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**Upside-down for the sake of Yeshua
Challenges and pressures on Israeli Jewish believers in Jesus**

By Kai Kjær-Hansen

The editors of *Kesher* have asked me to write an article on 'The Next Generation of Messianic Israelis'. The background for this wish is the book *Facts & Myths About the Messianic Congregations in Israel*, a survey done in 1998-1999 by Bodil F. Skjøtt and myself.¹ The main question which the editors wanted me to reflect on was: 'What can we predict about the shape of the Messianic Judaism [in Israel] twenty years from now?'

I don't know!

With the aforementioned survey - and the reactions to it - fresh in my memory and after several days of work on the requested article, I have finally concluded: I don't know. This 'don't know' does not merely refer to details but - which is worse - also to main trends in the future of the Messianic movement in Israel.²

I have to admit that I do not possess the gift of prophecy, and I do not dare to prophesy about the future. But I do dare to point to some aspects of some *present* observations which - depending on how they are tackled - may influence the future and the next generation of believers in Israel.

It is important to be realistic. Sometimes it is also a matter of renouncing something which in principle is legitimate for the sake of Jesus and the Gospel. This New Testament principle is for Jews as well as for Gentiles. At least the Jew Paul vouches for it.

Without toning down our responsibility for the future, we must nevertheless concede that only God knows it. The God of Israel is full of surprises, says Richard Nicol in an article from 1995 in which he warns against 'the end-times fever', which to his mind in an unfortunate manner also has influenced Messianic Judaism in North America.³ This fever is, according to Nichol, often justified by speculative treatment of biblical texts, with which Messianic Jews invite ridicule. But: 'We do not need to reinforce their [our Jewish neighbors'] skepticism by our naivité (p. 4-5). The end-times fever tends toward a mentality of cultural detachment, which leaves us miles from the hearts and minds of the majority of our brothers and sisters', says Nichol, and rightly so I think (p. 5). But the same attitude can be found among not a few Evangelical Christians around the world.

I wonder if the God of Israel has also surprised Israeli believers up through the 1990s? And I wonder if the end-times fever in an unfortunate way has influenced Jewish believers in Israel as it - according to Nichol - has influenced Messianic Judaism in USA?

I have to say that I consider the end-times fever - all other things being equal - much more dangerous and destructive for Jewish believers in Israel and for a sound development of the Messianic movement than, for example, a tightening of the anti-mission legislation or increased harassment, opposition or downright persecution of Jewish believers in Israel.

I admit without reservations that I am chilled when I see the books on offer about the end times in some book shops in Israel run by Messianic Jews and/or the mission. The reason why I say it is not just because *Facts & Myths* is banned and not stocked in some of these shops! It also gives me the creeps when I see an advert in *The Messianic Times* (Fall 1999, p. 10) for a book entitled *Yasser Arafat: An Apocalyptic Character?* and when the text in the ad says, among other things: This book documents how Arafat and the PLO have fulfilled almost 50 of Daniel's 80 details and are poised to fulfill the others very soon. I willingly believe it is a Bestseller, as the advert says. But I have to add: Unfortunately!

Jewish believers in Israel would do themselves and the rest of us - an enormous favour if they dissociated themselves from this day's speculative prophecy-teachers! No matter how much they talk about Israel. And whether they be Christian or Jewish believers in Jesus. Taking someone to task may for some mean taking themselves to task.

Many people outside Israel - and not least Evangelical Christians - have great expectations of believers in Israel. They need to see their responsibility for this and also for the pressure they put on Jewish believers in Israel. Some Jewish believers in Israel have, with their reports of what is going on in Israel, confirmed these expectations - sometimes with fabricated tales of success, as Menahem Benhayim maintains in the next issue of *Mishkan* (32/2000). The Israeli believers in question must themselves take responsibility for this. I don't know how Israeli believers will tackle the eschatological pressure which many may have placed on themselves. The way they do this will influence the future shape of the movement. This eschatological pressure may very well be the greatest danger to the movement.

Any prediction of the future must - in my opinion - be accompanied by a humble if or maybe. If you look back on the 1990s, there were - as will appear from the following - some factors which no one in the mid-1980s could have imagined and which have dramatically and unpredictably influenced the Messianic movement in Israel.

When the history of Jewish Jesus-believers in Israel is recorded, especially two external factors leap to the eye:

1. The collapse of the former Soviet Union and the subsequent wave of immigration of Russian Jews to Israel, among them Jesus-believing Jews.⁴
2. The peace negotiations at top level between Jews and Palestinians.

First I want to deal with the peace process. The way Jewish believers relate to this may throw light on some matters of principle and may be relevant for the issue of faith in Jesus and Jewish identity. New circumstances may demand new answers to the question of Jesus and Jewish identity. Or rather, new circumstances are a challenge to reflect on what to weight and how to order one's priorities.

The land issue and the relationship to Palestinian believers

In what direction is the Messianic movement heading in the land issue and in relation to Palestinian believers? I don't know. But this attitude influences the movement's shape. This is not so much a question of making predictions about the future as of examining reactions and arguments.

A survey from 1997, conducted by Bodil F. Skjøtt, addresses the question of Jewish believers' attitude to political issues, to Zionism, to Eretz Israel and to Palestinian fellow-believers.⁵ In this survey it is said that the overall Messianic community in Israel votes exactly like the rest of the population, with equal numbers voting for the right and for the left.

