

The problems linked to Jewish Evangelism in the Post-Shoah Polish society

By Emanuel Machnicki

There is a lack of systematic reflection from the Polish evangelicals' point of view on Jewish Evangelism as a distinct phenomenon, not to mention the post-Holocaust theology dilemma. Before WWII there were Jewish missions on the Polish soil, some of them conducted by the Hebrew Christians associated with various churches. In the post-Shoah period Jewish Evangelism has been almost non-existent in Poland, with few exceptions. Although the Jewish ministries like ours have operated for more than three decades, the development of the work is still on an early stage. For most of the time it was like an underground activity, often being misunderstood even by our fellow brothers and sisters. The situation improved after the fall of communism and in just recent years the interest in the so called Jewish topics started to grow very rapidly.

Poland occupies an exceptional place in the Jewish historical memory. It is said that because of our common history, the Polish-Jewish relations may either be very good or very bad, but never indifferent. The Jewish people and the Polish people lived side by side here, on Polish soil for almost a thousand years. They were interwoven with each other in all walks of life, and Jewish influence significantly contributed to Polish culture, economy, science and society. Many Jews became sincerest Polish patriots, loving this country to death. Before WWII the Jewish people comprised 10% of the total population of Poland and in the capital city Warsaw, they made up one third of the population. Almost entire community of the Polish Jews perished in the Holocaust leaving only a remnant of survivors. The trauma of the Holocaust and an outbreak of post-war anti-Semitism in the Polish society, cast a deep shadow on the Polish-Jewish common history, as well as our present relations and the Jewish perception of our country. In the Jewish collective memory this is the very place that stands for the hell on earth. For some of them, here is the proof that God cannot exist. Is it possible to preach the Gospel here?

“The field is the world” (Mt.13:38), Jesus once said in a parable. However improbable would it sound, no place on earth has been excluded from sowing the seed of God's truth. So, what kind of field is Poland today for Jewish Evangelism? A mine-field, I would say. You have to be extremely cautious in the land which is the biggest cemetery for the Jewish people, where wounds haven't healed, where pain hasn't eased.

Several factors contribute to the complexity of the evangelistic situation assumed in our subject. First of all, we cannot put aside the context of the Polish-Jewish relations. The first obstacle we come across are the contradicting aspects of Polish and Jewish sensitivities in regard to the past. The chief-editor of the leading opinion-forming Polish newspaper, who is of Jewish background himself, once said that on the Jewish side, there is a mechanism of a rejected love working here, which makes the issue even more delicate and difficult to solve. When a Pole meets a Jew with some Polish experiences, you often feel as if there was an invisible explosive between them, that needs to be defused first. The second obstacle is, on the other hand, the Polish national identity, which is infused with the XIX-century romantic view, claiming that there is a deeper meaning of our national calamities. Supposedly, we suffer for the sake of other nations. We are the “Christ” of the nations. This false messianism, which once helped us survive the loss of independence, today is a source of a destructive megalomania, which prevents us from accepting that somebody else, the Jews for instance,

could suffer more than we did. Therefore many debates end up bidding who suffered more or who is more guilty.

As Evangelical Christians we start from a different point. We believe that only by God's power our hearts can be released from the bounds of false pride and lies. Only His unconditional love and faithfulness to His covenants is the true source of our value and security as human beings. Also, only because we humbled ourselves before God to ask Him for forgiveness of sin and salvation in Christ, are we able by His power to humble ourselves before other people and sincerely ask them for forgiveness, acknowledging our nation's guilt.

Sometimes I wonder if we really are a "post-Shoah society". Historically we are, of course. But not in terms of feeling the gravity or empathy for the Jewish suffering, or feeling the need for and the relevance of the reconciliation. As a nation, we haven't mourned our Jewish co-citizens and neighbours yet. We pray for this spiritual breakthrough for our nation. Therefore, the sincere willingness to confess and to ask for forgiveness must be, and so far has been, an integral part of our testimony to the Jewish people. Without it, it becomes another message of triumphalism and the anti-testimony of the worst kind.

In these circumstances, it is extremely important to know how to engage in the conversation with the Jewish people. How to break the ice. In fact, this moment is crucial for the whole communication process, and this is another obstacle to overcome. As evangelical Christians, we want to express our genuine friendship and love for the Jewish people. However, you can expect that in this case it might be much more difficult than usually. Most probably it will take much time and much effort to build a bridge of trust or even to be able to start a conversation. When we speak about building relationships, and bridges of friendships and mutual understanding, we mean something serious. It cannot and must never be meant just as an evangelistic technique. That would be a hypocrisy. If you are not respectful to the person's dignity, if you treat somebody just as a missionary object, then you are misguided, and the true love of God is not in your heart, nor the humility of the Messiah. Our Jewish interlocutors are very careful to know what the true motives are. Because of the emotional ties, mentioned before, it's not unimportant for the Jewish people to know, how we feel about them.

Although we speak of a tiny remnant of the Jewish people here, the Jews you meet may be of very different backgrounds with completely different life stories behind. They often experience difficulties in defining their own identity. Some of them are atheists, some lost the faith because of the Holocaust, most were not religious, some are Catholics, some just recently discovered they were Jewish and don't know what to do now. We need to be very sensitive to all kinds of their problems. Since the fall of the communism, there has been a progressing revival of the Jewish life and culture in Poland. Many re-discovered the value of Judaism and became zealous neophytes. What would you tell them, and how? It's essential therefore, to know, how to find a common ground with your interlocutor and how to adjust your language to the person's need, without compromising eternal truth. Since every meeting is so unique and unpredictable, the guidance of the Holy Spirit is very advisable.

