

Alan M. Shore  
509 Texas St.  
Bellingham, WA 98225

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*Jewish Believers and the Religious Right*

The story is told of a recently arrived Jewish immigrant in Brooklyn who found himself on the street among a throng of delirious Dodger fans. They were wildly celebrating the one and only World Series victory "Dem Bums" ever achieved while they played at Ebbets Field. "What's going on?", he asked his American cousin. "The Dodgers won! The Dodgers won!" the cousin cried, clapping him on the shoulder. The immigrant was speechless with bewilderment. Then he ventured to ask, "Is this good or bad for the Jews?"

*Jews and the Religious Right*

Is this good or bad for the Jews? It is a question that has reverberated throughout the centuries-- a question that is asked whenever we have found ourselves buffeted by the forces of history and the prevailing winds of whichever culture we have been a part of. It is perhaps understandable that Jews have been such sharp eyed observers of changes in political and social climate. Again and again we have been deprived of even the most fragile of footholds in societies that have tolerated our presence for a time, only to turn against us overnight. Only in America would we find for the first time a way of life that did not depend on the whim of this or that defender of the faith or feudal lord. A way of life that rested on the legal guarantees that undergird the social contract. It is no accident that it is the judicial branch of the United States government that has been the one most profoundly shaped by Jewish presence and thought. Supreme Court Justices Frankfurter, Brandeis, Goldberg, Fortas and Ginzburg are just a few of the names that are

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written into the illustrious history of Jewish contribution to United States jurisprudence. If there is a people equipped to understand the authority of Law, who is it if not the Jews?

Moreover, elective office has also proven a fruitful endeavor for American Jews, particular in urban centers. The late New York Sen. Jacob Javits was widely acknowledged to be the finest mind in Congress during many years of honorable service. Mayor Ed Koch parleyed his colorful personality and love for New York City into national recognition. And countless Jewish political activists and behind-the-scenes contributors have made the Jewish people a formidable presence on the political scene.

In recent times, the United States has seen a resurgence of the presence of religion in the political arena. Books like "Kingdoms in Conflict" by Chuck Colson and "The Naked Public Square" by Richard John Neuhaus have made the case for a Christian political agenda whose purpose is to reassert Christian faith as a factor to be reckoned with in the arena of public policy. Movements such as the Moral Majority and the more recent Christian Coalition have sought to apply these ideas. Is this good or bad for the Jews? The response of the vast majority of American Jews to the rise of the Religious Right speaks for itself. It is, by and large, one of utmost suspicion.

This is so for a number of reasons. First and foremost is the ancient, well grounded fear that a reunion of Christian doctrine and political power spells hardship for Jews. The persecutions in

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Germany, Russia, Poland, England and Spain are simply too vivid to forget. Again and again history has shown that when Church and State unite, Jews suffer. Therefore, it ought not be surprising that wPat Robertson speaks in terms of a "Christian" America, Jews interpret his words as a threat. Or that when Patrick Buchanan conjures up the symbol of a cultural "holy war", the image is more than figurative to many Jews. The militant tone of some frustrated evangelicals worries many Jews who shudder at the thought of Christians as a force in law making.

The element of religious faith is only a part of the deep antipathy many Jews feel for the Religious Right. Another component is plain old politics. Until now the most recent concerted efforts to bring Christianity into the political arena have come from the conservative end of the spectrum. This, almost more than anything, has raised red flags among Jewish voters. Jewish social activists do not object to religious language *per se*. Many rallied around Dr. Martin Luther King despite the fact that Rev. King unabashedly clothed his call for racial justice in biblical imagery, much of it from the New Testament. But let that imagery be enlisted by a Ralph Reed of the Christian Coalition, and the reaction is quite a different story. The plain fact is that many Jews feel almost no empathy with conservative causes, and characterize religious conservatives as mindless Bible-thumpers.

#### *Jews and the Political Left*

"Why are all Jews leftists?", Richard Nixon was said to have

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queried Henry Kissinger. There is enough truth in this generalization for it to be instructive. Again, the reasons are rooted in Jewish history.

Since the late nineteenth century Jews have traditionally affiliated with leftist political parties and causes. Very early on the leftists projected a far more inclusive image in an effort to woo the immigrants who would soon become citizens and voters. Too, the interests of the lower socioeconomic classes have, until quite recently, been the province of leftist political forces. If you were poor, downtrodden and a minority, your home was the Democrat Party or some party or movement further to the left. The contours of this early shaping of the political landscape for Jews are discernible to this day.