(p. 74). It also appears that 94 percent of the respondents stated that there should be more fellowship between Jewish and Palestinian believers, and 85 percent believed that spiritual unity with Palestinian believers is more important than how much land is possessed by either people (p. 77). This should be compared with the fact that 76 percent hold that Judea and Samaria should be part of the State of Israel (p. 76). As to the question whether the Jewish people will be exiled again, it appears from the survey that 43 percent of Messianic believers in Israel are not sure that there will never be another exile! (p. 76). Most do not see Zionism as just a secular movement but rather as a necessary instrument in the fulfillment of prophecies and in God's program to bring the Jewish people to faith in Jesus (p. 76).

These - and other - observations from the mentioned survey might call for special treatment, which however is beyond the scope of this essay. In a recently published book by *Musalaha* there are quite divergent views among Jewish believers, which should not surprise anybody.⁶

In the chapter entitled 'The Land from a Messianic Jewish perspective' (p. 37-54), David H. Stern doesn't show much faith in the peace process, not even if the level of terrorism should decline. He writes:

But even if it [the terrorism] did abate, we would question the process for two additional reasons arising out of our faith. First, many of us interpret biblical prophecies to be telling us that peace simply is not to be expected; it is not what God will be doing in the time prior to Yeshua's return. Second, as believers we have a high standard for what peace ought to be. It is not merely a ceasefire, or the exchange of ambassadors, or a multinational force patrolling the borders to prevent terrorist infiltration. Rather, it involves both individual peace with God and the setting up of God's kingdom on earth. Neither of these will be accomplished by Barak, Arafat, Abdullah, Murabak, Assad or Hrawi. Only Yeshua will restore the kingdom to Israel (as affirmed by Acts 1:6-7) and bring peace to the world (p. 53).

I have no doubts that Stern will get support for these views, for example from many North American Evangelicals and fundamentalists. By the way, I share his belief that real peace can only be found in Jesus, and also I believe that perfection belongs to the world to come. But I am surprised that expectations of the future seem to tone down commitment to the present. Do we believers not have an obligation to do things here and now as well as possible while waiting for the perfect? Is there not a *chai* - life - here and now which we need to care about? Or in the words of Richard Nichol in the above-mentioned article: 'Simply stated, a world in the throes of death is not worth redeeming. If the end is here, why roll up our sleeves and involve ourselves in the local school system? Why get involved in local government? ...' (p. 7).

Lisa Loden, however, moves in a different direction in the chapter entitled 'Assessing the Various Hermeneutical Approaches' (p. 15-35) in the above-mentioned book. She takes her point of departure in hermeneutical considerations where she points out that one's hermeneutic is the decisive factor in determining one's eventual theology of the land. Different keys unlock different doors. (p. 34). She concludes: 'There is no such thing as a pure theology however hard we have to try to rid ourselves of bias and prejudice.' (p. 34-35). It

is against this background she can say about the relationship between Israeli Jewish believers and Palestinian believers:

They are together part of the one new man in Messiah. Both have been reconciled to God and each has received an ongoing ministry of reconciliation that is first of all to be exercised towards each other. Being in the Body of Messiah means more than any ethnic or national identity. Issues of love and reconciliation, ethical behavior and morality are of greater importance than territorial considerations regardless of one's status as occupier or occupied. However important, when taken in light of the implications of Jesus' love, territorial considerations are secondary (p. 134).

In the concluding chapter of this book, 'A summary of outstanding issues' (p. 187-194), one of the editors of the book, Michael Wood, sums up the various attitudes. About what is called 'The Middle Way' he says, among other things:

In this theology, reconstructed logic is used to build bridges between the New and Old Testament covenants in regard to the issues of both the land and human rights ...

In this approach, Jesus' New Testament injunctions regarding human rights are to be allied to God's Old Testament promises regarding the Land as the inheritance of the Jews. Logic and secular constitutions regarding human rights are also to be included where they do not countermand the Biblical mandate.

[Joseph] Shulam ... does not give up his Jewish hold on the promises of God made in the Old Testament but he does allow room for negotiations, based only upon Biblical premise, in the present (cf. Ezekiel 47:21-23). To him, ownership is not necessarily possession of the land which can indeed be used by others than the owner. So long as these persons have the temporary (but never final) possession of the property, they are to enjoy respect, rights and privileges as though they are indeed the owners of the land even if, in the final age, they are not (p. 191).

This attitude both allows for the Bible text *and* recognizes the needs of one's neighbour, although it is not clear whether it also implies a yes to some form of a Palestinian state. At any rate: Theology is never done in a vacuum, as Lisa Loden states (p. 34). And it might be added that the life of the faith is not lived in a vacuum either.

Can these observations be applied on other matters central to the Messianic movement? I don't know. Maybe!

We will now turn to the other factor which has influenced Israel and Jewish believers in Israel in the 1990's.

The Russian invasion

Without the Jewish believers in Jesus who have come from the former USSR in the 1990s the numerical increase of the Messianic movement in Israel would have been significantly smaller. In one way or other all congregations - also the Hebrew-speaking congregations - are influenced by the Russian influx. Those few who are not are the exception which proves the rule.

