

# {24} TRENDS IN JEWISH EVANGELISM IN ISRAEL

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To paraphrase Luke, “Many have undertaken to draw up an account of the things that have transpired among us.... Therefore, having carefully investigated these things, it seemed good also to me to write an orderly account for you.” Although the number of Jews in Israel who believe in Jesus (Yeshua, in Hebrew) is minute, there have been encouraging changes in this community of believers in the past decade. Books written about Christian ministries and congregations in Israel twenty years ago scarcely mention the existence of Messianic Jews.<sup>1</sup> Today, no responsible reporter of the religious scene can ignore the phenomenon of Jews who are embracing Jesus as Messiah and Redeemer.<sup>2</sup>

There has been little consistency in the reported numbers of Messianic Jews in Israel. The only common denominator in most of these estimates is that they are highly inflated. This may be due to several factors, but primarily it is because they are offered by “overly optimistic Christians and overly pessimistic Jews.”<sup>3</sup> First, it should be noted that no formal or complete census has been taken. Secondly, there are many distinctions which can be made which will affect the final figure. Some believers are citizens, others are not; some worship in Hebrew, others in English, Arabic, or a variety of other languages; and some are Jewish, others are Gentile. It is also difficult to estimate the number of “secret believers,” that is, believers who have not chosen to identify with a congregation. Their numbers are probably very small and are most probably shrinking. In short, it would be more accurate to say that there are somewhere between 1,000 to 2,000 Israeli Messianic Jews who worship in Hebrew congregations with any degree of regularity.<sup>4</sup> This compares with a figure of no more than 300 Jewish believers in 1965. Nevertheless, that figure is

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<sup>1</sup> For the purposes of this paper, “Messianic Jews” refers to all Jews who have entered a saving relationship with God through faith in Jesus, the Messiah of Israel. A number of them would prefer to be known as Jewish Christians. For older treatments of the Church in Israel, cf. Colbi, Saul. *Christianity In The Holy Land: Past and Present*. Tel Aviv: Am Hassefer, 1969; and Osterbye, Per. *The Church In Israel*. Lund, Sweden: Gleerup, 1970.

<sup>2</sup> cf. e.g., Pippert, Wesley G. *Land of Promise, Land of Strife: Israel at Forty*. Waco, Texas: Word Books, 1988; and Willmington, H.L. and Ray Pritz. *Israel at Forty*. Wheaton, Ill.: Tyndale House Publishers, 1987.

<sup>3</sup> Willmington and Pritz, pg. 19

<sup>4</sup> Hannan Weisman conducted an informal survey in November, 1988. His total for the number of Jewish believers is 1900, but questions regarding his methodology, definitions and interpretation of data cannot be answered at the time of writing, due to Mr. Weismari’s travel abroad.

growing and Messianic Jews are beginning to have an impact on public opinion which is disproportionately large in respect to their numbers.

Several reasons have been given for this continuing growth in the number of Messianic Jews. Some point to sociological factors in Israeli society. There appears to be a rise of religious interest which is evidenced on the one hand by the growth in numbers of students in the *yeshivot* (day schools with curricula that include {25} rabbinic Judaism and Jewish culture), and on the other by the growth of cults. Secular society has created a spiritual vacuum and Messianic Jews are capitalizing on the opportunity. The danger is that faith in Jesus may be perceived as merely one of several options offered by fringe cult groups. Others point to the influence of outside Christian groups such as those which will be discussed below, as well as to denominational representatives. Finally, there are those who point to a new generation of less inhibited Messianic Jews as the explanation for the increasing numbers. Willmington and Pritz, in *Israel at Forty*, observe that “these believers are average, well-adjusted Israelis, not those on the fringe of society.”<sup>5</sup> The answer may lie in all of these directions or, perhaps, beyond all of them, for certainly all would agree that such growth is primarily a work of the sovereign Lord.

The Great Commission of Matthew 28:19-20 can be organized around three exhortations: proclaim the gospel, plant new believers in congregations, and provide them with the training which they need to become effective disciples. Perhaps, in describing Messianic Jews in Israel, we would do well to look first at evangelism, then at the congregations, and finally at the training which is being offered. The relationship of the State of Israel to Messianic Jews and the difficulty of maintaining unity with Palestinian brothers and sisters during the intifada will also be addressed briefly.

