

An Update on the Situation in Israel and Opportunities for Cooperation in Europe

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Almost four years ago, as my wife and I were preparing to move to Israel (in my case moving back to Israel) to start working with Caspari, two questions popped up in almost every conversation we had about our imminent move. First: What is the situation in Israel now? And this was, in most cases, followed by the question: Aren't you afraid?

We all know that there is probably no other place on earth that receives as much media attention as Israel. Both in the secular world and in the Christian world, Israel is a topic of much debate and controversy. Few places generate so many strong emotions as this little strip of land. And I am sure that all of us here know very well that both politically and theologically, the situation in Israel is very complex and subject to many less-than-useful simplifications, perhaps all the more so where politics and theology intersect.

It is said that the only true constant in Israeli society is change. This is in many ways very true, and for that reason any presentation of the situation will only be a partial snapshot, which will soon enough need to be adjusted. That said, in this paper I will try to give a report on recent developments, primarily within the Messianic movement in Israel. This report will be limited to my perspective on the situation. I have attempted to include as much as possible, within the timeframe given to me, but I am sure that there are people here who could supplement and expand on what I present.

From the outset I must admit that I am much less confident when it comes to the second part of the title of this paper, which deals with opportunities for cooperation. Here I must admit a certain lack of knowledge as to what cooperation already exists through the various ministries, but I will try to mention some areas that will challenge us to find creative ways of working more closely with local believers toward our joint vision of seeing more Jewish people know and follow their Messiah and seeing the body of Yeshua grow among the Jewish people in Israel, Europe, and the world. Finding new opportunities for cooperation is hopefully what we will be doing here in the coming days.

The Messianic movement in Israel – growth and challenges

The Messianic movement in Israel is growing. This much we can be fairly certain of. So, how many are there? I would not dare to give a definite answer. The estimates given range from 7,000 up to 15,000, and in some rare cases as many as 20,000. The most quoted number today is between 10,000 and 15,000. If this is the case, we are witnessing remarkable growth from a missiological perspective. In the last survey, held in 1998 (*Facts and Myths About the Messianic Congregations in Israel*), the number reached for the movement was about 5,000, including 1,400 children under 18 and about 750 non-Jews (not married to Jews).

I have difficulty believing that the numbers have tripled in the last 12 years. Personally, I believe we will be closer to the real number if we stay in the range of 7,000-10,000. However, even if

that more conservative number is true, we are still witnessing the highest growth rate in the movement's modern history in the Land. When it comes to the number of congregations, the accepted number today is about 120. This is a realistic number as far as I can tell. In any case there is a need for an updated survey, something that we at the Caspari Center hope to be able to work on in the near future. Whatever the number, we need to be encouraged by the growth that is happening. People are coming to faith, finding fellowship and a place to serve the Lord. The number of ministries involved in educational programs, evangelism, and reaching out to the poor and the marginalized in society is growing from year to year.

So, who are all these new believers? The growth seen in recent years, I believe, can be divided into three main categories: immigration, natural growth, and new believers. What the percentages of these categories are is impossible to say, but we can safely say that immigration and natural growth are the most significant of the three. These three groups also point us in the direction of three of the main challenges facing the community today: integration, education, and evangelism. How can the body work toward greater unity between believers from different cultural and theological backgrounds – embracing diversity while encouraging integration? How can we provide teaching and training which will help children and youth face the challenges of a society which often is hostile to the faith, help them stay within the community of faith as they grow up, and ultimately help them become the future leaders of the movement? How can we more effectively communicate the gospel to non-believers from all layers and strands of society in Israel and help them find a spiritual home within the congregations (and how do we deal with the opposition which follows with the proclamation of the gospel)?

To these three challenges we should add a fourth: the challenge of Messianic theology. How can the movement develop a consistent, biblically-based theology which gives a true Jewish expression of the gospel in the 21st century, not forgetting 2,000 years of church history and 4,000 years of Jewish history, and relating to the many theological challenges raised by the Jewish community in which we live and the current political situation in the region?

In the rest of this paper, I will briefly try to relate to these four areas. As with all challenges, these areas also represent great opportunities for the movement in the years ahead.

Diversity and integration

The body of Christ has always been a diverse body – all the more so in Israel. And that is one of the remarkable things about the Kingdom, that it embraces the diversity of creation. Different cultures, languages, personalities, and even theologies all have a place within the Kingdom. However, this is also a significant challenge.

