

Special Features Archive

Welcome to **CLAL Special Features** where you will find articles by guest columnists and roundtables on hot issues and special topics.

Our authors are especially interested in hearing your responses to what they have written. So after reading, visit the **Special Features Discussion**.

To join in conversation with CLAL faculty and other readers click [here](#).

To access the Special Features Archive, click [here](#).



WITH FRIENDS LIKE THESE?

DEBATING THE 'THREAT' OF CHRISTIAN MISSIONIZING

Early in September, just in time for the Jewish High Holidays, the 16 million-member strong Southern Baptist Convention issued a booklet instructing its followers to "share the gospel with Jewish people." Titled "Days of Awe," the booklet urges Southern Baptists to pray for their Jewish brethren on each of the ten days of repentance between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, in order that Jews "see the futility of repentance apart from God's provision for sin," i.e. through Christ. (To download a copy of the booklet, [Click Here](#))

Jewish reaction was swift and negative. With the first wave of attention receding, we asked CLAL faculty to consider the booklet and Christian efforts to evangelize Jews in light of our core message of pluralism. Their responses appear below:

Scroll through all the responses or click on the authors names to access individual responses.

[\[Rabbi Brad Hirschfield\]](#)

[\[Rabbi Daniel Silberman Brenner\]](#)

[\[Rabbi Jennifer Krause\]](#)

[\[Dr. Michael Gottsegen\]](#)

[\[Andrew Silow-Carroll\]](#)

Rabbi Brad Hirschfield:

Typical of organized Jewry's reaction to the Baptist pamphlet was that of Rabbi Eric Yoffie, president of the Reform movement's Union of American Hebrew Congregations. Yoffie told *The (NY) Jewish Week*: "We are deeply offended. We do not welcome a campaign that singles out the Jewish people for conversionary activities, and which suggests that Jews must relinquish their faith for Baptists to strengthen their own."

Is it just me, or do other people find it curious that the head of Judaism's most aggressively conversionary movement (not necessarily a bad thing insofar as they are also the only movement to develop real processes for warmly integrating both converts and non-Jewish spouses into the Jewish community) is "deeply offended" that another religious group wants to convert some Jews! In all honesty, one could make a good case that such a desire is the natural outgrowth of one's love for, and belief in, one's given spiritual tradition. If this were not the case, then the Jewish people would not have developed a process for converting gentiles as much as two-thousand years ago.

In our own age, when Jews love nothing better than a good fright-fest about the dangers of intermarriage, who could possibly believe that we do not want to "strengthen our own [faith]" by convincing a lot of wonderful gentiles to "relinquish their own faith" in order to guarantee the vitality of the Jewish people? Think of it this way: How would most Jews respond if the Jewish spouse in an intermarriage was being asked to convert, as opposed to the non-Jewish spouse? Yet, we think nothing of making exactly that request of someone else. I have no problem with that, I just think that we should stop yelling at others for practices not all that different from our own.

It seems to me that the real question here, as is the case in so many social-spiritual matters, is not what others are doing, but what buttons those actions are pushing in us. What is it that we Jews are so unnerved about? Is it perhaps that we do not think that we can compete in the contemporary American public square of spirituality? Is it that we are not able to properly articulate our own complex balancing act between particularistic and universalistic commitments? Does it play on our seemingly persistent sense of being a vulnerable community despite the fact that we are privileged to live in an age of unparalleled financial, political, and social success and achievement?

What we really have here is an opportunity. We can seize this opportunity if we are ready to stop pointing fingers, and start looking in the mirror.

[\[Return to Top\]](#)

Rabbi Daniel Silberman Brenner:

The "Days of Awe" guide of the Southern Baptist Convention is hard to classify--it combines some deeply disturbing images with a heart-felt message of love for Israel and the Jewish people. Its cover, a close-up of one of Yad Vashem's more gruesome sculptures, is most unsettling. What is the message here? Jews suffer because they don't accept Christ as their savior? The photograph is inappropriate. The words, on the other hand, are a nice step ahead for Christian tracts. Instead of focusing on Jews as sinners, they express the notion that Jews are misguided penitents. It feels nice to be criticized instead of demonized.

[\[Return to Top\]](#)

Rabbi Jennifer Krause:

Just the other day I passed a church right around the corner from the CLAL office. The sign outside said: "We give thanks for our Jewish brothers and sisters at the New Year." I cannot recall what denomination the church was. I was only struck by the power and beauty of that simple statement. Perhaps this church was giving thanks because we give it and its members a bounty of opportunities to "save" a few million more sinners from a fiery fate. But maybe, just maybe, they were expressing a sentiment that we, in the Jewish world, often fail to communicate to each other at this time of year, or at any other time for that matter.

I have to believe there is value and truth in thanking God for the variety in people and for their beliefs. Similarly, I believe that there is value and truth in truly respecting others not for what we can make them, not for how we can change them, but for who they are now. I also believe that God knows better than to leave absolute judgment in the hands of human beings. That's why we call God "Dayan Ha'emet--the One, True, Judge."

So, pray for redemption, pray for peace, pray for justice. Pray for the victims of floods and earthquakes, pray for the people who survive senseless shootings while at work, at school, or at prayer, as well as for the families of those whose children and loved ones did not. Pray that we will have the sense to stop hurting each other and calling it religion. But please don't pray for me or for how I choose to worship and practice my religion. The world needs your prayers--and your help--far, far more than I do.

