

# Jews for Judaism Lifeline

KEEPING JEWS JEWISH

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## NEWSPAPER ARTICLE REPRINT EDITION

Every year, Jews for Judaism's highly acclaimed counter-missionary activities attract extensive media attention. This issue of Lifeline includes some of the dozens of newspaper articles that highlight the danger of the missionary threat to the Jewish community and for Jews for Judaism's response.

### Jews for Judaism celebrates *chai* anniversary

By DAVE GORDON  
Special to The CJN

It has been 18 years since counter-missionary group Jews for Judaism first opened its doors in Toronto, in response to the ever-growing problem of "Hebrew Christian" groups aggressively campaigning to convert Jews.

The *chai* anniversary is fitting, given Jews for Judaism's endeavours to bring people back to a Jewish life.

The office opened when Julius Ciss, the executive director, noticed the dearth of response to counter the missionary presence in Toronto. In 1982, he produced simple pamphlets and put ads in Jewish newspapers across Canada, as well as lecturing in synagogues.

Ciss, who was in the "Jews for Jesus" movement for a short time, had returned to Judaism and wanted to help others do so.

In 1989, the main branch of Jews for Judaism in Baltimore heard what Ciss was doing and asked him to join the organization. Eventually, Rabbi Michael Skobac, who is now the educational director, began working with Ciss.

The only Canadian office is in Toronto, but Ciss and Skobac also do speaking tours across Canada. They make themselves available for counselling sessions, relying on the Internet and long-distance calls to connect with out-of-city requests.

"We wish we could go out of business due to lack of business, but business is bigger than ever," says Ciss. Last year alone, he cites some 1,700 counselling sessions with Jewish victims of cults and missionaries. They fulfilled 2,600 requests for information, and more than 7,000 people attended their lectures. Jews for Judaism also distributed 90,000 free educational books and materials in 2007. They have the endorsement of Canadian Jewish Congress, United Jewish Appeal and other Jewish organizations across

Canada.

Ciss says there are 120 groups specifically targeting Jews for conversion in Canada. Seven years ago, Toronto had 100 messianic churches, according to Ciss. Now there are 130 who campaign regularly and widely to convince Jews that Jesus is compatible with Judaism.

But it's not the only anniversary for the counter-missionary group. Ten years ago, around Chanukah, Jews for Judaism opened their Thornhill, Ont., office, next to a just-opened "Jews for Jesus"-type church. The house of worship uses Jewish symbols and iconography, and even some blessings in Hebrew, but its congregants believe in Jesus.

Jews for Judaism moved in as community members were outraged that the church had opened at the corner of Bathurst Street and Steeles Avenue, a location where there was much Jewish activity – such as a Jewish youth organization, Jewish-Russian immigrant life and a kosher ice cream parlour – leaving many to believe the young and vulnerable were at risk.

As the Toronto office celebrates a milestone, a new office in Jerusalem run by a former "messianic Jew" has opened.

"A lot of Israelis believe in Christianity, and the 'Jews for Jesus' types blanket the country," says Ciss. A few years ago, he and Rabbi Skobac were on a speaking tour of Israel, and asked how many in one audience knew someone who is Jewish, but believes in Jesus. About a third of them raised their hands. "A shocking testament to the missionary problem," says Ciss.

This is compared to his empirical surveys in Canada and the United States, where he sees one-tenth, and a quarter, respectively, of the audience raise their hands to his question. One report says that about three-quarters of the new converts are Israeli or Russian.

"There is a spiritual weakness in that respect. They are susceptible," says Rabbi Skobac. "Outreach is needed not to protest the missionary's existence. But we want to try, lovingly, to help them realize that while we are in vehement opposition to what they're [the missionaries are] preaching, we desire dialogue to help them [Jews who have converted to Christianity] see the reality of the path they've chosen, and re-evaluate their Jewish commitment and bring their soul back to Judaism."

The Toronto branch of Jews for Judaism will present its flagship program, a free "counter-missionary survival seminar," over six consecutive weeks, starting Jan. 16, at Congregation Shaarei Tzedec on Markham Street in downtown Toronto. The program is designed to point out the reasons why Judaism does not accept Jesus.

This is especially pertinent today, as many use the Internet to find Jewish answers, says Ciss, and it is almost impossible to search for a Jewish topic without getting a number of responses from Christian groups.

"Ultimately, you're going to get 'Hebrew Christian' groups that will come up in some kind of search. These are spiritual predators. A lot of these groups have fluency in Hebrew and Judaism," says Ciss. Continuing to respond to these threats, Jews for Judaism is revamping their Internet home in 2008, www.jewsforjudaism.org.

What he is most proud of over 18 years is hearing how missionaries complain how difficult it is to get their message out, due to Jews for Judaism's activity. "It's because of the education we've been inculcating in our community," says Ciss.

"The preventative work we do make us the pre-eminent group that works to stop the message of Christian missionaries and the misinformation that they are disseminating."



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THE CANADIAN JEWISH NEWS, Toronto, Ontario, January 10, 2008, Page 12, 25.

# 1100 feast on Jewish learning at Limmud-Oz

LEXI LANDSMAN

MORE than 1100 people braved unusually wild Sydney weather to attend a record-breaking Limmud-Oz on the Queen's Birthday long weekend.

Armed with their programs offering sessions on topics ranging from Jewish music to antisemitism and why some Jews are easy prey for cults, the participants, including 200 interstate visitors, packed Moriah College for the two-day event.

Organiser Peta Jones Pellach said the event, which kicked off on Saturday night with a panel including comedian Deb Filler and Palestinian Media Watch's Itamar Marcus, was an "absolute buzz".

"We had an unbelievable turnout. We used to dream of getting 1000 people, now we have to set our sights higher," said Pellach, who is also director of adult education at the Shalom Institute.

The festival, which is hosted by the Shalom Institute, featured more than 200 sessions and 180 international and local speakers.

A further 250 people attended the young-adult event, JU Fest, on Sunday evening at the Comedy Store.

"As we hoped, the amount of music, the number of young people and the diversity of people and sessions, and respect people showed for one another, represented the true



Standing room only ... Temple Emanuel Woolahra's Rabbi Jeffrey Kamins addresses a full house at Limmud-Oz. Photo: Ofer Levy

spirit of Limmud everywhere," Jones Pellach told the AJN.

The most popular sessions included cult-buster Michael Skobac's lecture on "Missionary impossible"; Jewish educationalist Paul Forgasz on "The day God laughed and other rabbinic stories"; Rabbi Jeffrey Kamins of Temple Emanuel Woolahra on "The God delusion: a contemporary Jewish response"; and Marcus's session on "Mickey Mouse teaches Islamic supremacy: a study of Palestinian children's television and formal education".

Gus Glenar, a retired general practitioner, said the festival was "outstanding".

"It was difficult to choose which lectures to go to because they were all interesting and of such a high standard. I was very impressed."

Limmud-Oz, which launched in Australia in 1999 and alternates each year between Sydney and Melbourne, takes its name from the UK Limmud event, which launched in 1980.

Next year, because Queen's Birthday falls the same weekend as Shavuot, Melbourne Limmud organisers are set to meet next month to determine how best to host the festival at an alternative time. Last year, 850 people attended Limmud in Melbourne.



Rabbi Eli Cohen (right) handing out promotional material for Jews for Judaism.

## Jews for Judaism comes to Sydney

LEXI LANDSMAN

A BRANCH of the international counter-missionary organisation Jews for Judaism has opened in Australia.

Headed by Rabbi Eli Cohen, the organisation's mission is to serve the Jewish community by combating proselytising groups that target Jews for conversion to Christianity.

Rabbi Cohen, director of the Sydney branch based in the city, has been working closely with Jews for Judaism of North America for the past two years.

