

## SHARPENING THE FOCUS OF JEWISH EVANGELISM

### INTRODUCTION

All too frequently I hear those engaged in Jewish work (whether in missions or messianic congregations) state that their ministry focus is the Jewish community. I myself labored with an organization whose motto was "Reaching all Jews, everywhere." Rather than just saying that we are focusing on the Jewish community as a whole, we would do well to answer the question, "Which Jews?" If our ministry focus group were defined more precisely, our evangelistic strategies could be fine tuned to make them more effective.

This discussion will attempt to analyze the American Jewish community in a more precise way. This in turn will lead to a discussion of Jewish resistance and responsiveness. Finally, it will address strategies appropriate for the specific target audience.

What I am presenting is not based on hard scientific research but on my long time observations of the American Jewish Community. I suspect that many of you have been keen observers of the North American Jewish scene for a long while and can add your insights as well. I am deeply indebted to Jhan Moskowitz for helping me to articulate these concepts which I have observed and spoken about for many years. Probably all the helpful insights are his.

#### I. Understanding the Jewish Community

The Jewish Community in America is not monolithic. There are a variety of expressions of Jewish identity. Jews may express their identity religiously (Orthodox, Conservative, Reform), culturally (Ashkenazic or Sephardic) or regionally (New York, Midwestern, or West Coast). For the purposes of this analysis, Jewish identity will be looked at through the levels of Jewish community affiliation as seen through the following chart.

## UNDERSTANDING THE JEWISH COMMUNITY

	Category	Name	Affiliation	Attendance	Identity	Food	Relationships
Level One	Ultra-Orthodox	Shmuel Jacobson	Chasidic Shteetl	Daily	Jewish	Glatt Kosher	Only Jews Social & Business; Only will Marry a Chasidic Jew
Level Two	Religious	Sam Jacobson	Synagogue Temple	Weekly	American Jew	Kosher	Jews Socially/ Jews and Gentiles Business; Most likely to Marry a Jew
Level Three	Cultural	Steve Jacobs	Jewish Community Center	Twice a Year	Jewish American	Kosher Style	Jews or Gentiles Socially or Business; May Marry a Gentile
Level Four	Irreligious or Secular	Steve Jason	None or Unitarian Church	Never	American (Happens to be Jewish)	What's Kosher?	Mostly Gentiles/ Socially or Business; Will likely marry a Gentile

<b>Level Five</b>	<b>Gentile</b>	<b>Steve Jones</b>	<b>Messianic Congregation</b>	<b>Weekly</b>	<b>American (wants to be Jewish)</b>	<b>Biblical Kasher</b>	<b>Mostly Gentiles/ Socially or Business; Wants to Marry a Jew</b>
-------------------	----------------	--------------------	-------------------------------	---------------	--------------------------------------	------------------------	--

## II. Understanding Jewish Response

Jewish response refers to lessons to be learned from both Jewish resistance and Jewish responsiveness.

### A. Jewish Resistance

Jewish resistance can teach many lessons. Two of the following will be helpful for the purposes of evangelism.

1. *The more affiliated, the greater the resistance to the message.* The more insular Jewish people are religiously and socially, the less likely they are to consider Jesus as the Messiah.
2. *The more affiliated, the greater the censure will be against those who believe.* This is my own experience as well. Since I come from about a level two background with strong ties to level one, my father and extended family have severed their ties with me completely. The potential for this kind of censure hinders Jewish people from considering Jesus.

### B. Jewish Responsiveness

Obviously there are many spiritual causes of ~~openness~~ <sup>openness</sup> related to the working of the Holy Spirit. ~~It~~ <sup>It</sup> is safe to say that He is using some cultural factors as well. Here are two of them.

1. *The greater the identification with American culture, the greater the ~~openness~~ <sup>openness</sup>.* Jewish people who see themselves as Americans respond to the gospel message when it is presented in a way that is culturally relevant to modern Americans. They are more likely to understand and respond to messages that relate to the culture of America. That is why churches that

are contemporary tend to have some success in reaching Jewish people without even trying. For example, when a Jewish man goes to Willowcreek Community Church, he will not see a cross, it will feel like a theater, and the music and message, in fact the whole program, will relate to contemporary America. It will not feel “churchy.” He may be able to find help for his struggling marriage or guidance for rearing a teenager. Thus, he responds based on his “American” needs which overcome his “Jewish” resistance.

2. *The greater the interaction with non-Jews, the greater the openness.*

Jewish people who are willing to interact socially and share meaningful personal relationships with Gentiles, will be willing to listen to their views about spiritual issues which are usually deemed “too personal.” If these gentiles happen to be believers, they can have a profound impact for the gospel.

### III. Understanding Jewish Evangelism

Understanding the Jewish community and their levels of <sup>openness</sup>~~openness~~ should guide our evangelism strategy. Unfortunately, this is not always done.

#### A. The Problem in Jewish Evangelism

The primary problem is that most evangelistic outreaches to Jewish people do not delineate between those Jewish people who are more open or more closed. It is apparent that levels three and four are far more responsive. Yet, evangelistic strategies frequently employ much more traditional forms to reach them. Then we lament our ineffectiveness and decide to crank up our approaches and make them

even more traditional. This is frequently helpful for Jewish believers who feel insecure about their Jewish identities. However, it is not effective for evangelism.

B. The Proposal for Jewish Evangelism

First, in order to reach levels three and four, it would be wise to use Jewish *cultural* forms as opposed to *religious* forms. The meeting room should look like the J.C.C. meeting room, not a synagogue. Sing some Hebraic melodies, but the songs should be primarily in English. Limit liturgy to essentials, perhaps the Sh'ma.

Secondly, reaching levels three and four requires using *American* cultural forms. For example, remember threes and fours listen to Light FM or Oldies or even classic Rock. They do not listen to WEVD. So include contemporary music in worship. Remember that they are concerned with common cultural issues such as getting out of debt, raising children, making marriages more successful.

Messages should be geared to these issues, not why Jewish believers should keep Kosher or Shabbat. We must choose to be relevant to threes and fours and not merely pursue our own "Jewish identity" issues.

### CONCLUSION

There is nothing wrong with a believer maintaining a Jewish identity in a traditional way. It may even help deal with insecurities or enhance newly found Jewish roots. However, it takes sacrificial people to meet the needs of those we are trying to reach. Perhaps we would do well to sacrifice some tradition for the sake of effective evangelism.