

The Apostolic Messenger: Less Than a Saint

Tuvya Zaretsky, Dir. Staff Training, Jews for Jesus

Not that we are adequate in ourselves to consider anything as coming from ourselves, but our adequacy is from God, who also made us adequate as servants of the New Covenant... (II Corinthians 3:5-6)

Less Than a Saint

Ruth A. Tucker, author, historian and missiologist wrote *Not Ashamed: The Story of Jews for Jesus* in 1999. She was committed to produce an accurate portrayal of the individuals, adventures and strategies that characterized the first 25 years of the mission. In the Foreword to the book, she confessed a personal fear of hers that Moishe Rosen by sheer force of his personality might interfere with the integrity of the project. That concern proved to be unfounded. Her explanation of what changed her mind is instructive.

I was concerned that he might want to put his own spin on my work and turn it into just another exaggerated Protestant hagiography. I quickly discovered that Moishe's intent was the exact opposite, and I never doubted for a moment that he was for real.¹

Moishe had an opinion about almost everything. That was especially true when it came to what makes a good missionary to the Jewish people. If I learned anything from observing his life or hearing his lessons, it was that God is pleased to use ordinary people in the extraordinary work of Jewish evangelism. For that I am truly grateful and frankly relieved.

Moishe knew the purpose of hyperbole, *exaggeration*, and meiosis, *understatement*, as communicative tools within evangelistic literature in order to better grab the hearers' attention. However, when it came to the messengers of the gospel he was sure to remind us that we are all less than saints.

Perhaps you share my appreciation for Jewish mission history reports that are presented at our LCJE conferences. The best accounts are the ones about a real person, a *mensch*. Their story is often one of inspirational faith set against the genuineness of imperfect humanity. It is actually a blessing to hear one of the great reformers and Pietist, Philipp Jakob Spener, described as an ardent philo-Semite, an astute scholar and also "one lacking in courage and energy." German historian David Dowdey credits him as being one of the earliest promoters of modern Jewish missions in the 17th Century, in spite of the "limiting factors" in his personality.²

We can take encouragement from the pathos and humanity that emerges in the testimony and ministry of Joseph Rabinowitz. Kai Kjær-Hansen describes him as a visionary, a Zionist and the founder of a pioneering Messianic congregation in Kishinev at the end of the 19th Century. Yet, we also read of the challenges that surfaced with Rabinowitz family members and even ecclesiological misunderstandings among his denominational mentors.³ Quite obviously God is pleased to use ordinary people in accomplishing the extraordinary work of Jewish evangelism.

We can take comfort that God seems satisfied to employ ordinary people, not the spiritual elite, to do the work of an evangelist. Workers in the gospel do not need to be *spiritual astronauts* in the field of Jewish evangelism. We may go where others fear to minister in order to reach Jews

for Jesus' sake, but that isn't because we possess super-powers. Every follower of Y'shua is called to be a witness: in the sense of a loving duty drawn from the Greek term *martus*, "martyr."

One of Moishe's many aphorisms was, "the church isn't a country club for saints, but a hospital for sinners."⁴ I figure those of us who have made it through the rehab process are fit for service in the field.

A realistic assessment of ourselves will usually bring us to repentance; and repentance turns our hearts toward righteousness, which is where God meets us in our deepest need. Honest self-assessment brings us to join those who mourn in Zion. The Lord has promised such people that He will bless them with "a garland instead of ashes, the oil of gladness instead of mourning" ...so that He may establish His holy ones..."⁵ and in that manner He may be glorified."

The ordinary servant is called to make disciples of all nations (Matthew 28:19-20). If we are all to engage in bringing the whole gospel to the whole world, including the Jewish people, we need to be about that work just as we are, with the means that God has provided in the fullness of His sufficiency. He is pleased to use ordinary people in the extraordinary work of Jewish evangelism.

The Message is Not the Messenger

If we are honest a common misconception in our field is to assume that the acceptance of our message depends on the worthiness of the messenger. Perhaps you have struggled with the same interaction that I have at times. I'll be engaged in a conversation with a Jewish seeker. I want to tell him the good news. But his derisive attitude and a series of questions derail the conversation.

