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QH 6.3

BUILDING A SCRIPTURALLY STRUCTURED COMMUNITY

In one of our “Freedom’s Call” newsletters, we encouraged all of you who have not already formed a Scripturally-based community to do so. In response, we received several letters from brethren asking how to go about this.

While there is no agreed upon authority or method for followers of Yehoshua in creating such a community, there is an implied mandate and a general pattern described in scripture and in Jewish tradition, especially in the Apostolic Writings. What follows is a broad description of what has worked in the past and what is now working on several units we know of. Use it if you wish, or not, but bear in mind when setting up your own community that the more we all have in common, the easier it will be for chaplains, volunteers and ministries to work with us in the future. This system, or one very similar to it, worked for the apostles and first – century believers. It should work for you, too.

The basic structure of the community consists of a hierarchy of leadership, divisions for orchestrating worship and teaching, an action group for performing outreach and charity, and a *Beyth Dyn* (house of judgment). Initially some of these positions will overlap, with a few overworked brethren performing multiple tasks. As the community grows, tasks can be assigned by the leadership to those whom YHWH has given suitable gifts to best perform them.

The leadership group is made up of a *Rosh Beyth Dyn* (president or chief), *Zaqenym* (elders), and *Shamashym* (servants or overseers). The size of the community will dictate the number of each. For example, in a group of less than fifty members, two or three *Zaqenym* are appropriate. As a general rule of thumb, an additional elder can be appointed for each twenty-five members added to the community thereafter. This formula generally comports with the Torah instruction that leaders and judges of the people should be over groups of thousands, hundreds, fifties, and tens. The same formula works well for *Shamashym*. There can, of course, be only one *Rosh Beyth Dyn* at a time.

The first selected position should be *Zaqenym*. They should hopefully be of the eldest among you, but this need not always be so, and other qualities are just as important. They must be knowledgeable of scripture – especially Torah law. They should be wise and humble, willing to listen, yet firm in resolve, of excellent character and righteous in behavior. Most of all, they should be known for their love and mercy. *Zaqenym* are the silent power behind the *Rosh Beyth Dyn*¹, and they serve for life, or until they leave the congregation, so they must be chosen very carefully

The next selected position is the *Rosh Beyth Dyn*. He also should be knowledgeable in scripture, wise and humble. He is the outward face of the community, so his character must be as nearly flawless as possible. He must be able to lead and administer the community firmly, yet be filled with love and devotion for those he rules. To appoint a *Rosh Beyth Dyn*, a *Beyth Dyn* must be convened and the congregation assembled. This meeting is chaired by the *Zaqenym* who act as a panel of judges according to the command, “*at the testimony of two or three witnesses shall a matter be established.*” Nominations for the position are taken, and testimonies for and against each nominee are heard. Care must be exercised that no *lashon hara* (evil speech) is accepted as testimony. A non-binding vote is taken of the entire congregation so that the *Zaqenym* can see how all members feel about the choice to be made. Then the *Zaqenym* retire alone to make a final decision, returning shortly to present their choice of who will lead the community. The term for a *Rosh Beyth Dyn* is usually one year, and elections are traditionally held during the feast of Sukkoth. There are no term limits, and so a *Rosh Beyth Dyn* can conceivably serve for as long as the *Zaqenym* desire him to, as long as they re-appoint him to the position each year. It will seem disturbing to some who read this that the appointment of leaders is not done by popular vote or other democratic means. Scriptural succession never was. Democracy is dangerous and impractical in a believing community. It allows for mob-rule and the usurpation of power by un-learned men and new converts. Instead, we trust in the wisdom of our *Zaqenym* and the guidance of the Holy Spirit.

