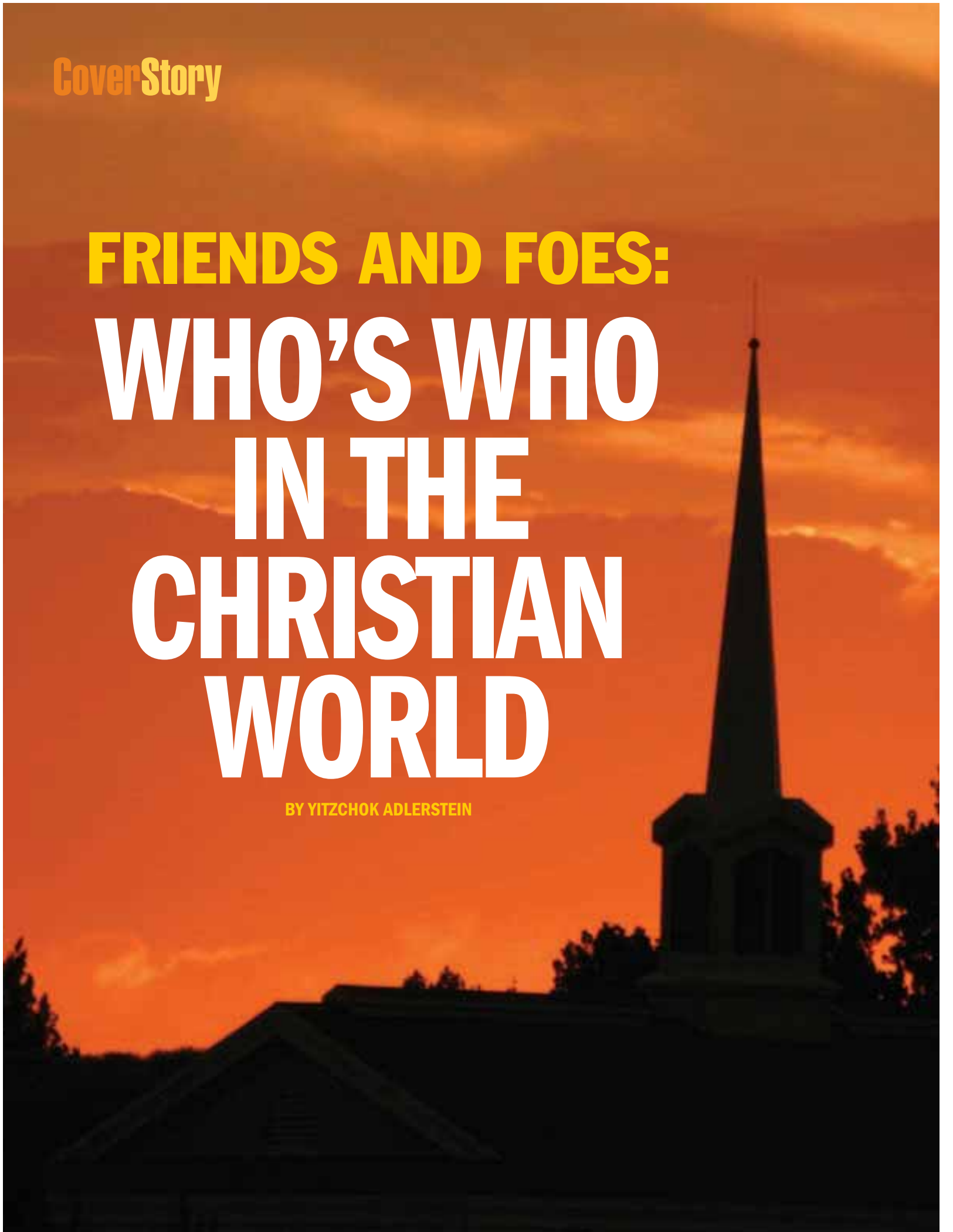


CoverStory

FRIENDS AND FOES:
WHO'S WHO
IN THE
CHRISTIAN
WORLD

BY YITZCHOK ADLERSTEIN



The young Rabbi Yonatan Eibeschutz watched from his front yard as a drunken Gentile peasant meandered down the street. Spotting little Yonatan, he faced him down from the walkway. “Hey Jew! What’s the difference between a pig and a Jew?” Our hero responded instantly, “The fence!”

For hundreds of years, it was easy to tell the difference between the victims and the victimizers. We Jews were the pursued innocents; Christians, plainly put, were our tormentors and foes. Matters are no longer so simple. In a world permeated with hatred of Israel, of meteorically rising anti-Semitism and an ascendant Islam suffused with more hatred of Jews than Nazi Germany, many Christians have become our most ardent supporters. Should we plod along as if nothing has changed? Chazal tell us to “*binu shenot dor vador*,” which some have appropriately rendered as “understand the differences between generation and generation.” We need to know who our friends are, and how far we can or should trust those friendships. We need to consider whether we are lulling ourselves into a premature sense of security. On the other hand, we also need to recognize that if it is Hashem’s will that Esav’s stance toward his brother Yaakov changes, we should not be obdurate in accepting his friendship.¹

The Earlier Church

Three ideas introduced early in Church history determined the course of centuries of persecution of Jews.

Many early Christians in the sec-

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ond century continued to be fascinated with elements of Jewish law and practice. The Epistle of Barnabas posited that the old Biblical covenant with Israel had been replaced. Faith had largely replaced the need for fidelity to myriad ritual requirements. More importantly, the Christian participants in a new covenant became the New Israel. Approaches that taught that the old covenant had either been replaced, or had morphed into a new form, became known as replacement theology, or supersessionism.

Around the same time, Justin introduced the charge of collective guilt for deicide. This charge would result in the spilling of oceans of Jewish blood, and enjoys popularity in many parts of the Christian world today, as Jews are still collectively abhorred for the ultimate crime of history.