First, I want to focus on cultural diversity. Israel is a country of immigrants. In that sense, the Messianic movement mirrors the society we are a part of, and we face many of the same difficulties: clashes of cultures, miscommunication, generational gaps, and so on.

The believers from immigrant backgrounds make up a significant, perhaps even dominant part of the Messianic movement today. Most would agree that the Russian-speaking segment within

the Messianic body in Israel comprises somewhere between 50 and 60% of the movement. Here I refer to immigrants from the former Soviet Union who are members of both Hebrew-speaking and Russian-speaking congregations. Whether the children of these immigrants should be included or not is a difficult question. The majority of the second generation immigrants have spent most of their lives in the country and are much more “Israeli” than their parents, but will still have a “Russian” element as part of their identity.

The Russian speaking believers belong to three different types of congregations: The largest part belongs to the many Russian-speaking congregations around the country (between 30-35 congregations and house groups). A second group belongs to Hebrew-speaking congregations that have a mixed membership of immigrants from different parts of the world and local Israelis (this includes almost all the Hebrew-speaking congregations in the country). The third group belongs to congregations that consist almost exclusively of Russian immigrants but still use Hebrew as their language of worship (Beit Hallel in Ashdod led by Pastor Israel Pochtar, and a branch of the Ohalei Rachamim congregation led by Pastor Leon Mazin).

These three groups may represent a line of development which will become more evident in the coming decade or two. It is inevitable that the Russian-speaking congregations will be challenged to use Hebrew more and more as the second generation of believers will use Hebrew as their main language. To what degree and for how long the older generation and the Russian cultural identity will withstand this challenge remains to be seen, but it is likely that some of these congregations will become Hebrew-speaking and so also open up for a more varied membership. We hope that this will bring the Russian-speaking congregations of today into closer contact and fellowship with the wider body of believers, but this will take time.

In the meantime, the Russian-speaking congregations face a situation where they are, to a certain degree, isolated from the Hebrew-speaking body. Most inter-congregational forums and educational programs are held in Hebrew.

There is a clear need for forums where Russian-speaking believers can participate also in their own language. This need is being met by the Haifa Theological Institute, Word of Life Bible School and Caspari Center, among others, in offering teaching and training programs in Russian. Also, Russian-speaking pastors have organized separate gatherings in Russian. The challenge for the whole body is to make efforts to encourage integration and cooperation across language and cultural barriers.

A smaller group of immigrant believers are the Ethiopian Jewish believers. This group is even more isolated from the rest of the body. Here the cultural differences are much more significant and the challenge of integration all the more difficult. Today there are nine Ethiopian congregations in the country. All-in-all, the group consists of between 700 and 1,000 believers; only a very few of them belong to non-Ethiopian congregations. There is very limited contact with the wider body of believers and among the congregations. Most congregations keep a low profile. They have a clear hierarchical structure, and little emphasis on education and children’s work. As a result, the generation gap becomes all the more apparent. The younger generation is

more Israeli in their culture, and they have opportunities for education and work that the parent generation – many of whom struggle to read and write – did not have. Many attempts have been made to engage more closely with the Ethiopian congregations, with varied success. There is serious concern that if nothing is done, many of the next generation will be lost to the faith.

The immigrant population within the Messianic body will play a central role in defining the future of the movement. Finding ways of overcoming cultural and language differences while maintaining and strengthening the diversity and unity of the body is perhaps the most important challenge for the future.

Education and leadership

As with the issue of integration, education is all about building for the future. With more and more children and youth growing up as second generation believers in Jesus, there is an increasing challenge in helping them attain a firm foundation in the faith.

First and foremost we need to help face the reactions of their friends and schoolmates to the fact that they, or at least their parents, are Jews who believe in Jesus. Although the numbers are growing, most children and youth are alone or in a small minority as Messianic Jews among their friends, in school, and eventually in the military and workplace. They need strong fellowship with other young believers, whether in their own congregation or from other parts of the country, and they need to be guided to a firm conviction of faith in Jesus as the Messiah.

Secondly, the need for education stems from the imperative to raise up competent and committed leadership for the future. Today, most of the pastors in the country do not have any formal theological training. Although most of them have much informal training and ministry experience, there is a great need for more fully-trained leaders in the future.

It is very encouraging to see that a number of new educational ministries and initiatives have appeared on the scene in recent years, and that many of the established ministries are growing.

Within higher education, Israel College of the Bible has for several years offered B.A. and M.A. degrees in biblical studies and counseling. A number of students have gone through the courses and are currently serving in different ministries around the country. In addition, Nazareth Evangelical Theological Seminary offers graduate and post-graduate degrees, mostly for the Arabic-speaking community.

