

Jews for Judaism

Lifeline

KEEPING JEWS JEWISH

3:5776

2795 Bathurst St., PO Box 41032, Toronto, ON Canada M6B 4J6 • 416-789-0020



This issue of *Lifeline* is an edited reprint of the Dec. 30, 2015 issue of *Ami Magazine*, which featured as its cover story an interview with Rabbi Michael Skobac, Director of Education and Counselling for Jews for Judaism.

EXCLUSIVE INTERVIEW

IS THE CATHOLIC CHURCH MISSIONIZING JEWS?

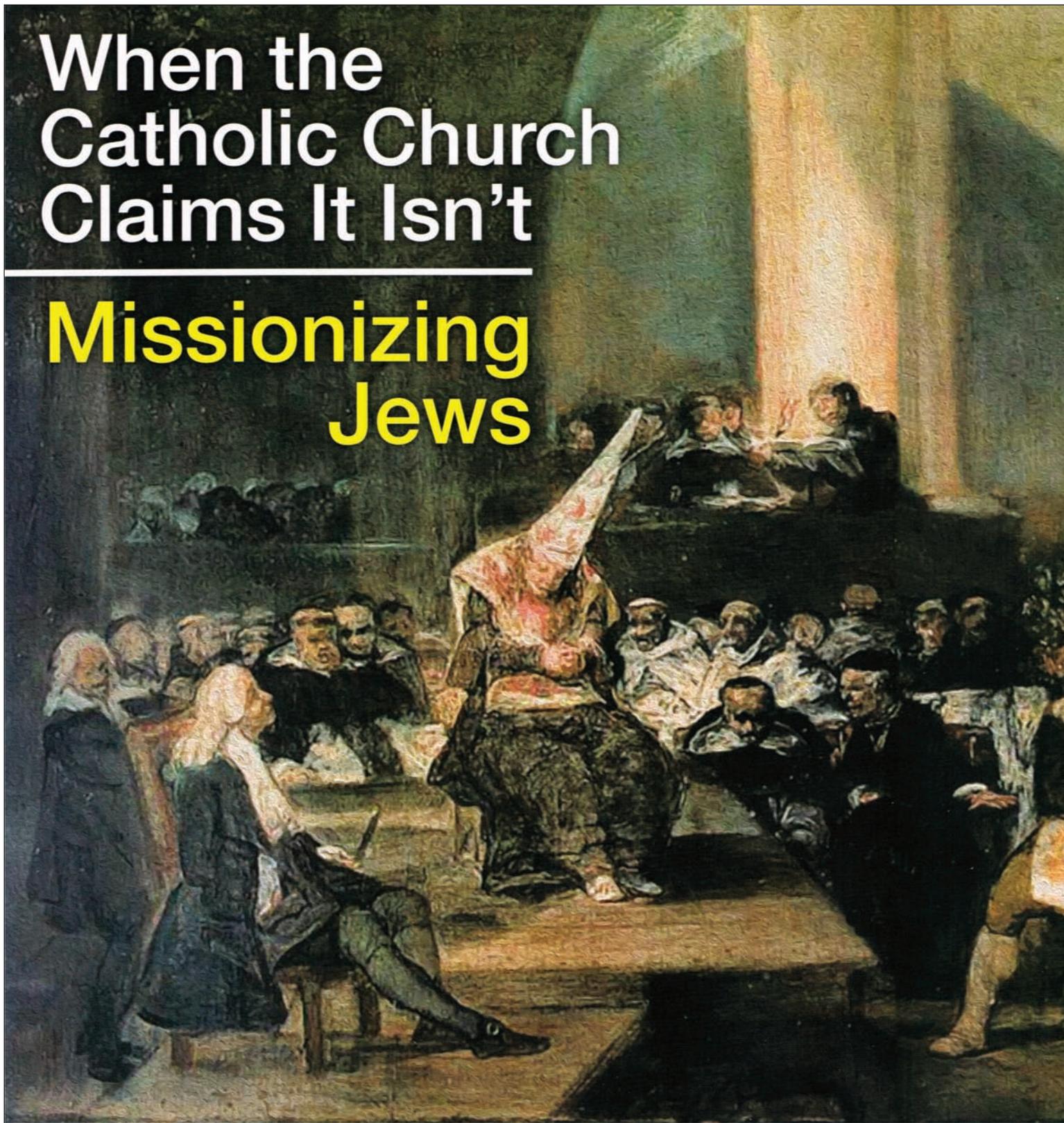
THIS MONTH THE VATICAN ANNOUNCED THAT IT ISN'T

