

Reaching the Haredim: Challenges and Strategies

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This paper is not intended to be an academic exercise in ultra-Orthodox apologetics. Rather, it is a practical and personal discussion about what I and my colleagues have learned in terms of reaching the Haredi community.

Shortly after I came to faith in 1971 at the age of 16, I was befriended by the local rabbi. He had just taken over the synagogue where I was bar mitzvahed and was about ten years older than me, having freshly graduated from Jewish Theological Seminary. Although he was a conservative rabbi (because he could not intellectually affirm the Orthodox position on Scripture and tradition), his spiritual leanings were more Orthodox, and so, he had great respect for Orthodox and ultra-Orthodox rabbis.

Seeing my zeal to share the gospel with my fellow-Jews, he made me a wager: “I will give you my wife and children and become your lifelong slave if you can convert a single Lubavitcher hasid,” meaning, one who was born into Lubavitch rather than a later *baal teshuvah*. He was that sure that, under no circumstances, would a lifelong Lubavitcher become a follower of Jesus. (Bear in mind also that, at that time, I knew nothing of Messianic Judaism, so that wasn’t even part of our discussion.)

At the age of 18, this rabbi brought me to meet with two Lubavitcher rabbis in Brooklyn, something I was more than glad to do. On the one hand, as a Jew who had been fairly secular, I was drawn to the ultra-Orthodox expression of our faith. There was a certain appeal and fascination to it. On the other hand, this was another opportunity for me to share the gospel! And at this point in time, I was quite ready to do so, having read the Bible cover to cover about five times in my first twenty months in the Lord and having memorized twenty verses a day during the previous six months – all out of the King James, of course.

But I was not as ready as I thought, as these very devoted men gently challenged my dependence on an English translation and seemed to have an answer for every argument I threw at them. This was part of God’s way of calling me into deeper study, ultimately leading to my Ph.D. in Near Eastern Languages and Literatures, to my writing multiple Jewish apologetics volumes, to my many debates with rabbis, and to my very deep, lifelong burden to see our ultra-Orthodox people come to faith in Yeshua. And I am absolutely sure that, sooner or later, we will see a massive, God-honoring, Jesus-exalting, glorious harvest of ultra-Orthodox souls.

In fact, I’m so sure of this that last year, when I was harassed by ultra-Orthodox Jews in Jerusalem (they had been provoked by a Yad L’Achim counter-missionary), and as they were cursing the name of Yeshu and spitting on the ground, I was asking myself, “I wonder how the Lord will reveal Himself to men like this. Will they have dreams, like the Muslims do? Will they discover Yeshua in their texts and traditions? I wonder how it will happen!”

I've also had a special burden and faith for the Lubavitchers, partly because of the hours I spent with them in those early years in the Lord (during three separate visits with them, including spending Yom Kippur with one of their families), and, more importantly, because of their belief that their Rebbe was the Messiah. Before he died, I was confident that, upon his death, his followers would proclaim that his death brought atonement to the generation, then they would predict his resurrection and return. Talk about redemptive analogies! I still believe that God will use these false beliefs about the Rebbe as a bridge to true beliefs in our Messiah.

That being said, it remains very challenging to reach the Haredi community, for a number of obvious reasons. First, they are a very closed community, difficult to access from the outside. We might as well as be Martians trying to bring them a new revelation about God. Second, they live totally within their traditions, which are both sacred and sacrosanct to them. Who are we to question what has been passed down to them through the generations?

Third, they are very suspicious of the outside world, which they view with suspicion and hostility. There are hostile, dangerous forces out there! Fourth, they have a terrible view of Jesus, and with that, Christianity. Fifth, in many ways, they have the characteristics of a cult, with their behavior tightly controlled and with fear keeping the adherents in tow. In fact, because the community is so insular and unique, it is very difficult for haredim to learn to function normally outside of that community.

Some years ago, after a Jews for Jesus outreach campaign in Brooklyn, a hasid came to faith and was being discipled by one of the Jews for Jesus leaders. The leader told this new believer, "You need to spend time with the Lord each day and develop a personal relationship with Him."

The Hasid replied, "What should I do?"

He was told, "You should read the Scriptures each morning and talk to the Lord in prayer."

He asked, "What should I read? And what should I say? And how many times should I say it?"

That was just the tip of the iceberg. As for functioning in the normal world outside his community, that was utterly foreign to him.

As we try to reach out to this unique community, we're faced with several unique questions: Must we live as they do, becoming ultra-Orthodox to the ultra-Orthodox, in order to win them? If we do it superficially, we'll be found out at once, rightly so. But to do it in a serious way requires a real immersion in haredi studies and lifestyle. How many of us are called to that? Or, conversely, do we allow our stark differences to stand out clearly, not trying to look like the haredim and letting our outsider status be our drawing card? But then, will they even talk to us?

