

# THE MISSIONARIES AT OUR DOORSTEPS



# A messianic center on Coney Island Avenue threatens to bring missionaries to the heart of the New York Orthodox community

By Yossi Krausz

## 'm standing

in a *sefarim* store on Coney Island Avenue in Brooklyn, watching through the window as a building is being renovated across the street. Alongside me is one of the store's employees. "I haven't seen any activity there," he nonchalantly says. Just as he's saying that, a door in the building opens. There's a man standing there, looking out into the sunlight.

I quickly say my *adieux* to the *sefarim* store employee and head across the street. The man eyes me suspiciously. He seems to be taken aback by my hat and jacket.

I ease into small talk, trying to pretend that I have no special interest in the building. I ask him if any of the buildings in the area are up for sale. Not that he knows of.

"You a contractor?" I can see behind him into an unfinished hallway, wooden beams exposed.

He nods.

"You guys almost done?"

"Nah," he says, laughing. "This will probably take us another year."

"What exactly is this building going to be?" I say, trying to sound casually interested.

"Well..." he starts. Then a suspicious look passes across his face. "My father would know how to explain that. He'll be back in a couple of days."

I thank him and walk off. *A year from opening?* I say to myself. Then there's still time to do something, if there is anything to do.

I look back. The man is still staring at me, suspicion written on his face.

## THE RABBI THAT WASN'T

In 1894, Leopold Cohn, an immigrant from Hungary, going by the title of "rabbi," began an organization in Brownsville, New York, dedicated to helping his fellow Jews find spiritual awakening and bring them close to religion. The Brownsville Mission to the Jews was dedicated to converting Jews to Christianity.

There is some dispute about whether his real name was Leopold Cohn and whether he in fact ever trained as a rabbi. Already in 1913, a lawsuit was filed claiming that Leopold Cohn's real name was Itsak Leib Jozzovics, and he really was a saloonkeeper who had been arrested and sentenced for fraud in Hungary in 1891. They claimed that he had escaped from Hungary, leaving behind his wife and children, to avoid prison.

Whatever his real name was, Cohn managed to create a new life for himself in America as a missionary to the Jews. After his own conversion to Christianity, he founded the Brownsville Mission to the Jews, which later moved to Williamsburg and became the Williamsburg Mission to the Jews. In later years, it changed its name to the American Board of Missions to the Jews, and in 1988, changed its name to Chosen People Ministries (CPM).

CPM is the second-largest organization in the world dedicated to Christians proselytizing to Jews, the largest being Jews for J which is also an offshoot of the original CPM that was founded. It was founded by a former employee of CPM.

They claim success in their mission to cause Jews to stray to Christianity, by falsely claiming that doing so is compatible with being Jewish. They have a massive presence in Israel, entrapping legions of Jews with little knowledge of their true heritage. And now, with the new multimillion dollar Charles L. Feinberg Messianic Center going up in the middle of Flatbush, CPM has announced that it is targeting what would be the biggest prize in evangelism to Jews: the Orthodox Jews of Brooklyn.

## ANATOMY OF A TROJAN HORSE

Messianic Jews often disguise their appearance to look like Orthodox Jews. A friend told me about a visit he made to Boulder, Colorado, to pick up some transcripts from the time he spent in college there. On campus he saw two men with black hats, black suits, and *tzitzis* dangling from under their jackets, so he went over to give them *shalom aleichem*. They gave him a funny look when he greeted them, and as the conversation progressed, he realized they were actually Christians dressed up as Orthodox Jews, at which point he turned on his heels and left.

Who exactly are these messianic "Jews," anyway?

The messianic movement was founded in the 1960s by evangelistic Christians, some of whom were Jewish. Messianic con-



gregations differ in their practices, but the general idea is that they use the trappings and even the ideas of a Jewish synagogue, while promoting Christian theology.

