

*The New
Anti-Semitism
and
Jewish Evangelism*



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*"And the Word became flesh, and dwelt among us and we beheld His glory,
glory as of the only begotten from the Father; full of grace and truth." (John 1:14)*



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Response to Kai Kjær-Hansen's Articles on Operation Mercy

Editor's note: Gershon Nerel has been given the opportunity to respond to Kai Kjær-Hansen's articles concerning Operation Mercy in the previous issue. Here we present Nerel's response with comments by Kjær-Hansen (KKH).

I am pleased that my initial research on the evacuation/exodus/flight of Jewish Yeshua believers (JYB) from Eretz Israel in 1948, known as "Operation Mercy" (OM),¹ has been stimulating supplementary readings with fresh analysis and interactions as expressed, for example, in issue 61 of *Mishkan*.² Indeed, each and every historical investigation develops through ongoing scrutiny, gradually exposing fresh data. Normally, mutual scholarly fertilization clarifies historical issues. Thus, the process of revisiting an issue from different angles always helps to illuminate a variety of perspectives.

Presently, I do not wish to repeat what I have already written, mainly in Hebrew, on the theme of OM in other publications. Readers may find ample material in my prior essays and quotations dealing with OM. Here I just wish to underline that within my

studies on this subject I have basically attempted to offer a panoramic view of the happenings—trying to avoid a narrow reportage of isolated facts as they often appear in journalistic coverage. Rather, my aim was, and still remains, to examine the broader context, formal and informal, of this occurrence as a case study of Gentile-Jewish relationships within the universal body of believers in Yeshua. In other words, my desire is to better understand the background that shaped the attitudes of Gentile ecclesiastical personalities toward the theological position of JYB. Basically, therefore, my historical research does not refer only to the short scope of time in which OM, *per se*, took place, but also to ideas that have prevailed over decades and even centuries. My research aims to reveal patterns of Gentile Christian conduct not just toward individuals, but also groupings of JYB.

Initially, I wish to comment on the critical points raised by Kai Kjær-Hansen concerning my writings on OM as follows: it appears that Kjær-Hansen wrote his review under heavy time pressure as he became aware of my latest *Iggud* article (Hebrew) long after the special issue of *Mishkan* on OM was planned and most of the material was already finalized. Therefore, then, my impression is that Kjær-Hansen was unable to carefully read my Hebrew papers and did not fully grasp my line of reasoning. It is no secret that Kjær-Hansen does not have adequate knowledge of Hebrew to distinguish or to evaluate the nuances of the Hebraic expressions.

KKH: I would have preferred an academic interaction concerning the themes I have treated in Mishkan 61, instead of having to deal with the question of whether or not I was "under heavy time pressure"—which, by the way, I often am when I write articles,

1 "Operation Mercy" was already discussed in my doctoral thesis: Gershon Nerel, "'Messianic Jews' in Eretz-Israel (1917–1967): Trends and Changes in Shaping Self Identity" (Ph.D. diss., Hebrew University of Jerusalem, 1996). Cf. also: Gershon Nerel, "'Operation Mercy': The Evacuation of Messianic Jews from Eretz Israel in 1948," in *Iggud – Selected Essays in Jewish Studies*, vol. 2, History of the Jewish People and Contemporary Jewish Society, ed. Gershon Bacon, Albert Baumgarten, Jacob Barnai, Chaim Waxman, and Israel J. Yuval (Jerusalem: World Union of Jewish Studies, 2009), 83–109; and "'Operation Grace' in 1948: The Theological Status of Messianic Jews vs. the Historical Churches," *Zot Habrit* (Organ of the Messianic Jewish Alliance of Israel), vol. 23 (Jan 2009): 11–12.

2 Kai Kjær-Hansen, "Numbers Connected with Operation Mercy," *Mishkan*, no. 61 (2009): 33–43; and "The Organizers behind Operation Mercy," *Mishkan*, no. 61 (2009): 44–60.

but then, I suppose I am not the only one in that situation. Nerel is quite right when he says that I “[do] not have adequate knowledge of Hebrew to distinguish or to evaluate the nuances of the Hebraic expressions.” However, the dispute between Nerel and myself cannot be reduced to a question of “nuances of the Hebraic expressions.” It is a question of two very different ways of reading sources. On page 33, note 1, I write: “In my interaction with him [Nerel], I have made sure that practically all my critical points are directed toward opinions, which also appear in his article in Iggud.”

