

COURTESY



Sally Howard, seen here with her husband, John, at the entrance to Shiloh, says their choice to invest in Israel is biblically motivated

Holy investment

Christian Zionists find another way to connect with Israel: innovation **By Maayan Hoffman**

DOES THE Bible instruct its followers to invest in Israel?

According to David Parsons, vice president of the International Christian Embassy in Jerusalem, “Investing in Israel is biblical.”

As such, this year, ICEJ engaged the OurCrowd equity crowdfunding platform to sponsor and present at its annual Feast of Tabernacles conference, which brings some

6,000 evangelical Christians from around the world to Israel. At the Sukkot event, both OurCrowd CEO, Jon Medved, and the organization’s partner and executive vice president of investor relations, Alan Weisleder, spoke to participants.

“They are very entrusted in our Bible for obvious reasons,” Medved told *The Jerusalem Report*, noting that when these

Christians look at Israeli innovation, “they see the fulfillment of prophecy.

“They see and believe the parts of Genesis that talk about how the world is being blessed through the Jews. When you see people get out of wheelchairs and walk, or people with Parkinson’s having their tremors stopped by an Israeli ultrasound, when you see the miracles that Israel is doing with

water technology – this is God’s will being manifested in the world,” he said. “If you are trying to find God’s blessing in what Israel is doing, you don’t have to look further than tech.”

Still, Medved said he did not expect mass investment from festival participants.

OurCrowd investors must be accredited, meaning they must satisfy one of the requirements regarding income, net worth, asset size, governance status or professional experience to be a part of the fund. Only about 60 people attended Weisleder’s “Introduction to Investment in Israel” breakout session.

Parsons said about 60 percent of Feast attendees are from Latin America, Asia and Africa and “they had to sell a lot of fish and bananas to fly here. Those folks would not qualify as certified OurCrowd investors, but they are very anxious and hungry for Israeli technology, and they want to hear about it.”

Parsons said he believes there is a place for a venture capital firm built around micro-funding of Israeli innovation from the “700 million evangelical Christians in the world that have a clear understanding that those who bless Israel will be blessed.”

Sally Howard is a biblically motivated Christian investor. She began investing in Israeli technology through OurCrowd in 2015, after learning about the crowdfunding platform during a visit with ICEJ.

“It says that Israel will bless all the families on the earth, and innovation is their way,” she told The Report.

Howard said she has been teaching the Bible for 35 years and that she loves Israel and the Jews and has always been charitable. When she learned that she could invest in the kinds of Israeli companies that are making an impact on the world – such as CropX irrigation system, which saves water and energy and boosts crop yield, or El Minda, which has made brain healthcare more intelligent, data-driven and available to everyone – she jumped at

the opportunity.

“The innovation is incredible,” Howard said, noting that her portfolio is doing well, though that is only part of her goal. “If I make a mint, that’s fabulous. If I don’t make a dime, I still helped Israel.”

Smart to invest in the Start-up Nation

Not all people are as philanthropic in their investments as Howard, however, Medved said. In fact, most individuals who choose to invest in Israel do it “because it’s smart.”

Israeli start-ups raised a record \$5.24 billion in 2017, up 9 percent from \$4.83 billion in 2016, according to the latest IVC-ZAG analysis of Israel. Medved said the amount raised by Israeli hi-tech companies has been growing since 2013, when the average financing round was \$3.6 million. In 2017 it was \$8.5 million, and Weisleder said, “2018 is going to be a record year.”

Weisleder said that he chose not to address the “blessing Israel line” from Genesis during his talk, but rather to focus on the fact that “there is excellent technology coming out of Israel and excellent investment opportunities in Israeli tech start-ups.”

Medved said that OurCrowd investors have never been “overly Jewish – people invest in Israel because it is a good investment, not because of their heart.”

If one looks at the OurCrowd site, based on names alone, it appears that more than half of the organization’s investors are not Jewish. But Medved said he is also not sure they are Christians.

“They are just people,” he said.

Biblical, business ambassadors

But Calev Myers, chairman of the Anti-BDS Commission of the Israel Association of Bi-National Chambers of Commerce and founder and president of ARISE – Alliance to Reinforce Israel’s Security and Economy, said these Christians are likely the best people to become ambassadors for the Jewish state.



COURTESY

Jan Sturesson

He said the Boycott Divestment and Sanctions movement is operating now through divestment, which cannot be regulated.

“They are infiltrating corporate social responsibility (CSR) organizations that rank international companies and countries based on their social records,” Myers said. “They are trying to create a formula whereby investing in Israel equals abusing human rights.”

Already two very large pension funds, including PGGM – the largest of the Dutch pension fund giants, divested from Israeli banks, because of negative CSR reports.

Myers hired a CSR agency to do an objective analysis of the Israeli corporate theme with the standard CSR grid to show that investing in Israel is not only not abusive, it advances human rights.

