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THE MESSIANIC JEW AND HEBREW CHRISTIAN

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Solomon Ostrovsky:

A Pioneer and

“Watchman” in Eretz-Israel



Among those very few Jewish believers in Yeshua (Jesus) who were already by the year 1922 settled in Eretz-Israel (Land of Israel), the name of Isaac Solomon Ostrovsky is often mentioned. Ostrovsky, who was born in the Ukraine in 1902, “fell in love” as a teenager with the person of Yeshua and with his teachings. He had read a book written by Count Leon Tolstoy which dealt, among other subjects, with the Sermon on the Mount and this impressed him very much.

After living and toiling in the Land, with some breaks, a total of some fifty years, Solomon and his wife Regina decided in the late 1980's to emigrate from Israel to Toronto, Canada, mainly to join their children and grandchildren who were already there. Since then, Ostrovsky has made short visits to his friends in Israel, and during his last visit in Jerusalem in May 1995 I had another opportunity to meet with him.

Ostrovsky was willing to be interviewed and allowed me to record his reminiscences as a Messianic Jewish pioneer in this land. This interview is presented here in an abbreviated form.



Solomon Ostrovsky, 1995.

by
Gershon
Nerel

1. From Kishinev to Palestine

Q: Brother Ostrovsky, when did you commit yourself to Yeshua?

A: On my way to Palestine, following the death of my father in a brutal pogrom against the Jews in Russia, I arrived with my relatives at Kishinev, Bessarabia, then under Rumanian rule. There I met the well-known *Yehudi-Meshihi* (Messianic Jew) Leon Averbuch, who was the leader of a small group of Jewish believers in Yeshua in that town. In Averbuch I found embodied all the virtues of a true disciple of Yeshua. Later I bought the New Testament and began to read it carefully. I completely yielded to

Yeshua as my Saviour, Lord and the Son of God after a period of inner spiritual struggle. At last I made peace with God through Yeshua and found peace in my heart. I was baptised by Averbuch, continuing on my way, as planned, to Eretz-Israel.

Q: Which believers did you contact when you entered the land?

A: I disembarked at the Haifa port and went to see Rev. Shabetay Rohold, the representative of the "British Society for the Propagation of the Gospel Among the Jews", also known then as the "British Jews Society" (B.J.S.). Rohold, who was a native of Eretz-Israel and spoke Hebrew fluently, was the superintendent of the so-called "Mount Carmel Bible School" associated with that mission; however, this "institution" hardly functioned as a Bible School as I had expected. Rohold had put up a sign in large letters reading "MOUNT CARMEL BIBLE SCHOOL", but it was not really a school. I was given a job as gardener, working in the mission compound, which I did with another "Palestinian" Messianic Jew, Moshe Immanuel Ben-Meir; we had much work to remove stones in the vineyard on the slope of Mt. Carmel.

Q: Did you feel at home in Haifa?

A: Unfortunately, I felt very lonely. I missed so much the joy and enthusiasm which I remembered from Kishinev. Instead of finding in Haifa the warm and intimate atmosphere of a closely-knit assembly, to which I was accustomed in Kishinev,

I encountered a formalistic "Mission Station", which did nothing to lessen my loneliness.

Q: For how long did you remain there?

A: Not for a long time. Leon Averbuch arranged for me to attend a Bible school in England, and between 1924-1929 I lived in London and studied in a very small Bible school with less than ten other students. There, too, I was disappointed because I did not find what I desired, a serious biblical syllabus and systematic teaching; neither were my teachers the best examples for me. In the early 1930's I returned to Palestine and settled in Tel-Aviv-Jaffa.

2. The "Watchman"

Q: How would you characterise your work during the 1930's-1940's?

A: In British Mandatory Palestine I identified myself particularly with the position and mission of "the watchman" — as he is presented in the Book of the prophet Ezekiel, who was appointed by God to be a watchman — to take the divine message to the House of Israel (Ez. 33: 1-9).

Q: Did you do anything to share your "call" with others?

A: In 1935 I founded a unique Messianic Jewish periodical called *Hatzofeh* (the Watchman) and edited it until 1947. In this pamphlet-form magazine I published articles written originally in Hebrew in the Land, as well as other material translated into Hebrew either by myself or by Moshe Ben-Meir.

Q: Which subjects did you deal with in *Hatzofeh*?

A: I included articles on a wide range of issues; for example, personal testimonies, apologetics, fulfilment of prophecy in Eretz-Israel and in general, about our identity as local believers in the land of our forefathers.

3. The "Peniel" Fellowship

Q: Did you have a separate place of worship, or did you attend other expatriate churches in Jaffa?

