

How The Fellowship Builds Bridges Between Christians and Jews

Passion pours out of Yael Eckstein's heart and life—a passion no doubt passed on via her father, the late Rabbi Yechiel Eckstein, founder of the International Fellowship of Christians and Jews (“The Fellowship”).

Sixteen years ago, this passion moved Yael, one of Rabbi Eckstein's three daughters, to make aliyah, moving to Israel from her home in the U.S. and planting her life there. Today, it calls her to carry out her father's legacy, building bridges of understanding between Christians and Jews as well as far-reaching support for the state of Israel. And tomorrow, she knows she will do whatever she can to bless Israel and, by extension, the many Christians committed to the land and its people.

“As soon as I made aliyah [immigrated to Israel] and saw the amazing work that my father, Yechiel Eckstein, of blessed memory, was doing here on the ground on behalf of millions of Christians around the world, I said, ‘I have to be part of it,’” Yael explains. “And since that day, I’ve moved from working in the mailroom to working in almost every position in the organization.”

“Every position” now includes Yael's role as president and CEO of The Fellowship. When Rabbi Eckstein died unexpectedly on Feb. 6, 2019, the plan of succession was already in place. Months before, as he was planning his retirement, The Fellowship Board of Directors had independently named Yael as president-elect. Shortly after his passing, she assumed her new role.

Yael shares what God did to bring this about. “We had an

amazing chairman of our board named John French; he was chairman of the board for the first 20 years that The Fellowship was established. And every year, on the forms that you would have to fill out for the government to be registered nonprofit, there was a line that said, 'What's the transition plan?'"

Yael says that every year, French, a believing Christian, wrote something in that line she doubts any other organization in all of America would have written: "When a transition plan needs to happen, God will send us the right person."

"And what's amazing is that John saw me as president-elect," she adds. "And indeed, there was no better timing than God's timing. And we see that so clearly now, in hindsight."

The transition after her father's death may have seemed sudden, but Yael stepped into it with fervor, believing God had called her "for such a time as this," she says.

Standing With Israel

In much the same way, God called Yael's father, a young rabbi just out of college, to Chicago in 1977. His mission? To rally support against a march planned by neo-Nazis to take place in Skokie, Illinois, a suburb where a large number of Holocaust survivors lived.

"We take for granted that it's a given, this Jewish-Christian relationship," Yael adds. But in the tense situation her father faced, a miracle happened she says he never could have predicted.

"Local Christian leaders came to him and said, 'We want to stand with you, unified, against this march,'" she says. "And it was the first exposure that my father had with the Christian community who prays for Israel, who loves Israel, who stands shoulder-to-shoulder with the Jewish community."

Until that expression of unity in the face of hatred and division, the support for Israel by Christians was isolated, happening only inside churches, Yael says. "The Jewish community didn't know about it. The larger population—the Jewish community around the world—didn't know about it."

As Rabbi Eckstein came to understand the respect and love among Christians for Israel and to find what Yael says was "so much commonality between the Jewish and Christian community," he made a prophetic declaration: "This has to be something bigger."

"And that's when he started the International Fellowship of Christians and Jews in 1983," Yael explains, adding that her father said he felt like Christopher Columbus. "He discovered a whole new world in this amazing friendship and partnership with the Christian community."

That "whole new world" expanded through the years, as Rabbi Eckstein led The Fellowship to become the "largest Christian-supported humanitarian agency helping Israel and the Jewish people around the world," raising more than \$127 million each year from its 1.7 million Christian donors, per its website. The nonprofit has raised more than \$2 billion altogether for programs helping Jews in Israel, the former Soviet Union, Latin America, Ethiopia and many other countries.

Continuing the Vision

God used her education and work experience along with her family background to prepare Yael for her current role. She received her education at both U.S. and Israeli institutions, including biblical studies at Torat Chesed Seminary in Israel; Jewish and sociology studies at Queens College in New York; and additional study at Hebrew University in Jerusalem. Prior to her present position, she served as global executive vice president, senior vice president, and director of program development and ministry outreach for The Fellowship. She, her

husband and their children—all four of whom were born in Israel—make their home north of Jerusalem.

As The Fellowship's president and CEO, Yael now oversees all ministry programs and serves as the organization's international spokesperson. In the two years since assuming this position, she has partnered with other global organizations, visited with world leaders on issues of shared concern, and appeared on national television, including a guest appearance on The 700 Club. She is the author or co-author of multiple books, including her most recent, *Generation to Generation*, which, she says she wrote "based on the traditions around the scriptural holidays that my parents passed on to me and that I'm passing on to my children," adding that the book is "so relevant today in this modern world, where so often faith can be lost, that I believe there's a lot that Christians can learn from it as well."