## I. EVANGELISM

Willmington and Pritz say, “In the past five or six years there has been an upswing in the number of Israelis receiving Jesus.”<sup>6</sup> While this is certainly true, the most evident change has been in the growing interest and involvement of the believers themselves in evangelistic activities. Ten years ago, most believers were intimidated. Although very few had actually lost their jobs or had suffered other forms of harassment or persecution, this generated a great deal of fear. Consequently, there were very few who were willing to pass out tracts on the street. There was even a reticence to be open with one’s neighbors about one’s faith.

A real turning point for some came as they realized that the persecution which they so feared - and sought to avoid - might be inevitable. While most were “in the closet,” others seemed to be inviting trouble by testifying openly. Even if a few were bold and aggressive, others tried to be as uncontroversial as possible. It did not matter. Intimidating opposition appeared to confront all believers, irrespective of their conduct or lifestyle. This resulted in a resignation to, and acceptance of, whatever future consequences might attend their open profession of Jesus as Messiah and Lord.

Once their fear had been “turned inside out,” some Israeli believers discovered within themselves a desire to be trained, organized, and directed. In order to meet these needs, believers began to form

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<sup>5</sup> Willmington and Pritz, pg. 21

<sup>6</sup> Willmington and Pritz, pg. 21

local organizations, but they also availed themselves of the assistance which outside organizations offered.

## **{26}A. Foreign organizations**

In addition to the denominations and ministries which have operated in the country for many years, other organizations which still shun publicity for a variety of reasons, and individuals who have held conferences, distributed literature, and brought groups of short term volunteers for evangelistic activities, four movements from outside of Israel merit special consideration.

### **1. Operation Mobilization**

Operation Mobilization has pioneered literature evangelism in Israel. They first began work here in 1964. Using mostly short-term volunteers (one or two year shifts), they have distributed thousands of pieces of literature and sold tens of thousands of books, going from door to door. They also passed out tracts before it became “fashionable.” Their work has been largely pre-evangelism, or seed-sowing, but they have seen results. Some have come to faith in a relatively short time, and others, who have expressed interest, have been directed to a congregation or to a Messianic correspondence course.

### **2. Jews For Jesus**

Due to their bold and aggressive evangelistic methods used in the United States since the mid-70's, Jews for Jesus is perhaps one of the better known missions to the Jewish people. They, along with sister organizations, have succeeded in raising the consciousness of the Jewish people that Jews , as well as Gentiles, believe in Jesus. This has indirectly affected the public consciousness in Israel. A recent contribution on their part, however, has been the practical training which they have offered to selected young Israeli believers over the past three or four years. Reflecting Nehemiah's Diaspora concern for conditions in Israel, JFJ's “Operation Nehemiah” has made it possible for several young Israeli believers to be involved in their New York City campaign each summer. Though some of JFJ's methods have not been transferable, these young people have returned to Israel with a greater desire to stand publicly for the Lord.

### **3. Lausanne Consultation for Jewish Evangelism**

Under the sponsorship of the Billy Graham Evangelistic Association, an international congress was held in Lausanne, Switzerland in 1974. As a part of the program, several Jewish participants from Israel, North America, and Europe participated in a workshop on evangelism. Several years later, in 1980, the Consultation On World Evangelism (COWE) was convened in Pattaya, Thailand as a follow-up to the Lausanne Congress. COWE focused on developing evangelistic strategy for reaching specific groups of people in pursuit of the ultimate goal of world evangelism. As in Lausanne, one of the workgroups concentrated on “Reaching the Jewish People.” This experience was so positive that they decided to form an ongoing task force which became known as the Lausanne Consultation on Jewish Evangelism (LCJE). They articulated their five-fold purpose which was, and continues to be:

**{27}** a) to gather and catalogue information useful in Jewish evangelism and to furnish such material in an occasional publication; b) to provide a platform on which Jewish missions can meet to coordinate strategies; c) to monitor and report trends in the Jewish community; d) to stimulate

theological and missiological research related to Jewish evangelism; and e) to organize consultations that will be useful to those engaged or interested in Jewish evangelism.<sup>7</sup>

LCJE has since held two international conferences, both in England: one in September, 1983 in Newmarket and the other in August, 1986 in Easneye. Its greatest achievement has been in providing a forum in which relationships have been established, cooperation has been fostered between expatriate organizations, local congregations, and individual believers, information has been shared; and plans have been coordinated.

