

EVANGELICALS AND JEWS: AN AMBIVALENT RELATIONSHIP

by Rabbi Joshua O. Haberman

One of the top candidates for the Presidency in the 1988 race will be a leading Evangelical minister, the Reverend "Pat" Robertson. Another Evangelical, the Reverend Jesse Jackson, also is a candidate, as he was in 1984. In 1980, Jimmy Carter and Ronald Reagan faced each other as born-again Christians, and John Anderson--does anyone still remember him?--is a former Evangelical preacher.

Evangelicals number some 40,000,000 Americans, and another 40,000,000, or more, agree with Evangelicals on most points concerning religion. We Jews are a relatively small religious minority. Do I need to say more on the importance of our relationship with that largest denominational body within the nation?

Most Pluralistic. As an active participant in Evangelical-Jewish dialogue programs, I find it painful to admit that many Jews are either entirely ignorant about Evangelicals, or downright prejudiced, or both. Especially in the New York area, the media depict the Evangelicals as a threat, as primitives, even as religious frauds. The Electronic Church, especially the raw appeals for money by such as Oral Roberts, have not helped the image of Evangelicals. Are Evangelicals nothing but Bible-thumping bigots whose hidden agenda is the conversion of all Jews by hook or crook? Are they really sworn enemies of our pluralistic democracy? Are they determined to rob us of our rights? Are they scheming to turn the nation into a Christian kind of dictatorship?

What about this picture? It just isn't so.

Evangelicals are no threat to the pluralism of America because they are themselves the most pluralistic of all denominations. There is no Evangelical national church but tens of thousands of churches, large and small. If you want to deal and negotiate with the Evangelical movement, whom would you contact? Who is their spokesman? There is no one person, no one organization that speaks for Evangelicals as a whole. They have no central authority, no national organizational structure.

Opposition to Bigotry. Not until 1941 was an attempt made to create a national umbrella organization, the ACCC (American Council of Christian Churches). However, the very next year another Evangelical group got together, the NAE (National Association of Evangelicals), which emphasized opposition to all forms of bigotry and intolerance while at the same time stressing commitment to religious conservatism.

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Real power is not in the hands of the ACCC or the NAE, but with the individual pastors of all sorts of congregations, some numbering a handful of members and others of mammoth size, with memberships of over 20,000 and TV programs with listening audiences into the millions. Also very influential in shaping the thinking of Evangelicals throughout the nation are those hundreds of Bible Colleges you never heard of.

Bible as Infallible Source. What is the common core characteristic of Evangelicals? In his important study entitled "Religion in American Public Life" published by the Brookings Institution in Washington, A. James Reichley defines Evangelicals as "that branch of Christianity...that emphasizes direct experience by the individual of the Holy Spirit (born again)--and that regards the Bible as an infallible source of religious and moral authority" (p. 312).

They believe in instant access to God and the Holy Spirit. This makes Evangelicals at times embarrassing to their non-Evangelical friends who are puzzled by their behavior: To them worship becomes really meaningful when it is emotionally and physically expressed. They sway their bodies, they raise their arms, and they shout out their "amens" with gusto. They are the "Hasidim" among the Christians.

Prayers roll off their tongues in situations where others would not dare to bother God, and they tell us often that God talks back to them and tells them what to do. Such claims arouse our suspicion of religious posturing or fraud or a kind of self-hypnosis. And yet, having come to know a number of Evangelicals intimately, I cannot doubt their sincerity. Moreover, my longstanding friendship with intellectual giants of the Evangelical faith such as the late educator and Biblical scholar, Dr. Frank Gaebeline, and the noted theologian and former publisher of "Christianity Today", Dr. Carl Henry, have convinced me that Evangelicals have their proper share of sophisticated thinkers and men and women of culture.

Religious Individualists. What is the real significance of their belief that God is available to them on call? It makes each Evangelical independent of the institutional church. It makes him a religious individualist. Evangelicals see no need and, in fact, are bitterly opposed to any form of religious regimentation or church hierarchy. They see no need for the mediation of an institutional church. For worship, they prefer the simple tent to an ornate cathedral. This is a point of kinship with Jews, who likewise believe that no clerical introduction is needed when you turn to God in prayer.

However, the strongest bond between Evangelicals and Jews is the Bible. No Christian group is more Bible-centered. Like Jews, they have raised up scriptures as the supreme spiritual and moral authority. They glory in the Bible. Their speech and worship resonate with the Bible. They know it and, to my shame, often they know it better than Jews. Someone once said: "The Jews wrote the Bible and the Evangelicals study it."

All public opinion polls report that Evangelicals are the fastest growing religious community in America. What is the secret of their success? One might list several factors: intensity, emotionalism, aggressive missionizing, and skillful handling of the media. But these would be superficial points. On a more profound level, I must credit Evangelicals for two notable achievements:

1) Evangelicals managed to associate themselves, either as advocates or adversaries, with a number of issues that people really care deeply about.

2) Better than other Christian denominations or church groups, the Evangelicals have articulated the new "Zeitgeist," the prevailing mood of this generation.