The legacy of those early days has provided a firm foundation for Jewish solidarity with many present day liberal causes. Part of that legacy is a deep seated antipathy on the part of many Jews toward the Republican party--the party perceived as the bastion of the White Anglo-Saxon Protestant aristocracy; a group not known for its warmth toward Jews. Of course there are exceptions. But for the most part, it was known that the Republicans stood for the *status quo*, and that unless you were white, Protestant and native born you were unwelcome. In the case of the Jews, it was the cause closest to the hearts of Jewish social activists that placed them most squarely against Republican standard bearers.

*Labor and Liberalism*

The cause that Jews espoused most passionately was the American labor movement. Indeed, poor working conditions and their attendant social unrest provided a most important impetus for Jews to migrate to the new world in the first place. Jews had been active labor organizers even in Europe. A Jewish labor movement sprang up there in the 1880's, leading to numerous strikes among cobblers, carpenters, tailors and others who were laboring fourteen to eighteen hours a day at pitiful wages. Tension increased. Jews were jailed as political prisoners. Pogroms began anew. Economic conditions combined with social unrest motivated millions to take the uncomfortable and frightening three week journey in steerage across the Atlantic from Hamburg to New York. The cost was \$34.

The Jews brought their passion for workers' rights with them, and found they were warmly received in the Democrat, Socialist and even the Communist parties. Soon there was a Jewish press, epitomized by Abraham Cahan's *Jewish Daily Forward*, that provided a focal point for political radicalism. The radical message of workers' solidarity soon branched out into other agendas for social change. It should not come as a surprise that for many Jews faith became non-essential. It became fashionable to view the old world religion as just another outmoded convention that deserved to be left behind. For many, agnosticism and atheism became synonymous with progressive politics. This identification has left a lasting imprint on American Jewish political consciousness.

*Jewish Culture and the Religious Right*

Politics is not the only reason for Jewish hostility toward

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conservative Christian causes. There are cultural reasons also. Jews are not only steeped in liberal ideology, but are highly committed to the preservation of cultural pluralism. Conservative Christians are not known for their eagerness to celebrate differences. Not only that, Jews in the United States have traditionally gravitated toward urban centers. It has been largely in cities that Jews have made their communities and contributions. Conservative Christians identify with Middle America, and love to point at cities as places riddled with crime, and all manner of social ills. And so they are. But in demonizing large urban centers as the chief culprits of societal breakdown, the Christian right alienates many Jews who thrive on city life. Too, conservative Christians as a group seem to project a deep seated suspicion of diversity and artistic expression- two aspects of American urban life Jews have traditionally celebrated. Add to this mix the flagship causes of the religious right- pro-life issues, school prayer, and the opposition of "special rights" for homosexuals- and it's no wonder it finds so few friends among the Jewish community.

Another aspect of the conflict between the Religious Right and the traditional political profile cultivated by the Jews is one that has direct bearing on the *Jews for Jesus*. It is the connection writer Jeffrey Goldberg attempts to draw between the Christian Coalition, Pat Robertson, and the task of Jewish evangelism. Writing in *New York* magazine, Goldberg villifies Robertson not just because he is a religious conservative, but because the American Center for

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Law and Justice, the legal advocacy group connected with *The 700 Club* went to bat for *Jews For Jesus* against the Jewish Community Relations Council of New York. For Goldberg, Robertson's viewpoint as a Christian conservative moves in tandem with what he refers to as "a far more pernicious form of anti-Semitism- one that wants to see the world rid of Jews. . . a movement that uses deception and distortion to convert Jews to Christianity." (1)

The article concludes by quoting Rabbi James Rudin of the American Jewish Committee, who succinctly sums up the position taken throughout- - "If Robertson is using his empire to foster something that aims for the spiritual extinction of Judaism," the rabbi says, "then he's no friend of the Jewish people." (2)

And of course by extension, if you're a friend of Robertson, then neither are you.

#### *The Christian Church- A House Divided*

If Jewish believers are uncertain as to how we may respond to these developments, we are not alone. Hosea's description of the political and social upheaval that marked the final days of the northern kingdom seems to be coming true before our very eyes.

