

# Messianic Jewish

# Life!

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## Messianic Judaism

*History, Identity, Symbols, & Purpose of our Movement*



an object representing



analogous qualities



Symbol: a thing conventionally regarded as representing,



an abstract concept



or by association



typifying, or recalling something else by possessing



or quality. O.E.D.



to fact or thought;



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The Essential Difference Between Synagogue & Church •  
Authentic Messianic Jewish Worship • Youth Perspective



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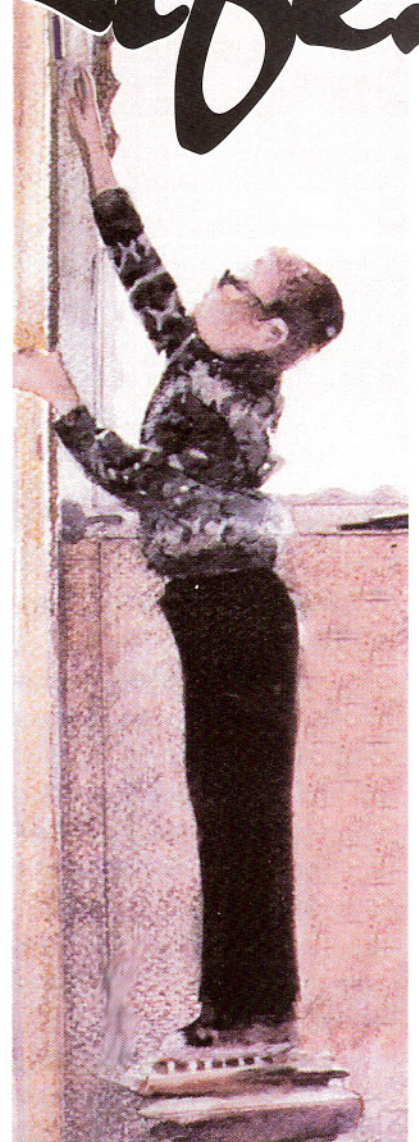
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## MISSION STATEMENT

The purpose of the International Messianic Jewish Alliance is to provide for the spiritual and material welfare of Jewish believers and to witness to the Jewish people about Yeshua the Messiah.

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# Symbols Used by Messianic Jews in Israel

Dr. Gershon Nerel

Many Messianic Jewish congregations and organizations in Israel use a logo as their graphic identification. Such symbols often relate to national images, like the menorah or the Star (shield) of David, that are rooted in the Bible or in Jewish tradition. Increasingly, these national signs also include the fish, well known since antiquity as a symbol for Messiah Yeshua. Of course, such imagery is not exclusive to Israel.

Contemporary Messianic Jewish symbols basically convey the message that there is no contradiction in being Jewish and believing in Yeshua. This message is directed towards Gentile Christians as well as mainstream Jews, to say that Yeshua was and remained a Jew, and that Jewish believers in Yeshua (JBY) are not traitors or renegades.



## The Sign of the Cross and Modern Messianic Jewish Symbolism

It is a fact, both in Israel and in the diaspora, that in the last decades the sign of the cross was gradually removed from most Messianic Jewish symbols. Sometimes, however, their new symbols still project the element of the cross, yet only in a marginal and indirect way. The explanation for this fact seems to be the growing visibility, as well as social involvement, of JBY within the normative Jewish milieu. Jewish collective memory still remembers Church persecutions, and forced conversions, always done under the sign of the

cross. In Israeli elementary schools, children who attend Math classes are taught to use the + sign in a way that would not look like an ordinary cross. In other words, pupils are requested to write the plus mark only with the three upper pointers of an +, omitting its bottom part. This shows how contemporary Jewry still considers the symbol of the cross as a symbol of Christian anti-Semitism. Therefore JBY try to shape their emblems through alternatives—eliminating or minimizing the cross sign. This development, however, did not occur without disputes and even divisions within congregations.

