

Proclamation Evangelism in Israel

Dan Sered, Chief of Station, Jesus for Jesus, Israel

The Problem

In 2008, Jews for Jesus hired a secular survey company to investigate the average Israeli's knowledge and feelings about our Messiah. Here are some disturbing results from this survey: only 8% of Israelis know Jesus' real Hebrew name, Y'shua; only 5% of Israelis know that Jesus rose from the dead, and only 1% of Israelis know that Jesus' central message was salvation. These numbers alone should be a wake-up call to everyone who is involved in Jewish evangelism. Today, I think that we need to understand that we have not yet succeeded in communicating the Gospel effectively to the majority in the land of Israel, nor have we had a significant impact on the culture. I think that most will agree with this statement: nearly all Jewish people in Israel are unreached with the Gospel.

Historical encouragement

When thinking of the body of Messiah in the land today, many have the impression that it is a success story that other countries can learn from. There may be some truth in that impression. If you ask any believer who lived in Israel in the 70's and 80's they would tell you that back then, all of the believers pretty much knew each other. They would say that maybe there were 500 Jewish believers in the land. Today, it is hard to know how many Jewish believers live in Israel. In "Facts & Myths about the Messianic congregations in Israel" which was published in 1999, authors Kai Kjær-Hansen and Bodil F. Skjøtt report less than 3,000 Jewish believers living in the land (see page 70). That was eleven years ago. Today, most Israeli believers say that there are about 10,000 Jewish believers living in Israel. A more conservative estimate would indicate about 5,000 Jewish believers living in Israel today. While general agreement on numbers may not be achievable, the fact remains that in 20 or 30 years the number of Jewish believers in Israel has increased significantly.

Credit should be given to the previous generation of believers that settled in Israel. At great sacrifice and with little help they were faithful to sow the seeds of the gospel and that work has borne fruit. Back in the 70's and 80's the number of Messianic congregations was only a handful, where today it is more than 100. There is not a city in Israel without a local congregation; most cities have more than one. Not to mention the many different evangelistic print ministries, like the Bible Society, Keren Achva and HaGefen ministry who today continue to produce and supply the Body of Messiah in Israel with new evangelistic literature. The growth that the body in Israel has experienced over the years is truly something to be thankful for and it is due to the labor of our brothers and sisters, some of which are here with us today. We need to learn from these dedicated servants who today are handing the baton to us, the next generation of Jewish believers in Israel.

Good foundations have been laid by the past generations and now we have the opportunity to affect and change Israel.

What is currently being done?

I want to mention some efforts in several areas of proclamation evangelism already happening today; internet, new-age festivals and evangelistic campaigns.

Campus Crusade has taken the internet and have developed many creative evangelistic web sites each geared to different populations. Under the leadership of Eitan Bar, Google ads are used on a regular basis. Israelis who are on line and who are searching for anything messianic have many opportunities to hear the Gospel.

The New Age festivals today are not what they used to be, but while they were big events the presence of believers were felt. If anything these festivals proved to us that we can co-operate and preach the Gospel side by side in different ways using different strategies. These festivals are now very small and are mainly geared towards minors which make evangelism there difficult. The National Evangelism committee under the leadership of Garry Denlinger continues to do outreaches there and to proclaim the Gospel.

IRRTV, a Finnish ministry, in the past three years gave significant amounts of funds to conduct media campaigns in Israel. The last campaign was in 2009 and it was named: "changed life". In the spring, IRRTV in corporation with several local congregations and ministries launched this "changed life" campaign to the Russian and Arabic speaking populations in Israel and then in the fall they did the same in the Hebrew language. While the spring campaign was only in areas where Russian and Arabic speakers live, the fall campaign was national. Call centers were established and believers were recruited to answer the phones to gather names and addresses of people who were interested in receiving the free booklet. This booklet was produced by HaGefen ministry in all 3 languages. The Hebrew campaign is the one that we at Jews for Jesus were involved in. The phone center for the Tel Aviv and Jerusalem region ads rang in our office. There was another phone center in Haifa which was managed by Carmel Assembly congregation. In total this campaign resulted in over 1,000 book orders. Jerusalem assembly gave out and followed up on the contacts in the Jerusalem region, Carmel Assembly dealt with contacts in the north and HaGefen and Jews for Jesus followed up on contacts in the center of Israel.

Jews for Jesus has reached its mid-point in our Behold Your God Israel outreach. Behold Your God Israel is our commitment to conduct evangelistic campaign in each region in Israel. We have completed six such campaigns and the results are encouraging. One hundred and forty Israelis have prayed to receive the Lord and we know that fourteen of these are grounded in local congregations. This year, 2011, we decided to strategically take as a year where we do not conduct any campaigns and our efforts have been entirely concentrated on follow up, calling the 7,000 Israelis on our data base who expressed interest in finding more about Jesus.