A conversation with **Rabbi Michael Skobac** of Jews for Judaism

Cover of Ami Magazine, December 30, 2015 — Reprinted with permission. Cover Photograph: Mozes Yehudaioff

When the Catholic Church Claims It Isn't

Missionizing Jews



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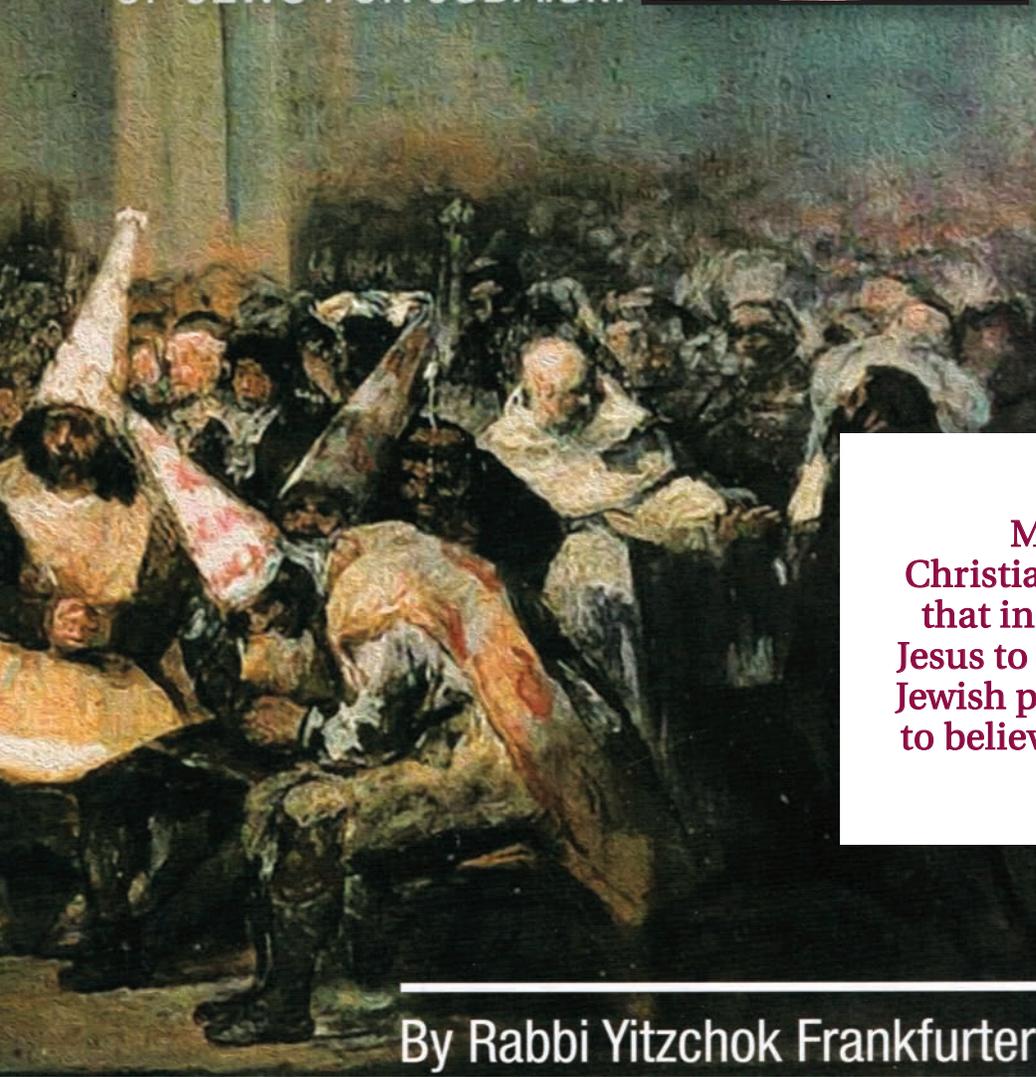
The Tribunal of the Spanish Inquisition as illustrated by Francisco de Goya.

