

Christian Zionists Heading to Israel: A Living Experience

By Hillel Kuttler

A mezuzah tilts on the front door frame of the house on Raven Street in the Israeli desert town of Arad, near the Dead Sea. On the kitchen wall, Hebrew from the Friday-night blessing Eishet Chayil (Woman of Valor) is inscribed on a colorful chamsa charm. Upon the den door appears a sticker for Delaware's Siegel Jewish Community Center.

The woman who lives here, Constance Campbell, is not Jewish. She is Christian and a proud Israeli—and most of her five children, 19 grandchildren and eight great-grandchildren are Jewish and likewise live in Israel. The long-time manager of Israel's iconic historical site at Masada is Campbell's son, Eitan; he considers himself neither Jewish nor Christian. He identifies himself simply as "Israeli."

ish nation's reconstitution in its ancient homeland. Some Israelis call them "Christian olim" or "Christian Zionists"—even righteous gentiles.

The Campbells followed a typical immigrant's path once in Israel: They attended an ulpan for intensive Hebrew-language study, made friends, decided where to settle, landed jobs and enrolled their children in school. Three of the kids adopted Hebrew names they've maintained: Eitan was born Kevin, Cameron became Ron, Ian switched to Ilan. (Only the now-deceased Jackson Burns Campbell Jr., known as J.B., demurred.) Two children born after the move received Israeli names: Ma'ayan and Yishai.

They're even typical in their post-aliyah wanderings: Jackson and Constance moved most of the clan back to America in the late 1970s before returning a decade later; Ron remained in the United States far longer, resettling in Israel in 2010. The Campbells have taken spiritual journeys, too: Ma'ayan and Ilan converted to Judaism long ago, with Ilan becoming very observant. Yishai became a Jehovah's Witness.

No Law of Return

A Christian family moving to Israel isn't the norm. Israel's Law of Return, passed by Knesset (parliament) in 1950 and modified over the years, entitles Diaspora Jews to immigrate and become citizens. But most non-Jews have no such right. So they often begin on tourist or work visas and eventually obtain temporary-resident or even permanent-resident status. Becoming a citizen entails some risk. Many countries don't allow for dual citizenship. The United States does, and Ron Campbell, 57, recently applied to be an Israeli citizen. Eitan became a citizen several decades ago. Noncitizens aren't eligible to vote in national elections for Knesset, although permanent residents may vote in municipal elections.

It's unclear how many Christian Zionists reside in Israel. According to Israel's Central Bureau of Statistics, 33,000 non-Arab Christians lived in the country by late 2013; the numbers aren't broken down by denomination and land of origin. (Of the nearly 161,000 Christians in Israel, 127,800 are Arabs.)

Christian immigrants interviewed for this article stated that they've integrated nicely and are accepted



White House photo by Joyce N. Boghosian

President George W. Bush spoke with Eitan Campbell, director of Masada National Park, during the president's 2008 tour of Israel.

Campbell and her late husband were religiously motivated to move to Israel, much like many American Jews. Like many in the late 1960s who made aliyah (literally: ascended), the Campbells were spiritually inspired by the country's victory in the Six-Day War.

"We thought that this is what the Lord wanted us to do, to be in Israel," Campbell, 83, said, offering a guest dried fruit and nuts from a Tu B'Shvat basket a neighbor delivered.

Devout Episcopalians, the senior Campbells relocated their family from suburban Wilmington in 1968 to support Israel and to revel in the Jew-

by Jewish Israelis. Curiosity about their religion fades, they noted, and the respect extended to Israelis is reciprocated.

Many immigrant Christians' assimilation derives from the Israeli responsibilities they've shouldered and the burdens they've carried.

Avi and Itai Setz—Christians like their parents Will and Yudit, who immigrated separately from the Netherlands 30 years ago—served in combat units in the Israel Defense Forces. Petra Heldt, a Berlin native who's resided in Israel since 1979, was severely wounded in a July 1997 terrorist attack while shopping in Jerusalem's market, Machne Yehuda. Hava (née Darlene) Bausch, of Chico, Calif., has lived in the Galilee since settling in Israel in 1973 and wouldn't think of moving back to America, even after the death nine years ago of her husband Lev (formerly Arden) and her continuing recovery from cancer.

"I feel like a tourist when I'm in America," Bausch said. "This is home."

Said Rafael Jospe, an observant Jew who teaches philosophy at Ariel University and is a close friend of Heldt and her British-Christian husband, Malcolm Lowe, "These are fine people. I wish many Jews were as Zionist as they are. She's paid with her blood, literally, for her support for Israel."

Christians on a Dubious Mission

Not all immigrant Christians' presence is benevolent.

Alan Schneider, director of the B'nai B'rith World Center in Jerusalem, said some settling in Israel conceal their motives, only to proselytize later.

He's noticed that those proselytizing have become increasingly overt, even brazen. Some represent overseas evangelical movements. A few individuals take legal action in bids to alter the Law of Return to enable wider Christian immigration and citizenship.

Christian evangelical conferences held in Israel might ordinarily be viewed as believers' internal rallies, but several gatherings set for 2015 have agendas explicitly including preaching to Jews, Schneider said.

One such event, held in May in Jerusalem and called Empowered21, was organized by the Pentecostal Global Congress. Its website says "Pray for Jewish hearts to be turned to Messiah Jesus," with the heading, "Preparing Jerusalem for Their King."

