The roots of Hebrew Roots

A small but growing movement of Christians believes fervently that Torah observance is for everyone.

by Dawn Araujo-Hawkins in the September 2024 issue
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For Amy Guenther, the shift to Torah observance was swift and unexpected. About a decade ago, one of her friends started creating Facebook posts suggesting that Christians should be keeping the laws laid out in the first five books of the Hebrew Bible. “She would say things like, ‘Christian, Jesus didn’t die so you could not do sabbath,’ and, ‘Jesus didn’t die so you could eat a ham sandwich,’” Guenther recalled.

Guenther, a Baptist-educated nurse and mother of three, had been raised to believe that following the laws of the Hebrew Bible was like “stomping on the grace of the cross”—a solid way to earn yourself a one-way ticket to hell. And although she

wasn’t particularly close with this Facebook friend, Guenther became somewhat obsessed with saving her from eternal damnation.

In preparation for a confrontation with her, Guenther started a notebook of the “debatable passages” such as Matthew 5:17–20—“I have come not to abolish but to fulfill” the law—that she’d seen used to promote the Torah’s relevance for followers of Jesus. She started using an interlinear Bible so she could verify the meaning of Hebrew words, and she read the entire Bible, looking especially for the place where God changes the sabbath from Saturday to Sunday.

“Of course I didn’t find it, because it’s not in there,” Guenther told the century. She also found that she couldn’t argue down those debatable passages she’d listed out.

So, a few weeks later, Guenther celebrated Passover for the first time.

Today, Guenther, 48, is passionate about helping others understand the blessings of Torah observance. She’s the publisher and editor-in-chief of *Torah Sisters*, a glossy bimonthly magazine for women, and she has a podcast and YouTube channel of the same name. Last fall, Guenther published her first book, *30-Day Sabbath Challenge: Transform Your Life by Resting God’s Way*.

Guenther doesn’t have a name for her religion. (“It’s just Bible people doing Bible things,” she said.) But the Hebrew Roots movement—the decentralized, widely variegated communities of people who, like Guenther, both keep Torah and believe Yeshua is the messiah—is growing.

Hebrew Roots differs from Messianic Judaism on both the role of rabbinic law and the question of Torah observance for non-Jews.

Compared to mainstream Christianity, the Hebrew Roots movement remains relatively small, said Jon Sherman, one of the teachers at 119 Ministries, a Hebrew Roots apologetics group. But there was a large uptick around 2008, and there’s been steady growth ever since, he explained. Congregations that began with a few families meeting in a living room are now renting spaces in churches and community centers and wind up looking for bigger spaces each year.

The fellowship finder on the 119 Ministries website, perhaps the closest thing to a Hebrew Roots data tracker, shows more than 14,000 Torah-observant Christian congregations and individuals on six continents—and Sherman said they add about

300 more entries each month.

But it’s an imperfect tool that relies on user submissions—and 119 Ministries is only one group. So the actual number of adherents is almost certainly higher. Within the Hebrew Roots movement, it’s not uncommon to hear of Christians who start keeping Torah but who think they’re the only ones doing it.

Guenther recently met a family that had been keeping Torah privately in their home for five years before they found one of the two fellowships in mid-Michigan that she attends. “I felt terrible that that family had been alone for five years,” she said. “I was like, ‘I need to get better at Google so they can find us on Google!’”

Yet despite the sometimes muted advertising, some Hebrew Roots congregations in the United States report having hundreds of people in attendance at their weekly shabbat services—and feast day celebrations can draw in as many as 500. Videos tagged “Hebrew Roots” on TikTok (either for or against the movement) collectively have more than 20 million views.

Hebrew Roots might sound a lot like Messianic Judaism, but they are actually two distinct groups within a larger Torah movement. One major point of division is the role of the rabbinic law: Messianic Jews affirm its authority, while the Hebrew Roots movement does not. Another is the question of whether non-Jews have an imperative to follow Torah. Messianic Jewish leadership says Torah observance is only for Jews, while Hebrew Roots says it’s a covenant obligation for everyone.

And Hebrew Roots itself is not a monolith. Different communities have different interpretations of Torah and even different names for themselves. But there are four outward behaviors that people in the movement mostly all agree on:

• They rest on the sabbath, from sundown on Friday to sundown on Saturday.

• They do not celebrate Christmas and Easter but do celebrate the festivals described in Leviticus 23.

• They eat “biblically clean,” which is similar but not identical to a kosher diet.

• Many of them—women and men—wear tzitzit, the tassels described in Numbers 15:37–41 and Deuteronomy 22:12.

“We see that Yeshua is our bridegroom and we are his bride,” said Anna Kaufman, a 25-year-old self-described Messianic Torah Observant Israelite from Napa Valley, California. “And if we’re supposed to walk out our faith like we’re married to him as a bride, where are our wedding vows? . . . The covenant clearly points to the Torah.”