John (“Golden Tongue”) Chrysostom, fourth century, saw to it that not only would Judaism be rejected as a belief system, but that Jews would be reviled as a people. He described them as “most miserable of all men ... lustful, rapacious, greedy, perfidious bandits ... inveterate murderers, destroyers, men possessed by the devil ... debauchery and drunkenness have given them the manners of the pig and the lusty goat ... pests of the universe.”

There were, to be sure, often major and minor figures in the Church who insisted upon humane treatment of Jews. (While Crusaders, monks and the rabble joined to plunder Jewish communities in their path, the majority of bishops during the First Crusade resisted and protected Jews by giving them refuge in their castles, or sequestering them in Christian homes.)² Yet these three factors—replacement theology, collective guilt and demonization—

became the de facto position of the Church in its interaction with Jews. They paved a smooth path to rapacious Crusades, blood libels, host desecration pogroms, autos-da-fe, Courts of the Inquisition and forced baptisms. They also prepared the ground for a smooth transition to modern racial anti-Semitism when the Church lost much of its clout in more recent centuries.

The weakening of the Church in the Reformation might have changed things. Indeed, the early Martin Luther was conciliatory, even solicitous to the Jews. But when they didn’t convert in droves to his enlightened Church, he turned on them with a passion. In the centuries that followed, Protestants, who had been so careful to distance themselves from the practices of Rome, showed themselves to be faithful heirs to centuries of Catholic animus toward Jews.

Modern Change

The Holocaust marked a new beginning in Christian relations with Jews. Reflecting upon what had happened, many people realized that Hitler—while fiercely anti-Christian himself—had co-opted centuries of hatred against Jews, and enlisted the aid of eager allies among the populations he vanquished who hated Jews more than their Nazi conquerors. Wanting to distance themselves from the horrors of genocide, churches began rethinking their attitudes toward Jews.

The most dramatic change occurred in the Catholic Church, with the appearance in 1965 of an important encyclical called *Nostra Aetate* (“In Our Times”). Because Catholics have a clear line of authority, a formal policy stance has real clout. (So-called traditional Catholics, unhappy with the liberal ten-

dencies of the last popes, broke away from Rome. Not unexpectedly, they include some very anti-Semitic folks, like Mel Gibson's father, Hutton Gibson, a notorious Holocaust denier.)

We currently have no measure of how far these teachings have penetrated to the Church faithful. We do know that the official position of the Catholic Church changed remarkably from what had been previously taught. Anti-Semitism is regarded as a sin. The charge of collective guilt for deicide stands repudiated, and the debt the Church owes to the Jewish people is acknowledged, along with the immutability of the Jews' own separate covenant with God. The previous pope made much of this change concrete by dramatic activity. His visit to a Rome synagogue took him only a short distance from his Vatican apartment, but it was a trip that was two millennia in the

Precisely because Protestant groups are not beholden to a Vatican that changes only glacially, Protestant denominations have less trouble adjusting their thinking when their members are seized with a new spirit. Changes, however, can come and go with equal speed.


The establishment of the State of Israel in 1948 vastly complicated matters. For some Protestants, particularly those in more conservative and fundamentalist circles, the return of the Jews to their homeland meant witnessing the clear fulfillment of Biblical prophecy in their own day. If they could be of further service to God by supporting and encouraging these Providential developments, all the better.

For others, the establishment of the State was a huge problem. Some retrograde thinkers in all groups of Christianity simply could not come to

For the purpose of this article, when we speak of Evangelicals we mean Protestant churches that are theological-ly more conservative and traditional, more intense in their demands on members and more spirited and dynamic than the more staid denominations on the Protestant left.

Evangelicals are not at the end of the religious spectrum. In worship, Charismatics are even more dynamic and spirited; in theology, there are fundamentalist groups that are further to the right than Evangelicals.

It is also mistaken to view them as preoccupied with proselytizing the unbelievers. Technically, all Protestants are "evangelizers," trying to teach their beliefs to every inhabitant of the globe, including Catholics and Muslims. This is a bedrock principle for all Protestants. Those we call Evangelicals are simply more aggressive about this obligation,



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making. He used that occasion to refer to Jews not only fraternally, but as the "elder brothers" of Christians.

Protestants tried making their own separate peace with Jews. More accurately, different denominations attempted to accommodate Jews in different ways. The most important of these accommodations was a deliberate muzzling of replacement and supersession talk. Protestants realized that if they continued to read Jews out of the Bible, treating them as historical discards, there would be no conversation or dialogue possible. Replacement theology was not quite buried, but it did go into mothballs. Protestant literature began to underscore that the relationship God had with the Jewish people was never abrogated, and that Christianity itself could not be fully understood without understanding its Jewish roots.

grips with a renascent Jewish nation. Centuries of decoupling Jews from Biblical Israel could not be easily overcome. Jews were supposed to dwindle and disappear, not make the desert bloom. For others still the creation of Israel meant a political headache, as they tried to protect traditional Christian interests in areas ruled by Arab and Islamic governments. By far, however, the worst problem was reserved for left-leaning denominations, which became more politicized and accepted a new Gospel of third-world, anti-West thinking in which Israel was one of the world's devils.

Evangelicals

Toward the other end of the Protestant religious spectrum, a different attitude prevailed. Evangelical support for Israel is well known and established.

while many on the left argue that they will make their best case for their beliefs by simply living fully according to their principles and making a good Christian impression upon others.

