

ABSTRACT

Messianic Jewish Movement in Ukraine

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In the beginning of the 1990s, Ukraine, like many other post-Soviet states, was swept by the tsunami of global evangelism and religious euphoria. Because of a number of cultural and historical factors, Ukraine was transformed overnight, as it were, into a remarkably fertile land for a great variety of religious movements both homegrown and imported. While Orthodoxy in Ukraine draws the most attention in academia and media, evangelical Christian churches are often overlooked and remain woefully understudied. One branch of Christian evangelicals that has completely escaped scholarly scrutiny is the community of Messianic Jews, a community that has gained a significant presence in the Ukrainian religious landscape despite some significant challenges. The present paper is an attempt to comprehensively study and describe the Messianic Jewish movement for what it is and by doing so to contribute to the study of religion in Ukraine as a whole.

Messianic Jewish Movement in Ukraine

by

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PREFACE

Born to an ethnically Russian mother and a Jewish father in Ukraine, I have often found myself struggling to find the boundaries of my identity. Having a mixed identity occasionally proved to be beneficial. If a conversation at a party went around Tolstoy or Dostoyevsky, I, with no sign of hesitation, prided myself in my Russian heritage. If someone happened to mention the percentage of Jews nominated for the Nobel Prize, I, with no dithering, pulled out my Jewish credentials. After all I, too, am a Jew. Being a person of a blurred identity or a “mutt” (as someone once referred to me) often served me well, creating meaningful points of reference between my ethnically diverse conversation partners and me. The sociology of it appeared to be good and favorable. But it was the psychology of my polyethnicity that often proved to be disquieting. A basic human need to belong *to*, to be a part *of*, and to identify *with* a group that shared with me common history, culture, customs, and traditions or religion had to be addressed. The question remained, though, Which people would that be: Russian, Jewish, or, not discounting the significance of my *rodina* (the place of one’s birth), Ukrainian?

The collapse of the Soviet Union stripped millions of people in Eastern Europe and Central Asia of their superimposed identity of *homo sovieticus*, leaving behind deep ideological gaps and reawakening long-suppressed national and religious instincts. The Communist utopian project, “Proletariat of all nations, unite!” cracked and shattered like a broken mirror, exposing artificially concealed ethnocultural divisions. In the midst of the post-Communist chaos, I, along with millions of other disenchanting Soviets, found myself searching in the rubble of broken hopes for the remnants or possible signs of

meaning and identity. Fortunately, the fall of the Communist regime followed by the age of *perestroika* and *glasnost* opened up for all of us “poor in spirit” a vast religious and ideological market. I found my niche in a Protestant evangelical community whose vibrancy and charisma intrigued my young and impressionable self. Unfortunately, although the newly acquired identity of a Christian helped to calm some storms, it provoked others. What does being a Christian do to my Jewish heritage? Is it possible to keep the former while not discarding the latter?

Being a Jew in the Soviet Union was no easy task, as the Jews were often a target of public ridicule and repressive government policies. From early childhood I learned to conceal and, if possible, to forget my Jewish origins, and I came fairly close to accomplishing this. Ironically, it was after conversion to Christianity that awareness of my Jewish extraction was brought into a sharper focus. Christianity, as it appeared, had Jewish roots just as did I. Were we to forget about our past and move forward, or were we to embrace it and become good students of it?

My personal wonderings coincided with political and cultural eruptions in Ukraine that in return caused social-psychological commotions on a national scale. Independent for the first time in their history, Ukrainians were now faced with the difficult task of constructing their own ethnocultural identity on both individual and national levels. Lacking clear and uniform national policy from the ruling elite, Ukrainians divided into competing camps, each supporting one or another view regarding their origins. Some Ukrainians claimed to be the heirs of the ancient civilization and the

first prototypes of all the Slavs, some stated that Ukrainians are simply a Russian subgroup,¹ and “some Ukrainians wanted to be Jews.”²

The idea for this project consequently was born in the midst of both a personal as well as the national identity crisis, when I came to witness and experience the birth of a new community. Ukrainian Messianic Jews are a religious hybrid of mainstream evangelicalism, mostly but not exclusively of a Charismatic nature, the Orthodox and Hasidic forms of Judaism, and Ukrainian Jewish small-town culture (*shtetl*). The movement, comprised of mostly ethnic Ukrainians, could not be more elegantly described than in the words of Dr. Peter Berger, who referred to it as “a sort of Pentecostalization of Hasidism.”³ In an attempt to find a possible explanation for the appearance of the Messianic Jewish phenomenon in Ukraine, Dr. Berger mentioned a project on the psychology of identity he was going to undertake many years ago but never came to realize because of other commitments. The resulting book, were it to be written, said Dr. Berger, would begin with the phrase, “Any identity is better than none.”

¹Serhii Plokyh, *The Origins of the Slavic Nations: Premodern Identities in Russia, Ukraine, and Belarus*, Reprint (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 1-2.

²Peter Berger, *Some Ukrainians Want to Be Jews!*, ‘The American Interest,’ May 2011, available at <http://blogs.the-american-interest.com/berger/2011/05/04/some-ukrainians-want-to-be-jews/>.

³Ibid.

CHAPTER ONE

Introduction

In the beginning of the 1990s, Ukraine, like many other post-Soviet states, was swept by the tsunami of global evangelism and religious euphoria. Although the desecularizing processes accompanied by a rebirth of passionate religiosity within both the public and individual domains were characteristic for most of the post-Communist states, Ukraine clearly stood out from the crowd not only by its greater number of churches, religious movements, and religious adherents, but also by a much greater religious diversity and plurality.⁴ Because of a number of cultural and historical factors, Ukraine was transformed overnight, as it were, into a remarkably fertile land for a great variety of religious movements both homegrown and imported. The latter kind was the work exclusively of Western missionaries, who flooded the ideologically bankrupt post-Communist society in the closing years of the 1980s. If in the beginning Ukraine was mostly absorbing the arriving missionaries, soon thereafter it turned into what can only be described as an epicenter of religious seismic activity, serving as a spiritual breadbasket not only for all of the former Soviet states, but also for Western Europe and as far afield as the United States. By the close of the millennium, Ukrainians had themselves become a missionary nation, sending out thousands of missionaries and planting hundreds of evangelical Protestant churches worldwide. It was as if the waters of Dnieper that once

⁴For definition of “plurality,” see Peter Berger and Anton Zijderveld, *In Praise of Doubt: How to Have Convictions Without Becoming a Fanatic*, (New York: HarperOne, 2010), 7.

had baptized pagan Slavs into Byzantine Christianity were baptizing them again, only this time into the Protestant evangelical charisma.

While Orthodoxy in Ukraine draws the most attention in academia and media (both Ukrainian and Western) for understandable reasons (the majority of Ukrainians are adherents of various branches of Orthodoxy), evangelical Christian churches are often overlooked and remain woefully understudied, even though they have demonstrated considerable growth both in numbers and stature. One branch of Christian evangelicals that has completely escaped scholarly scrutiny is the community of Messianic Jews, a community that has gained a significant presence in the Ukrainian religious landscape despite some significant challenges.

The first Messianic congregations in Ukraine were started in the early 1990s as a result of massive evangelistic campaigns organized and led by an American Messianic Jewish missionary organization called *Shema Israel Ministries* (Hear, O Israel) based (at the time) in Rochester, New York. The present work is an attempt to retrace the origins and the development of the movement in Ukraine and survey it in its contemporary form, all with an eye towards explaining its relative longevity and success and to contributing to the study of evangelical Christianity in Ukraine, the presence of which has long ceased to be perceived as a sociocultural oddity.

The modern Messianic Jewish movement is a fairly recent phenomena dating back to the Jesus Movement of the 1960s in the United States. Joining that movement were a considerable number of ethnic Jews who, although they converted to Christianity, insisted on maintaining a Jewish lifestyle and a Jewish mode of worship as long as it conformed to the New Testament teachings. As a result, multiple Jewish congregations

sprang up all over the US with a distinctively Jewish twist on Christianity, catering to Jews and increasingly non-Jews alike and serving as the principal institutional agency tasked with the evangelization of the Jews. Since the movement sprang out of evangelicalism, it is perhaps not surprising that 90 percent of Messianic Jewish congregations replicate in one way or another the main dogmatic/doctrinal traits and moral claims of American evangelicalism. Although these congregations by and large have adopted Charismatic and neo-Pentecostal styles of worship, they nevertheless differ from one another in their understanding, interpretation, and expression of the tenets of Messianic Judaism. As a result, some congregations order their congregational life according to the liturgical strictures often found in contemporary Jewish temples and synagogues, while others de-emphasize liturgical conservatism for the sake of broader inclusivity. This state of affairs reveals the relative youth and immaturity of the movement, which has been best captured by Dan Juster, one of Messianic Judaism's most published theologians and advocates: "As a pulsating grassroots movement, Messianic Judaism exhibits many of the theological immaturities, inconsistencies and naiveté of all such movements; however, it also exhibits the power and excitement of significant new discoveries."⁵

It is in this immature but ultimately exciting form that the Messianic Jewish movement was transplanted into the religiously fertile soil of Ukraine, taking roots and spreading with a considerable degree of success. While it kept many of the major features of its American predecessor, it became indigenized by the local culture and took on some distinctively native forms which reflected centuries of Jewish-Ukrainian

⁵Daniel Juster, *Jewish Roots: a Foundation of Biblical Theology for Messianic Judaism*, (Shippensburg, PA: Destiny Image Publishers, Inc., 1995), vii.

cohabitation and were determined by a unique set of historical and political precursors. It is my purpose in this paper to demonstrate what ethnocultural, historical, and religious factors may have aided in the movement's acceptance and proliferation in Ukraine. One of the most fascinating aspects of the Messianic Jewish movement in Ukraine is the fact that a large number of its followers (some would even argue the majority), are not Jews at all but rather ethnic Ukrainians and Russians. Considering the fact that historically Ukrainians and Russians have not been particularly well-disposed towards their Jewish neighbors, the question arises how it is possible for them to embrace what can only be called extreme philosemitism.

In what is probably the only existing comprehensive study of the evangelicals in Ukraine, the outstanding work *Communities of the Converted*, Katherine Wanner claims that the unparalleled receptiveness to Western missionaries in Ukraine was due to the fact that many Ukrainians already considered themselves Christians and saw their turn to religion as part of a process of recovering their lost identity and culture,⁶ without having to navigate between contradictory plausibility structures. I argue, however, that it is because of the lack of identity, its absence, or the general indifference to any identity that once existed that Ukrainians so easily identified themselves with imported religious movements even if these were often dissonant with the indigenous culture. The most puzzling aspect about Messianic Judaism in Ukraine, and the very thing that initially stimulated my interest in studying the movement, is that Ukraine has a centuries-old history of anti-Semitism. How is it that Ukrainians who took an active part in tsarist pogroms and gladly assisted Nazis in the disposal of the local Jews are so eager now to

⁶Katherine Wanner, *Communities of the Converted*, (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2007), 13.

take upon themselves a Jewish identity? Is it simply a matter of generational change? Or is there something more sociologically interesting going on? Religion in Ukraine, to use Robert Wuthnow's words, represents a patchwork, but until now the individual pieces of the religious quilt have existed separately with seemingly little or no cohesion and connection. By studying the Messianic Jewish movement, I attempt to make sense of these ostensibly independent developments and to contribute to the study of religion in Ukraine as a whole.

Methodology

It would be an understatement to say that there is a significant lack of scholarly material dealing with Ukrainian expression of Messianic Judaism. Reasons for the absence are twofold: first, the movement is yet in its formative period, although there are already discernable contours within it; and secondly, there is a general scholarly skepticism (though unacknowledged) about the future viability of the movement, with the result that nobody is eager to study the slow death of a religious infant.