If anything, all these efforts and I am sure that there are others I have missed show us that evangelism in Israel is possible. It is not easy to do proclamation evangelism but these encourage us and should also inspire us.

What needs to be done now within Israel?

With congregations in every city, representing believers throughout the land, we need to ask ourselves what we can do to continue the good work that has been done in the past? Why is Y'shua still known as Yeshu in Israel? Why are most Israelis unreached with the Gospel? Why isn't the New Testament available in every library and bookstore in Israel?

I believe what is most urgently needed is a resurgence of proclamation evangelism. By proclamation evangelism I mean public, vocal, unashamed declaration of our faith—doing so in every single venue that is open to us: the media, the internet, in the malls, on the streets and on the phones. Wherever there are people we need to be there, sharing the Gospel message with them.

I believe that one of the reasons for the growth that the body in Israel has experienced from the past is that proclamation evangelism was more broadly a part of what the body of Messiah in Israel was engaged in. Campaigns were conducted on a semi-annual basis. Garry Denlinger and Yacov Damkani report that these campaigns were events when believers would get together and not only fellowship, but actually go out on to the streets and preach the Gospel. Yet this commitment has waned in recent years. The body needs to go back to what we used to do.

We won't affect change in Israeli culture if we, as ambassadors of the Gospel, are not visible, audible and courageous to make the name of Messiah more widely known. Therefore, I now want to speak to two distinct groups that are present here today: namely those of us who live and serve in Israel and those of us who reside outside of Israel. We are all here because we believe in Jewish evangelism; we all want to share our faith with Jewish people.

For us who live in Israel

We need to go back to the basics. We need to go back to what Y'shua commanded us. “Go therefore and make disciples” (Matthew 28:19). We can easily spend more time attending conferences than sharing the Gospel. Conferences are good but not if they replace the active sharing of the gospel, Israel's greatest need. We need to re-order our priorities. One of the ways to affect change is to share our faith one on one. I am convinced that if every believer in the land would share his or her faith, Yeshu would be known as Y'shua and more Israelis would be reached for Jesus.

At one point there was an attempt to coordinate the various outreaches through a National Evangelism Committee. Unfortunately coordinating became controlling and many younger zealous Israeli's became discouraged and gave up. We may need a new and younger group of leaders who will cast an evangelistic vision for the body that is compelling and encourages all who are zealous for the Gospel to cooperate together.

With us today sit many leaders of Israel's believing community. What can we do to inspire our own congregations and help coordinate efforts of those especially gifted to join together across the various groups to draw strength from one another and encourage each other to boldness in proclamation of the Gospel in Israel? When we leaders make it to the shores of heaven, Y'shua is going to call us into accountability. We all need to encourage the people we lead—even insist—that they share the Gospel on a daily basis with the people around them, no matter what the cost. We need to exhibit this in our own lives and encourage the people that we lead to follow our example. We need to strategize together to build renewed enthusiasm, especially among the younger generation of Israeli's.

For those who live outside of Israel

As I travel around, the number one theme that I hear from believers is the desire to bless Israel. That is not a surprise in light of what the Bible says: “I will bless those who bless you...” I hope that we can all agree that the best blessing is knowing Jesus. Certainly that is the best blessing in my life. Why then aren’t most resources from abroad spent to bless Israel with the best blessing: bringing Jesus to the nation of Israel?

Sitting here are representatives and leaders of ministries who are committed to bringing the Gospel to Jewish people. We need to unify our efforts and share our resources to bring the Gospel to the nation of Israel. By bringing the Gospel I do not mean feeding the poor in Israel. Y’shua said the poor you will always have with you. I do not mean clothing the poor or providing medicines. I don’t mean relocating Jews from Russia. By sharing the Gospel I do not mean establishing congregations or doing a conference, bringing a great speaker and inviting the body. All of these are important and will definitely be a blessing, but that is not what I mean by bringing the Gospel.

What I mean by bringing the Gospel is sending your staff to come to Israel to share the Gospel with people for both the short and long term. Bringing the Gospel means that we need to invest our funds and efforts in reaching the lost with spiritual food. Bringing the Gospel means that we invest in locals who are engaged in proclamation evangelism and that we keep our staff in Israel accountable to sharing their faith.

Conclusion

Jesus said: “the harvest is plentiful but the workers are few” (Matthew 9:37). The harvest in Israel is indeed plentiful and we indeed need more workers. But here is my point: we are those workers and if we are honest with ourselves, we have not done enough to reach our people in the land. As a result most Israelis who die, do so without even an opportunity to believe in Jesus. We have failed and now is the time to change that and to join together to bring the Gospel to the masses in Israel. I hope and pray that at this LCJE international conference and especially today when we concentrate our attention on the state of Israel, that we can begin working towards key alliances and partnerships to proclaim the Gospel in Israel.

Dan Sered
dan.sered@jewsforjesus.org