"The threat is real, but still undercurrent, and there has been no organisation that has officially taken on the responsibility to combat [proselytising groups] in the whole of Australia," Rabbi Cohen explained.

"The Sydney branch is working with the Jewish community to inoculate the community from the missionaries and to bring back those Jews who have been lured away from Judaism to Christianity."

Rabbi Cohen, 29, who was born in London and moved to Sydney in 2004, believes there are more than half-a-dozen missionary groups actively targeting Jews for conversion.



Jewelry sold by Jews for Jesus. Photo: Ingrid Shakenovsky

in Australia by presenting Christianity as Judaism.

Among them are members of the Jerusalem Baptist Church, Christian Witnesses to Israel, Celebrate Messiah Australia, Jews for Jesus and countless other Christian groups worldwide that engage in proselytising activities.

"The idea of these groups is to blur the distinctions between Judaism and Christianity, and to make the Jew feel comfortable accepting the Christian faith in addition to Jewish faith, with the claim that by doing so one becomes a completed Jew or a better Jew," Rabbi Cohen explained.

Many proselytisers believe that in order for Jesus to return the Jewish people must first be converted to Christianity.

According to a Council of Jewish Federations population study in 1990, more than 275,000 Jews across the world were converted by proselytising groups over a 25-year period.

Missionaries often target university campuses, hospitals, drug-rehabilitation programs, aged-care residences, shopping malls in Jewish neighbourhoods, and the Israeli community, including inter-married couples.

Jews for Judaism, which was established in 1985, is an international organisation. It provides a wide variety of counselling services, including education and outreach programs that enable Jews to rediscover their Jewish heritage.

For further information contact (02) 9262 2809.

## Jews easy prey, says cult-buster

ETHAN ROTBERG

JEWs who are not finding spiritual fulfilment from traditional outlets are easy prey for cults and missionary groups such as Jews for Jesus, a renowned cult-buster has told an audience at Limmud-Oz.

"Jews are hungry," US-based Rabbi Michael Skobac said.

"They are not getting fulfilled and they are leaving because they're unsatisfied with their Judaism. They want passion and spirituality."

After showing a disturbing video that took the audience inside the Jewish Messianic movement, Rabbi Skobac explained that one of the rea-

sons that the Jewish community is being targeted is because Christians believe that Jesus will not return until all the Jews accept him.

"We are holding up the show," Rabbi Skobac joked.

He said that close to 30 per cent of Buddhists in North America come from a Jewish background, adding that missionaries especially target intermarried couples who see a "third way" as a middle ground.

During question time, one woman told the audience she was a born-again Christian, but Rabbi Skobac quickly shut her down, saying his lecture was no place for "free advertising".



US cult-buster Rabbi Michael Skobac: "Jews are hungry. They are not getting fulfilled and they are leaving because they're unsatisfied with their Judaism. They want passion, and spirituality." Photo: Joshua Levy

### By AVRUM ROSENSWEIG

Julius Ciss is an old friend. I met him close to 20 years ago. From the outset, this jovial Jew made me laugh. Julius is a child of Holocaust survivors, so having an abundance of joy in his heart, being such a cheerful man, is very special.

Julius is also a very tall person, somewhat of an anomaly among his Jewish contemporaries. He stands above a crowd and can be heard at the other end of a room with his booming voice.

The thing I admire mostly about Julius, however, more than his drive and ability to light up a room, is his courage. Julius is indeed a brave man.

More than 30 years ago, he made a choice, one that was painful to those he loved, but he made it anyway, with the belief that he be true to himself.

For five years Julius was a member of a "Hebrew-Christian" community and adhered to their basic dogma, including a belief in Jesus as the messiah.



URBAN WRITER

## Julius Ciss: a decisive Jew

On the face of it, many people would be critical of his decision, because of our mistrust of Christianity and the tools used by

Hebrew-Christians to convert Jews to their ways. But I am speaking of Julius's ability to make major changes in his life. He did so then, and he continues to do so today.

Julius is a decisive human being.

Ultimately, Julius left that lifestyle, according to the website of Jews for Judaism, because "he discovered the numerous inconsistencies in Christian belief."

Soon afterward, he did what few others have done. Angered by the devious conversion methods of Jews for Jesus and similar missionary organizations, Julius launched the Toronto branch of Jews for Judaism.

This move was not a simple one, as Julius was considered to be one of the finest

illustrators in Canada, and his shift in career priorities definitely limited his ability to enhance his career as a commercial artist and a highly respected teacher at the Ontario College of Art and Design. But he made the move, and he did so with great enthusiasm.

For more than 18 years, Julius has painstakingly built the organization with the help of colleagues and volunteers. He speaks regularly in Canada, the United States and Israel, and he has produced counter-missionary literature and tapes and been engaged in one-on-one counselling with Hebrew Christians in an attempt to bring them back into the fold. If you were to schmooze with Julius, you would discover that he has saved many a soul over the years and has played a key role as a Jewish leader.

Julius is a good person. Throughout the years, he has faced many difficult challenges including the death of his mother and a brother. They were hard times, to say the least, but Julius seemed to manage life's

hardships and challenges with grace and strength. I recall watching him and thinking what an inspiration he was, somebody I hope I can emulate when my time comes to deal with the difficulties of life.

Julius is a dedicated husband. His wife, Claire is equally committed to strengthening of the Jewish community. He is a father to Miriam, a very bright, inquisitive and lovely girl. He also introduced me to my dear friend and media partner, Marty Galin. Life is complex and requires us to be valiant and decisive on a daily basis. This is not simple, but Julius often makes it seem so.

As the founding director of Jews for Judaism, a world class illustrator, a loyal and loving father and husband, and a very good friend, and as a hilarious human being, Julius does indeed remind us that decent men are in our midst - people who pursue life with a vengeance and a desire to make our world shine. Julius is a decisive Jew and a very good man.

Comment on my blog avrumrosensweig ideas.blogspot.com.

## On 'Perfecting' the Jews

IMAGINE, IF YOU WILL, A WORLD IN WHICH THE RIGHT-WING pundit Ann Coulter were not a grating opportunist who said horrible things on air for her own personal gain. Imagine—and it's a stretch—that she occasionally said something interesting or at least worth considering. Then her recent comments on Donny Deutsch's cable show might have generated a useful conversation instead a lot of name-calling and

Scripture quoting. Here is what happened: Coulter and Deutsch were bantering about Israel and Iran, when Coulter used the phrase that has gotten so much attention. Christians, she said, "just want Jews to be perfected."

"Wow, you didn't really say that, did you?" asked Deutsch.

"Yes, that's what Christianity is," Coulter answered. Later in the program, Deutsch called Coulter "anti-Semitic," and in the days that followed, the Anti-Defamation League condemned Coulter's statement and the National Jewish Democratic Council called on news organizations to quit inviting Coulter on their programs. On the blogs, Christians alternately signaled their support of or opposition to Coulter's statement with Bible verses and profanity.

First, some background. "Perfected Jews" may have been Coulter's version of saying "completed Jews," which in some conservative evangelical circles means Jewish converts to Christianity. The phrase came into the mainstream in the 1960s and 1970s, when it was popularized by groups like Jews for Jesus who claimed they could retain their Jewish identity and practice while at the same time believing in the divinity of Jesus (a claim that most mainstream Jewish theologians find ludicrous). For them, "completed" made better sense than "converted," because in their view they weren't abandoning their Jewishness. Today these same people use terms like "fulfilled Jews" or "believing Jews." "By believing that Jesus is the promised Messiah of Israel, we've been completed in our Jewish identity by embracing the hope of our people," says David Brickner, executive director of Jews for Jesus. The term "completed Jews" has fil-

tered into the evangelical world. In 2001, the Christian addiction-treatment group Teen Challenge came under fire when an executive there said in a Senate hearing that some Jewish clients became "completed"—or Christian.