#### **4. Evangelism Explosion III, Int'l.**

Evangelism Explosion (EE) is a congregationally based evangelism training program. It is unique in that some of the training involves actual evangelistic encounters. It has been so warmly received that is now found in more than 80 countries. EE was first introduced to Israel through a weeklong seminar which was held in 1985, and was followed by a 16 week course. By 1987, it had been translated into Hebrew and adapted to Israeli culture. Since then, seminars have been held in 1987 and 1988, and several congregations have conducted one or more courses. Other congregations have plans to begin implementation of this training program in the near future. Although Israel is more resistant to the gospel than many other countries, EE is proving to be an effective tool. The effectiveness should increase as the leadership gains more experience and as the program continues to be fine tuned.

These are only a few of the organizations which have furthered the cause of the Messiah in Israel. In addition, the labors of other Jewish mission organizations, institutions, and personnel could also be cited. In all of these undertakings, however, there has generally been an absence of narrow sectarianism, harmful competition, or paternalistic attitudes.

#### **B. Local Organizations**

In harmony with these organizations from abroad, Messianic Jews began to form their own local structures. For example, the Israel chapter of LCJE was begun in 1984. In addition to regular meetings for their membership, they have sponsored two conferences for the wider Messianic Jewish community in Israel. The first was a "Seminar on the Writing, Design and Use of Evangelistic Tracts" which was held in September, 1984. The second was a national conference on evangelism which convened in September, 1988. LCJE-Israel has also assisted local congregations in coordinating the participation of a team of Israeli believers in an evangelistic campaign in England. Some more recent actions are the appointment of spokesmen who will respond to the media, the issuance of notices to the press, the formulation {28} of a statement on Christian Zionism, and an investigation of charges that postal workers have tampered with believers' mail.

The National Conference of Congregational Leadership was organized in November, 1981, and has subsequently proven its worth. It is estimated that as many as two-thirds of all of the leadership of the Messianic Hebrew congregations are actively involved in the Conference. More than any other single body of people, it has raised the profile of cooperation between congregations and has, therefore, vastly improved the image of the congregations and their leadership in the eyes of local Messianic believers. Prior to this new level of cooperation, congregational leadership was tempted to espouse theological anomalies or extremes. This tendency has been checked, not so much by

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<sup>7</sup> Perlman, Susan and C.David Harley, "To The Jew First" in *World Evangelization* 13:43 (June, 1986), pg. 3.

compromising, but by honestly listening to and learning from one another. The dialogue has shifted the discussion from personalities to issues. This intercongregational pastor's conference, in response to the increased interest in evangelism, began the Evangelism Committee in 1984. This was done in order to minimize the possibility that an overzealous individual or group might conduct an evangelistic activity in an irresponsible way which would cause problems for all Israeli believers. Specifically, their purposes were:

a) to coordinate intercongregational evangelistic efforts (and follow-up); b) to provide a framework in which those involved in public evangelistic efforts would have both accountability and moral and spiritual support; c) to help in the identification and development of gifted evangelists; and d) to encourage congregations to support evangelistic efforts with prayer, finances, and personnel.

While LCJE-Israel has provided a forum for evangelistic thought and strategy, the Evangelism Committee has been a facilitator. The Evangelism Committee has won a great deal of respect among the various congregations for the sensitive and sagacious manner in which it has guided and supervised evangelism within the country. Up to this point in time, they have placed their emphasis on pre-evangelism through the street campaigns.

In May, 1989, initial steps were taken toward the formation of the Messianic Jewish Alliance of Israel. Previous attempts to organize a local chapter had faltered; and at present, interest is mixed. It was formed to deal with a wider range of issues than most other organizations. A few examples are: 1) the development of guidelines for the observance of the holidays by Messianic Jews, 2) the response of Messianic Jews to government interpretations of the Law of Return, and 3) the relationship between Israeli believers and their non-Messianic countrymen. Generally stated, their aim is "to encourage fellowship and cooperation among Messianic Jews and their supporters in order to deepen the sense of a common destiny of Messianic Jews among our people and in the wider communion of believers in Jesus."<sup>8</sup>

To whatever extent these various organizations have been responsible, the fact remains that a major change has come about with regard to evangelism in Israel.

