

# An Unusual Relationship

*Evangelical Christians and Jews*

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## Evangelical Jews

### *The Rise of Messianic Judaism*

In the 1970s and 1980s, both Jews and Christians were surprised to see the rise of a large and vigorous movement of Christian evangelical Jews. Considering the two faiths to be completely separated from each other, many observers considered such an amalgam bizarre, like a cup of “half coffee and half tea.” Attempting to overcome the historical differences between the two religious traditions, these Jewish converts to Christianity often defined themselves as Messianic Jews instead of using the Hellenistic term *Christian*. The new name highlighted the messianic element in Christianity and pointed to the movement’s ideology of emphasizing the Jewish roots of the Christian faith. Since the early centuries of the Common Era, the understanding of most Christians and Jews had been that Christianity separated itself from Judaism, claiming to have inherited its place. Some Jewish converts to Christianity in the modern era had envisioned an amalgam of the two faiths, and the late modern era witnessed a number of attempts to create congregations of Hebrew Christians. However, this time the movement was larger and more assertive in its Jewish-Christian ideology. And while at first both Jews and Christians saw such groups as a symptom of “crazy times,” many, especially evangelical Christians, have come to accept the new movement and even support it.

Since the 1970s, this movement of Jewish believers in Jesus has grown considerably. Its development sheds much light on the changing relationship between evangelical Christians and Jews.

## Historical Background

The roots of the new movement can be traced to pietist and evangelical attempts, in the modern era, to promote the idea that Jews who had embraced the Christian faith could maintain elements of their Jewish identity. Pietist and evangelical missions to the Jews created an ideology that, at first mostly in theory, made being Jewish and Christian at the same time possible. Evangelical missions promoted Jewish symbols, such as the Star of David and the menorah, and claimed that accepting the Christian faith did not contradict retaining a Jewish identity but rather completed it. This innovative position involved abandoning the traditional Christian claims that the church had inherited God's promises to Israel. Motivated by a premillennialist view that considered the Jews to be the chosen people and heir to the covenant between God and Israel, evangelicals began a journey of altering their attitudes toward Jewish customs and symbols.

Premillennialism would become a central element of the theology of Jewish evangelical groups, serving as a source of commitment for bringing Jews to accept Jesus as their savior, as well as offering an ideology that justified maintaining Jewish identity, customs, and symbols. Following in the evangelicals' footsteps, first Hebrew Christians and later Messianic Jews embraced the definition of Christians as people who had undergone experiences of conversion, or being born again, and had accepted Jesus as their personal savior. Likewise, Messianic Jews adopted evangelical ways of reading the Bible and evangelical codes of personal morality on matters of family and sexuality.

There were a number of attempts in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries to create Hebrew Christian "brotherhoods," or "houses," designed to serve as centers for Jews who had converted to pietist or evangelical Christianity. Such experiments were mostly short-lived.<sup>1</sup> Jews who converted to Christianity did not see a need to remain in such centers and for the most part moved on, searching for their place in Protestant society. Jewish converts established associations in Britain in 1860 and in America in 1915, but most members of these Hebrew Christian

organizations were active missionaries or ministers in various Protestant churches, and their willingness to create separate Jewish Christian congregations was limited.<sup>2</sup> In the late nineteenth century Joseph Rabinowitz, a Zionist activist who converted to Christianity, established a congregation of Christian Jews in Kishinev, Russia. The dispensationalist-oriented Mildmay Mission to the Jews sponsored this experiment.<sup>3</sup> Evangelical leaders were impressed by Rabinowitz's work, and in 1893 Dwight Moody, the prominent American evangelist, invited Rabinowitz to America to evangelize at the World Columbian Exposition.

In the early 1890s, the Hope of Israel mission established a congregation of Jewish converts to Christianity in the Lower East Side of New York. The mission's directors, Arno Gaebelein and Ernest Stroeter, advocated the then unusual idea that Jews who had accepted Christianity had the right to remain observant and to follow Jewish customs and rites.<sup>4</sup> Like other attempts at building Jewish congregations in the nineteenth century, this unique experiment was short-lived. The converts themselves wished to leave the Lower East Side and move to Protestant middle-class neighborhoods. As a whole, at that time, the evangelical community did not see a particular merit in encouraging the establishment of Jewish-Christian communities. For Christians, "Judaizing" had traditionally been considered heresy, and many still expressed suspicion at the idea of separate Jewish congregations. Converts were reluctant to congregate with other fellow Jews, since they did not feel that the Protestant environment approved of separate communities of Jewish Christians.<sup>5</sup>

Attitudes changed slowly, with some missionaries, in the early decades of the twentieth century, initiating the establishment of Jewish Christian congregations. The directors of the Department of Jewish Evangelization of the Presbyterian Church U.S.A. considered it more economical to create independent Jewish congregations that would serve as centers of evangelization. They also believed that many converts would feel more at home in communities of their own, where being ethnically Jewish and acting Jewish was normative, but at the same time they envisioned a socially and culturally Jewish version of Presbyterian churches. Some of those congregations made timid attempts at creating a unique Jewish

Christian liturgy, but for the most part they followed the Protestant Presbyterian hymnology. The novelty of the Messianic Jewish movement in the 1970s and its Jewish Christian ideology was that a set of notions and aspirations that had previously been expressed only sporadically, partially, and hesitantly found a stronger and more assertive voice.

### Messianic Judaism, the Early Years

Messianic Judaism represented a new generation that possessed unprecedented freedoms of choice and experimentation, including the amalgamation of traditions that previous generations had considered alien and hostile to each other. Before the 1970s, the evangelical missionary claim that Jews could be true to their Jewishness while adopting the Christian faith did not hold much water with potential Jewish converts. In Jewish and Christian minds alike, Jews were Jews, and Christians were Christians. But for the generation that came of age in the 1960s and 1970s, things were often different. They felt that they could make their own choices and did not have to abide by old taboos, which they believed they could transcend. The new movement attempted to turn conversion to Christianity into an exciting option, offering a new, young version of Christianity that rejected traditional views of Judaism as an alien faith. Messianic Jews were well aware of older attitudes and reacted by developing a sense of historical mission—a sense that they were crossing historical boundaries. They believed that they were working to heal wounds and bring together the truth and beauty of both Christianity and Judaism: faith in Yeshua with the belief in the special role of Israel in history.

