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Rabbi Tovia Singer Fights Missionary Nonsense with Sense

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Fighting Missionary Nonsense with Sense

A conversation with counter-missionary expert
Rabbi Tovia Singer
If you had asked me just a short while ago what it takes to bring Jews back from the clutches of Christianity, I would have said, "Not much." Just take away the nonsensical belief in that egotistical Jew from Nazareth and the apostate will be back to where he started. To me, it seemed easy, almost a no-brainer.

But as I discovered from speaking with Rabbi Tovia Singer, deprogramming someone who has fallen into the clutches of a foreign ideology is anything but easy. There's a lot more involved than promoting reason; one needs to be quite skilled in order to deal with the irrational. Tovia Singer, founder and director of Outreach Judaism, a Jewish counter-missionary organization, is quite skilled. In addition to his familiarity with the New Testament and related writings (which he knows like the back of his hand), he has lots of street smarts and insight into people. These are skills that serve him well in his adopted calling.

**Man on a Mission**

Tovia Singer is in Philadelphia, where he will be lecturing for the next two days, when I catch up with him. This is a man who is always on the go. He has two new books coming out in a few weeks, and then he'll be back on the road for a book tour. "Let's just say that I have a lot of speaking engagements," he tells me with a chuckle. "I lecture in universities and in synagogues for chasidish young men who are interested in learning Navi."

How would he describe his primary area of interest?

"For over 30 years, my work was devoted to helping Jews who had converted to Christianity return to the Jewish faith," he tells me. "That's my primary focus. I travel around lecturing on this very important topic."

"And you also teach Navi?" I ask.

"I don't teach Navi as a regular course; I teach things that aren't readily accessible. For example, I just did a film with a chasidish olam in Boro Park on my shiturim on Divrei Hayamim. There are fantastic contradictions between Divrei Hayamim and Shmuel and Melachim. People don't understand what Divrei Hayamim is doing in Tanach; no one learns it. I certainly didn't when I was in yeshivah. When I teach, I address topics that aren't being dealt with; I need to fill in a gap. Of course, there are wonderful lectures out there and people who teach Navi, but I try to make things accessible that normally wouldn't be."

How did he become interested in Navi? Like everything else about Tovia Singer, there is a solid explanation.

"I grew up with a very traditional yeshivah education. When I began studying this stuff, it occurred to me that I had never learned Sefer Zecharyah in my life. Of course, you have the haftarah on Chanukah, but that's it. I had no idea of the context, so I had to learn it. It felt like what a bad teshuvah must feel when he opens up a Gemara, like, What Navi fascinated me. I obviously had to study it extensively in order to help Jews in the church. But there's also a big hunger among people with similar backgrounds to mine who want to learn Navi."

What interests me more, though, is how he got involved in counter-missionary work.

"I used to walk around New York City as a youngster," he elaborates, "and see all these Jews for Jesus missionaries. They would be on street corners in Midtown Manhattan when I was coming out of a restaurant with my family on a Motzai Shabbos, and it appalled me and made me angry. I was raised in a very insulated environment. Well, one time I began to argue with them. It just bothered me deeply. It was a little frustrating because I wasn't prepared for it. A few minutes into the conversation, this elderly Jewish man who was watching me (I was just 16 or 17 at the time) pulled me away and said, 'Don't argue with them because you don't know enough.' He told me that if I
really wanted to do something, I should tear down the posters they were putting up on lampposts. I was shocked because I went to yeshiva; how could it be that I didn’t know enough?

“The following summer I went to Eretz Yisrael and encountered a missionary there. That’s when I began to study the subject. It was really shocking to me because I had never really studied Yeshayahu. Now I sit and help Jews who are in the church as well as many goyim who have questions. I also have audio programs that are downloaded thousands of times a day.”

**Israeli Imports?**

“Are the members of Jews for Jesus mostly the products of Israeli missionaries?” I ask.

