

ENGAGING  
*with...*

# Jewish people

understanding their world  
*sharing good news*

Randy Newman

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Engaging with Jewish People

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Engaging with...

## Preface

Christians have a wonderful message to tell the world. As the angel said at the birth of Jesus, it is “good news of great joy, *for all people*” (Luke 2 v 10). But sometimes we have been slow to take that message of forgiveness and new life to others.

Sometimes it’s because we have become *distracted*. There are so many things that can push the need to tell others from its central place in our calling as individuals and churches. We get wrapped up in our own church issues, problems and politics. Or we get sidetracked by the very real needs of our broken and hurting world, and expend our energies dealing with the symptoms rather than the cause.

Sometimes it’s because we have lacked *conviction*. We look at people who seem relatively happy or settled in their own beliefs, and just don’t think Jesus is for them. Or perhaps we have forgotten just how good the good

news is, and how serious the consequences for those who enter eternity unforgiven.

But often it has been *fear* that has held us back from sharing the good news about Jesus. When we meet people whose culture, background or beliefs are so different from ours, we can draw back from speaking about our own faith because we are afraid of saying the wrong thing, unintentionally offending them, or getting into an unhelpful argument that leads nowhere. Perhaps this is particularly so for sharing the good news of the Messiah with Jewish people.

This little series of books is designed to help with this last issue. We want to encourage Christian believers and whole churches to focus on our primary task of sharing the good news with the whole world. Each title aims to equip you with the understanding you need, so that you can build meaningful friendships with others from different backgrounds, and share the good news in a relevant and clear way.

It is our prayer that this book will help you do that with Jewish people wherever you meet them: a neighbor, friend or work colleague. They may have an active Jewish faith, or simply consider themselves Jewish because of their background and culture. We pray that the result would be “great joy” as they understand that Jesus really is their Messiah, and is good news for them.

*Tim Thornborough*  
*Series Editor*

# Introduction

Writing this book brings me joy!

Allow me to begin by introducing you to a Yiddish word—*naches* (rhymes with “Loch Ness”). A dictionary would simply define it as “joy.” But Yiddish is such a colorful language that mere definitions never fully convey the various nuances of a word. *Naches* has an element of pride to it, often because of the accomplishments of a child or a very close friend. If two old Jewish friends meet (which is the way many Jewish stories and jokes begin), one might say, “I have such *naches*! My eldest son just graduated from medical school.”

Why do I begin a book about Jewish evangelism talking about *naches*? Because that’s what I feel when I think that some of my Gentile brothers and sisters in Messiah want to learn how to share the good news of the Messiah with the Jewish people, my people. Truly, I’m overjoyed.

How could I not be? The gospel has brought such joy and meaning to my own life and I’m confident that you, the reader of this book, would say the same thing. I was born into a Jewish family in the suburbs of New York City at a time when “maintaining Jewish identity” was a high priority. My father fought in World War II, and my parents were of that generation that first learned of the horrors of the Holocaust, that demonic explosion that slaughtered one third of the world’s Jewish population (6 out of 18 million). “Never again” became the slogan on every Jewish person’s lips as they labored for the es-

tablishment of the state of Israel, a homeland and haven for the descendants of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. They also made sure their children attended additional “Hebrew School” to learn the basics of the faith and how to participate meaningfully in the traditions of worship that set us apart from other faiths.

Although my parents were not particularly observant in their practice or even believing in all that Judaism taught, they joined a Conservative synagogue that leaned toward the Orthodox variety, and made sure their three sons would have a *Bar Mitzvah* and not get assimilated into the predominantly “Christian” culture in which we lived.

Very soon, I learned we were not like Christians, and early on I learned that to be Jewish meant to be hated. I vividly recall being called “kike” and “Christ-killer” by “Christians” at my school. I remember my father receiving a request from our synagogue president to guard our congregation’s property on a Halloween night. One year before, someone chose to carve a swastika into our synagogue lawn with a lawnmower.

