

How to Witness to Religious Jewish People Rabbi Barry Rubin

Introduction

Back in the 1970s, when I was with Jews for Jesus, I witnessed something on the steps of the Public Library in NYC. One of our missionaries was loudly arguing with an elderly, religious Jewish man in front of the large crowd of people that had gathered. The missionary made sure to show how expert he was, as he argued from Isaiah 53 and other messianic prophecies. The old Jewish man was humble and kind, saying he was no expert in prophecy; the missionary was cocky and arrogant and assured the man that *he* was. What the crowd saw, although they may have jotted down a few of the scripture references, was a young man in a t-shirt challenging an elderly Jew with a yarmulke. I'd say that the missionary may have won that battle...but I believe he lost the war especially with any religious Jews that were present.

At the UMJC conference in Dallas a few years ago, my wife and I sat down with a few so-called anti-missionaries, Rabbis Michael Skobak, Eli Cohen and Yisroel Blumenthal. Some of you know these men. Some thought that talking to these people was an unwise, perhaps dangerous thing to do. But we had some questions for them and wanted to get to know our fellow Jews, better.

When, as my friend, David Stern walked by, I asked Rabbi Eli if he'd like to meet him. He got up, hugged Stern, saying: "I've read every word you've written – it is such an honor to meet you." Since that time, Rabbi Skobak helped my wife order some product from Art Scroll for our catalog. Previously, they wouldn't sell to us. And when I asked Rabbi Blumenthal, a Talmud teacher, to read and comment on a new book I had just published, *Yaakov haTzadik/James the Just*, by Rabbi Barney Kasdan, he took time to read the entire book and interact with Barney in a respectable and intelligent way.

I share these two stories with you because they demonstrate something about witnessing to religious Jews that I believe we're missing: We don't have to antagonize our people. Yet, our efforts at evangelism, particularly with religious Jews have been frightfully fruitless. With all the money, energy and dedication to Jewish evangelism, we have to ask the question, "What has gone wrong?"

We know the revival we're all waiting for is really up to the Lord, yet, our job is to prepare the ground for this by not being a stumbling block, which I suggest we have been. We haven't had much *credibility* with religious Jews, have we?

The New Oxford American Dictionary defines evangelism as: "the spreading of the Christian gospel by public preaching or personal witness." Evangelism requires communication of some sort, whether with broadsides, banners, billboards or just sitting over a coffee, schmoozing. In some ways, effective evangelism is good communication. But, in order for any communication to be effective, i.e. persuasive, the messenger must be credible. I suggest that the number one reason we haven't been very successful with religious Jews is that we don't have much credibility.

The same dictionary defines credibility as "the quality of being trusted and believed in." These aspects of credibility, plus more, were corroborated by studies of persuasion that were being published when I took my Masters degree in Communication back in the 60s: *expertness*,

identification, and trustworthiness. Aristotle had identified these millennia ago. I suggest that until we who are involved in Jewish evangelism focus on these facets, we will be ineffective communicating the Gospel. But, how do we become more credible with religious Jews?

Expertness

We all need to have more *expertness*, understanding and appreciating where religious Jews are coming from. Some of us have a prejudice against the Talmud and those writings that undergird and inform the way religious Jews think and process information. We often ignore or criticize the writings of the rabbis, saying things like “They don’t have the holy spirit,” or “They rejected Yeshua so how can they say anything worthwhile.” We need to enter the “space” of religious Jews. We have to know what we’re talking about.

Keeping in mind that perhaps the number one stumbling block for religious Jews (and all Jews, for that matter) is the deity of Yeshua, thankfully, we will soon have a book that seeks to interact with this question from *within* religious Jewish writings. There have been others before, but I know this book is good because of all the push-back the author, Rabbi Tzahi Shapira, has received from religious Jews. Eli Cohen and the many religious Jews who have heard Rabbi Shapira speak and read his writings are coming at him with force. In other words, his expertness is getting the message of Messiah heard.

If we’re going to reach religious Jews, we have to become more expert in what informs their thinking. I urge us to start reading books written by religious Jews, which will also be personally worthwhile. Rabbi Joseph Telushkin’s, *A Code of Jewish Ethics*, for example is excellent for personal devotions.

Identification

Expertness is an important aspect of credibility, but so is *identification*, in order to be effective in evangelism. Paul said, “To the Jews I became as a Jew that I might win some of them.” How are we becoming “Jews,” i.e. religious Jews in this case? If we’re Jewish, we need to be familiar with those sources that religious Jews rely on, e.g. Talmud, Maimonides, modern religious Jewish writers. Otherwise, we’re not going to speak the same language.