When you take a deep breath, you see that from a Christian perspective, the term "completed Jew" makes a certain kind of sense. For Christians, Jesus is the Messiah prophesied in the Pentateuch. He is the risen Lord and the way to salvation. For a Christian, the Torah is just half of the story. For a Jew, the Torah is the whole story; the phrase offends some Jews because it implies that without Jesus, they are incomplete or imperfect.

Here, then, is the question that underlies Coulter's mouthing-off: why should I, a Jew, be offended because Coulter or any other Christian believes that her religion is superior to mine? The difference between Jews and Christians is 2,000 years old and rests on this fundamental: Christians believe that Jesus is the Messiah. Jews believe the Messiah is yet to come. Each group believes at some basic level that theirs is the right, best path, or they would choose a different one. In a nation that protects the religious freedom of all with all its might, at a time in history when Jews in America may claim their own religious truth without fearing for their lives, why not imagine a polite way to talk about our differences instead of pasting them over or throwing rhetorical bombs? The problem with Ann Coulter is not, in this particular case, that she thinks her way is more perfect than mine but that she incites and revels in hate talk for profit. Nobody's perfect, least of all Coulter—and I'm not worried about what she thinks about me.



JEW FOR JESUS: Evangelizing in NYC

**Nobody is perfect, least of all Ann Coulter—and I'm not going to worry about what she thinks about me.**

2007

COURTESY OF DISCUSS (TOP), PHOTOGRAPH BY LAUREN FLEISHMAN FOR NEWSWEEK

### On 'Defining' the Jews

LISA MILLER MADE SOME EXCELLENT points in "On 'Perfecting' the Jews" (PERISCOPE, Nov.5) in responding to pundit Ann Coulter. However, it is an oversimplification to say that the difference between Judaism and Christianity is whether Jesus is the Messiah. Judaism's uncompromising view of monotheism and belief in mankind's ability to serve and return directly to God is what defines our unique spiritual identity and makes us Jews not Christians.

**RABBI BENTZION KRAVITZ**, *Founder*  
Jews for Judaism International  
LOS ANGELES, CALIF.

JEW FOR JUDAISM LIFELINE is a free publication of JEWS FOR JUDAISM (Canada). JEWS FOR JUDAISM is the only international educational, outreach and counselling organization exclusively dedicated to counteracting the efforts of evangelical Christian missionary and cult groups that specifically target Jews for conversion.

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Published by the Canadian office of:

**JEWS FOR JUDAISM**

2795 Bathurst St., P.O. Box 41032  
Toronto ON Canada M6B 4J6

Phone: (905) 761-0040 • Fax: (905) 761-0070

Website: [www.jewsforjudaism.org](http://www.jewsforjudaism.org)

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Publications Mail Agreement Number 1806041

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# Unraveling the Red String

A Jewish anti-missionary and his organization take on The Kabbalah Centre.

by Amy Klein  
Religion Editor

It's just before midnight, and the Robertson neighborhood is bustling. Teenagers are hanging out on corners near the pharmacy and suited men and high-heeled women are walking from synagogue to synagogue to attend the lecture of their choice.

It's the first night of Shavuot, the holiday that celebrates when the Jews received the Torah, and it's customary to stay up all night studying Jewish topics in what's called a *tikkun Leyl Shavuot*, which literally means a repair (as in *tikkun olam*). It's repair for the fact that the Israelites fell asleep the night before the Torah was given; they were not excited enough, so now Jews, throughout the centuries, have studied, sometimes in private *chevruta* but often by listening to scholars speak.

Around this neighborhood — and the city — the standard lectures were being given on topics ranging from the Book of Ruth to Israel, but something off the beaten path was taking place on Robertson Boulevard in a lecture at Anshei Emet Synagogue. The subject was “Kabbalah and the Red String.”

Kabbalah is not often a topic studied by the Orthodox (who believe, according to tradition, that the mystical studies should only be done by scholars older than 40), and this was not necessarily a lecture one would expect to be delivered by Rabbi Yehonatan Kravitz, who is the head of Jews for Judaism, an anti-missionary and anti-cult center.

Jews for Judaism was founded 21 years ago “to keep Jews Jewish and defend the community from threats and missionaries.” Its primary purpose has been to rain Jews to ward off traditional missionaries, such as Jews for Jesus (which its name lends to parody), messianic Jews, Mormons and Evangelical Christians.

But kabbalists?

At the late-night lecture addressed to some 40 men and women — seated separately on wood benches on the men's side of the synagogue — Kravitz never mentioned any kabbalah institution by name. Well, not exactly. But add up the references to red string, Madonna, Britney Spears, Ashton Kutcher, expensive holy water and you can put it all together. The rabbi was alluding to the controversial practices of The Kabbalah Centre, whose L.A. base is on Robertson Boulevard.

“If Madonna can wear a T-shirt saying he's a cult member, who am I to argue with her?” Kravitz said.

Kabbalah is a library of Jewish mystical writings initiated in the 12th and 13th centuries of the common era in the books of the Zohar. The Zohar tells you the mystical reasons of the commandments, and that when you follow these commandments, you hasten the bringing of the Messiah.

During the hourlong midnight lecture Kravitz discussed why the kabbalah being promulgated by celebrities at the Kabbalah

Centre is not the real kabbalah of ancient Jewish mystics. He talked of what true mystical study really is and how religious Jews can benefit from it in their own spiritual practices.

He spoke of what it means to have spiritual *kavanah*, or intention, when you do something. Spiritual intention is good, he said, but intention without action is meaningless. Take charity for example. One can be meditating kabbalistically on charity, “but if there's a person sitting opposite you starving to death, you're commanded to actually feed them.”

Mystical thoughts can enhance spiritual

like the University of Judaism. But Kravitz's open questioning of the center represents a shift in the notion of what constitutes today's missionaries and today's threats to Judaism.

“I don't think cults have become less of a threat today; there are just different kinds of cults,” he said. “There are psychotherapy cults, freedom of mind cults.... People being pressured to volunteer and get their friends to join — if you're told that you can't benefit from the program, that may be a form of manipulation,” he said.

“I don't need to call [The Kabbalah Centre] a cult. They don't understand what a cult

center would not be spending one day on that if they couldn't sell it. Kabbalah was once a matter of defiance and freedom of creativity nowadays it is [www.kabbalah.com](http://www.kabbalah.com) — not ‘dot-edu’ and not ‘dot-org’ — but commerc. The center is part of the new age, part globalization. They are trying to couple spiritual grace with material success.”

“The Kabbalah Centres today have nothing to do with the Divine Plan for hidden meaning of the text or with any of that,” Eli said. “They are basically about selling books for people who don't read them... or for people who believe that by having a red string, drinking holy water they are connecting to the mysteries of the world.”

But not all rabbis and scholars of the Jewish mainstream agree with Kravitz's dire assessment.

Jody Myers, professor of religious studies and coordinator of the Jewish studies program at CSUN, is writing a book about the popularization of kabbalah in America. She doesn't believe that there is any such thing as authentic kabbalah, and she points out that The Kabbalah Centre doesn't claim to be part of the Jewish community. Myers says she neither condemns nor condones The Kabbalah Centre.

In terms of its fundraising, Myers says that The Kabbalah Centre needs to raise funds, as do all Jewish organizations; it's just doing it differently.

“I think that the American Jewish community puts a lot of pressure on people to raise money. It costs a awful lot of money to be Jewish today,” she said. At The Kabbalah Centre, “there are no membership fees, there is no annual membership; they get money from selling stuff at charging for lectures and classes. At they get money asking people to donate to a good cause, which is them.”

