

# STUDIES IN CHRISTIAN-JEWISH RELATIONS

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## *Jesus-Believing Jews in Australia: Celebrate Messiah as a Case Study*

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## Introduction

Messianic Judaism is an acutely controversial and confounding subject for the Jewish and Christian communities. Yet the academic world has hardly probed the question of who and what Messianic Judaism is, even though its bewildering hybrid of Judaism and Christianity is worthy of scholarly examination from both a sociological and theological perspective, with particular attention to questions of identity construction.

Such a study is also relevant to Christian-Jewish relations, especially because of the financial support the movement receives from Christian groups who are keen to utilize its resources and unique position for evangelizing the Jews. The apparently growing ministries of Messianic Jews generate immense controversy. The Messianics' brand of evangelism receives harsh criticism from much of the Jewish community and from many Christians interested in improving Jewish-Christian relations. A clear majority of Jews take issue and offence at being targeted for evangelization and ask: Are Messianic Jews in fact Christians portraying themselves as Jews? Is Messianic Judaism a deceptive missionary movement, organized and substantively funded by evangelical Christian bodies with the exclusive aim of converting Jews to Christianity? Are they simply couching fundamentalist Christianity in Jewish symbols? The answers are not simple.

While Messianic Jews contend that they are not closet Christians, most Jews find the Messianic message deeply offensive, and categorically discount the Jewishness of Jews who have embraced Christianity. Though Jewish scholars are steadily exploring the Jewish roots of Jesus' teaching, they find no Jewish basis for the Christian belief in his divinity. The various movements of Judaism all reject the Messianic message that one can retain one's Judaism while taking Jesus as one's savior and agree that one cannot be at once a Jew and a Christian. The consensus is that Messianic believers who

are born Jewish according to *halakha* retain their identity and status but are unfit to participate in the duties and benefits of Jewish life. Accordingly, Messianic believers cannot count towards a prayer quorum or be buried in a Jewish cemetery. Most Christians also do not count Messianic Judaism as a form of Judaism. In general, the movement is distinct from regular Christianity and more closely aligned with biblical and historical Judaism.

Yet, what is one to make of Messianic Jews/believers,<sup>1</sup> those men and women who have accepted the central tenet of Christianity, namely, a belief in Jesus, but who continue to identify as Jews and describe their adopted religious beliefs as natural extensions of Judaism? Is this self-conception a fiction? Messianic Jews practice their faith in a way that they consider to be genuinely Torah-based and culturally Jewish, but they provocatively blur the otherwise clear demarcation between Christianity and Judaism. Their hybrid identity, while counter-intuitive to others, constitutes an intriguing current pulsating through the modern religious tapestry. In various ways, Messianic Judaism is located within a variety of intellectual, historical, cultural and anthropological planes, embodying the ambiguous and shifting nature of a post-modern landscape. Inevitably, the presence of Messianic Jews opens up the sensitive and troubling issues of proselytism, mission and conversion. The presence of this group in Australia, as

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<sup>1</sup> I concur with Carol Harris Shapiro's position regarding the usage of the label Messianic Jews/Believers. She correctly notes that by using the term Jews, one is buttressing the Messianic assertion that it is practicing and believing in Judaism. I agree with her statement that one uses the term "for clarity's sake; [she] refer[s] to the group with the same nomenclature it refers to itself...this does not imply recognition of Messianic Judaism as 'real Judaism'." Carol Harris Shapiro, *Messianic Judaism: A Rabbi's Journey through Religious Change in America* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1999), 190.

elsewhere, is seen by some as endangering Jewish-Christian reconciliation.<sup>2</sup>

The fundamental purpose of this essay, *in nuce*, is to provide a preliminary overview, prior to a more comprehensive study of the as yet unstudied phenomenon of a specific Messianic Jewish community in Australia, as represented by the organization Celebrate Messiah and its Beit HaMashiach messianic congregation (the first of its kind in Australia) situated in South Caulfield, Melbourne. Based on an examination of Celebrate Messiah's published materials, this essay will describe and interpret this hitherto unstudied group. My conclusions are cautious and tentative, subject to future access to the principals of this study. In order to understand this group's context, the article will begin with a brief overview of the historical development of Messianic Judaism.

### The Definition of Messianic Judaism

Today, the Union of Messianic Jewish Congregations (UMJC), an international organization based in the USA, provides the most authoritative articulation of what Messianic Judaism stands for. It defines Messianic Judaism as a

...movement of Jewish congregations committed to Yeshua the Messiah that embrace the covenantal responsibility of

<sup>2</sup> As stated by the Council of Christians and Jews in Victoria, "a group of Christians and Jews who are drawn together because of their common heritage, a desire for understanding and dialogue and to explore their turbulent history of relating to each other." The council is "not a religion, it has no theology and its members do not seek to make converts to Judaism or Christianity." In this connection, it rejects Celebrate Messiah as an evangelizing group with a mission to convert Jews to Christianity. It sees Celebrate Messiah as misguided and cautions that it may obstruct further attempts at co-operation and may harm the good relations already established between the two faiths. See: "Walking together towards Understanding and Mutual Respect," The Council of Christians and Jews – Victoria. <http://ccjaustralia.org/en/?area=Victoria>, accessed December 2008.

Jewish life and identity rooted in Torah, expressed in tradition, and renewed and applied in the context of the New Covenant. Messianic Jewish groups may also include those from non-Jewish backgrounds who have a confirmed call to participate fully in the life and destiny of the Jewish people. We are committed to embodying this definition in our constituent congregations and in our shared institutions.<sup>3</sup>

Two other aspects of this belief system deserve notice. First, Messianic Jews have interlocking relationships with both the Jewish and the Christian worlds. The UMJC writes:

For a Messianic Jewish group 1) to fulfill the covenantal responsibility incumbent upon all Jews, 2) to bear witness to Yeshua within the people of Israel, and 3) to serve as an authentic and effective representative of the Jewish people within the body of Messiah, it must place a priority on integration with the wider Jewish world, while sustaining a vital corporate relationship with the Christian Church.<sup>4</sup>

Second, they speak to the nexus between the organization's credo and the collective canon of Jewish religious law:

In the Messianic Jewish way of life, we seek to fulfill Israel's covenantal responsibility embodied in the Torah within a New Covenant context. Messianic Jewish *halakhah* is rooted in Scripture (*Tanakh* and the New Covenant writings), which is of unique sanctity and authority. It also draws upon Jewish tradition, especially those practices and concepts that have won near-universal acceptance by

<sup>3</sup> "Defining Messianic Judaism," *UMJC Welcoming Messiah Home*, <http://www.umjc.net/home-mainmenu-1/global-vision-mainmenu-42/13-vision/225-defining-messianic-judaism>, accessed September 2009.

<sup>4</sup> <http://www.umjc.net/home-mainmenu-1/global-vision-mainmenu-42/13-vision/225-defining-messianic-judaism>.

devout Jews through the centuries. Furthermore, as is common within Judaism, Messianic Judaism recognizes that *halakhah* is and must be dynamic, involving the application of the Torah to a wide variety of changing situations and circumstances. Messianic Judaism embraces the fullness of New Covenant realities available through Yeshua, and seeks to express them in forms drawn from Jewish experience and accessible to Jewish people.<sup>5</sup>

A significant number of Messianic Jews see themselves as “completed” or “fulfilled” Jews, stressing that their faith in Jesus does not invalidate their Jewish identity, but is the path every Jew should traverse.<sup>6</sup> If some Jews accept Buddhist or Hindu tenets while claiming to remain Jewish, why, Messianic Jews ask, can't they believe in Jesus and remain Jewish? Messianic Jews posit that they are endeavoring to erect a positive and living bridge between Judaism and Christianity, invoking the early Jesus movement of the first century as the model for their community.

The growth and development now of global communities of Messianic Jews means that these ruminations, at once puzzling and unnerving, are gradually seeping into the fabric of theological and sociological discourse. As a matter of fact, the Jerusalem Report in 2005 noted that in recent years “Messianic Judaism in Israel has experienced extraordinary growth” with

<sup>5</sup> <http://www.umjc.net/home-mainmenu-1/global-vision-mainmenu-42/13-vision/225-defining-messianic-judaism>. For a history of the movement and its evolution see: David A. Rausch, *Messianic Judaism: Its History, Theology and Polity*, Texts and Studies in Religion 14 (New York and Toronto: The Edwin Mellen Press, 1982); Daniel Juster, *Jewish Roots: A Foundation of Biblical Theology for Messianic Judaism*, (Rockville, MD: Davar Press, 1986); David H. Stern, *Messianic Judaism: A Modern Movement With An Ancient Past*, (Clarksville, MD: Messianic Jewish Resources International, 2007).

<sup>6</sup> John Murawski, “Messianic Jews Prepare to Share Message,” *Palm Beach Post (FL)* (December 14, 2003): 1C.

estimates of more than 10,000 people who consider themselves Messianic Jews.<sup>7</sup>

### Recent Controversies in Israel Concerning Messianic Judaism

Before centering our analysis on Celebrate Messiah, it is instructive to pause and consider the state of Messianic Judaism in Israel, which in recent years has become the focal battleground between Messianic Jews and anti-missionary activists. Indeed, by any measure, in 2008 and 2009, Messianic Judaism in Israel thunderously seized the headlines and channeled attention to its cause and ethos in unprecedented ways, though not always in ways it had wished. The rapid flow of engrossing news items concerning the movement limned terrain unknown to most Jews and Christians, concretizing and fuelling interest in a faith community that until recently had drawn little attention, roiling emotions and stirring debate.

The burning of hundreds of New Testaments by students from *Michtav M'elياهو Yeshiva* in the Israeli town of Or Yehuda, Tel Aviv on May 15, 2008 set off a storm of concern by messianic Jewish groups over the ever increasing violent nature of anti-missionary activity. According to Israeli newspapers, the New Testaments were retrieved from Ethiopian Jews who were given the Bibles along with messianic pamphlets. This incident demonstrated the level of anxiety and fear Messianic Judaism (and its potential appeal) generates and fosters in the minds of Israelis, especially the ultra-orthodox. For many Israelis, Messianic Judaism undermines the Jewish faith upon which the state of Israel was founded. Nonetheless, in a country where religious identity is of paramount value, proselytizing is only illegal if minors are targeted, or if money or

<sup>7</sup> Ksenia Svetlova, “Just like Chabad,” in *Jerusalem Report* (April 29, 2005): 9.

other gifts are offered.<sup>8</sup> While apologizing to Christians worldwide and denying ordering the burning, the city's deputy mayor Uzi Ahron called the burning a 'commandment', adding that Israel could not permit Messianic Jews to "come into our homes and incite against our religion and turn our children away from Judaism."<sup>9</sup>

The burning of New Testaments was denounced by Jewish organizations and in Israeli newspaper editorials who pointed to an alarming trend. *Haaretz*, Israel's pre-eminent daily, issued a vigorous rebuke of the burning, stating that it was "...especially worrisome in light of the continued harassment of Messianic Jews in the country."<sup>10</sup> The editorial then defended the right of Messianic Jews to operate without restraint, likening the violent reaction to religious intimidation:

...as long as they do not stalk children or try to convince them to change their religious beliefs, their standing in this country should be equal to that of other religious and ethnic groups who enjoy freedom of practice and worship...The concern is that the persecution of Messianic Jews is rationalized by a twisted interpretation of Jewish sovereignty, as if we were dealing with something resembling an Iran-like enterprise whose *raison d'être* was taking revenge on the gentiles.<sup>11</sup>

Indeed, this episode was the latest in a series of incidents attesting to the volcanic escalation of tension between

<sup>8</sup> Rebecca L. Torstrick, *Culture and Customs of Israel* (Westport CT: Greenwood Press, 2004), 50.

<sup>9</sup> Michelle A. Vu, "Jewish Deputy Mayor Apologizes for New Testament Burning," *The Christian Post*, (May 22, 2008), <http://www.christianpost.com/article/20080522/jewish-deputy-mayor-apologizes-for-new-testament-burning/index.html>.

<sup>10</sup> "Shas' Book Bonfire," *Haaretz*. (May 26, 2008), editorial.

