

Jews for Jesus: Targeting Jews for Conversion with Subterfuge and Deception

Jews for Jesus, the leading organization dedicated to converting Jews to Christianity, has long been a concern because of its aggressive proselytizing with a deceptive message: that Jews who accept Jesus as the son of God and their savior remain Jewish. The group produces videos, publishes four periodicals, maintains 22 offices around the world at which it employs about 200 people, and sells products through an extensive online bookstore. It sees its primary work however, as preaching to Jews in the streets, with the aid of a network of 175 volunteers. The group claims in 2007 it converted 591 Jews and handed out 3,627,000 pamphlets describing the group's beliefs.



This image appears on the Jews for Jesus Website for South Africa.

The executive director of Jews for Jesus, David Brickner, took over leadership of the group in 1996 and he regularly appears at churches around the United States to promote the group's work. He gained widespread attention for a presentation he gave in August 2008 at the Wasilla Baptist Church in Wasilla, Alaska, where 2008 Republican vice-presidential nominee Sarah Palin is a member. During his talk, Brickner reportedly said that recent terrorist attacks in Israel were God's "judgment" against Israelis for failing to believe in Jesus as the Messiah. (Palin later distanced herself from his comments.) Following the media attention, a message was posted to the Jews for Jesus Website in which Brickner said his remarks had been taken out of context and that it was not his belief that "God is judging and punishing Israel via terrorist attacks." Brickner's presentation was entitled "The Jerusalem Dilemma" and he is currently scheduled to deliver the talk to five more churches through 2010.

Brickner made similar remarks during a sermon to the Marcus Pointe Baptist Church in Pensacola, Florida in March 2008, soon after a gunman broke into a seminary in Jerusalem and murdered eight unarmed Jewish teenagers. He said, "We see that desolation, that judgment played out in situations like... last week when a gunman broke into a seminary and shot up and murdered 8 young Jewish boys studying the Torah." The remarks came after Brickner repeatedly quoted Jesus as saying "your house will be left desolate" to those who did not believe he was the Messiah.

Jews for Jesus is an official member of several Christian evangelical umbrella organizations, including the Interdenominational Foreign Mission Association and the World Evangelical Alliance, which took out a full-page ad in *The New York Times* on March 28, 2008, that

defended targeting Jews for conversion to Christianity. On August 26, 2008, the World Evangelical Alliance issued a statement from Berlin calling for “renewed commitment to the task of Jewish evangelism.” A press release accompanying the statement said that “messianic Jews” had been involved in the drafting of the statement.

METHODS

Judaism, Jews-for-Jesus style

Incorporated under the name Hineni Ministries, Jews for Jesus was founded in 1973 by a Baptist minister named Martin “Moishe” Rosen, who was born a Jew but converted to Christianity at age 17. After his religious studies and ordination, Rosen - eager to convert his former coreligionists to his new faith - worked for the American Board of Missions to the Jews (ABMJ), a Christian proselytizing organization.

Realizing that many American Jews were proud of their Jewish identities but indifferent to theological arguments, Rosen pioneered an energetic evangelizing style – often using Jewish and Yiddish idioms – that was founded on the notion that a Jew could accept Jesus as savior and yet remain Jewish. Rosen broke from ABMJ to found his own organization, which soon became known as Jews for Jesus.

Consistent with Rosen’s teachings, Jews for Jesus describes Jesus not as the God of Christians but as the Jewish Messiah prophesied by the Hebrew Bible (Old Testament). In this way, belief in Jesus is more readily seen as “Jewish” and the teachings of Jesus as the “fulfillment” or “completion” of Judaism. “Believing in Jesus,” Jews for Jesus publications have proclaimed, “is the most Jewish thing you can do.”

The Christianizing process

Not all New Testament teachings are amenable to a Judaizing gloss. Once they become accustomed to the notion that Jesus may have been the Jewish Messiah, disciples of Jews for Jesus are then introduced to belief in the divinity of Jesus and other doctrines that are standard for Christians but alien and even contrary to the Jewish tradition, including original sin, the virgin birth and the Trinity.

Jews who accept Jews for Jesus’ Christian teachings are usually baptized. These new converts (like Jews converted by other messianic groups) typically call themselves either “Messianic Jews” or “Hebrew Christians,” often refer to Jesus by his Hebrew name Y’shua and begin worshiping in Christian churches. There are also a smaller number of messianic Jewish congregations.

Letters from Rosen to church leaders demonstrate that he sees his organization’s efforts as part of Christianity’s evangelical mission. “We consider ourselves an arm of the local church,” he wrote in a 1977 mass-mailing entitled “What Evangelical Christians should know about Jews for Jesus.”

Rosen continued, “We are primarily evangelists and we are always mindful that we should not usurp the authority of the local pastor. As we win and disciple [sic] Jewish people, we urge them to take their place in a local evangelical church or establish a congregation and call their own

minister. Our duty is to aid the church at large and we work as an arm of that body to gather in the Lost Sheep of the House of Israel.”

