

Jesus for Jews

By Larry Derfner, *The Jerusalem Post*
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The melodies of the prayers sound like Christian country music, but the words the congregants are singing with such feeling are in Hebrew. About 80 Messianic believers—about two-thirds of them Jews, the others evangelical Christians—are gathered for their Friday afternoon worship service at a hall in a Jerusalem commercial center. The leader is "Yonatan," who grew up in the capital in a traditional Jewish home, then found Yeshua—the Messianics' name for Jesus—some 30 years ago after a spiritual search that took him through Eastern meditation, Kabbala and other teachings.

At Yonatan's side are two burning Shabbat candles. On the other side, a guitarist, two keyboard players and a vocalist are sending up big, lush, emotional harmonies. The music builds and the worshipers start to rise from their chairs. "I want to fall before you, I want to fall at your feet," they sing. Their eyes are closed, some look like they're going to cry, some murmur "hallelujah." They raise their hands in a typically evangelical Christian gesture of surrender.

"There is no difference between the God of the Torah and the God of the New Testament," preaches Yonatan, a bantam-built man with a shaved head and commanding presence. "Yeshua is the embodiment of the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob—in a new time."

A few congregants come up to the microphone to give their "witness." The children are sent off by their parents to another room for Bible class, then brought back in at the service's end. Yonatan announces the upcoming Hanukka party, then invites anyone who's interested to stay afterward to pray.

"Shabbat shalom," he says.

One cold afternoon in front of Tel Aviv's frenetic Dizengoff Center, three young men wearing red T-shirts reading "*Yehudim L'ma'an Yeshua*"—"Jews for Jesus"—are handing out leaflets. The brochures are designed like the Israeli flag with the message "Yeshua is salvation" printed in blue on white. Many passersby accept the leaflet without breaking stride, as if it's for a restaurant or clothing store. "Most Israelis don't know who Yeshua is," says Dan Sered, 30, the Herzliya-born head of the organization's Israeli chapter.

Despite what most people think, the terms "Jews for Jesus" and "Messianic Jews" are not interchangeable. Jews for Jesus is an organization made up of Messianic Jews who actively proselytize, handing out leaflets and taking out newspaper ads. Their proactive approach makes many if not most Messianic Jews, at least in Israel, uncomfortable.

Outside Dizengoff Center, the Jews for Jesus get the occasional hostile reaction. A few fellows stop to argue religion, a teenage girl with her friend says, "Sure I know Yeshua. I slept with

him." One guy calls the police, but this doesn't worry Sered because he's not breaking the law, which only says you can't try to convert people by giving them money or other material favors, and you can't convert minors without their parents' consent.

"Even if the police come," Sered tells the upset bystander, "all they'll do is take my details and go away. You can give them my number, they know me. Tell them to be in touch." Sered walks off with his two partners—not out of fear of the police, he says, but because it's getting too cold.

Jews for Jesus, which has been operating here since the 1980s, has an office in Tel Aviv with 15 paid staffers. Its main work is one-on-one Bible study with people who take a leaflet or see an ad or otherwise get interested in Jesus and want to know more. "We get about 40 or 50 people coming in every month," says Sered. "Last year I'd say nearly 100 people made a profession of faith in Yeshua. Not all of them stay with it, but I'd say dozens of them did."

Messianic Jews have a terrible name in this country. Israelis who don't know any of them personally tend to be afraid of them. The community is widely viewed as a secretive cult that picks off vulnerable Jews and converts them to Christianity. There are at least two haredi "antimissionary" organizations, Yad L'achim (Hand to Brethren) and Lev L'achim (Heart for Brethren), that go to the limits of the law, if not beyond, to expose and harass them. The haredi activists try to get Messianic leaders ostracized in their neighborhoods by putting up *pashkevilim*, or attack posters, with their photographs. (Sered says there was a pashkevil campaign against him.) Yad L'achim fully acknowledges sending undercover spies into the Messianics' congregations, reporting on them to the Interior Ministry to prevent members from entering the country, making aliya or getting citizenship. (Yad L'achim also does this with Hare Krishna, Scientology, Jehovah's Witnesses and other religious or quasi-religious sects that proselytize in Israel.)

