

The Battle for Young Evangelicals' Views on Israel Could Determine the Future of U.S. Policy

Millennial Evangelicals are not as automatically supportive of Israel as their parents' generation was. Evangelical groups are taking action - some trying to secure young Evangelicals' love of the Jewish state, others to get them to learn about Palestinians



Parishioners at Sunday services at the Bethel Assembly of God church in Lake Worth, Florida. In 2008, the Obama campaign had success in winning back Christian voters, especially younger ones Credit: robert wallis / Corbis via Getty

Amir Tibon (Washington) | Oct 19, 2018 11:56 PM

WASHINGTON - Evangelical support for Israel has never been more influential in the United States than it is today, under President Donald Trump. But some Evangelical leaders are worried, and they think Israel should be as well. A battle is being waged in Christian Evangelical communities over the future of their support for the Jewish state. Polls show that young Evangelicals don't support Israel with their parents' level of enthusiasm, and Christian Zionists are putting up a fight. Other Evangelical groups increasingly see Israeli policies clashing with their faith, and they too are taking action. "The Battle for Young Evangelicals Views on Israel"

When it comes to Israel, Christian Evangelicals are the most influential religious group in American politics today. [Trump's](#) Evangelical supporters have successfully promoted policies aligned with the positions of the Israeli government, most notably the [transfer of the American embassy](#) in Israel to Jerusalem.

[Evangelical](#) Zionists, however, are worried that Israel is at risk of losing its future support among their communities. A [survey from December 2017](#) found that American Evangelicals under 35 are less likely than their elders to offer strong support for Israel, and are more likely to have a critical view of the country and its policies.

Amidst these concerns, Christian Zionist groups are expanding their efforts to connect the next generation of Evangelicals to Israel. At the same time, new groups in the Evangelical scene are trying to encourage younger Evangelicals to learn about the Palestinian narrative. Haaretz spoke with pastors and young Evangelicals in various communities to learn about the battle being waged for Evangelical hearts and minds – one that could determine the future of American support for Israel.



Members of a group of American Baptist Christian tourists stand at the Mount of Olives as they look towards Jerusalem's Old City and the Dome of the Rock on January 20, 2018. Credit: THOMAS COEX / AFP

Bishop Robert Stearns, a leading Christian Zionist pastor from New York who heads the Eagles' Wings Ministry, an international pro-Israeli group, believes that millennial Evangelicals – those born after 1980 – are not “turning against Israel.” His main concern isn't that Millennials are adopting critical views of Israel, but rather, that many of them don't have any views about it at all.

“They don’t have the automatic support for Israel that their parents had,” he explains. “This is a generation that is suspicious of anything that is presented without explanation. They don’t want to be political pawns. They don’t adopt automatic views and positions. In order to connect them to Israel, we need to make a case for why they should support it.”

[Rev. Mae Elise Cannon](#) is executive director of “[Churches for Middle East Peace](#)”, a group of Christians from different denominations who support a two-state solution and oppose Israeli settlements in the West Bank. An Evangelical millennial herself, she told Haaretz that she believes her generation is ready for a change when it comes to the Israeli-Palestinian issue.

“Millennials in our community care very much about global issues” she says. “They care about justice, poverty, human rights. We’re seeing millennials across the Christian spectrum demanding their leaders practice what they preach. And that also means not calling for a one-sided approach on Israel-Palestine. This mentality of supporting one side or the other is wrong. We need to look for ways to support both and promote peace between them.”



Christian evangelicals attend Sunday service at First Baptist North church in Spartanburg, South Carolina, on September 18, 2016 Credit: NICHOLAS KAMM / AFP

The December 2017 poll showed that young Evangelicals are receptive to this kind of message. While 58 percent of respondents said they support Israel, 66 percent said that the Evangelical church should “do more to love and care for the Palestinians.”

Stearns, a long-time advocate for Israel with ties to senior Israeli officials as well as to Vice President Mike Pence, told Haaretz that his main concern today isn't that Evangelicals care more about [Palestinians](#) – it's about Evangelicals who choose not to care about the issue at all. That's why he is focusing on an effort to bring dozens of young Evangelical pastors on organized trips to Israel. Over the past two years, his group has brought 90 pastors to Israel, and 40 of those pastors have already returned to the country leading church groups of their own.

