

The Christians in Europe to the rescue

By Lily Galili

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Around a month ago at Schocken House in Jerusalem, there was a meeting of a somewhat unusual group to discuss some very sensitive subjects. Those attending included National Union MK Yuri Stern; Josh Reinstein, a Canadian immigrant who coordinates the Knesset lobby to promote ties with Christian communities; and Dmitry Radyshevsky, who last Sukkot organized the Jerusalem Summit, which was attended by right-wing activists from Israel and from Jewish communities around the world.

But there were also representatives of the Christian communities in Israel at this meeting, including several Christian Arabs, and even one Arab priest, whose identity remains secret. The subject discussed was actually a follow-up of steps taken by the chairman of the National Union, Transportation Minister Avigdor Lieberman, who is seeking to promote his canton plan as an alternative to the establishment of a Palestinian state.

Under this plan, the area of Bethlehem, Beit Jala and Beit Sahour, which during the years of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict have been emptied of their Christian residents, would again become a Christian stronghold. In letters Lieberman sent to the Pope, the head of the Russian Church in Israel and other Christian figures, he called on these bodies to take responsibility for what is happening in these areas, to appropriate them from the Palestinian Authority and restore their Christian character. The letters have yet to receive a response.

The meeting produced a joint declaration of intent to promote the plan among the leaders of Christian organizations around the world and to even bring it to U.S. President George Bush, himself a good Christian. Everything was done behind a veil of secrecy, because there is hardly any more sensitive issue in Palestinian society than the internal tension between Muslims and the Christian minority. In fact, the Christians, who like the Palestinians in the territories are experiencing severe economic hardship, are fearful of receiving assistance from Christian organizations around the world. Some of the Christian participants at the meeting said they have now received threatening letters from their Muslim colleagues.

Rabbi Yosef is turning a blind eye

The meeting in Jerusalem was only one facet of the vast network of ties worldwide the Israeli right is establishing with Christian supporters of Israel, most of them fundamentalist. The depth of the ties with Christians in the U.S. has received considerable exposure. Now, while the European Union is expanding, these ties have another pillar: the establishment of the European Coalition for Israel, based on the American model. Its establishment was announced two weeks ago in Brussels, where its first meeting also took place, attended by 50 representatives from nine countries. In practice, a political alliance of conservative movements with a deeply religious orientation was formed there. The benefit for the Israeli right is clear: increased support for its positions within the institutions of the European Union.

"This will be the pro-Israel lobby alongside the European Parliament," declared MK Stern, who represented Israel at the founding session of the Christian coalition. "There are 3,000 lobbies alongside the parliament, and not one of them was registered as pro-Israel. The Greens have an Israeli equivalent and that's certainly true for the labor parties. We, for our part, will be the address of the Christian parties, who have no natural address in Israel."

Stern himself is one of the two chairmen of the lobby to promote ties with Christian communities, which was set up in the Knesset at the end of January. The other chairman, surprisingly enough, is MK Yair Peretz of Shas. Stern, one of the initiators of the lobby, needed a "kashrut supervisor" and after considerable effort, found Peretz. The other members of the lobby are Labor MKs Isaac Herzog and Orit Noked, Meretz MKs Ilan Shalgi and Hemi Doron, Likud MKs Gilad Erdan and Gila Gamliel, NRP MK Gila Finkelstein and National Union MK Aryeh Eldad.

These days MK Peretz is now reaping the fruits of his surprising association with the lobby. Worldwide Christian organizations are supplying over 5,000 Passover food packages to be distributed among needy families. "Every year, I distribute around 2,000 packages. This year, thanks to them, it's almost triple the number," Peretz reports. "In addition, they are working on a project to supply a schoolbag filled with all the necessary items for thousands of needy children. Now, a new and costly project has also started, a pilot project to provide dental clinics for the needy. They will bring not only the equipment, but also the volunteer doctors who will work with the children." Peretz's enthusiasm is understandable: since El Hama'ayan dried up, the well of the Christians will now offer refreshment.

Nevertheless, the association between the Jewish fundamentalist movements and Christian fundamentalist organizations is actually surprising. "They aren't planning missionary incitement, they're coming to help," says MK Peretz in praise of his new allies. "The fact is, they are also willing to get involved in projects with a clear ultra-Orthodox slant, such as bar mitzvah ceremonies and helping young couples who do not have enough to get married." Peretz admits that he deliberated a lot before agreeing to be the chairman of the lobby and even consulted with rabbis, "really Orthodox ones, not Reform rabbis." He says his activities are received with understanding and only one Haredi newspaper (not the Shas paper) attacked him for it.

