

American Jews and Evangelical Christians: Anatomy of a Changing Relationship

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In the aftermath of the U.S. elections of November 2004, national attention has focused on the role of the growing Evangelical Christian community. Among many Jews and friends of Israel, this community - and its views on a wide range of domestic and international issues - has been a topic of great interest and debate for years. At a time when Israel has lost ground in the battle for global public opinion, vocal support from Evangelical Christians has been welcomed by many American Jews and Israelis. The enthusiasm, however, is not universal; many American Jews have misgivings about the Evangelicals' embrace of the Jewish state.

Those who are uncomfortable with Evangelical support point to a long list of problems ranging from the theological reasons that this community supports Israel and its hard-line views on territorial issues to the positions espoused by many Evangelicals on a wide range of domestic issues, including abortion, church-state separation, gun control, and so on.

Among Jews who welcome Evangelical support, a common argument is that Israel's present-day needs must take precedence over potential problems in the future. They advocate cooperating on issues of shared concern while agreeing to disagree on other matters, so long as Evangelicals do not target Jews for proselytization.

In many ways, the debate over how to address Evangelical support for Israel parallels the newer debate in the broader American society that stems from the strong role played by Evangelicals in the national elections. As the election results underscored, Jews who care about Israel, including those uncomfortable with the notion of cooperating, will find themselves unable to ignore the influence of the large bloc of conservative Christians in America.

Introduction

The scene repeats itself at houses of worship across the United States: a spiritual leader recites prayers in front of packed pews, including prayers for the safety and security of Israel. It is a familiar sight in thousands of synagogues each Shabbat, but it is not limited to synagogues, and it does not happen only on Friday night and Saturday morning.

The phrases and the imagery may differ, but each Sunday morning - and at additional midweek services - thousands of Evangelical pastors, at large and small churches in every state of the Union, lead their flocks in praying for Israel. Those prayers reflect the deep-seated concern that large numbers of Evangelicals have for the Jewish state. In fact, a 2002 survey by the Tarrance Group, a Republican polling firm, found that Evangelical Christians are more likely to express support for Israel than all other ethnic or religious groups in the United States except Jews.¹

For many American Jews who support Israel, this seemingly new source of support has caused anxiety and discomfort. Many have questioned the Evangelicals' motives and see serious hurdles to building alliances with them.

Why would any supporter of Israel reject someone else's support? What do many Jews feel is problematic about Evangelical pro-Israeli activity? Are Jews demanding that Evangelicals meet a higher standard than that expected of other groups with which they build coalitions? These questions - rather than the reasons Evangelicals support Israel - are the focus of this article.

Opposites Do Not Always Attract

Why would American Jews who care about Israel and the U.S.-Israeli relationship have any qualms about accepting support regardless of its origin? What could make many of them recoil at the prospect of working together, or even being seen on the same side of an issue?

Answering these questions requires considering the positions taken by American Jews and by Evangelicals on a broader array of issues.

For decades, most American Jews have been vocal supporters of liberal positions on many domestic U.S. issues. American Jews have backed abortion rights, gun control, civil rights, gay rights, strict separation of church and state, and so on. They have also built many alliances with other like-minded groups to further these causes. Few of those alliances were built with Evangelical Christians, because they have been on the other side of each of these issues. (There have been notable exceptions, including coordinated efforts by Jews and Evangelicals on such shared concerns as religious freedoms and the global sex trade.)

The national director of the Anti-Defamation League (ADL), Abraham Foxman, stresses that the ADL and other organizations have been candid in telling Evangelical groups that cooperation with Jews over Israel will not affect Jewish positions on other issues. "Importantly, at no point have we heard them place any conditions on their support. There is no *quid pro quo*. At no point have we had to choose between our fundamental principles concerning the role of religion in America and our appreciation for their standing with Israel."²

There is nothing new, revolutionary, or duplicitous about this approach to coalition building. For decades, American Jewish organizations have forged alliances with other groups in American society - African-Americans, mainline Christian denominations, and countless others - on issues of shared concern; at no time has this caused American Jews to compromise their positions on other issues.