The sources for this work are of three kinds. The first kind consists of in-depth interviews conducted by this author with the major Messianic Jewish rabbis, ministers, and leaders—individuals who have pioneered the movement in the country and who continue to shape it even in the present. Since the Messianic Jewish movement in Ukraine is still evolving, living participants in the movement are a critical source of data and interpretation. I had the privilege of personally witnessing and in various ways participating in the birth of the movement in the mid-1990s, which provided me with a valuable firsthand experience and intimate knowledge of key events and people, as well as congregational life. Secondly, I draw on existing research to explain the origins, the

history, and the theology of Messianic Judaism in general, so as to put the movement's Ukrainian branch in its proper historical and theological context. And thirdly, I will draw upon a combination of primary and secondary material, mostly in the form of scholarly works, journal articles, news reports, and Messianic Jewish publications in Ukraine (and some in the US) that have been produced in the past several decades attempting to describe the movement for interested parties. In addition to the above, I have also spent countless hours listening to audio material and live video streaming of services in order to understand the experience of Messianic congregational life.

The State of the Art

The old notion that Jews who convert to Christianity are no longer Jews is not held with the same certainty today. Academia does not discard Messianic Judaism as hastily as it used to because it did not fit into neat religious or sociocultural categories. More and more scholars from within both Christian and Jewish traditions are intrigued by this persistently growing and boisterous religious community. The body of literature on the history and theology of the Messianic Jewish movement is by no means exhaustive, but a number of works do exist for any scholar whose ambition leads her to untangle the mystery of the Judeo-Christian hybrid. Most of the previously published academic studies have primarily concentrated on historical and theological aspects of the early Jewish Christianity. By far the most comprehensive scholarly endeavor dealing with the Jewish origins of Christianity and the history of the Jewish Christians was undertaken by the British historian Hugh J. Schonfield, himself a Jewish Christian, in his book *The*

History of Jewish Christianity.⁷ However, the growth of the movement has invited academic attention, and as a result in recent years there has been a noticeable growth in the number of works dedicated to the study of the movement, particularly in the United States and Israel.⁸

The re-emergence of Jewish Christianity in modern times has brought forth a dedicated group of scholars, both sympathetic and skeptical, who seek to dissect and understand the movement in all of its complexity. David Rausch provides an excellent account of the movement and its struggle for acceptance in the United States in *Messianic Judaism: Its History, Theology, and Polity*.⁹ Dan Cohn-Sherbok's book with the self-explanatory title *Messianic Judaism: A Critical Anthology* is one of the few favorable assessments of the Messianic Jewish movement, albeit limited to the United States, by an influential Reformed Jewish rabbi and Jewish theologian.¹⁰ Richard Harvey takes a deeper look at the Messianic Jewish theology and by doing so fills in an important gap in understanding the wide spectrum of Messianic theological views as expressed by Messianic leaders in his study *Mapping Messianic Jewish Theology: A Constructive Approach*.¹¹

⁷Hugh J. Schonfield, *The History of Hebrew Christianity: From the First to the Twentieth Century*, (London: Duckworth, 1936).

⁸Ray Pritz, *Nazarene Jewish Christianity: From the End of the New Testament*, (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1988).

⁹David Rausch, *Messianic Judaism: Its History, Theology and Polity*, (Ceredigion, UK: Edwin Mellen Press, 1982).

¹⁰Dan Cohn-Sherbok, *Messianic Judaism: A Critical Anthology*, (New York: Cassell, 2001).

¹¹Richard Harvey, *Mapping Messianic Jewish Theology: A Constructive Approach*, (Milton Keynes, UK: Authentic Media, 2009).

Other scholars of note such as Shoshanah Feher, Carol Harris Shapiro, and Jeffrey S. Wasserman have produced excellent sociological and anthropological studies of Messianic Jewish congregations in the United States and Israel, providing a clearer picture of the inner workings of the Messianic Jewish movement and its variegated beliefs, rituals, and practices.

Structure

My purpose in this project is descriptive rather than prescriptive. I wish to depict the movement for what it is, hopefully without bias. Chapter 2, “The History of the Messianic Jewish Movement,” traces the emergence and then disappearance of the first-century Jesus movement, which consisted almost entirely of Jewish followers of Jesus Christ. These Jewish followers culturally dominated the first-generation Church until the second half of the second century. Drawing on the existing body of literature, my study deals with the political and social causes of separation of the Jewish and Gentile Christian communities and the subsequent decline and eventual disappearance of the Jewish church as a visible historical entity. The chapter also will describe the isolated instances of Messianic Jewish belief in Ukraine in the latter half of the nineteenth century, when the first Hebrew Christian congregations were established in Odessa, Kiev, and Kishinev, serving as precursors to the contemporary Messianic Jewish movement. The last part of the chapter describes the birth of the modern Messianic movement in the mid-1990s, where it will be argued that the current Messianic Judaism has only loose ecclesiastical or historical connections to the first- or nineteenth-century Jewish believers, although it may be inspired by them, and that the real roots of the movement should be traced rather to the

overall religious rebirth in the post-Soviet Ukraine, with its religiously permissive environment.

The chapter titled “Constructing Messianic Jewish Boundaries” analyzes how Messianic Jews engage in a process of constructing a new hybrid identity and theology, drawing upon both Christian and Jewish traditions. It scrutinizes doctrinal beliefs and moral convictions that make up the complex of contemporary Messianic Jewish theology (MJT). And to the extent that MJT seeks to align its complex of belief and practice with the normative claims of contemporary evangelicalism, it is seen as part of the process of legitimization of the movement in the eyes of the greater evangelical world. Reactions to the brand-new Messianic identity and faith from both Jewish and Christian communities are therefore also examined.

The chapter that follows, “Messianic Jewish observances and Congregational Life,” pays special attention to Messianic congregations as an indigenous expression of Messianic Jewish faith in a distinctively Ukrainian cultural context. It sheds light on the Charismatic *klezmer* worship style originated and used only in Ukrainian congregations, the ultra-Charismatic Sabbath services that incorporate Hebrew liturgy with healings and exorcism, and the observances of Jewish holidays and *kosher* dietary laws accompanied by Pentecostal glossolalia and a rigorous fasting regiment. A case study of the world’s largest congregation in downtown Kiev is provided based on my personal observance of and participation in Messianic communal life in the end of the 1990s, as well as from interviews conducted with rabbis and members of the congregations via Skype in the past year.

Chapter 5, “Effects on Religious Economy and Surrounding Culture and Future Prospects,” analyzes the movement’s state of development since its inception in the 1990s and its possible impact on the overall religious and social landscape in Ukraine and raises the question of the durability of the movement in the future. It also focuses on the most significant question of the movement’s appeal to Gentile evangelicals and offers several social-psychological explanations of the phenomenon.

CHAPTER TWO

The History of the Messianic Jewish Movement in Ukraine

The Forgotten Messianic Community

Present-day Messianic Jewish believers assert that their movement is a reawakening of an old movement rather than the birth of a new one. They claim to be the heirs of first-century followers of Jesus who were almost exclusively Jews and remained so after the death and resurrection of their Messiah. Church historian Justo L. Gonzales notes:

The earliest Christians did not consider themselves followers of a new religion. All their lives they had been Jews, and they still were. This was true of Peter and the twelve, of seven, and of Paul. Their faith was not a denial of Judaism, but was rather the conviction that the Messianic age had finally arrived. Paul would say that he was persecuted ‘because of the hope of Israel’ (Acts 28:20). The earliest Christians did not reject Judaism, but were convinced that their faith was the fulfillment of the age-long expectation of Messiah.¹²

Nazarenes, as the earliest followers of Jesus were often known, were devout Jews regularly taking part in traditional worship and religious rituals in the courts of the Temple in Jerusalem and in synagogues, places perfectly suited for carrying out an evangelistic campaign in the name of *Yeshua* (Jesus’ Hebrew name and one used by Messianic Jews along with the honorific *Ha Mashiach* or The Christ), who they proclaimed to be Israel’s long-awaited Messiah. In the first few decades of its existence, the Nazarene community limited its proselytizing activity to Jerusalem and Judea,

¹²Justo Gonzales, *Story of Christianity: Volume I, The Early Church to the Dawn of Reformation*, (Peabody, MA: Prince Press, 1999), 20.

gaining a significant number of followers.¹³ But soon, as Hugh Schonfield points out, riots and attacks from Jewish religious authorities scattered the Jerusalem congregation into the surrounding provinces, where “the branches of the parent community had sprung up throughout all Judea and Galilee and Samaria.”¹⁴ Soon thereafter, developments of a new kind marked a new historical milestone in the development of the Nazarene group, taking it into a new and unforeseeable direction. This is how Jakob Jocz described it:

At first the proselytes [of Gentile origin] who were won for the Gospel remained in the Synagogue or attached themselves to small Hebrew Christian groups within the Synagogue. But soon new converts were added who had no previous attachment to Judaism. The question whether these newly won heathen were first to be received in the Synagogue or might become Christian without the mediacy of Judaism was bound to become a burning issue . . . It is at this point that the Apostolic Decree of Acts 15 becomes of vital importance.¹⁵

Here Jacob Jocz refers to the historical council gathered in Jerusalem where the mother church, presided over by James the brother of Jesus, faced with the issue of rapidly growing numbers of Gentile converts, decided that believing Gentiles could partake in the Salvation of the House of Israel under the canopy of the Noahic covenant without being subject to the Jewish laws in their entirety. From this point on, notes Schonfield, “It was agreed that the two organizations should be kept distinct, though closely allied to one another.”¹⁶ Little did the Apostolic Church know that only a century later, with a majority of adherents now being of a non-Jewish origin, the Church would reformulate the issue of inclusiveness. This time the minority in question would be

¹³Book of Acts 9: 1-2.

¹⁴Schonfield, 24.

¹⁵Jakob Jocz, *The Jewish People and Jesus Christ: A Study in the Controversy between the Church and the Synagogue*, (London: S.P.C.K., 1949), 67.

¹⁶Schonfield, 29.

Jewish converts, and the question of the period was, Can one be a Christian and remain a Jew at the same time?

The political and economic disruptions in the second half of the first century in Israel furthered the separation of the Jewish and Gentile believers. After the Bar-Kokhba Revolt, both Christian and non-Christian Jews were expelled from Jerusalem to Pella and suffered severe persecution in the hands of vengeful Romans. “Jewish Christianity,” explains Schonfield, “never regained its position of authority in the affairs of the Church. The Hadrianic war, which put an end to the Jewish hopes of political independence, had also relegated the Church of the Apostles to the rank of a heretical sect. Henceforth the Jewish Christians, while they observed their ancestral customs, were practically excluded from the Catholic Church and could only associate with one another in their own communities scattered about Coele-Syria and Transjordan, of whom the new orthodoxy could afterwards say ‘that while they will be both Jews and Christians, they are neither Jews nor Christians.’”¹⁷

If the beginning decades of the fourth century were promising for the Christian faith, the legalization of the faith being perhaps the most important of the developments, the period also marked the last and, alas, the saddest chapter in the history of Jewish Christianity, as the persecutions by Romans, this time Christian rather than pagan, was about to commence. After his conversion to Christianity, Emperor Constantine would institute certain policy initiatives that imposed severe restrictions not only against Jews

¹⁷Jerome, *Ep. ad Aug.* as cited in Schonfield, 62.

but also against Christians found to be observing aspects of the Mosaic Law and subscribing to a Jewish lifestyle, rather than a de-Judaized version of Christianity:¹⁸

We desire to have nothing in common with this so hated people, for the Redeemer has marked out another path for us. To his we will keep, and be free from disgraceful association with this people.¹⁹

It would take another 1600 years before the appearance of a newly articulated Jewish Christianity, staking a renewed claim in the continuing drama that is the history of Christianity. This time, however, it is confronting a religious marketplace far different than when it first began, having to account for the multitude of confessions, representations, and expressions of modern Christianity. Modern times dictate modern challenges.