“No. Some missionaries in the US are Israelis,” he explains, “but not many. There’s a lot of missionary work going on in Eretz Yisrael. Roughly 10,000 Israelis have converted to Christianity.

“In the US, it’s mostly Americans; the leadership tends to be Jewish, although the head of Jews for Jesus, David Brickner, happens to be a guy. His mother is the daughter of a minister and his father is a Jew who converted to Christianity many years ago. But the other members of the inner circle are Jewish.

“Those who are successful in converting Jews have two very important rules about Jewish evangelism: In almost all cases, the Jew who is converted is **not** converted by anyone in Jews for Jesus. Jewish people, even if they’re totally assimilated, are offended by these groups. Invariably, it’s because of a non-Jew, a layperson they meet in a social environment like a campus or workplace. It is these fundamentalist, pro-Israel Christians who are committed to converting Jews. The primary role of a Messianic congregation like Jews for Jesus is to train evangelical Christians how to effectively convert their neighbors and coworkers. That’s how it works.”

I share with him an experience I once had with a Polish woman. One time, when I wasn’t paying attention, she put a Yiddish-language New Testament in my car, and later told me she was a member of Jews for Jesus.

“You’re bringing up exactly my point. The entire Jewish community across the board hates these people. Therefore, the Jew who’s an apostate is too sensitive to try to proselytize, so they’ll use this Polish woman who wears a Star of David and ‘loves the Jews.’

“The Christian church puts out a lot of material on how to convert Jews. For example, they tell them not to use the words ‘Jesus Christ’; say ‘Yeshua Hamelech.’ Don’t say ‘convert’; say ‘become a Messianic Jew.’ Don’t say ‘come to church’; do say ‘come to temple.’ They give them all these instructions. They are masters at manipulating language in order to portray the belief in Jesus as the most Jewish thing you can do. That’s their weapon.”

“Rabbi Joseph Ber Soloveitchik once said that the modern-day missionaries have made it easier for Jews to convert by allowing them to keep their culture,” I offer.

“It’s true,” he agrees. “These churches have an **aron kodesh**, a Torah scroll, a **bimah** and an ordained minister wearing a **yarmulke** and **tallit**. But if you look closely you’ll see that the **tallit** is only attached to his belt loops; he’s not wearing a **kippah**, which is indicative of the entire movement. Outwardly, it looks kosher—just like a chazzir.

“They do the whole **Kaddish**; they read from the Torah. They even have a Passover **haggadah**, but it’s all about Jesus. The key thing they attempt to do is blur the distinctions between Judaism and Christianity in order to lure Jews who would otherwise resist the straightforward Christian message. In the early 1970s, they developed certain techniques at a conference that was held in Lugano, Switzerland. Their best minds gathered together to figure out the best way to evangelize the Jews. At that time, Jerusalem had just been liberated a few years earlier. There was an explosion of interest in spirituality. There was also an anticipation that Yoshke was going to return by the year 2000, so they felt an urgency to recruit Jews to the cause. They developed a very careful technique to portray Christianity as if it were Jewish, and did it very effectively.

“Not only do the kids who get involved in this know nothing about the faith they’ve abandoned, they’re also our most spiritual kids. They’re the ones who had spiritual questions and yearnings, and whose questions were never addressed in Hebrew School. These kids were never given any substantial relationship with Yiddishkeit. They were hungry, and the missionaries were there for them and we weren’t. We failed them, in a sense.”

**The Art of the Deprogrammer**

How many of these kids has he been successful in saving?

“I don’t really have numbers of how many Jews have left the church, but there are **rabbinim** with beards in Monsey and Passaic who used to be in Jews for Jesus that I got out. There were many cases over the years.

“In the old days,” he reminisces, “when there was no Internet or anything, I had to sit one-on-one and counsel people. It was very time consuming. Now that my lectures are available online for free of charge, thousands of people listen to them every day. This is crucial, because if someone is seriously considering Jews for Jesus, he can hear my lectures first and get out before he’s emotionally sold.

