matt. 18:15-17)

There is much confusion in the Messianic Community about what it means to "tell it to the church." A common opinion is that it means to stand up in front of the entire assembly and air the dirty laundry (*Lashon Hara*) about a situation, especially if repentance, restitution, and forgiveness have not occurred to their satisfaction. In our studies, we have learned this is not at all what this passage means.

To "tell it to the church" means they were to take the unresolved issue before the *Beit Din* (Bait Deen); the House of Judgment, or court, which existed in every Synagogue at that time. The *Beit Din* would hear the evidence and make a decision. Whoever the judgment went against was expected to adhere to it. If they refused, they were expelled from the Synagogue.

The fact that each congregation had a *Beit Din* (House of Judgment) that was responsible for settling disputes between members of the Synagogue (congregation), is directly addressed by the Apostle Paul:

**"Dare any of you, having a matter against another, go to law before the unrighteous, and not before the saints? <sup>2</sup>Do you not know that the saints will judge the world? And if the world will be judged by you, are you unworthy to judge the smallest matters? <sup>3</sup> Do you not know that we shall judge angels? How much more, things that pertain to this life? <sup>4</sup> If then you have judgments concerning things pertaining to this life, do you appoint those who are least esteemed by the church to judge? <sup>5</sup> I say this to your shame. Is it so, that there is not a wise man among you, not even one, who will be able to judge between his brethren? <sup>6</sup>But brother goes to law against brother, and that before unbelievers!**

**<sup>7</sup> Now therefore, it is already an utter failure for you that you go to law against one another. Why do you not rather accept wrong? Why do you not rather let yourselves**

**be cheated? <sup>8</sup> No, you yourselves do wrong and cheat, and you do these things to your brethren!"** (I Cor. 6:1-8)

Paul said it was better to accept a wrong (sin) done against us without comment, than to take a brother in the faith into a secular court.

So, we see that, as individuals, we are not to take on the burden of passing judgment on other people concerning their sins. However, if a sin (or disagreement) does occur which cannot be settled by the individuals involved, then it should be brought before the *Beit Din* (House of Judgment), which functions within the body of that congregation.

Whatever way the dispute is finally resolved, *Lashon Hara* should not be spoken about it. *Lashon Hara* only complicates matters when it comes to resolving disputes, since it only serves to hurt and/or anger the subject.

### ~ Elevation by Association ~

The second reason people speak *Lashon Hara* is to elevate themselves by seemingly being "in the know" about someone or something; of having information to which others are not privy. Telushkin quotes Dr. Samuel Johnson who observed:

"The vanity of being trusted with a secret is generally the chief motive to disclose it."

Consider the following example from the book *Words That Hurt, Words That Heal*:

"The president of the United States chooses you as his confidant. He speaks with you regularly, sometimes several times a day, shares his innermost thoughts, bounces ideas off you, and otherwise solicits your advice. The only condition attached to your relationship is that you are forbidden to tell anyone, ever, about it. The president also will never mention to anyone, either during his time in office or afterward, that he knows you or has ever spoken to you.

"For most of us, I suspect, the satisfaction and pleasure of having such access to the president would largely evaporate if we could tell no one, now or in the future about it. A primary motive for gossiping is to brag to others about our acquaintance with important people and important things; it follows therefore, that we must also be important." (p. 38)

It is one thing to brag about personally knowing someone who is considered important, and quite another to tell stories about them which might constitute *Lashon Hara*. The fact that a person has been close enough to personally learn some *Lashon Hara* about a famous person through direct association, 'proves' (in their mind) how important they must be.

Needless to say, someone who betrays the confidence of a famous person or leader, will be looked upon very poorly when his *Lashon Hara* is discovered. At that point, all of the prestige he seemingly gained from the association will vanish into disgrace:

**"The king's favor is toward a wise servant,  
But his wrath is against him who causes shame."**

(Proverbs 14:35)

The Apostle Paul set an example that all would do well to heed. Paul was brought before the Council (*Sanhedrin*) to be examined concerning the near riot that had ensued the previous day at the Temple. Paul began his defense by proclaiming that his conscience was clear before God. The High Priest was present that day (unbeknownst to Paul for he was not wearing the High Priests clothing because the Romans kept them locked up except for *Yom Kippur*). When the High Priest ordered that Paul be struck on the mouth for proclaiming his statement of innocence, Paul reacted:

**"Then Paul, looking earnestly at the council, said, 'Men and brethren, I have lived in all good conscience before God until this day.'**

**"<sup>2</sup> And the high priest Ananias commanded those who stood by him to strike him on the mouth. <sup>3</sup> Then Paul said to him, 'God will strike you, you whitewashed wall! For you sit to judge me according to the law, and do you command me to be struck contrary to the law?'**

**"<sup>4</sup> And those who stood by said, 'Do you revile God's high priest?' <sup>5</sup> Then Paul said, 'I did not know, brethren, that he was the high priest; for it is written, 'You shall not speak evil of a ruler of your people.'"" (Acts 23:1-5)**

Paul was justified in making the statement he did because he was struck in direct violation to the Jews own legal procedures. Nevertheless, when he understood that the person who ordered him struck was none other than the High Priest himself, Paul apologized, for the *Torah* states that one must not speak *Lashon Hara* about a ruler of the people. The passage in question is:

**"'You shall not revile God, nor curse a ruler of your people.'" (Ex. 22:28)**

It is not wrong to question the policies of our political leaders. However, it is wrong to make personal attacks on their character. If more politicians and media people would follow this one simple rule, our political process would be much more effective and operate much more smoothly.

#### **~ Revenge ~**

The third reason people speak *Lashon Hara* of others is to exact revenge. The basis for this form of *Lashon Hara* is anger; usually because the person feels personally wronged by another, or because they are taking on another person's cause or policy which they support.

Often times, this form of *Lashon Hara* is accompanied by exaggeration. If the plain facts of the matter were to be disclosed fairly, it is quite possible that people would take the other person's side, or would see that both parties are in the wrong (which is often the case).

At times a Believer may wish to take vengeance upon one who is a brother in the Faith. While that person may truly have sinned, the proper response is to go to him in love, as prescribed in Matthew chapter 18. A totally inappropriate response is to take revenge by speaking *Lashon Hara* about what he has allegedly done.

In the final analysis, if someone truly deserves punishment, that punishment will be of a divine nature, meted out by God:

**"Beloved, do not avenge yourselves, but rather give place to wrath; for it is written, 'Vengeance is Mine, I will repay,' says the Lord." (Rom. 12:19)**

Instead of trying to punish our enemies, we are commanded to love them:

**"Therefore 'If your enemy is hungry, feed him; If he is thirsty, give him a drink; For in so doing you will heap coals of fire on his head.' <sup>21</sup> Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good." (Rom. 12:20)**

Abraham Lincoln made a significant statement concerning the Civil War. He said: "In this great conflict both parties cannot be right, but both could be wrong." That is certainly the case in many disputes, especially those which take on a personal tone of character assassination.

What the person with the revenge motive wants to accomplish is to provoke "righteous indignation" among their friends, so their friends can share the rage. *Lashon Hara* is often used to stir up this shared rage. However, vengeance belongs solely to God:

**"O LORD [YHVH] God, to whom vengeance belongs -- O God, to whom vengeance belongs, shine forth! <sup>2</sup> Rise up, O Judge of the earth; Render punishment to the proud." (Psalm 94:1-2)**

By trying to take personal revenge, we risk placing ourselves in the path of God's vengeance, especially if we are in any way mistaken about what constitutes appropriate punishment. Perhaps the person in question has fully repented and God has forgiven him. If we then come down on the side of vengeful punishment against that person, we are in direct conflict with the mercy of God's righteous judgment.

Leviticus chapter 19 contains a number of *mitzvot* (commandments) concerning our relationship with one another. Here the *Torah* clearly states that personal vengeance is not an appropriate action for individuals:

**"'You shall not take vengeance, nor bear any grudge against the children of your people, but you shall love your neighbor as yourself: I am the LORD [YHVH].'" (Lev. 19:18)**

#### **~ Protection From Ridicule ~**

A fourth reason why people speak *Lashon Hara* about others is to protect themselves from ridicule.

If a person has done something for which they are ashamed and wish to hide that fact from public view, it sometimes works to divert attention from themselves by directing attention to the sins of someone else. This can easily be accomplished by speaking *Lashon Hara* about another person.

By performing such an action, the perpetrator now has added the sin of *Lashon Hara* to the sin he was originally trying to cover. While it might be possible to hide one's sins from other people, the end result will be only a temporary benefit, for:

**"He who covers his sins will not prosper, ..." (Prov. 28:13)**

It is impossible for us to hide our sins from God:

**"O God, You know my foolishness;  
And my sins are not hidden from You."** (Psalm 69:5)

However, our sins can truly be hidden or covered by God:

**"Blessed are those whose lawless deeds are forgiven,  
And whose sins are covered;  
Blessed is the man to whom the LORD [YHVH]  
shall not impute sin."** (Romans 4:7-8)

To forgive a brother of a sin he has committed, and to never mention it to anyone, is an act of love:

**"And above all things have fervent love for one another, for 'love will cover a multitude of sins.'"** (I Pet. 4:8)

Rather than trying to avoid ridicule by speaking *Lashon Hara* about another person, it would be far better to bear the ridicule, especially if it means protecting the good reputation of a brother:

**"A friend loves at all times,  
And a brother is born for adversity."** (Prov. 17:17)

Part of our calling to be a loving brother/sister in the faith, is to be willing to suffer ridicule, if doing so protects someone else. Learning to love in this manner may be one of the most difficult things a Believer does.

### ~ Ethical Speech ~

What is needed in the Messianic Community is *Lashon Tov* (Tohv), the Good Tongue; a tongue which speaks truth in a loving way. One example, of how the Good Tongue issues forth praise, is found in Psalm 45. This Psalm is known as *A Royal Marriage Song*. Both Jewish and Christian teachers view the Bridegroom in the Psalm as being King Messiah. Notice how the Psalmist calls his own tongue "a pen" and how he uses that pen to extol the virtues of the King:

**"To the Chief Musician.  
Set to 'The Lillies.'  
A Contemplation of the sons of Korah.  
A Song of Love.  
My heart is overflowing with a good theme;  
I recite my composition concerning the King;  
My tongue is the pen of a ready writer.  
You are fairer than the sons of men;  
Grace is poured upon Your lips;  
Therefore God has blessed You forever."** (Psalm 45:1-2)

Our tongues can be used to praise both God and men (when they deserve it). This is the first key to follow when attempting to establish *Lashon Tov* (Ethical Speech) as the centerpiece of one's life.

Speaking *Lashon Hara* behind a person's back is one major way in which we can harm another person. Another, and perhaps even more destructive way, is to put people down to their face. This is especially true in families. Negative comments by parents towards their children can have a chilling

effect to the development of a loving family relationship, and may cause lasting harm to the child's personality. The same is true when children verbally abuse their parents, no matter what their age.

Consciously replacing *Lashon Hara* with *Lashon Tov* is a first step in changing over to Ethical Speech. Do not expect to complete this changeover in a single day or week, for it takes time to change one's habits. Hopefully, after a month of practice, people will begin to see a positive change in your personality. After a year's time of practicing *Lashon Tov*, others should see a totally changed person.