Several anti-missionary activists whom I've spoken with explained that the original idea of messianic "Judaism" was very clearly just a Trojan horse for regular Christianity. The founders of the movement had discovered a way to make Jews feel comfortable joining a church. They called the church a synagogue, put a Torah scroll at the front wall, served latkes on Chanukah, and read the Megillah on Purim. The Jewish rituals the messianics performed were just the honey in the bear trap. Julius Ciss, executive director of Jews for Judaism in Canada, explains: "Based on my involvement in the fledgling messianic movement from 1975 to 1980, I personally witnessed comments from leaders within the movement that clearly acknowledged that they knew that 'messianic Judaism' was a portal to the church, a mission where the Jewish defenses against Christianity were down. I also witnessed many who were naive enough to believe that the evangelical ministers who deceptively portrayed themselves as rabbis were actually that."

The present-day messianics are different, according to the experts. After three generations of messianic Judaism, the theology of the movement has become legitimate in the eyes of a lot of its adherents, many of whom believe that while plain Christianity is fine for Gentiles, Jews must keep the mitzvot (in garbled form, of course) along with accepting Christian beliefs.

Penina Taylor, an author, motivational speaker, and director of a seminary in Israel, formerly had a leadership role in a messianic group. She describes the evolution of messianic Judaism: "Originally, the purpose of the Jewish Christian (later, Hebrew Christian) Church movement was to repackage Christianity in Jewish clothing, to convince Jews that it was a 'Jewish thing' to believe in [J]. The leaders were truly practicing deception. Nowadays, this may still be the case among many messianic leaders. However, I have found that most of the followers or messianic Jews themselves, rather than intending to be deceptive, are ear-



nestly attempting to synthesize their Christian beliefs with their Jewish identity. Many of these people, especially those who are second-generation messianics, may not even realize that they are not practicing a true form of Judaism.”

This false belief makes messianics a particularly dangerous group. Gavriel Sanders is a former minister and missionary who became a *ger tzedek* and is now a popular speaker on Jewish topics as well as an expert on missionaries. As he puts it, “Messianic Jews are not clever deceivers; they are sincere believers. The power of that sincerity makes their fellowship appear very attractive.”

# CPM has announced that it is targeting what would be the biggest prize in evangelism to Jews: the Orthodox Jews of Brooklyn.