<sup>11</sup> "Shas' Book Bonfire."

segments of the modern and ultra-orthodox sectors and the Messianic Jewish community. In October 2007, a Jerusalem church used by Messianic Jews was torched and suffered extensive damage, reinforcing the building up of hostility. In the spring of 2008, Ami Ortiz, the fifteen-year-old son of the leader of a Messianic congregation in the West Bank settlement of Ariel was seriously wounded when a gift basket left at the front door of the family home exploded in his face as he opened the parcel that was purportedly sent for the Jewish religious feast of Purim which began at sunset that day.<sup>12</sup>

On a less fiery note, but still significant was the case of Bat-El Levi. The young woman from the southern Israeli city of Beer-Sheva drew the ire of Israel's Chief Rabbis when it was discovered that the seventeen-year-old, who entered the finals of the international Bible Quiz competition (after winning the national championship) was a Messianic Jew. The two rabbis, along with a group of Zionist rabbis asked Israel's education minister, Yuli Tamir, to either disqualify Levi or cancel the contest because of Levi's inclusion. In their letter to Tamir, the Rabbis wrote, "It is unacceptable that a member of a cult that has removed itself from the Jewish faith will take part in a quiz dedicated to a book that has been holy to the Jews since their inception as a people." The *Jerusalem Post* quoted Rabbi Shlomo Aviner, Head of Yeshivat Ateret Yerushalayim in Jerusalem, who said he did not regard messianics as Jews and advocated they be "marginalized and distanced from Jewish communities in Israel." One of the rabbis calling for the boycott once again foregrounded the theme of messianic Jews as missionaries, saying they enlist sophisticated methods to proselytize and must not be given legitimacy. However, the legal department in the Education ministry ruled that the girl, whose mother is Jewish and whose identity papers say she is

<sup>12</sup> Laurie Copans (Associated Press), "Israel's Messianic Jews: Police Indifferent to Threats Against Us," *Ha'aretz* (June 20, 2008), <http://www.haaretz.com/hasen/spages/994682.html>



too, met the strict definition of who is a Jew and thus could participate.<sup>13</sup>

Calev Myers, founder and chief advocate of the Jerusalem Institute of Justice, an organization that represents members of the Messianic community, claimed that that the rabbis' appeal to ban the quiz was a sign of weakness. His statement reasserts and reiterates the oft-heard reasoning advanced by the Messianic movement, "It is about time that they stop having a monopoly over determining who is a Jew. The beauty of the Jewish world is the diversity. If you can still be considered a Jew even if you believe that the Lubavitch Rebbe [Menachem Mendel Schneerson] is the messiah, the same thing should hold true if you believe Jesus is."<sup>14</sup>

Emboldened by their new found confidence in sharing their beliefs and raising the publicity stakes, a group of Messianic Jews from the US waged a demonstration in Jerusalem in 2008 against what they termed Israel's discriminatory immigration policy against their members. In the same week, the Union of Messianic Jewish Congregations (UMJC) convened a three day conference in Israel. The top issue to be discussed was the backlash against Messianic activists.<sup>15</sup> Such a drive for acceptance and visibility recalled similar emotions voiced in 2005 during the 75<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Messianic Jewish Alliance of America. During the convention, characterized as a "coming out party," Joel Chernoff, Vice President of the MJAA limpidly delineated the organization's (and more expansively the movement's) singular objective: "The time has arrived for us to say to the Jewish and Christian world, and to the secular world, 'We are here'...We

<sup>13</sup> Matthew Wagner, "Chief Rabbis Call to Cancel Bible Quiz on Account of Messianic Jewish Contestant," *The Jerusalem Post* (May 7, 2008): 1.

<sup>14</sup> Wagner, "Chief Rabbis..." 1

<sup>15</sup> Matthew Wagner, "Messianic Jews to Protest 'Discriminatory' Immigration Policies," *Jerusalem Post* (June 26, 2008): 1.

have definite beliefs and a definite direction, and we are ready to make ourselves known as articulate players in the world's affairs."<sup>16</sup>

### **Jewish Responses to the Emergence of Messianic Judaism**

This creation of a defined Messianic Jewish identity also invited response from the Jewish community itself. Most persistent has been the question of whether Messianic Jews are Jews. In 1989, The Israeli Supreme Court rejected the application of two messianic Jews who demanded to be recognized as Jews so as to automatically receive Israeli citizenship according to the Law of Return. In his judgment, Supreme Court Justice Menachem Elon cited the couple's belief in Jesus as the unbridgeable chasm: "In the last two thousand years of history...the Jewish people have decided that messianic Jews do not belong to the Jewish nation...and have no right to force themselves on it."<sup>17</sup> He closed by saying that "those who believe in Jesus, are, in fact Christians."<sup>18</sup> In effect, the High Court ruled that Messianic Jews had converted and therefore were no longer Jewish.

After this 1989 ruling, Israel's Interior Ministry persistently refused to grant all requests for citizenship according to the Law of Return by Messianic Jews. However, this changed in April 2008. A group of twelve Messianic Jews whose application for citizenship was rejected argued before the Supreme Court that they were entitled to be classified as new immigrants and therefore were eligible for citizenship according

<sup>16</sup> Ken Sidey, "Messianic Jews Seek Visibility, Respect," *Christianity Today* 49, no. 7 (July 2005): 72.

<sup>17</sup> Daphna Berman, "Aliyah with a Cat, a Dog and Jesus," *Haaretz*, (June 10, 2006), posted at: <http://www.wvrn.org/article.php?idd=21820&sec=59&con=35>.

<sup>18</sup> Berman, "Aliyah with a Cat, a Dog and Jesus."

to the definition of "Who is a Jew" in the Law of Return because they were the offspring of fathers who were Jewish, not because they themselves were Jewish. According to Amendment 4A (a) to the Law of Return passed in 1970, "The rights of a Jew under this law... are also vested in a child and a grandchild of a Jew, the spouse of a Jew, the spouse of a child of a Jew and the spouse of a grandchild of a Jew, except for a person who has been a Jew and has voluntarily changed his religion." The court ruled that the petitioners were entitled to automatic new immigrant status and citizenship precisely not because they were Jews as defined by the Law of Return but rather because they were the offspring of Jewish fathers.<sup>19</sup> Thus, while the court ruled that belonging to a Messianic congregation does not preclude one from becoming an Israeli citizen, the Supreme Court upheld the 1989 precedent that Messianic Jews (whose mothers are Jewish) are not to be considered Jewish according to Jewish law. In other words, the court ruled that Jews who embraced a faith other than Judaism were not disqualified from emigrating to Israel and could not be denied citizenship. As Jonathan Rosenblum observed in the *Jerusalem Post*, "The Court not only overturned its own precedent in the Brother Daniel case but the Knesset's codification of that decision in Section 4A(a) of the Law of Return that one who chooses another religion is not a Jew for purposes of the Law of Return." He described the decision as further proof that Israel's Supreme Court was enforcing its own values rather than the values of the Israeli and Jewish people.<sup>20</sup>

<sup>19</sup>Jerusalem Institute for Justice, ENewsletter (April 2008), <http://jerusalemstituteofjustice.createsend.com/T/ViewEmail/r/B9DAACC135900E24/76932FBC5132052E2540EF23F30FEDED>, accessed May 2009. See also, Matthew Wagner, "US Report: Rise in Violence against Messianic Jews and Christians" *Jerusalem Post* (September 24, 2009): 6.

<sup>20</sup> Jonathan Rosenblum, "Terrified of Judicial Reform," *Jerusalem Post* (May 2, 2008): 8. Rosenblum's mention of the Brother Daniel Case references a 1962 Israeli Supreme Court case in which the judges ruled that Brother Daniel, who was born a Jew but converted to Catholicism was not entitled to Israeli citizenship under the country's Law of Return.

More generally, and even before the landmark Supreme Court ruling, a spectrum of Jewish organizations have voiced their concern about the gains Messianic Jews have made in their endeavors to obtain legitimate status. For instance, Mark S. Alfassa, Founder of the Judaic Alert News Service which tracks the progress and activities of groups posing as authentic Jews, contends that:

The "messianics" have the specific intent of being accepted as Jews in Israel. So much so that they have developed a political action group that lobbies the government, even using Holocaust survivors that have converted to Christianity as spokespersons. These people have a highly strategic plan, are well financed by mainstream Christian groups and have a single goal, to remove Jews from following the faith of their ancestors. Calling it a "significant breakthrough," messianic Judaism has been officially recognized by the Registrar of Non-Profit Societies, which is a department within Israel's Ministry of Interior. There you will find this Christian group with an official sounding name *Vaad Peuala Lma'an Yahadut Meshichit* (Action Committee for Messianic Judaism).<sup>21</sup>

Likewise, in his study of Israeli society's belief system and the quest of salvation, Benjamin Beit-Hallahmi classifies Messianic Judaism as a new religion or a cult.<sup>22</sup>

Considering that for centuries the Jewish nation fought to preserve its religion within antagonistic gentile societies and in the face of the Church's assailing missionary attempts, one can readily comprehend why many perceive Messianic Jews to be

<sup>21</sup> Mark S. Alfassa, "When the High Court welcomes Messianic Jews," *Israeli Fax*, May 17, 2002: N.P.

<sup>22</sup> Benjamin Beit-Hallahmi, *Despair and Deliverance: Private Salvation in Contemporary Israel* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1992), 34.

part of a clandestine effort to undermine the Jewish faith. This is indeed the one item on which there is complete consensus. With few exceptions, Jewish groups and leaders respond that Messianic theology is an absurdity, and view it as a deceptive Christian attempt to usurp the traditional Jewish view of the Messiah and decimate a persecuted tribe already under threat from assimilation and intermarriage.

Some examples from a range of sources: Rabbi Arthur Ruberg, in 1994 President of the Hampton Roads Board of Rabbis and Rabbi of the Conservative affiliated Congregation Beth El in Norfolk, Virginia was stunned by a guest column by Joshua Ben Yehoshafat who asserted that Jesus was the Jewish messiah. Though admitting that the board he heads take into account a wide spectrum of Jewish beliefs and practices, Rabbi Ruberg, maintained that all members and synagogues are united on one fundamental point:

...those who believe that Jesus is the Messiah are by definition Christians, and the religion they practice is not Messianic Judaism, or any kind of Judaism, but Christianity. It is no accident that the religion that asserts Jesus' divinity was called Christianity, it was well understood that the belief in Jesus was the line where one religion stopped and another began. We members of the Jewish community value Christianity and we respect all those who practice it. We ask only that discerning people not trivialize the real points over which our religions diverge. We request only that Christianity not be passed off as Judaism.<sup>23</sup>

Rabbi Carol Harris-Shapiro, who wrote a book-length study of a messianic congregation in the United States, depicts Messianic Jews as ones who accept

<sup>23</sup> Rabbi Arthur Ruberg, "Christians, Not Jews Defined by Belief in Jesus," *Daily Press* (August 13, 1994): E6.

Christ as their saviour without fully converting to Christianity...They want to continue in their Jewish customs and festivals while accepting theological doctrine that all other branches of Judaism find blasphemous. Messianic Jews then reinterpret Judaism in light of Jesus as the Messiah and try to teach that reinterpretation to other Jews.

Harris Shapiro is irritated by Messianic Jews: "It's almost like a case of identity theft. It's like when someone takes your credit card and tries to use it to their own advantage."<sup>24</sup> Similarly, the Central Conference of American Rabbis, the association of Reform rabbis, considers Messianic Jews to be apostates who have adopted another religion without coercion.<sup>25</sup>

In an important and wide-ranging essay, "When Jews Are Christians," David Novak sees Messianic Jews/Believers as a "new type of Jewish convert to Christianity." For Novak, these are people who contend that they remain Jewish while simultaneously accepting Jesus as the Messiah. Novak additionally asserts that Messianic Jews should be compared to the "heretical syncretists of the second and third century" rather than the first Jewish Christians. Novak explains:

These Jewish converts to Christianity not only claim still to be Jews, they also claim still to be practicing Judaism. Some of them insist that they are indeed practicing *the* true Judaism, implying that all other Jews are practicing a false Judaism. Others merely insist that they are

<sup>24</sup> From an interview with her by Christina Littlefield. "Seder with a twist: Messianic groups plan Passover amid controversy," *Las Vegas Sun*, April 22, 2005: 10B. See also her book, *Messianic Judaism: A Rabbi's Journey Through Religious Change in America* (Boston: Beacon, 2000).

