

Adopt a settlement: Christian Zionists and the West Bank

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Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas went to the United Nations in September seeking member status for a Palestinian state that would be configured along the pre-1967 borders. One of the primary reasons the Palestinians took their case to the UN instead of working through the negotiated peace process is the ongoing establishment of Israeli settlements in the West Bank, which has been occupied by Israel since 1967.

In May, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu reasserted his country's unwillingness to consider the 1967 lines as a viable border between Israel and a future Palestinian state: "While Israel is prepared to make generous compromises for peace, it cannot go back to the 1967 lines, because these lines are indefensible; because they don't take into account certain changes that have taken place on the ground." Israeli settlements are the primary "changes that have taken place on the ground."

In creating those settlements, Israeli settlers have been aided over the past four decades by Christian Zionists in the U.S. Between 2005 and 2009 I researched one such settlement—which most of the world considers illegal—and the support it receives from American Christians.

The settlement of Ariel began in 1978 when a group of Israelis led by Ron Nachman arrived by helicopter on a West Bank hilltop and slept in tents. Today Ariel has over 19,000 residents. Nachman became the city's first elected mayor in 1985 and has been repeatedly reelected ever since.

Ariel and the bloc of settlements nearby are "consensus communities," clusters of settlements that both Israeli and American leaders think should remain part of Israel in any final settlement with a Palestinian state. In this regard, Ariel is both strategically important and particularly controversial. Ariel is situated almost 13 miles beyond the 1967 border. What Israelis call their security fence dips deep inside the West Bank to surround Ariel. Netanyahu declared in January 2010 that Ariel is the "capital of Samaria" and an "integral part of Israel."

For most of its history, Ariel has benefited from the financial assistance of evangelical Christians. Ron Nachman first grasped the potential for such partnerships in the 1980s, when he met Rabbi Yechiel Eckstein, founder and president of the International Fellowship of Christians and Jews. After visiting with Eckstein, Nachman concluded that Israel cannot survive without seeking support from non-Jews, and Eckstein pointed him to the most eager non-Jewish supporters of Israel in the world: American Christian Zionists.

Nachman and the staff of the Ariel Development Fund have since cultivated friendships with a number of Christian groups and congregations. Ariel receives about 15 visits each year from various Christian Zionist groups. Nachman and Dina Shalit, the Development Fund director, have been guests at several events honoring Israel at American churches, including John Hagee's Cornerstone Church in San Antonio, Texas. Nachman strongly prefers these occasions to visiting American synagogues. He says that in synagogues he gets a lot of questions; in churches he gets big checks.

Shalit told me that Christian Zionist support for Ariel is "of mammoth importance." Because official government funding of settlements is restricted by law, Ariel depends on funding from American Christians to make the settlement more like a city than an outpost. "There are many practical services we would not have without their contributions. We would have a drastically reduced quality of life."

Ariel has the feel of a young, thriving suburb. The youth of Ariel can receive their entire education inside the settlement, with its multiple preschools, elementary

schools, junior high schools, high school and college (renamed "Ariel University Center of Samaria" in 2007 in an attempt to claim the status of university, which most government officials are unwilling to grant to a college in a settlement). The city has a shopping center, medical clinics, a public swimming pool, an extensive central park, a community center, a cultural and performing arts center and a sports and recreation complex. Over 100 small factories occupy Ariel's industrial park.

Christian Friends of Israeli Communities (CFOIC) organizes partnerships between American Christians and settlements like Ariel. CFOIC was born in 1995, when a Christian couple visited Israel and shared with a lawyer friend how disturbed they were by the Oslo Accords, particularly the call for Israel to withdraw from Gaza and the West Bank. The couple was Ted and Audrey Beckett, wealthy real estate developers based in Colorado Springs. Their lawyer friend suggested that they contact Nachman, who had organized a development fund in response to the Oslo Accords' freeze on government aid money going to settlements.

In its early days, the Ariel Development Fund focused on raising money from American Jews. The Becketts established CFOIC as a parallel organization to raise support for settlements from Christians. Part of the original vision of CFOIC was to link Christian churches with Israeli settlements through an adopt-a-settlement program. The first church approached about adopting a settlement was Faith Bible Chapel of Arvada, Colorado. It agreed to adopt Ariel.

Eventually CFOIC expanded beyond the Becketts' vision and focused on raising funds from individual churches for specific projects rather than on settlement adoption. Many of CFOIC's projects address the needs of children, providing playgrounds, scholarships, after-school programs, and counseling services. Other projects involve equipment for volunteer security and emergency response teams or provide relocation, construction and agricultural assistance for the "Gush Katif refugees"—settlers removed from Gaza when Israel withdrew in 2005.

