

Michael Skobac: Bringing Jews Back to Judaism

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SPECIAL TO THE CJN

Rabbi Michael Skobac is the education director at Jews for Judaism Canada, the national branch of an organization that works to challenge attempts at religious coercion away from Judaism. Rabbi Skobac is currently leading a six-week course called “Taking it Personally: Torah Tools for Spiritual Growth,” on ancient and modern wisdom for Jewish growth at Toronto’s Adath Israel Congregation. On Feb. 21, he led a program at the Baycrest Terrace Synagogue on “Replacement Theology” – the idea, held in some Christian circles, that the Christian church has “replaced” Israel. The CJN spoke to Rabbi Skobac about the issues Jews for Judaism aims to tackle, and why the organization believes the Jewish community is at risk.

How did the organization come about?

We began in the U.S. in the early 1980s as a response to Jews for Jesus and other missionary groups targeting the Jewish community for conversion. At that time, there had been at least 10 years of high-intensity efforts by Evangelical organizations proselytizing vulnerable Jews. Countless families were seeing their loved ones embrace Christianity, and there weren’t resources to help these people or inoculate Jews against that threat. The Canadian branch formally started in 1989. The work was two-fold: educational programming to help our community become more aware of the efforts by hundreds of Christian groups to convert Jews and to arm our people with effective answers to missionary claims. And secondly, counseling for individuals and families affected by the problem. We take a kind of medical model, investing in both preventative education and critical care.

But over the years, we realized that groups like Jews for Jesus aren’t really the problem – they’re a symptom of the problem. The real concern is the growing number of Jews who feel no meaningful connection to Judaism. We saw that some who felt disconnected would become vulnerable to Christian evangelism, while others Jews might become involved in Buddhism, Hinduism, Sikhism, New Age religions or cults. While the ambient religion in North America is Christianity, we’ve seen many Jews drawn to eastern religions. Some estimates have said 25 to 30 per cent of non-Asian Buddhists in North America come from a Jewish background, and many of their leading teachers are Jewish. I visited a Hindu temple in Toronto a number of years ago and the place was crawling with Jews.

So what is Jews for Jesus all about?

It’s the largest Christian organization that seeks to convert Jews. It has its headquarters in San Francisco and has offices all over the world. They’re an evangelical Protestant organization, and sometimes



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people use the term ‘Jews for Jesus’ generically, to describe any Jews who believe in Jesus. Sometimes they’re called ‘Messianic Jews,’ or ‘Hebrew Christians.’ They came about because historically, something that’s bothered some elements of the Church has been the question of why Jews wouldn’t accept Christianity. Jesus was supposed to be the Jewish messiah, and it irks many Christians that Jews didn’t tune into that. In the New Testament, it’s suggested Jews were blinded by the devil so they couldn’t see the truth. Some elements of Christianity believe they have a duty to convert everyone, and that conversion of Jews is a special priority. They realized that Jews are very resistant to converting to another religion and giving up their Jewish identity. Groups like Jews for Jesus attempt to overcome this impediment by blending Jewish practices and lingo into a Christian theological expression and fostering the impression that one can be a good Jew and still believe in Jesus. What drives many Christians to support these kinds of conversionary activities is their concern that unconverted Jews will burn in hell forever. For others, it’s their belief that Jesus won’t come back until all Jews are converted.

Our organization is tracking over 1,000 Christian groups that are working to convert Jews. In Israel alone, there could be about 300. In Canada, we’re talking around 150, and in the U.S., over 500.

Are organizations like Jews for Jesus actively trying to trick Jews into believing that they’re Jewish groups, or are they upfront about being Christian?

I don’t think Jews for Jesus is trying to trick Jews. This movement of Messianic

Judaism started in the 1970s. Protestant evangelicals, wondering why they were so unsuccessful at converting Jews, tried to understand Christianity from a Jewish perspective. They saw that many Jews associated Christianity with the Crusades, the Inquisition, the Holocaust and Christians telling Jews ‘You killed our God.’ So missionaries now try to convey to us, ‘We love you, we support Israel; a real Christian loves Jews.’ This is one of the reasons there’s been so much support for Israel among Christian evangelicals. They also saw Jews didn’t want to convert because they didn’t want to give up Judaism. So they started working the angle: ‘If you accept Jesus as your Messiah, you’ll become a better, more fulfilled Jew. You can still have Shabbat, Jewish holidays, wear a tallit and a yarmulke – you can feel very Jewish.’ To be clear, these groups aren’t converting highly educated and committed Jews. They’re converting Jews who weren’t that involved in Judaism. Some of these converts would then report ‘I’m more Jewish now than ever. Now I keep kosher, keep the Sabbath.’

They’re saying, ‘It’s Jewish to believe in Jesus.’ Well, that’s just wrong. Much of Christianity is antithetical to Judaism. I don’t think they’re trying to make Jews think they’re walking into a normal synagogue. They’re upfront about their beliefs. But they’re trying to make Christianity more palatable to Jews and to ease the discomfort Jews would normally feel in converting. They use euphemistic language meant to be less abrasive to Jewish ears, like calling the New Testament *Brit Hachadasha*, referring to Jesus as *Yeshua HaMashiach*, and calling Baptism *mikvah*. They claim to teach the ‘real meaning’ behind Jewish

traditions. For example, they’ll claim that the three matzot at the Passover Seder really represent the Christian trinity.

What are some of the educational programs Jews for Judaism uses to deter Jews from converting?

We give lectures and run programs in schools, synagogues and for Jewish institutions throughout Canada. We have also produced booklets and have a website packed with vital information. Today, much of our educational programming is online. We have over 250 videos on our YouTube channel that have more than four million views. Half of them deal with the Jewish response to the claims of Christian missionaries. It is critical for Jewish people to understand why we don’t accept Jesus as our Messiah and why the New Testament is not part of our Bible. The rest of our videos seek to present a compelling view of Judaism. We want to help Jewish people appreciate the profound wisdom and spiritual depth of Judaism. Our videos cover topics such as personal growth, environmental ethics, inner peace, the afterlife, and vegetarianism. We also have a very robust presence on social media platforms such as Facebook and Twitter.

We did a survey in the U.S. and it showed that 75 per cent of Jewish university students had someone attempt to convert them in their life. We want Jews to be better able to deal with claims made by Christian missionaries and to understand the fullness, meaning and spirituality of Judaism.

Why the spirituality?

Because so many Jews for Jesus converts or ‘Jubus’ – Jews who have become Buddhist – will tell you: ‘I had a bar mitzvah, I celebrated some holidays, but I never experienced any of it as spiritual.’ Judaism was, for so many of them, a culture and a tradition, but not a rich spiritual path that could lead to personal transformation. Jews for Jesus will tell you they now have a personal relationship with God, Jubus will say, ‘I meditate now and have access to tools for inner peace.’ They don’t realize there’s also meditation in Judaism. So Jews for Judaism aims to fill that gap. The very first video we put out was about Jewish meditation. I went to India with my wife years back to run Passover seders in Dharamsala. I looked at what attracts many Jews to eastern religions and found that, ironically, much of what they find exists in Judaism. We want people to appreciate that their own faith is a very rich, spiritual path. That’s why we named our organization Jews for Judaism and not something like “Jews against Jesus.” We’re intensely focused on keeping Jews Jewish. We’ve been endorsed by every Jewish denomination and have run programs across the entire spectrum of the Jewish community. ■

This article was edited for style and clarity.