

Messianic Judaism Gaining Momentum in Israel

In recent decades, Messianic Judaism, a movement of Jewish people who have accepted Yeshua (Jesus) as Messiah and continued to embrace their Jewishness, has been steadily growing—especially in the United States.

Jews have been coming to faith in Yeshua for centuries, increasingly so after Israel became a reality again in the late 1800s with the Zionist movement. After the Holocaust, when Israel became a nation again in 1948, the number of Jewish believers in Yeshua has been increasing worldwide, almost in lock step with Jewish immigration to Israel.

But what is the state of Messianic Judaism in Israel itself?

Because Israel is in an extremely dangerous area of the world, surrounded by Arab countries that have threatened its extermination, Jews there live with a certain amount of anxiety. When would the next Intifada take place? Which country would declare its desire to push Israel into the sea? When would Hamas rockets fly again?

Living with those concerns, the people have become cautious about “outsiders,” especially after nearly two millennia of “Christian” anti-Semitism. Thus, Christian missions to the Jews of Israel often have been met with suspicion. Yet some have been successful, especially if they are sensitive to and supportive of Messianic Judaism.

There are historic Anglican Jewish missions from the United Kingdom. King of Kings () is a congregational ministry of the Pentecostal Assemblies of Canada. The Caspari Center () is a Scandinavian Lutheran mission to the Jews. Christian Witness to Israel () sponsors Grace and Truth congregation in Rishon L'Tzion. They also publish books, as does Keren Yeshua.

Modern Jewish missions are also active in Israel. Jews for Jesus () has a new center in Tel Aviv. The Christian Jew Foundation (), not only does missionary work, it also supports a number of national pastors. Chosen People Ministries () has centers in Jerusalem and Tel Aviv and congregations in Jerusalem, Tel Aviv, Ashkelon, Ashdod and Ariel. Maoz () is an Israeli organization that publishes books in Hebrew and supports Israel while helping Jewish people meet their Messiah. There are others as well, but, as with most overseas missions, indigenous works have had the most success. Nowhere is this truer than in Israel.

The primary evangelistic work in Israel is not through missions. It is being done through local Messianic congregations. The larger ones are in Tiberias, K'far Saba, Netanya, Jerusalem and Joffa. There are 150-plus congregations in Israel with as many as 15,000 Messianic Jewish believers, of whom about 60 percent speak Russian as their first language.

The growth in the number of congregations has increased over the last 20 years, just as it has in the United States and other countries. Nearly every year, another indigenous congregation or two springs up, and as more and more Jews from around the world return home, this will only increase.

Israel is a small country—about the size of New Jersey—so these congregations are easily noticed by their fellow Israelis. More and more, Israel is increasingly aware that there are Jews who trust Yeshua as the Messiah and savior, much as it was in the New Testament era.

These Messianic Jewish congregations are now led by Israelis, even though they may have a mix of Jews and Gentiles. Most services are in Hebrew (sometimes Russian, Amharic, French or Spanish). The music too is indigenous, as is the style of worship—very Israeli. The melodies have a distinctly Middle Eastern tone to them. Most meet on Saturday when Jews

generally hold worship services. These congregations of Yeshua-followers are clearly Jewish.

Messianic Jews are gaining more acceptance in Israel. Instead of being perceived as threats to the Israelis, due to prejudices going back 2,000 years, they are recognized as friends, fellow citizens, and an active part of Israeli society. In part, the groundwork for this was laid by the benevolence work of groups such as Chosen People Ministries (), The Joseph Storehouse (), the Messianic Jewish Alliance of America's Joseph Project (), and other similar works.

Israelis, who have been especially challenged during the wars with Lebanon, Hamas and the high taxes used to pay for defense, are grateful to Messianic Jews, sometimes in spite of themselves, for food, clothes, medicine and other supplies. They need our help. This is a very tangible expression of the love of Messiah. Messianic Jews are being trusted enough to allow them to materially assist Israel during her most difficult times.

It is known that there are many Messianic Jews serving in the army—mostly the children of immigrants from the United States and Europe—who were raised in Israel. This shows unity with the people, so much so that the funeral of one Messianic Jewish soldier killed in the last war was well attended by Israel's leaders. The newspapers noted that he was a Messianic Jew, part of a congregation in the Haifa area.

A television special featuring interviews of members of the Christian *Moshav*, *Yad Hashmonah*, was widely watched. It included a Messianic Jewish family celebrating Shabbat, etc., giving a very good impression of Messianic Jews in Israel. No longer are followers of Yeshua seen as people to stay away from. Now, they are embraced as fellow strugglers in Israeli life.

Over the past centuries, because of all the atrocities done to

Jews in the name of Jesus, Jewish people have avoided having anything to do with Him, His followers, or His teachings. It was too costly, too risky. And in Israel, where people are more vulnerable to attacks, this is acutely so. But Messianic Judaism is changing things. Now, Israelis are more open to talking about Yeshua and considering his claims to Messiahship.

The congregational leaders in Israel need connections with pastors in the West. Many would appreciate prayer, fellowship and sometimes even financial support for special projects.

Western pastors have a lot to give to Israel's Messianic leaders by way of training and guidance, as well as prayer. Most Israeli pastors do not have much formal training and would benefit from partnering with non-Israeli pastors. Most Israeli pastors are pioneers and need more seasoned spiritual mentors to guide them.

Encouragingly, the perception of Messianic Jews is undergoing a steady transformation in Israel these days—from one of mistrust and outright loathing to recognition and acceptance. Knowing the love of Yeshua in the Messianics' hearts, the bridge between them and Orthodox Jews is getting shorter all the time. Doors to hearts once closed are beginning to open wide.

Rabbi Barry Rubin *is the president and publisher of Messianic Jewish Publishers and Resources/Jewish New Testament Publications. He is also the Rabbi of Emmanuel Messianic Jewish Congregation.*