

# How Has the Image of Messianic Jews in Israel Changed in the Last 37 Years?

Lea Bendel

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### Introduction

Not a few Messianic Jews in Israel today have encountered discrimination and injustice from individuals in society, the media, or the government. For this article, Israeli newspaper articles from 1979 until 2016 were analyzed with the focus on the depiction of believers in the media. For this purpose, I read media reviews and newspaper clippings in the Caspari Center in Jerusalem. First of all, the struggle of identity needs to be mentioned. The question of "Who is a Jew?" is a reoccurring

theme throughout the years regarding different issues. Congregations usually do not publish an explicit number of their members; therefore only estimated number of believers in Israel is given here. However, the enormous discrepancy indicates that different sources bear different agendas in mind: Some sources claim a higher number in order to underline the threat Messianic Jews are posing toward Orthodox Judaism, for example; others name a lower amount with the purpose to diminish the importance, and even influence in society, of this minority group in the country.

### **The Question of Messianic Jewish Identity**

The identity struggle for Messianic Jewish believers in Israel is manifested not only in the wide spectrum of numbers, names, and backgrounds, but also in their affiliation to different faith groups. At a Messianic conference in Tel Aviv in 2002, Joseph Shulam summed up the identity crisis in one sentence: “We are often too Jewish for the Christians, and too Christian for the Jews!”<sup>1</sup> The Hebrew word for Christians, “Notzrim,” has quite a negative connotation in Israel; that is one reason why many Jewish believers in Yeshua prefer to be called Messianic Jews. So who are Messianic Jews? Messianic Jews are Jews who believe that Jesus is the Messiah. Despite this shared belief with Gentile Christians, Messianic believers are different by embracing their identity as Jews and often celebrating Jewish holidays and sometimes keeping laws from the Tanakh.

“There is no such thing as Messianic Jews.” This statement could be found not only once but twice. First, by a judge in Israel’s High Court, and then repeated by Rabbi Yosef Ganz, former director general of Yad l’Achim, in an interview with *BaKehila*.<sup>2</sup> In a similar notion, a reader in a letter to the editor of *The Jerusalem Post* exclaimed that “Messianic Jews have betrayed the faith of their fathers while even the Church Fathers concurred with the sages that one cannot be both a Jew and a Christian.”<sup>3</sup>

Several times, the practices of Messianic believers were examined in newspaper articles in order to determine the difference between them and “standard Jews.” Yochanan Stanfield explained that he considers himself and his family to be Jewish: they keep the feasts, their children frequent public schools, and the family father served in the IDF. The only difference, according to him, is that “we have found the Messiah.”<sup>4</sup>

### *Numbers of Messianic Jews in Israel*

The number of Messianic Jews in Israel appears to be a big mystery, both for anti-missionary organizations such as Yad l’Achim and for Messianic believers and supporters themselves. In the following are the estimations made by different individuals over the last 37 years. As stated above, different numbers are given concerning the number of Messianic Jews in Israel. Yad l’Achim, however, tends to change its statistics quite regularly and combines the figures of different sects. In 2001, a representative claimed a growth of “that cult” of 200%, resulting in 20,000 members.<sup>5</sup> It is important to note that some estimations made by Yad l’Achim include “other sects” such as Jehovah’s Witnesses, as well as “Christian missionaries.”

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<sup>1</sup> Aviel Schneider, “To Be Or Not To Be: Israeli Believers Search for Jewish Identity and Expression,” *Israel Today*, (December, 2002): 21.

<sup>2</sup> “The ABC of Yosef Ganz,” *BaKehila*, (March 17, 2005): 18.

<sup>3</sup> Sha’i Ben-Tekoa, “Don’t Call them ‘Messianic’ . . .,” *The Jerusalem Post*, (May 13, 2005).

<sup>4</sup> Oren Kaminski, “Your Salvation,” *Modi’in News Plus*, (October 2, 2014): 12.

<sup>5</sup> “Missionaries Expanding Their Work,” *Yom l’Yom & Shisha Yamim*, (April 19 & 25, 2001).

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Year	Number Stated	Source	Notes
1979	10-15,000	June 12, 1979, <i>Haaretz</i> , "Jews for Jesus in Place of Zionism"	
1983	20,000	June 17, 1983, <i>Kol Ha'Ir</i> , "Jews for Jews"	"Jews for Jesus" and 6,000 others who are deeply entrenched in similar cults, by Reform rabbi Reuven Dubin
1984	1,500	March 16, 1984, <i>Haaretz</i> , "Inhabitants of the Borderland of Faith"	
1989	1,000	April 17, 1989, <i>Hamodia</i> , "Four Hundred Messianic Jews to Enter Israel"	By Yad l'Achim leader Rabbi Lipschitz
1989	4,000	December 20, 1989, <i>Hamodia</i> , "Renewed Pressure on Knesset"	By Yad l'Achim
1995	2,000	April 14, 1995, <i>Ha'Ir</i> , "The Messianic Jews"	
1996	25,000	August 20, 1996, <i>Haaretz</i> , "Conditional Love"	By Lev l'Achim, in the article describing Jehovah's Witnesses—everyone in "sects," not just Messianic Jews
1998	15,000	March 20, 1998, <i>Kol HaDaron</i> , "Daddy Baptized Me"	By Yad l'Achim, missionaries
1999	6,000	November 5, 1999, <i>BaMachaneh</i> , "Soldiers targeted by Religious Groups"	
2001	20,000	April 19, 2001, <i>Yom l'Yom</i> , "Missionaries Expanding their Work"	By Yad Achim, Jehovah's Witnesses & Messianic Jews probably
2004	15,000	August 13, 2004, <i>7 Yamim</i> , "You Shall Have No Other Gods"	By Seth Ben-Haim, Messianic believer
2005	10,000	April 29, 2005, <i>The Jerusalem Post</i> , "For God's Sake," Larry Derfner	By Eitan Shishkoff of Kiryat Yam congregation
2007	15,000	June 8, 2007, <i>Kol Bo</i> , "Messiah, Messiah"	By Chana Tal of <i>Kol Bo</i>
2008	15,000	April 10, 2008, <i>Yediot Ahronot</i> , "Not Waiting for the Messiah"	By Joseph Shulam, Director of Netivyah
2009	5,000	January 9, 2009, <i>Yated Ne'eman</i> , "The Mission Also Threatens"	By Daniel Asor, anti-missionary
2009	7,000	February 13, 2009, <i>The Jerusalem Post</i> , "Leap of Faith"	By Larry Derfner of <i>The Jerusalem Post</i>
2010	15,000	August 16, 2010, <i>Yediot Ahronot</i> , "Yeshua Superstar"	
2015	10,000	May 5, 2015, <i>HaChayim HaTovim</i> , "The Messianic Jews in Israel," Dr Adam Akerman, p 28	

### *False Information about Believers in Yeshua*

It is not uncommon, that Messianic Jews are confused with other faith communities. Messianic believer Gershon Nerel explained that the term “Messianic Jew” also describes Jewish settlers in Judea and Samaria, as well as followers of the Lubavitcher Rebbe.<sup>6</sup> Furthermore, the organization Jews for Jesus often stands *pars pro toto* for the whole community. *Haaretz* wrote in 2006: “The movement (of Messianic Jews) is also known as Jews for Jesus.”<sup>7</sup>

The late Sephardic chief rabbi of Israel, Rabbi Ovadia Yosef, warns of the sect of the “guru” (Jesus), as the teaching of meditation, offering of incense, and oblations is plain idolatrous adoration.<sup>8</sup> The overall goal of the “mission” is to ensnare Jews and to lead to conversion. The description sounds more like the Hare Krishna than like Messianic believers. In another article the author describes Messianic Judaism as a fusion of Eastern mysticism with Christianity, integrated with scientific, hypnotic, and psychological media, which sounds more like the Moonies sect.<sup>9</sup>

*Haaretz* published an article in 1979 about Jews for Jesus and “other Christian sects,” such as Moonies, Scientology, and Children of God. According to the author, the activities of Messianic believers anger and embarrass the Jewish leadership as they claim not to be Christians but to belong to Judaism. A nasty quote was put into the mouth of Moshe Rosen, the founder of Jews for Jesus. “Legend has it” that Rosen was once a very Orthodox Jew, before he became “enchanted” with a Christian girl. When his rabbi refused to perform a wedding rite and drove him out, Rosen allegedly said, “I will teach all the Jews a lesson,” founded Jews for Jesus, and married the shiksa in a civil ceremony.<sup>10</sup>

In 1979, Reverend Henry Knight took a stand on the accusation that “mission” and Messianic believers steal a high number of Jewish souls for their cause every year. He pointed out that 400–500 people converted to Judaism in Israel, mainly because of marriage. On the other hand, less than 10 became Messianic believers. Out of a population of 3.1 million Jews in Israel, the number seems rather insignificant and the danger of the “mission” exaggerated. Additionally, Rev. Knight remarks that “converts to Judaism are portrayed as acting out of honorable motive, with no external encouragement or inducement, while the ten converts to Christianity are depicted as ‘enemies of the people’ who were subjected to unworthy enticement.”<sup>11</sup>

The allegedly genuine report of someone who escaped the Messianic community was published in *Davar* in 1992. Under the pseudonym Avi, the author reports of the gruesome conditions under which believers seemingly live:

To be a Messianic is to live a double life . . . [an] ascetic life, almost monastic; watching TV, reading newspapers are out; and all kind of entertainment, such as films and theater, good food, attractive clothes, makeup for women are abomination; in short, all the pleasant things of life are from Satan and must be shunned like fire.

On top of that, he is convinced that the “thousands of Messianic Jews living and working among us in secret, fearing attack, complaining of discrimination and persecution” are not the innocent

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<sup>6</sup> Aviel Schneider, “To Be Or Not To Be: Israeli Believers Search for Jewish Identity and Expression,” *Israel Today* (December 2002): 21.

<sup>7</sup> Daphna Berman, “Aliyah with a Cat, a Dog and Jesus,” *Haaretz* (June 2006).

<sup>8</sup> “His Eminence Rabbi Ovadiah Yosef Warns Against Renewal of Mission Activity: The ‘Guru’ & ‘Meditation-Idolatry,’” *Hamodia* (December 12, 1978).

<sup>9</sup> “Law Without Teeth,” *Hatsofeh* (September 14, 1979).

<sup>10</sup> “‘Jews for Jesus’ in Place of Zionism,” *Haaretz* (June 12, 1979).

<sup>11</sup> “Controversial Law,” *The Jerusalem Post* (November 23, 1979).

victims of religious intolerance but rather the opposite: non-believing family members and apostates are constantly under pressure from the esoteric group, which acts like the modern day equivalent of the Inquisition.<sup>12</sup>

Despite the general conviction that Messianic Judaism began with the first followers of Yeshua or as others claim in the fourth century CE, an article in *Mechapsim* in 2015 claims that the first association of “Hebrew Christians” was founded in London in 1866. The denomination would be similar to Protestant Christianity, apart from the Jewish elements that were systematically used to be regarded “more Jewish.” Furthermore, Messianic Jews allegedly use emotional and social manipulation as evangelization techniques, presenting a distorted truth and one-sided presentation of Jewish orthodoxy, and even sending women out to marry non-believers to draw them to Messianic congregations.<sup>13</sup>

### *The Bias of Language in the Articles*

As can be seen in the previous examples of false accusations about Messianic believers, the language used in articles plays an important role in the formation of public opinion toward this minority group. Some articles were not reporting on Messianic Jews in a negative way as such, but the headlines at times indicated a bias. The newspaper *Yediot Ahronot*, for example, reported on a group of ultra-Orthodox Jews entering a private house where Messianic Jews were praying. First, the religious intruders were praying in front of the house loudly, which did not lead the Messianic believers to stop their meeting. That is when the ultra-Orthodox entered, smashed a flower pot, and a “sharp exchange of words between the two groups” happened. Neighbors had to call the police for de-escalation. The title of the article, “Clash with ‘Messianic Jews’ prevented,”<sup>14</sup> indicates the believers to be the active part of the potential clash, not the victims.

