The Deepening Challenge of Jewish Aliyah

BY MICHAEL HINES

It has been more than three decades since the plight of the persecuted Soviet Jews grabbed the world’s attention when prominent Jewish dissident Anatoly (Natan) Sharansky was jailed in a Siberian labor camp for demanding the right to “go home” to Israel.

In Israel itself, the ICEJ responded to Moscow’s crackdown on the so-called Refusenik movement by launching the ‘Mordechai Outcry’ – a series of protest marches targeting Soviet Embassies and national parliaments around the world. The emphatic rallying cry, “Let My People Go!” drew Christians and Jews together to defy the mighty Pharaoh of the age.

And sure enough, the unexpected collapse of the Berlin Wall in 1989 paved the way for the wholesale exodus of Soviet Jews to Israel and the West. Not unlike the exodus from Egypt, a people that for centuries were the largest single mass of Jews in the world was suddenly uprooted from the slavery of an atheistic totalitarian state.

In the intervening years, Israel has absorbed more than a million new citizens from across the former Soviet republics adding energy and talent that has fuelled the economy’s rapid recent growth. A million more have emigrated to the US, Germany, Canada and Australia. Of the estimated 700,000 Jews left behind in the former Soviet Union, many do not even recognize their own Jewish roots.

Put simply, of the nearly three million Russian speaking Jews living under Soviet rule, only a third made it to Israel. Some stayed behind, but the rest were lost in transit on the way, wandering the wilderness like their forefathers, outside the borders of the Promised Land.

In many ways, it is an accurate depiction of the challenge facing modern Jewish aliyah, the process by which Jews all over the world are invited literally “to go up,” to Zion. Despite a recent upswing in North American aliyah to Israel, nearly half a million Israeli citizens are currently living in the US and Canada. For each American Jew who relocates to Israel, three Israelis move to the US.

“What this shows me,” says ICEJ Aliyah Director Howard Flower, “is that we need to sharpen our pencils and come up with creative new ways to reach out to the Jewish people of America. A few high profile plane loads of immigrants each year isn’t going to make up the difference.”
Dear Friends,

I recently reviewed a DVD produced by Joel Rosenberg, a Christian author and good friend of ICEJ’s US Branch. It was called “The Epicenter” and is based on his bestselling book of the same name. In it Joel points out the central place that the Scriptures, backed up by history and current events on the ground, give to Israel, Jerusalem and the Jewish people.

Essentially he underlines the truth that when God chose a Jewish Jerusalem as the place to put His name, He also chose polarization and conflict. That is, this choice would ‘bring out of the woodwork’ those who would oppose Him. It would also galvanize opposition in the way of conflict. Thus it is that scripture affirms the central place that Jerusalem has played and will yet play in world events. For instance, Zechariah 12 foresees a day when all nations will come against the city.

Jerusalem is more than a symbol of God’s election, but rather of God Himself. This too the Psalmist states very clearly:

“Walk about Zion, and go all around her. Count her towers; Mark well her bulwarks; Consider her palaces; That you may tell it to the generation following. For this is God, our God forever and ever; He will be our guide even to death.” Psalm 48:12-14

In other words, to attack Jerusalem and dislodge it from Jewish control is in essence an attack against God Himself.

One should not then be surprised when the city is the chief issue, stumbling block, and ‘cup of trembling’ in terms of seeking a peace agreement in the region. The Bible rightly warns that those who seek to wrest it away from Jewish control will in the end rupture themselves. This is a warning that needs to be taken seriously.

Those then who have a biblical faith appreciate the context of the battle over Jerusalem and recognize that we have to side with God’s choice and with a city that will remain the eternal undivided capital of the Jewish people. This is our position and we invite all who stand with us to make it theirs and to make it a matter of constant prayer and intercession.