Of course, nothing will happen without prayer, and there is spiritual warfare to be waged on behalf of these precious souls. And while making our Jewishness clear is important (for those of us who are Jews), what we need to present is new life through the gospel, in the power of the Spirit. That, more than our sensitivity to tradition and culture, will be the primary means of salvation.

But there's something else to consider. The haredi culture is a culture of study, and so, regardless of our physical appearance or lifestyle, we can get materials into their hands to read and consider.

And for those who are curious enough to find ways to venture online, there's a world of material waiting for them. They *can* be reached, for sure. Additionally, as more and more of them come to faith – it's certainly a trickle right now, but I believe something is building behind the scenes – they are the perfect ones to evangelize their own people. They know the culture, they live the life, and, once born from above, they have the message.

In my own dealings with the ultra-Orthodox over the years, what we do have in common is intense love for God and deep reverence for His Word – it's a very different dialogue with Reform Jews! – so we can readily debate and discuss Scripture. This has definitely helped to draw some in, especially when we can interact with the traditional texts as well. The Spirit's work is a priority, but solid rabbinic learning, even if on a much more basic level than theirs, is of great importance.

Also, where we can use legitimate redemptive analogies, such as the traditional Jewish doctrine that the death of the righteous atones for the generation, or rabbinic use of Isaiah 53 in Messianic contexts, or some mystical and/or traditional Jewish expressions of God (including *memra*' and *shekhinah* and the *sefirot*), we can build bridges of communication that can lead to salvation. There's also an interesting movement among some religious Jews to recognize Yeshua as Mashiach ben Yoseph, providing another open door for sharing the good news.

Personally, I expect to see much more of this in the days ahead, as more and more ultra-Orthodox Jews discover the suffering and rising Messiah right within their own traditions. In particular, I expect this to happen among Lubavitchers.

Of course, the easiest haredim to reach are those who are “off the derech,” and so no longer religious. For example, I received an email last year from a young woman who was raised in the Satmar community and was about to be baptized. Providentially, while at a retreat, she met two grads from my ministry school, and they connected her to me.

She wrote to me last August:

Hi Dr Brown,

. . . I grew up Hasidic (a form of ultra-Orthodox Judaism) and have since left the community, after an arranged marriage.

I was new to the secular world, but have recently begun to know Jesus, and developed a newfound connection with God through him.

In the beginning of my journey outside of my community, it was very difficult for me to think of God and Jesus as something good, primarily because of my upbringing and the abuse I have been exposed to in the name of God and religion.

I am very blessed to have been able to put some of my pain behind me and this year has indeed been the best year of my life ever since I was a little child.

I am going to be baptized today, Aug 26, so that I can grow my connection with the one that has unlocked so much peace and happiness for me.

Diane and Brian [changed names] have recommended I share my testimony with you and read some of your books.

I am open to further communication, should you find it valuable. Thank you for reading my email.

To her shock, the video of her baptism was posted online and discovered by her old community, which led to articles being written stating that, to their great dismay, this young woman was not the only one to have left the fold and been baptized. They knew for sure about a couple of others and heard rumors about a good number more. What do you know!

What's interesting here, though, is that she was perfectly happy to refer to Jesus (rather than Yeshua) and was baptized in a church. And she's not the only one like this. I've seen the same with others. In their minds, while they recognize Jesus as the Jewish Messiah, in their minds, they have left Judaism and are following a new, true faith. While some will gravitate towards Messianic Jewish congregations because of their roots, others will be quite happy in a non-Jewish setting. They left their old, "Jewish" life behind.

Some of my friends are doing their best to reach out to both those within the haredi community and those who are left the community, and they are seeing some real, significant fruit. I asked them to list their strategies for me, along with some testimonies, so I share with you here what they have shared with me. I have changed names and removed references to specific locations for obvious reasons.

Strategy 1: Persons of Peace (Luke 10:6, Matthew 10:10).

We believe that the Ruach Hakodesh has placed specific and strategic people within the Jewish community that are gatekeepers of influence within their community. Evangelism and outreach become much easier when the grace of God is highlighted on a particular person within a community and outreach is done primarily through that person.

Testimony: We have found several people that meet this category. Some of them are already believers, some of them are not yet believers, and others are on a journey towards the faith. We found when walking with these people within their communities, outreach and evangelism tends to run easier and smoother, even if the person we are working with is problematic at times. This can be a man or a woman, and gatekeepers can come from all sorts of backgrounds. The key is recognizing the grace of God on their lives for such a calling and investing in them even if it gets messy.

Shlomo, one such person of peace, is the son of a famous rabbi in X. He was introduced to the person of Yeshua by a Messianic Jewish evangelist many years ago, but wrestled through totally accepting Yeshua. About a year ago, Shlomo came to faith and has been immersed. He was also brought to witness and participate in a major move of God with many signs and wonders in Asia. This stirred him up with a passion to win his own people to Messiah.

