

Cancel Culture, Billy Graham, and the Jews: Weighing Nearly Forty-Five Years of a Historical Record

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Is the Jewish world too quick to write off a leader as antisemitic, akin to when we hastily discard friends or supporters because of an offhand antisemitic comment, a thoughtless repeating of a stereotype? Or do the words of leaders captured in diaries or on private recordings reflect a deeper, more insidious hate to which our Jewish antennae must be keenly and necessarily sensitive? From President Truman's 1947 diary, found in 2003, which claimed that Jewish abuse of power is worse than that of Stalin or Hitler,¹ to President Franklin D. Roosevelt's privately expressed antisemitic sentiments alleging Jewish dominance and inferior Jewish blood,² each historian must weigh the evidence and determine the balance of a leader's life work.

Consider the Reverend Billy Graham (1918–2018), one of the most influential evangelical leaders who, over the course of six decades, preached in 185 countries to 215 million people through crusades and broadcasts, and shared messages face-to-face with 77 million people in 70 countries.³ Graham has a forty-five-year public record of speaking favorably about the Jewish community. He received three awards from national Jewish organizations for using his leadership position to passionately support and defend

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the Jewish people. Graham affirmed that as early as his conversion (his spiritual enlightenment and “making his decision for Christ”) at the age of seventeen, he, a southerner born in North Carolina, began immediately to wrestle with race and acknowledge “the debt” he “owed to Israel, to Judaism and to the Jewish people.” Over the course of four decades he used his power to help the State of Israel, to assist imperiled Jewish individuals and communities, and to preach against missionizing the Jews.⁴

Yet the 2002 release of a recording from a secretly taped February 1972 conversation between Graham, President Nixon (a well-documented antisemite), and Nixon’s Chief of Staff, H. R. Halde- man, and the 2009 release of a recorded 1973 phone call between Graham and Nixon, revealed another side of Billy Graham. The Jewish community’s faith in this evangelical leader’s friendship and allyship was largely shattered when they heard Graham audibly supporting Nixon’s 1972 rant against Jewish domination of the media. Graham remarked: “This stranglehold has got to be broken or the country’s going down the drain.”⁵

Jewish leaders again expressed disillusionment when hearing a recorded February 1973 exchange in which Graham vocally supported another scathing verbal attack by Nixon against the Jews. Graham added his own painfully prejudiced words that the nation’s problems can be attributed to those Jews who belong to “the synagogue of Satan.”⁶

Despite his nearly lifelong commitment to support and protect Jews globally in their times of peril by intervening at the highest levels of political leadership at critical moments when the safety and security of the Jewish people and Israel had been in jeopardy, many Jewish leaders were quick to “cancel” Graham. This renunciation by Jewish leadership failed to credit Graham for preaching a philosemitic theology, working to support the safety of Jews behind the Iron Curtain, publicly proclaiming his opposition to proselytizing Jews, and advocating support for the State of Israel from 1967 forward. Of greatest import, was Graham’s impassioned intervention with Nixon during the Yom Kippur War that led to an immediate US lifesaving airlift of more than 22,000 tons of tanks, artillery, and supplies from October 14 to November 14, 1973.⁷

In the spirit of fairmindedness and out of a need to maintain important alliances, the archives recording forty-five years of Graham’s actions and writings warrant reopening. They present

compelling evidence for reevaluating Graham's record. For twenty-three years, from 1969 until his death in 1992, Rabbi Marc Tanenbaum, in his role as national director of interreligious affairs of the American Jewish Committee (AJC), maintained a continued correspondence and friendship with Graham.⁸ As the Jewish-evangelical relationship was part of Tanenbaum's professional portfolio, the rabbi was thorough in archiving Graham's articles, letters, and speeches on all topics related to Judaism. Sometimes at Tanenbaum's urging and often other times completely of his own accord, Graham took risks to stand with and for the Jewish community and Israel on both the national and international stage.

In our current cancel culture, society is quick to publicly shame and silence individuals who are perceived to have committed a social transgression. But if Jewish communal leaders seek to build valuable bridges of support with today's evangelical community, we would benefit from delving more deeply into Graham's historical record to assess his character and his achievements insofar as they have benefitted Jews and Israel.