The participants, she said “give the money freely; they feel very grateful for [the center] and they are getting something from them that they are not getting from somewhere else.”

In the past, The Kabbalah Centre has shrugged off its critics.

At one Shabbat service in 1997, which *The Jewish Journal* attended, center founder Philip Berg sermonized that rabbis who oppose the center “don't want you to know the truth. They want you to live in chaos. They are the enemies of enlightenment.”

During the last two decades, Kravitz said that Jews for Judaism has worked with thousands of people — people targeted by missionaries and cults and their concerned family members — and in recent years, they have included people from the center. “[The people that I've come into contact with] clearly accuse The Kabbalah Centre of being very manipulative and being very deceptive with their promises,” he said.

What advice does Kravitz offer to those at risk of an unhealthy involvement?

“Always use critical thinking,” the rabbi said. “Always question. Don't accept what people say because it sounds good at first.”

For more information, visit this story online at [www.jewishjournal.com](http://www.jewishjournal.com). ■



Britney Spears in her video for “Everytime” — wearing her red string from The Kabbalah Centre. Photo by WENN

practice, “but the action is always the main thing,” he said. “And without mentioning names, when people take the action out of it, they're missing the purpose of why we do mitzvot and connecting to God.”

At the center, a common practice is to read letters and words repeatedly, including the Zohar, the original kabbalistic mystical text.

Kravitz earlier told *The Journal* in a phone interview that he didn't want to focus on The Kabbalah Centre by name because “I'm not interested in giving them more publicity. It's giving them credibility — they don't belong in the paper — every time some star decides to do something with them, they deserve space in a Jewish paper?” he asked, referring to *The Jewish Journal*. “To me, they're no different than Mormonism or Jews for Jesus or Scientology. They're using the terminology to make themselves look Jewish, but they're not part of it.”

This was not the first time Kravitz has delivered his lecture “Kabbalah and the Red String,” whose advance flyer included questions: “Why are people seeking answers to modern-day issues in an ancient Jewish wisdom? Why has kabbalah left so many disillusioned, angry and confused?”

In the last couple of years, he's delivered the same talk at synagogues and institutions

is. A cult is a group that uses deception and manipulation to keep members in its group.”

Rabbi Michael Berg, co-director of The Kabbalah Centre, was not available for comment as of press time. He has denied in the media that The Kabbalah Centre is a cult and rejects the idea that anyone is being brainwashed. In 2000, he told *New Times*, “One of the basic teachings of the center is, ‘Don't accept a word that anyone tells you; you have to come to your own understanding and live with it.’ Unlike many other religious organizations, there's no coercion. It's the opposite of that. We're very open that we need financial support to continue publishing books and running the organization, but there's no push. It's more like, ‘If you have a chance, please help us out.’”

Kravitz, of course, is far from being the first Jewish rabbi or academic scholar to denounce the center.

For example, in February, the UCLA Center for Jewish Studies hosted Rachel Elior, a professor of Jewish philosophy and Jewish mystical thought, and chair of Hebrew University's department of Jewish studies, to discuss “The History of Jewish Mysticism and West Coast Kabbalah.” Elior was much more direct than Kravitz. She said that The Kabbalah Centre is “part of the new age phenomenon, when ideas are for sale. The

# A NEW MISSION

## A MINISTER'S JOURNEY TO TORAH JUDAISM

The robust man has a curious combination of youthfulness and experience in his face. He sports a Vandyke and a yarmulke and wields literacy in dikduk and Tanach like a master swordsman. Behind ice-blue eyes lurk worlds of wisdom. This is Gavriel Aryeh Sanders, a Jew who knows a thing or two about Christian missionaries. He might even look like one — a missionary, that is. After all, he was one.

Today, this bracing intellect, when not exhorting his spiritual kim to get really excited about being Jewish in his frequent

local and national lectures, can be found behind his desk at ArtScroll/Mesorah Publications, where he markets that publisher's books. It's now been several years since the former evangelical minister converted al pi halachah to Torah Judaism, and over two decades since he abandoned the church.

But the path of return home taken by a neshamah named Gavriel Aryeh ben Avraham began in the land where it all began: the Holy Land.

BY MENDY HECHT

Mark Sanders had an American upbringing, "but in a rather fractured context," as he describes it, sadly not typical of his late-50s generation. Born in Atlanta, he attended Catholic school in his early elementary years, and his parents divorced when he was still young. He wistfully recalls relocating with his family every year, tearing up roots to settle down in a new hometown and school all across America about once every twelve months, setting the stage for a searching soul to start asking serious questions.

"When I hit my teen years, I started asking what somebody would call in [the] philosophical sense 'ontological questions,' questions of being." That was his first inkling of the presence of what he would later learn was a dormant Jewish soul, a spark whose kindling was some twenty years in the future at that point.

fective in winning Jews over to the missionary message. When asked about his view of Jews at the time, he states, "I saw them as wonderful people who were loved by G-d but lost. I participated in many conferences, studies and prayer meetings where we would strategize how to best persuade Jews to believe in [Christianity]. When I lived in Israel, there were perhaps thirty messianic congregations around the country; today there are well over a hundred."

It was in the church that he picked up the rich, fluid vocabulary and recording-arts aptitude that can be discerned today in his weekly radio show. He interned as a studio technician for a religious Christian radio station, and also picked up a career in preaching the faith to the faithful. By the time he turned twenty-four, he was a licensed minister.

By 1977, with several years of teaching and preaching under his belt, he found himself in Israel, as a Hebrew language student in a kibbutz *ulpan*. He'd been sent there by an evangelical Christian group based in California. But there were far more ominous goals in mind — Sanders, if this writer understands his story correctly, was an undercover missionary.

But Sanders explains: "It wasn't so 'undercover' as it was just not overt. ... In those days, in the 70s and 80s, you couldn't be an official missionary unless you were part of a church. So I was there — first as a student of language and then as a teacher of language — and I used that as, I guess you could say, a front or a legitimate reason for being there, and that would give me the platform from which I could create relationships, discussions, because that's what it's all about."

His first stint, beginning in June of 1977, lasted seven months. "I've been to Israel fourteen times," he states. "The last two as

a Jew."

After a year or two of work stints in Israel, Sanders was fluent in Hebrew, and, more importantly, fluent in the Israeli cultural idiom. But he decided to take it to the next level — to apply his ever-growing command of the Hebrew language and its grammatical rules to study the "Bible" in its original form of *lashon hakodesh*.

And the seeds — tiny seeds that would later turn into a mighty cedar of new faith—were implanted in his mind.



Learning Torah from the source: Gavriel visiting with Harato Shkono Wolbe, zt"l.

He engaged in philosophical and religious discussions with anyone he could enlist. He was introduced to the evangelical movement through missionaries in a park who approached him casually, inviting him to their youth group and church services. He says, "I joined them not so much for theological reasons at first. I didn't understand all that yet. They showed me love and care. That's why I joined."

He went to Israel to acquire the necessary language and culture skills to make him more credible and ef-



Sanders was fascinated by the Torah, especially by *Nach*. Now he could learn his beloved "Bible" in its original language, unsullied by numerous often-conflicting versions and read the actual text spoken and written by the Prophets. Now he could scrutinize the Christian interpretations of the *Tanach* the way they actually appeared in the Hebrew Scriptures, without anything lost in translation or in the mists of time.

But there was only one problem: The original texts had slight differences from their English-language counterparts. While some were differences of one word or two, they utterly changed the entire meaning of whole verses and chapters ... and threatened the integrity of whole faith systems.

*Could it be? Could it be the Jews were right all along?* The thought was too much to bear, and he shook it from his mind.

