

# "Jewish Evangelism among youth in Europe"

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## **Introduction**

A young man came up to me after a meeting at a Christian high school in Norway saying: "I've been wondering lately – Why should we believers bother about Israel? You see, there are quite a few Christians (mostly elderly people) who are mentioning Israel all the time when praying, but I don't see the point. Am I missing out on something?"

Generally speaking there's not much involvement to trace among young Christians in Norway related to Israel as God's chosen people, and Israel's place in God's plan for salvation. I doubt its plain ignorance, but for some reason the whole issue of Israel is being held at a comfortable distance among the youth. When it comes to Jewish Evangelism it seems like it's not even on their radar screen... This of course is a challenge for an organization with such a nature as of the Norwegian Church Ministry to Israel.

## **Background**

Throughout the last years we have gradually experienced a significant revitalization. With the launch of our youth movement named return2sender (R2S) four years ago, our vision is to see young people engaged in bringing the Gospel to the Jewish people. R2S is basically a network of young Norwegian believers from different backgrounds and contexts who share the same vision: Bringing back the Gospel to the people that once gave it to us.

Beside volunteer programs in Israel and different conferences and events in Norway, one of the more exciting things we have been involved in during the last years is sending teams consisting of 4-8 young adults who take part in evangelism campaigns carried out under the leadership of local believers in Israel. For the team members, and for our organization, this has given hands-on experiences from the field of Jewish evangelism among youth in Israel.

## **New Age**

One of the contexts that we have been doing evangelism within is the emerging New Age scene in Israel. Since 1997 a trend has been sweeping the land as a result of the hundreds of thousands of Israelis who have travelled in India and the Far East since the late 1980's. The Indian experience has profoundly affected a large number of these young people who, upon their return, desired to recreate the ambiance of India in Israel. It was this desire that birthed the New Age Festival movement in Israel. (Lisa Loden / Mishkan #38)

These festivals has been "the place to be" for those who are not mainstream, and those opposing to the ruling establishment. Three of the festivals are held throughout Israel during the biblical feasts of Pesach (Boombamela), Shavuot (Shantipi) and Sukkot (BeReshit). For about three days these alternative festivals draw teenagers and twenty-something who come and camp out by the thousands. The festivals described by the organizers as a place for meeting, experiencing, crossing borders and transcending social limitations through music, creation, and connection with nature.

The majority of the New Age festival goers in Israel today aren't hard core New Agers or hippies. Some are in the army, others at university; many are teens still living at home with their parents. Most Israelis can't see any negative spiritual implications in opening themselves up to New Age experiences. Some are truly seeking; for others the festivals are just "harmless

fun". (Janice Voth / Mishkan #46)

The sheer fact of the numbers attending these festivals is indicative of the impact they are making on young Israelis, and the Israeli society at large. The Jewish holidays have become prime time for a New Age spirituality and the New Age festival scene in Israel has become a sizable and significant subculture.

### **Evangelistic efforts**

The response of Israel's Messianic community to this phenomenon was slow in coming, but after some years more and more outreach teams have been present at the festivals. Both Messianic and non-Jewish believers has camped out and participated in various forms of friendship and contextual evangelism, but also more direct methods.

The spirit of these festivals, at least it used to be, a spirit of really openness and freedom to believe what you want and share what you want. This gave a unique opportunity for believers to have deep heart-to-heart conversations with young people; many of them open to the truth. God also opened doors and gave favour with festival organizers, who didn't have problems with New Testaments and other Messianic literature distributed at these festivals.

I believe there was a peak about 5-6 years ago, both in the popularity of these New Age festivals, attracting up to 40-50.000 visitors, but also when it comes to the quantify of evangelistic efforts done within this context. The National Evangelism Committee, together with several congregations and organizations such as Operation Mobilization and Jews For Jesus all had their successful outreaches.

Since then there has been a noteworthy shift and many will agree that the golden age for the New Age Scene in Israel is over for sure. The annual festivals struggle with decreasing interests and some have even been shut down. Festivals also attract a younger crowd, a factor that complicates Evangelistic efforts. Extreme orthodox groups like Yad L'Achim started to occasionally harass Messianic believers and lobby for their removal from the festivals. This opposition has increased and the orthodox have employed all kinds of tactics to shut down different groups from having booths at the festivals. A low key approach is still a possibility, but it is a challenge not being targeted.