First Signs of the Messianic Reawakening in Ukraine in the 1900s

The leaders of the Messianic Jewish movement in Ukraine do not reject out of hand the importance of American influence on the beginning of the movement in Ukraine in the 1990s; however, they argue that the movement is indigenous rather than transplanted, dating back to centuries of Ukrainian-Jewish relations. One of my Ukrainian interlocutors, Rabbi Valentin Sviontek, a Messianic Jewish rabbi in charge of the second largest Messianic Jewish congregation in Ukraine and the director of the Messianic Jewish Bible Institute (MJBI) in Odessa, prefers the term “Messianic rebirth” or “reawakening” to the widely used “movement” because in his estimation the modern Messianic Jewish phenomenon is nothing more than the revitalization of the missionary work started in Ukraine by one Leon Rosenberg, a Hebrew Christian commissioned by

¹⁸For more on Emperor Constantine’s persecution of the Jews, the reader may consult James Carroll, *Constantine’s Sword: The Church and the Jews: A History* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2001).

¹⁹*H.E. x, i.*, as cited in Schonfield, 97.

the British Mildmay Mission to serve as a pastor-missionary among the Jewish population of Odessa (then in South Russia) in the early 1900s.²⁰ In 1903, Rosenberg established what is considered to be the first Messianic Jewish congregation and a Messianic Jewish day school in Odessa, in what was then the Russian Empire. In subsequent years, Rosenberg would go on to establish two more congregations, one in Kiev and one in Yekaterinoslav, present-day Dnepropetrovsk. However, after coming under pressure by the newly established Communist government in Russia and Ukraine in the late 1910s, Rosenberg was forced to terminate his work in Ukraine and immigrate first to Germany and later, during World War II, to the United States, where he established the American European Bethel Mission (AEBM). The primary focus of AEBM's mission was the proselytization of the sizable community of the Russian Jewish *émigrés* arriving in the US from Nazi Germany and elsewhere in Europe.²¹ According to Sviontek, it is this Rosenberg-initiated "Messianic revival" in the 1930s and 40s that would later return to Ukraine like a boomerang in the 1990s, effectively restarting contemporary Messianic Judaism in Ukraine. It was in a sense a homecoming.²²

Another significant precursor to contemporary Messianic Judaism in Ukraine was a group of Jewish Christians known as the Israelites of the New Covenant, founded and led by Rabbi Joseph Rabinowicz in Kishinev, Moldavia, in the mid-1880s. Rabinowicz was a man of many talents, combining rabbinic duties and educational activities while at

²⁰Valentin Sviontek, interviewed by author, August 19, 2011, via Skype in Waco, Texas, transcript, Baylor University Institute for Oral History, Waco, TX, available online at http://contentdm.baylor.edu/cdm4/index_08buioh.php?CISOROOT=/08buioh.

²¹Vera Kushnir, *Only One Life: Biography of Leon Rosenberg* (Broken Arrow, OK: Slavic Christian Publishing, 1996).

²²Sviontek.

the same time pursuing law and showing himself to be a fine scholar of the Torah. Like many of his fellow Jewish intellectuals, Rabinowitz was initially interested in the fate of his fellow Jews in the Russian Empire, seeking political solutions to the plight of his ethnoreligious kin. It was this quest that would initially lead him to travel to Palestine in 1882 in hopes of finding a solution for the Jewish question, immigration to the Middle East being one option among many. Yet for Rabinowitz the answer came from a wholly unexpected source and lacked the initial political component that had put him on the path of travel. According to Kjær-Hansen, Rabinowitz would undergo a dramatic religious experience during a stroll on the Mount of Olives overlooking Jerusalem. It was there and then that Rabinowitz experienced his own “burning bush” moment, when he came to realize that only “brother Jesus,” as he calls him, a Jew from Nazareth, understood the yearning of his people of Israel. It was in this realization that the true solution to the eternal Jewish predicament was to be found and not in some political action.²³ Upon his return to Kishinev the same year, Rabinowitz would establish a Messianic synagogue, conducting services much like those of his Orthodox Jewish counterparts. So far-reaching and unique was his work that later he was dubbed the “Theodor Herzl of Hebrew Christianity” for “being the first Hebrew Christian to wish to retain his Jewish identity as a believer in Jesus” and for “getting the question of the continued Jewish identity of Hebrew Christians on the agenda.”²⁴ After seventeen years the congregation would effectively cease to exist due to a number of factors, chief among them the failure to find a suitable successor capable of continuing Rabinowitz’s work after the latter’s

²³Kai Kjær-Hansen, *Joseph Rabinowitz and the Messianic Movement: The Herzl of Jewish Christianity* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), 20-26.

²⁴*Ibid.*, 231.

death in 1899, as well as the refusal by the tsarist government to issue the congregation a legal status, and, perhaps most importantly, because of the decimation of Kishinev's 65,000-strong Jewish community.²⁵ Rabinowitz's legacy nonetheless survived and has subsequently played an important role in the resurgence of the present-day Messianic Jewish movement.

Present-Day Messianic Awakening

Despite my Ukrainian interlocutor's insistence that the recent spike in conversion numbers among Jews can be traced directly to first-century Christianity or to Odessa and Kishinev in tsarist times, these relationships are tenuous at best. It should be seen rather as yet another result of the process of desecularization that accompanied the collapse of the Soviet Union, where for once and for all religion was wrested from the rigid control of the Soviet state apparatus. Due to its geographical location and for historic reasons, Ukraine for many centuries has served as a crossing point for multiple cultures, languages, and religions, and as such it greatly differs from other post-Soviet states both in terms of its overall religious/demographic makeup and the role of the state in regulating the religious life of the country. One of the leading experts on religious issues in the former Soviet Union, Nikolai Mitrokhin, accurately describes the exceptional religious situation in Ukraine when he writes that "the main difference [between Russia and Ukraine] is that in Ukraine there is no single confession with a monopoly on the spiritual nurture of an historically Orthodox population."²⁶ There are four Orthodox

²⁵Ibid., 177.

²⁶Nikolai Mitrokhin, "Aspects of the Religious Situation in Ukraine," *Religion, State and Society*, 29, 3 (2001): 173.

churches in the country (Ukrainian Orthodox Church of Moscow Patriarchate, Ukrainian Orthodox Church of Kiev Patriarchate, Ukrainian Autocephalous Orthodox Church, and Ukrainian Greek Orthodox Church), all of them engaged in competition for a privileged status in the country. The intra-Orthodox competition has therefore opened up the space for a broader religious competition, allowing ample room to maneuver to religious denominations and organizations, some with exotic flavor and some with no historico-cultural ties to Ukraine to enter the field of competition with little or no legislative constraint, thereby making it possible for them to proliferate.

Besides the Orthodox, the government estimates 33,000 religious organizations representing 55 denominations, among which are Roman Catholics, Evangelical Baptists, Pentecostals, Charismatics, Lutherans, Anglicans, Methodists, Presbyterians, and Muslims, to name a few.²⁷ Overall, 27 percent of the country's religious organizations are Protestant. According to the latest statistical and analytical report on the development of religion and church-state relationship in Ukraine in the past 10 years published by Razumkov Centre, a think tank based in Kiev, 71 percent of Ukrainians presently claim to be religious.²⁸ Religious pluralism, high levels of religious consciousness among the population, and absence of state regulation of religion all have contributed to the emergence of new religious movements (NRM) and the revitalization of older religious traditions and institutions. In this light, the Messianic Jewish movement in Ukraine

²⁷State Committee for Religion and Nationalities, *Pro stan i tendentsii rozvytku religijnoi sytuatsii i derzhvno-konfesijnyx vidnosin v Ukraini za 2009 rik*, accessed on September 24, 2011 at http://www.irs.in.ua/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=603%3A1&catid=51%3Astats&Itemid=79&lang=ru.

²⁸Razumkov Centre, *Religiya i vlada v Ukraini: problemi vzayemovidnosin*, February 11, 2011, accessed September 24, 2011 at http://www.irs.in.ua/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=868%3A1&catid=51%3Astats&Itemid=79&lang=uk.

represents yet another expression of Evangelical Protestantism in that country's diverse religious landscape.

The remarkable growth of evangelicalism in Ukraine began in the early 1990s because of two primary reasons. On the one hand, it was aided by the overall liberalization of the political and religious life in the country, allowing many of the formerly repressed Protestant denominations to engage in evangelization campaigns. On the other hand, the country saw an influx of foreign missionaries of various religious and denominational stripes, American evangelicals representing by far the largest contingent. Among the incoming missionaries were also a handful of Messianic Jews led by Jonathan Bernis, a Messianic Jewish evangelist based in Rochester, New York, where he headed Shema Israel Ministries.

According to Bernis himself, he grew up in a secular family but was highly conscious of his Jewish identity. In the 1970s, largely as a result of the emerging Jesus Movement in the United States, Bernis experienced a "paradigm shift" along with thousands of other American Jews. In his book *A Rabbi Looks at Jesus of Nazareth*, which is part evangelical witness and part Messianic Jewish apologetics, Bernis explains his conversion thusly: "Embracing Yeshua was the most Jewish thing I have ever done."²⁹ Soon after his conversion Bernis felt the call to tell the story about Yeshua to his Jewish kin. In October of 1994, nearly two decades after his conversion, Bernis travelled to Ukraine, where he organized the first in a series of evangelistic campaigns inconspicuously called *Festival of Jewish Music & Dance*. The festivals were cleverly designed events where masses of Ukrainians numbering in tens of thousands, including a

²⁹Jonathan Bernis, *A Rabbi Looks at Jesus of Nazareth* (Grand Rapids: Chosen, 2011), 217.

considerable number of Jews, were both entertained and evangelized. These festivals usually lasted two or three days, took place in open-air stadia, and involved dozens of local and foreign professional musicians and dancers, volunteer staff, and spiritual counselors. The high point of the evenings would be a Christian evangelical message with a distinctively Messianic Jewish twist delivered by Bernis himself.³⁰

As the Kiev festival proved to be a sweeping success, with 20,000 attendees and thousands of respondents to altar calls, Shema Israel embarked on a number of evangelistic tours throughout the country's largest cities, with festivals held in Odessa (1995), Zaporozh'ye, Vinnitsa, Zhitomir, and Donetsk (1997).³¹ More than 40,000 people attended the festivals, and hundreds responded to altar calls.³² With the help and cooperation of the local evangelical churches, mostly Charismatic, dozens of Messianic congregations were established in the cities where the festivals took place.

As is the case with any fledgling religious movement, the newly founded Messianic congregations were in desperate need of educated and trained ministers and leaders to guarantee the movement's longevity. Realizing that without education in Messianic doctrines the fledgling Messianic movement might be short-lived, Bernis teamed up with Messianic theologian and rabbi Dan Juster, and with the financial backing of a few US-based churches and Messianic congregations they embarked on the institutionalization of the movement. They established a network of Messianic Jewish

³⁰Jewish Voice Ministries International, last accessed September 24, 2011 at http://www.jewishvoice.org/site/PageServer?pagename=proclaiming_Festivals.

³¹In 1996, a similar festival was organized in Kharkov (Ukraine's second-largest city) but was abruptly cancelled after Kharkov city authorities rescinded the permit for the festival following the pressure from the city's vocal Orthodox Jewish community.

³²Jewish Voice Ministries International, last accessed September 24, 2011 at http://www.jewishvoice.org/site/PageServer?pagename=Outreach_Festivals_Overview.

Bible schools under an umbrella organization called The Messianic Jewish Bible Institute.³³ The choice of Odessa was not a coincidence, since it still claimed the largest concentration of Jews of any city in Ukraine and historically served as the principal Jewish cultural center in tsarist Russia from the eighteenth through the twentieth centuries.³⁴ The choice of Odessa was also symbolic, as the city was the closest Soviet/Ukrainian naval port to Israel and served as a vital exit point for Jews making *aliyah* or repatriation to their Jewish homeland in the 1980s and later.