## ANOTHER KIND OF CHOSEN PEOPLE

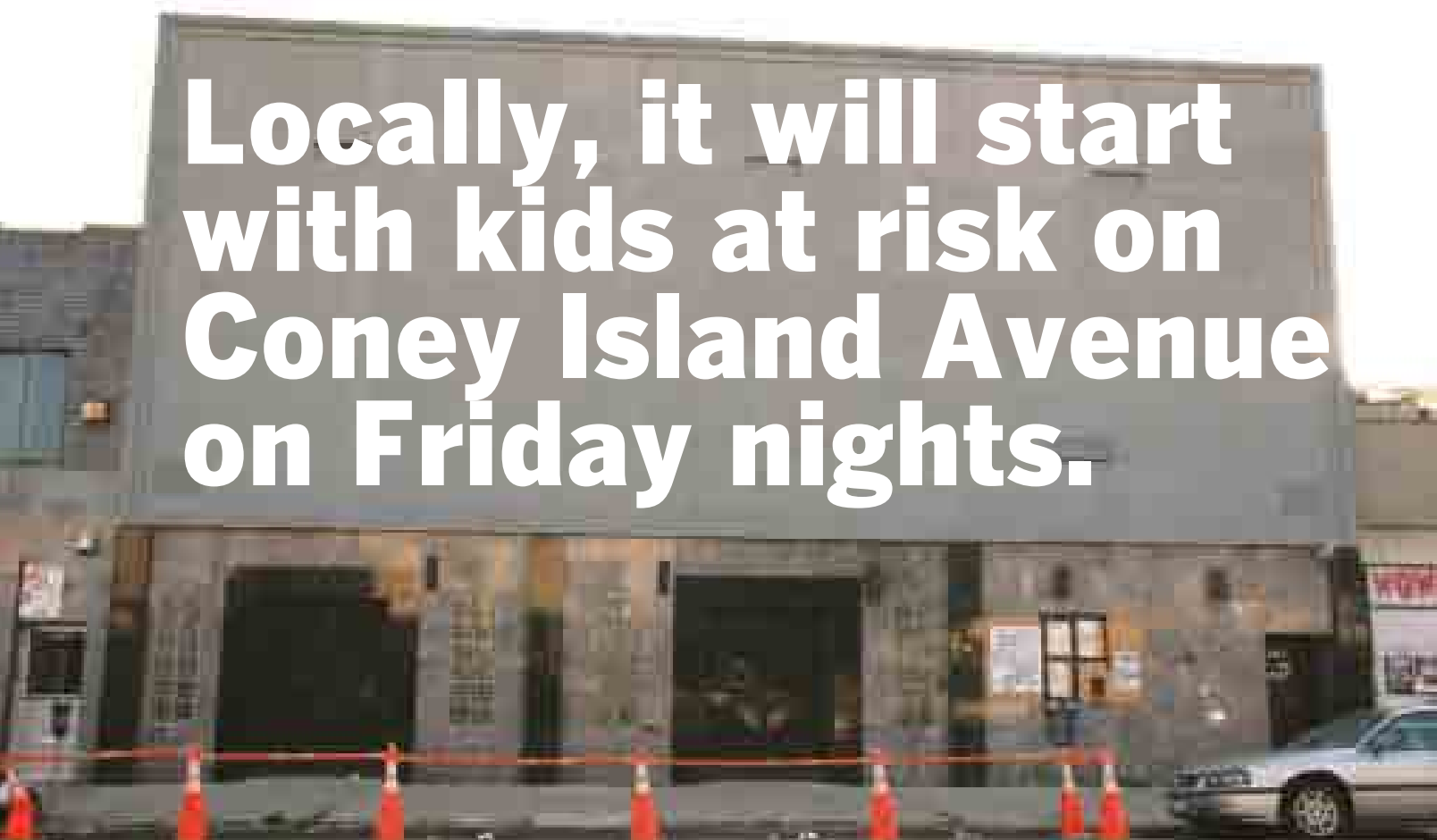
A Jewish teenager is getting off a bus at the Tel Aviv Central Bus Station. Across the street he sees activity in front of a three-story building, and he walks over to see what’s going on.

A young man standing outside invites the teen in. “Want some coffee? We’ve got a little café in here.”

Inside the café, the teen sees youths like himself spread out around a large room, drinking, eating, and obviously enjoying themselves. There are a large number of soldiers relaxing, their boots stuck out in front of them. The youthful hosts and hostesses are dispensing fun in large portions.

Oh, and also some books. Books about you-know-who.

# Locally, it will start with kids at risk on Coney Island Avenue on Friday nights.



Chosen People has centers across the United States, and they've also branched out internationally, with programs in many countries, including Germany, Argentina, and, of course, *Eretz Yisrael*, where it is very successful at targeting non-religious Jews.

Its world headquarters is in Manhattan, on Fifth Avenue, but it has made forays into Brooklyn, mostly targeting Russian Jews. It has a small messianic center on East 18<sup>th</sup> Street in Flatbush aimed at Russians, as well as a partnership with the Russian Community Life Center, a Russian messianic congregation in Brighton Beach.

And on June 30, 2010, these messianics bought the building that once housed Yablokoff Kingsway Memorial Chapel, at 1974 Coney Island Avenue, between Avenue P and King's Highway, with the stated intention of increasing their activities in Brooklyn and seeking out Orthodox Jews.

Mitch Glaser is a native Manhattanite who grew up in a Jewish household. But in 1970, he converted to Christianity and began working as a missionary. For some time he worked for Jews for J, but he ended up at CPM, where he eventually rose to become president of the organization.

