

Messianic Christians Accused of Converting Minor in Israel

A hard-line Jewish ultra-Orthodox group in Israel is taking aim at a couple it claims is manipulating minors into becoming Christians. The group, Yad L'Achim, singles out Jewish Christians, known as Messianic Jews, for harassment and abuse.

Yad L'Achim this week placed leaflets around the home of Serge and Naama Kogen, 37 and 42 respectively, in Mevasseret Zion, a suburban community located just west of Jerusalem.

Someone took out a full-page ad in a local newspaper the same week, giving the couple's address and telling residents they were part of a missionary group "targeting" the community. The Kogens are native Israelis and hence not part of any missionary group.

The advertisement invited the public to a protest planned against the Kogens, and on June 26, about 20 of the group's supporters demonstrated outside the couple's home, where they denounced them over megaphones for 90 minutes.

The protests came after Yad L'Achim lost a court case against the Kogens and their congregational leader, Asher Intrater. The group had accused them of "proselytizing" minors.

During the protest, a distraught 16-year-old girl, the alleged target of the couple's "missionary" efforts, said all of Yad L'Achim's claims were false. Donna Lubofsky maintains that she has never converted to Christianity. She wanted to speak at the protest to give her side of what happened, but the organizers wouldn't let her, she said.

"They are all liars, all liars! Ask them, why won't they let me speak?" Lubofsky told Compass at the protest. "They won't let me speak because what they are saying is untrue. [The

Kogens] never tried to get me to believe. They are just good people."

'Lot of Love'

The Kogens met Donna a year ago while they were next-door neighbors. Naama Kogen said Donna, whom she described as a "genius," had some issues adjusting to a new school, and her home life seemed problematic. The girl quickly became a regular fixture at the Kogen household and "a close part of the family," in Kogen's words.

"She said she had never seen a family like ours. We have a lot of love in our home," Kogen said, adding that the teenager told her the time she spent in their house was the first time she felt loved. Kogen said that during the course of the friendship, problems persisted in the girl's home, and at times she was afraid to return there. She also said the teenager began experimenting with alcohol and other potentially self-destructive behaviors from which the Kogens were able to deter her.

"I told her she would be the only one to suffer in the end," Kogen said. "Step by step, I started to see an improvement."

Kogen and her husband were emphatic in their claim that they never discussed religion with Donna, but that she expressed interest in attending their congregational worship. Kogen said she obtained permission from Donna's mother, and she attended Shabbat meetings with the congregation for about two months.

But Donna's mother, Bella Lubofsky, told protestors that the Kogens "took" the girl "every Friday."

Despite the progress Donna was making in some areas of her personal life, her family life was still in tatters, according to Kogen. She said she urged Donna to approach her parents and try to reconcile their relationship, but things remained tense.

The problems came to a head after a disagreement at the Kogen home when Lubofsky allegedly pushed her daughter, and the Kogens had her spend the night until things calmed down. Soon afterward, Lubofsky reported the Kogens to the police for "proselytizing."

Serge Kogen said police investigated the case, found that they had done nothing illegal and dropped the investigation. Yad L'Achim, not dissuaded by the police finding, went to court and brought charges directly against the couple and against Intrater, leader of the Ahavat Yeshua Congregation.

As with the police, the court found nothing illegal and on June 14 dismissed all charges against Intrater and the Kogens.

The Kogens said they weren't certain how Yad L'Achim became involved with the Lubofskys. They think an Orthodox Jew in their neighborhood approached the extremist group. One day the neighbor began harassing Kogen, she said; when she fled inside her house, the man and others demanded she come outside. On its website, Yad L'Achim claims the parents of the girl approached them for assistance.

Misrepresentations

Sunday's protest comes at a time when Yad L'Achim is trying to push new "anti-missionary" laws through the Knesset, Israel's national parliamentary body. Under Israeli law, spreading one's faith is legal, but "proselytizing" to minors and gaining converts through "material incentives" is illegal.

According to its website, literature and speeches, Yad L'Achim wants to make "proselytizing" by all non-Jewish groups illegal. The group does not specify which non-Orthodox groups they consider to be truly Jewish, or how groups with secular viewpoints might be similarly censored.

