Tough conversations

by John Buchanan in the September 20, 2011 issue

Downtown Hebron, West Bank. Steel mesh screens protect pedestrians from garbage dumped from settlers' second-floor windows. Photo by Sven-Christian Kindler, licensed under Creative Commons.

Last month, in an essay in the *New York Times,* columnist Roger Cohen cited an American protagonist in a Philip Roth novel who said that "in England, when someone mentions the word 'Jew,' I notice that the voice always drops a little." Anti-Semitism is always just beneath the surface in England, Cohen observed. Conventional stereotypes can surface in genteel conversation.

Cohen then explored another minefield of identity: he related how in the U.S. he has been accused by other Jews of not being a real Jew or of being a "self-hating Jew," because he has criticized Israel for what he calls its "self-defeating expansion of settlements in the West Bank." His essay—and the critical response he received—is one sign of how difficult it is for Jews to talk about the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

It is also difficult for Christians to talk about it with Jews. In August, Glenn Beck, the former Fox News talk-show host, toured Israel and held a "Restoring Courage" rally in Jerusalem. His aim was to display American solidarity with Israel. Beck's visit was

embraced by some Israelis, who are eager for such expressions of support, and reviled by other Israelis, who noted Beck's penchant for anti-Semitic outbursts and extreme anti-Muslim rhetoric. "If this is the only kind of friend Israel's government can find around the world, that's a very poor sign," said Yariv Oppenheimer, secretary-general of Peace Now.

Mainline Christians often wonder about Israelis' willingness to embrace people like Beck as well as fundamentalist Christians who support the state of Israel because they believe it has a role in the end times, in which Jews will be converted to Christ. I was once part of a Jewish-Christian dialogue group in which that issue was raised: "Surely," one Christian said to the Jewish participants, "you know that those Christians support you because you are instrumental in their hope for the return of Christ—but you are not part of the last chapter in their story." An official of a Jewish organization assured us that Jews understand Christian premillennialist thinking, but said that when Jews feel under siege and feel that their old friends, the mainline Protestant denominations, have turned against them, they are glad to get support, regardless of the source.

Talking together about the things that make for peace is difficult, but Christians and Jews must keep at it. That is part of our identity. Christians and Jews share a commitment to peace and justice. Together we must pray that some game-changing event will occur, that Israelis and Palestinians will each take political risks for the sake of peace. A section in my church's book of Confessions of Faith says that "the church, in its own life, is called to practice the forgiveness of enemies and to commend to the nations as practical politics the search for cooperation and peace. This search requires that the nations pursue fresh and responsible relations across every line of conflict, even at risk to national security" (Confession of 1967).