Another “linguistic” issue: Kjær-Hansen fails to distinguish between two loaded appellations—firstly, the “Messianic movement today,”³ and secondly, what he calls the “Messianic movement in 1948.”⁴ I have no doubt that it is a misleading anachronism to apply the contemporary designation “Messianic movement,” as it is commonly used nowadays,⁵ to the elapsed reality of 1948.

KKH: I recognize that Nerel is quite right in pointing out the importance of “linguistic” issues in his criticism of my use of the designation “Messianic movement” with reference to circumstances in Palestine/Israel in the 1940s. It might have been interesting to deal with this question in a different context. I leave it to others to judge whether my terminology in the places mentioned has any significant influence on my treatment of Operation Mercy.

Actually, in the 1940s, just as it was several decades earlier, people normally made use

of the name “Hebrew Christians.” Back in the year 1948, people hardly, if at all, employed the term “Messianic movement.” Furthermore, it should be remembered that particularly English speakers made use of the labels “Hebrew Christians” or “Jewish Christians” in their ordinary parlance.⁶ Hence nowadays, at the beginning of the twenty-first century, one must carefully comprehend which exact terminology to employ, since terms are loaded with different meanings and relevance should be attributed only to the right discernment of the different nomenclatures.

Inaccuracies and Exaggerations

Kjær-Hansen cynically criticizes Moshe Immanuel Ben-Meir by writing: “But there seems to be little existential consistence in Ben Meir concerning marriage, for although he was strongly against a Jewish believer marrying a non-Jewish believer, he himself married a Finnish Christian woman in 1977.”⁷ Yet Kjær-Hansen fails to also mention the very simple fact that Ben-Meir was a Gentile believer who adopted Judaism. His Finnish Christian wife, born as *Lempi Virtanen*, had willingly and formally converted to Orthodox Judaism and embraced *Ahuva* (“Beloved,” in Hebrew) as her first name.⁸

KKH: Regardless of one’s stance on my remarks about Ben Meir’s last marriage, the matter seems relevant to me. That my critical remarks should be made “cynically” must be Nerel’s own opinion.

3 Kjær-Hansen, “Numbers,” 33.

4 *Ibid.*, 34, 36, 38.

5 Keri Zelson Warshawsky, “Returning to Their Own Borders: A Social Anthropological Messianic Jewish Identity in Israel” (Ph.D. diss., Hebrew University of Jerusalem, 2007); Richard Harvey, *Mapping Messianic Jewish Theology: A Constructive Approach* (London: Paternoster, 2009).

6 Moses Klerekoper, “A Timely Duty of Hebrew Christianity,” *The Hebrew Christian Alliance Quarterly*, vol. 19 (Oct 1934): 13–15; *The Jewish Christian Movement*, Collection of Articles, Reports, and Addresses of the Jewish Christian Community (London: Patmos Publishers, 1954); Hugh J. Schonfield, *The History of Jewish Christianity* (London: Duckworth, 1936).

7 Kjær-Hansen, “Numbers,” 35, n. 10.

8 Rittie Katz and Elizabeth Wakefield, “Pillars of Zion: The Life of Ahuva Ben-Meir,” *Teaching from Zion*, vol. 22 (Oct. 2007): 19.

Kjær-Hansen also mentions that I claim to have found "the exact numbers connected to OM,"⁹ yet he does not provide the explicit "source" to support his alleged argument. Sadly, Kjær-Hansen uses quotation marks to show what I supposedly have written, as if he brings an accurate excerpt, but has no documentation at all to verify that "fact"! Thus, one should ask if this is a proper historical debate.

KKH: It goes without saying that I want "a proper historical debate," and I endeavour to quote correctly, although I sometimes fail. But I cannot help being surprised that Nerel cannot find the source of the quotation I attribute to him. On page 26 of his article in Mishkan 61, Nerel speaks about "the total number of evacuated Hebrew Christians," which totals "ninety-four." Nerel continues: "However, it is also significant to say that beyond the precise facts and the exact numbers connected to Operation Mercy. . . ." I have trouble seeing where I have erred, for I quote Nerel verbatim.

Anyhow, I should underline that as far as I can recall, I have nowhere claimed to refer to any precise *comprehensive and final* figures connected to OM, except in reference to certain specific (even sporadic) papers which were documented and mentioned in my footnotes. Hence, this proves that Kjær-Hansen was too hasty and inexperienced in his conclusions. It is obvious today, as well as before, that historians dealing with OM have at their disposal mere preliminary data, and, therefore, it is still impossible to talk about final figures and judgments. Clearly, researchers do need much more time, materials, and perspective to further study the whole issue in order to draw ultimate conclusions.