Wayne Wilks, at that time an elder of Shady Grove Church in Grand Prairie, Texas, was commissioned to head the school in Ukraine but soon passed the baton to an American Ukrainian couple, Valentin and Tatyana Sviontek, who continue their work as the directors of the Messianic Jewish Bible Institute (MJBI) to the present. Hundreds of graduates from Ukraine and other former Soviet republics have since passed through the two-year MJBI program, receiving instruction in the history of Israel, the history of the Messianic movement, Messianic doctrines, and other disciplines necessary to prepare them for ministry in Messianic congregations. Some fifteen years after the first festival took place in Kiev, the Messianic movement has continued to grow and succeed with over 50 Messianic congregations and thousands of followers.³⁵ For his efforts in the initial launching of the movement and establishing congregations and Bible schools,

³³Messianic Jewish Bible Institute, last accessed September 24, 2011 at <http://www.mjbi.org/history.php>.

³⁴Steven J. Zipperstein, *The Jews of Odessa: A Cultural history, 1794-1881* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1985), 2.

³⁵Sviontek.

Jonathan Bernis is often referred to by Messianic believers as a modern-day Apostle Paul of the Messianic Jewish faith in Ukraine.³⁶

³⁶Wayne Wilks, interviewed by author, April 24, 2011, conducted via Skype in Waco, Texas, access at Baylor University Institute for Oral History at http://contentdm.baylor.edu/cdm4/index_08buioh.php?CISOROOT=/08buioh.

CHAPTER THREE

Constructing Messianic Jewish Boundaries

Constructing Messianic Identity

Modern-day Messianic Jewish believers identify themselves with the first community of Jesus followers, a first-century group of observant Jews who believed that Jesus was the Jewish Messiah, simultaneously arguing that their movement is a renewal movement not unlike the one founded by Jesus. Yet their assertion belies the fact that unlike the first-century Jesus movement, which for all intents and purposes was a radical group within Judaism that attempted to redefine and reformulate the notion of Jewish identity, today's Messianic Jews are in reality just another group within larger Evangelical Protestantism making efforts to redefine Christian identity.

Daniel Juster, perhaps the most influential Messianic Jewish theologian and a prolific author who has in many ways given shape to contemporary Messianic Jewish thinking, defines the contemporary Messianic movement as “comprising those Jews who have come to faith in Jesus of Nazareth—whom they normally call Yeshua—as Messiah of Israel, Son of God and Savior of the world—who hold this faith specifically as Jews, and who refuse assimilation into Gentile Christianity.”³⁷ This definition is perhaps accurate in describing the Messianic believers in the US or Israel but is rather inadequate when one tries to apply it to Ukrainian expression of Messianic faith. It proves problematic, at best half-applicable, if only because of the fact that the Messianic Jewish

³⁷Daniel Juster and Peter Hoken, *The Messianic Jewish Movement: An Introduction* (Toward Jerusalem Counsel II, 2004, 6).

movement has attracted a considerable number of non-Jews to its ranks, to the point that there is the real possibility that their numbers eventually will overwhelm the number of ethnic Jews in the movement. If one was to do a simple numerical survey, it would quickly become obvious that the majority of Messianic Jewish believers are not Jews at all, or are so in name only, having no known cultural or religious ties to either historical Judaism or to Jews in Ukraine. In a sense this replicates the social and demographic trends of the first Christian communities in ancient Palestine, when Christianity began as an offshoot of Judaism only to evolve into a non-Jewish European religion with only a sliver of Jewish presence in its midst. The message about a Jewish Jesus intended for Jews inadvertently caught the attention of Gentiles, who, after discovering the Jewish roots of their faith (to the chagrin of some and to the surprise of the most), enthusiastically joined in celebrating traditional Jewish holidays, prayers, ceremonies, wearing Jewish ritual garments, and even taking Hebrew lessons, all meant to recover an identity they did not know they had or could have, as if by a choice. It was not uncommon for many Ukrainian evangelicals who were coming in contact with Messianic Jews to hurry into the local archival repositories in hopes of finding a distant great-grandmother or great-grandfather who was Jewish, poring over family genealogies trying to find a Jewish or at least Jewish-sounding name in hopes of rejoining the covenant and partaking in the blessings of the Chosen People.³⁸ Many went as far as changing their names into Hebrew names, picking up Yiddish slang, and learning Jewish jokes. One is inevitably reminded of an episode from the *Seinfeld* television program in which Jerry's Gentile dentist, Dr. Tim Whatley, starts telling Jewish-themed jokes and making Jewish

³⁸Rabbi Anton Antonovich, interviewed by author, March 23, 2011, conducted via Skype in Waco, Texas, access at Baylor University Institute for Oral History at http://contentdm.baylor.edu/cdm4/index_08buioh.php?CISOROOT=/08buioh.

references immediately after converting to Judaism, making Jerry suspicious that the dentist converted to Judaism only for the jokes.

Whether it was for the Jewish jokes, for the perceived benefits of being a part of the Chosen People, for the desire to follow in the steps of their Torah-observant leader Jesus, or for the mere fascination of an exotic religion, Gentile Christians began filling the pews of Messianic congregations, obscuring cultural divisions and introducing an element of confusion to a movement that was only in its infancy and was struggling to create a legitimate space between the two established religions of Judaism and Christianity.

The question of who or what the Messianic Jew is leads to another, more fundamental question of who or what is a Jew. The controversy over semantics and the implications of the term has not originated *in* and is not limited *to* Messianic circles in Ukraine, as it has for decades captured the attention of Jewish intelligentsia,³⁹ religious leadership, and now Israeli society and the Supreme Court.⁴⁰ Since the subject of this paper deals with a certain community within the borders of a certain country, I will refrain from going into detail on the controversy occupying Israeli and US Jewish communities and concentrate on who or what Ukrainian Messianic believers consider to be a Jew and, for that matter, a Messianic Jew.

In light of the Gentile predominance in congregations, Messianic Jewish believers in Ukraine have had to reformulate the definition of Jewishness. Since the very beginning of the movement they have actively engaged in the process of constructing a

³⁹See for instance Shlomo Sand, *The Invention of the Jewish People* (New York: Verso, 2010).

⁴⁰Jerusalem Post, *Taglit Screening out Messianic Jews*, November 25, 2008, last accessed September 25, 2011 at <http://www.jpost.com/JewishWorld/JewishNews/Article.aspx?id=121831>.

new social and religious identity, along with “creating new social and theological spaces,”⁴¹ as Patricia A. Power has put it. One of my Ukrainian interlocutors, Rabbi Valentin Sviontek, one of the pioneers of the movement in Ukraine, admitted as much when he told me that he shares the most liberal definition of a Jew as articulated by the first Prime Minister of Israel, David Ben-Gurion, who is quoted to have said that “I consider as Jewish anyone who is *meshuge* [crazy] enough to call themselves ‘Jewish.’” This is how Sviontek, himself a Gentile, explained his reconstructivist approach toward definition of a Jew:

If a person comes to a synagogue today and says that he wants to become a Jew, he has to go through *giyur* [conversion to Judaism by a non-Jew], a long process of conversion . . . After a period of time when this person goes through all the rituals and laws established by *giyur* he becomes a Jew, is circumcised by a rabbi, and can make *aliyah* [the immigration of the Jews to Israel]. Does it mean he is a biological Jew now? That remains to be a question. In my opinion, a Jew is a person who takes upon himself a responsibility to fulfill all of God’s law and to love God’s people, just like Moses did. In the book of Acts the Apostles lay out requirements for non-Jewish believers in order to become a part of Israel. Ephesians talks about it, saying that those that used to be ‘strangers and aliens’ are now ‘fellow citizens with the saints and are of God’s household.’ However, it is hard for a Gentile who fulfilled *giyur* to call himself a Jew in a country where being a Jew has been a disgrace and a subject of ridicule for hundreds of years. Therefore, I believe that a person who took upon himself responsibility to protect God’s people without fear and to keep His commands is a Jew, if not according to *Halakha* [the collective body of Jewish law] then according to his beliefs.⁴²

According to Sviontek’s definition, which is by and large the point of departure for most Ukrainian Messianic Jewish clergy, a Messianic Jew is any believer who believes in Yeshua, regardless of his/her ethnicity, who identifies himself or herself as Jewish by

⁴¹Patricia A. Power, “Blurring the Boundaries: American Messianic Jews and Gentiles,” *Nova Religio: The Journal of Alternative and Emergent Religions*, 15, 1, (2011): 78-79.

⁴²Sviontek.

exhibiting a Messianic Jewish lifestyle within the *Torahic* framework, and who is an active member of the Messianic Jewish community.

In her study of Messianic Jews in the United States, Shoshanah Feher argues that Jewish identity must include both ethnic and spiritual components, which combined provide an individual with a sense of belonging, stability, and meaning.⁴³ In a normative Jewish community a person is considered a Jew either by observing Jewish cultural and religious customs, within a range of possibilities, or merely living out communally shared and accepted cultural, ethnic, and social prescriptions. Feher goes on to argue that it is only when taking on a different religious identity that an individual, as believed by the Orthodox community, deserts his or her Jewish identity. Messianic believers, actively engaging in the process of construction of their identity, argues Feher, cross the established religious boundaries by fusing together Evangelical Protestantism and Judaism, thereby crossing sociocultural boundaries meant to safeguard one's identity.⁴⁴ The difference between the American and Ukrainian Messianic believers is that while in American congregations the ethnic component is still very much operative, in Ukrainian congregations it has become almost irrelevant. As the Kiev's Messianic Jewish Congregation's mission statement declares, "The heart of our God is open to *all people, no matter what their nationality, age, social status or education level*; that is why our congregation brings together more than a thousand *Jews, Ukrainians, Russians* and representatives of other nations (emphases added)."⁴⁵

⁴³Shoshanah Feher, *Passing Over Easter: Constructing the Boundaries of Messianic Judaism* (London: AltaMira Press, 1998), 22.

⁴⁴Ibid., 23.

⁴⁵Kiev MJC, last accessed September 26, 2011 at http://www.baruhaba.org.ua/?page_id=2.

There is yet another aspect of the expression of Messianic identity in a Ukrainian context that sets it apart from its American counterpart. Dan Cohn-Sherbok, in his insightful analysis of American Messianic Judaism, observes that a mere faith in Yeshua as Messiah is not enough in order for a Jew to be called Messianic. Messianic Judaism entails a conscious choice to adhere to all aspects of the Messianic Jewish lifestyle, including participation in traditional Jewish holidays, prayers, and ceremonies and fulfilling other requirements of the *Torah*.⁴⁶ This definition describes a “paradigm shift” that took place in 1970 when many Hebrew Christians, i.e. Jews who converted and assimilated into Protestantism, later transitioned into Messianic Judaism.⁴⁷ This definition of a Messianic Jew, supported by the leading American Messianic congregational leaders, is not entirely shared by their Ukrainian counterparts. Ukrainians on the whole seem to be more inclusive and the boundaries of their Messianic identity are not so sharp, with ample room for maneuver. Answering my questions of who is a Messianic Jew, Valentin Sviontek expressed the view generally supported in Ukrainian Messianic circles: “Take a Jew who joins the Russian Orthodox Church. I know a number of Jews who believe in Yeshua as their Messiah and Savior of the world, but they are members of a Russian Orthodox Church and follow Orthodox rites and traditions. Could they be called Messianic Jews or not? I think they could . . . I think the difference between a Messianic Jew and a Hebrew Christian is in the observance of the Jewish lifestyle, which in my opinion is not the essential aspect. The essential part is and always will be for us, that is Messianic believers in Ukraine, our faith in Yeshua.”⁴⁸ For

⁴⁶Cohn-Sherbok, 173.