I may not have been able to expound on all the major doctrines of Judaism but I knew, beyond a shadow of a doubt, that Jews do not believe in Jesus. For some reason, I took Judaism’s spiritual aspects more seriously than the rest of my family. I continued to meet with our rabbi even after my *Bar Mitzvah*, which was far from typical. When I was 15 years old, I chose to diligently obey all the many commandments associated with the celebration of the holiest day of the Jewish calendar, *Yom Kippur*—the Day of Atonement. The traditions of the rabbis mandated that you fast on that day, not ride in a car, abstain

from any work, and confess sins for the purpose of “afflicting one’s soul.” And so I walked to synagogue (about two miles from where we lived) and confessed every sin the liturgy listed. I had begun the holiday with the hopes that, if I obeyed all the commandments for that holiest of days, God would no longer seem distant and alien as he had up until that point.

But it didn’t work. I walked home, watching the sun as it set, and felt no closer to God than I had 24 hours before. And then I looked down at my shoes. I was dressed in a suit and wore leather dress shoes to match the formal attire. At that moment, I remembered something I was taught back in Hebrew School years before—you don’t wear leather shoes on *Yom Kippur*. If you were to visit a synagogue on *Yom Kippur*, you would see men dressed in fine suits and athletic shoes that don’t match. It’s a day for soft-soled footwear, not leather, which is equated with fine luxury—out of place on a day of repentance.

I wrestled with the notion that my shoes were the reason for my lack of connection with God. If only I had worn the right shoes, God wouldn’t seem so alien to me, I reasoned. And then I thought, “*That’s the stupidest thing in the world! Is that really what knowing God is all about? Wearing the right shoes? Obeying every obscure, demanding, rule the rabbis could concoct?*” If that was what a relationship with God was all about, I was not interested.

But still, I sensed there must be a better way and expressed some kind of prayer asking God to show me what it was. That began a process of searching that lasted more than five years. It included meeting a group of Christians who were different. They were different than me because

they talked about having “*a personal relationship with God.*” They were different than other “Christians” I knew because they challenged my thinking. They said that just because someone is gentile doesn’t mean they are Christian. And they were different than most everyone I knew in that they talked *about* God and *to* God in a way I found tremendously attractive. I couldn’t articulate it at the time but I was jealous that these *goyim* (a not-so-positive term for Gentiles) knew my Jewish God better than I did.

I began to read the Bible—both the so-called Old Testament and the New Testament—and found I had misunderstood both Judaism and Christianity. The God revealed in the *Tanach* (a Jewish term for the Law, the Prophets, and the Writings) was different than the rules-obsessed, law-enforcing deity I had heard about in Hebrew School. And the New Testament was not at all anti-Semitic as I had expected and been warned about. In fact, the New Testament sounded remarkably Jewish, quoting from David, Solomon, Hosea, Micah, and Malachi.

Most of all, I found that Jesus was not who I expected him to be—merely a good teacher. He made claims about himself that, if true, meant he was the Messiah and, if false, meant he was a megalomaniac. Best of all, I found this Jesus to be a delight to both my mind and my soul. He taught lessons that challenged and comforted, made sense and made for *shalom*—peace. He fulfilled what the prophets foretold and what my heart yearned for. And his death, I learned from Matthew, a Jewish man writing for a Jewish audience, atoned for sin in a way that no animal sacrifice in the temple or personal sacrifice after the temple’s destruction could ever manage. He was the

one Isaiah expected, the one Simeon hoped for, and the one I desperately wanted.

That same Jesus continues to amaze and delight me to this day. I regularly find ways in which he unifies the Old and New Testaments. He still challenges me with his teachings, cleanses me with his cross-work, and empowers me with his Spirit. He is the source of my every joy and the balm for my every *oy*. The thought of helping my Gentile brothers and sisters with the task of bringing the good news to my Jewish people cannot possibly bring anything but great happiness.

Writing this book also makes me say “Oy!” Here’s another Yiddish word you might want to learn: *tsuris* (pronounced *TSOO-riss*, rhymes with absolutely nothing). The dictionary would say it means “trouble.” Actually, it should be troubles, in the plural. Technically, there is a singular word, *tsureh*. But nobody ever uses that word because, “*how could there ever be only one problem? Give yourself time and you’ll see things are worse than you thought.*” We express *tsuris* by saying “Oy” (Oh!) or the more elaborate, “*Oy vey is meer*” (Oh, woe is me).