Anyone who is familiar with the highly informative and entertaining lectures of Rabbi Michael Skobac about the distorted teachings of Christianity will most likely find his approach reminiscent of the great medieval Jewish scholars in their formal disputations with Christian clergy. Like them, he dissects their fabrications with logic and lucidity. Those disputations, however, were not so much debates as they were trials, accompanied by bitter persecution of Jewish communities. Whether the Jews “won” or “lost”

a debate, the results were always devastating. After the famous Disputation of Paris, for example, thousands of Jewish holy books were burned on the streets.

While Jews are no longer persecuted by Christians in a similar fashion, and they can now debate their Christian counterparts in relative safety, many features of the old “disputations” continue to the present day. Jews are still being told by Christians that they are ignorant of their own sacred texts and that the Jewish Bible, as well as

A CONVERSATION WITH
ANTI-MISSIONARY EXPERT
RABBI MICHAEL SKOBAC
OF JEWS FOR JUDAISM



Many
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that in order for
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By Rabbi Yitzchok Frankfurter

the Talmud, is only properly understood by them. And the most vociferous and avid defenders of the Christian perspective are still Jews who converted to Christianity. This is so because the Christian campaign to convert Jews to Christianity is still ongoing. Accordingly, a person like Toronto-based Rabbi Skobac, who has specialized in

counter-missionary work since 1983, still has his hands full.

Of late, though, things seemed to be changing in the missionary arena. In a landmark document released on December 10, 2015, by the Vatican's Commission for Religious Relations with the Jews, it was announced that the Church no longer favours

institutional missionizing, and Catholics were directed to work with Jews in combating anti-Semitism. "A Christian can never be an anti-Semite, especially because of the Jewish roots of Christianity," it reads in part.

According to the document, entitled "The Gifts and the Calling of God Are Irrevocable," coming on the heels of the fiftieth anniversary of the historic *Nostra Aetate*, in which the Vatican absolved the Jews collectively of guilt for the death of Jesus, God never annulled His covenant with the Jewish people, and "the Church is therefore obliged to view evangelization to Jews, who believe in the one God, in a different manner from that to people of other religions and world views."

The document also called on Catholics to express particular sensitivity to the impact of the Shoah on Jewish history. The Vatican pledged "to do all that is possible with our Jewish friends to repel anti-Semitic tendencies."

I spoke to Rabbi Skobac recently about the significance of these developments in Rome as well as the general state of missionary efforts to convert Jews to Christianity.

Q: Do you consider *Nostra Aetate* to have been significant in terms of Jewish-Catholic relations?

A: Yes, but only in an abstract way. As you know, one of the major elements of that declaration was that the Church officially absolved the Jews of being responsible for the murder of their saviour 2,000 years ago. For almost 2,000 years their official policy was that the Jews were guilty oficide, that we had killed their god. We know how disastrous that was for us in terms of all the persecution we faced. However, by the time

that policy was renounced 50 years ago, the Church had already stopped persecuting Jews. It wasn't as if they suddenly came out with a new policy in the middle of all the bloodshed and ordered their followers to stop murdering us; it was essentially after the fact. It was more of an official confirmation of their position. It didn't have a tremendous impact on actual behaviour.

