

Jews for Judaism counters growing missionary movement

By PAUL LUNGEN
Staff Reporter

In sports, there's a cliché that successful coaches often repeat before a big game. Asked how they plan to defend against a tough opponent, they say, "We're not worried about what the opposition will do. We're worried about what we will do."

Though Rabbi Michael Skobac and Julius Ciss might not necessarily employ a sports metaphor, as the guiding hands behind Jews for Judaism, they, too, recognize that Jews must first tend to their own people before worrying about Christian missionaries.

After years of going toe to toe with evangelizing Christians, they recognize that the best way to block their inroads into the Jewish community is by building better Jews. Or

last year.

Most recently, with the assistance of twentysomethings adept in computer technology, Jews for Judaism has publicized itself through online social networking sites. A recent lecture in Montreal attracted 150 participants strictly through publicity generated on Facebook, Rabbi Skobac said.

The marriage of an ancient spiritual faith and modern technology is one way that Jews for Judaism is trying to stem growing missionary efforts to entice Jews to Christianity.

Making the case that all their spiritual needs can be found within Judaism is the best way to prevent missionaries from succeeding, Rabbi Skobac said. "The bread and butter of our work is education. Forewarned is forearmed."

The other aspect of the educational endeavour is preparing Jews – many of whom are woefully ignorant of their own heritage – to understand "the claims made by these people." The missionary movement argues that accepting Christianity is consistent with Judaism. Jews for Judaism refutes that by showing that Jews do not accept Jesus as the messiah, let alone as a divine being, Ciss said.

After years of interviewing people who have accepted the missionary message, Rabbi Skobac believes that "Judaism was not presented to them as focused on having a relationship with God."

The result is an apparent susceptibility to the enticements of other faiths. Citing a 2006 UJA Federation of Greater Toronto study, Rabbi Skobac said 5.8 per cent of Toronto Jews, or approximately 11,000 people, say they identify as Jews by ethnicity, but practise another religion. A further 8.1 per cent (14,585) identify as Jews ethnically but practise no religion.

Jews for Judaism estimates that more than 250,000 Jews have converted over the past decades. Missionary efforts have even reached into Israel, where as many as 15,000 Jews have left the faith.

Ciss said the Christian missionary movement has been increasing its efforts to proselytize Jews in recent years. More than 100 groups have been targeting Canadian Jews, and they are well-funded. Among them are Jews for Jesus, Chosen People Ministries and the City of David Messianic

Synagogue, which recently opened a large, high-profile facility at Yonge and Clark streets in Thornhill.

Many of those attracted to other religions grew up in a nominally Jewish home, Rabbi Skobac continued. They may have attended weekend Hebrew school, had bar or bat mitvahs, and celebrated holidays.

"But they didn't really experience it in a spiritual way or they did not establish a relationship with God," he said.

"Our failure... is the reason for their success," Ciss said.

Ciss, who attended weekend Jewish school many years ago, said the experience turned many people away from Judaism. The bar mitzvah was "seen by young people as a ticket to be released from learning about Judaism... My peers are raising kids today who are open prey for spiritual predators."

He added: "Getting a day school education is almost a recipe for Jewish continuity... People who come to us for counselling, it's almost across the board that they lack this education."

"The real answer is to have a Jewish community that is vibrantly Jewish, expressing spirituality through the Jewish faith," Ciss added.



Rabbi Michael Skobac (left) and Julius Ciss

to put it another way, they believe that Jews who see the spiritual and religious dimension of their own faith will be less likely to be tempted by other religions.

To that end, Jews for Judaism offers annual lecture series and individual seminars to educate Jews about the beauty of Judaism.

Next up in Toronto are three free public lectures. On Aug. 6, Rabbi Skobac, Jews for Judaism's director of education, will speak on "Catching the spirit of Jewish spirituality." He will follow that up on Aug. 12 with a discussion titled, "Sharing the light: how to communicate the beauty of Judaism."

Finally, on Aug. 21, Ciss, the organization's executive director, will share his "Reflections of a Former Jew for Jesus." Ciss was a member of that organization for more than five years. All lectures will take place at the Lipa Green Building, 4600 Bathurst St., Room 421, and start at 8:00 p.m.

Over the past 18 years, Jews for Judaism has offered three or four lecture series per year, attracting a couple of dozen people at a time. The Internet offers the opportunity to expand that reach by orders of magnitude.

The organization operates several websites, and so far this year, the sites (www.jewsforjudaism.org; www.be-true.org) have garnered 17,000 visits per month, up from 12,200

Jews for Judaism has worldwide impact

Letters to the editor,

I am concerned that your readers may have gotten the impression that Jews for Judaism offers only "three or four lecture series per year, attracting a couple of dozen people at a time" ("Jews for Judaism counters growing missionary movement," *CJN*, Aug. 7). This does apply to our counter-missionary survival seminar, but it's just the tip of the Jews for Judaism iceberg.

With the help of UJA Federation of Greater Toronto and thousands of generous donors from across Canada, in 2007 alone, Jews for Judaism's Canadian branch provided a remarkable 13,340 direct client services that included 1,898 counselling sessions on missionary, cult and intermarriage issues; 2,729 requests for help, information or referrals, and 8,614 participants in 159 educational programs at 84 different venues. In addition, we distributed more than 85,000 items of literature, books or audio materials free of charge.

With six international branches of Jews for Judaism, we are having a tremendous impact worldwide and have been an enormous deterrent to the effectiveness of missionaries and cults by preventing countless Jews from falling into their clutches.

Julius Ciss
Executive Director
Jews for Judaism (Canada)