Additionally, while referring to believers who left Palestine/Eretz Israel for the UK

in the spring of 1948, Kjær-Hansen counts people who were then linked to the British Church Missions to the Jews (CMJ), yet did not travel on visas issued in connection with OM.¹⁰ The question remains whether to include such travelers in the general calculation of those who were directly involved with OM. It is not unknown that indeed many of those who were connected with Christ Church in Jerusalem, for example, left the land during the evacuation process of the Mandatory period. Kjær-Hansen himself admits that there were those who left before "'Operation Mercy visas' were given to people in Jerusalem."¹¹ Why should such "external travelers" be considered as relevant to OM?

KKH: There may be different answers to this question. I have tried to present a survey of the number of Hebrew Christians who left Palestine/Israel in 1948, which I do not think is without interest.

In my opinion, however, within the scope of researching OM *per se*, it is only appropriate to refer to those who were unequivocally involved with OM, and not to the many others who were en route to flee the dangers and difficulties at the end of the Mandate epoch. One may find many lists of passengers via air, sea, and land, but I have no doubt that it is relevant to focus on JYB who were straightforwardly associated with the organized OM and not to broaden the scope regarding the general evacuation of the British.¹²

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 41.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² Yona Bandmann, *When Will Britain Withdraw from Jerusalem: The Confrontation between the Military Commanders in the Middle East and the High Commissioner for Palestine* (Tel Aviv: Ministry of Defense Publishing, 2004).

⁹ Kjær-Hansen, "Numbers," 38, 41.

What Is the Real Argument About?

My own research raised the thesis that apart from the plain humanitarian and civic aspects of OM, as it was presented *de facto* and dealt with, there have also prevailed other ideas and beliefs among the evacuees. Namely, my argument highlights the following conclusion: One should consider OM *not* merely as a graceful, charitable event, which would be correct from a certain aspect and, therefore, considered a legitimate action of benevolence. Basically, I am not arguing about the philanthropic dimension. I do, however, insist that OM was not just an action of brotherly love, but also that, to a great extent, it did *not* take place within a theological/ecclesiastical vacuum.

Opposing the Formation of a Hebrew Christian Church

According to Dr. Macdonald Webster, Secretary of the Church of Scotland Overseas Department in Edinburgh, it was mainly those connected with the CMJ, also known as the London Jews Society (LJS), who strongly opposed the idea of forming an independent Hebrew Christian church, namely a “church/synagogue” that would observe Jewish customs like circumcision and keep the Jewish Shabbat and festivals according to the biblical calendar. Only very few Gentile missionaries, like Webster, were willing to admit that their colleagues in the leading missionary societies to the Jews had opposed *de facto* the idea of creating a national Hebrew Christian church. Thus, for example, already in 1932, Webster wrote to Rev. E. M. Bickersteth of the Jerusalem and East Mission in London as follows: “The only Zionist or Jewish Nationalist argument against Jewish Missions to which I find no answer is the contention, or rather the

truth, that by our present methods we denationalize the Jewish people.”¹³

Also in the early 1930s, in a confidential letter to Bickersteth, Canon Dr. H. Danby, of St. George’s Cathedral in Jerusalem, wrote about the “real” missionary view *vis-à-vis* the feasibility of establishing an autonomous Hebrew Christian church as follows:

The missionary organizations at work among Jews are not now sympathetic to the idea, for two reasons (at least): they are familiar with the Jewish convert and are distrustful of his powers of leadership, of his team-spirit, and above all of his spiritual and mental stability; and, secondly, they are vividly alive to the danger of a Hebrew-Christian Church battenning on a missionary-minded Gentile public and depending on such support for its maintenance . . . (and) the vexed point of the danger of Judaising, and so forth.¹⁴

In fact, by the end of 1934, the Archbishop of Canterbury had decided to reject the official proposal of Sir Leon Levison, President of the International Hebrew Christian Alliance, to establish a Hebrew Christian church.¹⁵ However, the aspirations for and attempts toward a sovereign, Hebrew Christian church still survived among JYB, especially in Eretz Israel.¹⁶

In another letter, dated December 1937, Danby wrote to the Anglican Bishop in Jerusalem, Graham Brown, as follows: “And already I find myself getting too old to believe that the ‘professional’ Hebrew

13 Macdonald Webster to E. M. Bickersteth, November 7, 1932, The Jerusalem and the East Mission Archives 18/5, Middle East Centre, Oxford. Hereafter abbreviated as MEC J&EM.