<sup>25</sup> See, for instance, the 1985 resolution of the Central Conference of American Rabbis, "Deceptive Proselytization of Jews," available at <http://data.ccarnet.org/cqi-bin/resodisp.pl?file=prost&year=1985>, accessed September 2009.



practicing a true Judaism, thus implying if not actually demanding that their practice be accepted as a legitimate form of Judaism...In relation to the Christians, the new Jewish Christians claim a special role for themselves within the Church, offering themselves as a kind of personal link between the now gentile Church and its Jewish origins. This claim often includes a demand for recognition of their right, or even obligation, to perform the ritual commandments of the Torah, from which all other Christians have been exempted by Christ (see Matthew 12:8). Some of them go so far as to refuse the name "Christian" altogether, preferring to call themselves "Messianic Jews."<sup>26</sup>

A minority view from the Jewish landscape is brandished by Dan Cohn-Sherbok, a Reform rabbi and professor of Jewish Theology at the University of Wales, Lampeter. He suggests that Messianic Jews should be considered part of pluriform Judaism. He substantiates his primarily unique judgment (without referencing the proponents of this paradigm) by employing the pluralist model, which he deems a more tolerant one. Cohn-Sherbok contends that since modern Jewry is no longer united by belief and practice, "pluralists maintain that the exclusion of Messianic Judaism from the circle of legitimate expressions of the Jewish heritage is totally inconsistent."<sup>27</sup> He further opines that adherents of Messianic Judaism are more theistically inclined and observe a larger portion of commandments when compared with their counterparts in the Conservative and Reform movements. Employing the image of the seven branched menorah, he states that "Messianic Judaism should be seen merely as one among many expressions of the Jewish faith, (alongside) Hasidism, Orthodox

Judaism, Conservative Judaism, Reform Judaism, Reconstructionist Judaism, and Humanistic Judaism."<sup>28</sup>

Some mainline Christian theologians agree. Ellen Charry, who now serves as an Associate Professor of Historical and Systematic Theology at Princeton Theological Seminary, is emphatic that Messianic Jews represent no religious coherence or integrity. She observes that

...the religion attributed to Jesus by the Gospels overturns nearly every Jewish belief and practice...Christians do not worship a Jewish Messiah—they worship the second Person of the Trinity, the Son of God Incarnate...Messianic Jews are a duplicitous *terbium quid* that has neither Jewish nor Christian theological integrity, no matter how sincere its adherents are.<sup>29</sup>

Lauren Winner furnishes a similar assessment, arguing that any attempt to braid Judaism and Christianity is an inconsiderate and discourteous approach. Winner, who converted to Christianity, explains that Anglican observances reflect Jewish historical practices without claiming to be Jewish. She avoids attending synagogues out of an understanding that in the eyes of the Jewish people, who infused her with love for Judaism, she is now an apostate.<sup>30</sup>

In sum, a vast majority of Jewish scholars argue that the Messianic belief runs counter to a key maxim of Judaism that

<sup>26</sup> *First Things* (November 1991), <http://www.firstthings.com/article/2007/12/005-when-jews-are-christians-40>.

<sup>27</sup> Dan Cohn-Sherbok, *Messianic Judaism* (New York: Cassell, 2000), 212.

<sup>28</sup> Cohn-Sherbok, *Messianic Judaism*, 212.

<sup>29</sup> Ellen T. Charry, "Christian Jews and the Law," in "Symposium On 'Jewish-Christians And the Torah'," *Modern Theology* 11, no. 2 (April 1995): 187-193.

<sup>30</sup> Jason Byassee, "Can a Jew be a Christian?" *Christian Century* 122; no. 9 (May 3, 2005): 26, citing Lauren Winner, *Girl Meets God* (Chapel Hill, N.C.: Algonquin Books of Chapel Hill, 2002).

the Messiah has yet to arrive.<sup>31</sup> The vast majority of Jews worldwide say that Messianic Judaism represents an assault on their very system of faith and consider embracing Jesus a fatal contradiction to the faith, as oxymoronic as kosher pork.<sup>32</sup> They brand messianics as stealth Christians with an agenda to convert Jews via deception. Most Jewish groups strongly condemn Messianic Judaism, offended by what they feel is the movement's misappropriation of Jewish identity to facilitate their missionary outreach to Jews. *Yad L'Achim*, Israel's largest anti-missionary group (founded in 1950) has been in what they characterize as a holy war with gentile missionaries, which they contend includes Messianic Jews. They maintain that Messianic Judaism is an effort to 'hoodwink' Jews into being Christians.<sup>33</sup>

### The Australian Case Study: Celebrate Messiah

A nonprofit organization, Celebrate Messiah, is financed by individual Christians and churches who share the ministry's desire to spread the gospel among the Jews, described as "God's ancient people." It was established in 1995 by Lawrence and Louise Hirsch. Celebrate Messiah, and its transplanted congregation Beit HaMashiach (House of Messiah), have been part of Chosen People Ministries worldwide since 1999.<sup>34</sup> Chosen People Ministries was founded in 1894 as Brownsville Mission to the Jews by Rabbi Leopold Cohn, an Orthodox rabbi

<sup>31</sup> Aryeh Kaplan, *The Real Messiah: A Jewish Response to Missionaries* (Toronto: Jews for Judaism, 1985), passim. Available from *Jews For Judaism* [http://jewsforjudaism.org/index.php?option=com\\_docman&task=cat\\_view&gid=35&limit=5&limitstart=0&order=date&dir=DESC&Itemid=47](http://jewsforjudaism.org/index.php?option=com_docman&task=cat_view&gid=35&limit=5&limitstart=0&order=date&dir=DESC&Itemid=47), accessed May 2009. See also David Klinghoffer, *Why the Jews Rejected Jesus: The Turning Point in Western History*, (New York: Doubleday, 2005).

<sup>32</sup> Tom McLennon, "A Mission from God," *Daytona News-Journal*, (July 27, 1996): 1D.

<sup>33</sup> Larry Derfner, "A Matter of Faith," *Jerusalem Post* (April 29, 2005): 8.

<sup>34</sup> "Ministry Profile," Celebrate Messiah . <http://celebratemessiah.com.au/?ID=41>, accessed March 2007.

who believed, after studying the Scriptures, that Jesus is the Messiah awaited by the Jews. The parent organization of Chosen People Ministries was the American Board of Missions to the Jews (ABMJ).<sup>35</sup> In 1929, the organization started publication of a magazine called *The Chosen People*. Their purpose was to reach the Jewish people with the Gospel of Christ and to convert them to Christianity. Many organizations have grown from the ABMJ, including Jews for Jesus. What makes Chosen People different from other organizations that evangelize Jews is that instead of going from town to town, they transplant congregations in different countries. Today, it has staff in twelve countries whose main concern is setting up Messianic centers and congregations. Their key message is that Jesus, Yeshua, is the Messiah of Israel and Jews who accept Jesus as their Messiah is still Jewish. Accordingly, employees of Chosen People Ministries encourage Jews who choose to believe in Jesus to maintain their identification as Jews, to observe Jewish holidays and support Israel.<sup>36</sup>

Don Meecha, Toronto branch director of Chosen People Ministries, explains the messianic paradigm in an acutely revelatory way. He notes that the challenge before messianic Jews is how to be "a viable option" to the Jewish community, which he deems as "unsaved," "dying," and "perishing," and which "promotes expulsion" should any of its members embrace Jesus. Meecha asks, "Why would Jews want to leave the comfort and security of their community, for one that offers only eternal life but nothing for them in this life?" He argues that the solution is to plant a messianic synagogue that speaks Hebrew, and to allow Jews on the path to Jesus to preserve their traditional symbols and customs "as long as they do not violate the new covenant's [New Testament's] values." He laments that messianics have missed the mark with the Jewish

<sup>35</sup> <http://www.chosen-people.com/docs/GB/Resources/Publications/Nov98NL/index.html>.

<sup>36</sup> [http://www.chosenpeople.com/main/page/doctrinal\\_statement.html](http://www.chosenpeople.com/main/page/doctrinal_statement.html).

community: "We have not reached full potential to make them jealous enough to leave their dying community behind for one that offers eternal life." The end goal for Meecha is to "no longer go into the Jewish community, but to be part of it" because if that does not occur, a "spiritual holocaust will continue."<sup>37</sup>

### The Purpose and Aims of Celebrate Messiah

On its website, Celebrate Messiah identifies itself as "an interdenominational, evangelistic society dedicated to raising the banner of Messiah amongst God's ancient people in Australia and abroad through our partnership with Chosen People Global Ministries." In addition, the organization endeavours: "To successfully communicate the Gospel in a culturally relevant way to Jewish people in Australia by raising the truth that one can be Jewish and believe in Yeshua."<sup>38</sup> Celebrate Messiah does this in Melbourne primarily through their congregational presence, Beit HaMashiach (House of the Messiah).

In a one page brochure aimed for those joining the Sabbath services, Damien and Annemarie Ball, the current Pastors of Beit HaMashiach, present the theological underpinnings and *raison d'être* of the congregation, saying, "Beit HaMashiach is a unique congregation made up of Jewish and Gentile people who believe that Yeshua (Jesus) is the promised Messiah of Israel. As a messianic congregation, we are committed to celebrating our faith in Yeshua in a way that reflects our scriptural Jewish heritage." The pastors disclose that Beit HaMashiach Congregation is affiliated with the

<sup>37</sup> "Missionaries Plan to Step Up Conversion Efforts: Conference Hears Strategies on Making Jesus More Attractive to Jews," *Canadian Jewish News* 34, no. 19 (May 6, 2004): 3.

<sup>38</sup> "Ministry Profile," Celebrate Messiah <http://celebratemessiah.com.au//?ID=41>, accessed March 2007.

Conference of Churches of Christ.<sup>39</sup> They are both "fully endorsed Churches of Christ Ministers."<sup>40</sup>

In their "About Us" leaflet, Pastors Damien and Annemarie Ball add that the congregation's goals include "to remind the contemporary Church that it needs to reconnect with its Jewish heritage in order to reinvigorate its theology and mission."<sup>41</sup> In a one page leaflet, entitled "Our Mission and Values" *Beit HaMashiach* declares writ large that Evangelism, sharing the message of Messiah with the Jewish people is a core ambition.<sup>42</sup> Beyond their belief in Jesus as the Messiah, the congregation accepts such Christian theological concepts antithetical to the Jewish code of belief as original sin, the Trinity and vicarious blood atonement creeds.

Members of Beit HaMashiach claim to observe a variety of the rituals and practices of Judaism. There is no cross at Beit HaMashiach, even though the hall betrays its Christian antecedents as a former church. On the elevated stage stands a Torah scroll housed inside a wooden ark. Its members do not celebrate Christian holy days such as Christmas and Easter, which they do not deem to be part of Biblical tradition. There is a children's ministry, Yeladim for Yeshua (children for Yeshua), a women's ministry and a pastoral care team. Additionally, Beit HaMashiach has established an array of *Chavurot*, defined as a "Gathering of Friends" which meet for fellowship, prayer and Bible study.<sup>43</sup> There are also weekly Israeli dancing classes for those whose hearts "long to worship

<sup>39</sup> Damien and Annemarie Ball. "Welcome to Beit HaMashiach" Beit HaMashiach Messianic Congregation leaflet, 1.

<sup>40</sup> Damien and Annemarie Ball "About Us" Beit HaMashiach Messianic Congregation leaflet, 1.

<sup>41</sup> p. 1.

<sup>42</sup> "Our Mission and Values" Beit HaMashiach Messianic Congregation leaflet, 1.

<sup>43</sup> "Chavurot" *Beit HaMashiach Messianic Congregation Bulletin* (November 2008): 5.

our Maker and Saviour” and Beginners Hebrew lessons run by an Israeli woman.<sup>44</sup> Other avenues of messianic study include The Dwight Pryor Course and English/Russian books and videos housed in the Beit HaMashiach library.