The second group of the Jewish people you are likely to meet in Poland are the Jewish tourists from all over the world. There is also a growing number of the Israeli organized tourist groups visiting our country. Basically there are two approaches on the Israeli side toward this tourism: one reflects more or less the national policy of the State of Israel, and views Poland as another deterrent from the Diaspora solution. Besides, the so called Holocaust trips serve as incentives for alijah and serve to strengthen the pro-Zionistic attitude in the young Israelis.

Actually, it's been so far the dominant approach. It poses a problem to any efforts to make the outreach. The contact with such tourists or with the Israeli youth on the State-sponsored trips is virtually impossible and viewed with reluctance. However, a newer trend is emerging in a younger generation of the Israeli grass-roots activists, more open for the contacts with the Polish youth on social grounds. This approach is oriented toward building a common future and focusing on more universal problems. It opens a possibility for the Polish evangelical pro-Israeli youths to establish lasting relationships with the Jewish youths.

Here in Poland, the social setting itself poses a challenge for an evangelical believer. It is estimated that 90% of the Polish people belong to the Roman Catholic Church. Polish society within the shifted boundaries of the post-war territory became nationally, socially and religiously homogeneous, the situation which reinforced social aversion to any diversity. Therefore, with the Jews we share some of the similar problems of living as a tiny minority in this monolith. Although rarely persecuted, Evangelical Christians have always been stigmatized by the majority in their local environment. Therefore, an Evangelical who stands up for Israel may risk a double portion of dislike. When you oppose to anti-Semitism, you may risk an accusation that you're Jewish yourself.

Of course, quite large part of the Roman Catholic Church adheres to the Pope's John Paul II teaching regarding to the Jewish people and the new theology of Israel. These circles are called "The Open Church". The Catholics receptive to this position are very eager to learn about the Jewish roots of the Christian faith and are willing to reject the categories of the old replacement theology. They approach the Jewish people in terms of the post-Holocaust Dialog, in accordance with the documents of the Vaticanum Secundum and the subsequent teachings.

For most of the Jewish people however, the Polish Catholics and the legacy of their former attitudes to the Jews, stand for all Christianity. Therefore, in our conversations with the Jewish people, when confessing the guilt of our nation, it is not easy to emphasize at the same time our distinctiveness as Evangelicals. Because the distinctiveness of our evangelical message should not be perceived as an attempt to lessen the guilt of the Christendom.

The conservative part of the Polish society is less receptive to these new developments and is reluctant to more positive view of the Jewish people. Among them the old stereotypes are deeply rooted. In the modern age of electronic communication they are exposed and likely to adopt new forms of anti-Semitism like anti-Zionism or the latest conspiracy theories. In such circumstances, our every gesture of solidarity which the Jewish community here or the state of Israel, is very precious. In times of the growing danger of denial or diminishing the Holocaust, anyone who visits Polish soil, the silent witness of this unspeakable mystery of evil, takes the responsibility to be a spokesman against the lie.

The Polish evangelical community is of our particular concern. As I said before, we are still a fraction of 1% of the population. Nonetheless, we are convinced that it is the local church or fellowship that forms the natural base and provides support for our ministries. The problem is, that among the Polish evangelical Christians the understanding of God's love for Israel has been very minimal for decades. The establishment of the State of Israel in 1948 or the 1967 breakthrough went unnoticed in regard to a personal faith not to mention theology. As I said, just in recent years the interest in the Jewish roots of our faith started to grow very rapidly. This is a chance as well as a challenge for us. Most of the problems of the messianic movement, or the Torah movement, etc. have not emerged yet. However, the lack of proper

teaching already raises here and there fears of Judaizing. Although the gloomy edifice of the replacement theology has been verbally torn down, it left us with the enormous rubble of the old language, categories, interpretations, mental habits, that need to be cleaned up. If we want to go out and be a witness to the Jewish people, we have strive to clean up our own backyard.

We acknowledge that apostle Paul asserts a certain priority (Rom.1:16) for the witness to the Jewish people. We believe that every local church should demonstrate sensitive obedience to the enormous debt we owe the Jewish people by including a generous allocation to the prayer for Israel and to witness to the Jews. After all, “salvation is from the Jews”. Christian love instead of the arrogance, should foster “envy and jealousy” among the Jewish people for what we possess in Christ (Rom.11:11).

We long for the day when they would hear deep in their hearts a tender voice of God Himself speaking quietly but firmly: “I am Joseph, your brother.” We long for the day when Messiah returns and entire people of Israel will know the Lord. We also praise God that in the meanwhile He’s been and is so gracious to raise up the witness, working providentially through the multitude of circumstances to reach His people, and that we can be part of it. Here in Poland, although feeling such a pressure of history, we want to strive to conform our theology to the “whole counsel of God” rather than the intellectual climate of the moment.

Can we afford NOT to show God’s love here in such a place? Is there a better revelation of His love, given to a Jew and non-Jew alike, than the Messiah Yeshua’s atonement, which restores our true identity as God’s children?

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