“The key to helping someone leave the church is to do a lot of listening. Understanding the emotional needs that these cult-like groups fulfill is very important. My rebbe used to say, ‘You have two ears and one mouth. Use them in ratio. Do a lot of listening.’

Is that his entire technique?

“When I sit down with someone who’s involved in the church, I want to hear what’s

"Let’s take Yoshke and consider what he looks like. He’s always pictured around six foot one, perfect, beautiful hair, and he looks like a Viking. There aren’t any fat Yoshkes out there."
on his mind. I want to know why he was vulnerable in the first place. Most of these people have never encountered Judaism in a way that's deeply spiritual, where somebody's talking about Hakadosh Baruch Hu. I not only show them how the Gospel of Matthew and other Christian texts have deliberately manipulated and altered Nach, but I show them the beauty of Yeshayah, how delicious Zekharyah is, and how you can mamash be lifted up to the sky from Daniel. They hear a piece of Torah on the very pasuk that disturbed them. That sweeps them away. That's what they always wanted.

"Is your approach more emotional than philosophical?" I ask him.

"It's both emotional and intellectual," he answers. "The emotional aspect steps first. Jews for Jesus is a very tight-knit, cult-like group. Everyone is your friend. It's a social network. Even to a Jewish kid who grew up in a very assimilated home, Christianity and Jesus are as foreign as outer space. It's not only alien, it's hostile. Jewish people have an aversion to Christianity because of what the church has done to them for 2,000 years."

"The appeal of all avodah zarah is that it's concrete," I say. "Yoshke is concrete. Is that something you encounter?"

"Okay, let's take Yoshke and consider what he looks like. He's always pictured around six foot one, perfect beautiful hair, and he looks like a Viking. There aren't any fat Yeshkees out there. You have this very tangible thing. It's like the perfect celebrity, and people love celebrities. That's one thing.

"The second thing is something that I didn't understand years ago. Growing up in a traditional home, I couldn't begin to fathom what the attraction of Christianity was. Then, when I began to read the texts, I thought, Okay, I'll just show them how Matthew manipulates Yeshayah and they'll see it's a fraud and leave. In the early days, I just presented this information. But it didn't really work.

"I realized then that I had to understand the attraction. In life, people are often betrayed and hurt by those who should have protected them. The idea in the Christian bible is that it portrays Yoshke as having been betrayed by those who were closest to him—the Jews. As you said, he's very tangible, and people identify with this little imaginary friend. That's why you hear, 'You want me to reject Jesus? You want me to do to him what was done to him?' You and I know that's nonsense, but that's what I have to deal with.

"Exit-counseling, what deprogramming is called, takes a long time. It has to be one-on-one, because if it were done in a group it would turn into a sort of study session. When there's an audience of any kind, the ego comes into play. The person feels defensive and tries to protect himself and fight back.

"On rare occasions, a frum Jew falls in. They certainly don't want their identity found out. In those cases I have to work with them and maybe send them to a yeshivah in Eretz Yisrael to turn their lives around."

"Do you have other people working with you?"

"Yes, in the sense that when I write books I have editors and graphic artists and people behind the scenes. But when the rubber hits the road, I do the deprogramming, public speaking and writing."

"What's your public speaking all about?" I ask him.

"I do a lecture on Torah shebe'el peh. The church says that the rabbis invented the Oral Law. The Messianic church actually uses traditions and customs that are part of the Oral Law but they don't keep Scriptural law. They all light Chanukah candles and wear yarmulkes and so on... but none of them check their clothing for kapparos. That's because our rituals are very visual and very stimulating, and that's what they are after. They take the symbolic elements of Judaism and infuse Christian theology into them. It sounds horrific, but that's exactly how it works. They take our faith and pour a Christian message into it.