Sabbath services are held on the first Friday of every month and on Saturday morning. The Sabbath evening service on November 1, 2008 began with a blessing over the Shabbat candles by one of the female attendees, with a power point flashing the prayer in Hebrew and English so as to allow the rest of the congregation to join along. Afterwards, there followed a collective singing of several Hebrew songs such as *Our father our Lord, We are all One*, bracketed by a group of women engaged in Israeli dancing. Later, there were recitations of “The Declaration of the Unity of the God” and a “Prayer for the Peace of Jerusalem.” Barry Buirski who is one of the key personnel of the Celebrate Messiah organization recited the blessing over the Sabbath wine (he explained that this is not communion) and the blessing over the bread. He then asked that the children who are present step forward and receive the bread and blessing of Ephraim and Menashe. It is noteworthy that in Buirski’s short speech, he used the term Jesus rather than Yeshua, a usage which Messianic Jews tend to eschew since it underscores the Christological rather than the Judaic linkages they wish to stress. After several announcements regarding activities, Pastor Damien Ball invited members of Beit HaMashiach or visitors to step forward and share their experiences of the recent Jewish High Holidays.<sup>45</sup>

Pastor Damien Ball authors a regular column in the Beit HaMashiach bulletin entitled “Pastor’s Pen.” In the November 2008 edition, he reflected on the Jewish High Holidays festivities at the congregation, writing:

We are deeply blessed as Messianic believers to be able to connect with traditions that for thousands of years have been enacted each year by the Jewish people. We are blessed also because the feasts are enriched for us by what we know of Yeshua our Messiah...When the Shofar sounded at Rosh HaShanah we had a taste of the second coming foretold by Paul...And at Yom Kippur there was a sense of relief that Yeshua had entered into the heavenly Holy of Holies on our behalf to give his own blood for us as an eternal sacrifice.<sup>46</sup>

Beit HaMashiach conducts Jewish life cycle events, such as Baby Dedications, Messianic Bar/Bat Mitzvahs, Wedding Celebrations and Funerals, albeit through its own unique spectrum. Messianic bar mitzvahs are celebrated for boys who have reached thirteen. The boys read a portion of the Torah, as well as recite liturgical passages of the service in Hebrew. They often deliver a *drasha* (sermon) related to the text they read, donning a Jewish prayer shawl and wearing a Yarmulke.<sup>47</sup> Beit HaMashiach offers preparatory classes and pre-marriage counseling.

Some of these celebrations are new additions to the congregation’s activities. In 2004 Phil Plotnek officiated at his first wedding between a Jewish man and his girlfriend. Plotnek, who is a marriage celebrant for the Church of the Christ, observes that when the man announced his new faith to his family, his father unanticipatedly became more committed to Judaism, beseeching his son to do likewise.<sup>48</sup> In addition, Beit HaMashiach administers “Immersion,” a substitute term for baptism. It should be noted that when relating the story of the four young people who were immersed in 2006, their newsletter

<sup>44</sup> *Beit HaMashiach Messianic Congregation Bulletin*: 7.

<sup>45</sup> Visit of the author to *Beit HaMashiach Messianic Congregation*.

<sup>46</sup> Damien Ball. “Pastor’s Pen” *Beit HaMashiach Messianic Congregation Bulletin*. November 2008: 2.

<sup>47</sup> *Celebrate Messiah Newsletter* 8, no. 3 (September 2002): 2.

<sup>48</sup> *Celebrate Messiah Newsletter* 11, no. 1 (March 2005): 3.

employed the term “baptised” in parentheses, in a rare break from their usual avoidance of such Christian vocabulary.<sup>49</sup> Likewise, Lawrence Hirsch has applied the term in an annual report (for the Australian chapter of the Lausanne Consultation on Jewish Evangelism) on Celebrate Messiah’s activity, “...twenty-five Jewish believers have been baptised in obedience to the Lord this year.”<sup>50</sup>

### Executive Director of Celebrate Messiah: Lawrence Hirsch

As well as serving as Executive Director of Celebrate Messiah and up until recently Congregational leader of Beit HaMashiach, Lawrence Hirsch is also the former Australia/New Zealand area-coordinator for the Lausanne Consultation on Jewish Evangelism and the President of the Messiah Alliance of Australia. The biographical profile on their website records that he was brought up in a traditional Jewish home, that he attended an orthodox synagogue and celebrated his Bar-Mitzvah. He became a Jewish believer in Jesus after arriving in Melbourne from South Africa in 1984. There “Lawrence came to faith through the witness of his brother Alan, who had come to faith in Jesus a few months earlier. Amazingly, at the very same time, Lawrence’s childhood sweetheart living in South Africa at the time, also came to faith in Jesus.”<sup>51</sup>

After leaving Melbourne in 1989, Hirsch and his wife were educated as missionaries in South Africa and worked as missionaries there for five years.<sup>52</sup> Writing to the Australian Jewish News in 2007, Hirsch succinctly encapsulated his

<sup>49</sup> “News Briefs,” *Celebrate Messiah Newsletter* 12, no. 3 (August 2006): 3.

<sup>50</sup> Bob Mendelsohn, “Annual Report 2006 for LCJE Australia,” [http://www.lcje.net/bulletins/2007/87/87\\_05.html](http://www.lcje.net/bulletins/2007/87/87_05.html), accessed June 2009.

<sup>51</sup> “Profile: Lawrence Hirsch,” Lausanne Consultation on Jewish Evangelization, <http://www.lcje.net/profiles/hirsch.html>, accessed March 2007.

<sup>52</sup> “Ministry Profile,” *Celebrate Messiah*, <http://celebratemessiah.com.au/?ID=49>, accessed March 2007.

doctrinal moorings: “As a messianic Jew...(i.e. a Jewish person who believes in Yeshua/Jesus as the Messiah), I firmly and passionately uphold my Jewish identity, actively participate in Jewish causes and embrace biblical Jewish faith.”<sup>53</sup> In an earlier 2005 letter to the Australian Jewish News, Hirsch underlined his link to the Judaism and the community “...we remain committed to our identity as Jews, passionate about our faith in the Messiah and supportive of the Jewish community and the State of Israel.”<sup>54</sup>

### The Missionary Goal of Celebrate Messiah

A cardinal dimension in the Messianic matrix is the missionary mandate. In their zeal to spread the gospel about their newly discovered faith in Jesus, Messianic Jews fervently preach that one can both be Jewish and believe that Jesus was the Messiah foretold in Jewish scripture. This led to the decision to locate the Celebrate Messiah offices and Beit HaMashiach congregation in the heart of Melbourne’s Jewish community in South Caulfield. Hirsch alerted his readers in 2005 that since Celebrate Messiah has the full use of the Church building they are able to arrange their outreach to the Jewish community in a “more effective and culturally sensitive way.”<sup>55</sup> Hirsch later explained in the Celebrate Messiah newsletter:

Our office is now meters away from where we hold messianic services every Shabbat. As we are conducting our services, Jewish people are walking right past our place of worship on their way to their Shabbat services.

<sup>53</sup> Lawrence Hirsch, “Not A Cult,” *Australian Jewish News*, Letters Section (September 14, 2007): 15.

<sup>54</sup> Lawrence Hirsch, “Beit HaMashiach Vandalised by Jewish ‘Zealots,’” Letter to the *Australian Jewish News* (23 March, 2005). Sent to the author July 28, 2009.

<sup>55</sup> *Celebrate Messiah Newsletter* 11, no. 1 (March 2005): 8.



Within the area of Caulfield there are 30 synagogues. We have an amazing mission field right where we are and Jewish people are talking about us.<sup>56</sup>

On a related matter, in 2002, the organization announced plans, as part of their blueprint for reaching the Jewish community in Australia, for a project titled "Messiah College." The aim was to design a "platform for the Gospel by providing relevant education in a coaching environment for people of all ages" so as to "serve and interact with the Jewish community while creating a platform for the preaching of the Gospel."<sup>57</sup> To be sure, Messiah College was conceived as another creative missionizing tool, as Lawrence Hirsch explained, "Through this ministry we hope to engage Jewish people through offering various subjects that are needed in the community for young and old alike like Maths, English, Russian, Personal Development and of course, Bible classes."<sup>58</sup>

In a 2006 talk to the Northridge Vineyard Christian Fellowship in New South Wales, Australia, about the Passover festival, Lawrence Hirsch told his audience that Celebrate Messiah is "a mission organization. We do missionary work, visitation, evangelism in Australia, in particularly in Melbourne, which is our main focus..."<sup>59</sup> When the pastor of the Northridge Vineyard Christian Fellowship commented that it seems that more and more Jewish people were becoming Christians or accepting Jesus as their messiah, Hirsch replied:

We actually live in very exciting times. We've seen Jewish people come to faith in Jesus today at a rate that we

<sup>56</sup> "News Briefs," *Celebrate Messiah Newsletter*, 12, no. 2 (June 2006): 10.

<sup>57</sup> *Celebrate Messiah Newsletter*, 8, no. 3 (September 2002): 7.

<sup>58</sup> Lawrence Hirsch, "Annual LCJE Report for Australia and New Zealand 2002," [http://www.lcje.net/bulletins/2003/71/71\\_10.html](http://www.lcje.net/bulletins/2003/71/71_10.html).

<sup>59</sup> Northridge Vineyard Christian Fellowship, <http://northridgevcf.org.au/viewdoc.php?id=268>, accessed April 2007 but no longer available.

haven't seen since the times of the Book of Acts. So it is significant. We're living in very significant times. In Melbourne we've seen a lot of Russian speaking Jews come to faith in Jesus, around 250, almost 300. We've seen also Australian speaking, English speaking Jews come to the Lord. God's hand seems to be very much on Russian speaking Jews, all around the world, Israel, that's true also in Israel.<sup>60</sup>

Immediately afterwards, the Northridge Vineyard Christian Fellowship host asked that his members join him in praying for Lawrence and his organization. The short prayer discloses the mindset of some Christian groups towards Judaism and Jews, as well as how these churches envisage the role of Messianic Jews within the missionary scheme. They prayed:

Lord thank you for what you are doing in the Jewish nation, in the Jewish people all around the world. Lord we thank you that they were your first your love, that you love that nation, and that you came first for them. When Jesus came, he said I come for the lost sheep of Israel. *And Lord we thank you for what you are doing through organisations like Celebrate Messiah in reaching these folk and showing them the reason for their faith in God, and that Jesus is that one they have been waiting for, so bless their work.*<sup>61</sup> (author's italics).

### Endorsement for Celebrate Messiah by Figures in the Australian Church

Again and again, leading personalities in the Church laud Celebrate Messiah for its missionary activities to the Jews.

<sup>60</sup> Northridge Vineyard Christian Fellowship, <http://northridgevcf.org.au/viewdoc.php?id=268>, accessed April 2007.

<sup>61</sup> Northridge Vineyard Christian Fellowship, <http://northridgevcf.org.au/viewdoc.php?id=268>, accessed April 2007, but no longer available.

Pastor Mark Conner, Senior Pastor, City Life Church (Melbourne) praises the organization for being the “most effective evangelistic ministry to Jewish people”<sup>62</sup> that he knows of. Pastor Rob Buckingham, Senior Pastor, Bayside Church (Melbourne) recommends Celebrate Messiah as being on the “cutting edge of ministry and evangelism to the Jewish community.” He then adds, “Their proven strategies are working powerfully with many precious people coming to know Jesus as Messiah and Lord. I highly recommend this ministry.” Rev. Dr. David Price, Principal of Bible College of Victoria, applauds Celebrate Messiah and advocates financially supporting it since he believes it is “having a significant evangelical witness to Jewish people.” Pastor Gary Rucci Executive Pastor, Southside Christian Church (Adelaide) acclaims the organization for its passion and compassion in ministering to the Jewish community and for “reaping a harvest in a field most others have overlooked.”<sup>63</sup>

While Celebrate Messiah pronounces that its Judaic heritage is indispensable to its identity, there are also strong indications that it is a deeply Christian organization. Its entire Board of Reference (which acts as an advisory board providing guidance and counsel) consists of prominent figures within the Australian Christian world.<sup>64</sup> Moreover, an array of endorsements issued by members of the board and other pastors and posted on Celebrate Messiah’s own website confirms that figures from the Christian sphere judge and construe Celebrate Messiah not as a Jewish organization, but as a Christian entity – and that this is part of the identity that Celebrate Messiah seeks to promote. For instance, Rev. Prof.

