

# The SDA Mission to the Jewish Community in South America

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By Edson Nunes Jr.

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The famous Rabbi Jonathan Sacks quoted a young Israeli who had been asked what it meant to be Jewish: “Judaism is a hereditary illness. . . . You can get it from your parents and also pass it along to your children. And why call it an illness? Because not a small number of people have died from it” (Sacks 2000:2). Gershom Scholem, in turn, says: “Judaism cannot be defined according to its essence; since it has no essence. . . . Judaism is rather a living entity” (Scholem 1987:505).

These two short quotes not only introduce us to the main issues in Judaism itself which are related to the question,



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“What makes someone a Jew?” (Cardozo 2005: 86-87); but also touch on the problem of religious dialogue. As a pastor of a Jewish Adventist community in São Paulo, Brazil, some of the main challenges I feel Adventists face is not making ourselves relevant or accessible, and not knowing who we are supposed to talk to. Primarily, we must understand who we are, where we came from, and then delineate the goals to be reached in our challenge. Only then can we interact with anyone in the Jewish community.

## Who Are We?

### Theological Perspectives

As Seventh-day Adventists, Matt 28:18-20 and Rev 14:6-12 are often used as our mission statement. Since this mission mandate includes the necessity to preach to “all nations” and “every people,” of course, the Jewish community is part of this mandate.

Ellen White dedicates a whole chapter in *Acts of the Apostles* to underline the importance of reaching out to Jewish people. She wrote: “Let there be special efforts for the enlightenment

of the Jews” (White 1907:138). Additionally, she asserts, “In the closing proclamation of the gospel . . . God expects His messengers to take particular interest in the Jewish people whom they find in all parts of the earth” (White 1911:381). There are more references in Ellen White’s writings encouraging Adventists to preach to the Jews than to any other specific people.

There are also some interesting biblical texts dealing with the same task. Jacques Doukhan, in his recent book *Mystery of Israel* (2004), deals with the essential biblical texts which relate to the

ecy mandates to engage in this special task, we must at least admit that there are many theological points that Jewish people and Adventists hold in common—from the Sabbath and dietary laws, to the celestial sanctuary—which can be used as bridges to reach Jews. So much depends on how this important mission effort is viewed and understood.

Another biblical reason for faithfully ministering to Jewish people is found in the Elijah prophecy in Mal 4:4-6 and its connection and double application. Jesus himself applied this

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raison d’être for such a special mission endeavor. The title of Doukhan’s book is based on the context of Rom 11:25, where Paul talks about the two olive trees. Doukhan presents an extensive analysis of this particular chapter along with Dan 9, and, in the appendix, observes how Ellen White developed her own “vision” for the Jews. Doukhan’s book is an absolute requirement for anyone who wants to become involved in the Jewish/Adventist ministries.

Even if we choose to ignore the biblical and Spirit of Prophecy

prophecy to John the Baptist, but I believe there is a second meaning for Seventh-day Adventism. Adventists understand that they are to call the entire world back to the law given to Moses. John the Baptist quoted Isa 40:3 in his preaching, saying, “I am the voice of one crying out in the wilderness, ‘make straight the way of the Lord’” (John 1:22-23). However, the context of Isa 40:3 starts with verse one: “*Comfort, O comfort my people, says the Lord. Speak to the heart of Jerusalem*” (Isa 40:1-2, emphasis added). This

suggests that one important aspect of Seventh-day Adventist mission is to preach comfort to the Jews. Thus, in answer to the question of who we are, I would say we are the voice in the wilderness, shouting to Jerusalem, shouting a message of comfort.

### **Where Did We Come From? Historical Perspectives**

The work of the Adventist Jewish community in the South America Division (SAD) began only recently. Reinaldo Siqueira, a professor of Old Testament at the Adventist University of São Paulo (UNASP) in the late 1990s, was invited by the then president of the Central Brazilian Union (UCB) to establish a dialogue between the Adventist and Jewish communities in São Paulo. The invitation followed shortly after the General Conference in 1994 suggested through the World Jewish Friendship Committee that “it’s necessary to reflect carefully about the actual reality of Jewish people in a global way. Our friendship with each individual and each community of Jewish origin must be deepened. We need to find appropriate methods to communicate with them” (General Conference 1994).