CFOIC also participates in more controversial efforts, such as fund-raising in 2007 to erect temporary structures in Maskiot, where the Israeli government suspended plans for permanent buildings; these structures allowed the settlement to continue its existence until the building ban was lifted.

CFOIC has headquarters in Colorado Springs and in the West Bank settlement of Karnei Shomron, with offices in Germany and Holland, and representatives in the

United Kingdom, South Africa and Bulgaria. Kimberly Troup, who directs the Colorado Springs headquarters, described CFOIC's aims for the *New York Times* in 2010: "The more that we build, the more that we support and encourage their right to live in the land, the harder it's going to be for disengagement, for withdrawal."

CFOIC's Israel headquarters is directed by Sondra Oster Baras, an Orthodox Jew who grew up in Cleveland and studied law at Columbia University. She and her husband immigrated to Israel 1984, and she soon became a pro-settlement activist. She became director of CFOIC in 1998. A dynamic speaker appearing often in American media, Baras has publicly rejected the peace process, saying that it is "a process to weaken Israel, to deprive it of its most important assets, and to bring Israel to a point of defeat." When I asked her what sort of process would bring peace, she replied, "Oh, an absolute reversal of everything we've seen today. Israel needs to be a lot more aggressive."

Baras was also very frank about her differences with the evangelical Christians from whom she raises funds. She knows that they believe Jews should, and at least some eventually will, accept Jesus as the Messiah. "I'm convinced that they're wrong. They're convinced that I'm wrong. OK. We can leave it in God's hands." Beliefs about the conversion of Jews are irrelevant as long as Christians don't act on those beliefs and try to evangelize Jews.

Her view is shared by all the Jewish partners of American Zionist groups whom I met. Ideological agreement on issues of Israeli security and settlements trumps theological disagreements about the identity of the Messiah, whether he is about to come again or for the first time, and precisely what will happen in Israel when he arrives.

Nachman is pragmatic when it comes to tapping the generosity of Christian Zionists, who often speak of the promise in Genesis 12:3 that those who bless Israel will be blessed. "They don't do it because of us," he told me. "They do it for their own benefit." For Nachman this is unproblematic. "If we agree with their ideology, I don't see why not to strengthen it."

As CFOIC has shifted its focus away from settlement adoption and toward funding specific projects, the adoption of Ariel by Faith Bible Chapel took on a life of its own, independent of CFOIC.

Faith Bible Chapel has "had a hand in almost every facet of community life," one Ariel resident told me. The church's first gift was an ark for Torah scrolls. Since then donations have included medical equipment, items needed in the schools, college scholarships and contributions to community projects, including a Holocaust museum, the sports and recreation center and improvements to soldiers' accommodations.

Faith Chapel has also planted a vineyard on a hill in Ariel. Most Christian groups that visit the settlement plant vines in fulfillment of the prophecy of Jeremiah 31:5, which says, "Again you shall plant vineyards on the mountains of Samaria; the planters shall plant, and shall enjoy the fruit."

Christians have also endowed Ariel's Child Development Center. Originally built with a grant from the Milken Family Foundation of Los Angeles, the center now covers approximately 20 percent of its operating costs with donations from Faith Chapel. The center provides speech, occupational and physical therapies, as well as tutoring for children with learning disabilities and psychological services. Services are provided for children with congenital problems as well as those suffering from traumas, including the trauma of enduring terrorism.

"When we adopted Ariel," remembers Cheryl Morrison, leader of Faith Chapel's Israel Outreach ministry and wife of its pastor, "we asked the Lord, 'What do you want us to do there?' And the scripture came to me when Jesus said, 'When you've done it to the least of these, my brethren, you've done it to me.' So we said, 'Who would be the least in Ariel?' And it would be the children who have emotional, physical and learning disabilities."

In the words of one couple in Ariel, the people of Faith Chapel "don't just leave their money. They get involved." Whenever a group from the congregation visits Israel, it includes a visit to Ariel. When youth groups from the congregation take sightseeing tours of Israel, they do volunteer work in Ariel and spend time with the local teens.

Members of Faith Chapel also attend to Ariel's political agenda. Many in Ariel, Faith Chapel and the CFOIC opposed the construction of the security fence, seeing it as a denial that all of Judea and Samaria are the rightful property of the state of Israel. However, when it became clear that the barrier would be built, Ariel people wanted to be on the Israeli side of it. Members of Faith Chapel contacted the municipal offices in Ariel to let them know that they were lobbying for the barrier to go around

Ariel. Nachman often quips, "I don't call it a wall or a fence around Ariel. I call it a gated community."

