News



Rabbi Loren Jacobs, left, of Congregation Shema Yisrael, says a prayer during a rally in Michigan with Vice President Mike Pence, on Oct. 29, 2018. (RNS/Detroit News/AP/David Guralnick)

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November 1, 2018

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Jewish groups are speaking out against Vice President Mike Pence's appearance at a rally Oct. 29 in Michigan with Loren Jacobs, a defrocked clergyman in the Messianic Jewish movement.

The Jewish groups argued that allowing the rabbi, whom they don't recognize as Jewish, to offer a prayer for victims of the Pittsburgh synagogue shooting sowed religious division at a time when Americans should be standing with Jews.

Some Messianic Jews may be culturally or ethnically Jewish but, like Christians, they worship Jesus as the Messiah.

A statement from the Rabbinical Assembly, a Conservative Jewish group and one of several to object, declared that "so-called 'Messianic Judaism' is not a Jewish movement, and the phrase 'Jews for Jesus' is a contradiction in terms, insofar as Judaism does not recognize Jesus of Nazareth as the Messiah."

The statement called the elevation of Jacobs at the rally "regrettable," saying it "divided and confused at a time when we must be sensitive to the Jewish community and its hurt at the rise of antisemitism."

The criticism increased after NBC News reported that Jacobs had been stripped of his ordination by the Union of Messianic Jewish Congregations in 2003 after a judicial board found him guilty of libel.

Jacobs, who is listed as a rabbi at Congregation Shema Yisrael in Bloomfield Hills, a suburb of Detroit, prayed twice at a Republican event Oct. 29.

"God of Abraham, God of Isaac, God of Jacob, God and father of my lord and savior Yeshua, Jesus the Messiah, and my God and father too," Jacobs said in his opening prayer to the crowd in Michigan. He went on to quote Matthew 12 — a book in the Christian Bible that does not appear in the Jewish Torah — and closed by praying for "victory" for four candidates running in the state, all Republicans.

Pence, whose office stated it was Republican congressional candidate Lena Epstein who invited Jacobs, later called the faith leader back up on stage, referring to him as a "leader in the Jewish community here in Michigan" and asking him to deliver a

prayer for those killed during the mass shooting at the Tree of Life Synagogue in Pittsburgh on Saturday.

Jacobs again invoked Scripture from the Christian Bible — Matthew 5:4, "Blessed are those who mourn" — while calling on God to bless those mourning the fallen. He said he was praying "in the name of Jesus."

Epstein, who attends a Conservative synagogue and is one of the candidates Jacobs prayed for, acknowledged Monday evening on Twitter that she had invited him to deliver the invocation at the event. She defended the decision, saying she requested Jacobs because "we must unite as a nation — while embracing our religious differences — in the aftermath of Pennsylvania" and said "any media or political competitor who is attacking me or the Vice President is guilty of nothing short of religious intolerance."

Rabbi Elyse Wechterman, executive director of the Reconstructionist Rabbinical Association, who attended a funeral for one of the shooting victims in Pittsburgh, called Jacobs' appearance "a slap in the face."

Wechterman noted that there are numerous rabbis in the Detroit area whom organizers could have asked to offer a prayer.

Rabbi Marla Hornsten, past president of the Michigan Board of Rabbis, told NBC that "even to call [Jacobs] a rabbi is offensive."

Monique Brumbach, executive director of the Union of Messianic Jewish Congregations, confirmed to RNS that Jacobs was stripped of his ordination, but she said in a separate email that the invitation for him to pray was "a generous gesture of tolerance and Jewish unity during this time of shock and grief."

She also said it was "disheartening" to be "shunned" by "our Jewish brothers and sisters" in the aftermath of the shooting, explaining that a UMJC congregation was attacked by an anti-Semite in 1997 and that "people who hate Jews don't care whether some of us believe in Jesus."

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John Fischer, president of the UMJC and rabbi at a Messianic community in Clearwater, Fla., said he knew Jacobs but hadn't interacted much with him since he was stripped of his ordination and did not know if Jacobs held rabbinical status with another Messianic group.

As for tensions between Messianic Jews and other religious communities, Fischer said those are long-standing — including during the movement's modern emergence in the 1960s and 1970s.

"We've had pushback from the beginning," he said, adding he was involved in the movement's modern founding. "We realize there are people in the Jewish community who do not consider us to be part of the Jewish community. [But] we are hopeful because we have made some inroads in having relationships with the larger parts of the Jewish community."

Fischer said that members of his community come from different religious groups and that his own relatives were Jews in Europe who survived the Holocaust and fled to the United States. His community observes the Sabbath on Saturday instead of Sunday, as most Christians do, and many attendees observe kosher dietary habits. He also said his community expressed solidarity with the victims of the shooting during worship over the weekend.

"Were not a halfway house between Judaism and Christianity — we are a synagogue, we are Jews," he insisted.

Indeed, a small section of the U.S. Jewish population appears sympathetic to his argument: A 2013 survey of Jewish Americans by Pew Research Center found that 34 percent of Jews believed that someone could believe Jesus is the Messiah and still be Jewish (60 percent said the opposite).

However, Wechterman argued that regardless of such claims, Jacobs simply does not represent mainstream Judaism practiced at Pittsburgh's Tree of Life synagogue.

"There are lots of different ways to measure someone's status in the community," she said. "However, a basic tenet of Jewish faith, no matter what stream you come from, is that it does not accept that Jesus is the Messiah. Period. The end."

She said later: "I'm not interested in debating one's personal Jewish-ness, [but] I am interested in saying this person is not representative of normative Judaism at this

point in time and history. And frankly, I'm much more concerned with the healing of the communities that have been directly impacted [by the shooting], and … what we can do to limit people's access to firearms — that, to me, is much more important conversation."

Religion News Service reached out to Congregation Shema Yisrael to speak with Jacobs but was told he was declining all interviews at this time.