"Once you understand that, it's not hard to set someone straight. My hardest case was a man who today is a fairly well-known rav in New Jersey. Why was he so hard? He became a liberal Christian, an Episcopalian. That's very unusual. Episcopalians are very liberal and don't mamash believe it's the word of G-d. This guy was very hard to convince. The typical people involved in these movements are only involved with fundamentalist Christians. Once they see that the issue isn't just mistakes in the New Testament but that it's a theological crime scene, with deliberately altered and manipulated stories, it's easy to reach them.
“It used to be almost impossible to get Jews to convert because they just knew too much. Israelis are harder because they know the language and have access to the original texts.”

**Boteach’s Treife Yoga**

“I know you really went after Shmuley Boteach’s book *Kosher Jesus*. Do you think the book has had any negative effects?”

“There’s a caveat,” he answers. “The book itself is much more offensive to Christianity than to Judaism. But the title was nonetheless devastating. It nourished the message that Jesus is Jewish. It was irresponsible for a rabbi to do that. I thought it was reckless. I know Shmuley well. I was very upset and disappointed. But the book was really written by somebody else. He didn’t plagiarize it; he says it openly. It’s based on a very famous work written by Hyam Maccoby called *The Mythmaker: Paul and the Invention of Christianity*. The theory is simply this: Christianity was invented later; Yeshke had nothing to do with it. He was just a guy who fought against Rome and got killed, so he had nothing to do with Christianity and was basically a good person. The only people who loved Shmuley’s book and ate it up were the liberal Christians.

But was there any real harm done by the book?

“There’s anecdotal evidence that it was harmful. While Shmuley offended most missionarists by saying Yosheke was really just a regular guy who fought the Romans, the title had very bad implications.”

“Do you agree with his thesis that Jesus wasn’t the father of Christianity?”

“Almost all Christian theology emerges from the letters of Paul. Thirteen are attributed to him, but he actually wrote only seven. The main question is who Yosheke was. The Christian texts are completely unreliable. There are no contemporary authors of that time.

“Then there are those portions of the Gemara that talk about Yeshu, but the question is whether or not it’s the same person.

The standard answer in history has been yes, that if you look at the text you’ll see it’s referring to a student of Rabbi Yehoshua ben Perachyah, which would be about 100 years before the Christian era. I believe, and I’m fairly certain, that these Gemaras were self-censored and they really are talking about Jesus, but this is speculative and not something I’d lecture on. In some very old manuscripts—for instance, the Munich Shas from the 13th century—it has the same text about Yeshu but says ‘Hametzri.’ You have to understand that when the Gemara was edited around the year 600, Christianity had not yet reached Babylon. The Amoraim had nothing to fear by discussing Christianity and what they thought of it. What happened subsequently is that the Jews were thrust into the Christian world and the texts had to be self-edited. I’m fairly certain that the Yosheke in the Gemara is Jesus. Nothing so evil would ever come from a good person.

“I am assuming,” I say, “that Shmuley Boteach is no scholar of either the New Testament or the Masorah. So does his book have any merit?”

“No, it does not. The entire book is a mistake. There are four gospels in the New Testament that seek to portray the life of Yosheke. They contradict each other, but there’s a common framework. Matthew tries to present Jesus as the new Moshe Rabbinhu. For example, it has stories that portray him as the new lawgiver. The Sermon on the Mount, for example, is found only in Matthew, as is the tale that Herod the Great wanted to kill all the boys in Bethlehem and only Jesus was saved. It’s supposed to make him look like Moses. Yosheke goes to Egypt only in the Gospel of Matthew. He goes down to the wilderness for 40 days—a parallel to the Jews in the desert—only in Matthew. I could go on and on with examples. Matthew says that Jesus declared that he never wanted to change anything. If that were the case it would mean that Yosheke said that we should still keep mitzvos, however, the real point of the Sermon on the Mount was to make him the new lawgiver to somehow replace Moses; that’s how the story is fashioned. And that’s why it’s silly and sophomoric to have a notion that Jews can be Christian and still keep mitzvos. When Shmuley writes that Yosheke says to keep the law, he’s being theologically silly.”