Enthusiasts stress the particular needs entailed by Israel's difficult reality since the collapse of the peace process in late 2000 and the onset of the Palestinian terror war. Foxman is prominent in this group and, though he maintained a distance from pro-Israeli Evangelicals in the past, has in recent years become a leading advocate of embracing their support despite the misgivings of other Jews.³

Foxman acknowledges the concerns about the two groups' very different domestic agendas, as well as a sense among many Jews that Evangelical support for Israel is motivated by a disturbing vision of the End of Days - a vision in which all Jews will have to convert to Christianity or die. Jews also cite fears about proselytizing and anti-Semitic attitudes that have long been held by many Evangelicals.⁴

Foxman, however, speaks for many American Jews when he stresses that since the Jewish faith does not accept Jesus as the messiah, Jews need not concern themselves with what Christians believe will happen in the "Second Coming." "Meanwhile," he asserts, "the very real present is one in which Evangelical leaders are educating their publics about the importance of Israel's existence, security and well-being, [something] no amount of public relations and advertising budgets could buy."⁵ In other words, Jews should set aside their concerns about a distasteful eschatology when Israel, in the present, needs Evangelicals' backing. As for proselytizing, Foxman says Jews must condemn any such efforts but that they do not happen often.⁶

The Jewish Community Shifts

In its annual plenum for 2003, the Jewish Council on Public Affairs (JCPA; the umbrella organization of Jewish community-relations bodies across the country) adopted a resolution on Evangelical-Jewish relations that would have been unfathomable several years earlier.

The resolution notes that American Jews have long labored to build coalitions with groups spanning the spectrum of society, and says this same approach is now being applied to Evangelical Christians. "This difficult subject takes on special importance as Evangelical Christians are often among the few significant non-Jewish communities routinely expressing support for an embattled Israel," the resolution states. "This valued support is prompting many Jews to revisit the question of relationships with Evangelical Christians on both Israel and other issues."⁷

The resolution says further that cooperation on issues of shared concern should not hinder Jewish action on issues where the two communities diverge. Additionally, the resolution calls on Jewish community- relations organizations to "explore opportunities to mobilize and harness the pro-Israel sentiments and activities of Evangelical Christians."⁸

Even though community-relations professionals insist there is no difference between building coalitions with Evangelicals and with African-Americans or any other group, the resolution represents a huge shift for American Jewry. Proponents of ties with Evangelicals now emphasize, like many Israeli officials, that Israel needs all the friends it can get in these difficult times. Moreover, they insist that no quid pro quo has been demanded - or offered - on issues where Jews and Evangelicals do not see eye to eye. Nevertheless, many American Jews remain suspicious of Evangelicals' motives and uncomfortable about coordinating with them.

Writing in the *Jerusalem Report*, Stuart Schoffman takes issue with many American, Israeli, and other Jews' growing enthusiasm about Evangelical support for Israel. Although acknowledging that Evangelical backing feels welcome at a time when the world is so unsympathetic toward the Jewish state, he believes the Evangelical kind of support is not in Israel's best interest. He quotes this statement by the Reverend Pat Robertson in a speech to Evangelical pilgrims to Jerusalem in fall 2004: "I see the rise of Islam to destroy Israel and take the land from the Jews and give East Jerusalem to Yasser Arafat. I see that as Satan's plan to prevent the return of Jesus Christ the Lord. God says, 'I'm going to judge those who carve up the West Bank and Gaza Strip.'"⁹

Schoffman also emphasizes that many Evangelicals support a hard-line approach to Israel's territorial issues, and view the territorial concessions that most Israelis favor in return for peace as a violation of God's plan.

Nevertheless, Israel is always on the lookout for allies, and sometimes it finds them in unexpected places. While some allies, such as the tiny island nation of Micronesia, have little to offer beyond a psychological boost, others can prove pivotal in Israel's unending battle for global public opinion. The outcome of the U.S. presidential elections highlights how important Evangelical support for Israel can be.