<sup>62</sup>“Ministry Profile: What Pastors Say about Celebrate Messiah,” Celebrate Messiah, <http://celebratemessiah.com.au/?ID=114>, accessed February 2008.

<sup>63</sup> All cited at Northridge Vineyard Christian Fellowship, <http://northridgevcf.org.au/viewdoc.php?id=268>, accessed April 2007, but no longer available

<sup>64</sup> As listed at “Ministry Profile,” Celebrate Messiah, <http://celebratemessiah.com.au/?ID=113>, accessed July 2008.

Allan M. Harman, Retired Principal, Presbyterian Theological College, Melbourne remarks, “There is an urgent need for *evangelical Christians* in Australia to recognize their responsibility to reach out with the Gospel to the Jewish people ...Celebrate Messiah is doing just that...This is the type of Jewish evangelism that we need to support.”<sup>65</sup>

It is noteworthy that the Christian community considers Celebrate Messiah an indispensable and intimate piece in its religious quilt. Thus, “Which Christian” in its on-line guide lists the organization as an “interdenominational mission agency,”<sup>66</sup> and “Associated Christian Ministries,” a network of associated Christian churches, ministries and pastors, based in Melbourne that is officially recognized by the government, also files Celebrate Messiah under its Church/Ministry demarcation.<sup>67</sup> It is of note that even Mark Leach, Chairman of Celebrate Messiah’s Australian Board of Directors, places Celebrate Messiah within the Christian rubric. On his personal website as Vicar of Christ Church of Hawthorn, Melbourne, he references Celebrate Messiah as a Christian Ministry, along with *Leadership Network Australia*.<sup>68</sup>

### Mission Work by Celebrate Messiah

Celebrate Messiah actively seeks to cultivate relationships and partnerships with local churches in order to “share our burden to bring the Gospel to the Jewish people.”<sup>69</sup>

<sup>65</sup> “Ministry Profile: Endorsements for Celebrate Messiah Australia,” Celebrate Messiah, <http://celebratemessiah.com.au/?ID=114>, accessed July 2008.

<sup>66</sup> <http://www.whichchristian.com.au/mission.html>, accessed November 2007.

<sup>67</sup> <http://www.acm.org.au/churches-ministries/victoria>, accessed July 2008.

<sup>68</sup> “Mark Leach,” Christ Church Hawthorn, [http://www.christchurchhawthorn.org/app/w\\_page.php?id=16&type=section](http://www.christchurchhawthorn.org/app/w_page.php?id=16&type=section), accessed September 1, 2009.

<sup>69</sup> “Ministry Profile: Jewish Evangelism, Celebrate Messiah and your Local Congregation,” Celebrate Messiah, <http://www.celebratemessiah.com.au/?ID=131>, accessed September 2009.

The organization proposes several creative ways for churches to collaborate in its mission to the Jewish people. To that end, it produced a video documentary, available from its head office, titled "Bringing the Message to the Original Messengers."<sup>70</sup> Aside from explicating group's role and objectives, the video also teaches non-Jews how to missionize to Australian Jews. The introduction to the video states that, "The Jewish people living in Australia represent a large unreached people that need to hear the message they once were asked to bear. For these people to hear and accept the message of gospel it needs to be communicated within their cultural boundaries."

In that vein, later in the video documentary, Lawrence Hirsch imparts practical advice and strategies to his audience on how to witness to their Jewish friends. At the outset, Hirsch underlines the rationale for his address:

I want to lay down some important principles on witnessing to Jewish people. And if you grab hold of these principles then you'll be on to the right track to witnessing in a sensitive and effective manner to your Jewish friends. If you get those principles then you'll say the right things at the right time and the Holy Spirit will then be able to use you as an effective witness for Jesus.

Hirsch implores his listeners be careful in the terms they employ when speaking with Jews:

Watch your language—certain words may have totally different meaning to your Jewish friends and sometime may even be offensive. Words like Christ and cross bring up collective memories of persecution by so called Christians. So be sensitive in your choice—try and use words like Messiah, instead of Christ, try using congregation instead of

<sup>70</sup> No publication data available. Quotations from the video are the author's transcription.

church. Don't tell your Jewish friend that they have to become a Christian, tell them that they have to become a believer in Jesus."

Earlier in his talk, Hirsch explains that Jews have an "inbuilt defence mechanism towards the gospel" adding that having endured two millennia of Christian evangelistic attempts, Jews know "how to reject the claims of Christianity" and have been taught to exclude fundamental Christian teachings "such as the trinity, the deity of messiah and also the second coming of the Jesus."

Hirsch counsels the audience to eschew any discussion about religion with their Jewish friends, instructing them to instead center the conversation on the person of Jesus. Other evangelistic paths include befriending Jews: "Be a friend—far most effective way of witness to a Jewish person is to develop a true and honest relationship with him or her;"<sup>71</sup> He also recommends affirming Jewish identity. "Because we (the Jews) are brought up believing that we cannot be Jewish and believe in Jesus, it's important that you reaffirm your Jewish friend's identity and remind them that they do not give up being Jewish when they come to faith in Jesus." Non-Jews should encourage potential Jewish followers to attend a church or a messianic congregation and should subsequently introduce them to other messianic Jews.

Hirsch even outlines a suite of questions that non-Jews can ask potential Jewish candidates. He explains that these statements will simultaneously afford them with the opening to share the gospel as well as show their Jewish interlocutor that they are interested in their lives. To cite a few examples, "Ask a Jewish person how do you practice your religion? How often do you read the Bible? What role does the Bible play in your life? What do you believe about the messiah? Or what Jewish

<sup>71</sup> Celebrate Messiah . "Bringing the Message"

holiday is coming up and what does it mean to you? And you can ask them “I believe Passover is coming up what does that mean to you”?

Hand in hand with its video presentation to churches, Celebrate Messiah sponsored “eXperience Jewish Melbourne Week” which affords non-Jews

...an opportunity to come and experience Jewish Melbourne and learn how to share the Gospel with Jewish people. This four-day mission experience is designed to give [them] a ‘taste’ of Jewish culture, history and tradition and introduce [them] to the world of Jewish evangelism and the work of Celebrate Messiah Australia.<sup>72</sup>

Barry Buirski, an Associate Missionary with Celebrate Messiah who has worked with the Christian Open Doors Ministry, recounts that, during “eXperience Jewish Melbourne Week 2005,” over a thousand brochures were given out.<sup>73</sup> Buirski recalls being introduced to a Holocaust survivor with whom he shared the message of “God’s unfailing love in Yeshua.”<sup>74</sup> On one of its street evangelizing missions, Barry Buirski and his nine colleagues were accompanied by Tim, a Lebanese Christian, who, the newsletter recounts, had a “...very powerful testimony as an Arab believer who loves Israel and the Jewish people. You can imagine the effectiveness of his testimony while speaking to Jewish people on the streets of Melbourne.”<sup>75</sup> Buirski also ran “eXperience Jewish Sydney Week,” affording

participants the chance to take part in street evangelism and be trained in the craft.<sup>76</sup>

In this connection, Celebrate Messiah has also operated “Jewish Missions Week,” a three day campaign which includes witnessing to Israelis on St. Kilda Beach in Melbourne.<sup>77</sup> The first was held in 2003 and culminated on the St. Kilda beachfront. The group of missionaries consisted of University students who attended the Australian Fellowship of Evangelical Students’ National Training Event where Lawrence Hirsch taught a class on “Bringing the Messages to the Original Messengers.” As part of their activities, students and members of Celebrate Messiah, wearing T-shirts with Yeshua emblazoned across the front, distributed pamphlets and spoke to those frequenting the cafes on Acland Street which is often frequented by Israeli backpackers and Jewish teenagers. In 2006, Lawrence Hirsch, as part of his annual “Lausanne Consultation on Jewish Evangelism” reported that, “We have seen about thirty-five ‘lost sheep of the House of Israel’ come to faith in Yeshua as their Messiah and many others disciplined in their ongoing walk with the Lord.”<sup>78</sup>

Similarly, Celebrate Messiah sponsors “Outreach Israel,” (formerly called eXperience Israel) described as “a two-week mission/tour to Israel designed for eighteen- to thirty-five-year-olds.”<sup>79</sup> Celebrate Messiah approaches churches, offering “to customise a short-term program that meets [their] needs. And who knows, perhaps this ‘taste’ of Jewish missions will lead

<sup>72</sup> “Ministry Profile: Jewish Evangelism, Celebrate Messiah and your Local Congregation,” Celebrate Messiah, <http://www.celebratemessiah.com.au/?ID=131>, accessed September 2009.

<sup>73</sup> Celebrate Messiah *Newsletter* 11, no. 2, (October 2005): 3.

<sup>74</sup> Celebrate Messiah, <http://celebratemessiah.com.au/?ID=100>, accessed April 2008, page no longer available.

<sup>75</sup> “News Briefs,” Celebrate Messiah *Newsletter* 12, no. 3 (August 2006): 3.

<sup>76</sup> “News Briefs,” Celebrate Messiah *Newsletter* 12, no. 3 (August 2006): 3.

<sup>77</sup> Celebrate Messiah *Newsletter*, 11, no. 1 (March 2005): 3.

<sup>78</sup> Lawrence Hirsch, “Annual Report 2006 for LCJE Australia,” [http://www.lcje.net/bulletins/2007/87/87\\_05.html](http://www.lcje.net/bulletins/2007/87/87_05.html), accessed June 2009.

<sup>79</sup> “Short Term Ministries: Outreach Israel,” Celebrate Messiah, <http://www.celebratemessiah.com.au/?ID=106>, accessed September 2009.

someone to pursue a life-long calling to bring the Gospel to the Jewish people.”<sup>80</sup>

Finally, Celebrate Messiah, together with Ariel Ministries NZ holds an annual conference in New Zealand called “Simcha.” For instance, the 2009 convention is characterized as:

...a gathering of messianic believers from across New Zealand coming together to seek the Lord's favour and blessing. The vision for Simcha is to gather messianic believers together in unity in the Messiah, to look to God to grow and mature the messianic movement, to encourage one another and to work together for messianic revival amongst Jewish people in New Zealand and abroad.<sup>81</sup>

In archived photos from one “Simcha” gathering (no longer available on the internet) a man wearing a Yarmulke and draped by a Tallit (traditional Jewish prayer shawl) stands on a stage, behind him the Ten Commandments. Elsewhere a person is seen blowing the shofar; a man holds up the Torah scroll parading it around; a man recites a blessing over a Challah; a woman says a prayer over what appear to be Sabbath candles; children are given what seem to be Kiddush cups, while another holds two round Challot; a group is dancing with a curtain imprinted with a Star of David situated behind a musical group: men, women and children are baptized in a wooden tub. A considerable number of images show men and

women with t-shirts emblazoned with the word *Yeshua* in Hebrew.

In the 2004 meeting, as reported in the Celebrate Messiah *Newsletter*, three Jewish people embraced Jesus for the first time. It highlights one striking vignette:

One of the new believers was a sixteen year Jewish boy whose parents brought him along to the conference. At the end of the conference he confessed that he didn't want to attend Simcha but that during the weekend's events he felt that God was calling him. One of the Simcha youth workers prayed with him and felt that the barrier between him and God was taken away.<sup>82</sup>

According to the Celebrate Messiah March 2009 newsletter, the 2008 annual gathering in Philip Island (in Victoria, Australia) attracted a record number of participants, more than 280 Jewish and Gentile Believers.<sup>83</sup> Guest speakers included Vladimir Pikman from Germany, Evan Thomas from Israel and Dr. Ashley Crane from Perth, Australia. Vladimir Pikman “delivered a strong statement...about the Jewish people being set apart as God's Chosen people.” He also addressed the issue of the Holocaust, claiming that post WWII the German people had endeavored to “repair relations with the Jewish people and Israel” and in order to move forward, the Jewish people “forgave.” As reported in the newsletter, a Jewish Holocaust survivor and a German Gentile were both “blessed by this message.”<sup>84</sup> Also on the program were a wide spectrum

<sup>80</sup> Celebrate Messiah <http://celebratemessiah.com.au/?ID=77>, accessed March 2007, no longer available.

