He was from an Orthodox Jewish background, she was Reform. But both were searching for a real relationship with God. They found it, and then they found each other. Here are the stories of Stewart and Shoshannah Weinisch . . .
The Name I Couldn’t Mention by Stewart Weinsch

I was only five years old and had no idea what was going on as our family crowded into my grandparents’ living room on the day before Yom Kippur. I can still remember how my father picked up a chicken, tied up by its feet, and swung it over our heads, the chicken cackling and feathers flying all over the place. It was hard to think of anything but the noise and the feathers, but we all dutifully chanted three times, “This be my substitute, my vicarious offering, my atonement. This hen shall meet death, but I shall find a long and pleasant life of peace.”

My father took the chicken into the kitchen, and the next sounds we heard were “cackle—thud—uggh!” That was it.* The ritual slaughter of a chicken as a symbolic form of redemption before Yom Kippur is called shiluach kanapin.

After a year of reading the Scriptures, I decided to break my childhood vow and visit a church. The pastor spoke about how Abraham was the “father” of Jews and Christians, specifically the father of all those who believe in Y’shua (Jesus). I thought about this “faith” and realized in my heart this was something I didn’t have.

Soon after, I looked at the New Testament for the first time. My friend (the one I threw out of my house) had given me a little green New Testament. I wrapped it in some old dirty socks and pushed it to the back of my drawer. Now I retrieved it. Upon reading the very first verse, “A record of the genealogy of Y’shua the Messiah (Jesus the Christ), the son of David, the son of Abraham . . .” I somehow knew that if the Jewish people were going to have a Messiah, it had to be Jesus! Not long after that, I asked Y’shua to come into my heart.

At first I didn’t tell anybody. I thought, I must be the only Jew on earth who believes this. Then I remembered that everyone now and then, one of the Jews for Jesus had given me pamphlets in Manhattan. I had a pile of them that I never read, stored up next to that Bible, and for some strange reason, every time I got another one, I kept it there. There were other Jewish people who believed that Jesus is the Messiah!

Within a week or so, I told my only remaining grandparent, my mother’s mother, what I had come to believe. I had never heard my grandmother scream before, but she yelled so loud that she almost popped a vein in her neck as she said, “Never say that name in my presence again!” She must have told my parents, because when I came home from my grandmother’s, my father had a similar reaction. My parents forbade me to tell anyone else in the family what I believed. When my father calmed down, he said, “What is this, something new?” I said, “No, it’s about two thousand years old.” That really set him off once again.

Some years later, I told my mother that Jesus was like the Passover lamb, sacrificed for our sins. She shocked me when she replied, “You know, when I was in junior high school, my best friend told me the same thing.” I was amazed that someone had told her this 40 years earlier and she still remembered it!

Before long, two things became clear to me: First, I realized it was an all-or-nothing deal—I had to live my life for God—and, secondly, I was going to bring the message of Jesus as Messiah to my people. A friend told me that Jews for Jesus had a Bible study in Manhattan, and I began to attend. Then after a year or two I decided to go to Bible school.

After graduation I began telling other Jews about the Messiah. One day I was handing out tracts on the corner in front of Bloomingdale’s. Jews for Jesus had sent a team to the same location. A young woman approached me and asked if I would be willing to move to another corner because I was in her “appointed” area. I offered some words of encouragement and gave her my business card. That was our beginning—but I’ll let my wife, Shoshannah, tell the rest of that story.

*The ritual slaughter of a chicken as a symbolic form of redemption before Yom Kippur is called shiluach kanapin.
Jesus was Very Cool! by Shoshannah Weinisch

As my husband, Stewart, says, we met while I was on staff with Jews for Jesus in the summer of 1984 in New York City. We were both handing out pamphlets—Stewart with another organization called Chosen People—in front of Bloomingdale’s on 59th Street in New York City. From that moment I thought, “He is perfect for me.” You see, I had determined to marry a Jewish man who shared my belief in Yeshua. From such a small marriage pool, God heard my prayer!

A few years later I was living in New Jersey. Although I was not at that time working with Jews for Jesus, I wanted to hand out pamphlets in New York City. My congregation leader suggested I call Stewart; as he was looking for volunteers to do just that. After our first outing, I wasn’t sure whether I was more interested in handing out pamphlets or in Stewart! Nonetheless, we continued hitting the streets each Saturday. Finally, after one of our outings, Stewart invited me to dinner and a movie. On that first date Stewart said, “If you can see yourself married to me one day, we can continue to date. If not, this is our last date.” It took me a moment to process what Stewart had just said. Then I admitted I could surely see us together in marriage. We were engaged within a few months. In 1986, we were married in Summit, New Jersey.

