

A Call From Ukraine
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Youth With A Mission

Living and working in Ukraine is a very unique and interesting experience. One reason is the incredible amount of Jewish history in the area. For example:

- Israel B. Eliezer, also known as the Ba'al Shem Tov, who is considered to be the founder of Hasidic Judaism, did so in western Ukraine.
- Every Rosh Hashana, there is a major pilgrimage by tens of thousands of Hasidim and others from around the world to the burial site of Rabbi Nachman of Breslov (a great grandson of the Baal Shem Tov) in the town of Uman, Ukraine.
- The movie "Everything Is Illuminated" about the lost Jewish city of Trochenbrod, is set in Ukraine. The location of Trochenbrod is actually about 26 KM from where we live in Lutsk.

The other reason is the lingering effects of the Holocaust, which though not always outwardly visible, are never far away. According to a report issued in 2005 by the Jewish Preservation Committee of Ukraine (JPCU):¹

- In 1939 approximately 2 million Jews lived within what now are the borders of present day Ukraine. Out of that 2 million, it is estimated that 1.4 million were killed in the Holocaust.
- There are 495 mass graves in Ukraine. (My understanding is that they have discovered a couple more since the report was issued).
- The Jews of Ukraine currently constitute the third largest Jewish community in Europe and the fifth largest in the world.

These are just a few facts to illustrate the depth of Jewish history in Ukraine and the impact that the Holocaust has had on this region. Both are significant, to say the least, and both influence the efforts of Jewish evangelism in their own way.

There are some specific factors that influence our efforts to serve and witness to the Jewish community in Ukraine:

- Anti-Semitism and replacement theology within the Christian church, both Orthodox and Protestant, is still prevalent and very much an issue that needs to be addressed. That combined with a general lack of unity between many Protestant churches handicaps any consistent witness to the Jewish community on the part of the Church.
- We understand from many sources that the Ukrainian citizens who collaborated with the Nazis were often more cruel than the Germans during the Holocaust. That gaping wound is very significant, but it is buried deep out of site.
- There are also still some for whom residual pain/memories from the Holocaust are very real issues.
- Some Jewish people will not readily admit to being Jewish and many honestly don't know.

As the Jewish-World Office in Ukraine we are focusing our efforts in three general areas:

- The first is simply serving the Jewish community directly – serving them with the love of their Messiah; preaching the gospel with deeds first. This is a slow process but we are beginning to see fruit in this area. Doors of trust open slowly, and for understandable reasons.
- The second area is reaching out to (or into) the church – working to correct the idea of replacement theology primarily, though not exclusively, through teaching on God’s covenant nature.
- The third area is our own organization, Youth With A Mission – helping YWAM, as well as the church, truly understand and lay hold of God’s heart for the Jewish people. YWAM is currently operating in more than 1,100 locations in over 180 countries, with a staff of more than 18,000 people. Like the Jewish people, we are dispersed everywhere and so are strategically placed to serve the Jewish nation. But globally we lack the proper understanding and heart. That needs to change.

During our time in Ukraine we have done a variety of things:

- We translated Don Finto’s book “Your People Shall Be My People” into Russian which has changed many lives and had great impact in the region.
- In 2006 we directed a School of Jewish Studies in Kyiv
- From that school has come a prayer house ministry in Goa India which reaches out to the many Israelis on the hippie trail, as well as educating the church concerning God’s heart for Israel.
- Also from that school emerged a Jewish Dance team in Rostov on Don Russia who use Hebraic dance, as a door to share the Gospel and teach about God’s heart for Israel. Last year they came to our town and danced for the Jewish community during their Hanukkah celebration and were very warmly received.
- We have had the opportunity to teach concerning the Jewish Roots of Christianity in YWAM Discipleship Training Schools in several places in Ukraine as well as in Finland and Belarus.
- We have worked, on a couple of occasions, with another missionary couple from Poland to clean up the Jewish mass grave and monument as well as the nearby cemetery in the small town of Torchyn. This week long project was done in cooperation with people from a few local congregations and we used the opportunity to teach about the Jewish Roots of Christianity.
- We are seeing a new and slowly growing interest in the Christian community concerning things Jewish. Interest in the feasts/festivals, Hebraic topics etc. which we have been able to expand upon. This does not really appear to be an interest by church leadership, but more a grass roots interest. It is interesting to see and we are greatly encouraged by this as we’ve been able to share in Bible studies about Purim, Passover and other topics.
- With the help of a new acquaintance, we have been able to send out several hundred of Don Finto’s book to Pastors, Messianic Rabbis and leaders around the country. From this project has already come an invitation to hold a seminar concerning the Jewish Roots of our faith for about 40 Pastors in the Poltava region of Ukraine.
- Thanks to a donation from a supporting church in America we were able to buy over 600 Star of David Bibles, the Russian version of “The Complete Jewish Bible” which we have distributed to several Messianic congregations, many individuals and other groups or organizations who in turn distributed them further.

Several years ago I read an interesting article (in the Encyclopedia of Judaism) concerning the Jewish concept of repentance. It is said that when a person commits a sin and repents of that sin, and then later has the opportunity to repeat that same sin yet does not, then, it is said, that repentance is complete. When I read that I could not help but think of Europe and Eastern Europe and the failure of the Christian Church during the Holocaust. Although there were some individuals who helped the Jews, the Church as an institution, by and large, was most often silent at best and complicit at worst.

The day I dream of is the day the Jewish people can look to the Christian Church, in an hour of need, be it great or small, and receive such an overwhelming response of love, support and solidarity that they can say concerning the Christian Church “repentance is *indeed* complete!” *That* is the day I long to see and I sincerely hope that the Christian church will quickly come to that place of love for Israel. It is for that hope that we labor, reaching out to the Jewish community with the good news of Messiah’s love written in our deeds. Striving in prayer and action to see the Church as an institution and believers as individuals truly lay hold of Gods heart for Israel and obtain an understanding of God’s intent for Jewish/Gentile relations. May our repentance soon be complete in Ukraine and in the entire world.

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¹ JEWISH CEMETERIES, SYNAGOGUES, AND MASS GRAVE SITES IN UKRAINE; United States Commission for the Preservation of America’s Heritage Abroad 2005.