In a promotional video on CPM's website, Glaser takes a visitor on a tour of the new center, showing what construction has been carried out so far and what is yet to come. In the video, as he and a contractor wander through the construction site, he describes what will be going on inside the center. There will be two messianic congregations housed in a main sanctuary, a Russian congregation and an English-speaking one. Glaser also points out some rooms that will be used to house students and traveling missionaries.

They are installing an industrial kitchen and setting up a soup kitchen to lure poor Jews inside. "I wish it could be bigger," Gla-

ser tells the contractor, "but this is Brooklyn." He laughs. "What I'm excited about is that there are thousands of Russian Jewish people in this area, many of whom are elderly, many of whom are poor. They came here and couldn't get jobs. They don't know the Lord, and they need help. If we can put in a soup kitchen here and help some of these people, it would be wonderful. In Tel Aviv we've been doing that across from the Central Bus Station, and it's just been a wonderful ministry."

The facility will also become the new home for the Charles L. Feinberg Center seminary program—a partnership CPM has with the Talbot School of Theology of Biola University, offering the first fully accredited master of divinity degree in messianic Jewish studies in the United States.

In short, a full-blown, fully functioning messianic menace will soon be operative in the heart of Jewish Brooklyn.

And what is perhaps most chilling is the video's use of shots of obviously Orthodox Jews walking down Coney Island Avenue.

"My hope and my prayer is," intones Glaser, "that some of the Orthodox young people will come in, eat some kosher cookies, hear about the Lord, drink some coffee, meet with our staff." The video moves to a shot of a yeshiva *bochur* strolling down the sidewalk toward the camera. Apparently, he is included in Mr. Glaser's plans for cookie eating and coffee drinking.

## DO THEY REALLY THINK SO?

Thankfully, messianics have had a low rate of success among Orthodox Jews. Akiva Powers, American director of the Magen League Anti-Missionary organization, says that "in my 30 years of counter-missionary work, I have yet to run into any truly Orthodox Jew [involved in messianic Judaism]. Most of them will



try to claim, as Mitch Glaser does, Orthodoxy or an Orthodox connection, but they themselves don't have it. Grandparents, great-grandparents, maybe even parents for a few, but they themselves—no.”

Ruth Guggenheim, of Jews for Judaism in Baltimore, says she has met very few *frum* people who joined. “We have had a few Orthodox Jews who have been attracted to these groups due to their ability to appear non-judgmental. These Orthodox people are going through a crisis in their lives and feel that Yiddishkeit or the community has deserted them. Two that I know were [normally] functioning individuals and were raised *frum*, but felt very abandoned in their time of need.” Nevertheless, she agrees that the numbers are miniscule.

So why is Chosen People Ministries moving into an Orthodox Jewish neighborhood?

Mitch Glaser, in a fund-raising letter, discusses his (apparently) religious grandparents, and their reaction to his becoming Christian at 19. “Word came back to me from my mom that my grandparents were very upset and didn't want to see me.” He describes visiting his grandparents' home in Florida with his new “messianic Jewish wife”: “We approached their apartment, and my grandfather opened his screen door and stared at me without blinking, after not having seen me for more than five years. He glanced at my wife and turned his head to look at my grandmother, who I saw sitting stone-faced on the couch. My grandfather then turned around, looked at me one more time, and slammed the door in my face.

“To this day, it was the most difficult experience I have ever had as a believer.”

He follows this sordid little tale by describing how the messianic center will soon be opening to attempt to reach religious Jews like his grandparents.

“Someone asked me the other day why we were moving into the heart of an Orthodox Jewish neighborhood. The answer is this: If we hope to reach religious Jewish people for [J], then we must minister in their neighborhood.”

The anti-missionary professionals that I contacted were divided as to whether the messianics really believe they can convert Orthodox Jews.