Rejects Social Engineering. Evangelicals differ sharply with the liberal mainline churches in the approach to such social problems as: the rise of teenage pregnancy (by 300 to 400 percent in a single decade); the fact that 25 percent of white and 55 percent of black children now grow up in single parent homes; and the immeasurable devastation of drug addiction; not to mention a crime rate that makes American streets the most unsafe in the entire world next to Beirut, Lebanon. Mainline churches and liberal Jews, by and large, still are beholden to social engineering, to the welfare bureaucracy, and would continue to treat the problems we have mentioned, largely or exclusively, with more monetary appropriations and social tinkering. Evangelicals make a powerful appeal to our common sense and moral instinct by attacking these problems on a moral and religious level--sometimes with overstatements such as Jimmy Swaggart's incredible blooper, broadcast on February 16, 1984:

"All the work of Mother Theresa--and I repeat, all the charity work she has done in her life--means nothing. Absolutely nothing in terms of her salvation" (see "God in America" by Furio Colombo, p. 80).

I suppose most Jews likewise react unfavorably to the statement of the popular Fundamentalist theologian, I.M. Haldeman, who wrote that trying to save the world through political or economic reform was "like cleaning and decorating the staterooms of a sinking ship" (quoted by A. James Reichley in "Religion in American Public Life", p. 206).

Final Period of History. This brings us to the other theme that has turned eyes and ears to the Evangelicals: their eschatology. Eschatology, a term familiar to Jewish and Christian theologians, refers to that body of beliefs which deal with the approaching end of the world, with the final tribulation, the last judgment, and the end of all history. This happens to be a favorite preaching theme of Evangelicals and, in our time, it conforms to an almost universal sense of gathering doom. We are in the midst of a radical mood-switch from the optimism, progressivism, and super confidence of the modern age. We are the postmodern generation, filled with pessimism and visions of future catastrophe.

After two World Wars, Auschwitz, Hiroshima, and the debacle of the League of Nations and the United Nations, man, the crown creation, homo sapiens, stands revealed as homo sap. Chief Rabbi Joseph Hartz of Great Britain put it this way:

"The 19th Century propounded the theory of man's descent from the ape, and the 20th Century has proven it."

The Evangelical vision of the end of history differs from all other Christian faiths by assigning to Jews the leading role in God's scenario for the final days. The now dominant branch of Evangelicalism, which is known as Dispensationalism, divides all of history into seven dispensations or periods of time in each of which mankind is put to the test by different events. According to Dispensationalists, we are now in the sixth, the pre-final period of history. This is the world's last chance, they say, to come around and be saved

through the gospel, which is the door God opened for Gentiles to partake of His Covenant with Israel. All others are doomed to destruction except the Jews whose survival--albeit in a small remnant--is assured by God's unbreakable Covenant.

The Dispensationalists' idea that the people of Israel are destined to survive contradicts all other Christian denominations, which share a kind of "death-wish" for the Jewish people. From the close of the New Testament to the present age, the universally held Christian view has been that the continued existence of the Jewish people is an anomaly, even a scandal and a mystery. Having failed to acknowledge Jesus as God and Savior, Jews, because of their spiritual blindness, are called partners of Satan, deserving of the severest punishment. But then, there is this mystery of Jewish survival. Could this perhaps be a special form of punishment? A long, lingering, drawn-out decline, destined to end with their final disappearance? This notion has been popularized in the myth of the eternally wandering Jew.

Believing in the Jewish Nation. Evangelicals of the Dispensationalist school are the only Christians who believe in the future of a Jewish nation. Whereas others, even those who are very friendly to us, look upon Judaism as something obsolete and often speak of themselves as the new Israel replacing the old Israel, Evangelical Dispensationalists hold that God wants both a "carnal" Israel (a Jewish people in the flesh) and a spiritual Israel, namely the Christian believers.

We are now, they say, near the end of the sixth, the pre-final dispensation, which will witness a time of dreadful tribulation for all mankind. It will also bring about the restoration of carnal Israel to their land. This idea is the main reason for the amazing pro-Zionism of Evangelicals. To them, the State of Israel is proof that their prophetic timetable is correct. The rebuilding of the Temple will usher in the seventh and final dispensation and the return of Jesus as the Messiah-Christ. Then will come the so-called "rapture." And just what is that? It is the bodily elevation of all believing Christians into heaven where they will constitute the spiritual Israel. Some Evangelicals display the bumper sticker that says, "In case of the rapture, this vehicle will be empty."

A Missionary Hope. And what will happen to the rest of mankind? They will live here on earth in the millennium, which is God's kingdom of 1,000 years, in which Israel of the flesh will be supreme among the nations. At this point, Evangelicals assert their missionary hope. Israel will recognize Jesus as its savior and lead the nations in conversion to Christianity. At the end of the millennium, Satan will break loose and win control of the universe, but he will be overcome and tossed into the Lake of Fire for eternal damnation. Then history will come to an end with all the faithful enjoying their untroubled hereafter.

Reciprocity is a law of human relations: Love begets love. Hate begets hate. Ambivalence begets ambivalence.

Ambivalence toward Jews is the hallmark of the New Testament. On the one hand, there is the recognition of the Jews as the people of the Covenant, the elect of God through whom God chose to reveal the Scriptures and among whom Jesus was born. On the other hand, the New Testament contains diatribes of vituperation and warnings of punishment of the Jews for the rejection of Jesus.

Love, not Hate. Christians through the ages reflect this ambivalence by swinging back and forth between a love of Jews and anti-Semitic attitudes. On the whole, I think Evangelicals today are positively disposed toward the Jews, prompted more by love and friendship than by hate. Jews wonder if it is for real. I personally am inclined to believe it is. And the fact that even our most earnest Evangelical friends hope and pray that, at the end of days, Jews will become Christians does not trouble me very much, since I stand equally ready to receive our Christian friends back into the Jewish mother faith at any time. Amen.