The denominational background from which the majority of the Russian believers come is primarily Baptist or Pentecostal. Those who have not been influenced by a Western form of the charismatic movement are often described as the *quiet* Russians . Those under charismatic influence are described as the *noisy* Russians . The difference is perceptible not least by their style of worship: quiet or noisy .

The leadership structures are generally speaking loose. Few of the leaders have any long experience of leadership. And few have a theological education proper. But the level of boldness and activity is high. They don't have much faith in high profile evangelism. Not that they are afraid of the consequences as such, but because their focus is on non-believing Russian immigrants whose confidence has been won through care and friendship.

The question of theology and identity that shaped most pre-1990 congregations (see below) has *not* significantly influenced the Russian congregations. For the pre-90 congregations it has been important not only to be *Jewish* but for some also to be different from the Gentile church. For example: No Christmas! Some *Jewish* Russian believers have, however, turned this upside down. Many of them find it natural to celebrate Christmas and have a Christmas tree. And only limited emphasis is given to Jewish tradition and Jewish holidays. Church as well as Jewish holidays are primarily an occasion to come together and to include new people in the fellowship. If you will: bring others to faith in Jesus! Jewishness or not!

I don't know in what numbers Russian believers will be immigrating to Israel over the next 20 years. I don't know if the receptiveness to the Gospel among Russian Jews who are already in Israel will continue along the same lines over the next 20 years as in the 1990s. If this happens - and on the assumption that the growth in the number of non-Russian Israelis stays at the same level as in the 1990s - then the majority of Israeli Jewish believers in 2020 will have a Russian background. Whether at that time they will be as little concerned with their Jewish identity as Jesus-believers as they, generally speaking, are now depends to a large degree on how mature Israeli non-Russian Jewish believers will react to them. Based on observations which I am going to present below I am reasonably confident. But it does require a good measure of maturity, flexibility and not least a change of priorities. For a time, anyway. For the sake of the Russians. And indeed for the sake of Jesus, I would think!

This invasion of Russian believers has not meant a wholly new agenda, but some of the old believers have, on some significant points, changed the priority of items on the movement's agenda.

The 1990s changed the picture of the Messianic movement in Israel. I hope that it is possible, in spite of all, to rejoice in the invasion of Russian Jewish believers.

We are now going to examine how a number of Israeli Jewish believers, due to a new situation, have demonstrated flexibility and have given matters which are dear to them a lower priority. For the sake of Jesus! I see this as evidence of considerable maturity. We need to take a look back in history.

The 1980s marks of an indigenous Israel Jewish congregation

The closer you are to a painting the more difficult it is to perceive it. The more you are involved in the Messianic movement and the closer you are to the course of events, the more difficult it can be to see what has really happened up through the 1990s as compared to trends

in the 1970s and the 1980s. In this context it is not quite beside the point to say that many things, quite remarkably, have been turned upside down.

The development in Israel in the 1990s has turned upside down issues which many believed were solved at the end of the 1980s or which were at least in the process of being solved. With optimism and direction people were then committed to the establishment of local indigenous Israeli Jewish congregations which should be different from the expatriate churches ruled by the Gentiles. Presumably no one had then imagined that the biggest obstacle to the realization of this goal would be *Jewish* believers.

In a number of areas the situation around 2000 is comparable to the situation prior to the indigenization process. In a way the situation at 2000 is more like the situation of the 1950s, 1960s and early 1970s than to the situation of the 1980s. The main difference is that whereas expatriates prior to the 1970s to a large extent were made accountable for, and by some even were found guilty of, a lack of will to indigenization, this has now become an *Israeli* issue. It is *Jewish* believers who now hinder, or at least are not very concerned with, this process and thereby slow down the indigenization process of the 1980s.

If the Jewish believers are not aware of this dramatically new situation, they will fail to see some challenges, and this means that the local Israeli Jewish believers do not assume responsibility for the development. It is no longer possible to blame the Gentiles.

I shall restrict myself to a few examples based on historical observations. I shall refrain from discussing the question whether the missions before the 1980s were as indifferent to the process of indigenization as Israeli Jewish believers then claimed.

When Baruch Maoz,⁷ for example, in the mid-1970s draws a picture of *expatriate churches* in Israel, it is said, among other things, that the denominations and missions from overseas labour to set up churches of their own, bearing all the marks and habits of the churches; the spoken language is usually not Hebrew. Most of the members are expatriates, Sunday is the day of worship and - if possible - it is also the day of rest.

The indigenous churches on the other hand are, according to Maoz, largely composed of Jewish believers, and the language spoken is Hebrew. There were doubts whether Christmas should be celebrated and whether the Jewish national and religious holidays should be ignored. Among the members of the indigenous churches there are many whose education, knowledge of the Holy Scriptures and understanding of the Christian faith is restricted to an extent that gives room for grave concern, Maoz states (p. 26-27).

One of the characteristics of the *expatriate churches* in the mid-1980s is - still according to Maoz⁸ - that on the whole they are comprised of expatriate Christians, culled primarily from long or short-term visitors. Their leadership, forms of worship, financial support, spoken language and hymnody indicate a foreign group in a strange land. They celebrate few if any of the national holidays, says Maoz.

In contrast to these are the *local churches* in the 1980s: These groups are predominantly Israeli and their leadership is mainly local; the language spoken is usually Hebrew and national festivals are celebrated (p. 4).

