

How Israel Won the Support of Christian Right

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our God."

Such sentiments resonate with special force among many conservative Christians, whose interpretation of the Bible declares Israel the covenant land promised to the Jewish people by God. In Huntsville, Ala., last month, more than 1,200 Christians packed the Von Braun Center to celebrate a Passover Seder and urge support for the Jewish state. An evangelical congregation in Colorado is rehearsing Hebrew folk songs to present at Israeli military bases on a Bob Hope-style tour next month. Evangelical Christians across the U.S. are raising millions to benefit Israel.

There's little evidence Jewish voters will respond to the Republican embrace of Israel. GOP candidates haven't won even 20% of Jewish voters in the past three presidential campaigns. Some Jews remain suspicious that conservative GOP support for Israel obscures a lack of respect for religious pluralism. Before he ran for president, Mr. Bush himself once expressed the belief that people who didn't accept Jesus as their savior wouldn't go to heaven. He later softened that assessment while declaring, "I'm a tolerant person."

The office of House Majority Whip Tom DeLay of Texas, once seen as cool toward Israel but now one of its strongest backers in Washington, has received increased interest from Jewish donors, who are planning to hold fundraising events for him soon here and in New York. "My phone is ringing off the hook every day with up to one dozen calls of Jewish Americans who ... want to support Tom DeLay," says Jack Abramoff, a conservative Jew who is helping raise money for Mr. DeLay.

Matthew Brooks, executive director of the Washington-based Republican Jewish Coalition, claims a "tectonic shift" in support that has included unusually successful fundraisers around the country for 2002 Republican Senate candidates running in South Dakota, Texas, Missouri and Minnesota.

Lobbyists for Israel have encouraged the shift, not merely with contributions but also by flying politicians to Israel to experience the Holy Land. The one overseas trip Mr. Bush took as he prepared to run for president in late 1998 was to Israel.

Back home, what provided the political raw material was the transformation of the GOP at the hands of religious conservatives. That change has taken place within the lifetime of Mr. Eastburn in Memphis. In 1980, the year before he was born, religious conservatives flocked to the candidacy of Ronald Reagan, helping him retool a GOP once dominated by genteel Easterners from mainline Protestant denominations. Among those who were moved to register and vote for the first

time that year were Matthew's father, Robert Eastburn, a plant salesman, and his mother, Dorothy Eastburn.

Their fellow congregant at Bellevue Baptist Church, a Colgate-Palmolive Co. marketing executive named Ed McAteer, would play a significant role in the realignment of the GOP through his work nationally in the conservative Religious Roundtable. Mr. McAteer is a Christian for whom support for Jews is a biblically based family tradition. He helped connect the Eastburns to several conservative activist groups. They would later pass on the tenets of those groups to Matthew and their four other children, who are being educated at home. The Eastburns began writing to members of Congress and becoming active in political campaigns.

At first, it wasn't obvious that the change in the GOP would benefit Israel at all. At a time when Americans still felt deeply dependent on Arab oil, Mr. Reagan decided to sell five sophisticated Airborne Warning and Control System planes to Saudi Arabia, against Israeli objections, and was backed by the Republican-controlled Senate. All but 12 of the 53 Senate Republicans, including Majority Leader Howard Baker of Tennessee, voted against the Israeli government's position.

The AWACS sale roused the American Israel Public Affairs Committee, a pro-Israel lobbying organization based in Washington. Executive Director Tom Dine, a Democrat who had worked on Ted Kennedy's presidential campaign, began reaching out to possible conservative supporters, especially evangelicals, across the country.

The efforts were quickly evident in Memphis. Though Jews are just 1% of this Mississippi Delta city's population, Jewish leaders began working with Christian leaders, especially Mr. McAteer. He had discovered Israel years earlier through his wife, Faye, who was active in a fundamentalist "country church" outside the city. Her grandfather had encouraged her to be good to Jews, citing God's vow to Abraham in Genesis, and her preacher cited other biblical passages mandating Christian support for "God's ancient people." Over the years, Mr. McAteer says, he had become "a Christian Zionist."

When Matthew Eastburn was a toddler, Mr. McAteer brought a Holocaust survivor to Memphis to tell members of Bellevue Baptist and other churches of how a Christian family in Holland had helped save Jews from the Nazis. As a

child in grade school, Mr. Eastburn recalls, he watched a church-produced video of her story called "The Hiding Place." In 1991, Mr. McAteer helped bring about 150 Southern Christian clergymen together with prominent Jews at a rally to raise funds for the first Christian-sponsored airlift of Russian Jews to Israel.

Jesse and Ariel

In Washington, he joined lobbyists for Israel in trying to win over the Republican right. They worked on leaders such as Sen. Jesse Helms of North Carolina, whom the pro-Israel lobby didn't consider an ally. Mr. Helms, who survived a 1984 election challenge from a Democrat who had extensive Jewish financial support nationally, traveled to the Holy Land the following year. A picture from that visit, of Mr. Helms and Mr. Sharon, hangs in the senator's office. Aides say he was deeply moved by the trip, and since then, says AIPAC, his voting record has been consistently pro-Israel.

Mr. McAteer eventually traveled to Israel with hundreds of prominent Christians, ranging from religious-broadcasting executives to John Ashcroft. Another was the Republican congressman who represented Memphis through most of the 1980s, Don Sundquist.

Former Sen. Rudy Boschwitz of Minnesota, an unusually conservative Jewish lawmaker, encouraged support from others on the right by pointing out that Israel provided invaluable security assistance to the U.S. What's more, he said, supporting Israel could produce valuable campaign donations. In numerous trips, he introduced local Jewish activists and donors to Republican members of Congress.