In the early 1970s, the term *Messianic Judaism* came into public use, designating groups or individuals who viewed themselves as fully Christian and fully Jewish and were confident about their right to express both identities. The term, however, was not entirely new, having been used in internal debates in the community of Jewish converts to evangelical Christianity as early as the beginning of the twentieth century. At that time, it referred to a minority of converts who wanted to retain elements of the Jewish tradition and law.<sup>6</sup> When the term was revived

in Israel in the 1940s and 1950s, its meaning changed and it came to designate all Jews who had accepted Christianity in its evangelical form. The word *Meshichyim* (messianic) linked the movement to the Jewish tradition and overcame the sense of alienness that the word *Notzrim* (Christian) would have provoked.<sup>7</sup> Adopted in America in the early 1970s, the term *Messianic Judaism* began to be used in other parts of the globe. At the turn of the twenty-first century many Jewish Christians have begun using the term *Jewish believers in Jesus* to designate all Jews who have adopted Christianity but still maintain a Jewish identity. In the first phase of the movement, during the early and mid-1970s, Jewish converts to Christianity established on their own initiative congregations that were largely independent of the control of missionary societies or Christian denominations. However, most congregations of Messianic Jews that have appeared since the late 1970s were established with the assistance of missionary societies, who had come to appreciate the success of such communities in promoting conversions of Jews to Christianity. Yet the independence of the early congregations shaped much of the image and self-perception of the movement.<sup>8</sup>

Messianic Judaism was greatly influenced by the atmosphere that developed in America in the late 1960s and early 1970s. A number of evangelists attuned to cultural trends established missions or ministries intended for members of the counterculture. Some ventures, such as Chuck Smith's Calvary Chapel, have left an enduring mark on the mainstream of evangelical charismatic Christianity in America and elsewhere. By the early 1970s, the evangelical community was ready for new groups to appear on the scene and promote new styles of worship and communal engagement, provided that they followed evangelical theology and morality. Jewish converts too had changed, and their sense of what it meant to be Jewish had been transformed. Among other things, the Six-Day War in June 1967 had strongly affected Jewish self-perceptions. The war raised the converts' status within the larger evangelical milieu and boosted their pride in their Jewish heritage and their desire to maintain Jewish identity. Jewish evangelical writers such as Louis Goldberg published articles and books in which they interpreted the

war, conveying a sense of devotion and attachment to Israel and Jewish heritage.<sup>9</sup> The same years also saw dramatic changes in the way Americans related to ethnic cultural heritages. Like African Americans and Native Americans, Jews were taking a renewed interest in their “roots” and were emphasizing their unique cultural attributes. Whereas previously the trend for Jews was to eradicate tribal features, the trend in those years reversed.<sup>10</sup> For Jews, as for others, the resurgence of ethnicity was not merely nostalgia; rather, it involved incorporating their perceptions of their collective past and heritage into their current identities. In such an atmosphere, the prospect of Jews joining Anglo-Saxon, “Gentile” Christian congregations and disappearing into that milieu seemed less attractive. At this time, the encounters of Jewish converts with the evangelical community reinforced notions of ethnic pride, since evangelicals were taking a renewed interest in the Jews and their culture.

### Early Congregations

Although it advocated an independent movement of Jewish converts, Messianic Judaism remained an offspring of the evangelical community, striving for recognition within the larger evangelical culture. The ideology, rhetoric, and symbols that evangelicals had promoted for generations provided the background for the rise of the new movement, and within a few years most evangelical activists came to accept the movement as a legitimate part of evangelical Christianity.

From the perspective of the members of the new evangelical Jewish groups, their movement had broken away from older forms of Jewish expressions within evangelical Christianity. But in effect there was a direct link between the older forms of Jewish involvement with evangelicals and the new Messianic Jewish expressions. Beth Messiah in Cincinnati is a case in point. Its founder and first leader, Martin Chernoff, began as a missionary on behalf of the American Association for Jewish Evangelism, a conservative evangelical missionary group with an overt premillennialist theology. A convert to Christianity, Martin Chernoff settled in Cincinnati with his family in the late 1950s after working as



a missionary in Atlanta. In the late 1960s and early 1970s, many Jewish students at the University of Cincinnati responded to Chernoff's evangelism and came to believe in Jesus as the Messiah. This dynamic group of educated young people produced, in later years, a number of the leaders of the Messianic Jewish movement in America. The Cincinnati congregation chose to become independent from missionary control, acquiring a more assertively Jewish character and, in contrast to the American Association for Jewish Evangelism and other major missions to the Jews during the period, became charismatic. It incorporated enthusiastic modes of prayer that included music and dancing and the raising and clapping of hands during services. Like other congregations of its kind, the new community struggled from the 1970s onward to find a path that would give expression to its Christian beliefs, its charismatic style, and its Jewish roots. The move toward the incorporation of Jewish elements was gradual, as would be the case in other Messianic Jewish congregations, and was not without internal debates and struggles. The congregation eventually chose to conduct its weekly prayer meetings on Friday nights, asked its male members and guests to wear yarmulkes during the services, and asked women to perform the ceremony of lighting Shabbat candles. It also installed an ark in the prayer hall.

The community also manifested its affiliation with the charismatic movement. In the 1990s, for example, the congregation adopted a practice known as the Toronto Blessing or "being slain in the Spirit," a devotional event in which, inspired by the Holy Spirit, members fall to the floor. Members of the community have kept in touch with other charismatic congregations around the world. On traveling, for example, to Israel, they visit and pray at charismatic Messianic congregations rather than at noncharismatic ones. Messianic congregations serve as centers of evangelism. Members invite friends to attend services, and curious observers and seekers also come by. Almost all sermons are evangelistic in nature, promoting the Christian evangelical creed and striving to inspire the visitors in the audience to convert. Such messages emphasize the necessity of accepting Jesus as a savior, the need of Jews, like all other people, to be born again in Christ, and the view that Jews become better Jews when

they accept Jesus. Messianic leaders consider their achievements in evangelism to surpass those of missions to the Jews when the manpower and resources spent are compared, and they regard their enterprises to be beneficial for the propagation of the Gospel among the Jews.<sup>11</sup>

### Christian and Jewish Reactions

The evangelical community, whose theology and message helped bring about the rise of Messianic Jewish congregations, at first reacted with suspicion to the new movement. In the eyes of a number of missionaries, for example, Messianic Judaism, at least potentially, represented misguided forms of Jewish Christian expressions that could compromise the status and achievements of the historical evangelical interaction with the Jews. They were concerned about a new movement of congregations outside the auspices of established missions or denominational bodies. The missions were dependent on the support and trust of the larger evangelical community, and some missionaries and older Hebrew Christians feared that the new movement of Messianic Jews was going beyond the accepted theology and customs that the evangelical community was willing to tolerate.<sup>12</sup>

However, many Messianic Jews would have concurred with the ideas voiced by some of their critics. They did not try to join the synagogue but rather attempted to become a new subdivision within evangelical Christianity with its own characteristics and set of congregations. They certainly did not wish to go beyond the accepted theological and moral norms of the evangelical world. Although the Fellowship of Christian Testimonies to the Jews, as an association of missionaries, was suspicious toward the Messianic Jewish movement, its members invited Larry Rice, the general secretary of the Messianic Jewish Alliance, to present a defense of Messianic Judaism. This sign of openness in the midst of suspicion proved significant. The missionary movement began coming to terms with Messianic Judaism and its methods, adjusting itself to the new changes. Attempting to advance the cause of evangelism among Jews, missions tried to make the most out of the Messianic program. By

the 1980s, groups such as the American Board of Missions to the Jews began sponsoring Messianic congregations.

