

Orthodox Jew: Israeli Proselytizing Bill Killed, But Damage was Done

Last Sunday, a story broke on All Israel News about a bill that was introduced in Israel's Knesset that was complicated, controversial and confusing. From there, the story was picked up by others and created a stir all around the world, among Christians, between Jews and Christians who work closely together, and with religious and civic leaders of some of Israel's democratic allies.

By late Wednesday afternoon, Prime Minister Netanyahu tweeted in Hebrew and English, "We will not advance any law against the Christian community." This seemed to put the issue to rest, but the damage was already done. What was the issue and why did it create such a stir?

The proposed bill was alleged by some as preventing Christians from preaching the gospel in Israel, even making it illegal. It was probably intended as a law that would restrict Christians sharing their faith specifically with the intent to convert people to Christianity.

But the bill was wider, speaking of efforts to persuade a member of one faith to convert to another, thus protecting Jews, Christians, Moslems, Bahai and others from coercive efforts of another faith. The bill did specifically single out Christians, but was not restricted to Christians. It was inferred that the target of these actions would be Israeli Jews, but it also applied to Muslims trying to convert Christians, or any proselytizing of any person from one faith to another.

But the bill was vague, perhaps deliberately, or perhaps because it was just not well thought through. It's not the

first time the Knesset member (MK) Moshe Gafni has proposed this bill or a version thereof. It may have been more of a knee-jerk, visceral and even pro-forma legislation, even though it's been proposed before but never passed. So why was it news now?

To be clear, as an Orthodox Jew, I am opposed to specific actions directed specifically at Jews, and specifically in Israel, the Jewish state, to convert Jews to Christianity or anything else. After millennia of being subject to the whims and threats of living as a dispersed people among the nations, at best tolerated and often persecuted and the subject of pressure from the religions of the societies in which we lived, now that we are home we should be able to live here, freely, without fear of religious coercion.

Yet I am also reminded of the sage words of a Jewish friend who died last year. He was less bothered by Christians or others "sharing their faith" to convert us because in the marketplace of faith and ideas, Judaism has more than solid footing to stand on. Jews, he would say, are party to God's original and unbreakable covenant. As such, we have our unique personal relationship with and obligations to God that Gentiles do not have, and to which gentiles are not obliged.

I believe efforts directed at Jews to convert us are theologically and historically problematic. They are also the polar opposite of the kinds of relationships that we, Jews and Christians, should and need to have.

I spend the vast amount of my waking hours building bridges between Jews and Christians. I discuss my views openly with Christian friends, sometimes uncomfortably, but always honestly and from a perspective of respect and sensitivity. I don't expect Christians to know or understand why Jews find this so offensive, or understand millennia of church history persecuting Jews, including forced conversions and even murder, in the name of Jesus. It's ancient history which most

Christians don't know, but for which many Christians still atone today. When good Christians learn about and understand this, they are horrified.

But Jews know. It's part of the baggage that we have brought along with us for thousands of years. From slavery in Egypt to the destruction of the Temples, our exiles, being persecuted by the church for centuries, in the Islamic world more recently and in modern times with the Holocaust, these are all part of our history which we cannot shed or forget.

This is part of the motivation behind the introduction of the legislation, and the overall sensitivity to proselytizing and even anger and distrust that it breeds among Jews.

I write not to cast aspersions on Christians today, just to explain part of the perspective of how Jewish Israelis look at the issue, and why such legislation is being proposed to begin with. But I write also to explain why the bill was problematic. While there were many problems with the proposed legislation and the spirit behind it, there are many reasons for it and issues to which Christians who do wish to have a sincere relationship with Israel need to understand.

As an Orthodox Jew, I choose to spend my waking hours serving the calling of building bridges between Jews and Christians and Christians with Israel. It's not always easy. There's pushback from both Jews and Christians.

Sometimes I feel like I am engaged in a contact sport. I believe that as much as we have significant theological things about which we disagree, there are many more things about which we can agree and build upon.