Once *Lashon Hara* has been laid to rest, one can expect to see more intimate and satisfying relationships begin to develop. In fact, the words used in *Lashon Tov* can actually effect healing, not just of relationships, but also of one's spirit:

**"Pleasant words are like a honeycomb,  
Sweetness to the soul and health to the bones."** (Prov. 16:24)

Too often, we are stingy with our *Lashon Tov*, and later regret not having spoken kind words more often to those around us, especially those we love. Joseph Telushkin relates the following poignant story about what occurred after a funeral:

"After the service, everyone left the cemetery except for the mourning husband and the Rabbi. The husband remained at the grave for a long while; finally, the Rabbi approached him. 'The service is long over, it is time for you to leave,' he said.

"The man waved him away. 'You don't understand. I loved my wife.'

"I am sure you did,' the Rabbi answered, 'but you have been here a very long time. You should go now.'

"Again the husband said, 'You don't understand. I loved my wife.'

"Once more the Rabbi urged him to leave.

"But you don't understand,' the man told him. 'I loved my wife -- and once, I almost told her.'" (p. 154)

We need to learn how to express our love and gratitude towards others in this life, and not wait to do it in the next.

### ~ Changing Our Thoughts ~

Learning to change our habits of speech from *Lashon Hara* to *Lashon Tov* can have a very positive effect on a person's overall mental health and personality. However, if the kind words spoken do not come from a sincere heart, eventually we will revert back to our old ways. The Scriptures are full of admonitions designed to encourage a real conversion of the heart, not just a temporary surface conversion of one's speech habits:

**"Finally, brethren, whatever things are true, whatever things are noble, whatever things are just, whatever things are pure, whatever things are lovely, whatever things are of good report, if there is any virtue and if there is anything praiseworthy -- meditate on these things.** (Phil. 4:8)

It is very important, as Messianic Believers in *Y'shua HaMashiach*, that we begin to train our minds to think on those things which are positive. As the old song goes:

"You've got to accentuate the positive,  
Eliminate the negative,  
Latch on to the affirmative,  
And don't mess with Mister In-Between."

By asking God for wisdom, and then calling upon that wisdom to make right decisions, we can learn to lead peaceable lives which bear good fruit:

**"But the wisdom that is from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, willing to yield, full of mercy and good fruits, without partiality and without hypocrisy. <sup>18</sup>Now the fruit of righteousness is sown in peace by those who make peace."**  
(James 3:17-18)

The eventual outcome of all this training in righteousness will be a life that is full of good fruit:

**"But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, longsuffering, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, <sup>23</sup>gentleness, self-control."**  
(Gal. 5:22-23)

Notice that kindness is one of the fruits of the Spirit. By replacing *Lashon Hara* with *Lashon Tov*, we are harvesting the spiritual fruit of kindness.

#### ~ Summary ~

*Lashon Hara*, the speaking of evil about other people, is a deadly sin. Yet it often goes unrecognized within the Messianic Community.

*Lashon Hara*, in its most basic definition, is:

- ◆ Making a remark which in any way puts down or belittles another person or causes them to feel bad, or be hurt physically, mentally, emotionally, spiritually, or financially.

While it is sometimes permissible or even required to speak *Lashon Hara* about another person, the situations where that rule applies are few and far between. When such a situation does occur, it is of extreme importance to go first to God in prayer, seeking His will and His guidance in the matter at hand.

Listening to *Lashon Hara* is also forbidden, unless a person is in a situation where it is impossible to escape hearing it. In such cases, one should give the subject of the *Lashon Hara* the benefit of the doubt until all the facts can be checked out.

While the tongue is the instrument through which *Lashon Hara* is spoken, the real seat of this evil is to be found in the heart, for the mouth speaks what the heart feels. Since man has an inherently evil heart, it is of primary importance for Messianic Believers to pursue peace and seek a change in their heart.

People speak *Lashon Hara* for at least four different reasons;

- ◆ Status Competition
- ◆ Elevation by Association
- ◆ Revenge
- ◆ Protection from Ridicule.

The counterbalance to *Lashon Hara* is learning how to speak ethically; which we have termed *Lashon Tov*. By changing our speaking habits from *Lashon Hara* to *Lashon Tov*, we can begin to change our very life.

Learning to live an ethical life and speak the ethical speech of *Lashon Tov*, is the first step. We encourage you to take that first step by learning to identify *Lashon Hara* when others speak it, and also when you speak it. It is usually easier to identify the Evil Tongue in others than it is in ourselves.

Once this fabulous journey has begun, do not look back for:

**"... Jesus [*Y'shua*] said to him, 'No one, having put his hand to the plow, and looking back, is fit for the kingdom of God.'"**  
(Luke 9:62)

Do not forget that you have been cleansed from your sins through the bloody sacrifice of our Lord and Savior *Y'shua*. For this reason, Peter admonishes us:

**"But also for this very reason, giving all diligence, add to your faith virtue, to virtue knowledge, <sup>6</sup> to knowledge self-control, to self-control perseverance, to perseverance godliness, <sup>7</sup> to godliness brotherly kindness, and to brotherly kindness love. <sup>8</sup> For if these things are yours and abound, you will be neither barren nor unfruitful in the knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ [*Y'shua HaMashiach*]. <sup>9</sup>For he who lacks these things is shortsighted, even to blindness, and has forgotten that he was cleansed from his old sins."**  
(II Pet. 1:5-9)

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## ~ Group Bible Study Keys ~

Be diligent to present yourself approved to God,  
A worker who does not need to be ashamed,  
Rightly dividing the word of truth.  
II Timothy 2:15



In recent years there has been a great movement in small Home Fellowship and Bible Study groups. Many Believers feel this movement constitutes a revival of the Church comparable to the great tent revivals in America during the 1900's. For many it seems to be the only alternative to what they see as oppressive corporate Churches and/or domineering local ministers. Whatever the cause, the Home Fellowship Revival is becoming a viable alternative for many Believers in both the Seventh Day Sabbath and First Day Christian communities.

Small Home Fellowships and/or Bible Study Groups are very appealing to those Believers who have had to sit in large congregations every week and listen to a minister deliver a prepared sermon. Now they have an opportunity to ask questions, to express viewpoints, and to search the Scriptures for answers with other Believers of like mind. This type of interaction can create bonds of fellowship that are not always possible to achieve in a large church setting.

Along with every positive opportunity comes an equally negative opportunity for the new format to be used to incorrect ends. Some people who have become involved in small group discussions have found them dominated by articulate people with strong personalities, but not always by those who are well grounded in the Scriptures and correct doctrine. This can lead to real disappointment for those who have just come out of an abusive large church experience. Unfortunately, when this happens, some people just turn off and go home to study and worship by themselves, (or worse yet, give up on God altogether) while those who remain may be allowing themselves to be led astray by false teachers:

**"But know this, that in the last days perilous times will come: for men will be lovers of themselves, lovers of money, boasters, proud, blasphemers, disobedient to parents, unthankful, unholy, unloving, unforgiving, slanderers, without self-control, brutal, despisers of good, traitors, headstrong, haughty, lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God, having a form of godliness but denying its power. And from such people turn away!**

**"For of this sort are those who creep into households and make captives of gullible women loaded down with sins, led away by various lusts, always learning and never able to come to the knowledge of the truth.**

**"Now as Jannes and Jambres resisted Moses, so do these also resist the truth: men of corrupt minds, disapproved concerning the faith; but they will progress no further, for their folly will be manifest to all, as theirs also was. ...**

**"But as for you, continue in the things which you have learned and been assured of, knowing from whom you have learned *them*, and that from childhood you have known the Holy Scriptures, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith which is in Christ Jesus [Messiah Y'shua].**

**"All Scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, thoroughly equipped for every good work."**

(II Tim. 3:1-9, 14-17)

Good solid Bible study is extremely important so the Believer can remain well grounded in the faith. As stated before; do not accept any new interpretation of Scripture, no matter where it is found (including the pages of *Hebrew Roots*), without thoroughly checking it out for yourself to the very best of your ability. Also, never forget that in the final analysis:

**"... by grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God, not of works, lest anyone should boast. For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus [Messiah Y'shua] for good works, which God prepared beforehand that we should walk in them."**

(Eph. 2:8-10)

And what are the "... good works which God prepared beforehand that we should walk in them..."? Nothing less than the instruction book of God, the *Torah*.

With all of this in mind it is our fervent desire that all of our readers might experience small group Bible studies that are doctrinally sound, interactive (so that all feel welcome to participate), spiritually uplifting, allowing for differing views (but not heretical ones) and focused always on our Creator God. To aid in this righteous endeavor we offer the following guidelines for Bible study. We do not claim that this format is the only one that can be used successfully, rather we offer it as one that we hope you will consider. We have seen it used in the past and truly believe it can help to avoid domination by a strong personality while opening up the discussion to all participants.

### ~ General Guidelines ~

**Method of Study:** Following are four basic methods for Bible study.

- ◆ Chapter by Chapter. A good example would be to use the *Weekly Torah Reading Schedule* as the basis for a study.
- ◆ Word Studies. Choose a key word and have everyone study all usage's of that word in the scriptures. (This would require everyone to have a good concordance, or the willingness of someone to copy the necessary page(s) for those who do not.)
- ◆ Specific Doctrines. This is the most difficult category for interactive Bible study since there may not be any easy way to find all of the appropriate scriptures that apply to a doctrine.

- ◆ **Character Studies.** Exploring the life and character of a specific Bible character to see what can be learned from their example.

It is our recommendation that a new group begin by using the Chapter by Chapter method of study before attempting any of the other methods. We heartily recommend using the weekly *Torah* readings. Since many Believers do not have a good grasp of the *Torah*, and therefore do not have the proper foundation for their faith, this is an opportunity for everyone to grow in grace and knowledge.

**Assignments:** All participants should come to the Bible Study having not only read, but studied the material to be covered. Assignments need to be long enough to provide a good study, but short enough so that even those people who are pressed for time can at least do a cursory study prior to the meeting. After a few studies it will become apparent how long the assignments should be for the particular group.

**Leaders:** Bible Study Leaders should be selected based on their ability to lead a study and their desire to do so. It is essential to have more than one Leader so that: 1.) It does not become a burden to any one individual; 2.) There are backups available if the assigned Leader cannot attend; 3.) No one individual can dominate the group; 4.) Leading does not become a head trip.

#### **Housekeeping:**

- ◆ It is important to start on time. Do not delay starting if someone is consistently late, it only frustrates those who are always on time.
- ◆ Set a time to end the study. If all the material has not been covered, carry the remainder over to the next study. If some want to stay longer and continue the study that is fine, but be sure all material discussed is properly covered next time so those who had to leave will not feel left out. (They will really appreciate your thoughtfulness).
- ◆ Do not allow visiting during the study, that can be done before or after the study. Never allow gossip to take place either before, during, or after the study. Gossip has no place in the lives and speech of Believers. If you cannot say something good about a person, say nothing (see previous chapter).
- ◆ Refreshments can be a distraction during a Bible Study, for both the people serving and for those receiving. If refreshments are needed, because of day long activities, serve them before or after the Study.

#### **~ Format ~**

**Prayer:** Always open the study with prayer. Have different people offer prayer each time. Ask God to open, to His instruction, the eyes, ears, heart and mind of each individual present. Pray that God will lead everyone present to live more Godly lives, to draw close to Him, and to come to see Him as He really is.

**Background:** When a new book, word or topic is introduced, it is important that all present have a proper understanding of some pertinent background material. For example; who wrote it? When was it written? To whom was it written? Is it primarily a book of history,? prophecy,? instruction in righteous living,? etc.

