**A Complex Conversation: Perspectives on Missionaries in Israel**

By Donald Zev Uslan

“In Jewish History there are no coincidences.”

Elie Wiesel

**This article is an informal social survey that explores diverse opinions about missionaries and their impact in Israel from across the social, political, occupational, and religious spectrum.**

## On May 28, 2023 a 10-year multi-denominational evangelical missionary campaign to be known as [2033.earth](https://2033.earth/) was launched on the Southern Steps of the Temple Mount, largely focused on conversionary efforts towards the Jewish people and Jerusalem. The prime goal is “Recognizing the need of the more than 8 billion individuals on earth to hear and respond to the good news of Jesus Christ.”

I take a critical view of evangelizing efforts and activities, largely writing about missionaries in Israel from a psycho-social perspective. I was present at the rally to protest the event, but I also made attempts to engage in dialogue with various young missionaries about the impact their proselytizing has on Jews.

I witnessed aggressive border patrol officers who rushed and tackled young protesters, and I saw many of the protesters push back.

I saw no one spitting on the Christian missionaries, although I understand it is a long-standing tradition for some members of certain Hareidi sects to spit on the ground -even in their own synagogues – when referencing forbidden worship. (For the sake of argument, I’ll acknowledge at this protest and others, there have been some provocateurs. I haven’t seen them, but I’ve been told they exist.)

One quiet Haredi young man held up a sign at the Southern Steps that read,

“We haven’t forgotten our Temple that was destroyed by Rome nor the inquisition in Spain and all the pogroms. We have not forgotten the bloodshed nor the Six Million who were murdered in the Holocaust. Now we have returned to our country and pray in the remnant of our Temple that will be rebuilt soon. Please respect the feelings of the Jewish people and hold your Christian ceremonies in your churches and not here.”

What was reported in the Israeli and international media, and then condemned by Israeli politicians who were not present, was that the demonstrators were “anti-Christian” “extremist religious Jews” and “ultra-orthodox Jews” (see [“Christians worry growing protests against ‘missionaries’ will soon turn bloody’](https://www.timesofisrael.com/christians-worry-growing-protests-against-missionaries-will-soon-turn-bloody/), Times of Israel, July 7, 2023.)

In the spirit of traditional Jewish reasoning and dialogue, and although I have my (strong) points of view about missionaries and missionizing in Israel, I felt it important to ask and conduct a survey of sorts of other viewpoints and opinions. So I sought out people I know and didn’t know from across the religious, ethnic, occupational, and political spectrum, and simply asked them, “What do you think of missionizing or missionaries in Israel?” What follows are the responses (some people wanted to remain anonymous, interesting in itself).

**The Informal Social Survey:**

**Worried about her adult children, Ms. Anonymous, a native-born Israeli, mother of 6 adult children said:**

*“As a mother of sons who served in the army in combat units, I lost many nights of sleep. But it wasn't due only because of my concern for my boy’s physical safety. I found myself worrying many times about their spiritual well-being. I heard from my 5 sons of many fellow soldiers who confided their belief in Jesus. We're talking about Jewish Israeli young men who belong to messianic congregations throughout Israel and became close friends of their fellow soldiers. I also found myself many times telling my sons to invite lone soldiers home to us for Shabbat rather than see them go to Lone Soldier homes some of which are owned and operated by Christians and messianics.”*

**Mr. Anonymous, an American-born Israeli attorney who has been in Israel for over 40 years does not see missionizing as the threat perceived by myself and others:**

*“While I do not like missionizing in Israel, I think that in a country facing major problems, the issue of missionaries is not anywhere near the top of the list. I feel that the solution to the problem will not be solved by stronger legislation or increased enforcement of existing laws. Rather than put efforts into trying to curtail the work of missionaries, I would prefer to see people putting more resources into Jewish education (of whatever stripe) and work on "our side" of the equation.”*

**Here’s the perspective of Gavriel Aryeh Sanders, American-born Israeli, a former evangelical minister/missionary, convert and now missionary awareness consultant:**

*“Many missionaries are sincere believers, not cunning deceivers. I’ve lived in their minds. The common Jewish method of engagement with missionaries is generally reactive and combative. That's way off the beam, ineffective, and only reinforces their resolve. Missionaries fully believe they are rescuing Jews from eternal hell fire and ultimately bringing the redemption. Christian missionaries are sincere - and sincerely wrong. I have over 20 years in their world and not once did anyone speak of deceiving Jews or stealing souls.”*