Along with this growing opposition there has also been a tension within the messianic believers who has different point of views on what's the best method to approach the context.

Tree weeks ago, on Chol HaMoed Pesach (Intermediate Days of Passover), we had 4 young Norwegians joining an outreach at this years Boombamela festival. Here is a report written by the leader of the campaign:

"Every Passover, for 12 years now, there is a large New Age festival on the beaches of the Mediterranean. The Boombamela festival is a chance for young Israelis to escape reality for a few days, listen to music, and learn about the New Age. This year there were about 20.000 kids camped out on the beach for 3 days. In the past we were able to have booths at the festival where we could openly share our faith. This is the third year now we have not been able to officially participate in the festival due to pressure from the Orthodox community.

One Orthodox Jewish group was able to openly proclaim their Rabbi as the Messiah. A Hindu group was free to invite thousands of people into their worship services and feed them food

sacrificed to their gods. Just about every idea was tolerated at the festival, while the proclamation of Jesus as Messiah and king of Israel was prohibited.

There were large groups of Orthodox Jews at the festival who opposed our work by sending young Orthodox women to sit outside our camp and follow us as we went out to talk to people. Although they generally refused to speak with us directly, many of these girls heard the Gospel as we shared. The women would try to take away New Testaments and warn people not to listen to us. Thankfully they did not find our camp for almost two days, and even after they did we found ways to avoid being constantly followed. At one point even the organizers of the festival also threatened to throw us out of the festival grounds because the Orthodox were complaining about us.

Despite their opposition, we found many people who were very open. Often we were invited to eat with the people we met and were able to answer questions about Jesus. All together we were about 60 people and were able to speak with hundreds of people and distribute thousands of Gospels and New Testaments. There is still an incredible interest in the Gospel in Israel. Please pray the door remains open for the Word to go out.”

I personally took part in an outreach at the Boombamela festival during Pesach in 2008. We encountered some serious opposition from Yad L’Achim who had recruited zealous followers to hinder our work. The same year we also had a Norwegian movie maker with us on our team. On a very low budget he produced the DVD *Anything but Yeshua* – an honest and plain documentary film about spirituality, youth culture, resistance and passion.

One of our team members that year summed up our experience this way: “It’s quite challenging and hard in many ways, but at the same time, in the team and in our camp, everyone seems to agree that, if nothing else, it is a sign that we are doing something right. Here at the festival, there are workshops in all kind of different spiritual disciplines, but the orthodox doesn’t care much about them. However, they seem to fear us, a small group among 40.000....”

### **Reflections**

It is a real challenge to come for a three days festival. Young believers from Europe need time to get accustomed to totally new surroundings. Could it be that a short campaign in such a setting becomes an experience rather than an opportunity to share deeply with people? You are asking much from a group that is trying to acclimate to totally new surroundings, and it takes time till people really get into the groove of approaching total strangers.

I believe we can learn from our experiences so far, and actively search for the new arenas that are suitable for upcoming outreaches to reach young Israelis. We need to be adjustable and willing to enter new contexts that are open for the gospel, even where there is opposition. Weighing the pros and cons will allow us to consider different aspects of the opportunities that the future holds for us in Jewish evangelism.

Attitudes in Israeli society are also shifting. New Age is becoming Mainstream. Many Christians abroad support and pray for Israel, but they have an unformed idea of who Israelis are. As gentile believers in the Messiah, we should bother about Israel. We should care for the Jews and reach out with the good news for the lost. Israel is more than a parameter in Gods universal salvation plan. It’s about people really; People who are lost without Yeshua. Instead of meeting the truth, a majority of young Israelis are exposed to ideas that are

opposing the word of God. Involvement in Jewish evangelism is actively facing this challenge. We have the message for the young generation; a message deeply rooted in the Jewish faith. It is our hope and prayer that this message also will help the young generation of Christians in Europe to see their responsibility for the Jewish people. "The Truth will set you free!" For the gospel, and Jewish evangelism, the challenge is immense – as is the opportunity.

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