The cross anti-Semitism is particularly remembered in the State of Israel. When daily surrounded by the geography and history of the Land of Israel, one can hardly forget the Crusades. With the blessing of the Church, Crusaders conquered this Land with slaughter and expulsion of Jews. With bloody hands the Crusaders used, at the very same time, both the cross and the sword. With this local background, most Israeli Messianic Jews refuse to exhibit the physical symbol of the cross on the walls of their homes or congregation halls. This is the same even with a small personal ornament, like the cross on a necklace.

However, we should also realize that in their teachings JBY constantly emphasize, both privately and in public, that there is no substitute for the message of the crucified Messiah. Even without using a golden or a

wooden decoration of the cross, and without highlighting the cross in their symbolism, still JBY repeat and point to the narrow way of the cross. They openly declare the teaching of the cross as being the source for mercy, forgiveness, and everlasting life, which is the cornerstone of their faith. In general, Israeli Messianic Jewish symbols express continuity and renewal: JBY are the heirs of the New Testament Jews, as well as active partakers in the restoration of Israel.



## The Cross in the Star of David

Between the World Wars the symbol of the cross in the Star of

David was widely used by JBY, and it remained so in Israel during the first decade after the establishment of the State in 1948. Three persons, Abram Poljak, Agnes Waldstein and Albert Springer, stood behind the mass dissemination of this image. In the early 1950s their Jerusalem Jewish Christian Fellowship used publicly an official flag: a blue cloth as background and a white cross in the Star of David. In 1959 they also introduced another emblem: a wooden candelabrum, with a cross inside the Star of David placed between the seven branches.

The cross in the flag, however, soon became a controversial issue in this community. By the argument that “we are not semi-Christians,” Poljak strongly defended the presence of the cross in the flag. But eventually the leadership of this



group went to Europe and after Poljak's death in 1963, the symbol of the cross in the Star of David no longer appeared in Israeli Messianic Jewish congregations. Since those times Messianic Jewish logos in the country developed in other directions. They looked for graphic substitutes for the sign of the cross.



### The Star of David in the Star of Light

In 1958, Zeev Shlomo Kofsman, the founder of the Messianic Assembly of Israel—

The Assembly of Jerusalem, created for his congregation a new symbol. This emblem contained three elements: a white Star of David in the center, encompassed by a blue star, surrounded by a ring that included the Hebrew verse: “Arise, shine; for your light has come” (Isaiah 60:1). The blue star was shaped by octagonal angles, with its four extreme corners stretching out beyond the ring. The star image also represented the cross, yet in an indirect way.

Another motif that is reflected in this symbol is the compass. Just as the compass is a valuable tool to direct a person on his way, pointing to the North Star, so also the light of Yeshua leads to the truth. The integration of all these components produced a symbol friendly to the environment, not provocative, but still combining the basic messianic narrative of the Old and New Testaments. The Hebrew inscription in this symbol, together with the star of light, gave the association of ideas that the holders of the logo believed in the fulfillment of biblical prophecy. Although the graphic play with the star still left the cross, no one could be mistaken that this symbol represented a Jewish group.

However, like the other symbols of the cross in the Star of David, also this emblem of the Star of David in the star of light did not survive more than a decade. In December 1969 the Jerusalem Messianic Assembly accepted new members, and it moved back to its original place on the Street of Prophets, where it is located today. As the congregational symbol was greatly identified with the personality and work of Kofsman, was not accepted by the new leadership. After Kofsman's death in 1976, this symbol gradually disappeared. Today this Assembly uses another emblem: the *menorah* and the fish.



### The Dolphin

Between the years 1966–1969, under the auspices of the United Christian Council in Israel

(UCCI), an unprecedented Messianic Jewish Printing Press was established in Jerusalem. The symbol of the fish—in the form of the dolphin — appeared on the publications. Victor Smadja, then head of the UCCI subcommittee for Hebrew literature, and Risto Santala, both representing the Finnish Evangelical Lutheran Mission (FELM), introduced the dolphin symbol. Unlike the cross, the fish was not a controversial sign, yet at the same time it was universally accepted as symbolizing Yeshua.