From the beginning, Stewart and I had foundational things in common. We shared a faith in the Jewish Messiah. We both came from Jewish homes with no intermarriage. And we both had a deep love for our Jewish heritage that included a desire to raise children in a Jewish lifestyle that reflected our faith. But let me go back now and tell you how a woman raised in a Jewish home came to be telling other Jewish people about Jesus.

I was born in 1953 in Detroit, Michigan. My parents, Jerry Tillerman and Lois Fazen Tillerman, were both Jews of European background. Their families immigrated to the United States through Canada in the 1940s. I have three siblings. Debra is the oldest, born in 1951. I followed in 1953, then Mark in 1958 through Canada in the 1940s. I have three siblings. Debra is the oldest, born in 1951. I followed in 1953, then Mark in 1958, then Michael was born in 1960.

For most of my childhood our family lived in Grand Rapids, Michigan. My great-grandfather, Morris Singer, was an Orthodox Jew from Russia. He was my mother’s grandfather. I spent all of my summers in Detroit with Grandpa Singer and his widowed daughter, Rose Joffee. Aunt Rose was like a mother to me. I observed my grandpa wrap tefillin and pray each morning, chanting in Hebrew and davening. I would sit quietly across the room in a rocking chair and “daven” in time with him. All I knew was that Grandpa was talking to God like my grandpa did, so I imitated him. I didn’t understand any of it. I just believed God was real.

By her 24th birthday, my mother had four children and wasn’t equipped to raise them. Mom did not have parenting skills and did not have the support of her family or community. My dad, Jerry, was a master plumber. He worked out of town a lot, leaving my mother alone with four young undisciplined kids. We attended a Reform temple, and three of us four kids went to Jewish education classes each Sunday morning. We attended synagogue regularly until I was confirmed at age thirteen.

Then, our family fell apart. My mom left home to make a new life for herself. She was worn out and felt she was a failure as a mother. She just didn’t know how to relate to her own children. When Dad was home, he yelled and screamed at mom and at us. Mom just couldn’t take the stress anymore and she left us when I was in third grade. So now it was dad and four unruly children. Dad continued to work long hours and the four of us were left to care for ourselves. He would leave us money to walk to the grocery store for food. The next five years we moved at least five times, and Dad had a series of girlfriends. Our Jewish education came to an abrupt end, as did our family life. My sister Deb and I were in survival mode. We were charged with cooking, cleaning and caring for our two younger brothers. Mom would visit us once a week for about an hour at the house when Dad wasn’t there.

Those five years were tumultuous. Dad had a terrible temper; he was angry and took it out on us. He kept dating women in the hope of finding a replacement “mom” for us, but each relationship ended badly. I am not sure how many times Dad got married. But a few of his wives left, quite an impression.

There were terrible years filled with fear and a sense of belonging to anyone. Three of the four of us eventually moved out of our dad’s house to live with our mom and her new husband in south Florida. As long as we said low and didn’t make too much noise, we had a roof over our heads and clothes to wear. Through all of this I always prayed to God. I would mostly just cry in my bed and ask him questions. I didn’t understand how to live in my circumstances. In high school I started using all kinds of drugs. I managed to graduate in 1972. Then I got in a car with a friend and drove across the country and landed in San Francisco.

For the next eight years I wandered through various jobs, relationships and some college courses. But I was on a spiritual quest. I wanted to know the God my grandpa Singer prayed to. I started going to a Conservative temple, but found it unfulfilling. Then I started reading eastern philosophy and religion. I would go to bookstores, sit in the section where spiritual books were shelved and read anything that grabbed my attention.

One day, I picked up two books someone had left in my apartment, a Bhagavad Gita (Hindu Book of Knowledge) and a Bible that included a New Testament. I lost interest in the Bhagavad Gita but kept reading the Bible. Eventually I found myself in the New Testament. I really thought Jesus was very cool.

