

Faydra L. Shapiro
Christian Zionism:
Navigating the Jewish-Christian Border
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In many ways Faydra Shapiro's newest book builds upon her earlier book, *Building Jewish Roots: The Israeli Experience* (2005). In that book, Shapiro investigated a Jewish experiential learning program for non-practicing Jews, Livnot U'Lehibanot ("To Build and to be Built"), which is similar to the Birthright travel programs for young Jewish adults begun in the 1990's. As she immersed herself within this three-month program, she observed the participants, noted their various backgrounds, and chronicled how many were encouraged "to choose" a form of Judaism to identify with. What made this research significant, and therefore relevant for her current work regarding Christian Zionists, was her emphasis on hybridity in the formation of religious belonging, and, as she put it, her awareness of her own slow evolution from "a scientific non-practicing Jewish *neutral observer*, to an *Orthodox Jewish* academic of comparative religion."

In her current work, she expands her mode of scholarly exploration (which I will designate as *ethnographic witness*) to Christian Zionists. *Ethnographic witness* can be differentiated here from the academic field of ethnography because the researcher is *self-aware* of their own subjective participation and change *through* accompaniment with a certain group. It is no neutral qualitative decision which brings Shapiro to understand Christians and their relationship to Jews; at the outset she is a "cautious friend" and invites other Jews to join along as part of the research (p. 5). She states "there are some Jews who are simply 'drawn' for various reasons to Christianity. I count myself among them. I find myself . . . aware that this is somewhat of a strange position for an 'Orthodox Jew' to be in" (p. 2). It is this awareness of her own "awkwardness" regarding the religious phenomena at hand which gives her conclusions an almost autobiographical voice. An example would be her ambivalence about participating in a pro-Israel march of Christian Zionists in Jerusalem that she is studying. She writes: "Myself, I am a little uncomfortable—Do I belong in the march, or on the sidelines? I am not a Christian, but a Jew, as are the Israeli onlookers. But like the marchers, I am also a foreigner in Israel. Ultimately I end up walking with the Canadian group, confi-

dent that no matter where I stood that day, as an Orthodox Jew investigating evangelicals and Israel, I would be out of place" (p. 35). She is "witnessing" not as an outsider or as an insider, but as one who recognizes the attraction of common elements (in this case, Judaism and Zionism) between two different groups: Jews and Christians. This self-awareness permeates her work and may even give it resonance to other religious seekers.

To study the phenomena of Christian Zionism, she studies and attends events held by several well-known Christian Zionist organizations: *Christians United for Israel (CUFI)*, *The International Fellowship of Christians and Jews (IFCJ)*, *Bridges for Peace*, and *The International Christian Embassy Jerusalem (ICEJ)*. She conducted many interviews, with both leaders and members. What becomes immediately clear from her research is that "Christian Zionism" is not an essentialist term. Many of the supposedly common features of Christian Zionist thought, such as viewing Jews as unwitting actors in a Christian apocalyptic scenario, are revealed as simplistic and even incorrect. She observes, "In my research it became clear very quickly that the connection between premillennial dispensationalism and Christian Zionism has been vastly overdrawn. Overwhelmingly my informants either did not consider themselves dispensationalists or—more often—did not know what [this term] or pre-millennialism meant" (p. 12). She disagrees with those who describe evangelical Christians' support of the State of Israel as a political ideology masked in religious terms: "Christian Zionism is indeed a religious movement with profound political implications. But political ideology is not the source of adherents' commitment or motivation. Christian Zionists are interested in politics primarily as an arena for expressing their religious beliefs" (p. 45).

In her exploration of Christian motivations for an attachment to Israel and a favorable view of Judaism, Shapiro finds three undergirding religious beliefs. The first is an attachment to and strong affirmation of the authority of the Bible, and with it, a hermeneutic that sees the promises and stories within it as actual, literal, and historical. It is love of this Bible which, they say, determines their religious and political views. The second is a feeling of closeness with others who share this same Bible, in this case, the Jewish people. They are motivated to support Jewish causes (such as aid to poor immigrants to Israel, as in the case of the IFCJ) and the State of Israel out of religious gratitude, "a debt owed to Jews," and a belief in the faithfulness of God to a common destiny for both peoples (p. 13). Finally, there is an attraction to what Shapiro calls Jewish-Christian values, or to the tradition of Jewish "ethical monotheism." Although all of these motivations have been noted before, her research presents these with clarity and, in the process, undermines more jaded accusations of political and apocalyptic rationales.

Shapiro focuses on Christian Zionists' complex views of contemporary Judaism. She writes: "This ambivalence—a love of Jews coupled with a deep fascination with specific aspects of Judaism [i.e., Jewish life], and complicated by a doctrine that asserts the insufficiency of Judaism—sets the groundwork for one of the greatest theological knots of Christian Zionism" (p. 90). Even in Christian Zionists' attraction to all things Jewish, there is an age old religious boundary,

“Judaism,” that remains at the center. She notes, then, that in response, to Christian Zionists “*Jewish* becomes an ethnic category, stripped of the specifically religious content of *Judaism*. Just as there are *Chinese* believers in Jesus and *Arab* believers in Jesus, there are also *Jewish* believers in Jesus. This separation of (ethnic) Jewishness from (religious) Judaism is one that has significant implications . . . Jewishness [for Christian Zionists] is primarily a kinship category, a shared ethnicity with a biological component” (p. 95, emphasis added). Just like other Christians, then, Christian Zionists face the perennial division regarding the divergent *religious* claims between Christians and Jews. She wryly notes that for Christian Zionists “minimally, the ‘right kind’ of Jew is one with a sense of [his] Jewishness [and] a commitment to his cultural heritage and ancestral homeland. The ‘right kind’ of Jew is one who ‘exalts God’s name,’ the precise content of which is to be found in Christian social values, fiscal conservatism, and a hawkish approach to Israel’s security issues” (p. 86). In evangelicals’ attraction to this “kind of Jew,” rather than a Reform, Humanistic or even non-Zionist Jew, Shapiro finds Christian Zionists seeking a religious partner made in their own image.

Throughout her observations, the work of Daniel Boyarin, and specifically his book *Borderlines: The Partition of Judaeo-Christianity* (2004) is never far from her mind. She finds relevant Boyarin’s critique of the so-called “parting of the ways” model of a tidy separation between Judaism and Christianity in the first few centuries CE. Shapiro compares this to her own work: “What Boyarin sees as an ongoing process of differentiation . . . in late antiquity, I look for still today in Christian Zionism. The busy border crossing continues to separate people and ideas at the same time as it serves as the meeting place between them, the uncomfortable place where Judaism and Christianity rub up against each other” (p. 28). But what is opened up in this post-modern re-imagining of communal identity is not so easy to contain and clarify. Shapiro asks probing and delicate questions about the borderlines between Christians and Jews, but hints that the answers to such questions must be offered by each community, especially as they consider issues of continuity and survival.

It is ironic that in a work which promises such glimpses of religious soul-searching and entry into other tradition’s sacred spaces, Shapiro is somewhat reticent about more fully disclosing her own journey. Perhaps deeper questions about religious longing will be addressed in the next ‘chapter’ of her own life, though she recognizes that this thing called “Judaism” is far from simple. She writes, “If Christians practice Judaism as the root of their faith, what is ‘Jewish’ Judaism and why ought it thrive in its own right, not just as a supporting player for another religion?” (p. 157). She ends as she has begun in her fascinating journey, as a seeker of Judaism through a Christian prism. In this valuable and sympathetic study of Christians’ views of Judaism, she calls herself, with appropriate irony, a “Jewish Jew for Judaism” (p. 2).