

STORIES FROM THE FIELD

A WORD FROM OUR FOUNDERS



PERSECUTION FACING BELIEVERS IN ISRAEL

Israel is a democratic country, and an oasis of religious and personal freedom in a neighborhood dominated by radical Islam. Believers in Israel largely experience great freedom to live and worship as they wish. However, the decision of a Jewish person to follow Jesus most definitely comes with a cost. Believers need to grapple with their identity in Christ as they try to live in peace with the people and culture around them.

When an Israeli Jew comes to understand that Jesus is the Jewish Messiah and decides to follow the Lord, there are many trials and much opposition which they must face.

Painful misunderstandings and objections can come from within their own family, their community and their culture. In addition, disturbing and even violent persecution can come from a small but vocal group of anti-Jesus activists.

For more than two thousand years, the leaders of rabbinical Judaism have been building thick walls between Jesus and the Jewish people. In addition, there have been centuries of undeniable anti-Semitism coming from those who call themselves Christians. The Holocaust was only 74 years ago and the generation of today's Israeli parents have heard the stories from their parents and grandparents of the church bells ringing just outside the walls of the concentration camps.

These two factors, religious instruction and "Christian" persecution of Jewish people, make belief in Jesus by a Jew seem at the least incongruous and at the worst like a betrayal of the Jewish people.

"In fact, everyone who desires to live a godly life in Jesus the Messiah will be persecuted."
The Apostle Paul in 1 Timothy 3:12

To their friends and family, these new Believers will initially seem to have turned their back on their own people. One young believer who has become a friend of our family suffered a frequent barrage of verbal abuse whenever she was home. She has remained loving

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and faithfully respectful of her parents, but living at home long-term has not been a healthy option. Israeli culture, like the rest of the Middle East, is deeply centered in family life. When a new believer loses the love, connection and protective covering of their Jewish family, it is devastating.

Two of our sons were riding a bus in Jerusalem, and one of them was wearing a shirt with a verse from Isaiah 53 written in Hebrew. One of their fellow passengers began asking them about the shirt and they explained that they were Messianic Jews and new immigrants from America. Another passenger overheard their conversation and began to loudly berate them and describe how he thought they should be "strung up!"

In addition to the pain of family and cultural misunderstanding and rejection, there are occasional cases of aggressive and even violent persecution. These acts are carried out by a small minority of religiously motivated *heredi* (or ultra-Orthodox) Jewish individuals and groups.

In 2008, fifteen-year-old Ami Ortiz, a son of a Messianic pastor, found a gift basket at his family's apartment door during the Purim holidays. It had been left there by a Jewish radical (later arrested, convicted and serving a life sentence in Israel) opposed to Jesus followers, Palestinians and others. The basket exploded and nearly killed the young man. He required 14 surgeries in addition to the plastic surgery needed for the scars that cover his entire body.

One congregation in the Galilee was without a place to worship for several years, because they were vandalized and then fire-bombed. No one in the area would rent space to them and so they met in the woods. As the colder, rainy months approached an Arab pastor offered them the use of his congregation's church building. What men meant for evil, God used for good as these Arab and Jewish believers demonstrated the unity and peace that comes through Jesus.

Following Jesus anywhere in the world can bring trouble. Jesus Himself said that the world hated Him and will hate His followers. Most of the time, God uses the pressures of being "different" for His glory as the believers find unity under duress, grow stronger in their faith and gain an opportunity to share the gospel message of God's love!

This is an edited version of an article authored by Joel and Lynn Rosenberg. To view the entire article, visit www.joshuafund.com/persecution.

📍 | NEIGHBORS

COUNTING THE COST

For those of us living in the Western world, we're used to having the right to practice any religion we desire. Our freedoms leave us assuming that almost any religious choice we make – including a change in religious affiliation – will be accepted with very few repercussions. That is often not the case throughout the Middle East.