Eventually I prayed and asked God to give me a sign if Jesus was the one I had been searching for. The next day a neighbor gave me a book to read. The Late Great Planet Earth I read that in a day. Soon after that, my landlord talked with me about Jesus. She had never done that before. Within 24 hours of that conversation, a customer at the restaurant where I waitressed was in a conversation with the people at her table about Jesus. I was soavastipated. She noticed and asked me if I was a Christian, I told her I was Jewish, and she asked me if I had ever heard of Jews for Jesus. It was at that moment I remembered seeing Jews for Jesus posters off of a telephone pole years before. I had told my friend these people were liars, that you can’t be Jewish and believe in Jesus. But I gave this woman my phone number and a woman named Martha from Jews for Jesus called me.

I began meeting with Martha weekly. My biggest dilemma was reconciling the idea that my wonderful Grandpa Singer was in hell. But over a few visits we settled it.” And I knew I had to accept Jesus as my Messiah. I did so on May 20, 1980.

My life drastically changed. I began to attend weekly Bible studies at Jesus for Jesus. One of the staff also met with me weekly one on one to teach me the Bible. Then a married couple in the congregation I started attending invited me to live in their house as a part of their family. It was a process, but I stopped using drugs and God did a lot of healing in my life and heart. Within a year, Jews for Jesus offered me a scholarship to attend a Bible college on the East Coast, and I never looked back.

Stewart and I have been married more than a quarter of a century now. We had a honeymoon (continued on page 8).
Stewart and Susan Weinisch encountered a number of obstacles on their way to believing in Yshua (Jesus). Here are some of the ideas they had to confront:

"Christians hate Jews."

This is what Stewart's father told him, and many people do point to "Christian anti-Semitism" as a reason to dismiss Jesus. When our people start wondering whether Jesus might be the Messiah, thoughts of the Crusades and the Holocaust quickly rush to mind, setting off a warning signal—Jews who believe in Jesus join the same league as those who hate our people.

Many people have used the name of Jesus as a justification for their anti-Semitic crimes. But Jesus never taught hatred of Jewish people. Jesus and his teachings have no connection to crimes committed in his name. How can we blame Jesus for those who claim to follow his teachings but do not? If (as some have done) we blame all believers in Jesus for killing people they never knew, we become guilty of the same thing our persecutors do when they wrongly blame all Jews for the corruption of the name Y'shua (Jesus' Hebrew name). In "Yeshu is cursed." Many people have used the name of Jesus as a corruption of the name Y'shua (Jesus' Hebrew name). In medieval Judaism, Jesus was portrayed as a deceiver, even a sorcerer, and when Jesus was mentioned, his real name was never used. A letter was knocked off to form a Hebrew acronym for the remaining letters: "Ym'nach Shero Vke-zikro", which means, "May his name and memory be blotted out."

Yet if Jesus was not a deceiver, but the Messiah of Israel as he claimed, then his name, which means "the LORD saves," should not only be remembered, it should be honored.

"The New Testament is cursed; I should never read it."

Rabbi Isaac Lichtenstein (1824-1909) shunned the New Testament for years. He describes his experience when he finally dared to read it:

I had thought the New Testament to be impure, a source of pride, of overweening selfishness, of hatred, of the worst kind of violence, but as I opened it, I felt myself peculiarly and wonderfully taken possession of. A sudden glory, a light, flashed through my soul. I looked for thorns and gathered roses; I discovered pearls instead of pebbles; instead of hatred, love; instead of vengeance, forgiveness; instead of bondage, freedom; instead of pride, humility; instead of enmity, conciliation; instead of death, life, salvation, resurrection, heavenly treasure.  

The New Testament narratives of Jesus' life (the Gospels) are centered in the land of Israel. The writers, with the possible exception of Luke, were all Jews. The early followers of Jesus were also Jewish. In the New Testament, there is one primary literary treasure that is invested with supreme authority: the Hebrew Scriptures. The initial New Testament proclamations are laced with passages from Moses and the prophets, indicating that what is taking place is the fulfillment of the Jewish hope.

"No other Jews believe in Jesus."

This publication, ISSUES, has been sent to the homes of tens of thousands of Jews who believe in Jesus. While most Jews do not believe in Jesus, a significant minority does. Jewish scholar Dr. Michael Brown, a Ph.D. in Near Eastern languages and literature from New York University, writes:

All of Jesus' original followers were Jews, and within a few years after his death and resurrection, thousands of Jews believed in him. . . . Since then, in every generation there has been a faithful remnant of Jews who have followed Jesus the Messiah, numbering from the thousands into the tens of thousands, and they have maintained their faith in spite of often difficult circumstances.  