The change in the missions' attitude had to do with the realization that the evangelical community at large was actually open to the new movement's style and methods. There was a certain amount of uncertainty in evangelical circles during the early and mid-1970s concerning Messianic congregations. It was a new development, and many in the evangelical community were uninformed as to its exact nature and purpose. Major evangelical publications such as *Christianity Today*, *Missiology*, and *Moody Monthly* published articles to inform their readers and let spokesmen of Messianic Judaism present their case.<sup>13</sup> As such accommodations indicate, there was no rejection or censorship of the movement. The evangelical community was willing to listen and to be persuaded. One article by *Christianity Today* focusing on a Jewish family of converts was entitled "More Jewish Than Ever—We've Found the Messiah."<sup>14</sup> Louis Goldberg, director of the Department of Jewish Studies at the Moody Bible Institute, published a more theological essay in the same magazine entitled "The Messianic Jew."<sup>15</sup> Goldberg claimed that Messianic Jews were part of the church—the body of the true believers—but that they were not merely Christians who happened to be of Jewish origin. As Jews, they had a special role in serving as witnesses to their brethren. So the call to the evangelical community to accept Messianic Jews as a legitimate group included the idea that they should serve effectively as evangelists to other Jews. Nonconverted Jews, regular Christians, and Jewish believers in Jesus each had different roles in history, the Moody professor asserted.

Goldberg's openness to Messianic Judaism made the program he directed at the Moody Bible Institute attractive to the new generation of converts. A number of Messianic Jews became interested in the kind of education the program offered. Similarly, the new, dynamic missionary organization Jews for Jesus built a working relationship with the department, and students in the program did fieldwork in Jews for Jesus. Since the 1980s, graduates of the program have pursued careers not only as missionaries but also as leaders and pastors of Messianic congregations

and institutions. In the 1990s, Michael Rydelnik became director of the program, while Goldberg, who retired, joined the ranks of Jews for Jesus. Neither the professors nor the Messianic Jews who studied at the Moody Bible Institute were “traditionalists” who wore yarmulkes or kept the Jewish dietary laws.

Another open defender of Messianic Judaism was James Hutchens, who wrote a doctoral dissertation at the evangelical institution Fuller Theological Seminary, “A Case for Messianic Judaism.” Hutchens, who converted to Judaism while holding to his belief in the messiahship of Jesus, advocated Messianic Judaism as a means for Jews to accept the Christian faith while retaining the cultural components of their Jewish heritage. Beyond “the core faith,” the cultural trappings were variable, he contended, and were matters of choice.<sup>16</sup> Other evangelical institutions of higher learning, such as Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, Moody Bible Institute, and Dallas Theological Seminary, also opened their doors to Messianic Jews. Being admitted to such schools signaled acceptance by the core evangelical community. The *Moody Monthly*, the bulletin of the Moody Bible Institute, published, in 1972, an article entitled “A Breakthrough for Messianic Judaism?,” presenting the movement positively and noting its potential for converting large numbers of Jews. “The ministry of sharing Jesus with Jewish people is a much more rewarding enterprise than it was a decade or so ago,” the journal noted.<sup>17</sup> The growing positive response of members of the evangelical camp toward Messianic Judaism is best illustrated by a book published in the early 1980s by an evangelical scholar, David Rausch. Rausch traveled throughout the fledgling congregations of the late 1970s and early 1980s and wrote about what he encountered with much sympathy.<sup>18</sup> He set out to defend Messianic Judaism in the pages of the more liberal *Christian Century*. “The fact that Judaism and Christianity are not incompatible has, it seems, been a well-guarded secret,” he approvingly quoted a Messianic leader.<sup>19</sup>

Liberal Protestants looked at times less favorably upon the new movement. The years in which Messianic Judaism made its debut were the heyday of Jewish-Christian dialogue. A number of Protestant denominations as well as interdenominational bodies had come out with

declarations absolving the Jews from the deicide charge and asserting the legitimacy and validity of the existence of Judaism alongside Christianity.<sup>20</sup> Most significantly, liberal Christian groups closed down their missions to the Jews. From the liberal point of view, there was no need for Jews to turn to Christianity, certainly not to conservative evangelicalism, a form of Christianity many liberals cared little for anyhow.<sup>21</sup> The liberals were interested in speaking with “real” Jews and learning from a “sister religion,” not from Messianic Judaism, which they did not consider to be a valid form of the religion they were now looking at in a new light. Many liberal Christians now joined the Jews in viewing the evangelizing of Jews as a sign of disrespect toward Judaism. Moreover, dialogue between Christians and Jews was based on what was then a common perception: that Christianity and Judaism were entirely separate from each other and in need of reconciliation. Messianic Judaism posed an alternative path of reconciliation based on blurring the differences between the two faiths. Most Jews and Christians at the time did not view this option as viable, and some, including those committed to dialogue, resented it.

Evangelicals were not bothered by liberal Christian or Jewish objections. Missionary societies, such as the Chosen People Ministries, Jews for Jesus, Ariel Ministries, and denominational missionary bodies such as the Assemblies of God, the Christian and Missionary Alliance, the Southern Baptist Convention, and rather out of line and controversially, the Presbyterian Church U.S.A., decided to establish and support congregations of Messianic Jews.<sup>22</sup> The American Board of Missions to the Jews, which at first was very skeptical, became a major sponsor of Messianic congregations. This became the major means through which the veteran mission now attempted to propagate Christianity among the Jews.<sup>23</sup>

While the American Board embraced the idea of Messianic congregations and turned them into its means of evangelism, it influenced their character, and as a result they have become more reminiscent of the Hebrew Christian congregations of the 1930s through the 1960s. As a rule, prayers have not followed traditional Jewish customs, arks have not been placed in assembly halls, and services have not included chanting

from the Torah. For the most part members have not worn yarmulkes or *talitot* (prayer shawls). In describing the first congregation in northern Chicago, its first pastor, John Bell, spoke about “planting the Jewish oriented Church.” Another missionary of the American Board wrote: “If we can share the Gospel with a Jewish accent, we can have a local congregation with a Jewish flavor that is reaching out to Jews and Gentiles.”<sup>24</sup> Missionary organizations, however, appropriated the Messianic Jewish terminology. Perhaps not surprisingly, the American Board of Missions to the Jews decided in the 1980s to change its name to the Chosen People Ministries. The name demonstrated a wish not to be identified with “missions” and instead to emphasize a premillennialist understanding of the Jewish people and its role in history. In a manner typical to ethnic evangelical communities, a number of Messianic congregations share buildings with other congregations, signifying affinity in faith and agenda. As remarkable as the rise of Messianic Judaism has been, it has not been the only group to amalgamate ethnic practices with evangelical faith and values. It was not a coincidence that when the evangelical group the Promise Keepers launched a major rally in Washington, D.C., in 1997, two groups of born-again Christians who participated in the rally were particularly visible. Messianic Jews came to the gathering wearing *talitot*, prayer shawls, and holding *shofarot*, ram’s horns, and Native Americans came dressed in their traditional attire and decorated with American Indian symbols. Both groups signified the inclusiveness of the rally, which gave space to all sorts of conservative evangelicals at the same time that it demonstrated a common set of values. It also signified the acceptance of evangelical Native American and Jewish as well as other ethnic groups by the larger community of born-again.<sup>25</sup>