Akiva Powers believes there are two reasons they are moving to Flatbush. “One: It is a great fund-raising tool to say to your supporters, ‘We aren't afraid to go into the area where few have gone before.’ Two: Their real target is the Russian community. Look at the people that they spotlight on the website; most of those that are working or are planning on working in the area are themselves Russian. Who are the most vulnerable and who might be most affected by this group? The *chassidim*? No, the Russians. Here they know that they will be successful.”

Some expressed the idea that Orthodox Jews are a bigger prize for the messianics than any other type of convert. Rabbi Bentzion Kravitz, founder of Jews for Judaism and director of the Los Angeles branch, says that while it is foremost a fund-raising gimmick, “also, in their distorted minds and attempt to validate their position, one Jew is worth a thousand Gentiles, and one Ortho-

dox Jew is worth a thousand secular Jews.”

Gavriel Sanders says: “Orthodox Jews are the final frontier in Jewish evangelism. They do believe they will be successful, and they are investing hundreds of millions yearly to reach the Jewish world. Locally, it will start with kids at risk on Coney Island Avenue on Friday nights. These disaffected Jewish youths will be met with listening ears, sympathetic dialogue, a place to hang out, some good *cholent*, and an introduction to ‘real biblical Judaism’ through belief in [J]. CPM will also influence Russian Jews through English-as-a-second-language classes offered for free and High Holiday services offered for free.”

Rabbi Moshe Shulman, the New York-based executive director of the anti-missionary organization, Judaism's Answer, sees this center as a true danger for Orthodox Jews. “They've been developing texts and books using rabbinic writings [Mishna and Gemara] in order to reach out to Orthodox Jews. There are some very dangerous texts that they've developed. It is clear that so far they don't have someone who can really guide them in bringing in Orthodox Jews. But they're working on it, and they hope that this center can help them.”

Rabbi Shulman told me he's seen the messianic movement over the past 15 years taking increasingly stronger steps to make in-



roads among Orthodox Jews, and although they have not been successful until now, he says that we need to counter them before they begin having success.

### WHAT IS THERE TO DO?

A small amount of time still remains until the center opens. Whether it is a year, as the contractor told me, or only until the fall, as others I spoke to have heard, the construction is definitely moving forward.

This group does not have a money problem. They receive funding from donors, and they also get funds from some of the large evangelical groups, such as the Southern Baptists and the Assemblies of G-d. Their audited income for 2009 was \$12,296,725; of that, \$6,530,576 was for programming expenses. They paid for the building on Coney Island Avenue in full, without taking a mortgage. Its price was \$2,050,000.

I asked the anti-missionaries whether the construction was going slow for money reasons, and they all thought that is out of the question. Julius Ciss said care with the money may be one reason for treading cautiously. "They are meticulous stewards of their donor dollars."

Moshe Verschleisser, an anti-missionary activist from Flatbush, told me that their delays are really only the average delays for putting such a structure up in New York City. "They need permits to have a soup kitchen, to make living space for missionaries." He says that the Jewish community has no option to stop the building on legal grounds concerning the sale of the building. "The sale was entirely legal." If anything, codes, permits, and regulations could be used against the building itself, which may be a reason for CPM to be meticulous in following the law in their construction.

So if the center will inevitably open, what should the Jewish community do about it? Does anything need to be done?

The first thing mentioned was education. Akiva Powers expresses it like this: "In my opinion, the community should start now with a counter-missionary campaign. Educational programs should be presented in every synagogue and *shteibel*. People need to become more aware of who these people are, what they are saying, and how to answer them. We especially need to train Russian speakers in this area, since the Russians are the most vulnerable."

Ruth Guggenheim points out that people need to be informed about where to turn when there is a crisis involving a family member or friend who becomes involved in these missionary groups.

Several people told me about the interventions that ordinary people can make. Moshe Verschleisser says that because missionaries target susceptible members of the community—kids at risk, the poor, the uneducated—the more the Jewish community reaches out to the vulnerable, the less impact the messianics will have.

