

Israel finds more to like about Christian Zionists

by [Michele Chabin](#) in the [December 14, 2010](#) issue

When Texas megachurch pastor John Hagee wrapped up a recent visit to Israel with 40 pastors in tow, he sought out the places where Jesus walked, preached and prayed some 2,000 years ago.

But there was another meeting on the itinerary that was a must-not-miss event for Hagee and his host: a sit-down with Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu.

The fact that Netanyahu—knee-deep in contentious talks with Palestinians over a freeze on Israeli settlement construction—found time to meet Hagee's contingent on November 15 speaks volumes about the ties between Israeli officials and evangelical Christians.

Christian Zionist support for Israel is at an all-time high, observers say, and Israelis, American Jews and Palestinians are all taking notice—some favorable, some not.

While Israel has long courted financial and political support from evangelicals, many Jewish American leaders have viewed the alliance with suspicion, leery about potential proselytizing and uncomfortable with evangelicals' domestic agenda at home.

Lately, however, the U.S. Jewish community has found a new appreciation for evangelical support at a time of mounting international criticism of Israeli policy and financial hardships for many prominent Jewish groups.

Hit hard by the economic downturn and the Bernard Madoff Ponzi scheme that

decimated Jewish charities, American Jewish groups are sending less money to Israel. Dozens of evangelical groups "have definitely stepped in to fill some of the void," said Dan Brown, creator of the website e-jewishphilanthropy.com.

One of those groups is the International Fellowship of Christians and Jews (IFCJ), a Chicago-based group that has donated as much as \$70 million to Israel in 2009 alone and another \$30 million to Jewish causes in the former Soviet Union and elsewhere.

Five years ago, *Hadassah*, the magazine of the Jewish women's organization of the same name, rejected an ad from the IFCJ, which was founded by Rabbi Yechiel Eckstein. But this year, after a large donation to a Hadassah-affiliated hospital in Jerusalem, Hadassah honored Eckstein's group at its annual gala.

"We still haven't been embraced by the establishment Jewish organizations, but I do think there's a growing admiration because we've been able to grow by leaps and bounds over the past three years while the Jewish federation system and other sources of Jewish philanthropy have suffered declines," said Eckstein.

Evangelical leaders say their reliance on thousands of small donors—rather than a few mega-givers—has helped them weather the recession and actually increase their funding to Israel. No one knows how much Christian Zionists give Israel in total, but the amount is substantial.

The organizations, including many based in the U.S., support Israeli hospitals, schools and social welfare programs. A few pay for bomb shelters and ambulances and assist elderly Holocaust survivors and victims of terror attacks. Hagee's San Antonio-based group has donated more than \$50 million since 2006, including \$8.5 million this year.

Monetary support, however, is just part of the equation. For the past four years, another Hagee group, Christians

United for Israel, has held an annual Washington summit to push Israeli concerns on U.S. lawmakers. Christian Zionist groups sponsor letter-writing campaigns and are active on college campuses.

Joshua

Reinstein, director of the seven-year-old Knesset Christian Allies Caucus in the Israeli parliament, said there has been "an explosion of support" from evangelical political leaders. The group now has pro-Israel "legislators of faith" caucuses in 18 countries, including the U.S.

Palestinian Christians, who have successfully cultivated their own powerful and wealthy allies in the Roman Catholic and mainline Protestant churches, are vocally opposed to Christian Zionism. Many of their church allies are active in the so-called global BDS movement—boycotts, divestment and sanctions of Israeli goods and citizens.

Christian Zionism is "a heretical and false interpretation of Christian theology" that "justifies violence and oppression in the name of God," said Jonathan Kuttub, chairman of the West Bank's Bethlehem Bible College.

Ari Morgenstern, a spokesman for Christian United for Israel, reads the Bible differently.

"The biblical mandate for Christian Zionism is Genesis 12:3," he said, referring to a verse in which God promises to bless those who bless Israel and curse its foes. "As Pastor Hagee has said, Christians should support Israel because it is simply the right thing to do."

Ironically, just as American Jewish groups have warmed to Christian Zionist partners, several prominent ultra-Orthodox Israeli rabbis have forbidden their followers to accept funds or services from organizations funded—even in part—by evangelicals.

David Parsons, spokesman for the International Christian Embassy Jerusalem, said hard-line rabbis

pressured Israeli dignitaries not to attend the recent opening of a home for Holocaust victims that was partially funded by Parson's group. "It's a real shame they tried to spoil the event," Parsons said. "We don't missionize, and the focus should have been on the needs of destitute Holocaust survivors." —RNS