Q: What do you make of the latest declaration, that the Church doesn't officially support missionizing Jews?

A: You have to understand that it's being reported in the news in a much more simplistic way than the declaration reads. Those who belong to the Vatican Commission for Religious Relations with the Jews are very scholarly people, so the actual

document they authored is very nuanced, very complicated; it's not something you can reduce to a headline or a sound bite, which is what's happening in the reporting. People are saying things in oversimplified ways that don't really reflect what the document states.

For example, the Church didn't exactly say not to missionize Jews. What it did say is that it doesn't have any current programs directed specifically at converting Jews, which is true. The Catholic Church doesn't officially support efforts to missionize Jews, although there are several organizations of lay Catholics that do reach out to Jews and call themselves Hebrew Catholics. So it isn't as if there aren't any Catholics involved in trying to reach us; it's just not officially coming out of Rome. They just happen to be Catholics who have a commitment to reach Jewish people and convert them. Some of the people in this movement are Jews who converted to Catholicism. They're doing it ad hoc, but not as an official arm of the Church.

At the same time, this recent document does say that Catholics have a responsibility to share their faith, and that includes sharing it with Jews. So while the Church isn't officially sponsoring programs specifically trying to convert Jews, it still maintains that Catholics have a responsibility to share their faith with all people, and that includes us.

Q: Then what's so unique about this declaration?

A: What's unusual is that it advances, to some degree, a concept known as "dual covenant theology." For many centuries, Roman Catholics and other Christian movements taught that the "New Covenant" proclaimed by Jesus, which offers salvation to those who believe in him, had replaced the old Jewish covenant offering



The public debates between Christian and Jewish scholars were held throughout the Middle Ages. This contemporary illustration shows a 16th-century "disputation" between rabbis and priests. The Jews are wearing the obligatory distinctive hats.

As one of the leading American missionaries once put it, "Unconverted Jews make Christians wonder if perhaps Jesus wasn't the messiah after all."

Torah; Judaism is the way Jews can have a relationship with God and be guaranteed a share in the world to come. For non-Jews, the track is Christianity. The Catholic Church doesn't accept this and articulated very clearly in this document that there is no way for a person to have eternal life and salvation other than through the atoning death of Jesus. Yet ironically it also says that a Jew has no need to accept Jesus for salvation! So the big question is, if there's no need for Jews to convert to Christianity by accepting Jesus, how are Jews going to be saved? Can Jesus save them without their believing in him? The Church said that this is a "divine mystery." So the whole declaration is sort of paradoxical, and to many Christians it makes no sense.

Groups like Jews for Jesus are up in arms about this new declaration. They're saying that this is opening up the door for Christianity to fall apart completely. The one thing that has always been an absolute is that the only way anyone can have eternal life is by believing in Jesus, and the concern is that this is being done away with. An article came out recently that was written by an interesting Christian in Canada who has some Jewish lineage. This fellow was very disturbed by this development because he said it's illogical. He wondered if it means that if a Jew comes to a priest seeking

redemption through the observance of the Torah. This idea is called replacement theology or supersessionism, meaning that the New Covenant had superseded the old and that the Church has replaced Israel as God's people.

Some Christian groups, by contrast, believe that the New Covenant hasn't replaced Judaism; the two can exist side by side. This is called dual-covenant theology. They believe that there are two separate tracks. For Jews, there's the track of

conversion, the priest should explain to him that it isn't really necessary. Are Catholics now supposed to push away Jews who want to convert?

This proclamation took a lot of people by surprise inside the Church itself. Many of the traditionalists were furious about it.

Q: What's your reaction to the part about not missionizing?

A: In practical terms this is not really news. The Catholic Church hasn't been doing that for a long time. What is noteworthy is their coming out and saying that there's no need for Jews to accept Jesus because we can somehow have a full spiritual life and be worthy of eternal life without accepting him.

Q: Is it something that will help you in your efforts to fight missionaries?