When Jim Sibley⁹ has to describe style and worship in Israeli congregations in the late 1980s, he writes that there is definitely a trend towards contextualisation. Immigrants are learning Hebrew, and congregations are moving away from a dependence on simultaneous translation into English, French, etc. (p. 31).

It is also worth noting what Joseph Shulam¹⁰ said at Manilla II, arranged by The Lausanne Committee for World Evangelization (LCWE) in 1989:

For the first time in the history of the church in modern times there is an indigenous Jewish Israeli body that transcends the church's mission to the Jews. This body is cross-denominational, self-governed, and theologically independent. It is not uniform in its views and ideas, but it has developed a sense of belonging to each other and functions in major projects together.

And:

The age of Ecclesiastical Colonialism and the rule of the expatriate missions over the local Christians are basically over. The wise missions are beginning to see their role in the Land one of supporting and serving, not dominating and ruling.

And:

Hebrew liturgy and forms of worship are being developed by the local believers. Cultural and Jewish forms are coming to life; the ancient Gospel is coming back to the place in which it first sprang up to give life to all Gentiles of the world.

And:

There is active involvement of a number of leaders in the country to develop a Messianic Jewish Theology that will give adequate treatment to the historical developments of Christianity and to the New Testament background and expression within Judaism... (p. 6).

In other words: when local believers in the 1970s and 1980s described the process of indigenization, the following were important ingredients: local leadership, local believers, Hebrew language, less translation to foreign languages during the worship and a development of Hebrew liturgy and forms of worship compared to what was found in expatriate churches.

New circumstances and factors which were unknown at the time have influenced the process of indigenization quite significantly, which will now be shown.

New circumstances and new challenges

How, then, is the picture when we take as starting-point the conditions which local Israelis in the 1980s regarded as important in the process of forming an indigenous Jewish Israeli body that transcends the church's mission to the Jews?

As to the *Ecclesiastical Colonialism* those societies which Shulam may have had in mind have not escalated their rule ... over local believers. And if one insists that new agencies have appeared on the scene and that they give financial support to the new and in this way exercise rule over them, this comes back like a boomerang. For the majority of the Israeli congregations are, with a few exceptions, in one way or another dependent on financial support from abroad. Not all want to admit this fact.

When it comes to *leadership*, all congregations, with a few exceptions, have local, Israeli leaders. It is true that many of these are newcomers, but their official status is that of citizens

of the State of Israel. And by the way: Many of the old leaders were also once newcomers, and yet no one questioned that they were locals ! The majority of the leaders of the congregations are now Jewish.

Perhaps it was believed in the 1980s that having local, Israeli Jewish leadership would guarantee a more indigenous Jewish Israeli body/church/congregation, but now one has to face that this is *not* the case. As Ecclesiastical Colonialism, according to Joseph Shulam, was already in the late 1980s basically a thing of the past, the main responsibility for the development can no longer be attributed to the expatriates or the missions .

When a new and unexpected situation arises, one can shut one's eyes to it, or one can face it, reorder one's priorities and adapt to the new reality, which has also often been the case for the leaders of many congregations in Israel. For the sake of Jesus. Without necessarily changing the content of the agenda one might, prompted by the new circumstances, have to put the items in a different order. One does not necessarily have to renounce the importance of establishing an indigenous Jewish Israeli body, but perhaps a change of pace would do. And when one sees some *Jewish* fellow-believers who are theologically weak and perhaps going astray from *the basic faith in Jesus*, what does one then do? How else can one see it but as a challenge to teach them the *Alef Beth* of faith in Jesus. For the sake of Jesus it even looks as if mature local Israeli leaders on account of the new situation are prepared to act like the missionaries of the 1950s and 1960s. I am not afraid to say this. It is not done to pay back the negative things which some Jewish believers have said about the missionaries of the past. Believe me or not: I see this as evidence of great maturity in the Israeli believers - for the sake of the Gospel.

As already said: there are situations in the Messianic congregations today which are more like the situation of the 1950s and 1960s than the situation of the 1980s. In the perspective of faith, it looks as if God has provided the new circumstances. And along with these come new challenges. If one believes in God, how can one not change the order of priorities of the items on one's agenda when it seems that God is behind these new circumstances?

Let us, as an example, take the use of Hebrew and the setting-up of non-Hebrew speaking congregations in the 1990s.

Hebrew: something secondary in relation to people's needs?

The use of *Hebrew* was one of the marks of an indigenous congregation in the 1980s. The absence of Hebrew - or the use of bad Hebrew, earphones and translation were marks of an expatriate church. These things have now been turned upside down. All denominational churches with a long history in the Land have now moved in the direction of becoming local congregations. They have succeeded, with a few exceptions. And in all of *these* Hebrew is now the main language. Anyway, the issue of what main language is used in the congregations is no longer something which divides expatriates and locals (this is about the language used in the congregations, it is not a comment on the expatriates' level of proficiency). It is an issue between locals and locals, that is, between Israeli believers themselves. The problem has become an internal local and Israeli matter.

It should be noted that a leaning towards Messianic Judaism is not in itself a guarantee for Hebrew as main language. Other factors make themselves felt, not least the level of the leader's mastery of Hebrew and also the members' proficiency in Hebrew. The same was the

case with much mission work in the 1950s and 1960s. Whereas it used to be missionaries from the West who established English-speaking congregations, it is now Jesus-believing Jews from North America who do so - whether or not they have been involved with the Messianic Congregational Movement or not. (I am not saying that there are no North American immigrants in the Hebrew-speaking congregations!)