Many problematic passages kept popping up, one after the other. Sanders' head was spinning. And the answers he got were anything but satisfactory.

"If we could identify some mountain peaks in the range of my process, then I could say that one of them was going to a countermissionary lecture with Rabbi Bentzion Kravitz of Jews for Judaism in Los Angeles in 1984. There I heard a clear, consistent and reasonable case for why everything I believed in was either distorted or deceptive. I recall a disturbing discussion I had with a Yad L'Achim countermissionary worker in Israel that happened down by the Kosel — that was in '83 or '82 — and he really knew his stuff; that had a lingering effect on me."

Rabbi Kravitz had organized a significant rally to respond to aggressive missionary efforts to reach Jews in Los Angeles during an international sporting event in 1984. Sanders was part of that outreach and had been officially sent by the church to attend the Jews for Judaism rally and report on what the Jewish community was saying and doing to counter

Gavriel Sander engaging in dialogue after a lecture.



8

20 TEVES 5767  
JANUARY 10, 2007

Hamodia Magazine Section

Feature

Jews for Judaism

L I F E **4** L I N E



its work. But as Kravitz and others discussed the co-opting of Jewish symbols and rituals, and as they explained the abuse and misuse of the Jewish Scriptures to prove the basics of the Christian beliefs, he realized he was in theological quicksand. "And worse — I was pulling Jews into it with me," he remembers. "I had converted a number of Jews over the years."

I ask him what his moment of truth was. "People commonly ask me that question," he points out. "They're looking for that single event. It wasn't a single event. It was a process of events."

That process picked up steam when Sanders started realizing the truth behind the tactics used by his fellow missionaries. "We were abusing people under the guise of counseling," he recalls. "I mean, we were giving them inaccurate information about the source of their problems and the solutions. ... We were giving them this spiritual placebo that didn't really work in the long run. And I saw that."

It was thus in September of 1986 that Sanders, then a pastoral staff member of a large church in California, quit active Christianity, disappointed. The inherent and substantial falsehood of the "Three Hundred Proofs," and the aggressive, unethical tactics being used by church personnel in Israel, had finally come across to him as one big fallacy.

"And then I became what I call a 'goy for nothing' for a number of years," he explains. "I was searching,

I was questioning. My whole paradigm of life and truth and reality had sort of crumbled — it was a very awkward situation. I wasn't where I was, and I wasn't where I was going to be. It was a between stage that was very uncomfortable."

The next few years found Sanders wandering around, both physically and spiritually. These peregrinations included a stint in Saudi Arabia. "It was very hard for me to focus on working after I left the church in '86," he recounts. "I was in a lot of internal conflict and pain. I promoted tours to Israel and Egypt — then the first Intifada broke out! I marketed financial services to teachers. I worked nights for a start-up airport van service. It was tough to figure out what a burnt-out and broken ex-preacher could do. There were no transition services for this lot."

"I got a very interesting position teaching English to Bedouin recruits with the Royal Saudi Naval Forces Technical Institute of Naval Studies in Dammam, located on the Gulf. It was hot, humid and very restrictive living. But it paid well," recalls Sanders. "I happened to be in Saudi Arabia during the first Gulf War. Our area had frequent Scud attacks, including the last one that killed two dozen American personnel about two miles from my base. I learned a lot of Arabic and gained some very useful insights into the Islamic worldview, especially vis-à-vis Jews, the West and Islamic ideas of prophecy. And of course I had many offers to convert to Islam!"

In 1992, now back in California, Sanders picked up a book by the late Rabbi Aryeh Kaplan on Jewish meditation — his first serious foray into Jewish spiritual practices. "I realized it was a very viable faith system; it wasn't an artifact or a relic. It was alive and transformative — that's the important thing I realized by reading Kaplan's work."

It was in March/April of 1996 that he enrolled in a nine-month adult bar mitzva/conversion course offered locally through the Reform movement and "converted" by their standards to become a regular participant in their services. Sanders reflects, "At that time, just ten years ago, I didn't understand the vital differences between Torah Judaism and the knockoff versions that were created out of rebellion, denial and revisionism." But after three years of Reform services, with Sanders often leading the minyan and Torah study discussions on Shabbos, he came to a startling conclusion that would fuel the next phase of his personal journey to Har Sinai. "I realized that if Judaism was a house, I was living on the porch, and I wanted to be a *ben bayis*."

He migrated out of the Reform congregation and submitted to a rigorous, nearly two-year program of conversion through the Rabbinical Council of California. Sanders recalls, "They were tough. I worked with Rabbi Avraham Union, Rabbi Tzvi Holland, Rabbi Yitzchak Summers, Rabbi Nachum Sauer and other key L.A.-based *rebbe'im*. My teaching Rav was Rabbi Asher Biron. They were kind, but demanding and appropriately cautious. Today, I have enormous *hakaras hatov* for their standards."

After his *gerus al pi halachah* in Los Ange-

les in Kislev 5760, Sanders assisted Rabbi Kravitz of Jews for Judaism to expand the local educational outreach of the organization. He wrote materials, authored grant petitions, gave lectures in schools and shuls throughout Southern California and counseled a number of Jews who'd been influenced by missionaries.

In the summer of 2000, he was offered a very attractive position in New York marketing a new communications platform for insurance brokers. "It was my dream to relocate to New York," he says. "The level of Torah learning and living resources here are exceptional." While the marketing position fizzled after Sept. 11, Sanders had gained valuable experience. For nearly five years, he's been applying that to the marketing of books for ArtScroll/Mesorah Publications where he's worked on numerous well-known projects.

While appropriately busy with his work and his early-morning learning at a Five Towns yeshiva, Sanders makes time to rectify the impact of his past. He speaks often on behalf of Jews for Judaism and Yad L'Achim. He writes articles and produces audio recordings explaining the mistranslations and out-of-context interpretations of missionary texts. He periodically interviews former messianics on his radio program. "I can't get to all those Jews I influenced all those years ago. But I can do something today to curtail the incursions the missionaries are making into our communities. I'm arming Jews with knowledge. And that's the essential weapon against false representations from missionaries and deceptive cults."

Today, Gavriel Sanders is a popular speaker on the Jewish lecture circuit, a respected member of the Five Towns, New York, *frum* community where he lives, and a growing *talmid chacham*. A convert since 1999, he married his Jewish soul mate in 2002 and often brings her along on his frequent lectures. Like *gerim* historically have, he moves fluidly among *Yiddishkeit's* heterogeneous *hashkofos* and communities, with friends and eager listeners in Litvish, chassidic, Lubavitch and Young Israel circles equally.

And, like *gerim* also have historically done, he'd like to improve the spiritual status of his brethren. The Rambam himself alludes to as much in comparing converts to *tzaraas* — superficially meddlesome but spiritually of mighty benefit.

"I have this axiomatic statement," he posits. "When Jews are weak, missionaries are strong, and when Jews are strong, missionaries are weak. What gives us strength is knowledge. It's a matter of education, but I'm not referring to factoids about Judaism."

In closing the interview, Sanders says he feels passionately about one thing more than anything else: "At the end of the day, I have to have a personal relationship with *Hakadosh Baruch Hu* that touches me and influences me when I'm all by myself, when there's no one there to see whether or not I say a *brachah* before eating or if I *bentched*. All of us are good conformists in the presence of other people — but how well does it work when we're by ourselves? And how well does it work when we're going through rough times? To not be a fair-weather friend to *Hakadosh Baruch Hu* is critical. ... If the soul is satisfied and connected to *Avinu Malkeinu*, it doesn't matter what the news is, good or bad. A person of weak faith looks at difficulty and asks, 'How do I get out of this?' whereas a person of *bitachon* looks at the same difficulty and asks, 'What do I get out of this?'"