Polls released immediately after President Bush defeated Senator Kerry showed a striking trend: fully 21 percent of voters cited "moral values" as the key factor in casting their ballots, and 78 percent of those who cited moral values voted for Bush.¹⁰ Suddenly, the American media focused on a huge segment of the population that had long been all but ignored by most Americans outside of that community. Today American Evangelicals find themselves at center stage, weighing how best to use the newfound political capital they are deemed to have.¹¹

Although the Evangelical community has grown over the years - their number now estimated at fifty million to seventy million Americans - it did not appear out of nowhere.

Indeed, many commentators have asked how so many non-Evangelicals could have missed this group's increasing importance.

Yet, while the general American public may only be starting to grasp this community's significance, Jewish friends of Israel took note earlier.

In 2002, the ADL published a series of newspaper advertisements across the country featuring a reprint of a pro-Israeli op-ed by Ralph Reed, former head of the Christian Coalition and one of the key Evangelical figures. The following year Reed, as a keynote speaker at the ADL's National Leadership Conference in Washington, noted that since 9/11 more Americans, and especially Evangelicals, feel a kinship with Israel. He went on to cite American Jewish concerns: "But even as those ties between our two nations strengthen, many Jews wonder: do we really want to be on the same team with these Christians? Can we really trust them? Do they come with an ulterior motive or a hidden agenda?" To dispel these concerns Reed, who is co-chair of Stand for Israel, the group that commissioned the 2002 Tarrance poll of attitudes toward Israel, pointed to the poll's results: "The survey confirmed my own heart. It found that 62 percent of church-going conservative Christians support Israel, and a healthy majority - 56 percent - do so because of shared democratic values and God's promises to Abraham and the Jews to the land where the modern state of Israel is currently located. Only a distinct minority made any reference to the New Testament or the end times."¹²

The poll indeed provides insights into the breadth, depth, and motivations of the Evangelical support. Although 35 percent of Evangelicals said they back Israel because it is the place prophesied for the Second Coming in the New Testament, 24 percent said they support it because it is a democracy that values freedom. Another 19 percent cited Israel's being a longtime U.S. ally that works with America in the war on terror.¹³ When the pollsters pressed Evangelicals to cite their key theological reason for supporting Israel - even if they pointed to nontheological motivations - 59 percent said the Hebrew Bible's promise to bless Israel and the Jewish people (Genesis 12:3 and elsewhere) came first; 28 percent cited the end-times prophecies of the New Testament.¹⁴

In his remarks to the ADL leadership, Reed stressed areas of mutual concern and agreement while acknowledging that they do not annul the points of contention. "[O]ur agreement on opposition to anti-Semitism and religious bigotry in all its ugly forms, our shared support for Israel, does not mean that we should gloss over our other differences. A true friendship means speaking honestly and acknowledging differences - but we need not allow those differences to become divisions. Rather, let us agree to disagree on some issues, but work together on the many things that unite us."¹⁵

Reed's position is similar to that of Rabbi Yechiel Eckstein, the founder of Stand for Israel. Eckstein, who is also president of the Chicago-based 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."¹⁶

In April 2003, former presidential candidate and Evangelical leader Gary Bauer was the keynote speaker at the annual Policy Conference of the American Israel Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC) in Washington. Thousands of delegates gave him applause and standing ovations as he spoke of what Evangelicals see as the bonds between the United States and Israel. "We believe God owns the land and he has deeded it to the Jewish people, a deed that cannot be canceled by Yasser Arafat and cannot be amended - even by a president. This God has spoken clearly. He said, 'He who blesses Israel I will bless, he who curses Israel, I will curse.' For believing Christians that is clear enough, and good enough for us."¹⁷

Obstacles to Cooperation

Nobody disputes the fact that nearly all Jewish openness to relationship-building with Evangelicals stems from concern for Israel's welfare in the difficult period since 2000. Few Jews had paid attention to Evangelicals' views of Israel before the collapse of the peace process and the descent into terror. At a time when Israel finds itself increasingly isolated on the world stage, and when there is much criticism of Israeli policies in the United States and the world, one might think American Jews would bond instantly with such an important group of pro-Israeli Americans. Although some mainstream Jewish organizations like AIPAC and the ADL have indeed done so, other factors prevent a full-blown alliance from forming.

