

Zionism's New Face

An update on the growing and passionate movement to stand with Israel

His crushing handshake contradicted the easy way in which he motioned with his other hand for us to sit down. I was enjoying my first trip to Israel with famed Bible prophecy teacher and Israel supporter David Allen Lewis. We had been traipsing around that tiny country of huge significance while gathering interviews for Lewis' new book. And here we were, shaking hands with Ariel Sharon, the legendary Israeli general-turned-political official, and being seated in his Tel Aviv office.

A terrifying and brutal figure to some and a savior to others, Sharon led a daring crossing of the Suez Canal in October 1973 that saved Israel from destruction at the hands of Syria and Egypt. The wily general, now an older statesman, smiled broadly as he recounted for us his first memory of Lewis.

"There we were, fighting a terrible enemy in Lebanon [1982-1983], suffering also from international condemnation," he said, describing Israel's war against Palestine Liberation Organization forces, "and we look up and see the famous Assemblies of God men running up and down the border, reporting back to America what was really going on!"

I was stunned. These two men—the Israeli soldier and the Christian evangelist—were of such different backgrounds, yet they were bonded together by their love of Zion. Lewis' eyes twinkled while he engaged in relaxed conversation with the "Bulldozer," as Sharon was nicknamed, who at the time sat in the government of newly elected Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu.

I was witnessing a picture of Lewis, my friend and mentor, in his role as a pioneer in pro-Israel work among Christians. He could chat easily with all people, whether he was in the presence of a modern Jewish warrior or a simple Palestinian family. His efforts weren't confined to the evangelical world. That he greatly influenced Christian Zionism in the evangelical world is indisputable fact.

Lewis went to be with the Lord in 2007, but the work of his ministry continues through the efforts of his family. And the nascent Christian Zionism movement he helped to pioneer quickly spread.

Lewis' work in the 1970s with the National Christian Leadership Conference for Israel (NCLCI)—one of the only viable pro-Israel groups among mainline denominations—was tireless. The efforts of the NCLCI spilled over into alliances with the America-Israel Friendship League (AIFL) and other groups, and issues such as Soviet Jewry became front-and-center topics.

In fact, a colleague of Lewis', the Rev. William Harter, became one of those early human bridges between groups such as the NCLCI and AIFL. Harter is a force today in the mainstream for combating the divestment campaign against Israel. Recently, he returned from hosting another delegation to the country—an ongoing project of the AIFL that promotes reconciliation between Arabs and Israelis and Jews and Christians.

It is this remarkable work that has brought evangelical clergy together with men such as AIFL Chairman Kenneth Bialkin, a power-broker in Washington, D.C., New York and Jerusalem. Bialkin is delighted by the efforts to bring some relief to a beleaguered part of the world.

When AIFL President Harley Lippman recently hosted a "Heroes to Heroes" tour with wounded American war vets, enabling them

to meet their counterparts in the Israel Defense Forces, Bialkin noted the obvious value in such bridge-building.

“The American and Israeli war veterans who participated in this program sustained their wounds while fighting for freedom and against terrorism,” Bialkin explained. “This provides a basis for their bonding, which grew during the 10 days that they were together.”

It has been through these kinds of developing relationships that Jews and Christians have come to better understand each other, while mutually standing with Israel. Through the initial contacts made decades ago, these different communities have now developed deep bonds. The common denominator was and is Zionism.

1 Million United Believers

As with most divine connections, the seeds that Lewis and others planted long ago bore fruit much later—principally with the founding of Christians United for Israel (CUFI), a powerful advocacy group headed today by John Hagee, senior pastor of Cornerstone Church in San Antonio. CUFI has become the next step in a dramatic increase in support for the state of Israel among American evangelicals.

CUFI was founded by Lewis in 1992. When Hagee asked for and received permission from the fiery evangelist to use the name for his new organization, the new version of CUFI was born in 2006.

In the spring of 2012, CUFI passed the 1 million mark in overall members, making it the largest pro-Israel group in the United States. It currently has 225 college chapters as well.

Victor Styrsky, a pastor and longtime pro-Israel activist from Northern California, is a regional director. He understands the critical importance of what the organization is up against.

"Most Americans have no idea what's being taught on college campuses [about Israel]," he says. "If we don't get this right, in 10 years the young people who are running the country will have forgotten Israel. We'll have to pack it up with regard to Israel."

The strength of the organization is considerable when its collective muscles are flexed, as proven when CBS' *60 Minutes* broadcast what many consider to be a "hit piece" on Israel on Sunday, April 22. The program featured the plight of Palestinian Christians, yet the show's producers essentially blamed Israel for the alleged exodus by Arab Christians from the Holy Land. Styrsky says CUFI members mobilized in protest of the one-sided program and sent CBS 32,000 emails.

A Unified Leadership

It is the broad-based network Hagee put together that is perhaps CUFI's chief asset as it moves ahead. The San Antonio pastor made a bold move and enlisted the services of Washington, D.C., attorney David Brog as CUFI's executive director. Brog still recalls their initial meeting as fascinating.

"At first I wasn't sure if, as a Jew, I would be fully accepted by our Christian leadership and rank-and-file," he explains. "But Pastor Hagee believed very strongly that part of our mission is building a bridge to the Jewish community and that my faith would exemplify our heart on this reconciliation. He knew what he was doing. It's been a wonderful partnership."

Brog says any initial hesitations he had about the union are long gone.

"I don't feel like I'm working with people who are different from me," he says, "[but] with people who share my deepest values: my love of God, my love of America and my commitment to Israel. I feel that I'm working with dear brothers."

He says CUFI now combines a solid scriptural message with the latest in nonprofit and political marketing to achieve and sustain a rapid rate of growth. He believes Christians are realizing the futures of America and Israel are intertwined, and that they see believing Jews and Christians as natural allies. Brog is confident CUFI's 1 million mark "is only the beginning."

He also has been touched on a personal level by his involvement. "I've been with CUFI for only six years, but when I look at the people I truly love in this world, the majority are people I've met through this wonderful organization," he says.

They would include Robert Stearns, director of Eagles' Wings ministry and a relatively new leader in the Christian Zionist movement. In his article titled "The New Zionism," published in the March/April 2012 issue of *Ministry Today* magazine, Stearns outlined a bold strategy for engaging new generations.

"A fresh generation of Christians are discovering the importance of Israel, not simply from the perspective of biblical prophecy, but because Israel stands on the front lines of core values that we are fighting for in our world," insists Stearns, who has been a bridge-builder in the vein of David Allen Lewis.

A CUFI regional director, Stearns is adamant that engaging young people in support of Israel is an effort that must be handled with innovation.

"To be pro-Israel is to be pro-human rights, pro-social justice, pro-religious freedom," he observes. "It's not simply a matter of being pro-Israel; it's a matter of being pro all of those issues—of which Israel is a microcosm."

Stearns represents a new generation that values authenticity and truth above all else. He is also not afraid to counter prevailing arguments against Israel that some believe border

on propaganda, such as the issue of Palestinian Christians in the Holy Land.

“[Israel] is the only nation in the Middle East where the Christian population is *growing*. It’s the only country where there is freedom for religious minorities,” he points out. “Israel is not a perfect country, but Israel does embody the best of what we hope for in terms of basic civil rights and justice.”

Although struggles remain, it is obvious the legacy of Christian Zionists who served as pioneers in the early days is in good hands for 2012 and beyond.

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