Yours in Jesus,

Rev. Malcolm Hedding,
ICEJ Executive Director

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The Kingdom of God

Discerning the Signs of the Times

By Malcolm Hedding

One of the great difficulties that Christians have is understanding the purpose of God for the times in which we live. This problem is one that manifests from the pulpit to the pew! One frequently listens to preachers applying biblical texts to the present that in context find their fulfilment in the future messianic age.

While at some level it may be viewed as harmless, at another level this practice is highly dangerous in that it initiates a response that gets Christians swept up into agendas supposedly of God, yet are not! So, there is a need to understand the ‘Kingdom of God’. What is it and how does it manifest and at what time? It is important to remember that Jesus told us to discern the signs of the times. In short, He was saying, ‘Don’t be foolish but understand the purpose of God’ (Matthew 16:2-3).

Paul himself called upon believers to understand and pursue the will of God. For him living a holy life was a crucial part of recognising God’s will (Romans 12:1-2).

In our present age, the Kingdom of God is not coming with signs to be seen. No, it is inward, invading the hearts of men and women and making them followers of Jesus (Luke 17:20-21). The age to come, or Messianic Age, will see the Kingdom of God visibly set up with Messiah’s glorious throne in Jerusalem. He – the Messiah – will rule from shore to shore in righteousness and peace and yet with a “rod of iron” (Isaiah 11:3-5; Psalm 2:9; Revelation 2:27; Revelation 12:5).

One cannot take scriptures referring to this ‘age’ and apply them to the present. To do this is to lead God’s people astray. Our focus must be upon the nations and their need to hear the good news of Jesus. God must rule in the hearts of men and does so by a powerful work of regeneration (Titus 3:3-5).

The restoration of Israel is a sign or herald of the closing of the age (Luke 21:24). It is not the Kingdom manifested but in many respects the beginning of the ‘birth pangs’ of the Kingdom. We cannot therefore expect Israel to possess all the land promised to her until she is fully possessed by the God of the Bible. This is the teaching of the Law and the Prophets. Israel’s journey, though fraught with danger and conflict, will be a triumphant one in the end. About this we can be sure (Isaiah 66:10-13).

Until this new day of visible kingdom glory breaks in, we are to occupy by means of prayer, holiness, submission to God’s will and testimony to His faithfulness. No wonder Jesus taught us to pray, “Thy Kingdom come, Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven.” (Matthew 6:9-13).

This prayer acknowledges three truths:

1. That the manifestation of the Kingdom in Heaven is not the same as the one on earth. It is perfect and all-embracing, without unrighteousness or sin.

2. That a day is coming when the two will merge into one. Indeed, the knowledge of the Lord will cover the earth, as the waters cover the sea (Isaiah 11:9).

3. That we are instruments of God’s purpose, thus bringing these two ‘kingdom poles’ together.

May we hold these things dear and live by them.

Rev. Malcolm Hedding serves as ICEJ Executive Director in Jerusalem
In a country that does not celebrate Christmas, few in Tel Aviv’s African Refugee Center expected the holiday to come at all, let alone come early. To begin with the 250 men, women and teens crammed into this two-room ‘unofficial’ shelter, do not technically exist.

Most are Christians from Sudan and Eritrea, a small, forgotten Muslim dictatorship wedged between Islamic northern Sudan and Ethiopia on the western Red Sea shoreline, across the straights from Saudi Arabia. They have no legal status in Israel, unlike many of their counterparts from Darfur and southern Sudan. But they too have fled intense persecution at the hands of powerful Muslim overlords, via Egypt to the only safe haven they know: Israel.

With no ability to work and no standing with the government, these refugees have been forced to fend for themselves with little but the help of the few Israelis that know about their plight. Yet they do so with remarkable character. The men take turns to sleep outside in the cold in shifts of up to 40 at a time, thus allowing the others room to stretch out inside on the shelter floor. One man is there with his 3 year old child. Thirteen women share the second tiny bedroom. There is one bathroom; one shower.