In addition to these, there are several ministries involved in more informal leadership and theological training. Caspari Center has been offering leadership training courses for current and future leaders for a number of years, and several congregations and independent ministries have been developing leadership training programs. The Caspari Center has adjusted its “Hearts to Serve” program, and now offers more locally-targeted leadership training courses for individual congregations or groups of congregations in different parts of the country. The Word of Life Bible School provides a basic theological course for local and international students, currently with 30 students attending. A significant recent addition to this field has been the

establishment of the Haifa Theological Institute. A “Certificate in Biblical Studies”-program, is offered as a two-year modular program. This program primarily targets the Russian-speaking community in the north of Israel. In addition, an extension program for Russian-speaking Messianic believers in Germany is currently under development. The institute has about 40 regular local students and 20 students in Germany who follow the program.

Another new addition to the educational scene has been the establishment in Jerusalem last year of מכון ללימודי יהדות ומשיח – an extension of the Messianic Jewish Theological Institute in the U.S., led by Dr. Mark Kinzer.

Today there are two Messianic schools in Israel, one in Jerusalem and one in Tiberias, functioning under the auspices of the Anglican school in Jerusalem. The Jerusalem school has about 115 students in grades 1-9, and efforts are being made to obtain formal status with the educational authorities. The need for Messianic schools which offer a safe environment for Messianic children in Israel is growing, and plans are underway for schools to be established in several other cities.

A number of other teaching and discipleship programs offered to members of the congregations should be mentioned. Among them, the Caspari Center’s Shabbat school seminars, held nationally twice a year, attract between 120-150 participants, with additional smaller regional seminars. Lech Lecha offers a three month discipleship program for young believers who have finished military service, incorporating Bible teaching, hiking across the country, evangelism, and practical service in local congregations. Netivah youth ministry, led by Yoel Goldberg, organizes youth conferences and youth leader conferences for young believers all over the country. Musalaha organizes reconciliation conferences and desert encounters for young Messianic believers and Christian Palestinians. In addition, a number of ministries and congregations organize camps for children and youth during the summer and the Jewish holidays. This list could go on. The latest addition to this list is the Yuval School of Music and the Arts, a collaboration between King of Kings Assembly, HaChotam publishing and Beit Geula congregation in Jerusalem which opened this fall.

Much of this educational work is supported by the different ministries involved in publishing. HaGefen Publishing, HaChotam, Keren Achva Meshihit, Maoz, the Bible Society, and the Caspari Center provide affordable Hebrew books and materials for congregational work. In addition, ministries such as Medalion and Midor Ledor provide materials for children and children’s ministry.

As a number of new educational initiatives have emerged, a new body was established in 2009 to provide a network for cooperation between both Jewish and Arab educational ministries. The Israel Education Forum’s aim is to provide a forum for strategic development within the field of education, and to provide various practical services and consulting to the different ministries within the forum and their staff.

Opposition, openness, and evangelism

As the body of believers grows, it is also becoming more visible in Israeli society. This has had many positive consequences but also negative ones. On the positive side, many opportunities have presented themselves over the past few years to show the movement in a positive light in the media. Still, most of the articles and news segments about the movement are littered with prejudice and negative attitudes toward believers. In some cases, however – such as the Channel 2 news segment aired in 2007 featuring believers from Yad Hashmona and Shemen Sasson Congregation in Jerusalem, and the more recent interview with Asher Intrater on the *Chotse Israel* program on February 22 – believers were allowed to share what it means for a Jew to believe in Jesus and how this faith is practiced. This reflects, I believe, changing trends in attitudes toward Messianic Jews within Israeli society (these trends can be followed through the Caspari Center's Media Review). Most Israelis will still dismiss Messianic Jews as strange Jewish converts to Christianity, but more and more the believers are met with open curiosity instead of hostility.

This is not to say that hostility does not exist. Opposition against the movement, especially from extreme anti-missionary groups such as Yad L'Achim, continues. The most famous attack on believers was, of course, the bombing of the Ortiz family's home in Ariel in 2008, which left Ami Ortiz (the 15-year-old son of local Messianic congregation leader David Ortiz) seriously injured. In November 2009, Yaakov Teitel, who has claimed to be a Yad L'Achim operative, was arrested for this bombing and a number of other attacks. In December 2010 it will be decided whether he is fit to stand trial for his crimes.