*Then they will say, "We have no king  
because we did not revere the Lord.  
But even if we had a king,  
what could he do for us?"*

*They make false promises  
take false oaths  
and make agreements;*

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*therefore lawsuits spring up*

*like poisonous weeds in a plowed*

*field. (Hosea 10:3-4 NIV)*

The bitter fruit of the widespread distrust of our political parties and elected officials is a deeply felt failure of confidence in the system itself. Our civil discourse is now characterized by polarization and name-calling. Sadly, these divisions have made themselves felt even among our Christian leaders,

For example, an article which appeared in *Christianity Today* in the summer of 1995 reported the deep rifts that have developed among evangelicals over the nature of political involvement. In response to Christian Coalition's "Contract with the American Family", a group of Christian leaders including such names as author and sociologist Tony Campolo, Jim Wallis of *Sojourners*, InterVarsity Christian Fellowship president Stephen Hayner, and Habitat for Humanity founder Millard Fuller issued a "Cry for Renewal" that put forward a scathing critique of the Christian Right. "The moral authority necessary to mitigate the excesses of power has been replaced by a thirst for political influence. . . The almost total identification of the Religious Right with the new Republican majority in Washington is a dangerous liaison of religion with political power." (3)

This expression of outrage did not go unchallenged. The same article cites Dr. James Skillen, executive director of the Center for Political Justice, who has himself expressed reservations about the Christian Coalition's agenda. Nonetheless, he called the "Cry for Renewal" "a reactionary document, a plea to be heard and get



attention by people who fear that- because of the Christian Coalition's newly achieved clout - they are no longer viewed as significant voices in the public dialogue." (4)

Disagreement among evangelicals is not restricted to those with differing political philosophies. Colin Powell's flirtation with a run for the Republican presidential nomination was enough to create a public rift between such high profile evangelical conservatives as Gary Bauer of the Family Research Council and Dr. James Dobson of Focus on the Family on the one hand and author and well known conservative William Bennet and Ralph Reed of the Christian Coalition on the other side of the controversy. What was the issue? Colin Powell's pro-choice position with regard to abortion. Bauer and Dobson were aghast that Bennet and Reed could encourage the candidacy of someone at such odds with what has been the keystone cause of conservative Christian political activism.

*Jewish Believers- Voices in the Wilderness*

Where do Jewish believers fit into all this? Not surprisingly, we find ourselves caught between two poles, each of which exerts a powerful pull. Something in us resonates with Jewish activism in the righteous social causes of previous decades that is so much a part of the story of Jews in America. But as believers in Y'shua we have felt reluctant to follow any political party or cause in an uncritical way. Where does God want us to stand?

There is no doubt but that the Religious Right strikes some chords with evangelicals including *Jews for Jesus*. Yet, its defects are also worth noting. Through a critique of the movement that

affirms its strong points and assesses its weaknesses a positive agenda for Jewish believers may be developed that not only stresses faith, but also addresses the kinds of issues Jews have traditionally cared about.

On the one hand, we must confess a substantial amount of agreement with the beliefs and concerns of those evangelicals who constitute the Religious Right. In a world of watered down faith, polite pretense, and superficial agreement, evangelicals who hold to the authority of scripture and the reality of Messiah are our brothers and sisters. Their causes are in many instances our own. After all, who among us is not alarmed by the seemingly wholesale secularization of our learning institutions and the media? Who among us is not disturbed by government that interprets the establishment clause of the first amendment as protection *from* religious faith rather than protection *for* it? And who among us is not aghast at the plight of the unborn?

Yet there are pitfalls Jewish believers must avoid if we are to preserve our prophetic witness--especially to other Jews.

The first is the tendency to view faith through the prism of any single political ideology. This unfortunate habit tends to produce a political agenda in search of a religious faith rather than an exploration of how a well developed, articulate Biblical faith impacts political and social issues across the board. Many Jews in the United States find the choice of issues and causes embraced by the Religious Right particularly alienating. The emphasis on the anti-abortion, anti-immigrant, anti-gay, anti-social program

message is perceived as narrow and negative by socially conscious, traditionally liberal Jews. To be sure, the right end of the spectrum does not hold a monopoly on narrowness. If the Religious Right is guilty of restricting its concerns to the agenda of the Republicans, Liberation and other leftist theologies are just as guilty of using a skewed interpretation of scripture to validate the agenda of Marxism. In each case, the error is in wanting a humanly devised set of ideas to dictate the shape of the gospel message, when it should be the gospel that shapes the message. Dianne Knippers, president of the Institute on Religion and Democracy observes, "The Religious Left's rhetoric against the Republican agenda is no less a liaison of religion with political power than the Religious Right's support for it." (5)

Another pitfall believers should be aware of is alignment with groups whose methods cast dishonor on the cause of Christ. We must not allow ourselves to forget that it is possible to win a battle and lose the war. We who consider ourselves ambassadors for Christ need to remember that we do not wrestle against flesh and blood. For this reason the weapons of those so eager to gain and wield political power in this world are not ours to use. We should repudiate as vigorously as possible any person or group that seeks the upper hand by the use of unscrupulous methods, the spreading of slander, or the expression of hatred. Nothing that leads us beyond the bounds of God's love in our discussions with others can do anything but hurt our witness. Yet, guided and empowered by that love, is there anything in God's will that is impossible for us?

