

MILESTONES

After Verbal Sparring, Hagee And Yoffie May Meet

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Now that they've called each other disrespectful, Rabbi Eric Yoffie and the Rev. John Hagee are ready to meet and discuss their differences—respectfully.

The two religious leaders have been squaring off for the past week.

Yoffie in a major speech called on Jews to dissociate themselves from Hagee and the organization he founded, Christians United for Israel, asserting that the pastor did not respect other faiths or the right of Israeli leaders to make territorial concessions.

Hagee, a San Antonio-based evangelical mega-church leader and arguably the country's most influential Christian Zionist, fired back in a conference call with reporters.

"Rabbi Yoffie's speech demonstrates not only a lack of respect for me but a troubling lack of respect for the truth," he said.

Hours after Hagee's media call, however, both men were sounding a more conciliatory note.

"I was told he was interested in meeting with me," said Yoffie, the president of the Union of Reform Judaism, said. "I'd be delighted to sit down and talk to him."

Hagee's spokesman, Juda Engelmayer, confirmed that the pastor was considering such a meeting.

Yoffie's initial speech and the potential for a rapprochement come as Hagee is working to repel a tidal wave of negative publicity unleashed by his endorsement of U.S. Sen. John McCain, the presumptive Republican presidential nominee.

Critics have called on McCain to distance himself from the endorsement, accusing Hagee of religious intolerance. The controversy threatens to weaken Hagee, one of Israel's most influential Christian supporters, while also supplying a boost to liberals who oppose the increasing willingness of Jewish organizations to work with him and other right-wing evangelicals on Middle East-related issues.

"Jews should not enter into alliances of any kind with those who do not speak respectfully of other faith communities," Yoffie told the approximately 300 Reform rabbis who had gathered in Cincinnati for their annual convention.

"And sadly, tragically, Christian Zionist leaders have engaged in repeated attacks, expressed sometimes in shocking and unacceptable language, directed against other religious traditions. This is not a matter of highlighting differences in belief but of making use of overheated rhetoric that spews hatred and vitriol toward the Muslim and Catholic faiths."

The anti-Catholic charge especially irked Hagee, who delivered prepared remarks during the conference call. Hagee denied reports that he had referred to the Catholic Church as

“a great whore,” a “false cult system” and an “apostate church.” When using such terms, Hagee added, he had been referring to all Christian anti-Semites, whatever their denomination.

The pastor did not address claims that in the past he had said some intolerant things about Islam, including his reported assertion that the Koran instructs Muslims to kill Jews and Christians. After the call, a Hagee spokesman said the pastor distinguishes between Islam and radical Islam.

Yoffie said that he would go back to the sources to see whether he had plucked any of these statements out of context. “I would be delighted if we could agree” on treating other faiths with respect, the rabbi said.

A powwow with Hagee would hardly be the first time Yoffie, a staunch liberal and Zionist, met with an ideological foe. He delivered a major address last year at the annual convention of the Islamic Society of North America, and in 2006 he gave a speech at Liberty University and met with its founder, the late Rev. Jerry Falwell, a top Christian conservative. Yoffie’s boldest step last week was his call for Jews to stop attending the “Nights to Honor Israel” that have been Hagee’s key triumph.

Christians United for Israel, the pro-Israel organization that Hagee founded, says the nights have raised tens of million of dollars since he launched them 25 years ago at his church.

Since its founding two years ago, CUFI has held 75 such events across the country, often working with local Jewish groups. Jews who attend the events report being bathed in goodwill and encouragement.

Even with the recent controversies, Hagee still commands strong support within the Jewish community.

Lee Wunsch, the executive director of the Jewish Federation of Greater Houston, who joined Hagee on his current Israel tour, sent an e-mail to constituents urging them to give the pastor the benefit of the doubt.

“I know that Pastor Hagee has encountered his share of public criticism these last weeks and months. He and I have discussed some of these criticisms,” wrote Wunsch, whose federation has received support from Hagee. “I must tell you from the bottom of my heart that I believe that he has been maligned by the press and unduly criticized by some in the Jewish community that cannot accept his unconditional love and support for Israel.”

On the national level, Hagee has strong ties with the American Israel Public Affairs Committee. He delivered a keynote address last year at the pro-Israel lobby’s annual policy conference, and CUFI leaders consulted with AIPAC officials in structuring the Christian Zionist organization’s lobbying blitzes.

AIPAC did not comment.

Yoffie acknowledged the feel-good aspect of the CUFI events, but said negatives deriving from Hagee’s outspoken opposition to a two-state solution, as well as the pastor’s reported bromides against Muslims and Roman Catholics, made such alliances dangerous.

“I have listened to my colleagues who have chosen to do otherwise and have tried to understand,” Yoffie said in his speech in Cincinnati. “But my view is that most of the time, these evenings will not increase our political clout. They will reduce our political clout and drive away our allies. And I cannot accept the argument from Jewish leaders that they can endorse CUFI events, appear as speakers at these events, accept CUFI money and still distance themselves from the positions that CUFI embraces.”

In supporting Israel, Yoffie said, CUFI “rejects a two-state solution,

rejects the possibility of a democratic Israel, and supports the permanent occupation of all Arab lands now controlled by Israel.”
“If implemented, in fact, these views would mean disaster for Israel, and would lead to diplomatic isolation, increased violence and the loss of Israel’s Jewish majority,” he said.

Hagee acknowledged skepticism regarding territorial compromise but said that above all, he heeded Israel’s government.
“It is true that I and many other Christian Zionists have grown skeptical of territorial concessions after watching the results of Israel’s withdrawals from Southern Lebanon and Gaza,” he said.
“However, CUFI’s fundamental philosophy from day one has been that Israelis and Israelis alone have the right to make the existential decisions about land and peace.”

Answering a question about what he and other CUFI activists raise in their lobbying meetings with U.S. lawmakers and administration officials, Hagee said Iran was the priority issue.

“When meeting with lawmakers or government officials concerning Israel, our primary focus is to support economic sanctions against Iran in the hope that Iran will abandon its nuclear agenda,” he said.
Yoffie said such claims were disingenuous.

“This is a matter of public record,” he said. “We’re not talking about a statement here or there by him, by employees of CUFI, by board members. Their position has been clear and unequivocal: no territorial compromise.”

Hagee retains close ties with settlers: He spoke on the phone with reporters from Israel, where he had distributed \$6 million, including a contribution to the West Bank town of Ariel. He also led a march through Jerusalem, where he made clear his opposition to any deal involving the city, although the current government has suggested such compromises are inevitable.

“Turning part or all of Jerusalem over to the Palestinians would be tantamount to turning it over to the Taliban,” Hagee said at a Jerusalem rally.

Still, Yoffie said, if Hagee’s “central message on territorial compromise is that Israel needs to decide, I would welcome it.”

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