If the development follows the usual pattern, these non-Hebrew speaking congregations will gradually incorporate more and more Hebrew and eventually become Hebrew-speaking. It is normally a prolonged process. Some congregations may - before that happens - even have ceased to exist. And even if they become Hebrew-speaking, it is not a matter of course that they will weight Jewish identity (on this, see more below). This depends, to a large extent, on the way mature Israeli Jewish believers relate to them.

It is also interesting to note how Hebrew-speaking congregations have responded, for example to the influx of Russians. As already mentioned, all Hebrew-speaking congregations are, with a few exceptions, affected by this. A few are affected to such a degree that old members have left their congregation for this reason. These congregations have got earphones, and they offer translation during their worship, so that what used to be a mark of expatriate churches is now common in local indigenous congregations. Consideration for actual needs is seemingly (and to my mind: fortunately) weightier than the consideration for the process of indigenization, which as a result of this may now progress more slowly than intended. We could also say that it is a indication of a high level of maturity, that consideration for the Gospel is more important than the Hebrew language.

Some have actually gone further. I will just mention one example: Three congregations are today under the leadership of Eli Levi, who was born in Israel to Bulgarian immigrants. He serves on the board of Netivyah Bible Instructions Ministry. In *Facts & Myths* (p. 249) the theological character of the Hebrew speaking congregation has been described as non-charismatic and emphasizing Jewish traditions and the freedom to continue a traditional Jewish lifestyle also as a believer in Jesus.

A Hebrew-speaking congregation was founded by Eli Levi in Tel Aviv in 1991. Around 1995 a group of Bulgarian immigrants joined the group. In 1997 the congregation chose to split into two language groups, Bulgarian and Hebrew, but with the same leader who masters both languages. In 1998 the leader began meeting with a group of Russians in Rishon Letzion, and a congregation was formed with the same person as leader, who here preaches in Hebrew which is translated into Russian. In passing it may be noted that today the members of the Hebrew-speaking group gather *Sunday* evening.

To put things in perspective: I almost shudder to think how local Israeli Jewish believers might have reacted if, for example, The Norwegian Church Ministry to Israel (NCMI) in the late 1980s had continued their Hebrew services in Beit Eliyahu in Haifa but had chosen to make Sunday their day of worship and with the same pastor had set up an independent Romanian-speaking congregation and yet - with the same pastor - had set up an English-speaking independent congregation for Messianic Jews with a background in the Messianic Congregational Movement in North America, in acceptance of the fact that these people could not learn Hebrew! In passing it may be mentioned that the very Beit Eliyahu congregation has a local, Israeli *Arab* pastor today - who is of course fluent in Hebrew!

As far as I am concerned, I am pleased that an Israeli-born Jewish believer like Eli Levi, who wants the freedom to continue a traditional Jewish lifestyle also as a believer in Jesus, does what the missionaries once did: in order to get his message across he addresses his audience in a language they understand. If the comparison is unpalatable, then let me draw attention to what Jewish believers did in the 1950s in Israel, whether they were called Daniel Zion (former chief Rabbi of Bulgaria) or Hayim Haimoff (Bar-David). They also used non-Hebrew languages to communicate the Gospel.

To push it to extremes: Eli Levi - and others with him - have sacrificed Hebrew, at least for a time. What is second best is - due to a new situation - nevertheless what serves the purpose best.

And yet, in a larger historical perspective than the modern missiological concept of indigenization it is perhaps not such a big sacrifice *under certain circumstances* to renounce a language for a message - even when that language is Hebrew! Wasn't it Jews who before the Common Era carried out the translation of the Hebrew Tanach into Greek - for the benefit of Jews who did not know Hebrew? And wasn't it Jews in *Eretz Israel* who at the beginning of the Common Era and in the following years produced *targumin* in Aramaic for Jews in *Eretz Israel* who did not understand Hebrew?

Who is squeezing whom when it comes to the use of Hebrew? And who have inflicted pressure on themselves? Do the Scriptures have something conclusive to say about this issue? And is Hebrew holier than other languages? Can the Gospel not be communicated in other languages? Isn't it better to communicate the Gospel in a language people understand?

It goes without saying that I think Hebrew is the *natural* language in Israeli Jewish congregations - that is, *if* people understand it. The Jews who do not understand it must hear the Gospel preached in their own language. No language sacrifice is too big! If not, there is a danger of making the same mistake as Christian missions have made in other parts of the world: If you want to become a Christian, you have to learn English!

Torah-oriented Messianic congregations in Israel

We are now going to take a brief glance at those congregations in Israel which may be termed Torah-oriented. It is true that this term is open to misunderstanding - it might give the impression that Jesus is not at the centre of their faith, which all emphasize that he is. But it will also not do to call them Messianic Israelis: for some of the congregations this might indicate a closer attachment to North American style Messianic Judaism than they wish. What they do have in common is that they do not think that a Jewish flavour in the congregations is enough. They see the question of Jewish identity as an important part of the life of the faith. The emphasis differs, but they all stress that it is important for Jewish believers to keep the Torah, whether they define themselves as Torah-positive or emphasize that the Torah is important because it was important for the first believers. In general there is no wish to interpret the Torah through Jewish tradition but rather through Jesus. For a majority it is important to practise Jewish traditions as long as they do not contradict the Gospel. The importance of an identifiable Jewish life-style as a testimony to the Jewish people is a central point. They recognize the unity of Jews and Gentiles in the body of Messiah.

