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Modern Israel's First Martyr

By Shani Sorko-Ram Ferguson

Tom* was the quintessential British gentleman. He was brilliant. He worked as an aircraft design engineer, but he never made you feel like you were any less intelligent than him. A few years after he and his Israeli wife Yaffa were married in England, Yaffa came to know the Lord. Tom was always supportive of her decisions and with his background in the Church, dove in with her. So there they were, a Christian and a Messianic Jew, one in Messiah.

Tom and Yaffa became a part of my life when they began attending my parent's congregation, Tiferet Yeshua, in the late 1990's—back when the congregation met in our basement. Tom always came early to help set up. “Bokers” (his take on the Hebrew morning greeting of “Boker Tov”) was his perfect blend of British quip and Israeli joy and still pops into my mind on a particularly bright morning.

*Names have been changed to protect the family

Upon retiring a few years ago, they moved to Modi'in, a city conveniently about halfway between Tel Aviv and Jerusalem. Most importantly, however, it brought them closer to their grandkids.

They weren't a spotlight type of couple. But Yaffa had a master's degree in counseling, and they both loved to help people struggling with life issues, so they would often be called on to advise and encourage.

It was for this reason that a friend in their congregation encouraged Yaffa to spend some time with Ronit. Ronit is an American immigrant, married to an Israeli man who is said to have attended a variety of congregations over the period of a few years. Though he had a reputation of being slightly odd, believers embraced him like anyone else who needed the Lord.

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Yaffa and Tom had visited the couple before but Ronit had just had her third child and had invited Yaffa to come see them. What happened next is based off information we gathered from the family and eyewitnesses.



Hundreds of people attended Tom's funeral, but Yaffa was not able to come

On election day this past March, Yaffa and Tom arrived at the home of this couple. Upon arrival Yaffa and Tom began chatting with Ronit while the husband went outside. By the time he came back, Yaffa was snuggling their newborn child while she continued talking to Ronit. Undeterred by the danger he would put his baby in, the husband lunged at Yaffa (72) and struck her in the head with a brick used to build sidewalks. Yaffa crumpled to the ground but protected the baby with her body as she fell. Seeing the danger, Tom (75) threw himself in front of his wife and absorbed the deadly blows that followed.

Reportedly, a neighbor saw the man beating Tom through a window and ran over screaming, "What are you doing?"

"They are missionaries!" yelled the killer.

"So what?! They're still people!" responded the neighbor. At this, the killer raised his hands and walked off.

The funeral was delayed for days in hopes that Yaffa would be well enough to attend. But, in the end the doctors felt the danger of seizure was too great so she said her goodbyes in a letter that would be read by her son at the funeral. At the time this article is being written, Yaffa is in rehab and is recovering.

The situation was terrible, but how the authorities handled the situation made things worse. The suspected murderer's lawyer gave a statement to the police—and the press—that his client acted due to feeling harassed by the victims and their "Messianic cult." You should know that "cult" in Israel is a loaded term and is attributed to highly manipulative groups who prey on people for financial gains or carnal pleasure.

While the alleged murderer was immediately provided with a lawyer by the state, the police reportedly went straight to Yaffa at the hospital. She was barely conscious, had been given medication and her hearing aid had been broken in the attack. They demanded she sign permission papers for the police to search her home. Obviously, she was not in a position to understand what they were asking, but having been a law-abiding citizen her whole life, she wanted to help the police with anything they needed to prosecute the murderer. So of course, she signed.

Tom and Yaffa's daughter, also assuming this was about helping her parents and wanting to cooperate fully with the police, let them into her parents' apartment. When the detectives began seizing laptops, phones and documents, she questioned what they were doing. "We want you to help us find official documents related to your Messianic cult," they

responded as they rummaged through Yaffa's journal and made snide remarks about its content. That was when she started realizing that something was wrong—that *these detectives had taken the word of the murderer and were now investigating her parents as cult members.*

At the time of this writing the police have returned some of the items. They still won't give back the computer and seem to have lost Tom's phone and wallet. We're told they've also begun calling in members of Tom and Yaffa's Messianic congregation for questioning.