Regardless of the opinions we hold of our leaders we are called

upon to pray for them. When a television evangelist is depicted hawking copies of the particularly vicious "Clinton Chronicles" on a gospel show, the negative image many Jews hold of churches is only reinforced. The question Jewish believers and evangelists must come to grips with is how we may formulate a message that meets our other Jewish brothers and sisters at the point of their political and social concerns without adulterating the message of the gospel.

### *What about politics and Jewish Evangelism?*

There are those for whom this question is of little value. After all, is not the gospel a timeless message that speaks primarily to the spiritual condition of humanity? Why should we get bogged down in carnal matters that have little to do with eternal destinies? I want to suggest that this view of evangelism, particularly Jewish evangelism, is far too narrow.

The teaching of Y'shua regarding the Kingdom of God conveys a vital component of the gospel. It is not only individual hearts and minds that are meant to be changed. The entire world including its social structures are to be remade as well. "The creation waits in eager expectation for the sons of God to be revealed." (Romans 8:19 NIV) The liberating proclamation of the Messiah transforms the world from injustice, violence and enmity to justice, peace and reconciliation. It is not for nothing that He is called King. *of Kings*

This message did not come out of a vacuum. The Messiah's Word enhances and fulfills the prophetic utterances of Isaiah, Jeremiah and the rest. These voices, or at least their echoes, still inform the things that matter to Jews. Post-enlightenment Jewish thought

did not originate the themes of social justice and civil rights. Their source is far older than that. It is the authentic knowledge of God that the scriptures preserve and enjoin. Moses and the prophets knew that social justice would spring from true worship and obedience to God. It is this very message Y'shua came to bear and to fulfill. What many politically active Jews fail to see is that any vision of social justice will soon break down if it excludes right relationship with God.

However, the self-understanding Jews have preserved regarding their role as redemptive agents in a broken world and the Jewish believers' response to the call to be salt and light can be an important point of contact.

This is a challenge to all who wish to bear witness to Jews, particularly in the U.S. First and foremost, evangelism is the good news of the atoning sacrifice and of Y'shua. But the meaning of the cross and its ramifications encompass virtually every aspect of what it means to live in this world. Evangelism the message of salvation and hope for the world to come. But it is also the message of how God's presence confronts this present world and its need in every conceivable way. Paul's goal to be "all things to all people" was a determination to speak the language of the gospel to every possible circumstance.

The prophetic component of Y'shua's teaching is also part of the gospel message. It is therefore a part of evangelism. Does this mean that we must fall into the pitfalls of partisanship, special interest, and power politics? Certainly not. But it does mean that as evangelists we must be conversant with the things that people

care about. Politics is about values. The question of where we derive our values cuts to the heart of our view of the world and our perception of the human condition. Such themes invariably lead to deeper questions concerning the nature of the universe. It is ironic that the two topics of conversation conventional wisdom warns us to avoid--politics and religion--are so much a part of each other.

The presence of faith in politics is a subject of widespread concern for our fellow Jews. Why not treat as an open door? In doing so, we may find unexpected opportunities to make the most of--for our conversation to be "always full of grace, seasoned with salt, so that you may know how to answer everyone." (Colossians 4:6 NIV)

The current restlessness on the political scene constitutes a challenge to Jewish believers and evangelists to search the Scriptures and our prophetic tradition with new eyes. If we do, we may see the life-giving message of the Prince of Peace take root in unlooked for places, and in unexpected ways.

Endnotes:

- 1) Jeffrey Goldberg. "Are You A Completed Jew?" *New York* 2 October, 1995, p.40.
- 2) Ibid. p.41
- 3) Carolyn Curtis, "Putting Out a Contract" *Christianity Today*, 17 July, 1995, p.54.
- 4) Ibid.
- 5) "Political Partisanship Revisited" *Christianity Today*, 17 July, 1995, p.54.