As soon as you put the word “Jewish” and the name “Jesus” together in a sentence, you’re asking for *tsuris*. If there’s one thing the vast majority of Jewish people believe, it’s that “Jews don’t believe in Jesus.” In fact, they go further. If you “used to be Jewish” and you believe in Jesus, you’re no longer Jewish, they insist. You betrayed and abandoned your people.

But wait! It gets worse. History gives Jewish people ample reason to resist the gospel. A great deal of hatred, per-

secution and worse has come to the Jewish people from Christians. Even after accounting for the fact that some of those people weren't really Christians, there still remains some terrible things said and done to my people by people I would have to call brothers or sisters in Christ.

It might be worth pausing at this point to explain something in the title of this book. If you're familiar with the series (*Engaging with Muslims*, *Engaging with Hindus*, etc.), you might have expected the title of this volume to be *Engaging with Jews*. But even the mere mention of the word "Jew" raises some problems. "Jew" was the word my people had to wear on an armband in Europe during the Holocaust to identify them as objects of hatred. The word "Jew" sounds harsh and hateful in the ears of many Jewish people. If you want to pave the way toward deeper friendship and more meaningful conversation with your Jewish friends, use the term "Jewish people" instead of the word "Jew."

I know. You want to say, "*But the New Testament calls them 'Jews.'* *If it's good enough for John and Paul, it's good enough for me.*" But the New Testament was written before the Holocaust and before Martin Luther used that word in some pretty hateful ways. A minor vocabulary change can lead to major improvement in evangelism. I'll say more about word choices later. (And just to make this more tricky—it's not always bad to use the word "Jew." Thus, in this book, I will sometimes use that term. Is this consistent? No. But Jewish people tend to have a high tolerance for inconsistency.)

This all flows from the fact that the devil seems to hate the Jewish people. Just take a quick glance at our history

and that statement doesn't seem far-fetched. To be sure, we could look at economic, sociological and historical factors that paved the way for the Nazis' engineering of "the final solution." But the extent of the evil, the dogged determination toward total annihilation of an entire race of people, and the fact that this wasn't the first time Jewish people faced this strategy (see Haman in the book of Esther, for example), points in the direction of demonic power, not just human obsessions. If indeed the Jewish people have a unique place in God's plan for the world, it does not seem odd that the devil has a place for them in his schemes as well.

Thus, engaging with Jewish people might not always be fun or easy or immediately fruitful. And if you get close to some Jewish people, Paul's "great sorrow and unceasing anguish" (Romans 9 v 2) that they do not know the One to whom all the law and the prophets point might resonate with you. But hopefully, you'll take heart from the fact that that same Paul used to persecute Jewish and Gentile followers of the One he eventually came to worship and proclaim. If God can knock a self-righteous Pharisee off his donkey on the way to Damascus, there is no limit to what he can do in and through the lives of the Jewish people he brings across your path.

What this book is not

Not long ago, I spoke at a church's missions conference about the power of the gospel. I spoke of how good it is and how God has "blessed us in the heavenly realms with every spiritual blessing in Christ" (Ephesians 1 v 3). I wanted to motivate God's people to share good news

out of a profound sense of gratitude for all God has done for rebellious sinners like us. I preached with the aim of having them take stock of the riches we have as blood-bought saints.

When I opened the session for questions, the first inquirer posed this question: *“So who do you think the 144,000 are in the book of Revelation?”*

My heart sank. And so did the questioner’s when I fumbled for a minute and then said, *“I’m not really sure.”* There are many questions we may have about future prophecy. Who are those 144,000? Who is the anti-christ? Will Messiah’s return come before a tribulation? Will he return before the millennium? This book will not answer those questions.

Nor will I be able to tackle the many theological questions about the relationship between Israel and the church, whether the political state of Israel is the fulfillment of prophecy, or what the best solutions are for the Israeli-Palestinian conflicts.