"You can't be Jewish and believe in Jesus."

It all depends on how you define a Jew. If a Jew is a person who belongs to the descendants of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, with whom he made covenants through Abraham, Moses and David, then Jews who follow Jesus qualify. Some rabbis might say that such a belief is misguided or voring. But if one can be an atheist and be a Jew, why is being Jewish and believing in Jesus such a stretch?  

Michael Brown adds: "The fact is . . . that belief in the real Jesus (i.e., the Yeshua of the Bible and not the one of later, man-made tradition) and true Jewishness (which does not always equate with traditional Jewishness) are compatible, and when a Jew embraces Yeshua the Messiah, he becomes more Jewish than ever before."

"If Jesus is the only way to heaven, then my relatives are in hell."

Brown, responding to a question from someone concerned about the eternal destiny of their Jewish grandmother, said this:

These are not questions to be answered lightly, as if heaven and hell were figures of speech. And, to be perfectly frank, we're not just talking about your grandmother; we're talking about my grandmother too. Still, the bottom line is this: While I don't know your grandmother and I am certainly not her judge, I do know that countless millions of Jews and Gentiles have lived lives that have displeased God (and this includes at least some of our grandparents) . . . Would I be fair to you if I failed to warn you in advance . . . God is both a compassionate and righteous Judge, there are consequences to breaking his commandments, his standards are high, and if we reject his ordained means of atonement, we are in trouble.  

As Brown notes, God is the final judge. The gospel—that Y'shua came, died for our sins, and rose from the dead—is good news and offers hope to those who repent and turn to him.  

"God will judge me if I enter a church."

Since the first believers in Yshua were all Jews, the first Christian congregation (or "church") was an all-Jewish assembly. Rather than God judging this group of Jesus-believing Jews, the New Testament records that God greatly blessed them: "Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts. They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts, praising God and enjoying the favor of all the people. And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved (Acts 2:44-47)."

The word "church" in the New Testament refers to the body of believers in Jesus rather than to an edifice. Yshua said, "God is spirit, and his worshipers must worship in spirit and in truth" (John 4:24). Worship is a matter of the heart, not what kind of building we meet in.

"My family won't understand."

They probably won't. Many Jews have risked alienation from family and friends to follow Jesus. Moishe Rosen, the founder of Jews for Jesus, tells this story:

I then came to the tenth chapter of Matthew, and was startled when Jesus said, "He who loves father and mother more than me is not worthy of me . . . and he who will not take up the cross is not worthy of me" (verses 37, 38). At that point, I sat the Bible down, and decided, "This is not for me. I don't want to go any further." I knew that I would be headed for a family crisis if I were to allow myself to believe.

Years later my Jewish wife was persuaded of the gospel, and I began rereading the New Testament to show her how silly it was. But in fact, it wasn't silly, and I couldn't fault it. When at last I did realize that I believed . . . it was simply that despite my intention to disbelieve, I'd been drawn to Jesus, and I could no longer deny that he was true.

However, there are others like Steve Wertheim, who, not long after coming to faith in Jesus, saw his father, a Holocaust survivor, come to believe. His mother soon followed because she too could no longer deny what she knew to be true.  

3. Ibid., p. 5.  
4. Ibid., p. 28.  
5. You can read Steve Wertheim's story online at http://www.jewsforjesus.org/publications/issues/16_01/generation.
baby in May 1987, nine months and four days after our wedding—Melissa Ruth. I remember counting her fingers and toes and thanking God for giving us a healthy baby. We lived in the Bronx at that time. Soon after, Stewart was asked to lead a Messianic congregation in Connecticut. Each Friday afternoon we would pack up our sweet Melissa and drive to Connecticut for Shabbat services. I taught the children and led the music while Stewart led the Shabbat service. The congregation began to grow. Soon we moved to Connecticut and our congregation, Joy of Israel, solidified. In 1989 Jonathan Samuel was born in Bridgeport, Connecticut. Our second child was healthy and perfect too! I won’t try to recount all my life since then, but our two great kids are grown up now and living independently (maybe they can tell their story one day too), while Stewart and I continue to tell other Jewish people about Y’shua.

I think if I had not come to believe in Jesus I most likely would not be alive today. But I have found in him a very abundant life!