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The social and political context of Jewish mission in Europe

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In this overview I am going to provide some contemporary demographic, social and political updates related to the Jewish people in Europe while giving corresponding recommendations for Jewish missions.

Halachic Jews

According to some contemporary research¹ the number of Jewish people in Europe who have a Jewish mother and identify themselves as Jews is about 1,500,000. According to the statistics the major Jewish community in Europe is in France, followed by the UK, Russia and Germany. The average age of the Jewish population in Europe is about 50 years. This age is even higher in the countries of the Former Soviet Union and Germany, where it averages approx. 55 years; it is about 45 in some other European countries. Generally, the Jewish population in Europe is declining as we see the number of deaths clearly exceeding the number of births.

Recommendations:

- *Pray and engage in growing outreach to the Jewish people in France*
- *Such countries as UK, Russia, and Germany still have a comparatively significant number of Christians that can be motivated and equipped to reach out to their Jewish friends.*
- *Outreach to elderly Jews is gaining in urgency and priority; this includes the ministry of providing loving care.*

Non-Halachic Jews

The statistics given above exclude all those who are born of mother not considered halachically Jewish or who do not identify themselves as Jews. However, the number of such people of Jewish ancestry is great and is steadily growing in Europe. Intermarriages and assimilation contribute to this tendency. It is estimated that more than half of the European Jewish population is intermarried, with that percentage much higher in the countries of the FSU. It is a very difficult task to even come up with an approximate number. At the same time, while many halachic Jews are trying to assimilate, many of those of Jewish descent are starting to discover and appreciate their relationship to the Jewish people.

Recommendations:

- *Strengthen outreach to intermarried couples and their children.*
- *Adjust Jewish outreach to the needs of those rediscovering their Jewish identity.*

Resident Areas

In European countries Jewish people prefer to live in bigger cities, particularly in the capitals of those countries. The major part of the Jewish population is spread out in different city districts. Only in a few European cities can we find small "Jewish quarters" (e.g. London, Paris, Amsterdam) that are primarily inhabited by Orthodox Jews.

¹ Statistics for this paper are primarily taken from Sergio DellaPergola, *World Jewish Population, 2012* (The Hebrew University of Jerusalem); http://www.jewishdatabank.org/Reports/World_Jewish_Population_2012.pdf

Recommendations:

- *Start and continue to support messianic groups/communities/congregations in cities, especially in those with larger Jewish populations, so that such communities become a visible presence of the gospel in each given city.*
- *Train Christians in cities to reach out to the Jewish people they know.*

Welfare and Migration

The majority of the Jewish people in Europe likely belong to the middle class within society, the exception being the elderly people in the courtiers of the FSU. Jewish immigration to Europe from the countries of the FSU has almost stopped. Although we see a portion of the Jewish people emigrating from Europe to Israel (averaging 8,000 a year for the past few years), particularly from France, Eastern Europe and the UK, many Israelis are moving to Europe (e.g., to Germany and the UK).

Recommendations:

- *Strengthen loving outreach through humanitarian aid for the elderly Jews of the FSU.*
- *Establish outreaches to the Israelis immigrating to Europe.*

Church and Jewish Missions

The general Christian attitude toward the Jewish people in Western Europe is mostly politically correct, friendly and tolerant. However, the general Christian position concerning the conflict in Israel is becoming more and more evidently pro-Palestinian, which in consequence is laying the foundations for a new form of European Christian anti-Semitism. Although the churches in Eastern Europe generally try to follow the patterns of those in Western Europe, many of them are presently still retaining their traditional anti-Semitic attitude, though not becoming as strongly pro-Palestinian as the churches in the West, likely due to continuing strong anti-Islamic feelings and more conservative Christian theology. Anti-Israeli sentiments in the churches lead to anti-Semitism and the decline of a loving attitude toward the Jewish people, in consequence leading to the rejection of healthy Jewish outreach.