Other instances of opposition include the fire bomb in the Baptist House in Jerusalem in 2007, the burning of New Testaments by the vice-mayor and a group of Yeshiva students in Or Yehuda in 2008 and the continuous harassment of congregations, leaders, and individual believers around the country. Most recently there was a case of arson against the CMA (Church and Missionary Alliance) building in Jerusalem on the night of October 29. Fortunately no one was hurt in the attack. Despite suggestion that this was an attack targeting Arab Christians, it is just as likely that it was targeting the Messianic believers who use the building. The building, until recently, housed the Israel College of the Bible and will soon house the Caspari Center. Over the past years, the opposition has been most strongly felt in the southern cities of Arad and Beer Sheva. This year, the movement followed eagerly the court case filed by the Nachalat Yeshua Congregation in Beer Sheva against the Chief Rabbi of Beer Sheva and Yad L'Achim following a demonstration and riot inside the congregation's premises on December 24, 2005. A huge crowd of orthodox protesters had gathered after rumors circulated that many Jews, including children, were to be baptized that day. The protesters stormed the premises, destroying property and attacking congregation members. The congregation sought damages or at least a public apology. After long deliberations and many postponements the congregation lost the case in court and was not only ordered to pay legal fees. They were in addition ordered to pay compensation to the defendants. In Arad the local congregation has recently been evicted from the premises they were meeting in and are now forced to gather outdoors.

The legal arena has come more into focus in the movement's struggle for recognition and acceptance in Israeli society. The Jerusalem Institute of Justice, a Messianic advocacy group, was established a few years ago and is involved in raising issues of discrimination against Messianic Jews through the legal system. Two recent cases have been the battle for the right of Messianic Jews to hold *kashrut* licenses for their businesses (after Pnina Konforty, a Messianic baker, was denied her license and after initially getting verdicts in her favor in the courts, she finally lost in the Supreme Court), and a petition from the Jerusalem Institute of Justice to the attorney general to dismantle Yad L'Achim and declare it a terrorist organization. This is partly based on revelations published in *Haaretz* last fall describing how Yad L'Achim are actively involved in doing "informal" personal investigations of individual believers. In some cases this information is then used by the Ministry of Interior to deny believers citizenship, permits, and visas. It remains to be seen what effect this petition will have.

The opposition will no doubt continue as the movement grows, and will challenge the movement to stand up for its rights and to be conscious about how it is presented and presents itself in Israeli society.

The encouraging aspect of this opposition and the attention it draws is that it generates increased interest from Israelis about who these Messianic Jews are. This opens opportunities for evangelism.

I will leave it to others to expand on this area, but will briefly mention that there are many different initiatives for evangelism in the Land right now. Jews for Jesus, the National Evangelism Committee, individual congregations and others are responsible for street evangelism campaigns. The New Age festival evangelism which has been in focus for many years is now slowing down, primarily because the festivals are losing momentum and some have been cancelled in recent years; in the remaining festivals, the participants are mostly under the age of 18, which makes direct evangelism problematic from a legal point of view.

On the other hand, other avenues for evangelism are being developed. In the last couple of years there has been a development in internet evangelism. A number of new websites have been developed to attract seeking individuals, such as: www.iGod.co.il, www.medabrim.org.il, www.xrabbi.co.il, www.newlife.org.il, and [www. הברית-החדשה.com](http://www.הברית-החדשה.com). Part of this work also aims to channel seekers who use Google and other search engines to Messianic sites and away from anti-missionary ones that present a false picture of the movement and the faith.

In a different field, David Loden has been working toward holding performances of Handel's *Messiah* in Hebrew. This spring successful concerts were held in several cities, with professional musicians participating. In addition to being a cultural event, this is a great opportunity for reaching a slightly different audience with the gospel. These concerts were so successful that a new series of concerts are planned for this coming December.

Also, the many social ministries which have emerged in recent years are taking part in sharing the gospel with the most needy and vulnerable in society.

