

## The Outstretched Hand

by Motti Inbari

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Last week, my family and I celebrated the first night of Passover in our current hometown—Lumberton, North Carolina (population: 22,000). We have lived here since 2009, when I took a position as an assistant professor of religion at the University of North Carolina at Pembroke. We are the only Israelis in town and, as far as I know, the only Jews (though there was once a small community here). But it's not as lonely as it might sound, thanks in large part to our Evangelical Christian neighbors.

Among the guests at our seder table this year were our landlord and his wife. They take their annual vacations in Israel, have bought a house in the Negev, and are so enthusiastic about the country that they are planning to retire there. Another guest was a restaurant owner who flies a big Israeli flag over his establishment. These people, I hasten to note, are not atypical. The mechanic at a nearby service station gives me a discount when he fixes my car; the clerk at the post office can scarcely contain her excitement when I bring her letters or packages addressed to Jerusalem; the cleaning man in my office sends yearly donations from his presumably not very large salary to assist Ethiopian Jews in Israel.

I know, from experience, how suspicious this makes some Jews, and the kinds of questions it leads them to ask. Does all of this support for Israel reflect a hidden agenda aiming at the conversion of Jews? Does the man cleaning my office yearn for the battle of Armageddon, in which people like me will die in great numbers? Is all of this identification with Israel a kind of anti-Semitism in disguise? I don't think so. What in fact has happened is that a new type of Christianity has evolved in America in recent decades, and Jews ought to be aware of it.

I recently published a book on the religious Zionist rabbis' approach to territorial compromise, the last chapter of which is devoted to the American Evangelical response to this issue. It focuses on the teachings of two prominent and influential pastors: John Hagee, founder of Christians United for Israel, and Hal Lindsey, the author of a large number of hugely popular books that have transformed the way Evangelicals look at Jews. In the eyes of these thinkers, the rise of the State of Israel and its victory in the Six-Day War represent clear signs of the imminent return of Jesus and the beginning of the End of Days. This belief, which is based upon a reading of the book of Revelation, is tied up with the anticipation of terrible apocalyptic warfare that will have to take place in the Holy Land prior to Jesus' return.

Hagee's and Lindsey's interpretation of history and especially of current events, like Israel's victory in 1967 and Iran's quest for nuclear weapons, has led them to conclude that this war—which will, of course, be a nuclear war—is about to take place, and soon. But what impact, one

must ask, does this have on their behavior? Their firm conviction that we are just around the corner from a cataclysmic war would seem to make them eager to get the fighting started, and thereby hasten the advent of their Redeemer. But they are, in fact, doing just the opposite.

Christians United for Israel, the Evangelical lobby in Washington, does not encourage war and chaos in the Middle East, which is what you might expect from people eager to see Jesus return. Nor does it adopt a passive stance. It aims to *prevent* Iran from going nuclear.

Why? Why do Evangelicals act contrary to what would seem to be their own best interests? It is because they are very attentive to the divine promise that those who are seek the well-being of the Jews will be the recipients of God's favor: "I will bless those who bless you," He once said to Abraham, "and I will curse those who curse you." (Genesis 12:2-3) In the end, the benefits they derive from promoting the welfare of the Jews mean more to them than the theoretical possibility that the Redeemer will return following a devastating war in the Middle East—an eventuality that they actively seek to prevent.

My daily interactions with my neighbors and, I should add, my students, as well as my research into Christian Zionism, have led me to the conclusion that a new type of Christianity has emerged, one that is not at all hostile to Jews and ardently wishes to promote the Jews' well-being. We should set aside our old fears and accept this movement. Evangelicals are stretching out their hands to us. We should reach out to them, too.

*Motti Inbari is an Assistant Professor of Religion at the University of North Carolina at Pembroke and the author of [Messianic Religious Zionism Confronts Israeli Territorial Compromis](#)*