**This American self-described Evangelical Christian has been reading various accounts of missionary activities in Israel, and is upset by their activities:**

“*It seems that we Christians have lost sight and have become as reactionary as those on the American political/social side of things. Christians have often become antagonists rather than peace makers. It should not be about “winning” as has become so powerfully imbedded in America’s**corporate/social/religious psyche****.*** *Extremism has always been a risk with Christianity. This distortion should be readily obvious to “Evangelical” Christians. All it seems to take is the tiniest element of truth to give a major distortion credibility!”*

**For a military perspective, Major Elliot Chodoff (res.) is a political, military, and strategic analyst. He has published academic articles including “Virtual Double-Edged Sword: Communications Technology in the Service of Terrorism and Democracy”:**

*“Today, more than ever in history, there are many Christians who stand fully shoulder to shoulder in support of the Jewish People and Israel. Nonetheless, there remain many Christians who are bent on converting Jews to Christianity, no matter what the method. They remain in the ranks of the Jew haters of history, from the early Constantine Church through the Inquisitors and others who cannot tolerate the Jews. They must be vigorously confronted as their threat is no less than that of Antiochus, who triggered the Maccabean Revolt.”*

**Sam Shube is an activist and manager of an Israeli organization that promotes Arab-Jewish understanding:**

*“As a Jew I expect Evangelicals to treat me with the same respect I have for their Christian faith. And the fundamental, unifying characteristic of Jewish identity – from stridently secular, anti-religious movements like the Bund to the most insular haredi groups, is that Jews do NOT believe in Jesus. As deeply committed as I am to multiculturalism, there can be no genuine interreligious dialogue with Christians who fail to accept this. Missionaries constantly protest their love for the Jewish people. But Jews don't need love. We want respect. The same respect we must afford others, if we want to live in a civilized society."*

**A native-born Israeli, Naomi Ziri, a retired architect, has had no exposure to missionaries, and is a bit perplexed by the issue:**

*"I was born in a Jewish country, where Jewishness is a sure thing. So, for me being Jewish is not the most important part, but being empathetic to people is my main criterion. I know that many missionary activities are manipulative and not empathetic, and so then I'm against it, just like I'm against all the terrible things that are happening all the time in our world. When I meet these things, I feel disappointed and helpless."*

**An American-born Israeli, former Soviet Jewry activist and leader, Pamela Cohen is the author of “Hidden Heroes: One Woman’s Story of Resistance and Rescue in the Soviet Union”:**

*“The movement for the emigration of Jews from the former Soviet Union was a struggle for the survival of Jews conducted by a grassroots movement in the West that would not be silent in the face of their people’s persecution and forced assimilation. Having survived waves of assaults from enemies determined to annihilate us, an evangelical proselytizing movement, aggressively active in Israel, has cost us the lives of thousands of Jews and generations of Jews that would have come from them. Once again, Jews in Israel and America cannot afford to be silent in the face a movement determined to love us to death.”*

**In contrast, Mr. Anonymous, a European-born Israeli, an academic and convert, believes:**

*“I'm not so sure if we, Jews, and Israelis, are so easily seduced. If that would be the case, the Jewish minority would have long been dissolved into their neighboring Christian and Muslim cultures. I think that’s also a thing with the missionaries: Israel from within looks different (strong, secure, self-assured) than Israel from the outside (tiny country, threatened). I guess the Israelis have the feeling they have it under control. It seems nobody is actually caring about evangelicals. Hard to believe any proper church (meaning: State churches, Catholics, or Protestants) are going to join these loonies.”*

**Here is another perspective of an American Evangelical Christian, Ms. Anonymous:**

*“It is beyond me why many Christians seem to think they have to "make" things happen for God. For one thing, they don't even take into consideration God's entire scriptures, both Jewish and Christian as a whole, but they pick and choose what they think is most important and then go all or nothing to reach their particular goal. I'm truly sorry.”*

**Ms. Anonymous, a native-born Israeli arborist of Moroccan-descent, repeats the “kindness” concern expressed by Ms. Anonymous (retired architect above) and doesn’t see the missionaries as a threat. She is confused by the interplay between Jew and Christian:**

*“I met with missionaries in the past and I found it bit funny to try and convert a Jew to Christianity... Jesus was Jewish. If someone converts, if he's happy and feeling better about his everyday life, and kind to others, go ahead. In today's world Christianity and the Jewish world have bigger issues with the Muslims and other forces that try to break what we have built so far.”*