Some of the needed background information can be found in various Bible Dictionaries. Some study Bibles may contain limited amounts of information on each book, or even certain topics. It should be the responsibility of the Leader (or someone else who has agreed to do it) to provide the necessary background information before the study begins.

Each subsequent study on the same book, word or topic should be started by the Leader, or a member of the group, giving a very brief review of the background information plus a brief review of the previous study. This will serve to refresh the memory of those who were present and let any newcomers know where this study will pick up the topic.

#### **Discussion:**

- ◆ The Scriptures pertaining to the study should be read aloud before any discussion begins. This serves to refresh everyone's mind concerning the material in case some did their study several days previous rather than just prior to the study itself.
- ◆ The Leader will then select one individual to read a few verses (generally one complete thought).
- ◆ Discussion will then ensue. Everyone must be permitted to speak if they wish to do so, however comments should be kept brief so that all will have an opportunity to participate. If anyone rambles on too long it is the responsibility of the Leader to gently ask that person to finish up so others can have equal opportunity. Following are some appropriate questions that might be asked concerning the passage under discussion:
  - What is the literal meaning of the passage?
  - Are there other scriptural passages that come to mind that are related to this one? (Margin references are often helpful in this case.)
  - Does the passage in any way deal with symbolism? If so, what are those symbols? Does the symbolism override the literal meaning of the passage?
  - Does the passage contain any idioms that might make it mean something other than the literal? (For example; when we say that someone is "beating around the bush" we do not mean they are literally taking a stick and beating the ground around some poor shrub, but rather they are trying to evade making an honest reply.)
  - Is there a deeper meaning to the passage that is not readily apparent from a cursory reading of it.
  - Are there any principles contained in the passage that have a direct application in your life?

- Can you share a personal experience where this principle directly affected your life? (If this is done, everyone must agree not to share this information outside the meeting. Confidentiality is critical to the effectiveness of this kind of sharing. Also, the sharing must be done voluntarily, never under coercion. There should be no advice given, or problem solving taking place during the study. And above all, there must be NO JUDGING!)

**Wrap-up:** The Leader should give a very brief (2-5 min.?) summary of what was covered and some of the lessons learned. There may be a brief discussion on the effectiveness of the study and ways in which it can be improved.

**Assignment:** The next study assignment should be given based on how much it is felt the group can cover. Input from the group is essential. Also, a Leader needs to be picked for the next study.

**Prayer:** A final prayer should be offered thanking God for His presence, assistance and instruction in the study. It is also appropriate to ask God for help in applying His principles of living in each persons life.

### ~ Rules ~

(The following rules are very important and should be read to the entire group prior to the study each of the first few times you meet. Thereafter it would be appropriate to review them at least once each month.)

- ◆ The Leader is there to lead, not to teach. This is a group learning situation, not a lecture class. All are encouraged to share (and thereby to teach) and to learn.
- ◆ No one person should ever be allowed, or allow themselves, to dominate the study. If this happens on a consistent basis the study group will dissolve. (This is a law of group dynamics.) It is the responsibility of the Leader to see that this does not happen.
- ◆ The Leader must have control of the group to keep the study on track. While tangents may be interesting, they can quickly cause the group to lose focus. If a tangent proves interesting enough for the whole group, it can be scheduled as the next Bible Study after the current study is finished.
- ◆ Any items of a personal nature must never be shared with anyone outside of the Bible Study group that was present when the individual revealed it. This means do not discuss it outside the meeting, unless totally private, and then only with the individual that shared it.
- ◆ If someone expresses a personal need in their life, it is not to be discussed or attempted to be resolved during the study. Anyone moved personally to assist someone who has a need is encouraged (even commanded) to deal with that matter outside of the study. If the individual wishes the group to discuss

and advise, that can be done after the Bible Study is completed or at another time.

- ◆ Be aware that just because you believe something to be true, that does not make it true. Always be willing to hear another person's opinion. You may learn something!
- ◆ Never argue over scripture!!! It then becomes striving over words and is offensive to God. Arguing never convinces anyone, it only leads to more intransigent positions.
- ◆ Come to the study with an open heart and mind, willing to learn from the scriptures. Remember that even the least educated, least articulate of those present can have a profound truth to share. God is not a respecter of persons.
- ◆ If questions arise, the Leader, and other interested parties, should write them down. During the week they can take it upon themselves to search for the correct answer, reporting their findings at the next study. Be prepared to say; "I don't know the answer," since some questions may require months or even years before the correct and full answer is forthcoming.
- ◆ Above all things, study together in love.

### ~ Summary ~

It is our hope that these Group Bible Study Keys will be of help to those who are participating, or planning to participate, in small group Bible Studies or Home Fellowship groups. Remember, that while Bible Study may be the core, it is not the only part of Home Fellowship. Sometimes it may be more important to just sit and talk with one another. Other times it may be more appropriate to spend significant amounts of time praising God in song or dance. Still other times it may be most important to spend the entire time in group prayer. Still other times it may be most meaningful to take a walk in the woods or on the beach, or picnic in a meadow or a park. Different Home Fellowship groups have different needs, and any single group may have different needs at different times.

**"Study to show thyself approved,"** so that we might all become better prepared for our soon coming Wedding to the Messiah. As each of us grows in love, understanding, peace, joy and grace; we in effect are adding stitches to the wedding dress which is to be worn by the Bride.

**"Let us be glad and rejoice and give Him glory, for the marriage of the Lamb has come, and His wife has made herself ready. And to her it was granted to be arrayed in fine linen, clean and bright, for the fine linen is the righteous acts of the saints."** (Rev. 19:7-8)

May your studies be blessed with *Shalom* (Peace).

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## ~ Resolving Disputes ~ ~ In the Assembly ~

Let all bitterness, wrath, anger, clamor, and evil speaking  
Be put away from you, with all malice.  
And be kind to one another, tender hearted, forgiving one another,  
Just as God in Christ also forgave you.  
*Ephesians 5:31-32*

**W**henver people congregate together for any length of time, disputes arise. Whether the congregation is religious, political or social. It is a law of human nature that different people will want to do things in different ways. In the realm of religion and politics this is especially true, for groups of these types operate under a set of principles or beliefs in addition to the rules of general social or business conduct. Of course *YHVH* knew all this before He even created us, and has made provisions for resolving those disputes which naturally arise within the Body of Messiah.

### ~ A Brief History ~

Among the children of Israel, disputes were initially resolved by Moses himself. However this method proved to be too burdensome, so a system of elders and judges was established (Exodus 18). All disputants were expected to abide by the decisions laid down by this tribal court system, with Moses serving as the 'Supreme Court.'

Another form of decision making involved the High Priest taking problems to *HaShem* through the use of the *Urim* and the *Thummim*. It is believed this method was only available to top ranking priests, judges and kings.

Later down the road, disputes were resolved through a synagogue court system called the *Beit Din* (Bait Deen) or 'House of Judgment.' These courts were first established when the synagogue system was set up, and were based on the judicial system established during Moses' time. Most historians believe this judicial system began during the time of Ezra, after the second Temple had been rebuilt. Within this system, membership on a local *Beit Din* consisted primarily of Scribes and Pharisees, since they were the ones in charge of the Synagogues. However, The Great *Sanhedrin* (the highest court in the land) was more heavily weighted in favor of the Sadducees (mostly Priests and Levites). This being the case, any controversial rulings at the local level were sure to be struck down by the Sadducees when presented before the higher level *Sanhedrin*.

The *Beit Din* court system was considered by all Jews to be the legacy of the elder and judge system of Moses' day. Therefore, the Scribes and Pharisees of *Y'shua's* time were considered to be sitting "in Moses' seat" for judgment at the local level. However, they were not supposed to make any ruling that was contrary to the *Torah*, but rather (like our courts

which are based on the Constitution) they were required to interpret the *Torah* as it related to specific situations.

It is interesting to note that *Y'shua* did not take issue with the *Beit Din* system. In fact, He gave His support to it:

**"Then Jesus [*Y'shua*] spoke to the multitudes and to His disciples, saying: 'The Scribes and the Pharisees sit in Moses' seat. Therefore whatever they tell you to observe, that observe and do, but do not do according to their works; for they say, and do not so.'"** (Matt. 23:1-3)

With this information as background let us now proceed to look at the instructions that *Y'shua* gave to His disciples concerning how to resolve the disputes that were bound to arise within the Believing congregations. These instructions are well known to most Believers and are found in Matthew chapter 18 and I Corinthians chapter 6.

### ~ Saving the Sheep ~

In Matthew chapter 18, our Saviour begins by telling us that the first priority of a good shepherd is to make sure that he does not lose any of his sheep. This is important in light of what follows, for *Y'shua* is telling us that when disputes arise in the Assembly they must be handled in a way that will insure, to the greatest degree possible, that none be lost. This is the perfect goal towards which all of us should strive.

**"For the Son of Man has come to save that which was lost. What do you think? If a man has a hundred sheep, and one of them goes astray, does he not leave the ninety-nine and go to the mountains to seek the one that is straying? And if he should find it, assuredly, I say to you, he rejoices more over that sheep than over the ninety-nine that did not go astray. Even so it is not the will of your father who is in heaven that one of these little ones should perish."** (Matt. 18:11-14)

As we proceed through the next few verses, please keep well in mind the principle just quoted; **"...it is not the will of your Father who is in heaven that one of these little ones should perish."**

### ~ When Your Brother Sins Against You ~

**"Moreover if your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault between you and him alone."** (Matt. 18:15a)

The very first thing to be understood is that the offense committed by the offending brother must constitute sin, and it must be a sin that has been committed against the accuser personally. This means that every Believer must know the *Torah* well enough to be able to properly identify sin. Hurt feelings, unfriendliness, lack of consideration, disliking someone's personality, and general disagreements may not be sin.

Sometimes Matthew 18 is used as a club, by individuals or organizations, in order to drum out people whom they do not like, or with whom they disagree concerning certain doctrinal positions. This is not the purpose of this passage, and it should never be used in this manner.

### ~ Differences of Opinion or Heresy? ~

True heresy is a sin against the entire body, for it can threaten the very belief, faith, and ultimately, the salvation of members in the body who might fall prey to the false teaching. But who is qualified to define heresy?

The dictionary definition of heresy is:

"An opinion or doctrine at variance with established religious beliefs, especially dissension from or denial of Roman Catholic dogma by a professed believer or baptized church member." (*The American Heritage Dictionary*, pub. by Houghton Mifflin Co., New York, 1992.)

Does the Roman Catholic Church establish doctrine for all Believers? The Orthodox and Protestant churches would all give a resounding "No!"

Many Protestant Believers would say that heresy is when one holds a doctrine at variance with established Evangelical beliefs. Meanwhile, small sects would likely say that heresy is when anyone disagrees with their particular views on the Bible.

We would like to offer another definition of heresy, that is; "An opinion or doctrine at variance with the Holy Scriptures."

Of course, now we have a problem. Who is going to be the one to define exactly what the Scriptures mean on any single issue? In a large church organization it is easy. They merely convene a committee of theologians (from their own denomination) and that committee decides the doctrines for that particular church.

But in small individually organized local congregations the problem is much greater. There is probably no one member present who is qualified to define all of the doctrines for that particular congregation. Besides, once the doctrines, ('Statement of Beliefs') are written down, then what happens when some members of the congregation come to realize that some of the stated points are not in line with Scripture? That's when trouble really begins to brew.

