

A number of years ago I was approached by a Christian minister who led a group called "Christians for Israel." He asked if he could host a meeting for Christian ministers and lay leaders at our synagogue to talk about "Christians for Israel." Before saying "yes" I wanted to know more about his organization. He told me about the mission of his group, working with the State of Israel to fulfill the prophecy of Isaiah (49:22) that the exiles of the Jewish people would return to the Land. "Christians for Israel" funded the *aliyah* of tens of thousands of people from the Ukraine to Israel. I was interested in the religious message given these people. "Do you encourage them to come to Christ," I asked. "Are you only supporting people who are sympathetic to conversion?" "No," he answered, we do believe that the second coming of Jesus is imminent and that the ingathering of the exiles of Israel is a crucial step in that process, but we have no pre-conditions.

Should we allow this group to spread their message in our synagogue? I thought about it for a few days. On the one hand, they were saving Jewish lives. On the other, their ultimate goal of the ingathering of the exiles was to lead the Jewish people to the belief in Jesus as the savior. Should we support a group helping Israel now knowing that such aid is part of a not-so-subtle long-term goal of seeing us disappear?

After a few days of internal struggle the lay leaders and I agreed – "Christians for Israel" would be welcome to use our synagogue. Our *parasha*, which includes the Ten Commandments, is one of only two Torah portions named for someone not Jewish. Yitro, Moses father-in-law, is honored in our traditions for his recognition of God and his support for the nascent Israelite nation. His example – and Judaism's respect for him – can serve as a model for how we can (and should) respond to Evangelical Christians.

We in the Reform movement have not generally had close ties with Evangelical Christians. There is much that separates us. Last April the head of the Union for Reform Judaism, Rabbi Eric Yoffie spoke at a bastion of fundamentalist Christianity – Jerry Falwell's Liberty University. During his remarks

he acknowledged that the two communities have sharply contrasting positions on several hot-button issues, including abortion, civil rights for gays and lesbians, and the role of religion in public life. While many rabbis, myself included, have close ties with Catholic priests and ministers from the “mainstream” Protestant denominations, the connections between rabbis and evangelical ministers has been rare.

The rapid growth and strength of the Evangelical movement, however, is something that we must acknowledge. Evangelical Protestants now appreciably outnumber mainline Protestants. While American Baptists, Episcopalians, Lutherans, and Presbyterians are declining in number, groups like the Assemblies of God, Pentecostals and Southern Baptists are experiencing rapid growth. It is estimated that there are between 50 and 70 million Evangelicals in the United States alone. Nearly one-quarter of Latinos identify with evangelical churches. A recent article in the *New York Times* indicated that “Experts believe there are roughly 400 million Pentecostals worldwide, and this year, the number in the city is expected to surpass 850,000 – about one in every 10 New Yorkers.”¹ We ignore fundamentalist and evangelical Christians at our peril – risking the ignorance that is spawned by a lack of connection and, in addition, failing to build bridges in common cause where we can find it.

Even with our differences, however, there is much that we do share. Increased dialogue between our communities could help each better understand the other and help build recognition of the range of issues where Reform Jews and Evangelical Christians are in alignment: treatment of religious minorities in other lands, concern about global warming and conservation of the environment, a shared revulsion with the lack of moral boundaries in our society and helping those in need of social services.

Most important for the Jewish community, at this time in history, is to not take for granted the incredible support Evangelical Christians have shown for Israel.

¹ *New York Times*, January 14, 2007

A number of polls show that behind Jews, Evangelical Christians are Israel's greatest allies. Though some Jews are suspicious of their motives, it is important to understand that there are deep roots for Zionism amongst American Christians.

At the founding of the United States, Elias Boudinot, president of the Continental Congress, predicted that the Jews, "however scattered . . . are to be recovered by the mighty power of God, and restored to their beloved . . . Palestine." John Adams imagined "a hundred thousand Israelites" marching triumphantly into Palestine. "I really wish the Jews in Judea an independent nation," he wrote. During the Revolution, the association between America's struggle for independence and the Jews' struggle for repatriation was illustrated by the proposed Great Seal designed by Thomas Jefferson and Benjamin Franklin, showing Moses leading the Children of Israel toward the Holy Land.

Restorationism, the idea of restoring a Jewish presence in the Land of Israel, became a major theme in antebellum religious thought and a mainstay of the Methodist, Baptist and Presbyterian churches. In his 1844 bestseller, *The Valley of the Vision*, New York University Bible scholar George Bush - a forebear of the two presidents of the same name - called on the U.S. to devote its economic and military might toward recreating a Jewish polity in Palestine. But merely envisioning such a state was insufficient for some Americans, who, in the decades before the Civil War, left home to build colonies in Palestine. Each of these settlements had the same goal: to teach the Jews, long disenfranchised from the land, to farm and so enable them to establish a modern agrarian society. In 1863, Abraham Lincoln said that "restoring the Jews to their homeland is a noble dream shared by many Americans," and that the U.S. could work to realize that goal once the Union prevailed.