Finally, we discussed why Jews should be Jewish. "The food's pretty good!" he jokes. He holds that every Jew — *frum*-born included — should become a *baal teshuvah*. To blaze his or her own trail to G-d. "That doesn't mean that one should go away and come back — *Echta v'ashuv*," he explains. "It means that each of us have the opportunity to do *teshuvah* in a way that enflames our heart and enlightens our mind." □



Hamodia Magazine Section

Feature

20 TEVES 5767  
JANUARY 10, 2007



9

# The Missionary Challenge

By Braha Bender

The facts are sobering: they are successful.

A study by the Council of Jewish Federations conducted in 1990 confirmed that over 600,000 Jews in North America alone identify themselves with some form of Christianity. Does that number look familiar? Worse still, in a mass movement marking a landmark innovation in modern anti-Semitism, today being Jewish and being Christian is no longer in conflict, according to the millions of "Messianic Jews" and "Hebrew Christians" worldwide who make every effort to convince Jewish people of all denominations that being a good Jew includes embracing the false messiah.

"Messianic rabbis" educate Jewish children in "Messianic yeshivas," wearing yarmulkes, *talleisim* and other Jewish accoutrements, Shabbos and High Holiday services in "Hebrew Christian synagogues" are intelligently designed to goad the unsuspecting Jewish layman into a relationship with false gods. The name of the Christian deity is delicately glossed over, and changed to a misleading Hebrew term. Women of these faiths often cover their hair when they get married, wear clothing in congruence with the laws of *tznius* and keep their meat and dairy dishes separate. Not surprisingly, the founder and international director of the infamous organization that claims Jews are promoting the Christian deity is known by the name of Moishe Rosen.

Over 900 organizations dedicated to this method of Christian missionary activity currently exist in North America, with the numbers of "synagogues" such as those described having swelled from 20 to over 400 in the past twenty years. The threat doesn't end with North America, though. Over 100 of these congregations have been discovered in Israel, over 40 in South America and over 38 in the former Soviet Union. In case you thought you could rely on the Jewish State to provide its Jewish citizens with protection against this sort

keep in mind that in July of the year 2000, the organization alleging that Jews support the Christian deity was granted official status in Israel as a government recognized entity. As Israel relies more and more

*The past 25 years have seen over 275,000 Jews strengthen their relationship with their Jewish heritage by taking on the Christian faith.*

heavily upon the generous financial aid of various Christian organizations, allowances like this become nearly impossible for the government to avoid.

Whether functioning in North America or Israel, however, the calamity wrought by organizations like this remains the same: to the average secular Jew, the difference between these masquerading missionaries and the *frum* community is not readily apparent whatsoever. Thanks to charlatans like these, the past 25 years have seen over 275,000 Jews decide to strengthen their relationship with their Jewish heritage by taking on the Christian faith. Is there anything that we in the *frum* community could have done, when these men and women sought Torah and became tragically misled? Are we doing anything about it now?

Although most of the Jews preyed upon by these groups are Torah-ignorant, many do not fit the stereotype of a psychologically unstable person that we might assume is particularly susceptible to being successfully swayed by missionaries. Places like college campuses, seniors' residences and malls in or near large Jewish communities are often fertile ground for missionary activity.

"Testimonies" by Jews documenting their journeys into Christianity abound. Rich

researcher from Brooklyn, talks about his experience: "If someone had just walked up to me out of a church and said that I needed to believe in the Christian deity, I would have probably said no. Contemporary Jews are open to many things, but the Christian deity, as we understand 'the Christians' believe in him, is not an option. Yet..." Today, this man is a proud and practicing *ba'al avodah zarah*. How many pogroms, expulsions and ghettos did this man's grandparents survive in order to make sure that he would be born — and remain — a Jew?

We fool ourselves by believing that only secular Jews are

*In our modern day and age, do Christians care more about our secular Jewish brothers and sisters than we do?*

targeted by missionary efforts. During the grand finale for the five-year Behold Your G-d campaign, sponsored by the organization which claims that Jews promote the Christian deity, over 80,000 free DVDs in a high-level, fluent Yiddish, featuring the attractively "frum" cover art of an aged rabbi blowing a *shofar*, were sent to *chareidi* Jewish homes across the New York area, to communities including Monsey, Lakewood, Williamsburg, Borough Park, New Square, Flatbush and other neighborhoods that many continue to believe are invulnerable. At least three quarters of this entertaining "kosher" DVD had to be viewed before its actual message became clear: the life and importance of the Christian deity as the messiah. The five-year campaign claimed some one thousand Jewish converts.

Comments Penina Taylor, founder and director of the Shomrei Emet Institute for Counter-Missionary Studies, "We probably didn't lose one *frum*, Yiddish-speaking adult, but it's the kids who grabbed these DVDs and watched them. Dangerous seeds have now been planted in our children's minds."

"Hundreds of kids are walking around today with a head full of *Gemara* and a heart full of nothing," adds Rabbi Gavriel Sanders, a leading authority in anti-missionary work in the world today, regarding the widening phenomenon of kids at risk. "Missionaries make quick work out of kids like that." Mrs. Taylor and Rabbi

Sanders, like many leaders in the Jewish anti-missionary world today, were both once successful ministers proselytizing for the other side. For many previously Christian *ba'alei teshuvah*, such intimate knowledge of the Christian world comes in handy in debunking missionary success.

Unfortunately, Christian missionary success is not surprising. Christian outreach organizations overflow with human and financial resources. Christian organizations the world over pour more than \$300 million dollars per year into efforts strictly dedicated to aggressively evangelizing the Jewish People. A \$16 million dollar theme park in Orlando, Florida, called The Holy Land Experience, coaches Christian visitors about the importance and practice of evangelizing their Jewish acquaintances. The organization promoting Jews for the Christian deity proudly presents a pie chart on their website displaying how a full 81% of their entire international revenue, approximately \$15

*"We make a mistake when we assume that sincerity — in and of itself — is necessarily a good thing..."*

million dollars every year, is spent on evangelism.

Missionary methods are nothing if not creative.

"We know college is really expensive," begins a catchy internet advertisement. "[The organization of Jews promoting the Christian deity] is pleased to make grants available to qualified students for certain levels of commitment." While our grandparents sacrificed their lives through the fires of the Inquisition and the Holocaust rather than convert to Christianity, today their grandchildren are easily bribed into "certain levels of commitment" to Christianity, out of an ignorance that we in the *frum* community are forced to admit lands squarely in our court.

"The difference between Christian outreach and Torah outreach [evadil]," explains Rabbi Sanders, "is that we in the *frum* community send professionals out to entertain people, while we sit at home and wait for them to do their job. The Christian outreach paradigm reflects an entirely different mindset. Whether he serves as a doctor, a lawyer or a worker

flipping burgers at a fast food joint, every Christian believes that his or her own personal most important job and mission in life is to save people's souls by making them believe in the Christian deity." The largest percentage of Jews converted to Christianity is converted by lay Christians encountered at school, at work or socially.

"Every individual Christian sees himself as an outreach professional," continues Rabbi Sanders. "Which is why they don't wait for somebody else to tell non-religious people about their god. They make friends and form personal relationships. When your neighbor, whose kids play with your kids, invites you over for a barbecue, you don't get defensive. He's your friend! When, in a moment of special camaraderie, he tells you that he just wants to bless you with a prayer that the Lord comes into your life, you don't get upset. You might even give his words some thought. After all, you know he really cares about you. His blessings are sincere."

"We make a mistake when we assume that sincerity — in and of itself — is necessarily a good thing," says an article published by the anti-missionary activist organization Jews for Judaism. "Hitler, *ym"sh*, was most likely also quite sincere in his belief that the world would someday thank him."