Graham's Influence and Impact Safeguarding the Jewish People

Graham's forty-five-year support of Israel and the Jewish people, as an evangelical leader of unmatched influence, was remarkable. As early as 1966, Graham's voice emerged as a beacon in Jewish-Christian relations. In his opening address at the World Congress on Evangelism in West Berlin (where one Arab Christian expressed the belief that Jews were gathered in Israel so as to bring about their end in one blow fulfilling a prophecy of Gog and Magog that will mark the end of time and dawn of a messianic age), Graham's voice stood out with a clear declaration of appreciation for the Jewish foundations of Christianity and with a call to accountability for Christianity's historic sins against them. "Of the Jewish people we ask forgiveness," he preached, and then made clear: "We must remember that our Savior was born of a Jewish mother, and it is to this people that we owe the Bible."⁹ Graham traced his strong appreciation for Judaism back to his conversion—his acceptance of his own personal relationship with and responsibility to Jesus.¹⁰

During a ten-day Billy Graham Crusade at Madison Square Garden, on June 23, 1969, the evangelical leader accepted an invitation

by the American Jewish Committee (AJC) to his first formal meeting with American Jewish leadership. After AJC's success with methodical and ongoing advocacy with American Catholic leadership leading to *Nostra Aetate*, the AJC recognized the potential powerful benefit of developing a relationship of depth with the evangelical community. The Graham meeting with approximately thirty Jewish religious and community leaders, including rabbinical representatives of the Reform, Conservative, and Orthodox movements, grew out of AJC's preparation for an August 1969 National Baptist-Jewish Scholars Conference at the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in Louisville, Kentucky.¹¹ The "genuine feel of rapport" reported by Jewish delegates present at that initial meeting would mark the beginning of a three-and-a-half decade relationship of correspondence, private meetings, and formal conferences and ceremonies connecting Graham to the Jewish community.

Graham's theology rejected replacement theology; he taught instead that Christians do not displace Jews nor are Jews rejected by God or cursed. The Jewish denial of Jesus, Graham posited, allowed for gentiles to be included in the covenant and to "be grafted on to the Jewish people" (an image emerging from Romans 11) thus sharing with them God's blessings. Graham soundly rejected claims of Jewish deicide by declaring: "The Romans killed Christ." And then he underscored his meaning, "All of the people of that day had a part in the tragedy. It was man's sin as man that was responsible, not the sin of man as Jew or as Gentile."¹²

Graham's scholarship affirmed the Hebrew Bible as the foundation of Christian Scripture. In Graham's introduction to Leonard Yaseen's 1985 book *The Jesus Connection: To Triumph Over Anti-Semitism*, Graham wrote: "Evangelical Christians especially have an affinity for the Jews because the Bible they love is essentially a Jewish book written under the influence of God's Spirit. One theologian has said: 'Remove the New Testament books written by the Jews and only two remain, Luke and Acts. Remove every Jewish concept, every Jewish influence from the New Testament and only a question here and there from a pagan source is left, scarcely enough for one short paragraph.'"¹³

Graham's leadership rejected the proselytization of the Jewish people. This became especially important in response to two evangelical efforts in the early 1970s that elicited waves of pressing

concern in the American Jewish community that Jews would be targeted for proselytization. The first was Explo '72, an International Student Congress on Evangelism sponsored by Campus Crusade for Christ, which brought 75,000 Christian students (mostly high school and college) to Dallas for a week of training on evangelism during the day and concerts at night. It was referred to as a "religious Woodstock" and named Explo for the spiritual explosion it aimed to create.¹⁴

The second event evoking even greater Jewish distress was Key '73—a unified effort of more than 150 denominations "to share with every person in North America more fully and more forcefully the claims and message of Jesus Christ." Evangelical events were planned throughout the 1973 calendar year.

The rising national Jewish anxiety surrounding the Key '73 campaign, and reports over the psychological harassment carried out by young evangelists on high school and college campuses, compelled Graham to invite Tanenbaum to his mountain-top home in Montreat, North Carolina. The two men—one an internationally prominent evangelical leader and the other the national director of interreligious affairs of the AJC—met on February 27, 1973, engaging in a three-hour discussion on a broad range of Jewish and universal concerns. Following that meeting, Tanenbaum shared on his syndicated broadcast that Graham of his own initiative issued a statement clarifying publicly for the first time "his opposition to proselytizing the Jewish community, his commitment to American pluralism in which all religious and racial groups are full partners, and his conviction that Judaism . . . possesses a covenant from God which is 'eternal, forever,' and not subject to abrogation."¹⁵

In Graham's statement he affirmed: "Just as Judaism frowns upon proselytizing that is coercive, or that seeks to commit men against their will, so do I . . . along with most evangelical Christians, I believe God has always had a special relationship with the Jewish people . . . In light of that, I have never felt called to direct my evangelistic efforts to Jews or any other particular group."¹⁶