My own impression of the Messianic Jews, though, is that they are a benign bunch—native Israelis and immigrants who usually came from outside society's mainstream, who were spiritually hungry and found a new "faith community." Of the estimated 7,000 Messianic Jews here, as many as half are recent Russian immigrants who were not raised Jewish. "There are very few of what I call 'kosher Jews'—regular Israeli Jews with a Jewish-born mother and Jewish-born father - in our congregation," said "William," a Christian Zionist from the West who's lived here many years.

The Messianics aren't a cult, either. They have no single leader or even a leadership team, and none of them is considered by any means divine, or closer to God than others, or possessed of divine powers. Each of the 100 or so congregations is effectively a community unto itself, with "a great deal of 'congregation-hopping' going on," says William. They maintain no closed commune or retreat where new converts are brainwashed or "love-bombed," the newcomers are not kept away from their families or friends and anyone who wants to leave the community, leaves.

While Jews for Jesus are the only ones who proselytize strangers in the street, Messianics are candid about talking up Jesus to any Jew (or gentile) who shows an interest. "I believe that

Yeshua is the messiah, the savior of mankind, and if I refused to tell anyone about him, it would be like knowing the cure for AIDS but keeping it to myself," says Yonatan.

Their religion and fellowship appeal to spiritual seekers, often to those in personal crisis or economic distress. Many of them followed a husband or wife into the community, naturally bringing the children along. In the end, the Messianics operate within the bounds of the laws limiting proselytizing; they don't coerce or brainwash Jews into joining them anymore than Chabad, Aish Hatorah, Betslav or other Jewish "outreach" movements do. And between the harassment from Yad L'achim and Lev L'achim, the antagonism from the Interior Ministry and the occasional acts of violence members have suffered, Messianics seem more a persecuted minority than a menace.

However, their enemies are right about one thing: The religion these people believe in is not Judaism, it's Christianity. The belief that Jesus Christ was the son of God, that he rose from the dead and that he's coming back one day to save mankind—that's not Judaism, that's the essence, the creed, of Christianity.

Messianic Jews believe that the New Testament Jesus is the messiah spoken of in the Tanach. For evidence, they quote passages from both books, which are combined in one volume as their Bible. They celebrate Jewish and Israeli national holidays, not Christian ones. They have their sons ritually circumcised according to Jewish tradition. But nearly all of them get baptized "in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Ghost." In terms of identity, those born and raised Jewish are Jews. Beyond that, they're all passionate Zionists and Israeli patriots, with army service being very important to them. But their religion is indistinguishable from evangelical Christianity; they speak of themselves as "Messianics" or "believers" more than as "Messianic Jews." They pray in evangelical Christian churches and evangelical Christians pray in their congregations—they prefer not to use the term "synagogues"—with no changes in text or ritual necessary.

"There's no difference between Messianic Judaism and evangelical Christianity, although most Messianic Jews wouldn't agree," says Eitan Kashtan, an Israeli Jew who, with his wife, accepted Jesus 18 years ago and now publishes Messianic literature and leads a congregation in Rishon LeZion. "If the Israeli establishment didn't cast such doubt on our Judaism," he continues, "we wouldn't work so hard to emphasize it. I'm a Jew by birth, but in faith, there's no difference between me and an evangelical Christian."

Sitting in the publishing office he rents at Kibbutz Givat Brenner, Kashtan, 48, is a typically relaxed, outgoing Israeli who was raised secular and who, along with his wife, "found Yeshua" after being convinced by reading the texts of the Tanach and New Testament. "I'm a computer systems analyst, I have to be persuaded by logic," he says. "For nine months I spent hours a day studying the Bible—and I couldn't find any bugs [in the Christian belief that Jesus is the messiah written about in the Tanach]. I thought this couldn't be just any old book. I'd grown up believing that religion was just rules and regulations, but in the Bible I found love, strength and holiness."

His awakening came at an American evangelical Christian community where his father-in-law had converted, and where he had taken a job designing the community's computer system.

