

## THE VISION VACUUM

Jewish Evangelism from a Denominational Base  
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Shoresh is a ministry with Anglican roots

### RITA AND STANLEY

I'd like to introduce you to two people whose stories are never far from my thoughts. Both Rita and Stanley, and their quests for the truth about Jesus the Messiah, challenge the Church to prepare gentile believers for life-changing conversations with Jewish friends.

God captured my heart for Jewish ministry when I toured Israel for the first time and learned of the ongoing work at Christ Church in Jerusalem. Theresa Newell, then Director of CMJ/USA, prayed me onto that trip, and upon our return we joined a Modern Hebrew class together at the local Jewish Community Center. Our instructor was an Israeli woman named Rita. I don't remember much about the first class except that Rita was talking with someone as I left, so I deposited my payment on the desk and figured I'd meet her next time. Anyway, I was hungry and anxious for a lunch stop on the way home. Instead, as I drove away God challenged me to spend the day fasting and praying for Rita. I struggled a bit over that (I had mentally decided upon my lunch menu!) but when the time came, I reluctantly drove past the drive-thru at McDonald's and began an afternoon of interceding for her. Interspersed with intercession were bouts of hungry confusion over whether I had genuinely heard God. At about 5:30 PM the phone rang. A woman with a heavy Israeli accent introduced herself as Rita, my new Hebrew teacher. "I hope you don't mind that I have called you at home," she said, "but I see by the check you left that your husband is a minister." She hesitated. "I wonder if you would mind if I asked you a few questions about Jesus?"

Stanley is a Jewish man, a leader in the Jewish community in his city, who, when his gentile wife died, found himself in the office of the rector of the Episcopal church she attended. The rector, a veteran of many Shoresh trips and a man with a zeal for Jewish evangelism, struggled with Stanley to find a way to plan a funeral which honored his wife's vibrant faith in Jesus while also honoring Stanley's Jewish heritage and convictions. After the funeral Stanley visited again. "There's a great deal I don't understand", he said, "but as Christians go, the people in this church seem to be the real thing. I've never experienced anything like the love I've seen here. I want to join you. How do I do it?"

These stories form the backdrop of my comments because they demonstrate the need for the gentile Church to be seriously equipped for evangelistic conversations with Jewish people. It is not enough for those of us in Jewish evangelism to see the Church as a place to mine for contacts with Jewish friends of gentile Christians, although that has an

important place. It is not enough for us to see the gentile Church as source of financial support, although their support is critical. As the Lord awakens in His Jewish people a hunger for relationship with Himself, the gentile Church will increasingly be called upon to have evangelistic conversations themselves with the Jewish people in their lives. Preparing the Church for those conversations is part of our call as a denominational ministry of Jewish evangelism.

### **MAKING THE GOSPEL CASE**

While Shores is now interdenominational, it began in this country as an Episcopal ministry. In this regard we have perhaps had a harder road to hoe than other denominational ministries because of the pervasive theological liberalism in our national leadership. The concept of evangelism itself is often seen to be offensive. Many want it to be redefined to mean only one's personal witness to one's personal, but non-normative, experience. Others brand evangelism as arrogant triumphalism. Moreover, Jewish evangelism is generally thought to be unconscionable. Jewish evangelism is seen as an offense in light of the Holocaust. If one accepts the pervasive lie that it is impossible to believe in Jesus and remain Jewish, then both Hitler and Jewish evangelists can be seen as eradicating Jews. The denominational leadership also frequently fears that Jewish evangelism will threaten years of careful effort toward interfaith dialogue with the Jewish community.

When news of the Shores ministry in Pittsburgh became known, I received stacks of angry letters. While some were from the Jewish community, most were from churches in my denomination! I found that, once again, as has so often been the case in our history, our emphasis on Jewish evangelism drew us into discussion with church leaders about the uniqueness of Jesus and the exclusiveness of His claims. While God has clearly called us to testify to him in these situations, converting liberal church leadership is not our call. Rather we see that the Messiah of Israel has reunion with His people on His heart. Like Joseph who saved the whole gentile world of his day and then enlisted their help in staging a reunion with his Jewish brothers, Jesus has a role for His Church in the reunion His Word promises is coming.

Part of our call as a denominationally based ministry is to be a prophetic voice in the gentile Church a voice which calls the Church back to the Romans 1 priority of taking the Gospel 'to the Jew first'. Charles Simeon, a British Evangelical leader at the time of CMJ's establishment, was once waxing eloquent at a missions meeting, talking about the need of the 6 million Jews of the world to hear the Gospel, when someone pointed out that there were 600 million non-Jews in equal need. Simeon is reported to have replied, "What if the 6 million are, in God's strategy, the KEY to reaching the 600 million? What then?"