Some groups have insisted that Protestants must give up efforts at proselytizing as a precondition to bridge building with Jews. This is a serious error, and an insult to their convictions. Only those who do not take their own faith seriously can speak in such terms; Orthodox Jews know that faith cannot be bargained away. What Jews can get Protestants to understand is that targeting Jews as Jews, and offering them bait that is neither Judaism nor Christianity (i.e., "Messianic Judaism") is reprehensible. In some cases, Protestants can be convinced by Jews they have gotten to know that Jews are a poor choice for specialized proselytizing because their

own covenant with God makes them less of a priority than other groups, and because two thousand years of history has left them with a visceral contempt for missionaries.

John Hagee, one of the most powerful evangelicals in the country, publicly admits that he is sometimes accused of being “soft” on proselytizing Jews. His close friendship with his neighbor Rabbi Aryeh Scheinberg, an Orthodox Jew in San Antonio, has taught him a few things about how Jews react to Christians who wish to save their souls.

Jews tend to make a number of mistakes about Evangelicals. They see all Evangelicals as supporters. Many are; many are not. Those who call themselves premillennial dispensationalists (and they are the largest sub-group) are more likely to openly embrace Israel as the fulfillment of Biblical prophecy. There are plenty of Evangelicals, though, who do not have such leanings. Additionally, as in any non-Jewish community, old-fashioned anti-Semitism still thrives.

We also think that Evangelicals support Israel because they hope to bring Armageddon closer in time, at which point all Jews will either convert or be killed, God forbid. This is a very common fallacy. If Israel-friendly Evangelicals prepared a top-ten list of reasons to support Jewish causes, their picture of the end of time might rank as number eleven. Evangelicals look forward to a Messianic Age, but very few believe that it is within their reach or duty to hasten it. Supporting Israel is important to them because God’s covenant with Abraham, as set forth in Bereishit, explicitly promises that those who bless the Jews will be blessed themselves. Simply put, Evangelicals are being completely self-serving—in a laudable manner—when they militate for Israel. They take the Bible seriously, and they wish to assure themselves a piece of God’s favor!

Jews err in believing that they can count on Evangelical support as surely as indigestion after *shemurah matzah*.

This is not true. Evangelicals are not locked into their current position. The Bush years gave them much to ponder. As their influence soared, they had to consider how to translate their political currency into real buying power. To succeed politically, you need to build bridges to varied groups. Some Evangelical leaders argue that they need to be somewhat more muted in positions that damage relationships with diverse communities. If Christian Zionism is such an irritant to many Americans, perhaps they need to rethink whether they have given Israel too free a

thoroughly unfamiliar with the denominations of the Protestant Left. These are the churches that helped create America in Colonial times, and built it up in the two centuries thereafter:

Congregationalists, Lutherans, Episcopalians, Presbyterians and (later) Methodists. These are the groups that put the “P” in WASP. Some of them carry on the legacy of aristocratic, establishment attitudes, which, disdainful of immigrants and minorities, never looked kindly upon Jews.

Political leanings, however, have changed. Episcopalians, they used to



Members debate replacing the Presbyterian Church’s 2004 Israel divestment resolution at the PCUSA’s General Assembly in Birmingham, Alabama, on June 21, 2006. The 2004 resolution identified Israel’s “occupation” as “the root of evil acts committed against innocent people on both sides of the conflict” and called for a policy of “phased selective divestment” from companies that do business with Israel.

Photo: Rachel Pomerance/JTA

ride. In order to prevent an erosion in Evangelical support, we will need sustained and assiduous Jewish effort.

Mainline Protestant Denominations

Most Orthodox Jews seem to be

quip, were Republicans at prayer. More recently, though, politics have swung sharply to the left. A better description today might be Michael Moore-Jesse Jackson Democrats at non-prayer.

Two themes contributed to the extreme makeover of the mainline

churches. Tradition, ritual and ceremony gradually eroded in a post-World War II America, whose culture was increasingly open and liberal. While much of old-time religious practice was led out to pasture, values persisted longer than do's and don't's. In the case of many pastors emerging from seminaries in the fifties and sixties, one Christian value in particular survived the general devastation of the old order: taking up the cause of the powerless. Coupled with the movement of many in academia and the power elite toward liberal ideas and ideals, far-left politics became the unofficial catechism of churches that never had one before. The equation was a simple one. Power was bad, powerlessness was good. Satan could be found not in the deadly sins, but in the exercise of strength and security. Those who had strength were oppressors; stopping them became the new work of the Lord. Power was seen as vested in two entities in particular: the United States and Israel.

Developments elsewhere helped this along. The mainline denominations participate in a national umbrella organization called the National Council of Churches, which in turn is a member of the Geneva-based World Council of Churches (WCC). The WCC has many members in third world countries, which tilted far left during the Cold War, embracing socialist and revolutionary politics, befriending the Soviet orbit (which included the Arab world) and demonizing the West. Israel, with its meteoric rise to material success and its close ties to the United States, was roundly regarded as a colonialist garrison state.

It is difficult to overstate the animus shown by the WCC toward Israel. While the WCC routinely expresses its concern regarding minority rights and humanitarian issues (except when crimes are committed by third world countries themselves),³ it sat back in ominous silence each time Arab armies threatened to drive Jews into the sea. It broke its silence only after Israeli victories, and then only to demand that

Israel ease up on its "occupation" policies against the oppressed Arab peoples. It was almost as if Christian feelings of guilt about the Holocaust vanished when it came to Israel. (In truth, some of the denominations realized the contradiction, and formally declared that reaching out to Jews and declaring their legitimacy as a people—which they very much wanted to continue doing—had nothing to do with recognizing the right of the Jews to some piece of disputed geography in the Middle East.)⁴ Soon after Egypt's Nasser threatened in 1967 "to drive the Israelis into the sea," Protestant theologians A. Roy and Alice L. Eckardt diagnosed "a powerful ideological affinity ... between Christian predispositions and the annihilationist designs of the Arabs." Whenever Israel "is assailed ... certain suppressed, macabre elements in the Christian soul are stirred to sympathy with the assailants."⁵

