

The warmed, recycled air of the plane was like a tunnel between two tundras, Misha Kapilov\* reflected as he disembarked. Gone were the sights and sounds of the life he had left behind, first in Kiev, then in Israel.

*Bienvenue au Canada* read the sign as the frigid air pulled him into the terminal with an urgency. Passport control. Luggage. Waiting area. And there she was: Aunt Katya. Smiling, waving vigorously, and very welcoming, she eagerly stepped forward to take her 17-year-old immigrant nephew under her wing. All Misha really knew about his father’s sister was that Aunt Katya had “converted” to Christianity, but his ambiguous understanding of religion made his aunt’s choice a complete non-issue.

As they drove down the broad highways of Toronto, Misha reveled in his newfound destination. The scenery was different here; the air rich with promise. The houses were beautiful and spacious. He had come to Canada to seek his fortune, and find it he would.

There was a large pot of soup waiting on the stove in Aunt Katya’s modest two-bedroom apartment, and a bed turned down especially

**They sat down to eat and Misha became aware of keen eyes watching him.** for her nephew. They sat down to eat and Misha became aware of keen eyes watching him. And then, gently but bluntly, Aunt Katya lay down the house rules. One rule, actually, stunningly simple:

“If you believe in and pray to Jesus, then you are welcome in my home,” she told him.

The converse was glaringly implicit.

Misha Kapilov had a big problem. Up until now, religion had been a rather trivial chapter in his life. Russia certainly hadn’t offered him anything of faith, and his brief year in Israel had only served up a large helping of hypocrisy and

cynical anti-religious indoctrination. If he found Aunt Katya’s terms untenable it was not because she was demanding his belief in Christianity,

**It wasn’t her demand to believe in Christianity that was untenable, it was the demand that he believe in any G-d at all.**

But free room and board was nothing to sneeze at for an immigrant boy fresh off the boat. So he promised he’d try and, like a good little nephew, he grudgingly accompanied Aunt Katya to... synagogue.

Well, at first glance it certainly looked like a synagogue, with a rabbi cloaked in a tallit and one of those arks that housed the Torah scrolls like he blurrily remembered seeing once as a child. There were congregants with skullcaps and prayer books, and everyone wished him “Shabbat Shalom” and stayed to shmooze afterward during kiddush. Young Misha was pleasantly surprised by the warm atmosphere and the after-services get-togethers where the friendly community made him feel welcome and invited him to come back again the next week.

Misha thought it was odd how Aunt Katya, a professed Christian, permitted herself the sacrilegious practice of praying in a synagogue. But her strange practice was soon resolved when he came to understand that “Yeshua HaMashiach,” abundantly referred to in the prayer texts and other parts of the “synagogue” service, was none other than Jesus, father of Christianity. He was surprised and a bit aghast. After all, hadn’t Papa told him that Jews didn’t believe in Jesus?

It didn’t take long until dear Aunt Katya threw him out of her house forever, in disappointment over his failure to “believe.” But Misha continued to attend Sabbath services at Congregation Beit

HaMashiach\* on Regal Avenue on his own – if just for the sense of belonging. Very soon he became a valued member of the “synagogue.” It satisfied his craving for friendship and closed the hole of loneliness. With sincere and loving persistence, Misha’s fellow congregants demonstrated to him how Jews were meant to believe in Yeshua, bringing “proof” from Messianic texts. With time, the former atheist became a passionate advocate of these Jews for Jesus.

### An Unexpected Invitation

Parkdale was once populated by the wealthy upper-class. Today, it has the faded look of an expensive ball gown left crumpled in a garbage bin for many years, with cats and rodents nesting in its once-delicate hems. The crumbling apartment complexes tower above the dank alleyways where pursuits of a variety of illicit activities are the norm. Crime is to Parkdale as salt is to soup – a diverse landscape of immigrants, panhandlers, and a motley group of patients released from the psychiatric hospital that closed its doors a number of years ago.