A: Not really. The Catholic Church represents about one-half of all Christians in the world, but when it comes to efforts to convert Jews, they've basically been out of the picture for a long time. It is very, very rare to see Jews who have embraced Catholicism. The Catholics are having their own internal problems. They're hemorrhaging, losing adherents. That's one of the reasons they haven't been so active in evangelism; they're struggling to keep their own people in the Church.





Rabbi Skobac lecturing.

Q: So which Christian denominations have been growing?

A: The born-again Protestant Evangelicals. These are the groups that are really growing. Then you have the modern, Christian sects that arose over the past 150 years like the Mormons, the J' Witnesses and the Seventh-Day Adventists, among others. These groups are all extremely dedicated to spreading their faith. They're trying to convert everyone in the world, but a disproportionate amount of effort is focused on us.

For example, here in Canada there are 150 Christian groups dedicated solely to converting Jews. Worldwide, there are well over 1,000. You don't have anywhere near that number of Christian organizations trying to convert Hindus, Buddhists or Muslims.

Q: Why is that?

A: It's simple. The Evangelicals are defined by their commitment to the Bible, which they take literally. They are committed to every

word without question, and their Bible points them toward the Jewish people. The first four-fifths of the Christian Bible are the books of the *Tanach*, our Hebrew scriptures. Of course, these books are all about the Jews: the Jews are the Chosen People; they're the apple of God's eye; God will bless those who bless the Jews and curse those who curse them. They don't read anything in the Bible about Muslims or Buddhists or Hindus.

Another striking thing is that everything in the Bible takes place in Israel. Of course, their saviour is a Jew; his twelve disciples were Jews; they go to the Holy Temple in Jerusalem to pray; they keep the Sabbath and the Jewish festivals. Today's Christians see in their story a Jewish story. In addition, their messiah said that he only came for the "lost sheep of the House of Israel" and tells his followers not to go to the cities of the gentiles or Samaritans. So they see that during Jesus's lifetime he was only focussed on the Jewish people to the exclusion of everyone else. After he died they introduced the concept of having a responsibility to bring their "good news" to the entire world. But even so, Paul, who wrote most of the New Testament, said that the Gospel was to go to the Jews first and only afterward to the gentiles.

A second reason they're obsessed with converting Jews is that many Christians believe that in order for Jesus to return, the Jewish people have to believe in him. There's a verse in their Scriptures where Jesus was speaking to the Jewish people of his time and he said, "You're never going to see me again until you say, 'Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord.'" Now, it's not clear what that means, but many Christians understand it to mean that he won't come back until the Jews accept him. Therefore, many Christians feel that we are the ones holding up the works. If Jesus can't come back until the Jews accept him, you can see why they would see our conversion as a top priority.

Q: Do you see in this obsession with Jews a validation of Judaism, as many people see in anti-Semitism?

A: I've always thought that the fact that the entire world has hated us for 3,000 years shows that there is something very spiritually powerful emanating from us attracting all that heat. It's not only that anti-Semitism exists but that it comes out in totally illogical, counterintuitive ways. So yes, it's confirmation that there is something very special about us that we provoke such intense opposition.

It's interesting that both Christianity and Islam have the same problem with us. What really bothers Christians is that the Jews didn't accept Jesus. After all, if he really was the messiah, the people best qualified to know whether he was or wasn't were the Jews. The entire concept of messiah is a Jewish concept rooted in the Jewish Bible. Everyone else in the world back then were

