

The Godfather of Jewish Evangelism

Written by Ken Walker

Monday, 01 March 2010 04:38 PM EST



Moishe Rosen, founder of Jews for Jesus, looks back on his confrontational career with plenty of satisfaction—and few regrets.

Moishe Rosen spends a lot of time resting now as he copes with the effects of prostate disease that metastasized into bone cancer. Last fall, he nearly died after surgery for an intestinal blockage.

Although outlasting the doctor's prediction in January 2008 that he wouldn't live past Thanksgiving, soon after that surgery Rosen considered hospice care. Ultimately, he rejected it, reasoning he didn't want it until he was unable to get out of bed.

"At 77, how much longer should I live?" asks the outspoken founder of Jews for Jesus (JFJ), who turns 78 if he survives until April 12.

"Do I mind going?" he asks. "I don't know if I'll like the journey, but I'll let you know when you get there."

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That humor demonstrates the wit that long ago prompted Brooklyn's *Jewish Press* to declare that Rosen was obviously using Madison Avenue advertising writers. No simple evangelist could write so persuasively, the newspaper theorized.

Though the *Press* didn't know it was praising Rosen, his flock of admirers has no such reticence. They know that this somewhat cantankerous guy is one of the true fathers of Jewish evangelism in the modern world.

For Jay Sekulow, chief counsel for the American Center for Law and Justice (ACLJ), memories of Rosen go back to 1987, when the two men stood outside the U.S. Supreme Court building. Sekulow had just completed oral arguments in defense of JFJ's right to distribute gospel tracts at the Los Angeles International Airport.

"Moishe turned to me and said, 'I think you're going to be here often,'" Sekulow recalls. "I laughed because nobody was here that often, especially in those days. One out of 10,000 lawyers maybe argues a case, and that's probably an overstatement."

Sekulow not only secured a victory for JFJ, he has returned to the high court 13 times while serving as a thorn in the side of liberal activists.

Marveling at Rosen's insight, Sekulow remembers later walking by a building at Second Street and Constitution Avenue. Noticing a "for sale" sign, Rosen remarked that his attorney ought to buy it. Though Sekulow scoffed, close to a decade later ACLJ did just that.

"The guy had tremendous foresight in a whole lot of areas," Sekulow says. "And he was relentless. I never saw him take a setback as something that was going to be a permanent situation."

Add to that toughness a pioneering spirit, says JFJ board member Lon Solomon. When the suburban Washington, D.C., pastor became a believer in 1971, he reasoned that he must be the only Jew who believed in Christ as Messiah. After all, he didn't know any others who did.

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Now if a Jew makes that decision, it is no secret that he has company. Solomon credits this shift in cultural awareness to JFJ's overt, unashamed proclamation of the gospel to Jews.

"More than any other single person, Moishe has been responsible for putting the idea of being Jewish and believing in Jesus on the map," says Solomon, pastor of McLean Bible Church in northern Virginia. "He has inspired several generations of young Jewish men and women to have a burden to reach their own people. He has been a marvelous example."

For *The Messianic Times* editor Paul Liberman, Rosen is an inspiring figure. Back in 1986 Liberman was struggling with God's direction for his career.

A call to Rosen prompted a personal visit from his mentor. After a long talk, Liberman asked Rosen to summarize in one sentence why he had come.

Noting his protégé's struggles, Rosen replied, "My sentence is: I want you back in the game." Energized, Liberman started the messianic church now led by his son before he later moved to Israel for nine years.

"To me it was a crossroads in life," says Liberman, who until last summer was also director of the Jewish Messianic Alliance but today is back in California. "He's always been a hero of mine. He provided a lot of energy and showed us we can evangelize Jews. He was a leader by example."

Various adjectives apply to Rosen, whether "prescient," "brilliant," "outspoken" or "humble." Others use terms such as "authoritarian," "overbearing" and "controlling"—critics who see him as anything but kind. There were enough of the latter that in 2004 Rosen posted a letter on JFJ's Web site apologizing to anyone he had offended.

"It's true," Rosen says of his aggressive nature. "Most people who are in charge of things—you will come up against them. Those are things about my personality, but it didn't stop me from doing what I needed to do."

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Book editor Steve Lawson, who once worked under Rosen as JFJ's director of publishing, never found the major accusations valid. He mentions the meeting where staffers discussed a negative article and Rosen remarked, "If we're a cult, how come I can't get you guys to do what I want you to do?"

"Everywhere I go I meet Jews who have been offended by Jews for Jesus," Lawson says. "Nobody's perfect. ... Moishe Rosen is the first to admit it. There have been people hurt because of mistakes or something done wrong, but a larger number have been offended because of the gospel."

When it comes to how her father will be remembered, Ruth Rosen says it will depend on the speaker's perspective.

Currently writing his biography, the longtime JFJ editor says many will see him as the person who helped them discover God. Others will label him an eccentric and some a traitor responsible for so many Jews turning to Jesus, she says.

As for former cohorts who founded the bitterly critical organization called Ex-Jews for Jesus, Ruth Rosen hopes they understand her father's legacy doesn't focus on his greatness but God's.

"Moishe Rosen never thought he was God's gift to Jewish evangelism," Ruth says. "It was always the other way around. He always felt that telling Jewish people about Jesus was a gift and a duty that God had entrusted to him. His legacy is to pass that gift and that duty to others."

In a sense, he already has. Though still a board member and missionary, Rosen is so often publicly identified with Jews for Jesus that some forget he stepped down as executive director in 1996.

