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Coney Island Dubbed One of New York's "Worst Beaches"



Gang-Related Homicide, Staggering Levels of Pollution Harm Reputation of Once-Popular Destination

BY LINA HESKIEL AND DANIEL PEREZ

A national landmark for nearly a century, Coney Island is famous for its Cyclone roller coaster, side shows and carnival attractions, as well as a popular beach opposite its aging boardwalk.

On any given day, the boardwalk is packed with bikers, elderly couples holding hands, black-hatted Jews, screaming children, and adolescents, many of them Russian immigrants. Walking along the boardwalk one will see restaurants (sadly,

none of them kosher) packed with young couples, and New York City's famous aquarium delighting children and parents alike. The opportunity to ride Coney Island's iconic Ferris wheel, grab an Italian ice and enjoy a little fun in the sun is a major draw for both tourists and locals. But a number of disturbing trends in the area raise the question: Is Coney Island safe?

In terms of pollution, the Coney Island area—particularly Brighton Beach from 6th to 15th streets and Coney Island from West 16th to West 27th streets were ranked among the worst in the city, according to a report

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R' Eckstein and the Int'l Fellowship of Christians and Jews A Blessing or a Liability?



PHOTO COURTESY IFCJ

A dynamic leader - Rabbi Eckstein has been instrumental in mobilizing Christian support for Jews in Israel and around the world.

BY TZVI ALLEN FISHMAN

While sitting on a return flight from Israel about a year ago and enjoying some falafel on pita I had picked up en route to the airport, I noticed some commotion coming from some nearby seats.

People kept on coming over to this blond-haired, not terribly Jewish-looking fellow, all of them excitedly chatting with him about Jerusalem, the Galilee, Nazareth, Bethlehem and how they loved Israel. I finished my falafel and eventually my curiosity got the better of me. Leaning over I introduced myself to the man who was at the center of all this attention. He introduced himself and told me that he was a Christian pastor from a ministry in Texas. He had brought 50 members of his congregation to Israel for a two-week trip. Fascinated, I asked him

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R' Yechiel Eckstein and the International Fellowship of Christians and Jews

A BLESSING OR A LIABILITY?

Continued from Cover

how it was for them.

He responded, with great sincerity and a slight Texas drawl, "We love Israel; it's my first trip and I can't wait to come back. Next time I am bringing a hundred with me.

We got into a deep discussion during the eleven-hour flight from which I learned a lot. I asked him why he loved Israel so much, and

"Eckstein operates under strict guidelines to accomplish his objectives: 'Cooperate whenever possible, oppose whenever necessary, and teach, sensitize and build bridges at all times.'"

he replied, simply and honestly, that it's "the ancestral home of the Jewish people and our (Christian) roots are from the Jewish people." Sensing my apprehension he attempted to allay my fears.

"I know what you are thinking," he said, "it's about who is the messiah." When I responded that such was indeed the case, he answered: "Well, we talked about that with our tour guide and we came to a conclusion that it just does not make a difference at this point and we don't have to discuss nor agree on that now." He continued and assured me that the future of the Jewish people in the Land of Israel is of paramount importance to the majority of Christians in America.

This reporter (along with many traditional Jews) feels both happy and slightly uncomfortable with the idea that so large a segment of America's non-Jewish population supports Israel strictly on a theological basis. Yet, we also realize that more than anyone, they are zealous about their support for Israel and are willing to act on their beliefs, opening both their hearts and their wallets to help the people of Israel in any way they can.

There is a certain American rabbi, one of the most controversial Jewish figures in the Orthodox world today, and his name is Yechiel Eckstein. This reporter, along with Jewish Voice publisher David Ben Hooren and his editor Daniel Perez had the distinct honor of interviewing him. If I was confused before, I am even more confused now, but was nonetheless astounded by what we learned.

Rabbi Eckstein is President of the International Fellowship of Christians and



Before founding the IFCJ, Rabbi Eckstein was a successful singer, and sometimes used his musical talents to entertain and boost the morale of IDF soldiers.

Jews (IFCJ), and he has been actively involved in promoting ecumenical ties between Christians and Jews for 35 years. He was ordained by Yeshiva University and is recognized as the world's leading Jewish authority on evangelical Christians. He has received dozens of awards worldwide and was named in June 2010 as one of the top 50 most influential rabbis in America. Eckstein has appeared on numerous radio and television programs worldwide, lectured in some of our nation's top universities, and has written numerous books, including a book for Christians about Israel entitled "The Journey Home." Additionally, Eckstein serves as gatekeeper for an IFCJ fund, some \$200 million raised each year for Israel by Christian ministries all over the United States, much of that coming from Sunday collections. (Note for our readers: While Judaism prohibits the handling of money on the Sabbath and holidays, allowing us only to make pledges to tzedakah, many Christian churches have the custom of passing around a collection plate during prayer services to collect charity in a practice that they, borrowing the language of the Tanakh, refer to as "tithing." —ed.)

