

local lay leaders (including former CIA Director James Woolsey) voiced strong opposition, stressing that singling out Israel for economic punishment was unfair and would send the “wrong message” to both Jews and Arabs, the leadership not only persisted, but influenced the United Methodist and Episcopal denominations to adopt similar divestment campaigns. Thus far, these efforts have been turned back, mainly as a result of strong opposition by pro-Israel forces within the denominations themselves.

Although some Jewish leaders maintain that an anti-Israel boycott/divestment/sanctions campaign should be an internal matter for the churches to resolve or should be addressed with behind-the-scenes diplomacy, I believe that the Jewish community needs to cooperate closely with groups and individuals within mainline Protestant churches who strongly support the State of Israel, and not sit on the sidelines.

### *Influence of Mainline Churches*

IT WOULD BE A MISTAKE TO MINIMIZE or dismiss the influence of mainline Protestants in America just because their numbers are declining. While mainline church members now constitute fewer than 10% of American citizens (part of a broader trend in which, for the first time in history, fewer than 80% of Americans identify as Christians), they continue to have an outsized influence in the political sphere. They constitute more than one third of the membership of the U.S. Congress. Former senator and current Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton says she learned “the connection between my personal faith and the obligations I face as a Christian” from a line in a song she sang as a child at the First United Methodist Church in Park Ridge, Illinois—“Red and yellow, black and white, all are precious in His sight”—words that have stayed with her more “than any earnest lecture on racism. . . . Despite the problems of poverty and illiteracy and violence, there are solutions being born. . . . in churches and communities throughout the world.”

Given the importance of mainline Protestants in public life, it is not surprising that Union for Reform Judaism President Rabbi Eric Yoffie has called for intensifying Christian-Jewish dialogue. “Most Christian denominations have changed their theology on Judaism so as to atone for an inglorious past,” he says. “They are eager for a true dialogue with Jews. And Reform Jews are the appropriate partners, because we bring

to the table a readiness for theological discussion and an ethic of self-criticism, both of which are essential for success.”

### *What Congregations Can Do*

THE MOST IMPORTANT ARENA FOR improving mainline Protestant-Jewish relations is at the local level. Joint synagogue-church and rabbi-pastor programs that include discussion of Israel and related issues are especially helpful in encouraging mainline Protestants to more fully understand and appreciate Israel. If your congregation isn’t yet engaging in such an initiative, the Commission on Interreligious Affairs of Reform Judaism can help. In collaboration with the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, the Presbyterian Church USA, the National Council of Churches, and the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, the Commission created Open Doors, Open Minds, two interreligious programs specifically designed for members of Jewish and Christian congregations. Open Doors, Open Minds I is a seven-session curriculum covering both common aspects and critical distinctions of interfaith history; engaging in joint study of sacred texts; and participating in a structured conversation concerning Israel and the Middle East conflict. Expanding upon the relationships established in the first program, Open Doors, Open Minds II addresses social justice issues from a religious perspective, focusing on the shared values and commitment to making the world a better place. A separate section reflects on the meaning of Israel for both faith communities. To download the program free of charge visit [urj.org/socialaction/issues/opendoors](http://urj.org/socialaction/issues/opendoors). For additional information, including complimentary consultation with Reform Movement interfaith experts about issues arising from the congregational dialogue process, call 202-387-2800 or email [interreligious@urj.org](mailto:interreligious@urj.org).

To help your interreligious dialogue on Israel succeed, follow my proven “10 Commandments of Interreligious Dialogue” (pp. 50-53).

The reemergence of an independent Jewish state onto the world stage has forced both faith communities to examine themselves, and each other, in a new light. Programs with mainline Protestants that center on Israel are certain to be complex and often emotional, but well worth the effort. Our relationship with our Protestant neighbors and Israel’s wellbeing depend on it. □

[VII]

## Know your audience.

A presentation about the unfairness and dangers of an anti-Israel boycott/divestment/sanctions campaign may not be appropriate for young Sunday school students, but on the mark for clergy or a men’s or women’s church club.

[VIII]

## Don’t assume

that inadequately informed dialogue partners are hostile toward Israel. Clergy and church members generally know little about the conflict, but they care about both Israelis and Palestinians; and, as the Presbyterian Church poll indicates, they are committed to maintaining positive relations with American Jews and Israel. Often they are eager to learn why their Jewish neighbors are so passionate about Israel’s security and survival.

[IX]

## Seek solidarity.

Find areas of mutual agreement, such as opposition to sectarian violence, terrorism, and antisemitism; support of religious diversity and pluralism in the Middle East; and advocacy of human rights.

[X]

## Don’t aim for “victory”

Rather, concentrate on enlightenment, explanation, clarification, and a sense of shared humanity.