



THE AMERICAN JEWISH COMMITTEE

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How do you talk to non-Jews about Israel?

With help from a marketing research firm, AJC has been surveying how the American public views Israel, and has found that many people view both sides as equally involved in and responsible for the violence. These are people who are sick and tired of hearing about the conflict. They want it to go away already and don't understand what is preventing the peace. *Keep this in mind when speaking to non-Jews about Israel:* not everyone is as well read about the situation as you may be, and certainly many people do not have a vested interest in the conflict at all.

Since the situation is so emotionally charged, some people shy away from discussing the politics involved. If someone really isn't willing to discuss the topic, then don't force the issue. We don't want Christians to see Jews as all about Israel and nothing else, because then there will be fewer opportunities for coalition building.

If it's a question of someone not wanting to talk about Israel with Jews, then stress the value of coalition building in general. As Jews we have many other issues that are important to us and sometimes, when solid contact is developed, and trust is earned, then views about Israel may surface.

Once you have an idea of what drives peoples' opinions about Israel. Whether it is the media, their religious beliefs, their upbringing, or friends, you can enter a discussion knowing which areas to focus on and have a better idea of what may appeal to that person. **The key is to make arguments that will resonate with them about why they should support Israel, so there is absolutely nothing wrong with catering your message to the individual person or group.**

Background Information

What informs the thinking of Mainline Protestants and Catholics about the Mideast conflict?

- Christians, like Jews, are influenced by what they read in the media.
- Also like Jews, Christians are motivated by a concern for social justice based in the prophetic call to action on behalf of suffering. Many Christians are unaware of the political history of the Mideast. In their analysis of the Palestinian/Israeli conflict, they see Israel as a strong country with a viable economy and its own army, in contrast to the Palestinians.
- Catholics, Greek Orthodox, Episcopalians, Lutherans and other Mainline Protestants have indigenous churches and institutions in the Middle East. Even when they mistrust Muslims, Christian Palestinians identify culturally, ethnically and linguistically more closely with Muslim Palestinians than with Israelis.
- Christians also have a relationship with the Holy Land through the Bible and other texts that is both real and symbolic. They may worry about the future of the Christian community in Israel, which has declined to only 2% of the population.

What's the deal with Evangelical Christians?

- There are over 50 million Evangelical Christians in the United States today and they come from different churches, including the Southern Baptist Church.
- Evangelical Christians, with a fundamentalist reading of the Hebrew Bible and New Testament, believe that the Messiah will come after the re-establishment of the Jewish state in Israel and the rebuilding of the Temple in Jerusalem. This accounts for much of their public support for Israel as a Jewish state with Jerusalem as its capital.
- Support for Israel does not necessarily stem from support for the Jews. Some Evangelicals are active in campaigns to convert Jews to Christianity, including Hebrew Christian groups. While at the same time, many have "pure motives" and genuinely sympathize with Israel's struggle.



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helpful tips for discussing Israel with Christians:

(Christian attitudes toward Israel cover the spectrum from staunch support to harsh criticism. When dealing with Christian groups, it helps to appeal to the common religious heritage we share)

1) *Be prepared to talk about the importance of Israel from a Jewish point of view.*

* The land of Israel has been a part of Jewish identity for as long as Judaism has existed, going back to G-d's promise of the land of Israel to Abraham.

* Our yearning to return to a Jewish state in Israel has been part of Jewish prayer life for two thousand years. Observant Jews pray for the return of the Jewish people to Jerusalem every day. At Passover every year we say, "next year in Jerusalem!" Today, the existence of a Jewish state in Israel reassures us of Jewish continuity.

* A Jewish state existed in Israel three thousand years ago and is described in the Biblical books of First and Second Samuel, First and Second Kings, and First and Second Chronicles.

2) *Understand the importance of Israel from a Christian point of view.*

* Christianity is the only major religion existing today that was born in Israel. Jesus' entire life and ministry took place within what is now the State of Israel. Christians have had a continuous presence in the Holy Land.

* Christians have been visiting holy sites in Israel, especially in Jerusalem, since the dawn of Christianity. Today, Israeli law protects these sites. Israeli law also guarantees that Christian groups (and any other religious groups) can govern their own holy sites.

3) *Do not confuse Israeli-Palestinian politics with Jewish-Muslim relations.*

* Although Palestinian anti-Zionism is at times fueled in mosques and can take the shape of Islamic extremism (suicide bombers, for example, being regarded as martyrs according to Koranic definitions), the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is not primarily a religious conflict. Not all Palestinians are Muslims (about 2% of Palestinians in Israel are Christians). Territory and security are at the heart of the conflict.

* Judaism and Islam are not at war. Even amidst the deterioration of Israeli-Palestinian relations, Israeli and Diaspora Jews continue to seek out Muslim dialogue partners. Many of these efforts have been thwarted by the introduction of political issues; however, in religious terms, Judaism and Islam are related as children of Abraham and have enjoyed peaceful coexistence at many points in history. These include the so-called "Golden Age" of Judaism in Muslim Spain, the modern friendship between Israel and Turkey (a secular state with a predominantly Muslim population). Plus, Israel has negotiated peace treaties with Egypt and Jordan demonstrating that peace is possible when there is a partner for peace who will genuinely recognize Israel's right to exist.