⁴⁷Power, 78.

⁴⁸Sviontek.

Sviontek as well as for other leading Messianic Jewish leaders in Ukraine, a mere profession of faith should suffice for a Jewish Christian to be categorized as a Messianic Jew, which is obviously much different from the definition offered by American Messianic believers.

Constructing Messianic Theology

In the process of constructing theological formulations that inform and legitimate the Messianic identity, Messianic believers generally draw upon two traditions: Rabbinic Judaism and Evangelical Protestantism. While it is Jewish in form, it is Evangelical Protestant in content; therefore, its core beliefs and doctrinal preoccupations are much the same as its evangelical counterparts. Such issues as biblical inerrancy, salvation through Yeshua alone, literal understanding of the creation narrative, belief in heaven and hell, and so forth, remain at the center of the Messianic message. Moreover, most of the Messianic congregations in Ukraine are Charismatic or neo-Pentecostal in their style of worship with strong emphasis on glossolalia, healings, exorcism, and prophetic manifestations, although there are congregations that do not share in such supernaturalism and generally reflect the ethos of evangelical denominations they are affiliated with, such as Baptists. Peter Hocken, a Catholic priest who is also one of the leading exponents of Pentecostal theology, explains that the connection lies in two core attributes of contemporary Evangelicalism: first, evangelical preoccupation with the Old Testament prophecies concerning the people and the land of Israel; and second, the

revivalist attitudes by which Evangelicalism is shaped and in which the Messianic movement is understood.⁴⁹

One of the principal arguments used by modern-day Messianic Jews in their quest to legitimize their entire *raison d'être* is their rejection of *supersessionism*, commonly referred to as Replacement Theology, which claims that the Church has replaced Israel as his principal agent on earth. The covenant with Jews as God's chosen people was effectively nullified with the incarnation, death, and resurrection of Jesus and the institution of His Church, which for all intents and purposes is God's New Israel. Messianic Jews argue moreover that beginning in the 3rd century AD the Church, by abandoning everything Jewish and removing itself from its Jewish roots, committed two principal errors: one, theological, which was manifested in the wrong interpretation of the Scriptures; and one, social, as it acted on its initial theological error by paganizing and contaminating Christianity by appropriating pagan beliefs and practices, thereby inviting God's disfavor upon itself. They see the result of this was the Constantinization of the faith, whereby the Church, hitherto aloof from political machinations, became a tool in the hands of the powers that be. In view of this tragedy that allegedly befell Christianity in its early period, the first and foremost purpose of the Messianic movement is to restore the broken relationship between the Church and God's *original* Israel by meeting two main objectives: to reconstruct and recast Christianity in its more pristine version, i.e. its first-century configuration; and to bring Jews to the Messiah they have been awaiting all along but which they did not know they had.⁵⁰ Thus the principal thesis

⁴⁹Peter Hocken, *The Challenges of the Pentecostal, Charismatic and Messianic Jewish Movements*, (England: Ashgate, 2009), 103.

⁵⁰Antonovich.

communicated by Messianic Jews to their evangelical brethren is not merely to remind them of the Jewish roots of Christianity, but to demonstrate that in rejecting Jews the Church went wrong both theologically as well as missiologically, the underlying assumption being that Messianic Judaism is the most accurate way of practicing Christianity, practiced by Jesus Himself. Traditional Christian holidays and observances, including celebration of Sunday, Christmas, and Easter, are in this economy deemed as “pagan” and “un-biblical” innovations having nothing in common with biblical (divinely ordained) holidays celebrated by Jews and by early Christians, such as the Passover, the Sabbath, and Yom Kippur.

While recounting their first encounter with Messianic teachings, many believers do not shy away from using superlatives to describe it, and it is not uncommon for them to speak about the encounter as a “born again” experience. For example, during an interview one of my interlocutors, the rabbi of the Zhitomir Messianic Jewish congregation, Anton Antonovich, an ethnic Ukrainian who refers to himself as a “former Gentile Christian,” recalled with much regret the time he was a member of a Charismatic church where he worshiped on Sundays instead of Saturdays, celebrated “Pagan Easter” instead of “biblical Passover,” and called his Savior “Jesus” instead of his true Hebrew name “Yeshua.”⁵¹ He ascribed his “ignorance” to being a new Christian and not knowing any better. Anton shared how glad he was to discover “true” Christianity and to take this “Good News” to the rest of his Christian brothers. Antonovich, along with thousands of other Messianic believers in Ukraine, perceives his calling to be to restore

⁵¹Antonovich.

the Jewish roots of Christian faith and by doing so to bring the Church to its original and pristine state.

Another important aspect of the contemporary Messianic Jewish Movement (MJM) in Ukraine is the role of the state of Israel in God's plans for humanity and the Church. In a short documentary produced by the Kiev Messianic Jewish congregation exploring the history of the Messianic revival and its meaning for the future of the Church and Israel, the narrator reflects on the cause-effect relationship between the Church's position toward the state of Israel and subsequent God's grace or disgrace toward the Church. In the video, the history of Israel is closely intertwined with the Charismatic and Messianic movements, which are interpreted as the revival of the New Testament Church. As the Church turns its face back towards Israel and the Jews in the third century, God reciprocally turns His face back towards the Church:

The first churches were Messianic congregations consisting of almost exclusively Jews. At the end of the first century the number of Gentiles in Messianic congregations significantly superseded the number of Jews. As a result, the early Christians began to depart from the New Testament model of Christianity and specifically from its Jewish roots. At the same time the presence of the Holy Spirit in churches withers away, miracles and wonders become a rarity. The Nicene Council that took place in 325 AD sealed the final withdrawal of the Church from Israel and from the purity of God's Word. Subsequently, ritual liturgy took over the living ministry of the Holy Spirit, and the authority of men usurped the authority of God in His Church . . . In the end of the 18th and the beginning of the 19th centuries the Great Awakening swept over Great Britain and the United States ensuring the return to individual piety and commitment to God's Word and renewal of missionary efforts among the Jews. Almost at the same time in 1897, the First Zionist Congress took place, giving way to the movement among the Jews to return to their historical land. Years 1904 and 1906 marked the beginning of the first Messianic congregations in Kishinev and Odessa. Soon after, a Pentecostal revival takes place on Azusa Street . . . In 1948 after 2000 years of exile and displacement, the Jewish people established the state of Israel. This was followed by the Charismatic revival, restoration of the ministry of the Holy Spirit in the Church, and emergence of hundreds of Messianic congregations around the world. The most important lesson to be learned from history is that separation of Israel and Church and of Christians and Jews has always resulted in the fall of both and withdrawal of the Holy Spirit. But restoration of their unity will mean "life from the dead."⁵²

⁵²Kiev MJC, November 10, 2010, last accessed on September 14, 2011, at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=78OxWYn7tAon>, translation by author.

Messianic believers in Ukraine see the history of the Christian Church and the history of Israel as intimately intertwined in a teleological union awaiting the consummation of marriage between the two with the Second Coming of Yeshua HaMashiach (Jesus Christ).

In two groundbreaking works, *Dying for God: Martyrdom and the Making of Christianity and Judaism* and its follow-up *Border Lines: The Partition of Judaeo-Christianity*, Daniel Boyarin is tackling an important issue that seems to boggle any student of Judaism and Christianity; that is, “the parting of the ways” between Christianity and Judaism. In his elegantly formulated argument Boyarin proves that the walls separating the two religions were socially and artificially erected by both communities at a time (as early as first and mid-second centuries) when each one of them was trying to construct its own identity against the *other*, the “heretics who embodied the instability of our constructed essences.”⁵³ This argument, perhaps unintentionally yet in a very real way, reinforces the key postulate of the modern Messianic believers: if the two entities have been forcefully separated to the detriment of both, then bringing the two together again will only mean enrichment and blessing for both. In this view, Messianic Jewish believers essentially see themselves as a bridge between Christianity and Judaism, whose purpose is to bring healing and restoration into the fragmented and painful relationship between the two.

Messianic Jews also perceive themselves to be instrumental in what they believe to be the last days before the Second Coming of Christ. In many ways similar to the first

⁵³Daniel Boyarin, *Border Lines: The Partition of Judaeo-Christianity*, (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004), xiv.

community of Jewish-Christians whose religious practices were under the influence of the “eschatological-apocalyptic spirit permeating their age,”⁵⁴ modern Messianic theology is propelled by the same apocalyptic images. Not only do they believe themselves to be living in the end of times, but they are also convinced of their own crucial role in the divine drama, the culmination of which is the Second Coming of Christ. In the address dedicated to the fifteenth anniversary of the Messianic movement in Ukraine, Boris Gricenko, the most influential Messianic figure in Ukraine, called on the entire Christian world to get busy with what he believes to be the most important commission of God to His children in the last days: “We believe in the New Testament that clearly says that there is one important condition for the great global revival and return of Jesus Christ in His Glory. As strange as it might seem to many Christians, this condition is directly connected to the Jewish people. According to multiple prophecies in the Old Testament and various places in the New Testament, there will be no anticipated spiritual revival and no return of Jesus Christ without the mass conversion of Jews. It is about time Christians accepted this as the truth and began acting on it.”⁵⁵

So it is no surprise that Messianic Jews believe modern-day Israel and the Jewish people to be the physical heirs of biblical Israel. God did not reject Israel, and the Gentile Church was not the replacement of Israel, but rather the latter were the “in-grafted” wild olive branches into the natural olive tree (the Jewish believers in Yeshua).⁵⁶ For this reason various Old Testament prophecies and New Testament references are marshaled to uphold Messianic Jewish claims. Some of the key Scriptures used come

⁵⁴Geza Vermes, *The Religion of Jesus the Jew*, (Minneapolis: First Fortress Press, 1993), 184.

⁵⁵KMJC, *ibid.*

⁵⁶Romans 11.

from Apostle Paul's letter to Romans and one in particular: "For if their rejection brought reconciliation to the world, what will their acceptance be but life from the dead?"⁵⁷ Because Messianic Jews perceive themselves to be the restoration of the first Christian community and a reinstatement of the Jewish component in the Church, they believe they will have a "resurrection effect" on the whole of Christianity, thus preparing the Second Coming.

Jewish and Christian Reactions

The growing numbers of Jews who have over the years joined MJ congregations have not been without a backlash from the Jewish community in Ukraine. The backlash varies in degrees of negativity, from passive skepticism to outright hostility. Both skepticism and hostility were manifest from early on when *Hear O Israel* started its evangelistic campaigns in the 1990s, encountering strong opposition from Ukrainian Jewish civic and religious leaders. On occasion such opposition had results, as in 1996, when under pressure the city authorities of Kharkov banned the festival a day prior to the event (after accepting tens of thousands of dollars to rent out the city's largest outdoor soccer stadium and other fees).⁵⁸ The moneys were never returned. In addition to such activism rabbis also warn their members not to attend concerts, Shabbat services, or any other events organized by Messianic Jews under the fear of expulsion from synagogues. According to Anton Antonovich, who is the rabbi of the Zhitomir Messianic Jewish congregation, the Chabad-Lubavitch synagogue in Zhitomir, one of the most ultra-orthodox congregations in Ukraine, is also reported to have threatened to deny access to

⁵⁷Romans 11:15.

⁵⁸Christianity Today, *News Briefs*, November 11, 1996, last accessed on October 8, 2011 at <http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/1996/november11/6td96c.html>.

soup kitchens and other humanitarian aid to any member of the synagogue who is suspected of any association with Messianic Jews.

Jewish institutions perceive real dangers in the Messianic movement and therefore make extensive efforts in educating the Jewish community about Messianic Jews, representing them as impostors, heretics, and wolves in sheep's clothing.⁵⁹ The main objective in the Jewish anti-Messianic propaganda is to expose Messianic believers as essentially Christian proselytizers engaged in subterfuge, co-opting cherished Jewish symbols and rituals for their own proselytizing purposes in order to gain converts.