In a July 24, 2005 New York Times Magazine article, writer Zev Chafets, notes that "Some of Eckstein's Orthodox rabbis would like to exile him for consorting with Christians." The article continues that for decades Orthodox critics have accused him of being a closet Christian while the The Jewish Observer, the house magazine of the Agudath Israel of America, called Eckstein's work "a curse." Abraham Foxman, National Director of the ADL and a prominent critic of Eckstein, accused the Rabbi of "selling the dignity of the Jewish people" by pandering to Christians.

Our interview with Rabbi Yechiel Eckstein revealed a very different picture.

Eckstein's career has taken some interesting twists and turns, and our paths actually crossed about 40 years ago, when I was producing and writing Jewish music and young Yechiel was singing as part of various Jewish pop groups, sometimes using his talents to entertain IDF troops. He is a soft-spoken, intelligent, motivated and dedicated Orthodox Jew with a true abiding love for Torah and Judaism. He truly believes that his work is part of a G-d given mission to fulfill the mitzvah of making the Jews "a light onto the nations." It is for this reason that he uses the term "ministry" (a term with which Christians are comfortable but which gives many Jews pause) in describing his work. Eckstein states that he has to speak to Christians in terms that they understand, and

they understand the word "ministry". Jews work together and form "organizations," Eckstein explained, whereas Christians get together and create "ministries." By using another term he may placate his Jewish critics, but it would harm his ability to reach out



The IFCJ supports projects that feed Israel's needy. Seen here: Kosher for Passover care packages.

to his Christian supporters.

Eckstein further states that despite some negative reactions over the years, he has brought the majority of the Jewish secular and even religious communities over to his point of view. "The Jewish Community was puzzled by Christians and their love for Israel. In the beginning the main sources of opposition came from the liberal Jewish Community and the secular Federation liberal side, not the religious and Orthodox side. They were concerned about the impact on them from the likes of Jerry Falwell, and the implications of the United States being made into a Christian nation. They were concerned about the key political issues and less so about the religious issues.

Says Eckstein: "Their concern was about what the quid pro quo is from this growing group of influential conservative evangelicals who are pro-Israel, and what is the price they want for having their support. They worried about their Political Agenda and such issues as Abortion, Gay Rights etc."

Time eventually showed the liberal Jewish world that there would be no price to be paid either politically or religiously. At a

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meeting with Jewish leadership and Jerry Falwell in Washington, Falwell stated, "I know that my support for Israel embarrasses you, but I don't do it for you. Because Christians truly believe in this, I am not asking for anything in return, I do it no matter what."

Secular Jewish groups woke up and realized that the Evangelical Christian world was a great source of funding for various Jewish and Israel-related programs and when it became evident that conversion wasn't part and parcel of the Christian Zionist agenda, rendering the whole enterprise "kosher," more traditional and religiously-observant Jewish groups came around as well.

Eckstein with a big smile turns to us and says that they come for money, and lots of it. Eckstein sits on the Board of various Jewish

Organizations including the well-known Joint Distribution Committee, or JDC.

The JDC gets from the IFCJ more than thirteen million dollars a year in order to establish and sustain programs. The money is from Christian sources and everyone "appreciates and honors it," to use Eckstein's words. In addition to the JDC, many groups both secular and religious, and even far-right religious institutions are taking money for their projects, some outright and some more discreetly. Eckstein explains that "we fund many Chareidi ('Ultra-Orthodox') institutions."

In the various wars in Israel, The IFCJ was there through a fund called "The Kupat Yehidut," the "Friendship Fund." In over 160 cities in Israel, millions of dollars in funding were given for specific projects that have no other means of public support, including but



Rabbi Eckstein with JV Publisher David Ben Hooren.

PHOTO BY TZVI ALLEN FISHMAN



Rabbi Eckstein working with Jewish villagers in Ethiopia.

PHOTO BY KAREN SANDWICK.

by no means limited to health care for the needy, including dialysis for children, and community needs such as fire engines. Eleven million dollars was donated just for just to build and reinforce missile shelters. In other countries around the world, The IFCJ also funds security projects for synagogues and other Jewish communal institutions.

In our interview, Eckstein explained that he did not have any problem with the theological differences between Christians and Jews, "as long as they are not trying to convert us," it is not an issue. Eckstein operates under strict guidelines to accomplish his objectives: "Cooperate whenever possible, oppose whenever necessary, and teach, sensitize and build bridges at all times."

The distinctions between Judaism and Christianity run deeper than the identity of the Messiah, and include differing perspec-

tives on sin and redemption, as well as the purpose of the ingathering of the exiles, and even the very purpose for the Messiah's coming, be it his second (according to Christianity) or his first (according to Torah). Does this mean that we should not be associating with, receiving chizuk from and accepting money donated by Christians, particularly for causes pertaining to the State of Israel? Rabbi Yechiel Eckstein and many others feel that these theological differences should be respected but should not have any bearing on our showing gratitude as a matter of simple derech eretz to the Christian world for its support of Israel. He further feels that the Christian world has so far demonstrated loyal support for the people of Israel and the plight of world Jewry, and that we as a people should accept this support graciously and with the realization that Israel needs all the friends she can get.

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