

Messianic Jews Face Organized Resistance in Russia and Ukraine

A Russia-born American rabbi has launched an aggressive campaign to warn Jews about Messianic outreach efforts

After years of unchecked growth, Messianic Jewish groups in the Soviet Union are facing their first organized, well-funded opposition. It comes from a newly opened center in Moscow. The four-person office, opened in early February in a former kindergarten in the center of the Russian capital, is run by Rabbi Alexander Lakshin, a Russia-born U.S. citizen who said he is committed to fighting Messianic Jewish groups across the former Soviet Union.

“Clearly, belief in Jesus as a Messiah or God or both clearly contradicts the foundation of Judaism. For 2,000 years, Jews rejected this idea,” said Lakshin, a soft-spoken 44-year-old with a flowing beard and an easygoing manner.

Lakshin criticizes Messianic Jews—ethnically Jewish Christians who incorporate Hebrew traditions into worship services—for what he said was their intentional efforts to mislead uneducated, secular Jews into believing that belief in Jesus as the Messiah is consistent with Judaism.

For their part, Messianic Jewish leaders counter that Jews don’t stop being Jews when they start believing in Jesus.

"Of course I am a Jew. One hundred percent. In every way," said Rabbi Efim Litvak, 64, who heads a 400-member congregation of Messianic Jews called Shomer Yisrael. "When a Jew becomes a Christian, they say, 'Fine, you go your way, and we will go our way.' But when a Jew becomes a Messianic Jew they want to hunt him down."

Lakshin said he has no intention of hunting down Messianic Jews, but is working instead to better inform Russia's estimated 600,000 Jews, the vast majority of whom have only a basic knowledge of Judaism after 70 years of state-enforced atheism. "Ignorance" is especially high in small, remote Jewish communities in Siberia and the Far East, Lakshin said.

"The best way to counter [Messianic Jews] is with Jewish education," said Lakshin, explaining later that he has also organized pickets of large-scale events, such as appearances by American preacher Sid Roth.

Although Lakshin's five-room Moscow center opened only in early February, he said he plans to quickly build a network of volunteers throughout the former Soviet Union to counteract the rapid growth of Messianic congregations. He estimates the number of Messianic Jewish believers to be in the tens of thousands, with an especially strong presence in Ukraine, the former Soviet republic with a slightly smaller Jewish population than Russia.

In the Ukrainian capital of Kiev, Yevgeny Umedman, a secular Jew working closely with the local Chabad Lubavitch synagogue to monitor and combat the growth of Messianic Judaism, said in a recent interview that "for every one Jew who goes to synagogue, there are 10 going to churches."

"It is a very big danger. When I go to a synagogue, there are hardly any new faces," said Umedman, who volunteers his time gathering intelligence at Messianic Jewish meetings. "But when you go to these services, you'll get at least 10 new people at each service."

Hard numbers for Messianic Jews are virtually impossible to come by because there is no central organization, and many congregations come under the aegis of local Pentecostal, charismatic or Baptist groups.

By most accounts, Kiev boasts the highest number of Messianic Jews. There are three congregations, one that has more than 1,000 members.

In Moscow, Rabbi Litvak said he has already noticed a change. He said an Orthodox Jewish aid organization, Chama, recently cut off all assistance to his Shomer Yisrael congregation when it became clear they were Messianic, not traditional Jews. Now Litvak said he is struggling to make up for 3.5 tons in dry goods that, until January, had been arriving monthly for his congregation's poor and elderly members.

Rabbi Dovid Karpov, a member of Chama's board of directors, said there was no link between Shomer Yisrael's Messianic Judaism and the decision to cut off aid. "Maybe that is what they think, but it is not like that," said Karpov, adding that the Russian government determines where most of the aid goes. "There is only so much aid, and Russia is a huge country. We've got a directive to work in the Far East and Siberia this year."