

Reaching Millennials with #SMARTalks

This fall, Jews for Judaism's SMARTalks initiative was launched on the USC campus. The pilot event was a tremendous success, drawing more than 100 students and community leaders.

Four renowned experts — publisher and columnist David Suissa, community activist Julie Bram, screenwriter David N. Weiss, and marketing and branding guru Sasha Strauss — gave concise presentations that tied-in their life experience with the importance of critical thinking.

USC Hillel director Bailey London closed the event with a passionate argument that SMARTalks is unique because it advocates for critical thinking skills within a Jewish

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SMARTalks presenters and partners (Lt to Rt) Sasha Strauss, Bailey London, Julie Bram, Rabbi Zalman Kravitz, Aaron Rifkind, David Suissa, Rabbi Dov Wagner, and David N. Weiss.

A Missionary's Journey to Judaism

By Esther Gold

Even though I was raised in a Christian family, my life was transformed when I became a born-again Christian at age 15. While studying in Cape Town, South Africa at age 24, I realized the Jewish people needed to be “saved” and hear the “good news of Jesus.”

I attended a local synagogue regularly for 6 months to learn about Judaism so I could be a more effective missionary to the Jews. I kept my true intentions a secret until Jews for Jesus recruited me to organize their summer “Behold You God” missionary campaign in Cape Town.

Just before launching the campaign, a Jewish friend invited me to a lecture. He did not know I was a missionary or which Rabbi was speaking. I nearly fell over when I discovered that Rabbi Bentzion Kravitz from “Jews for Judaism” had come from the other side

of the world to speak out against the very campaign I was so busy organizing.

Initially I was angry at the thought of Jews for Judaism combating Jews for Jesus. But to my surprise, Rabbi Kravitz spoke respectfully of Christians. However, he demonstrated

“Initially I was angry at the thought of Jews for Judaism combating Jews for Jesus.”

that they were misguided in their attempt to convert Jews, because they were reading a mistranslation of the Jewish bible and they were studying passages out of context. He showed us numerous contradictions in the New Testament that disqualified Jesus as being the Jewish Messiah.

I introduced myself to Rabbi Kravitz and told him, “I am Christian, and respectfully disagree with you”. He

was so gentle and humble, and he didn't even try to argue with me. He suggested that I have an open mind.

His confidence in the truth and his description of the spiritual beauty of Judaism made a huge impression on me. I had been taught Jews didn't believe in Jesus because they only studied the teaching of the Rabbis, and were spiritually blind to understanding the bible.

Rabbi Kravitz's knowledge of the original Hebrew bible shattered my pre-conceptions.

I had serious questions, but I could not deal with this new evidence right now. I went ahead with the “Behold your God” campaign and married a Christian man. However, Jews for Jesus disappointed me. Although they wore provocative t-shirts that said “Jesus made me Kosher,” they had no qualms about eating bacon sandwiches.

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EDITORIAL

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A Parent’s Cry for Help

Our oldest son informed us that he was dating a Christian girl. At the start, we reluctantly accepted the relationship, expecting that it would not last. After all, how could it? He attended Jewish day school through eighth grade, and continued his Jewish studies through high school. We were active in our synagogue, kept kosher and observed the Shabbat and holidays.

What we didn’t appreciate was that his girlfriend was an active member in a Christian campus missionary group. The relationship did not end, rather it intensified. Our son accompanied his girlfriend to Christian social events and bible studies. He was becoming a believer.

“We discovered our son’s deepening Christian involvement by accident”

We discovered our son’s deepening Christian involvement by accident, when it came out during a family visit. We were angry, confused and saddened. We felt shame and guilt, asking ourselves what we had done wrong as parents.

We couldn’t understand, and we did not want to accept, that our Jewish son was on the road to becoming a Christian.

There is a modern liberal dictum that parents must accept the choices of their children as they become adults, even if those choices conflict with the parents’ own values and desires. But we could not accept the pain his conversion would bring us. How could we allow our son to make a decision that would affect the rest of his life when he didn’t seem to be thinking clearly?

We needed to intervene – but we didn’t know what to do. We confided in a few close friends and Jewish professionals, but they could not offer the help we sought.

An internet search brought us to the Jews for Judaism website. We were moved by stories on the website that struck a chord as they described parents and young adults in circumstances comparable to ours. So we called Rabbi Bentzion Kravitz.

Immediately, he responded with sympathy, compassion, and a plan of action. He listened to our story. Then he became involved – intensely involved.

First, Rabbi Kravitz helped us to calm down and to focus on restoring our relationship with our son. He offered validation that we could love our son, even as we acted to oppose a choice we felt was not right for him. He offered the support we had been searching for, at a time when we needed it most.

We asked our son to allow Rabbi Kravitz to speak to him, and eventually our son agreed.

They began to converse regularly on Skype, sometimes for hours at a time. Rabbi Kravitz was persistent and patient with our son. When our son and his girlfriend visited her parents in LA for Christmas, Rabbi Kravitz hosted them for a Shabbat meal and showed them the warmth and spirituality of Judaism.

“Rabbi Kravitz was always there for us with his characteristic patience and humor”

Rabbi Kravitz was always there for us with his characteristic patience and humor, celebrating even modest victories and sustaining his message of hope.

Several months went by. Our son had scheduled a date for his conversion – Easter, which coincided with the start of Passover. Two days before Passover he texted us that he would be joining us for the Seders. This meant he would not be converting that weekend. He also ended his relationship with

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Gala Enlightens and Inspires

More than 250 friends and supporters filled the room at Jews for Judaism's annual Gala.

