

UPDATE ON
MEDIA COVERAGE OF
THE MESSIANIC JEWISH MOVEMENT

Presented by Susan Perlman to the
Tenth North American Coordinating Committee Meeting
of the Lausanne Consultation on Jewish Evangelism

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In the past year, the media coverage of our movement has been varied. There were three major news stories that I'd like to comment on and then some others to round out the report.

1. The Beresford deportation

To recap, Jewish believers, Gary and Shirley Beresford moved to Israel from Zimbabwe in 1986 and applied for citizenship under the Law of Return. They were denied citizenship based on the fact that they were believers and baptized into another religion. They took their case to the Israeli Supreme Court, where in 1989 their claim for benefit under the Law of Return was denied. They remained in Israel under tourist visas and tried to obtain permanent residency under the Law of Entry but were refused that status as well. They were told they would need to leave at the time of their visa expiration. They decided to try to get international media attention and held press conferences, etc.

According to David Stern, they had press show up from Time Magazine, Newsweek, Associated Press, the New York Times, etc. In February 1993 there were numerous articles in major US newspapers on the matter. The New York Times, writing in its international news section, titled their article, "Jews who call Jesus Messiah: Get Out, Says Israel." It is a relatively sympathetic article as is the Associated Press release that appeared in hundreds of U.S. papers. Perhaps the most sympathetic account was found in the Chicago Tribune of February 4 by Tom Hundley. It begins,

"Their children served in the Israeli army. Their relatives died in Nazi concentration camps. They insist they are Jews. But the Interior Ministry disagrees and has ordered their deportation."

Only last week, the international edition of Time Magazine came out with a follow up on this story. Their "fact" person called to ask some background questions about the movement, including how many Jews are there who believe in Jesus. According to the Chicago Tribune article the number is "anywhere from 100,000 to 400,000."

Newspapers and magazines which continually question Zionistic aspirations, clucked their tongues over the Beresford deportation case. Coupled with the deportation of the 400 Hamas agents, people who had little care for Israel talked about atrocities and injustices. There are a growing number of evangelical Christians who are wondering out loud if Israel really belongs to the Jewish people, if the Jews are still God's chosen people and highlight atrocities against Arabs into this milieu of multi-colored thinking. The idea of the injustice of the deportation of the Jewish believers took root and made news.

The broader issue of Jewish believers in Jesus in Israel has been addressed in the U.S. press throughout the year. According to the Jewish Press of New York, there are at least 40 congregations of "Messianic Jews" or "Hebrew Christians" in Israel with a combined membership of 5,000. Quoting the anti-missionary group, Yad

L'Achim, "Five thousand Hebrew Christians may not sound like a lot in a country of four million people. but we're talking about people who are passionately devoted to missionizing. A few thousand people can cover a lot of territory in a small country like Israel, and if they succeed in converting even a handful of Jews, that's a catastrophe for the Jewish State."

Also of note was article that appeared in the Globe and Mail in Canada on April 11, 1992 in which some of the believers are profiled: Ron and Aliza Neshet, King of Kings Assembly and Wayne Hilsden, Michael Bulman of CMJ in Jerusalem. This is juxtaposed with a profile of Yad L'Achim director, Judy Pearlman and her efforts as a "cultbuster."

2. The Schneerson Phenomena

The ongoing story of the Lubavitcher Hassidim and whether the coming of the Messiah, has made its way onto the pages of every major print publication in this country. In addition, several of the networks have picked up the story as has CNN and BBC.

Shortly after our last LCJE/NA meeting, an article appeared in Time Magazine, "Expecting the Messiah: An ultra-Orthodox sect says the Redeemer is due to arrive any day now—and he might be an American."

Habad's active campaigning to crown Schneerson Messiah has included billboards and full page advertisements with titles like, "Moshiach is coming and we must make the final preparations." These ads, of course, have a photograph of the rebbe prominently displayed.