ACTIVITIES AND TACTICS

Distributing literature

Jews for Jesus focuses its missionary activity on areas with large Jewish populations, and combines aggressive media campaigns with efforts at establishing personal contact with individual Jews. Much of the organization’s notoriety is attributable to its distribution, in concentrated campaigns, of vast numbers of brightly colored, cartoon-like pamphlets along high-volume pedestrian areas. Recently, it has begun animating some of these pamphlets on its Website, including one entitled “Jesus Made Me Kosher.” These tracts frequently mix evangelizing messages with Jewish cultural references (e.g., bagels, rabbis, overprotective mothers).

Ad campaigns and direct mail

The group supplements the literature distributions with ads – with messages such as “Be more Jewish: Believe in Jesus” or “Jesus for Jews” – on billboards, in subway cars, newspapers and magazines, and on radio. It also uses direct mail outreach, and has sent postcards, fliers and books to hundreds of thousands of families with Jewish names in locations around the country. Some of the group’s periodicals and many other publications are directed toward Jews who have yet to accept the group’s message, while others are directed toward those whom the group has converted and to mainstream Christians.

Appeals at churches

A large portion of the group’s fundraising efforts are directed at the latter group, and Jews for Jesus leader David Brickner’s presentations to churches include appeals for funds to help in its work. Other members of the group frequently travel to American churches, including a music group called “The Liberated Wailing Wall” that perhaps best epitomizes the group’s desire to combine Jewish music, language, and themes into a Christian message. Brickner began his involvement with Jews for Jesus through the music group.

Active Internet presence

Jews for Jesus also maintains an extensive Internet presence, with unique Websites for each of the nine countries outside of the United State where it maintains offices. It has other Websites in languages like Korean and Farsi for regions where it has no presence on the ground. Its U.S. Website includes various blogs, a forum, and an online store that sells a variety of books, videos, apparel, music and other products produced by the group. It claims to receive 20,000 unique visitors to its primary Website each month.

The group has also produced a number of promotional videos, which it posts on its Websites, YouTube, and VodPod, a Website designed to allow users to create individual pages for videos. Jews for Jesus’ primary promotional video makes clear its focus on Israel, and the group also maintains collections of videos that purport to show how one can perform Jewish rituals connected to holidays like Passover while believing in Jesus as the Messiah. Another video is a

collection of stories from Holocaust survivors on how they eventually came to accept Jesus as the Messiah.



This T-shirt is sold in Jews for Jesus' online store.

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Hoping to convert Israelis

Jews for Jesus' current focus is on Israel, and it is in the midst of a six-year campaign to convert Israeli Jews to Christianity. The group maintains an office in Tel Aviv led by an Israeli convert and regularly sends missionaries to Israel as an extension of its "Operation Behold Your God" campaign. At a recent appearance at an American church, Brickner called Israel the place in the world that is the most open to the Jews for Jesus message.

For its Israel campaign, the group has taken out full-page advertisements in major Israeli newspapers and maintains a Hebrew language Website, but it still sees street preaching as its primary outreach effort. A centerpiece of its goal is to convince Israelis to refer to Jesus as "Yeshua," which means "salvation" in Hebrew.

The group also organized a "Massah" trip in the summer of 2007 composed of college-age youths, which was designed to proselytize to young Israelis in Israel and abroad. (Massah means "journey" in Hebrew. The Jewish Agency and other Jewish groups run a program called Masa that seeks to connect young Jews to long-term programs in Israel.) During the summer

2008 Massah trip, the group also traveled to India, where they proselytized to young Israelis traveling there. Jews for Jesus calls Massah “highly relational and highly experimental” and “effective.”

The director of Jews for Jesus’ Israel office, Dan Seder, also appeared on an Israeli morning television show in May 2008. On the show, Seder outlined, in Hebrew, the group’s view that acceptance of Jesus as the Messiah does not mean one has converted from Judaism to Christianity. Seder is an Israeli who converted to Christianity at the age of 15 while his family was living in New York City.

Members of Jews for Jesus have charged that they are harassed by Orthodox Jews in Israel, and recounting such an experience is a focus of presentations Brickner delivers to American churches. In August 2008, Brickner said the group had handed out 132,000 tracts in Tel Aviv and converted 32 Israelis. Hoping to reach all areas of Israel, the group is targeting the Northern Galilee for October 2008.

The original “Operation Behold Your God,” which began in 2001 and officially ended in 2006, was designed to reach every city in the world outside of Israel with a population of at least 25,000 Jews. It culminated with an extensive effort in New York City in the summer of 2006, the biggest campaign in the city in the group’s history. It also passed through several other American cities, and included outreach in Mexico City, Sydney, Odessa, London and Paris. The group continues to run “Summer Witnessing Campaigns” where members proselytize to Jews each year on the streets of major cities around the world. Its summer 2008 campaign in London drew the interest of a British-based newspaper, which reported that the group had spent between £10,000 and £15,000 (\$20,000 to \$30,000) on the two-week effort, and that the group’s yearly budget was over \$1 million.

CHRISTIAN RESPONSE

Not surprisingly, many Jews find the tactics and beliefs of Jews for Jesus offensive, and numerous Jewish leaders have condemned the group. Christians of many denominations have also voiced their disapproval of the group’s theology and tactics.