Likewise, a title in *Hatsofeh* praises the anti-missionary organization’s efforts without paying attention to the other side: “Yad L’Achim in Petah Tikva laboring to rescue from the mission.”<sup>15</sup>

In the same year, *Yediot Ahronot* used a lot of biased phrases in an article about “Jews for Jesus.” The organization “sets a trap” to “hunt souls,” they spin “webs of deceit and lies,” and they “exploit weaknesses” by offering friendships that are not genuine. Nevertheless, “Operation Enticement is crowned with success.”<sup>16</sup> Yad L’Achim boasts success in breaking up “the ranks of the enemy” and hence “saving people from the fangs of the mission.”<sup>17</sup>

Unfortunately, references to the Holocaust are also not rare when speaking of Messianic believers. Shas MK Yitzak Saban said about the congregation in Beersheba: “Hitler murdered our bodies for us and they murder our souls for us.”<sup>18</sup> A Gur Hasidim member shouted at a Messianic woman that Messianic Jews “are responsible for the murder of six million in the Holocaust.”<sup>19</sup> Even worse, Daniel Asor, a former converted Christian who became Orthodox and a fierce anti-missionary, believes that:

Missionary activity cannot be tolerated, just as everyone knows that we wouldn’t allow the “Hitler youth” to hold a campaign for the destruction of the State of Israel

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<sup>12</sup> “Suffering for God’s Love,” *Davar* (April 13, 1992).

<sup>13</sup> “Rewriting History in Favor of the Messianic Community,” *Mechapsim* (September 2, 2015); 8.

<sup>14</sup> “Clash with ‘Messianic Jews’ prevented,” *Yediot Ahronot* (June 18, 1978).

<sup>15</sup> “Yad L’Achim in Petah Tikva Laboring to Rescue From the Mission,” *Hatsofeh* (November 9, 1979).

<sup>16</sup> “Jews for Jesus Going Out To Hunt Souls,” *Yediot Ahronot* (February 17, 1980).

<sup>17</sup> “Holy War,” *Maariv* (February 23, 1990).

<sup>18</sup> “Hitler Murdered Our Bodies For Us and They Murder Our Souls for us,” *Kol HaNegev* (November 26, 1999).

<sup>19</sup> Asher Keshet, “Jewish Crusade,” *Kol HaZman* (June 15, 2007): 54.

here. . . . Many more Jews were killed over the generations in the name of “that man” than in the name of Hitler!<sup>20</sup>

In 2011, Rabbi Yosef Sheinin of Ashdod compared Messianic Jews to Hitler, saying that both wanted a final solution, yet the believers today do not have the instruments of destruction—“so they are using those of apostasy.”<sup>21</sup> The rabbi warns that if Messianic Jews are not “finished off,” the city will be harmed in the most dangerous way.<sup>22</sup>

In 2012, members of the religious community in Netanya declared the activity of Israel College of the Bible to be worse than the Holocaust.<sup>23</sup> Likewise, a Holocaust survivor agreed that Messianic Jews want to destroy Judaism, and so the rabbi did not see a difference between “people who want to convert Jews to a belief in Jesus and what the Nazis did.”<sup>24</sup>

In the wake of a Messianic conference in 2015, the rabbi of the Old City, Rabbi Avigdor Liventzel, and Daniel Asor, a former Christian, allied in the fight against the “Messianic cults” and called their actions a “modern crusade” and a “Final Solution” for people’s souls. The anti-missionaries hope that the public will realize the “hate beneath the love.”<sup>25</sup>

In the same manner, comparisons to terrorist groups are not rare. Rabbi Lipschitz from Yad l’Achim compared the believers of the King of Kings Pavilion in Jerusalem to Hamas, and appealed to end the indifference toward “missionaries.”<sup>26</sup> In a report on the “danger of Jews for Jesus” in *The Jerusalem Post* in 2010, the evangelical organization was called insidious and anti-Semitic, and furthermore was compared to the Ku Klux Klan or the Muslim Brotherhood.<sup>27</sup>

Lehava is a far-right organization that prevents assimilation between Jews and non-Jews in Israel. Additionally, any Christian presence is condemned and to be averted. The head of Lehava, Bentzi Gopstein, was questioned by the police for his controversial remarks, inter alia for calling believers in Yeshua “vampires.” The organization has been under surveillance by the police since 2014, when Lehava activists were arrested for an arson attack at a bilingual school in Jerusalem.<sup>28</sup>

### *The Followers of Yeshua*

There are also various opinions about the name for Messianic believers in Yeshua: for example, “Jews of Christian religion,” “Jewish Christians,” or Messianics.<sup>29</sup> One newspaper acknowledged that “they do not like to be called Notzri but rather Yehudim Meshikhiim”;<sup>30</sup> nevertheless, in the majority of cases the authors do not grant the wishes of the believers and choose to call them by another name. Sometimes the descriptive word is mixed with specific Christian denominations. Then, the believers are called Pentecostals,<sup>31</sup> and Yad l’Achim named them in 1990 a “Dangerous Catholic Sect.” A less flattering but not less common name is “Soul-hunters.”<sup>32</sup>

<sup>20</sup> David Graus, “The Mission Also Threatens,” *Yated Ne’eman* (January 9, 2009).

<sup>21</sup> Yair Harosh, “‘This is a Blood Libel,’” *Yediot Ashdod* (February 25, 2011): 34.

<sup>22</sup> Aharon Pakser, “A Mass Protest Rally Against the Mission in Ashdod,” *HaMevaser* (February 22, 2011): 1.

<sup>23</sup> Guy Fishkin & Elinor Barak, “Yeshu and I: The Friends of Yeshu,” *Zman Netanya* (May 25, 2012): 30.

<sup>24</sup> Guy Fishkin, “The Friends of Yeshu,” *Zman Netanya* (September 21, 2012): 34.

<sup>25</sup> Yehuda Yakovi, “Secrets From the Conversion Room,” *Yated Ne’eman* (May 22, 2015): 22.

<sup>26</sup> “Yad l’Achim Demonstrates, Calls to Close New Missionary Center in the Heart of Jerusalem,” *Hamodia* (November 5, 2004).

<sup>27</sup> Stewart Weiss, “On a Mission From God,” *The Jerusalem Post* (June 4, 2010, 4): 12.

<sup>28</sup> Sharon Polver, “Chairman of LEHAVA Questioned After Calling Christian Missionaries ‘Vampires’ In Article,” *Haaretz* (February 22): 6.

<sup>29</sup> Dani Tzidkoni, “‘Messianics’ in Rehovot: We Will Continue to Hold Prayers,” *Davar* (December 4, 1984).

<sup>30</sup> “Christianity in the Eyes of the Jew,” *Al Hamishmar* (October 1, 1978).

<sup>31</sup> A. Sofer, “Missionaries ‘Infiltrating’ Israel in the Guise of Kibbutz Volunteers,” *Hamodia* (May 6, 1983).

<sup>32</sup> “Stubborn Fight Against the Tel Aviv Soul Hunters,” *Hamodia* (June 12, 2000).

On the other hand, Klaus Mosche Pülz refuses to be called a Messianic Jew. He prefers the terms “Hebrew Christian” or “Protestant Christian of Jewish origin.”<sup>33</sup> Here, the issue lies not in the personal description, as everyone is free to call themselves by the name they prefer; the problem arises when one person chooses a descriptive name in order to manipulate the identity of an individual. For example, a Messianic believer can call himself a Christian, but it often appears patronizing when a journalist “baptizes” a Messianic Jew as Christian. Several newspapers have used their choice of words in order to demoralize believers and discredit their Jewish identity.

### *Jesus’ Name*

The name of Jesus has power. Even individuals who deny that he is the Son of God, the Messiah, and the Redeemer of Israel and all nations struggle with speaking or writing out his name. The high priest speaking to Peter and the apostles 2,000 years ago omitted Jesus’ name:

“We gave you strict orders not to teach in this name,” he said. “Yet you have filled Jerusalem with your teaching and are determined to make us guilty of *this man’s* blood.” (Acts 5:28)

“That man”<sup>34</sup> is an extreme Orthodox evasion of the name Jesus. One of the most common names used by religious Jews is “Yeshu,” the Hebrew acronym for “May his name and memory be blotted out.”<sup>35</sup> Former chief rabbi Ovadia Yosef called him “the Guru,”<sup>36</sup> and the ultra-Orthodox newspaper *Shearim* “that man from Nazareth” (1985–1992). Other names are “the Baptist”; “the one who died nearly 2,000 years ago” (1985–1992); “Yeshua the Christian”<sup>37</sup> or “Yeshua HaNotzri”; “this wicked man from Nazareth”;<sup>38</sup> and the religious newspaper *Yated Ne’eman* simply denotes the Lord in the late 1990s as “J.” The worst name came from a Gur Hassid in Arad: “a bastard.”<sup>39</sup>

Yad l’Achim often does not refer to the organization “Jews for Jesus” as such but writes “Jews for J-s-s” or “Jews for J----.” *Shearim* calls it “Jews for Christianity,” adding in parentheses “which is really not called by that name but by the name of ‘Jews for the one who founded Christianity,’ by his name.”<sup>40</sup>

### **Persecution of Messianic Believers and Restrictions through Anti-Missionary Activities**

Since Messianic Jews are often mentioned synonymously with “missionaries,” believers in Israel have frequent encounters with anti-missionary organizations such as Yad l’Achim. Similarly, evangelists and evangelicals are often confused, as in a *Haaretz* article in 1989. The debate about Messianic believers being missionaries who want to turn Jews away from their faith and baptize them into Christianity led to the passing of an anti-missionary law. Until today, not everyone in Israel is aware of the significance of that regulation, and actual evangelists are often scared off by anti-missionaries who try to convince them that spreading the gospel is illegal. As a matter of fact, evangelizing is lawful as long as it obeys the requirements.

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<sup>33</sup> “Mission to the Jews: Yesterday and Today,” *Israel Nachrichten Tel Aviv* (October 19, 1979).

<sup>34</sup> “The ‘Messianics’ in Israel feel like home,” *Hamodia* (May 20, 1988).

<sup>35</sup> *Radio Galai Tzahal* (April 8, 2005).

<sup>36</sup> “His Eminence Rabbi Ovadiah Yosef Warns Against Renewal of Mission Activity: The ‘Guru’ & ‘Meditation-Idolatry,’” *Hamodia* (December 12, 1978).

<sup>37</sup> “Religious War Moves to Chess Boards,” *Iton HaTzvi* (March 10, 2005).

<sup>38</sup> Yitzak Kakun, “The Missionary Who Disguises Himself as Orthodox Jew,” *Yom l’Yom* (November 22, 2007): 2.

<sup>39</sup> Larry Derfner, “‘Watch Out, Missionaries!’” *The Jerusalem Post* (July 3, 2009).

<sup>40</sup> “Massive Missionary Campaigns in USA & Israel,” *Shearim* (December 24, 1982).

### *Anti-Missionary Law*

Since April 1, 1978, it is a criminal offence in Israel for anyone to offer money or any other material benefit to induce a person to change his religion, which can lead to up to five years in prison. The bill as such is stated below:

Israeli Anti-missionary Law 5728 (1977):

Whosoever gives or promises to a person money, money's worth or some other material benefit in order to induce him to change his religion, or in order that he may induce another to change his religion, is liable for a term of imprisonment of five years or a fine of 50,000 pounds.<sup>41</sup>

Before the law came into force, several Jews in distress blackmailed Yad l'Achim by threatening to send their children to the "mission" if the orthodox Jews did not provide help, money or even an apartment for the extortionists. Rumor had it that Messianic Jews, like Christian institutes such as monasteries and charities, would provide for any need in exchange for the petitioner's soul: namely, through baptism. The anti-missionary organization presented a brief survey from 1975 to 1985 about alleged bribery by Messianic Jews. However, they have to admit that the believers are very cautious and thus there is no proof. Even Yad l'Achim activists suspect that some of the individuals who tell them stories about bribes by the "missionaries" do so in order to obtain material and financial aid from Jewish agencies.<sup>42</sup> Not many incidents are known where Jews accepted material benefits for conversion. However, this law has protected new believers against this accusation.