The religious revolution envisioned by the crafters of Key '73 fell far short of its goal. A dramatic rekindling of Christian faith across the United States was not realized. But what the effort did foster was dialogue and a deepened understanding between Jews and Christians.¹⁷

Graham's greatest positive impact on global Jewry was his support and defense of the Jewish State of Israel. His steadfast love of the Jewish State was not built upon an "end-time prediction" but a "now-time exhortation" and that "an end-time battle . . . will see Jews restored in greater security in their homeland."¹⁸ His first visit in the 1960s included a lunch hosted by then Foreign Minister Golda Meir, which was followed by a press conference that Graham later said had been characterized as the largest press conference since Israel announced its independence. He would also meet with Israel's President, Yitzhak Ben-Zvi and hold three "evangelistic meetings," which attracted thousands of participants. They were configured as meetings because Prime Minister Ben Gurion opposed a large evangelical rally.¹⁹

Following the Six-Day War in June 1967, Graham maintained his steadfast and vocal support of Israel, urging its leaders not to yield to political pressure that would endanger Israel's security. He envisioned Jerusalem as an undivided Jewish city, called for evangelical-Jewish dialogue, and declared that "[t]he Jews are God's chosen people," and "We cannot place ourselves in opposition to Israel without detriment to ourselves."²⁰

In the midst of the 1973 Yom Kippur War, Graham played a decisive role in helping Israel attain critical military aid. During the third and fourth days of the war, a stalemate developed between Secretary of State Henry Kissinger and Secretary of Defense James Schlesinger over whether the United States should send missiles to Israel through an emergency airlift. Prime Minister Golda Meir, unable to reach Nixon, called Graham during the night pleading for his intervention and expressing fears that within twenty-four hours, Israel could very well be defeated. According to Tanenbaum, Graham immediately called Nixon beseeching action, "God will judge you as to how you respond to Israel in its hour of need. That God forbid if anything should happen to Israel, you will have to bear the responsibility before the Lord, for failing the Jewish people in their hour of need."²¹ The next morning, an impressive US military airlift would begin, one which US *Airforce Magazine* claimed was "justifiably called the airlift that saved Israel."²²

Graham also mourned with the Jewish community. After the massacre at the 1972 Munich Summer Olympics in which Palestinian terrorists killed eleven Israeli athletes, Graham visited a San Francisco synagogue to join them in prayer at a memorial service.

Graham helped imperiled Jews in the Soviet Union, successfully advocating for and earning the release of several Soviet Jewish individuals who had been denied visas for great lengths of time. In 1971, his direct line to Kissinger helped secure the release from Potma Prison of Ruth Aleksandrovich, a twenty-three-year-old nurse who was on the verge of dying from arthritis and nephritis after imprisonment for the crime of purchasing a Bible on the black market. In 1972, he advocated through the Nixon administration for the successful release of Gavriel Shapiro, a Jewish activist, from prison. During a 1984 twelve-day tour in Russia, Graham visited Jewish synagogues in Moscow and Leningrad, meeting with Jewish leaders to discuss their aspirations and hardships. Afterwards, he spoke with Soviet officials about allowing more Jews to emigrate.²³

Graham made consistent efforts to meet with Jewish communities behind the Iron Curtain. In September 1977, in the midst of a week-long crusade in Hungary, he met in a closed, off-the-record meeting with the Jewish religious and civic community and visited a synagogue gathering. He recalled weeping with them as they remembered the Nazi murder of 400,000 Hungarian Jews and reported that the 80,000 to 100,000 Hungarian Jews who survived were enjoying, for the first time in their history, the ability to freely enjoy Jewish education, culture, and worship.²⁴

In 1978, Graham met with Jewish leaders of Poland and was deeply impacted by a visit to Auschwitz. In a statement issued from that death camp where one million Jews were murdered, he noted, "Auschwitz stands as a reminder for all humanity—as a reminder of one of the darkest periods in the whole history of civilization. It reminds us of the terrible potential man has for violence and inhumanity. We cannot claim the excuse of ignorance whenever we allow any portion of humanity to be scorned and harassed. Auschwitz also stands as a monument to the courage and the steadfastness of those who sought to fight the evil system that it represented. The Holocaust of Auschwitz, Birkenau, Dachau, Treblinka, and other camps reminds us of the courage and indestructibility of the Polish people and the Polish Jews and those from many other countries who died and suffered here." In a 1982 conversation with New England Jewish leaders he reflected: "I would like to think that the vast majority of people involved in that terrible hell, the Holocaust, were professing Christians and not real Christians."²⁵

