**The Mormons did it, why not the Evangelicals?**

By Donald Zev Uslan and Ellen W. Horowitz

On Har HaTzofim, Mount Scopus, the Brigham Young University Jerusalem Center looks over a panoramic view of Jerusalem. The Center provides education to young members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints on the Jewish and Christian bibles, modern and ancient Near Eastern Studies, Hebrew and Arabic. The Center also offers regular, impressive, pay-as-you-will concerts to the public throughout the year.

Adherents of the LDS, better known as Mormons, are a “triumphalist” and missionizing denomination. However, in the early 1980s, they committed to a non-proselytizing agreement with the State of Israel and have upheld this agreement to the letter for 38 + years.

**What is “Triumphalism”?**

Christianity\* and Islam are formally known as “triumphalist” religions. This is the conviction that one’s theological and religious beliefs are superior to others. Historically and to the present day, this belief system leads to employing various devices with the intent of declaring “victory” over others, including physical, cultural, and spiritual conquest, that is, domination and often subjugation of other peoples by seduction, conversion and predatory actions.

*[\*Note: Many mainstream Christian denominations do not consider Mormons to be Christian because of certain scriptural and theological differences.* *LDS members do consider themselves Christians.]*

Triumphalism is the historical motivating force behind Christian missionizing throughout the world. Archaic tactics of violence and subjugation eventually yielded to more “civil” methods of proselytizing via global missions to “win the Jews to Christ.” But no matter which way you slice it, the Jewish community perceives targeted Christian evangelism as a form of persecution (some would say anti-Semitism).

*Ironically due to American pressure and international religious freedom statutes, proselytizing remains legal in Israel save for 1: proselytizing to minors without parental permission and 2: or offering monetary or other tangible inducements to convert.*

Many Christian denominations have, in modern times, ceased attempts to convert Jews to Christianity for a variety of reasons, including “futility” - that is, the lack of success in converting Jews. In addition, after historical reflection, there is now a heightened awareness and sensitivity to Jewish sensibilities on the issue. While many of the orthodox Churches have ceased missionizing, most evangelical denominations are still doing their utmost to bring the” good news” to the Jews. Perhaps they can learn a thing or two about theological etiquette in Israel from their LDS brethren.

***Despite its theological principals,*** ***why doesn’t the LDS Church proselytize, or use other missionary tactics to convert Jews in Israel?***

In 1979, Brigham Young University wanted to build a permanent center for its Jerusalem campus (affiliated with its main campus in Salt Lake City, Utah, which is the largest religious university in the United States). A 49-year lease was granted on Har HaTzofim.

In 1984, protesters in Israel, the chief rabbis and religious political parties, and many Jews in the United States, mobilized against the establishment of a missionizing facility in Jerusalem. Jerusalem’s Jews, primarily from the Haredi sector, took to the streets and opposed its construction, causing a national and international uproar – under the banner, “Israel is not for sale!”

At issue was whether Christian support of Israel, with its theology and history of conversionary activity to Jews, should be granted a permanent presence in Israel. The government proposed that the LDS Church issue a formal commitment not to missionize. Church leaders complied. LDS’ commitment not to missionize in Israel was supported by the U.S. President at the time, Gerald Ford, members of the U.S. Congress, and the United Jewish Council of Utah, which supported and endorsed the veracity of LDS commitment as reliable. Thus, the BYU Center on Har HaTzofim was opened in 1987, and the Church has upheld its commitment since then.

The BYU Jerusalem Center [website states](https://jerusalemcenter.ce.byu.edu/policies-standards):

“The Center has made a firm commitment that no one associated with the Center, BYU, or Church will engage in Christian proselytizing activities while in the Holy Land. Students may not proselytize, directly or indirectly. Proselytizing is defined as any activity that could be construed as aimed at including, encouraging, or leading people in the country Israel to investigate any religion for possible conversion. Such activities are strictly contrary to the desires of the government and people of Israel and to the commitments made by BYU, the Jerusalem Center, and the Church. “

No other Christian missionizing organization has ever made a similar commitment not to proselytize, missionize or evangelize in Israel.

An attempt was made in the late 1990s to form a similar LDS-style pact with the leading evangelical organizations in Israel. It failed.

As a result, evangelical missionary activity is unrestrained and rampant in Israel. Due in part to US and international religious freedom legislation, the Knesset has failed to enact any laws to curb this menace and threat to Jewish identity. Our “best friends and “allies” are spearheading efforts to propagate “messianic Judaism” in Israel under the guise of religious freedom, while government agencies and non-profits turn a blind eye to the problem.

**Can one be a devout evangelical and a “mensch” while in Israel?**

We believe that it should be possible. And it’s time to enact a thoughtful, reasonable, no-missionizing, no nonsense policy that will not trample religious freedom nor the freedom to worship in Israel. However, in doing so, the nation of Israel must not compromise its obligation to uphold the Torah and the integrity of the land and people living here.

Interfaith relations and dialogue in Israel present the Jewish state with unique challenges. Triumphalist faiths, which also have a history in and value the Holyland, will continue to strive to establish a foothold here and find any opportunity to witness their faith. And devout evangelical Christians will likely yearn to influence the populations living here -both Jew and Muslim- towards embracing Christocentric belief systems. This presents Israel with a slew of halachic challenges as well, which are beyond the scope of this article.

Israel as a sovereign nation has the responsibility to ensure Jewish continuity and the right to formulate definitions of religious freedom that are suitable and will preserve and protect a delicate balance between faith communities present in Israel. Understandably, the direction Israel takes will and should vary from that of Western Christian nations. However, any approach should be formulated thoughtfully, respectfully and with sensitivity to the other. And certainly, freedom of worship does not include the right to intrude upon the other (i.e missionizing).

**If the Mormons did it and the Evangelicals can't, then what does that tell Israel about the good faith and intentions of our "best friends"?**

***Donald Zev Uslan*** *is a medical and rehabilitation psychotherapist from the University of Washington in Seattle, Washington, now living in Jerusalem. His specialty over a 45-year career has been working with individuals and groups with complex chronic illnesses, most of whom had been psychologically, physically, or sexually abused in childhood.*

***Ellen W. Horowitz*** *is an artist and author who served as the former content and research director for JewishIsrael.com, an organization exploring the challenges and complexities of Israel’s alliances with fundamentalist, evangelical and messianic Christian groups.*