



# Caspari Center NEWS

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Equipping  
the next generation  
of Jewish believers  
in Jesus



## The typical Messianic believer is an immigrant

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## "Yes" = "Ken" ... = "Da"?!?

As of March 2011, the average Israeli Messianic believer in Jesus is . . . Yes, who is he? Trying to answer based on impressions from Israeli media coverage of recent years might make you think of a native Israeli who is proud to have served in the Israel Defense Forces, possibly even in a combat unit. On the one hand, they wear no special religious clothes, study or have regular jobs, and pay their taxes. On the other hand, they may be a part of a family or raising one which gathers every Friday night around a traditional Shabbat table and celebrates other biblical holidays, more or less following age-old traditions. In other words, this average believer is Israeli in every respect.

As with many other images of Israel that the media is trying to sell us, this one too leaves much to be desired. Of course, it is not totally detached from reality. Today the Messianic community does have in our midst native Israelis – about 10%. And since another 10–15% are expatriates (these percentages are estimates, since no accurate data is available), it is obvious that the typical Messianic believer is an immigrant. Moreover, his mother tongue is most likely Russian, since at least half of all Israeli Messianics come from the former Soviet Union. Why?

Israel's history has been closely connected with the "land of the north," as Jeremiah called it (16:15), from the outset: the very first Zionist immigrants at the end of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th were Russian Jews fleeing pogroms. The last Russian-speaking wave came in the early 1990s, and since then Israel has received from the former USSR over a million people – nearly one fifth of its current Jewish population. The old joke is, "You've been in the Land for so long, and still

don't speak any Russian?"

The Soviet regime generally had little place for freedom of religion, to say the least. Thus, deprived of any religious and spiritual heritage, Jews from the former Soviet republics naturally were – and still remain – the group that is most open to the gospel message among Israelis today. Some came to faith in their country of exodus after the fall of the "iron curtain," usually through the Orthodox Church, and some through Baptists, Pentecostals, and Charismatics; others made their way into the church after coming to Israel.

Compared to immigrants from other nations, Russians have been quite successful in meeting the challenges of integration into their new country. This is evidenced by a significant "Russian presence" in virtually all areas of Israeli life, from the Knesset (the Parliament) to sports teams, and can be attributed to flexibility, a strong work ethic, and free higher education – one of the few benefits of Communism that they were able to bring along. However, they have also changed Israel culturally: today Russian newspapers, bookshops, grocery stores, and signs can be found in every city, and Russian radio and TV are available around the country. But this change is a mixed blessing: while it allows Russian immigrants to preserve and enjoy their native culture, it also somewhat de-motivates them from going deeper into the Israeli one.

The same can be seen on a much smaller scale in the Israeli Messianic community. On the one hand, many Russians today are members of Hebrew-speaking congregations, and are to a greater or lesser degree returning to their biblical Jewish heritage. Many are pastors and leaders, and some are active on the national level and work shoulder to shoulder with others. On the other hand, there are also leaders and congregations that lean toward creating a theological and cultural ghetto, in which cultural awareness and the advice of the “others” are not really welcome.

A ghetto mentality is dangerous for many reasons, but the one that troubles me most is the next generation. Faith did not begin with us and is not to end with us. To pass it on to our children – who surely speak Hebrew better than we do – we have to learn their language, in every sense of the word. Will it take some humility and work? Of course, but I firmly believe that it's worth the effort. So thank you in advance for your heartfelt prayers.

*Alec Goldberg*



## **Meet the Pastor – or the Rabbi?**

Leon Mazin is a busy man, and getting him to give an interview is not an easy task. However, with God even that mission is possible. He leads “Shavei Tzion” – a Messianic congregation in Haifa where the only native Israelis are children and young people who attend with their Russian-speaking parents. He has kindly agreed to answer a few questions.

*Leon, please tell us about yourself and your family.*

I am married, my wife's name is Nina, and we both come from the former USSR – me from Bobruisk (Belarus), and she from Simferopol (Ukraine). I moved in 1989, after finishing my

engineering studies in the Riga Technical University. And Nina came to Israel in 1990. We met and got married here, and today have 5 children, aged 3 to 16.

*What made you move to Israel?*

It is easier to say what it was not: neither anti-Semitism, which was surely present but not terrible, nor economic difficulties (our family was doing okay economically). I can't give a rational reason. Today, looking back, I say that it was God's hand on Jews from “the land of the north” that drew us here.