Over the years, several Knesset members tried to revise the anti-missionary law. In 2005, Shlomo Benizri of the Shas party proposed a bill that "anyone preaching or carrying out any kind of missionary activity—either to an individual or publicly—that causes a Jew to convert to Christianity must face three years in prison." According to him, Christians and Jews who convert to Christianity have only one goal—to make extinct the memory of the remnant of the Jewish people.<sup>43</sup>

In 2008, MK Shmuel Halpert of the ultra-Orthodox Agudat Israel party proposed a stricter anti-missionary law forbidding "any missionary activity whatsoever." Prior to the statement, Halpert had received a letter from the director of Yad l'Achim with a report about the "124 missionary congregations" in Israel. The most shocking revelation for him was that most congregational leaders are Jewish, and that apparently even the pope recently had called all Christians to covert Jews to Christianity.<sup>44</sup> For more than one reason, both proposals were declined.

### *Attacks by Anti-Missionary Organizations or Individuals*

In the following, some cases of verbal and/or physical abuse by anti-missionary organizations or individuals toward Messianic believers will be presented.

The Bible Society in Israel (at 17 Jaffa Street, Jerusalem) was accused of missionary activities for selling affordable Old and New Testaments. In 1979, an American wearing a kippa entered the shop and threatened the owner that he "will be having trouble." Two weeks later, the window was

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<sup>41</sup> Berkley Center for Religion, Peace & World Affairs, <https://berkleycenter.georgetown.edu/quotes/israeli-anti-missionary-law-5738> [accessed: June 14, 2016].

<sup>42</sup> "The Mission as Myth," *Kol Ha'Ir* (August 4, 1985).

<sup>43</sup> "The Penalty for Conversion: Three Years in Prison," *Yom l'Yom* (September 1, 2005).

<sup>44</sup> "MK Shmuel Halpert: Proposal to Prohibit All Missionary Activity Whatsoever," *Hamodia* (March 11, 2008): 2.



smashed and the sign broken. Likewise, a similar incident happened in the beginning of the 1970s in Ashdod, where a shop was set on fire.<sup>45</sup>

In 1984, Chief Rabbi Simha Kook and hundreds of ultra-Orthodox Jews demonstrated for several hours in front of a private home in Rehovot. The group prevented Messianic Jews from worshipping and scattered their holy books. The believers were accused of being financially supported by Nazi funding. As the landlord of the flat ran a food plant, the rabbinate threatened to withdraw her *kashrut* certificate if she did not end the lease with the Messianic Jewish believers.<sup>46</sup>

The women's magazine *La'Isha* published an article called "Soul Hunters" about Messianic efforts to convert Jews; it included the pictures of five believers in Nahariya. The methods of these "missionaries" are described as modern, sophisticated, and psychological: "Missionaries exploit economic and mental distress, hunt out weak characters and offer them the fat of the land, or more correctly, the land outside Israel."<sup>47</sup> In addition, the organization "Jews for Jesus" is accused of not only the previous charges, but also of brainwashing its "victims." It is mentioned that a Messianic Jewish seminar was planned at the Bethel guest house in Shavi Zion, but the conference was cancelled at the last moment following threats by the chief rabbi of Nahariya that he would expose the guest house as a missionary center. The claim is that 150 Jews were going to convert to Christianity.

The article "Rescue Operation" in *The Jerusalem Post* speaks about the efforts of American activists to counteract the spread of Christian Bibles in *ulpan*s. Again, the targets are described as "those softened up by economic distress, family breakdown or social dislocation." Youngsters who lack a sense of Jewish identity are often especially open to the message.<sup>48</sup>

The Messianic Action Committee published an ad in 1997 opposing a bill for religious censorship—more about that later under *The Voice of Messianic Believers in the Media*. In reaction, Lev l'Achim promised to fight against those who "betray their people and abuse democracy and the freedom of speech by evangelistic preaching." Furthermore, legal advisors were consulted to deduce if the ads are a breach of the current anti-missionary law.<sup>49</sup>

After having suffered a lot of intimidation and harassment in the previous years, the Messianic community in Arad wrote an open letter to *Iton HaTzvi* in 2005 to ask the general public not to turn a blind eye to threats by the ultra-Orthodox community, as this is not appropriate for a democratic state. The extent of harassment ranges from insults and curses, threatening children, and spitting on Bibles to the destruction of personal property.<sup>50</sup> One month later, the chess club belonging to the Messianic Jewish congregation went up in flames in an arson attack; Tanakhs and other Holy Scriptures were burned. The police found writing on the wall. The members spoke of a miracle that no one was in the building when the attack happened. Out of fear of being assaulted in their private homes, the leadership did not want their names to be published. Nevertheless, the believers stand firm, as these acts "only strengthen our faith in Yeshua the Messiah who will bring justice to the light."<sup>51</sup> A couple of weeks later, another riot happened. This time a member of Arad's council, Shamaya Tennenbaum, was caught on film participating, and even the police believe that he instigated the riots.<sup>52</sup>

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<sup>45</sup> "Terror Against Bible-Selling Shop," *Kol Ha'ir Jerusalem* (October 5, 1979).

<sup>46</sup> Dani Tzidkoni, "Messianics" in Rehovot: We Will Continue to Hold Prayers," *Davar* (December 4, 1984).

<sup>47</sup> Esther Chen-Barzilai, "Soul Hunters," *La'Isha* (October 26, 1983): 16.

<sup>48</sup> "Rescue Operation," *The Jerusalem Post* (May 17, 1983).

<sup>49</sup> Betzalel Kahn, "Lev l'Achim: We Will Continue to Fight Against the Mission," *Yated Ne'eman* (October 1, 1997).

<sup>50</sup> Messianic Congregation Arad, "What Is the Point of Persecution?" *Iton HaTzvi* (July 7, 2005): 8.

<sup>51</sup> "Vandals Set Fire to 'People of the King' Club in the Local Market," *Iton HaTzvi* (August 4, 2005).

<sup>52</sup> "Haredi Riots Continue Against the Messianics," *Iton HaTzvi Arad* (September 22, 2005).

Lev l'Achim clashed with Jacob Damkani and his team in Netanya in 2006. Although the encounter was mainly verbal, the anti-missionary organization filed a police complaint in the end. Damkani denied any distribution of "missionary material" to minors, and said forgivingly, "Lev l'Achim sees themselves as the guardians of Judaism . . . and they haven't yet grasped that our God is also God of the Gentiles."<sup>53</sup>

Pnina Comforti is the owner and manager of a chain of bakeries in the south of Israel. When the rabbinate found out that she is a Messianic believer, her kashrut license was revoked in 2007. The explanation behind the decision is that a Messianic Jew cannot be trusted in matters of kashrut. Yet she did not accept this verdict and filed a lawsuit in the Supreme Court against the Chief Rabbinate and the rabbis of Ashdod and Gan Yavneh. In the course of the proceedings, flyers with her name and accusations of apostasy were circulated. Appeals to not "go into her shop because she has a slippery tongue and is trying to hound you into the Christian religion" were made; "proud Jews" should "stay away from her." Comforti was harassed to the extent that she had to move to another city.<sup>54</sup>

Two years later, Comforti's situation had not improved. The owner of the bakery is still lacking essential documents to continue her business with a kashrut license. As a matter of fact, the chief rabbi requires a "double kashrut," as a "missionary" is considered to be an apostate and thus it is necessary to constantly supervise her goods. Even the Justice Minister observed in that context that Israel seems to be moving toward a halakhic state. "The religious council is taking the law into its own hands and doing what it wants," said Comforti. The Messianic believer is concerned about the country's future:

If they don't respect the laws made in Israel and if there isn't one law which applies to everyone, the day isn't far off when I'll be required to wear a patch saying "Messianic Jew" or that my children won't be allowed to serve in the army—until finally we get to the point where we won't even be able to live in Israel anymore.<sup>55</sup>

In March 2008, a 15-year-old Messianic believer survived an attempted assassination by parcel bomb. Amiel Ortiz, son of congregational leader David Ortiz in Ariel, opened a package that was delivered to their home and it exploded right in front of him. Investigations showed that it was a personal attack on the family as they are Messianic believers.<sup>56</sup> On June 29, 2016, the "Jewish terrorist" Yaacov Teitel was judged to be sane and sentenced two life terms plus an additional 30 years in prison, and the payment of compensation to his victims or the families of murder victims. Teitel stated that he did not have any regrets and that he is proud of his deeds.<sup>57</sup>

In the following days and weeks, many news outlets reported on the incident, as well as on other forms of persecution toward Jews who believe in Yeshua throughout the country. Believers in Beersheva and Arad recounted three incidents from the previous week, when tens of ultra-Orthodox harassed them verbally, stole a security camera, punctured tires, incited schools and employers against believers, and sprayed graffiti on private homes and the congregational building

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<sup>53</sup> Adi Lerner, "Godly Turmoil," *Zman Netanya* (June 9, 2006).

<sup>54</sup> Yair Harosh, "Crusade," *Kol HaDorom* (January 5, 2007).

<sup>55</sup> Yair Harosh, "Still No Kashrut License for Pnina Pie," *Yediot Ahronot* (December 18, 2009): 36.

<sup>56</sup> "Assassination Attempt by Means of Booby-Trapped Mishlo'ach Manot," *Yediot Ahronot* (March 21, 2008).

<sup>57</sup> Yonah Jeremy Bob, "Jewish Terrorist Gets Two Life Term Sentences over Murder of Palestinians, After Court Axes Appeal," *The Jerusalem Post* (June 28, 2016).

reading: “Murderers” and “We’ll send your corpses from Arad in coffins.” Witnesses told the newspaper that they don’t feel safe even sitting in a coffee shop anymore.<sup>58</sup>

The Nachalat Yeshua Messianic congregation filed a law suit in 2009 against the chief rabbi of Beersheba, Yehuda Deri, and against Yad l’Achim. In prior years, anti-missionary activists repeatedly broke into the congregation’s building, destroyed furniture, and attacked worshippers. One time it took the police three hours to evict the perpetrators from the compound. A Korean man was surrounded by Orthodox activists, kicked, and told to “go back to Thailand, you dirty Thai worker.” The motivations behind the attacks were the alleged baptism of ten busloads of Jewish children. Pastor Howard Bass corrected: “Only two people were supposed to be baptized on that day. Both were over 18 and were exercising their rights under Israeli law.”<sup>59</sup> Later that year, Rabbi Yehuda Deri and other anti-missionary activists arrived at the congregation again after hearing about a baptism. A riot was started, in the course of which Bass’s glasses were broken and the pastor thrown into the pool. Howard Bass sued Rabbi Deri for NIS 60,000 for damage of property, the breaking of his glasses, and slander. Deri said in court: “I acted as a rabbi is supposed to. I deserve a medal.”<sup>60</sup>

The Messianic Elav conference took place in July 2015 next to the Old Train Station in Jerusalem. Around ten activists from Lehava broke into the hall and attempted to disrupt the meeting. Two of them were arrested for “attacking and disturbing public order.”<sup>61</sup> As a participant of that conference, I witnessed a heated discussion between an ambulance driver and an activist. A group of Lehava activists blocked the ambulance from treating patients at the hall.

#### *The Anti-Missionary Organization Yad l’Achim*

Yad l’Achim is one of the most well-known anti-missionary organizations in Israel. Founded in 1950 by Rabbi Shalom Dov Lipschitz, its main goals are countering the “mission threat” and fighting against assimilation, namely marriages between Jews and Arabs.<sup>62</sup> Their modus operandi is holding demonstrations against every “sect”—including Messianic Judaism and “Christian missionaries”—and rescuing brainwashed victims from said cults or mixed relationships. An article in *Hatsofeh* describes how Yad l’Achim is “laboring to rescue from the mission.” Assigned groups are engaged in various fields to return apostates to Orthodox Judaism. The Baptist Village near Petah Tikva and Kibbutz Aynat are the focus of some special projects “against the claws of the accursed mission.”<sup>63</sup> Additionally, there are several cases where Yad l’Achim contacted the Ministry of Interior to thwart citizenship application processes by believers in Yeshua. Yad l’Achim has also gotten Messianic believers fired on grounds of their faith.<sup>64</sup>

*Haaretz* published an article in 1986 about the “under cover activities” of Yad l’Achim. Among other things, that includes intrusions at night into Christian, Messianic, and missionary institutions, bribery of members of these institutions for information, photocopying of documents, acting as inquirers or believers, and recruiting “apostates” who turned back to Orthodox Judaism. There are fifteen official branches of the anti-missionary organization in Israel and many more operation points. Thousands of unpaid and paid agents and volunteers act throughout the country. They use modern technology and photo equipment, and get information by renting flats and even

<sup>58</sup> “We hope We Aren’t Next in Line,” *Yediot Ahronot* (March 24, 2008).