A: In the early 1930's I started arranging meetings especially for local Jewish and Arab believers. We used a building which had belonged to the German Templars in the border zone between Tel-Aviv and Jaffa called the "German Colony". The Arab believers were very friendly to me. British civil servants and soldiers also attended our small fellowship. We called it "Peniel Hall". Our main meetings were held on Shabbat in the afternoon, usually combined with a communion service. On Shabbat people were free from work and were able to attend the services.

Q: Which language did you use at the Peniel services?

A: I taught the Bible and gave other lectures both in the Hebrew and the Russian languages. Often new immigrants from Russia used to come to our services. We also had prayer meetings on Wednesday evenings.

Q: Did you use *matzot* (unleavened bread) in your communion services?

A: No. In those days we were accustomed to the use of ordinary

bread. I know that today in Messianic Jewish congregations believers use *matzot* when they celebrate the breaking of bread; in those days we did not think this way. We also did not use the term *Rav* (Rabbi), as it is common today in certain Messianic Jewish circles in the Diaspora.

Q: Until when did you continue your services at the German Colony?

A: After the establishment of the State of Israel in 1948, all properties of the German Templars were sold to those who paid the highest price. Some legal problems also arose and complicated the situation so that we could no longer use the Peniel Hall for our services. Instead, in the early 1960's our small assembly could afford to purchase a new building in Yefet Street in Jaffa. Since then we have had our services there, and we also could operate a Bible shop. Today it still serves as a small local Israeli congregation which has obtained the legal status of an *Amuta* — a recognised non-profit entity.

4. The "Herzliya Experiment"

Q: After the State of Israel was born, did you think about new ideas to put into practice?

A: I thought about establishing a Messianic Jewish agricultural colony or kibbutz. Before 1948 my wife and I bought a piece of land of twelve dunams (around three acres) near Herzliya, north of Tel-Aviv. We wanted to start a communal farm which would provide a work place to Jewish believers, as well as a supply of such

agricultural products as were rare and expensive in those days.

Q: What did you grow there?

A: We had about thirty fruit trees, a donkey, around 150-200 chickens and we grew vegetables like cucumbers and watermelon. We also raised rabbits for those who wanted to buy them for meat. You know those were the *Tzena* (austerity) days of severe food rationing. Every individual and family received a ration book for food that was available with ration tickets.

Q: Did this "kibbutz" develop?

A: Unfortunately, nobody joined us. Although we had good income because we sold our products in our neighbourhood, we had no Messianic Jews to help as workers. The very few believers who then lived in the Tel-Aviv area refused to engage in agricultural work, but preferred to take other jobs. For a whole decade my family had to struggle there alone. We had to hire workers who were not believers in Yeshua. At last, when we saw that we remained the only Messianic Jews there, we decided to sell the land and all we had there and in 1958, after ten years, we did so.

5. The Future of Israel

Q: What is your vision for the future of Messianic Jews?

A: I expect the emergence of a large movement of Jewish disciples

of Yeshua, as it developed in the times of the first apostles. This vital worldwide movement will be no less enthusiastic and influential than it was in those days.

Q: Could you point to any developments you expect in the future?

A: Definitely. Israel has a unique place in God's revelation to the world and His purposes for mankind. Isaiah, who prophesied the suffering and substitutionary death of the Messiah, saw also a repentant Israel and the new Messianic rule in the world with Jerusalem as its centre; "And it shall come to pass in the last days, that the mountain of the LORD's House shall be established in the top of the mountains, and shall be exalted above the hills; and ALL NATIONS shall flow unto it. And many people shall go and say, Come ye, and let us go up to the mountain of the LORD, to the house of the God of Jacob; and HE will teach us of His ways, and we will walk in His paths; for out of Zion shall go forth the Torah, and the Word of the Lord from Jerusalem" (Isa. 2: 2-3).

Israel will acknowledge her sins and will remember what happened in Jerusalem so many years ago. They will then see Yeshua in His true image which some of the churches have disfigured beyond recognition, and will turn to God in repentance and mourning. Israel will be spiritually reborn.

THE INTERNATIONAL MESSIANIC JEWISH (HEBREW CHRISTIAN) ALLIANCE

- GREAT BRITAIN:** "Shalom", Brockenhurst Road, Ramsgate, CT11 8ED.
(Telephone: [01843] 592669 and [01843] 549756) (also Fax).
ISRAEL: P.O. Box 6130, Jerusalem, 91061. (Telephone: [02] 249480).
U.S.A.: P.O. Box 6307, Virginia Beach, VA 23456.
(Telephone: 804-486 5768. Fax: 804-430 0895).
CANADA: 800 Steeles Avenue West, Suite B10-200, Thornhill, Ontario L4J 7L2.

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