He still has many challenges in his new walk as a believer and is still wrestling with many issues. However, because of his pedigree (*yechus*) within the Orthodox and ex-Orthodox community, the doors to sharing the gospel have become wide open! Even though Shlomo is a new struggling believer, we have found that he is the gatekeeper to his Orthodox and ex-Orthodox community, and as hard as it is at times, we work through him and lean on his ideas about engaging his own community.

Strategy 2: Back to Family (Zechariah 12:10-14, 1 Corinthians 4:15-16, Genesis 12:1-3).

The cycle of the feasts in Israel and within the Orthodox Jewish community is centered around family. The home and the Shabbat table are the center of Jewish life. If we could both model messianic “church life” as family, as well as our outreaches focused on reaching both the nuclear and extended family - our outreaches would be not only indigenous in culture, but also indigenous in its missiology. This includes eating and finding ourselves in the homes of Jewish families intentionally.

Testimony: Two of us were going out to look for “persons of peace” in the town of X. After prayer walking one of the neighborhoods, we started going from house to house to take “spiritual surveys” that we use as a filter to find people that the Holy Spirit is already working with. An Orthodox Jewish father answered the door and invited us in. After taking the spiritual survey we asked the young Orthodox father and his children if we could tell them a story. We started telling them the story about how Rabbi Yeshua Ben Yosef called Shimon Kepha out on the water while He walked out to them on the water. The young Orthodox man loved the story and said he would commit to living out His life in greater faith with no doubt after hearing this story.

We asked if we could bless him. He said he didn’t want prayers to “Yeshu.” We asked him if he believed in the idea of merit (*zechut*) and if we could receive vicariously through the rabbi’s merits. He said, “OF COURSE!” and shared about the merit of Rabbi Baba Sali. We then asked him what is wrong with asking for the merit of Rabbi Yeshua Ben Yosef HaTzadik. He then let us bless him by Yeshua’s merit. Both him and his children felt the power of God and the son fell under the power of God onto his couch and was healed! Just like this young Orthodox father, we have found that ministry in homes with the family at the center of ministry and disciple-making has been very effective with Jewish Israelis.

Strategy 3: Pray in the Local Synagogue (Acts 17:2)

This is something our young new friend Shlomo taught us that is really just another principle recovered from the scriptures. We went in Bnei Brak (an ultra-Orthodox town) to share the gospel. Shlomo told us, “If you don’t pray mincha with the Orthodox, then they will not listen to you. However, if you do pray mincha with them, they will be eager to meet you and hear your story.” We found the combination of Shlomo’s reputation as well as our team being willing to go out of our comfort zone and pray mincha at the main synagogue in X led to many conversations in restaurants, homes, and on the streets with many in the Orthodox community opening up to us and Yeshua’s message completely! We

also found that we relate to the Jewish people not as “them”, but as “us” is much more helpful! We are family and have family arguments sometimes, and we are not arguing as enemies or cousins, but as a conversation within family.

Strategy 4: Stories

We have found that rather than telling the entire gospel immediately, many times it is much more effective to start with simple stories about the life of Yeshua and have those we are speaking with relate to those stories. We use a form of the Discovery Bible Study method that we have fit into a PaRDeS hermeneutic when telling these stories and asking inductive questions. We have also seemed to fit certain stories to certain audiences that relate to those audiences to begin with. Yeshua was the master story-teller and we have found this an extremely effective strategy both for evangelism, discipleship, and a congregational format of meeting.

Strategy 5: Signs and Wonders (1 Corinthians 1:22)

We have found culturally appropriate ways to approach signs and wonders, prophetic ministry, healing ministry, and the gift of faith is key to reaching the Orthodox world. Particularly strong is the prophetic ministry. God is speaking to many Orthodox Jewish people already in dreams and visions and by being in their homes and asking them about their spiritual experiences it can lead to these experiences they have already had.

Testimony:

Moshe is an Orthodox Jewish young friend of Shlomo. While Shlomo was sharing the gospel with him one day, Moshe stated emphatically that he already knew who Yeshua was because he saw him in an open vision. Basically, he described that he saw many tables in a room that were set with white table clothes and fine dishes. Behind each table was a famous rabbi and they had an aura of light around them. However, across the room there was a table that was set with a light that eclipsed all the other lights. He knew that it was Yeshua sitting behind that table. However, it left him confused that Yeshua’s light would eclipse the light of his rabbis. Currently, Moshe is meeting with two of us to discover more about the person of Yeshua because of this open vision.