Sympathy was generated from within the Mideast as well. In the late nineteenth century, many groups insisted on some sort of presence in the Holy Land. Walk through Jerusalem, and you will be struck by the variety of denominations and governments that established churches, schools, hospitals and other brick-and-mortar institutions. Those who built them were moved more by mistrust of everyone else than by pure charity. Everyone wanted a stake in Jerusalem; in particular, no one wanted to be at the mercy of a competing group. While others, in time, lost interest, church groups kept up their ties, and continue strong associations with branches of their own denominations, or a proxy presence through a related church. While this is perfectly understandable, it means that the coreligionists of American Protestants have the ear of the church hierarchy. When church officials in the Middle East have their own reasons for hating Israel (anti-Semitism, Arab nationalism, fear of their new Palestinian masters), their loathing for Israel takes a direct route to the heads of American denominations.

Missionaries exacerbate the prob-

lem. Churches constantly send them to work in the Middle East, servicing exclusively Arab populations, both Christian and Muslim. Many of these missionaries—highly motivated and doctrinaire to begin with—return to the States having wholly embraced the mindset of the clientele they served. They become politicized warriors for the Palestinian narrative, never having heard the Israeli version. This problem is worsened by key personnel of Arab extraction among the paid professionals in some of the churches. Egyptian-born Victor Makari is the coordinator for Middle Eastern affairs for the Presbyterian Church (USA)(PCUSA) and a vigorous voice against Israel. His son serves in a similar capacity for two other denominations. All of these denominations have passed horribly anti-Israel resolutions in the last two years.

Unlike the Catholic Church, where the Vatican ultimately can determine policy, the organization of Protestant denominations is supposed to be bottom-up, rather than top-down. The leadership positions should theoretically merely give voice to the will of the people, rather than shape it. In practice, however, this is not the case—particularly in regard to Israel. It is the national leadership that runs the web sites, prints the books and coordinates the national lecture series. Mainline Protestants who turn to their churches for insight and information about the Mideast have been treated for many years to a steady diet of anti-Israel propaganda. These churches rarely, if ever, provide a mainstream Israeli perspective.⁶ The material they distribute is supersaturated with imagery of the horrors of the "occupation," the presumed culprit for everything that is wrong in that region. The "apartheid wall" is a reflection of Israel's colonialist-expansionist designs, not a non-violent measure for protecting Israelis—Jewish, Christian and Arab—from suicide bombers, whose havoc is rarely described. When local churchgoers hear speeches about the Middle East, they listen to Palestinians who have

been quietly making their rounds for ten years, arousing sympathy and pointing a finger at the Israeli oppressors. Denominations have teamed up with hateful organizations, like the Sabeel Ecumenical Liberations Theology Center, and its Protestant head Naim Ateek. Ateek has said that he can accept the reality of Israel, but not its right to exist, and has used blatantly anti-Semitic imagery in his writing, like the ongoing “crucifixion” of the Palestinians by Israel. His colleagues urge both a one-state solution (i.e., a single state whose nature would be determined by the majority of its citizens, namely Muslims) and a return to supersession, without which Palestinians suffer too much, because Jewish historical claims to the land are legitimated.

Who provides the Jewish voice, when one is even sought? Jewish leftists,

gap between the Presbyterian laity, who were opposed to the resolution, and clergy, who supported it. The seminaries have been clearly effective in miseducating a generation of pastors.

Within this last factoid resides the silver lining in a cloud of anti-Israel bias. The thickness of that lining varies from denomination to denomination, but exists in every one. Simply put, the people in the pews do not share the views of their own leaders. The laity is often more conservative and traditional than its national leadership and its local clergy. They mistrust such moves as the consecration of gay marriage, and the substitution of Sophia (an old term meaning wisdom, but that smacks of heretical personification to many) for God in worship, as an egalitarian concession. Literally millions of members and hundreds of churches have simply

is not a myth, and they have become more eager not to contribute to it. Some are even prepared to battle it.

The paid professionals in the national offices use their power effectively to muffle these voices and quash resistance. A UCC (United Church of Christ) pastor, having served over twenty years at various pulpits, was repeatedly nominated as a delegate to the General Synod. He has been passed over every time—simply because the entrenched hierarchy knows him to have right-leaning views (as do his congregants), and it does its best to keep such people out of the national assemblies.

In most cases, then, the substantial numbers of pro-Israel members have not changed the direction of their movements. The Presbyterian Church—in a sense the most prestigious mainline

WHILE THE WORLD COUNCIL OF CHURCHES ROUTINELY EXPRESSES ITS CONCERN REGARDING MINORITY RIGHTS AND HUMANITARIAN ISSUES, IT SAT BACK IN OMINOUS SILENCE EACH TIME ARAB ARMIES THREATENED TO DRIVE JEWS INTO THE SEA.

full of scorn and derision for the Jewish State, fill that role with alacrity.

What kind of guidance can Protestants expect from their local pastors? Nothing that would brighten the picture. Pastors are trained in seminaries, which are really liberal arts academic institutions. The virulently anti-Israel atmosphere on so many US college campuses is a manifestation of the gross tilt to the left in academia. The mainline Protestant seminaries are part of the same phenomenon. The US and Israel are pilloried daily; there are few opportunities to hear a different voice.

In August 2004 the PCUSA's General Assembly passed a resolution in favor of divestment from companies supporting the “occupation.” This was followed by similar measures that were proposed, and in some cases adopted, by every other denomination. A poll taken shortly thereafter showed a wide

walked out of their denominations because of these leftward moves. Many traditionalists still remain. They are often more conservative about the message of the Bible, and about politics in general. Many are enthusiastic supporters of Israel. They recognize the positions of their national spokespersons as morally wrong for its imbalance, and pragmatically stupid for being off-putting to Jews.