Of the 81 groups surveyed in *Facts & Myths* nine fall into this category, in our opinion. Two of these nine congregations have a long history in Israel, namely *Ramat Gan Congregation*

(1957) and *Roeh Yisrael* (1972/refounded 1993) in Jerusalem. After a split of the Ramat Gan Congregation in 1996 *Yad Hashmona House Group* was set up. Three of the nine congregations were formed in the 1990s and led by Eli Levi, and probably formed under the inspiration of Joseph Shulam, who is the leader of *Roeh Yisrael*. (As to the languages used in these three congregations, namely Hebrew, Bulgarian and Hebrew/Russian, see above.) In one way or another, these six congregations are a product of - if you will - *Eretz Israel*.

The remaining three congregations were formed by American Jews who prior to their immigration were involved with the North American Messianic Movement, namely *Ohalei Rachamim* in Kiryat Yam north of Haifa (1995), *Kehilat Neveh Tzion* in northern Jerusalem (1995) and *Yeruel* in Arad in Negev (1998.). The leader of this last congregation, Milton Maiman, died in May 1999, and I have not been updated on its subsequent development.

On basis of the figures mentioned in *Facts & Myths* it is possible to assess how much space they take up in the overall Messianic landscape in Israel.

The total number of *Jewish adult members* in the 81 congregations/house groups is 2178. 223 of these are members of or belong to the core group in these nine congregations. You could say that they form a minority in the Messianic movement in Israel in terms of congregations and adult membership.

The total number of members in the nine congregations is 300. In accordance with the criteria we set up in *Facts & Myths* these 300 adult members may be split up in the following categories:

| | |
|---|-----|
| 1. Jewish | 223 |
| 2. Non-Jewish but married to a Jew | 38 |
| 3. Non-Jewish with Israeli citizenship | 14 |
| 4. Non-Jewish without Israeli citizenship | 25 |

Out of the total number of 300 adult members in these nine congregations, immigrants who have come throughout the 1990s (mainly from North America, the former Soviet Union and Bulgaria) make up approx. 50 percent. The number of non-Jews is approx. 25 percent. The two old congregations, Ramat Gan and *Roeh Yisrael*, number 100 adults, *Yad Hashmona House Group* numbers 11, which means a total of 111 adult members. Eli Levi's three congregations number 70 adults. The three congregations set up in the 1990s with leaders coming from North America number 119 adults.

If we look at *external features* which characterize the Messianic Congregational Movement in North America, it would seem that these have had little impact in these nine congregations in Israel, for example the use of kippa and prayer shawls in the worship. Only two congregations use a Torah scroll in their worship - and in one of them it is only on every other Sabbath. None call their congregation a synagogue, and the leaders do not call themselves rabbi (apart from the late Milton Maiman).

If you bear in mind that these congregations have a common point of departure, you cannot help being surprised at the diversity. I'll just mention a few examples.

Ohalei Rachamim defines itself as charismatic, *Roeh Yisrael* and the three congregations under the leadership of Eli Levi, as well as *Ramat Gan Congregation* and *Yad Hashmona*

House Group, define themselves as non-charismatic. *Roeh Yisrael* does not have music at their worship, which all the others have. All celebrate Jewish holidays and emphasize the importance of this. That also goes for *Ramat Gan Congregation*, which however sees no problem in celebrating the birth of the Messiah at Christmas. But then *Ramat Gan Congregation* finds it difficult to formulate a creed or a statement of faith because they are convinced that by doing so they would stand in danger of minimizing the biblical faith. *Ohalei Rachamim* and *Neveh Tzion* have a statement of faith. Milton Maiman had plans to write one. Joseph Shulam has written a personal statement of faith, but *Roeh Yisrael*, whose leader he is, has no such statement. All underscore the importance of Jewish expression in their worship, but only *Ramat Gan* use the Lord's Prayer, which is a Jewish prayer if anything, even given by the Jew Jesus. That others refuse to adopt this Jewish prayer may very well be because it is part of the liturgy of some Christian churches - though I cannot help wondering that this in itself should be enough to avoid using it. But the biggest surprise is perhaps that only two of these nine Torah-oriented congregations define their worship as liturgical, namely *Roeh Yisrael* and *Neveh Tzion*. Practically all read from the weekly synagogue portions, *Parashat Hashavua*, but none seem to take the time to read them in their entirety. And strangely enough there is no reading from the New Testament on the basis of a similar cycle. Many other things could be mentioned.

In other words: the North American Messianic Movement has only had a modest impact on the Messianic congregations in Israel.¹¹ The attitudes which characterize the Torah-oriented congregations with a long history in Israel have only to a small extent influenced other congregations. And again: the greatest obstacle to the propagation of the cause up through the 1990s has been other local Israeli Jewish believers, not the Christian mission.

Granted that these observations are subjective, they are nevertheless not a value judgment of attitudes in these congregations.

We shall now deal with the congregations which, though not Torah-oriented, yet want an Israeli Jewish flavour in their worship.

