

AS OUR STAMP TEAM HELPS PREPARE FOR A MAY/JUNE JEWS FOR JESUS CAMPAIGN, Shrill modern “Pharisees” rebuff Christian witness endeavors

What is our Israel STAMP team (December 28—January 8) encountering right now? It is arriving in a nation-state formed 64 years ago that has existed in a constant state of defense alert ever since. At the same time, Israel is a power that occupies the Jordanian, Egyptian, and Syrian territories of the West Bank, Gaza, and the Golan Heights.

Israel’s religious composition (excluding the occupied territories) is roughly three-quarters Jewish, 17 percent Muslim, and 2 percent Christian/Messianic Jews. Only 4 percent of the population is officially non-religious. But, estimates *Operation World*, the Jewish population is more realistically 25 percent Orthodox Jewish and 20 percent secular, with the rest somewhere in the middle.

All religions are allowed to minister within their own communities. Jews who follow Messiah Jesus, however, have in the past been denied legal standing as a religious body and faced difficulties obtaining premises for fellowship. This changed in 2009, enabling Messianic congregations to register as houses of prayer and religious entities. Still, proselytism (seeking the conversion of those affiliated with another religion) is increasingly opposed.

On the political front, the four-way division of parties (Jewish religious left, right and far right, plus Arab) means that coalitions generally must be formed—giving disproportionate power to the far right religious faction: the ultra-Orthodox *Haredi* minority. These currently make up only 10 percent of the population but see themselves as the preservers of Jewishness in Israel. They predate the establishment of modern Israel in 1948 and are virulently anti-Zionist, believing that there should be no Jewish state until the Messiah comes. The *Haredi* regard evangelicals as subversive and a threat to Judaism, and therefore malign and occasionally harass them.

Their rabbis have sought political engagement and gained disproportionate influence over policy in Israeli society. This has likely been boosted by the ultra-Orthodox community’s rapidly increasing numbers, due to extraordinarily high birthrates. Reform and Conservative Jews are often marginalized by ultra-Orthodox influence, which applies constant pressure to limit freedom of religion through anti-conversion laws and persecution of Messianic Jews. A vast majority of the ultra-Orthodox receive exemptions from military duties required of all other Jewish Israelis.

At the same time they maintain a policy of cultural detachment. More than 60 percent of ultra-Orthodox men opt for full-time Torah study and welfare subsidies rather than work; consequently, more than 50 percent live below the poverty line. Ultra-Orthodox zealots have been increasingly encroaching on the public sphere with their strict interpretation of modesty rules, enforcing gender segregation and the exclusion of women.

One year ago, Israel's struggle over religious extremism was publicly dramatized in the city of Beit Shamesh, situated between Jerusalem and Tel Aviv. Established in 1950 near the ruins of an ancient city of the same name, the city took off in the 1990s with the construction of two new neighborhoods: Ramat Beit Shemesh A and B. The ultra-Orthodox population boomed. Residents say 20,000 more planned housing units are marked out for them.

In Ramat Beit Shemesh B, signs on the walls of buildings call for modesty, exhorting women and girls to dress in buttoned-up, long-sleeved blouses and long skirts. Outside a synagogue in the Kirya ha-Haredi quarter, a sign requests that females should cross to the opposite sidewalk and certainly not linger in front of the building.

A blond, bespectacled second-grade girl became the unlikely symbol of the struggle. Naama Margolese, then 8, is the daughter of American immigrants who are observant modern Orthodox Jews. An Israeli weekend television program told how Naama had become terrified of walking to her elementary school there after ultra-Orthodox men spat on her, insulted her and called her a prostitute because her modest dress did not adhere exactly to their more rigorous dress code.

In ensuing days of confrontation, ultra-Orthodox men and boys from the most stringent sects hurled rocks and eggs at the police and journalists, shouting "Nazis" at the security forces and assailing female reporters with epithets like "*shikse*," a derogatory Yiddish term for a non-Jewish woman or girl, and "whore."

The battle has broadened since then. Orthodox male soldiers walked out of a ceremony where female soldiers were singing, adhering to what they consider to be a religious prohibition against hearing a woman's voice. Women have been challenging the seating arrangements on strictly "kosher" buses serving ultra-Orthodox neighborhoods and some inter-city routes, where female passengers are expected to sit at the back.

Not surprisingly, such strong religious legalism makes the *Haredi* quite difficult to reach. And because they live in insular neighborhoods, our STAMP team members may not personally encounter many from this sector of Israeli society. (Just in case, however, their training touches on dealing with personally directed hostility, and responding to extreme situations.) Pray that many more of these modern Pharisees may experience what Nicodemus did—a process that *Operation World* reported is already beginning to happen.

Our STAMP team is engaging in street evangelism in Israel's largest city, Tel Aviv. They are partnering with local Jews for Jesus workers who are Israeli nationals, led by JFJ Israel director Dan S. Our team members expect to improve their skills in engaging seekers—handing out tracts, engaging in conversations, and other forms of proclamation evangelism of a Jewish populace. But they also hope to provide a boost to those who serve there year-round, and to generate new contacts that they may be able to follow-up on in the weeks ahead.

Our STAMP team's visit is also timed to help lay the groundwork for a major outreach in Israel scheduled for next May and June. Together with long-time College Church missionary Susan Perlman, now the San Francisco-based JFJ's associate executive director,

they make up a pilot advance team. Susan, who has overseen the global communications aspects of Jews for Jesus for decades, says she is hoping to have 30 young people on the streets for next summer's ministry.

The JFJ website spells out its purpose: "We exist to make the messiahship of Jesus an unavoidable issue to our Jewish people worldwide." In addition to Susan P., our team consists of leader Spencer G, Tommy J. and his wife, Precious, Joan C., Michael J., Howard K., Laura M. and Isaac S. They will return with a fresh commitment to stand with embattled Jewish Christians, and better able to pray for that ministry. Their trip is concluding with a short visit to selected biblical sites. So they will also return with an enhanced feel for the land in which the biblical narrative is centered.