Stearns' concern about Israel's standing among young Evangelicals started a few years ago, when he noticed that “at pro-Israeli Christian gatherings in America, there were usually very few young people. It was increasingly an older and older crowd attending these gatherings, despite the fact that there is a lot of young Christian activism in our country.”

“A generation ago, support for Israel was automatic among most Evangelicals in America,” Stearns explained. “You pretty much couldn't be an Evangelical without supporting Israel. Millennials don't accept that. They're suspicious of the demand to be automatically supportive of the country. They don't want this pushed down their throat. Instead, they are asking questions. They want to know – why should we support Israel?”

The role of the Zionist Christian leadership, Stearns believes, is to provide meaningful answers to that question – and not to assume that support should be obvious in light of Israel's biblical significance. “I think this generation has a more sophisticated and nuanced view of the realities in Israel,” he says.

Overall, Evangelicals are one of the most right-wing groups in American society. [Evangelicals voted in record numbers for President Donald Trump in the 2016 election](#), and the Republican Party's hopes for keeping control of Congress this November rest to a great extent on mobilizing Evangelical voters.

Stearns says, however, that while these characteristics are all true with regards to older Evangelicals, millennial Evangelicals are a different story. “They don't necessarily have a right-wing political view on everything. Many of them are passionate about issues of social justice, inequality and human rights,” he says.

A poll [published](#) in August by Morning Consult underscores Stearns' point. It showed that younger Evangelicals are more likely than their elders to vote for political candidates who support equality for the LGBTQ community and who oppose restrictions on immigration to the United States. The poll didn't include questions on Israel.

“Many young Evangelicals, unlike their parents, don't want their first interaction with Israel to be based on either politics or eschatology,” Stearns says, referring to the theological concern with the end of times. The reason for that, he explained, is that they prioritize other issues, such as social justice, human rights and community building. The

problem, however, is that “many aren’t aware of other kinds of engagements with the country.” Evangelical engagement with Israel over the past decades, Stearns said, focused heavily on the biblical aspects of the country – for obvious reasons – and “tended to leave out many fascinating aspects of modern Israel,” such as Israel’s democratic political system, its innovation-based economy and the diversity of its population. Stearns believes that in order to attract young Evangelicals to Israel, “that’s something we have to change.”

His current project, which enjoys the support of leading pro-Israeli churches, aims to do just that. When he brings young pastors to Israel, he takes them to visit some of the main biblical sites in the country, but also to the offices of high-tech companies in Tel Aviv, or to the hallways of the Knesset. The idea is to introduce them to modern Israel, not just the biblical one. “Many of them are surprised to discover that there Arab members serving in the Knesset,” Stearns notes, saying that this particular piece of information shows “that relations between Jews and Arabs are more complicated than what you often see on the news in America.”

“These pastors are looking for authenticity, and for real human connections,” he says. “They don’t want to come to Israel and be confined to a Christian bubble for the entirety of their trip. They want to get to know the people of the land.”

Jeff Osborne, an Evangelical pastor in his early 30’s from California, visited Israel with one of Stearns’ groups earlier this year. It was his first visit to the country. “I was caught by



One of Bishop Robert Stearns' group visiting Israel Credit: Courtesy of Eagle Wings Ministry

surprise on so many levels,” Osborne told Haaretz in a phone interview, saying that his view of Israel was focused almost entirely on the biblical aspects prior to the trip, and that he didn’t know about Israel’s modern politics, economics and about the diversity of Israeli society.

“Millennials care about politics because we’re compassionate. Politics for our generation is highly relational. For people in my generation to care about Israel, we need to have a real relationship with that country, and we need to sort the political and the religious questions as we journey along,” he added.

One of the aspects that most surprised him during the trip was being exposed to Israel’s high-tech industry, and specifically Tel Aviv’s startup scene – things which reminded him of his home state of California. “It gave me a sense of what connects our two countries in the present day, beyond all the important connections that are based on history,” Osborne explained. “I didn’t know enough about that before the trip.”

Adam Mesa, another millennial pastor who participated in one of the trips, told Haaretz that for him, “the most important thing about the trip was seeing the reality between Israel and Palestine with my own eyes. I learned a lot of things that I never would have learned through the media. We met Bedouins who live in Israel, we went to Bethlehem, we learned about Jordan’s involvement in the West Bank, we saw things that just don’t make it into media coverage here in the United States.” These encounters, he explained, gave him a “deeper understanding of the conflict than what I had before.”