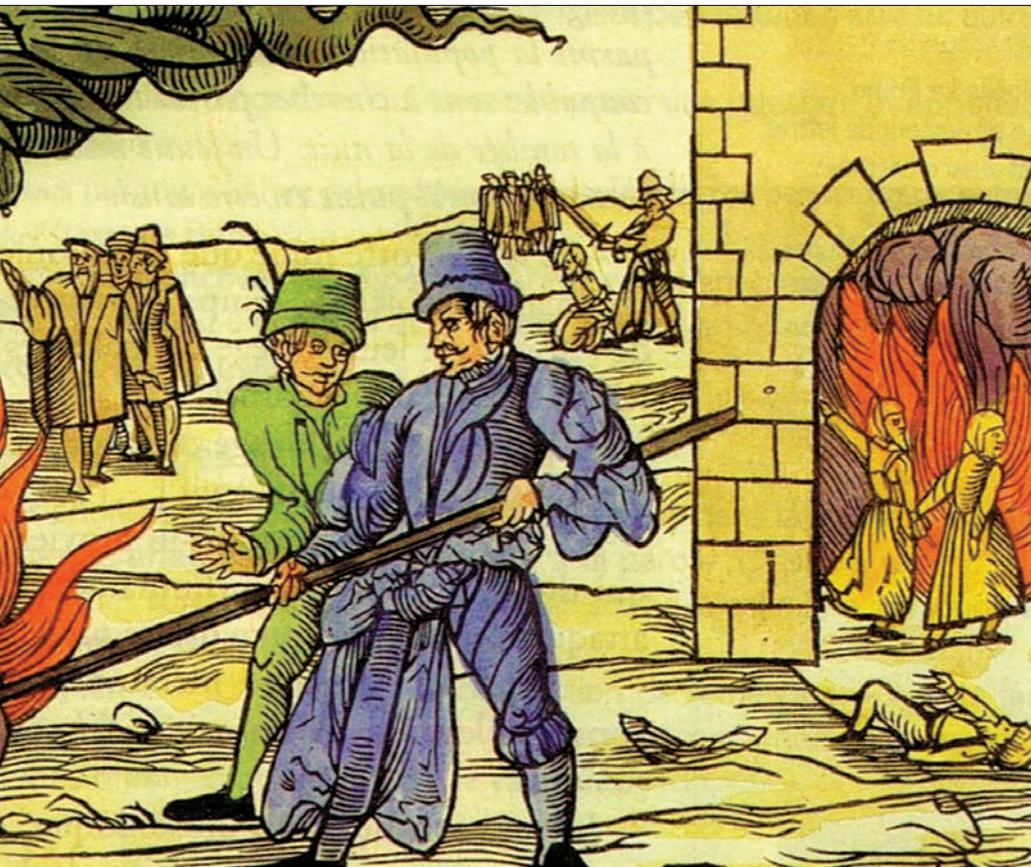


Illustration of Christians burning Jews.



Close-up of a relief in the Arch of Titus in Rome showing spoils from the destruction of Jerusalem.

pagan barbarians who didn't even know what the word messiah meant. It frustrates Christians that the pagans came to believe in Jesus, but the Jews who knew the Torah and were praying for the messiah to come didn't accept him.

To a great extent, the fact that Christianity became very anti-Semitic was not because we supposedly killed their god; that wasn't it. The problem was that we rejected him, and that was a tremendous repudiation of their whole belief system. In other words, their obsession with converting us is based on a psychological dilemma that makes them question whether what they believe is true. As one of the leading American missionaries once put it, "Unconverted Jews make Christians wonder if perhaps Jesus wasn't the messiah after all."

The same thing happened with Islam. When Muhammad started preaching that he was the prophet, virtually all the people living in his area were pagan. There was nothing to talk about with these people. But the Jews there had a Bible, they had prophets, and Muhammad thought we would be the first people to embrace him. In the beginning Muhammad had adapted many Torah practices and was praying in the direction of Jerusalem. When the Jewish people wouldn't accept him, *that's* when he turned on them and Islam's hostility to Jews began. It stung because the only people with any credibility rejected his message.

You could say the Christian and Islamic obsession with us confirms that we have the truth. Deep down inside they know it, and it bothers them.

Q: It has been said the continued existence of Jews contradicts the Christian theology that they were

supposed to replace us and we were supposed to disappear, whereas there is no similar concept in Islam.