In 1985, when President Ronald Reagan had accepted the invitation of Germany's President Kohl to a ceremony of reconciliation at the Bitburg Cemetery not knowing that forty- nine members of the Waffen SS, a division of the elite Nazi guard who ran death camps, were buried there, Graham intervened. Graham spoke two times with Reagan and once with First Lady Nancy Reagan, reporting that he was "very strong with Reagan . . . I have never been so strong with him before—and told him that this was far more a moral issue than a political one, and that unless he finds a way to straighten this out it will undermine his moral authority in the country and overseas." Graham recounted that Nancy Reagan wished that Kohl would find a way to withdraw the invitation to the Bitburg cemetery and was angry with the staff who got them into this hole.²⁶ The itinerary would be amended. On May 5, 1985, Presidents Reagan and Kohl preceded their eight-minute visit to Bitburg's Kolmeshöhe Cemetery with a visit to Bergen-Belsen concentration camp where Reagan delivered a speech reported by *Time* magazine as a "skillful exercise in both the art of eulogy and political damage control."²⁷ Reagan remarked in his speech (which Rabbi Tanenbaum had a hand in helping to message): "All these children of God, under bleak and lifeless mounds, the plainness of which does not even hint at the unspeakable acts that created them. Here they lie. Never to hope. Never to pray, never to love. Never to heal. Never to laugh. Never to cry . . . And then, rising above all this cruelty—out of this tragic and nightmarish time, beyond the anguish, the pain and the suffering and for all time, we can and must pledge. Never again."²⁸

Graham's steadfast stance of support earned him three awards from Jewish organizations: The Torch of Liberty Plaque by the Anti-Defamation League of B'nai B'rith in 1969, the International Brotherhood Award from the National Conference of Christians and Jews in 1971, and the American Jewish Committee's first National Interreligious Award in 1977.

In Graham's 1977 acceptance speech when he received the Interreligious Award from the AJC, he acknowledged that "the institutional church has sinned through much of its history and has much to answer for at the Judgment, especially for the anti-Semitism practiced against the Jewish people." He noted that just as Jews ask the question, "Who is a Jew," so must one ask, "Who is a Christian?" He opined that those who profess Christianity

but fail to love their neighbor are not true Christians. And he outlined areas for future Jewish-evangelical partnership—working and praying for the peace of Jerusalem; working for better race relations in America (black and white, Jew and Gentile, majority and minorities); supporting our country that offers freedom and opportunity to Christians and Jews alike; creating common agreements for teaching moral law in public schools; working together for world peace, freedom, and justice; and working together for a national spiritual and moral awakening in America.²⁹

Graham's influence over US presidents was immense—he had a relationship with every president from Truman to Obama. At a 1982 meeting with Jewish leaders from the New England region, Graham shared that while people thought he was close to Nixon, he saw President Johnson more than any other president, even preaching at his funeral. Graham then recalled a story that Johnson had told him. When President Kennedy was assassinated and Johnson set out for Washington, the first letter Johnson received was from his aunt who said, "Remember the Jews. Always be friends to the Jews and God will bless you. If you're not friends with the Jews, God won't bless you."³⁰

That anecdote stayed with Graham, who made it part of his life's work to bless Israel and to bless the Jewish community through his preaching and through the work of his Billy Graham Evangelistic Association (BGEA) that had a global reach.

Graham's Fall from Jewish Grace

After his retirement, Graham acknowledged with regret that there were times he crossed the lines between pastoring and politics. Critics maintained he was an apologist for Lyndon Johnson's Vietnam War and Nixon's Watergate scandal. *Time* magazine called Graham's relationship with Nixon, "his coziest—and costliest . . . Watergate not only left Graham personally disillusioned but also damaged his moral authority outside the evangelical world."³¹

While Watergate was a national nightmare and led to Nixon's humiliating resignation, the antisemitic comments made by Nixon inside the White House would become Graham's personal nightmare. Akin to Roosevelt and Truman, Nixon never made public antisemitic comments; however, as Brandeis University historian Steven Whitfield in the journal *Patterns of Prejudice* noted: "Inside

the White House, Richard M. Nixon's remarks were often scurrilous. His antisemitism was not casual; it was close to compulsive. And it could be coupled with other seething grievances, for example, towards liberals, radicals, the media, Blacks and Italian-Americans."³²

Graham, as pastor to the President, would become entangled in Nixon's string of antisemitic tirades, and his support of Nixon's antisemitic rants would seem to validate many Jewish fears unproven up until that time—that Graham's support of Jews was insincere, superficial, and that his foundational evangelical beliefs were antisemitic. The first glimpse of Graham's prejudicial attitudes, that predated the release of the secretly taped Oval Office recordings, came to light with the 1994 release of the diaries of Nixon's Chief of Staff H. R. Haldeman. Haldeman not only recalled Graham joining in with Nixon's discussion of the "total Jewish domination of the media" but also recalled Graham saying that the nation's problems lie with "satanic Jews."³³

Upon hearing Haldeman's account, Graham professed to be in a state of disbelief and issued a public statement: "Those are not my words." He added: "I have never talked publicly or privately about the Jewish people, including conversations with President Nixon, except in the most positive terms."³⁴ This would prove to be untrue.