Myers said he will hand out this positive CSR report to some 500 Christian business people next month at the International Christian Chamber of Commerce’s “The Commonwealth of Israel” conference, which runs from November 3 to 6.

“The goal is to turn these Christian business people, who are highly motivated by their love of Israel, into a troop of business

ambassadors and diplomats on behalf of Israel,” Myers told The Report.

Jan Sturesson, chairman of the board of the ICCC, said this has always been part of his motivation.

The ICCC was started in 1985 by a Swedish businessman interested in connecting Christian businesspeople around the globe to Israel. Today, ICCC is active in 77 countries. At its onset, the ICCC mostly made donations – such as in 1999 when the organization sponsored several aliyah flights for Jews from the former Soviet Union. However, over time, Sturesson said, these business people also invested in tech and business.

Though he said ICCC has not tracked investments by participants, since they are private, he estimates it in the tens of millions of dollars since the organization’s founding.

“We have been the gateway for Christian business people to invest in Israel, and we want to scale that up now,” Sturesson said. “One thing is standing up and standing together for Israeli society and the nation of the Jewish people, with which we share a common history. And the other is supporting Israel in the area through which it can be the biggest blessing to the nations. Israel is so innovative in several sectors, from agriculture to biotech to life sciences.”

As such, the last day of this year’s event will take place in Tel Aviv, where Myers’s ARISE has arranged a day of matchmaking between participants and Israeli companies.

Myers asked the business people to answer 10 questions related to the types of technology in which they prefer to invest, their investment levels and geography. Then, he worked with the Israel Export Institute to cross reference the information so that the business people could meet with appropriate start-ups. In

addition to those meetings, Israeli companies in the fields of artificial intelligence, virtual reality, agriculture tech and crypto securities will offer demos.

Myers said he was eager to partner with the ICCC because he believes evangelical Christians are the largest pro-Israel group in the world.

“While Christians donate several hundred million dollars per year to projects in Israel, the amount invested is closer to \$10-15 million,” Myers explained. “I want to see more for-profit investments come into Israel from these Christians.

“If you donate to a good cause, you give money, and that’s great, but then you walk away and go on with your life. It’s not a relationship. If you take your hard-earned money and invest it in the Israeli economy, you will start watching the Israeli news to see what is happening with your investment. It is a much deeper commitment.”

Sturesson said tech is the wave of the future and that if other countries want to be a part of this future, they will need to come and learn from Israel. This, he said, will also strengthen the Jewish state.

“Business is the peace process,” Sturesson said.

Knesset Member Robert Ilatov (Yisrael Beytenu), chair of the Knesset Christian Allies Caucus, expressed similar sentiments. He told The Report that in his role, he is working with evangelicals on both the political and economic fronts to ensure Israel stays secure and viable despite BDS.

“The BDS movement wants to sanction us,” said Ilatov. “We want to develop relations between the world and our technology, so the world can appreciate what Israel has to offer.”

He continued, “Evangelicals understand that the blessings they give Israel they will get back.” ■

Blessing Israel with every step

This year, evangelical Christians will take another step toward connecting with Israel through Run for Zion, a new evangelical Christian team that will raise funds to fly to Israel and take part in the Jerusalem Marathon.

“If you are a Christian and a runner, Jerusalem is the most powerful and impressive place to run,” said Jonathan Feldstein, president of a new nonprofit organization, Genesis 123. “Most Christians look at the Jewish return to and reestablishment of Israel as fulfillment of a biblical promise.”

Feldstein said Genesis 123 plays off the verse Genesis 12:3, which states that God will bless those who bless Israel.

The organization’s first project is Run for Zion, and Feldstein says he hopes to recruit 500 runners and walkers to take part in the March 15, 2019 event. This year, he is focusing on participants from North America, though in the future he will target evangelical Christians in other countries where there are strong evangelical populations, such as China, Latin America and Africa. He expects to raise as much as \$1.25 million through Run for Zion team fundraising pages, which will be distributed to Israeli charities across the spectrum.

Feldstein said he was already endorsed by outgoing Jerusalem Mayor Nir Barkat, and he is working in conjunction with the Jerusalem Affairs Ministry and the Jerusalem Development Authority.

“Visiting Israel in the 70th year of statehood since Israel was reborn and the Jewish people restored to their land” is significant, Feldstein explained, especially for Christians who will walk on the “cobblestone ancient roads of the Old City where Jesus walked.”

In his marketing materials, he touts that Jerusalem (Zion) is mentioned more than 600 times in scripture and that “when you know that is where Jesus and the apostles and the prophets and the kings walked, your faith comes alive in new dimensions.”

His tagline: Bless Israel with every step.

“When we think about marketing Israel, we often look toward the 5.5 million or 6 million American Jews,” Feldstein said. “I made the realization that there are between 70 million and 100 million other people in the US who are Christian, who love Israel, and we are missing an opportunity to communicate with them and build lasting and important relationships for everyone involved.”

M.H.