{29} Until 1986, many local believers and veteran missionaries assumed that street evangelism was simply out of the question in Israel. As late as October, 1985, a "Hebrew believer" was quoted in *Moody Monthly* as saying, "You can't use the same methods...In the States you can hand out tracts, but not here."<sup>9</sup>

News of the Tel Aviv Campaign of August, 1986 was received with a great deal of interest by the Israeli Messianic community. Some local believers were shocked at the news of what had happened, while others were greatly encouraged. It had been decided not to focus on tract distribution, but on the collection of names and addresses of interested Israelis. These would be contacted following the campaign and would be given more material about Jesus and the New Testament. The total number of participants in the six day campaign was only 22, but it resulted in hundreds of conversations regarding Jesus and the New Testament.

T-shirts had been prepared which proclaimed the wearers as Messianic Jews, and each participant was given a tract bag of literature for distribution. Although the primary instrument of outreach was

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<sup>8</sup> As translated by Menahem Benhayim from the draft constitution

<sup>9</sup> Donohue, Sharon. "Let My People Live" in *Moody Monthly*, October, 1985. Pg. 28.

a questionnaire, other media included street preaching, drama, and music. In spite of the fact that literature distribution was not the strategic focus, three hundred and fifty pieces of literature were distributed. Furthermore, there was not a single incident of violence.

The next campaign was held in February, 1988 in Haifa. This campaign was smaller, and marked the first time that posters had been used. Posters, which quoted Acts 5:38-39, said, ““If this plan or action should be of men, it will be overthrown; but if it is of God, you will not be able to overthrow them; or else you may even be found fighting against God’--Rabbi Gamaliel MESSIANIC JEWS.” These were placed on municipal sign boards all around the city, just prior to the campaign. A logo with a menorah was used on the T-shirts, tracts, and posters. It had been developed by Christian Witness to Israel and is now used extensively by Israeli Messianic Jews.

The next three Tel Aviv campaigns coincided with holidays. The Passover Campaign of 1988 involved 38 participants, with 29 of them on the streets. This time, the focus was on tract distribution, and 45,600 broadsides were distributed. There was one incident of violent confrontation, but serious injury was avoided. Additionally, names and addresses were recorded for follow-up. The Purim Campaign of 1989 also concentrated on tract distribution and, in the brief three days of this effort, 31,500 broadsides were handed out. The Pentecost campaign was held in June 1989, involving 42 participants. Emphasis was placed on sharing the gospel through street conversations and over 400 people received an in-depth presentation of the Good News; 19,500 broadsides were also handed out.

Although tracts, Scripture portions, and Messianic booklets are distributed in person, door-to-door, and through the mail, the majority are distributed in the campaigns. A wide variety of subjects are dealt with in the literature which include full-sized books, booklets and more comprehensive tracts, an Israeli {30} version of “The Four Spiritual Laws,” and the catchy, informal broadsides. These broadsides are written and produced locally, many of them by those who were trained at the tract-writing seminar of 1984.

Though these “high profile” campaigns have resulted in few new believers, they have attempted to communicate a three-fold message:

a) the Jewish Messiah has come; b) Jews can, and do, believe in Him; and c) a Jewish believer is accessible for more information.

In addition to the evangelistic campaigns on the streets of the major cities, Messianic Jews have also begun to use the major newspapers to carry the message of Messiah to the people of Israel. Although there had been precedents, a new day began in 1988 with two advertisements which were placed by Ya’akov Damkani. Following those of Damkani, Meno Kalisher placed full page ads in the Hebrew press in January and in April, 1989. These advertisements have varied in content, style, and approach, and have been carried by all but two of Israel’s major Hebrew newspapers. These two are still closed to any Messianic advertisement. Although the response has varied with each advertisement, some Israelis have become believers through this medium. Under the aegis of L.C.J.E.-Israel, a conference on the media was held in September, 1988. This is an area which will require more attention, but some progress already been made.

Although some have come to faith through the street campaigns and the media advertisements, these means are to be considered and evaluated as pre-evangelism, rather than as evangelism. The most significant results of these efforts will probably not be known for many years.

By and large, direct, personal evangelism is related to the local congregations. Some congregations have a regular program of home visitation; others are using Evangelism Explosion, while yet others are presenting the gospel in less structured, more informal ways. The important thing is that Israelis are entering into a personal relationship with the God of their fathers through Jesus the Messiah, as the good news is presented in their living rooms. Though not as public, this is the real work of evangelism.