Gavriel Sanders makes this point as well. "We typically outsource *kiruv* to *kiruv* professionals and send them out to reach the unaffiliated Jews. That will ultimately fail. There aren't enough professionals to keep up with the rapid rate of assimilation and intermarriage. Missionary groups like CPM train laypeople to

reach others and thereby multiply their efforts further and faster."

He also says that even giving someone an ArtScroll English *Tanach* can help. The messianics twist *pesukim* around to "prove" their points, and a true translation can defeat those talking points. (Gavriel told me, "I don't mean this for commercial reasons," when he recommended the Artscroll *Tanach*, and we both laughed. He is the public relations director for Artscroll.)

At the same time, Rabbi Craig Miller, co-director of the Spiritual Deception Prevention Project of the Jewish Community Relations Council of New York, emphasizes that individual responses should be made only in a constructive manner. "Rash acts by the Brooklyn community would only strengthen the missionaries."

Everyone agrees that a professional response would be valuable, but there is a lack of funding, and there is no full-time anti-missionary group in New York. Even national organizations like Jews for Judaism have a hard time raising just a fraction of the huge amount of money the missionaries can leverage.

"We all put in whatever time we have left after making a living," Rabbi Shulman says.

Even the JCRC's project, which gets Jewish Federation funding, is not given enough support to be able to focus on all the threats, several people told me.

Akiva Powers comments, "If possible, if someone would support the establishment of a counter-missionary/outreach center next door to them, or across the street from them, it would be a great *kiddush Hashem*."

How will this center affect the Jewish community of Brooklyn? No one can say for sure. But we may find out within the year.

*Special thanks to Gavriel Sanders for his help with this article.* ●



### A Meeting of the Messianics Chosen People Ministries sent out the following e-mail on June 14:

Join us for a Town Hall Phone Conference!

I wanted to give you an update on the progress of our new Feinberg Messianic Center now being renovated in the heart of Orthodox Jewish Brooklyn. The demolition is complete, our plans have been approved and already some of the rooms are being framed, and I can see some of what we've only been dreaming about beginning to take shape. Praise G-d—that's progress! There are just under a million Jewish people in Brooklyn and very few of them have ever heard the Gospel in a Jewish way. Will you help us reach them?

We will be hosting a Town Hall Phone Conference to bring you up to date on the Feinberg Messianic Center on June 30 at 8:00 PM Eastern Daylight Time. I hope you'll join us for the phone call by calling 1-888-886-6603 and then dialing the private conference code, 16440.

## The Few against the Many:

### Jews for Judaism

By Chanie Asher

Jews for Judaism, founded in Baltimore, Maryland, in 1983, is the leading international organization in monitoring and countering the multi-million-dollar efforts of missionary and cult groups that target the Jewish community for conversion. Through public awareness campaigns, a major presence on the web, and their highly acclaimed interactive educational programs geared to high school and college students, Jews for Judaism serves thousands of individuals annually. In addition, it offers individual and family counseling and support, helping those who have been ensnared find their way back to Judaism and the community.

"The ever-increasing number of Jews, even Christians, who have been deceived into believing their propaganda is staggering," says Ruth Guggenheim, executive director of Jews for Judaism. "Even worse is the fact that many of these missionaries are now savvy enough to walk the walk and talk the talk. Unlike the missionaries of yesteryear, today's missionaries are not as overtly identifiable. Often disguised in *frum* dress, such as black hats, *tzitzis*, knitted kippa, *talleisim* and tefillin, they *daven* in their 'synagogues' out of adulterated Hebrew/English siddurim and *lein* from *sifrei Torah* that resemble ones found in bona fide shuls. In fact, they are true experts in *kiruv* (Jewish outreach)."