The effort to combat the perceived encroachment on their religious and cultural heritage by Messianic Jews was institutionalized in December 2001, when the Federation of the Jewish Congregations of the CIS (The Commonwealth of Independent States) organized an executive arm, Magen League, commissioned to "protect Jewish people from the spiritual genocide."⁶⁰ In its founding document the Magen League lays out its mission to expose and disarm Messianic Judaism as a deception and a dangerous cult:

The missionary campaign organized to snare Jewish souls reached unprecedented proportions in the territory of the former Soviet Union. Hiding behind the mask of Judaism are missionaries who call themselves 'Messianic Jews,' 'Jews for Jesus' or 'Hebrew Christians' whose purpose is to entrap Jews into their congregations and by means of deception force on them an alien religion. Magen League was founded by Jewish organizations and congregations of CIS to protect Jews from the religious genocide. We are ready to help every Jew, every Jewish family, every Jewish community or congregation to withstand the missionary threat. We support the right of every human to make a conscious and educated decision regarding his or her religion.⁶¹

⁵⁹Jerusalem Post, *How to reply when the doorbell rings*, July 2, 2008, last accessed October 8, 2011 at <http://www.jpost.com/Opinion/Op-EdContributors/Article.aspx?id=106321>.

⁶⁰League Magen, last accessed October 8, 2011, at <http://www.magen.ru/>.

⁶¹League Magen.

The basic issue for the Jewish community is that a Jewish person cannot become a Christian and remain a Jew. Centuries of persecution suffered under Christians and a modern-day threat of assimilation and mixed marriages compel rabbis to maintain a clear-cut dichotomy between Judaism and Christianity.⁶² Another obvious problem is the noticeable predominance of ethnic Ukrainians in Messianic congregations, which seems bizarre and suspicious to the Jewish community accustomed to living among a people with a long history of anti-Semitism, pogroms, and Nazi collaborationism. The sudden rise of philosemitism is interpreted by some in the Jewish community as a clever trap until the next pogrom. Alarmed by the rapid growth and visibility of Messianic Jews, Yakov Dov Blaikh, chief rabbi of Ukraine and the president of Jewish Federation of Ukraine, has in no uncertain terms threatened to pursue Messianic Jews wherever they are found, promising to put a stop to their attempts to “sow the seeds of ethnic and religious hatred and divide the Jews,” declaring that “they [the Jewish establishment] will not be silent.”⁶³

Messianic believers, on their part, protest being lumped together with the rest of Christians, who they say have a history of denying Jews in general and Jewish Christians in particular a right in maintaining their Jewish identity.⁶⁴ Christian symbols and vocabulary, often associated with Gentile prejudices and persecution of the Jews, are avoided by Messianic believers, even to the point of wearing the Star of David rather than the crucifix as part of their dress code. They argue that they have a legitimate place in

⁶²Rausch, 241.

⁶³Jewish.ru, *Molchat bol'she nel'zya*, May 23, 2001, last accessed October 8, 2011, at <http://www.jewish.ru/theme/world/2001/05/news2191.php>.

⁶⁴Jewish.ru, *ibid.*

the Jewish community and a right to claim Jewishness. Odessa's Messianic Rabbi Valentin Sviontek compares the struggle of Messianic Judaism for recognition by the Jewish community with the struggle of Hasidic Jews in the beginning of the twentieth century:

We, Messianic Jews, have challenged the rest of the Jewish community to accept us as Jews and as one of the branches of Judaism. So far it has been unsuccessful and remains to be something we are working on. But we have a precedent. There was a time when the Hasidic movement was struggling to be recognized as a branch of Judaism. They achieved it only after the death of the Orthodox rabbi who strongly opposed them. Now they are a legitimate community in Jewish society. There are many examples of divergent groups within Judaism who tried to split away from the mainstream religion but soon faded away because they never succeeded in gaining legitimacy within the Jewish community. In order for our movement to continue to exist and survive we need to gain legitimacy . . . I would like to see the Jewish community accept the right of Messianic Jews to believe in Yeshua as Messiah and at the same time to live according to the Tanakh [the Hebrew Bible] as we interpret it independently from the Orthodox community. We want to keep our right to believe what we believe and to be considered a part of Judaism. The main tenets of Judaism are to honor God, to observe Torah as the Word of God, to teach our children God's commands, and to identify with the Jewish nation. We qualify to be a branch of Judaism according to all of these requirements.⁶⁵

Both Yakov Dov Blaikh and Valentin Sviontek reflect the rudimentary problems challenging any dialog between these parties. Messianic believers insist on their right to be called Jewish; the Jewish community regards this as nothing short of a sham.

Reactions in the Christian community, however, have been wide-ranging, covering the entire spectrum between outright hatred to eccentric fascination. To understand the attitudes dominating in various denominations, one must have an understanding of the inter-confessional dynamics and the church-state relationship in Ukraine today. Compared to Russia and most other post-Soviet states, Ukraine is enjoying a high degree of religious freedom and religious plurality. The government

⁶⁵Sviontek.

maintains a neutral position on most religious issues and for the most part does not display any signs of preferentialism towards any one Christian confession. However, with the coming to power of the current president, Viktor Yanukovich, who is communing in the Ukrainian Orthodox Church of Moscow Patriarchate (UOC-MP), the UOC-MP has become more visible and vocal in the religious life of the country, although short of any explicit legislative moves to cement this ascension.⁶⁶

These developments in the church-state relationship have had both negative and positive effects on the interconfessional situation in the country. On the one hand, dozens of religious institutions, including the Roman Catholics, the Uniates, Ukrainian Orthodox Church of Kiev Patriarchate (UOC-KP), Ukrainian Autocephalous Orthodox Church (UAOC), and multiple Protestant denominations claim that the government is actively discriminating against them, allegations that are not entirely ungrounded.⁶⁷ On the other hand, this has allowed the aggrieved and sidelined confessions to cooperate against the common enemy, i.e., the Moscow Patriarchate with its resurrected hegemonic ambitions. Thus the situation is far from wholly adverse and has perhaps, in a very real way, opened up the religious space for interconfessional and interdenominational dialogue, making it possible for these organizations to promote a commonly acceptable social reformist agenda.⁶⁸

⁶⁶Lidiya Tonoyan and Daniel Payne, "The Visit of Patriarch Kirill to Ukraine in 2009 and Its Significance in Ukraine's Political and Religious Life," *Religion, State and Society*, 38, 3, (2010): 253-264.

⁶⁷IRS, *Glavy evangel'skix cerkvej zayavlyayut ob otsutstvii dialoga otdel'nykh ministertstv s konfessiyami*, August 26, 2011, last accessed October 10, 2011 at http://www.irs.in.ua/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=909%3A1&catid=34%3Aua&Itemid=61&lang=ru.

⁶⁸IRS, *V ezhegodnom poslanii k parlamentu president Ukrainy predstavil svoj vzglyad na otnosheniya gosudarstva i cerkvi*, April 16, 2011, last accessed on October 10, 2011, at http://www.irs.in.ua/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=848:1&catid=34:ua&Itemid=61&lang=ru.

Messianic Jewish congregations have also become the beneficiaries of the ecumenical and pluralistic religious atmosphere in the country. Because all the Messianic congregations in Ukraine that date back to the 1990s are in one way or another associated with Charismatic churches, their main advocates can be found in the Charismatic community. However, there is a growing and noticeable tendency in the larger Protestant as well as in Catholic communities for recognition and support of the Messianic movement. Most of the mainstream Christian denominations show their full support and acceptance of Messianic Jews through joint participation in both Christian and Messianic Jewish events, meetings, and celebrations. One way this support was manifested was the September 2011 memorial service at the Babi Yar ravine in memory of the 35,000 Jewish and 100,000 Ukrainian, Gypsy, and other lives taken by the Nazis in 1941. The memorial service was organized by the Kiev Messianic Jewish Congregation and attended by the President of the All-Ukrainian Council of Churches and Religious Organizations Dr. G. I. Komendant, the Roman Catholic Archbishop of Kiev and Zhitomir regions Peter Mal'chuk, and the President of the All-Ukrainian Council of Evangelical Christian Churches of Pentecostals M. C. Panochko.⁶⁹

In March 2011 Rabbi Boris Gricenko, rabbi of the Kiev Messianic Jewish Congregation (KMJC), was invited to speak at the evening service of the Ukrainian Roman Catholic Cathedral of St. Alexander, an event that, according to Rabbi Gricenko, signaled the beginning of a promising relationship between Ukrainian Roman Catholics

⁶⁹KMJC, *Khristiane Ukrainy ob'edinilis chtoby pochtit pamayt zhertv Bab'ego Yara*, September 23, 2011, last accessed October 10, 2011, at <http://www.baruhaba.org.ua/?p=13366>.

and Messianic Jews in Ukraine.⁷⁰ The vicar general of the Kiev, Zhitomir, and Chernigov dioceses of the Ukrainian Roman Catholic Church, Stanislav Shirokoradyuk, paid a reciprocal visit to the KMJC, giving a pastoral word to the congregation and participating in the traditional Jewish wedding in the end, where he gave his episcopal blessing to a couple under Chuppah.⁷¹

Anton Antonovich, the rabbi of the Zhitomir Messianic Jewish congregation, affirmed both openness to Messianic Judaism and rising interest in the Jewish history of the Church in local churches. While Charismatic churches, he pointed out, remain to be the most receptive of the Messianic community, other denominations, such as Baptists, Pentecostals, Adventists, and even the Ukrainian Orthodox Church of Kiev Patriarchate admit the right of Messianic Jews to participate in a wide circle of Christian fellowship and, most importantly, to do so within the framework of the Jewish lifestyle.⁷²

According to Rabbi Antonovich, every year representatives of various denominations join the Zhitomir Messianic congregation in celebration of the Jewish Passover that takes place in the central city square. In light of a long history of local anti-Semitism and religious divisions, this is a sign of repentance and restoration, according to Rabbi Antonovich.⁷³

⁷⁰Religiya v Ukraini, *Glava Messianskikh Evreev Ukrainy propovedoval v Katolicheskom Sobore Kieva*, March 25, 2011, last accessed October 10, 2011, at http://www.religion.in.ua/news/ukrainian_news/9073-glava-messianskix-evreev-ukrainy-propovedoval-v-katolicheskom-sobore-kieva-foto.html.

⁷¹Evrejskij Messianskij Portal, *Katolicheskij Episkop v pervye propoveduet v KEMO*, June 27, 2011, last accessed October 10, 2011, at <http://ieshua.org/katolicheskij-episkop-vpervye-propoveduet-v-kemo.htm>.

⁷²Antonovich.

⁷³Ibid.

Not all of the Christians are receptive and approving of Messianic Jews, however. Most evangelicals in Ukraine, being suspicious of tradition and elaborate liturgies that smack of high-church snobbism, have come to look at Messianic Jews and their emphasis on synagogue liturgy with deep suspicion if not open antipathy. They look at these liturgical idiosyncrasies as religious formalism constraining the work of the Holy Spirit. Meanwhile, the Ukrainian Orthodox believers and clergy have their own reasons to disapprove of the movement. Throughout its history, including the present time, the Russian Orthodox Church has exhibited strong tendencies to nationalize the Church, often serving as a fountainhead of xenophobia and conspiracy theories. Often injected with extreme nationalism, the Russian Orthodox Church perhaps more than any other Christian confession has had the hardest time accepting Jewish connection to Christianity.⁷⁴ It is not at all uncommon to witness an open anti-Jewish sentiment exhibited by individual believers when encountering Messianic Jewish evangelism in a public place: “They robbed us of everything; now they are after our Jesus.”⁷⁵ This is a common reaction reflecting the prevalent attitudes toward Messianic Jews among Orthodox Ukrainians. Lack of understanding and cynicism toward Messianic believers also can be found in the Protestant and Evangelical communities, who are being confronted on theological and personal fronts by an eclectic and self-assertive movement.⁷⁶

⁷⁴For more information on anti-Semitism and chauvinism in Russian Orthodox Church, as well as on its national aspirations, see Yu. K. Begunov, A.D. Stepanov, K. Yu. Dushenov, *Tajna Bezzakoniya Rossii* (St. Petersburg: Tsarskoe delo, 2002); Nikolaj Mitrokhin, *Russkaya Pravoslavnaya Tserkov*, (Moscow: Novoe Literaturnoe Obozrenie, 2006); and Irina Papkova, *The Orthodox Church and Russian Politics*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011).