But please hear me carefully: I am not saying those questions are unimportant. They must be answered by every church and all individual believers. Just because God’s people have not come to a consensus on these and many other questions does not mean we should fail to wrestle with them from the Scriptures by ignoring tricky passages. If you’ve ever heard a series of sermons on the book of Romans that skipped chapters 9, 10 and 11, you’ll know why I’m concerned about this.

At points in this book, I’ll give some suggestions about where I stand on certain debated issues. Whether you agree with my conclusions or not, I hope you’ll dig into

God's word and decide for yourself what you believe about all that God teaches. I've suggested some resources that might help at the end of this book.

I do feel a need to offer a warning at this point. There may be times when you find my tone too lighthearted. I might even slip into a Yiddish expression or two that, given Yiddish's humorous nature, may seem flippant. (Did you catch that when I used the word "*fumfer*" a few paragraphs back. I didn't even realize that was Yiddish until my spell-checker went all *meshuguh*. There I go again.) I'm not just doing this to be funny. I want you to immerse yourself in the Jewish mindset that has learned to find humor just about anywhere. (Given our history, can you blame us?)

If you're going to engage with Jewish people, you might just need to lighten up a bit. Most Jewish people think Christians are uptight, humor-impaired and boring. That's a barrier to the gospel that we should demolish. In the midst of sharing good news with your Jewish friends, don't be afraid to crack a joke, laugh at yourself or smile. Like chicken soup, "it couldn't hurt."

What this book is

My prayer for you as you read this book is that you will be encouraged. You will sense that the gospel reservoir from which you drink goes deeper than you had previously known. You will marvel more and more at how God's promises, prophecies and pictures in the early parts of his word have been fulfilled in the last part. You'll devote yourself to prayer for the salvation of the Jewish people,

and you'll feel emboldened to start conversations that just might alter eternity.

God is as powerfully at work in the lives of Jewish people as he was when he parted the Red Sea. Their resistance or the evils done to them are not obstacles that can thwart the omnipotence of our God. In fact, friends of mine in Jewish missions tell me that Jewish people are more open to the gospel than ever. Perhaps that's because many Jewish people have defaulted to secularism long enough to discover its emptiness, shallowness and many disappointments. Or perhaps they've tried to reconnect (or connect for the first time) to the requirements of the law and found them crushing, as I did. Or perhaps they've come face to face with the failures of naïve Jewish optimism to bring about *shalom* in the Middle-East, or in racially strained cities, or in their own souls.

For whatever reason, Jewish people are reading the New Testament, talking about Jesus, visiting evangelistic websites, attending Christian Bible studies, sneaking in the back doors of churches and messianic congregations, and finding the One who has fulfilled the prophecies of Isaiah, Micah, Hosea and all the other prophets. Not only that—many of these Jewish people are embracing the One who satisfies their deepest longings, atones for all their sins, and grants them *nachas* that will last for all eternity.

# Understanding Jewish people



## Chapter one

# Who are the Jewish people?

There are approximately 14 million Jewish people in our world of over 7 billion. That means my people make up less than one percent of the world's population. Actually it's a lot less than one percent. It's two tenths of one percent. And yet, in ways that could fill entire books, Jewish people have had a disproportionate amount of influence in the worlds of politics, education, business, science, entertainment, literature, and numerous other fields. When you consider how so very few (none?) of the world's other ancient peoples still exist (seen any Hittites or Jebusites lately?), you can see why some people see the hand of almighty God behind the people he calls "chosen."

A little less than half of those 14 million live in Israel. Almost that same number live in the United States with almost half of those living in or near New York City. Most Jewish people live in or near cities such as Los

Angeles, Paris, London, Toronto, Buenos Aries, and Moscow. Of course, by the time you read this, those locations may have shifted a bit. As I write this in early 2016, I hear about significant migrations of Jewish people from France to Israel because of rising anti-Semitism.

My people have always had to move because of hatred and persecution. Some of the numbers of change in population can stagger the imagination. Poland's demographics disturb the most. In 1930, 3 million Jewish people lived in Poland. Today there are barely 3,000. Most were killed by the Nazis. The rest escaped to America, Israel and elsewhere. The combined populations of Jewish people in Germany, Austria, Czechoslovakia, Hungary and Romania had grown to over 2.5 million by 1930. Today, those locations account for less than 200,000.