The basement itself is in such disrepair that they have been forbidden to cook because of fears that faulty electrics could start a fire. Instead they rely on the help of their few Israeli friends who spend their evenings visiting local hotels and taking the scraps of food from the plates that diners have left behind.

Yet the most unusual part of this uniquely African Christmas story is that it would come at the hands of secular Israelis who themselves have never celebrated the holiday.

Several months ago a group of young mothers whose children belong to a local daycare center heard about the refugees in their neighborhood and decided to do something to help. They told their friends, and before long the mothers and children had raised over 3000 shekels (approx. $800) and put together Christmas presents and letters in sacks for the refugees. Then they searched for a non-profit organization that could help distribute them. Their enquires led them to the International Christian Embassy Jerusalem.

“What is so exceptional, and so heartening,” says Charmaine Hedding, who heads up the ICEJ’s burgeoning aid program to Sudanese refugees in Israel, “is to see Jewish Israelis work with an evangelical organization to aid Christian refugees from Africa who have fled the most intense and horrific persecution.”
“So we took them Father Christmas hats and stocking sacks,” says Hedding, “stuffed with candy, toys, warm clothes for the children.”

With their future hanging in the balance, the ICEJ is continuing to work with the Israeli government to persuade the authorities not to send these refugees back to Egypt where they face certain danger and possible death, but to grant them refugee status and release them into our care.

“It’s vital that American Christians reach out to these persecuted brothers and sisters from Africa,” Hedding concludes. “After all they have been through, escaping the scourge of radical Islamic rule and braving the dangerous desert journey across the Sinai to Israel, it’s up to us to see that they find the safe haven they have been seeking.”

To find out more or lend your support to ‘Operation Hope’, the ICEJ’s emergency aid program for Sudanese and Eritrean refugees in Israel, visit our web-site where you can make your secure online donation.

Go to: www.icejusa.org/hope

In early December ICEJ staff visited the African Refugee Center carrying Christmas gifts, blankets and food vouchers, in addition to the gifts donated by the Israeli volunteers, and supplemented with funds raised by the ICEJ’s worldwide family as part of the ongoing ‘Operation Hope’ emergency appeal.

“But it wasn’t only in Tel Aviv,” continues Hedding. “Soon afterwards we were asked to throw a Christmas party for 95 mostly Christian refugee children living in tents at the Ketziot maximum security jail deep in the Negev desert.”

Today over 1000 refugees are held at Ketziot, about an hour and a half south of Beersheva close to the Egyptian border. The men are in high security wings alongside hardened criminals and terrorists while the government tries to figure out what to do with them. The women and children live outside in a makeshift tent city adjacent to the prison compound.

“Help Sderot!”

After 7 years of rocket attacks, it’s time to stand with the embattled Israelis of Sderot!

Give Now at: www.icejusa.org/sderot
Farewell to Tim King
By Malcolm Hedding

In December, the International Christian Embassy Jerusalem said farewell to Timothy King with a special reception on the occasion of his retirement after more than 27 years of service. From the very beginnings of the ICEJ, Tim has served as our Financial Director. There is no doubt that he piloted the organisation through many challenges up until the present, some of them quite overwhelming. Yet with a steady and calm hand, Tim hurdled them and ‘steadied the ship’. We owe him a great debt of gratitude.

He is the last of that original pioneering team to leave the Embassy staff and he will be greatly missed. The farewell evening was attended by prominent Israelis, church leaders, and friends from across the world. It was a fitting tribute to a man who certainly gave the best years of his life to the International Christian Embassy Jerusalem.

We wish Tim, Martha and Anna many blessings and much joy as they begin a new season of God’s purpose for their lives.

Hands on with Grafted
By Noree Logsdon

I breathed deeply as a blast of warm air from the Holy Land hit my face. As I closed my eyes to picture the Judean Hills I would soon be driving through, my reverie was broken by three loud blasts of a car horn. I laughed. I was definitely back in Israel!