<sup>59</sup> “Court Hears Messianic Jews’ Suit against Beersheba Chief Rabbi,” *The Jerusalem Post* (June 22, 2009).

<sup>60</sup> “He Encountered a Determined Jew,” *Maariv* (November 27, 2009).

<sup>61</sup> Jeremy Sharon, “Extremist Anti-Missionary Group Forcibly Breaks Into Christian Conference in Jerusalem,” *The Jerusalem Post* (July 12, 2015): 4.

<sup>62</sup> “Background,” Yad l’Achim, <http://yadlachim.org/?CategoryID=188> [accessed July 22, 2016].

<sup>63</sup> “Yad l’Achim in Petah Tikva Laboring to Rescue from the Mission,” *Hatsofeh* (November 9, 1979).

<sup>64</sup> Orit Bar-Gil, “Petah Tikva Municipality Unlawfully Dismissed An Active Mission,” *Globes* (August 26, 2005).

disguising themselves as secular Jews. Yad l'Achim's main sources of income are ultra-Orthodox Jews abroad and in Israel. In 1986, members were required to contribute five NIS per person to fund the operations. A small part of its budget is funded by governmental offices, like the Ministry of Interior, Ministry of Religious Affairs, and Ministry of Education.<sup>65</sup>

In 1979, Yad l'Achim published a warning about missionaries in Israel, attaching a list with the names, addresses, passport and telephone numbers of 14 believers.<sup>66</sup> The same occurred 30 years later: the list presented by Yad l'Achim showed "missionaries who concealed their faith in 'that man' in front of the court when applying for citizenship." The detailed list of more than 60 Messianic Jews was printed not only in *Yom l'Yom* but also in other religious newspapers like *Mishpacha*, *HaMachaneh HaHaredi*, and *HaShavua BiYerushalayim*. Yad l'Achim director Rabbi Lipschitz suggests a questionnaire for the Ministry of Interior to use in asking about applicants' beliefs—Messianic Jews cannot deny their faith and shall thus be revealed.<sup>67</sup>

An elderly couple from a Messianic assembly, who "pretend to be upright people," wearing a Star of David but also a cross, angered the anti-missionary organization by distributing 30,000 copies of the New Testament to soldiers. Yad l'Achim activists called their landlord and urged him to end the tenants' contract. For his part, the landlord showed no interest in that invasion of privacy. After the couple had received more threatening letters, they removed the name tag on their door. Yad l'Achim complains that apparently these facts are insufficient in the eyes of the government to act against their missionary activities.<sup>68</sup>

In another incident, neighbors informed Yad l'Achim about their suspicion that "missionaries" had moved into the neighborhood. The activists investigated and found out that one of the women is part of a Messianic congregation. Thus, a warning against her influence was released so that the residents of the area were aware of the "danger lurking in the neighborhood."<sup>69</sup> The author of the article concludes that the work of Yad l'Achim is like the fight of David and Goliath: the anti-missionary organization against mission organizations who receive funding from all over the world.

*Maariv* published an article in 1990 about the "holy war" of Yad l'Achim against "the mission." In order to detect weak spots in Messianic congregations, undercover agents are planted strategically all over the country, looking like "normal Israelis" without black coats and hats or side curls. Yad l'Achim reports huge successes, and claims that since 1985 Messianic Jews have been unable to rent the Sokolow hall in Tel Aviv for events—each time anonymous bomb threats are used as prevention.<sup>70</sup>

Yad l'Achim claimed in 1998 that a five-year-old kindergartener told his teacher that he had been baptized. The supervisor immediately contacted the anti-missionary organization in order to convince the father to return to Judaism. The child's mother stated that her husband "has turned into a robot" and only accepted the baptism for the promise of money and help with housing. However, even the reporting newspaper, *Kol HaDaron*, realized that Yad l'Achim likes to cite cases such as these to push for harsher anti-missionary bills, as well as more financial support from different concerned sponsors.<sup>71</sup>

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<sup>65</sup> Nadav Shragai, "Yad l'Achim: The Second Arm," *Haaretz* (March 7, 1986).

<sup>66</sup> "WARNING: MISSIONARIES !!!" *Maariv* (February 21, 1979).

<sup>67</sup> Chaim Israeli, "Sixty Missionaries Were Recently Converted," *Yom l'Yom* (July 9, 2009).

<sup>68</sup> "Mission Bait," *T'mura* (October 22, 1982).

<sup>69</sup> "A Day with the Warriors Against The Mission: Yad l'Achim," *Hatsofeh* (February 29, 1980).

<sup>70</sup> "Holy War," *Maariv* (February 23, 1990).

<sup>71</sup> "Daddy Baptized Me," *Kol HaDaron* (March 20, 1998).

On November 28, 1998, Yad l'Achim organized a protest in front of a Messianic congregation in Beersheba due to an alleged mass baptism of 150 Jewish children. The chief rabbi of Beersheva, Yehuda Deri, and around 1,000 protestors left their synagogue Shabbat prayers to arrive at the meeting place. As not only threats but also rocks were thrown at the building, the police had to come and evacuate the Messianic believers and their children. Eyewitnesses report a life-threatening situation. Some cars belonging to congregation members were damaged, and the Orthodox protestors "threatened to kill the believers and burn their homes." Rabbi Deri claims that it was a spontaneous demonstration and that no violence happened other than "knocking on the door." In addition, he clarifies: "We don't want wars, and we have nothing against the Christian community. But the Messianic Jews are a threat." A member of Yad l'Achim agrees and promises to continue protesting against this "dangerous cult."<sup>72</sup>

Yad l'Achim claimed a successful infiltration of a Messianic wedding in 2002. An activist identified the couple from the previous week, when they were married in a religious Jewish ceremony in the rabbinical court. The head of Yad l'Achim warned against "missionaries" who abuse the system in order to receive the benefits of being Jewish yet are part of a "Christian" congregation. In the end, Yad l'Achim admitted that the Messianic couple was successful.<sup>73</sup>

A resident of Bat Yam went to the police to open an investigation against harassment—all because she is a Messianic believer. The music teacher, who is also involved in children's performances throughout Israel, was visited by Yad l'Achim activists in 2007. After she refused to talk about her private life, the ultra-Orthodox men became verbally abusive and returned to her house several times. Afterward, they approached her secular husband in order to stir him up against his wife and urge her to abandon her faith and community. As the anti-missionaries' attempts turned out to be fruitless, posters warning of the "missionary music teacher" were hung up in her building and the entire neighborhood. The victim compared her situation with the "persecution of the Jews in the Diaspora," and even the police officer was shocked at this kind of treatment in a democratic country.<sup>74</sup>

In a response to attacks against Messianic Jews, Yad l'Achim's Shalom Dov Lipschitz justified violence, contrary to previous statements: "It's not natural that there won't be violence. Look, according to what they've done to us we should kill a Christian every day. No?" Another member of the anti-missionary organization agreed:

[Messianic believers] are the murderers of souls. Jewish apostates. The offspring of the initiators of the crusades, who ran Jerusalem's streets with rivers of blood. They are smiling monsters with pockets full of funds which flow from the US, whose whole purpose is to convert the Jewish people and not to leave one pure Jewish soul alive.<sup>75</sup>

The same article recounts how a rabbi attacked congregational leader Howard Bass and threatened him and his wife in very explicit and crass language. Only when the reporter revealed his profession, the head of the yeshiva explained:

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<sup>72</sup> "Protests in Beersheba," *Haaretz, Hatsofeh, Maariv, Yated Ne'eman, Yediot Ahronot, Army Radio, Israel Radio, Israel TV, Hamodia, Maariv, The Jerusalem Post, Beersheba regional weeklies* (November 29–30; December 2–4, 1998).

<sup>73</sup> "One Week After the Marriage Ceremony at the Rabbinat - A Christian Marriage Ceremony Was Performed for the Couple and Immediately After, They Were Converted," *Hamodia* (July 12, 2002).

<sup>74</sup> "The Messiah Hasn't Come," *Zman Holon Bat-Yam* (May 25, 2007).

<sup>75</sup> Boaz Gaon, "God of Revenge," *Maariv* (April 18, 2008).

That's the only way to talk to them. They're considered important people in their community and so we have to trample on their dignity, humiliate them. . . . They're murdering innocent souls! They're like Hamas! But worse.

However, the public's perception of Yad l'Achim is not all positive. Rabbi Aharon Keller of Nahariya is convinced that most of the reports by the anti-missionary organization are half-truths for the sake of publicity.<sup>76</sup>

### **The Perspective of Journalists and the General Public**

There is no unanimous perspective on Messianic Jews in Israel: some journalists write in favor, or at least are unbiased, about believers; some write in a rather inflammatory style. The opinions of neighbors, police officers, and members of the Knesset have varied over the years and always depend on the case.

In one case, the attack on the Beersheba congregation in November 1998, neighbors spoke rather supportively of the members of the Messianic congregation. The believers only "sing and pray" and no one in the area had ever complained about them: "we all have good relationships with them." A professor of Ben Gurion University witnessed the incident and calls it a riot, not a demonstration. On the other hand, the chief rabbi and members of Yad l'Achim insisted that it was a peaceful manifestation of their disapproval, and they portrayed the believers as the real threat, a danger that needs to be stopped. The spokesman for the police's Southern District described the scene as "a few dozen people praying, dancing and singing. . . . There were over 500 people there."<sup>77</sup>

Similarly, in Arad in 2004, busloads of Orthodox Jews arrived outside the homes of 15 Messianic families to protest. The police and local authorities permitted it and did not intervene. Again, the neighbors, who were likewise besieged, contested the validity of the anti-missionaries' claims that the Messianic believers "hunt souls" and "kill and steal children."<sup>78</sup> Surprisingly, a Haredi newspaper quoted a Messianic believer who allegedly said, "The orthodox spill our blood and no one does anything."<sup>79</sup> Two weeks later, though, the same paper accused the coverage by secular Israeli outlets as "driven crazy by self-hatred" for slandering the ultra-Orthodox community, accusing them of disrupting the peaceful Messianic community by their declaration of war.<sup>80</sup> Another source quoted the chief rabbi of Arad: "Get out of our city, you liars, who . . . want to snatch our children and convert them to Christianity. . . . They should hang a chain and cross around their necks so we can recognize them as Christians and not mistake them for Jews."<sup>81</sup> As the Orthodox opposition continued, more and more people took a stand on the matter. A citizen of Arad vouched for the believers as they are not "missionaries, nor anything of the sort" but a "valuable group." He even mentioned two Messianic Jewish paramedics who have saved many lives in the city. The frustration lies in the fact that "if people behaved like this toward Jews abroad we would be outraged."<sup>82</sup>

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<sup>76</sup> Jehoshofat Hassan, "Half-Truths in 'Yad l'Achim' Publications," *Nahar-Ton* (September 27, 1983).

<sup>77</sup> "Protests in Beersheba," *The Jerusalem Post* (December 4, 1998).

<sup>78</sup> Sara Leibowitz-Dar, "In the Role of the Jews: Christians," *Haaretz* (April 30, 2004): 26.

<sup>79</sup> "The 'Messianics' Complain About the Incitement Against Them," *HaMahane HaHaredi* (April 22, 2004).

<sup>80</sup> "The 'Messianics' Complain About the Incitement Against Them," *HaMahane HaHaredi* (April 22, 2004).