Basically, the rank and file of American Jewry has been much more hesitant about the Evangelicals than the leadership has been. The question was highlighted in countless debates - formal and informal - among American Jews in the run-up to the November elections.

Jewish concerns about building coalitions with Evangelicals fall into three key categories, which were noted above:

1. Fear of efforts to target Jews for conversion, and the implied lack of acceptance of Jews as Jews
2. Discomfort with Evangelical notions of "end-times" scenarios
3. Disagreement with Evangelicals on a host of domestic policy issues ranging from abortion to church-state separation.

In many conversations with American Jews, this author has encountered countless versions of the first two objections. Both tend to be grouped under a heading of

"motivation" - as in, "What are the true motivations of Evangelicals who say they support Israel?"

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."¹⁸

Gorenberg also disputes the findings of the Tarrance poll:

The Christian right's view of Israel derives largely from a double-edged theological position: Following a classic anti-Jewish stance, it regards the Jewish people as spiritually blind for rejecting Jesus. Yet it says that divine promises to Jews - to bless those who bless them, to return them to their land - remain intact. Indeed, it regards Israel's existence as proof that biblical prophecies are coming true - heralding an apocalypse in which Jews will either die or accept Jesus.

He dismisses the arguments of Jews who say Israel's current needs warrant setting aside concerns about the end-times beliefs.¹⁹

Although Gorenberg's view is shared by many American Jews, Israeli politicians have adopted the pragmatic approach being taken by so many communal leaders in the United States. Prime Minister Ariel Sharon has called Evangelicals some of Israel's best friends, and is only the latest in a series of premiers and other top politicians to embrace the community.

The third concern voiced by many Jews - that Jews and Evangelicals disagree on many domestic issues - is indisputable. Many - though not all - Jews favor liberal abortion laws, while many - though not all - Evangelicals oppose them. The same can be said for a host of other issues ranging from tuition vouchers for private schools to gun control, as well as attitudes toward gays.

The JCPA acknowledges the differing views between the two communities, but urges that traditional community-relations techniques be used to work with Evangelicals on matters of shared concern. No coalition is ever based on complete agreement, community-relations professionals say, and the ties between Evangelicals and Jews should not be held to a different standard.

However true in theory, in practice many Jewish community activists have devoted so many years to building relationships with liberal groups that the challenge of working with conservatives catches them unprepared. What is needed is for both sides to agree to disagree on issues beyond the scope of the alliance, and for those issues to be considered off-limits.

Judging by the high-profile presence of Evangelical leaders at key Jewish gatherings, and the growing instances of joint rallies and lobbying efforts, that approach seems to be making inroads among American Jews. And judging by the new awareness across the United States of the powerful influence of Evangelical Christians - their man is in the White House for a second term and their "values" issues are widely deemed to have powered his reelection - it seems inevitable that many groups (not just Jews) will be working to build alliances with this community.

Not a Monolith

Any discussion of how American Jews view Evangelical support for Israel is inevitably based on generalizations. It is important to note that one group - the Orthodox - views the evolving relationship differently than many others in the Jewish community. On the one hand, many Orthodox Jews place great value on cultivating non-Jewish support for Israel, and hence tend to be more welcoming of Evangelical support. This is bolstered by ideological congruence on both domestic and foreign policy; many Orthodox Jews view domestic issues such as abortion and gay rights in ways that mirror the Evangelical positions. Tempering the support, however, is tremendous concern about any perceived threat of proselytizing, which remains a very sensitive issue among Orthodox Jews.

The recent U.S. election also underscored the fact that no group or person speaks for all American Jews. Old notions about accepted "Jewish" views on various issues no longer hold sway, as growing numbers of Jews pursue their own political paths. Likewise, there is a broad spectrum of views among Evangelical Christians. Although many Evangelical leaders are vocal advocates for Israel, the level of knowledge and understanding of Arab-Israeli issues among most of their followers is much lower.

