

In Coalition Together

Nathan J. Diament

It isn't just about Israel. American Jews — whether politically liberal or conservative — can, should, and do work with Evangelical Christians. Headlines and stereotypes tend to hype the issues where a majority of (liberal) Jews are at odds with a majority of (conservative) Evangelicals — abortion and gay rights quickly come to mind; there begs the question, “Can we work together in support of Israel?” But there are many issues, and the list is growing, on which Jews and Evangelicals are working toward common goals.

Washington is where many public policy initiatives are pursued. The organized American Jewish community and its advocates pursue most initiatives by building broad coalitions with organizations and communities that reach beyond the Jewish community. Coalition politics leverage each community's members and political contacts to a level larger than the sum of its parts. Jewish representatives — whether Orthodox, Reform, or secular — have regularly and successfully pursued policy initiatives, both foreign and domestic, by partnering with Evangelicals.

On the domestic front, several religious liberty initiatives come readily to mind. Jewish groups across the spectrum, along with Evangelicals and other faith communities, are currently working to enact the Workplace Religious Freedom Act, a measure that would strengthen federal civil rights law to prod employers to accommodate the religious needs of their employees in the workplace. There is a growing partnership between Jews and some Evangelicals with regard to combating global warming, immigration law reform, and other serious matters.

These current efforts are an outgrowth of past achievements. Several years ago, a similarly broad coalition of Jews, Evangelicals, and others worked to enact the Religious Freedom Restoration Act and also the Religious Land Use Act, each of which gives greater protection to the religious liberties of individuals or institutions when they would otherwise be burdened by certain laws or regulations. Jewish and Evangelical leaders have worked together to reduce abuse in prisons, oppose coercive proselytizing in the military, and maintain religion-friendly tax benefits.

There are foreign policy initiatives apart

from Israel on which Jews and Evangelicals have toiled together as well. They include the promotion of religious freedom in oppressive countries as enacted by the International Religious Freedom Act of 1998; promoting debt relief for poor third-world nations, combating the genocide in Darfur (a crisis for which Evangelicals were raising the alarm long before the Jewish community), and initiatives to reduce the spread of HIV/AIDS in Africa.

All of the above, it must be emphasized, are coalition efforts wherein the “liberal” views of the Jewish community dovetail easily with the commitments of the Evangelical community. This is without even getting to areas — such as greater government aid for parochial schools or opposing the full-scale adoption of the gay rights agenda — where the Orthodox Jewish community parts ways with our co-religionists and continues to partner with conservative Christians.

Finally, it is worth noting that we need not forsake our deeply held, faith-informed positions on issues when engaging in such partnerships. When the Orthodox Union announced its support for federal funding for embryonic stem cell research, I was questioned by more than one representative of Evangelical organizations as to why we would do such a thing. When I explained to them that the position resulted from an extensive consultation with rabbinic authorities applying ancient Jewish teachings to a modern problem, my Evangelical interlocutors expressed disappointment but great respect for our position. In fact, it was the strongest rationale I could have offered them in this case — for they truly understand the demands upon adherents to a faith.

Questions to Prompt Further Discussion

1. Should Jews embrace “Evangelical friends” and their support of Israel?
2. What are the dimensions and limitations of that “friendship”?
3. How is the Evangelical-Jewish relationship similar to and different from the relationship between Jews and Catholics?

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