

Reform Jewish leader calls Hagee 'extremist' unworthy of support: Different views on what it means to support Israel

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The president of the 1.5-million-member Reform Judaism movement called controversial Texas pastor John Hagee an “extremist” and urged fellow rabbis to shun his high-profile support of Israel.

Eric Yoffie, head of the Union for Reform Judaism, denounced Hagee, head of the Christians United for Israel, at an April 2 meeting of Reform rabbis in Cincinnati.

The rabbi accused Hagee of fostering religious intolerance between evangelical Christians and people of other faiths, as well as exacerbating the Israeli-Palestinian conflict by vigorously opposing a two-state solution.

What Hagee and his allies “mean by support of Israel and what we mean by support of Israel are two very different things,” Yoffie said. “Their vision of Israel rejects a two-state solution, rejects the possibility of a democratic Israel, and supports the permanent occupation of all Arab [territory] now controlled by Israel.”

Hagee has endorsed Senator John McCain’s White House bid, but Yoffie asserted that the pastor and the adherents of his two-year-old organization “do not represent most evangelicals, do not represent most Republicans and do not represent the American heartland.”

The pastor defended himself April 7 on a conference call from Israel. Hagee said that statements accusing him of making critical comments about the Catholic Church and being insensitive to Muslims have taken his remarks out of context. “It saddens me that Rabbi Yoffie failed to exhibit the very [sensitivity] of which he spoke,” said Hagee.

“Israel is not a vassal state of the U.S.,” Hagee said. “They are a free and independent democracy whose citizens should determine their own destiny.”

The San Antonio megachurch pastor, who angered some Catholics last year with his book *Jerusalem Countdown*, has denied that on other occasions he has described Catholicism as “a false cult” and an “apostate church.”

A longstanding dilemma over this ardent brand of evangelical support for Israel, often called Christian Zionism, has worried not only the Reform wing of Judaism but also many in centrist Conservative Judaism.

“On the one hand, there’s a desire to have as strong a support for Israel as possible,” said Rabbi Joel Meyers, who heads the Rabbinical Assembly, an umbrella group of Conservative rabbis. “On the other hand, there’s concern that no one wants to back any religious extremist,” Meyers said in an interview. “And some of the comments coming from some of the leaders of the evangelical movement are certainly extreme when they talk about other faiths. That makes a lot of people, including myself, very uneasy.”

Christian Zionism has various interpretations, but its central belief is that ancient Israel must be restored to bring about Armageddon and the second coming of Christ. Most Christian Zionists believe that during the second coming, Jews will either convert to Christianity or perish.

While Israel’s birth in 1948 seemed to many to fulfill biblical prophecy, Christian Zionists believe that an intact Israel must also include Judea and Samaria—the predominantly Palestinian West Bank, captured by Israel in 1967. They have therefore resisted the return of any land to the Palestinians as part of a peace deal. And a war with Iran, some say, could usher in Armageddon.

In Jerusalem, Hagee tends to find more backing among Orthodox Jews. Two influential Israelis defended Hagee after Yoffie’s criticism. Hagee is a “man of courage,” said Benny Elon, a Knesset member and chair of the Christian Allies Caucus.

Elon, a rabbi, said also that he told the pastor that he’s “the right man in the right time in the right place.”

Yoffie's remarks were called politically motivated by Shlomo Riskin, the chief rabbi of Efrat. "Yoffie was unfortunately letting his particular brand of Israeli politics get in the way of seeing a magnificent outpouring of support on the part of the evangelical community," Riskin said.

"I've been working with Pastor Hagee a long time and I've never heard him take a philosophical stand on any particular political posture Israel should take," Riskin added. *-Religion News Service*