14 H. Danby to E. M. Bickersteth, December 4, 1932, MEC J&EM 18/5.

15 “Hebrew Christians,” The Bishop’s Note, September 11, 1934, MEC J&EM 18/5.

16 Abram Poljak, *The Cross in the Star of David* ([London]: The Jewish Christian Community Press, 1938), 59–87; Moshe Imanuel Ben-Meir, *From Jerusalem to Jerusalem* (Jerusalem: Netivyah, 2006), 108–23.

Christian will ever be anything but a pliant reed and a faulty tool."¹⁷ Then, three years later, the same bishop wrote to the Lord Archbishop of Canterbury, as follows: "As I see the situation, the true policy for the Hebrew Christian is absorption into the local Christian Churches, and not by establishing a Hebrew Christian Church as a separate entity."¹⁸

Therefore, it seems that such few, yet very clear, examples speak for themselves, and OM should be viewed with the existence of such conceptions in the background.

Church and Missionary Conception—Not "Conspiracy"

In general, I should emphasize that I never defined OM as a "conspiracy" of the ecclesiastical institutions "against" JYB, as Kjær-Hansen has interpreted my position.¹⁹

KKH: Nerel points out that he "never defined OM as a 'conspiracy.'" To my mind, it is not a matter of definition. I maintain my opinion of Nerel's handling of the sources and, therefore, stand behind what I wrote on page 60 in Mishkan 61: "In any case, Gershon Nerel's theory—that the Hebrew Christians in Palestine were the object of a conspiracy from the church's side—is to my mind, and with reference to the 'authentic documents' that I have presented, a construction which lacks historical foundations." I will leave it to others to judge whether it is a fair representation of Nerel's main thesis.

I did, however, argue that the overall process of OM had once again revealed the long-lasting theological and sociological

conception of the Gentile church, mainly through missionary leaders, toward JYB. Methodologically, my research attempts to focus on history of mentality, especially through examinations of mutual perceptions, the outcome of conceptions and images, and reciprocal consciousness.²⁰

Messianic Jewish Sovereignty

In my opinion, the evacuation of JYB from Eretz Israel in 1948 (also referred to by other terms such as *exodus*, *flight*, or *migration*) should be evaluated in connection with the wider issue of *corporate* Messianic Jewish self-identity and Messianic Jewish *collective* sovereignty. By sovereignty, I mean both theological and organizational self-authority. This matter is closely linked to the issue of legitimization or delegitimization of a Messianic Jewish entity within the universal body of the *ecclesia* or *kehilah*. Indeed, again, one cannot ignore the benevolent and/or rescue aspects of OM, yet my point is that throughout all the stages of this eventful operation, JYB were treated in a "paternalistic" way, as being guests within the churches and not as a free national grouping and institution. In other words, JYB were not really considered by their ecclesiastical hosts as an autonomous, self-determining body. Normally, JYB were treated as "mere converts" that should sooner than later assimilate within the hosting denominations. Because of the general circumstances, JYB did not have a sovereign status that would allow them to shape their own vision and policies.²¹ This long-lasting situation changed dramatically only after

17 H. Danby to the Bishop in Jerusalem, December 3, 1937, MEC J&EM 18/5.

18 Bishop in Jerusalem (Graham Brown) to the Archbishop of Canterbury, Lambeth Palace, London, December 16, 1940, MEC J&EM 18/5.

19 Kjær-Hansen, "Organizers," 60.

20 Cf. Israel Jacob Yuval, *Two Nations in Your Womb: Perceptions of Jews and Christians* (Tel Aviv: Am Oved, 2000).

21 Cf. Daniel Juster, "What Is Messianic Judaism?" *Kesher*, vol. 14 (2002): 40–49; Mark Kinzer, *Postmissionary Messianic Judaism: Redefining Christian Engagement with the Jewish People* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2005).

Space to Respond

I need to stress the fact that following Kjær-Hansen's critique of my articles on OM in *Mishkan* 61, I was personally assured by the outgoing editors that I would be given a reasonably proportional space to respond, but eventually this did not happen. Regrettably, the place for my feedback was strictly limited to an unequal number of words, and, therefore, I was not able to adequately explain and document my arguments. I really wish that I had been given the full opportunity to share my position and allowed to fairly express my own analysis—at least with the same generous number of pages provided to Kjær-Hansen.

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[Ed. note: All future copyright will remain with *Mishkan*. Furthermore, the decision to limit the length of this response was that of the present editor alone.]

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Gershon Nerel (Ph.D., Hebrew University), along with his wife, Sara, revised the Delitzsch Hebrew translation of the New Testament (Negev Version, Beer Sheva, 2003).