In the end, every individual must either place himself under the umbrella of a denomination's doctrinal platform, or decide to stick by what he or she believes the Scriptures say. Now, a person in this latter position must be very careful before pointing an accusing finger against the supposed 'heresy' of another member within their group. Often times, what passes for heresy in the minds of some is merely a difference of opinion on a non-salvational issue. Once a Believer begins judging another person's faith, they are stepping onto very soft ground, for it is written:

**"Judge not, that you be not judged. For with what judgment you judge, you will be judged; and with the same measure you use, it will be measured back to you."**

(Matt. 7:1-2)

This scripture tells us that if a Believer falsely accuses another of being a heretic, and does not repent, they will find that same degree of harsh judgment, which they brought against their brother, now brought against them.

In reality, many so-called "heresy" issues are really just differences of opinion on matters that have nothing to do with salvation. However, the apostle Peter did warn the church:

**"... there will be false teachers among you. Under false pretenses they will introduce destructive heresies, even denying the Master who bought them..."** (I Pet. 2:1 CJB)

Where it really becomes serious is when a false doctrine ("an opinion or doctrine at variance with the Holy Scriptures") causes a person to lose faith in the existence of the Creator God, or in their Saviour, *Y'shua HaMashiach*. That, in our opinion, is true heresy.

### ~ Those Who Will Hear ~

**"If he hears you, you have gained your brother."**

(Matt. 18:15b)

If your brother hears what you have to say, and agrees that he did sin against you, and asks forgiveness for his sin against you, and makes restitution, if that is necessary, then you, as a brother in Messiah must forgive him. If he sins against you again, and asks forgiveness a second time, you must forgive him again. How many times must you forgive him? *Y'shua* said:

**"...I do not say to you, up to seven times, but to seventy times seven."**

(Matt. 18:21-22)

If you ever decide to call a 'Matthew 18' on someone, be prepared to forgive. Especially if you do it correctly and in love.

### ~ When It Is Truly Sin ~

What if a Believer becomes aware of a sin that has been committed against a brother or sister, and they are not taking appropriate action? Perhaps the offended person is weak and is not sure if they should take action, or they "just don't want to cause any trouble." What if the sinner is a leader in the congregation? Some members of the 'flock' may be too intimidated to bring a charge against a 'minister.' However, it must also be remembered that an accusation against a minister needs corroboration:

**"Do not receive an accusation against an elder except from two or three witnesses."**

(I Tim. 5:19)

These can be very delicate situations. However, standing by and doing nothing is harmful to both the sinner as well as the observer; for now the sinner has been enabled to continue in sin. Meanwhile, the silent observer has become an ally with sin. This is a situation where wise counsel may need to be sought before action is taken. However, one other important principle needs to be brought to our attention at this point. When a person sins against one member of the body, they sin against the entire body!

**"And if one member suffers, all the members suffer with it; or if one member is honored, all the members rejoice with it. Now you are the body of Christ [*Messiah*], and members individually."**

(I Cor. 12:26-27)

Therefore, if a Believer becomes aware of a sin that has been committed against another brother or sister, they do have the right to become involved. But they must use great wisdom

and common sense. If the perpetrator is someone the Believer does not like, they need to be especially careful -- for they may actually be operating from a position of revenge, which would be wrong. Motives must always be pure.

Another case in point. What about a person who is committing a sin but it does not involve other members of the congregation? This was the situation the Corinthians found themselves in when Paul wrote his first epistle to them.

**"It is actually reported that there is sexual immorality among you, and such sexual immorality as is not even named among the Gentiles -- that a man has his father's wife! ...**

**"In the name of our Lord Jesus Christ [Y'shua HaMashiach], when you are gathered together, along with my spirit, with the power of our Lord Jesus Christ [Y'shua HaMashiach], deliver such a one to Satan for the destruction of the flesh, that his spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord Jesus [Y'shua]."** (I Cor. 5:1, 4-5)

The fact of the matter was that this man had indeed sinned against the entire congregation by bringing shame upon them through his illicit sexual relationship with his stepmother. Even worse was the shame he brought upon our Husband, Y'shua HaMashiach. Quick and decisive action was called for in this situation.

#### **~ Those Who Will Not Hear ~**

**"But if he will not hear you, take with you one or two more, that "by the mouth of two or three witnesses every word may be established.""** (Matt. 18:16)

So then, if your brother does not agree with you but believes that you are accusing him falsely, you are to take one or two other Believers, whom you know to be sincere and just people, to meet with him. However, be prepared to have your brother also bring one or two fellow Believers as his personal witnesses.

What follows is what we might call, in today's legal terms, a deposition. Each person has an opportunity to state what they perceive to be the facts in the case, and all of the testimony is duly heard (and possibly recorded) by the witnesses. This is not to be a power play where one of the parties brings in someone to try and intimidate their adversary, but it is really what might be called a 'discovery session.'

If it is apparent to all assembled, except for the defendant, that he is indeed at fault and has sinned, then the witnesses may be able to convince him that he is in the wrong and needs to repent, apologize, make restitution and be forgiven. If that happens the matter is dropped. The accuser may have 'lost' the friendship of that brother personally, but they have been able to keep him from being 'lost' from the congregation and, in extreme cases, from the Kingdom of Heaven.

Obviously, by bringing witnesses into the matter it will require that *Lashon Hara* be spoken against the sinning brother. (See the first chapter.) That is the only way the witnesses will know what the charges are. The accuser must be prepared to accept the fact that in rebuttal the defendant may well be

required to speak *Lashon Hara* against him, especially if his position is not particularly tenable.

Also, the accuser must be prepared for the possible event that the witnesses may decide that he really does not have a case against his brother. In that event, it is the accuser who must repent, and ask forgiveness for falsely accusing a brother. In such a case, the defendant would be required to forgive the accuser.

#### **~ Taking It to the Church ~**

**"And if he refuses to hear them, tell it to the church."**  
(Matt. 18:17a)

The synagogues in Y'shua's day all had a local *Beit Din* (Bait Deen = House of Judgment) that was required to hear disputes. A local *Beit Din* consisted of a minimum of three members, all of whom were considered to be elders. While the membership of the *Beit Din* remained constant (members served for life), the leadership of the *Beit Din* was rotated annually so that each member of the *Beit Din* had an opportunity to serve. This was to prevent any one person from gathering unto personal power.

If the defendant in a case had not repented as a result of the testimony that was given before the witnesses, he probably felt that he had a pretty strong case. This being so, he could choose to let the problem come before the local *Beit Din*, in hopes of being vindicated there.

The *Beit Din* would then hear the testimony of both parties, as well as that of the witnesses. They might well ask questions of both parties (cross examine), and then retire to their chambers to render a decision. Since a *Beit Din* always had an odd number of members (the Great *Sanhedrin* had a separate president, usually the High Priest, so it really had seventy-one members) the verdict may have come down to a split decision with the majority ruling.

It must be pointed out that what 'taking the matter to the church' meant, was for both the accuser and the accused (plaintiff and defendant in modern parlance) to stand before the *Beit Din*. The apostle Paul confirms this practice in his first letter to the Corinthian Church.

**"Dare any of you, having a matter against another, go to law before the unrighteous, and not before the saints? Do you not know that the saints will judge the world? And if the world will be judged by you, are you unworthy to judge the smallest matters? Do you not know that we shall judge angels? How much more, things that pertain to this life?**

**"If then you have judgments concerning things pertaining to this life, do you appoint those who are least esteemed by the church to judge? I say this to your shame. Is it so, that there is not a wise man among you, not even one, who will be able to judge between his brethren?**

**"But brother goes to law against brother, and that before unbelievers! Now therefore, it is already an utter failure for you that you go to law against one another. Why do you not rather accept wrong? Why do you not rather let yourselves be defrauded? No, you yourselves do wrong and defraud, and you do these things to your**

**brethren! Do you not know that the unrighteous will not inherit the kingdom of God?..."** (I Cor. 6:1-9a)

**"But if he refuses even to hear the church, let him be to you like a heathen and a tax collector."** (Matt. 18:17)

In this ancient system, both parties were expected to abide by the decision of the *Beit Din*. If the judgment went against the defendant he had to accept it or else be considered **"...like a heathen or a tax collector."** Of course, the same was true if the decision went against the accuser and he refused to hear.

#### ~ Binding and Loosing ~

Now we come to the famous 'binding and loosing' scripture.

**"Assuredly, I say to you, whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven."** (Matt. 18:18)

In context, and with an understanding of how the court system of the *Beit Din* functioned, what this verse is actually saying is that whatever the *Beit Din* decides (as long as it conforms to the *Torah*) will be honored by our Father in heaven.

Anciently if the losing party believed the decision of the local *Beit Din* went against the clear teachings of the *Torah*, they could appeal to a higher court. This is exactly what happened in Antioch where Paul and Barnabas were living and teaching.

**"So they stayed there (Antioch) a long time with the disciples."** (Acts 14:28)

It was there in Antioch that a dispute arose between some orthodox Jews from Jerusalem (Pharisees who were Believers), and Paul and Barnabas. The Pharisaic Believers were teaching:

**"...Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved."** (Acts 15:1)

This doctrine caused a harsh dispute. It was clearly in violation of the testimony that Peter had given concerning his vision of the unclean things and his visit to the 'God Fearer,' Cornelius. However, the Pharisees did have a point.

The local *Beit Din* was unable to resolve the dispute satisfactorily. Although scripture does not say that the problem was taken before the local *Beit Din*, it seems most probable that such was the case. Apparently, that body decided in favor of Paul and Barnabas. This would be the expected decision from a local *Beit Din* which could have had both Paul and Barnabas as members.

However, the men from Jerusalem felt they were on good strong *Torah* ground. After all, the *Torah*, explicitly said that circumcision was a requirement for a stranger that wanted to have a part within the household of the children of Israel.

**"And when a stranger sojourns with you and wants to keep the Passover to the LORD [YHVH], let all his males be circumcised, and then let him come near and keep it; and he shall be as a native of the land. ..."** (Ex. 12:48)

So the matter was referred to the Messianic *Sanhedrin* in Jerusalem. *Ya'acov* (James), was the president of that *Sanhedrin* and was therefore the one responsible for rendering the final decision.

**"And after they had become silent, James answered, saying, 'Men and brethren listen to me:'"** (Acts 15:13)

What we are dealing with here is another example of the Church's court system. The local *Beit Din* carried the primary responsibility for judging the disputes in the congregation, based on the clear teaching of the *Torah*. Once the local *Beit Din* gave a judgment, all parties were expected to follow their decision. Of course it was possible that the *Beit Din* might decide in favor of the defendant and against the plaintiff who brought the charge. In that case the plaintiff had to abide by the decision as well. The punishment for refusing to abide by the decision of the *Beit Din* was to be become **"...like a heathen and a tax collector."**

(For more information on how the 'Jerusalem Council' or Messianic *Sanhedrin* functioned and the results of their decision, as given in Acts 15, please write and request our recorded message: *The Early Church, Part III; The Jerusalem Conference*.)

#### ~ Where Two or Three Are Gathered ~

*Y'shua* put His stamp of approval on a type of 'Believers Synagogue,' complete with its traditional method for resolving disputes when He said:

**"Again I say to you that if two of you agree on earth concerning anything that they ask, it will be done for them by My Father in heaven. For where two or three are gathered together in My name, I am there in the midst of them."** (Matt. 18:19-20)

Here we see *Y'shua* reassuring His disciples that they would have the power to establish their own Messianic *Beit Din* court system, and would not have to rely on the decisions of the local Jewish synagogues who's *Beit Din* members were nonbelievers in *Y'shua*. In fact, the Greek word from which **'gathered'** is derived is *sunago* (Strong's #4863), and it means **"to lead together."** It is the word from which *synagogue* (#4864) is derived.

