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SENIORS

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Former missionary reveals proselytizing practices

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A group of men and women join together in the synagogue sanctuary, swaying together to vibrant music. The lights dim on this Friday night, and a woman with a cloth covering her head stands in front of two candlesticks. The congregants hold hands and sing "Sunrise, Sunset."

The woman recites the traditional Shabbat candle lighting blessing - traditional except for an addition, in Hebrew, at the end of the blessing that translates, "In the name of Jesus Christ."

Such occurrences characterize a messianic synagogue service, said Julius Ciss, executive director of Jews for Judaism in Toronto.

Ciss, who was involved in Messianic Judaism for five years, an experience that began at the request of a Christian girlfriend, shared an insider's look at the world of Christian missionary groups in a lecture sponsored by The Phoenix Community Kollel Feb. 15 at Young Israel of Greater Phoenix.

Messianic synagogues, led by a "rabbi," do whatever they can to make their Christianity look Jewish, Ciss said. Messianic synagogues have an ark with at least one Torah scroll inside, feature illustrations of dancing Chasidim and Israel on promotional materials, and often buy listings in the phone book under "synagogues."

Although on the surface it may appear to represent Judaism, Messianic Judaism adherents actually take Christianity and "flavor it with Jewish syrup," Ciss said.

Nevertheless, thousands of Jews are attracted to Messianic Judaism, he said. He estimates there are 350 Messianic synagogues in the United States, 100 in Israel and 100 elsewhere in the world - and that 75,000 regularly attend Messianic religious services.

Ciss said he found nine missionary organizations in Phoenix, one in Scottsdale, three in Tucson and others in Chino Valley, Glendale, Peoria and Yuma.

The forces behind the groups are often "right-wing fundamentalist born-again evangelicals," Ciss said. He cited the Southern Baptist Convention, The Assemblies of God, The Missouri Synod of the Lutheran Church and independent non-denominational

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evangelical churches and Pentecostal groups.

According to a November 1993 issue of Newsweek magazine, 25.7 percent of Americans are Evangelical Protestants. A 1998 study by Christianity Today magazine states that 27 percent of North Americans are evangelical Christians.

Evangelical Christians' primary motive in converting non-Christians is a passage of John 3:16: "For God so loved the world that He gave his only begotten son, so that all who would believe in him would not perish, but have eternal life." Certain Christian groups embrace this commandment and use it to try to "save" non-Christians, Ciss said.

What draws Jews to Messianic Judaism, and what can the Jewish community do to help prevent the numbers from increasing?

"Children need to grow up in homes where Judaism is taken seriously and passionately," Ciss said. "We live in a world where our children will face many challenges to being and staying Jewish."

One such challenge, present since the beginning of Christianity, is the Christian missionary, Ciss said. However, obstacles Jews once used to ward off the Christian message aren't as prevalent today, and missionaries have devised new tactics.

When missionaries approached Jews in the past, they were direct about their motives, and Jews who didn't want to discard their Jewish identity simply rejected the missionary's pitch. This served as the first obstacle.

In response, the Hebrew-Christian movement - telling Jews they can retain their Jewish identity while believing Jesus is the messiah - uses Jewish symbols and Hebrew names and prayers, intended to help a Jew feel comfortable while practicing Christianity.

Ciss said that the second obstacle Christians formerly encountered was that Jews were educated in Torah and Talmud. Today missionaries take advantage of Jews' general lack of knowledge of the Hebrew language, Ciss said. Christian Bibles are mistranslated from the original Hebrew, and missionaries use this mistranslation, as well as biblical passages taken out of context, to try to convince Jews that Jesus fulfilled the messianic prophesy.

The third obstacle missionaries had to overcome, Ciss said, was that Jews used to better understand Jewish concepts and spirituality. Missionaries today take advantage of assimilated Jews' lack of knowledge and also question the Jewish individual's relationship with God.

During his lecture at Young Israel, Ciss showed a video with clips from promotional videos distributed by Christian missionary groups. The video depicted synagogue services and Jews for Jesus members proselytizing on college campuses and to the elderly. Clips included missionaries performing "Jewish gospel music" in churches and encouraging church members to "share the good news" with Jews. One missionary stated on film, "We're capturing many Jewish hearts, bringing them into the kingdom."

The video boasted of raising another generation of Messianic Jews, showing shots of summer camps and schools. Men and women of all ages and nationalities were shown being baptized.

The leader of one of the missionary groups in the video - Jonathan Bernis of Hear O Israel, based in Phoenix - identified himself during a question-and-answer session at Young Israel and suggested a debate. A handful of other Hebrew Christians also acknowledged their presence.

"I was very pleased that so many Hebrew Christians attended the lecture," Ciss said. "Often, these Jewish Christians will not speak to us directly, so the opportunity to hear our

message, and to be inconspicuous at the same time, gives them the opportunity to not be threatened.

"In fact, one of those in attendance said that the evening's presentation had caused her to doubt her faith in Jesus and we are now following up with her."

When the Jewish Christian is able to hear the Jewish response to missionaries in a non-threatening environment, Jews for Judaism sees a 70 percent success rate of Jews leaving Christianity, Ciss said.

After being approached by a missionary, "use the occasion as a catalyst to strengthen yourself, your family and your community," advised Ciss. "Bring more Judaism into your life and into your home. Decide to help make the Jewish world less vulnerable to those who seek to prey on our souls. Be a Jew for Judaism and you won't be a Jew for Jesus."

For more information about Jews for Judaism, visit the Web site at www.jewsforjudaism.org.

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