[\[Return to Top\]](#)

Dr. Michael Gottsegen, Ph.D.:

The publication of "Days of Awe: Prayers for Jews" by the International

Mission Board of the Southern Baptist Convention, has provoked a firestorm of controversy. For their decision to preach the Gospel to the Jews, the Southern Baptists are accused by Jewish and liberal leaders of violating the unwritten rules of the road, the rules that have kept America relatively free of the kinds of religious conflicts that unsettled Europe for so many centuries. Basically, the rules constitute an agreement to accept and maintain the religious status quo. The practitioners of each religion are protected by an informal agreement not to compete with one another. In terms borrowed from another sphere, we might describe this arrangement as a tacit oligopoly, an agreement in restraint of trade.

In general, we tend to look upon such arrangements as bad for the consumer, as keeping costs high and quality low. In general, we rebel against such an infringement upon consumer choice, and we expect the government to break up such "combinations in restraint of trade."

In principle, then, I think the decision of the Southern Baptists to sell their wares on the corner is a good thing. And targeting their advertising at potential "brand switchers" makes good business sense. Though, I would hasten to add that in practice the Baptist pamphlet is rather obtuse. I cannot imagine it will find any audience among Jews whom it characterizes as materialist and as wielders of government power. In principle, however, hawking one's religious wares in the marketplace does not strike me as offensive. Of course, what is good for the goose is good for the gander. Let Jews and Jewish denominations do the same, targeting new markets and seeking to build brand loyalty among their current customers.

As John Stuart Mill observed, restraint of trade in the marketplace of ideas inevitably has a negative effect on the quality of the merchandise. Instead of living truths, quickened by the demands of a competitive market, one finds shelves filled with dead dogmas and empty slogans. On all sides spiritual lassitude and apathy prevails and belief becomes merely nominal. Stuart Mill's prescription in the face of such illness was straightforward: create a free and open marketplace of ideas.

In practice, such a market already exists, and the statistics indicate that many American "producers" have learned to play by the rules of this market. The proof is that today we live in a nation of faith-shifters with some 30-40 percent of American adults belonging to a religious denomination other than the one in which they were raised. In an age of consumer choice, more and more Jews are becoming faith-shifters as well. Adopting a pro-proselytization position, and accepting that one will be missionized in turn may be controversial, but it is profoundly in tune with contemporary American attitudes. And I fear that if

we seek to buck this trend and to protect our market-share through anti-competitive practices, we shall do so at our peril.

Perhaps it is feared that a minority religion could not possibly prevail in an open market. Or that a free market would inevitably favor the larger and more established players, such as the Baptists. But this is to misconstrue the highly segmented nature of the spiritual marketplace and to overlook the potential power of targeted niche-marketing as a way of increasing volume and market-share.

Yes, I am sanguine about the prospect. But I am also a realist. As the numbers of faith-switchers increases and as brand loyalty decreases, it is clear that success will only belong to those who are ready and willing to operate in a highly competitive spiritual marketplace. Wanting to maintain artificial barriers in restraint of trade is to shut one's eyes to a patent reality. For the question of whether the spiritual marketplace should or should not be open and competitive is moot. It already is an open marketplace! The only question is whether we will act to increase our market or will watch it continue to erode. It is in our hands.

[\[Return to Top\]](#)

Andrew Silow-Carroll:

I understand the impulse to play down the Southern Baptist "threat" to Jews. "It's a free market of ideas, and Jews have the power and safety to compete on a level playing field." "Aren't we proselytizing when we encourage non-Jewish spouses in an intermarriage to convert?" "The impulse to pray for us should be welcomed, even if the Baptists ultimately are seeking our conversion."

I'm not losing sleep at night over the Baptists' booklet, but I do wonder if as an organization that promotes pluralism we shouldn't be more critical when one religious institution specifically and officially disparages the beliefs of another. I know that pluralism isn't synonymous with "I'm Okay, You're Okay," but I am disappointed when one group tells another that (I quote from the booklet) "there is nothing they can do to merit God's forgiveness" and that they should instead "seek to cultivate customs and culture that magnify God's glory" (as opposed to...). I'm reminded of the famous declaration by an Orthodox authority in Israel that the mitzvah of shofar cannot be fulfilled in a non-Orthodox synagogue. There's a difference between holding such a belief, and broadcasting it.

I also get the creeps when a Southern Baptist is encouraged to "Pray that

7/1/2009

Special Features Archive: WITH F...

Jewish people would be free of the strong influence of materialism in the lands where they live." A worthy sentiment when my rabbi says it, but slightly more ominous when it comes from my Christian neighbors. And let's not forget the prayer "that Jews in high government posts will seek truth and find it in the Messiah." That's all this country needs on the cusp of the millennium: a reminder that non-believers are actually making decisions that affect the lives of believers.



To join the conversation at Special Features Discussion, click [here](#).

To access the Special Features Archive, click [here](#).



Copyright c. 2000, CLAL - The National Jewish Center
for Learning and Leadership. All rights reserved. Reproduction
in whole or in part without permission is prohibited.