Yet the organization hasn't suffered. Today it employs more than 100 missionaries in 11 nations. The ministry has 148 volunteer chapters and 200 volunteers who accompany staff on short-term evangelism projects, camps and internships. JFJ personnel distributed approximately

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2.8 million tracts last year and spoke in 2,700 evangelical churches.

David Brickner, who held seven staff positions before replacing Rosen, says his preparation for leadership was the same as other candidates: a combination of mentoring, challenging, opportunity and hard work.

“He is a man who never stops teaching and is a man of insatiable curiosity,” Brickner says. “His questions and ponderings about life, ministry and the Scriptures were conversations we were invited into whenever we were with him.”

The director says the ministry’s 37 years of existence is a testament to the systems, values, and biblical and ethical principles Rosen put in place that have stood the test of time.

The leading principle that still drives the ministry is direct Jewish evangelism, something that includes constant rejection, hostility and lawsuits. The latter included one from comic Jackie Mason after his picture appeared on a tract in 2006 (JFJ withdrew it after an apology).

“We strive for excellence in all we do,” Brickner says. “If we say we’re going to do something and we fall short of doing that, then we want to be honest enough to say we fell short. We’re not going to call failure a victory.”

The victories range into the thousands. According to Solomon, more than 50,000 Jewish people worldwide follow Christ, a figure attributable to many ministries, yet still one that reflects JFJ’s impact.

A Miraculous Ministry

Born in Denver, Rosen came to Christ in 1953, the same year as his wife, Ceil. Though he often cited the arguments of atheist authors, nothing shook Ceil’s faith. One evening as Rosen read a pamphlet about heaven in a mocking tone, its truth penetrated his heart.

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A year later came the first of many miracles he would experience. It happened en route from Colorado to a Bible college in New Jersey. One night near the end of the trip, as he was about go to sleep, Rosen heard a voice say: "Tires. Check the tires."

Since he had inspected the car prior to the trip, he wondered why. Still, he went outside to look. Nothing.

Back in his room, ready to go to sleep, he heard the voice again. He took a flashlight outside and crawled under the car. There he saw a huge bulge in the right front tire's sidewall.

"When he got to the tire shop the next morning, the man couldn't believe he had made it from the hotel," says Ruth, who learned of the story during book research. "That was a crisis averted—one of those special times when God showed He was definitely watching over him."

Another occurred in 1966 when Rosen was on his first deputation tour with the American Board of Missions to the Jews (now Chosen People Ministries). Driving through Arizona one morning he stopped at a convenience store, where a stranger stuck a knife in his ribs and said, "Your money or your life."

"You can have my money," Rosen replied. "You could never take my life, because it belongs to Christ. But if you kill me, I go to be with Him. Well, what about you?"

"Are you a Baptist?" the man responded before breaking into tears and halting his robbery attempt. The next morning, Rosen found a switchblade on the seat of his car.

One of the more dramatic moments in Rosen's life occurred in 1982 when he sent an appeal letter to raise \$120,000 to place gospel ads in 10 major newspapers. The letter raised \$400,000. Since he had pledged to spend the funds on advertising, he included outlets such as *Time* magazine to finish the job.

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As gratifying as such experiences are, Rosen laments what he feels is evangelistic ground being lost as he draws near the end of his career.

He sees the battle receding on several fronts. One is confronting people with the gospel, a tactic he fears is fading from the influence of "friendship evangelism." Making friends with someone so they will then listen to you on matters of faith doesn't work with serious Jews, he says.

"I'm not against friendship and I do have many friends among the Jews," Rosen says. "But these are friends who have made it clear to me that we're going to be friends until or unless I start trying to persuade them about Jesus."

Another is ecumenical ministries that emphasize Christian-Jewish relations but at the expense of foregoing efforts to share the gospel. He cites the International Fellowship of Christians and Jews, which raises more than \$80 million a year, 10 times as much as Chosen People's evangelistic outreach.

Among other disappointments are leaders who asked to visit JFJ to learn how to run a successful ministry but after arriving only wanted lessons in fundraising.

Still, Rosen reflects, you give what you can and hope that people will respond: "Some respond well, and others respond with treachery."

Though some point to the longevity of JFJ as one of Rosen's notable accomplishments, the founder shrugs that he didn't start a ministry; he just answered God's call to become a missionary. That he had to wade through considerable opposition never bothered him.

"I've always found that when I was doing God's will, I was fighting the hardest," Rosen says. "The battles were always hard-fought, hard-won, and you had to hold on very hard. I usually knew that I was in God's will because of the opposition."

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That's a good lesson for any evangelist to remember.

Ken Walker, a writer based in Huntington, West Virginia, has written previously about Jews for Jesus for *Charisma*.

□ MOISHE ROSEN VIDEO

Go to rosen.charismamag.com to see *Charisma* publisher Steve Strang's interview with Jews for Jesus founder Moishe Rosen.

A Lifeline of Evangelism
Moishe Rosen has never viewed witnessing as optional. He is consumed with passion to reach his fellow Jews with the gospel.

Rosen and Cell in 2007

A 2006 JFJ outreach. More than 20,000 Jews have professed Christ through Rosen's efforts.

Rosen's 1977 book *Christ in the Passover* was one of 10 that he wrote.

Jews for Jesus began officially in 1973. This ministry parade was staged the next year in New York City.

A Jews for Jesus movement began in 1969 amid anti-war protests and the hippie culture. This musical outreach team was called the Liberated Waiting Walk.

The Rosens in 1960 with their two daughters, Lyn and Ruth.

An atheist at one time, Rosen came to faith in 1953.

Rosen married his wife, Cell, in 1950.

Rosen was born in Denver in 1932. He is 2 in this photo.

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