Of course, these numbers all presume it's easy to identify who is Jewish and who is not. They're the biological descendants of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, right? But such simplicity rarely occurs in the Jewish world. In fact, you could read lengthy discussions about "Who is a Jew?" that would make you wonder if you've stumbled into a law-school classroom or a Shakespearean tragedy.

Part of the problem developed when the newly established nation of Israel passed "the law of return." This allowed Jewish people from all over the world to settle in Israel and claim automatic citizenship "*if they identify themselves as Jewish.*" You see the potential problems, don't you? The Israeli government had to qualify that a bit. Eventually they landed on the view that you were Jewish if your mother was Jewish. Why your mother and not your father, since so many places in the Scriptures

trace people's ancestries through the line of the father? Because the centuries of persecution often included the raping of Jewish women by non-Jewish oppressors. This led to births of children who knew who their mother was but for whom identifying their father wasn't so easy. So the rabbis decided that the way to keep our people intact and distinguish who "we" are from who "they" are was to keep track of the mothers and their children. God did raise up fathers to lead the families and communities from the survivors of such cruelty, but it all made for a rather messy situation. Perhaps this is why Jewish people now place such a high priority on the family. Then again, the Bible values the family rather highly as well.

For the purpose of this book, however, we don't need to explore the debate about "Who is a Jew?" any further. The Jewish people you're likely to meet won't be wondering if they're really Jewish. They'll either identify themselves as such or not. Some, to be sure, may be wondering what that means. They may not have been raised in a very observant family and now they would like to connect to their roots. In fact, a growing number of Jewish people in America are reclaiming or re-establishing or finding for the first time their Jewish roots during their middle age. These kinds of newfound identities could be fertile soil in which to cultivate conversations about the Messiah. But I'm getting ahead of myself. Let's wait a bit before we explore how we reach out.

For now, it's worth reflecting further on understanding who we're talking to. Jewish people love to point out that Judaism is more than a religion. And it's more than a race. And it's more than an ethnicity. Some like to say,

*"It's a way of life."* Jewish people weave together doctrine, diet, humor, tone of voice, and a dozen other aspects of life all under the banner of "Jewish." Part of the reason why Jewish evangelism is so difficult is that most Jewish people see Christianity as so alien. Being Jewish is not just having a different set of beliefs. It's different flavors of food, different ways to tell jokes, different views about politics, and different planets of social customs. If I had to condense what it means to be Jewish to four prevailing themes, I'd say they're pain, pride, pleasure, and promise.

## Pain

I've already mentioned enough things to highlight the reality of pain in the Jewish mindset. A fair number of Jewish holidays commemorate times when enemies tried to wipe us out but God spared us. For Passover we remember our deliverance from slavery to the Egyptians with a feast called a *seeder*. For *Purim*, we rejoice that wicked Haman's plot to kill us didn't succeed and we nosh on cookies called *hamantaschen*. For *Hanukkah*, we dedicate ourselves to God, who empowered us to retake the temple from Antiochus Epiphanies, and we eat potato pancakes. One Jewish comic quipped that most of our holidays could be summarized with three short sentences: *"They tried to kill us. We won. Let's eat."*

## Pride

Because we have survived so much, against such odds, so many times, we have developed a kind of Jewish pride that has been, in my opinion, both a blessing and a curse. It's a blessing because it builds upon itself. It looks

at past accomplishments and spurs us on to even greater ones. Not only do we survive persecutions but we also produce Nobel Prize winners, cure diseases, write masterpieces, advance social improvements, and rise above our circumstances. We can do anything—or so we think. This kind of pride has enabled the country of Israel to thrive economically and agriculturally even though it consists largely of desert. The Jewish people have developed a will to excel even when the odds are against them. When Jewish people reflect on their corporate rags-to-riches status, they grow more energized to excel still more.

But ethnic pride has also been a curse because, along the way, some Jewish people have forgotten God. Despite warnings like the one in Deuteronomy 8, it is easy to think we are the source of our success instead of appreciating the gracious hand of God. Through Moses, God warned:

Be careful that you do not forget the LORD your God ... Otherwise, when you eat and are satisfied ... then your heart will become proud and you will forget the LORD your God, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery.