It's easy to build bridges when there's no conflict, or when Israel's enemies are also enemies of Christianity, and we have a common agenda. It's harder when challenges come from among Jews or Christians, and actually (or are perceived to be) targeting one another. This is when we need to redouble our

efforts and create understanding, even if we still disagree.

Ironically, I read about the proposed legislation on the morning of the last day of my Run for Zion program, the first Christian oriented program around the Jerusalem marathon. Our goal is to build bridges based on mutual respect, from our respective traditions, "blessing Israel with every step." Together.

The opposite of building bridges is building barriers. I see this proposed legislation more about the later. I don't think that the people who proposed the law care about building bridges, or the ramifications of their bill even if it was with good intent from their perspective. But for those of us who do, it was problematic for many reasons.

First, it was perceived and presented among Christians as a potential complete ban on Christians speaking about Christianity, "sharing the gospel" and maybe even practicing their faith. I read the legislation. I don't know if that was the intent, and didn't see the language that specifically says that. But because it was vague, it allowed for wide latitude on interpretation of what it means.

What the legislation actually proposed was a stricter view of how one might "share the gospel" with the intent to proselytize. The law currently is that one may not try to convert someone to another faith using any material compensation, and not among minors. I don't believe anyone has ever been arrested much less tried for this.

By being vague, the proposed law opened questions about what might be a criminal offense. Would an interfaith group of Jews and Christians need to sign a waiver to discuss religion with one another? What about Jews and Muslims? Or would these kinds of gatherings and conversations be considered illegal?

Could I be prosecuted for hosting the Inspiration from Zion podcast where I ask Christian guests to talk about their

faith, specifically in the context of their love for Israel, and where we might discuss New Testament verses that highlight this or even mention Jesus by name?

Would a tour guide risk prosecution guiding a group at Christian sites throughout Israel? Would courses in comparative religions be banned?

Would Christian media or ministries in Israel that are by definition pro-Israel and seek to bless Israel, fall in the crosshairs of such a proposed law simply by communicating to other Christians about their faith, literally sharing the gospel and the imperative to stand with Israel and be subject to prosecution?

These are extreme examples, so much so that they sound absurd. But maybe not. Since the legislation was vague, we don't know. And we don't know, if passed, how it might have been enforced.

I shudder to think about any of this happening, but because it was vague and not well thought through, such a law would leave possible interpretation up to police in the enforcement (unimaginable to me), or a judge looking for legal basis to prosecute.

Having said that, I don't believe the intent of this legislation was to bar anyone from living, worshipping or speaking about their faith broadly, outside the scope of deliberately trying to convert someone. I lost count of how many concerned emails and text messages I got from Christian friends all around the world.

While different in Israel as the Jewish state, Israel ensures rights of belief and worship for all. I don't see that changing. I don't believe that apocalyptic suggestions made, that the proposed law was the end of freedom of worship (specifically among Christians).

As much as I believe that, there are deeper issues that need

to be addressed.

There was a survey in Israel some years ago that indicated that the vast majority of Israelis have never met a Christian. My son-in-law was one of them until he came into our family and had the opportunity to meet many of my Christian friends. However, it's also intuitive that while the majority of Israelis have never met a Christian, the majority of these do not hold favorable views of Christians and Christianity. How can that be?

This is rooted in the consequence of Christian anti-Semitism and replacement theology that goes back nearly 2000 years, and all forms of persecution, pogroms, forced conversions and more, all sanctioned by the church, in the name of Jesus.

Jews also look at Christians as having a short list of ulterior motives in supporting Israel and the Jewish people. I was at a wedding recently where I saw a friend who I had not seen in a while. Catching up, he told me that he understood that Christian support of Israel was simply to get all the Jewish people to live here, and then there would be an end times war that was necessary for Jesus to return. Are there Christians who believe that? Sure. Is this what drives most Christian support for Israel?

Absolutely not.