A: The Muslims have a concept that Jews are *dhimmis*, a special category of protected people who are supposed to live subservient to Muslims. It's not the same as replacement, but similar in that they can't tolerate the resistance of the Jews. Islam doesn't claim to be the true Israel, although it's interesting that the story is switched in the Koran so that Yishmael, rather than Isaac, was bound at the *Akeidah* by Abraham. So there is a bit of supplanting, even in Islam. The Koran also contains some of our rabbinic *Midrashim*, which they claim we copied from them! [Laughs]

Q: You talk a lot about how Biblical passages have been misrepresented by Christian theologians. How much are people interested in those kind of arguments today?

A: It depends whom you're talking about. One thing I find that's surprising is that when you ask Jews who converted what led them to become Christian, they all tell you "the Bible." Then they quote Isaiah and Daniel and Zechariah. But the truth is that not a single one of them converted because of the Bible. How do I know this? Because if you had met any of these Jews for Jesus in a McDonald's a week before they converted and asked, "Hey, do you know that the food you're eating is forbidden by the Torah?" They'd answer, "Who cares what it says in the Torah?"

The Jews who convert are not converting because of what the Bible says because they never really took the Bible that seriously. The reason they're converting is that they had a hole in their soul, with no real spiritual life or relationship with God. The way it works is that they first get attracted

JEWES 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.

JEWS FOR JUDAISM's two primary goals are to strengthen Jewish pride and identity and to win back those Jews who have been influenced by Christian missionaries, cults and other religions.

JEWS FOR JUDAISM works to achieve these goals and promote Jewish continuity through the following highly acclaimed programs and activities:

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To date, over 400,000 Jews worldwide have participated in JEWS FOR JUDAISM'S successful educational programs and counselling services.

One of JEWS FOR JUDAISM'S most outstanding accomplishments has been the uniting of the entire Jewish community in a common cause. JEWS FOR JUDAISM has earned endorsements from a wide spectrum of Jewish agencies, rabbis and educators.

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JEWS FOR JUDAISM

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

T 416-789-0020 • F 416-789-0030 • TF 866-307-4362

www.jewsforjudaism.ca

© 2016 Jews for Judaism

Executive Director: Julius Ciss

julius@jewsforjudaism.ca

Education Director: Rabbi Michael Skobac

rabbiskobac@jewsforjudaism.ca

Board of Directors:

Michael J. Halbert • Frank Mayer • Charles Glina
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JEWS FOR JUDAISM Branches:

Toronto (416) 789-0020

Los Angeles (310) 556-3344

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to the intense spirituality modelled by Christians they meet and this leads them to embrace Jesus. It's only after making a serious commitment to Christianity that they prioritize the Bible. Why is that? Because no one wants to admit that he or she made a decision in life that alienated them from their family and friends because it felt good. They want to be able to justify what they did and say it's the truth. It's only after they convert that the Bible becomes important to them and they quote it left and right.

When I speak to these people, I don't start with the Bible. Since the Bible did not lead these people to Jesus, I try to understand their trajectory and deal with the more primary issues that led to their conversion. The problem they usually have is that they remember Hebrew school or whatever they grew up with and assume that Judaism is empty and not very meaningful or spiritual. They assume that Jews don't really speak to God in prayer — we just read prayer books with words

The reason they're converting is that they had a hole in their soul, with no real spiritual life or relationship with God...

we don't understand. They have tremendous misconceptions about Judaism. I try to get them to realize that Jews *do* have a personal relationship with God that's at the centre of our lives. I want them to realize that their whole journey was based on misunderstandings and an unfortunate lack of knowledge. I ultimately want them to come to me and ask me to explain these Bible verses

they are fond of quoting. But now, they will be asking because they want to know and understand rather than trying to convince me.

Q: You're active in getting people out of cults. Is it similar to getting people away from Christianity?