⁷⁵Jewish.ru, *ibid.*

⁷⁶Zoya Satarovna Svintsitskaya, interviewed by author, July 8, 2011, via Skype in Waco, Texas,

Dr. Peter Hocken, a Catholic scholar of Pentecostalism, in his outstanding work *The Challenges of the Pentecostal, Charismatic and Messianic Jewish Movements*, argues that encountering Messianic Jews is a challenging experience for Gentile Christians of any tradition, as it exposes controversial theological and personal issues.⁷⁷ “This challenge,” continues Hoken, “touches Catholics, Orthodox, classical Reformation Protestants, Evangelicals and Pentecostals in their self-understanding and so impinges on the respective Christian identities of all.”⁷⁸ Whether it be Catholics and Orthodox who pride themselves on “tradition and apostolic heritage” or Evangelical Protestants who boast in “the purity of their biblical faith and on their knowledge of the Scriptures,” Christians have been deeply affected by thinking, “God rejected Jews and replaced them with us,” which Hocken believes to be a sin of arrogance and a “damaging spiritual virus.” From Messianic Jews has come a new impetus to recognize a primordial conflict between Jew and Gentile, to repent of bigotry and divisions and to reconcile.⁷⁹

transcript. Baylor University Institute for Oral History, Waco, TX, available online at <http://contentdm.baylor.edu/cdm4/document.php?CISOROOT=/08buioh&CISOPTR=4154&CISOSHOW=4153&REC=3>.

⁷⁷Hocken, 104.

⁷⁸Ibid.

⁷⁹Ibid., 107.

CHAPTER FOUR

Messianic Jewish Observances and Congregational Life

Messianic Jewish Congregations

Daniel Juster rightly observes that there have always been Jewish people who believed in Jesus and belonged to Christian churches, but it is when Messianic Jewish congregations, independent from the Gentile churches, began to be formed that the modern Messianic Judaism gained substantial strength and took on the form of an autonomous and rapidly growing movement.⁸⁰ As was discussed earlier, the theological underpinnings of Messianic Judaism in Ukraine largely rest on a combination of three distinct theological foundations: those of Evangelical Protestantism, neo-Pentecostalism, and Rabbinic Judaism. Moreover, I have argued that what sets Messianic Judaism in Ukraine apart from its American counterpart is the fact that it is expressed in a distinctively Ukrainian cultural and religious idiom. These theological formulations and cultural practices have to great degree also affected the movement's congregational life and issues of congregational governance. Despite the movement's extensive ties to Charismatic and neo-Pentecostal churches, Messianic congregations insist on being independent from the control of any Gentile denomination or church.

In this way, the Messianic Jewish movement in Ukraine has no organized structure or central governing body, making it difficult to assess the true scope of the movement. In addition, most of my interviewees, driven by certain religious convictions

⁸⁰Daniel Juster and Peter Hoken, *Messianic Jewish Movement: An Introduction*, (Toward Jerusalem Council II, 2004), 6.

(which lie beyond the scope of this paper), as well as suspicions of scholars probing about the inner workings of the congregations, refused to share their statistical data. (Once while conducting a survey I was accused of being a KGB agent.) Therefore, only rough estimates are available, but based upon these estimates I believe that there are at least 50 Messianic congregations in Ukraine, with membership ranging anywhere from 50 to 2,000.⁸¹

Even though Messianic congregations in Ukraine are not organized into a formal association, they are closely connected through a loose network of associates and maintain a robust Internet presence with news dealing with all things Messianic Judaica, discussed in lively virtual forums. Messianic rabbis and congregational leaders gather yearly for retreats, prayer and fasting, celebrations, and training. Pastors and ministers visit each other's congregations, ministering and fellowshiping.⁸² Most of the congregations are not directly subject to any North American network or the Messianic Jewish Alliance (MJA), the umbrella organization for Messianic Jews that brings together Messianic Jews in North America, with a mission similar to the National Association of Evangelicals (NAE). The only outside influence still having an impact in Ukraine is coming through the Messianic Jewish Bible Institute in Odessa, Ukraine, initiated by the partnership of a number of North American Charismatic churches and Messianic Jewish associations.⁸³ The largest Messianic congregation in Ukraine and in the world, the Kiev Messianic Jewish Congregation (KMJC), is located in Kiev, Ukraine. KMJC's Rabbi

⁸¹Sviontek.

⁸²KMJC, *Startoval Letnij retrit KEMO*, August 23, 2011, last accessed October 14, 2011, at <http://www.baruhaba.org.ua/?p=11680>.

⁸³Wilks.

Boris Gricenko is the informal leader of the Messianic Jewish movement, enjoying the respect of other Messianic leaders and that of the leaders of Evangelical Protestant denominations.

The leadership model in Messianic congregations follows the pattern of most Evangelical churches, with the pastor (rabbi) being at the top and elders or a council overseeing central aspects of congregational life. Most congregations have the structure of a “cell-church,” where the smallest units, *domashnie gruppy* (home groups), each consisting of 10-12 people, are organized according to the location of the residence of its leader into *regiony* (regions), whereas regions are integrated into *koleny* (tribes), borrowing from the Old Testament familial nomenclature. Each home group, region, and tribe has leaders responsible for organizing weekly meetings that include prayers, worship, Bible study, outreaches, and fellowship. The purpose of the “cell-group” model is to provide personal discipleship and to help each member of the congregation reach his or her potential and place of service in a congregation.⁸⁴

Evangelism is mostly conducted through family ties and personal relationships, as the era of massive open-air crusades came to a close at the end of the 1990s. However, music concerts, drama performances, and special services associated with Jewish festivals, such as Passover, Purim, and Rosh Hashanah, are held in public places and city halls, providing publicity and gaining new converts for congregations.⁸⁵ The most successful evangelistic venue, according to Rabbi Gricenko, has been Messianic Jewish *cafés* and interest clubs that provide a casual and warm atmosphere, along with delicious

⁸⁴KMJC, *ibid.*

⁸⁵KMJC, *V centre Kieva v zhivopisnom meste pod nazvaniem Arka Druzhyby narodov*, September 27, 2011, last accessed October 13, 2011, at <http://www.baruhaba.org.ua/?p=13419>.

refreshments.⁸⁶ These innovative meeting places replicate a small community or *shtetl*-like environment stimulating close relationships, conversational openness, and intimate spirituality. A youth and children's minister at KMJC, Alisa Shinova, noted that it was "family-like dynamics and close community ties" of Messianic Jews that made her switch from a Charismatic church to a Jewish congregation.⁸⁷

Due to the fact that the movement is still in its formative period, Messianic Jewish rabbis and leaders see the urgent need for religious education that will educate congregational members in the basic concepts and beliefs of Messianic Judaism and will equip them for their ministry in the congregations. The discipleship training is mostly done from the pulpit through sermons during Shabbat services on Friday evenings or Saturday mornings. In addition, each congregation has membership schools where the basic beliefs and doctrines of Messianic Judaism and Messianic Jewish lifestyle are taught to the new members being prepared for *tvila* (water Baptism).⁸⁸ Many congregations have a school for training small group leaders, evangelists, and teachers. In 2006 KMJC established a very successful school for training Messianic leaders where they train congregational and church leaders not only from Ukraine but also from Belarus, Russia, Moldova, and Germany. Here is how the organizers of the school explain its purpose and vision:

We live during the time of rapid growth of the Messianic Jewish movement and congregations, when the churches are returning to their Jewish roots and realize

⁸⁶Gricenko.

⁸⁷Alisa Shinova, interviewed by author, July 6, 2011, via Skype in Waco, Texas, transcript, Baylor University Institute for Oral History, Waco, TX, available online at <http://contentdm.baylor.edu/cdm4/document.php?CISOROOT=/08buioh&CISOPTR=4154&CISOSHOW=4153&REC=3>.

⁸⁸Antonovich.

the importance of ministry to Jewish people. One of the signs of the last day restoration is the growing interest among many Christians in Messianic theology, biblical Judaism, and Jewish history, festivals, and traditions. Christians of different denominations begin to realize God's heart toward Israel and the importance of ministry to the Jews. Many of them express interest in establishing a Jewish ministry in their community and want to receive the necessary training in Messianic vision, specifics of ministry to the Jews, history of Israel, and issues of anti-Semitism. In order to meet this need, KMJC established a School for Training Messianic Leaders.⁸⁹

Some of the courses offered in the school are Jewish Roots of Christianity, Second Coming of Christ and Our Responsibility in It, Zionism and *Aliyah*, the Holocaust, Salvation of Israel as the Aim of Any Ministry, and so on.⁹⁰

Another important aspect of Messianic congregational life is its pronounced "other-worldliness." In an attempt to escape the grimness of everyday life, Messianic Jews created what can only be described as Schutzian "finite provinces of meaning" within the confines of their community. Their exuberantly Charismatic praise and worship, ecstatically cathartic prayers, and inspirational sermons prompt participants to transcend the dreadful realities of this world into the world of healing and hope.

The majority of my Ukrainian interviewees, who had traveled abroad and had the privilege of experiencing Messianic congregations in the US, emphasized striking dissimilarity of the Ukrainian congregations with the ones in the US. In their attempt to describe Ukrainian experience they almost always identified themselves over and against their American counterparts, emphasizing the uniqueness of the Ukrainian experience. The main difference, as they see it, is that North American Messianic Congregations have become too liturgical and too legalistic regarding Torah observances. In an interview

⁸⁹KMJC, Shkola Messianskikh Sluzhitelej, last accessed October 13, 2011, at http://www.baruhaba.org.ua/?page_id=4977.

⁹⁰Ibid.

with the Messianic news agency *Ieshua.org*, Rabbi Valentin Sviontek pointed out that most of the Messianic Congregations in the US are victims of two extremes: conservatism and liberalism. The former one developed when, in a search for Jewish identity and acceptance by the greater Jewish community, some congregations became too fixated on liturgy and tradition at the expense of spiritual vivacity. Liberalism, in Sviontek's opinion, is evident in upholding the moral prescriptions and normative claims of Messianic Judaism. Ukrainian congregations, argues Rabbi Sviontek along with some of my other interviewees, succeeded in maintaining a healthy balance between tradition and the movement of the Holy Spirit, which makes Ukrainian experience so much more lively and attractive to both Jews and Gentiles.

Messianic Jewish Worship and Observances

Most Messianic congregations in Ukraine follow a Charismatic pattern of worship with a moderate use of non-Messianic synagogue liturgy. Maintaining a degree of musical creativity, Messianic Jewish congregations incorporate Israeli, Evangelical, and Ukrainian Hasidic musical expressions into their services. The exuberantly Charismatic worship is often accompanied by prophetic intermissions, prayers for healings, and "spiritual deliverance." A special place during the services is given to individual testimonies of miracles, healings, and prayers that God has ostensibly answered in the previous week. This practice is held in order to encourage faith and instill hope in those believers who go through similar struggles.