Also common in the Hebrew Roots movement is a conviction that the church got offtrack in regard to the Torah because it has largely misunderstood Paul’s writings about it—a trap they say Peter explicitly warns against in 2 Peter 3:16.

The 119 Ministries book *The Pauline Paradox: What Did Paul Teach about the Law of God?* argues that in passages where Paul appears to be rejecting the Torah, he is in fact rejecting a ritual conversion to Judaism that was being promoted as a means of salvation. “Paul was not preaching against the Law of God—something he calls holy, righteous, and good (Romans 7:12)—but against a *misuse* of the Law of God,” it says. “Why? Among many reasons, it took the emphasis off the work of Messiah for salvation and placed it on the work of man.”

In some ways, the Hebrew Roots treatment of Paul’s theology seems to rescue it from the antisemitism sometimes ascribed to it. But despite their consensus that Paul emphatically affirms the Torah—and despite their generally Zionist worldview—people in the Hebrew Roots movement typically see Jesus as an insurmountable hurdle to worshiping alongside Jews. Although some of them said they hope this could soon change.

While there’s not enough data to confirm this claim, both Guenther and Kaufman said that anecdotally, they’ve noticed more and more Jews discovering Jesus, which they find encouraging.

“They’re putting their faith in Messiah, and they’re worshiping Yeshua as their savior, and they’re putting their faith in his death and resurrection in record numbers,” Guenther said.

People in the movement observe the sabbath, celebrate the festivals described in Leviticus 23, and eat “biblically clean.” Many also wear tzitzit.

Although the Hebrew Roots movement is experiencing something of a resurgence, it’s not new. Believers, of course, say that this is the way Yeshua and his first followers practiced their faith and that there’s always been an orthopractic remnant.

But the actual label “Hebrew Roots” was coined in 1992 by Dean Wheelock, a musician and retired data processing executive in California. He had it trademarked in 2004.

Raised in a secular home, in 1968 Wheelock converted to the Worldwide Church of God, a controversial apocalyptic Christian community founded three decades prior by radio evangelist Herbert W. Armstrong. Armstrong’s followers kept the sabbath and celebrated some of the Levitical festivals but, as Wheelock would later claim, they did so without any acknowledgment of the essential Jewishness of it all.

Wheelock died in 2022, but in a 2014 interview with Torah Life Ministries he explained that it was his growing interest in Jesus’ Jewish identity that ultimately led to his 1995 split with the Church of God International, an offshoot of the WCG where he was an ordained elder. He had begun studying under Joseph Good after receiving a copy of Good’s 1991 book *Rosh HaShanah and the Messianic Kingdom to Come: A Messianic Jewish Interpretation of the Feast of Trumpets*.

In 1996, now no longer affiliated with the WCG or CGI, Wheelock and his wife, Susan, sent out a 28-page pilot newsletter they called *Hebrew Roots*, hoping to share what they had been learning about Y’shua HaMashiach—Jesus the Messiah. The newsletter got a positive response, and over the next 25 years the Wheelocks would build an entire education ministry around it.

Dean’s failing health caused them to stop publishing *Hebrew Roots* in 2021, but Susan told the century that the last issue went out to more than 2,900 subscribers.

She may not be publishing anymore, but Susan said she is committed to continuing the teaching aspect of the ministry she and Dean shared. It’s largely a prison ministry these days, and while everything on the *Hebrew Roots* website is free and printable, she recently purchased a booklet printer so she can send materials to incarcerated readers who can’t access a printer.

“I believe this is a work that God gave us, and when you feel that God has called you to do something, do you argue?” she said, laughing.

Not every person in the Hebrew Roots movement today acknowledges or is even aware of the Wheelocks’ influence on their religious practice. Jon Sherman at 119 Ministries, for instance, had never heard of them. And yet, armed with Dean Wheelock’s language of “Hebrew roots” and an array of 21st-century digital tools,

the new generation of believers is hard at work building a proud and conspicuous Torah-pursuant culture.

YouTube videos produced by 119 Ministries—which can reach up to 26,000 views—are sleek and professionally produced. Torah lifestyle bloggers share their aesthetically pleasing, curated Instagram feeds with thousands of followers. Others in the movement create and sell Torah-specific homeschool curricula or run online shops stocked with items like personalized Hebrew banners, vinyl shofar stickers, or "This house keeps Torah" welcome mats.

Kaufman owns Torah Market, a platform where Torah-observant makers can sell their wares. She came up with the idea in 2021 after people expressed interest in the Torah-themed leather bracelets she'd started making for herself.

Lately, Kaufman's been studying business models. She said that if it's God's will, she'd love to expand Torah Market so that someone looking for, say, a dress could easily find a Torah-observant clothier to buy from.

"It's amazing seeing how, especially in stricter religious communities, just how long a dollar stays within that community," she said. "When you look at the Muslim community, a dollar gets passed around like 14 times before it's out into the world. And the same with Jews, it's like 12 times. But when it comes to Christians and Torah-observant believers, you don't see that at all."