In 1991, President George H. W. Bush strained the budding alliance by refusing to help Israel secure \$10 billion in U.S. loan guarantees unless it agreed to halt new settlements in the West Bank and Gaza. American Jews responded in 1992 by giving Mr. Bush, a Connecticut-born Episcopalian, just 11% of their votes, one-third of his showing four years earlier.

Yet the courtship between Israel and the GOP's rising conservative Christian bloc continued. During the loan-guarantee fight, Mr. McAteer says, a conservative Jewish business executive phoned him with an offer to finance travel to Israel for 200 influential Christians. Among those who went: Memphis pastor Wayne Allen and Shelby County tax assessor Harold Sterling.

The results were evident soon after the Republican landslide in the 1994 midterm elections. One of the first acts of Tennessee's newly elected governor—Mr. Sundquist—was to set up a commission to promote ties between Tennessee and Israel. The Republican who succeeded Mr. Sundquist in the House, a Southern Baptist named Ed Bryant, began compil-

ing a solidly pro-Israel voting record.

Today, Israel commands enthusiastic support from a wide range of conservative sources. Rabbi Yechiel Eckstein, who directs the Chicago-based International Fellowship of Christians and Jews, says conservative Christians have donated more than \$60 million to help Israel since 1994, and the donations have jumped sharply since Sept. 11.

Funds for a Synagogue

Prime Minister Sharon has asked Mr. Eckstein to work with Ralph Reed, a former leader of the Virginia-based Christian Coalition, to reach out to evangelicals in the U.S. and around the world. The Anti-Defamation League, a Jewish organization that once warned of religious intolerance by conservative Christians, ran newspaper ads across the country this month quoting a speech by Mr. Reed. Near Memphis, a group of Christian activists recently raised \$180,000 and presented a new ambulance to the Baron Hirsch synagogue, which arranged for it to be shipped to Israel.

Some Jews who have experienced the shifting political winds for years can scarcely believe the extent of the changes. "I have never seen anything like this," says David Kustoff, looking around the Hirsch synagogue, filled in part with members of local churches. Mr. Kustoff, who led Mr. Bush's campaign in Tennessee in 2000, is now running for Congress to succeed Rep. Bryant, who's seeking a U.S. Senate seat. If Mr. Kustoff wins, he would be the first Jew elected to Congress from Tennessee.

Mr. Bryant, for his part, is locked in a fight with former Gov. Lamar Alexander for the Republican Senate nomination from Tennessee. Mr. Alexander supports Israel but not as ardently as Mr. Bryant, says Mr. McAteer. "As people find out about that, it is going to make a difference in this race," he predicts. He and the Eastburns are backing Mr. Bryant.

Mr. McAteer hasn't had much time to get involved in the 2002 races, though. He says he's busy planning a rally for next week in front of the state capitol in Nashville, to urge the state Legislature to approve a resolution in support for Israel.



Ed McAteer

Chosen People

How Israel Became A Favorite Cause Of Christian Right

Recipe Included Reagan's Rise,
OPEC's Decline, Sept. 11,
Activists Like Mr. McAteer

A Changing Mood in Memphis

By TOM HAMBURGER
And JIM VANDEHEI

MEMPHIS, Tenn. — The only Jew Matthew Eastburn remembers knowing until recently was his sinus doctor. But earlier this month, the 20-year-old Baptist walked into the orthodox Baron Hirsch Temple and started cheering.

Joining his pastor there, Mr. Eastburn waved an Israeli flag as local rabbis and a Republican congressman lashed out at Yasser Arafat and expressed their loyalty to the Jewish state. "It was thrilling," he said afterward. When the rally was over, he heeded a call for Christian conservatives nationwide to place a phone call to President Bush expressing support for Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon. The White House comment line was jammed.

The activism by the part-time college student was part of an extraordinary political alliance that has burst into view during the current Mideast crisis. Advocates for Israel, who once looked to liberal Democrats as the bulwark of U.S. support, now find equally conspicuous support from conservative Christian Republicans they once suspected of intolerance or even anti-Semitism.

That shift is having far-reaching consequences. More than any other single factor, it explains why there has been so little pressure from a Republican White House on Israel to curb its crack-down on Palestinians. President Bush, himself a born-again Southerner with far more instinctive sympathy for Israel than his father displayed, has taken advantage of the new climate by repeatedly expressing understanding for Israel's tactics in response to terror attacks. House Republican leader Dick Armey of Texas has gone so far as to suggest that Palestinians, not Israelis, ought to be the ones to surrender land in the quest for peace.

Oil Politics

In large part, this new alignment of forces represents an unanticipated consequence of the rise of religious conservatives within the GOP. But two critical developments, one playing out over three decades and the other over eight months, have also helped propel it to the American political stage.

The first is the declining political might of Arab oil producers. The 1973-74 Arab oil embargo dramatized U.S. dependence on imports from the Persian Gulf. That and the ties it produced between Gulf nations and oil-producing states in the American South had served as a brake on the U.S. government's willingness to embrace Israel.

The embargo stirred producers outside the Persian Gulf to step up production and claim more of the American market. Today, the Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries accounts for 45% of U.S. oil imports, down sharply from 70% in 1977. As Russia and the Caspian Sea states increase production, America may find more non-Gulf options. The upshot: The U.S. hasn't quite the same imperative to curry favor with Arab states as it had a generation ago.

Feeling of Kinship

The political shock delivered by the Sept. 11 attack only accentuated this drift in American opinion. Within minutes that morning, Americans developed an identification with the kind of threats from Islamic terrorists that Israelis have faced for a half-century. It heightened a sense of kinship with a fellow democracy forced to live on a war footing.

"We serve the same Holy God," said Holly Coors, a brewery heiress and conservative benefactor, to the Israeli ambassador at a recent gathering in Washington. "It is the enemy who goes against our God."

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