The evening was launched with a cocktail reception where guests had a chance to mingle and bid in the silent auction. Highlights from the evening included the award presentations and inspiring talks.

While attendees enjoyed a magnificent dinner they were entertained by our Master of Ceremonies, screenwriter David N. Weiss. David's hilarious monologue turned serious when he acknowledged Jews for Judaism's role in helping him rediscover his Jewish identity after converting to Christianity.

Two awards were presented during the event to recognize and honor special individuals.

Jennie Lewkowicz and Dr. Emanuel Gottlieb received Jews for Judaism's Community Leadership Award for their exemplary philanthropic and volunteer activities. Their vision enabled Jews for Judaism to implement its innovative Smart Choices Project and keep Jews Jewish.

Marisa Belinfante was recognized with the Chai Society Award, for her dedication to Jews for Judaism's Young Professionals and SMARTalks initiative.

A feature of the evening was a poignant talk given by the mother and father of a college student. They were devastated when they discovered that their son was planning on converting to Christianity. You can read their story, "A Parent's Cry for Help," in this newsletter on page 2. ■



Rabbi Bentzion Kravitz presents the Jews for Judaism Leadership Award to Gala honorees Jennie Lewkowicz and Dr. Emanuel Gottlieb.



More than 250 friends and supporters enjoy the spectacular Jews for Judaism Gala



Friends, supporters and Young Professional enjoy the Gala.



Master of Ceremonies screenwriter, David N. Weiss.



Rabbi Zalman Kravitz presents the Chai Society Award to Marisa Belinfante

A Parent's Cry for Help

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his girlfriend. We did not know what lay ahead, but we hoped the worst was behind us.

For a year or so he was somewhat in limbo – not knowing where he was religiously- but our relationship grew stronger than it had ever been. We spent hours with him on the phone as he began to accept our support and advice, during his move to a new city to start a career. He slowly and tentatively began to explore the Jewish community in his new city.

After much encouragement, our son decided to go on a Birthright Israel trip this past summer. Imagine our joy when he called from Israel to tell us that when his group – a non-religious group – had no plans for Shabbat morning services in Jerusalem, he took it upon himself to seek out a place to daven near the hotel and organize a group of friends to go with him.

Since the Birthright trip, he has made more effort to explore his Judaism, and has begun to realize that he needs a fresh start.

It has now been over three years since that fateful family visit. Today, we look back and our experience seems unreal. We cannot believe this happened in our family. But we also realize this can happen to any family, regardless of how much we try to raise our children in a Jewish home, provide a Jewish education, set an example of living a Jewish life and instill a love of Judaism in our children.

As much as we try, we cannot fully protect and shelter our children from the influences of the outside world. Nonetheless, we have learned, with the help of Rabbi Kravitz, to have faith in the strength of our family and in our commitment to living a Jewish life.

We are strong supporters of Jews for Judaism, and we urge everyone who hears our story to support them as well. We found no other organization that could offer the help and experience that Jews for Judaism provided in our time of need.

We will never forget how he helped us, and our son, in our hour of need. ■

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framework, thereby demonstrating how our tradition is relevant to today's internet savvy generation.

Broad community sponsorship was received from the Jewish Community Foundation, USC Hillel and Chabad, and the USC Casden Institute, in partnership with 10 other organizations. The feedback we received from the participants was invaluable; we now understand the specific needs of Millennials and that they desire to have conversations within a cohesive community.



USC Hillel director Bailey London.

#SMARTalks has evolved into a conversational space for Millennials to overcome life's challenges. Relevant discussions will be hosted on the most prevalent social media platforms, and will be supplemented with live events.

A Missionary's Journey to Judaism

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In fact, they believed like other Christians that the biblical commandments were obsolete and instead were actually a stumbling block to serving God. Jews for Jesus also failed to answer my numerous questions.

Deep down I knew I had taken the wrong path. The calling to Judaism continued, and I went to live in Israel, to work for a Christian organization in the Old City of Jerusalem. I wanted to be close to the Jewish people and their heritage.

The doubts that began at Rabbi Kravitz's presentation were nagging me relentlessly. I had no peace. I divorced my husband and felt free to make my own choice about my faith. The 16 years of confusion had to end. I told God I needed the truth. Was Jesus the Messiah or not?

I knew exactly where to go; the Jews for Judaism website. The evidence on their YouTube videos and articles was



Students captivated by the presenters.

Through this approach, we will create a cohesive community which will sponsor and champion purposeful conversations to strengthen Jewish confidence, develop young leaders, and ultimately, engage the unengaged.

#SMARTalks will effectively address Millennials' most critical questions and assist in finding the answers that they seek, as seen through a Jewish lens. In this context, Judaism can become an established part of their lives.

To drive and shape the program as it evolves, and ensure the program's success, Millennials will work with us and become an integral part of #SMARTalks. It is our aspiration to transform what began as a series of thought-provoking events into a passionate Jewish movement. ■

overwhelming. As my world crumbled, I finally realized I had discovered the truth; I could no longer be a Christian.

I decided to convert to Judaism and completed the intensive conversion process with the South African Beit Din at age 35. I am now married to an orthodox Jewish man and we both cherish our relationship with Judaism and God.

I am eternally grateful to Rabbi Kravitz and Jews for Judaism, without whom I never would have received God's greatest gift to humanity, the Torah. Without Jews for Judaism I would still be a missionary and many Jews would have been converted through my efforts.

I have come full circle and I now live in Los Angeles with my husband, where I am already helping Jews for Judaism in their important work. Thank you for supporting Jews for Judaism so they could be there for me and many other people. ■