Had the great missionaries of the past not learned the language and ways of thinking of people they were trying to introduce to Jesus in China, Africa, etc., they would have been less effective. Often, they had to give up their western ways and learn languages that were difficult. Samuel Isaac Joseph Schereschewsky translated the bible into Mandarin so he could reach people in China. He and these old-time missionaries labored hard to identify with the people they were called to reach.

We won’t be effective reaching religious Jews until we start learning to *be* like religious Jews. We don’t have to become religious Jews, per se, but we have to learn to identify with them. If we’re not Jewish, it is a mistake to pretend to be Jewish, but it’s good to care about things that matter to Jews—Israel, family, anti-Semitism. We can identify without pretending to be something we’re not. But it’s more than just being an expert or identifying. We also need to be trustworthy, whether we’re Jews or non-Jews.

Trustworthiness

If we’re Jews we have to start living like Jews. Although many of us derive our theology from a dispensationalist worldview that may teach that Torah is *finished*, there are other ways to look at the Torah, the foundational document of religious (and all) Jews. We need to remember that some religious Jews gave their lives to protect the Torah. A religious Jew fully believes that the

Torah is valid in order to be in a relationship with God and to be blessed with long life and be preserved from calamity and plagues (see Deut. 28). Whether we believe the Torah has been “finished” or “fulfilled” in Messiah, or that it is irrelevant since we’re no longer in the Land, or that it can be understood in a variety of ways, we must recognize that it is foundational to religious Jews, as is the Talmud. When someone disdains something that someone else loves, trust is broken. I know someone who dissed the new husband of her best friend. They are no longer friends. Trust was broken. Now, there is no relationship. We need to be careful about what we say about those things that matter to others, especially religious Jews in order to be more effective.

Now, if we’re not Jewish, we need to show ourselves trustworthy by understanding what matters to Jews. When I was searching, back in 1972, I went to a Hebrew-Christian Rosh Hashanah service, conducted by Dan Rigney, a missionary with what was then known as ABMJ. I went with my fiancé to learn how people worked out their mixed marriages. Boy, was I mistaken. This was a place where Yeshua (Jesus in those days) was being lifted up.

After the service, I went up to Dan, who was wearing the *miter* and *kittel* of a rabbi, with cowboy boots sticking out under his robe. “You’re not Jewish are you!” I said accusingly. Instead of getting defensive or lying about his ancestry, he said, “No, I’m not Jewish, but I love the Jewish people because of Jesus.” “What,” I shouted at him. “Christians hate the Jewish people because of what we Jews *supposedly* did to Jesus.” Calmly, he told me that was not the case and invited me to his weekly bible study. The rest is history. Even though Dan wasn’t a Jew, he understood Jewish issues. I wasn’t that religious, but I was definitely a dedicated Jew. Dan affirmed that. He was trustworthy.

A gentile becomes more trustworthy when he or she admits that the Jews are the chosen people, have brought great blessing to the world as promised in the Torah, and need to be affirmed in their Jewish identities. Too often, when a Jew becomes a follower of the Jewish Messiah, he is directed to a church and soon becomes part of that family. So, the religious Jew sees this, which confirms what he had suspected—once a Jew becomes a Jesus-follower, he gives up his identity and thus reduces the already small number of Jews in the world. But, if we affirm Jewish identity, it makes us trustworthy.

Conclusion

Since evangelism is using persuasion to convince people that Yeshua is the Messiah, it requires good communication. Yes, it’s up to God to draw people to Yeshua, but we can prepare the ground for the seed to be planted. With religious Jews, especially, we need credibility, something I daresay we haven’t had much of. We need to be experts (or at least more educated) in Judaism; we need to identify with religious Jewish people, seeing them as “us,” *klal Yisrael*, as opposed to “them”; and we need to be trustworthy, being honest about who we are, whether Jewish or not.

The days of confrontational evangelism, although it had its place in the past, have to give way for credible communication with religious Jews, respecting their views while trying to convince them about Yeshua. I’m in touch with several significant Jewish New Testament scholars and may organize a time when they can sit down with Messianic Jewish scholars and talk.

Since it’s not up to us to cause someone to believe in Yeshua, all we can do is present ourselves as fellow Jews who have some degree of expertness, identifying with things Jewish, and can be trusted. The rest is up to God.

