

“A Night to Honor Israel;” My Evening with Pastor John Hagee
Rabbi Adam J. Raskin
Congregation Beth Torah
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I did not expect to be out on Dallas’ coldest night in recent history. In fact I left family cuddled up around a fire in the fireplace, sipping hot chocolate and watching an Aladdin DVD, as snow and freezing rain swirled outside. As the TV reporters were warning people to stay off the roads if at all possible, Ruth Schor and I jumped into my car and drove to Irving, of all places, to attend an event that even the bitterly cold weather couldn’t cancel. On Thursday night, at the New Beginnings Church in the shadow of Texas Stadium, we were warmly welcomed by a congregation of Israeli flag waving, evangelical Christians who also braved the snow and ice to honor Israel and to take up the charge of Pastor John Hagee.

I’ll tell you that this night was preceded by tremendous of debate and dissention in our Jewish community. Evangelical Christians definitely trigger our self protective instincts, particularly here in Texas. What does it mean to attend a rally with a thousand Christians who, while loving Israel, also probably oppose stem cell research, legal abortions, the strict barrier between Church and State, and evolutionary biology? What does it mean to accept monetary support from a sect that also disdains territorial compromise in the peace process, and professes a rather frightening scenario for the end of the world as we know it? These are the questions that caused debate and consternation around the board of directors’ table at the Dallas Jewish Federation. These are the issues that my rabbinic colleagues in town wrestled with passionately. These are some of the reasons that the San Antonio Jewish Federation, the home of Pastor Hagee’s 18,000- member Cornerstone Church, has distanced itself from his organization, Christians United for Israel. And to be totally honest, these were the questions that swirled in my head as Ruth and I drove up to the sprawling campus of New Beginnings Church, to an event that was being broadcast live to millions internationally on the Christian Daystar Network. There we sat, a small delegation of Federation and Jewish community leaders, in the first few rows of the church as the program began.

And who ascended the dias, clad in a blue kippah and an Israeli flag tie to blow the shofar as the event began, but Mark Kreditor himself! They must have heard about his high holiday performances at Beth Torah. A choir of a dozen Christian singers and a live band filled the massive chapel with powerful, penetrating Israeli music. When we stood for the anthems, I could barely sing along with Hatikvah—I was so emotionally overwhelmed by the soulful music and energy of a thousand people singing and celebrating. I could have done without the *kippot* on obviously non-Jewish heads; I could have done without the constant references to *Hashem* by the preliminary speakers; I could have done without the *magen david* superimposed over the cross on the lectern; I would have rather seen “charity” than *tzedakah* on the collection box in the sanctuary. The pastor of the church asked me at the *glatt kosher* reception that followed the program if they had been sensitive and inclusive of the Jews in attendance. While I was about to mention the details I just listed, I instead replied, “Everything was wonderful. We are so

appreciative of your support for Israel and for hosting this event.” You see, their philo-Semitism, their interest in Jewish symbols, Hebrew, and Judaica is not for the purposes of converting unsuspecting Jews, which is very much the goal of messianic congregations, but an effort to get in touch with the roots of Christianity and its founders. While it may be an annoyance to me, it is a facet of their spirituality I wasn’t motivated to assail.

Hagee himself reminded me of Don Corleone...First, he looks like him! He is a large, rotund man with an air of gravitas born of a long and famous career as a preacher. He has met every Israeli Prime Minister since Menachem Begin, not to mention the power he wields in Washington and in the evangelical community, where he is in fact a god-father figure. He began by acknowledging the skepticism about him and his organization within the Jewish community. And he said, the skepticism is “well deserved”...We don’t exactly have a great historical track record, he admitted! Hagee proceeded to publicly ask forgiveness for centuries of Christian anti-Semitism. He announced what he hoped would be a new beginning in the relationship between Christians and Jews, but first insisted that Jews had not been replaced by Christians “in the economy of God.” That the Jewish covenant is, was, and will always be binding. The place erupted in applause, amens, and halleluyahs.