That was in 1991. Today the Kashtans' two older sons are Messianic Jews serving in elite army units, whose members know of their beliefs. The family's two younger children haven't yet adopted the faith.

In a cafe on Dizengoff after leafleting for Jesus, the affable, energetic Sered says he was raised secular but began wondering who the messiah was while studying for his bar mitzva. At 19, he decided that Jesus was the messiah after being told this by a Messianic Jew named Dina, who later became his wife. He was baptized in a New York Protestant church.

Sered's more serious, intense colleague, Ofer, says he accepted Jesus about two years ago "in a time of hardship when I had a true desire to find God," hinting that he'd been living a pretty dissolute life. Born to a traditional Jewish family in Jerusalem, he was working as a security guard when he bought a used copy of the Gospel of John, began reading it and by the time his shift was over, he'd become a believer. His wife followed him. Three months after reading that book he was baptized at Yardenit, the baptismal at the site where the Jordan River flows out of the Sea of Galilee. "I couldn't wait," he says. "It's a public profession of faith. You go under the water and the old you departs, and you come up from the water with new life through Messiah Yeshua."

Generally, Messianic Jews say their families were shocked to hear of their religious conversion, but eventually got used to it. "We spend every holiday with our families," says Kashtan. "I have the same friends I met in the army. We disagree about religion but everything else is the same."

Kashtan, Sered and Ofer live with their families in secular neighborhoods, they neither advertise nor hide their beliefs, yet they report no antagonism from their neighbors or any kind of ostracism or taunting of their children at school - even, in Kashtan's and Sered's cases, after being denounced in pashkevilim. The Messianics say it's only militant Orthodox Jews who give them problems; the mainstream Israeli Jews they live among are completely tolerant.

It wasn't always like that. David Tal, who grew up in a prominent Messianic Jewish family in Rishon Lezion and Bat Yam during the 1970s, says he was "persecuted terribly as a child. I was spat on and beat up in school. They called me a 'stinking Christian.' Once there were 300 haredim demonstrating outside our house, and some of them broke inside." He says his teachers never treated him badly. "Although it was interesting, you could say, to study history and hear that Jesus was a terrible person," he adds.

Since then, the community has grown so that Messianics, while still exotic, aren't seen as Martians, and mainstream Israelis have become a lot more worldly. "Society accepts Messianics a lot more today than when I was growing up," says Tal, 46, who is still friends with many in the community even though he left it as a teenager after deciding he didn't believe in God.

Although society leaves the community largely to itself, when interest is shown, it's usually negative. When I began approaching Messianics for this story in December, I ran into a lot of suspicion. People seemed worried that I was either going to write about them as brainwashed weirdos, as many media accounts have done, or that I was working undercover for Yad L'achim

or Lev L'achim. I came armed with references from the community, but even my references were wary.

The US State Department, for one, says they have good reasons to be. "Harassment of Messianic Jews... by Orthodox Jews increased during the reporting period," according to the State Department's section on Israel in its 2008 Report on International Religious Freedom. "Orthodox Jewish groups published announcements in religious newspapers calling Messianic Jews 'dangerous' and calling for their expulsion from Israeli areas."

The Bnei Brak-based Yad L'Achim, which considers Messianics to be law-breaking "missionaries" and "cultists," makes no bones about doing everything legally possible to make these people's lives miserable. In an interview in 2005, the organization's aged leader, Rabbi Shalom Dov Lifschitz, told me: "When we find out about a missionary, we'll publicize his identity on posters, newspaper ads, by word of mouth. We don't even have to phone up his place of work - a lot of Jewish employers don't want to be involved with missionaries... So seeing an ad in the newspaper is enough for [the employer] to fire him. But not all employers will do this."

Binyamin Klugger, then head of Yad L'achim's Jerusalem office, told me he went undercover among the Messianics for several months (until they found him out), and once prevented the aliya of an American Messianic Jew by informing the Interior Ministry, which denied his citizenship application. "Yad L'achim knows all their plans," said Klugger.

Calev Myers, a Jerusalem attorney who represents many Messianic Jews, said the Interior Ministry is still heavily staffed with Orthodox Jewish bureaucrats appointed during the years when Shas was in control, and these clerks work hand-in-glove with Yad L'achim to get around the law and deny Messianic Jews their rights.