**Deuteronomy 8 v 11-14**

This warning is for all of us, whether Jewish or Gentile. Everyone must be wary of a reliance on self that forgets our constant dependence on the One who gives us every breath, step and thought. Without him, we cease to exist—both individually as persons and corporately as a people.

For some, this ethnic pride has theological roots—but not ones that accurately reflect the teaching of Scripture. God’s word goes out of its way to say that God did not choose the nation of Israel because of any merit of its own.

The LORD did not set his affection on you and choose you because you were more numerous than other peoples, for you were the fewest of all peoples. But it was because the LORD loved you and kept the oath he swore to your ancestors that he brought you out with a mighty hand and redeemed you from the land of slavery, from the power of Pharaoh king of Egypt.      **Deuteronomy 7 v 7-8**

Tragically, for some, this pride has angry roots. I have interacted with enough Jewish people to hear a recurring theme of resentment that God didn’t prevent or stop the Holocaust and other evils. For these people, their success, especially the establishment, protection, and prosperity of the nation of Israel has been *in spite of God* rather than *because of him*. Their cry of “Never again!” means that they will prevent another Holocaust by fighting to the death to provide a safe haven for Jewish people in Israel—even if God doesn’t come through for them. I write these words with tears and an ache in my heart but I know these sentiments are real for at least some of my people.

If you’re tempted to think condemning thoughts right now about Jewish pride, consider the universal and insidious nature of pride. And reflect carefully that you too may, from time to time, take credit for things that actually come from the hand of our gracious God. Examine

your heart and see if you harbor any bitterness toward God for not always behaving the way you want him to. Spend time considering how necessary the cross was to atone for your sins, and drink deeply from the well of gospel grace that chose to rescue you from your own self-reliance. And then ask God to give you the same burden for the Jewish people that Paul had, agreeing with his description of them as...

zealous for God, but their zeal is not based on knowledge. Since they did not know the righteousness of God and sought to establish their own, they did not submit to God's righteousness. **Romans 10 v 2-4**

## Pleasure

I've already mentioned the close ties between Jewish holidays and food. But deliciousness is not just for ceremonial occasions. Who needs to wait for a wedding or a holiday to enjoy lean corned beef, fresh gefilte fish, stuffed cabbage, bagels, cream cheese and lox, or a dessert tray that'll warrant a lecture from a cardiologist? And this goes beyond the calendar. It shapes a whole way of seeing. Many Jewish people see Gentile culture (which they do not distinguish from Christianity) as sterile, bland, and in desperate need of a new caterer. Such realities are not insignificant when it comes to reaching out with the gospel.

I've also mentioned our love for humor. We love to laugh and make others laugh. For many years, the stand-up comedy world was dominated by Jewish comedians. Perhaps we're trying to counter our many years of trouble and sorrow. Or perhaps our times of lack propel us to go

after more and more. I'll save it for the cultural anthropologists to analyze the causes. For the sake of this book, I want you to see that Jewish people like nice things, appreciate good music and art, love to celebrate with food and laughter, and think that life—this life—is a good thing. We don't just sing "L'Chaim" ("To Life!") because it was a nice show-tune in *Fiddler on the Roof*. That song was written for the musical because it reflects how Jewish people think and live. If you're going to engage well with Jewish people, you'll want to show and tell how the gospel is good news for this life as well as for the next. And you should probably do so over a nice meal.

### Promise

The Jewish mindset, at its best, looks simultaneously backwards and forwards. For example, every year at Passover we retell the story of God's miraculous deliverance of his people from slavery. Long ago he worked miracles to pour out judgment on Egypt's false gods through the ten plagues, and displayed his power by parting the Red Sea. But we also look forward during that celebration to the time when all slavery, all oppression, all idolatry, and all wickedness will be wiped away. We end every *Seder* (Passover meal) with the words, "*Next year in Jerusalem*," a shorthand reference to the time when the Messiah comes to set up his kingdom on earth.