<sup>81</sup> <http://74.125.155.132/search?q=cache:IDYa5zK3c-MJ:www.celebratemessiah.com.au/events/+The+vision+for+Simcha+is+to+g+athr+messianic+believers+together+in+unity+in+the+Messiah.&cd=1&hl=en&ct=clnk&gl=au&client=firefox-a>.

<sup>82</sup> “Ministry to Australian Jews,” Reaching God's Chosen People in Australia and Abroad in 2004 (December 2004): 1 <http://www.celebratemessiah.com.au/pdf/APDec04.pdf>

<sup>83</sup> Celebrate Messiah *Newsletter* 15, no. 1 (March 2009): 4, [http://www.celebratemessiah.com.au/files/CMVol15Iss1\(low\).pdf](http://www.celebratemessiah.com.au/files/CMVol15Iss1(low).pdf).

<sup>84</sup> “Simcha 2008—The Best Simcha Ever,” Celebrate Messiah *Newsletter* 15: no. 1 (March 2009):4.



of sessions: a workshop for Russian attendees; discussions about the unique role Australia, New Zealand and England played in the “restoration of Jews from exile”; and messianic dancing and music.

Another significant focus of Celebrate Messiah’s missionary work is the Russian Jewish community. This evangelism to the Russian Jews was aided immeasurably by Chosen People Ministries whose president visited in 1998 to explore a partnership. This resulted in a two-week visit by their staff person, Klaudia Zhelezny, of Ukrainian origin herself. Chosen People Ministries reported, “By the end of Klaudia’s visit, 40 Russian Jewish people had received Jesus as Messiah.”<sup>85</sup>

Supposedly, Celebrate Messiah has had particular success in making inroads into the Russian immigrant community in Australia. Originally it spread its Christ-centered Judaism to the Russian community through a Russian-speaking congregation named *Dom Missi’ee* (House of Messiah) that operated in St. Kilda in Melbourne.<sup>86</sup> As part of its matrix of missionizing strategies, *Dom Missi’ee* made available weekly Bible Studies classes and English classes to more than 100 Russian speaking Jews.<sup>87</sup> Doubtless, the location of *Dom Missi’ee* was aimed at affording Celebrate Messiah optimal access to the Russian community. As of 2009, *Dom Missi’ee* no longer operates independently. It has merged with Beit HaMashiach and no longer conducts its meetings in St Kilda.

<sup>85</sup> Chosen People Ministries, <http://www.chosenpeople.com/docs/GB/Resources/Publications/02-02NL/evinaus.html>, accessed April 2007, no longer available.

<sup>86</sup> “Ministries,” Celebrate Messiah, <http://celebratemessiah.com.au/?ID=121>, accessed March 2007. The current text has been updated.

<sup>87</sup> Lawrence Hirsch, “Annual LCJE Report for Australia/New Zealand 2003,” [http://www.lcje.net/bulletins/2004/75/75\\_07.html](http://www.lcje.net/bulletins/2004/75/75_07.html), accessed November 2008.

The person principally charged with reaching out to the Russian community is Rita Ivenskis, whose duties include teaching Bible studies for Russian Jewish people in Melbourne. Celebrate Messiah quotes Rita Ivenskis as saying: “I feel that Russian Jewish people are becoming more open and ready to receive the Gospel and they are hungry for the word of God.”<sup>88</sup> A graduate of a training course with Chosen People Ministry in New York, she has also studied at Tabor College Australia, a “multidenominational charismatic Christian Education Centre...[that] seeks to equip people for Christian life and ministry by providing teaching which is Christ-centred, biblically based, ministry-oriented, academically sound, positively expressed and spiritually empowered.”<sup>89</sup>

As of 2009, Celebrate Messiah claims that since 2003 over 300 Russian Jewish people have accepted a belief in Jesus.<sup>90</sup> In the organization’s newsletter, several staff testify to their successes. Rita Ivenskis speaks of her achievements with Russian Jews in Melbourne:

Today I went to see a Jewish family who I’ve known for 25 years. They asked me to visit with them because they were experiencing health problems as well as problems with their son. I shared with them my personal testimony of what Yeshua has done in my life and they accepted Yeshua with open hearts. Michael, the father, has been reading the Bible and had come to believe that Yeshua is a Son of God. They now want to meet regularly each week for a Bible study.

<sup>88</sup> “Ministry Profile,” Celebrate Messiah, <http://celebratemessiah.com.au/?ID=53>, accessed March 2007.

<sup>89</sup> Tabor College Australia, <http://www.tabor.edu.au/>, accessed March 2007.

<sup>90</sup> “Ministry Profile,” Celebrate Messiah, <http://celebratemessiah.com.au/?ID=53>, accessed March 2007.

In another account, Rita Ivenskis mentions that she visits Russians Jews with terminal illnesses and assists them with their shopping. Rita Ivenskis conducts Bible studies for elderly Russians in the Commission flats.<sup>91</sup> Phil Plotnek, a Melbourne born former Pastor of Creative Ministries in Melbourne's Bayside Region, now with Celebrate Messiah, works alongside Rita. He reports, "I am enjoying a new challenge of working with the Russian Jews...During a recent meeting, 5 Russian Jews made a commitment to follow Jesus. We have also been visiting with people in their homes and this week another 2 Jewish people came to the Lord."<sup>92</sup> In 2006, Celebrate Messiah conducted what the organization termed "special outreach to the Russian community" in Prahran, an area where a considerable segment of that population lives. It reports, under the heading of "Five Salvations" that five Russian Jewish people accepted Yeshua as Messiah, describing the occasion as a "significant day in the work amongst Jewish people in Melbourne."<sup>93</sup>

According to Celebrate Messiah their messianic idea also touches young Israelis visiting the antipodes. The organization reports that during "Jewish Missions Week 2003," which involved visiting the Holocaust Museum and attending a synagogue and a Sabbath dinner, one of the ten Melbourne University students (known as "The Messiah Team") met Irit, an Israeli tourist at another venue, the Jewish Museum of Australia. Irit, apparently, was receptive to the message about Jesus and turned up at Beit HaMashiach. There she met two Israeli believers who regularly attend services.<sup>94</sup> This outreach

<sup>91</sup> "News Briefs," Celebrate Messiah *Newsletter* 12, no. 2 (June 2006): 8. Commission flats are low rent accommodation subsidized by the government.

<sup>92</sup> "Ministry Profile," Celebrate Messiah, <http://celebratemessiah.com.au/?ID=53>, accessed March 2007, page has since been updated.

<sup>93</sup> "News Briefs," Celebrate Messiah *Newsletter* 12, no. 3 (August 2006): 3.

<sup>94</sup> Celebrate Messiah, <http://celebratemessiah.com.au/?ID=77>, accessed March 2007, page content no longer available.

enterprise was evidence, according to Lawrence Hirsch, that "Jewish people are becoming more open to the Gospel, once you begin to scratch below the surface."<sup>95</sup> The June 2006 newsletter narrates the story of an Israeli couple backpacking through Australia and New Zealand who were witnessed to by Christians. After arriving in Melbourne, they visited Beit HaMashiach, and were astonished to encounter a considerable number of Israelis believing in Jesus. Armed with messianic literature, they returned to Israel, apparently transformed into believers.<sup>96</sup> The next issue tells of Igal, an Iranian-born Israeli who served as a soldier in the Israel Defence Forces and who regularly attends Beit HaMashiach, who joined Tim, a Lebanese Christian, along with Lawrence Hirsch arm in arm and prayed together in the name of Jesus for reconciliation in the Middle East.<sup>97</sup>

The Jewish community is aware of this activity. Rabbi E. Gorelik, Executive Director of Friends of Refugees of Eastern Europe in Melbourne, whose Jewish cultural centre and synagogue cater to many Jews from the former Soviet Union, has confirmed that Celebrate Messiah has been operating within the Russian Jewish community. Rabbi Gorelik is concerned that Russian-speaking Jews are being intentionally targeted for proselytizing because of their relatively weak ties to Judaism and poor socioeconomic status.<sup>98</sup>

Finally, Celebrate Messiah boasts its own Punk Rock band, Joyful Noise, consisting of Asher Reich and Jordan Plotnek, sons of the ministry's main leaders. Set up in 2001 it performs at various events, including concerts, conferences and benefits. On its MySpace site, the band introduces itself

<sup>95</sup> Lawrence Hirsch, "Annual LCJE Report for Australia/New Zealand 2003," [http://www.lcje.net/bulletins/2004/75/75\\_07.html](http://www.lcje.net/bulletins/2004/75/75_07.html), accessed July 2008.

<sup>96</sup> "News Briefs," Celebrate Messiah *Newsletter* 12, no. 2 (June 2006): 3.

<sup>97</sup> "News Briefs," Celebrate Messiah *Newsletter* 12, no. 3 (August 2006): 3.

<sup>98</sup> Interview with author, August 27, 2007.

with the following: “Ever listened to *hava nagila* and other Jewish songs and thought, hey this will sound great with fast drums, thumping bass and blazing guitar, well we did! is a Messianic Jewish Punk Rock Band.” It then announces the members of the band,

...Nath, the most yidish goy ever, shouting till he needs his inhaler, the girls Jordan and Nadege providing some harmony and energy, Ash rocking and making the 'noise' on guitar, Sam banging on drums and other things and Jord, um, playing bass, Joyful Noise play a unique style of punk/rock/klezma/jazz/funk/metal and traditional Jewish music that will get stuck in your head all day.<sup>99</sup>

The band, apart from embodying the youthful expression of the messianic ardor, is another element in the matrix of tools wielded by the organization to draw younger members.

### **Opposition to Celebrate Messiah by Figures in the Jewish Australian community**

Dr. Paul Gardner, a Melbourne-based Jewish community leader who has been active in interfaith work for several years strongly rejects groups such as Celebrate Messiah. Dr. Gardner was chairman of the B'nai B'rith Anti-Defamation Commission (ADC) from 2002 to 2006 and a 2004 founding member of the Jewish-Christian-Muslim Association of Australia (JCMA). He currently represents the ADC on the JCMA Board. He was also a founding member of the Victoria Police Multifaith Council and served on the advisory committee of the Premier's Multifaith Forum in 2005.

Dr. Gardner anchors his denunciation of Messianic movements on several grounds. He opines that such

<sup>99</sup> “Joyful Noise” on MySpace. <http://www.myspace.com/joyfulnoiseaustralia>, accessed January 2008.

movements are intellectually dishonest. “Christians are of course free to have faith in Jesus as their Messiah,” he says, “but Jesus cannot possibly be the Jewish messiah...One cannot therefore be a faithful Jew and simultaneously believe in Jesus as the Messiah. The argument by messianic movements that one can be both a Jew and a Christian is a case of intellectual fraud.”<sup>100</sup> Moreover, Dr Gardner treats such movements as clandestine attempts to convert those Jews who are on the fringes of the Jewish community to Christianity. “Viewed over the period of two millennia, Christian-Jewish relations have generally been unhappy, to say the least.” Dr Gardner notes:

They have been dominated by a supersessionist view that regards Christianity as a superior replacement for Judaism, that Judaism is an obsolete religion, and that Jews who retain their adherence to Jewish tradition are blind at best and deliberately stubborn at worst. This is classic theological antisemitism, contempt for Judaism and for those who hold to it. During the past half-century, mainstream Christian groups have sought to reject this view. In the Catholic Church, the Second Vatican Council and the *Nostra Aetate* document laid the foundations for a paradigm shift. God's covenant with the Jewish people remains in force. Attempts at conversion are no longer theologically acceptable.<sup>101</sup>

One must bear in mind, Dr. Gardner adds, that the emergence and flowering of organizations such as the Council for Christians and Jews and more recently the Jewish-Christian-Muslim Association, reinforce the notion that Jews and members of other faiths can meet together in an atmosphere of

<sup>100</sup> Email from Paul Gardner, September 3, 2007.

