

Messianic Jews in Israel Seek Apology for Attack

✖ After a final court hearing in Israel last week, a congregation of Messianic Jews awaits a judge's decision that could force an ultra-orthodox Jewish organization to publicly apologize to them for starting a riot and ransacking a baptismal service.

A ruling in favor of the Messianic group would mark the first time an organization opposing Jewish believers in Jesus in Israel has had to apologize to its victims for religious persecution.

In 2006 Howard Bass, pastor of Yeshua's Inheritance congregation, filed suit against Yehuda Deri, chief Sephardic rabbi in the city of Beer Sheva, and Yad L'Achim, an organization that fights against Messianic Jews, for allegedly inciting a riot at a December 2005 service that Bass was leading.

Bass has demanded either a public apology for the attack or roughly \$400,000 from the rabbi and Yad L'Achim.

The case, Bass said, was ultimately about "defending the name of Yeshua [Jesus]" and making sure that Deri, the leadership of Yad L'Achim and those that support them know they have to obey the law and respect the right of people to worship.

"They are trying to get away from having any responsibility," Bass said.

On Dec. 24, 2005, during a baptismal service in Beer Sheva, a group of about 200 men pushed their way into a small, covered structure being used to baptize two believers and tried to stop the service. Police were called to the scene but could not control the crowd.

Once inside the building, the assailants tossed patio chairs, damaged audiovisual equipment, threw a grill and other items into a baptismal pool, and then pushed Bass into the pool and broke his glasses.

"Their actions were violent actions without regard [for injury]," Bass said.

In the days before the riot, Yad L'Achim had issued notices to people about a "mass baptism" scheduled to take place at the facility in the sprawling city of 531,000 people 51 miles southwest of Jerusalem. In the days after the riot, Deri bragged about the incident on a radio talk show, including a boast that Bass had been "baptized" at the gathering.

The 2005 incident wasn't the first time the church had to deal with a riotous attack after Yad L'Achim disseminated false information about their activities. On Nov. 28, 1998, a crowd of roughly 1,000 protestors broke up a Yeshua's Inheritance service after the anti-Christian group spread a rumor that three busloads of kidnapped Jewish minors were being brought in for baptism. The assailants threw rocks, spit on parishioners and attempted to seize some of their children, Bass said.

In response to the 1998 attack and to what Bass described as a public, cavalier attitude about the 2005 attack, Bass and others in the Messianic community agreed that he needed to take legal action.

"What is happening here has happened to Jews throughout the centuries," Bass said about persecution of Messianic Jews in Israel, adding that many in movements opposed to Messianic Jews in Israel are "arrogant." He compared their attitudes to the attitudes that those in Hamas, a Palestinian group dedicated to the destruction of the State of Israel, have toward Israelis in general.

"They say, 'Recognize us, but we will never recognize you,'"

Bass said.

Long Battle

Bass has fought against the leadership of Yad L'Achim and Deri for four years through his attorneys, Marvin Kramer and Kevork Nalbandian. But throughout the process, Kramer said, the two defendants have refused to offer a genuine apology for the misinformation that led to the 2005 riot or for the riot itself.

Kramer said Bass's legal team would offer language for an acceptable public apology, and attorneys for the defendants in turn would offer language that amounted to no real apology at all.

"We made several attempts to make a compromise, but we couldn't do it," Kramer said. "What we were really looking for was a public apology, and they weren't ready to give a public apology. If we would have gotten the public apology, we would have dropped the lawsuit at any point."

Despite several attempts to reach Yad L'Achim officials at both their U.S. and Israeli offices, no one would comment.

The hearing on April 15 was the final chance the parties had to come to an agreement; the judge has 30 days to give a ruling. His decision will be issued by mail.

Kramer declined to speculate on what the outcome of the case will be, but he said he had "proved what we needed to prove to be successful."

Belief in Israel

Bass said he is a strong supporter of Israel but is critical of the way Messianic Jews are treated in the country.

"Israel opposes the gospel, and these events show this to be true," he said. Referring to Israel, Bass paraphrased Stephen,

one of Christianity's early martyrs, "'You always resist the Spirit of God.' What Stephen said was true."

Kramer said that the lawsuit is not against the State of Israel or the Jewish people, but rather for freedom of religion.

"It has to do with a violation of rights of individuals to worship in accordance with the basic tenants of their faith and to practice their faith in accordance with their beliefs in accordance with law," he said.

Terrorist Organization?

Bass' lawsuit is just one of many legal troubles Yad L'Achim is facing. In February, the Jerusalem Institute of Justice (JIJ), a civil rights advocacy group, filed a petition asking Attorney General Yehuda Weinstein to declare Yad L'Achim a terrorist organization and order that it be dismantled.

In the 24-page document Caleb Myers, an attorney for JIJ, outlined numerous incidences in which Yad L'Achim or those linked with it had "incited hatred, racism, violence and terror." The document cited instances of persecution against Christians, as well as kidnappings of Jewish women from their Arab partners.

"Israel is a 'Jewish and democratic' state, while the actions of Yad L'Achim are not consistent with either the noble values of Judaism or the values of democracy," the petition read. "Not to mention the fact that it is a country that arose on the ashes of a people that was persecuted for its religion, and has resolved since its establishment to bear the standard of full equality, without discrimination on the basis of gender, race, religion or nationality."

According to the document, Yad L'Achim went after people it viewed as enemies of ultra-orthodox Judaism. The group particularly targeted Messianic Jews and other Christians.

"Yad L'Achim refers to 'missionary activity' as if it was the worst of criminal offenses and often arouses fear of this activity," the document read. "It should be noted that in the State of Israel there is no prohibition against 'missionary activity' as the dissemination of religion and/or faith among members of other religions/faiths, unless such activity solicits religious conversion, as stated in various sections of the Penal Code, which bans the solicitation of religious conversion among minors, or among adults by offering bribes.

"Furthermore, the organization often presents anyone belonging to the Christian religion, in all its forms, as a 'missionary,' even if he does not work to spread his religion."

Particularly damning in the document was reported testimony gleaned from Jack Teitel. Teitel, accused of planting a bomb on March 20, 2008 that almost killed the teenage son of a Messianic Jewish pastor, told authorities that he worked with Yad L'Achim.

"He was asked to talk about his activity in Yad L'Achim and related that for some five years he was active in the organization, and on average he helped to rescue about five women each year," the document read, using the Yad L'Achim term "rescue" to refer to kidnapping.

The 2008 bombing severely injured Ami Ortiz, then 15, but after 20 months he had largely recovered.

Teitel, who said Ortiz family members were "missionaries trying to capture weak Jews," has been indicted on two cases of pre-meditated murder, three cases of attempted murder, carrying a weapon, manufacturing a weapon, possession of illegal weapons and incitement to commit violence.

In interviews with the Israeli media, Yad L'Achim Chairman Rabbi Shalom Dov Lifshitz said his organization wasn't connected with the attacks of the Ortiz family or with Teitel.