Thus, Judaism has a forward-looking posture to it, even for some of the most secularized, non-observant Jews. And that future orientation has a strong aspect of hope to it. In fact, the Israeli national anthem is called "HaTikvah", which means "The Hope"! Perhaps this is why Jewish peo-

ple involve themselves in politics or pursue civic causes. There's something in the Judaic DNA that longs for a better day when people "will beat their swords into plowshares and their spears into pruning hooks" (Isaiah 2 v 4). For some of them, this taints their view of Christians who they see as only interested in life after death, only in heaven and not caring about earth, and "so heavenly minded as to be no earthly good." Part of the task in proclaiming the gospel to Jewish people involves agreement that things are not as they should be while still pointing to eternity—the only time when all longings for heaven can be fulfilled.

As followers of the Messiah and lovers of all of the Scriptures, both Old and New Testaments, we see even greater reasons for hope and looking forward. God has already sent his Messiah once, so we are confident that he'll send him again to fulfill all remaining prophecies. In the meantime, the promises of Romans 11 tell us that God is not finished with the Jewish people.

I ask, then: Did God reject his people? By no means!

**Romans 11 v 1**

This verse answers Paul's rhetorical question with a resounding "No!" Israel did not "stumble so as to fall beyond recovery (v 11)." The Bible gives us good reason to be optimistic about fruitfulness in proclaiming the good news to the Jewish people.

God promised Abraham that his descendants would be as numerous as the stars in the sky, and that they will be a light to the Gentiles. Some interpreters believe that Messianic Jews will bring ultimate fulfillment to that

promise when they, as followers of Jesus, will join all the proclaimers of the gospel, tell of the One who is “the light of the world,” and play important roles in the fulfillment of the great commission. Whatever the detail, we should be encouraged that God has not rejected our Jewish friends and neighbours, and that sharing the gospel with them is not a fruitless exercise. There will be many Jewish believers in the Messiah in the crowd who gather around the Lion of the tribe of Judah, singing his praise forever (see Revelation 5 v 5-13). Perhaps one of the Jewish people you know will be among them.

### **Watch Your Language**

Words do more than just convey meaning. They paint pictures, express emotions, and stimulate responses. Some words offend or sound harsh or prompt pain. You can avoid unnecessary stumbling blocks by choosing certain words instead of others.

Say “Jewish people” instead of “Jews.”

Say “Messiah” instead of “Christ.”

It’s OK to say “Jesus” but you might want to also use “Yeshua.” Don’t be surprised if you need to explain who you’re talking about.

Say “believer in Jesus” instead of “Christian.” It’s also good to sometimes distinguish “Jewish believers in Jesus” and “Gentile believers in Jesus.”

“Congregation” is better than “church.”

Avoid the words “missionary” and “missions.”

And if you’re *farblondget*—hopelessly lost and confused—by the different terms and types of Jewish religion, don’t worry; there’s a glossary of terms over the page.

## Naomi's story

Naomi grew up in a very observant Jewish home, the daughter of a rabbi of a Conservative congregation. She knew Judaism well, both from her family's practice of rituals in the home and from the teaching in her Jewish schools. So, when Tabitha, her Christian babysitter began to talk to her about Jesus, Naomi's rejection was emphatic. *"No, Jesus is not real. I'll never believe in him."* Even as a young child she challenged her babysitter with questions, like, *"If you believe in Jesus, isn't that idolatry because it's believing in more than one god?"*

Still, even though she had arguments against what her babysitter said, what Naomi couldn't debate was that Tabitha was loving, confident and served her whole family with a sacrificial heart. Eventually, both parents embraced her as another member of the family. Even to this day, after almost two decades of serving as far more than just a babysitter, Tabitha continues to stay close to Naomi and her family. Much of her witness was indirect. She showed Naomi movies about Jesus' birth and his death, and spoke of Paul's conversion and other New Testament stories, but they all seemed *"out of context for me."* But something drew Naomi in ways that her Jewish practices did not. Somehow all the lighting of candles, reciting of prayers, and eating of ceremonial foods seemed like just *"mere ritual."*