The fact that two are required to agree hints that, in the local congregation, the *Beit Din* would usually be composed of three members and they would need at least two of them to agree before a decision could be considered binding.

#### ~ Messianic Discipline Today ~

To the best of our knowledge, very few (if any) congregations today have a fully functioning *Beit Din*. Even if some local congregations have established such a body, it is unlikely that higher up courts have been established to take cases on appeal. Certainly there is no 'Messianic *Sanhedrin*' that has either the right or the power to impose its judgment upon all individual congregations or individual Believers. What exists is a situation similar to that described at the end of the book of Judges:

**"In those days there was no king in Israel; everyone did what was right in his own eyes."** (Judges 21:25)

Today many Believers belong to organized assemblies, each of which have their own methods for dealing with members who may have fallen into sin. In some assemblies the rights of the individual are protected, so that a Believer can not be cast out of that assembly without having gone through some system of due process. However, in other organizations it is just the opposite. Merely questioning the teachings of an authoritative leader may cause a person to be 'put out of the Church.' In truth it is impossible for any human being to 'put someone out of the Church,' (only the Father and *Y'shua* can do that). Such action often creates a most unfortunate situation for the person who is dealt with in such a harsh manner. These abused people often find themselves outside looking in, wondering what has happened that they are no longer able to fellowship with their friends. Sometimes families are torn apart by such acts of wanton abuse.

On the other hand, experiencing the loss of fellowship from an authoritative Church can be a very positive and liberating step. Being outside of a restrictive church organization frees the individual to study the scriptures and find out what they really say, not just what that church teaches.

Believers who find themselves in this position often gravitate toward small home-based fellowships. This is a growing phenomena throughout the United States in all branches of Christianity; from Catholicism to Protestantism to Sabbaterians. For many, this has been the opening of a very great door to truth and understanding. But with truth and understanding comes additional personal responsibility. The existence of sin within a local, small home based fellowship becomes the problem of every single person who attends there. This is why it is so important for Believers today to learn how to properly use the principles found in Matthew 18. However, they must never be used for personal vendettas. Since the exercise of Matthew 18 always involves *Lashon Hara*, it must be done carefully so that the one bringing the charge against the sinner does not also fall into sin through the evil use of their own tongue.

Because of the fragmentation of today's Christian community, Matthew 18 may be a moot point for some small Messianic congregations. If someone in a small congregation brings an accusation against a sinner, it is easy for the sinner to pick up his bags and move on to some other unsuspecting congregation. But then, this too was foreseen and addressed by our Messiah:

**"Another parable He put forth to them, saying: 'The kingdom of heaven is like a man who sowed good seed in his field; but while men slept, his enemy came and sowed tares among the wheat and went his way.**

**"But when the grain had sprouted and produced a crop, then the tares also appeared. So the servants of the owner came and said to him, "Sir, did you not sow good seed in your field? How then does it have tares:""**

**"He said to them, "An enemy has done this." The servants said to him, "Do you want us then to go and gather them up?"**

**"But he said, "No least while you gather up the tares you also uproot the wheat with them. Let both grow together until the harvest, and at the time of harvest I will say to the reapers, 'First gather together the tares and bind them in bundles to burn them, but gather the wheat into my barn.'"**" (Matt. 13:24-30)

A few verses later *Y'shua* gives the interpretation of this parable.

**"...He who sows the good seed is the Son of Man. The field is the world, the good seeds are the sons of the kingdom, but the tares are the sons of the wicked one. The enemy who sowed them is the devil, the harvest is the end of the age, and the reapers are the angels.**

**"Therefore as the tares are gathered and burned in the fire, so it will be at the end of this age. The Son of Man will send out His angels, and they will gather out of His kingdom all things that offend, and those who practice lawlessness, and will cast them into the furnace of fire. There will be wailing and gnashing of teeth. Then the righteous will shine forth as the sun in the kingdom of their Father. He who has ears to hear, let him hear!"**

(Matt. 13:37-43)

The tares will exist along with the good wheat (the Believers) until the Messiah comes to sort it all out. In the meantime, we must all do our best to live righteously before the Father.

#### ~ Summary ~

What to do about sin in a local congregation is a very real problem for all Believers, especially those who are meeting in small, home-based fellowship groups. Every new congregation must learn how to deal with sin and disputes. The principles set forth in Matthew 18 and I Corinthians 6, should be the guide in such matters. We pray that what has been set forth in this article will be of help to those of you who are being faced with these types of problems within your church or fellowship group.

Being an obedient Believer is not easy. Sometimes tough decisions need to be made. Sins and disputes must be confronted and eliminated. On the other hand, a local church should never become a little 'police state' where everyone is afraid to express an opinion that diverges in the slightest degree from the norm, for fear of being brought "before the Church."

For most of us, this is plowing new ground. But if we allow ourselves to be led by the Holy Spirit, then right decisions will be forthcoming. Above all, seek to learn how to love one another, and how to appreciate the differences that our heavenly Father has created in each one of us.

One last thought. In a very small fellowship, it may be perfectly proper for all of the adults to function as a *Beit Din*. Or, the fellowship could choose three of its members to function in that capacity, with the membership of the *Beit Din* being changed for each new problem as the need arises. Just remember one thing, the more people who sit on the *Beit Din*, the longer it will take to reach a verdict, and the less likely it will be that a unanimous decision will be obtained.

**"But the end of all things is at hand; therefore be serious and watchful in your prayers. And above all things have fervent love for one another, for 'love will cover a multitude of sins.'"**  
(I Pet. 4:7-8)

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## When Is It Heresy?

A humorous look at the problem of disagreements within a religious group, from a book entitled:  
*Lake Wobegon Days*, written by the noted US author and entertainer, Garrison Keillor.

"Our family was dirt poor ... And, in a town where everyone was either Lutheran or Catholic, we were neither one. We were Sanctified Brethren, a sect so tiny that nobody but us and God knew about it, so when kids asked what I was, I just said Protestant. It was too much to explain, like having six toes. You would rather keep your shoes on. ...

"We were 'exclusive' Brethren, a branch that believed in keeping itself pure of false doctrine by avoiding association with the impure. Some Brethren assemblies, mostly in larger cities, were not so strict and broke bread with strangers -- we referred to them as 'the so-called Open Brethren,' the 'so-called' implying the shakiness of their position -- whereas we made sure that any who fellowshiped with us were straight on all the details of the Faith, as set forth by the first Brethren who left the Anglican Church in 1865 to worship on the basis of correct principles. In the same year, they posed for a photograph: twenty-one bearded gentlemen in black frock coats, twelve sitting on a stone wall, nine standing behind, gazing solemnly into a sunny day in Plymouth, England, united in the opposition to the pomp and corruption of the Christian aristocracy.

"Unfortunately, once free of the worldly Anglicans, these firebrands were not content to worship in peace but turned their guns on each other. Scholarly to the core and perfect literalists every one, they set to arguing over points that, to any outsider, would have seemed very minor indeed but which to them were crucial to the Faith, including the question: if Believer *A* is associated with Believer *B* who has somehow associated himself with *C* who holds a False Doctrine, must *D* break off association with *A*, even though *A* does not hold the Doctrine, to avoid the taint?

"The correct answer is: Yes. Some Brethren, however, felt that *D* should only speak with *A* and urge him to break off with *B*. The Brethren who felt otherwise promptly broke off with them. This was the Bedford Question, one of several controversies that, inside of two years, split the Brethren into three branches.

"Once having tasted the pleasure of being Correct and defending True Doctrine, they kept right on and broke up at every opportunity, until, by the time I came along, there were dozens of tiny Brethren groups, none of which were speaking to any of the others. ...

"Brethren history is confusing, even to those of us who heard a lot on the subject at a young age -- the Dennis Brethren, for example: I have no idea whether they left us or we left them. Ditto the Reformed Sanctified, and the Bird Brethren, though I think that Sabbath observance was involved in our (i.e., the *Beale* Brethren, what we were called before 1932 when we Coxes left the Johnson wing) dispute with the Birds, who tended to be lax about such things as listening to the radio on Sunday and who went in for hot baths to an extent the Beales considered sensual. The Beale, or Cold Water Brethren, felt that the body was a shell or a husk that the spirit rode around in and that it needed to be kept in line with cold baths. But by the time I came along, we listened to the radio on Sunday and ran the bath hot, and yet we never went back and patched things up with the Birds. Patching up was not a Brethren talent. As my Grandpa once said of the Johnson Brethren, 'Anytime they want to come to us and admit their mistake, we're perfectly happy to sit and listen to them and then come to a decision about accepting them back.'" (pp. 101, 105-107. pub. by Viking Penguin Inc., New York, 1985.)

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## ~ Calendar Chaos ~

### ~ A Plea for Tolerance ~

### ~ A Hope for Unity ~

For God is not *the* author of confusion but of peace,  
As in all the churches of the saints.  
1 Corinthians 14:33

**I**n early 2005, *Hebrew Roots* received a number of phone calls and e-mail's from people who were confused about the Festival Calendar. In most cases they had learned that their fellowship had suddenly decided to celebrate Passover and the Days of Unleavened Bread one month earlier than they had expected. Some called to find out why *Hebrew Roots* follows the *Traditional Hebrew Calendar* which, that year, dated Passover in April. Needless to say, many were confused and some were upset. In order to clear up any confusion about where we stand on this issue, and why we stand where we do, we offer this essay.

Please understand that we are not condemning anyone who holds a different view about the calendar, for it is obvious to us, from the conversations we had with a number of people, that all are doing their very best to please our Father in heaven by their actions here on earth. Everyone, with whom we spoke, appears to be striving to do what is right in God's sight.

Sadly, this is a controversial issue.

### ~ Rational Discussion ~

We refuse to argue about calendar issues, but we are willing to discuss them rationally. We also refrain from belittling those brethren who see things differently, or scorning those who might not have as much knowledge about the calendar issue. Knowledge is wonderful, and the Bride of Messiah needs to grow in knowledge and understanding, but if knowledge is used to club one's brother on the head, it is of no use whatsoever:

**"We know that we all have knowledge. Knowledge puffs up, but love edifies."**

(1 Cor. 8:1)

We are saddened to hear of those who go so far as to break fellowship with their brethren over the setting of the Festival calendar, after all, the Festivals constitute only seven days out of the year. There are still fifty-two Sabbath days on which everyone can meet together.

### ~ A Variety of Calendars ~

The calendar in common use today is the *Gregorian Calendar*. It was proclaimed by Pope Gregory XIII in 1582. The *Gregorian Calendar* is a strictly *Solar Calendar*, where the months have no relationship whatsoever to the moon. In a *Solar Calendar*, the equinoxes and solstices always occur

within the same two or three calendar days of each year (for example the Vernal Equinox always occurs on March 20, 21, or 22).

The *Gregorian Calendar* was a replacement for the *Julian Calendar* (which was also a *Solar Calendar*), which had an error in the adding of leap years that had caused the calendar to become 14 days out of sync with the sun by the time of Pope Gregory. However, the Pope only approved the advancing of the calendar 10 days, so that the vernal equinox would fall on March 21st, as it did in 325 CE, at the time of the Council of Nicaea.