Nor does the motive to convert Jews to Christianity drive most Christians, at least not those I know. But many Jews think that it does. It exists of course, but is not dominant as the motivation to engage Israel and the Jewish people among those who do so. There have been notable (and egregious) recent cases of Christians trying to do so in Israel, some overtly and some deceitfully. This colors how Israeli Jews of all backgrounds perceive Christians and Christianity.

It's not just the ultra-Orthodox community as in those who proposed the new legislation. I am modern Orthodox. Many in my

community believe this too. But even secular Israelis do as well. There have been notable instances of anti-Christian ideas being expressed in the secular media by secular Israelis, expressing an anti-Christian bias that's sometimes even hostile. It's something about which I spent significant time and effort to call out.

I have the privilege of knowing, and having deep intimate conversations with, Christians of many backgrounds. I get to know them and their hearts. Many Israelis and Jews who don't engage like I do simply look at Christian support for us being motivated by our being their theological pawns in a wider game to save souls or to bring Jesus back. As a whole, many or most Jews don't know much about Christians and Christianity, the same way many or most Christians don't know much about Jews.

While these (and other allegations) are not what drive most Christian support for Israel and love for the Jewish people, most Jews don't know that, and probably don't particularly care. One can be forgiven for not knowing about people or a faith group with which one has no interaction, and it goes both ways between Jews and Christians.

Christians should care that the history of the anti-Semitism of the church is what shapes much Jewish views of Christians and Christianity, and that these were done in the name of Jesus. As one Christian friend said, "we have dragged Jesus' name through the mud and it's our job to show the Jewish people that we have no ill intent."

From an Israeli and Jewish perspective, I didn't think the proposed law was a good one. I am against efforts to persuade Jews to convert to anything. I want Jews to embrace and live the blessings and promises of being part of God's covenanted people.

But proposed legislation like this does more to create ill will than to protect Jews, or anyone else for that matter,

from efforts to convert anyone. Interestingly, as divisive as this has been, I have enjoyed the conversations with friends, Jews and Christians, as we dissect what the bill meant, what the implications could be, and how it might be applied.

It's been discussed in a way that is actually Talmudic, a detailed analysis of every word, and the spirit and circumstances behind it.

I believe that Israel has a unique role not just to allow and protect freedom of faith and worship in Israel, but a unique obligation to protect Christians and Christianity. As one friend said, he's concerned that Christians won't be able to speak about Jesus in the land of His birth.

Part of our obligation to protect Christians and Christianity in Israel relates to indigenous Christians, mostly Arabs. It's not the forum, and I cannot go into detail here for concern of placing some Christian Israeli Arab friends at risk, but the fact is that Christian Arabs in Israel face struggles and persecution from their Arab Muslim neighbors in ways that are unthinkable.

It embarrasses me as an Israeli Jew that things like this are allowed to happen at all. Rather than seeing half-baked legislation proposed like this, I'd like to see laws enforced that protect Israel's Christian minority from actual threats by their own Muslim neighbors.

As it relates to the proposed law, before the Prime Minister seemed to have hit the brakes, the genie was out of the bottle. The damage had been done. Even assuming the bill has died, for those not inclined to support Israel or looking for any occasion to give Israel a black eye, the mere reporting of the proposed legislation, that never even went to the Knesset for a preliminary discussion, gives ammunition for Israel haters to use against us. That's bad.

For Christians who tend to genuinely love and support Israel,

they are legitimately feeling that they may be the ones getting the black eye. Few I know felt good about this. For some, it caused alarm because of the overdramatized reports. For every message I received, there were surely hundreds or more for whom the reports about the bill caused distress, most of whom don't know someone like me here in Israel with whom to address this openly. They simply saw misleading news reports and felt bad about it.

Part of the problem is that those who proposed the bill and those who might have supported it, are not those who typically consider how Christians feel about Israel, for good or for bad, and therefore don't take into consideration that mere discussion of something like this can be bad for Israel, and make our friends feel bad.

