

Sweet Home Alabama by Ronna Cohen

What would it look like if a Messianic congregation was positioned under an open heaven? Maybe it would look something like Beth Hallel in Birmingham, Alabama, where a true sense of camaraderie prevails in this tightly knit body. The people in this fellowship make it unique. Through the power of the *Ruach* moving through them, they are blessed with anointed praise and worship, God-breathed teaching, a yearning for the power of the Holy Spirit, and a manifestation of the Lord's provision. The worst grievance they could imagine would be to have newcomers visit and not feel welcome. This issue is so important that some 20 families volunteer their time in one of the most valued teams at Beth Hallel: the greeters.

This four-year-old congregation is made up of 400 members. This is a remarkable figure, considering Birmingham is a city with only 5,000 Jews. Featured on the local ABC two-part television news special, "Matters of Faith," Beth Hallel was named "the fastest growing congregation of its kind, not just in Alabama, but in the entire nation." Incredibly, they've added 100 new congregants each year they've been in existence.

Beth Hallel owns five buildings on 55 acres, 45,000 square feet of facilities they purchased for one tenth of its value. The sanctuary sits on the side of a mountain across the highway from the city's Jewish community. The property includes pavilions, picnic tables, a prayer walk and creek, with running water, as well as a mock "wailing wall," where people put their prayer requests prior to them being taken to Israel.

When purchased by the congregation, the building came fully equipped and furnished with everything needed for ministry—pens, pencils, copier, telephones, easels, furniture, lighting, five sound systems, a baby grand piano, drums, guitars, and flags. Practical items, such as lawn mowers, lawn edgers, soap, canned goods, sugar, chalk and hundreds of trash cans were also provided.

Inspired by Yeshua's exhortation "if you love me, then feed my sheep," their vision is to reach the House of Israel in Birmingham. Messianic Rabbi Eric Walker insists you have to know what will satisfy their physical and spiritual hunger. At Beth Hallel, this has taken a multi-faceted approach that

includes a four-service menu each week.

On Tuesday, there's a lunchtime "Prophecy in the News" class, which offers a free meal for eager listeners who, like the men of Issachar, long to understand the times in which we live. Tuesday night, there's a provocative Jewish Roots and heritage teaching, where the writings of Rav Shaul are expounded, as well as controversial issues that have been brewing in Jewish and Christian circles over the past 2,000 years.

Friday night, the Holy Spirit explodes onto the scene in Shabbat praise and worship. Three hundred people come back week after week because they've had an encounter with the Lord. The altars are full during the music portion of the services, where Eric preaches genuine worship.

Early Saturday morning, Eric disciples a group of ten men. His hard-hitting approach is creating leaders who cling to God's Word, while cultivating very real relationships with Him. Later, the congregation gathers for expository Torah teachings. They spent 19 months working their way through the book of Genesis, and one year in both Exodus and Leviticus. Because of Eric's commitment to "protect the Word," the Lord has poured out unfathomable blessings upon this exemplary Acts 2 model of believers. For example, a healing service is held quarterly, where the Great Physician shows up. People have been given new knees, bones have grown, and cancer and Parkinson's disease have disappeared. This is one of the places where God manifests His glory in the supernatural realm.

Obviously, God has given Beth Hallel tremendous favor since the very first service in February 2007, attended by 150 newcomers. They conduct very strategic local outreaches that include an annual city-wide Passover seder, music performed by Paul Wilbur, a Hanukkah party that's the talk of the town because of its festive atmosphere, and a Jewish music festival utilizing Jewish members of the Alabama symphony.

Their website hosts audio recordings of most of the sermons. In fact, everything that goes on at Beth Hallel is recorded for accountability purposes. Eric is excited about what is happening. "I have no seminary training, only congregational experience and general education," he admits. "I rely completely on the Lord to put the words in my mouth each week." There's a hint of the

"radical" in Eric. "I'm not smart enough to not believe all of what it says in the Book. I believe it all and I'm not even afraid to touch a dead body. Bring me a dead body and let's see God raise it back to life!"

A Jewish businessman with almost 40 years of corporate background, Eric, 59, came to the Lord at the age of 42, and immediately entered the Messianic world. He spent many years in discipleship under Messianic Rabbi Robert Solomon in Atlanta. After finishing IAMCS Yeshiva training in 2006, Robert called him into his office and asked "What do you know about Birmingham, Alabama?" Having never been there, Eric replied "all I know is that it's called the Pittsburgh of the South." "That's good enough," Robert quipped. "I want you to plant a congregation there."

Sensing the Lord was calling Eric and wife Lora to downsize, they sold their home and moved to Birmingham. It was a sacrifice for Lora, who was from a family who had been in Atlanta for six generations. Though she was raised as a Baptist, Lora was called to Messianic Judaism when she married Eric. Today, Lora ministers full time side by side with him. A gifted teacher and administrator, she also heads the sisterhood, as well as the discipleship programs. Lora imparts the heart and the softer side to the overall tone of the congregation.

What's going on at Beth Hallel is completely Biblical, fashioned after the life of Yeshua and the first believers. There are no hints of legalism, religiosity or elitism. Eric stands firm that everything is available to everyone and at Beth Hallel he shares this truth in an end time prophetic dimension. His office is in a courtyard outside the main sanctuary of their building, which always reminds of him of the courtyard by the holy place in the ancient Temple.

The congregation also houses a coffee shop called Holy Grounds that is open all day long. With coffee and free Wi-Fi, it is replacing the local Starbucks as neighborhood hangout, strategically placed right outside the perpetually open doors of the 600-seat sanctuary. "What a marvelous tangible reminder of the wondrous atonement that always allows us to be in God's presence!" This is what Beth Hallel is bringing to Birmingham, and the Lord is affirming their efforts with signs and wonders. **MT**



Above: Rabbi Eric Walker carries the Torah
Below: Worship at Congregation Beth Hallel