The last of the leadership positions selected is the *Shamashym*. *Shamash* means “servant,” and these serve in such a capacity at all Sabbath, holiday and other community gatherings. In a prison setting, they perform set-up and take-down, serve *kiddush*² and meals, act as security if necessary, as well as various, other similar functions. At other times they can act as the extended hands and feet of the *Rosh Beyth Dyn*, to assist him in his tasks. A *Shamash* is much more than a servant, though. He is also that one described as a “deacon” in 1 Timothy, chapter 3, and is in a position to be elevated for higher leadership in the future. Disciples of Yehoshua should always first prove they can humbly serve before ever being allowed to lead. On most prison units, community members are separated

¹ Head of the House of Judgment – who has the tie-breaking vote in any decision made by the *Beyth Dyn*

in different buildings. A Shamash on each one can be an effective interim leader, teacher and mediator for isolated brethren during the week between regular services, binding and encouraging them until then. This also gives an opportunity to develop and showcase their skills to community elders. Consequently, a Shamash must also be a person of excellent character, knowledgeable in scripture and having righteous behavior. They usually are younger members, but never should they be new converts. Shamashym are selected by the Rosh Beyth Dyn personally and he may choose whomever he will, however, it is customary for him to seek the counsel of the elders before making any final appointments.

Non-leadership positions are chosen by the Rosh Beyth Dyn at his sole discretion. Teachers should be chosen not only for their knowledge of scripture and tradition, but also for their teaching abilities and firm adherence to sound doctrine. Worship leaders should have excellent knowledge of music and prayer, but also should be exuberant personalities and full of YHWH's Holy Spirit. Those chosen for seeing to works of charity must be charitable themselves and utterly honest men, but also wise as serpents. Outreach ministers need to have patience and discernment, as well as a heart for the lost. In most new communities these non-leadership duties will at first be carried out by the leaders themselves, but it should not remain so. As YHWH makes available to the community men gifted in these areas, they should be encouraged to participate in its functions, as it is written, "...the body has many members..."

One further position within the community should be mentioned here. Though this is not a formal part of its structure, it is an integral part of every believing community and is commanded by no less than the Messiah himself. It is the position of Talmid. Talmid literally means "student", but also means disciple. The Hebrews have always had talmidym. From Yehoshua ben Nun to Elisha, the students of Hillel and Shammai, to those of Akiva in the second century and down to this day. The elder or leader takes devoted and able men under his wing and does his best to teach them everything that he knows. The talmid is one who humbles himself to sit at the feet of his teacher to learn and become like him, then does so for as long as is necessary until the mantle of the teacher is finally passed down to him. The teacher watches over his talmid, and the talmid looks after the needs of his teacher. The apostles themselves were all talmidim of our Messiah, and, in Mattithyahu 28, Yehoshua commanded his disciples to make disciples of their own when it came their turn to teach. No community of believers is complete without talmidim in its midst.

The Beyth Dyn is an indispensable part of any Scripturally-based community. In small groups, a Beyth Dyn is usually composed of the three elders, one being appointed as its senior or lead judge. In such a small group, the Rosh Beyth Dyn acts as the prosecuting attorney on behalf of the community in criminal or monetary matters. If the community has only two elders, the Rosh Beyth Dyn must serve as the third judge, and some other person is appointed as prosecutor. In non-criminal proceedings, the triumvirate of judges acts alone, without a prosecutor or mediator, deciding on doctrinal matters or making leadership appointments unilaterally. No judge may sit on a Beyth Dyn who has a vested interest or personal bias in a matter brought before it. Such a judge must recuse himself and a suitable replacement found and appointed by the remaining judges.

Something needs to be said at this point about Beyth Dinyim being used for criminal proceedings, as there is much abuse of the rules and intent of scripture regarding these – particularly the passage in Mattithyahu 18:15-17. In fact, this passage is most often turned on its head and used in exactly the opposite way it was intended by Yehoshua. The Beyth Dyn should be used as a very last resort in disputes among brethren. A goal to be strived for by true disciples of Yehoshua should be to never have to resort to a Beyth Dyn at all, and that is the teaching of Mattithyahu 18. Too often, we have seen brethren rush through the first two verses, 15-16, in order to get to 17 where they suppose it is then permissible to expose some perceived sin by a brother or sister to everyone in the congregation. Nothing could be more wrong, or further from the truth. The correct understanding of the passage is found by looking at it in its context. Verses 12-14 speak of a man leaving ninety-nine sheep to go and save one who has gone astray, and then says that your Father in heaven doesn't desire that any be lost. That is the goal of verses 15-17, to do all possible not to bring your brother before the Beyth Dyn (court/assembly/church), publicly accusing and embarrassing him, and possibly losing him. Immediately thereafter, in verses 21-22, Yehoshua says that you should forgive your brothers sins "up to seventy times seven." Do not be quick to take anyone before the council, brethren. Do all you can to avoid it. Oftentimes, in prison especially, people who do rush to a Beyth Dyn for judgment and receive it, find the court's decision unenforceable anyway. Just because a court of inmates finds another inmate guilty of some violation of Torah, does not usually mean that inmate can be censured or punished, since he or she is under the jurisdiction and protection of a state institution. To pass an unenforceable sentence upon someone makes your Beyth Dyn appear toothless and rather stupid. Still, sometimes it is necessary to bring a community member before a Beyth Dyn, and this is always preferable to bringing them before the secular authorities of the institution. Paul gives testimony of this in 1st Corinthians 6:1-8. Judge righteously, brothers, but whenever possible, do not judge at all. An excellent and successful assembly is one who always uses its Beyth Dyn for excellent and constructive purposes – that build up, rather than tear down. Such an entity is an asset and an invaluable part of any community of believers.