<sup>81</sup> "Unrest in Arad," *Israel Today* (June 2004): 23.

<sup>82</sup> Moshe Regev, "Haredi / Nationalist City in Tel Arad," *HaTzvi* (March 8, 2007).

### *Negative Reports and Reactions*

Messianic Jews appear to be a danger for some Israelis as they seem to be Jewish but are not anymore.<sup>83</sup> For them, it is an attack on Judaism. Especially as it seems that their focus is set on vulnerable people like new immigrants in ulpans, a restriction of entrance for missionaries is a proposed solution, according to an article in the newspaper *Hatsofeh*.<sup>84</sup>

Late Chief Rabbi Ovadia Yosef determined that “according to Halakhah, the New Testament is to be burned.”<sup>85</sup> Correspondingly, the deputy mayor of Or Yehuda and member of the Shas party Uzi Aharon piled copies of the New Testament onto a bonfire. Interestingly, Aharon defended his action on Army Radio, saying that he was “purging the evil among us” and simply following a “commandment.”<sup>86</sup> However, the deputy mayor apologized in the English-speaking *Jerusalem Post*, swearing that it was not planned and the yeshiva students did it—he merely rescued the books out of the fire. Despite his regret and his respect toward all religions, he emphasized that Messianic Jews cannot be allowed “to come into our homes and incite against our religion.”<sup>87</sup> In a school in the Jordan Valley, teachers invoked the chief rabbi’s call when they burned a New Testament in front of students 36 years later, in 2015. Most of those present responded favorably; however, some were concerned that “where books are burnt, there people will be burnt as well.”<sup>88</sup>

A father of a 20-year-old woman who was baptized in Holon is enraged and saddened about losing his child in spirit. He calls the Messianic movement the “tracts of Satan.”<sup>89</sup>

A *Haaretz* reporter wanted to interview a staff member in leadership with Jews of Jesus in Israel, but he was refused: “Jewish and Israeli journalists are prejudiced against us and we’re not interested in negative press,” reads the statement. The author concluded in the article, titled “The Converts,” that it is evident that “one must wage war against the JEWS FOR JESUS since the Jewish people cannot permit itself at present to lose even one Jew, but one should not see them as a real threat.”<sup>90</sup>

In 1989, three families sent an appeal to the Rehavia (Jerusalem) neighborhood committee to act against the group of “Jewish Christians.” Even though the head of the group, Joseph Shulam of Netivya, promised the quiet conduct of its members, the accusers describe them as “eccentrics, Jewish missionaries who believe in Jesus, a collection of the weirdoes and wretched of the city.”<sup>91</sup>

### *Positive Reports and Reactions*

In an Israeli German-language magazine, Christians and Messianic Jews give statements concerning sharing the gospel with Jews in Israel. Theology professor Heinz Kremers and Bishop Helmut Class believe that all missionary activities toward Jews must be abandoned, as they are offensive. The reason for that proclamation is the abuse by Christendom during the Holocaust and the subsequent lack of trust toward believers in Jesus. On the other hand, Klaus Mosche Pülz, a German Messianic

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<sup>83</sup> “Christianity in the Eyes of the Jew,” *Al Hamishmar* (October 1, 1978).

<sup>84</sup> “Law Without Teeth,” *Hatsofeh* (September 14, 1979).

<sup>85</sup> “The New Testament,” *Haaretz* (October 25, 1979).

<sup>86</sup> Army Radio, 9:00 am (May 21, 2008).

<sup>87</sup> Amir Mizrahi, “After New Testament Burning, Deputy Mayor Tries Damage Control,” *The Jerusalem Post* (May 21, 2008): 1.

<sup>88</sup> “Teachers and Students Burned Bible with New Testament in School in Emek,” *Index HaEmek VaHaGalil-Shavua Afula* (September 11, 2015): 50.

<sup>89</sup> Sara Friedman, “Father whose 20-year-old daughter became a Christian: When I saw the pictures of the baptism, it became a black day,” *Maariv* (February 4, 1983).

<sup>90</sup> “The Converts,” *Haaretz* (June 25, 1982).

<sup>91</sup> “Narkis Street Jewish Christian Sect,” *Yediot Ahronot* (November 2, 1989).

Jew who made aliyah in 1967, believes that the mission to the Jews is the sole solution to the Israeli conflict.<sup>92</sup>

A neither negative nor positive remark in *Maariv*: the International Christian Embassy Jerusalem and Messianic Jews in general are evangelizing the Jewish people by means of “love bombs.”<sup>93</sup>

As mentioned above, Chief Rabbi Ovadia Yosef encouraged the burning of New Testaments. Yad l’Achim likewise asked that missionary material and New Testaments be sent to them in order to enlarge their bonfire on Lag B’Omer in 1980. A journalist from *Ha’Shavua Ba’Meshek* wonders what would happen if foreigners set afire Jewish holy books like the Tanakh: the burning of books is a manner of Nazis, and it is a shame that in a country like Israel that prides itself in being liberal toward all religions something like this can occur. “Is the burning of the holy books of a great religion like Christianity an act of liberalism? Is there no law to prevent this?”<sup>94</sup> Similarly, the “secular” yeshiva Bina in Bik’at Ono, run by the United Kibbutz Movement, demonstrated against “the burning of the books of the Messianic Jews.” The poster read: “As Jews and as people of the Book, we are forbidden to stay silent in the face of such acts. . . . Join us in rescuing the books from the flames through study and joint reading.”<sup>95</sup>

*Haaretz* reacted to the arson attack on a Messianic congregation on HaNeviim Street in Jerusalem in 1984. In the editorial, the author warns against religious Jewish extremism that leads to a “worrisome chain of terror acts.” In the end, the government, rabbis, and influential individuals are prompted to expose and resist this dangerous trend.<sup>96</sup>

In 1984 in Rehovot, the neighbors of the congregation led by Baruch Maoz spoke positively about the believers: “The members of the congregation are very much liked by us, they are quiet and don’t trouble us. True, they knocked on our doors to invite us to their Bible studies, but when we refused they stopped coming. . . . In a democratic country, everyone can engage in his own affairs as long as it causes no public damage. These are friendly people who harm no one.”<sup>97</sup>

In Yavniel, a settlement in the Galilee, residents were asked in 1986 about the presence of Messianic Jews in their community. Dr. Moshe Avrahamson, a veterinarian, feels no threat from the Messianic Jews: “The Hassidim don’t work, and they are anti-Zionist, while these Christian fellows do no one harm. One of them, for example, the carpenter Greenberg, is a fine fellow, quiet, and causes no trouble. It’s the local rabbi who stirs up all this tumult about the missionaries. Don’t worry about our souls. It will work out fine, the people of Israel live!” Avraham Maimon, a shepherd, warns that “anyone who tries to do them harm will have to deal with me! They are excellent people and none of them have tried to convert Jews to Christianity.”<sup>98</sup>

Regarding the “Who is a Jew debate” in 1988 (see “The Voice of Messianic Believers in the Media,” below), a journalist for *Yediot Ahronot*, Boaz Evron, wrote the following:

All that we ask is what every person in the enlightened world enjoys, life in a normal state, a state where all its citizens are equal before the law, without regard to whether they are Jews or not, religious or secular, black or white. As one great Jew

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<sup>92</sup> “Mission to the Jews: Yesterday and Today,” *Israel Nachrichten Tel Aviv* (October 19, 1979).

<sup>93</sup> Ted Levite, “4000 Christians at Qumran Returned to the Days of the Bible,” *Maariv* (September 30, 1983).

<sup>94</sup> “Is It Legal to Publicly Burn the Holy Books of Other Religions?” *HaShavua Ba’Meshek* (June 3, 1980).

<sup>95</sup> Yuval Gamliel, “Dozens Demonstrated in Front of City Hall Against the Book Burning,” *Yediot Bik’at Ono* (June 6, 2008): 24.

<sup>96</sup> “Arson Attack in Jerusalem,” *Haaretz* (January 8, 1984).

<sup>97</sup> “Messiah’s Emissaries Land in Rehovot,” *Al Hamishmar* (December 19, 1984).

<sup>98</sup> Yacov Gal & Zvi Ben Elior, “The ‘Quiet’ After the Storm,” *Erev Shabbat* (May 23, 1986).



said nearly 2,000 years ago: “Before God there is neither Jew nor Greek, neither circumcised nor uncircumcised.”<sup>99</sup>

Quite a positive article was published 1995 in *Ha’Ir*. The report is true to the facts, and even the voice of opposition—here the ultra-Orthodox Lev l’Achim—cannot deny that the Messianic body offers “many activities among the new immigrants. People from all the layers of society come to them today.” Especially as they observe that the Israeli society is alienating, many are looking for warmth and support, “and their congregations give it.”<sup>100</sup>

The tragic death of Abigail Litle, a 14-year-old Messianic believer who died in a suicide bomb attack in Haifa, led to vast coverage in Israeli newspapers and responses from Knesset member Yuval Steinitz, US ambassador to Israel Daniel Kurtzer, and her pastor Shmuel Aweida. Eight major Israeli papers, as well as radio and TV programs, reported on the terror attack with particular mention of the teenage victim. Her funeral was described as a real testimony to her faith; the service was conducted in Hebrew and verses from the Torah and the New Testament were read.

Parliament member Yuval Steinitz called Abigail a symbol for the “start of a new era of friendship and common fate between the Jewish and Christian faiths,” pointing out the cross on her coffin and the Star of David on the flag. The US ambassador to Israel, Daniel Kurtzer, who is an Orthodox Jew, described Abigail as a “true bridge between our two countries,” a “true bridge between our many faiths, so dedicated as she was to family and to God . . . and her community.” Additionally, Pastor Shmuel Aweida was asked in a *HaYom HaZe* TV interview about the Messianic Jewish faith and the hope Abigail and other believers have in the Messiah.<sup>101</sup>

*Yediot Achronot* published in 2008 the report of “undercover” journalist Techiya Barak, who spent two and a half months in the Messianic Jewish community in Tel Aviv to unveil their doings in Israel. According to the article, she was pressured to be baptized and received many phone calls after she stopped attending the services.<sup>102</sup> Despite the negative tone of the exposé, the outcome of the project was quite satisfying: several counter-articles appeared in different news outlets to defend the image of Messianic believers. Menachem Ben of *Maariv* protested that the article was “cheapened” and “likely to encourage the sending of more explosive devices and more book-burning.” One should not forget the “humanity and spirituality of Messianic Jews, their attentiveness to Holocaust survivors, the homeless, and youth in danger.”<sup>103</sup> A *Yediot Achronot* journalist likewise countered the original report by underlining the good experience she had with the community in the previous three years: “I received help in every case and never once was I asked to accept Yeshu [*sic*] as the Messiah.” Another opinion is that:

The article which was meant to expose the wicked acts of the Messianic Jews in fact merely demonstrates that here is a group of good, idealistic people who show mercy and compassion to the most far-flung and forgotten corners. . . . If they do what they do, it only reflects badly on other segments of Jewish society—particularly the Orthodox—who are failing to provide the necessary help.<sup>104</sup>

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<sup>99</sup> “One Great Jew,” *Yediot Achronot* (November 25, 1988).

<sup>100</sup> “The Messianic Jews,” *Ha’Ir* (April 14, 1995).

<sup>101</sup> David Rudge, “You Will Be Our Guardian Angel,” *The Jerusalem Post* (March 10, 2003): 3.

<sup>102</sup> Techiya Barak, “The Messianic Code,” *Yediot Achronot* (August 8, 2008): 16.

<sup>103</sup> Menachem Ben, “Quintet,” *Maariv* (August 15, 2008): 5.

<sup>104</sup> Tamar Ben-Arie, “Good People,” *Yediot Achronot* (August 15, 2008): 22.