As is well known, the early Church fathers made reference to *ichtus*, the Greek acronym identifying Messiah with a fish. The original acronym was for *Iesous Christos Theou Yios Soter* this meant Jesus Christ, Son of God, Savior. Since then this association of Messiah with fish has remained until today. In Israel, the dolphin was used by JBY as a peaceful artistic means to introduce the fish symbol relating to Yeshua.

The late Moshe Ben-Meir provided a relevant interpretation to the following verse: “for as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of the great fish, so will the Son of Man be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth” (Matthew 12:40). Ben-Meir explained that the big fish was *dag* in Hebrew, and not a whale. Whale is *leviathan*, an unclean sea fish, while *dag* is a clean creature. According to Ben-Meir, the Hebrew letters *dalet* (4) and *gimel* (3) in the word *dag* make the number 7, “a sacred number, indicating divine fulness.” Following this reasoning—using numerology—one could easily point to Yeshua's perfection and divinity—in the messianic symbolism of the fish.

Dolphin Christian Press and Publishers was housed rent-free in a basement room at the Finnish Mission School in Jerusalem and the International Hebrew Christian Alliance (now International Messianic Jewish Alliance) and FELM were represented on its managerial board. In October, 1969 the equipment and funds of Dolphin Press were handed over to Yanetz Ltd., a new Messianic publishing house in Jerusalem still in operation today.



### The Light of the Menorah

In 1991, when the Messianic Jewish

Alliance of Israel (MJAI) started to publish its magazine *Zot Habrith* (*This is the Covenant*), the emblem of a seven-branched candelabrum was chosen as its symbol. The seven-branched candlestick was originally placed in the Tabernacle and Temple sanctuary. The Menorah has since become a universal symbol of Jewry and Judaism, and now it is the official emblem of the

continued on page 28



President and State of Israel. However, unlike the traditional unkindled menorah, Messianic Jews usually show an illuminated menorah. For JBY, the menorah symbolizes the light of the Messiah (John 1: 4–5), shining and covering the whole earth (Luke 8: 16).

The new Israeli Alliance, born in 1989, was closely related to the International Messianic Jewish Alliance, born in 1925, so the daughter society found the symbol of the Menorah already there with the mother Alliance. Since the 1940s the International Alliance has used the symbol of the shining menorah as a “candlestick of witness.” Later, in the 1950s the International Alliance also added to its Menorah logo the Greek word *ichtus*: fish, symbolizing the Messiah Yeshua. However, in the 1970s *The Hebrew Christian*, the quarterly of the International Alliance, dropped the Greek word *ichtus* from its logo, and instead inserted in Hebrew the inscription “Yeshua said: I am the light of the World.”

Today, the illuminated menorah in the logo of the International Alliance holds a shortened inscription in Hebrew: “Yeshua light of the world.”



### The Torch and the Trumpet of Gideon

The model of the judge Gideon is the source for the emblem of the Ethiopian Messianic Jewish community in Israel. In this logo appears Gideon, or one of his followers (Judges 7:20), holding in one hand a lightened torch (*lapid*) and in the other a trumpet (*shofar*). Under the legs of this fighter is a broken pitcher. Below this image an inscription in Hebrew holds three words: trumpet, pitcher, torch. Metaphorically this logo declares: “We are a small minority, but God is

with us; eventually the victory is ours.”

Interestingly, the torch and trumpet were used previously by Israeli JBY. *The Torch* was a Messianic journal in Hebrew published in Jerusalem between 1960 and 1962; *Voice of the Trumpet* was another journal printed in Haifa in 1953.



### The Menorah and the Fish

Helmut Iffert, of the Messianic Assembly in Jerusalem, is the initiator and designer of the menorah and fish logo, which is widely used among Israeli JBY. In this symbol, the bottom side of the horizontal shape of the fish is the basis of the lower branch of the menorah. This is also printed on books and pamphlets published by Yanetz Printing Press in Jerusalem, currently under the management of Victor Smadja. The menorah in the fish is printed as a sticker in various colors and is distributed freely.