*How would you describe your integration into a new life?*

Well, the language was not a problem, because back then there were very few Russians here, so we simply had to speak Hebrew. There also were some difficulties. First of all, the culture shock. I came from Riga – in many ways a Western city even under the Soviets – and suddenly found myself in a neighborhood with many religious Jews from Morocco. Secondly, with a degree in robotics, I couldn't find a job here in this field, and had to work at construction jobs.

*Now to your faith: was it easy for you as a Jew to become a believer in Jesus?*

I grew up in a secular Jewish family. We did not have any religious dimension to our identity; for sure at Passover there was *matzo* [unleavened bread] at home, but that was about it, basically. When it came to Jesus, I did have a dilemma as a Jew. To me he was first of all the God of the Gentiles. Becoming convinced that he is actually God took intense and focused prayer, searching the Scriptures, and a revelation that I experienced.

*Please tell us about your congregation in Haifa.*

We are about 140 people, with about 40 of them being children and youth. I preach in both Russian and Hebrew, depending on the occasion. The order of the Shabbat service is quite similar to that in the synagogue; we also keep the kashrut laws, circumcise our boys and celebrate the Jewish holidays.

*In other words, you don't look very Protestant...*

Not at all! Of course, the Jewish tradition for us is neither the way to salvation nor a manipulative missionary trick. Our emphasis on it comes from the conviction that God's covenants with Jerusalem and Israel, as well as his ordinances for us as a people and promises to us, were given forever, and that faith in Jesus does not annul anything of that. The Book of Acts shows this very clearly. We are Jews, we live in Israel, and our lifestyle should reflect it.

*Thank you very much for your time!*

You are welcome, thank you too.

## Caspari Goes North

You have to live in Israel to know what five minutes means here . . . or why strangers at a bus stop strike up a conversation and ask you about your parents' health . . . or why we say that our country is very small but has very long roads. Ok, let me explain at least the last one: for an average Israeli, 60 or 70 kilometers (approximately 40 miles) is almost the distance between the Earth and the Moon. Oh, sure, many drive that far to get to work and back, or to see the family once in a while – but rarely for any other reason.

Sixty kilometers, by the way, is also the distance from Haifa to Netanya. It is in Netanya that we have been holding the national seminar for Shabbat school teachers for the past 14 years. And in recent years, fewer and fewer participants have been coming from the north, including Haifa – something which made us think and pray about going to them instead of inviting them to come to us.

Having a seminar in Haifa seemed important also for other reasons. One is the high number of congregations in the north of Israel. Another is that about 60–70% of Shabbat school teachers are Russian speakers, who are eager to preserve their language and culture at least in the family. And third, we already had a Russian-language seminar last year, in Tel-Aviv, which showed us that the need is there.

So dozens of Russian-speaking teachers from the north were invited to attend an event on February 25 in Haifa. This time, the speaker had to be able not only to teach about Shabbat school ministry, but to do so with knowledge of the cross-cultural situation of the audience. And since this was the first event of its kind, failure would have been especially unwelcome.

The challenge was met brilliantly by Hadassah K., a seasoned teacher from Tel-Aviv. Her vast experience matched her understanding of both Russian and Israeli culture, enabling her to minister effectively to those in attendance. The seminar dealt with the most important matters. What should be prioritized: sticking to the program or trying to see the children's worth, their inner world and potential? How can a teacher avoid problems with discipline? How can the Good News be made alive for children?

The participants were all very grateful, and we are confident that this first Shabbat school seminar in the north of Israel was a small beginning of something larger to come.

Rita Kontorovich



## media review



**Caspari Center publishes a weekly review of material from the Israeli press documenting attitudes toward Messianic Jews, the mission, and the Christian faith. To receive the Media Review free of charge by email, sign up on our website at [www.caspari.com/signup.html](http://www.caspari.com/signup.html).**

**Several newspapers covered the large demonstration of between 500 and 1,000 Orthodox Jews against the Messianic congregation in Ashdod on February 22.**

"We're talking here about the sect that calls itself 'Messianic Jews,' which operates with a huge budget from Christian organizations across the world. . . . Their goal is to eradicate the Jewish people and bring as many Jews as possible into Christianity. Our message is simple: The Jewish people lost a third of its members, six million Jews, in the Holocaust, and it can't happen that today, in Israel, the missionaries should continue to destroy more of our brethren.

. . . We're also trying to influence the landlord who rented the place to the sect to cancel the rental contract and to force the missionaries out of a place which was, before they moved in, a center for Torah study," said Rabbi Benjamin Walkin a few days before the protest.