Rabbi Sanders concludes emphatically, "If we want to see results, then it's this sort of outreach that has to become as common among the *frum* community as saying *Aleinu* after *davening*!" Let alone opening new programs, campaigns, creative initiatives and theme parks. As we reflect on how the relatively few *ktuv* organizations that already do exist must struggle for financial support as well as for volunteer efforts, the accuracy of Rabbi Sander's observations hits home. We are forced to face the question: In our modern day and age, do Christians care more about our secular Jewish brothers and sisters than we do?

Several counter-missionary organizations stand at the helm of the battle being waged against targeted missionary efforts in the Jewish community. Jews for Judaism, the leading organization in the Jewish anti-missionary field today, has been responding to evangelical Christian and cult activity in the Jewish community since 1985.

With centers around the globe, Jews for Judaism fights fire with fire. Anti-missionary educational seminars, proactively geared towards equipping the modern Jew with the information he or she needs to respond to the convincing claims made by missionaries,

HAMODIA, Jerusalem, Israel, June 20, 2007, Page C4, C5

This edition of Lifeline is dedicated

to the blessed memory of  
**Albert Mendelson, z"l**  
**Eliyahu ben Meir Ber**  
אליהו בן מאיר בער ז"ל

Who passed away on  
Cheshvan 9, 5768  
ט' חשוון תשס"ח

His deep love and commitment  
to Judaism and Israel  
was the guiding force of his life.

July 6, 1921 – Oct. 21, 2007

provide an analysis of falsified Christian "proof texts." Private and familial counseling sessions counter damage already done by successful missionary activity. Their free North American hotline, 1-800-4-PROOF-1, depicts the organization's educational bent.

"Proof texts" that missionaries provide vacillate between falsified claims, hollow mistranslations of verses and authentically quoted Biblical passages that are framed entirely out of context. Christian falsifications are designed to sound

thing tugging at us to connect with G-d. We decided to pick up the phone book and look under synagogues. There was one listed, and since we had no idea that Messianic Judaism is not a recognized form of Judaism, we called for the meeting times and set out on our adventure."

After describing the enthusiastic, serious involvement this couple grew into in the Messianic Jewish movement, the letter continues in a different vein. "Eventually, my husband and I had reached the point where no one in leadership could answer our questions or teach us what we wanted to learn." Years had gone by, though, and change had become much more difficult. "At this point, I suspected that we had been lied to, but it had been drummed into me so much that the Christian deity is the messiah that I was stuck. What to do? I prayed and prayed, asking G-d to show me. The struggle was

"... We felt some pulling, something tugging at us to connect with G-d."

authentic, accurate, complex and direct in their unavoidable implications. "The Dubna Maggid provides a metaphor for this," says Rabbi Sanders. "They're like the man who shoots an arrow and then draws the bull's-eye around it wherever it lands." For the ignorant, however, arguments like these can be very compelling.

More compelling, however, is Christianity's historical and continuing emphasis on emotional involvement. Christian ceremonies, particularly those focused on evangelical action, are upbeat, inspiring, aesthetically pleasing and led by charismatic leaders who are focused on showing their congregants a good time.

Comments Rabbi Sanders, "The Christian orientation towards the intellect is completely different than ours. As *frum* Jews, we have been trained to practice the *shidduch* system" in everything we do. We value intellectually evaluating whether something is true before letting ourselves get emotionally involved. Christians, however, are encouraged to [devote themselves with a blind fervor]. Once [that happens], you know, you're willing to make compromises." Compromises in basic moral and intellectual integrity have not been foreign to Christian history since the religion's inception centuries ago.

For Jews today who have been lured into the Christian mindset, letting go of these emotional attachments may require a serious struggle, despite the intellectual clarity they might have acquired. In 2002, over 4,500 counseling sessions to aid individuals and families who were victimized by missionary activity were held by Jews for Judaism.

"After several years of marriage, my husband and I became interested in religion and how we would raise our children," relates an anonymous Jewish woman writing to Jews for Judaism. "Neither of us had much of a religious upbringing, but we felt some pulling, some-

*Their dedication must inspire our dedication.*

immense; after all, if I rejected the Christian deity and he was the messiah, then I would be roasting ... for all of eternity."

However, help for this young couple was not far away, *baruch Hashem*. With the help of an online support group, an e-mail from a *baal teshuvah* with a similar background, and an exchange with Rabbi Moshe Shulman, the couple was led to Jews for Judaism.

After several weeks of counseling, the couple began to discover the beauty of authentic Torah Judaism. "The next Shabbos we spent in Los Angeles with friends of Rabbi Shulman. I found it amazing that people who didn't even know us would open their homes and welcome us. That weekend is still a blur to me. It was Rosh Hashanah, and, in a way, it was a whole new beginning." Thanks to Jews for Judaism and the *kiruv* efforts of the Los Angeles Jewish community, this young couple had begun their journey home.

The Christian missionary effort challenges our community to take action in our own *kiruv* efforts. Their dedication must inspire our dedication. With the help of Hashem, every one of us has the opportunity to respond to the challenge and share in reaping the rewards of success.

*For all your comments and suggestions related to the "The World of Kiruv" column, please e-mail kiruvupdate@gmail.com*

*For assistance or questions related to kiruv, please call the Oz Nidberu Kiruv Hotline at 1-800-98 KIRUV.*

## Jewish community girds for Christian messianic drive

By DAVID LAZARUS  
Staff Reporter

Jews for Jesus plans to open a branch in Montreal as part of "Behold Your God," its international missionary campaign to convert Jews to Christianity that starts here Sept. 18 and runs for three weeks.

The missionary group's website says the new outpost will be led by Karl deSouza from its Toronto office.

"Karl will be leading the [Montreal] branch, and we hope that through the campaign, friendships with many Christians and contact with many Jewish seekers will get off to a running start," the site says.

Jews for Jesus says deSouza was born in Karachi, Pakistan, and that his mother is "from the Bene-Israel Jewish community in India." It says "he came to know Jesus as his Messiah" in his senior year at Concordia University and that his parents have also "come to faith."

The group's five-year "Behold Your God" drive, launched in 2001, targets 65 cities around the world (outside Israel) with Jewish populations greater than 25,000. It has reached 40 so far.

In Canada, that has included a 2003 stop in Toronto, where Jews for Jesus claims to have reached 10 Jews "who trusted in Y'shua" - Jesus' Hebrew name - and several other dozen "who were willing to be followed up on," said Rabbi Michael Skobac, education director of Jews for Judaism.

The Toronto-based counter-missionary group has been working closely with Canadian Jewish Congress, Quebec region (CJC-Q), FEDERATION CJA and local synagogues to mount an all-out counter-campaign to run concurrently with the conversion effort.

Rebecca Rosenberg, CJC-Q's associate director, said the main goal is "to reach as many Jews as possible in order to let them know [Jews for Jesus] is coming and to know what to expect."

When it comes to missionary conversion efforts, "we have to subscribe to the notion that even one is too many," Rosenberg said. "We have to be there to safeguard Jewish community members."

Jews for Judaism believes Jews for Jesus and other such groups use deception to convert Jews, telling them that if they accept Jesus, they can still be "fulfilled" or "committed" Jews. Jews for Judaism also opposes the missionary group's selective targeting of Jews.

The counter-campaign's "launching pad," Rabbi Skobac said, will be a full

weekend of activities called "Stand Up for Judaism" to be held at the Beth Israel Beth Aaron Congregation. Slated events include a Sept. 19 "town hall meeting" with Rabbi Skobac and an all-day "counter-missionary survival seminar" on Sept. 18.