Practically, the symbol of the menorah within the fish functions as an identification sign among Messianic Jews, and even as a badge of pride. However, although Israeli JBY live in an intolerant environment, this symbol should not be interpreted as a secret means of identification for an underground catacomb movement. Many Israeli cars are the platform for political and even military labels. For example, some would proudly exhibit stickers of special units of the Israeli Defense Forces. In the same way, Israeli Messianic Jews also use such stickers as their trademark.

The Messianic Assembly in Jerusalem, originally founded by Shlomo Kofsman, now uses as its logo another format of the menorah and the fish symbol. This congregational logo is a semi-oval consisting

of three parts: a large seven-branched menorah, a small fish above it and on the top, as a cover, are written the Hebrew words *Kehillah Meshihit Israelit*, (Israeli Messianic Assembly). The message of this symbol is clear: Messiah Yeshua — the fish — is placed in the center, and the menorah represents the national Jewish aspect.

In the Messianic Assembly building, a seven-branched menorah, lit with electricity, is placed near the pulpit in the congregational hall. This is customary also in some other congregations. Thus even just the menorah itself is viewed by JBY as a messianic symbol

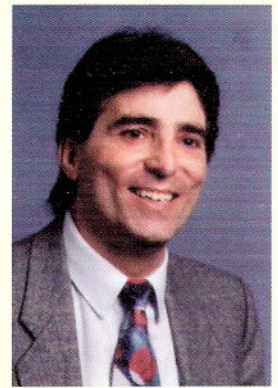
Interestingly, according to Israeli archaeologists, since the late second and third centuries AD, the menorah has been a messianic symbol throughout the entire Jewish world. Namely, in Jewish art the menorah reflects the hope for the future coming of the Messiah. Within mainstream Jewry, the menorah became a symbol for the still expected Messiah. Thus, while in the wide Jewish world the menorah is accepted as a messianic symbol, expressing hope for redemption, JBY find it legitimate to identify the menorah with Messiah Yeshua. Consequently the menorah is viewed by JBY both as a national and a messianic symbol.



### Epilogue

The menorah and fish, separately or together, are major symbols used by Messianic Jews in Israel. Also the Star of David appears in various logos. However, it is especially the menorah, with its national and Messianic symbolism, that becomes an artistic instrument to identify with the ethnic Jewish community and at the same time, represent Yeshua through the





**In Loving  
Memory of  
Ilan Zamir**  
MJAI President  
ר"צ

The Executive Committee of the Messianic Jewish Alliance of Israel wishes to express its deepest sorrow on the passing of our beloved brother and friend, Ilan Zamir, who died on April 6th, 2000, after a long and complicated illness. Ilan, who served as the Alliance President from January, 1994, until 31st December, 1999, is survived by his dear wife Shir-El, their two young children, Netanel and Moriel, and his mother, sister, and brother.

On April 7th, 2000, Ilan's body was laid to rest in a traditional Jewish funeral in the mountains overlooking the city of Jerusalem, where he spent much of his life. Later that day, a memorial service was held at Messianic *moshav* (village) Yad Ha-Shmona in the Judean hills. The service, lasting several hours, provided the proper forum for Ilan's family, friends, and co-workers to pray, worship, and to pay their respects to a man who was a true servant of the Messiah.

The Messianic Jewish Alliance of Israel greatly mourns the loss of Ilan, who was an inspiration to all. We thank the Lord for the many years in which Ilan served as President of the MJAI. As he did in other aspects of his life, Ilan fulfilled this role with dignity, grace, faithfulness, dedication and wisdom. During Ilan's years at the Alliance, his desire to serve and to build the Body of Messiah was always evident. When there was a need in the Body, or a goal to achieve, he set out to accomplish whatever needed to be done. Ilan's vision for the unity of the local Body of Messiah was deep in his heart — the guiding principle behind his outstanding service. This is the legacy that remains and propels us forward as we strive to be a light to our people, Israel. »

SUGGESTED READING

Walter Riggins, "Image and Reality: The Use of Jewish Symbolism by Messianic Jews," in *Mishkan*, 19 (1993), pp. 54-63.