Strategies and Ideas for Programs

- Seek out opportunities to meet with Christian and Muslim student leaders to plan events. Be in touch with your Hillel House and go through them to contact the local Newman center (Catholic students), Muslim Student Association or other campus resources that serve Christian and Muslim students. For this cooperation to work, you must not get involved with extremist groups who refuse to condemn terrorism -there must be at least some semblance of common ground.
- **Think about how your Israel programming can attract a wide range of support from students.** At the University of Michigan, Hillel sponsors an "Israel Coffee Talk" every Tuesday night which is open to the public and publicized through email. Different professors are invited each week to come to Hillel and speak about Zionism, particular elements of Judaism, and other topics pertaining to Israel. Students are encouraged to ask questions and actively participate in the discussion. Such a program can be very successful in bringing students together and establishing a forum for discussion. It helps to have someone facilitate the discussion – namely a Hillel Staff member. Perhaps, asking a Christian group, or Muslim student group to co-sponsor a series of lectures like this may be a good way to build bridges between the two communities. Make sure to agree on the topics that will be discussed ahead of time and jointly decide who will be speaking as well.



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- Hold icebreaker sessions at first so Christian and Jewish students get to know one another better. Building rapport is essential for furthering relationships to ensure the continuity of any discussion program. This should not be difficult on college campuses because there is certainly a shared sense of school spirit, common interests in sports teams, classes, majors, professors - plenty of ways to earn trust among students before they open up to one another sharing personal opinions, political views and religious convictions.
- Plan an Israel Educational conference that is open to the community with help from Jewish organizations like AJC, Hamagshamim, AIPAC, and others. Do not hesitate to contact such groups for help in bringing speakers to campus. Invite other student groups to co-sponsor the event and sit on the planning committee.
- Plan rallies in cooperation with other groups. If you keep the message simple -- Israel has a right to defend itself and a right to exist as a **Jewish** state -- then you won't run the risk of marginalizing your support base.
- Counter demonstrations can also be effective, but make sure that your message is **pro-peace** and **non-confrontational**.

Scenarios:

- 1) What can you do if your campus is being pressured to divest from companies who do business with Israel?
- 2) How do you respond to accusations that Israel "is an apartheid state?" or that "Zionism is Racism"?
- 3) What if Pro-Palestinian groups go to great lengths to portray Israel in a negative light, for example by setting up a mock refugee camp in the middle of the courtyard, a roadblock in the middle of the street or a checkpoint. Etc...?

Tips:

- Create counter petitions to pass around campus
- Write letters and make phone calls to administrators, board members, regents, and trustees. Do whatever it takes to influence the decision-makers. *Don't try to do this alone*, it is crucial to reach out to gain as much support as possible. Ask faculty members, student groups, and administrators for help. *Building Coalitions is an effective way to make sure that your voice is heard.*
- Proactive steps, like writing editorials to the campus newspaper, are critical. Also, responding to unfavorable pieces by writing letters to the editor can be effective, but try to be the one shaping campus discourse, *it's better to act than to react.*

Frequently Asked Questions and possible ways to respond

(Common questions of concern for Christians tend to focus on peace, justice and military strength)

- 1) **Why do Jews reject Palestinian aspirations for their own homeland? Why are they in control of the Palestinian people, occupying their land and denying them their independence?**
 - * Polls show the majority of Israeli citizens recognize the claim of the Palestinian people to a state of their own in parts of the West Bank and Gaza. In fact, a state had been offered by the Peel Commission in 1937, UNSCOP in 1947, and again at Camp David II in 2000 – only to be turned down repeatedly by Palestinian leadership. Israel does not want to "rule" the Palestinian people, on the contrary, it wants Palestinian autonomy and self-rule (as stated in the Oslo Accords). Israel asks only for peace and security in return.
- 2) **How can a people who suffered so much during the Holocaust be so callous about how their actions humiliate and harm innocent Palestinians? (Roadblocks restricting movement of people and produce, curfews, economic sanctions, identity checks, preventing people from praying in Jerusalem) Why does Israel use collective punishment against Palestinians for the acts of a few extremists?**
 - * Without getting into moral equivalencies, we need to acknowledge the legitimacy of some criticism of Israel's use of (excessive) force, and Israeli defensive activity that harms or humiliates civilians. Here are four fundamental points to emphasize:
 - 1) To be Pro-Israel = Pro Peace, no nation has been more willing to take risks for peace. In 1977, settlements were dismantled and grave concessions were made in giving up the entire Sinai to Egypt for peace. Then again in 1994 peace was achieved with Jordan.
 - 2) Israel is a democracy with a National Unity Government in power.
 - 3) Israel has the right to defend itself, unfortunately innocent people are sometimes hurt or killed. As recent events have shown, Israelis themselves are highly critical of events that result in the deaths of innocent people.
 - 4) Jews have never sought domination, Zionism is not colonialism.