Not only are the Messianic Jews of Israel interested in evangelism at home, but also in the world. In fact, the Lord Himself told some of the first Messianic Jews, "You shall be My witnesses both in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and even to the remotest part of the earth" (Acts 1:8b, NASB). This perspective is maintained by a quarterly supplement of international Christian news ("Window On the Christian World") which is distributed with *Me'Et Le'Et* (cf. infra.).

In June, 1988, a team of three Israeli believers was sent by their local congregations to work in partnership with Jewish believers in England (Christian Witness to Israel) in a street campaign. This was arranged through the initiative and the {31} contacts of LCJE-Israel. The results of this cooperation were encouraging, and the future of this type of arrangement looks promising.

With such small numbers of Messianic Jews in Israel, it might seem strange to send teams overseas. However, there are significant numbers of Israelis who have emigrated to major European and American cities, and reports indicate a greater receptivity to the gospel among these emigrants than among the general Israeli population. It is also healthy to maintain a world vision in order to counter the Israeli tendency to introversion.

## II. CONGREGATIONS

The best estimates indicate that, at the present, there are approximately thirty congregations and house groups. Many of these meet in private homes. They are scattered from Upper Galilee to the southernmost tip of the Negev. For the past four or five years, they have increased in number at the rate of more than one new congregation per year and, at present, there are at least two new works anticipated by the end of 1989.

Very few descriptions can be offered of these congregations which will not be challenged by exceptions. Nevertheless, in general, they believe in the autonomy of the local congregation, a plurality of elders (with one handling most of the preaching responsibility), the priesthood of the believer, and believer's baptism by immersion (almost exclusively adults).

Though some congregations meet on Friday evening, others on Sunday evening, and at least one on Wednesday evening, most meet on Saturday. This arises not so much out of exegetical or theological reasons, as out of the six-day Israeli work schedule (in which Sunday is a day of labor and school for Israelis). Israel is moving toward a five-day workweek in which the weekend will consist of Friday and Saturday. This should free up more time for believers and give congregational leadership a little more freedom in scheduling activities.

With regard to the style of worship, there is definitely a trend toward contextualization. Immigrants are learning Hebrew, and congregations are moving away from a dependence on simultaneous translation into English, French, etc. There is a preference for the use of indigenous Hebrew music over the Hebrew translations of American, British and German hymns. Initially, most of the locally produced choruses were Scripture songs which used passages from the Psalms or other passages from the Hebrew Scriptures. Today there are more songs which are based on New Testament passages.

Most of the Hebrew songs which are sung in the congregations were introduced at annual music conferences held between 1981 and 1986. This music is reflecting more biblical content and a more “Jewish” sound. To date, five books of choruses have appeared, with more on the horizon.

{32} Several years ago, very few congregations provided an adequate Messianic education for their children. What literature there was, had been translated from material which had originally been written in English. Hebrew literature ‘is now being produced which is directed specifically to the Israeli Jewish context. It is being used regularly by approximately twelve congregations-this includes most of the larger congregations in the country. The goal is to produce age-graded materials which follow a three-year cycle. As more serious attention is given to Messianic children’s’ education, there will be an expanded need for teacher training.

Local congregations tend to eschew denominational labels, seeing them as hindrances to contextualization (among other reasons). Nevertheless, there is a solid consensus on the essential tenets of the faith. Although in the past one or two had hedged, the deity of our Lord is not openly denied. The atonement of Jesus is accepted as the basis for our salvation, received with repentance and faith in Him alone. The heretical “Dual Covenant” theology has had very little influence on Messianic Jews, though it has had considerable impact on non believing Israelis. On the surface at least, there appears to be an evangelical consensus.

This consensus on essential doctrines, however, belies a tremendous diversity of thought and expression. Since the Charismatic movement swept through the Israeli community of faith in the early ‘70’s; many congregations have been extensively affected. There are, however, several congregations which have not been significantly influenced by the “Renewal.” There have also been a few congregations which have been oriented more toward Torah observance. While these distinctives are still valid, it should be noted that there is a growing awareness, in all quarters, of the need for more serious study of the Scripture. There seems to be more concern for theological training and a hunger for more substantive doctrinal and expository teaching and preaching.

