

Alpha and Aleph – A Jewish Difference

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Alpha

The Alpha format originated at Holy Trinity, Brompton, England under the leadership of Nicky Gumbel in 1990. It incorporates a ten-week teaching with emphasis on building relations through sharing informal meals each week, a teaching followed by discussion in a small group setting. Alpha proved to be extremely fruitful in bringing many to salvation wherever it has been used. However, it was missing a Jewish expression.

Nicky Gumbel

Nicky Gumbel was born in 1955 to Walter and Muriel Gumbel. His father was a German Jew from Stuttgart whose license to practice law in that city was withdrawn in one of the early Nazi purges. Walter Gumbel immigrated to Britain and became a successful barrister. Gumbel's mother, Muriel, served on the Greater London Council for many years between 1967 and 1986 and was Mayor of the Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea. Nicky was educated at Eton College and Trinity College, Cambridge and later read Theology at Oxford University and today serves as the pastor of Holy Trinity, Brompton. (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nicky_Gumbel, Cited July 9, 2015).

In the early-1990s I led a group from Trinity School for Ministry to England for a Church History tour. We worshipped at All Souls, Langham Place, London where John Stott was preaching that Sunday morning. We heard that there was a 6:30 PM service at Holy Trinity Anglican Church, Brompton which was within walking distance of our hotel in Kensington. We were unaware that Holy Trinity was in the midst of a mighty Holy Ghost revival so were shocked to find a line from the church down the block outside waiting to enter for the evening service. It was there I met Nicky Gumbel for the first time.

Later Nicky and the newly developed Alpha team from Holy Trinity came and stayed with us in Sewickley, Pennsylvania where they held one of the first Alpha conferences in the USA at our parish, St Stephens. Our church enthusiastically put our own Alpha team together and began to reach out with the Gospel to those in our community near Pittsburgh, PA.

Having opened the first CMJ USA office in 1981 in Fairfax, Virginia, I naturally wondered if there could be a comparable outreach to Jewish people using the Alpha idea. The relational aspect of bringing people together for an informal meal, small groups, attractive topics and questions that seculars might be asking about “eternal things,” all added up to an approach worth trying to reach out to Jewish people.

Nicky Gumbel, in spite of his Jewish background on his father's side, did not seem to have a vision for developing such a program and was at the time busy getting Alpha spread around the globe. Some years later I was put in contact with the then Director of Intercultural Alpha program who was overseeing Alpha programs designed to reach diverse people groups. The Director had been a missionary in Japan for over ten years and had seen success in using Alpha there. I presented the idea of Alpha for Jewish people in the USA. He liked the idea and invited me to an Alpha conference in Dallas that year.

He offered to have Alpha print up copies of their major booklet titled "Who is Jesus?" with a new cover which would read "Who is Yeshua?" It was a generous offer, but I knew that something was missing. While the basic questions that Alpha posed were certainly applicable to Jewish Americans such as "Is there more to life than this?" and "Why am I here?" the program was decidedly written with a gentile audience in mind.

In other words, could one take an Alpha course wholesale and slap a Jewish façade on it and expect it to be effective as an evangelistic tool for a highly secularized, assimilated Jewish population in America? Certainly the foundation questions were the right ones. But the topics and content would need some major tweaking, I felt.

Bottom line: Alpha has proven to be a successful program for reaching thousands of people globally with the Gospel. Like the Intercultural division of Alpha, recognition has been given by Alpha leaders that the basic program would need to be revised to better reach out to various cultural groups. For example, a charismatic Catholic working with Alpha designed a program especially suitable to Catholic groups and used it with great success.

Enter Aleph

Fred Lessans, congregational leader in the Baltimore area, began thinking about transforming Alpha into an Aleph course some years ago. Fred defined Aleph this way: "The Aleph Course is an introductory course for Jewish and non-Jewish people seeking spiritual meaning and purpose in life . . .Where one can Ask questions – Learn about God – Explore the Scriptures – Probe for answers – Hunt for truth. A good acronym for Aleph.

Our colleague Barry Rubin was the first to mention Fred's idea to me in the 80s. Fred envisioned three parts to Aleph which would incorporate not just evangelism but discipleship as well. The three parts he titled:

- Discovering Yeshua
- Following Yeshua
- Sharing Yeshua

Part I is written and has been used. Besides using an Alpha format, Fred also drew from his experience in presenting "The Life in the Spirit" seminar which was part of the charismatic movement in the 70s and 80s.