Tsvi Sadan, *Even After Auschwitz — Immanuel*, in *Teaching from Zion*, 9 (January 1997), pp. 28-29.

Haim Joseph Haimoff, *Beginning at Jerusalem*, in *Salvation*, 22 (1968), p. 6.

Abram Poljak, *The Cross Matters*, in *Jerusalem*, 28 (1949), p. 5.

Gershon Nerel, *Messianic Jews in Eretz-Israel (1917-1967): Trends and Changes in Shaping Self Identity*, Ph.D. Dissertation, The Hebrew University of Jerusalem 1996, p. 171 (Hebrew).

*Shalom*, (Journal d'Information), Granville, Manche 1961-1966, the cover page. Appeared on the private letterhead of Zeev Kofsman and his wife Yvette.

"Two U.C.C.I. Books Ready for Publication," in *UCCI News*, [United Christian Council in Israel], vol. 1 (1970), p. 13.

Moshe Ben-Meir, *The Message of the Prophet Jona*, Haifa, n.d., p. 11.

*Zot Habrith—This is the Covenant*, Jerusalem, Autumn 1999, p. 1.

Gershon Nerel, "Messianic Jews in Eretz Israel," in *Mishkan*, 27 (1997), p. 25.

Heinz Leuner, ed., *Der Zeuge, The International Hebrew Christian Alliance*, cover page.

Fritz May, *Von Saba nach Zion*, Wetzlar 1998, p. 134.

Dan Barag, *The Menorah as a Messianic Symbol in the Late Roman and Byzantine Periods*, in *Proceedings of the Ninth World Congress of Jewish Studies*, Division B, Volume I, Jerusalem 1986, pp. 59-62 (Hebrew).

Bellarmino Bagatti, *The Church from the Circumcision, Jerusalem 1984*, p. 214; Cf. G. Robinson Lees, *Notes, (Lamps from Tomb near Silwan*, in *Palestine Exploration Fund*, London 1892, p. 198.

Gedaliahu Guy Stroumsa, *The Early Christian Fish Symbol Reconsidered*, in I. Gruenwald, Sh. Shaked & G. Stroumsa, eds., *Messiah and Christos*, Tuebingen 1992, p. 205.

menorah. Yet as JBY rarely use the traditional sign of the cross, because of the connotation with Church anti-Semitism, they still adopt the fish symbol.

The interesting point is that modern JBY even view the fish symbol as an authentic sign of the original Jewish community of the New Testament. One may ask the following question: is this just an anachronism, even ignorance, or, is there a realistic possibility that the fish symbol was an authentic messianic sign for the first JBY?

Although there is no substantial evidence, archaeological or narrative, that Yeshua's first Jewish followers identified the Redeemer with the fish, a few scholars still believe that they did so. In research recently done at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, it was suggested that the identification of Yeshua with the fish first occurred in the earliest, Aramaic/Hebrew-speaking, community. Namely, it is argued that the fish symbol for Messiah did not originate in the Greek world, but rather among the Palestinian Nazarene Jews, as part of their linguistic association between the names of Yeshua and Yehoshua, i.e. Joshua Ben-Nun, the successor of Moses. Literally, *nun* in Hebrew means fish. Perhaps some modern JBY could find in this new hypothesis an affirmation for currently using the fish as a Jewish symbol for Messiah Yeshua. »



GERSHON NEREL has been the Israel secretary for the IMJA since 1993. He received his Ph.D. on *Messianic Jewish Self-Identity in Eretz Israel* from the Hebrew University of Jerusalem (1996). Dr. Nerel is involved in several academic projects researching the modern Messianic Jewish movement. He also serves on the editorial

board of *Mishkan*, a forum on the Gospel and the Jewish people published in Jerusalem.