In the case of women's prisons, there is no choice but to set up your communities in the same way as the men do. Gender segregation is not a natural state for those of our faith. However, order must be found and the body of Messiah must be cared for and taught. Throughout Israel's history, great women have arisen when the need occurred. You, our sister in chains, can do the same.

Once the basic structure of your community has been decided upon and assembled, it must be developed. Walk before trying to run. Begin doing communal Torah studies, charity and support of one another. Seek to bring your nascent community into agreement on basic practices and doctrine. Stay away from arguments or discussions about pet doctrines or unnecessary subjects that bring disunity, but instead find agreement and harmony among yourselves. Remember – other inmates, and likely your prison authorities, will be watching you. Make sure they see you growing in grace and peace, a people worthy of further opportunity and help.

When the time comes and you are ready, begin probing your unit chaplains and wardens about services. Be very gentle and patient in this. Expect a "no" or "maybe" the first couple of times you ask. Never jump to file grievances or lawsuits right off the bat. Be nice – even if they are not. Expect them to test you in this, to find out who you really are. Begin contacting outside ministries and local congregations for support and volunteers. Pray constantly that YHWH acts on your behalf to establish you, then behave as if He

is going to act any moment. Be patient, and wait on YHWH. Believe this, brethren, He is still in the business of doing miracles to this day. We have seen them.

Occasionally, it becomes necessary to increase pressure after a time in order to be granted services or other things. This can be done successfully, but it is not easy and is always painful. You will likely need outside help to succeed this way and will probably end up with some sort of compromise to settle things as a result of your efforts. If it is learned by outside ministries and congregations that you are hot-headed and did not try the way of peace and patience first to establish your new community, it is unlikely you will receive any help in doing so. First of all, you must establish yourselves as a people worthy of being helped and accommodated, so let the light of Messiah shine in you for all to see. Then, if need be, and all else fails after a sufficient time, get outside help to turn up the heat a bit. And even then, do it with an olive branch of peace in your hand and with love. This is the excellent way in which you should walk, the higher path of a disciple of Yehoshua. It is also the way that usually works.

One thing we as a faith group have going for us – and that wardens and chaplains across the nation are coming to realize – is that we are a people of order and integrity that are bound to a higher standard of behavior than other religions are. Rather than embracing a faith which emphasizes that “the law has been done away with,” as most preach, we, as convicted lawbreakers, have turned away from our former lawlessness to embrace the Torah and Yehoshua’s interpretation of it as new men and women. This is attractive to the authorities and to their advantage. It makes sense from the standpoint of security and rehabilitation – their foremost concerns. It is also to our advantage in establishing Sabbatarian communities.

Once you have done the things outlined in this article, have your community leaders contact Sabbath Keepers Fellowship and let us know what you are doing and what you need from us. Provide us a list of your members and any other information you think might be useful to us in helping you. We will do what we can.

May YHWH bless you in your efforts to please Him and to walk in an orderly fashion after the way of His son, our Savior, Yehoshua Ha Mashiach. *Ma tovu oheleykha Ya’acov! Mishkanoteka Yisrael!* (How excellently are thy tents, O Ya’acov! Thy dwelling places, O Yisrael!)

B’Shalom,
Ovadyah