### **III. DISCIPLESHIP**

Obviously, discipleship is primarily the responsibility of the local congregation and the individual believer. Nevertheless, through camps, conferences, Messianic literature, and theological education, the process of discipleship is greatly enhanced. Messianic Jews in Israel are fortunate to have each, though they vary in the level of their development and helpfulness.

The Baptist Village serves both Jews and Arabs as it intentionally promotes the unity of Abraham’s greater Son. The Village is now used for congregational retreats and conferences, intercongregational seminars and conferences, family conferences for Messianic Jews, and conferences which coincide with some of the major Jewish holidays. The most significant of these is the Passover Conference which draws hundreds of believers from all parts of the country. This conference was once organized by an ad hoc committee, but is now the responsibility of the National Conference of Congregational Leadership.

{33} The Israel Trust of the Anglican Church has operated the Stella Carmel Conference Center near Haifa since 1961. It serves both Arab and Jewish believers, and also places a priority on reconciliation. It may best be described as a retreat center with an emphasis on encouragement, renewal and intercession. Many of the congregations and families of Messianic Jews throughout the



country have been strengthened by the ministry of the staff and the conferences which have been hosted by Stella Carmel.

A local board of directors (Keren Achvah Meshichit) has owned and operated Beit Yedidiah Conference Center in Haifa since the early '70s. Although the relationship is unofficial, this center is related primarily to a few congregations, such as Messianic Assembly in Jerusalem. It seeks to serve the needs of all congregations, but actually ministers to a more restricted circle. Nevertheless, through their conferences, they have contributed to the discipleship and growth of believers and congregations.

From 1966-1972, the Baptist Village sponsored a Hebrew camp to which both Messianic and non-Messianic Israelis sent their children. Since 1971, the Messianic Assembly in Jerusalem has sponsored a camp program for the children of Messianic believers. It began with approximately 25 children, half of whom spoke English. This camp now serves 160 children and teenagers during a Hebrew-only summer program. The Messianic Assembly also has special events for high schoolers during some of the major holidays. In addition to this, the congregations on the coastal plain (Ashqelon, Tel Aviv, Netanya, etc.) are formulating plans for a camp program which is set to begin in 1990.

Messianic literature is also an important tool in the discipleship and spiritual growth of Israeli believers. In 1973, a three-volume concordance to the Hebrew New Testament was published, under the auspices of the United Christian Council of Israel. In the first quarter of 1990, the Bible Society plans to release an annotated edition of the Modern Hebrew New Testament. It will contain cross-references, color maps, tables of weights and measures, a glossary, an index, a wide range of introductory and explanatory articles, and footnotes which, in addition to the usual clarifications, will alert the reader to parallels in rabbinic literature as well as in other Jewish sources. Most of these articles and notes are locally written and edited.

Although several groups have published books and materials in Hebrew, the largest two are Yanetz, in Jerusalem, and HaGefen, in the Tel Aviv area. Yanetz has published over one hundred titles which cover many categories of Messianic literature, particularly devotional literature and biographies. HaGefen, on the other hand, has published over thirty books. Although HaGefen has published some devotional literature, it has concentrated on books which deal with doctrine, Bible exposition, and practical areas of application. HaGefen publishes more locally-written material which is {34} written specifically for an Israeli readership. Both HaGefen and Yanetz publish evangelistic materials.

Trends in this area are difficult to identify, but there has definitely been an improvement in the quality of both the writing and the production of Messianic literature over the years. More books are being written in Israel, and for Israelis. *Ha'Ish HaHu* ("That Man")<sup>10</sup>, a book which presents the life of Jesus in the context of the land and people of Israel, is a good example.

Messianic magazines have also been sources of information, edification, and encouragement. *B'Shuv* ("With the Return"), a journal of news and relevant devotional articles is published twice annually, under the editorship of Menahem Benhayim. *Me'Et Le'Et* ("From Time to

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<sup>10</sup> Hendren, Noam. *Halsh HaHu*. Tel Aviv: Dugith, 1987.

*Time*”) is a quarterly which is published by HaGefen and edited by a four-member editorial board. It consists of news and articles of informed devotional content dealing with history, doctrine and apologetics. HaGefen also publishes *Re’a Ne’eman* (“Faithful Friend”), a quarterly devoted to young people between the ages of 9 and 13. Also produced by an editorial board, *Re’a Ne’eman* seeks to develop a total world view, with articles covering a wide range of subjects such as geography, science, Jewish lore and Bible stories.