Congregations which want to give the Gospel an Israeli cultural relevance

This is the case with a number of Hebrew-speaking Israeli Jewish congregations, whether they are pre-1990 or of the 1990s and whether or not they have a denominational background. Even those old congregations with a long history in Israel, which some might still call denominational, have a considerably greater element of Jewish flavour in their worship. There are still differences in terms of forms of worship, and differences between liturgical and non-liturgical, charismatic or non-charismatic, etc.

Quite a few of those congregations which identify themselves as non-liturgical have, nonetheless, adopted elements from the Jewish worship in their own worship, such as the Shema, other liturgical elements and the weekly synagogue portion (*Parashat Hashavua*). Practically all celebrate the Jewish holidays in one way or another. The flavour has become more Israeli but not necessarily more Jewish. The desire is to retain an Israeli and culturally-relevant identity. But they are not in the same way as the above-mentioned congregations oriented around the Torah. No strong emphasis is placed on being Messianic in the sense that adherence to the Torah or the Jewish traditions is observed. Celebration of the Jewish holidays is also seen as a tool for evangelism. Their concern is to make the Gospel culturally relevant in an Israeli Jewish society, which may also rub off on the form of worship. Generally speaking there is a vision of the 'one new man' of Ephesians 2, constituted by

Jews and Gentiles. It would be wrong to say that the question of Jewish identity is irrelevant in these congregations, but it does not have the same weight as in the above-mentioned congregations. And generally speaking they do not feel the same need to dissociate themselves from the Christian church, as some of the Torah-oriented leaders do.

Of course I am aware that there are individuals in these congregations who share the vision of those above who were termed Torah-oriented.

Allow me to give one more example of how an Israeli Jewish congregation which wants to be culturally sensitive has yet found a liturgical form in their worship. I choose *Beit Asaf Congregation* in Netanya (founded in 1978/re-founded in 1983) and with David Loden, Evan Thomas and Paul Liberman as keypersons today. The service in *Beit Asaf* is described in this way in *Facts & Myths* (p. 199).

The service follows a set order made up for the congregation: 1. Song. 2. Reading from the weekly Torah portion in Hebrew, English and Russian. 3. Worship (20 minutes). 4. Responsive reading of either the Amida or the creed written for the congregation. 5. Intercessory prayer for a) the nation of Israel; b) the world; c) new groups. 6. Communion. 7. The Sh ma said in Hebrew. 8. The sermon (30 minutes). 9. The havdala service (if the service is in the afternoon). 10. Announcements. 11. Aronic blessing.

I have just one comment on this: Even if *Beit Asaf* in its theology is not Torah-oriented, it nevertheless wants to be culturally relevant and to express an Israeli Jewish identity. For this congregation it has led to a *liturgical* form of worship. And for this reason a service in *Beit Asaf* may by some be *experienced* as more Jewish than what may be *experienced* in some non-liturgical Torah-oriented congregations.

Well, compared to the situation of the 1960s quite a lot has been accomplished in the process of indigenization in the Hebrew-speaking local Israeli Jewish congregations - and more than appears from this article. The process may have been different from what some people predicted in the late 1980s, and maybe it has also been slower and more difficult than foreseen. Perhaps it has not got as far as many people had expected and has not led to the unity which many hoped it would.

But the process is in motion. I am convinced that it will continue.

And who says - or demands - that the process should be quick? And be easy? And just follow one track? And who says - and demands - that Jewish believers in Israel should be more of one mind than Christians are in other places in the world?

By way of conclusion I would like to reflect on this.

Nothing is going to get done easily

First I would like to quote what Moishe Rosen said in Manila in 1989 in connection with the world conference on evangelization sponsored by The Lausanne Committee on World Evangelization (LCWE). The theme of the conference was *Proclaim Christ until He comes*. It would not be wrong to say that *some* at the conference exerted a *pressure* to the effect that

the Gospel should be proclaimed to all the world by the year 2000. It was in this context Moishe Rosen¹² said some words which can today be applied to other contexts:

Back in 1954, the Baptist Church had a slogan, A million more in '54. What happened when we didn't get the extra million? We quietly forgot the slogan. Today, some are talking about fulfilling the great commission by the year 2000. These people take new Christians and crush them under their false expectations. *We* know that such slogans shouldn't be taken seriously; but new believers, who are full of zeal to win the world for Christ, end up defeated because they were set impossible goals. *Nothing is going to get done easily* (p. 8).

I know from written reactions to our book that *Facts & Myths* has stirred up anger among the leaders of four or five congregations in Israel. I also know that it has made some nervous because they fear that the information in it will increase the pressure of anti-mission organizations on them. To have angered others is sad, especially when these others are fellow-believers. As to the other point, I don't think that this book contains any significant information which the anti-mission organizations cannot get elsewhere. For a follow-up on the survey I have to refer those interested to the debate in *Mishkan* (no.32/2000).

But it is more important to note the distress the book has caused for some 'old timers' in the Messianic movement in Israel. This distress is not due to the appearance of the book but to the reality it brings to light. Not that the reality takes them by surprise but the fact that it is there in black and white. Although it is possible to point to inaccurate details - and there are many misprints and other inaccuracies - no one has so far decisively challenged the trend in the overall picture of the Messianic movement. It is a very heterogeneous entity whose common denominator is the believers' faith in Jesus as Messiah and Saviour. I don't think there is any other common denominator.

