**When Christian Evangelical Behavior Turns Predatory**

By Donald Zev Uslan

In my effort, as a medical psychotherapist, to understand the impact of extensive evangelical missionizing in Israel, the parallel between abuse by sexual predators and the exploitation of Israelis by missionaries has become increasingly clear with similar long-term consequences of personal, familial, and societal illness**.**

I see the behavior and dynamics of missionaries in Israel as proselytizing predators, which closely follows the pattern of grooming and manipulation demonstrated by sexual predators. I believe this approach should be explored to bring attention to its impact on the Jewish people.

But before continuing, we need to take a deep breath and acknowledge that a very significant Pro-Israel Christian evangelical community has, for years, been in the forefront of political lobbying on behalf of the State of Israel and has contributed vast sums in economic and philanthropic support towards the Jewish state and its institutions. Despite the upheaval and changes in the current U.S. administration, evangelicals remain staunch supporters of Israel, and Israeli diplomats and Jewish leadership in the Diaspora would rather turn a blind eye to what they deem as benign missionary overtures than question or sever the cleverly orchestrated faith-based ties that now firmly bind us together. Indeed, there are strings attached and costs involved in this relationship that beg examination.

There are now over 300 agencies and places of worship in Israel, and many online, dedicated to converting Jews to a belief in Jesus. The aggressive efforts of missionary organizations in Israel (funded largely from the U.S.) have led to a doubling in the number of conversions over the last 5 years to 30,000 people. Quasi-governmental bodies in Israel utilize evangelical Christian missionary organizations for financial support and to offer services to Israelis.

My 45-year career has entailed working with individuals with complex chronic medical conditions, the majority of whom were women referred by physicians. Most of these women and some men had been emotionally, physically, or sexually abused in childhood, as teenagers or in young adulthood. Research has shown that severe stress and abuse in childhood and young adulthood can set the stage for a compromised immune system and the propensity to develop an illness or illnesses in later in life. Most patients had a concurrent psychological diagnosis associated with anxiety and trauma, in addition to their medical conditions.

The typical profile of an abuser has a recognized system of “grooming”, preparation for manipulation, which entails the abuser developing a pattern of relating to the vulnerable victim or victims with trust and friendship, obscuring their actual motives of sexual gratification and control, and gradually desensitizing the victim as to their desired outcome. These men, and some women, are predators—they specifically seek out victims.

Some of the dynamics of these predators are:

**Vulnerability:** The typical victim is vulnerable, with features of being misunderstood, feeling insecure in themselves and their identity. Their families are often broken or characterized by mental health or drug-related problems.

**Seduction:** The predator is usually charming, seductive, persuasive and to some degree intimidating. They cultivate fear in their victims.

**Trust:** Predators cultivate trust and rapport, offer “love,” affection and acceptance to those who feel unloved and unaccepted.

**Manipulation and Deception:** Predators engage in deception, lies and falsehoods to persuade and convince their victim. They “buy” the attention and affection of their victims, often with gifts and offers of money.

**Alliances:** They ally themselves with trusted figures of authority and respect thus gaining credibility. Alliances with parental or leadership figures enable them to prey on their victims.

**Rationalization and Justification:** They rationalize and justify their behaviour of manipulation to themselves and others.

Missionaries identify and seek out specific victims in groups or as individuals and gain some form of gratification from their success and efforts. This gratification may be theological, spiritual, emotional, control or influence. They too gradually desensitize their victim or victims as to their true desired outcome: conversion. Thus, they are “spiritual predators”.

Missionaries identify and exploit vulnerable populations in Israel. These include immigrants from Ethiopia or the FSU who may have not yet been fully integrated into Israeli society nor fully accepted as Jews. Missionaries also identify Holocaust survivors, the disaffected young Haredi, the sick and dying, and lone and lonely soldiers. Other vulnerable individuals include those with low self-esteem and issues concerning sexual behaviors, sex workers and mental health or types of addiction.

Missionaries “prey” on fear: “You want to go to heaven; you don’t want to go to Hell. Believe in Yeshua.” Many covert missionaries have mastered various Jewish external attributes such as speaking Hebrew, learning Jewish rituals and life events, and sometimes adopting the attire of religious Jews. Professionally produced videos displayed on social media are seductive, using attractive missionaries skilled and trained in communication techniques. Their seduction attempts are slow, gradual, incremental with seldom any clarity as to the ultimate outcome: conversion.

Missionaries are typically identified by Israelis as “nice people”, “friendly”, “kind” and “caring”. They cultivate trust and dependency by offering entertainment, meals, and other means of social bonding to breed familiarity. (Israelis, acculturated by long history to war, trauma, and physical threat have no natural “defences” against politeness and niceness.) Many adherents of "messianic Judaism" are themselves the children of missionaries who arrived in Israel via loopholes in Israel's Law of Return and identify as Israelis.

