

Chapter 14

TORONTO HEBREW ACADEMY

The two years I spent at the Hebrew Academy were very enjoyable as the students there were highly motivated and worked hard at their studies. Besides my departmental work I also coached the school soccer team to its first winning season in the local 'separate schools' league. For the first time in my teaching experience I was receiving a good salary - probably the best in all of Toronto as the Hebrew Academy was committed to paying its teachers 'at least' what the public schools were paying. Our daughters were talking about the new home we were going to buy - with a swimming pool, of course! There was only one thing wrong! In all my other schools, I had been free to take the initiative in speaking to my students of my faith. In each of them I had been able to start a Christian Union or similar meeting for the students, to which noted speakers would come, or at which I would lead discussion. Of course, this was not a possibility at the Academy.

Thus it was that I approached the District Superintendent of the church we attended to seek opportunity for lay preaching. That opened up a whole new direction in my life. The outcome was that after two years teaching at Toronto Hebrew Academy, I gave my notice to leave the school, as I was to become a pastor with the Christian & Missionary Alliance - but that's another story ... and I must relate the highlight of this present story before I tell you that!

It was four weeks from the end of Spring term - the last weeks for our Grade 13 students who would spend their final school term at a kibbutz in Israel. I was in the staff room when Ari Barchi approached me. Ari, a graduate of the University of Jerusalem was in Toronto to teach Hebrew studies. This included some teaching on comparative religions.

"Gareth" he said, "I'm about to teach a lesson on Christianity and I thought it rather foolish for me to do that, when you know so much more about Christianity than I do. I wonder, would you be willing to come into my lesson with me?"

Naturally I said that I'd be delighted, so next morning I went with him to a Grade 13 "religions" class. The twenty five students, ages 17 to 19, showed little interest as we entered. After all, they knew who I was. Didn't they see me every day as they came to the Science labs? Ari spoke in Hebrew and then said,

"Mr. Evans will now tell you what Christianity is all about"!

I gulped! I thought I was to be there simply as a resource person to answer any questions. I was not expecting to teach the lesson.

"Maybe I should tell you what Christianity isn't all about." I started, trying desperately to think of what to say. "It isn't Northern Ireland with its sectarian war; it isn't the Crusades with its bloodshed; it isn't the politics of much of the western world. It's acknowledging that Jesus is the Messiah of God, come to take away the sins of men. Let me tell you how I became a Christian. Then I'll tell you how I became a Jew"! Everybody woke up! "Then I'll answer any questions".

I gave my testimony briefly, as in Chapter 2 of this book. Then I told how this made me a child of God - by faith, just as Abraham's faith made him righteous before God (Gen.15) and the 'father of the faithful'. I now worshipped the Jewish God, having been 'adopted' into His family. I spoke for about ten minutes and then asked, "Any Questions?"

Every hand in the room went up. I remember starting at the boy in the back, right hand corner of the room. He asked how it was possible for Jesus to be the Messiah when everyone knew the Messiah would bring peace on Earth, and only wars had followed the advent of Jesus. I answered by pointing out the Old Testament prophecies of a suffering Messiah as well as a victorious one. Wars are a result of man's refusal to accept the efficacy of the sacrifice He made at Calvary. However, He will return, this time as King, to establish His "peace on Earth." Many questions followed, the students waving and shouting to get their question heard. "Please sir! Please sir! I'm next, sir!"

One young lady asked, "Do you believe the Messiah will come in our lifetime?" I answered in the affirmative, adding that I hoped we would be together when He came. When she asked me 'why?' I said, "Because I'll be able to point out to you the marks of nails in His hands and feet!"

The lesson continued like this for forty minutes before the school bell signaled that it was time to leave for the next class, a Grade 11 lesson in Physics. However, these students were not willing to let me go as they had so many unanswered questions they were eager to ask. Soon I noticed that too much time had passed and that it would be pointless for me to leave for the Grade 11 class. By now, they had left the Physics lab and would be settling down to study in the library. This was normal procedure if a teacher did not turn up on time for a lesson, for whatever reason. So I continued answering the questions until another period had passed. This time, I had to leave, but only after promising that I would come again, if their teacher wished it.

As I drove home that evening, I was so excited at the privilege I had had, being able to speak of my faith with these special young people. I had never dreamed that this would be possible and could only marvel at God's wonderful ways. I prayed that the words I had spoken would bear some fruit in the lives of those students, being confident that the Lord never sows His seeds in vain. The next morning a note was waiting for me in my school letterbox. It read,

"Mr. Evans, please come and see me in my office at 10 am this morning. - Rabbi S "

My heart sank. Evidently the senior Rabbi had heard about my time with Grade 13 and I was about to be reprimanded. Maybe, I'd even be asked to leave the school! I felt very vulnerable but comforted myself by remembering that I had warned them at my interview, that this might happen. As I approached the glass-walled office, I could see Ari Barchi sitting inside, talking with the Rabbi.

"Ah, Gareth, come in" said Rabbi S. "Ari and I have been discussing the lesson you had with Grade 13 yesterday". He continued, "As you know, this school was founded to give our Jewish children an excellent education. A very important part of that is to instill in them a love for all things Jewish, so we teach them our history, our poetry, our culture and our religion. I have taught here for several years, and must admit that, one of the biggest disappointments I have, is that so few come to real faith in God. However, when I entered my class this morning, I found them all wanting to talk about faith and God. Gareth, I have never seen them so excited! The only problem is, its all in their heads and not in their hearts. We were wondering if you could help us get such faith into their hearts"!

"The only way I know is by acknowledging that Jesus is the Messiah" I said, my head beginning to swim.

"I understand that," said the Rabbi," but you realise we will have to agree to differ. But ... we were wondering if you would be willing to come into some more classes to teach our students. They are amazed to find a man of science who is also a man of faith - and one who knows their scriptures as you do. Please will you come?"

I quickly expressed my willingness and arrangements were made for me to attend a Grade 13 lesson the next day. I guess I could have sounded 'spiritual' and said, "Let me pray about this" but I suspect the Lord forgave me my impetuosity!!