Toronto’s Parkdale district was not the fortune Misha had sought. Having been exiled from Aunt Katya’s, he found himself trapped in the seedy but affordable slums. Misha wanted out, and intervention from a Power he did not yet fully comprehend obliged.

“You’re looking for an apartment?” a friend of his parents from the Old Country asked, when they bumped into each other one day. He scratched his chin. “I know someone with an apartment for rent. I’ll give you her number.” And that’s how Misha met Mr. and Mrs. Sheiner.

“You looking for an apartment?” Olga Sheiner peered at the tall, skinny boy before her with a mixture of dismay and motherly affection, her Russian-accented English thick like the fragrant

smells that wafted from her kitchen on this Friday afternoon.

Misha dutifully took a tour of the basement apartment but with disappointment, he realized that his ticket out of Parkdale was not located at this particular address.

“Thank you,” he told Mrs. Sheiner, “But it’s not for me...”

She nodded with disapproving approval. He was on his way out the door. They would likely never meet again. It was Friday afternoon. He was a Jewish boy, that much was apparent. Should she reach out to him? Would he spurn the offer? Would it even matter? She wiped her hands on her apron and shrugged inwardly. It was a long shot, but so was David’s when he attempted to defeat the giant Goliath.

“Y’know, it’s Friday afternoon,” Olga said. “You’re already here in my house. Why don’t you stay for Shabbos?”

A look of surprise crossed the teenager’s face. Stay for the entire Shabbos with this obviously religious couple? Rather absurd. But how could one argue with the tempting scents that emanated from the stove? His miserable flat in Parkdale made the modest Sheiner home look like a palace. Besides, a full Shabbos together would enable him to proselytize to these noble yet uninformed Jews about the beauty and dazzling truth of Yeshua. Misha nodded his consent.

Over golden chicken soup and crisp potato kugel, the Sheiners were treated to a fifth course – on Messianic Judaism. Earnestly, Misha explained to them how essential it was for Jews to believe in the Christian “savour” in order to be forgiven for their sins and to ensure their share in the World to Come.

They almost choked on their soup, but the Sheiners contained their horror. Calmly and

patiently they explained to a surprised Misha that they were quite comfortable in their

**They almost choked on their soup, but the Sheiners contained their horror.** current belief system and were not interested in adding another deity to their lives. They did not berate him, engage him, or laugh at him. Misha left that Saturday night with a full stomach and an intriguing

invitation to meet a friend of the Sheiners who, they said, was potentially interested in the “wares” he peddled.

### The Anti-Missionary

Julius Ciss is a man you don't forget. The only thing more towering than Julius’ six-foot-five height is his gentle presence and affable love of all Jews. Julius founded Jews for Judaism, the anti-missionary organization in Toronto several years after he, himself, was saved from the clutches of a deep, five-year involvement with the very same Congregation Beit HaMashiach that Misha attended. It was this gentle giant whom Olga Sheiner urgently contacted as soon as Misha left her house.

“You must get in touch with this boy,” she told Julius, “or he will be lost and bring others down with him.”

Julius was hesitant. In his line of work he had seen enough to know that true counter-missionary success only came from those who initiated contact on their own, expressing interest in hearing the other side of the story. By calling Misha directly he was worried that the young man would be put off and an opportunity would be squandered. But Olga persisted.

“You’ve got to call him,” she ordered. “He’ll never call you.”

So Julius called Misha.

The two spoke for many hours and the conversation was pleasant and thought-provoking. Julius talked to Misha about his aspirations, his friends, his experiences in Canada, and he took a genuine interest in Misha's wellbeing. The two definitely clicked.

Eventually, the conversation drifted to Misha's belief in Christianity. Julius's approach was non-threatening and non-judgmental. He didn't want to come on too strong; all he wanted was to push the door open a crack to ensure further conversations. He spoke with Misha about the importance of being intellectually honest about his decision to embrace Christianity. Julius talked about the paramount importance of making an informed decision in every area of life. "When you cross the street, you don't just look one way; you look both ways! How much more so if you cross a spiritual street," he said.