Other synagogues will have education and Shabbat programs, and rabbis will recruit volunteers from their pulpits.

The counter-campaign also features an eight-page insert in *The CJN* - an abridged version of a book by Jews for Judaism founder Rabbi Bentzion Kravitz, *The Jewish Response to Missionaries*.

Jews for Judaism is recruiting dozens of volunteers to "counter-leaflet" missionaries at high-traffic street-corners over the three-week period. Its campaign will also

include public seminars, events in Jewish schools, a hotline to call if missionaries are seen distributing material, and cellphone communication to make volunteers available at a moment's notice.

"We have a real comprehensive program," Rabbi Skobac said. "The idea is preventive education and to hopefully make the community less vulnerable."

Julius Ciss, Jews for Judaism's Toronto director, said that while Montreal Jews are probably less likely to be swayed by missionaries than Jews in other communities due to their strong "traditional" habits, the threat from Jews for Jesus still remains.

"According to [Jews for Jesus'] own website, they've given out 12 million pamphlets and 851 Jews have been 'converted,'" Ciss said. "Montreal is not immune."

He said that although Jews for Jesus has never established a permanent presence in Montreal, several "messianic synagogues" have been operating in the city for years.

On its website, Jews for Jesus describes Montreal as a city where "[h]edonism, relativism and secularism are rampant" and as one "that

needs the Gospel."

It says that in Montreal, "most Jews have never heard the Gospel in terms they can understand and are perishing without Messiah!"

Plans in Montreal, according to the site, include "broadsideing" the public with evangelical material in the downtown core, as well as telephone and door-to-door canvassing, staging a debate "between an Orthodox Jewish rabbi and messianic Jewish scholar," and holding "testimony evenings and film showings."

Jews for Judaism's hotline number in Montreal is 343-8710 and the group can be e-mailed at [montreal@jewsforjudaism.org](mailto:montreal@jewsforjudaism.org).

*'We have to be there to safeguard Jewish community members'*

*'Jews for Judaism is recruiting dozens of volunteers'*

# Da Vinci Code 'doesn't give us the real story:' rabbi

By JESSICA FREIMAN  
CJN Intern

The international bestseller *The Da Vinci Code* has generated much controversy worldwide with its conspiracy theories that question traditional Christian doctrine.

Author Dan Brown was on the right track, say Rabbi Michael Skobac, education director for Jews for Judaism, but he followed the wrong clues: the book's main allegations are based on fictions, but research is now pointing to the possibility of a bigger Church cover-up that is rooted in fact.

"A sense among many scholars is emerging that a real history of Christianity has been concealed from the beginning which has serious scholarship behind

it. It's a much more interesting story than Brown's. It's not conclusive or the final chapter of the story, but many scholars are beginning to head in this direction," Rabbi Skobac said.



Rabbi Michael Skobac

The rabbi told an audience at Shaarei Tefillah Congregation last month that *The Da Vinci Code* portrays the following as true: Jesus was married to Mary Magdalene, who was later portrayed by the Church as a prostitute; their child, Sarah, became the progenitor of French monarchs and this bloodline still exists today; and the Holy Grail is not really a chalice but a metaphor for this bloodline that has been protected by an ancient organization called the Priory of Sion, and its members

conceal clues about these truths in art. The first problem with the book, Rabbi

Skobac said, is that the claim on which it is based – that the Priory of Sion is a cult of secret goddess worshippers protecting secrets about Jesus' bloodline – is itself based upon a fabricated document.

In France's national library, there are documents from a group called the Priory of Sion listing its leading grandmasters in history, but journalists noticed that there was no record of who deposited these records.

In 1956, a group called the Priory of Sion – borrowing its name from a medieval Catholic Monastic order – registered with the French government, Rabbi Skobac said. It was organized by Pierre Plantard, an ultra-conservative anti-Semite obsessed with reuniting Europe under the Roman Catholic Church, which would be ruled by a monarchy descended from Jesus.

"Plantard fabricated these documents and had them planted throughout France. His co-conspirators confessed in the 1980s. Checkmate to *The Da Vinci Code*," Rabbi Skobac said.

Other historical fallacies are rampant in the book. "Dan Brown says that the marriage of Magdalene and Jesus is a matter of historical record, but there is no evidence that Jesus was married to anyone," Rabbi Skobac said.

"Next, Brown's character Teabing mentions an apocryphal gospel of Philip stating that Mary Magdalene was Jesus' 'companion.' Teabing says that the Aramaic word for 'companion' also means 'spouse.' The problem is, the gospel of Philip was not Aramaic. It was Coptic, which borrows its word for 'companion' from the Greek, which has no connection to 'spouse.'"

*The Da Vinci Code* postulates that its version of history has been obscured, yet "hundreds of scholars have not unearthed one shred of evidence to support Brown's half-baked truths," Rabbi Skobac said.

However, this doesn't mean that a real Christian truth has not been covered up for millennia, he added.

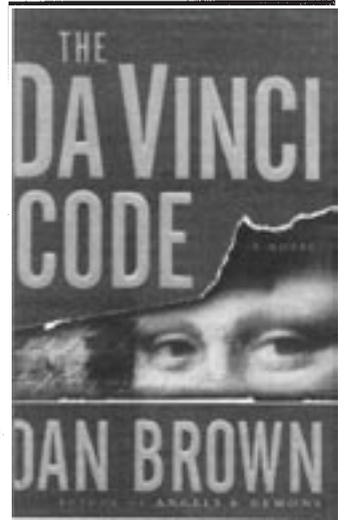
Mary's story is now being held to higher scrutiny by scholars, Rabbi Skobac said. Her status as the mother of God leads to implicit Christian doctrines like perpetual virginity – that Jesus did not have a human father.

The doctrine of perpetual virginity means that even after Jesus was born, Mary had no relations with Joseph, "painting her life as totally disconnected from how a Jewish woman would have lived 2,000 years ago," the rabbi said.

"In John 8:41, Jesus' opponents say to him, 'We were not born of fornication,' implying that Jesus was. Perhaps Jesus had an earthly father, but it wasn't Mary's husband."

In 176 CE, Rabbi Skobac said, a philosopher named Kelsus suggested that Jesus' father was a Roman soldier named Pantera. A Yeshua ben Pantera is listed in talmudic sources as having lived in the Galilee.

And a tombstone in Germany, document-



ed in 1906, lists the name Tiberius Julius Abdes Pantera, a soldier who fought in Palestine in the first century, he added.

"Studying his name, scholars determined that this Pantera was a freed slave, certainly Semitic and possibly Jewish. He left Palestine in 9 CE. The name and date seem correct."

Another slighted aspect of Jesus' life is the historically documented existence of his brother, James. "If Mary was practically deified, James was marginalized – ironic because scholars say James is the critical link to uncovering who Jesus was. It may not be a coincidence that James is so obscured, specifically because he is the key to understanding Jesus."

The Book of Acts "practically says nothing about disciples and relatives of Jesus," Rabbi Skobac said. "It's all about Paul of Tarsus."

"Paul never met Jesus but claims that Jesus appeared to him in a vision. For Paul, Jesus becomes the message," Rabbi Skobac said. "It's not about what Jesus taught."

"As Paul's church grew, Torah observance was jettisoned and Christian doctrines became standard. Relatives and Torah-observant disciples of Jesus became an embarrassment to the Church, so they were written out of the story."

*The Da Vinci Code* claims that a story about the origins of Christianity has been concealed. "That is true," Rabbi Skobac said, "but it doesn't give us the real story. The real one is substantial and emerges from the texts."

"Many of us feel that we are living in special times, that we are at a point of unfolding more truth in the world. I feel that this book by Brown could play a part in making people ask more questions and this would lead to uncovering more truths."

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