The new movement challenged traditional Jewish understanding of the legitimate boundaries of Judaism as a religion and as a community. Many Jews also shared, from the 1960s onward, prevailing liberal images of evangelicals as opponents of cultural openness and progressive values.<sup>26</sup> However, the Jewish community’s reaction to the new and innovative movement of converted Jews was not always unified or consistent. Significantly, Jewish activists and writers often viewed missionaries and

converts within the larger framework of “cults” or “bizarre” new religious groups who were out there to captivate innocent souls.<sup>27</sup> Scholars have pointed to common themes that appear in anticult literature, including the claims that the new groups are deceptive and that they intentionally lie about their true activities. This theme has appeared in the Jewish literature on Messianic Jews.<sup>28</sup> Many Jews have not taken seriously the Messianic Jewish assertion that one can embrace Christianity and remain Jewish and have considered the groups to be either fraudulent or “crazy.” Giving expression to what was a common Jewish perception, Rabbi Ronald Gittelsohn wrote in an article in *Midstream*: “Jews for Jesus is only one of several aberrant religious or pseudoreligious cults flourishing today on the American scene.”<sup>29</sup> Gittelsohn’s relating to Messianic Judaism as “Jews for Jesus” is not unique. To this day, many Jews and non-Jews confuse the two movements and are often unaware that Jews for Jesus is a specific organization that in fact has had a complicated relationship with the Messianic Jewish movement as a whole. Gittelsohn also saw a need to offer a psychological explanation for the attraction of young Jews to these groups: “What a blessed and wonderful relief to throw all this heart-breaking, backbreaking, brain breaking worry onto a gentle Messiah who will solve everything? Jesus or Krishna, or Sun Myung Moon—represents to them the kind, loving daddy they knew, or for whom they desperately yearned as children, the daddy who would answer all their doubts, assuage all their hurts.”<sup>30</sup> Jewish anticult literature often directed its criticism as much against mainstream Jews as against Christian groups. Jewish writers accused Jewish parents of failing to raise their children in committed Jewish homes, criticized the Jewish community for its inadequacy in making Judaism attractive to the younger generation, and criticized Jewish education for failing to transfer Jewish knowledge and spirituality to the next generation. Many of the writers also criticized Jewish congregations for a lack of spirituality, warmth, and a sense of community.

The visibility and relative success of the new Jewish Christian groups stirred Jewish activists to establish new venues of education and emphasize the spiritual dimensions of Jewish life. This approach is reminiscent

of the Jewish reaction to Christian missionaries in the nineteenth century and the first half of the twentieth century, when Jewish activists saw a need to offer welfare services to counter missionary activities. Jewish outreach, both Orthodox and liberal, developed mostly in the last third of the twentieth century. Among other goals it has aimed at offering spiritual and communal Jewish alternatives to the non-Jewish religious groups that Jews began joining by the tens of thousands. Here too, Jewish outreach activists have not differentiated between Messianic Jewish groups and other new religious movements. Much of the outreach motivation has come from the realization that Judaism is now competing in an increasingly open market of religions and that if Jews wish to maintain their constituency they must enter the competition.<sup>31</sup>

Jewish activists have also founded specific organizations aimed at combating missionaries, Messianic Judaism, and new religious movements in general. These include Jews for Jews, its name unmistakably inspired by that of Jews for Jesus. Disbanding after a few years, it was replaced by a new organization, Jews for Judaism.<sup>32</sup> The group has sponsored lectures on university campuses, published antimissionary literature, and organized demonstrations at Messianic Jewish gatherings. In Israel, the ultra-Orthodox organization Yad L'Achim (A Hand for the Brethren) has made a name for itself in combating missionaries and congregations of Jewish believers in Jesus.<sup>33</sup> The antimissionary groups, however, have been, as a rule, small in size, budgets, imagination, and scope of activities. Their often short-lived histories have indicated their standing in the list of priorities of the Jewish community. American Jews have given large sums of money to such causes as the arts, higher education, and social projects, but they have not shown the same generosity toward combating missionaries or Messianic Judaism and have not considered the fight against them to be an important cause. Unlike the Anti-Defamation League, such organizations have not become household names in the Jewish community, and many Jews have not even known they existed.

On rare occasions Jews have turned to violence against Messianic Jews. Such behavior has been mostly the initiative of individuals or small



groups. In February 1980, two young men entered a Messianic Jewish congregation, Ahvat Zion (Love of Zion), in Encino, Los Angeles, and removed a Torah scroll from the Ark of the Covenant. The men claimed that the use of the scroll by a Christian congregation desecrated the Jewish scriptures. However, for members of the congregation, as well as the police and the general public, it was an intrusion and a theft. According to newspaper reports, the Messianic Jewish congregation in Philadelphia, Beth Yeshua, encountered opposition when it tried to build its center in a Jewish neighborhood. An unidentified Orthodox group called for an after-service social gathering on Friday night not far from the Messianic group's prayer house as a protest against the activities of the new congregation. The appeal to come to the protest echoed common Jewish perceptions of Messianic Jews: "Jewish residents of Overbrook Park: there is a cult in your midst. Like the Moonies and the Krishnas. . . . They are the Messianic Jewish Movement."<sup>34</sup>

By the 1980s, Jewish educators and activists thought that they should prepare Jewish youth for a possible encounter with the new rhetoric of Christian evangelism and Messianic Judaism. From the 1970s onward, a number of Jewish activists published "know what to answer" books and pamphlets in response to, among others, Jewish Christian groups and their faith. These tracts did not speak in one voice but represented various viewpoints. *What to Say When the Missionary Comes to Your Door*, by Lawrence M. Silverman, a Reform rabbi, was one such brochure.<sup>35</sup> Expressing a progressive Jewish viewpoint, it included sentences such as "The messianic age will come to pass in this world!" and "We do not believe that personal salvation and eternal life should be overriding concerns in one's life." Many traditional and most Orthodox Jews would probably not have agreed with Silverman. The Department of Youth Activities of the Conservative movement circulated a different guidebook, *The Missionary at the Door—Our Uniqueness*, a collection of essays such as "Why Aren't We Christians?" The guide illustrates some of the problems mainline Jews have been facing in trying to counter Messianic Jewish groups, who demonstrate pride in their ethnic identity and make extensive use of Jewish symbols and language. The discussion

guide thus insists that Judaism is a religion and not merely an ethnic group and that being a “Jewish-Christian makes no more sense than [being] a capitalist-communist.”<sup>36</sup>

The writers of “know what to answer” publications were perhaps right to assume that many young Jews did not have ready answers to Messianic Jewish assertions. It is doubtful, however, that such tracts could have made a significant difference when such Jews encountered individuals or communities propagating a Jewish-friendly version of the Christian faith. In contrast to both Jewish and Christian perceptions, many of the Jews who become attracted to Christianity do not join their new faith merely for theoretical, theological reasons. The Messianic Jewish environment offers them a sense of community and spiritual and moral content. Promoting a conservative worldview, their new evangelical faith has also made demands and imposed clear boundaries and guidelines in the realm of personal morality. From their point of view, the newly converted have found in their new religious communities more nurturing environments than in liberal Jewish congregations or in secular, unaffiliated Jewish or non-Jewish life.

