Jews and Evangelicals: Is It Really a Marriage Made in Heaven?  

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Back in 1994, the Anti-Defamation League ranked leaders of the evangelical Christian community with its report titled “The Religious Right: The Assault on Tolerance and Pluralism in America,” which asserted that groups such as Pat Robertson’s Christian Coalition were working to lower barriers separating church and state.

Such a breakdown would, implicitly, make it more difficult for Jews and other religious minorities to live fully as Americans.

But, since then, relations between Jews and evangelicals—who comprise up to one-third of the American populace and are becoming increasingly more difficult to pigeonhole politically—have improved markedly, even as tensions have surfaced between Jews and more liberal mainline Protestant churches.

American Christian political and financial support for Israel has been well-documented, but there’s also been cooperation on a number of other causes, including religious freedom, HIV/AIDS research, the environment and global warming. That evangelicals have become active in environmental causes has been cited by political scientists as evidence that evangelical politics has over the years become somewhat more liberal and bit more diversified.

Signs and Symptoms

According to a number of speakers at an academic conference held last week in Center City, called “Evangelical Jewish Relations: Politics, Policy and Theology,” some healthy signs do exist—in addition to some fault lines—in the emerging alliance between the two groups.

“We have to move away from one-dimensional views of what each side believes,” warned Marshall Breger, a law professor at the Catholic University of America, who has also held posts in both the Reagan and the first Bush administrations.

“There is very little understanding of evangelical theology among Jews. Jews want to use evangelicals to support their vision of Israel, and evangelicals need to love the Jews,” added Breger, who worked as Reagan’s liaison to the Jewish community.

He said that more sustained and meaningful religious dialogue needs to take place in order for any political alliances to be effective.

Sponsored by the Feinstein Center for American Jewish History at Temple University, the Jewish Theological Seminary and Baylor University, the two-day conference served as a follow-up to one held two years ago in New York. That program—the brainchild of the late Philadelphia Jewish communal leader Murray Friedman—led to the publication of the book Unusual Alliances: Evangelical and Jewish Relations, a collection of papers presented at the symposium. A follow-up volume is planned to reflect last week’s event.

James Tonkowich, president of the Institute of Religion and Democracy in Washington, D.C., said during his presentation that the generation of leaders that included Robertson and the late Rev. Jerry Falwell has lost influence, and no one speaks for the millions of Americans who fall under the evangelical rubric.

He added that evangelicals accept the Bible as literal truth and believe in fostering a personal relationship with Jesus Christ—tenets adhered to by many Christians who don’t self-identify as evangelicals.

Breger explained that, surprisingly, Reform Judaism—thought to represent the most socially and politically liberal segment of organized Jewry—has established the firmest ties with evangelical organizations. Orthodoxy groups, despite sharing similar views on many social issues, have remained more leery of any such association, perhaps reflecting a distrust of the gentile world, according to Breger.

Reform’s Religious Action Center had worked with evangelical groups to get Congress to pass the 1998 International Religious Freedom Act—which established a bipartisan commission on religious freedom—and called the government’s attention to global human-rights abuses.

Still, Israel is clearly where the agendas of Jews and evangelicals most naturally intersect.

According to John Green, director of the Ray C. Bliss Institute of Applied Politics at the University of Akron, religious Christians are largely behind the American public's support for Israel. In a survey he conducted, some 60 percent of white evangelical Protestants said that they were sympathetic toward Israel, the second highest group after Jews, with 95 percent.

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The lowest number was provided by Latino Catholics, at 24 percent.

Greater Understanding

On the flip side, Stephen M. Cohen, a sociologist at Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion, noted that his research shows a trend of declining commitment to Israel among younger generations of American Jews, revealing the importance of evangelicals for continued U.S. support for Israel.

Lunchtime speaker Zev Chafets, author of A Match Made in Heaven: American Jews, Christian Zionists, and One Man’s Exploration of the Weird and Wonderful Judeo-Evangelical Alliance, said that while the two groups seem like natural allies, many Jews he interviewed for his book held negative stereotypes about evangelicals.

Chafets—who once worked as a spokesman for Israeli Prime Minister Menachem Begin and was a founding editor of The Jerusalem Report—said that evangelicals overwhelmingly harbor positive sentiments toward Jews, but have felt hurt and rebuffed by certain Jewish attitudes, such as outright fear or paranoia.

The American-born Chafets singled out the AFL for criticism, particularly a 2003 speech where AFL’s national director Abraham Foxman sounded the alarm about Christian groups, whose goal, he insisted, “is to implement their Christian worldview, to Christianize America, to save us!”

Rabbi Eric J. Greenberg, director of interfaith policy at the AFL—who attended the conference last week—countered that the AFL has led inter-religious dialogue for decades, and that Foxman was referring to a small percentage of Christian leaders who seek to spread the separation clause of the U.S. Constitution. He was certainly not alluding to the vast majority of the evangelical community, added the rabbi.

Nonetheless, Chafets asserted that whatever political and theological differences exist between evangelicals and Jews, it’s in the best interests of Jews to help foster a better relationship.

“To me, it’s perverse to object to somebody else’s theology,” said Chafets, adding: “What difference does it make if you don’t believe in it?”

“In a war, friends are important. The Jews and Israel don’t have a wellspring of friends.”