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3) What possible justification can there be for the desecration of Christian holy sites (Church of the Nativity) and the IDF's wanton destruction in Lutheran churches, hospitals, schools and other Christian institutions? Why doesn't Israel show respect to the neutrality of holy sites? Israel often appeals to Christians around the world for support in its ongoing conflict with the Palestinians, but Israelis show little regard for Christian sensibilities. (For example, why did it take so long for Israel to act against the construction of a mosque on the church plaza in Nazareth?)

- Don't defend the indefensible. Acknowledge that Israel sometimes makes mistakes, then go on to discuss other points.
- Stress the role of Jewish values in Israel's policies. Israel's respect for Christian holy sites is an example of the Jewish value of honoring the stranger among us, while non-Jewish citizens have full rights and equality under Israeli law.
- In contrast to the period before '67, when Jordan did not allow Jews access to Judaism's holiest site-the Western Wall-and desecrated dozens of synagogues in the Jewish Quarter of Jerusalem as well as Jewish cemeteries on the Mount of Olives, Jews have allowed Muslim and Christian entry into holy sites, and maintained the status quo with regard to control of the holy sites (Muslims control the mosques, Christians the churches)
- Also, it is important to mention that one million plus Israeli Arab citizens enjoy democratic freedoms that their Arab brothers and sisters are deprived of in the rest of the Middle East. (i.e. voting privileges, free speech, free religion, free press. etc.). Acknowledge that there is discrimination, but the Israeli government is genuinely trying to deal with it.

4) Why is it that American Jews unconditionally support everything the Israeli government does regardless of how many people are hurt or injured? Whenever anyone criticizes Israel, the Jews cry "anti-Semitism", why can't they tell the difference between anti-Semitism and legitimate criticism of government action?

- Israel is fighting a war for its survival and we, as American Jews, realize how vital it is to stand in solidarity with our brothers and sisters in Israel.
- At the same time, we are appalled by the resurgence of vitriolic anti-Semitism throughout Europe and the Arab world, which is ostensibly being fueled by events in the Middle East under the guise of anti-Zionism. Having said that, how can one tell the difference between legitimate criticism of Israel's policies/actions and deep-rooted anti-Semitism? Unfortunately, it is not always clear cut and there is no simple answer to this dilemma. The least we can do though, is try to understand that not every critique of Israel is anti-Semitic. *We must assure Christians that we can differentiate between the two, but also want to remind them that this is often a very fine line*

Important historical events in Christian-Jewish dialogue:

1) In 1965 at the Second Vatican Council in Rome, the World's Catholic Bishops issued the landmark *Nostra Aetate* declaration, an authoritative Catholic teaching that repudiated the false belief that Jews are guilty of deicide. In addition, it condemned anti-Semitism, calling for mutual understanding and respect as the foundation for "living room dialogues" that have been facilitated over the years by the American Jewish Committee and our Catholic partners.

2) In 1972, the General Conference of the United Methodist Church (UMC) adopted a ground breaking statement on Christian – Jewish Relations. This statement condemned proselytizing and called for repentance to absolve the long history of past injustices and anti-Semitism towards Jews, declaring a "new dimension in dialogue with Jews".

3) In 1987, the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church adopted a study paper calling for Christians to repudiate their historic "teaching of contempt" for Jews, and to recognize the Jews' covenant with G-d. This statement helped to pave the way for future dialogue and understanding among Christians and Jews.

4) In 1994, over 100 Christian and Jewish leaders issued *A Shared Vision: Religious Liberty in the 21st Century*, a statement affirming traditional principles of church-state separation, religious liberty and the proper role of religion and politics. *A Shared Vision* is considered required reading for anyone participating in interreligious dialogue.



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- Rather than engage in a debate with other students about Mideast issues, it is more beneficial to start a dialogue.
- This worksheet provides a basic outline of important points you should keep in mind in order to prevent your dialogue from turning into a debate.

The Difference Between *Debate* and **Dialogue**

Debate....

Dialogue...

is oppositional: two sides oppose each other and attempt to prove each other wrong.

is collaborative: two sides or more sides work together towards common understanding.

has winning as the goal.

has finding common ground as the goal.

lets one side listen to the other side in order to find flaws and to counter its arguments.

lets one side listen to the other side in order to understand.

Defends assumptions as the truth.

Reveals assumptions for reevaluation.

Causes critique of the other position.

Causes introspection of one's own position.

Defends one's own positions as the best solution and excludes other solutions.

Opens the possibility of reaching a better solution than any of the original solutions.

Creates a closed minded-attitude, a determination to be right.

Creates an open-minded attitude, an openness to being wrong and an openness to change.

Prompts a search for glaring differences

Prompts a search for basic agreements.

Involves a countering of the other position without focusing on feelings or relationship and often belittles or deprecates the other person.

Involves a real concern for the other person and does not seek to alienate or offend.