One of the most interesting commentaries on this messianic fervor was in a recent edition of the Philadelphia Exponent (2/5/93) in an article entitled, "Is it time to remove the messianic concept?" Ernest Cohen writes:

**Is it time to remove the messianic concept?
by Ernest R. Cohen
Jewish Exponent 2/5/93**

Along with the authors of several recent letters and articles, we are also concerned about Christian missionaries, who try to sell Jews the idea that Jesus is the Jewish messiah. Rather than argue about who is, or will be, a messiah, perhaps it is time to remove the messianic concept from Judaism altogether.

The Hebrew word "messiah" means "anointed." The concept of a political/military leader appointed by G-d became a rallying point for Jews struggling to regain independence from the Roman Empire. The Jewish people longed for such a leader who would defeat the Roman army, and bring a descendant of King David back to the throne. The ritual of crowning Jewish kings involved anointing with oil, hence the use of the word "messiah."

In time, the concept took on mystical trappings, since the planned revolts never succeeded. Today, the State of Israel has been restored, and few Jews desire that it be ruled by a monarch, whether of David's line or not. At best, the term "messiah" has lost its original meaning; at worst, it has developed into twisted theological mysticism.

While some Orthodox Jews still talk about a coming Messiah as a human person, Reform and Conservative Jews have generally interpreted the Messiah into a "messianic age" at the end of time. Christians have wholly distorted the concept, turning it into a mystical personage so that they can claim continuity with Judaism. However, if we recognize the historical basis for messianic thoughts, we can simply assert that it is no longer a significant Jewish religious theme.

The Jewish people have been plagued by too many Jewish false messiahs, as well as by Christians attempting to foist their Trinity onto us by use of this word. By removing the word from our thinking, Jews can go back to what we are best at: trying to do G-d's work in the present world.

3. The British Press

There have been as many articles on our movement in Britain in the past year as there have been here in North America. This is a result of two events. One, the removal of the Archbishop of Canterbury's patronage of the CMJ and two, the arrival on the scene of Jews for Jesus/UK. The Archbishop's distancing of himself from Jewish evangelism made all the major newspapers, secular and religious.

Jews for Jesus produced evangelistic ads for the London tubes which were put up in the trains and then taken down due to pressure from the Board of Deputies of British Jews and the Council of Christians and Jews. This made it into a media event which was the subject of dozens of articles and radio interviews. The matter is still pending.

There are other areas of coverage in the media that bear mentioning:

Defections that have made the press

On a sad note, American Chuck Snow, who moved to England in 1988 to head up the London Messianic Congregation, left the faith and moved to Israel and this made the front page of the November 13 edition of the Jewish Chronicle of London. The article says, "One anti-missionary Jewish activist described Mr. Snow's departure as 'a body-blow to messianic Judaism world-wide.'"

In the States, Ellen Kamentsky, who served on staff with Jews for Jesus for two years in Los Angeles and went through an "exit counselor/deprogramming experience," has written a book, "Hawking God: A Young Jewish Woman's Ordeal in Jews for Jesus." She is on the lecture circuit with anti-missionaries and has had her story picked up in some of the Jewish newspapers including the Jewish Advocate of Boston.

Anti-Missionaries

In August 1992, Jews for Judaism put out a release about how they were going to disband because of a lack of funds. The Baltimore Jewish News reported that Jews for Judaism was "\$40,000-\$50,000 short this year of meeting its annual budget of \$120,000." It went on to say that among the group's creditors was "the Internal Revenue Service which has a judgement against the organization for about \$15,000 in back taxes." This article was picked up by dozens of Jewish newspapers. However, the funds must have come in because, Jews for Judaism is still in business.

The following month an article in the Orange County Jewish Heritage related how Ben Zion Kravitz, the LA director of Jews for Judaism and Tovia Singer, his counterpart in New York, came to the Hyatt Regency, Irvine for the seventh annual Southwest regional conference on Messianic Judaism. Kravitz boasted of having thirty in-depth conversations with "former" Jews at the messianic conference between the Friday evening and Sunday morning. He went on to say our movement has continued to grow: "In the mid-1980s they didn't have any conferences, and now they have half a dozen a year. In Dallas this summer, they drew 1,200 people to a convention. We came into town and gave 24 lectures around the Jewish community the time of the conference. That is how we try to counter their work. But there are a lot more of them than us and they mean to convert us."