It is understandable that heart-searching painful questions present themselves for those who through a long life have fought for an indigenous Israeli Jewish body and now face the reality:

Are we really so few Jewish believers? Are we really so different? Have we really not come further than this in the formation of an indigenous Israeli Jewish body? Have we really had so many internal splits which we ourselves are responsible for? Are we really no better than non-Jewish believers? Have we, when all is said and done, been as ineffective as non-Jewish believers?

Now it is my turn to turn things upside down by asking:

Where do the Scriptures say that Jewish believers in Jesus should be better than non-Jewish believers? Or should be able to do things better? If they have been pressurized to this attitude by well-meaning Christians, they should settle with them. If this is a pressure they have imposed on themselves, they should settle this with themselves. If they have, consciously or unconsciously, believed that the Israeli Jewish believers would be able to handle things better than the Gentiles and also better than the first Jewish believers, I don't think there is any basis in Scripture for this view. Is there?

The conviction of living in the end times - and not only that - the conviction of being in the focal point of the end times and part of the eschatological drama - has possibly put an

unreasonable pressure on parts of the movement and given some people the mistaken expectation that they should represent a golden age with progress, agreement and - Jewishness. The reality contradicts this. So far.

It is not difficult to find examples of Jewish believers who have argued that living in *Eretz Israel* and being part of the national restoration gives them a unique opportunity to develop a genuine expression of Jewish Messianic faith. But the question is if they have really faced the fact that holy ground under your feet does not guarantee anything at all.

Have Jewish believers in Israel been exposed to pressure or have they perhaps put an unreasonable pressure on themselves in an effort to reach impossible goals? I think this is an essential question to reflect on.

I do hope that the movement as such can resist - in Menahem Benhayim's words¹³ - the hunger for sensation and melodramas (p. 14-15).

I also hope that the movement as such will not become so much involved in the eschatological drama of the future that it does not take the present challenges seriously.

I do not want to minimize the importance of working with the question of Jewish identity for Jewish believers in Israel. This work is not just legitimate - it is necessary. But a new situation may require a new priority.

Is it too daring to turn things around and say: The God of Israel has - again - surprised us. We had hoped - now that the Ecclesiastical Colonialism was over - that everything would go smoothly. They don't. But in the 1990s God sent us many Jesus-believing Jews. They have little understanding of the importance of Jewish identity. They are full of zeal, but many are young in the faith. First we need to help them with their faith, and along the road we can return to the question of Jewish identity. For the sake of Jesus.

Some might say these are false alternatives.

I don't know.

Notes:

1. Kjær-Hansen, Kai & Skjøtt, Bodil F.: *Facts & Myths About the Messianic Congregations in Israel*, Jerusalem 1999. The survey was published by the United Christian Council in Israel (UCCI) and Caspari Center in the summer of 1999 as a double issue of *Mishkan* (nr. 30-31/1999). In this article I refer to it as *Facts & Myths*. - The survey has got a lot of attention in Israel and abroad. Reactions from Messianic Jews in Israel have been mixed - ranging from praise and appreciation over a hesitant and uncertain position to downright rejection of the book as an expression of a project which manifests the spirit of the world, the flesh and the devil. On the inpayment form with dues to LCJE 2000 one LCJE member in Israel wrote: ...By the way, perhaps your book should have been entitled *Facts and Fantasies* ! (So many cranks about). And a reviewer in *The Jerusalem Post* (24 December 1999) opens his review with the words: Never have I read such a totally boring book so avidly. It has no plot. Yet it is all about a plot.

In the upcoming issue of *Mishkan*, no. 32, spring 2000, there is an updated discussion of reactions to the survey *Facts & Myth*.

2. In this article I forego a terminological discussion of self-designations. 69 congregations and 12 house groups are surveyed in *Facts and Myths*, and these 81 groups all see themselves - no matter how different they are - as part of the Messianic movement in Israel .

3. Richard C. Nichol: Messianic Jewish Outreach into the 21st Century, in *Kesher*, 2/1995:1-10.

4. In order not to make this discussion too elaborate I leave out, in this article, the Ethiopians with their Amharic-speaking congregations in Israel, even though they see themselves as part of the Messianic movement in Israel.

5. Bodil F. Skjøtt: Messianic Believers and the Land of Israel - a Survey, in *Mishkan* 26/1997:72-81.

6. Loden, Lisa & Walker, Peter & Wood Michael (eds.): *The Bible and the Land: An Encounter*, (Jerusalem: Musalaha, 2000).

7. Maoz, Baruch: The Work of the Gospel in Israel - A Personal View, in *Banner of Truth* 150/1976:24-32.

8. Maoz, Baruch: *The Gospel Scene in Israel*, (Kent: CWI, [1986?]).

9. Sibley, Jim R.: Trends in Jewish Evangelism in Israel, *Mishkan* 10/1989:24-38.

10. Shulam, Joseph: A Brief History of Jewish Evangelism in Israel. Unpublished paper 1989.

11. See Wasserman, Jeffrey S.: Messianic Jewish Congregations. A North American Expression, *Mishkan* 27/1997:26-35.

12. Rosen, Moische: Evangelising the Jews. An Overview, in *LCJE Bulletin* 18/1989:6-9.

13. Benhayim, Menahem: The Messianic Movement in Israel - A Personal Perspective (1963-1998), in *Mishkan* 28/1998:4-34.