As stated on its website, the Lausanne Consultation on Jewish Evangelism's agenda for its assembly

in Jerusalem this August includes the following bullet point: "Strategize on the global level so that more Jewish people will hear and consider the good news of Jesus the Messiah."

Promotions for these and other events attest to "increasing signs that Christian Zionists or Israel-supporting Christian groups are more and more active as missionaries," Schneider said. "I've been shocked to find that some people who are true friends of Israel are missionaries—openly.

"This raises questions for people like me who [were] very vocal in trying to advocate for B'nai B'rith to be out in front in embracing cooperating with these Christians with the Evangelicals," he said.

"You can't be a friend of Israel if you're here to missionize Jews—the remnant of Jews after the Holocaust. I'm not going to make common cause with anyone even remotely related to missionary activity."

A small group of Israeli Jews working to combat such missionary activity is JewishIsrael.com.

Christian Zionists' proselytizing often begins with what Ellen Horowitz, the organization's content and research director, said is called "church planting," establishing a presence in Israel to entice Jews to adopt Christianity or Messianic Judaism (Jews who believe in Jesus).

Israeli law prohibits only those missionary activities involving financial inducements or involving a minor without parental consent.

But Israel is in somewhat of a bind, Schneider and Horowitz explained, because it markets itself as a tourism destination for Christians. And while protecting the Jewish nature of the state, Israel also is wary of running afoul of the United States' International Religious Freedom Act of 1998 that monitors other countries' compliance and issues an annual report listing non-complying governments.

An Israeli Ministry of Interior spokeswoman did not respond to several requests for comment.

The Ecumenical Theological Research Fraternity in Israel, an organization of Christian clerics that eschews proselytizing, is directed by Heldt, an ordained Protestant minister. The group assists other Christians in a Zionist way, helping Arabs, such as some living in Nazareth, interested in deepening their own identification as Christian Israelis rather than as Christian Arabs, including by serving in the IDF.





Rabbi Josh Broide, founder and director of the Boca Raton Jewish Experience, with Eitan Campbell on his visit to Masada.

Paving the Way to Israel

B'nai B'rith gave Heldt a grant to study in Israel in 1974. "That instilled a love [of Israel] that's been with me ever since," said Heldt, who went on to earn a doctorate at The Hebrew University of Jerusalem, where she teaches Christianity and Judaism in the Middle East in the first millennium C.E.

"It was never planned—can you imagine?" she said regarding the motivations for settling in Israel.

Heldt is deferential to Israel and expresses appreciation for being allowed to reside freely as a Christian in a sovereign Jewish state. Asked what she enjoys most about living in Israel, Heldt cites very Jewish-religious dimensions, like discovering new synagogues in her Jerusalem neighborhood of Arnona and families' singing wafting through her open windows to celebrate every Shabbat.

"I regard it as grace, and as great. To live in Israel, among Israelis, to share with Israelis the joys and the pains, is something very special," Heldt said.

Sundays, she worships in a church in the Old City. Saturdays, Heldt attends synagogue services, her fluency in Hebrew and familiarity with the liturgy enabling her to partake. Jewish holidays regularly find Heldt and her husband Lowe celebrating at the home of Jospe and his family a few miles away.

"The last 18, 19 years, we haven't had a Pesach without them," she said. "We love them because they're devoted to God in their way, we in our way. It isn't a question of converting them. It wouldn't occur to me."

In Arad, Campbell relates something remarkable, too, that deals with personal influence.

It's not just that she and her husband, shortly before moving to Israel in 1968, attended a New York museum exhibition about Masada—hardly dreaming that Eitan would eventually run the site. Or that Ron, having vis-

ited Israel only three times as an adult, would return in 2010 to live there because, as he said, "I identify myself 100 percent as Israeli," even though he never converted to Judaism, or that Ilan's son would study to be a rabbi.

It is this: Eitan's friend in New Jersey said that meeting Constance had actually strengthened his Jewish identity.

"That makes me feel so good," she said.

In the village of Neve-Oved-Poria, near the Sea of Galilee, Bausch, too, finds abundant welcome.

Her Sephardic landlord had just dropped off some hamentaschen for Purim. Friends, including a young family living on an agricultural settlement, host her for other Jewish holiday celebrations. She attends Christian worship, and, if invited, she'll join Arab friends for their Christian holiday festivities. "But it's not like I even have a Christmas tree," Bausch said.

"I'm in a Jewish environment, you see. I like the Jewish holidays."

When the Second Lebanon War broke out in 2006, Bausch, then living in Tiberias, sought shelter as Hezbollah-launched rockets fell around. "You become part of things," she said.

She never considered leaving the country during the war.

"You have to make a decision when you come here, just like any Jewish person," she said. "You can't just be here for the yofi-tofi [swell] times."

When Christian tourists she knew wanted to proselytize, Bausch set them straight. The chastened visitors emerged, she said, "with a better understanding of Israel."

The Boomerang Effect

For Shannon Nuszen, the boomerang went a step further than that.

The daughter of a minister, Nuszen was trained in her Houston church, Assembly of God, to proselytize to Jews. Seeking a deeper understanding, Nuszen read traditional Jewish books. Her self-education in Judaism caused her to reassess her mission.

"My whole world fell apart. I realized that Judaism did make sense," Nuszen said.

That was 10 years ago, setting her on the path to conversion. She is now Jewish, and with her Jewish-born husband, the parents of seven children in a blended family, attends an Orthodox synagogue in Houston. The kids go to a Jewish school.

This summer, the Nuszens plan to move to Israel. 