A few days after the murder, Tom's family went to visit Ronit who was in shock. It was a very emotional time. Tom's family expressed their forgiveness for what her husband had done.

I think when I imagined the solemn day we would all hear about the first martyr in Israel's Messianic community, the story would be something like a mob of angry Orthodox Jews throwing stones, or another crazy bomb-making guy. And I was sure it would happen to one of our front-line evangelists who would end up "witnessing to the wrong guy." I never dreamed it would happen so deliberately and so unprovoked to someone as unobtrusive as Tom.

Yaffa was attacked and Tom was killed because in the murderer's eyes, they represented Yeshua. It's as painful, and as simple as that.

We hope you will join us in honoring his ultimate sacrifice, supporting his family in this time of mourning, praying for God to bring good out of this tragedy, and taking this as an opportunity to stand up for the legitimacy of believers in Israel. ■



Understanding Persecution in Israel

By Shani Sorko-Ram Ferguson

“More packages in the mail?” I asked as I got in the car and pushed over the pile of envelopes. The year was 1992 and being a Jewish believer in Yeshua was still one of the strangest things most Israelis had ever heard of. A special mailbox had been set up to receive mail from Israelis interested in knowing more about our faith, but hesitant to reveal their identity. We could understand their initial anxiety and would connect them with a believer they could talk to who lived in their area. Of course, not all the mail that arrived was from interested parties.

“Yeah, one package was full of pages from that outreach book that was being given out—the sender had used it as toilet paper before mailing it.” I rummaged through the pile and found another package.

As I opened it gently to see what was inside, a fine powder puffed out of the top—ashes. They’d burned the book and sent it back.

I was too young to remember if this secret mailbox ever resulted in Israelis coming to the Lord. I do, however, recall the never-ending hostilities towards us as Jewish believers.

I remember the Orthodox Jews who looked like they could spit dragon fire once they realized who we were. I remember the government passing laws that defined the belief in the Jewish rabbi Yeshua as a betrayal of everything Jewish. I remember secular Israelis looking at us as if we believed aliens walked among us. They weren’t necessarily hostile, but we definitely were an odd bunch to them.

I also remember the summers when we flew to the US; that’s where I met Christians. They smiled big and enjoyed feeding us. They loved everybody. They also ignored anything they didn’t understand. I remember walking through halls of ministry buildings and schools and seeing the 10/40 window map that was spread across the walls. Every country within the “window” was brightly colored with stats of population, economic status, religious breakdown etc. Every country except Israel. Israel was gray, as if it weren’t there.

As a teen, I didn’t grasp the theological ramifications of this—that Christians weren’t really sure what to do with Israel. That the people of Israel hadn’t been a part of

Christian theology for centuries and her sudden reentry onto the world stage left many theologians scrambling and churchgoers shrugging.

A few theological attempts made it into the limelight: Israel is already saved; Israel gets saved after the rapture; Israel rejected God and is, therefore, no longer being offered salvation. That last one was actually the oldest theory—the one Christians seemingly agreed upon soon after the original Jewish Apostles died out and Gentile believers outnumbered Jewish ones. It was also the theory they used to convince masses of Christians to “help” God extinguish that people group who “killed God.” By ‘extinguish’ they meant kill, or force them to renounce their wicked Jewish heritage and convert to Christianity.

For the most part, modern Christians are not hostile, though many of them still carry the old thought that Jews should all be

converting to Christianity. Still, many Evangelicals today have bewildered Israel’s government with their unwavering support

provided the world. However, Paul wasn’t talking about Israel in general. He was talking about the Jewish believers in Israel.

The government hasn’t banned believers from working certain jobs, it doesn’t have to. The cultural fear of Messianic Jews is enough to deter some employees from hiring believers.

of the modern state of Israel. Tours, prayers, political support and billions of dollars are literally thrown at the concept of Israel. This support has done much to the hearts of Jews in the way of healing the wounds of the past. But, Evangelical support of Israel could be so much more effective if they took a few moments to consider how and what they are supporting.