For example, he told me of one of his clients, an American Christian woman who married an Israeli Messianic Jew and has been living with him here for nine years, yet her application for citizenship hasn't been granted when by law, it should have been granted more than four years ago. "The Interior Ministry has been stalling them interminably," he said, e-mailing me a ministry receipt they received in December that showed written on the back: "To Anat, the file of this woman was sent to you since there was a problem with the examination by Yad L'Achim as to whether she is actually a Messianic, and the file has not been returned to me yet. Ilona."

Myers said a ministry clerk, Ilona, accidentally wrote that message on the back of the receipt she gave to the Messianic couple before sending them on to see another clerk, Anat.

By press time, the Interior Ministry had not responded to my questions about Myers's claims.

At times Messianics have been targeted for serious violence. Congregation buildings in Jerusalem and Kiryat Yam have been firebombed, both times in the middle of the night, causing no injuries. The Beersheba community's baptismal was once stormed by haredi activists, while in Arad, Messianics on their way to prayer on Saturdays are often spat on and cursed by local haredim, says Myers.

Last year there were two especially severe attacks, both cited in the State Department report. A campaign against Messianics in Or Yehuda, led by Shas-affiliated Deputy Mayor Uzi Aharon, culminated on May 15 when he "sent a group of students from a local haredi Jewish school throughout the town to collect the New Testaments [distributed by Messianics], which were subsequently burned in front of a synagogue while 'hundreds' of students danced around the burning books," according to the report, quoting a *Ma'ariv* story.

And on March 20, following a *pashkovilim* campaign against Messianic Jewish pastor David Ortiz in Ariel, his 15-year-old son Ami was badly injured when a pipe bomb hidden in a "Purim basket" and left at the family's doorstep exploded.

No one has ever been brought to trial for any serious act of violence against Messianic Jews, and Yad L'achim strenuously denies any involvement in such crimes. When I told Lifschitz that the Kiryat Yam congregation suspected that Yad L'achim was behind the 1997 firebombing of its warehouse, he replied, "They're lying, it's all lies. For all I know, maybe there was a fire there, but that doesn't mean we started it. Maybe they started it themselves so they could blame it on us."

The bomb that put Ami Ortiz in the hospital, though, is the most grievous attack on the Messianic community ever. Police investigators were quoted in the media saying they suspect it was done by the same people who left a pipe bomb on the doorstep of leftist Prof. Ze'ev Sternhell last September, and, over the last two years, on the doorsteps of three Arab activists.

Myers, whose car was twice spraypainted by unknown vandals not long before our interview, said he doubted that Yad L'achim was behind the Ami Ortiz attack. "They incite, they foster the atmosphere that leads others to do such things, but they themselves don't go in for such heavy-duty violence."

One night in Jerusalem, before the start of a concert of Messianic music attended by about 1,000 people, a congregation leader in the lobby was being very guarded about answering my questions, until I pulled out my wallet and showed him my government press card. "I don't think they give these to Yad L'achim," I said to him, and he began to loosen up. "It's probably a good idea for you to show that to people when you talk to them," he suggested, insisting that his name and the concert's location not be mentioned.

The crowd was not a typical Israeli gathering by any means. There were a lot of fair-skinned blonds and several Asians and non-Ethiopian blacks. A lot of Russian and English was spoken. But the emcee, a *heimishe* Israeli Jew in his 60s, spoke in Hebrew. The song lyrics were in Hebrew, spelled out in phonetic English on a big screen so people could sing along.

"Yeshua, I cannot glory except in you. Yeshua, who am I without you? Take control, Yeshua, so that i will not be seen, only you."

Sitting near the back of the darkened hall, I could see hundreds of straining, raised hands silhouetted in black against the bright lights from the stage. Choir members had their eyes closed and their hands raised, too. A thousand Messianics, many of them Jews born to Jewish mothers

and fathers, were gathered at night in a kind of safe house, singing to Jesus. They didn't seem threatening, they seemed innocent and vulnerable. Out of the public's sight, they were giving voice to their freedom of religion.

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