

From an Evangelical Perch

David Neff

American Evangelicals constantly debate among themselves what it means to be an Evangelical. The question has no easy answer. Rabbi Yehiel Poupko courageously treads on disputed territory, and he gets it mostly right.

Poupko definitely gets this right: Central to the Evangelical understanding of reality is a deep sense that something is profoundly wrong with every member of the human race, that we each have a fundamental proclivity toward sinful self-love rather than toward loving God and our fellow human beings. This universal disease can only be cured by God's radical act of self-sacrificing love embodied in Jesus of Nazareth and by the transforming work of God's Holy Spirit. This divine rescue from sin's guilt and power must be received as a gift, which God offers freely. The theological narrative of rescue combines with individual narratives of transformed lives to form the fabric of Evangelical self-consciousness.

This message of bad news and its accompanying good news is at the heart of Evangelical theology, piety, and practice. No one likes to be told there is something wrong with him/her. But if what is wrong is actually a sickness unto death (Kierkegaard), the one who delivers the bad news is doing a necessary kindness. It is an act of love, for only in the context of the bad news can the good news be grasped.

Because Evangelical Christians believe that every human being needs to hear the dire diagnosis, Jews must understand that we do not "target" them, as has sometimes been claimed. Our particular form of Christian faith is universal in its diagnosis, in its prescription, and (potentially) in its application.

Poupko identifies the apparently paradoxical nature of Evangelicals' relationship with Jews. We seem to undermine Jewish identity when we share the Christian gospel, yet we strengthen Jewish existence when we work for a secure Jewish homeland in the Middle East.

But to us it is not paradoxical. These two aspects of our relationship are created by our sense of kinship. Although most Evangelical Protestants are not descended physically from Abraham, we understand ourselves to be his spiritual children. The expressions of covenantal love given by God to Abraham and later to Moses and the children of Israel we understand as laying the groundwork for God's later ex-

pression of covenantal love in Jesus. These earlier manifestations of Divine love were specific to a man, a family, and their descendants; they were ultimately, though, intended to be vehicles of universal love.

As people who have received this divine love, we Evangelicals are bound to those through whom it came historically. Despite the early separation between the Jews who followed Jesus and those who laid the foundations for rabbinic Judaism, we share common roots. Thus Jews and Evangelicals can either think of ourselves in adversarial terms or we can think of ourselves in familial terms — estranged cousins, but cousins nonetheless.

Unfortunately, this sense of relatedness is more often lived out in the Evangelical imagination than it is in the concrete relationships of daily life. The respective demographic of the American Jewish community and Evangelical Protestants conspire to keep us apart unless we intentionally pull together. Working jointly for the security and safety of Israel as well as for justice and peace in the Middle East is one way of building concrete relationships. From the Jewish viewpoint, that seems paradoxical. Given the centuries of mistreatment of Jews at Christian hands, Jews understandably feel that our attempts to share our understanding of God's good news/bad news is an attack on Jewish identity. But from the standpoint of Evangelical Christians, many of whom are largely unaware of the ancient and medieval development of Christian anti-Judaism, helping Israel and sharing our spiritual understandings with Jews are two forms of the same familial love.

To the American Jewish community I say, please do not consider us enemies, but estranged (and indeed, at times, strange) cousins. In contemporary society, we have much to work for together. Together we can meet the challenges of secularism, of anti-family individualism, and of a commercialism that reduces life's meaning to the goods and services we consume. At home and abroad, we can fight for human rights and freedom.

In all of these things, we belong together. And when we Evangelicals share our faith in ways you find oppressive, please don't ask us to disavow what is fundamental to our identity. Instead, help us to live out that belief in ways we can both find workable and fruitful.

David Neff is Editor of Christianity Today, a journal founded by Billy Graham to be a voice for Evangelical Christians.

May 2007 Iyar 5767 To subscribe: 877-568-SHMA www.shma.com