The afternoon that the story broke, a respected Christian journalist called and wanted my input. I had not yet read the proposed law, or even the article in which it was reported, but I basically said what I have written above.

I also noted a bit of irony in that many Christians I know celebrated the return of Prime Minister Netanyahu to power last year, some specifically celebrating the inclusion of right-wing Jewish/nationalist political parties. To be honest, I hesitated to join them on this level, specifically because I don't believe that these parties by in large understand, particularly care about or even support Christians in Israel, or the phenomena of Christian support for Israel.

In this instance, two members of one of two ultra-Orthodox parties of the government who proposed this bill, created a big problem that is still being felt. Had Netanyahu not pulled the plug, its intuitive that the second ultra-Orthodox party would have joined as well.

And it was also possible that the two Jewish religious/nationalist parties, or at least many of their

members, would too. If that were the case, it could have created a situation where half the government coalition actively supported it, and challenged or coerced Netanyahu and his Likud party to require that the entire coalition's support.

Netanyahu would have done better to take the wind out of the bill's sail on Monday morning, before the damage could have been done and ill feelings engendered. Those who read the bad news, may not read the good news.

Last year, I went to my local post office looking for stamps that the Israel Postal Authority had issued celebrating Christianity in Israel. I asked the person if they had these stamps to which he replied, "Yuck, Christians. We would never sell that here." Obviously. I wasn't speaking to a person who valued building bridges, much less understanding anything about Christianity. There's work to do on that end which I embrace.

The same year, I was hosting a webinar with pastors and other Christian leaders mostly from developing countries where there are no Jews, but who love us warmly and sincerely. It was during the period when tourism was largely shut down because of the pandemic. At the end of the program, a pastor asked if he could pray.

"Yes, please," I said. In no time the pastor began praying that Israel would open its borders soon so they could come back to witness to and try to convert Jews.

I did not interrupt the pastor and his prayer, nor openly contradict him. But the next day. I explained why this is problematic theologically, and historically, and how Jews take such efforts with offense. He listened respectfully, and then spoke. He thanked me, apologized, and since then we have been even closer friends.

Another Christian friend sees this bill as a natural outcome

of 2000 years of Christian anti-Semitism and persecution of Jews. She shared that it is the responsibility of Christians to “live out our faith” rather than trying to use persuasion to convert Jews.

Someone raised the concern that this would create anti-Semitism among Christians, based that that now they perceive they are being persecuted by Jews?

What about me? I spend all day working with Christians. Rarely a day goes by that I am not speaking with or sending electronic communication (that might have been outlawed) having to do with Christians and Christianity, including referencing Jesus and the New Testament. If I were to do this after such a law were passed, could I be arrested? It seems and feels unlikely, but with a loose reading of the text, and strict interpretation, perhaps not impossible.

There are good reasons for Jews to be concerned by and push back against efforts by Christians (or others) to try to convert us. The bill was certainly an outcome of such efforts. Even though many Christian friends say that only God can convert or change someone’s heart, there are no shortage of Christians and Christian ministries that support and are actively engaged in this.

Christians have reason for concern because a loosely written bill that is as not well thought through, could have led to limitation of legitimate rights of Christians (or others) by people who do not consider Christian feelings.

 For now, it seems the issue has been put to rest. But there are still underlying sensibilities and issues behind it, and the outcome, that must be addresses. The Genesis 123 Foundation will host a webinar on Monday, March 27 with a panel of Jewish and Christian leaders to do so.

You are invited to register to join the conversation. {eo}

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Jonathan Feldstein was born and educated in the U.S. and immigrated to Israel in 2004. Throughout his life and career, he has been blessed by the calling to fellowship with Christian supporters of Israel and shares experiences of living as an Orthodox Jew in Israel. He is president of the Genesis 123 Foundation, which builds bridges between Jews and Christians. Hear and understand more about this subject, including the backstory on the *Inspiration from Zion* podcast.