

## Synagogue

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An attempt to combine belief in Jesus with elements of Jewish culture and religious forms. Adherents see belief in Jesus as completing Judaism, not creating religion in stark contrast to it.

Rabbi Levine pointed out that the movement goes back to the Jewish foundation of Christianity. Indeed, Christianity itself was essentially Jewish until the decision to allow Gentiles to join the church without requiring that they first become Jews — the issue at the center of the Council of Jerusalem in 52 A.D. — shifted early Christians' from a Jewish to a non-Jewish focus.

The "outpouring of the spirit" that urged the current wave of Jewish acceptance of Jesus began at the same time as the "Jesus People" and Charismatic movements in the late 1960s, Chernoff explained. Indications of modern Jewish acceptance of Jesus began with the Hebrew-Christian movement of the 1980s and the MJAA's foundation in 1985. Yet the earlier phase was small in scale, and most of its adherents either remained a part of a synagogue or joined a Christian church. The Jews for Jesus movement — which began in 1973 and is separate from the Messianic Judaism movement — continued to emphasize joining Christian churches.

But some Jewish people were somewhat uncomfortable in Christian churches, Chernoff said, noting, "These non-Jewish cultural expressions of faith are valid, but they did not offer Jewish people an option. They wanted to worship in a Jewish context."

With a growth of interest in Messianic Judaism, however, the first synagogues were established in the early 1970s, Chernoff said.

Meanwhile, the movement is beginning to pick up speed, Chernoff reported. And the MJAA hopes to be at the center of it.

Now that a base of support has been created with the emergence of congregations, he explained, the MJAA is launching a five-year plan to gain attention, to proclaim Jesus to the Jewish people and to let Jews who have come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah know that they are not alone. The organization's goal is to swell its membership from its current 2,500 to 100,000 during that period.

Moreover, Chernoff claimed that a study conducted by the Council of Jewish Federations in 1990 — the National Jewish Population Survey — indicated that 350,000 Jewish people identified themselves as Messianic Jews, Hebrew Christians or as attending Christian churches.

"It will just be a matter of time until Messianic Judaism is the dominant stream in the Jewish faith," Chernoff predicted.

That sentiment was echoed by Shema Yisrael member Sandra Luciano, who views Messianic Judaism as the fulfillment of biblical prophecy.

"More and more Jewish people are coming to believe," noted Luciano, the daughter of a Wesleyan minister and the wife of a Roman Catholic who is also part of the congregation. "Zechariah 12:10 says all the Jewish people shall look on him whom they have pierced and know that he is the Messiah."

"To me, it's an amazing fulfillment of the prophetic teachings in the Bible of what's going to happen in the last days," observed Jim Appel, a Jewish member of the Rochester congregation. "It's clear the focus of the last days is Jerusalem."

Indeed, there is a "last days" aspect to the movement, Chernoff observed.

The acceptance of Jesus by Jews, Chernoff explained, "was a key sign in Biblical prophecy that we had passed into the end days before Jesus' return. In the end days, God is putting the focus on the people of Israel."

Meanwhile, this reaching out of God to the Jewish people is a sign to non-Jews, Luciano suggested.

"It shows how really true the Bible is, how faithful God is, how deep God is," Luciano said. "It gives you a deeper understanding of his purposes for man, his purposes for the Jewish people."

"His purpose is still to be faithful to the Jewish people," Luciano continued. "It shows you how faithful he will be to the Gentiles."

One of the things that has been holding Jewish people back from accepting Jesus is centuries of anti-Semitism, Chernoff observed. And a great deal of that anti-Semitism came at Christian hands.

"Sixteen, seventeen hundred years of persecution — by so-called believers in the Messiah — that was not helpful in producing a positive response to Christianity," Chernoff observed.

Nevertheless, it was through the efforts of Christians that Rabbi Levine, for example, found himself drawn to the movement.

Raised in Conservative Judaism — one of the branches of Judaism today — Rabbi Levine was active in his synagogue in Roanoke, Va. But he also had acquaintances who were fundamentalist Christians. Finally he asked one about his faith, expecting to get a lecture about Christianity's "superiority" to Judaism.

Instead, the rabbi recalled, "He told



Karen Baron, a parishioner at St. Joseph's Church in Penfield, prays with the synagogue's members during a recent service.

me about the faithful God of the Jewish people who had a plan for the Jewish people. He said so many wonderful things about God that it provoked jealousy in me. He knew the God of Israel. I had only heard about the God of Israel."

That conversation began a period of Bible study and prayer that led Rabbi Levine to accept Jesus as the Messiah, to work in pastoral ministry in a Christian church and, ultimately, to Messianic Judaism.

Appel, too, found his way to Messianic Judaism through involvement with a Christian church. As a member of the New Covenant Christian fellowship in Penfield, he discovered "a great deal of love and respect for the Jewish people. That wasn't what I was told as a Jewish child."

In fact, he even rose to become a deacon in the church, and engaged in work among some of the Russian Jews who were settling in the area. Through that work, he met Rabbi Bernis, and was drawn Congregation Shema Yisrael.

"There was an appreciation of Jewish roots that's



Song leader Mary Burke leads the congregation in song. Shema Yisrael services include joyful and prayerful music and dance, followed by prayer and a sermon.

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