Jewish reactions have not remained static. Many Jews have continued to look upon Messianic Judaism suspiciously as a bizarre development. However, in recent decades some have reconsidered their position. Messianic Judaism has not faded away; in fact, it has grown in numbers and confidence and has turned into a permanent feature of the religious and cultural scene in Jewish population centers around the globe. Some liberal Jews have begun looking at communities of converts in a new way. Articles in *Moment* and the *Jerusalem Report*, appearing in the 1990s and 2000s, treated Messianic Jews respectfully and presented their case in a surprisingly impartial tone—a long shot from the articles of the 1970s and 1980s, which related to that movement in a condescending manner or attributed to it conspiratorial motives. The writers of the newer articles described the converts in realistic terms as normal people whose faith offered them meaning and a sense of purpose. In 2000, Dan Cohn-Sherbok, a Reform rabbi in Wales, wrote a book on Messianic Judaism in which he called upon Jews to accept the movement. Stirring

surprisingly little controversy, the book was praised for its openness and pluralistic attitude.

### An Evangelical Jewish Subculture

While struggling to be accepted as genuinely Jewish and Christian, Messianic Jews, from the 1970s onward, have built their own subculture, complete with conferences and organizations, youth movements and summer camps, prayer books and hymnals, and numerous websites, books, and periodicals, including theological, apologetic, and evangelistic treatises. One series of Messianic conferences, the Messiah Conferences, has been held since the 1980s at the Mennonite evangelical Messiah College in Pennsylvania, a place that was chosen, among other considerations, for its name. Sponsored by a number of Messianic organizations, the gatherings demonstrate the movement's varied activities and groups, which have included bands of singers and dancers, youth ministries, and missionary organizations such as Ariel Ministries and Jews for Jesus. Messianic hymns resemble contemporary evangelical ones, and the music is unmistakably the rock-influenced New Christian Music, yet many of the hymns have been written and composed by Messianic Jews, offering an opportunity for songwriters and musicians within the community to express literary and musical talents.<sup>37</sup> Hymns often relate to Israel's role in history, convey a Messianic hope, and refer to Jesus as Yeshua. Messianic hymnals often include Israeli songs.<sup>38</sup>

Messianic Judaism has developed since the 1970s into a large movement. By the early 2010s, there were about three hundred Messianic Jewish congregations in America, with a noticeable presence in evangelical life going beyond those numbers. There are about one hundred communities in Israel and dozens more in Europe, Latin America, and the former Soviet bloc. Whereas previously membership was almost insignificant in comparison to the larger Jewish population, the size of the current movement is larger than that of Reconstructionist Judaism or humanistic Judaism. While creating their own set of congregations and their own culture, Messianic communities follow mainstream

conservative evangelical social and cultural norms. For example, all Messianic rabbis or ministers are men, although women, often unofficially, fulfill leadership roles. Remarkably, for many Messianic Jews, adherence to central Christian evangelical tenets of faith and morality is what has allowed them to adopt and promote Jewish rites and customs.

While creating a subculture of its own, Messianic Judaism is not a fully unified or uniform community. There are many subdivisions and groups within the larger definition. A major division between charismatics and noncharismatics reflects the same division within the larger evangelical community, where, since the 1970s, the charismatics have been on the rise. Their advocacy of a direct personal encounter with the divine and their more joyful and expressive services have appealed to many Jewish converts. At times, charismatic Messianic Jews have formed organizations separate from noncharismatic fellow evangelical Jewish believers. However, despite differences, the mutual campaign to be recognized by the evangelical community as genuine Christians and by Jews as authentic Jews, and the basic sense of identity as Messianic Jews, have often overshadowed the divisions.

Another difference between Messianic congregations is over observance of Jewish tradition and rites. On the one end of the spectrum are those who have adopted the name of Messianic Jews but have been very hesitant to observe Jewish rites and customs and have adopted a liturgy close to that of non-Jewish "Anglo-Saxon" congregations. On the other end of the spectrum are those who advocate extensive incorporation of Jewish rites, such as the wearing of yarmulkes during prayer and at times even on a daily basis (although the number of such people is very small). Some have introduced into Messianic services such rites as the wearing of *talitot* by leaders of the communities, and some reading from a Torah scroll as part of the service, as well as chanting of prayers according to traditional Jewish melodies and the holding of the major weekly services on Friday nights or Saturday mornings. None, however, have claimed that there is a requirement to observe such rites in order to be justified in the eyes of God.

Many Messianic congregations have found a middle position along this spectrum. One feature that has helped create larger uniformity has been liturgical compilations. John Fischer, a pastor of a Messianic congregation in Florida and director of Menorah Ministries, has edited a Messianic Jewish *siddur* (prayer book) that has become popular in the Messianic movement.<sup>39</sup> The *siddur* picks and chooses elements of the traditional Jewish prayer book, making up for passages it leaves out with prayers that give expression to faith in Jesus and his role as the Redeemer. Almost all congregations celebrate Jewish holidays, the most popular of which is Passover, in which the liturgy from a Messianic Haggadah is read.<sup>40</sup> The manner in which Messianic congregations choose to celebrate the Passover points to the dialectical approach of the movement, which promotes attributes of the Jewish heritage while remaining within the theological boundaries of public approval and evangelical correctness.

One of the more popular versions of the Haggadah, Eric Lipson's *Passover Haggadah: A Messianic Celebration*, is distributed by Jews for Jesus, attesting to the Messianic Jewish spirit the mission has decided to adopt. Written entirely in English and assuming no prior knowledge of Jewish customs, it maintains features of the traditional celebration, such as "the Four Questions," the four cups of wine, and an additional fifth cup for Elijah the Prophet, although many Messianic Jews prefer to drink grape juice instead of wine. Lipson's version cuts out passages of the traditional Haggadah, most notably those of the *midrash*, rabbinical elaboration on the Exodus story. Instead, the text offers numerous quotations from the New Testament, such as from John 20:19 on Jesus's appearance before his disciples after his resurrection from the dead.<sup>41</sup> The Haggadah also includes prayers relating to Jesus and his role as a savior, including "Blessed art Thou, O Lord our God, king of the Universe, who had sent Thy son, Thine only son, Y'shua the Messiah, to be the light of the world and our Paschal Lamb, that through him we might live."<sup>42</sup>

J. Ron Tavalin has also produced a Haggadah, *Kol Hesed Messianic Haggadah*. "The Messianic Believer's Haggadah," Tavalin explains in the

preface, “differs from the traditional Haggadah in that we who maintain the Messiahship of Yeshua (Jesus) see an even greater blessing and redemption than that one contained in the book of Exodus. Even as the Israelites were redeemed from Slavery to Pharaoh, so all peoples, Jew and non-Jew, through the New Covenant of the Messiah, are redeemed from bondage to sin and death.” While Tavalin’s Haggadah incorporates Hebrew, it is intended for uninitiated participants, both Jewish and non-Jewish, and it offers both a glossary of terms and ample explanations throughout the text. *Kol Hessed* also eliminates the *midrash* passages, instead bringing in Jesus and his role as the Redeemer. The first blessing reads: “Blessed are you, O Lord our God, King of the Universe, who has sanctified us through faith in Yeshua Ha Mashiakh and commanded us to remove the leaven.”