Larry Derfner, a journalist with *The Jerusalem Post*, investigated the Messianic Jewish faith on his own in 2009. His verdict: The community cannot be considered a cult because of the lack of a single leader, and there is no brainwashing of new converts, who are also not being kept away from family and friends—“anyone who wants to leave the community, leaves.” Derfner condemned Yad l’Achim’s attempts to try “everything legally possible to make these people’s lives miserable,” from publishing personal details of believers in newspapers, to calling employers and urging them to fire Messianic Jews, to contacting the Interior Ministry to prevent members receiving citizenship and its benefits.<sup>105</sup>

As it became more and more general knowledge that anti-missionary organizations work together with the Ministry of Interior, further articles arose that reveal the injustice faced by Messianic believers:

They serve in the army, educate their children according to the values of the State and Zionism, send them to regular schools, work for their living, mostly in the free professions, pay taxes, love the State, swear loyalty to it and are dedicated to it, . . . but despite all this, feel like a persecuted minority.<sup>106</sup>

In 2010, *Yediot Ahronot* published a lengthy article about the Messianic Jewish community in Israel as part of the series “Who Is a Jew?” The language of the report is quite condescending, yet the information given is all correct and Messianic believers are defined as Jews.<sup>107</sup>

When Rabbi Yosef Sheinin compared Messianic Jews to Hitler, another newspaper conducted a poll to determine readers’ attitudes toward Sheinin’s comment. The most prominent opinion was that it is a shame for Ashdod that taxpayers’ money is funding “such a black person.” Furthermore, the highest commandment of Torah, “You shall love thy neighbor as thyself,” is apparently not observed by the rabbi. Only one comment stated that the quote is disturbing but the efforts to keep the Jewish character of the city are respectable.<sup>108</sup>

### **The Reaction of the Government or the Police**

The role of the government in the Jewish democratic state is highly discussed. Some argue that the focus is stronger on Judaism than on the need to be a democracy. The influence of religious authorities in political decisions is indubitable in Israel. Statesmen do not eschew to proclaim their attitude toward Messianic believers, and thereby influence fellow Israeli citizens. The head of the religious council in Eilat, for example, said that he is “all too familiar with Messianic Jews” and that he will “personally make sure that they will not survive here.”<sup>109</sup>

In a letter to the editor of *The Jerusalem Post*, a citizen is disturbed by the presence of Jews for Jesus at the Kiryat Shmona absorption center, claiming that their calling in life is to convert Jews to Christianity: “Whilst I believe in democracy, I don’t see why as a Jew, I should contribute through taxation for this type of person to learn Hebrew.”<sup>110</sup>

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<sup>105</sup> “Leap of Faith,” *The Jerusalem Post* (February 13, 2009).

<sup>106</sup> “Birthpangs of the Messiah: All Israelis are brothers—forget it,” *Haaretz* (October 2, 2009).

<sup>107</sup> “Yeshua Superstar,” *Yediot Ahronot* (August 16, 2010).

<sup>108</sup> “Survey,” *Yediot HaDarom* (February 25, 2011): 22.

<sup>109</sup> Lior Yado, “Waiting For The Messiah,” *Yediot Eilat* (January 6, 2006).

<sup>110</sup> “Ludicrous Situation,” Letter to Editor, *The Jerusalem Post* (November 12, 1978).

### *Struggles with the Law of Return*

One of the most debated topics for the government concerning Messianic believers is their status as Jews regarding the Law of Return. Due to the major influx of immigrants after the Second World War, the Knesset passed the Law of Return in 1950 in order to facilitate the naturalization process in granting immediate citizenship to Jews.<sup>111</sup> As the question of “Who is a Jew?” arose, the law was amended significantly in 1970 and the offer of citizenship was extended to a child or grandchild, the spouse, the spouse of a child of a Jew, and the spouse of a grandchild of a Jew. The exception here is a person who has been a Jew and has voluntarily changed his religion.<sup>112</sup>

The question of identity is not only relevant to finding acceptance in Israeli society but moreover in legal issues, most of all the Law of Return. It is fascinating to observe how opinions on “what makes someone a Jew” have changed and probably will continue changing over time. The ambiguity is visible in an article in *Maariv* called “Israeli Stupidity,” where the author generously invites members of the “lost tribes” in Western Asia to be part of the Jewish community even though they are called Christians in their own countries and are followers of Yeshua, because “they’re Jews no less than other groups.”<sup>113</sup> On the other hand, Messianic believers who desire to obtain Israeli citizenship get denied because they are allegedly not Jews anymore because they believe in Jesus as the Messiah.

Mina Fenton of the former Mafdal National Religious Party explained that the “ministry must protect the Jewish State and Judaism,” and that citizens’ rights are only applicable to Jews. The objection that some Jews believe in Buddha or are atheists was said to be irrelevant.<sup>114</sup>

In 1979, an American citizen was denied Israeli citizenship due to his involvement with Jews for Jesus. According to the High Court, believers in Yeshua are not Jews but Christians, and therefore members of another religion.<sup>115</sup>

The same verdict was given to Eileen Dorflinger, whose case was quite prominent in the media. In the end, she was granted residency but not citizenship.<sup>116</sup>

Due to the increase in cases of Messianic Jews who have their citizenship application rejected, in 1988 *Haaretz* published a public opinion poll conducted by Dahaf. The question was whether a person “born to a Jewish mother, loyal to the State of Israel, who serves in the IDF, pays his taxes, celebrates Jewish festivals, observes the Torah commandments and tradition, and feels himself to be Jewish, but nevertheless believes in Jesus as the Messiah and has not been baptized into Christianity, remains a Jew according to Israeli law in general, and the Law of Return in particular.” Out of 1,189 Israelis, 78% replied in favor of the Messianic believers’ appeals. However, the head of the Interior Ministry’s population registry, Yehoshua Kahana, rejects public opinion by calling Messianic Jews more dangerous than Reform Jewish converts as the latter “at least want to be Jews, while these people (Messianic Jews) are Christians pretending to be Jews.”<sup>117</sup>

It is evident that applications for citizenship by Messianic believers depend on the favor of the Ministry of Interior and the political party that is in charge in any given year. Conversely, even

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<sup>111</sup> “Israel. 2016,” Encyclopædia Britannica Online, <https://www.britannica.com/place/Israel?anchor=ref741699> [Accessed July 21, 2016].

<sup>112</sup> “Law of Return 5710–1950,” Israel Ministry of Foreign Affairs <http://www.mfa.gov.il/mfa/mfa-archive/1950-1959/pages/law%20of%20return%205710-1950.aspx> [Accessed July 21, 2016].

<sup>113</sup> “Israeli Stupidity,” *Maariv* (December 8, 2006).

<sup>114</sup> “Mabat Current Affairs Program,” TV Channel One (April 10, 2005).

<sup>115</sup> “High Court in Fundamental Decision: Jews For Jesus are Christians According to the Law of Return -- Request of American Citizen for Israeli Citizenship on Basis of Law of Return,” *Haaretz* March 19, 1979).

<sup>116</sup> “Jewess who Believes in Jesus Permitted to Remain in Israel: She Has Demanded to be Recognized as Jewish Under the Law of Return,” *Maariv* (October 26, 1979).

<sup>117</sup> Ron Kislev, “Messianic Jews to High Court in Israel: Government Case Heard,” *Haaretz* (February 5, 1988).

though the Interior Minister in 2004 was secular and left-wing, Avraham Poraz sided with anti-missionary organizations in rejecting citizenship applications by Messianic believers. In his defense of using information provided by Yad l'Achim, Minister Poraz explained that most parts of the government in Israel had been under the authority of orthodox ministers and are "still influenced by the Orthodox worldview." The article concludes with the description of a Messianic worship service in one of the Jerusalem congregations. In the end, the pastor encouraged the believers to pray for the nation's leaders, and especially for the Interior Minister, to receive grace and wisdom from God.<sup>118</sup>

The "black list of Messianic Jews at the Interior Ministry" gained attention in 2005, when a reporter from TV Channel One called it a "story of religious persecution reminiscent of the dark ages."<sup>119</sup>

After much evidence was accumulated, attorney Calev Myers wrote to Minister of Interior Ofir Pines to file a complaint. A couple had been waiting for a long time to hear about their citizenship process. Finally, they were rejected due to claims that they had engaged in missionary activities and belonged to the Messianic Jewish community. The statement is speculative and based on information given by extreme Orthodox organizations, said Myers. At the publication of the article in *Iton Yerushalayim*, the attorney had not received an official response and was considering bringing the matter to the High Court.<sup>120</sup>

Renanta Kaufman, a Holocaust survivor who is married to an Israeli citizen, was denied the right to make aliyah. As a Messianic Jew, she was considered a "traitor" and not a real Jew by the Jewish Agency. Kaufman's husband Adi likewise suffered consequences due to his decision to follow Yeshua; he was beaten more than once and lost several jobs. The Holocaust survivor is outraged about the injustice: "For the furnaces in Germany we were Jewish. But for Israeli citizenship we're not."<sup>121</sup>

Following several attacks against believers in Rehovot, more than few appeals from the US and Germany were sent to the Foreign Ministry, requesting that the Assembly of Messianic Jews in Israel be permitted to function freely. Baruch Maoz protested that the police did not interfere enough when physical attacks happened and property damaged.

Yet the city council of Rehovot passed a resolution protesting "missionary activities." Mayor Yehezkiel Hamelekh emphasized in a diplomatic way that Messianic believers are not desirable there and encouraged them to operate elsewhere. The mayor of Rishon Le'Zion has been working for a long time to remove the Messianic Jews from his town, according to *Haaretz*.<sup>122</sup>

Concerning the arson attack on a Messianic congregation on HaNeviim Street in Jerusalem in 1984, Mayor Teddy Kollek criticized rabbis and other religious officials for not speaking up against attacks on Christian institutions: "When Jewish synagogues are attacked abroad, the first to denounce these actions are Christian religious leaders, and when they fail to do so, we accuse them of anti-Semitism. Now when Christian chapels are burnt, the rabbis remain silent."<sup>123</sup>

This statement, on the other hand, led to accusations against the Jerusalem mayor that the target was not a church but a missionary office, and that it was not proven that Jews were involved in the attack. His behavior is decried as disrespectful toward the rabbinate.<sup>124</sup>

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<sup>118</sup> "You Shall Have No Other Gods," *7 Yamim (Yediot Ahronot)* (August 13, 2004).

<sup>119</sup> *Mabat Current Affairs Program*, TV Channel One (April 10, 2005).

<sup>120</sup> "Messianic Jews Are Angry with the Ministry of the Interior," *Iton Yerushalayim* (August 19, 2005).

<sup>121</sup> Shalom Yerushalmi, "Fruit of Success," *Maariv* (February 21, 2014): 5.

<sup>122</sup> "In the Name of the People of Israel & Yeshua, its Messiah!" *Haaretz* (December 3, 1980).

<sup>123</sup> "The Rabbis are Silent when Churches are Being Burned," *Yediot Ahronot* (January 8, 1984).

<sup>124</sup> "Kollek the Preacher," *Hatsofeh* (January 9, 1984).

In the 1980s, Ari Sorko-Ram, a Messianic believer and director of Maoz Israel Ministries, was removed from his IDF unit after Yad l'Achim complained about him. In the *Al Hamishmar* newspaper, a journalist objects to the double standard of the Israeli army: ultra-Orthodox “missionaries” are tolerated, but Christian “missionaries” are punished and forbidden.<sup>125</sup> Sorko-Ram did not even proselytize, yet the mere fact that he is a Messianic Jew led to the loss of his post.