In my experience, one factor stands out as most important. Many Protestants simply want good relations with the Jewish people in general, as well as with Jewish neighbors, business associates and, unfortunately, with intermarried relatives. In many cases, they have learned from Jewish friends how important Israel is to them, and how distorted was their understanding of Middle Eastern history. They have come to realize that widespread anti-Semitism

denomination on the status ladder, and overrepresented on Capitol Hill—is an exception. As soon as the divestment resolution of 2004 was passed (by delegates who were not given an opportunity to understand what was involved, and thought they were simply rubber-stamping another pro-peace measure), many Presbyterians swung into action. They included lay people on the left (who simply thought the measure unfair to Israel) and right, and pastors of some of the largest and most affluent congregations, some of whom threatened to withhold funding to the national church. Almost from day one, they generated dozens of overtures from their local presbyteries to revoke or modify the resolutions on divestment and condemning Israel's security fence. These overtures would slow-cook over the next years, awaiting a vote at the next General Assembly in June 2006.

Defending Israel from the Pews

Disseminating the truth about the Middle East conflict is what drives James Hutchins, the thirty-eight-year-old moderator of ucctruths.com, a web site that is dedicated to presenting the “truth” to members of the United Church of Christ (UCC) on a whole host of issues. According to the site, the national offices of the UCC “have shifted away from the needs of the local church and have set on a course of *dishonest* political activism.... The purpose of [ucctruths.com] is to ... challenge those in the national office to be honest in their pronouncements.” A lay person in the UCC, Hutchins, who lives in Cleveland where the UCC has its headquarters, feels that “Israel’s very existence is a justice issue.” Ucctruths.com was created because of a “genuine concern about Israel, driven out of a sense of justice,” says Hutchins.

Another Christian who has been actively fighting divestment is Jim Roberts, a professional mediator who practices in Southern California and Nevada. Roberts, who splits his time between San Diego and Idaho, is the chairman and organizer of The

Committee to End Divestment Now, a group of Presbyterians who came together to repeal the 2004 Presbyterian Church (USA) General Assembly’s call for divestment from Israel. Interestingly, while Presbyterians who belong to The Committee to End Divestment Now have different views on many other political and social issues, they nevertheless united to “decisively overturn a bad policy on divestment and decisively overturn a bad policy on the security barrier, and [achieve] success with an overture clearly and unequivocally labeling suicide bombings as a crime against humanity,” Roberts explains.

When Roberts first learned about the 2004 divestment call, it struck him as wrong. “Whenever you are part of an organization ... that makes decisions without consulting everyone, that is

very troubling,” Roberts says. “It didn’t sit well with me ... [or with the] others who sit in the pews.”

Roberts estimates that he spent 1,000 hours working on this cause in the eighteen months prior to and including the General Assembly in Birmingham in June 2006.

Established just over a year ago, Christians for Fair Witness on the Middle East, based in New York, is a group of mainstream Protestants and Roman Catholics who have come together out of a growing sense of concern over the anti-Israel sentiments they have seen in the church, particularly among “peace and justice

groups.” Fair Witness provides an “alternate voice ... on issues related to the conflict of Israel and its neighbors,” says National Director Sister Ruth Lutt, who lives in Queens, New York. The



Jim Roberts is the chairman and organizer of The Committee to End Divestment Now, a group that formed to oppose the Presbyterian Church’s call for divestment from Israel.

A group of activists slowly coalesced. They included pastors, attorneys, writers, seminarians and ex-military people. It would be hard to find a group of more motivated clear-thinkers. They knew every argument used by the other side, and were armed with cogent responses. Taking up the cause of Israel became a large part of their lives. They correctly reasoned that the danger in divestment was not in its economic impact, although Palestinian activist groups shared an acronym—BDS, or boycott, divestment, sanctions—to describe their program of economic warfare. More dangerous was that it created an identity in people’s minds. Israel

equals South Africa—the only country against which divestment is commonly thought to have worked. Such an identity would mean that the ugliness on the European street and in the American university, where Israel is seen as an illegal colonialist power, would penetrate to America’s heartland. Our activist friends were not motivated by the expectation that their efforts would grant them untold blessing through the old Abrahamic covenant, as would be members of churches much further to the right. There was nothing in it for them, other than the conviction that a moral wrong was in progress, and they wanted to help correct it. Their zeal and

tenacity are an inspiration.

In May, eleven of them organized a weeklong trip to Israel. Most had been there many times before, but they wanted to focus this time on the arguments that are so often brought up—the horrors of the “occupation” and the security fence—or not brought up at all—like the persecution of Christians in the Palestinian Authority by Muslims. They invited three rabbis to accompany them. As it turns out, all were Orthodox: Rabbi Abraham Cooper, of the Simon Wiesenthal Center; Rabbi Eugene Korn, formerly of the American Jewish Committee, and me. We were by no means the only people working on the

group acts as an advocate within the members' churches—they regard themselves as a “third voice,” not representing the Israeli/Jewish side or the Palestinian side. “There is an objective truth and that is what we are looking for,” says Sr. Ruth, a sister of the St. Dominic Order and a partner in a law firm.

For Fair Witness, supporting Israel is a matter of social justice. Sr. Ruth says she and her partners “feel called to do this ... it is a sacred duty that God has given us.” She is quick to distinguish her group and herself from Christian Zionists, who support Israel because of theological reasons. “I don't have a single Christian Zionist in the organization. We support Israel for ... the theology of social justice.... This is an issue of defending those who are oppressed.” Both Roberts and Sr. Ruth say they couldn't have accomplished as much as they have without the help of so many members of their respective groups. In Roberts' case, this includes people from across the country.