It is true that in Romans 15 the Apostle Paul discussed the support of Israel by Christians as a given—a natural reaction of gratitude for the spiritual blessings Israel had

*For you see, the believers in Macedonia and Achaia[a] have eagerly taken up an offering for the poor among the **believers in Jerusalem**. They were glad to do this because they feel they owe a real debt to them. Since the Gentiles received the spiritual blessings of the Good News from the believers in Jerusalem, they feel the least they can do in return is to help them financially. (Romans 15:26-27)*

Can you imagine Christians in Paul’s day taking up offerings from Christians to provide the Pharisees with fresh garments and a new synagogue? How about funding young Jewish boys to study under the tutelage of the Sadducees? And yet, that is exactly what Christians around the world are doing today. If it has a Star of David on it—they support it.

It’s Subtle

Occasionally, I’m asked about persecution in Israel and my initial reaction is a shoulder shrug. All of us in Israel are used to the constant threat of rocket fire and bus bombings; aggressive people who don’t like the fact we exist is a way of life. But I have to stop myself and remember — just because we’re used to it, doesn’t make religious persecution right. And left to fester, it could easily get worse.



Orthodox Jews who largely value their rabbis instructions above the secular Israeli government often go head to head with law enforcement.

For most of my life, persecution of Jewish believers in Israel has consisted of largely subtle, under-the-table activities. Our government doesn't lop off heads of people who claim to follow the Jewish Messiah; we're not that kind of country. But they also don't do much to protect Israeli believers when other groups come against us simply because of our testimony of faith.

The government hasn't banned believers from working certain jobs; it doesn't have to. The cultural fear of Messianic Jews is enough to deter some employers from hiring believers despite laws against discrimination. The government won't refuse Messianic Jews the right to rent a hall and worship together; it doesn't have to. Business owners are too afraid of an Orthodox Jewish boycott (which would include a large number of tourists) to rent their facilities to Jewish believers in Yeshua. As a result, Messianic Jews often have to rent facilities out in the middle of nowhere for conferences and summer camps—or simply not have the event at all.

I've Never Heard of This

Perhaps you even visited and enjoyed a delightful and inspiring trip. But there is a big difference in the Israeli mind between a Gentile Christian tourist who is coming here to spend money and go home versus an Israeli citizen who will spend their life claiming Jews are destined to follow Yeshua.

Israel is a democracy and nation where freedom of religion is a given right. But as any student of history knows, laws are only as good as the men and women charged with enforcing them.

One of the most well-known cases of religious harassment is the case

of Pnina Pie, a kosher bakery owned by Pnina and her family which was targeted by religious activists simply because the family were believers. It should be noted that there is no law disqualifying Christian or Muslim Arabs from providing kosher food—this was a specific attack on Jews who claimed belief in Yeshua. Enraged upon finding out the owners of the bakery were believers, activists stood in front of their bakery with pamphlets warning of the dire consequences of eating a delicious croissant made by the hands of soul-damning missionaries

When their activities thwarted only part of the clientele, one activist ran in and ripped their kosher certificate off the wall. In some Israeli neighborhoods, not having a kosher license is a death sentence for a business, as



When people call me and order a cake, some tell me "please, make sure there isn't a logo or a sticker on the package."

Pnina Comforti, owner Pnina Pie Bakery

not only ultra-Orthodox, but many observant Jews will not patronize such a business. Despite the loyalty of customers, many simply could not in good conscience purchase and serve "non-kosher" pastries.



Orthodox Jewish activists surround cars of congregants and block entrance to the meeting hall in bid to intimidate congregants from coming. Congregants say the police have so far ignored calls to disperse them.

Understanding the ramifications this held for believers all over the country, should Orthodox officials allow this behavior of attacking businesses of Jewish believers to go unaddressed, Maoz partners helped us fund a full-on legal assault and push the case up to Israel's Supreme Court. The Supreme Court ruled in favor of Pnina Pie's right to provide kosher food despite the owner's belief system. However, had the case been left at that, all the effort would've been for naught because the rabbinical authorities in Israel fundamentally do not respect the Supreme Court's jurisdiction over their religious decisions!

It took several more pushes until the Court issued fines to get the rabbinical authority to acquiesce. Today, Pnina Pie serves happy customers at two kosher locations. Still, Pnina won because Messianic Jews and Christians around the world stood up for her. But Jewish believers in Israel, as a whole aren't

confident that Christians will stand up for them in time of need.