“I know that when you debated Shmuley you quoted the eminent Rambam.”

“The average person on the street with some knowledge of Christianity might find his book to be intriguing. But I know this field well, and can pick up the distortions. If you know the Rambam, you know he says that Christianity is idolatry. Shmuley puts words in the Rambam’s mouth that don’t exist.”

**Easy Targets**

“Are missionary groups like Jews for Jesus growing?”

“Of course—and exponentially, although not in the frum community. They have nothing to sell to anyone who knows anything about Judaism. The success of Jews for Jesus is that it represents the unpaid bills of the Jewish people. Assimilation is rampant. Outside of the frum community, Jewish kids know almost nothing about Judaism. It’s open season. The only good thing is that information is now accessible on the Internet, and I’m exploiting that fully to get people to listen to my lectures and read my books.”

“Didn’t the Roman Catholic Church say it would no longer do missionary work among Jews?” I proffer.

“Not really. There’s a document that came out of the Second Vatican Council that’s positive in every way. Pope John XXIII was certainly one of the nicest popes in history, but it doesn’t say they’re going to stop missionizing. It just refers to Judaism as the Church’s ‘older brother’ and admits that Jews do have a relationship with G-d. But technically, the Catholic Church still believes in replacement theology.

“Today, the Catholic Church is not a fundamentalist church. Most Catholics in America are very liberal, and are therefore not inter-
ested in converting Jews. There are still some traditionalist Catholics who are very conservative and do want to convert Jews. There’s even a Messianic Catholic congregation in Kentucky and a Hebrew Catholic movement, but it’s very friendly. The average Catholic doesn’t want to convert Jews and, adorabah, is interested in what Judaism has to say.”

“Do you consider it unethical for missionaries to proselytize Jews?”

“They have a right to do it in the United States, but it’s an issue of consumer fraud on two levels. The first is, if I tell you that something is this when it’s really that, that’s a scam. Certainly, the way it’s presented as ‘Jewish Christianity’ is consumer fraud. It’s very deceptive.

“The other thing is that the fundamentalist church is seeking to eradicate the Jewish faith, as it always has. The only difference is that they believe in an ideology called ‘premillennial dispensationalism,’ which means they accept that the Jews are the Chosen People. They reject the whole notion of replacement theology and believe that Israel belongs only to the Jews. All of the Christians, like Lord Balfour, who supported the creation of a Jewish state, came from that genre; they believe that the Jews have to return. So on the one hand, they are philo-Semites and are genuinely pro-Israel. But it also benefits them in that they can say they support Israel and the Jews.”

“Do fundamentalists get upset by activities like yours?”

“No. They respect me. I lecture to a lot of Christian groups. The exception is the Jews for Jesus organization. They’re like the Mafia. There are hundreds of Christian missions specifically targeting Jews in the US, but the Jews for Jesus are the only ones who try to take me to court or get me thrown out of a hotel where there’s a conference I want to speak at. No other group will do that. Other groups understand that I was never a Christian and I’m sincere and speak from my heart, and they respect me for it.”

“What do you talk about to Christians?” I want to know.

“The topic is up to them,” he tells me. “They bring me in to speak. I usually teach systematic theology, why Jews don’t accept the Christian faith and the Christian messiah. Almost all of the books coming out today on Judaism and Christianity contain the same regurgitated stuff: We all believe in the same G-d and Jesus is kosher, blah, blah, blah. That’s the whole genre now.

“Also, Judaism is now very ‘in.’ There is a tremendous curiosity about how Judaism reads the texts and thinks.”

“How do you explain Christianity’s pull for so many years, and do you think it will ultimately crash?” I ask.