For about 30 years Faith Chapel has also sent a group called the Internationals on a summer performance tour of military bases in Israel, carrying the message that God has chosen Israeli soldiers and blesses what they are doing and that there are Christians who love and support them. Being a member of this performance group requires extraordinary commitment and dedication. The members practice throughout the year. Israeli coaches help them perfect their song choices, choreography and Hebrew pronunciation. They are also given lectures and reading assignments, such as *In Defense of Israel*, by John Hagee.

Each annual tour includes about 13 performances. The shows include a dozen or so songs with a costume change for every number (black satin Hasidic costumes for a folk dance, *Fiddler on the Roof* costumes for "L'chaim," fluorescent T-shirts and white capri pants for a modern Israeli pop song and Israeli military uniforms for a military tribute).

Several of the performers, and even their parents, told me they believed they could die on this tour, and it would be worth it. The youngest of the dancers, a 16-year-old on tour for the first time, said he thought they would be safe because they were doing this for God. "But if we're not," he said, "I'm ready to go." A staff member who tours with the group and is the mother of former and current performers mentioned that her daughter and son-in-law had recently prepared a will, naming legal guardians for their two-year-old twins, because they were about to go on the tour. This grandmother concluded, unflinchingly: "If we don't come home, we don't come home, and it will have been worth it."

One mother who went on the tour as a chaperone summed up why the congregation believes the tour is so important. She could barely speak of the experience without crying. "The thing that really was amazing to me was watching these average kids, you know, these kids that I know . . . and they go there and they bless these soldiers who are defending this land . . . just these average, middle-class, Christian kids blessing the apple of God's eye, you know? Defending the land that God gave them."

While the Internationals take the message of God's blessing to the Israeli military, a similar group of young people from Ariel, named For Zion's Sake, takes messages of gratitude and further need for support to American Christians. While on tour, Shalit

introduces the group's western dance number by comparing the pioneering spirits of the American West and the West Bank. "In the U.S. it was settlers who built the country, spreading the borders past the original 13 colonies. Your history, however, only reflects admiration for the settlers who moved west, and with visions of a manifest destiny created a free and democratic USA from sea to shining sea."

Shalit was contrasting the American view of settlers with that of most of the world, including many Israelis who view Israeli settlers as second-class citizens and dangerous zealots. This sense of isolation and rejection takes a toll on the young people of the settlements, and by the time they reach their teen years many of the youth in Ariel feel no connection to the settlement project or to Judaism; they want out of the West Bank.

For some of these teens, a sort of conversion occurs when they encounter American Christian Zionists. The 2007 visit of For Zion's Sake to Faith Bible Chapel coincided with Yom Hazikaron, Israel's Memorial Day. The Israeli teens arrived at the church to find the Internationals outside waving Israeli flags and bearing gifts. They were then ushered into the church's prayer chapel for a special ceremony remembering fallen Israeli soldiers. Names were read aloud of those who died in the 2006 Lebanon conflict, and a candle was lit for each one.

Those who work with the teens of Ariel describe interactions like this as life-changing. When the teens encounter people saying, "You are chosen by God. God has not forsaken your people. God chose you to settle the land he promised to Abraham. We love you unconditionally and support your right to the land," they feel loved and confident and have a new interest in Judaism and new commitment to Israel, military service and the settlement movement.

Many people think of Christian Zionists as believing that they can hasten Jesus' return by their support of the state of Israel. Books on Christian Zionism often have fiery images and titles referring to Armageddon.

But the Christian Zionists I met are not focused on the end times. One of the favorite songs at Faith Chapel is based on Genesis 12:3. The song says, "I will bless those who bless my people. I will curse those who curse them too. For this I have promised to my servant Abraham. I will keep my word." There is no question that Christian Zionists like those at Faith Chapel are "blessing" Israeli settlers in terms of improving the quality of their lives and their morale. It is also clear that they do so out of a

genuine sense that they are both obeying a commandment given by God and cooperating with God's work today. Believing that God's ultimate plans for world peace, prosperity and joy will be realized when God's kingdom is established in Israel, they are prepared to support the occupation and violence in the Middle East, which they believe precedes the establishment of God's kingdom.

Can any true "blessing" come from such a troubling reading of scripture? Even assuming uncritical support for the state of Israel, does such support for the settlements help or harm Israel's long-term security and flourishing? Christian Zionists seek to bless Israel and to curse those they believe are cursing Israel, like the United Nations and the Obama administration. But are they "cursing" Israel themselves by damaging long-term interests and impeding the peace process?

To Christian Zionists, questions like these are irrelevant. Their concern is not ultimately with the coming decades of Israel's nationhood but the coming of Christ to establish his eternal kingdom. Although they know that their activism will not make Christ return any sooner, they believe that by supporting Israel they are assured of being on the right side of the battle lines when he does come.