Theology and politics

The last challenge I want to mention is a theological challenge. As Richard Harvey has pointed out in his recent book, Messianic theology is still very much a theology in the making. It is encouraging to see more and more Israeli leaders engaging in the theological arena. Doing theology is becoming more “kosher,” so to speak. Messianic theology in Israel is influenced by global theological trends, especially by Messianic theology in the U.S. However, the movement in Israel is facing different challenges than it does elsewhere, and so is developing uniquely within its context. Its theology can still be characterized as broadly conservative evangelical. Different congregations incorporate different identifiably Jewish elements. Celebrating the Jewish holidays is common across the board. Reading from “parashat hashavua” is becoming more common, but only a small minority actively makes use of rabbinic sources and traditions in their worship and theology. However, the place of Torah in the life of the believer and the possible authority of rabbinic sources are issues that will certainly be part of the theological discussion in years to come. This is obviously part of the ongoing process of defining what it is to be a Jewish believer in Jesus in Israel today – a question that has many different answers. Where is the emphasis: on the movement’s Israeli identity, on its Jewish identity (and if so which Judaism?), or on its “Christian” identity (or perhaps more appropriately its identity “in Christ”)?

The main theological issues raised in recent years have been centered on the person of Jesus, and the debates mirror the debates of the early Christian church. Is Jesus true God and true man? As a movement of Jewish believers in Jesus with roots extending back to the original Jewish followers of Jesus, the movement has, to a certain degree, taken the liberty of reevaluating some traditional Christian dogmas. This is done against the backdrop of communicating the gospel to Jewish people today, and doing so using Jewish and not Christian terms. Interestingly enough, the theological conclusions that have been reached so far are very much in line with the creeds of the early church. With more local believers engaging in theological studies, we will no doubt see dynamic development within Israeli Messianic theology in the years to come.

An ongoing challenge to Messianic theology which has become more pronounced in the last few months is that of relating to Palestinian Christian theology. The “Karios Palestine” document published in December 2009 and the “Christ at the Checkpoint” conference held by the Bethlehem Bible College have received strong reactions from within the Messianic movement. The issue in question is, of course, the role of the people and land of Israel in God’s plan for salvation, and how different understandings of these issues affect attitudes toward the political situation in the region. These differences in opinion threaten the fellowship between Messianic Jews and their Christian Palestinian brothers and sisters. There is a danger of politicizing the theology on both sides to such a degree that efforts for reconciliation and the fellowship that exists today between believers on both sides will become more and more difficult, if not impossible. If that happens we will be squandering a unique opportunity to show the world the unifying and reconciling power of the gospel. I believe the only way of dealing with this is by engaging theologically on the basis of the Scriptures with the Palestinian Christian community,

and seeking a better understanding of how our theology relates to the political events unfolding around us.

A last point on messianic theology is the perhaps strange absence of a messianic Jewish theology of mission. As mentioned there is a strong focus on evangelism, but this is almost exclusively targeted at a Jewish audience. There is today practically no theological formulation or planned practical execution of the role of messianic Jews in bringing the gospel to the nations. Hopefully this is something we will see emerging in the coming years.

Conclusion: cooperation and fellowship

Trying to sum up this mass of information, I would encourage us to rejoice about all the positive developments we see in the movement in Israel. At the same time, the challenges are ever present and we need to be aware of them as we engage in ministry in Israel.

This leads me to the area of cooperation. As the movement grows, it is clear that the believers in Israel are no longer only on the receiving end of Jewish mission. Today, most of the work done in reaching Jewish people with the gospel in Israel is done by local believers. This, I believe, gives the traditional mission societies opportunities for engaging in new ways with the movement, perhaps in more of a supporting role than a leading role in the movement. This, of course, should not limit us to sending money to Israel. I believe the body will benefit from being less dependent on outside funds, but also from a closer partnership with the mission agencies. Hopefully we can put mutual suspicion and prejudice behind us and learn from the mistakes of the past.

Being involved in educational ministry, I personally see many opportunities for cooperation. There is a clear need for specialized teaching within the community. Areas such as organizational development, management, and administration are areas in which there is a need for improvement in Israel. On the other hand, as the body in the Land is growing in maturity, there are resources in Israel which can have an important impact on the Messianic movement and the church in other parts of the world. We see this already in, for example, the training program of the Haifa Theological Institute reaching students in Germany.

Obviously there are many other fields of potential cooperation, not the least of which is evangelism. Perhaps the LCJE is a forum in which we can develop better strategies and a theology not only for evangelism to the Jewish people, but perhaps also evangelism from the Jewish people to the world.

It is my belief that the LCJE can play an important role in developing stronger international networks. The LCJE has, in the past, struggled to involve local believers in our forum in Israel. At the last LCJE gathering in Israel a few months ago, we saw some encouraging signs that this may be changing. At the end of the day it is up to us to build strong fellowship among ourselves and with the local believers in Israel, and to ask God to give us wisdom and creativity as we develop our vision and strategy for the future – always keeping in mind that ultimately we are part of what God is already doing among his people in Israel today.