

Estranged: Between mainline Protestants and Jews

by [John Buchanan](#) in the [June 28, 2003](#) issue

A painful accompaniment to the conflict between Israel and the Palestinians is the estrangement it has caused between mainline Protestants and Jews. For decades mainline Protestants have fostered theological dialogue with the Jewish community. Christian and Jewish scholars have worked together on common texts and common history. No seminary education is complete without reading works by Rabbi Joshua Abraham Heschel. Christian and Jewish congregations have studied, worked and worshiped together in a way that has fostered a new climate of understanding and mutual affirmation. The Presbyterian congregation I serve is honored to host Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur High Holiday services for neighboring Congregation Sinai. That congregation, in turn, allows us to use its facilities for retreats and conferences, and every Lent its people help us understand their Seder tradition and its relationship to Jesus' last supper.

But now we find ourselves in a difficult place. Mainline Protestant denominations have been sympathetic to the aspirations of the Palestinian people for an independent nation, and they have sometimes been critical of Israel's policies. And that stance has been hurtful to our Jewish friends. Most troubling of all has been the fact that some Jews have regarded Christian expressions of support for the Palestinian cause and of opposition to Israeli policies as a form of anti-Semitism.

No Christian who knows how anti-Semitism grew and thrived in the bosom of Christianity is anything but appalled by the unprecedented evil of the Holocaust. Christians are also appalled by suicide bombings which take the lives of innocent Israeli citizens. Those deeds underscore the absolute necessity of a strong and secure state of Israel. Most mainline Christians, I believe, pray for that and, at the same time, for an independent, viable and secure Palestinian state. And we also pray for the occasion to join hands again with Jews, working together for justice and peace.

An additional twist in this estrangement is the burgeoning alliance between premillennialist fundamentalist Christians and Israel, which Donald Wagner describes in this issue. Israelis are understandably happy for the support. But it is dismaying and ironic that those Christians who believe Israel has a biblical claim on the land are the ones who see Israel's future as merely a prelude to the end of the Jewish faith. As historian Martin Marty recently observed to Jewish colleagues, "The fundamentalists/premillennialists cast you in the first act of a two-act drama, but you are not part of the second act."

A far better conversation is the one Protestants and Jews were formerly embarked upon: about the nature of God's covenant, how Christians and Jews relate to one another as people of the covenant, and how Christians can pay more attention to the bonds of history and faith which Jews and Christians share and which are God's gifts to us.