The Lord has placed in my heart a deep desire to do humanitarian aid work and so the ICEJ Grafted Summer Hands On Tour could not have been a better fit for my heart’s desire; not only did I get to see Israel, but more importantly I also got to work hands on with Israelis in need. Our group spent days cleaning and ministering to a compound that houses troubled youth. We also put on a day camp for children living in the Old City, we fed the homeless out of a soup kitchen in the center of Jerusalem and we brought supplies to Sudanese refugees who recently fled war-torn Sudan to the safety of Israel.

The stories of the Bible came alive as we took a boat ride on the Sea of Galilee and stood at the Temple Mount where Jesus prayed. I was humbled to be allowed to pray for the peace of Jerusalem on the actual Old City walls of Jerusalem. And I was blessed to have the opportunity to reach out and touch the lives of Israelis and show them that they are not alone in this world, that there are others willing to stand with them and support them.

I am so excited to be a part of the ICEJ’s young adult program Grafted! And I encourage you to find out more of all Grafted has to offer!
A recent US intelligence report has concluded that Iran suspended its pursuit of nuclear weapons back in 2003, a finding that Israel worries may take the steam out of international efforts to confront Tehran and its threats to destroy the Jewish state.

In early December, the US and European Union seemed to have finally convinced Russia and China to go along with tougher economic sanctions against Iran's renegade nuclear program. The progress came after Iran's new nuclear negotiator Saeed Jalili, a close ally of president Mahmoud Ahmadinejad and his Islamic doomsday sect, defiantly lectured his counterparts about God, theology and the need to start talks all over again with him.

But two days later, the Bush Administration released an updated National Intelligence Estimate that determined Iran froze its nuclear military program four years ago under international pressure, though it has continued to enrich uranium for civilian purposes.

Israel responded to the startling new assessment by contending that while Washington may be right about a freeze in 2003, Iran has since revived key components of its atomic program and is pressing on towards nuclear arms production. Israeli intelligence points to accelerated uranium enrichment, advances in developing ballistic missiles, and construction of a 40-megawatt heavy-water reactor in Arak that could produce plutonium – all phases of building and delivering a nuclear bomb.

The US sent its top Pentagon official to Jerusalem to reassure Israel that Washington still considers Iran a serious threat, while Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice and even President George W. Bush himself are due in the region by January to bring the same comforting message.

But America has been through some crucial intelligence failures of late, including the shock of 9/11, the futile search for weapons of mass destruction in Iraq, and the A. Q. Khan nuclear black-market ring out of Pakistan. Israel cannot afford to take any such chances when its very existence is being threatened.
Recognizing the trend, the Israeli cabinet in December launched an ambitious relocation project for 2008 to mark the state's 60th anniversary year. Dubbed “Coming Home,” the program will use a combination of tax breaks, employment and small business loans to persuade Israel’s 650,000 expatriate citizens to return.

But what of new aliyah and the realization of the Zionist dream? “We have found some things which can have a positive effect,” suggests Flower.

“In 2004 we organized a telethon in St. Petersburg using an ICEJ database simply compiled from the telephone directory.” Working together with the Jewish Agency the list was narrowed down to 10,000 Jewish households, 2,000 of which were interested in aliyah.

Now Flower has turned his attention to North America reaching out to former Soviet Jews living in the US using some of the methods pioneered back in Russia. “The ICEJ has made 2 databases for the USA and Canada, each of more than 1 million households: one of Ashkenazi families with Russian roots, the other Sephardic families with South American roots.”

The initiative is in the planning stage now, but a pilot project has been started in conjunction with the Jewish Agency’s new global calling center in Jerusalem.

“It will be expensive,” Flower admits, “and will take many years, but the Bible specifically says that the gentiles will help with the ingathering of the Jews” (Jeremiah 16:16).

“We are perfectly positioned to play a major role in the next great wave of Jewish aliyah.”