Celebrating Passover night became, by the 2000s, fashionable in the evangelical camp, a reality that has worked in favor of Messianic communities. Now evangelical churches, by the thousands, are conducting seder demonstrations, often under the leadership of Messianic Jewish guests. This has become a common means for groups, such as Jews for Jesus, to approach the evangelical community, advertise their agenda, influence evangelical culture, and apply for funds. “See the link between the ancient festival of redemption and Christ as the Land of God,” reads a brochure by Jews for Jesus, which calls upon churches to “invite Jews for Jesus to visit your congregation.”<sup>43</sup> Evangelicals have shown growing interest in Jewish matters, historical and contemporary. Evangelical scholarship in the last generation has paid attention to the Jewish roots of Christianity, a reality that works to enhance interest in Jewish holidays that go back to Jesus’s era and that are mentioned in both the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament.<sup>44</sup>

Messianic Jewish congregations differ as to the percentage of Jews versus non-Jews they have as members. According to a survey conducted by Michael Schiffman in the early 1990s, most Messianic congregations had percentages of Jewish membership between 25 and 50 percent.<sup>45</sup> The percentage of intermarried couples within the congregations surpasses the average for the Jewish population affiliated with

non-Messianic synagogues.<sup>46</sup> In Israel, at the turn of the millennium, 30 percent of Messianic Jews were intermarried, a much higher percentage than in the general Jewish population in the country.<sup>47</sup> Thus Messianic congregations are centers of evangelism for non-Jews as well. Although the communities are theologically evangelical, the non-Jewish members resemble, at least partially, non-Jews joining conventional synagogues. In both cases, non-Jews show interest in elements of the Jewish tradition and become members in houses of worship that define themselves as Jewish, incorporating Jewish customs, folklore, and humor into the celebration of the Jewish Sabbath and holidays.<sup>48</sup>

No comprehensive survey on the socioeconomic makeup of Messianic congregations has so far been conducted, so assessing this aspect of Messianic life can be based on impressions only. Yet it seems that with noted exceptions most members are in the lower middle classes, are college educated, and hold stable jobs.<sup>49</sup> Compared to the larger Jewish population, these congregations lack prestigious professionals, intellectuals, academics, and people of standing in the media and the arts. This is gradually changing with a growing presence of scholars, a reality that affects the theological discourse in the movement. Early Messianic communities consisted mostly of converts of the baby boom generation who came of age in the 1960s and 1970s, but they have been joined by younger converts, and in a growing number of congregations a second generation of Messianic Jews who have grown up in the movement are making an impact.

An important feature of Messianic Jewish culture has been its special vocabulary. It has been strongly influenced by the evangelical rhetoric of conversion, yet it has used terms that reflect the movement's unique sensitivities. The terms *mission* and *missionary* have been abandoned.<sup>50</sup> Rather than "evangelizing," Messianic Jews speak about "sharing," and "witnessing," and rather than "converting" they speak of "coming to the faith," or "coming to know Yeshua." They speak about "believers" to designate born-again and differentiate between "Gentile believers" and "Jewish believers," the first being non-Jewish evangelical Christians and the second, Jews who have accepted the Christian evangelical faith.<sup>51</sup> The

vocabulary helps shape a communal spirit among the converted. Converts learn this language along their spiritual and communal journey toward conversion, and their adoption of it signifies their acceptance of Messianic theological perceptions and communal norms.<sup>52</sup>

In principle, members of Messianic congregations do not smoke or gamble, and they refrain from drinking hard liquor and often other kinds of alcoholic beverages. Similarly, they promote a conservative sexual morality, not unlike that of evangelical Christians or Orthodox Jews.<sup>53</sup> Most Messianic Jews, like conservative evangelicals in general, subscribe to conservative social and political views, seeing themselves as patriotic Americans or Israelis. Messianic Jews support Israel out of an understanding similar to that of premillennialist evangelicals. Their relation to Israel serves to reaffirm their Jewish identity at the same time that it carries the theological perceptions and political agenda of the evangelical camp. Like evangelicals in general, Messianic congregations organize tours to Israel, establishing personal attachments to that country.<sup>54</sup>

The new Messianic Jewish messages and vocabulary have transformed the position of the evangelical faith in Israel. In previous decades missions concentrated their efforts on the poor, immigrant neighborhoods in Israeli cities, making very few permanent converts. But since the 1970s Messianic Jewish communities have reached the heart of Israeli culture and society. Young men and women who grew up in Israel, were immersed in its culture, and served in its army joined the movement by the thousands. Israeli society has changed dramatically since the early days of the state. It has moved away from the pioneer spirit of the prestate era and the early years of independence to become a Western-oriented consumer society. Following the Yom Kippur War of October 1973, the older Israeli elite, who were mostly European born, secular, and labor oriented, lost much of their self-confidence. Faith in Zionism as an all-encompassing ideology, providing hope, meaning, and a sense of purpose, weakened considerably. With the fading away of a central secular national faith and the moral and spiritual vacuum it left, there was plenty of room for alternative faiths to make their way in the Israeli spiritual and communal market.<sup>55</sup>



In the years following the Yom Kippur War, thousands of young Israelis joined new religious movements that had not been represented in the country just a few years earlier, including EST, the Church of Scientology, the Hare Krishnas, and the Unification Church. Thousands became “returnees to tradition” and joined Orthodox forms of Judaism. Many others accepted the Christian faith, mostly in its evangelical Messianic Jewish form. The community of Messianic Jews in Israel grew considerably from the 1970s on. From no more than a few hundred people in the mid-1960s, it grew to over fifteen thousand by the 2010s. Some of the growth came from immigration, as hundreds of Jewish converts to evangelical Christianity from America settled in Israel, and thousands arrived from the former Soviet Union and Ethiopia. Jews (and their non-Jewish spouses) who had converted to Christianity in the former Soviet Union or in Ethiopia often joined Messianic congregations in Israel. Such a choice helped them reconcile their loyalty to their Christian faith with the culture of their new country and served to ease the tensions of building their lives in Israel. By the 2010s, the demography of the Messianic congregations was a far cry from the realities of the earlier years of the state. It became evident that this Israeli evangelical movement had been making converts in almost all segments of society. Much of the stigma surrounding conversion to Christianity had faded away, at least in the non-Orthodox community, as Israeli culture became more inclusive and tolerant and as new religious movements became part of the Israeli scene.<sup>56</sup> For many secular Israelis, Messianic Jews had become just a friendly new religious movement, not a threat to Israeli society. A public opinion poll solicited by Messianic Jewish activists in the late 1980s discovered that most Israelis were willing to accept Messianic Jews.<sup>57</sup> Since the 1990s, Messianic Jews have marched under their own banner in the yearly Jerusalem marches, something that could not have taken place earlier. This is not to say that Messianic Jews did not encounter opposition and even occasional harassment, almost always from ultra-Orthodox circles, but the larger Israeli society opened to that option much more than before.