“I can only answer the second question from Tanach, that yes, it will crash. However, if you look at it logically, we should be the ones to crash. The Jewish people have always lived on the knife’s edge. We know there’s no natural explanation for our existence. Christianity is the biggest religion in the world, so according to the laws of nature, they should continue and we should disappear. But we know that Christianity is Edom and will be destroyed. The Rambam explains that the purpose of Christianity is to prepare the world for the concept of Moshiach.”

“Does your lecturing make you a stronger Jew?” I wonder.

“Of course. When you’re out there fighting for your faith, it’s inspiring. And when you learn the Navi, which is missing from most American yeshivos, everything fits together like a musical chord. Yeshayah with Shmu’el for example...it all fits so perfectly. I have a Daniel and a Zechariah next to my bed, and every night I go through some pesukim. Some of them are very difficult. But when I get an idea, it’s like G-d has given me a kiss.”

“Which yeshiva did you learn in?”

“Mir in Brooklyn.”

“You studied the New Testament on your own?”

“Yes. Where would I go to study it? I have a library of probably around 3,000 books. I had to study all the Christian books in order to understand their arguments.”

Past and Future

“Do you ever get any ideas from the disputations the Rishonim had with Christians?”

“There’s a chapter in my new book about the debate that took place between the Ramban and Pablo Christiani in 1263. That debate was magnificent. The arguments are fantastic. The Ramban had such a mind...it’s so inspiring. Wow, he got it!”

“Of course I use his arguments. The Ramban was debating a Jew who had converted to Christianity, so there’s a lot of Catholic stuff in there. But the ideas are beautiful. It’s really a must-read.”

“Who’s your greatest inspiration in all
he converted to Christianity. He hated Jews and went to the Church to convince them to burn the Gemara. He told them that it instructs us to commit incest, to abuse children... The Church was thrilled. Well, there was a man named Joseph Reuchlin, a non-Jew who lived in Germany. He was a giant in the Christian world and a great Hebraist. They called him in to investigate and he determined that it was all nonsense and that Pfefferkorn was a liar. Pfefferkorn was expelled from the Church and the two became enemies. A Christian became the defender of the Jews, and the born Jew was the enemy of the Jews! In every generation, Jewish anti-Semites are always the worst. Up until then, the Church had thought that the Jews were just mistaken and weren’t reading the Bible properly. But starting in the 11th and 12th centuries they began to believe that the Talmud was the problem because it blasphemed Jesus. Before then, they had no access to it. That caused the big burning of the Talmud in France in 1242 among other incidents. It was a game changer.”

“What do you think will be the next game changer?” I ask him as my final question.

“This may sound radical, but I don’t think that there is any person of faith who looks at the events taking place today and doesn’t sense the footsteps of the Messiah. The stage is set. When you read Yechezkel 38-39 where it describes Gog u’Magog and the End Time, and you read Zechariah, every single aspect of what we’d anticipate is happening now, as well as things we couldn’t even imagine. We’re seeing a tremendous interest among goyim; there are so many people who are really ‘impostor gentiles.’ There were millions of Jews who converted to Christianity and took their secret to the grave. Now, suddenly, all these Christians are interested in anything Jewish.

“There are hundreds of passages in Tanach that discuss Moshiach, but they say almost nothing about him. Moshiach himself is not the point. He is the preservation of the covenant G-d made with David, and he, of course, will reign as the human king from the Davidic line. But the essential feature of Moshiach is that the whole world will know about him. That’s the ikkar; everything else is secondary to that. We are at a point in history where Iran is rising up. If you just read Yechezkel 38 and 39, it discusses all these countries.

“At present, the effort to extricate Jews who have become lost to Christianity is more important than ever, as well as to educate Jews from the hasidish olam who are hungry to learn Navi and understand these simple yedios.”

Between his debunking of idolatrous mythology and his promotion of Tanach’s eschatology, Tovia Singer certainly leads an interesting life. That he actually helps wayward souls find their footing again is what elevates his life to the realm of the extraordinary. •