The initial meetings took place in a room in the back of the Central Paulistana Seventh-day Adventist Church, one of the largest churches in the São Paulo Conference. In the beginning, there were only fifteen

Jewish people, all of who came from an Adventist background. They were short of money and perspective, and at that time Dr. Siqueira could only give his weekends to the task since he continued to teach at UN-ASP. Those early meetings basically consisted in studying the *parasha* (weekly portion of the Pentateuch) and stressing the importance of witnessing to Jewish people.

Less than a year later, the group moved to another back room at the São Paulo Adventist Hospital. Several months later it was decided by the UCB leadership to give greater support to Siqueira’s efforts by renting a house that continues to be our meeting place until the present date (1999-2009). The move to a rented facility demanded a full-time leader, so the São Paulo Conference nominated João Luiz Marcon to be the first full-time pastor and leader of the Jewish work. He worked in that position from 1999 to 2004 when I was called to take his place.

All the Jewish Adventist work in Brazil have adopted *Beth B’nei Tzion* (BBT) for their name, and even through the work for Jewish people is quite young, there have already been several areas of contention. The first one was over liturgy. One group wanted to maintain a Jewish liturgy, which would take two hours and be done completely in Hebrew. Another group wanted to shorten the liturgy and use both Portu-

guese and Hebrew. As a result, Siqueira introduced an entirely new *sidur* (liturgy) book, which combined basic aspects of Jewish liturgy (*shema*, *amidah*, etc.) with New Testament texts, as well as readings from the *Torah* (Pentateuch) and *Haphtarah* (Prophets).

Another dispute arose over the role of women in liturgy. Some felt that women had no right to do anything, similar to the teachings of some orthodox rabbis. In the end the group followed the biblical principle that “there is neither male nor female” (Gal 3:28). Even the *Talmud*

Judaism made us rethink our methodology.

As a result of the crisis described above, two decisions were made: (1) men and women were allowed to sit together during the service and women were allowed to participate in the service (preaching, directing the liturgy, singing, reading the *Torah* portion in Hebrew, and so on; and (2) a new liturgy was developed, using both the Jewish liturgical elements alongside Adventist and New Testament perspective, but with less “formal” structure. These two decisions helped us eliminate our “over-

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(*Seder Nashim*) agreed on this issue, so women were allowed to participate in the liturgy.

These two disputes provoked so much conflict that almost 20 people left the community, some of them returning to their Adventist churches while others decided to follow Judaism. We learned, in the hardest possible way, that cross-cultural missionary churches must handle membership identity issues wisely and avoid both over- and under-contextualization (Bauer 2005:18-33). The radical reaction of Adventists converting to

contextualization” problem and showed our membership that while we love Jewish tradition, we will not become a Jewish congregation.

Another area we struggled with was whether or not to accept any Adventist who wanted to join our community even if they had no Jewish heritage. For those Adventists who had a Jewish heritage we found that it was better to do an evaluation of their attitudes and beliefs and, if needed, to spend time in focused Bible study with them to avoid misunderstandings.

Another problem area involved the community's multiple objectives. The objectives of *Beth B'nei Tzion* were (1) to revive in Seventh-day Adventist members of Jewish origin a love and appreciation for the culture and traditions of their own people, reaffirming their Jewish identity and their connection with the general Jewish community, (2) to develop within Seventh-day Adventism an increased knowledge, appreciation, and respect for the Jewish people and for Judaism and Israel to better understand the roots of the Christian faith, (3) to create an environment where everyone, Adventists and non-Adventists, may worship God according to the principles taught in the *Torah* and followed in both the Jewish and Adventist traditions, (4) to fight against the anti-Semitism that has become part of Christian beliefs and teachings through centuries of intolerance and tendentious interpretations of Bible texts, (5) to develop within both society and the general Christian population the same knowledge, appreciation, and respect for Jewish people, Judaism and Israel that we seek to develop among Adventists, (6) to fight against any anti-Semitism that exists in Western cultures regardless of how it is manifested in society, (7) to promote among assimilated Jews a revival and an awakening of their Jewish identity, and above all to emphasize love for the God

of Israel, his word, and deepen interest in the faith and life that God wishes Jewish people to live, and (8) to provide a place that may be used for an open and respectful dialogue between the Jewish and Adventist communities and their members.