Intriguingly, while Naomi argued against belief in Jesus, inwardly she began to wonder: *Could he be the Messiah? Did he rise from the dead? Did he fulfill prophecy?* The person of Jesus, displayed through the gentleness of Tabitha, moved Naomi closer and closer to belief. But it was a belief she resisted fiercely. *"I pushed those thoughts away a lot. I didn't want Christianity to be part of my life. I was so against it. I didn't want Jesus at all!"*

Then, one day in ninth grade, an unwitting evangelist

helped Naomi cross over from darkness to light. In her Jewish school, taught exclusively by strict adherents of Judaism, Naomi found herself defending Jesus—not out loud but undeniably in her head. Naomi’s history teacher presented a lecture on why Jews don’t believe in Jesus. She was “hard core” in her efforts to disprove Christianity, insisting that no one—Jewish or Gentile—should believe in the resurrection. She presented “proofs” and “evidence” and “facts” that it “couldn’t happen.”

But, Naomi says, *“It had the complete opposite effect on me. She convinced me that Jesus did rise from the dead! In that moment, I knew I believed.”* She went home from school and immediately told Tabitha that she believed and wanted to read the New Testament and learn all she could about Jesus. Over the next few days, as she read the New Testament, Naomi sensed that, *“It completed every question I had my entire life.”*

To this day, over five years after that eternity-changing day in her Jewish school, Naomi delights in how meaningful and joyful it is to believe in Jesus. *“I finally decided to trust my life to Jesus for his forgiveness, and I received new life through the power of God’s Holy Spirit.”*

### **Reflection**

- What are you hoping to gain from reading this book?
- What fears do you have about speaking, and perhaps sharing the gospel, with someone from a Jewish background?
- Where do you come into contact with Jewish people on a daily or occasional basis? What are the different possibilities for having a conversation and perhaps starting a friendship?

## **Glossary of useful terms**

**Bar Mitzvah/Bat Mitzvah.** A ceremony for 13-year-old boys (Bar Mitzvah) and girls (Bat Mitzvah) as they become “adult” participants in the liturgies of Judaism.

**Evangelism.** The verbal proclamation of the unique message that Jesus, the Messiah, died to save sinners. Many other messages may pave the way for that message (pre-evangelism) or build support for that message (apologetics).

**Gentile.** A non-Jewish person; anyone who is not a physical descendant of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, regardless of belief.

**Gospel.** The verbal message that God sent his Son, Jesus, to die as a sacrifice for sins so that those who trust in him will have eternal life.

**Hebrew.** The language that most of the Old Testament was written in and is still spoken today by many Jewish people.

**Holocaust.** The horrific, systematic killing of 6 million Jewish people and many others by the Nazis in the 1940s.

**Jewish.** The general term for many things, including religion, culture and ethnicity related to the Jewish people, those who are physically descended from Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.

**Judaism.** The faith system derived from the Old Testament and other Jewish writings that is practiced by and influences of the Jewish people.

**Messiah.** The person promised by numerous prophecies in the Old Testament who atones for sin and establishes God’s kingdom of righteousness, justice and peace.

**Messianic.** An adjective describing any of the many

things associated with the coming of the Messiah.

**Passover.** The holiday that retells and celebrates God's deliverance from slavery in Egypt.

**Rabbi.** A spiritual leader in a synagogue or Jewish community.

**Seder.** The ceremonial meal of the holiday of Passover, the remembrance of God's deliverance from slavery in Egypt, as recounted in the book of Exodus.

**Shalom.** The Hebrew word that means peace (and many other things that flow from that peace—individual well-being, social harmony, a sense of wholeness, restoration of damaged things, etc.).

**Synagogue.** The place for most Jewish corporate worship times or celebrations.

**Talmud.** A collection of Jewish discussions and commentaries on various parts of the Bible. Some terms associated with parts of the Talmud include Gemara, Mishnah and Midrash.

**Tanach.** A Hebrew acrostic term for the parts of the 39 books of the Old Testament: Law, Prophets, Writings.

**Torah.** The first five books of the Bible: Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy.

**Yiddish.** A language developed by Jewish people in Eastern Europe who wove together elements of Hebrew, German and other languages.