### **EQUIPPING THE SAINTS**

If one assumes that among those who believe they are called to share their faith with others, a somewhat smaller percentage of people will be ready to share it with Jewish people, the task of equipping the Church for Jewish evangelism is daunting. Can you guess what percentage of Baptists in the pew say that they have ever shared their faith with another person so as to call for a decision? The answer is only 4%. In all other

Protestant denominations, the statistic drops to 2%. To make matters worse for us, the average Episcopalian asks a friend to church once in every 27 years!

At the same time we are told that something like 85% of Jewish believers in Jesus were brought to faith through the witness of a gentile friend or family member. This says to us in Shoresh that our job is to equip the saints for the unique opportunity and calling that is theirs in this age. It doesn't mean that we are confusing teaching in the Church with direct Jewish evangelism. Rather it takes seriously that the Church must be taught to have an answer for Rita and Stanley because Rita and Stanley are turning to them. Unlike far-flung unreached people groups who have never heard the Gospel, the Jewish people are an unreached people group within reach of the life of the gentile Church. Gentiles in the Church need training for the cross-cultural ministry in their midst. While looking to the gentile Church for resources and referrals to Jewish friends may be useful, it represents a poverty of vision if it is all we do.

Several years ago, the Shoresh staff and board of directors responded to what we felt was God's call to us to see what He was doing and to 'bless' or 'get on board with' it. We observed that those who participated in our Jerusalem based study tours came home on fire with enthusiasm for supporting the work and sharing the Gospel with the Jewish people. They had been taught by Jewish believers in Israel and had heard the testimonies of Jewish people from around the world who had responded to the love of Jesus. Our 'alumni' often became actively engaged in Jewish evangelism and sought our support in their own witness. While it opened us to misunderstanding about being 'just' a Christian tour ministry, we began to see that each group which returned home from such a study trip represented an open door to us to equip the saints for Jewish evangelism in their own part of the world.

As we have experimented with the training of these ready-made enthusiastic groups, we have found that the material available falls into one of two categories. Either it is very practical but has no helpful Jewish background information, or it provides good training in Jewish thought and perspectives but is weak in giving practical tools for witness. As a result we are working in cooperation with several other ministries to create a weekend training seminar which will open the door to a deeper understanding of the Jewish world while providing some very concrete evangelism training. Our target for completion of these materials is the end of 2000.

As well, we regularly take groups of leaders to Israel and make an effort always to include strategic leaders from parts of the world where there are large Jewish communities. Our inclusion of a South American leader on a Shoresh tour resulted in an invitation to train the church in his home city in Jewish evangelism. That has resulted in one woman coming to know the Lord and many others hearing about Him in the five months since our time there. Now more leaders in that city have joined us in Israel study and the Church there is embracing a new vision for direct evangelism. Our inclusion of African leaders has led to the training of a Ugandan woman with a clear call to Jewish evangelism. In all our teaching and training we are working closely with the Shoresh office in Jerusalem, which now can offer courses for seminary credit through Trinity

Episcopal School for Ministry.

### **REFUSING TO POLITICIZE THE GREAT COMMISSION**

Perhaps the Anglican/Episcopal Church differs from most represented here in that most of its leadership, policy, and in many ways its history, is politically outspoken and is pro-Palestinian. Because Shoresh offers teaching in Israel on the Jewish background and context of the gospels of Jesus, it is frequently assumed to be Zionist politically. We find in that in Anglican/Episcopal circles frequently church tour groups tend to visit Palestinian refugee camps and to experience a highly politicized teaching and touring program. Such travelers rarely hear of Messianic believers or of the Messianic movement in Israel. In contrast, we make scrupulous efforts to avoid the politicizing of the biblical teaching program we offer at Shoresh. We talk solely about the 1st century Hebrew roots and context of the life and teaching of Jesus. We ask what the Hebrew 'lens' allows us to see in the scriptures that the Western 'lens' obscures. We introduce Shoresh participants to those who are working to see reconciliation between Jewish and Arab peoples.

We are finding, however, that there are those in the Anglican world who would dismiss Jewish evangelism and Jewish roots study of the New Testament as little more than Zionist sentimentalism and right-wing politics. As a result of our denominational position, we are engaged in a dialogue with international church leadership that exhorts them to refuse to politicize the Great Commission mandate and to wrestle with the claims of the scriptures that God has a continuing purpose for the Jews. While this is sometimes both painful and time-consuming, we see it as a strategically important argument to make in the Anglican Communion.

At the international meeting of LCJE in New York this past summer, many speakers reflected on the next millennium and referred to the strategic importance of the gentile Church in the continuing task of Jewish evangelism. One speaker spoke of the gentile Church as ready to be "utilized". I believe our challenge and our niche as denominationally based ministries is to see that the gentile church is trained so that it can be of use to the Lord Jesus (and to other ministries) to encourage the reunion with His people for which we know His heart longs.