One of the goals of Fair Witness, which makes its voice heard at press conferences and rallies as well as in workshops for local church groups, is to try to avoid the “sin” of anti-Semitism, which, Sr. Ruth claims, has recently

morphed into anti-Zionism.

Hutchins sees the divestment issue as one of politics and leverage. “In my opinion [it is] politically opportunistic to be against us,” Hutchins says.

“Domestically, political liberals view divestment as a battleground issue against political conservatives [who have a history of supporting Israel both politically and financially]. As cynical as it sounds, I think for some liberals, ‘the enemy of my enemy is my friend,’ in this case, Palestinians.... I can't understand any other rationale of some liberals—especially religious liberals—to align themselves with violent groups known to have committed terrorist acts.

“If I heard more Christian leaders speak out in favor of Israel's need to protect itself, I might genuinely accept their wish for peace in the Middle East,” Hutchins continues. “However, the level of anti-Israel language can only lead me to believe that there is a political motive. It is sad; true Middle East peace should not be a political game.”

While the divestment movement has fizzled especially since PCUSA's 2006 reversal on divestment, there is much animosity toward Israel in Protestant circles, and continued calls for divestment. “We've got a long way to go because anti-Israel forces that have

been lobbying within our churches have been doing this for over twenty years,” Sr. Ruth says. Until recently, however, “no one has had the courage to stand up” and do something about it.

Though many agree that the divestment movement is losing steam, in the UCC “there are a handful of leaders who have proven that they are determined to preserve the divestment language in our resolutions at any cost,” Hutchins says. “As we look to overturn the UCC's current resolution of ‘Economic Leverage,’ we expect very heavy resistance since the UCC is, in reality, the last pillar of divestment in US Protestant churches.”

As for The Committee to End Divestment Now, the group's mandate originally stated that it would dissolve in July of 2006 when its goals had been accomplished. However, that deadline has been delayed, says Roberts. The mandate has been extended for two years, until the next General Assembly, “in order to monitor PCUSA's compliance with the will of the General Assembly as established in 2006.”

Dassi Zeidel is assistant editor of Jewish Action.

problem of Protestant divestment. A host of other Jewish organizations—and concerned Christians from other denominations—devoted much energy to the issue, sometimes through other strategies, such as continuing dialogue with the Church leadership.

In the end, however, it was Presbyterians who turned the tide at their June General Assembly in 2006, not their Jewish cheerleaders. After a long struggle, a committee issued its report, recommending action by the entire assembly. Hearings were both public and private. The public hearings allowed absolutely anyone to speak, as long as they signed up in advance and

limited their remarks to two minutes. Very few committee members, chosen at random, had any historical background or context to the problem. The two-minute limit made it impossible to appeal to what we would call the historical “facts.” The most dramatic moment came when James Woolsey, ex-director of the CIA, took the mike. “My name is James Woolsey,” he said. “A vote for divestment is a vote for Hamas.” It produced audible gasps in the room, and discomfort when he cogently explained what he meant. Professor Judea Pearl, father of slain *Wall Street Journal* writer Daniel Pearl, explained how divestment had empowered only one group—the

terrorists who beheaded his son—who effectively used the resolution to prove to the Arab street that with time, even the Americans could learn the truth of the Palestinian position. The Palestinians themselves stayed away in large numbers. They didn't have to be there to make their case. Their side was taken by Jews, manning booths, working the crowd, all the while speaking up against Israel.

The committee report acknowledged faults in the process of two years earlier that led to the resolution, recognized the pain it had caused the Jewish people and substantially changed the wording of its economic policy to strip

it of the word “divestment.” Church leadership tried several times to change it on the floor, but to no avail. In the weeks and months that followed, they gamely tried to dilute the importance of the vote, but this too has been countered by the same group of activists who fought for Israel two years before. These friends deserve the thanks and acknowledgment of all who love Israel.

It is very unlikely that the victory at the Birmingham General Assembly



Jews and Christians gathered at the Portland Convention Center in Portland, Oregon, in July 2005, in a silent vigil for Israeli victims of Palestinian terror, while the Disciples of Christ, who passed a resolution opposing Israel's West Bank security barrier, held their annual convention inside the center. The resolution followed other Protestant denominations considering divestment from Israel. Photo: Jewish Review

will be repeated with other denominations. While, as noted earlier, friends of Israel can be found in every denomination, there are simply not as many of them—or they have not found a way to organize as well as the Presbyterians. This is particularly true when their church leadership still remains somewhat tied to the old upper-class European hatred of Jews that has not waned. The American Episcopalians, for instance, are still bound to the British Anglicans, from whom they derived.

The other denominations, however, may learn from Birmingham that opening up arms of welcome to the American Jewish community while stabbing Israel in the back simply will not work. They may understand that divestment accomplishes nothing for

Palestinians or Israelis, strengthens the hand of terrorists and eliminates any role they may have as honest brokers in real progress in building bridges between cultures on the grass-roots level. They may backpedal on divestment not because of love for Israel, but so as not to embarrass political candidates in their denomination. (Hillary Clinton is a Methodist; a recent candidate for state office in Connecticut who is a UCC pastor was sharply challenged for his membership in a church that has a terrible record on Israel.)

The bottom line is simple. We must offer support to mainline friends, and seek to contain the damage of adversaries. We have fallen behind many years through inaction, while a consortium of left-leaners and Palestinians have infiltrated the leadership of churches and their key agencies, and have brought their message to local churches across America. There is no telling how successful we will be, but no reason to doubt that what has

worked in some places can work in many more. Find a church with a particularly good record on Israel, and you will usually find a Jewish group that has reached out to its spiritual leader, or congregants, or both. Sponsored trips to Israel are wonderfully effective. Members of those missions return with a profoundly changed view of Israel—her history, legitimacy, value to the United States—and her security needs.