**A very powerful opinion from renowned Nazi hunter Efraim Zuroff, Ph.D., author of “Our People: Discovering Lithuania’s Hidden Holocaust,” “Operation Last Chance: One Man’s Quest to Bring Nazi Criminals to Justice,” and “”Occupation: Nazi-Hunter: The Continuing Search for the Perpetrators of the Holocaust”:**

*“Missionary activity is another form of antisemitism. For hundreds of years the major basis of antisemitism has been religious because Jews had rejected Jesus and refused to adapt or convert to Christianity. To come to Israel, to get people to abandon the religion that our ancestors fought to survive for hundreds of generations is itself a crime. These missionaries prey on the most vulnerable populations in our society. It’s like stealing Jewish souls and lives. ‘Antisemitism with love.’ It’s a horrible tragedy to lose Jews to missionaries.”*

**An American Mormon perspective is given by Ryan Larsen, American, about missionizing in Israel:**

*“I am an actively participating individual of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints. My church and faith have always had a strong foundation and belief in proselytizing and sharing our religious perspectives. My faith also teaches one to be kind, to love others and more importantly in this case to respect others’ beliefs and rights and religious freedom. My faith and church leadership are very deliberate with* [*i*](https://newsroom.churchofjesuschrist.org/article/interfaith)*nterfaith relations and talk about it often. It is my personal desire and hope that all people can strive to find some common ground of peace, kindness towards others, and respect for all people regardless of differences, including religious beliefs and practices.”*

**A statement by Ms. Anonymous, a former activist and leader in the Soviet Jewry movement, an American-born Israeli who has been in Israel for over 40 years:**

*“For the sake of Jewish survival we fought vociferously for the freedom and Aliya to Israel for Soviet Jewry and not to be prey to missionaries in Israel who deprive them of their Jewish heritage.”*

**Two native-born Israelis, both educators, when asked “What do you think of missionizing or missionaries in Israel?” both said the same thing:**

 *“I don’t know anything about them*.”

**Irwin J. Mansdorf, PhD, a psychologist who worked with Project Liberty, An American community-based outreach program developed after the 9-11 attacks, is an American-born Israeli, social researcher, academic and trauma expert.:**

*“Free choice is a central pillar of Jewish philosophy. When it comes to active missionizing of Jews, 'free choice' is often compromised, especially by some who use subversive means, such as assuming outward Jewish identities or providing prayers in Hebrew. Jewish individuals who respond to such tactics believe they are acting "Jewishly," thus falling victim to what is essentially the robbing of their free choice under the guise of Judaism and moving towards a belief system they would ordinarily never approach."*

**A former senior librarian at the U.S. Library of Congress, Dr. Lester Vogel, offers a balanced view of the evangelical relationship with Israel. He is the author of “To See a Promised Land: Americans and the Holy Land in the Nineteenth Century”:**

*“Some Christian missionaries have relied more on deception and fraud as a way of penetrating into Jewish life in order to spread its message. Such a practice is to be thoroughly condemned. At the same time, a greater understanding and appreciation of the re-emergence of a Jewish State has been the cause of deeper reflection on the relationship between Judaism and Christianity, with some Christians gaining a fuller understanding of Judaism’s reasons for not adopting Christianity’s doctrines. I urge that those who continue to target Jews for evangelization within Israel to cease their activities and come to recognize not only the futility of their efforts, but also their utter disregard for how their deceptive practices reflect on their personal values as Christians.”*

**The head of a large and successful organization committed to Jewish-Christian relations, Mr. Anonymous is an American-born Israeli who offers these thoughts:**

*“While I believe that most evangelicals do believe that they need to convert anyone who is not a Christian, Jews included, some of whom (mostly messianics) nearly exclusively focusing on us, I don’t believe that everyone (here) who is an evangelical is out to convert us. Some not at all. Some not actively but may think it's not bad but they don’t engage in it. There are many ranges. Not black and white.”*

**An American-born Israeli, Andrea Simantov, is a blogger and radio personality:**

*“There has been an influx of Christian missionaries in my southern Jerusalem neighborhood. I used to laugh at their childish comic books and flyers but, sadly, the joke is now on me. They have grown sophisticated and are clearly well-funded. Who is targeted? In my neighborhood, it is primarily working-class Israelis of Moroccan descent and Russians. There is an agenda at play that includes the acquisition of Jewish participants, a gathering of Jewish souls for an endgame that is designed to erase the faith of our forefathers. It is a duplicitous agenda. This is a war, and we’d better know our stuff. “*