CMJ and Aleph

CMJ USA began a partnership several years ago with a messianic congregation in the Cleveland area which had just begun using an Aleph program. CMJ USA's Director Daryl Fenton and messianic rabbi, Eric Lakatos, leader of Tikvat Yisrael in Lyndhurst, Ohio discussed ways to reach out to the over 80,000 Jewish people in Greater Cleveland area.

(http://www.clevelandjewishnews.com/news/local/cleveland-jewish-population/article_3dc25048-46d9-11e1-a00b-0019bb2963f4.html, cited July 11, 2015)

Rabbi Eric had been introduced to the Aleph curriculum written by Rachel Wolf in Cincinnati. Rachel, wife of Rabbi Michael Wolf of Beth Messiah Congregation, Cincinnati, Ohio, describes her curriculum as "a work in progress."

In describing how she began her research to produce Aleph, Rachel said: "I attended an Alpha conference to learn the whole Alpha concept from soup to nuts from the inside. After doing this, I felt that we could make very good use of the structure of the Alpha program, i.e. its social set up (meal, discussion, talk, etc) but we could not use the content of the teachings, though they are excellent in the church context. So I set about to write my own curriculum based on Jewish, rather than Christian, questions." Having written her curriculum she said she "did an online course with a few leaders explaining the Alpha concept, my curriculum and what we have done with the program. Of these, only Eric and one other are the only ones I am aware have used the program."

However she said that her own congregation "has run the Aleph program three or four times. In each case we tried to limit the participants to Jewish people and their non-Jewish spouses or hosts (if applicable). In every case all of the participants were very enthusiastic about the program. Two of the times they did not want to stop so we had an ongoing "Bet" class for about a year after (once a month). Everyone rated it very highly on our evaluation sheet . . . and most said they learned quite a bit and were challenged in their understanding. Quite a few became regular attenders, though after five or more years not all are still attending. The courses averaged from about 18 people to about 45 people."

Rabbi Eric's congregation has used Rachel's Aleph program curriculum two times in the last few years. Six or seven Jewish people have come to faith as a result. In a recent email, Eric wrote, "I am planning to use Aleph again here in Cleveland, and we hope to begin new rounds of volunteer training in the fall with the purpose of implementing a new Aleph course sometime in early 2016."

The Difference

Topics for the ten sessions of Alpha are effective discussion starters for gentiles but not terribly relevant to Jewish people. Topics are: Who is Jesus?, How can I be sure of my faith?, How does God guide me?, How can I resist evil?, What does the Holy Spirit do?, and How can I

make the most of my life? Such topics were designed to be approachable, relevant, and thought-provoking for gentile Alpha Course participants.

But would they speak to a Jewish person and lead them to wrestle with such questions or cause them to seek real answers regarding the truth of the Gospel? Rachel wrote, “My curriculum is written for the educated connected Jew, not necessarily religious, but one who deeply identifies as Jewish and has internalized the Jewish historical mindset about our history and religion.” You will see in the outlines below that there is a definite Jewish worldview reflected in each of these curricula which can be used successfully with a variety of Jewish seekers.

Fred Lessans’ Aleph programs’ topics are:

1. What is Judaism: Religion, race or Relationship?
2. Atonement or At-one-ment: Does it Matter?
3. Messianic Prophecy: Fact, Fiction or Fantasy?
4. Yeshua: Mench, Madman, or Messiah?
5. Resurrection or Reincarnation – is there a Difference?
6. The Messianic Vision
7. Who is the Ruach HaKodesh?
8. Can God Live in Me?
9. How to Live a Messianic Life
10. Celebration Dinner

Rachel Wolf’s curriculum for Aleph has this outline:

1. A Word to Atheists: Why Does it Matter What We Believe about God?
2. The Land of Israel: Historical Evidence of God’s Faithfulness to Israel and Purposes for the World
3. What’s a Messiah: Biblical and Jewish Concepts of the Messiah
4. Who is Yeshua?: Who does the Bible and other sources say that he is?
5. Why Did Yeshua Die?: If he’s the Messiah, why didn’t he bring peace to the world?
6. Emet and Emunah: What is the Truth: What is Faith?
7. What is Prayer? Why and how do we pray?
8. Can I Experience God?: The Spirit of God can touch your life.
9. What is the New Covenant?: What Does God Require of us?
10. What Does the Future Hold for Israel? What should I do now?
11. How to Receive

Conclusion

Having participated in Alpha programs in a predominately gentile church setting, I am excited to see that Jewish congregational leaders are creating, writing and using Aleph. While still in a stage where models are being built and experimented with, the hope that they will soon

be published for wider distribution and use is a positive sign for Jewish outreach in the USA. Pray not only that the development and publishing of these materials will progress but also that guidelines will be written in how to train up dedicated congregational teams so essential to a successful Aleph program.