Who will take responsibility in this arena of our struggle for Israel's well being? Until now, the heterodox movements have been responsible for most contact between communities. There is no minimizing the good work that Reform and Conservative clergy and lay people have done, and in many cases, continue to do in this arena. But there

has been serious erosion of commitment to Israel in these circles. Some rabbis actively identify with far-left organizations, and promote positions on Israel we would not want Christians to embrace. Others who are sympathetic to the State are hamstrung by laities so divided about Israel that these rabbis consider it unwise to take a political stand that could alienate members of their congregations. Large groups make public statements that try so hard for balance that their tepid rhetoric only confuses Christians watching from the sidelines. They can only wonder whether American Jews really support the Jewish State with enthusiasm, and whether they ought to do the same to win their friendship.

More and more, it appears that the Orthodox community must play a large, if not dominant, role in any action plan regarding Christian attitudes toward Israel.

Moreover, committed Christians are often more at ease and less self-conscious with Orthodox Jews than with any other kind. To Christians on the right, Orthodox Jews share a belief in a God Who speaks to Man, Who makes His Will known through discrete texts, Who makes many demands of Man, including some he will not understand but must obey nonetheless, and rewards and punishes him for his activities. In speaking with traditional Jews, committed Christians know that they will evoke understanding rather than muted sneers or paternalistic condescension when they speak of an afterlife, of God's Providence, of the efficacy of prayer. Even in liberal denominations, serious thinkers—even those with whom we disagree regarding many social issues—admire the depth with which *halachah* explores contemporary issues, providing a nuanced framework in which to conduct ethical discussion, as they struggle themselves to find reliable moorings in a changing world.

While serious Christians have an easier time speaking to Orthodox Jews, Orthodox Jews have a harder time than others speaking to Christians. We treat

memory as a mitzvah, and the memory of two millennia of Christian mistreatment casts a long shadow over any attempt at rapprochement. Suspicion and fear that in the end we will be hurt has been bred into our community. Most of us (including this author) see a firm barrier to interfaith theological dialogue. We make the mistake of thinking that any meaningful contact with Christians falls under the same rubric.

Meeting with local Christians is not the same as interfaith dialogue, especially when rabbis do not take part. (*Rabbanim* can accomplish much by private, discreet friendships with Christian clergy. Especially outside of

time, will bring up Israel, and will gain a new perspective.

A coordinated effort of Orthodox shuls, particularly in major cities, to open channels of communications with religious groups, especially mainline Protestant ones, could slow the Palestinian juggernaut. Making tens of thousands of new friends would be wonderful, but may not be necessary. We need to create and strengthen enough friends in different churches so that their national leaders cannot have their way without a fight, without some people rising to the mike and pointing to institutionalized hostility to Israel, and the price that will be exacted for it.

said. “When the next Holocaust comes, we’ve organized a network of homes across America that has pledged to become houses of refuge, to which Jews can flee and hide.” The thought is both appreciated for its sincerity and profoundly disturbing. Only Hakadosh Baruch Hu can stay the hands of those who would destroy us. Our chief concern must always be to secure His protection through our prayers and *mitzvot*. He also, however, asks us to act within the parameters of “natural” forces. At other times in history, we gratefully accepted hands of friendship proffered by important non-Jews, such as Antoninus, whose relationship with

MAINLINE PROTESTANTS WHO TURN TO THEIR CHURCH FOR INSIGHT AND INFORMATION ABOUT THE MIDEAST HAVE BEEN TREATED TO A STEADY DIET OF ANTI-ISRAEL PROPAGANDA.

New York, many more are doing this than is generally realized.) Virtually every *rav* I have spoken to has instantly recognized the distinction. To be sure, there are weighty halachic issues that must be carefully addressed. Meetings should take place in neutral locations, like a Starbucks, to avoid the halachic issue of entering a church. Astute thinking must create protocols regarding refreshments, so that no element of *kashrut* be compromised. It must be made clear that theological issues are not what the proposed meetings are about—they are about people learning more about their neighbors.

The contacts are easy to set up. Church groups often seek new activities for their members. A shul member can call or write, suggesting that as neighbors, members of each group should get to know each other. An offer to meet in order to educate one’s Christian neighbors about Israel will probably not be as successful. When people meet, topics of interest to both will come up. The Christian attendees, in the course of

This is within our grasp.

The first time I met a group of Christian supporters of Israel, one saw my unease, and tried assuring me of her group’s deep affection for the Jewish people. “We are not going to allow what happened in Germany. No way,” she

Fliers urging boycotting Caterpillar, Inc., the Illinois-based heavy machinery company that sells bulldozers to the Israeli army. Caterpillar has been one of the main targets of the Presbyterian Church (USA) divestment campaign. Fliers are from CATdestroyshomes.org, a site maintained by the San Francisco-based Jewish Voice for Peace (JVP), a fringe group that strongly endorses divestment from Israel.

Rabbi Judah the Prince helped bring the Mishnah to publication, and Johannes Reuchlin of the fifteenth century, whose intervention rescued the Talmud from the pyre.

Is there a compelling reason to act differently today? **JA**

Notes

1. See *Netziv, Ha’amek Davar*, Bereishit 33:4.



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DATE**

**109TH
Anniversary
OU
National
Dinner**

**THE NEW
YORK
HILTON**

**SUNDAY
MAY 20TH
2007**

**RECEPTION AT 5:00 PM
DINNER AT 6:00 PM**



2. Edward H. Flannery, *The Anguish of the Jews: Twenty-Three Centuries of Antisemitism*, rev. (New Jersey, 1985), 91-93.

