

‘He Connected Christians to Israel’: A Jew’s Tribute to Rabbi Eckstein

“Jonathan—call me when you can—it’s important.”

That’s the message I woke up to Wednesday morning from a friend on the West coast. A few minutes later I learned that our mutual friend, Ossie Mills, had died suddenly at 58. We chatted about Ossie, how I got to know him through a unique project he was running to bring Christians to Israel, how it was in fact Ossie who introduced us. And we consoled one another.

Fifteen hours later, my day ended with sharing news and memories about the untimely death of another great man whose life’s work was about connecting Christians to Israel. I spent the last hours of the day coordinating rides to his funeral which, according to Jewish tradition, would take place the next day.

Rabbi Yechiel Eckstein died in Jerusalem, a place that was dear to his heart and where he moved after spending most of his life in the U.S. He was an Orthodox rabbi; a devoted husband, father and grandfather; and the visionary founder of the International Fellowship of Christians and Jews. Part of his being a visionary was who he was, an out-of-the-box thinker and passionate Jew and Zionist. And part of it was his being literally among the pioneers of building bridges among Christians from the Jewish side.

For nearly four decades, Rabbi Eckstein built a means for Christians to understand a biblical imperative to express their support for Israel. Over the years, the IFCJ, under his leadership raised more than \$1.3 billion. The good that has been done through this, over nearly two generations, will last

for generations. That's not just platitudes, it's fact.

Countless Israelis and Jews in distant countries have benefited from Rabbi Eckstein's vision and commitment. Many never knew, and never will know, that they were helped because of him and the international network of support, the fellowship, he created. No one had a greater heart for Israel than Rabbi Eckstein, but his heart suddenly stopped this week. Filling this void will be hard.

Like many out-of-the box visionaries, Rabbi Eckstein was not a stranger to controversy. From a Jewish perspective, especially when he started, reaching out and embracing Christians was bold. If not challenging Jewish traditions as an Orthodox rabbi, he challenged Jewish discomfort and attitudes about Christians. Just two generations after the Holocaust, it was nearly unheard of for any significant public expression of care or concern about Israel and the Jewish people coming from Christians. Most Jews remained untrusting of ulterior motives, and thousands of years of history and baggage that left Jews persecuted in the name of "the church."

Rabbi Eckstein broke many of those barriers down and sowed the soil that allowed many others—Jews and Christians—to embrace the importance of mutual fellowship and support.

I am privileged to be one of those he inspired. I consider him a mentor in many ways. When God called me to be a bridge between Jews and Christians in a small church in Cleveland, Tennessee, I had never heard of Rabbi Eckstein. In fact, I didn't know there were others who were doing what he was doing, and what I had just been called to do.

Before I moved to Israel, I wrote to Rabbi Eckstein seeking his counsel. We had the privilege to connect a number of times, in Israel and different parts of the U.S. Or, I should say, I had the privilege. It was important to me that, on multiple occasions, he affirmed my work was important. Once he

asked me, "Why are you not working for us?"

While I never was his employee or immediate partner, we connected often enough that I'm sure he knew that I was in fact working "for us" in the broader Jewish-Christian bridge building sense. On one of the many trips we each made throughout the U.S., we ended up spending Shabbat in the same community together. I had the dual privilege of seeing him "on," masterfully speaking with no notes, to a crowd of Jews about why what he was doing was important. And on quieter moments that weekend, we engaged in personal banter about more important things such as our family, his recently deceased father and why we each did what we were doing.

Rabbi Eckstein's fingerprints are truly all over Israel. The national media tributes to him affirm that. His presence will be felt for some time, albeit without his soothing voice. And for some time, visitors will note his joyous face upon arrival and departure in IFCJ ads though the jet-bridges at Ben Gurion Airport. A bridge builder indeed.

Why I am doing what I am doing was underscored to me today, vividly.

Around a recent unremarkable mid-50th birthday, I pondered a serious life and death issue, for me at least. Neither my father, my grandfather nor my great-grandfather lived to see 60. Each died from something different, but hereditary all the same: cancer, heart disease and anti-Semitism. I know there are things I can do to prevent the possibility of some of these, but ultimately, I believe my destiny is in God's hands.

So, on the occasion of my unremarkable birthday I prayed about what my legacy would be, whether I made it out of my 50s or not. As I learned from Rabbi Eckstein that Shabbat we spent together, the first answer to that is my family. Being blessed with a grandson now, this part of my legacy took on a new dimension.

Professionally, I have done many wonderful and even outstanding things on behalf of some good and important organizations. I spend most of my waking days working. Yet, I realized that my professional legacy would “just” be the sum of a variety of jobs. That wasn’t good enough. So I started my own organization, , to address building bridges between Jews and Christians from a new approach. Not to duplicate or compete, and certainly not to look at Christians as a faith-based ATM with some just trying to get money out. On one of my recent trips to the U.S., after hearing about what I am doing, someone commented, “Oh, you mean like Rabbi Eckstein.”

Of course I could never do what he did and would never have the hubris to think I could. But as an inheritor of the Jewish tradition that he pioneered, I have joined a growing number of Jews who actively embrace working with Christians, not to appease a boss wants to raise more money, but for the value and importance of these relations. To fellowship.

Pondering the early death of a friend and mentor the same day, the reason for my doing what I am doing has never been more evident. I don’t need a statue or a street named after me to have a meaningful legacy. I just want to do good, and do good in a way that will outlive me and continue beyond my time on earth. If God gives me 67 years to do His work as he gave to Rabbi Eckstein, I want to make the most out of it. If I get that long, not only will I have spent about as much time building bridges as he did, but I know I can achieve a meaningful legacy. As he did.

Many Jews don’t understand the concept of fellowship as Christians do. I pray that this will inspire more good Christians to work with and embrace people like me, and for more Jews to do the same. To truly fellowship together. I don’t pretend to be his successor, but our work building bridges is important. Whether this is your calling as it is mine and it was his, or not, please join me. {eo}

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