

A Jewish Believers Life in the Church

By Edith Sher

My topic is “A Jewish Believer’s life in the Church.” You might wonder what this has to do with evangelism, but it falls into the category of post-evangelism, of establishing the Jewish believer in the Body of Messiah. Let me say at the outset that this obviously is going to be very subjective. My experiences aren’t representative of every Jewish believer – but perhaps as I share some highlights and lowlights of those experiences, it might help you understand some of the struggles Jewish believers can face – as well as sharing some of the joys because most of my life in the Church has been great. What I’m going to do over the next half hour is just touch on some of the markers along the way that impacted me as a Jewish person.

Let me start by saying something about the year 1976. Back in 1976 in South Africa there were no personal computers, no rap music, but that’s got nothing to do with anything because what *is* pertinent is that back in 1976 in South Africa, there was no Messianic movement. Back in 1976 in the church there were no seminars on how to witness to your Jewish friends and acquaintances. Why am I focusing on 1976? Because that’s the year I got saved.

I’m not going to tell you how I came to faith in Jesus. Suffice to say that it centred around three things: the first of which was relationship. The Gentile friends whom God used to witness to me were people with whom I already had a friendship, and the second and very important thing was that they had the sensitivity to affirm to me God’s covenant relationship with the Jewish people. I’m not at all sure that I would have received the Gospel from people who were into supersessionism, otherwise known as replacement theology.

The other thing that marked these Gentile believers who witnessed to me is that they walked the talk. There was no contradiction between what they preached and how they lived. For someone like me who’d been raised to have all the usual Jewish misconceptions and prejudices about Jesus and about Christians, this couple showed me the true face of my Messiah. So whatever they lacked in terms of knowledge about the right way to witness to a Jewish person was offset by the strength of our relationship and by the way they lived their lives. They did what *Rom. 11:11* speaks of. They provoked me to jealousy and I thank God for them. Let me say at this point, you might one day be involved in street outreach or have a chance encounter with a Jewish person and you might not have the time and opportunity to build a relationship with them or show them that you’re walking the talk. All the more reason that you learn now to be culturally sensitive so that you can make the most of the opportunity when it arrives. And even if you *do* have a solid relationship with your Jewish friend, strengthen that by understanding where they’re coming from and implementing the things you’ve learned today.

When I did eventually commit my life to Jesus, I was overwhelmed by him. His presence was so real to me. I asked myself, ‘How could I have been so blind?’ From that point on, it was just like the Bible said. All things were made new. Just one example, God delivered me from my 40 cigarette a day addiction as I was lighting up a cigarette. I was so hooked on nicotine, the only thing I didn’t do was eat the box. But in an instant, God delivered me.

It was a time of spiritual revival in South Africa, part of which was the charismatic renewal in the historical denominations. If I can put it this way, the supernatural was a natural part of what was happening in the church at the time. Or should I say, *my* experience of church. The people God surrounded me with were all Pentecostals and, as mentioned, it was a time of spiritual revival. There were different meetings to go to every night. In fact, at that time there was a rhyme doing the rounds: “Mary had a little lamb, it never became a sheep. It became a Pentecostal and died for lack of sleep.”

Because of all that was going on around me and the exciting things I was experiencing, I didn't pay much heed to where I fitted into the scheme of things as a Jew. I was simply part of the Church, a Christian. And what's more I was part of a church that understood the place of Israel. In my naïveté and lack of knowledge I thought that was true of the whole Church. More of that in a moment.

I believe that nothing in the life of a follower of Jesus happens by chance. God is intimately involved in the details of our lives and so the experiences I had were (I believe) ordained by him for his purposes. He orders our circumstances in order to shape us into the people he's called us to be. Even though I said earlier that in those early days I didn't focus much on my Jewishness, I nevertheless felt a certain loneliness. Even though I was part of a wonderful church and was enjoying life in the Spirit, I thought I was the only Jew on the planet who believed in Jesus. I think that *is* representative of many Jewish believers who've been led to the Lord by Gentile Christians and who've been steered into a predominantly, if not exclusively, Gentile congregation. I hadn't met any other Jewish believers or been introduced to any.