The many objectives in the mission statement led to confusion and dissipated the energy of the group (Rainer and Geiger 2006:29-56). It also caused a loss of identity, for with so many different objectives anyone could choose one or two statements and go in that direction. Since our community had a majority of people from an Adventist background, they picked numbers 2, 3, and 5 from the above list with the result that the focus was on building a church for those who were already Adventist instead of becoming a cross-cultural missionary church.

The membership still faces complicated issues because some who joined the group brought anti-church behavior and saw the Jewish liturgy as the answer to all the problems such as music, reverence, and so on. However, in spite of the problems there are now 70 members and the group has had 18 baptisms in the last nine years.

### **Where Are We Going? Future Perspectives**

One of the first things we did was to work on our mission statement and purpose in order to present a simple and comprehensive idea. With Siqueira's

help and the support of our leadership, we decided to have one goal, and that was to build a respectful and meaningful dialogue with the Jewish community. But the focus needed to be sharpened to decide which part of the Jewish community. The decision was made that there was one main group that we could easily and substantially establish a dialogue with, the academic Jewish community. This group is mainly composed of professors from the University of São Paulo (USP), the most respected and famous university in Brazil. They are open-minded

knowledge about Judaism to the larger Christian community. We have also been able to share about Christianity and Adventism with the Jewish community. By becoming students in the Center for Jewish Studies we have been able to change some of the bad image that Christian pastors have in Brazil among Jews. The opportunity to be Adventist pastors in an academic environment has been a bridge builder for relationships between Judaism and Adventism.

Another important bridge builder has been the production of a new magazine that brings

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and willing to exchange knowledge, information, and partner in events. Since they have a strong influence in the Jewish society, they can help us build relationships with the larger Jewish community.

Then, Dr. Siqueira and I decided to become part of the Center for Jewish Studies at USP. He began his post-doctorate studies and I started my master studies with both of us researching the Bible within the Jewish perspective. As students we have the opportunity to be part of the main events and to contribute

together Jewish and Adventist thought. This magazine is in some ways similar to *Shabbat Shalom* produced by Jacques Doukhan at Andrews University. Another joint venture is a music CD with traditional Jewish songs and some new Adventist compositions produced by songwriter and singer Leonardo Gonçalves.

Irving Greenberg said that Judaism and Christianity working together will heal the world (*tikun olam*). "God intended that Judaism and Christianity both work for the perfection of the world



[kingdom of God]" (Greenberg 2004:225-226). If an ordained orthodox rabbi has this vision, it is the time to effectively do what needs to be done to bring the two communities closer to each other. The two joint ventures of producing a magazine and a music CD are bringing Adventists and Jewish thought leaders together and are contributing to better understanding between Jews and Adventists.

*Beth B'nei Tzion* needs a new place to meet that is closer to the Jewish neighborhood in São Paulo because one cannot establish dialogue between two groups from a distance. To purchase such a meeting place in the right neighborhood would cost \$500,000 —money we do not have. So, in order to move ahead we are working with Kleber O. Gonçalves, senior pastor of New Seed Seventh-day Adventist Church (a church planting project to secular/postmodern people in São Paulo), to establish a temporary Jewish-Adventist community in his new building in the heart of São Paulo.

## Conclusion

The mission of our Jewish Adventist community is to be a bridge builder and through respectful dialogue present our message of comfort to the Jewish community. The development of any new cross-cultural church faces challenges dealing with over- or under-contextualization. I believe that with a strong Adventist theological basis and a

flexible methodology we can not only survive but fulfill our mission to share the gospel with Jewish people.

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