

## Examples of Cruciformity

### **6. Shmuel Aweida**

An Arab(!) pastor of a Messianic Jewish Congregation in Haifa

The following is a condensed version of Shmuel Aweida's story found in Julia Fisher's book, *A Future for Israel? Christian Arabs Share Their Stories*<sup>1</sup>. Further, I had an interesting interview with him in February and discussed much of the content with him.

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I am an Israeli Arab, born and raised in Haifa. My two younger brothers and I attended Hebrew speaking Jewish schools. Although Arabic is our mother tongue, Hebrew is our main language and the language we use to speak to each other! Growing up, 95 per cent of my friends were Jewish. So, you can see my upbringing was far from typical.

I was very blessed with parents who enabled me to grow up in Jewish surroundings and become familiar with Jewish traditions. My father worked at the Haifa Municipality and helped Jewish immigrants find jobs. He spoke Yiddish fluently. Our closest friends in the neighbourhood where we lived were holocaust survivors from Poland. So we grew up not just going to Jewish schools, but my parent's closest friends were Jewish, too. In the neighbourhood where I grew up there were Jews and Arabs living in the same buildings.

Today I pastor the Messianic congregation in Haifa that I grew up in—Beit Eliyahu (Elijah's House). It's predominately Jewish and reaches out to Jewish people. People say I must be an unique person in Israel, being an Arab pastoring a Jewish congregation; that may be true. I certainly don't know any other Arab pastors who are leading a Messianic congregation. However, I'm just a Gentile pastoring a Messianic congregation; the Bible doesn't differentiate between Arab, British or American—we're all Gentiles!

There have been times when I wished I was Jewish; times when I've shared the gospel with a Jewish person and they've turned round to me and said, 'This Yeshua is for you Arabs; he's not for us; why are you telling me this?' Other times I'm mistaken for a Jewish person and the response has been hostile; they've accused me of being a traitor and betraying the Jewish people by believing that Yeshua is the Messiah. Then I tell them I'm not Jewish, I'm an Arab and they stop to listen some more to an Arab who loves Israel 'How. can this be?' they say to me. Then we go through God's plan of salvation . . . why did he choose Israel? And sometimes coming from an Arab makes them listen!

I find it surprising that some Christians believe in Replacement Theology, because if people believe that God has rejected Israel—that they're not his chosen people any more—then how can they trust the rest of his promises? On the other hand, I've also met people who are crazy about Israel; they'll do anything for Israel—except share the gospel. This is also a mystery to me! 'We'll give Israel anything we have but not Yeshua,' they say. I believe such people support Israel blindly. I have no problem saying I'm pro-Israel, I

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<sup>1</sup> Julia Fisher, *A Future for Israel? Christian Arabs Share Their Stories* (Sparkford, UK: J.H. Haynes Ltd., 2006) 105-111

support Israel. But when you know there are 60,000 abortions in Israel every year and the same people who love Israel fight abortion in England but don't care about the 60,000 who die yearly in Israel, it doesn't make sense to me. Or they pray against a gay parade in London, but turn a blind eye to the gay parades in Tel Aviv, Haifa and Jerusalem —it just doesn't make sense; it's as though they hold different standards. I can't see the apostle Paul being a member of such a church. I believe those two extreme views are both unbiblical.

Our congregation is called Beit Eliyahu, House of Elijah, and just as Elijah confronted the prophets of Baal on Mount Carmel, and showed the people then who the only true God is, that's what I believe God is calling us to do—to confront the vast amount of idolatry here in Israel today. New Age philosophy, Buddhism, the mystical Jewish Kabala—they are all flourishing. All manner of other religions are attracting Israelis today. Each year many thousands of young Jewish people travel to places such as India and Thailand seeking a spiritual experience; as soon as they come out of the army, they want to travel to clear their minds, and in the process they end up becoming involved with various Eastern religions.

At the present time we are putting together a team of young Jewish believers drawn from congregations all over the land to go to a big New Age festival that is staged near Tiberias during the Feast of Tabernacles in October. They will share the gospel with these spiritually hungry Israelis.

The biggest New Age Festival in Israel is actually held during Passover; thousands of people are worshipping idols in the form of these new religions instead of remembering how God brought them out of Egypt all those years ago. This demonstrates the spiritual hunger in Israel and the tremendous openness of the people to engage with other religions as they search for some spiritual reality. There are many such gatherings each year; some of them are extremely large, attracting twenty to fifty thousand people. And it's not just young people who are attracted to these events; families with young children also attend. Sometimes they are completely naked—attracted by free drugs, free sex, whatever. This is the Holy Land! The need for Yeshua is so strong. Jesus cried when he looked over Jerusalem; I think he would do the same today.

Today the Messianic congregations are growing; many are coming to faith in the Lord and this is very encouraging. But as I look to the future, I believe we will have to face some severe persecution, especially from the Orthodox Jews. Yesterday we were praying for one of the congregations in the south of the country that is facing much persecution from the Orthodox Jews there. I am anticipating that it will not be long before we face the same troubles here in Haifa.

I would like to ask the Christians in the west to understand what God is doing here today. Paul understood and taught that God has a plan for Israel (Romans 9-11). However, knowing what God is going to do eventually is one thing; in the meantime, what did Paul do? He went from place to place, starting at the synagogues, preaching the gospel. I know of no greater need in Israel today. To pray for the peace of Jerusalem is to pray for the true peace that can only be found through the Prince of Peace. The One New Man in the Messiah is a reality!