Messianic Congregations

There continues to be local coverage of messianic congregations that are having an effect in their communities. Kevin Williams, a cantor with Adat Adonai in Toledo was profiled in an article last Passover in the Bowling Green Sentinel Tribune.

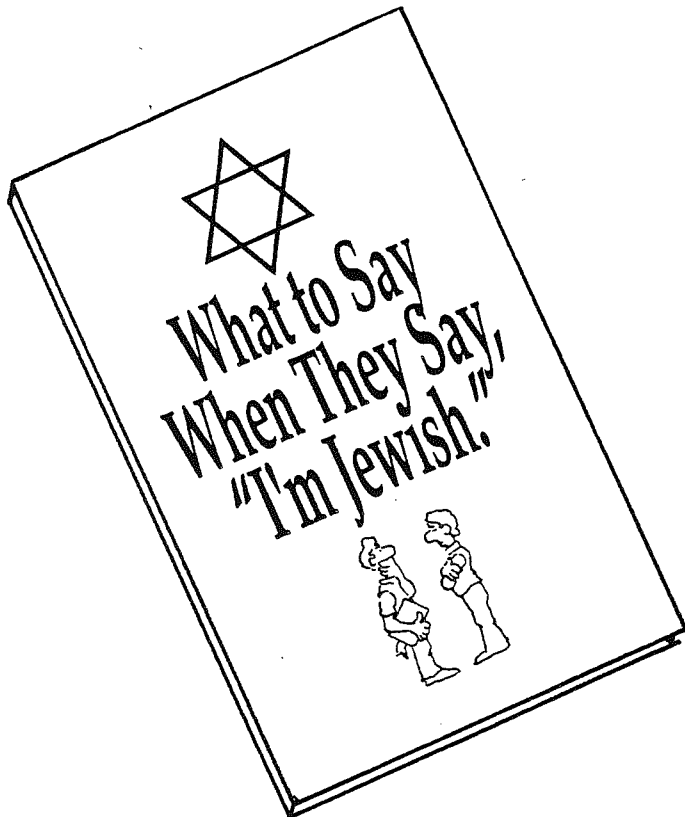
The Jewish Review of Portland did a piece on Bob Morris and Beth Ariel Congregation. Comments from Mark Powers of Jews for Judaism include, "There are 500 groups in America that push messianic Judaism...Although the Portland Ariel group has only 15 or 20 members, the messianic Jews are growing nationally with 160,000 members, 10 years ago the figure was 10,000."

Harvey Koelner of Temple Aron Kodesh in Lauderdale Lakes, Florida had a feature article in the Broward Jewish World in September of 1992. Congregation members are interviewed and several local rabbis offer their comments. The article also included a mention of other messianic congregations as well as mission agencies in the area. Dr. Sandy Andron of Miami, offered the following analysis:

"I don't consider Messianic Jews a cult. I consider them a sect. They are certainly more tied to Southern Baptists than to Judaism. They are deceptive. They are not Jews. You can't be partially pregnant. You're either black or white. This is not a gray matter. They are Christians."

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Fenton M. Ward

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR... At 37, Fenton Ward sold his financial planning firm in Houston, packed up his wife and three children, and followed the call of God to an area of Los Angeles that was--and is--heavily Jewish. To the religious, it was admirable; to others, it was insane. Ward came as the founding pastor of a Jewish and gentile congregation, which he served for nine years. In 1986, he resigned and became the Director of a Los Angeles based Jewish outreach program, Project Ingrafting. In 1992, he became an Adjunct Professor, teaching Jewish evangelism at Fuller Seminary.

Dr. Ward is a member of the Lausanne Consultation on Jewish Evangelism and was a delegate to Lausanne II in Manila, July 1989. He is also a member of the Executive Committee of the Southern Baptist Messianic Fellowship. Though most of his work has been as a pastor and a missionary, he has also lectured at the seminary level. His initial degree was from Oklahoma State University with a major in Advertising and Public Relations.