<sup>101</sup> Email from Paul Gardner, September 3, 2007.

warmth and mutual respect to learn about their similarities and differences. "However," says Dr Gardner,

there is no attempt to blur the differences or pretend that we are all the same, and there is an absolute rejection of attempts to convert people. This position demonstrates a respectful recognition that the long history of interfaith relations has often had tragic consequences for the Jewish people. Christian groups that seek to convert Jews do not demonstrate this respect.<sup>102</sup>

Temple Beth Israel Senior Rabbi Fred Morgan has expressed a deep concern about Celebrate Messiah: "We're not at all happy with it, like all other Jews I imagine." Rabbi Morgan observed: "We would distinguish between Christianity and Judaism as two distinct religions and an attempt by one group to portray itself as Jewish when in fact they accept the tenets of Christianity is undermining to Jewish identity." Rabbi Morgan was of the view that the activity undertaken by Beit HaMashiach was "insulting as it did not treat Jews with dignity or respect as a separate religious group."<sup>103</sup> In response, Lawrence Hirsch compared the work of Beit HaMashiach to the activities of other Jewish groups:

Well, don't the Lubavitchers do that? They go out actively on the street in the Chabad mobile or mitzvah mobiles actively seeking people to convert to their form of Judaism. They try and convert Jewish people from other different sections of the Jewish community to their form of Judaism which they believe is the only right form of Judaism.<sup>104</sup>

<sup>102</sup> Email from Paul Gardner, September 3, 2007.

<sup>103</sup> Mark Briskin, "Missionaries Branded Heretics," *Australian Jewish News*, February 11, 2000. N.P

<sup>104</sup> Briskin, "Missionaries..."

The Rabbinical Council of Victoria has issued an unequivocally condemnatory statement concerning Celebrate Messiah:

The advent of the Messianic Jews phenomenon is very unfortunate. It amounts to reincarnation, a kind of "wolf in sheep's clothing" of the old missionising of Jews into a slick new deceptive form but with an unchanged goal of sparing no effort to convert Jews to Christianity. Historically, Jews have suffered greatly at the hands of Christians who would resort to any means, fair or foul, friendly or violent, to draw Jews away from their ancient, timeless beliefs and sacred way of life and to force them to accept Christianity. Whilst the messianic phenomenon resorts to subtler means, the unlimited financial resources it invests in this process are evidence of its determination to win over Jews. The messianists and their missionary aims are at a variance with many mainstream Christians today, who, through the experience of the role of Christianity in setting the background for the Nazi Holocaust, have cast aside their desire for winning over Jews to their saviour in favour of mutual understanding and respect."<sup>105</sup>

Several years ago, it was reported that St. Mary's Anglican Church in Melbourne used *Jews for Jesus* in its recruitment campaign to draft members of the Jewish community into its church. Thousands of leaflets were distributed in neighborhoods where many Jews reside and billboards featuring a Holocaust survivor saying "you should hear my story" were erected.<sup>106</sup> Those who signed up received letters inviting them to join Christian courses. According to Lawrence Hirsch, in the backlash that followed windows were

<sup>105</sup> Sent to the author on 16 September 2007.

<sup>106</sup> Liam Houlihan and Kate Rose, "Christian front recruiting Jews," *Herald Sun*, April 27, 2005. N.P .

smashed and graffiti painted on the Beit HaMashiach building and silicone inserted into the locks.<sup>107</sup> Hirsch claimed that the spate of vandalism was carried out “by misguided and over-zealous orthodox Jews” and that this “demonstrates the religious intolerance that exists in the Jewish community to other Jews who believe differently to the mainstream.”<sup>108</sup>

### Amy-Jill Levine and the Jewish Care Controversy

In July 2008, the Australian Jewish News (AJN), the country’s only Jewish weekly publication, featured several items about Celebrate Messiah, including, unusually, a front page headline. The focus on this small group and the attendant firestorm of debate began when Jewish scholar Amy-Jill Levine of Vanderbilt University visited Melbourne and told the AJN reporter that the local community may need to come to grips with Jews who believe in Jesus. Describing the issue of Messianic Jews as “exceptionally complicated,” she noted that these messianic Jews have “palpable and real views” and that this subject carries not only intellectual, but also personal implications.<sup>109</sup> Professor Levine then presented her own theological assessment:

A number of messianic Jews are halachically observant, so the question of messianic Judaism as a branch of Judaism will have to be considered. It’s often easier when someone says they’re no longer a Jew but a Lutheran, but a Presbyterian, but what happens when they want to hang on that Jewish identity, and what do we do with that individual’s family? One could look at them simply as a Christian, one could look at them from a traditional Jewish

perspective as a “bad” Jew or an apostate Jew, or a very confused Jew. On the other hand, if the argument is that they have a different way to the divine, a different pathway to God, then I can say the atheist Jew doesn’t care about God at all. Why would I accept one and not the other?<sup>110</sup>

A week later, the AJN carried a front page item titled, “Messianic Jews at Jewish Care Victoria.”<sup>111</sup> The paper reported that outraged family members lodged a complaint with Jewish Care Nursing Smorgon Home over the presence of Messianic Jews who were working as volunteers at the institution. The complaint followed an incident in which one of the visitors, Suzanne Terkel (whose mother is a patient at the nursing home) confronted the wife of the leader of Celebrate Messiah, Louise Hirsch, when she noticed that Louise was painting the nails of an elderly relative. Terkel told the AJN that she was appalled that this was allowed to happen, querying why Messianic Jews were allowed into the nursing unit as volunteers.<sup>112</sup> Terkel opined that it was naïve to assume that personnel from Celebrate Messiah were at the unit for any other reason than proselytizing. Moreover, Terkel was distressed at the lack of “safeguard” that restricted Messianic Jews from contact with high-care patients.<sup>113</sup>

Similarly, Raphael Aron, the director of Cult Counseling Australia, told the AJN that he was seriously concerned that people associated with Celebrate Messiah were involved with Jewish Care and warned that Celebrate Messiah employed a variety of “sophisticated techniques to spread its message”

<sup>107</sup> Houlihan and Kate Rose, “Christian front recruiting Jews”.

<sup>108</sup> Lawrence Hirsch, “Not A Cult,” *Australian Jewish News* (Letters Section), September 14, 2007:15.

<sup>109</sup> Peter Kohn, “Scholar Predicts Softer Line on Messianic Jews,” *The Australian Jewish News* (14 July, 2008): 3, 16.

<sup>110</sup> Kohn, “Scholar Predicts Softer Line on Messianic Jews,” 3.

<sup>111</sup> Ashley Browne, “Messianic Jews at Jewish Care,” *The Australian Jewish News* (21 July, 2008): 1.

<sup>112</sup> Browne, “Messianic Jews at Jewish Care,” 1.

<sup>113</sup> Peter Kohn, “Jewish Care Volunteer Did Not Discuss Religion,” *The Australian Jewish News* (25 July, 2008): 3.



which he described as “false and misleading.”<sup>114</sup> Additionally, Aron claimed that Celebrate Messiah had attempted to infiltrate another community organization, and stated that, “It would be naive and dangerous to assume that the fact they have chosen to volunteer their time to a Jewish organization is merely a coincidence. I believe there is a clear agenda.”<sup>115</sup> In a later interview, Aron stated that while he advocated diversity among the employees of Jewish Care, he could not welcome Celebrate Messiah staff since their official agenda is “...an anathema to the core values of Jewish traditions and life.”<sup>116</sup> In its initial response, Jewish Care, through its President Robyn Schwartz, remarked that it unequivocally and unambiguously embraced the diversity and richness of its paid and unpaid staff.<sup>117</sup>

Louise Hirsch, who along with two other members of Celebrate Messiah had been working as a volunteer at the unit for several months, rejected the assertion of missionizing, saying that they revealed their beliefs and affiliation to Jewish Care when they applied for the post and assured management that they had no intention of proselytizing.<sup>118</sup> Hirsch argued that no one could be forced to become a Messianic Jew, especially since the patients she attended to either had dementia, were deaf or did not speak English, and that “proselytize is a strong word to use.”<sup>119</sup> Hirsch added that they had friends and family in the Jewish community, who disagreed with their beliefs, but were “mature and secure enough in their own faith not to be

threatened by ours.”<sup>120</sup> In a letter to the *Australian Jewish News*, Lawrence Hirsch marshalled his most combative and accusatory language yet to repudiate his detractors. “It seems to me that there are still some people in the Jewish community, Ms Terkel et al, that are still living in the Dark Ages. If this religious vilification and witch hunt for Messianic Jews in the community is allowed to continue, aided and abetted by religious leaders like Raphael Aron, then I say it is the Spanish Inquisition in reverse.”<sup>121</sup>

The Jewish Care saga spotlighted the strong reaction by the Australian Jewish community to any suspected missionary presence among its folk. A study of the AJN’s editorial, letters section and website reveals a wide spectrum of reactions by its readers and offers a useful and representative insight of the Jewish community’s perception and understanding of Messianic Jews. What is strikingly clear is that the general consensus is that messianic Jews are not considered to be part of the Jewish community or seen as Jewish.

The same week that it carried the Jewish Care story, an AJN editorial strenuously disagreed with Professor Levine’s viewpoint that it had reported the previous week. While the editorial’s headline, “Extending a Hand to ‘Messianic’ Jews,” appeared sympathetic, at heart the paper’s column echoed sentiments expressed by most readers, and by extension, the mainstream collective. It is noteworthy that the editor chose to

<sup>114</sup> Kohn, “Jewish Care Volunteer Did Not Discuss Religion,” 3.

<sup>115</sup> Kohn, “Jewish Care Volunteer Did Not Discuss Religion,” 3.

<sup>116</sup> Ashley Browne. “Jewish Care Intensifies Staffing Policy Review,” *The Australian Jewish News* (1 August, 2008): 7.

<sup>117</sup> Peter Kohn, “Jewish Care Volunteer Did Not Discuss Religion,” 3.

<sup>118</sup> Kohn, “Jewish Care Volunteer Did Not Discuss Religion,” 3.

<sup>119</sup> Kohn, “Jewish Care Volunteer Did Not Discuss Religion,” 3.

<sup>120</sup> Kohn, “Jewish Care Volunteer Did Not Discuss Religion,” 3. In an unpublished letter to the *Australian Jewish News*, parts of which were used a quotes in the July 25, 2008 article, Louise Hirsch denied that her motives were “sinister” and labels Suzanne Terkel’s actions as “unacceptable” and adds, “and Ms Terkel, as a Jewish person, should know better than to persecute others simply because she disagrees with their beliefs and questions their motives.” Received by the author on July 28, 2009.