The Moslems use a strictly *Lunar Calendar*. However, since 12 lunar months are over 11 days short of a full solar year, it is not long before the festivals, which were originally celebrated in the spring, are found to be in the winter, then the fall, then the summer, then (after 33 years) back once more to where they started in the spring.

The *Hebrew Calendar* is a *Lunar/Solar Calendar*. That means the months are determined by the moon, while the years are determined by the sun. Because 12 months (moons) are over 11 days short of a full solar year, an additional month (*Adar II*) must be added every two or three years in order to keep it in sync with the sun, so that the Festivals always fall in their proper season.

At the end of a 19 year time cycle, the *Lunar/Solar Calendar* returns to its original place in the solar year with a discrepancy of only 1 hour, 26 minutes, and 56 2/3 seconds. This is quite remarkable and shows how God has used the sun and moon to set the *moedim* (mow-eh-dim' = appointed times) which was established at creation:

**"Then God said, 'Let there be lights in the firmament of the heavens to divide the day from the night; and let them be for signs and seasons [moedim], and for days and years; <sup>15</sup> and let them be for lights in the firmament of the heavens to give light on the earth;' and it was so."**

(Gen. 1:14-15)

### ~ Declaring a New Moon ~

During the time of the Temple, two methods were used, in concert with each other, to establish the beginning of a month on the *Hebrew Calendar*. First of all, a *Calculated Calendar* was used so the leaders knew when to expect a New Moon or a New Year. However, while the Temple stood, the practice was to confirm that calculation with a physical sighting (*Sighted Calendar*) of the New Moon when weather conditions permitted. Here is what the *Encyclopedia Judaica* has to say about their practice:

"Originally, the New Moon was not fixed by astronomical calculations, but was solemnly proclaimed after witnesses had testified to the reappearance of the crescent of the moon. On the 30th of each month, the members of the High Court [*the Sanhedrin*] assembled in a courtyard in Jerusalem, named *Beit Ya'azek*, where they waited to receive the testimony of two reliable witnesses; they then sanctified the New Moon. If the moon's crescent was not seen on the 30th day, the New Moon was automatically celebrated on the 31st day. To inform the

population of the beginning of the month, beacons were kindled on the Mount of Olives and thence over the entire land and in parts of the Diaspora. Later, however, the Samaritans began to light misleading beacons, and the High Court dispatched messengers to far-removed communities. Those Jews who lived great distances from Jerusalem always celebrated the 30th day of the month as the New Moon. [making the previous month 29 days long] On those occasions when they were informed of its postponement to the 31st, they also observed this second consecutive day as the New Moon. (RH 1:3–2:7)." (*Encyclopedia Judaica, CD-Rom Version, emphasis ours.*)

The above article does not tell us how Jews as far away as Babylon established the New Moon. Perhaps they relied solely on the *Calculated Calendar*. Perhaps they had a *Small Sanhedrin* (23 members) confirm the *Calculated Calendar* by sightings. As far as we know, there is no record.

After the destruction of the Temple (70 CE), sighting the New Moon and proclaiming it throughout the land became more problematic. The *Sanhedrin* (the only body which had the authority to proclaim a New Moon) was first moved to Yavneh (*Joppa*). After the *Bar Kochba* revolt (135 CE) the *Sanhedrin* moved again, this time to the Galilee region. The practice of using both the *Calculated Calendar* and the *Sighted Calendar* continued well into the 4th century CE, at which time they went to the strictly *Calculated Hebrew Calendar*.

#### ~ The Ancient Hebrew Calendar ~

The *Hebrew Calendar* balances the lunar and solar discrepancies so the Festivals always fall in their correct season. This type of calendar requires a somewhat complicated set of rules. According to Arthur Spier, in his book *The Comprehensive Hebrew Calendar*, during the time of the Temple:

"A special committee of the Sanhedrin, with its president as chairman, had the mandate to regulate and balance the solar with the lunar years. This so-called Calendar Council (*Sod Haibbur*) calculated the beginnings of the seasons (*Tekufoth*) on the basis of astronomical figures which had been handed down as a tradition of old. Whenever, after two or three years, the annual excess of 11 days had accumulated to approximately 30 days, a thirteenth month Adar II was inserted before Nisan [*Aviv*] in order to assure that Nisan and Passover would occur in Spring and not retrogress toward winter. However, the astronomical calculation was not the only basis for intercalation of a thirteenth month. The delay of the actual arrival of spring was another decisive factor. The Talmudic sources report that the Council intercalated a year when [1] the **barley** in the fields **had not yet ripened**, when [2] the fruit on the trees had not grown properly, when [3] the winter rains had not stopped, when [4] the roads for Passover pilgrims had not dried up, and when [5] the young pigeons had not become fledged. The Council on intercalation considered the astronomical facts together with the religious requirements of Passover and

the natural conditions of the country." (pp. 1-2, emphasis ours.)

#### ~ Green Ears ~

While this account states that barley had to be "ripened" for a New Year to be proclaimed, today most believe that what was needed were "green ears" which would ripen during the two intervening weeks, so that ripe barley could be used to perform the *Omer Wave Offering* during the *Days of Unleavened Bread*. However, the appearance of the "green ears" (or "ripened ears") of barley is only one of five criteria which the *Sanhedrin* used to determine when a New Year was to begin.

#### ~ The Sighted Calendar of the Karaites ~

The primary reason for the 2005 calendar issue lay with a Jewish sect which call themselves the *Karaites*. They are a sect that had its origins around the beginning of the eighth century CE as a group of Jews who rejected traditional Rabbinic authority. Part of that rejection included a break with the *Traditional Hebrew Calendar*. Instead of following the *Calculated Calendar* of the Rabbinic Jews, which had been established by the last *Sanhedrin* in the 4th century CE, they implemented a *Sighted Calendar* to determine when a New Moon occurs. This means, on most months, they are one or two days different from the *Traditional Hebrew Calendar*, while on other months the two calendars coincide.

When it comes to determining a New Year, the *Karaites*, look for green ears of barley to determine when the first month of the year, *Aviv* or *Nissan*, should begin. In 2005 they claimed to have found green ears of barley at the time of the March New Moon. They therefore declared that, according to their *Sighted Calendar*, the New Year should begin in March, rather than in April as the *Traditional Hebrew Calendar* states.

Even if "green ears" (or "ripened ears") of barley were the only criteria to be used, this same year (2005) another group (made up of Messianic Believers), who were also searching for "green ears of barley" in Israel, cast doubt about the *Karaites* declaration. This group claimed the *Karaites* were wrong in their assessment and that the general barley crop was not in "green ears" in early March. This group claimed the only place where "green ears" could be found was next to highways where they believed extra heat from the traffic caused that particular grain to begin maturing early.

Another objection to using the "green ears," as the sole criteria to determine the beginning of the New Year, is the fact that grain has changed a great deal over the centuries, and modern barley may not mature at the same rate as did barley in the first century.

#### ~ The Astronomical Calendar ~

Still another group of Messianic Believers hold to an *Astronomical Calendar*. This means they always use the astronomical calculations to determine when the New Moon occurs. They say the New Moon always occurs at the *molad* (mow'-lad = conjunction) because that is the scientific definition of a New Moon:



"The conjunction of the moon with the sun is the point in time at which the moon is directly between the earth and the sun (but not on the same plane) and is thus invisible. This is known as the, *molad* (birth)." (*Encyclopedia Judaica*, CD-Rom Version, emphasis ours.)

Rabbinic authorities, however, state that *Chodesh* (hoh-dehsh' = New Moon in Hebrew) means the beginning of the month, and does not mean a strictly astronomical New Moon.

The *Astronomical Calendar* is in direct contradiction to the *Sighted Calendar* since often the New Moon is not visible on the day the *molad* (conjunction) occurs. For example, in 2005 the astronomical New Moon for April fell on the 8th day of the month. However, the Full Moon, which should come 14 or 15 days later, actually occurred 16 days later. This is because the crescent moon would not be visible on the 8th. This meant the *Astronomical Calendar* would have put Passover on April 22nd that year instead of April 24th as the *Traditional Hebrew Calendar* had it.

Those who keep the *Astronomical Calendar* depend upon the vernal equinox to determine whether a thirteenth month should be added. Yet here too there is disagreement, for some say that only Passover need fall after the equinox, while others say that even the first day of *Nisan* (a.k.a. *Aviv*) must fall after the equinox. In the latter case, those who followed this rule would have been celebrating Passover in April, while those who followed the first rule would have been celebrating in March.

#### ~ The Calculated or *Traditional Hebrew Calendar* ~

According to Arthur Spier, while the official *Sanhedrin* was still in existence they used a combination of the *Calculated Calendar* and the *Sighted Calendar*. However, in the 4th century, it became apparent that the Roman government was going to prohibit the *Sanhedrin* from meeting any longer. Therefore, for the unity of the Jewish people, the last official *Sanhedrin*, under the leadership of Hillel II, published the calculated calendar so that Jewish people throughout the Diaspora could all celebrate the Festivals at the same time; rather than relying on a chaotic situation where each Synagogue or sect tried to do their own individual observations.

Here is what Spier has to say:

"This method of observation and intercalation was in use throughout the period of the second temple (516 BCE - 70 CE), and about three centuries after its destruction, as long as there was an independent Sanhedrin. In the fourth century, however, when oppression and persecution threatened the continued existence of the Sanhedrin, the patriarch Hillel II took an extraordinary step to preserve the unity of Israel. In order to prevent the Jews scattered all over the surface of the earth from celebrating their New Moons, festivals and holidays at different times, he made public the system of calendar calculation which up to then had been a closely guarded secret. It had been used in the past only to check the observations and testimonies of witnesses, and to determine the beginnings of the spring season." (p. 2, emphasis ours.)

The result of this disclosure was the *Traditional Hebrew Calendar* which is in use today.

#### ~ Postponements ~

Those who keep the *Sighted Calendar* or the *Astronomical Calendar*, object to the fact that the *Traditional Hebrew Calendar* has certain rules which sometimes cause the postponement of the observance of a New Moon so the rule can be observed. (Remember, the Rabbis interpret the word *Chodesh* as the beginning of the month, and not necessarily an astronomical "New Moon" conjunction or *molad*.) The chief among these rules is that *Yom Kippur* (Day of Atonement) must not fall on a Friday or a Sunday so that one does not enter the weekly Sabbath fasting, or leave the weekly Sabbath fasting. (There are other rules as well.)

Because of the postponement rules, the *Traditional Hebrew Calendar* sometimes has months which match the *Astronomical Calendar*, while at other times it has months which match the *Sighted Calendar*. In many years all three calendars differ.

#### ~ What Does the Bible Say? ~

It is important to understand that the Scriptures have almost nothing to say about the setting of the New Moon or the New Year. When it comes to what constitutes a New Moon, there is virtually no information at all. This has even led some to believe that what is normally called the Full Moon is really the New Moon and vice versa.

When it comes to the New Year we find this enigmatic passage:

**"Now the LORD [YHVH] spoke to Moses and Aaron in the land of Egypt, saying, <sup>2</sup> 'This month [*chodesh*] shall be your beginning of months [*chodesh*]; it shall be the first month [*chodesh*] of the year to you.'"** (Ex. 12:1-2)

While the name of this first month is not mentioned in this passage, it is named in other Scriptures:

**""The Feast of Unleavened Bread you shall keep. Seven days you shall eat unleavened bread, as I commanded you, in the appointed time of the month of Abib [a.k.a. *Aviv* or *Nisan*]; for in the month of Abib you came out from Egypt.'"** (Ex. 34:18)

While the Hebrew word *Aviv* (*Abib* in some versions) is generally thought to mean only "green ears" of barley, this is, in fact, not true. *Aviv* can mean either "green ears" or any "ears" of grain, including "ripe ears." *Aviv* can also apply to any grain including wheat. *Gesenius' Hebrew-Chaldee Lexicon to the Old Testament* defines *Aviv* in this manner: "an ear of corn [grain], a green ear."