Unfortunately, prominent opponents have used their influence to combat Messianic believers. A Messianic Jewish society (the newspaper mentions “Jews for Jesus” but this organization is often synonymous with any Messianic Jewish group) paid to rent a hall at the Laromme Hotel in Jerusalem for the lecture “What do Jews have to do with Jesus?” in 1989. The Jerusalem rabbinate blackmailed the hotel to cancel the contract; otherwise they would withdraw the hotel’s kashrut certificate and forbid weddings at the venue. Arnon Yekutieli, a city council member and advocate of the Citizens’ Rights Movement, urged the general manager of the hotel to not try to appease the rabbinate. However, the management replied that a kosher hotel is dependent on the favor of the rabbinate and thus not eager to “engage in a war” against the religious entity.<sup>126</sup>

One very sad incident happened in 1995 during a custody dispute between a mentally ill father and a Messianic Jewish mother. The mother lost the case due to her faith, as the “welfare of the children” could only be ensured if they were not brought up in Christianity. It would only cause “continuous conflicts which influence their mental health adversely.” A copy of the New Testament was brought to court as evidence, causing the judge to cry out, “This should be burned!” Ruth, the mother, assured the court that her children were not involved in a Messianic congregation. Even though the father returned from the Lebanon War verbally and physically violent, and the children expressed the desire to stay with their mother, the judge granted custody to the father. Nevertheless, Ruth showed forgiveness toward the judge and determination to pursue her case: “May God bless him, he does not know what he does. The rabbis in Israel have changed the Jewish religion to a way of controlling and I will not let them control me.”<sup>127</sup>

Bat-El Levi, a Messianic believer living in the settlement of Adam, won the national Bible quiz in 2008. When an anonymous caller informed Yad l'Achim about the participant’s faith, a couple of Orthodox and National Religious rabbis attempted to stop her.<sup>128</sup> Members of the anti-missionary organization justified their planned boycott by saying the quiz is “designed for Jewish youth and members of the ‘Messianic Jewish’ sect are not recognized as Jews.”<sup>129</sup> In response to objections by the Chief Rabbinate of Israel, Education Minister Yuli Tamir clarified that the quiz will not be cancelled, nor the participation of Bat-El Levi denied:

The point of the quiz is to check the participant’s knowledge of the Bible, not to scrutinize their faith. The legal department in the Education Ministry verified that Levi is Jewish according to the criteria of the state. That’s good enough for us.<sup>130</sup>

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<sup>125</sup> Yoav Amiri, “Who is a Missionary,” *Al Hamishmar* (May 26, 1987).

<sup>126</sup> Dan Arkin, “The Rabbinate Pressured—and the Director of Laromme Hotel Gave in,” *Maariv* (June 1, 1989).

<sup>127</sup> “The State of the Halakha is already here,” *Kol Ha’ir* (November 10, 1995).

<sup>128</sup> Matthew Wagner, “Rabbis Call For Bible Quiz Boycott Due to Messianic Jewish Finalist,” *The Jerusalem Post* (May 1, 2008): 1.

<sup>129</sup> Abraham Mann, “Scandal: Missionary Girl May Become Winner of International Bible Quiz,” *BaKehila* (May 1, 2008): 16.

<sup>130</sup> Matthew Wagner, “Chief Rabbis Call to Cancel Bible Quiz on Account of Messianic Jewish Contestant,” *The Jerusalem Post* (May 7, 2008): 1.

The non-profit organization Taglit-Birthright, which offers free ten-day trips to Israel for Jewish youth, discovered Messianic believers among the participants. From November 2008 on, the eligibility rules changed and the declaration added: "I do not subscribe to any beliefs or follow any practices which may be in any way associated with Messianic Judaism, Jews for Jesus or Hebrew Christians." The father of a son who was denied participation explained his frustration:

"If my son had told them that he was a Buddhist, an atheist or a homosexual they would have no problem. Belief that Yeshua is the savior is the dividing line." Attorney Calev Myers called the screening practice a "blatant, ridiculous discrimination. . . . Instead of drawing children of Messianic Jewish families closer to their Jewish roots, they are excluding them from participating."<sup>131</sup>

All 120 members of the Knesset received in 2012 copies of the New Testament via mail. While the majority of the MKs just ignored the Scripture or returned it to the sender, MK Michael Ben-Ari of the National Unity party tore it to pieces in front of cameras.<sup>132</sup> The Knesset's only Christian MK, Hana Sweid, urged the attorney-general to press incitement charges, calling the act "hooliganism, bullying and an apocalyptic act of hatred that was baseless and unnecessary." Knesset Speaker Reuven Rivlin, who is since 2014 the president of Israel, condemned the disrespectful treatment of a holy book which is important to its believers. Similarly, there would be an outcry if in another country a Torah were burned. MK Masud Gnaim likewise received a copy of the New Testament but restrained from ripping or burning it because "as a Muslim, I respect all religions' holy books." Only a MK of the Shas party, Nissim Ze'ev, spoke in favor of Ben-Ari's acts.<sup>133</sup>

### Ambiguous Cases

Here we present three ambiguous cases that prove the double standards of society, individuals, or the government concerning Israel as a democratic state. In each situation, Messianic believers had to suffer injustice due to their faith in stark contrast to other groups with different beliefs.

The mayor of Nazareth Illit demanded the removal of billboards in Russian that proclaim God's love through the sacrifice of his son, Jesus. The posters contained a phone number and the offer of a free book and the visit of a counselor. One of the organizers of the campaign said in defense that it was not missionary material and the members were not Christians but Messianic Jews who want to share their hope. He insisted on their right of speech and religion, and that any constraint would be an infringement of democracy.<sup>134</sup>

On the other hand, the followers of Rebbe Nachman of Breslov openly advertise their belief and spray paint their motto all over the country. Chabad, the Orthodox Hassidic movement, is also well known for its outreach, and posters of Rabbi Schneerson can even be seen on means of public transportation such as busses and *sherut* taxis in Jerusalem. In a Nazareth weekly paper, the author asks at the end of his sarcastic article about missionary activities in the Galilee: "What's all the noise about? Isn't this what Chabad does?"<sup>135</sup>

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<sup>131</sup> Matthew Wagner, "Birthright Screening Out Messianic Jews," *The Jerusalem Post* (November 26, 2008): 4.

<sup>132</sup> Tzadika Brot, "MK Ben-Ari Tore New Testament to Pieces," *Yediot Achronot* (July 18, 2012): 26.

<sup>133</sup> Lahav Harkov, "Christian MK Calls For Legal Action Against Ben-Ari For Defiling New Testament," *The Jerusalem Post* (July 19, 2012): 6.

<sup>134</sup> Vered Levi, "Mayor Gapso Demanded the Removal of Signs That 'Offend the Public'; 'osp.mobi' Company Is Furious," *Yediot HaEmek—Afula* (April 20, 2012): 38.

<sup>135</sup> "CAUTION: SAINTS," *Upper Nazareth weekly* (April 17, 1992).

The Messianic moshav Yad HaShmona was sued in 2012 after refusing to host a lesbian couple's wedding. A representative of the moshav explained to several news outlets that Yad HaShmona's inhabitants are persons of faith, and different rules are applied in the facilities—for example, the genders are housed separately and unmarried couples cannot rent a room together. As a result of the lawsuit, Yad HaShmona had to close its reception hall, the moshav's largest source of income. The concern arose that if the courts continued in that manner synagogues would be sued and financially ruined for refusing same-sex wedding ceremonies. In the weeks following the publication of the case, several homosexual couples called to book their weddings there just to be denied, so they could sue the moshav. Nevertheless, representatives of Yad HaShmona are proud that they stood their ground and did not deny their faith or compromise their moral standards.<sup>136</sup>

On the other hand, at the beginning of the year a Messianic Jewish couple from Rishon l'Zion was not allowed to rent an event hall in Yavne for their wedding ceremony, due to their faith. Only if the couple promised not to read verses from the New Testament in their ceremony could the rental take place. The believers are suing the owner for NIS 100,000 for religious discrimination.<sup>137</sup>

A sad case of ambiguity happened in 2013 when Amiel Ortiz, the Messianic teenager hurt by a parcel bomb in 2008, was denied the status of a terror victim. The Jewish terrorist Yaakov Teitel murdered two Palestinians and attempted the murder of a left-wing professor, a Christian monk, several Arabs, and Ortiz. Teitel received a life sentence and was ordered to pay compensation to his victims or their families. However, as Ortiz is the only Jewish victim, he will not receive financial compensation: the law recognizes terror victims only when a Jew attacks an Arab or vice versa, and not when a Jew assaults a fellow Jew. Ironically, Messianic Jews are not widely recognized as Jews and often have to suffer consequences such as denied citizenship and assistance. The Ortiz family engaged a lawyer to fight this discrimination.<sup>138</sup>

### **Positive Change over the Years**

The religious daily paper *Hamodia* reported in 2000 on the Messianic Students Union at Hebrew University. The issue was brought up in the government when Knesset member Rabbi Meir Porush spoke about the Union's actions, such as distributing pamphlets and inviting students to "lively 'theological' discussions" about life and death. Also, Bible and New Testament classes were offered. Rabbi Porush was alarmed and surprised that parents are warning their children of the dangers of "fire, heights, pins and knives," but not of "teachings that are false and not connected to the law of Sinai."<sup>139</sup> Despite the article's warning tone, it is exciting that there is a Messianic Students Union that meets publicly and is bold enough to invite other students. All over the country, international and local believers in Yeshua meet up in student Bible studies either on campus or in private homes, often inviting their religious or secular Jewish classmates to come along. The students know that they might have to face marginalization, and non-citizens risk their chance of making aliyah.

In the same spirit, a couple of Messianic believers distributed fliers at the conservative Bar Ilan University campus in Ramat Gan two years later. The leaflets point out the desperate situation due to terror attacks and that rabbinical Judaism had failed to give answers to all the issues. Jesus is the only hope and answer. In his Army Radio program *Ma Boer*, Razi Barkai conducted an interview

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<sup>136</sup> Dov Nardaf, "The Ruling Minority," *Makor Rishon* (November 2, 2012): 3.

<sup>137</sup> Avi Itzovitz, "The Messiah is Not Coming," *Yediot Rishon* (January 1, 2016): 46.

<sup>138</sup> Talem Yahav, "Jail Until Death," *Yediot Ahronot* (April 10, 2013): 20.

<sup>139</sup> "University Students Dabble in Mission Work," *Hamodia* (June 22, 2000).

with Moshe Shui, an Israeli Messianic Jew, who commented on the student outreach, his faith, and the growing Messianic community in Israel.<sup>140</sup>

On Simchat Torah 2001, the Israel family channel, Channel 3, screened the mini-series *Jesus*—a well-budgeted series including many prominent actors that received positive reviews. Several viewers called and complained; the responses varied from “cynical humor to full blown rage.”<sup>141</sup> Even though not all the reactions were in favor, the showing of a film about the Messiah is quite surprising and gives hope for the future.

A reporter visited a Messianic student conference in the Baptist Village over the Independence Day holiday in 2005. Instead of just giving his own point of view, several Jewish and Gentile believers were interviewed. The whole article turned out quite fair toward the Messianic community in Israel, and even a cynical comment about their attitude toward homosexuality becomes a witness of Christ-like love: “The homosexual community can breathe a sigh of relief because the Messianics do not hate them but rather see the act of homosexuality as sin.” Some students complained about the persecuting nature of Yad I’Achim and shared their own stories. On the other hand, the anti-missionary organization was allowed only a short space to give their opinion.<sup>142</sup> It is interesting to see the shift from biased reporting to more balanced statements, and most of all, the chance for Messianic believers to explain their faith and share their point of view.

The newspaper *Kol HaZman* reported in 2007 on Messianic Judaism and presented an extensive list of facts in order to refute false allegations and information.<sup>143</sup>

In 2007, Israel’s TV Channel 2 aired a report on Messianic Jews, their faith, lifestyle, and congregations.<sup>144</sup> Even though the newspapers that covered the program were shocked by the channel’s choice to publicize “Christian propaganda”<sup>145</sup> and cynically analyzed every aspect, the show itself was rather objective and its depiction of believers quite favorable. Different believers were interviewed, insight was given into a worship service at the Shemen Sasson congregation in Jerusalem, and even persecution by the ultra-Orthodox was mentioned.

