

Messianic Group Sues After Violent Riot

A Messianic congregation is suing the chief rabbi of Beersheba, Israel, and a Jewish anti-missionary organization for damages incurred during a riot that lasted more than three hours and interrupted regular Sabbath services on the premises of the congregation.

On Dec. 24, 2005, hundreds of Orthodox Jews forced their way onto the property of Nachalat Yeshua ("Jesus' Inheritance"), throwing chairs, equipment and punches at some worshipers. Police testified to arriving on the scene shortly after the riot began, witnessing the violence and arresting some of the rioters.

But authorities never filed charges against the perpetrators, and the incident seemed set to go away. So leaders of Nachalat Yeshua, led by pastor Howard Bass, sued the men accused of organizing the riot, which was the second attack against the congregation in seven years. "Having already turned the other cheek once in a big way, and numerous times in smaller incidents ... and after counseling with other Messianic leaders around the country, we decided to sue the Sephardi chief rabbi of Beersheba and the anti-Messianic organization Yad L'Achim," Bass wrote in a June 25 *Jerusalem Post* editorial.

Attacks against believers have escalated in recent years, culminating with a bomb disguised as a gift package that nearly killed Amiel Ortiz in the northern town of Ariel last year. No arrests have been made in that case, which is still under investigation. "[The violence] is progressing," Bass said. "The outcome of our case could bring more attention to the situation in Ariel and in Arad," where Orthodox Jews have demonstrated against Messianic Jews and Christians regularly since 2004, many times violently.

In the first Beersheba attack in 1998, some 1,000 Orthodox Jews marched to Nachalat Yeshua, threatening congregants and throwing stones, but remained outside the property. In the 2005 attack, hundreds of Orthodox Jewish trespassers forced their way onto the grounds, attacked worshipers, damaged property and pushed Bass into the baptismal pool, witnesses said.

Bass stressed that the lawsuit should not be construed as an attack against the Jewish people and should not be used to perpetuate anti-Israel sentiment. It is simply a matter of law, he says. He writes in his editorial that the point of the trial is "to uphold the legitimate right to express the true Messianic faith in Yeshua here in Beersheba and in Israel, according to the existing laws which supposedly govern the State."

The case will continue Nov. 23 in Beersheba Magistrate's Court. The judge then has a month to render a verdict. Nachalat Yeshua is one of about half a dozen congregations in the southern Negev city. It supports organizations that feed the hungry and helps the poor in the region.

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