

SEVENTH ANNUAL MEETING WITH EVANGELICALS June 1-2, 2015

The seventh annual meeting of Jewish religious and communal leaders with national leaders of the various Evangelical groups was convened in Washington, DC from June 1-2, 2015. 28 Jewish participants and 20 Evangelicals were present. The topics that were discussed were: Evangelizing and evangelizing Jews; The Middle East today; The role of freedom in foreign affairs; Immigration: Biblical and contemporary perspectives; Preachers and teachers dealing with passages on Jews and Judaism in the New Testament and Christian liturgy; and Evangelical understanding of God's covenant with the Jewish people today. In addition to the formal presentations and responses, the members were divided into small discussion groups.

David Neff, retired editor of *Christianity Today*, described the evolution of the program of evangelizing Jews that really started with Paul. In America, the 19th century witnessed acceleration of that program led by the Methodists and Baptists, first in Great Britain and towards the end of the century here in America. In the 20th century, Billy Graham was the prime mover (aided by an apostate, Tuviah Zaretsky). Then came the Willowbank Document which advocated further proselytizing Jews. Neff stressed that no one should engage in deceptive evangelizing. He also noted that evangelizers are often of Jewish descent.

A long discussion ensued over the nature of so-called "messianic Jews" and what constitutes the end of a person's membership in the Jewish people. Many failed to see that missionizing Jews is both wrong theologically and unnecessary. The problem of persecution of Christians in the Middle East and Africa was discussed and several suggested the US needs to appoint a special envoy to handle that painful problem.

Ira Forman of the US State Department discussed the growing problem of anti-Semitism, noting that a deterioration has taken place. He fear that in 5-7 years, some European Jewish communities may disappear. Increasingly, Jews want to emigrate as their situation deteriorates. He drew a comparison with the days when Soviet Jewry fought for the right to emigrate. He noted that it was, in a sense, easier to wage the campaign then because there was only one address to turn to, namely, the Kremlin. But today there is a list of countries involved including Erdogan of Turkey, Kirshner in Argentina, etc. We must work together to blunt their hateful tactics and combat anti-Semitism.

Dr. Chris Seiple of the Institute for Global Engagement observed that we enter a war with a strategy but fail to leave it with a strategy and this has exacerbated the situation in countries such as Iraq, Syria, Libya, etc. In 1998, the US created the post of Ambassador of Religion and Global Affairs (a spot now occupied by our own, Rabbi David Saperstein). We have tried to enhance the security of the religious groups around the world but it is hard to converse about religions. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton did attempt to create a fruitful dialogue between religious groups and civil society.

Professor Saul Berman of Stern College of Yeshiva University analyzed the vulnerable status of immigrants and discussed the Torah's views on how to deal with that element of society. The Torah's position is clear: there shall be one law for the citizen (*ezrah*) and foreigner (*geir*) alike. The Torah commands us numerous times to "love" the stranger; at the same time, the immigrant must adhere to the Seven Laws of Noah.

Professor Amy-Jill Levine of Vanderbilt University noted that it is a struggle to disabuse evangelicals of their anti-Jewish biases that crop up in their preaching and teaching. There is also the issue of the dispute between Israel and Palestine. Religious schools and seminaries preserve the old teachings about the deicide, the Pharisees as evil hypocrites, whereas Jesus served as the champion of social justice. Christian must learn never to say, "all Jews," etc. Just study the Jewish commentaries the Bible to see the great variations in Jewish thought and philosophy. And remember that there are Jews living and creating *today*—not just in the ancient world.

In the discussion that followed, several wondered about the status of “messianic Jews” and who defines, “who is a Jew?” Rev. Dr. Jason Poling of the New Hope Community Church wondered how to deal with a Jew who accepts Jesus since this is what the New Testament is all about.

Rev. Dr. Joel Hunter of Northland Church, A Church Distributed in Florida, observed that these days we Christians do so many things together with Jews that the old stereotypes have died. In preaching the Gospels, it is imperative to stress that we are witnessing an ancient power struggle within the Jewish community *intra* Jews. We need to teach our congregants that fact.

Professor Alan Johnson, emeritus professor at Wheaton College, suggested that evangelicals be defined religiously, not politically. He discussed the controversial Willowbank Document, noting that even those who actively evangelize Jews agree that it must not be coercive. He analyzed the so-called pre-millennial dispensationalists’ approach to Jews, Judaism (which they insist is obsolete) and the State of Israel, which they view as the forerunner of the Second Coming of Jesus.

All evangelicals believe in one, not two covenants; the younger one has superseded the older. But newer scholarship and Christian theology have highlighted Romans 9-11 so that we have witnessed a sea change in Christian theology: Judaism is no longer viewed by most Christian thinkers as obsolete and devoid of a *raison d’etre*.

Professor Ruth Langer of Boston College, responded with an analysis of the meaning of covenant (*brit*) and how the various covenants intersect. The Jewish view of *brit* is that it is a contract between God and Israel and it entails the performance of *mitzvot* (commandments).

In sum, all found much stimulation, learning and fellowship between the members who came from as far away as California.