Evangelical Christians fund social and other services, provide buildings, resources, and manpower to demonstrate their “love” and support politically and socially, to achieve and maintain credibility. Multiple efforts to deceive their intended victims, Israelis, are made using Jewish symbols, rituals, appearance, obfuscating terminology (“Yeshua” instead of “Jesus,” “Completed Jews”). They take advantage of the weak legislation in Israel against proselytizing. Missionaries in Israel have rid their messages of the familiar trappings of Christianity: the cross, images of Jesus, the use of the word “Christ”, the concept of the trinity, references to the virgin Mary, manger scenes and other representations of Christianity that are generally innately offensive to Jews.

Missionaries ally themselves with Israeli political leaders and agencies, Jewish social and rabbinic figures and facilitate political and financial relations with the United States, gaining credibility and authority. So, it is often Jews who enable this spiritual predation. Many Jewish leaders who have facilitated the involvement of Christian Missionaries in Israeli society say, “Nobody has ever tried to convert me,” or “I’ve never seen them try to convert anybody.” Israeli government and community leaders have inculcated the public with the understanding that the evangelicals are "our best friends" and are to be trusted.

Missionaries believe they are “saving” and “completing” Jews. This justifies all means of deception, as noted in the New Testament:*“To the Jews I became like a Jew, to win the Jews.”*  1 Corinthians 9:20-22

When both the sexual predator and the proselytizing predator are confronted with their exploitive behaviours, they resort to denial and obfuscation, aggressively enlisting others in their defence, and ultimately claiming their own victim status in the face of accusation, often proclaiming fear of reprisal because of the “false” accusation.

Ironically, the average American or Israeli Jew recoils at missionary advances. But data is lacking on the impact in Israel of evangelical predatory proselytizing. One of the reasons for this is that families are embarrassed and ashamed that their son or daughter would convert out. So, it is kept a “secret.” Professionals who encounter anyone traumatized by missionaries are ethically bound to confidentiality and committed to protecting the victims and their families.

Many Jewish community leaders derive a significant portion of their income from evangelical Christian support. With the evangelical movement estimated at 60-80 million in the United States and 600 million worldwide, Israeli leaders are understandably eager to welcome evangelical Christian “friendliness”, manpower services and financial and political support.

Missionizing has an impact on the sense of religious and cultural safety felt by Israelis. Missionizing is a blow to the Jewish soul, an insinuation into our reason for being in Israel-- the Jewish Home, the place of safety and security for Jews. Proselytizing is an insidious act of seduction and assault that we not only cannot deal with, we also cannot identify nor acknowledge. The result of this secret shame and embarrassment is the weakening of the bonds that tie us together. This is the “illness” impact to the Israeli “immune system,” similar to the medical and psychological conditions of my patients. I believe Israel and Israelis have experienced, or will experience, the missionary version of PTSD: “PTCD”- “Post-traumatic Conversion Disorder,” together with its associated personal, familial, or societal systemic illnesses. This trauma and shock to Israeli society and culture needs an effective intervention.

There is a cost involved when the Israeli government makes little effort to assert itself and establish red lines in its dealings with evangelical Christian allies.

Due to pressure from Israel's evangelical allies and messianic Christian groups, attempts at enacting significant counter-missionary legislation in Israel have met with repeated failure. Israel is left with two ineffectual anti-proselytizing laws that are difficult to enforce: 1) It is illegal to proselytize to a person under 18 years of age without the consent of both parents and 2) The law prohibits offering a material benefit while proselytizing.

Of course, all of this may fly in the face of many who perceive evangelizing as legitimate and part and parcel of fundamental Christian belief. And what about those who have enshrined and uphold such lofty concepts of freedom of religious expression in an open marketplace of ideas where, in a free encounter, "the truth will always prevail"? It needs to be recognized that these ideas, which are ensconced in the public policy and psyche of America, do not always export well to other nations –especially when it comes to matters of intimate expressions of faith. Judaism is a non- proselytizing religion which values personal spiritual boundaries and has traditionally shunned public debate with the other monotheistic faiths that are triumphalist by nature.

And then there is an ethical matter. The aggressive and deceptive tactics used by missionaries seem to run contrary to the aim of advancing the free flow of accurate and truthful information. The Fundamentalist Christian demand for the freedom to proselytize in the Jewish state is being employed as an unfair tactic of religious triumphalism that challenges the very spirit of the Nation of Israel – a nation charged with ensuring its continuity and of preserving the identity and heritage of the Jewish people.

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