Ironically, autobiographical accounts have signaled that the converts find Israeli secular culture and values unsatisfactory.<sup>58</sup> In this, again ironically, they share similar outlooks with the many “returnees to tradition” who have become Orthodox Jews and, like them, reject open and permissive aspects of Israeli culture. This accounts, among other things, for the bitter animosity of the Orthodox propagators of the faith toward Messianic congregations, since they have felt that they compete for the same pool of potential converts. For similar reasons, Messianic Jews have held a less than favorable attitude toward Orthodox Jews.

Even though Messianic Jews reject some Israeli ways and values, their relationship with Israeli society has improved in the past few decades, and they have come to feel much more at home in it. Their religion’s relative appeal and greater success may come from its growing legitimacy and its posing of an alternative to some of the other options within Israeli culture.<sup>59</sup> It has provided a sense of community within a society that, as a whole, has lost much of its sense of unity, cohesion, and purpose. As in America, the terminology adopted by the Messianic Jews in Israel has helped in the process of creating a community as well as a sense of finding a home for the soul. Those joining Messianic congregations have called themselves *maaminim* (believers) and have spoken about “lehagea laEmuna” (becoming a believer) and not about their “conversions.” They remain “Yehudim” (Jews) and not “Notzrim” (Christians), even after their conversion.

The Messianic Jewish community in Israel is far from being uniform. In addition to manifesting the divisions that exist in America, congregations operate in a number of languages, including Hebrew, English, Russian, and Amharic. Messianic congregations often depend on missionary support; many of them are located on the property of churches, and foreign missionaries take part in the life of many communities. Menahem Benhayim summarizes the atmosphere: “Most Israeli congregations and fellowships reflect the Evangelical Christian streams from Calvinist to Charismatic, which have influenced their leaders and members. We sometimes hear gentile Christian visitors from abroad making much significant comments during visits to Israel, ‘Oh, we feel so

much at home here; the service and atmosphere was just like ours!”<sup>60</sup> He concludes by expressing a wish for more independent and authentic Israeli content to Messianic Jewish life in the country. Since the turn of the twenty-first century, both in America and in Israel, Messianic Jews, especially intellectuals and scholars, have been increasingly calling for more independence from Christian groups and agencies.

In recent years, Messianic Judaism has made its mark not only in Israel but also in the former Soviet Union. The opening of the countries of the former Soviet Union gave American evangelicals unexpected new territories where they could encounter Jews and propagate the Gospel among them. In this realm, too, missions to the Jews were like many other evangelical missions to the former Soviet bloc once the communist regimes there crumbled.<sup>61</sup> Many evangelical groups had been active in the former Soviet Union since the early 1990s, and Soviet Jewry proved to be a promising and fertile group for evangelism. The use of Messianic vocabulary and the Jewish Christian option proved attractive to many Soviet Jews. After seven decades of communist rule, which destroyed Jewish educational, cultural, and religious infrastructure, most Jews there were ignorant of Jewish knowledge and practices, and a high percentage of them had intermarried. They had no preconceived notions of what Judaism was supposed to look like and no concept of the theological and liturgical content of traditional forms of Judaism. For some, Messianic Judaism was the only Judaism they had ever encountered, and the Messianic option allowed them to connect with their Jewish identity and roots while maintaining or embracing Christianity.

Like Israel, the countries of the former Soviet Union became something of a promised land: a place that called for a special mission and effort, that conveyed a sense of enthusiasm and triumph. Missions and Messianic Jewish organizations sent dozens of evangelists, organized tours, and established seminars to train local activists. They helped build a handful of Messianic congregations. Jewish observers have remarked that the Messianic congregations are often larger, younger, and more active and enthusiastic than conventional Jewish synagogues in the former Soviet Union.<sup>62</sup>

### A Theological Coming of Age?

Having built a diverse and growing subculture within the larger evangelical camp, Messianic Jewish thinkers have produced a series of theological and apologetic tracts that have come to define and defend the movement's unique path. Among the Messianic Jewish theologians at the turn of the twenty-first century are Stuart Dauermann, John Fischer, Arnold Fruchtenbaum, Richard Harvey, Daniel Juster, Mark Kinzer, Gershon Nerel, Rich Robinson, Tsvi Sadan, and David Stern, to name but a few. Their work expresses a spectrum of opinions. However, one claim that several of them have made concerns the antiquity of the movement. According to that notion, Jews who have embraced Christianity are following in the path of the original Christians, making Messianic Judaism a continuation of the earliest and one of the most authentic forms of Christianity. David Stern, a leader and thinker in the Messianic Jewish movement in Israel, has translated and edited a Messianic Jewish New Testament. In it, he has changed St. Paul's traditionally titled Epistle to the Hebrews into a Letter to Messianic Jews.<sup>63</sup>

A major trend has been a gradual move to a more independent form of Jewish Christian thought. This development has manifested itself in the work of Arnold Fruchtenbaum, a relatively moderate Messianic thinker. In the 1970s, Fruchtenbaum defined himself as a Hebrew Christian and was skeptical about the more assertive forms of Messianic Judaism.<sup>64</sup> In *Hebrew Christianity: Its Theology, History and Philosophy*, Fruchtenbaum defended Hebrew Christians and presented them as solid Christian believers in good evangelical standing. At this time, the more assertively Jewish Messianic Jews would not have shared his views on where Jewish converts should look for community, as he declared that "the Hebrew Christian should be a member of the local church along with Gentile believers."<sup>65</sup> Fruchtenbaum modified his views a number of years later, and Ariel Ministries, which he founded and led, has been instrumental in the establishment of a number of Messianic Jewish congregations. In 1985, Fruchtenbaum defended the right of Jewish believers in Jesus to establish congregations and observe Jewish rites if they so

wished, as long as they looked upon it as an option and did not consider it a requirement toward salvation.<sup>66</sup>

*The Messianic Jewish Manifesto* has been one of the better-known Messianic theological tracts of the late twentieth century. In it David Stern presents the merits and goals of the movement as many evangelical Jews have understood them: “By providing a Jewish environment for Messianic faith, Messianic Judaism is useful in evangelizing Jews” and “It is useful in focusing the Church’s attention on the Jewish people.”<sup>67</sup> The last argument relates to the role of Messianic Jews within the evangelical camp. They have served, since their inception, as a lobby within the larger evangelical camp for giving high priority to the evangelization of the Jews as well as support for Israel and defense of Jewish rights around the globe. Stern’s declaration that Messianic Jews are not half Christian and half Jewish but rather 100 percent Christians and 100 percent Jewish has become a cornerstone of mainstream Messianic Jewish self-understanding at the turn of the twenty-first century.