Several decades later Teddy Roosevelt wrote, "It seems to me that it is entirely proper to start a Zionist State around Jerusalem, and [that] the Jews be given control of Palestine." President Harry S. Truman was raised in a Baptist household, had been a member of the pro-Zionist American Christian Palestine

Committee and an advocate of the right of Jews - particularly Holocaust survivors - to immigrate to Palestine. Against the advice of the foreign policy establishment, he announced on May 14, 1948 that the U.S. would be the first nation to recognize the newly-declared State of Israel. Introduced a few weeks later to an American Jewish delegation as the president who had helped create Israel, Truman took umbrage and snapped, "What you mean 'helped create'? I am Cyrus" - a reference to the Persian king who returned the Jews from exile.

In contrast to this long-standing Christian support for Jewish re-settlement in the Land of Israel, the strongest religious critique of the State of Israel - including those questioning the very essence of Israel as a Jewish State - has come from our old allies in the mainstream churches. Calls for divestment of funds from Israel come not from Evangelicals, but primarily from those in the liberal Christian denominations. In September 2004, the Anglican Peace and Justice Network concluded a Middle East visit with a statement criticizing Israel, but saying not a word about terrorist acts by such groups as Islamic Jihad or Hamas. The sanctions called for against Israel - and no other nation in the world - in some "mainline" churches is a sign that our old allies are not content challenging Israeli policy, but its very moral standing and legitimacy. Further proof of this was seen last summer when Israeli actions were condemned by many liberal Christian denominations with little mention of the Arab violence and aggression that precipitated the current crisis. We may have much in common with liberal Christians, but we are more and more on different sides when it comes to Israel.

It is against this background of anti-Israel rhetoric that we must see the publication of ex-President Jimmy Carter's recent book *Palestine: Peace Not Apartheid*. His goal is to make American Evangelicals rethink their affection for Israel. While he has every right to criticize Israel, his one-sided finger pointing his hint to his bias against Israel and Israelis. And the choice of the word "apartheid" - an insidious connection to a racist South Africa - negates the ongoing attempts of Israeli governments to pull back from Palestinian land and

the general support of the Israeli population for a two-state solution. There are some egregious wrongs in Israeli attempts to hold on to land captured in 1967, but the use of the term plays into the hands of the dangerous idea that Zionism is, by its very nature, racist.

In such a climate we should welcome the attempts in the Jewish community in general and by Reform Jewish leaders, in particular, to reach out to Evangelicals. This is not to paper over the differences, sometimes very broad, that exist between us.

Amongst the greatest of challenges is our suspicion that the motivation of Evangelicals is less than sincere and our worry that, in the end, they seek our elimination. Even a cursory look at the speeches of Evangelical leaders and websites of their churches shows that, at times, their religious rhetoric move beyond the level of theological debate into that which has the whiff of religious anti-Semitism. In the "End of Days" prayed for by some Evangelicals Jews will ultimately have two options: either convert to Christianity or be incinerated at Armageddon.

Israeli journalist Gershom Gorenberg, who has studied Evangelical views of Israel for years, advocates caution toward this support: "Accepting the embrace of conservative evangelicals poses problems of principle for Jews and Israel, in return for an illusory short-term payoff. Jews would do better to follow the Hebrew maxim 'Respect him and suspect him,' maintaining a polite distance and publicly delineating their differences from the Christian right, even while at times supporting the same policy steps."²

Is Gorenberg correct? How can we cozy up to those who ultimately seek our religious annihilation? As problematic as it is, I prefer to make alliance with those who are our friends at the moment and leave eschatological and messianic debates for the future.

² Gershom Gorenberg, "Unorthodox Alliance," *Washington Post*, 11 October 2002

Rabbi Yechiel Eckstein, president of the International Fellowship of Christians and Jews, has been galvanizing Evangelical support for Israel since long before it was fashionable to do so. In 2003, his organization raised \$40 million from Evangelicals to support bringing Jewish immigrants to Israel, funding social welfare projects there, and helping Jews in the former Soviet Union. Eckstein has always been aware, however, that the shared concerns do not necessarily mean Jews and Evangelicals will agree on broader issues. His motto sums up his approach: "Cooperate whenever possible, oppose whenever necessary, and teach and sensitize at all times."³

It is neither being false to our values nor duplicitous to make alliances with those with whom we do not entirely agree. More than that, only when we have opened lines of communication with Evangelicals can we move them to distance themselves from overt attempts to convert us and their sometimes anti-Jewish hyperbole.

In short, we Reform Jews must reach out to Evangelical Christians and work with them when we can. We should be grateful for their support in areas where we find common cause. Yes, our embrace should be cautious, but just as we have found deep bonds with other Christians in ways our ancestors could scarce have dreamed about, so might we with those Evangelical Christians willing to join hands with us.

³ International Fellowship of Christians and Jews Mission Statement, www.ifcj.org