Q: Are you Jewish?	<i>Yes</i>
Q: Is your mother Jewish?	<i>Yes!</i>
Q: Is your father Jewish?	<i>Yes!!</i>
Q: Did you make Bar Mitzvah?	<i>(Sigh) Yes...</i>
Q: What kind of synagogue?	<i>Reformed</i>
Q: Ahah! No wonder you believe in Jesus!	

Some of you knew our colleague Rachmiel Frydland. He shared a testimony about a similar and all too frequent experience. If you didn't know him, Rachmiel was a Polish Jew gifted with an incredible mind and a phenomenal memory. His Jewish education included the Jewish Yeshiva in Chelm and the Rabbinical Academy of Warsaw. In the midst of the Holocaust, he came to faith in Christ. His life was dedicated to telling other Jews about Y'shua. This humble scholar, fierce witness and dedicated family man trained many of my generation and the one preceding. With such impeccable credentials, he occasionally encountered the same Jewish skepticism:

Q: Are you Jewish?	<i>Yes</i>
Q: Is your mother Jewish?	<i>Yes</i>

Finally, an enquirer asked him, "So what kind of Jewish education do you have." Rachmiel would explain his background without pride or boasting. I was dumbfounded to hear a Jewish student at Queens College actually say, "And with THAT kind of Jewish education, you still have the *chutzpah* to believe in Jesus?"

Our worthiness does not determine the truth of the message. It is not about us. I think of our colleague, Avi Snyder, who framed the argument best when he wrote a tract with the title, “Okay, Okay, so I’m Ugly and My Mother Dresses Me Funny...” This discussion isn’t about us. It is not about our piety or our spirituality; it is not about our education or our Jewishness. Again the focus of our message is the gospel.

I appreciate what Stanley Hauerwas said when *TIME* Magazine in 2001 named him “America’s Best Theologian.” He responded, “‘Best’ is not a theological category.”⁶

The gospel is the message. I don’t think we improve on it by pursuing Jewish education, traditional religious piety or a diet of any kind. God seems quite pleased to use very ordinary workers to accomplish what He desires. Why else would He have included the story of Gideon and his overmatched band in the Bible? The Lord’s message through Gideon is simple and repeated elsewhere in Scripture, “Trust in the Lord with all your heart and do not lean on your own understanding. In all your ways acknowledge Him, and He will make your paths straight.”⁷ We do not need to be “the best,” the brightest or the most pious – and the gospel will take care of itself.

The Messenger is the Message

Wait a minute? Isn’t that a contradiction to what I just said? Actually, I said that the message is not the messenger. However, communication theorists do tell us that the messenger is often the message as the hearer comes to understand it.

The content of the gospel message is fixed. The message given to us is that “...Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, and that He was buried, and that He rose again the third day according to the Scriptures.”⁸ That does not change. However, the personality, the social group or even the psychological mindset of the messenger can effect how that message is heard throughout the communication process.

Forget about being a saint. Forget about being the *ideal* missionary model. Instead, think about how you come across if you are Jewish or a Gentile. How does your education or vocabulary influence the way you present the message to the hearer? How does any of that shape what people hear in the gospel message? Missiologist Donald K. Smith put it this way, “The communicator is a container, and the container inevitably shapes the message.”⁹

Smith illustrates his point by asking, “What shape is water?” Well, that depends on the container, doesn’t it? Is it in a lake or a river, in a pitcher or a bottle? Our message is clear and it is fixed. We are not trying to say new things, just something that others can hear. The orientation of that process is all about the hearer, their ethnicity, their culture, and their cultural signal system. And so it is our responsibility to shape the message to their values and in a way that they can appreciate the truth leading to eternal life.

A Jewish music producer, musician, songwriter and committed practitioner of a 12-step recovery program in Los Angeles has been teaching me this in a new way. As he puts it, “I want to go to the next level with God, and I think Jesus might be a key.” As a classic post-modern, he has not

wanted to read the Bible but starts our discussions from his own subjective perspective of experiences.

