

THE Finchley church hall is packed with Jews. Some women have the scarves of orthodoxy on their heads, many wear a star of David around their necks. This Friday night there are 150 people here to celebrate Jesus; about ten are black. A woman stands up, "We'd like to welcome you to the London Messianic Fellowship and tonight we've got the New Jerusalem Players from the US to bring you Jewish gospel music and drama."

Seven young, fresh-faced Americans appear. The women are in long red skirts and jerkins, the bearded men in Russian-style cream shirts, red trousers and tunics. One woman plays fiddle, others play trumpet or guitar, sing and clap their hands. The lead singer's solo proclaims, "He is the Christ and we are the sheep." The message is Christian, the music Yiddish.

As the hymn ends, the seven raise their arms like a Broadway chorus and the audience responds, clapping wildly. One of the men addresses the congregation in an easy Californian friendliness. "Shalom and good evening. We call this experience a messianic joy. Most of you who are Jewish know that we've been waiting around 3,000 years for the Messiah. That's a long time to wait. Well, I'm here to tell you that he's come and his name is Y'shua or Joshua, which means Jesus." A second hymn, *Behold God is my salvation*, is sung by the band, in Hebrew.

As I watch these Jewish Christians praising Jesus in Hebrew to Yiddish folk rhythms, I sense that I am witnessing the biggest Jewish sin. In Jewish law the Messiah is yet to come, to embrace Jesus as Messiah challenges the whole concept of Judaism. But this group are professional persuaders, their performance has a studied, East European ghetto authenticity which strikes a nostalgic note in the hearts of these Ashkenazi Jews who have cast aside their orthodox heritage for assimilationist "Jewish Christianity."

The music ends and the play begins. A young man steps forward. "We'd like to remind you that being Jewish and believing in Jesus is not such a new idea, all Jesus's followers were Jews." The group work is a mixture of 1960s street theatre, agitprop and Jewish/American self-mockery.

Jerusalem in the time of Jesus is downtown New York, and the miracles are announced as just another news flash. The big news is that some Jews want to spread Jesus's word to non-Jews. One of the prophets stares out to the audience and says cynically, "Gentiles for Jesus, it'll never catch on." There is a roar of approving laughter.

We move on to confession. A young man steps forward greeting us with *Shabbat shalom*. He talks of his conversion. "I was in Cincinnati when I first heard the gospel. A burly guy came up to me on campus and said, 'Hey brother, can I have a word with you?' He spoke to me about Jesus but I resisted him because I considered myself an atheist at that time. Eight years later, I was pursuing an acting career, I was depressed, I was taking

JEW FOR JESUS

JULIA PASCAL

drugs, when one night I went to hear a friend sing. She sang of Jesus and I had chills running down my spine. I was so moved that a week later I was a believer in the Messiah.

"The fact that my family was 3,000 miles away helped, of course [big laugh of acknowledgement from the audience] and then two years later I heard that Jews for Jesus were looking for me to act in the New Jerusalem Players. So I joined them and also took part in handing out our tracts in the street. In San Francisco a man spat at me but I thought I don't need to go to San Francisco to get insulted, I could've stayed in L.A. [Laughter]. We've passed out 20,000 tracts in London and now we're going to do some seed planting in Leeds, Glasgow, Birmingham and Jerusalem. We know that no real peace will come to Jerusalem until the Prince of Peace is accepted there."

Another sketch follows, showing the problems the group have with their families. Then the music stops and for a moment there is a dramatic silence. Then the young man asks the congregation to take the pamphlet they were given at the door and tear off the Involvement Card, which is a request for cheques, cash or just an address for a mailing. "We're not a church," he says, "but we do need your financial support if you share our vision of Y'shua as the Messiah and want to share that vision with our Jewish brothers and sisters."

The offertory is an empty sweet tin on one

side of the hall, and an oblong Tupperware container for the other. The Tupperware comes my way stuffed with notes - quite a few tens. As the money is generously handed out, the stage fills with the Americans singing the Lord's Prayer. The money is collected, and an English believer gets up to pray.

The weekly meetings of Jews for Jesus are spearheaded by a Londoner, Richard Harvey. "I was brought up a Jew but, when I was 13, I didn't really want a barmitzvah because I didn't believe in God," he says. "I experimented with transcendental meditation and read Aldous Huxley. But it wasn't till I encountered a Church of England minister who came to our school that I began to think of Jesus as the Messiah." I ask him if he was opposed by his family. He pauses and then answers, "Jesus said it would never be easy. He said they will throw you out of the synagogue."

How does the group stand on Zionism? "Israel's my homeland," he says, "and when Jesus returns, the Jews will recognise him and return to Israel." And the Palestinians? "Because we're Christians," he says, "we have a greater concern for the Arabs than the Jews. In Israel our group meets with Christian Arabs and they sit together and pray in congregations in Tel Aviv."

But is he a Christian or a Jew? "I take any label: Hebrew Christian; Messianic Christian, Seed of Abraham, but my favourite is Messianic Jew." Does he believe in Jewish ritual - for example, circumcision? "Why not? I'm a Christian but not a Gentile. I'm proud to be a Jew."

David Brickner from Boston leads the American troupe. He comes from five generations of Jewish Christians but, he asserts, "We don't have to contest our Jewishness. We're mainstream Christian evangelists but we still maintain our Jewish identity."

Most of his group have found Jewish marriage partners. He didn't. "My mother would have preferred me to have married a Jewish girl," he says, "but my wife is a Moabitess like Ruth. Anyway the biblical tradition works through the patrilineal line. We talk of the house of Abraham and Isaac, not Rebecca or Leah. If I have kids, they are going to appreciate their Jewishness."

He's been in London for three days, handing out tracts on street corners and already he's been the butt of anti-semitic remarks, ironic considering his father is an ordained Baptist minister. But countering anti-semitism is seen as part of the struggle to bring the Jewish Y'shua to the unbelievers.

After the British and Israeli tour, the group go on to Jewish congregations in South Africa, Australia and Hawaii before returning to New York. "Our largest work is concentrated in New York," Brickner says, and then asks me about my own Jewish background and what I think of Jews for Jesus. I tell him I don't believe in Messiahs, but I can tell from his expression that he thinks I might yet be saved.



Henry Iles