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Local group celebrates both Passover and Easter

By Jeff Adair / News Staff Writer
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NATICK -- With a dozen children gathered in a semicircle, Nici Smith told the story of the Passover, telling how Moses led the Israelites out of Egypt and how today Jews around the world commemorate their release from slavery.

Smith talked about the Hagaddot, the Seder, "Elijah's Cup," and the other customs and traditions of the eight-day holiday, which begins tonight at sundown.

"Who is the hero of Passover?" she asked during Shabbat services last Friday at Congregation Sar Shalom.

"Moses," one child said.

"You ask most Jewish children, and that's what they'll say," said Smith.

"It's Jesus," another child blurted out.

"That's right," Smith said.

Smith, who will sit down with family and friends tonight and tomorrow to celebrate Passover, will be in the pulpit at Crossroads Community Church in Framingham on Easter Sunday.

Not all members of Congregation Sar Shalom, a 2-year-old Messianic congregation that meets in the former East Natick United Methodist Church on Wellesley Road, celebrate Christian holidays.

However, they believe Jesus was the Messiah and despite what some may say, that doesn't make them non-Jewish, they say.

"Just because we now believe in Jesus doesn't mean we stop liking Jewish foods and stop speaking with our hands," said Smith, who kept her beliefs secret from her grandfather for a year because she didn't want to disappoint him.

"Anyone that knows me would never say I'm not Jewish," said elder Mike Levitz, laughing at the thought. "I celebrate Shabbat every week....I support Israel. Pretty much all the markings of a typical Jewish person I have. So I don't really get that, to be honest with you."

Led by three elders, the congregation of about 25 members meets once a week for Shabbat services. The men wear yarmulkes and the congregation sings and recites prayers in Hebrew. Frequent references are made to the Torah.

Some say their families accepted them when they came to believe in Y'shua, Hebrew for Jesus. It was a shock and upsetting for others. The members come from all walks of life.

Joanna Porter of Marlborough, who is half Jewish, attended Unitarian churches during her childhood.

Photo Gallery



Nici Smith holds up matzah and the Cup of Redemption during a Passover lesson for children at the First United Methodist Church, which hosts a Messianic Jewish congregation. (Photo: Lauren McFalls)

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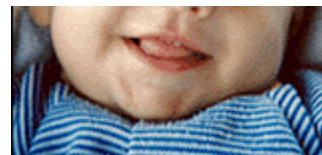
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"I've always been attracted to my Jewish roots," she said. "I joined Jews for Jesus, and...I felt more deeply inspired by the Jewish music and the Jewish tapestry and legend. I was just really attracted to what I feel is a richer cultural experience, just a fuller meaning of the whole plan of God."



The congregation has not run into trouble in Natick, but members admit Messianic Judaism is controversial among mainstream Jewish leaders. There are critics in the Christian community as well.

Some have called the group a cult. Across the nation, a number have been accused of using deceptive practices for listing themselves in telephone books as "synagogues" instead of "churches."

Two years ago, a man in Worcester was evicted from his apartment, he claimed, after his landlord found out he was a Messianic Jew.

Last September, a congregation in Philadelphia funded by the Presbyterian Church -- the first it has ever endorsed -- created a rift in that denomination that has not been resolved.

"It's misleading both to the Jews and to the Christians and to our own theological tradition," the Rev. Cynthia Jarvis, pastor of the Presbyterian Church of Chestnut Hill, told The New York Jewish Weekly in an October article.

Jarvis, who is trying to get the church to stop the funding, went on to say: "Presbyterians would do well to spend their evangelical time and money on all those gentiles having coffee at Starbucks on Sunday morning and leave God's relationship with the Jews to God."

The founders of Congregation Sar Shalom attended another Messianic congregation in the Boston area and started the Natick group because they wanted something closer to home.

The congregation is independent but has sponsored advertising campaigns with Jews for Jesus. Last month, the two co-sponsored a full-page open letter that ran in local newspapers supporting Mel Gibson's "The Passion of the Christ."

Members are clear not to call their meeting place a synagogue. They are careful in how they describe their beliefs.

"Converted is one of those no-no words," said Smith, a Namibian immigrant. "We don't like the word converted because in the Jewish community converted means you've become a gentile. We strongly believe that Jesus is Jewish and the Messiah. The most Jewish thing we can do is to believe in him."

Robert Pill, who is Jewish by heritage, said at one time he was an atheist and then an agnostic. He said that when he became a believer there were occasions he felt discrimination in church.

"There was a time the pastor asked me to get up to pray....I said, 'Blessed are you, Lord our God, King of the universe,' which is a standard Jewish prayer," said Pill, an elder. "The pastor came back to me and said there was someone who wanted me out of there....It was get that Jewish boy out of here."

Levitz, who grew up in California as a Reform Jew and a decade ago followed his father's footsteps becoming a Messianic Jew, attends the congregation for similar reasons.

"You go to a church, you don't have the Jewish aspect," he said. "I've been to churches in the past, but to be honest, we want to raise our kids Jewish."

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