But the God who is involved in the details of our lives brought other Jewish believers into my life, one of whom, by the way, was a very young Dr David Bloch. Don't misunderstand me. I am incredibly blessed by my Gentile Christian friends but we Jews have some unique struggles that only another Jew can really understand. Women have issues that men can't fully appreciate and vice versa. That's why there are sometimes seminars and weekend retreats geared for women only or for men only. In this way we can support one another in the struggles unique to each group.

Therefore, if you're a Gentile Christian and God uses you to lead a Jewish person to the Lord, may I encourage you to introduce him or her to other Jewish believers fairly early on.

Another thing that prodded at this lurking loneliness was the Church's attitude to Torah. I was still a very new believer when I heard a minister pray during a Sunday morning service. His prayer went like this: “Lord, I thank you for the free gift of salvation. I'm so glad I don't have to keep 613 commandments to earn it.” Now believe me, I'm also glad for the free gift of salvation. But I suddenly felt as if someone had kicked me in the stomach. The minister was of course alluding to the Jewish teaching that there are 613 commandments in the Hebrew Scriptures. But it wasn't so much what he said as the way he said it. His voice was filled with contempt, with a sneering superiority. Let me hasten to say that what I heard was not anti-semitism but ignorance.

I don't want you to get the wrong impression about me. I was not an observant Jew. However, in his book, "Restoring the Jewishness of the Gospel," Dr David Stern says that even though a Jewish person might be quite secular, nevertheless, even at a subconscious level there's a connection with Torah. And that is exactly what I felt that morning. David Stern also said that if the Church wants to engage meaningfully with the Jewish people, it's got to change its attitude concerning Torah.

It's ironic in a way that much of the Church is so anti-Torah, denouncing it as legalism when much of the Church itself is filled with legalism! Even at a time when there was so much freedom in the Spirit, the Pentecostal denominations I encountered at the time had their own set of house rules. Don't dance, don't go to movies, don't smoke – a very good rule – and of course, there were lots of rules for women that would have rivalled the Talmud. Head covering was a biggie. Other rules were that women mustn't wear slacks. And a big favourite, women mustn't wear makeup.

But I digress. One day someone gave me a booklet written especially for new Jewish believers or Hebrew Christians as we were called. On the back was a drawing of a bearded man. He didn't look particularly Jewish but clearly the artist intended him to be identified as a Jew because he was drawn wearing a kippah or yarmulke. Looking closer I discovered that it was an artist's impression of Jesus. Above the picture was the name "Yeshua." Below was the brief explanation that this was Jesus' Hebrew name. It was the first time I'd heard it.

Now again, I don't want you to misunderstand me. I love the name Jesus. Those people who've been led down a side road by the "Name" movement have totally missed the point. But I have to tell you that the day I learned that Jesus had a Hebrew name, that he would in his life on earth have been called Yeshua, had a profound effect on me. I kept wanting to say that name. Yeshua. All of sudden, he really was one of us.

I want to say something more about that but first I have to go back to the issue of legalism in the Church. It affected my witness to my family and I made some major blunders. In the denomination I was attending at the time one of the big no-no's was alcohol. And if I may make a small pun, I imbibed their attitude towards it. The reason I mention it is that someone should have locked me away at Passover. Even though I'd bought into the Church's teaching that a Jewish believer in Jesus should no longer celebrate the festivals, I still joined my family for Passover. I bet they wished I didn't. While they were drinking the four cups of Passover wine that were integral to the Seder, I sat grimly clutching my glass of grape juice, looking with disapproval at their 'licentiousness.' If only that had been my sole error but sad to say it wasn't, and as yet there was no one to teach me to be sensitive to my family and fellow Jews.

Then the day came when a friend invited me to a series of meetings at her church. It was at a large independent church and it was the time when the Kingdom Now-Dominion movement was sweeping through certain churches. That was when I first encountered anti-semitism in the Church. Not just your common variety of anti-Semitism but the raw, unvarnished variety. I heard remarks from the pulpit like "Jesus was no skinflint Jew" and "We're all spiritual

Jews now. You don't need a big nose to be a Jew." Not having a terribly petite nose myself, this was getting a bit personal. At those meetings I saw the ugly side of Church as well, but God in his grace kept me from bitterness and backsliding, because the good side of Church was far greater than that.