Jews for Jesus published a full-page ad in *Yediot Tel Aviv* in 2007, including a brief outline of Messianic belief and the offer of a free book for those enquiring via phone or the website.<sup>146</sup>

*The Jerusalem Post* recognized the hardships endured by Christians and “Jewish converts to Christianity who call themselves Messianic Jews.” After explaining the upcoming holiday, the newspaper wished all believers “Merry Christmas” in 2008, and expressed the wish for even stronger ties and increased mutual respect between the Christian and Jewish communities.<sup>147</sup>

In 2013, a reporter conducted interviews with several Messianic Jews on the occasion of the Shavuot holiday that “invites the stranger in our midst.” The journalist surprisingly recognized, though, that Messianic believers “are actually an inseparable part of the people of Israel.” The whole article is very fair and even acknowledges the community’s struggle for citizenship.<sup>148</sup>

Dr. Adam Akerman describes in detail the lifestyle, background, and hardships of Messianic Jews in Israel. Moshav Yad HaShmona is singled out and praised as a “positive and unique” contribution to Israeli society. The author visited several Messianic congregations, Yad HaShmona,

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<sup>140</sup> *Ma Boer*, Army Radio (October 17, 2002).

<sup>141</sup> Pnai Plus, “‘Jesus’ on Simchat Torah,” *The Jerusalem Post* (October 4, 5, 18, 2001).

<sup>142</sup> Saher Harel, “Come, Come, Come,” *Tzomet HaSharon* (May 20, 2005): 62.

<sup>143</sup> Asher Keshet, “Jewish Crusade,” *Kol HaZman* (June 15, 2007): 54.

<sup>144</sup> Israel Channel 2 News (February 23, 2007) <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3sEBAldf4L0>.

<sup>145</sup> Nili Ben-Gigi-Wallach, “Mission During Prime Time,” *Hatsofeh* (February 23, 2007); “The Messiah Isn’t Telephoning,” *Maariv* (February 23, 2007).

<sup>146</sup> “Yeshua Gave His Life,” *Yediot Tel Aviv* (September 29, 2007).

<sup>147</sup> “Christmas 2008,” *The Jerusalem Post* (December 25, 2008): 13.

<sup>148</sup> Asant Lev-Ari, “Messiah Times Two,” *BaEmek veBaRama* (May 20, 2013): 30.



and the Messianic school Makor HaTikvah in Jerusalem. He concluded that the fear and aversion toward believers in Yeshua are unjustified as they are not “hunting Jewish souls” but are actually characterized by their strong ties to Jerusalem and the State of Israel.<sup>149</sup>

While several years ago Messianic believers in the army encountered difficulties when professing their faith openly, in 2014 a gunner in the commander’s tank in the 77<sup>th</sup> Battalion of the 7<sup>th</sup> Brigade received the Presidential Medal of Excellence—and spoke about his beliefs in an interview: “Faith connects me to the Jewish people and to the values of perseverance and diligence.”<sup>150</sup> Furthermore, three other Messianic believers in the IDF were interviewed a year later. Sergeant Hananiah Naftali, Sergeant Liel Khouri, and Lieutenant Yotam Fong spoke candidly about their faith, and the latter even proclaimed that being a Messianic Jew gave him strength during Operation Pillar of Cloud and helped him “understand each soldier in the best way”; his faith not only makes him a better commander but helps him consider the army an educational tool.<sup>151</sup>

### *The Voice of Messianic Believers in the Media*

Over the last 37 years, the voice of Messianic believers has become more and more audible. While in the 1980s and 1990s only neighbors or governmental officials gave their statements after incidents with Messianic Jews, reporters gradually showed eagerness to listen to the other side of the story. Since the early 2000s, this minority has been considered a trustworthy source despite the rumors and incitement against them. Quite a few times, Messianic believers have taken advantage of this opportunity to explain their faith and give a testimony of what the Lord has done in their lives. Additionally, an increasing number of newspapers have been publishing advertisements from Messianic ministries and organizations. Even though there is sometimes a backlash due to the controversial content, many media outlets have stated their impartiality and continue to print the announcements.

The first Messianic ad found in the media archive is from 1988. Jacob Damkani published a full-page paid notice in *Yediot Achronot*, *Hadashot*, and *Haaretz* on the eve of Yom Kippur, under the headline “Who Is the Sacrifice?” He proclaims Jesus as the Messiah, gives quotations from the Tanakh, and shares an address for more information and material.<sup>152</sup> Yad l’Achim and other Orthodox Jews sent complaints to the newspapers and said that they would “keep our eye on Damkani” who had run his “Jesus campaign” for a decade. The assistant editor of *Yediot Achronot* promised that the newspaper would not accept ads like this again, whereas *Haaretz* declared that any ad that does not violate the law or preach racial hatred will be published.<sup>153</sup>

At Passover 1989, Meno Kalisher wrote in *Haaretz* and local weekly newspapers about Jesus as the Lamb and the Passover Sacrifice.<sup>154</sup> Likewise, the response was “shock” over the “missionary advert”; Dr. Joseph Burg, the president of the Mizrahi world movement of religious Zionism, protested firmly against what struck him as another “blood libel of the Christians.” Again, *Haaretz* stated it would not intervene with adverts like these.<sup>155</sup>

The Messianic Action Committee published an ad in *The Jerusalem Post*, *Maariv*, and *Haaretz* in 1997 about the religious censorship bill:

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<sup>149</sup> Dr Adam Akerman, “The History of Messianic Jews in Jerusalem,” *Yerushalayim Shelanu* (June 9, 2013): 22.

<sup>150</sup> Shalom Albez, “Local Pride: Tiberias Soldiers Will Receive Award from President,” *Yediot Tveria* (May 2, 2014): 28.

<sup>151</sup> Ofir Tal, “Who Is A Jew,” *BaMachane* (May 14, 2015): 38.

<sup>152</sup> “Who is the Sacrifice?” *Yediot Achronot* (September 16, 1988).

<sup>153</sup> “Jaffa Jew Advertises for Jesus,” *The Jerusalem Post* (October 5, 1988).

<sup>154</sup> “The Lamb—the Passover Sacrifice,” *Haaretz* (April 14, 1989).

<sup>155</sup> “Shock over Missionary Advert,” *Hatsofeh* (April 16, 1989).

In defense of a bill for religious censorship in Israel, Knesset members and others have described the Messianic Jewish community in Israel as traitors who work for the destruction of the Jewish people, emissaries of malevolent foreign forces. We do not recognize ourselves in these dark descriptions.

We Messianic Jews are Jewish and love to be so. . . . Of course we are not perfect! Yes, we openly profess faith in Yeshua as the Messiah of Israel and we do not submit to the spiritual leadership of the rabbis. Yeshua is our chief rabbi, our spiritual leader.

We call upon our nation to allow in Israel freedom of religious expression, and not to try to muzzle us by establishing a religious censorship.

A Jewish State—yes! But a State that is both Jewish and democratic, brave enough not to forbid others the right to express their opinions openly. A brave, Jewish and democratic State, not a State subject to the Halakhah.<sup>156</sup>

In reaction to the proposal of Shas MK Raphael Pinchasi to require a prison sentence of three years or a fine of 50,000 NIS for anyone who preaches his faith in public, the Messianic Action Committee posted an advert in 1998 in *Haaretz* and *Yediot Ahronot*:

This law would take all the residents of Israel back to the dark middle-ages. This bill would trample freedom of speech and religion, and stamp out Israel's democratic character. We fear . . . the possibility of religious censorship in Israel. If peaceful citizens are thrown in jail tomorrow, only because they believe that Yeshua is the Messiah of Israel, let no one say "we didn't know."<sup>157</sup>

The phrase "we didn't know" had often been used by German citizens after the Holocaust. This is a hint that the proposed law bears resemblance to legislation from the Nazi regime.

Tsvi Sadan used another strategy to straighten up misconceptions about Messianic Jews by making his voice heard at Bar Ilan University in 1999. As part of a seminar on philosophy, Sadan gave a lecture about Messianic Judaism at the religious institute in Ramat Gan. Students asked questions about sin, baptism, and Jesus, and Sadan could address these issues to his hearers' satisfaction by quoting from the Old and New Testaments, and from traditional sources like the Talmud, Kabbalah, and Maimonides.<sup>158</sup>

As the years went by, more and more opportunities were offered to Messianic believers to explain their faith in the media. On November 15, 1999, Messianic Jews and ultra-Orthodox rabbis discussed different issues on Channel One. While an anti-missionary activist presented video clips to give a visual impression of the danger of missionaries and Messianic Jews, the Israeli Messianic believers presented their perspective in a calm manner. At times, the discussion became a bit turbulent, and one of the ultra-Orthodox rabbis rose and left.<sup>159</sup>

The Israeli financial paper *Globes* conducted an interview with Dan Sered, director of Jews for Jesus in Israel, in 2006. Sered explained his faith, how he came to believe in Yeshua, and his wishes for Israel. He spoke openly about his ministry and the rejection of his family due to his life-changing decision.<sup>160</sup>

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<sup>156</sup> "Concerning the Bill for Religious Censorship," *The Jerusalem Post* (September 29, 1997).

<sup>157</sup> "Concept of Democracy and its Violation," *Yediot Ahronot* (July 15, 1998).

<sup>158</sup> "Messianic Jew Gives Lecture at Bar Ilan University," *Israel Today* (June 1999).

<sup>159</sup> Messianic Jews on TV, *Politica*, Channel One (November 15, 1999).

<sup>160</sup> "Missionary," *Globes* (August 11, 2006).

Calev Myers is the founder of the Jerusalem Institute of Justice and a human rights activist. During a campaign at American universities, he raised awareness about the corruption of the Palestinian Authority and urged discernment between the distorted image the media presents and the reality in Israel. At the end of the article, Myers' faith in Yeshua is addressed, and he openly professes, "I'm a Messianic Jew—so what? Let's get over it. I don't feel persecuted, but I definitely feel like I am outside the camp."<sup>161</sup>

## Conclusion

Even though the attacks on Messianic believers seem to have become more violent through the years—from verbal insults to physical assaults and, in fact, terrorist attacks—an positive trend can be seen in the coverage of these events. The voice of believers in Israel has become more and more audible and influential. Joseph Shulam of Netivya ministry noticed in 2008 that "lately there's a sense of persecution against us. . . . They're inciting against us in a very gross and serious fashion."<sup>162</sup> It is agreed that there is growing persecution from the ultra-Orthodox sector. Anti-missionary demonstrations, verbal and physical attacks, incitement—the list goes on and on. However, by analyzing the newspaper reports on Messianic believers in Israel from 1979 to 2016, a positive change can be observed in the media: a shift took place from merely reporting myths about the strange sect of Jewish believers in Yeshua to actually interviewing Messianic believers and letting them explain their faith themselves. On several occasions, Messianic ministries and congregations published advertisements in Israel's newspapers. TV channels asked Messianic Jews about their beliefs in their programs. Journalists and other public figures condemned the attacks and called for justice in this democratic country. A reporter responded fiercely to the incident in Ariel in 2008, when Messianic teenager Amiel Ortiz was hurt by a parcel bomb:

[The attack] is not only a criminal abomination but also a cultural crime against spirituality, faith-belief in God and the New Testament . . . , not to speak of the gross violation of the freedom of religion in Israel. . . . You don't have to believe in Yeshu [sic] the Messiah (and I truly don't) in order to be disgusted and pained by this awful attack.<sup>163</sup>

The public appears to empathize more, and to recognize the injustice experienced by Messianic Jews at the hands of ultra-Orthodox extremists and strict governmental regulations regarding the recognition of their status as Jews. Overall, public opinion on Messianic Jews in Israel is quite positive. The main non-religious newspapers present them in a mostly unbiased and affirmative way. Therefore Messianic believers—both Jews and Gentiles who are part of the family—can be encouraged by the upward trend in media reports. Nevertheless, persecution will never cease. Jesus warned his followers that a godly life will lead to mistreatment, and the closer we get to his coming, the more incitement will need to be endured. The Lord's power dwells in us and we, as the Messianic body, need to stand firm with each other and be reminded:

But we have this treasure of jars of clay to show that this all-surpassing power is from God and not from us. We are hard pressed on every side, but not crushed; perplexed, but not abandoned; struck down, but not destroyed. (2 Cor 4:7–9)

<sup>161</sup> Yaniv Khalili, "Freedom of Temptation," *Yediot Ahronot* (March 7, 2014): 18.

<sup>162</sup> "Not Waiting for the Messiah," *Yediot Ahronot* (April 10, 2008).

<sup>163</sup> Menachem Ben, "Quintet," *Maariv* (March 28, 2008): 7.