In 2002, John Green, director of the Bliss Institute of Applied Politics at the University of Akron, conducted a study of 350 Evangelical leaders in which he found that 60 percent expressed support for Israel, a slight increase from his previous poll in 2000. Contrary to the impression of many Americans that support for Israel is paramount for tens of millions of Evangelicals, Green says that most of the rank-and-file people in the pews focus more on domestic issues than on the Middle East conflict. Even though 60-70 percent of Evangelicals may express support for Israel, some 50 percent also express support for the Palestinians, and most of them cannot answer in-depth questions about the Arab-Israeli conflict or the finer details of Israel's reality. "On a lot of questions, you will get the 'I don't know' answer," Green noted. "It is very foreign to their experience."²⁰

Green's surveys yield another interesting finding. Although prominent Evangelical figures such as Robertson, Bauer, and syndicated radio talk-show host Janet Parshall toe a hard line against Israeli territorial concessions, Green found that most Evangelicals who have an opinion feel strongly that Israel should take steps to secure peace with the Palestinians. While finding that 60 percent of Evangelical leaders

support Israel, he has also found that 52 percent of those leaders favor the establishment of a Palestinian state. Most of them say, like many Israelis who take the same position, that they will only support such a state if it does not pose a threat to Israel.²¹

In many ways, the spectrum of views on Israel found among Evangelicals mirrors the spectrum found among American Jews. It is the prominent, vocal Evangelical leaders who tend to be hard-line.

Conclusion

American Jews continue to grapple with the question of how to regard Evangelical support for Israel. Whereas many embrace these friends of Israel, many others shudder at the very mention of cooperation. Clearly, American Jews do not speak in one voice on this issue.

Given the paucity of pro-Israeli voices in the world today, and the new recognition of the Evangelicals' power on the American political scene, it seems inevitable that increasing numbers of pro- Israeli Jews will reach the conclusion that Israel's interests will be served by a cautious embrace of these millions of supporters. As in all coalition building, limits must be set and issues must be defined, but it is increasingly difficult to imagine that American Jewry will veer far from the Israeli government's view. That view was summed up by Prime Minister Sharon in a letter marking a national day of prayer for Israel that Stand for Israel sponsored in 2002: "United in this bond of eternal friendship, we will overcome every challenge, and triumph in the battle to bring peace to this land and to its people."

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Notes

1. The survey, commissioned by Stand for Israel, a project of the International Fellowship of Christians and Jews, polled 1200 Americans, with an oversampling of Jews and Evangelicals. The survey found that 85 percent of Jews expressed support for Israel, as did 62 percent of "conservative church-going Christians."
2. Abraham Foxman, "Evangelical Support for Israel Is a Good Thing," Jewish Telegraphic Agency, 16 July 2002.
3. Ibid.
4. Ibid.
5. Ibid.
6. Ibid.
7. 2003 JCPA Resolution on Evangelical-Jewish Relations.
8. Ibid.
9. Stuart Schoffman, "Trick or Treat," *Jerusalem Report*, 1 November 2004.
10. Dan Froomkin, "How Did He Do It?" *Washington Post*, 3 November 2004.
11. Paul Asay, "Conservative Lobbyists Newly Energized after Votes," *Philadelphia Inquirer*, 18

November 2004.

12. Ralph Reed, remarks at ADL National Leadership Conference, Washington, DC, 29 April 2003.
13. Executive Summary, Stand for Israel Survey, prepared by the Tarrance Group, Washington, DC, 9 October 2002.
14. Ibid.
15. Reed, Remarks at ADL National Leadership Conference.
16. International Fellowship of Christians and Jews Mission Statement, www.ifcj.org. This author worked with Eckstein in 2002-2003.
17. Gary Bauer, remarks at AIPAC Policy Conference, Washington, DC, 30 March 2003.
18. Gershom Gorenberg, "Unorthodox Alliance," *Washington Post*, 11 October 2002.
19. Ibid.
20. Todd Hertz, "Opinion Roundup: The Evangelical View of Israel," *Christianity Today*, 9 June 2003.
21. Ibid.

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