Let me return to the matter of evangelism. At the end of the day, and at the beginning too, salvation is a work of the Holy Spirit. All we can do is be faithful witnesses. I like to think of the four friends of the paralysed man in *Mark 2*. They were really good friends. Those people who are into the symbolic meaning of numbers in the Bible will tell you that the number four represents witness. According to Mark's gospel, Yeshua was in Capernaum, probably at Peter's house and a great crowd had gathered to hear him. So much so that the four friends carrying the paralysed man on a pallet couldn't get near Yeshua. No problem to them. They shinned up the roof, made a hole in it, and lowered the man down to Yeshua.

Permit me if you will to spiritualise this account and use it as an illustration. Think of the paralysed man as the majority of the Jewish people, unable or unwilling to come to Yeshua of their own volition. The man was barred by the crowd. Think of this as the Church, not all that willing to make a way for the Jewish people but concerned with their own relationship with Yeshua. Other obstacles for Jewish people are preconceived ideas, wrong teaching by church and synagogue, bad experiences with so-called Christians, and cultural insensitivity. To me, those obstacles are illustrated by the roof and walls of the house. So what did the four friends do? They made a hole in the roof. They removed the hindrances preventing the man from coming to Yeshua.

Having done so, what happened next was entirely between the man and Yeshua. The four friends could do nothing about the man's response, but what they could do was remove the hindrances and make it possible for the man to come face to face with Yeshua. And that's all we can do.

Which brings me to my brother, Lionel. When I tell this to Christians, some look at me as if I've uttered heresy. Others say they understand. My dad had died a year before I became a believer, but in the years that followed my mother and sister both came to faith in Yeshua.

My brother was a lot harder to reach, and following my mother's death, became very involved in the local synagogue. 30 years down the line I found myself praying, "Lord, whatever it takes, save Lionel's soul." The Lord answered that prayer but not in the way I would have wished. Some four years ago my brother was diagnosed with cancer of the oesophagus. By the time he eventually got round to seeking medical help, the tumour was inoperable. I rallied all the prayer support I could, and believe me when I say, that at that time of heartache and stress, it was good to be part of the Church. I received e-mails of support and encouragement from as far afield as England and Israel.

I witnessed to my brother in earnest and he began to soften but all the misconceptions he had about Yeshua were like a mountain he just couldn't get over.

One day I felt the Lord direct me to ask a Gentile Christian friend named Johnny to come share his testimony with my brother. Johnny had a powerful testimony and he had a gift for witnessing. As he spoke to my poor sick, grey, emaciated brother, the presence of God in the room was tangible, and I could literally see my brother come under conviction. Johnny then asked him if he wanted to pray with him. My heart almost stopped beating when my brother said, "Yes." Johnny began to lead him in the sinner's prayer and my brother prayed after him word for word. Then Johnny said, "Say after me, I commit my life to Jesus Christ..." It was as if a large fishbone had become lodged in my brother's throat. He could not get the words "Jesus Christ" past his lips.

Nevertheless, God is faithful and two months later my brother did accept the Lord when he prayed with me in the name of Yeshua. Three weeks later he died in the early hours of the morning. This is what offends some Christians: My brother knew that Jesus and Yeshua were the same person but somehow he could not relate to Jesus Christ, yet he could relate to Yeshua. Of course, that's not every Jewish person's experience, but the point I'm trying to emphasize is that one size doesn't fit all in Jewish evangelism. It was Moishe Rosen who said that if you throw a ball *at* someone they'll instinctively duck to avoid getting hit. But if you throw a ball *to* someone, they'll reach out to take it. Far better to talk *to* Jewish people in a language they can understand than *at* them in a language they can't.

The accusation has been levelled against Jewish believers that we're more concerned with our Jewishness than our Jesusness. One could say some Gentile believers are more concerned with their Baptistness or Anglicanness, but *Rom. 11:29* and *1 Cor. 7:18* speak of being Jewish as a calling. This is who God created and called us to be. This is how I see it: God created Adam, male and female he created them, and then he took the woman out of the man. Which seemed like a very unproductive exercise because he then joined them in marriage and the two became one again, but the man was still a man and the woman was still a woman. One in the covenant of marriage and yet distinct. In a similar way, God created the nations, then he took Israel out of the nations, then he took people out of every nation to be the Church and now he's joining Israel and the Church together to reflect his glory, one in him, yet distinct. God's idea of one is two. And that is the witness that will win the world.