Started by ultra-Orthodox Jews, Yad L'Achim is known for its aggressive, confrontational style. At other protests, followers of the group have assaulted Messianic Jews. The

group also places information in its publications that Messianic Jews say is either unconfirmed, misleading by its incomplete nature or blatantly untrue.

They claim that Messianic Jews are enemies of the Jewish people and have no place in Israel. The group makes no distinction between Christianity and cults, or between Christians and "missionaries."

Referring to the protest on its website, Yad L'Achim described Naama Kogen as a missionary "who has been having a devastating impact on local youths." The group goes on to say that Donna "soon found herself attending prayer groups and being subjected to brainwashing. Gradually she came to accept J and began to pull away from her parents ..."

The website makes no mention of the ultimate outcome of the failed case that Yad L'Achim filed.

Intrater said Yad L'Achim is a fringe group whose views aren't representative of most in Israel. The group has tried to frame its argument as one of Jews against Christians and has dredged up the specter of hundreds of years of anti-Semitic persecution to lend weight to its argument, he said.

Intrater said he sees the entire issue as a disagreement between two groups of Jews. He said the first generation of Jews who believed in Jesus didn't refer to themselves as "Christians," and it is a title he avoids. Most "Messianic Jews" don't use the term in reference to themselves. Instead, they prefer to be known as Jews who believe in the Messianic claims of "Yeshua," the Hebrew name for Jesus.

"They look at us as worse than Christians," Intrater said. "They look at us as if we've betrayed our people and become Gentiles. And they want to annihilate us. We see ourselves as true Jews. We see it as an argument over who is the true Messiah. What we want to say is, 'Who is the real Messiah?' They feel hatred toward us and see us as the enemy. We don't

look at them that way. These are our people, and we love them.”

Protest Fallout

The protest went peacefully for the most part. Surrounded by signs saying “missionaries” are “targeting” Jewish souls, a small group of protestors gave speeches, including Bella Lubofsky. Protestors refused to speak to any media they viewed as being neutral or unsupportive of their demonstration. Asked if a Jew who believes in Jesus is still a Jew, one protestor said, “No.”

The demonstrators jeered as a camera crew for an international news media outlet left. After the protest was over, a group of six Yad L’Achim sympathizers insulted and menaced a Compass reporter and a friend, then followed the two by foot for about two miles, threatening violence against them along the way. When the reporter tried to get help from passersby, the group frightened off people and shouted that the reporter was a “missionary.”

When the two reached a local mall, the hard-line sympathizers followed them inside. Mall security and police refused to help and left the two – now surrounded at a distance by the group – stranded for more than 90 minutes. Only after intervention by a group of women declaring that Israel is a free country would mall security escort the reporter and his friend to a taxi. The group of Yad L’Achim supporters, however, was never asked to leave the mall.

The Kogens still have contact with Donna, but her parents don’t allow her to go to the congregation. The Kogens, Asher and others agreed that Donna should obey her parent’s wishes as long as she is a minor. They sent her and her parents each a letter to that effect, which according to Kogen was very painful to the girl.

The evening after the protest, the Kogens came home to find

Donna with a stack of Yad L'Achim literature that she had collected by hand and ripped to pieces. It was obvious she had been crying, Kogen said.

"This group doesn't care about this girl at all, they just care about getting to us," she said about her and her husband.

Kogen said on July 1 that the response of her community to the protest has been mixed. Before the protest, no one knew about her religious beliefs, she said. But she said now most people in her community have been very supportive. Some of their neighbors, even those who could be considered "traditional," have made an effort to send their children over to play with her four children.

But the persecution continues. Supporters from Yad L'Achim continue to plaster her streets with leaflets. They have also started handing out pamphlets at the mall.

More insidiously, on Wednesday (June 29) the Kogens' landlord asked them to leave their apartment because she was receiving phone threats ordering her to evict them, Kogen said. The man making the threatening call told the landlord that if she didn't remove the couple, "we will."

The caller said he would burn down the Kogens' home. The landlord offered the couple money to move, but the Kogens – who had moved into the apartment only two months ago – refused to move again.

On June 26 the landlord talked with the couple again.

At the congregational meeting on Friday, Serge Kogen told the group the landlord said, "We could stay as long as we want."