However, in the following passage it is generally agreed that the word *Aviv* refers specifically to barley, and therefore to the *Omer Wave Offering* which was traditionally offered at the time of the *Days of Unleavened Bread*:

**""If you offer a grain offering of your firstfruits to the LORD [YHVH], you shall offer for the grain offering of your firstfruits green heads [*Aviv*] of grain roasted on the fire, grain beaten from full heads.'"** (Lev. 2:14)

While the *New King James Version* translates *Aviv* as "green heads," the actual grain used for this offering had to be mature. Thus, the translation "green heads" is misleading, for they would never use unripened grain for the *Omer Wave Offering*, since it was required to be made into the finest of flour before the ceremony could take place. We believe the *Stone Chumash* translates the passage more accurately:

**"When you bring a meal-offering of the first grain to Hashem: from ripe ears, parched over fire, ground from plump kernels, shall you offer the meal-offering of your first grain."** (Lev. 2:14 SEC)

The main body of information about the *Omer Wave Offering* is given in this passage:

**"Speak to the children of Israel, and say to them: 'When you come into the land which I give to you, and reap its harvest, then you shall bring a sheaf of the firstfruits of your harvest to the priest. 'He shall wave the sheaf before the LORD [YHVH], to be accepted on your behalf; on the day after the Sabbath the priest shall wave it. ... 'You shall eat neither bread nor parched grain (*kali*) nor fresh grain (*karmel*) until the same day that you have brought an offering to your God; it shall be a statute forever throughout your generations in all your dwellings.'"** (Lev. 23:10-11, 14)

Traditionally, the *Omer Wave Offering* was offered at the Temple on the first day of the week following the weekly Sabbath which fell during the *Days of Unleavened Bread*. Taking everything in context, it is clear the *Omer Wave Offering* was commanded to be performed during the first month of the year. However, a number of points need to be touched on concerning that ceremony:

- ◆ The Israelites did not observe the *Omer Wave Offering* command until after they had come into the Promised Land; since there was no grain to be harvested in the wilderness during the 39 years of their wandering, even though they had the Tabernacle. (v. 10)
- ◆ Today Israel has a presence in the Promised Land and they raise grain, however there is no functioning Tabernacle or Temple. Therefore, the *Omer Wave Offering* cannot be legitimately performed today. (v. 11, 14).
- ◆ It is generally assumed, according to tradition, that the grain being spoken of here is barley. However, the Leviticus 23 passage does not specifically tell us that, for the Hebrew words *kali* (kah-lee' = parched grain) and *karmel* (car-mel' = fresh grain) are not specific to barley. In fact, *karmel* means "1) plantation, garden-land, orchard, fruit orchard 2) fruit, garden-growth," while *kali* can mean either wheat or barley.

The point of all this is that one is hard pressed to come up with an absolutely correct calendar, or ceremony for the *Omer Wave Offering*, from Scripture alone. Therefore, it is necessary to rely in large part on tradition. Tradition says the Leviticus 23 passage is referring to barley as being the first grain of the

season to ripen and therefore the one to be used for the *Omer Wave Offering*.

However, as we have already seen, tradition also teaches that the appearance of the "barley ears" was only one of five criteria to which the *Sanhedrin* looked to for guidance in determining when a thirteenth month should be added.

### ~ Based on Tradition ~

All of the above information has been given as background so that those who are not familiar with the Calendar Controversy will have some understanding concerning what this argument is all about. As you can see, none of the Hebrew calendar systems in use today are perfect. All of them are based upon tradition, and all of those traditions were handed down within Judaism through the Rabbis. The question then becomes: Since all of these calendars differ in some respects, and none can be positively proven by Scripture, which one should a person follow?

Our answer to that question is that the real issue we are dealing with here is one of authority. Which authority are we going to follow?

- ◆ Are we going to follow the *Sighted Calendar* based upon the authority of a group of *Karaite* Jews which was originally organized for the purpose of rejecting Rabbinic tradition when they, in fact, must rely on Rabbinic tradition in order to establish their calendar? Are we going to accept their sighting of the "green ears" as evidence that a New Year should begin when others dispute their claim? Are we going to accept their declaration of the New Moons as being authoritative?
- ◆ Are we going to follow the authority of those astronomers who report the *Astronomical Calendar* when it does not allow for the fact that during *Y'shua's* day the Rabbis waited for the first crescent of the moon to visibly appear before they proclaimed a New Moon? If we do so, which New Year method should we adopt; the one which says that only Passover need fall after the equinox, or the one saying that *1 Aviv* must fall after the equinox?
- ◆ Are we going to follow the authority of the last *Sanhedrin* who set the *Traditional Hebrew Calendar*, even though it has postponements, based upon tradition, which sometimes cause it to match the *Astronomical Calendar*, sometimes the *Karaite's Sighted Calendar*, and often neither one?

Since all of the calendars have problems, the issue comes down to the question of ...

### ~ Authority ~

There is no question that originally the authority to set the calendar was given to *Moshe* and *Aahron* (Moses and Aaron) for that is what Scripture says:

**"Now the LORD [YHVH] spoke to Moses and Aaron in the land of Egypt, saying, 'This month shall be your**

beginning of months; it *shall be* the first month of the year to you."  
(Ex. 12:1-2)

Notice, God did not say: "Speak to the children of Israel." A similar phrase occurs in verse 3 but it only applies to what follows:

**"Speak to all the congregation of Israel, saying: "On the tenth day of this month every man shall take for himself a lamb, according to the house of his father, a lamb for a household.""**  
(Ex. 12:3)

The children of Israel (by family) were responsible for selecting their Passover lambs on the 10th day of the first month and offering them on the 14th. However, the people were not given the authority to decide when the month began. That responsibility was given to *Moshe* and *Aahron*. Can you imagine the chaos which would have ensued if each family, clan, or even tribe had made its own calendar calculation for that first Passover? Tens of thousands of Israelites might well have died as a result.

### ~ The Authority of the Elders ~

Since *Moshe* and *Aahron* had the calendar authority given to them, the next question is: To whom did the authority to establish the calendar pass?

The leadership of the nation and the Tabernacle passed from *Moshe* and *Aahron* to *Joshua* and *Eleazar* respectively. However, since the time of *Moshe* and *Aahron*, there had been a body of elders who were intimately connected with decision making for the Children of Israel. They were known as the *Seventy Elders*:

**"So the LORD [YHVH] said to Moses: 'Gather to Me seventy men of the elders of Israel, whom you know to be the elders of the people and officers over them; bring them to the tabernacle of meeting, that they may stand there with you. <sup>17</sup> Then I will come down and talk with you there. I will take of the Spirit that is upon you and will put the same upon them; and they shall bear the burden of the people with you, that you may not bear it yourself alone.'"**

(Num. 11:16-17)

The *Elders* played an integral part in the governing of Israel during the time of *Joshua* and beyond:

**"Israel served the LORD [YHVH] all the days of Joshua, and all the days of the elders who outlived Joshua, who had known all the works of the LORD [YHVH] which He had done for Israel."**  
(Josh. 24:31)

The *Elders* continued to function as leaders for Israel throughout their history until the 4th century CE. For example:

**"Therefore all the elders of Israel came to the king at Hebron, and King David made a covenant with them at Hebron before the LORD [YHVH]. And they anointed David king over Israel."**  
(II Sam. 5:3)

**"Now Solomon assembled the elders of Israel and all the heads of the tribes, the chief fathers of the children of Israel, to King Solomon in Jerusalem, that they might bring**

**up the ark of the covenant of the LORD [YHVH] from the City of David, which is Zion."**  
(I Kings 8:1)

After the captivity and removal of the House of Israel, and the Babylonian captivity of the House of Judah, the Jews returned to the Promised Land. One of their main leaders was *Ezra*, the Priest and the Scribe. *Ezra* was not a dictator, for in addition to *Ezra* there were *Zerubbabel* the governor, and *Jeshua* the High Priest:

**"Then Jeshua the son of Jozadak and his brethren the priests, and Zerubbabel the son of Shealtiel and his brethren, arose and built the altar of the God of Israel, to offer burnt offerings on it, as it is written in the Law of Moses the man of God."**  
(Ezra 3:2)

Again, at that time, the Elders functioned in the decision making process:

**"... and that whoever would not come within three days, according to the instructions of the leaders and elders, all his property would be confiscated, ..." (Ezra 10:8)**

The Elders of Judah (the House of Israel was long gone), during the time of *Ezra*, was known as the "Great Assembly." As time went on, and the Greeks took over that area of the world, this body became known by the Greek word *sunedrion*, or as it is called today, the *Sanhedrin*.

**"Sunedrion Meaning:** 1) any assembly (esp. of magistrates, judges, ambassadors), whether convened to deliberate or pass judgment 2) any session or assembly or people deliberating or adjudicating 2a) the Sanhedrin, the great council at Jerusalem, consisting of the seventy one members, viz. scribes, elders, prominent members of the high priestly families and the high priest, the president of the assembly. The most important causes were brought before this tribunal, inasmuch as the Roman rulers of Judaea had left to it the power of trying such cases, and also of pronouncing sentence of death, with the limitation that a capital sentence pronounced by the Sanhedrin was not valid unless it was confirmed by the Roman procurator. 2b) a smaller tribunal or council which every Jewish town had for the decision of less important cases." (Strong's Dictionary from *BibleWorks 5.0*, emphasis added.)

It is quite certain that the *Sanhedrin* had the authority to establish the calendar during *Y'shua's* time, for there is no record that *Y'shua* ever objected to the *Sanhedrin's* announcing the New Moons and the New Year. All of these ceremonies were done at the Temple, which *Y'shua* called, "My Father's house:"

**"And He said to those who sold doves, 'Take these things away! Do not make My Father's house a house of merchandise!'"**  
(John 2:16)

There are no historical records indicating that *Y'shua* and His disciples kept a different calendar than what was approved by the *Sanhedrin* and observed at the Temple, even though there were alternative calendars at that time as well. It is true they kept Passover one night early in *Y'shua's* last year, due to

His impending death. (See our booklet *The Passover in Egypt and Jerusalem* for more information on the Last Supper.)

### ~ Calendar Authority Today ~

Since the *Sanhedrin* had *Y'shua's* tacit authority to establish the calendar in His day, it is our view that the *Sanhedrin* also has the authority to establish the calendar for our day. No one else has been given that authority, whether it be a body of Jews called the *Karaites*, an individual Messianic congregation, or private individuals. To allow anyone (other than the *Sanhedrin*) to have such authority puts the Messianic Community into the same situation in which the children of Israel found themselves during the latter days of the Judges:

**"In those days there was no king in Israel; everyone did what was right in his own eyes."** (Judges 21:25)

The end result of having numerous calendars (one estimate puts the total number at 20) is CALENDAR CHAOS! All it does is lead to arguments, anger, and division in the Messianic Community:

**"But Jesus [*Y'shua*] knew their thoughts, and said to them: 'Every kingdom divided against itself is brought to desolation, and every city or house divided against itself will not stand.'"** (Matt. 12:25)

Many in the Messianic Community believe that *Abba* has begun an end time work to bring the houses of Israel and Judah back together, and that the Messianic movement represents, in large part, the house of Israel. If this is true, how can we, as Messianic Believers, ever be joined with Judah when we use so many different calendars? The House of Israel cannot be reunited with brother Judah if it cannot be united within itself.