Juan Rivera, a millennial pastor from Ohio who also attended one of Stearns’ trips, told Haaretz that he felt there was a lot of emphasis on open discussion of controversial issues. “I think one of the problems today is that we have two extremes in the conversation about Israel. There is anti-Israeli extremism that you see in parts of the left and the media, and then there are some in the pro-Israeli camp that say Israel can do no wrong, everything is always the other side’s fault, and it basically becomes anti-Arab.”

Millennials, he said, “don’t like to be forced to choose between these two extremes. They want to learn the facts and make up their own mind. The best way to do that is to visit the country and see things with your own eyes.” The trip, he said, increased his sense of support and connection to Israel – precisely because “it was on a micro level. A lot of the big pro-Israeli gatherings, which I have attended before, focus on the macro level, on the big political issues. But it makes a difference when you learn about what things look like on the ground, on the micro level.”

'The way to create more support for Israel is to end the occupation'

Not everyone sees the shifting positions on Israel among millennial Evangelicals as a threat.

Mae Elise Cannon of CMEP believes it’s inevitable for young Evangelicals to reexamine their community’s automatic viewpoint on the Israeli-Palestinian issue. “Young people who are followers of Jesus want to see integrity,” she says. “They look at Israel and say –

we want to see human rights being protected, everybody's human rights. We want to see justice. If you ask me what's the best way to create a sense of affection and more support for Israel – that's the way. Ending the occupation.”

Cannon spoke with Haaretz from Oklahoma City, where a pro-Palestinian Christian gathering is taking place this week, under the title “Christ at the Checkpoint.” It's a bi-annual event started by Palestinian Christian activists from Bethlehem in 2010. This year, for the first time, it is being held in the United States, drawing Christian leaders from across the country. Cannon is slated to be a keynote speaker at the event.

“It's very important that this conference is happening this year in the United States,” she says. “Trump's policies have been so one-sided and so divergent from the positions of past U.S. administration, that it's very important for us, at this moment in time, to bring the conversation to churches here in the United States. We need to talk about what role the church can play, how we can help to constructively achieve peace.”

When “Christ at the Checkpoint” began in 2010, it caused concern among Israeli officials, as well as among Christian Zionist groups. Today, however, Israeli officials say that the movement has not developed into a significant one, and that it is still operating on the sidelines of the Evangelical world.

“They have a potential for growth among younger people, but right now, we're not aware of any indications that they are growing,” one Israeli official who works with Evangelical groups told Haaretz, on condition of anonymity.

CMEP isn't the only group attempting to get young Evangelicals to take a different look at the conflict. The “Telos Group,” for instance, organizes trips for Christian leaders to Israel and the Palestinian Authority, seeking to offer a balanced view of the conflict and to promote a message of co-existence. The group's website describes it as “pro-Israeli, pro-Palestinian, pro-American, pro-peace. All at once.” The group's founder, Gregory Khalil, said that being “pro-Israeli and pro-Palestinian at the same time” is “the only way to move forward.”

Other initiatives include “The Network of Evangelicals for the Middle East,” a new group being formed by Evangelical faith leaders and activists. According to Cannon, this group would offer a “more holistic perspective” on the conflict. “We need to change the zero-sum game in which you are either pro-Israeli or pro-Palestinian. If you truly support Israel, you should care about the well being of the Palestinians as well, and the same is true for people who support Palestine,” she explained.

Stearns told Haaretz that for him, these groups are not a major source of concern. “I've had a number of conversations with the people at Telos and I thought what they were doing was interesting,” he said. With regards to Christ at the Checkpoint, he shared the Israeli officials' estimate that the organization wasn't seeing significant growth. From his point of view, the main challenge remains engaging young Evangelicals who aren't engaged with Israel at all – much more than combating critical forms of engagement.

His long-term goal, he added, goes far beyond bringing in groups of pastors. He believes Israel can draw “millions” of young Evangelical to visit it on an annual basis, from all over the world. Last weekend, he hosted a prayer event in Jerusalem in which hundreds of millennials participated. Evangelical Christianity, he noted, is attracting millions of new adherents in South America, Africa and Asia – including many young people. “I want all of them to come and see Israel with their own eyes,” he explained. “There’s an endless potential for growth. We just need to make it happen.”



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