*MISHKAN: A Theological Forum on Jewish Evangelism*, which you hold in your hands, began as a project of the United Christian Council of Israel. Although it serves an international readership, it is not without influence and honor in its own country. It is read by believer and non-believer alike, and provides a forum for the exchange of ideas which are relevant to Jewish evangelism, Hebrew Christian/Messianic- Jewish identity and Jewish/Christian relations.

Though some of the young Israeli believers are studying in Christian schools abroad, there are some options within Israel. Beit Immanuel Study Center began in 1981 and, although in the first several years had enrolled very few, in the last three years has had about three hundred students who have enrolled for seminars and short term offerings. Just over 40% of that number was indigenous. In addition, more than one hundred fifty students have completed at least one of the fourteen semester-length courses (90% of those were local believers). By offering courses in the evenings, the Study Center has been able to serve local believers who must also work. The Study Center has recently closed, but there are plans to open a new study center soon, with an organizational structure placing administration and control of the program in the hands of local Messianic Jews.

Caspari Center is the Israeli branch of the Norway Israel Mission (D.N.I.). It is named for Theodore Caspari, a Norwegian Messianic Jew who wrote a definitive Arabic grammar in the last century. Caspari sponsors *Telem*, a lay version of theological education by extension. *Telem* offers two certificate programs and a diploma program. They have averaged approximately twenty students per year since they began in 1984 and are continuing to produce original classroom materials {35} in Hebrew. Together with the Beit Immanuel Study Center, they have helped to meet a very pressing need. Of course, much more needs to be done.

#### **IV. MESSIANIC JEWS AND THE STATE OF ISRAEL**

Though Jewish believers have always found themselves in the minority not since the first century have they lived in the context of a Jewish, unbelieving State. Several legal studies have been made which relate to the Messianic Jews in Israel. Eric Pillischer, an Israeli believer and lawyer, made a study of “Religious Freedom in Israel” for the United Christian Council of Israel; an Israeli lawyer retained by a Jerusalem congregation made a study of prohibitions and possibilities in evangelism in Jerusalem; and legal counsel representing the Evangelism Committee has investigated the legality of tract distribution in the Tel Aviv area.

Basically, the legal concerns of Messianic Jews in Israel lie in three areas: gaining citizenship under the Law of Return; countering harassment or defamation; and establishing the freedoms of expression and assembly, in order to witness and congregate as Messianic Jews. In relation to this last mentioned area of concern, clarification is needed regarding the so-called “Anti-mission Law.”

Wesley Pippert says, “In Israel, the law prohibits activity by Christian missionaries.”<sup>11</sup> This reflects a common misunderstanding. In the first place, the Ministry of Interior, in consultation with the Ministry of Religious Affairs, grants visas to scores of missionaries and denominational representatives annually. This is in perfect harmony with Israel’s commitment to freedom of religion. In the second place, there is little distinction between a missionary and any other believer. However much believers may oppose Moshe Porush, leader of a group of anti-missionary activists in Jerusalem, he was absolutely correct when he said, “Whoever declares that he is a good Christian but is not a missionary either is lying or isn’t a good Christian. Whoever is familiar with theology knows that in their eyes mission is an obligation.”<sup>12</sup> One could only wish that every believer shared his “Orthodoxy”! Israel permits the activities of Messianic Jew and missionary alike.

What the law proscribes is the offer or acceptance of a material inducement (i.e., a bribe) to change religions. Again, it has been said, “Thus even giving out a tract, being a thing of value, is against the law.”<sup>13</sup> The question, however, is not whether a thing has value, but if that value is sufficient to constitute “material inducement.” At this point, Israelis are not becoming believers in order that they might become recipients of a tract!

This law reveals a total lack of understanding concerning what it means to place one’s trust in the Messiah of Israel. That trust is faith in Jesus alone for eternal salvation, and must be completely unaffected by material considerations. Furthermore, it is not until an individual is capable of making this decision that {36} he can be considered a believer. Finally, Messianic Jews have not converted from being Jews to non-Jews, but are Jews, once alienated from the God of their fathers, who now have a personal relationship with Him through Jesus the Messiah. Needless to say, no charge has ever been brought to court under this law.