Jewish missions, while being considered inappropriate by the European society, are still permissible. The constitutions of the European countries generally support the freedom of belief, implying the freedom to speak about belief. The general Christian attitude toward Jewish missions ranges from opposing it (for the sake of tolerance and peace with the Jewish community) to indifference toward it, though we can see some positive exceptions, particularly in Eastern Europe. We especially see a growing interest on the part of free evangelical churches to the Jewish roots of their faith. This tendency is especially strong in Eastern Europe. Some churches have even started practicing Jewish traditions and celebrating Jewish holidays. Many churches and Christians, especially in Eastern Europe, are passionate about travelling to Israel and fall in love with the Land.

Because European churches today are relatively uninterested in Jewish missions, raising support for this type of ministry is difficult. Missionaries and missions usually need more time to get the necessary funds. This is especially true if a mission organisation is not related to a church denomination that is open to Jewish evangelism and that dedicates some funds for this type of outreach in their budget. As a result, Jewish missions in Europe usually remain small in terms of vocational ministers. Because it is common for many Christians in Europe to minister voluntarily (frequently part-time, sometimes even full-time) in the areas they are passionate about, the best way for ministry to grow is to involve volunteers.

Recommendations:

- *Intercede for the Jewish people and explain the role of the Jewish people and the Land in a biblically based way.*
- *In response to the abovementioned areas of interest, present the Jewish roots of the faith and organise tours to Israel with an emphasis on the role, necessity and methods of Jewish outreach.*
- *Start programs and establish systems for volunteers to be involved in the ministry.*

Jews and Jewish Missions

The rising anti-Semitic and anti-Israeli tendencies and sentiments in Europe over the past few decades have highlighted the Jewish people's isolation and strengthened their "victim-feeling," developed over the course of their entire history. The Jewish people feel very strongly that there is no certainty that what happened in Nazi Germany will not be repeated.

In recent times, unfortunately, the Jews' worst enemy has been their own apathy about their spiritual heritage. In Europe, assimilation - attempts to be like everybody else - is often the reaction to anti-Semitism and the danger of being Jewish within some European contexts. Correspondingly, concerned Jews have intensified the attack on assimilation and the factors contributing to it. In the light of history, a Jewish person simply cannot consider anything as an option that even remotely contributes to the breakdown of Judaism.

Historically, the Jewish assumption was that Christians are the enemies of the Jews. Although this assumption is disappearing in the European aim for tolerance and peaceful coexistence and we can see growing interest to the Jewish Jesus among some Jewish scholars, the best common Jewish attitude toward Jesus is that Jesus can be good for Gentiles but not for the Jewish people.

Most of the Jewish people in Western Europe are positive about liberalism and democracy on the societal level. They see it as granting them equal rights and a place within society. Nevertheless, while enjoying positive political outcomes and acknowledging biblical values such as equality and freedom, most conservative Jewish religious leaders recognise the incompatibility of the democratic political system with the Bible. Due to the same reasons that come into play in connection with liberalism and democracy - namely, the longing for an equal and free place within society - socialism (together with its "higher" form, communism) has been also attractive to the Jewish people, promising economically segregated Jews access to the fruits of common labour. Many of the Jewish people in Eastern Europe (particularly so-called "Russian Jews") have experienced and grown up in the totalitarian political system of the Soviet Union and other countries of the "Soviet Bloc." Most did not like the system and suffered from the anti-Semitism that was an essential component of the system's ideology and practice. At the same time, this worldview has been deeply embedded within them from childhood, and they can, with some exceptions, hardly think differently. Among the Russian Jews, this is also underscored in the "Russian" tendency of longing for a "good Czar." This subsection of the Jewish people is hence more open to a theocratic societal model.

Recommendations:

- *Emphasize the important role of the Jewish people in the divine plan of the salvation of the world.*
- *Jewish mission should address the survival of the Jewish people.*
- *Elevate Jesus as the Jewish Messiah and the "King of the Jews."*
- *Elevate the Messiah as the good and just Ruler in a community of equal rights and justice.*