A: Cults are a different situation. Although there have been some Christian cults, the vast majority of Christian churches and denominations are not really by definition cults. A cult is any kind of group where people are being manipulated socially and psychologically and lose their ability to think

critically. It doesn't have to be religious in orientation; it could be a therapeutic group or one ostensibly based on a business paradigm. The common denominator is that the members are being controlled by someone or some group of people and lose their personal autonomy.

Cults are still a huge problem in North America. People think they disappeared in the 1970s, but they have just evolved. They used to be very exotic and extreme. People left their families to go live communally and were given new names. They were so radical that they lost credibility. Today, they're much more sophisticated. I'm dealing now with a number of families here in Canada whose kids have been manipulated by these kinds of groups.

Q: Before I let you go, how did you come to study Christianity?

A: When I was in university I found myself being barraged by Christian missionaries. As I've always been someone who enjoys speaking to people, I spent a lot of time talking to them. At about the same time, I began my own journey toward reconnecting with my Jewish heritage. What's interesting is that for every step I took toward Judaism, there were more Christians trying to convert me. When I first started studying Judaism I went to a public library, and every Jewish book I opened had a missionary pamphlet placed



The Roman Jewish ghetto.

inside. When I eventually went to study at Yeshiva University in 1972, my interest in the Jewish response to Christianity was just a sidebar; I didn't really seriously devote myself to studying it until later.

In 1983 the Jewish community of Philadelphia recruited me to start a counter-missionary program. Philadelphia was a hotbed of missionary work in North America. That's when I really got involved in this full time.

Q: And it still keeps you busy?

A: Yes, and more than ever, primarily because of the Internet. Ten years ago I was only able to interact with a fraction of the number of people I do now. I'm very active on social media. Our YouTube channel is receiving between 2,000-3,000 views each day of our numerous videos. Many of the people accessing these videos contact us with questions or for further information and guidance. We have a website where I write a daily blog and I'm on

Our hope and prayer is that one day, the Jewish people will reach a point of health and vitality where there will no longer be a need for our organization!

Facebook and Twitter. I participate as an advisor to several different Facebook groups for people who are struggling with Christianity and have questions about the Bible. I also do several Internet "radio" programs focusing on Jewish responses to Christianity. In addition, I facilitate a Noachide

group here in Toronto for non-Jews interested in exploring the universally relevant teachings of Judaism. This is all in addition to the ongoing classes and lectures I give regularly across Toronto and elsewhere, as well as the tremendous number of families and individuals who turn to us for counseling and help on a wide array of issues and concerns. Of course, our hope and prayer is that one day, the Jewish people will reach a point of health and vitality where there will no longer be a need for our organization! ■

MINI-LECTURES with Rabbi Michael Skobac

**Thursday, July 21, 8:00 – 9:30 PM:
Counter-Missionary Nuggets**

- Exposing a Huge Missionary Bluff
- Daniel 7: Who is the Son of Man?
- Can Messiah Be Born to a Virgin?
- Isaiah 53... in 5.3 Minutes
- Jeremiah 31's New Covenant
- Jesus is Not Our Passover Lamb

**Thursday, July 28, 8:00 – 9:30 PM:
Judaism 101 Appetizer**

- Deuteronomy 18: Who is the Prophet?
- Judaism is Not Wikipedia!
- The Rock Solid Foundation of Judaism
- Can a False Belief Change Your Life?
- Standing Before God if We've Sinned?
- Understanding the Oral Torah

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The Jewish Connection to ISRAEL



The Biblical & Spiritual Significance of Israel

An in-depth exploration of Biblical and Rabbinic perspectives on the meaning and importance of the Land of Israel and its relationship to Jews.

Lecture by **Rabbi Michael Skobac**
Wednesday, July 20 – 8 PM



Israel/Palestine for Critical Thinkers

An analysis of opposing claims of Israelis and Palestinians to the land of Israel, exposing all the facts on both sides of this complex issue.

Presentation by **Richard Bass**
Wednesday, July 27 – 8 PM

Shaarei Tefillah Congregation, 3600 Bathurst St., Toronto

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