Yael shares her insights into life in Israel, the Jewish faith, and Judeo-Christian relations weekly on The Fellowship's radio program, *Holy Land Moments*, broadcast daily on nearly 1,000 stations across the globe. And in February 2021, she launched her podcast, *Nourish Your Biblical Roots*, on the Charisma Podcast Network.

"It's going to connect people to my life here in Israel, with my children, with the organization," Yael says. "This year, we're going to follow the weekly Torah portions that Jews around the world read in synagogue and explore together how that's relevant both to Jews and Christians in this modern world today."

Bringing Scriptures to Life

Continuing her father's vision is "a huge honor," Yael says. "And on top of the enormous belief I have in our mission, The Fellowship is Israel's largest philanthropic organization."

What does that look like in real numbers? Yael says in 2020

alone, The Fellowship helped over 2 million Jewish people. In line with her father's legacy, "Everything we do with The Fellowship—all of our programs—are directly spoken about in the Bible," she says. "That's where we look to see where we should be involved in the area of philanthropy."

And today, just as Rabbi Eckstein learned so many years ago, believers in Jesus are among The Fellowship's most important strategic partners. To make decisions about where to invest the generous gifts it receives, The Fellowship returns to the pages of Scripture. The Bible says to "feed the hungry, clothe the naked, shelter the homeless, care for the orphans and the widows," Yael explains.

"And that's exactly what we do," she says. "In Israel, we feed over 25,000 elderly every single month, bringing them medicine and heat in the winter. And we also have programs where we provide clothing for orphans in Israel. We help orphanages for Jewish children in the former Soviet Union."

The Fellowship's responsibilities to care for others have only increased since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, Yael says. "Just like the rest of the world, Israel is really having a hard time with COVID," she says. "The level of poverty has been increasing. And the level of vulnerability for the elderly has gotten to a place that there's so much desperation."

Even in this dire situation, The Fellowship, through the gifts of its caring donors, is making a difference. "We're continuing to increase daily the amount of emergency aid that we're distributing in heating aid, medicine and food to the Jewish people, specifically Holocaust survivors, those who are the most in need, the most desperate, who have nowhere else to turn," Yael says. "And what's amazing to me is that in everything we do, we tell the people who are receiving our aid, 'This is donated by Christians who love you.'"

Although Yael says around 175,000 Holocaust survivors are still living in Israel, it won't be long until there are none left. Estimates show that around two of these precious people die per hour, she says. "That's the urgency within The Fellowship's mission, to get to these people in need before it's too late."

In addition to caring for the vulnerable, The Fellowship offers another key program that also comes from the Word of God, Yael says. "We look at the Scriptures, and we see the words of Ezekiel and of Isaiah and Jeremiah that the Jewish people will come home to Israel in what people know of as 'the ingathering,'" she says. "The Fellowship supports aliyah flights, rescuing Jews from at-risk countries and bringing them to Israel. So it is such an honor to not only be continuing my father's legacy, but also continuing to bring the words of the Scriptures to life."

Partnering With God and One Another

That solid foundation in Scripture, combined with an emphasis on the practical outworking of faith, has carried The Fellowship through the challenges of 2020 and well into the first half of 2021.

"I always say actions speak louder than words," Yael says. "And so as I'm here in Israel, breaking all these taboos, telling the Jewish community, 'The Christian community loves us; they stand with us; they are our greatest friends. They are our greatest strategic partners.'"

"Then suddenly comes a COVID year, with our Christian friends facing this crisis as much as we are in Israel," she adds. "But with their tangible support, we have not only been able to continue to give, but to actually increase it. It's inspired the Israeli government to partner with The Fellowship and say, 'We want to have programs with the Christian community to feed the elderly.' And The Fellowship is honored

to be the conduit.”

So what lies ahead for Yael Eckstein and The Fellowship? “I anticipate God working through us as He has for the past 38 years. And I believe that He has awesome things in store. I think that any organization has to be really led with two hands: one, the hand of faith, recognizing that you are in a position that is blessed by God to be able to help others. And every day I wake up and realize the enormous responsibility I have, that individual Christians and Jews around the world are giving their tithe through The Fellowship, and what a huge responsibility it is of mine to make sure every dollar gets exactly where it needs to go.”

Yael says with the second hand, she runs the organization by “strategy and professionalism. Every nonprofit should be run the same way as a business, looking at very clear goals, very clear deliverables, making sure you’re on track. And instead of the focus being, ‘How can we make the company or shareholders more money?’ what we’re focused on is ‘How can we get more people food who are in need?’

“And so I think that we have been very obedient at The Fellowship with both of those areas,” she says. “And I believe that when you create a vessel—a healthy, faithful, strong vessel—God dwells within it.”

Those who wish to be a part of that vessel and learn more about The International Fellowship of Christians and Jews may explore the organization’s wide range of programs at .

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