

Mormon PR blunts Jews' unease with Romney

by [Julia Duin](#) in the [December 27, 2011](#) issue

Two groups that opposed former Massachusetts governor Mitt Romney's 2008 presidential run were evangelical Protestants and Jews. Many of the former believe that Mormons constitute a cult; the latter have long been offended by the Mormon practice of providing proxy baptisms for Jews who died during the Holocaust. Then there was Romney's 2008 campaign kickoff at Detroit's Henry Ford Museum.

"Why would an American presidential candidate choose to announce his candidacy at a museum dedicated to the memory of America's most notorious and influential anti-Semite?" Jewish lawyer and author Alan Dershowitz wrote in February 2007 in the *Huffington Post*. "I believe Mitt Romney owes the Jewish community, indeed all Americans who hate the sort of bigotry represented by Henry Ford, an explanation and an apology."

Fast-forward four years and it's clear that Jewish opposition to Romney has been neutralized, thanks in part to some skilled diplomacy on the part of leaders of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. The LDS Church in 2009 quietly flew in Jewish leaders for all-expenses-paid tours of Mormon temples, the Brigham Young University campus, Temple Square and Welfare Square, the latter an impressive facility showing the church's worldwide charity work. Mormons emphasized the commonalities between one of the world's oldest religions and one of its youngest, plus showing that it shares biblical concerns about the poor.

"All us rabbis were totally blown away," said Rabbi John Crites-Borak of Amud ha-Shachar/First Light in Los Angeles. "We talk a good game about social justice work. It's a fervent idea in Judaism—but Mormons do it like nobody's business."

Participants reported intense theological discussions, on topics ranging from Israelite temple worship during King David's reign 3,000 years ago to how Jews survived as a faith community over the millennia. The notoriously publicity-conscious LDS Church knows its image needs a major brush up—and what better group to ask for advice

than the Jews, America's most-loved religious group? (The "most-loved" statistic comes from the 2010 book *American Grace: How Religion Divides and Unites Us*, which as it happens was co-written by a Jew, Harvard professor Robert D. Putnam, and a Mormon, David E. Campbell.)

"They want to be recognized as a valid faith tradition instead of a cult and be integrated into American society like the Jews," says Rabbi Niles Goldstein, a senior fellow at the Foundation for Interreligious Diplomacy, who was on the guest list. "They want to be more accepted and integrated. Because Jews have this long history of being blamed for everything from capitalism and communism to the death of Jesus, it makes sense they would want to talk to us."

Mormons consider the Jews as their spiritual ancestors, and the LDS presents itself as a restored Israel with its own temple, prophet and priesthood. The parallels with ancient Israel are deliberate; there's even a Jordan River coursing through north-central Utah, and the Great Salt Lake just to the west of Salt Lake City has been likened to the Dead Sea.

"They humbly said in no way they wanted to compare themselves to Jewish suffering over the ages," Goldstein says, "but in North America, they have a long history of persecution by the federal government."

The Mormons took Jewish leaders through a temple, comparing it to Israel's ancient edifices.

"We [rabbis] looked at one another as we saw the conscious efforts of the Mormons to build something close to what the original temples contained," Goldstein adds. "While they view their religion as an expression of a restored priesthood, we feel the rabbinate has supplanted the priesthood. For some, this was disturbing; for others, like myself, I found it very interesting."

The trips were the brainchild of Erik Ludwig, the former executive director of the United Jewish Federation of Utah, and Mark Tuttle, the interfaith director for the LDS Church. Top Mormon officials—including some of the church's 12 ruling "apostles"—made themselves available for discussions and kosher meals.

"There was this incredible level of hospitality," says Rabbi Brad Hirschfield, president of the National Jewish Center for Learning and Leadership. "At a lunch, not only was the food I ate kosher but the whole event was kosher-catered. I asked why and they

said, 'You can't feel like you're at home if you're eating something different from us.'"

Rabbis use phrases like "holy envy" and "new openness" to describe LDS largesse.

"A generation ago," says Goldstein, "the idea of the Mormon church flying two or three dozen Jewish leaders to Salt Lake City, putting them up in a hotel and a Mormon elder taking them around" would not have emerged.

Relations improved after the two sides inked an agreement on proxy baptisms in September 2010. And the Mormons' charm offensive brought results. No Jewish leaders are complaining about Mormons these days.

President Obama won 78 percent of the Jewish vote in 2008, according to the National Jewish Democratic Council. Since then, his stock has fallen among some Jews because of a perception that he is sympathetic to the Palestinian cause. Romney seems to be doing well among Jewish voters this time around.

"Romney's Jewish supporters say what's most inspiring about the Republican presidential candidate is that he actually does rather than just talk," opined the Jewish *Daily Forward* in July. The magazine added that Romney and a Jewish backer had just completed a fund-raising trip to Florida that netted the campaign \$1.8 million.