Recently, in response to a question, I described for him my awareness of alienation from God. He responded with intensity asking, “Why is that? Why are we alienated from God?” I thought for a moment, and then did my best to give an honest answer, “My selfishness.” He could identify with that and somehow it helped him understand. Though I felt vulnerable, I knew I had to be transparent and honest with him. That actually made him want to know more about why *he* was separated from God. Since he wasn’t ready for the Bible, and didn’t have a Christian vocabulary I didn’t use the word “sin.” As a result of that conversation, he is now reading the Bible to learn more from God. He is asking the Lord to help him find the remedy for that sense of separation.

The gospel message is just fine on its own. It doesn’t need to be fixed by the saints. However, we who communicate it do need to be aware of how we might be shaping what we are communicating to hearers of the apostolic message.

Paul made perfect missiological sense when he wrote, “To the Jews I became as a Jew, so that I might win Jews...I have become all things to all *men*, that I might by all means save some.”¹⁰ We don’t need to argue among ourselves over the most *authentically Jewish* method for presenting the gospel. There is a place for discussion of Jewishness in evangelistic strategy. It is most likely in discerning some of the subjective cultural preferences of the hearer. But we must be honest with people that the power of the gospel stands on its own apart from our personality, piety or psychological state.

If the communicator is the container of the message, then we have to be sensitive to how we come across or even how we feel when engaged in personal dialogue. Jack Hayford in “Character Before Communication” described his internal self-inventory as a “clay jar” through which the gospel light shines.

He had been invited to tape a series of broadcasts at a television studio. He arrived early, was made up and had been ready to go for an hour. He found himself sitting on the set, his temper starting to boil. He described how in his spirit he was being assaulted with conviction. To himself he said,

How dare you even think of using your authority over these people to intimidate or incriminate them, as though they were chattel merely salaried to serve your exalted eminence? How can you even think of taping this teaching in Ephesians 1 without, at this very moment, living out the acceptance and grace that it reveals?

And when it was all over, I’ll be tempted to smile with sickening magnanimity (presumably undetected as superficial by the interviewer and his cameramen) only to be broadsided by the Spirit of God.

Hayford recognized through this inner conviction that he was painfully aware of his undisciplined spirit at the moment, indulging itself in anger, pride and pettiness – all of it activity that was absent the Spirit of Christ.¹¹ Through that inventory he saw what he might therefore minister in addition to the words of the Bible through his personality and emotional state. That is an example of the messenger's effect on the message.

The power and efficacy of the apostolic message does not ultimately depend on the piety of the messenger. Rather as the container we bear a responsibility for how we might distort or even obscure it. Our goal is to do everything possible to get out of the way of the message. Yet we are participants in the gospel ministry in that "...we have this treasure in earthen vessels, so that the surpassing greatness of the power will be of God and not from ourselves."¹²

He chose "the foolish things of the world to shame the wise, and...the weak things of the world to shame...the strong...so that He may nullify the things that are, so that no man may boast before God."¹³ Therefore, I say we are free to be less than saints, because our adequacy for the task is not from ourselves. Our adequacy is from God. And He seems to be quite pleased to use ordinary people like us in the extraordinary work of Jewish evangelism.

Tuvia Zaretsky
Tuvia.Zaretsky@JewsforJesus.org

¹ Tucker, Ruth A. *Not Ashamed: The Story of Jews for Jesus*. (Oregon: Multnomah Publishers) 1999, P. 12

² Dowdey, David. "The Early Pietistic Movements' Contribution to Jewish Evangelism" in *Jesus, Salvation and the Jewish People*, David Parker ed. (London: Paternoster) 2011. P. 124

³ Kjør-Hansen, Kai. *Joseph Rabinowitz and the Messianic Movement: The Herzl of Jewish Christianity*. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans) 1995

⁴ Rosen, Moishe. *Sayings of Chairman Moishe* (Carol Stream, IL: Creation House) 1974. PP. 22-23

⁵ Isaiah 61:3

⁶ Elshtain, Jean B. "Theologian: Christian Contrarian," *TIME Magazine* online edition, 17 September 2001

⁷ Proverbs 3:5&6

⁸ I Cor. 15: 3b-4

⁹ Smith, Donald K. *Creating Understanding* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing) 1992. P. 105

¹⁰ I Corinthians 9:20, 22b

¹¹ Smith, P. 114

¹² II Corinthians 4:7

¹³ I Corinthians 1:27-29