An important feature of Messianic Judaism in this respect has been the predominance of the premillennialist faith in the second coming of Jesus. At the turn of the twenty-first century, David Brickner, the current director of Jews for Jesus, published *Future Hope: A Jewish Christian Look at the End of the World*. The book advocates the premillennialist messianic faith and its view of the Jews and at the same time is intended to serve as a tool for evangelism among the Jews. “The millennium,” Bruckner promises, “contains some special provisions for Israel.”<sup>68</sup> Dispensationalism offers a special meaning to Messianic Jews, as it convinces them that the Jewish people have a special role and mission in history, are heirs to biblical Israel, and serve as a central nation in the messianic times. This aspect of the evangelical faith can give Messianic Jews a sense of pride and self-esteem within the larger evangelical community. It also adds more vigor to their attempts to evangelize their ethnic brothers and sisters. Likewise, overcoming the schism between Judaism and Christianity has added to their sense of historical mission. “The Messianic Jewish community will be the vehicle for healing the worst

schism in the history of the world, the split between the Christians and the Jews," declares David Stern optimistically.<sup>69</sup>

The relative success of the movement of Messianic Jews and its acceptance in conservative evangelical circles have paradoxically encouraged growing theological independence among evangelical Jewish thinkers. At the turn of the twenty-first century, a number of thinkers on both sides of the Atlantic have come up with new interpretations and suggestions about how to understand and practice this unique amalgamation of Judaism and evangelical Christianity. Gershon Nerel, an Israeli Messianic intellectual, has advocated for a greater reliance on the sacred scriptures. A historian by profession, Nerel has engaged in extensive research on the history of Jewish believers in Jesus in twentieth-century Palestine and views the early activists, before the rise of the current movement, as worthy sources of inspiration. An ardent premillennialist, Nerel views Israel as fulfilling an important role in God's plan for humanity and criticizes Christians who would like to undermine its achievements.<sup>70</sup> Especially since the intifada, Palestinian and Jewish believers in Jesus have often differed over their visions for the Land of Israel, or Palestine, and Nerel has pointed to Palestinian Christian unfavorable media coverage and interpretation of Israel and its actions.<sup>71</sup> Like Nerel, Tsvi Sadan grew up in Israel and served in its armed forces. He too became a believer in Jesus as a young man searching for meaning and, like Nerel, completed a doctoral degree at the Hebrew University, researching the attitudes of Jewish thinkers toward Jesus.<sup>72</sup> An editor of *Kivun*, a Messianic Jewish Israeli journal, Sadan has developed an independent understanding of the Jewish faith in Jesus, believing that Messianic theology can free itself from conventional evangelical theology. While he sees faith in Jesus as essential and the Christian sacred scriptures as authoritative, he has come to consider many other features of Protestant dogma and theology as open for discussion.<sup>73</sup>

While not all as daring as Sadan, a group of American Messianic Jewish thinkers have organized to develop innovative Jewish Christian thought. Wishing to cut the umbilical cord with missionary patrons and sponsors, at least on the intellectual level, they have advocated an

independent approach on the part of Messianic Jews.<sup>74</sup> Mark Kinzer and Stuart Dauermann are founders and leaders of Hashivenu (“Bring us Back,” in Hebrew), a group of Messianic Jewish intellectuals who promote a more independent Jewish Christian culture and thought. A number of such thinkers have asserted, in the last few years, that Jewish Christians should, at least in certain instances, look for inspiration in Jewish, postbiblical sources, over and against postscriptural Christian texts that may not be very relevant anymore. Jewish Mishnaic sages may at times be more appropriate sources than sixteenth-century Protestant reformers, for example.<sup>75</sup> While having few members, Hashivenu has made a name for itself in evangelical Jewish circles.<sup>76</sup> Using traditional rabbinical Jewish language, the group has expressed its agenda: “We seek an authentic expression of Jewish life maintaining substantial continuity with Jewish traditions. . . . It is our conviction that *Hashem* brings Messianic Jews to a richer knowledge of himself through a modern day rediscovery of the paths of our ancestors—*Avodah* (liturgical worship), *Torah* (study of the sacred texts), and *Gemilut Chasadim* (deeds of loving-kindness).” Significantly, while most Messianic Jewish congregations and leaders have not identified with the new group, and some have expressed criticism, the movement and its leaders have not been rejected or treated like pariahs.<sup>77</sup> The Hashivenu group has established the Messianic Jewish Theological Institute, which provides an online graduate school for Messianic Jewish leaders and activists, publishes the journal *Kesher*, and organizes conferences.

While looking to strengthen the intellectual basis of Messianic Judaism, Hashivenu also promotes connections with nonevangelical groups of Jewish believers in Jesus. The first such conference took place in Helsinki in June 2010 and included, besides Messianic Jews, representatives of Jewish converts to Christianity in its Catholic and Greek Orthodox versions who wish to maintain their Jewish roots.<sup>78</sup> Such groups are smaller in size than the evangelical Messianic Jewish movement and, as a rule, do not advocate the same assertive Jewish ethnic and religious symbols and rites as the evangelically oriented Messianic Jews have done.<sup>79</sup> Hashivenu and its circle point to the growing diversity within

the larger Messianic Jewish movement, where different communities and individuals have placed greater emphasis on varied components of the Jewish Christian amalgam. At the same time, one can look upon Hashivenu as an avant-garde of the movement at large, which in the last decades has generally been promoting and reclaiming Jewish rites, texts, customs, symbols, and language.

In sum, Messianic Judaism has been the outcome of the energetic evangelical engagement with the Jews and the effect of the biblical-Messianic dispensationalist theology on evangelical Jewish converts. The spirit of the age has also brought about development from small, moderate, and hesitant forms of Hebrew Christianity to the more dynamic and assertive movement of Messianic Judaism. The movement has reflected larger trends, such as the transition from a melting-pot paradigm to a new interest in and emphasis on roots and ethnic pride, and the ease of a new generation in crossing boundaries and picking, choosing, and bringing together rites, customs, and ideas from different traditions. Messianic Judaism has challenged long-standing definitions of Judaism and Christianity as well as the conventional wisdom on the relationship between the two religious traditions. It has proposed a different solution to the age-old difficulties between the faiths. While the initial reaction of many Christians and Jews was shock or mockery, the Messianic Jewish movement has carved a niche for itself within the evangelical community and has been largely accepted as a legitimate subdivision within that larger culture. This should be attributed not only to evangelicals' increasing willingness to give more room to ethnic expressions but to their growing appreciation of Jews and the Jewish tradition in their midst. In spite of the Messianic Jewish commitment to Jewish identity and its incorporation of Jewish symbols and customs, the acceptance of the new movement by the Jewish community has been slower and more limited. However, while Jews have traditionally viewed conversions to Christianity as desertion from the Jewish ranks, their opposition to Messianic Jews has weakened throughout the years, and many Jews have come to treat the movement with some respect.



Ironically, while advocating conservative views on political, social, and cultural issues, this evangelical Jewish movement is postmodern in that the individuals and communities drawn to it possess multiple identities and loyalties and struggle to negotiate among them. Such hybridization has become prevalent in contemporary evangelical communities and has worked in favor of evangelical growth and energy.<sup>80</sup> It has also been evident in Jewish choices, which, since the 1960s, have often tended toward innovation and amalgamation of different traditions and practices. For example, there is now a large movement of Jewish practitioners of Buddhism, most of whom have not seen a contradiction between their Jewish identity and their Buddhist practices. Other hybrids have amalgamated Hasidic Judaism or hippie culture. Still, the rise of Messianic Judaism is more extraordinary than the rise of Jewish Buddhism. Judaism and Buddhism had not made conflicting claims over the same religious legacy and have not developed a long history of bitterness and accusation. The evangelical Jewish movement has signaled a new openness on the part of conservative evangelical Christianity and the development of alternative means of easing the historical tensions between the communities and reaching rapprochement between them.