In the Muslim nations where The Joshua Fund ministers, Islam is not just the majority religion. It is woven through nearly every fabric of the culture, including social life, political life, family life and, of course, religious life. To reject or depart from Islam is to try to tear apart that fabric. Those who convert to Christianity can be excommunicated from their culture, disowned by their families, threatened by extreme elements of their former religion, tortured or killed.

"And whoever does not bear his cross and come after Me cannot be My disciple. For which of you, intending to build a tower, does not sit down first and count the cost, whether he has enough to finish it." Luke 14:27-28

What about churches serving in Muslim communities? Isn't there sanctuary and refuge available there? Aren't Muslim Background Believers (MBBs) welcomed into the body of Christ with open arms?

Sadly, MBBs attempting to attend church are often viewed with suspicion, with people asking questions, such as: "Are they sincere Believers or informants for the security forces or radical groups? Will their presence create persecution for the pastor or other church members?"



“BUT GOD IS WORKING MIGHTILY IN THE MUSLIM COMMUNITY, AND WE CONTINUE TO SEE ENCOURAGING SIGNS AS THE GOSPEL MOVES FORWARD.”

The pressure against MBBs can come not only from Muslim relatives and their society but also from Arab Christians and their unique culture, as well. Traditional (often nominal) Christian religious communities have a very different view of society and religion than Muslim Arab communities. These stark differences can lead to mutual feelings of fear and unacceptance between MBBs and traditional-background Believers.

Similarly, evangelical communities in Israel and the West Bank may struggle with integrating MBBs into their congregations. This means that many MBBs feel cut off and adrift, both from the Muslim culture they had known and from traditional Christians who are sometimes reluctant or unwilling to accept them.

But God is working mightily in the Muslim community, and we continue to see encouraging signs as the Gospel moves forward.

One of the most exciting ways MBBs are growing is through direct, person-to-person discipleship and evangelism. As part of a very communal culture, Muslims often prefer household settings to corporate gatherings, and are thus more open to spiritual conversations with a trusted friend. Once they give their life to Christ, MBBs typically find a network of friends from their background and participate in informal house churches or home fellowship-type gatherings. This allows them to remain discreet among the majority Muslim society.

Evangelism to Muslims progresses through similar methods of personal relationships. We continue to hear stories of quiet, daily investment in relationships, as Muslims are fascinated by the love and selflessness shown by friends who are Believers. While challenges of persecution and cultural resistance remain, there also seems to be new openness and opportunities as many Muslims are curious and interested in personal stories and conversations about faith.

Another Joshua Fund ministry partner, who welcomes everyone into their church, has shared, “Our church is mixed (believers from both backgrounds) and this man (a MBB) tells me weekly he cannot believe his eyes. He would have never dreamed that these two groups could be together, loving each other, and serving God.”

We continue to praise God for the reports of His irresistible love on display in the Epicenter.

PRAY

How can I pray for the Muslim Background Believers (MBBs) in the Epicenter?

- Pray for these who daily spend themselves encouraging and growing their small MBB flocks
- Pray for God to break down walls of fear and cultural difference that separate the Arab Christian and MBB communities
- Pray for protection for the MBB community, and that they would have the strength to stand as witnesses in persecution
- Pray that God would continue to stir the hearts of Muslims and call them to a knowledge of Him



2019 CRUISE + EPICENTER BRIEFING

There's still time to sign up for TJF's inaugural cruise to New England and Canada, September 28 – October 5, 2019, from Boston to Montreal

Join Joshua Fund Founders Joel C. and Lynn Rosenberg, along with Jewish and Arab ministry leaders, in discussing what God is doing in Israel and among Her Neighbors. During special sessions on the cruise, Joel will be teaching on "Prophecy and Prayer in an Ever-Changing World, answering your questions on Biblical prophecy and the spread of the Gospel in the Middle East. Come with us on an unforgettable adventure of learning and spiritual growth, as well as rest and relaxation, all while enjoying fall colors along the northeastern seaboard.

To register or for more information, visit www.joshuafund.com/cruise

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