<sup>121</sup> Lawrence Hirsch. “Response to AJN front page article, “Messianic Jews at Jewish Care,” Friday, July 18, 2008.” Unpublished portion. Received by the author on July 28, 2009.

frame the term “messianic” in quotation marks, signaling that the paper deemed the usage ironic, unusual, or simply distancing themselves from the terminology so as to indicate disassociation or disapproval. The editorial urged Jewish Care to move swiftly and decisively. Although it accepted that there was no evidence of missionizing, it averred that in light of “the entire movement’s commitment to raising the banner of Messiah”—such action cannot be discounted in the near future.”<sup>122</sup> The AJN’s editorial core stance is worth quoting at length:

Prof Levine anguishes about Jews who embrace Jesus but who want to retain their Jewish identity and observances. Are they Christians, are they apostate Jews, or are they, as she ponders, “confused” Jews? Shouldn’t they be given some leeway for wanting to hang on to their Jewishness, and aren’t they still more Jewish than Jews who announce their conversion to Christianity or become atheists? She sees messianic Jewishness as “an exceptionally complicated issue,” but it is, in fact, a simple issue. There is a line beyond which one cannot be a Jew in any meaningful sense of the word. If messianic Jews feel comfortable sitting at Seders or eating gefilte fish, that is their prerogative. But in the eyes of the community, they have ceased, to all intents and purposes, to be Jewish. Our compassion as a community should be channeled into efforts to shield vulnerable Jews on the fringe of the community from the lure of proselytizers. To those who already call themselves messianic Jews, we should offer a pathway, not just back to the community, but back to Judaism. Above all, we need to ask ourselves as a community what it is we are lacking and how we may

<sup>122</sup> Editorial, “Extending a Hand to ‘Messianic’ Jews,” *The Australian Jewish News* (18 July, 2008): 18.

have failed those who choose to explore their spirituality elsewhere.<sup>123</sup>

The AJN’s view mirrored the position of the *Jerusalem Post* editorial following the shocking Ortiz attack. The *Jerusalem Post* editorial stated, “Messianics insist that one can remain a loyal Jew while professing faith in Jesus as the Son of God and the Messiah. In fact, this theology is abhorrent to Jews and Judaism.”<sup>124</sup>

Most letters responding to these articles agreed with the AJN’s editorial stance. Local resident David Travers opined in that, “The term ‘messianic Jews’ is a euphemism for the previous title of the group, Jews for Jesus. The name change...diverts attention from the obvious contradiction in the name.” After elucidating why Jesus is not the Jewish messiah, Travers called on messianic Jews to get their belief system right, and to stop confusing themselves: “...if you still insist on continuing to delude yourself, don’t try to delude others, it is simply wrong and deceitful. No wonder you have received such bad press within the Jewish community. It’s not who you are but what you profess to be peddling.”<sup>125</sup> Morry Sztainbok argued that messianic Jews “...want to eat meat while still being considered “vegetarian”, to be accepted into mutually exclusive worlds without making a commitment to either.”<sup>126</sup> Jon, who described himself as an ex-Christian, labeled messianic Jews as missionaries who are “determined to steal Jewish souls in any way they can. The hate they show towards Judaism is their driving force.”<sup>127</sup> Rabbi Eli Cohen, the

<sup>123</sup> Peter Kohn, “Scholar Predicts Softer Line on Messianic Jews,” 3, 16.

<sup>124</sup> Editorial, “Judaism’s Golden Mean,” *Jerusalem Post* (31 March, 2008): 13.

<sup>125</sup> David Travers, “Leave Beliefs At Home,” *The Australian Jewish News* (1 August 2008): 18.

<sup>126</sup> Morry Sztainbok, “Mutually Exclusive Worlds,” *The Australian Jewish News* (1 August 2008): 18.

<sup>127</sup> “Letters—And Briefly,” *The Australian Jewish News* (1 August 2008): 19.

Australian Director of Jews for Judaism, a global anti-missionary organization, avoided a swift damnation of Messianic Jews, writing, “Notwithstanding the fact that they have estranged themselves from Judaism, we should still view them as our Jewish brethren. They need to be lovingly encouraged back into the Jewish community, instead of us writing them off to Christianity forever. Jewish people embracing Christian doctrine is unfortunately a very real phenomenon.”<sup>128</sup> Nevertheless, Cohen’s classification of messianic Jews points to a common and recurrent thread that appears in most Jewish literature on the topic—these Jews, while born Jewish, have now joined a new religion, notably, Christianity.

However, another reader, Michael Korman was angry that the AJN was suggesting that volunteers at Jewish Care from Celebrate Messiah “have a hidden agenda of converting elderly people away from Judaism.”<sup>129</sup> Korman argued that the article was neither factual nor balanced, and castigated the paper for not contacting the subjects of the story and integrating their side of the story. Claiming to know Louise Hirsch, Korman wrote that the purpose of the visits was not to proselytize but simply to provide the elderly with love and good will. In an evident sign of assuredness, Jennifer Morris, who identified herself as a Messianic Jew, bluntly reproached the paper, accusing it of incitement:

As a messianic Jew I am appalled by the fear mentality expressed by The AJN on the subject of messianic Jews visiting the elderly at the Smorgon Nursing Home (18/07). The headline was inflammatory and inferred that messianic Jews are undesirables. There are many aged Jewish

people in retirement homes in Melbourne. Will the community now proceed on a “witch-hunt” to purge messianic Jews from visiting their own relatives in these homes and bar them from the natural act of talking with other Jewish residents? Will the next step be to purge our presence from every community organisation? Your fear of us is unfounded and any pursuing “witch-hunt” could be viewed by history as shameful.<sup>130</sup>

Following the memorable spotlight given to his organization in the *Jewish News* in light of the Jewish Care saga, Lawrence Hirsh, Executive Director of Celebrate Messiah, again set forth his manifesto of beliefs. In a letter titled, “We Are Jews Too” Hirsh underscored his ties to the Jewish community and insisted that Messianic Judaism will not be ignored:

What is so surprising that there are messianic Jews serving in the community? Some of our parents and grandparents have been and are residents in Jewish Care. We see ourselves as part of the Jewish people worldwide. We are committed to Jewish causes, are public supporters of Israel, continue to uphold our Jewish identity and actively work against assimilation. Our faith is in the God of Israel and in the Messiah he promised in the Tanach. Some may disagree with our beliefs, but that doesn’t take away from the fact that we are still Jews in God’s eyes...I too believe that it is time for the Jewish community to come to terms with the fact that there are Jews who believe in Yeshua (Jesus) as the Messiah. We are not going away, we are here to stay. We are a growing movement worldwide and we will continue to identify ourselves as Jews whether our brethren like it or not. In today’s world, can the Jewish community really afford to isolate and

<sup>128</sup> Rabbi Eli Cohen, “Jews for Judaism,” *The Australian Jewish News* (1 August 2008): 18.

<sup>129</sup> Michael Korman, “Don’t Do Unto Others,” *The Australian Jewish News* (1 August 2008): 19.

<sup>130</sup> Jennifer Morris, “Witch Hunt,” *The Australian Jewish News* (25 July 2008): 18.

excommunicate other Jews simply on the basis of their beliefs?<sup>131</sup>

### Opposition to Celebrate Messiah by Figures in the Non-Jewish Australian Community

Resistance to Celebrate Messiah is not confined to the Jewish community. The former executive chairman of the Council of Christians and Jews, Reverend Anne Amos labeled Beit HaMashiach in 2000 as heretical and fundamentalist.<sup>132</sup> In a letter to *Crosslight* magazine, the Uniting Church's Victoria-Tasmania Synod journal, the Reverend Dr. John Bodycomb, a retired Uniting Church of Australia minister writing on behalf of the Synod Working Group on Christian-Jewish Relations in Australia broached the issue of Celebrate Messiah and the evangelizing to the Jews. Although happy to share ideas and views about issues of faith and about Jesus with those curious about the subject, Bodycomb completely rejects any attempt at evangelization. “[Sharing] is very different from trying to convince them that I am right while they are wrong, and trying to induce them to become Christian. I see that as an assault on the dignity of Jews and Judaism.” Accepting that conversions, or as he puts it “switching” from Judaism to Christianity and vice versa have always occurred, Reverend Bodycomb nevertheless reiterates his ardent opposition to missionizing, extending his censure to those who financially sustain Messianic congregations targeting Jews for conversion: “I cannot support, and I am unhappy about support being given to, evangelistic bodies that target Jews for conversion to their particular kind of Christianity.”<sup>133</sup>

<sup>131</sup> Lawrence Hirsch, “We are Jews too” in *Australian Jewish News*, July 25, 2008:17.

<sup>132</sup> Briskin, “Missionaries...”

<sup>133</sup> John Bodycomb, “How ‘Jews for Jesus’ is an Assault on Jews and Judaism,” *Crosslight* (6 November 2007): N.P.

Singling out Celebrate Messiah, which he incorrectly claims is the *Jews for Jesus* organization operating in Australia, Bodycomb writes that *Jews for Jesus* “targets Jews who are dislocated from home and culture, students, elderly and parties to interfaith marriages. It uses deceptive tactics to confuse prospective converts into thinking one can be a follower of both Judaism and Christianity at the same time.”<sup>134</sup> He ends his letter calling on members of the Uniting Church of Australia to join him in disendorsing Celebrate Messiah

In the 2008 edition of *Gesher, The Official Journal of the Council of Christians and Jews*, the United Church of Australia Assembly re-released a statement it issued two years earlier to all its state synods and constituents responding to the activities of Celebrate Messiah. In their release, the National Assembly expressed its reservations about the “evangelistic efforts being carried out by Christian groups in Victoria, under the banner Celebrate Messiah.” The statement asserts that a series of Uniting Church congregations were approached and invited to partake in the Celebrate Messiah program of evangelism, which “specifically seeks to convert members of the Jewish faith to Christianity.” While acknowledging the legitimacy of reaching out in witness to spread the gospel, Assembly President Reverend Gregor Henderson termed the “deliberate evangelistic targeting of people of other faiths” as disrespectful and lacking in integrity, and likely to produce tensions between those groups and Christians.<sup>135</sup> It is of note that the Uniting Church of Australia does not refer to Celebrate Messiah by the organization’s preferred moniker of Messianic Jews. Rather, it brands it as a Christian group which is engaged in conversion of Jews.

<sup>134</sup> Bodycomb, “How ‘Jews for Jesus’...”

<sup>135</sup> “UCA Responds to Celebrate Messiah,” *Gesher* 3, no. 5 (5 September 2008): 88.

In response, Reverend Mark Leach, Vicar of Christ Church in Hawthorn, Melbourne, who also served as Chairman of Celebrate Messiah's Australian Board of Directors, issued the following statement:

It has become common for some leaders within liberal segments of the mainline churches (Uniting, Anglican) to criticise the efforts of some to evangelise people of other faiths, especially those of a Jewish background...To say, in the name of tolerance, that followers of Jesus cannot, or should not, seek to convince others (of all faiths, or no faiths) of the truth claims of Jesus, is itself an profoundly intolerant and oppressive position...If the truth claims of Jesus are true, as we believe them to be, then it would be a failure of love, indeed a racist and anti-semitic act, to not give Jewish people the opportunity to consider these claims, and perhaps accept them as true.<sup>136</sup>

In countering the Uniting Church of Australia's criticism, Leach also reiterated Messianic Judaism's assertion that adherence to the belief that Jesus is the Jewish Messiah and the Son of God does not nullify one's Judaism, but is rather a genuine way of expressing one's Jewishness:

We believe that to become a follower of Jesus does not mean that a Jewish person has to cease being Jewish and become a "Christian." Rather we believe that following Jesus as Messiah is an authentic way of being Jewish and we encourage Jewish followers of Jesus to continue to think of themselves as Jewish and as much part of the Jewish community as they wish to be. So, for example, where anti-Semitic persecution is present, we would fully expect messianic Jewish believers to be seen

by the persecuting group as part of the Jewish population and to be persecuted with them as Jews.<sup>137</sup>

## Conclusion

Although few in number, statistically speaking, Messianic Jews are growing and becoming harder to ignore. An increasingly organized faith community, Messianic Jews have formed transplanted congregations in numerous countries and are forging ahead with national and international networks that are emphatic about their creeds and core beliefs. Specifically, the existence of this community defies established verities and illustrates the new direction that religious beliefs have taken in a post-modern environment. Moreover, Messianic Jews signal that in the study of religion a variety of religious forms often confound our expectations by transcending conventional boundaries. A linear analytical strategy may not capture the complex, often contradictory nature of this type of religious practice. Clearly, the group which resides in this essay forces scholars to reassess old theories and re-think the sharply defined divides of conventional religious forms. Messianic Judaism is not simply a taxonomic exercise, but reflects a real struggle over identity within contemporary religious consciousness, within the Jewish world and its confrontation with missionaries and within the thorny tableaux of Jewish-Christian dialogue. To be sure, Messianic Judaism is increasingly a subject-matter of tremendous tension and conflict within Israel and in Diaspora Jewish communities, and is sure to continue and evoke resentment and nervousness from its various stakeholders.

<sup>136</sup> Mark Leach. "A Response to Criticisms about Jewish Evangelism" e-mail correspondence with the author, 30 September, 2009.

<sup>137</sup> Mark Leach. "A response..".