It's Not the Government. It's Who's in Government.

The Israeli government has many departments, and some of them are believed to have been infiltrated by ultra-Orthodox activists. For decades, the powers that be have made it very difficult for Jewish believers to receive citizenship. It wasn't always clear how the government would know about the personal lives of believing Jews who were looking to immigrate, but rumor had it, people within the

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government relied on "detectives," mainly from an organization called Yad L'Achim who would spy on people to establish whether they were followers of Yeshua.

It was bad enough that the government could be acting on information provided by civilian, self-appointed spies. But then concerns were raised that people inside the ultra-Orthodox controlled Ministry of Interior was also sharing information. There's no way to prove it because we don't sneak into government buildings, but out of nowhere we—and believers all over the land—began receiving "evangelistic" magazines at our home addresses with articles confronting our erroneous religious ideas and encouraging us to convert to "true" Judaism. The magazines were addressed to us using our full legal names—which we don't use anywhere ever—except for government paperwork. So, while we had never been asked by the government on any occasion about our beliefs, it appears someone in the government has a file on us and had given this non-governmental organization access to our personal details including our home address.

It should be noted that years ago, when an ultra-Orthodox mob got hold of my mother's home address, they threw a Molotov cocktail outside her door trapping her inside her third-story apartment



On rare occasion, the unjust and even illegal persecution against Messianic Jews is being recognized by Israel's media. One such article—a 4,000-word exposé on the anti-religious freedom organization which ferociously fights the Messianic Jews was published on Oct 3, 2009 by the Haaretz newspaper.



Credit: Apmages/Dan Ballity

The unrepentant Ya'akov Teitel was convicted for the attempted murder of Ami Ortiz after a lengthy investigation and legal battle



as the hallway went up in flames. Fortunately, the fire department arrived and put out the flames.

Years later after my parents were married and living near Tel Aviv, a car bomb was placed under their vehicle. Thankfully, they saw the suspicious looking package and called the bomb squad who pulled it out and blew it up.

case was one of the few times a perpetrator was brought to full justice and will serve the rest of his years in prison. Though this particular attack was found to be the work of a lone-wolf religious Jew, the attack was clearly inspired by the targeted protests against the pastor in the months leading up to it.

Thankfully, there are many people of principle in our government. When injustices occur, a Messianic Jew can bring his or her case all the way to the Supreme Court.

The most well-known case—because of its brutality—in which Messianic Jews were targeted this way was that of Ami Ortiz, the son of a local pastor. He was the victim of a bomb disguised as a Purim gift package left for his dad by their front porch. Ami was 15 at the time, and it would take more than two years and 14 operations to rebuild his badly burned body. Because of a security camera - and a lot of legal pressure, this

A lesser-known but significantly disturbing situation also occurred several years ago when a believing family shared that their school-aged daughter had been called into the principal's office and questioned by a group of religious men about her family's religious activities. She was encouraged to keep the conversation quiet and so didn't think to mention it to anyone until the day her family's van exploded while parked in front of their home.

Thankfully, there are many people of principle in our government. When injustices occur, a Messianic Jew can take his or her case all the way to the Supreme Court, if need be. The High Court has a pretty good history of enforcing law above personal opinion. Unfortunately, you can't reach the bench of the Supreme Court without significant funding and pressure from masses of people. The small body of believers in Israel doesn't qualify as masses. Should they try and take a stand, many of them would risk becoming a target themselves. And so the question is, who will stand up for believers in Israel?

At a time when Israel is under a constant barrage of diplomatic condemnations and sanctions, Israel recognizes that Evangelicals are, perhaps her strongest ally in the world. As with Esther, who was put in a place of influence to defend the people of God from slaughter, who knows if you have been put in this position *for such a time as this*. ■

SO YOU WANT TO
PRAY
FOR
ISRAEL
BUT THINGS
IN ISRAEL MOVE
AT THE
SPEED OF LIFE.
HOW CAN YOU
KEEP UP?

The Maoz Weekly
Prayer Email
will keep you up to
speed with what is
happening from
inside Israel and how
to pray about it.