And Shas? Shas has chosen to look the other way and its acceptance of these steps can be seen in the fact that Rabbi Ovadia Yosef himself recently attended (a rare event) the bar mitzvah of Peretz's son.

Common denominators

In contrast to Peretz, Stern's objective is clearly political, although he has managed to develop for himself his own theological doctrine. At the first meeting of the Knesset lobby, at which the Vatican representative in Israel was present, Stern said in his opening remarks: "This is apparently the first time in history that Jews and Christians are so clearly on the same side of the barricade, in the new conflict with radicalism. This common denominator of Judeo-Christian values, of Judeo-Christian civilization, is now clearer and more relevant than ever before."

"This is what we are building on," Stern clarified. "On the way, we must deal not only with Christian stereotypes about us, but also with Jewish stereotypes about them. Despite all the differences, there is a large common denominator between Judaism and Christianity regarding moral imperatives and public ethics."

Stern believes so strongly in this that he is willing to ignore the big plan, according to which this love for the Jewish people derives from the vision of the end of days, when the Christian messiah will come for the second time and then the Jews who survive that event will convert to Christianity. But why worry about such a vague future, when it is possible to gain immediate benefits so long as both sides are awaiting the messiah, even if it is not the same messiah? Evangelists in the U.S. include in the material they send to their supporters there prior to the presidential elections information about the candidates' positions not only on issues such as abortion, but also their positions on Israel.

Stern and his colleagues see potential in Europe. "In the elections for the European Parliament in

June, the small nucleus that supports Israel may be completely eliminated if no active steps to preserve it are taken," Stern says. "Therefore, we are trying to encourage and assist in the eastern European countries that are about to join the EU. We want to approach Russian-speaking communities in Europe and ask them to support pro-Israel candidates. It's more complicated than in the U.S., because the elections are pan-European, and the voter doesn't really control the machinery of the party for which he votes."

Stern is also promoting ties with Christian groups in countries outside the European Union. Thanks to his connections in the former Soviet Union, he has initiated an appeal to Orthodox churches in the Ukraine.

There has been a "positive response" and willingness on the part of several groups within the Ukrainian church to visit Israel. That is how realpolitik, bypassing generations of low points, conservatism and a shared Soviet background are combining to form a single political bloc. In the European Council, Stern has already established contacts with the Czechs and Baltic states representatives, whose potential is still untapped. But he was unsuccessful with the Poles, "who still get nervous when they hear Russian," as he put it.

Within Stern's party as well, there are still some "nervous" members who are not impressed by this new alliance. Tourism Minister Benny Elon, an ordained rabbi, apparently did forgive the Christians in a true Christian spirit and he goes abroad to speak to their gatherings in the U.S. But MK Uri Ariel, for example, refused to sign a thank you letter the party sent to Christian friends. He is still suspicious of these groups.

Stern, the living spirit of the lobby and the European effort, is so free of restraint that he even preaches to the Christians to strengthen their faith, albeit for Israel's benefit, of course. "The pro-Israel Christian coalition in Europe is still small, because Europe is today secular by definition," he explains. "I told them that it is possible that this activity with Israel may actually help Christians strengthen their ties to their religion. I think that the current world conflict is essentially religious in nature. And if the fight is a religious one, you have to approach it with your faith reinforced. If Israel's position in the U.S. is strong compared to Europe, the only explanation for it is the depth of religiosity in America."

Doesn't he sometimes feel he is playing with dangerous, volatile material?

"Sometimes, yes," answers Stern. "After all the past speaks for itself. But the basic figures have changed and we have no choice. Israel survived for years because during the Cold War it was part of the coalition against communism; after the Soviet Union's collapse, we were left without a coalition in which we were a vital component. That's why we have to find connections for ourselves, where will be protected by the interests of others. Now it's a religious, Judeo-Christian interest. Just as in the Cold War, we have to take a side in the war of civilizations that is now underway."

At a meeting of the Knesset lobby to promote ties with Christian communities around the world, Malcolm Hedding, the executive director of the International Christian Embassy Jerusalem, reported that his offices were being flooded with thousands of emails from all over the world from Christians who support the process. "The eyes of the Christian world are upon you," said Hedding. Once such a sentence would have sounded like a threat; now there are those who would see it as a political promise.

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