Questioning the group’s tactics

The Interfaith Conference of Metropolitan Washington, an umbrella organization that includes Roman Catholic, Methodist, Baptist, Lutheran and Presbyterian church groups, has condemned Jews for Jesus as promoting activities “harmful to the spirit of interreligious respect and tolerance.” The conference also denounces the group’s “deceptive proselytizing efforts,” adding that when they are practiced on “vulnerable populations” such as the young or the elderly, these efforts are “tantamount to coerced conversions.”

The Board of Governors of The Long Island Council of Churches voiced similar sentiments in a statement about three groups, including Jews for Jesus, that “noted with alarm” the “subterfuge and dishonesty” inherent in the “mixing [of] religious symbols in ways which distort their essential meaning.”

Accepting the Jewish faith

More broadly, many Christian denominations have explicitly rejected the assumption that undergirds Jews for Jesus' entire theology: that the "Old Covenant" between God and the Jewish people has been revoked and that Jews need Jesus for their salvation.

And while Jews for Jesus would convert all Jews to Christianity, the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops has stated that since the Second Vatican Council of the 1960s, the Christian evangelizing mission "no longer includes the wish to absorb the Jewish faith into Christianity and so end the distinctive witness of Jews to God in human history."

Many Protestant denominations have put forth similar doctrines. The United Church of Christ, a union of American Protestant churches, stated in 1987 that "God's covenant with the Jewish people has not been abrogated," and that "God has not rejected the Jewish people." A 2002 statement from The Christian Scholars Group on Christian-Jewish Relations, which includes Lutherans, Methodists and Episcopalians, stated that "In view of our conviction that Jews are in an eternal covenant with God, we renounce missionary efforts directed at converting Jews."

LEGAL CASES INVOLVING JEWS FOR JESUS

Jews for Jesus has been involved in a variety of legal cases regarding their right to distribute literature, their portrayal of Jews as members of the group, and other issues over the years. Specific cases include:

- In 2007, Jews for Jesus won the right to distribute its pamphlets in Oyster Bay, New York after several of its members had been arrested for doing so. The ruling declared unconstitutional an Oyster Bay ordinance that had required individuals to obtain permits to distribute fliers in public parks.
- In 2006, Jackie Mason dropped a \$2 million lawsuit he brought against Jews for Jesus after the group had used his name and image in a pamphlet, implying that he was a member. Mason agreed to drop the suit after the group gave him a written apology for the pamphlet.
- In 1998, Jews for Jesus filed suit against Steven Brodsky, an Orthodox Jew who registered the Internet domain name www.jewsforjesus.org. Brodsky's Web page described Jews for Jesus as a "cult" that was "founded upon deceit and distortion of fact." It linked out to the Web site of Outreach Judaism (www.outreachjudaism.org), a Jewish educational organization that specializes in opposing groups like Jews for Jesus. Jews for Jesus claimed that Brodsky's domain name infringed on its trademark. A judge issued a preliminary injunction against Brodsky, who vacated the name. It is now the group's main Web address.
- In 1993, Israel's Supreme Court, in a case involving a couple affiliated with Jews for Jesus, ruled that Jews who adhere to the Christian beliefs are regarded by Israeli law as "members of a different faith," and are not eligible for the automatic citizenship that Israel grants Jews. In its summary of the ruling, the Israel Ministry of Foreign Affairs stated that the belief that Jesus is the Messiah "cannot be reconciled with Judaism" and "marks the clear separation between Judaism and Christianity."

- In 1992, New York's highest court ruled against Jews for Jesus in a suit the organization brought against the Jewish Community Relations Council of New York (JCRC), an umbrella group representing 60 Jewish agencies in the metropolitan New York area. The case addressed the JCRC's 1985 warning to Long Island rabbis that Jews for Jesus was seeking a venue to conduct a Passover seder. The JCRC urged the rabbis to contact their Christian colleagues, as well as catering establishments and large restaurants, to "impress upon them how serious an affront these Hebrew-Christian groups are to the Jewish community." Subsequently, Jews for Jesus could not find a venue for the seder on Long Island, and was forced to conduct it in New Jersey. Jews for Jesus sued the JCRC for violating its civil rights; the 1992 decision upheld a lower court ruling that the JCRC communication did not "go beyond the proposal stage" and that there was no evidence that any of the Long Island rabbis had actually contacted establishments for the purpose of discriminating against Jews for Jesus.
- In another lawsuit brought by Jews for Jesus against the JCRC of New York, a U.S. Court of Appeals ruled in 1992 that the efforts of the JCRC urging Jewish organizations not to patronize a New York country club because it allowed Jews for Jesus to hold its annual convention on its premises were not protected as an exercise of the JCRC's First Amendment rights.
- In 1987 the U.S. Supreme Court ruled in favor of Jews for Jesus in a suit it filed against the municipal agency in charge of Los Angeles International Airport. Airport officials had barred Jews for Jesus from distributing leaflets at their facility as part of a larger ban on what they described as "First Amendment activities." Jews for Jesus challenged the airport's right to institute such a sweeping ban.