Messianic Jews in Israel do not have great difficulty with the laws of the State, but with the abuse of authority often exercised by clerks and bureaucrats, and with the indifference of officials to the plight of believers. Another cause of concern is the fact that a portion of the financial support for Yad L’Achim, a society of anti-mission activists, comes from the government itself. Nevertheless, most believers are patriotic citizens who abide by the laws of the land.

## **V. MESSIANIC JEWS, ARABS AND THE *INTIFADA***

To begin with, it is essential that a distinction be made between Israeli Arabs and West Bank or Gaza Arabs. Though most Israeli Arabs consider themselves Palestinians, the pressures and dynamics are different.

There are solid relationships and excellent fellowship between Messianic Jews and Israeli Arabs. In spite of the language and cultural differences, congregations of Arab and Jewish believers occasionally worship together or exchange pulpits. It should also be noted that Arab believers have joined with Messianic Jews in every major evangelistic campaign.

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<sup>11</sup> Pippert, pg. 205

<sup>12</sup> Moshe Porush, newspaper interview in January, 1984, quoted on pg. 32 of Willmington /Pritz

<sup>13</sup> Pippert, pg. 205

With regard to West Bank or Gaza Arab believers, the *intifada* (uprising) has definitely brought about a change of relationship with Messianic Jews. Prior to the *intifada*, fellowship retreats were held in which Messianic Jews and West Bank Arab believers got to know and understand each other. They spent time in each other's home, and their families were brought together.

In spite of a very sensitive and caring statement which was issued by Grace and Truth Congregation in Rehovot and some fellowship which continued initially, these activities largely ceased with the *intifada*. Two major reasons may be suggested for this: the West Bank and Gaza believers face a very serious threat from radical extremists if they are perceived as being too friendly with Israelis. Many who were thought to be collaborators with Israel have been brutally murdered. The second reason is a theological difference which politics have thrust to the fore: whereas most Messianic Jews believe that God's covenant with Abraham was unconditional, that therefore the people of Israel still have a valid biblical claim to the Land, and that there is yet a distinct role for the Jewish people in the economy of God, their brothers and sisters on the West Bank and in Gaza would tend to disagree. Prior to the *intifada*, it was possible to overlook these differences, but that is no longer the case. Outside influences have prevented believers from expressing their oneness, what with the tension and strife which are bound up in the *intifada*.

{37} An Israeli believer, serving not only as an elder in his congregation but also in Israel's reserves, told of a recent tour of duty in Gaza. While there, he was gratified to be able to be of some help to several Arab believers. Nevertheless, it would have been naive to claim that politics did not matter, as he stood with a gun and a uniform that symbolized all that they had grown to hate. As conditions seem to be deteriorating politically, we can only pray that the Prince of Peace will invade the hearts and lives of Jew and Arab alike.

To the Western mind, religion and politics are separate categories. This is not so in the Middle East, where the political implications of religious belief are more immediately apparent. The premise that one's beliefs determine one's political actions is taken for granted, but it is no less true with regard to the trends which we have observed among Messianic Jews in Israel. Proverbs 23:7 says, "As a man thinketh in his heart, so is he."

There is a constant need for balance. The trend toward greater cooperation has helped to provide balance both in theological development and in evangelism. This will continue to be a priority concern. The trend toward the indigenization of present ministries and institutions must be balanced by the needs for trained leadership. The trend toward contextualization should be balanced, not only by gospel distinctives, but also compounded with a world vision and with compassion and justice for the "stranger within thy gates" (Deuteronomy 24:14).

The mere identification of trends, however, is inadequate. Through prayerful and careful Bible study, we must identify God's will for future development. Neither our theology nor our practice should be allowed to develop "accidentally." We have been called to work together in thoughtful and intentional ministry.

This article has been an attempt to paint a picture of the conditions and the degree of development of Messianic Jews in Israel. This has necessarily involved a survey of the events of the past ten or fifteen years. Within the confines of an article of this nature, it has not been possible to paint with a very fine brush. The fact that readily available information is often inadequate and sometimes inaccurate is a

frustration to be anticipated. Nevertheless, the production of a fairly comprehensive study of Messianic Jews in Israel covering the 1970's and 1980's is a work which needs to be done. It should richly reward the patient and skilled hand, for though these times are perilous, they are indeed exciting.