Julius told Misha that Jews who embrace Christianity seldom ask themselves why Judaism rejects the Christian claim that Jesus is the messiah. Misha agreed that he didn't actually know the Jewish perspective on belief

**Jews who embrace Christianity seldom ask themselves why Judaism rejects the Christian claim that Jesus is the messiah.**

in Jesus. Julius invited him to meet later that week to talk about it and to learn more. Misha was intrigued with his gentle but on-target arguments, and agreed to explore the issue further.

Before he called again, Julius embarked upon a furious mission to find Misha an apartment. He knew that finding a healthy Jewish environment where Misha would feel nurtured and supported was key in giving him the chance to leave his messianic community.

## A New Home

Iris and Harold Kaufman\*, parents of five, are legendary in the Toronto community for their hospitality, tzedakah and boundless kindness. Their warm, easygoing personalities – not to mention their vacant, beautiful basement apartment for rent – made them ideal candidates for taking in Misha. Even better, Harold was very active with Aish HaTorah, a Jewish outreach organization that provides opportunities for Jews of all backgrounds to discover their heritage. This meant he could introduce Misha to the vibrant Aish community in Toronto.

It was not a simple decision for the Kaufmans to take in a young, messianic teenager. Far from being a tenant, Misha would become part of the family where the impressionable minds of the five Kaufman children, similar in age to Misha, would be subjected to his devout messianic doctrine. But after careful deliberation and consultation with their rabbi, Iris and Harold gave Julius the green light and a joyful Julius notified Misha that he'd found him the greatest apartment ever. Misha soon became a well-integrated part of the Kaufman family. Misha had finally found a true home.

What ensued was a battle for truth. Misha describes it like this, "I would tell Julius what the people at the 'messianic synagogue' were teaching from their proof texts. Julius would refute it. I would go back to my people with Julius' refutations and they would counter-refute what Julius was saying. These I would take back to Julius to see what he had to say about them. But Julius had all the answers."

Like a buoy fighting the undertow desperately trying to touch the sky, Misha fought bravely through the doctrine he had been taught and the diametrically opposed belief system Julius offered him. And like that indomitable buoy, Misha emerged victorious.

It was difficult for his friends at Congregation Beit HaMashiach to see him slip away after all the time, effort and genuine friendship they had invested in him. Especially at the hands of one of their former members! When the messianic rabbi ran out of answers with which to refute Julius's convincing arguments, he fixed Misha with a penetrating look and warned him, "That Julius is the devil."

This grim statement, intended to strike fear in the heart of the conflicted boy, backfired and had a rebound effect. Misha had come to know Julius very well – as a person and as a counter-missionary – and he was quite certain that the kind and loving Julius was far from the devil. He realized that the messianic rabbi had come up against a brick wall. And so had Misha who decided to begin a new chapter in his life.

Misha enrolled in CHAT, a local Jewish high school, and began learning more about his heritage. Today, Misha lives with his wife, Rachel,\* and their two children in the Toronto community where he is an active member of Aish HaTorah. He has helped Julius in his anti-missionary activities and speaks freely of the incredible Divine providence that brought him from a steep, slippery slope to the joyous pinnacle of observant Judaism.

For Misha, all it took was a hesitatingly proffered Shabbos invitation to launch a dramatic transformation in his life and future descendants. G-d's mysterious ways often involve His creations – regular, ordinary, busy people who rise to the challenge and reach out to others. One act of kindness can forever alter another person's destiny.

*\*All names, except Julius Ciss, have been changed. This story occurred 19 years ago when the messianic congregation described in this article was under different leadership than today. Julius Ciss, an Aish HaTorah alumnus, has been Executive Director of Jews for Judaism (Canada) since 1989.*

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# Saved



**A young Jewish man gets ensnared in the welcoming community of Messianic Jews.**

by

*Riva Pomerantz*



Keeping Jews Jewish