


rience, Jewish history, Jewish values, fears, and hopes into account. That will not make things simple or straightforward, but in time it will knit a strong bond of mutual respect and affirmation, even when full agreement is not possible.

Gospel-centered in life and faith is what “Evangelical” means. Nearly all mainline Protestants would say they strive to be Evangelical,

in that sense. Taking others seriously as they define and understand themselves is life-affirming and faithful to God’s gospel purpose, so mainliners are Evangelical precisely when they meet with and learn about Jews, when they see and respect the complexity and richness of Jewish diversity, and when they commit themselves to walking God’s paths together toward a future none of us can yet imagine. 

A Courtship of Convenience?

Ethan Felson

It is said that in every relationship one party is always a little more smitten than the other. The nascent union between Evangelical Christians and Jews is no exception. Although a honeymoon may be far in the distance, it’s worth exploring why we have such cold feet.

Motives: A mantra of those skeptical of the Evangelical-Jewish encounter is to question motivation. An agenda grounded in theology is considered suspect, all the more so because it may relate to some end-of-days scenario. As Rabbi Poupko reminds us, though, the pre-millennial dispensationalist segment of the Evangelical community is small. Three of the largest Christian Zionist groups, responding to a screed from several Bishops in Jerusalem, wrote “Christian Zionists do not base their theological position on end-time prophecy, but on the faithful covenant promises of God given to Abraham some four thousand years ago not a ‘thirst for Armageddon’ or a ‘claim to know the sequence of events that will lead to it.’”

Strings: The consensus domestic agendas of Jews and Evangelicals are disparate, and Jews fear some quid pro quo. Evangelical support for Israel, however, comes from their own theology and is not the result of anything any Jew has done for a few millennia. We can cooperate on issues like Israel, religious liberty, and the protection of God’s creation and part company on others.

Policy: At the April 2002 Israel solidarity rally in Washington, DC, Evangelical radio host Janet Parshall declared “We will not give back the Golan!” As David Elcott notes, American Jews are far more likely to embrace territorial compromise than Christian Zionists.

But there is no expectation that we mute our agenda. Advocacy partnerships should further our own consensus positions. American Jews can and have helped our Evangelical friends to understand why Palestinian self-determination is in Israel’s best interest, but where differences remain, we are free to go our separate ways. In the interim, the support of Christian Zionists touches on many other less political issues, most notably humanitarian support.

Civics: The Evangelical community is diverse, and its leaders do not speak for all adherents. We are not required to partner with all comers. One prominent Evangelical leader said that granting equal protection rights to same-gender couples was “worse than terrorism.” Dialogue can help such spokespeople understand the profound hurt these statements cause — and our willingness to engage other less hyperbolic leaders sends a strong signal that our commitment to civility remains steadfast.

Proselytization: David Neff reminds us of the Christian imperative to share their gospel. Honest conversation can help set appropriate boundaries, especially where evangelizing is aggressive or deceptive. The reality of the encounter, however, is that most Christian Zionist activists have a far deeper respect for our faith than we give them credit. Indeed, the biblical quote most on their minds is not from the Christian scriptures, but rather from our own, the promise of blessing for those who bless us.

Theocracy: American Jews recoil at the idea of America as a “Christian Nation.” A Barna poll indicated that a sizable majority of Evangelical Christians would amend the U.S. Con-

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stitution to make Christianity our official religion. Just as we are not shy to the fight, we should not be shy to the calm conversation. There is little harm and much good that can come from educating others why we fear a substitution of just policy for moral piety. Throughout, we need to remember that Christian Zionists and Christian Conservatives are not always the same constituency.

Reaction: It is hard to overstate the disdain that many in the mainline have for their Evangelical cohorts. Jewish leaders often identify this as a reason to eschew Evangelical ties. Ironically, many mainline influentials are already convinced that the marriage exists. Regardless, they long ago cast their lot through policies and actions such as their unflinching support of groups like the vociferously anti-Israel Sabeel Center. Mainline support of Pales-

tinians comes from a place of theology, too, in the form of a mandate to alleviate the suffering of a people they see as powerless. We must redouble our Israel advocacy efforts with the mainline and other constituencies to help them understand the devious power that is terror and the complex security decisions Israel is forced to make.

At the 2007 JCPA Plenum, Susan Michael, USA Director of the Christian Embassy Jerusalem made a gracious plea. She asked for dialogue with the recognition that most Evangelicals have not encountered many Jews and may make mistakes just as she admitted having made. Rev. John Wimberly, a mainline Protestant leader and our outstanding friend, sat next to her on the dais. He continued to offer his hand to us in partnership and fellowship. No one ever said that our relationships have to be monogamous. 

The Heterogeneity of Evangelical Christians


Mara Einstein

I agree with Rabbi Yehiel Poupko that “Evangelical Christians pose a great conundrum for American Jews,” because there is nothing more confusing than someone loving you and thinking that you are going to hell at the same time. Poupko is also correct in stating that the number of Evangelicals in the U.S. is growing; according to *Business Week* magazine, they represent 36 percent of all religious practitioners. And megachurches, Evangelical churches that cater to congregations of 2,000 or more, are growing exponentially. In fact, the largest megachurch in the U.S. now boasts 40,000 weekly attendees. Another startling statistic: 50 percent of church goers attend 12 percent of churches, which suggests that a handful of pastors are having considerable influence on a growing number of people. And these pastors often hold opinions in opposition to what many American Jews believe.

But Evangelicals — like any group of people, including Jews — are not as homogeneous as we might initially suspect. The mass media depict Evangelicals as primarily white and usually southern. However, this is a distorted picture. Two of the largest megachurches are in affluent suburbs of Chicago and Los Angeles;

many, perhaps most, black Evangelicals reflect liberal political beliefs similar to most American Jews, and, there is a growing liberal Evangelical movement — most visible in the ministry of Jim Wallis, author of *God's Politics* and editor of the progressive Christian magazine, *Sojourner*. Many of these believers perceive that their faith has been hijacked by the Christian Right. Evangelicals are not monolithic, but rich and poor, Southern and Northern, conservative, and yes, liberal.

So much of what has happened in Evangelical growth has to do with marketing. Although we're seeing more people going to megachurches, they are not necessarily taking on full membership and committing their lives to Christ. And recent statistics show that young Evangelicals are not coming into the fold through traditional or even untraditional churches; rather they are finding Jesus at rock concerts and multimedia events, if at all.

What can we learn from these observations? We need to take a harder look at the specific Evangelicals that are cozying up to the Jewish community and providing support for the state of Israel. Their friendship, perhaps, is one that should elicit suspicion. 

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