Even if one does not hold to the "House of Israel" theory, but considers themselves to be Gentile, they too must be "grafted in" (Rom. 11) to the Commonwealth of Israel. In either case, if the Messianic Community is to be united with Judah, the calendar issue must be resolved.

### ~ Tradition ~

One thing the Greek Scriptures (NT) teaches us is that we must do our best to avoid division in the Body of Messiah:

**"For God is not the author of confusion but of peace, as in all the churches of the saints."** (I Cor. 14:33)

The Apostle Paul taught Messianic Believers to follow the traditions they have been taught:

**"Therefore, brethren, stand fast and hold the traditions which you were taught, whether by word or our epistle."** (II Thess. 2:15)

This does not mean that one should hold to the traditions of churches and denominations which have rejected the *Torah* of God and set their own traditions in place of the *Torah*; for the Greek word translated "traditions" is *paradosis* and it means, among other things:

*"2b) of the body of precepts, esp. ritual, which in the opinion of the later Jews were orally delivered by Moses and orally transmitted in unbroken succession to*

*subsequent generations, which precepts, both illustrating and expanding the written law, as they did were to be obeyed with equal reverence."* (Strong's Dictionary from *BibleWorks 5.0*, emphasis ours.)

Yes, there are times when we, as Messianic Believers, must rely on the Oral Traditions of the Jews in order to properly understand difficult passages of Scripture. The Calendar is one of the cases where this is true, simply because there is not sufficient information in the Scriptures to come to a definitive conclusion on how the calendar is to be calculated.

According to Paul's own words, he kept the customs and traditions of his fathers (the Jews) all of his life:

**"And it came to pass after three days that Paul called the leaders of the Jews together. So when they had come together, he said to them: 'Men and brethren, though I have done nothing against our people or the customs [ethos] of our fathers, ...'"** (Acts 28:17)

If Paul had been keeping all of the "customs" of his fathers, surely he must have accepted the authority of the *Sanhedrin* to set the dates for the *Hebrew Calendar*.

Until very recently, there has been no official *Sanhedrin* to make decisions on issues as important as the calendar. However, the last *Sanhedrin*, knowing they were about to be disbanded by the Romans, established a calendar that allowed all Jews and (in our opinion) by extension, the Messianic Community which has been grafted into the Commonwealth of Israel, to keep the Festivals at the same time. That calendar (the *Traditional Hebrew Calendar*) is the one we follow.

### ~ Our Position ~

Given all of the above information, here is our position on the Calendar:

- ◆ We believe that the *Sanhedrin* was the direct derivative of the ancient *Seventy Elders* of Israel.
- ◆ We believe that only an official *Sanhedrin* has the authority to make changes to the way the *Hebrew Calendar* is to be calculated.
- ◆ We believe that no sect, group, congregation, or individual has any authority whatsoever to establish their own calendar.
- ◆ We believe the only time one should deviate from the *Traditional Hebrew Calendar* is when it can be Scripturally proven that what has been established is incorrect. The only place where we find this to be true is in the setting of *Shavu'ot* (Pentecost), which according to Scripture should always fall on the first day of the week because the day from which one is to count is the weekly Sabbath (*Shabbat*) not the Festival Sabbath (*Shabbaton*). (See our booklet *Shavu'ot The Feast of Weeks* for information on *Counting the Omer*.)
- ◆ We believe that the last *Sanhedrin* had the authority to establish a *Calculated Calendar* just prior to their demise, so that all Jews throughout the world could

observe the Festivals together on the same dates in a spirit of unity.

- ◆ We believe the *Traditional Hebrew Calendar* has been, down through the centuries, a great blessing in this regard and has been a key factor in keeping unity within the Jewish community in the Diaspora.
- ◆ We believe that the new *Sanhedrin* (which has recently been established in Jerusalem), if it becomes accepted as official, will have the authority to make changes and corrections to the existing *Hebrew Calendar*.
- ◆ We believe this new *Sanhedrin* may well return to using observation in order to confirm their *Calculated Calendar*, just as they did in *Y'shua's* day. When that happens, we will follow their authority. However, if the Internet goes down (and some day it will go down), so we could not receive the official calendar report, then we will return to the *Traditional Hebrew Calendar* as it was calculated back in the 4th century CE, if the new *Sanhedrin* has not replaced it with another *Calculated Calendar*.

#### ~ How Should One React? ~

How should we, as Messianic Believers, react when someone in our fellowship declares their intent to observe a calendar different from the one we are observing? The reaction should not be with anger and hysteria, but with love:

**"By this all will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another."** (John 13:35)

Too often, people outside of the Messianic movement see Messianic Believers arguing over doctrine to the point of anger and division. Sometimes this negative behavior causes newcomers to turn away because they cannot believe such an attitude would exist within a true Body of Messiah:

**"Accept him whose faith is weak, without passing judgment on disputable matters."** (Rom. 14:1 NIV)

Certainly, from what we have seen, the Calendar is one of those "disputable matters." Subjecting new Believers to these kinds of disputes may weaken their faith and make them doubt they are in the right place for their spiritual walk, especially if the discussions are carried out with rancor.

As we stated at the beginning of this article, everyone we spoke with about this issue was wanting to please our heavenly Father by doing the right thing concerning the calendar. It must be remembered that if someone is absolutely convinced they should hold to a particular calendar, be it the *Sighted Calendar*, the *Astronomical Calendar*, or the *Traditional Hebrew Calendar* (or any other calendar for that matter), then they need to follow that calendar, for:

**"... whatever is not from faith is sin."** (Rom. 14:23)

To argue or badger someone into observing another position when, in their mind and heart, they do not believe it to be true, is causing them to sin before God because of their conscience:

**"Now the purpose of the commandment is love from a pure heart, from a good conscience, and from sincere faith, ..."** (I Tim. 1:5)

If we truly believe that we should be walking in a certain way, or keeping a certain calendar, and our conscience is clear in the matter, then that is what we must do, for that which is not of faith is sin.

Likewise, when someone we know makes just such a "clear conscience" decision, then we must allow them to walk in that way without trying to browbeat them into thinking the same way we think. That is not to say that we should avoid making our case to the contrary, for to not do so would be a dereliction of our duty. However, we must ask *Abba* to guide us so we know when to bring the subject up, and how to approach it so that our relationship with that person is not torn asunder:

**"Therefore let us pursue the things which make for peace and the things by which one may edify another."** (Rom. 14:19)

#### ~ What Should We Do? ~

What should a person do if they find themselves in a situation where their fellowship makes a decision to follow a calendar which they believe to be incorrect?

First of all, it is our belief that Passover is to be celebrated in the home whenever possible, for that is the manner in which the first Passover was kept:

**"Then Moses called for all the elders of Israel and said to them, 'Pick out and take lambs for yourselves according to your families, and kill the Passover lamb.'"** (Ex. 12:21)

It is a very common practice to have "Teaching *Seders*" around Passover time. Therefore, for the sake of unity, we recommend that people attend a "Teaching *Seder*" with their fellowship on the calendar date the fellowship has chosen. Then, go ahead and celebrate the Passover at home on the date which you, in good conscience, believe to be the correct date for Passover.

Be up front with the members of your fellowship. Tell them that you will honor their decision to observe the Festival at a different time, but that you must, in good faith, observe it at the time which you believe (in good conscience) to be the proper time. Hopefully, since you are willing to honor their decision, they will be willing to honor yours. In this way, unity can be maintained among the brethren, even when the disagreement concerns something as important as when to celebrate the Festivals. In this way you will be:

**"... endeavoring to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace."** (Eph. 4:3)

Expect harmony to prevail, but be prepared for disharmony, so if they fail to honor your decision, you will not be caught by surprise.

~ When Will This Be Resolved? ~

Do not expect a speedy resolution to the Calendar issue, for as long as there are free people, living in the world of the Adversary, there will be disagreements.

Perhaps, when the new *Sanhedrin* takes up the Calendar issue they will discover a way to satisfy all the various factions. However, this does not seem likely. If they decide to go to a combination of the *Sighted Calendar* and the *Calculated Calendar*, will the *Karaites* submit to their authority? No one knows. Likewise, if they do go to a *Sighted Calendar*, such a move will not satisfy those who follow the *Astronomical Calendar*. Or if they decide to go with a strict *Astronomical Calendar*, that certainly will not satisfy those who follow the *Sighted Calendar*.

Perhaps the issue will not find resolution until the coming of *Elijah*:

**"Behold, I will send you Elijah the prophet  
Before the coming of the great and dreadful day of the  
LORD [YHVH].**

**<sup>6</sup> And he will turn  
The hearts of the fathers to the children,  
And the hearts of the children to their fathers,  
Lest I come and strike the earth with a curse."**

(Mal. 4:5-6)

Perhaps we will have to wait for *Y'shua HaMashiach* to come back and straighten everything out. May He come soon and in our time.

~ Summary ~

The current Calendar situation has brewed dissension within the Messianic Community. Well intentioned people, whose chief desire is to serve God with all their heart, soul, mind, and strength, have come to major disagreements about which Calendar to follow. Sadly, these disputes have led to further splits and schisms which Paul warned against:

**"...that there should be no schism in the body, but that the members should have the same care for one another."**

(I Cor. 12:25)

Apparently, the early Messianic congregations also had divisions which occurred in their assemblies, although they were probably not over the Calendar issue:

**"Now I plead with you, brethren, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ [Y'shua HaMashiach], that you all speak the same thing, and that there be no divisions among you,**

**but that you be perfectly joined together in the same mind and in the same judgment."**

(I Cor. 1:10)

For us personally, the decision has been easy, for we believe that the only body of *Elders* which has the God-given authority to establish the Calendar for the Commonwealth of Israel is the *Sanhedrin*. Since the Messianic Community is a "grafted in" part of the Commonwealth of Israel, we believe it is incumbent upon us to follow the lead of the *Sanhedrin* in this matter:

**"What advantage then has the Jew, or what is the profit of circumcision? <sup>2</sup> Much in every way! Chiefly because to them were committed the oracles of God."**

(Rom. 3:1-20)

We believe that a part of the "Oracles of God" which was handed off to Judah after the House of Israel was taken captive, is the establishment of the Calendar. It is only when the *Traditional Hebrew Calendar* specifically defies Scripture (such as with the dating of *Shavu'ot*), that we believe we should deviate from it.

If the entire Messianic Community were to begin to follow the *Traditional Hebrew Calendar*, it would bring unity and cohesion to the movement. Then, the House of Israel (*Ephraim* or *Joseph*, as some call it) could begin the process of reuniting with our brother, the House of Judah.

When full unity finally does come, both Houses of Israel will arrive at that wonderful place which David wrote about in the Psalms:

**"A Song of Ascents. Of David.**

**Behold, how good and how pleasant it is  
For brethren to dwell together in unity!**

**<sup>2</sup> It is like the precious oil upon the head,  
Running down on the beard,**

**The beard of Aaron,  
Running down on the edge of his garments.**

**<sup>3</sup> It is like the dew of Hermon,  
Descending upon the mountains of Zion;  
For there the LORD [YHVH] commanded  
the blessing --**

**Life forevermore."**

(Psalm 133:1-3)

May we all come to worship the Great King in unity, love, and peace.

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