At the protest itself, Rabbi Yosef Sheinin compared the Messianic Jews with Hitler: "They want a final solution, what Hitler wanted, but they don't have the instruments of destruction so they're using those of apostasy."

**Ashdod BeKoterot** (February 16), **Yediot Ashdod** (February 25), **Kan HaDarom** (February 25), **HaShavua BeAshdod** (February 25).



## Remember...

There were about 25 teenagers chattering with one another in the activity room of the church, but they fell silent for a moment as I walked a bicycle into the room and propped the bike's kickstand into place. As soon as I did, their questions flew like confetti:

"Whose bike is that?"

"Why did you bring a bike in here?"

"Are you giving it away?"

"Are you going to ride it?"

I'd been asked to talk with the church youth group about communion, and was counting on the bike to help the teens think about the Lord's Supper in a new way. I asked if any of them knew what the term "muscle memory" meant (they didn't), so I told them that it was a formal name for a phenomenon they'd all experienced. "If you regularly practice a specific motor skill like typing, throwing a ball, or playing an instrument, the movement becomes embedded in your long-term memory and you can do it without thinking about it."

"Like riding a bike!" one young man laughed.

I nodded, and told them about something I'd done throughout my growing-up years that had become a part of my spiritual "muscle memory" – my Jewish family's yearly Passover Seder. The ceremonial meal recounting God's miraculous deliverance of my people from generations of slavery in Egypt was both ritual and feast. My grandfather insisted on reading every passage in the *Haggadah*, the booklet guiding the recounting of the Exodus story. The symbols of water, egg, parsley, saltwater, bitter horseradish, sweet *charoset* (an apple-cinnamon-wine-nut mixture), lamb shank bone, wine, and *matza* (unleavened bread) were the centerpiece of the table, living illustrations of a true story that had been passed down for generations in obedience to God's command to remember and retell (Exod. 13:8). The Seder meant active participation for everyone as we sang, prayed, ate, and remembered.

This sort of active, participatory remembrance was captured in the apostle Paul's familiar words in 1 Corinthians 11:23–26:

*For I received from the Lord what I also passed on to you: The Lord Jesus, on the night he was betrayed, took bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and said, "This is my body, which is for you; do this in remembrance of me." In the same way, after supper he took the cup, saying, "This cup is the new covenant in my blood; do this, whenever you drink it, in remembrance of me." For whenever you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes.*

"When we hear the word 'remember,' most of us think of recalling information – recollecting the information for a test, or trying to think of where you left your house key," I told the teens. "But the word 'remember' in this passage is a deep kind of muscle memory remembering, like riding a bike. It goes far, far beyond simply remembering the facts about what Yeshua did for us."

I reminded them that communion was rooted in Yeshua's final Seder meal with his friends, and that remembering him at communion means bringing to active remembrance the context in which this sacrament was given us.

Then I flicked the kickstand up and climbed onto the bike. I hadn't ridden a bike for nearly thirty years, but was betting that the skill was so deeply embedded in my muscle memory that I would still be able to do it. "How many of you think I'm not going to be able to ride this bike since I haven't been on one for three decades?" The room erupted into laughter. They all were certain I'd fall or crash into something.

I was wobbly, but I successfully pedaled a couple of laps around the room's perimeter. I simply had to bring that long-dormant skill to active remembrance in order to do it. (I hope that the image of me pedaling around the room will not be what the teens remember the next time they take communion!)

Yeshua infused new meaning into the cup and the unleavened bread at the final Seder he shared with his friends, when he told them that these familiar symbols proclaimed the deliverance and new life he came to bring each one of us.

All we must do is receive his gift . . . and remember.

Michelle Van Loon

Michelle Van Loon and her husband, Bill, live in suburban Chicago. Bill serves on Caspari's international board.

## Prayer Requests

- For Ethiopian believers who find it difficult to integrate into Israeli culture – more so than all other immigrant groups.
- For immigrant children and youth, that they come to the faith, stay in the faith even after their Army service, and not confuse integration into the culture with becoming worldly.
- For persecuted Israeli believers, especially in Ashdod and Arad.
- For Caspari's leadership training and Shabbat school seminars.
- For seminary students attending Caspari's international study program in March-April.



**If you would like to know more about the Caspari Center and its activities, write to [caspari@caspari.com](mailto:caspari@caspari.com) or visit our website, [www.caspari.com](http://www.caspari.com).**

**You can support our work by prayer, volunteering, or financial gifts to help with individual projects or the general work of the center.**