3. In 2004, The Institute on Religion and Democracy, an umbrella group of conservative elements within the mainline churches, issued a revealing report on four years of human rights advocacy within these denominations. The following is taken from the report's executive summary:

Overall, criticisms of Israel amounted to 37 percent of the ninety-seven human rights criticisms offered by the churches during those years, only slightly higher than the 32 percent of criticisms leveled at the United States. The remaining 31 percent of criticisms were shared by twenty other nations. For every one criticism of any other foreign nation, one criticism was made of the United States and one of Israel. Nearly all churches demonstrated this focus on the United States and Israel in their legislative actions, their statements, their news sources or all three.

As a result, nearly three out of four human rights criticisms were made of nations designated as free (mostly the United States and Israel) by the Freedom House assessments. Those rated not free totaled 19 percent of criticisms, while partly free nations totaled only 8 percent of criticisms. Of the fifteen worst human rights offenders in the world, only five were criticized by the churches during the four-year period studied.

Regions like the Middle East (apart from Israel) and Central Asia (former Soviet republics) were the most notable areas ignored by the churches in their human rights advocacy. Partly free nations, where church influence might be most effective in widening the limited civic space already open to indigenous Christians and other citizens, received the least attention.

4. A 1987 document, *A Theological Understanding of the Relationship Between Christians and Jews* (Presbyterian Church [USA], Louisville) outlined the struggle and the substance of one church's attempt to arrive at a new understanding and appreciation of the Jewish people. Its section on Israel shows how difficult it can be to balance competing interests, and how unsatisfying the conclusions can be to both Christians and Jews. Here are a few quotes:

The State of Israel is a geopolitical entity

and is not to be validated theologically... Further, because land is God's to be given, it can never be fully possessed... The Hebrew prophets made clear to the people of their own day as well, indeed, as any day, that those in possession of "land" have a responsibility and obligation to the disadvantaged, the oppressed, and the "strangers in their gates." God's justice, unlike ours, is consistently in favor of the powerless (Ps. 103:6). Therefore we, whether Christian or Jew, who affirm the divine promise of land, however land is to be understood, dare not fail to uphold the divine right of the dispossessed. We have indeed been agents of the dispossession of others. In particular, we confess our complicity in the loss of land by Palestinians... We disavow any teaching which says that peace can be secured without justice through the exercise of violence and retribution. God's justice upholds those who cry out against the strong... "Land" is understood as more than place or property; "land" is a biblical metaphor for sustainable life, prosperity, peace, and security. We affirm the rights to these essentials for the Jewish people. At the same time... we affirm those same rights in the name of justice to all peoples.

5. A. Roy Eckardt, *Elder and Younger Brothers: The Encounter of Jews and Christians* (New York, 1967), 172.

6. See, for example, the Episcopal Church's timeline of the Middle East at http://www.episcopalchurch.org/1866_19041_ENG_HTML.htm, which omits almost all important context and balance. In 1948, the War of Independence creates 650,000 Palestinian refugees—but no mention of the expulsion of Jews from Arab lands. In 1967, Israel conquers the Golan, Sinai and the West Bank and creates 600,000 more refugees—but no mention of the threats to drive Israel into the sea that precipitated Israel's defensive action. Israel "invades Lebanon" in both 1978 and 1972—in neither case are the waves of terrorist attacks from the north mentioned. In 2002, "the reoccupation of Palestinian territory begins"—once again, without mention of the suicide bombings that led to them. Israel is portrayed almost uniformly as the big bully on the block.

7. <http://www.pcusa.org/today/departments/go-figure/past/2005/gf-0605.htm>.

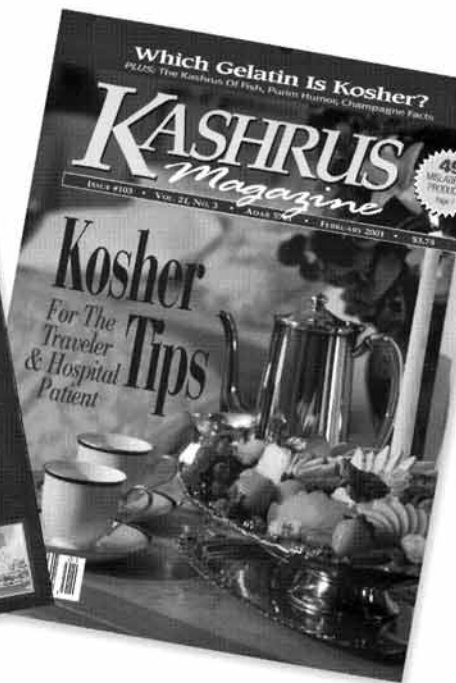
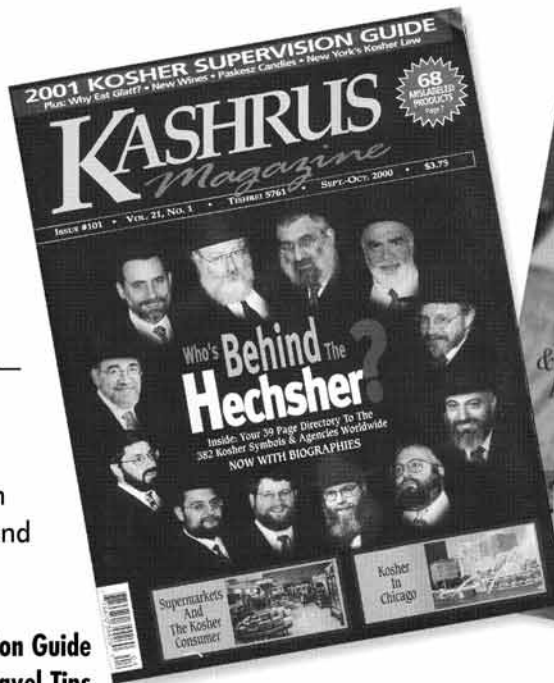
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