One day Moshe brought Avi (one of our team members) to a meeting with ex-Orthodox while Moshe himself is still Orthodox. Avi got to play his worship music in the ex-Orthodox meeting. Afterwards they went to a house of many ex-Orthodox and after talking with Avi, they were amazed that the messianic people with Moshe were very different than those they had ever met before in a good way.

Strategy 6: A “Living Room” and Halfway House

There are tens of thousands of young people leaving the Orthodox Jewish world in Israel currently. Many of them are having a hard time adjusting to everyday society after they leave that world. Some find themselves on the streets, but many find themselves in secular support groups and events the government puts on for them. They often need life skills and

a place to talk about their unique challenges and traumas they experienced in the ultra-Orthodox world with others like them.

We are suggesting that we should open up a “living room” style outreach center for ex-Orthodox young people as well as eventually having a half-way house and live-in discipleship program for ex-Orthodox new believers. We would train them in basic life skills, overcoming life’s traumas, life in Messiah Yeshua, apologetics (Dr Brown’s materials), how to live out community, and how to go back into their communities and live out the gospel. We believe this is an extreme need for a very open group with one of the most incredible potentials for a great harvest.

Here's another testimony from this same team:

The general principle that I have found (that has no substitute) is building personal relationships with the people. Loving on them and taking interest in their lives will go further than any random street meeting.

I currently go weekly with Shlomo to a very large synagogue in X. We first pray with them (usually Mincha) and then we start mingling with them and also share with them, according to the situation. Just last Tuesday, after the prayer, Avi said he wanted to lay tefilin so we asked the "Gabbai" if he has a couple of tefilin for us. He was very happy to give them to us. Over the past few month we got to know him and we have befriended him.

A few weeks ago, he saw the name "Yeshua" tattooed on Shlomo’s arm. He asked us what it means, and we shared very briefly with him and told him that we'll have to sit sometime when he has some time and explain to him more in depth. This stirred a great curiosity in him that only grew stronger.

So, this past week, we had a good opportunity to answer his many questions. We had his undivided attention in a prayer room in the synagogue, and we shared the whole Gospel with him. He also wondered how I came to believe, and so I was able to share my testimony with him.

On top of all that, when he tried to challenge the “Jewishness” of the message, we read Isaiah 53 together. I can't say he came to believe (yet), but at least he heard a lot and even if he didn't agree, we were not thrown out of the synagogue. We are maintaining our relationship with him and many others, as we are kind of part of the community/ weekly attenders there. Also, the whole time, there was another young man in the room semi-reading his Siddur and praying but mostly listening to us, and every once in a while, he interjected with a question.

Aside from that, we spent many hours in some of the ex-ultra-Orthodox’s homes until the very late hours of the night talking, sharing, praying for them and again building relationships. This is but a sample of what we’re seeing.

Back in 1993, I was contacted by a colleague who led a Messianic congregation in Brooklyn. An eighteen-year-old hasid was coming to their meetings, and they weren’t sure what to make of him.

Was he a spy? I met with him privately and found him to be a sincere seeker, and he informed his family he wanted to leave home and come to Maryland and join our school. He was subsequently kidnapped and threatened, kept alone with counter-missionaries and much more. We could only pray for his wellbeing, as we lost all contact with him. But while praying for him in Korea (I had flown there immediately after he had been kidnapped), God gave me an assurance that he would make it.

A few years later, he contacted us again, ready to make a move, and he actually took a bus to Maryland and moved into our home (I was in India the month that he came). Sadly, he was kidnapped a second time, brought to Israel, beaten, and drugged. (He was kept drugged for a period of years before learning he was not actually sick and this was all a ploy to keep him trapped.) But once he broke away, he had little interest in pursuing the Lord. We would be in touch on and off over the years, but it seemed that every time he made a decision to follow Yeshua, all hell would break loose against him, including his wife threatening to leave.

It was only last year, 2018 – and so 25 years after our initial contact – that he got fully settled in the faith, and he is now part of a Messianic congregation and standing strongly for the Lord. When I asked him what three things would be tell those reaching out to his community, he responded: “1) be authentic, 2) you don't need to have answers for everything and you could say I don't know but will get back to you, 3) don't mock their customs or teachings rather question them about it.”

And what was it that initially drew him to Jesus? First, he saw a lot of hypocrisy and corruption in his own community. Second, while sharing a room in the hospital with a Christian teenager (he was about sixteen at the time), he was impacted by the love shown by this teenager's family. These Christians seemed to be very special people, and it got his attention.

And that brings me to my last point (in these simple, non-academic reflections). Let us never forget that we really do have the message of life, the message of transformation, the message of forgiveness, the message of redemption. We must never forget the power of the gospel! As one former Breslaver hasid puts it: “Judaism believes Messiah is the just reward for good behavior. Christianity believes Messiah is the merciful gift for bad behavior.”

Thank God for His merciful gift!