**Gedallah Gurfein is an American-born Israeli and the author and developer of “The People’s Talmud”:**

*“Missionizing Jews (or anyone for that matter) is an insult to the religion missionaries think they represent. It is an affront to thinking humanity. The assumption of goodness in their "soul saving" is a tremendous expression of arrogance. The work of the missionary is the devil dressed like an angel.”*

**A retired American congregational rabbi, Stuart Federow, is the author of "Judaism and Christianity: A Contrast," and the co-host of a radio show with a Baptist minister and Catholic priest:**

*“How is it possible that so many Israelis are being successfully proselytized? How is it possible that the messianics have doubled their size in 10 years? This shows that conversion to Christianity is emotional, based on feelings, on psychological need, and not on rational thought. Israel needs to make sure that the spiritual and emotional needs of its Jewish citizens are being met.”*

**A native-born Israeli and veteran tour guide, Mr. Anonymous, had a personally painful experience with missionaries involving a family member:**

*“My son, in the army, was “stolen” by missionaries, as were a couple of his army friends. It took a lot for me and a few of us to get them out of it. I don’t want to talk about this anymore. You have enough information.”*

**Conclusion:**

It is ironic that the victimization stance of Christian missionaries about protests against attempting to convert Jews is “anti-Christian,” when, indeed, the mission to convert Jews away from Judaism is anti-Semitism.

Complexity of thought, dialogue, reasoning, and respectful argument guided my path to becoming a *ba'al teshuva*. The simplicity of this “anti-Christian” victimization demagoguery reminds me of the current overly simplistic political discourse now taking place in America. I left America for Jewish Israel.

It is more than a coincidence and an inevitable consequence that we’ve adopted an “evangelistic-type narrative” about ourselves in Israel. We’ve not only allowed the importation of Christian missionizing, but we are also adopting the one-dimensional, goal-oriented reasoning evangelicals espouse (“Heaven or Hell,” “God or the Devil,” “Jesus or Die”). Our Israeli discourse about missionaries in Israel has been reduced to American-Christian Left-Right, Good-Bad, Crazy-Sane.

In “The Scandal of the Evangelical Mind,” author Mark A. Noll, an evangelical Christian, writes:

“The scandal of the evangelical mind is that there is not much of an evangelical mind…modern American evangelicals have failed notably in sustaining serious intellectual life. …they have largely abandoned the universities, the arts, and other realms of ‘high culture’…the evangelical ethos is activistic, populist, pragmatic, and utilitarian.”

Noll quotes scholar N. K. Clifford:

“The Evangelical Protestant mind has never relished complexity. …its crusading genius, whether in religion or politics, has always tended toward an over-simplification of issues and the substitution of inspiration and zeal for critical analysis and serious reflection.”

A recent article by Eric Dolan, in the journal “Cognitive Science,” entitled “[New psychology research indicates that social rigidity is a key predictor of cognitive rigidity](https://www.psypost.org/2023/07/new-psychology-research-indicates-that-social-rigidity-is-a-key-predictor-of-cognitive-rigidity-166284)” addresses the issue surrounding the Black and White reactive thinking in calling the frustration of missionizing in Israel “anti-Christian” and the evangelical Christianization of Israeli discourse:

“The researchers noted that being a good problem solver requires the ability to overcome rigid perspectives, seek alternative reasoning paths, and tolerate ambiguity. They argued that this thinking skill is reflected in other forms of social reasoning, such as being open-minded and questioning established norms. In contrast, individuals with high social rigidity tend to be less flexible in their thinking, which hinders their problem-solving abilities.”

The Jewish Enquiring mind vs. the “Evangelical Over-simplification” mind.

When there is no leadership, no guidance, no laws, no regulation, no red lines, no national discourse about missionaries trying to convert Jews, then, as we can see in other social movements, people get frustrated, and they protest. Spitting on the ground (albeit distasteful) is a passive form of protest. A rally where participants yell, ‘Missionaries Go Home!’ is a legal form of protest. Signs and placards are a reasoned form of protest.

Without any leadership, governmental or religious acknowledgment of the impact of Christian missionaries not only in their conversionary efforts but in the “Christification” of Israeli culture, such protest activity will only increase.