Hagee started hosting Nights to Honor Israel 25 years ago in San Antonio. The first one ever received a bomb threat, ending the program before it even began. His own car windows were shot out, and Hagee’s life was threatened repeatedly. But Pastor Hagee did not back down. “If these anti-Semites hate what I’m doing so much,” he proclaimed, “I’m going to keep on doing it until they get used of it.” More applause and amens. And keep on he has. In San Antonio alone, he raised \$7 million dollars to support orphanages, soup kitchens, and the purchase of ambulances in Israel. Hagee has taken this program on the road to OK City, Detroit, Toronto, Houston, Berkely, Orlando, in each place raising hundreds of thousands of dollars for direct transfer to Israel. In a passing of the plate that couldn’t have taken more than ten minutes on Thursday night, \$35,000 was raised for Israel. Last summer Hagee mustered 3,500 Christians to Washington in the midst of Hezbollah’s war on Israel; an army of Christians from all 50 states who met with the staffs of every single congressman and senator to lobby their support for Israel. He’s planning to do it a second time this coming summer. It took AIPAC decades before they could get 4,000 Jews to come to its annual policy conference in Washington. But more than the money, Hagee has afforded Israel something that is priceless; a commodity Israel could not purchase anywhere else. He is taking the message of Israel’s survival to hundreds of thousands of evangelicals across America. He is explaining the importance of supporting democracy in the Middle East, of not remaining silent in the face of terrorism, of standing up for the cause of a Jewish homeland to sectors of the American public who know little to nothing about the issues.

Pastor Hagee reminded the audience of the historical irony of a new Hitler in the world, in the form of the Holocaust-denying, Israel-hating president of Iran. He said that in 1935 the Christian world was silent in the face of Hilter’s threats to annihilate the Jewish people. Now there are close to 6 million Jews—that number is burned on our psyche—6 million Jews living in the State of Israel, and another Hitler is promising a nuclear

holocaust. And Pastor John Hagee is traveling America to make sure that this time, the threats will not go uncontested.

In our tradition, we judge people based on how they act, not on what they believe. In a breathtaking teaching in the Talmud, our rabbis proclaim, *hassidei umot ha'olam yesh lahem chelek ba'olam ha'ba...*the righteous of all nations have a place in the world to come. Notice they do not say the believers, the monotheists, the faithful, or the converts to Judaism of the world will have life eternal. Rather our Sages teach that people who live lives of righteous *behavior*; who use their talents and resources to bring about goodness in the world—these are the people who inherit eternity. I do not feel the need to be aligned with John Hagee on every theological nuance or political position before I can acknowledge and celebrate his righteous support for Israel. In fact, Hagee has not placed a single condition on the money he raises on Israel's behalf. He has not demanded that Jews sign onto his domestic agenda or that Israel implement his views with respect to the territories or the Palestinians. Yet some Jews want to ignore his support because of his positions on other issues.

Friends, after my experience on Thursday night, I am not one of those Jews. Evangelical Christians have become some of the most sincere and genuine supporters of Israel, and in a world that censures Israel repeatedly for human rights abuses but has yet to even once meaningfully sanction Sudan for its genocidal campaign in Darfur, I think we ought to take all the support we can get!

In our *parasha* this morning, Jacob has a life transforming dream. God speaks to Jacob saying:

Ha'aretz asher atah shocheiv eleiha, lecha etnenah ul'zarecha...

This land that you are lying upon, I will assign to you and your offspring...

Bechol asher teilech va'hashivoticha el ha'adamah hazot..

And wherever (in the world) you go, I will bring you back to this land.

Friends, the evangelical community believes these words. They believe that Israel is a uniquely Jewish homeland because their Bibles tell them so again and again. Sometimes I think they may believe it even more than some Jews do. Let us not snub a potential relationship with 100 million evangelicals with whom we may not agree on every cause, but who are rock solid in support of Israel. As a tradition that thrives on diversity of opinions and the importance of debate, let us not insist on complete agreement before we can join together on an issue of such great mutual significance. Now is the time to forge friendships across religious boundaries, not to circle the wagons or bolt down the shutters.

Most importantly—and I say this especially to the teens who are here in shul today—let's be strong enough, proud enough, confident enough in our own faith that we can stand side by side with other people who are strong in their faith without constantly worrying about our own authenticity. Let's stop second guessing our beliefs, our

commitments, and our tradition. Let's stand tall— proud of who we are, proud of our Torah, proud of what our people have believed in and stood for over thousands of years, proud of the people and the State of Israel—and then, my friends, you'll have nothing at all to fear...Can I hear an Amen? Amen!