Building community appears to be one of the highest priorities for people in the Hebrew Roots movement. For example, the closest Hebrew Roots fellowship to Kaufman, Altar of Truth, is two hours away in Sacramento. Yet she often makes the trek with her husband and two young children. And three times a year, the family flies from California to Tennessee to celebrate the Levitical feasts with Messianic Torah Observant Israel, a group Kaufman said has been instrumental in her faith journey.

In Michigan, Guenther said one of the highlights of gathering for shabbat every Saturday is simply being with like-minded people. Services often don't start until noon because it's the sabbath and people are allowed to sleep in, she explained. Then, after worship and a potluck, the kids play while the adults chat and pray for each other—sometimes until 8 p.m. or later.

“No one wants to go home,” Guenther said. “Also, there’s nothing to do. We don’t go to football games, we’re not going to go to Home Depot, we’re not going out to eat because it’s sabbath. Our schedules are clear.”

Many people in the Hebrew Roots movement say the decision to eschew Sunday worship, as well as Christmas and Easter, caused conflict with their Christian family and friends. Guenther won’t go so far as to say that the movement is being persecuted in the United States—this country is one of the best places to practice any religion, she said—but that doesn’t mean that what they’re doing is easy.

“When you start doing a faith walk that’s really different, that’s brave and it’s hard,” she said. “It takes hard-core people to do this.”

The movement certainly has its detractors.

In a 2014 position paper, the International Alliance of Messianic Congregations and Synagogues called the Hebrew Roots movement dangerous and “deeply and intimately intertwined with replacement theology.”

For some evangelicals, cataloging the ways the Hebrew Roots movement is erroneous, a cult, or both has become something of a hobbyhorse. Entire blogs and books have been devoted to the topic, including 2019’s *Twist-A-Matic Theology: Exploring the Doctrine of the Hebrew Roots Movement* by Brent Adkisson, a former youth minister. R. L. Solberg, who teaches theology at Williamson College, a nondenominational Christian school in Franklin, Tennessee, has made an entire ministry out of denouncing the Torah movement.

Carol Harris-Shapiro, a Reconstructionist rabbi who teaches religion at Temple University and who wrote a book on Messianic Judaism, said she can appreciate the Hebrew Roots movement’s impulse to try to emulate Jesus’ religious practices. But where she thinks at least some people in the movement shift away from emulation and into something more disrespectful is in their stated allegiance to *sola scriptura* at the expense of Jewish oral law.

“That’s the ultimate supersessionism,” Harris-Shapiro said. “Some of them believe the Talmud is a distortion and that they’re the only ones who are doing it right—and the Jews who have been doing it for 2,000 and some years were really just wasting their time.”

For the last ten years, Caleb Hegg has cohosted *Messiah Matters*, a YouTube show that addresses what he sees as the many heresies of the Hebrew Roots movement—including a rejection of the Trinity, Sacred Nameism, or a belief that people can only be saved if they know the correct Hebrew name of God, and two-house theology, which maintains that today's Christians are descendants of the ten lost tribes of Israel.

In his day job, Hegg is the director of operations at Torah Resource, a Messianic Jewish ministry that his father founded in 2002. And while he feels a filial duty to support his father's work and legacy, Hegg no longer identifies as a Messianic Jew. Instead, he prefers to call himself a Pronomian Christian—*pronomian* being Greek for "pro-law."

Hegg told the century that Pronomian Christianity is a theology rather than a movement. And it's a spectrum. On one end, you have people who still worship in mainstream Christian churches but identify as Pronomian, he said. "At the other end of the Pronomian spectrum is someone like me, and I'm going to tell you that I think Christians should be keeping the sabbath, Christians should be keeping the biblical festivals, and that there will be another temple rebuilt and in that temple there will be sacrifices again."

In a Torah Resource blog post explaining his exit from Messianic Judaism, Hegg wrote that, in recent years, too many Messianic evangelists have opted for shock value and, in the process, have turned to sloppy theology. "The fact is, Christianity is not a bad word," he added. Yet despite feeling at theological odds with two of the Torah movement's major players, Hegg is convinced that the church is currently undergoing a reformation, prophesied by God, in which it's being called back to its, well, Hebrew roots.

"It's in Isaiah 56," Hegg told the century. "It says that the Gentiles will keep the sabbath and that the Gentiles will keep a kosher diet. And when they don't, that's not good news for them."

Guenther, too, is convinced that more and more Christians are starting to keep Torah because it was prophesied. God promised to bring back the lost tribes of Israel, she said, and people are now awakened to their true identity. It's only a matter of time before Torah observance becomes the default, she added.

“I think everyone who says, ‘Yeshua is my King of kings and Lord of lords,’ is part of Israel,” she said, “and we’re all going to be doing this someday.”