Although in its heyday Jews for Judaism was able to raise half a million dollars and conducted 70–100 educational programs a year, unfortunately, it is not receiving the funding it once did. "There are not enough of us," says Ms. Guggenheim, who is only one of two full-time employees in Jews for Judaism's Baltimore/Washington East Coast headquarters.

While the Jews for Judaism website is the largest counter-missionary website in the world, it cannot compete with the professional websites of the missionaries, according to Ms. Guggenheim. There are hundreds of Hebrew-Christian websites on the Internet, and they have direct links to legitimately Jewish websites, such as Chabad.org. There is even one website, Massah Israel, that mimics the "kosher" MASA Israel website.

Ms. Guggenheim says there are over 1,000 messianic churches in the world. In the former Soviet Union, thousands of people come to "Jewish festivals" and are given thousands of dollars in humanitarian aid as a form of proselytizing. The relatively ignorant Jews who attend these programs believe these festivals are truly Jewish. In Argentina and Uruguay, Jews are targeted as well, by groups such as Chosen People Ministries, Jewish Voice Ministry, and Jews for J. Because no one is reaching out to these people the way the missionaries do, they are falling prey to these spiritual predators and adopting Christianity.

#### The messianic mind-set

Missionaries are out to nab each and every Jewish *neshamah*, because they believe that their Messiah will not come until they do. They have forever used newspaper ads, billboards, leaflets, tele-

marketing-style phone campaigns, and door-to-door canvassing to reach their Jewish victims. Now they have added viral YouTube videos and social networking on Facebook, Myspace, and Twitter.

It could never happen to me, you might say, or my children, who have a yeshivah background. Not at all, according to Ms. Guggenheim. Jews for J, which was started in the 1970s and is the founding organization for what is called today Messianic Judaism, has evolved into a highly sophisticated targeting organization whose missionaries are trained in proselytizing and engaging Jews one-on-one.

"They are succeeding because they make things comfortable," explains Ms. Guggenheim. "They engage in peer-to-peer evangelism, and they engage so beautifully, with unconditional love. And we are all looking for a connection, a relationship with Hashem, to fulfill our spiritual needs. When a highly charismatic and passionate missionary comes along—it can be hard to resist."

Ms. Guggenheim shared with me a true case in point. A *frum* teenage boy, the middle child in a large family, was shot down at an early age for asking questions. He was eventually expelled from yeshivah, and his father, a *rebbe* in a yeshivah, was so embarrassed by this and so afraid that his children's *shidduchim* would be compromised that he refused to speak to him. This young man left *Yiddishkeit* and ended up hanging out with a Fundamentalist, born-again Christian. This friend subsequently introduced him to a messianic "rabbi" with whom he felt comfortable. After being involved with the messianic movement for six months, he contacted Jews for Judaism in the hope of making peace with his father, which he subsequently did. He admitted that while he was associated with the messianic congregation he never felt such unconditional love, and that if his own community had reached out to him the way the messianics did, he would not have left *Yiddishkeit* in the first place.

#### The deception

These missionaries have training manuals that teach them exactly how to talk to Jews. Their movement gains legitimacy because they package it Jewishly. Their "siddur" bears the title *Siddur L'Yehudim Mishichen*, in Hebrew letters, and their "*Tanach*" is titled *The Complete Jewish Bible*, which contains both the Old and New Testaments. In fact, they do not even celebrate Christian holidays such as Xmas and Easter.

"Even *frum* kids question what is wrong with accepting Messianic Jews," contends Ms. Guggenheim. "The deception is that it is actually 100 percent Christian theology wrapped in Jewish garb."

#### Too close for comfort

The messianic epidemic is spreading throughout the world at a rapid pace. "It is a growing disease, even though you don't see it or know about it," says Ms. Guggenheim. "We have to understand that all the current red flags, all the things we are struggling with as a community, create the fertile territory that missionaries are trained to pick up on," she continues, saying the best thing to do if you are confronted by a missionary is not to debate, but to disengage as soon as possible and walk away.