Messianic Jews celebrate Sabbath from Friday sundown to Saturday sunrise. Weekly Shabbat services are usually on Friday evenings, Saturday mornings, or Saturday afternoons. The Shabbat services usually include some elements of the traditional Jewish

service, namely introductory Psalms, the blessings before and after the *Sh'ma* (God's affirmation of Israel from Deuteronomy 6:4), the *Sh'ma* itself, and readings from Deuteronomy 6 and 11 and Numbers 15. The Torah blessings and readings are very common, as well as classical hymns such as *Adon Olam*, *Hatikva*, and *Aleinu*, which epitomize the most profound Jewish hopes and professions. The services are usually concluded by the Aaronic Benediction. Traditional Jewish lifestyle and lifecycle are an essential part of the Messianic Jewish practice, although Messianic Jews, like many contemporary Jews in general, vary in the degree of their observance. Messianic Jews live by the Jewish calendar and adhere to most traditional biblical holidays that include Passover, *Sukkot*, *Shavuot*, *Rosh Hashanah*, and *Yom Kippur*. In Messianic congregations, all biblical festivals are interpreted through *Yeshua*, who is believed to either have already fulfilled or will fulfill them in the near future according to the Prophets.

*Case Study: Kiev Messianic Jewish Congregation,
Rabbi Boris Saulovich Gricenko*

Boris Gricenko is the founder and pastor of the world's largest Messianic Jewish congregation (approximately 2,000 members) located in the capital of Ukraine, Kiev. Raised in a secular Jewish family during Soviet times, Boris endured misfortunes of being a Jew in Soviet Ukraine in early childhood, when his father and brother were charged and arrested by Soviet authorities for Zionist activities in the 1970s. In an interview given to the Christian news agency *Novosti Khristianskogo Mira* (News from the Christian World) in November of 2005, Rabbi Gricenko shared some perturbing childhood memories from 1971 when his brother was beaten and subsequently arrested

by *militsiya* (Soviet police) along with hundreds of other Jews during a peaceful procession in Kiev commemorating the thirtieth anniversary of the Babi Yar massacres.⁹¹ In 2011, Rabbi Gricenko was able to do what was unthinkable some 30 or 40 years ago when in September “Saulovich” (as friends and members of the congregation warmly call him) organized dozens of Christian clergy and laymen, national and city officials, and Holocaust survivors and their families for a memorial service at the Babi Yar ravine where representatives of various denominations, including Baptists, Pentecostals, Catholics, and Orthodox, expressed their deepest regret on behalf of the entire Ukrainian nation for assisting Nazis in the mass execution of 35,000 Ukrainian Jews in 1941.⁹²

Combating anti-Semitism and xenophobia in Ukraine has become one of the Kiev Messianic Jewish Congregation’s (KMJC) most important and most public undertakings. Through organization of seminars and conferences on the history of Israel and Christianity, the KMJC is “assisting people in deliverance from anti-Semitism and its severe consequences, as well as from other extremes in regards to the Jewish question.”⁹³ “The notion of the land cursed on behalf of the innocent blood is supported by the Bible,” proclaimed Rabbi Gricenko at the memorial service, calling Ukrainians to take responsibility for anti-Semitism and assisting Nazis during World War II, stressing meanwhile that “A nation that does not repent for the atrocities it committed will

⁹¹NKhM, *Ravvin KEMO Boris Gricenko: Podpol'naya organizatsiya...*, November 14, 2005, last accessed October 1, 2011, at <http://prochurch.info/index.php/news/more/3069>.

⁹²KMJC, *Khristiane Ukrainy ob'edinilis' chtoby pochitit pamyat zhertv Bab'ego Yara*, September 23, 2011, last accessed on October 1, 2011 at <http://www.baruhaba.org.ua/?p=13366>.

⁹³KMJC, *Mission*, last accessed October 2, 2011, at http://www.baruhaba.org.ua/?page_id=3907.

experience disaster after disaster. Healing and blessing will fall on behalf of those who truly repent.”⁹⁴

Rabbi Gricenko’s first encounter with evangelical Christianity happened in 1988 when a friend, a former gangster and drug-addict whose life was radically changed after conversion, invited him into a small Pentecostal church. A year later during a business trip to Tallin, Estonia, Rabbi Gricenko recalls he would be “born again” himself, but it was not until a few years later, after he experienced a devastating tragedy and despair, that he “completely turned to God in hopes only for His help.”⁹⁵ Soon Rabbi Gricenko was drawn into a Charismatic movement and joined a Charismatic church, *Zhivoye Slovo* (Living Word), where he would soon oversee the church’s small group ministry. In 1994, after participating in the *Hear O Israel* Messianic Jewish Festival, Gricenko was invited to establish and pastor a Messianic congregation in Kiev. He traveled to Israel in order to gain experience from Israeli Messianic congregations but was deeply disappointed with the “staleness and lack of enthusiasm” and decided that “there is not a single congregation in Israel that he would like to imitate” and that he would rather build this congregation after the pattern of Ukrainian Charismatic churches.⁹⁶

Soon after his arrival in Kiev, he founded the Kiev Messianic Jewish Congregation (KMJC) in 1995 with the help of a handful of Charismatic enthusiasts from *Zhivoe Slovo*. The congregation now numbers more than 2,000 active members with hundreds of weekly attendees. For a first-time visitor it appears like a traditional Hasidic wedding with a combination of loud Klezmer music and Christian rock fused with

⁹⁴KMJC, *ibid.*

⁹⁵NKhM, *ibid.*

⁹⁶NKhM, *ibid.*

extreme manifestations of neo-Pentecostalism. Best described as a radically Charismatic synagogue, KMJC services bring together *glossolalia* (speaking in tongues), “holy laughter,” healings, and deliverance prayers (exorcisms) with Jewish rituals and Torah observances. KMJC was the first one in the world to incorporate into its Shabbat services a very unique indigenous Jewish spiritual music and dance, characteristic to the Hasidic movement that originated in eighteenth-century Ukraine.⁹⁷ The congregation’s cell-group network is spread all throughout the greater Kiev metropolitan area, providing weekly house fellowships close to the members’ homes. Frequent home fellowships, Internet clubs, *Sabbath*, and midweek services and celebrations create many opportunities to form close ties and to develop comradeship between the members. KMJC also sports various ministries serving countless spiritual and physical needs of the members within and the community without the congregation. Some of the most effective programs have been a rehabilitation center for substance abusers, soup kitchens for the poor and the elderly, youth cafés, and children’s summer camps for the children of congregation members, although there are non-Messianic and non-Christian families that send their children to the camp, as these camps are free of charge.

Another reason for the congregation’s success is Rabbi Boris Gricenko himself. Gricenko has a rare combination of sharp intellect, charismatic leadership, administrative skills, and care for the people. Never forgetting his own troubled journey to faith, Rabbi Gricenko keeps the doors to his congregation open to people of all social and ethnic backgrounds, making it clear that “*people* and not *programs*” are the focus and meaning of congregational life.

⁹⁷Ibid.

CHAPTER FIVE

Conclusion: Effects on Religious Economy and Surrounding Culture and Future Prospects

In my study of the Messianic Jewish movement in Ukraine, I pursued two principal goals. The first one, objective and sociological in nature, was to systematically examine and provide an exhaustive overview of a religious community whose growing presence and influence are becoming more and more visible in the public life in Ukraine. The second one was an attempt to answer a very subtle and somewhat psychological question that baffled me throughout this project: Why do Ukrainians want to be Jews?

In the course of four chapters, I offered a comprehensive, although, due to the fluid and formative state of the movement, not yet conclusive analysis of the religious movement. The first chapter introduced the ethnoreligious phenomenon of the Messianic Jewish movement in the Ukrainian context as being one of the expressions of the Evangelical Protestant revival that swept the country in the beginning and mid-nineties. Messianic Judaism was one of the dozens of denominations, churches, and sects hunting for Ukrainian displaced souls who in return were searching for a sense of identity and community. The exotic nature of Messianic Jewish faith, the representation of it as being the recapturing of the lost community of Jesus and his disciples, and a strong sense of community and belonging found in the Messianic congregations attracted thousands of followers, most of whom are ethnic Ukrainians. Without a doubt, after a long period of subjugation and repression, Christianity in Ukraine is experiencing a renaissance and

with it a rising fascination with Hebrew Scriptures and an enchantment with the Holy Land and biblical Israel. Alongside the growing attraction to Charismatic evangelicalism is a nascent strand of evangelical philosemitism. Hated and despised for centuries, Jews have been precipitously transformed through the lens of the Old and New Testament Scriptures into a physical remnant of biblical Israel, playing a pivotal role in the long-awaited fulfillment of the Messianic kingdom. The Old Testament texts, dense with promises of earthly benefits and prosperity for the biblical Jews, become highly coveted by evangelical Gentiles. Learning from the grievous errors of past hatred and abuse of the Jewish population, Ukrainian Evangelicals and Christians of many other traditions refuse to follow in the Kainite steps of their forefathers and choose to bless in order to be blessed, echoing God's promise to Abraham and his descendants.⁹⁸

It is evident that the Messianic Jewish movement in Ukraine is spreading at a moderately fast pace. As it continues to grow both in numbers and in influence, it is bound to have certain effects on the general religious economy and surrounding culture. However, the fluidity characteristic of most Evangelical churches in Ukraine is also present in Messianic congregations. Many Messianic Jews are immigrating to Israel, Germany, and other Western countries. There are many who have dual citizenship and continue to change their residence to keep pace with the changing economic and political realities in their host countries, especially in Israel and Ukraine. During the second *intifada* in Israel, a process of reverse immigration brought large numbers of new members to the Messianic congregations, but as soon as the political situation in Israel

⁹⁸Genesis 12:3: "I will bless those who bless you, and whoever curses you I will curse; and all peoples on earth will be blessed through you," is one of the key Old Testament Scriptures used in Evangelical circles to promote love toward Jewish people.

improved, the ethnic Jewish membership declined yet again.⁹⁹ As a result both membership levels and leadership are constantly changing and unstable, perhaps pending a more stable socioeconomic situation.

The Messianic Jewish movement in Ukraine is in the process of maturing and forming in the areas of identity, theology, and congregational expression. It appears to be succeeding, as in the last 15 years the number of congregations has grown from zero to at least 50, with the number of Messianic believers numbering at least 10,000 persons, concentrated mainly in major cities with historic Jewish presence. However, the significance of the Messianic movement in Ukraine is not as much in numbers of congregations or adherents, which represent rather a small percent of Ukrainian evangelicals, as in the manifest presence and influence they exercise on the evangelical and Christian religious landscape of the country. Combating anti-Semitism and xenophobia both in the society at large and among the Christians in particular is unprecedented, as no other Christian denomination is involved in such activism. Messianic Jews, merely by their presence, pose a challenge to Christians of all traditions, inviting them to introspection regarding anti-Semitism and prodding them towards reconciliation and a mending of historical divisions between the churches and denominations, between Gentiles and Jews. As Peter Hoken elegantly puts the issue in focus, “The Messianic Jews can powerfully help this confession/reconciliation. For their presence alters the traditional encounters between Catholic and Protestant. Before the Jews all Gentile Christians are in a similar situation. We all find ourselves at the bar of

⁹⁹Sviontek and Antonovich.

history with sin to confess. This new situation (the emergence of the Messianic Jewish movement) makes it easier to leave behind the traditional forms of self-justification.”¹⁰⁰

In conclusion, the story of Ukrainians who want to be Jews is a biblical story of Ruth the Moabite, who after the death of her Jewish husband refused to go back to her own people and family but deliberately chose to stay among the Jewish people, and not merely stay, but also identify with them culturally and religiously, sharing in both their fortunes and disasters. The Gentile Ruth, who is peculiarly mentioned in the Jewish lineage of King David (she was his grandmother), came into history with her memorable words: “Your people will be my people, your God my God.”¹⁰¹

¹⁰⁰Hoken, 111.

¹⁰¹Book of Ruth 1:16.

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