With the 2002 release of Nixon's secretly recorded tapes, Graham's voice of bigotry was undeniable. The call took place in the Oval Office on February 1, 1972. The President was complaining about Jewish control of the media. Graham, instead of challenging Nixon's prejudicial claims, added to them. To the statement, "I mean not all the Jews, but a lot of Jews are great friends of mine," he added a denigrating comment that undercut his public bond with American Jews: "They swarm around me and are friendly to me because they know that I'm friendly to Israel. But they don't know how I really feel about what they're doing to this country."³⁵

In 2009, a second incriminating tape was circulated. It was a recording of a twenty-minute phone call from Graham to Nixon on February 21, 1973, just hours after Nixon addressed the country from the Oval Office about the Watergate scandal.

On this publicly released tape recording, Graham complained to Nixon about the Jewish opposition to Key '73 (in which all the major U.S. denominations of Christianity were joining together in

an evangelistic effort for the first time), saying that Jews were going “right after the church.” He shared with Nixon the upcoming meeting he had planned with Rabbi Tanenbaum for later that month. The President told Graham to be “very, very tough with all of our Jewish friends and Marc Tanenbaum. You tell him he’s making a terrible mistake and they are going to get the darnedest wave of anti-Semitism here if they do not behave . . . This anti-Semitism is stronger than we think. It’s unfortunate but this has happened to the Jews. It happened in Spain. It happened in Germany. Now it’s going to happen in America if these people don’t start behaving.”³⁶

Graham verbally agreed with Nixon saying, “The Bible talks about two kinds of Jews. One is called the synagogue of Satan. They’re the ones putting out the pornographic literature. They’re the ones putting out these obscene films.”³⁷

Nixon concluded the conversation saying, “It may be they have a death wish. You know that’s been the problem with our Jewish friends for centuries.”

The condemnation by many in the Jewish community was immediate and lasted from 2002 until after Graham’s death. “Here we have an American icon, the closest we have to a spiritual leader of America, who has been playing a charade for all these years,” Abraham H. Foxman, the national director of the Anti-Defamation League, said in an interview immediately following the release of the tapes. “What’s frightening is that he has been so close to so many presidents, and who knows what else he has been saying privately.”³⁸

Though Foxman would later accept an apology by Graham, at the moment of the tape’s release, he called for Graham to return the 1971 award from the National Conference of Christians and Jews. Washington journalist James D. Besser said that the remarks “should awaken Jews to the intense dislike for them among many evangelical Christians, except insofar as Jews are useful to the fulfillment of Christian apocalyptic prophecies.”³⁹

Rabbi Tanenbaum’s widow, Dr. Georgette Bennett, recalled that even more disturbing than the condemnation was the silence. “Having known everything Billy Graham did for the Jewish community, I was appalled that no one was stepping forward to defend him.” In an effort to keep alive her late husband’s legacy of friendship and partnership with Graham, Dr. Bennett’s 2002 letter to the *New York Times* called for forgiveness. “Evangelical Christianity

is based on the premise that even the greatest sinner can be redeemed." She later noted that this letter was the sole defense of Graham from the Jewish community at the time.⁴⁰

After his death in 2018, while a handful of Jewish voices stood in support of Graham, a preponderance of headlines and comments related to Graham's relationship with the Jewish people noted his lowest moment, leading most Jews to write off Graham's legacy. Typical of this canceling was a piece entitled "Billy Graham Proved That One Can Support Israel and Still Be an anti-Semite" in which longtime political analyst Bob Schneider wrote, "Billy Graham was an anti-Semite. He bought off on Henry Ford and Adolf Hitler's views that Jews control the media."⁴¹

In a rare tribute after Graham's death, Jonathan Tobin, Editor-in-Chief of the *Jewish News Syndicate*, expressed greatest sorrow not for the death of this ninety-nine-year-old great American evangelical leader but for the fact that most Jews dismissed this valued friend "as the epitome of '[holy] roller' who hated Jews." Tobin called upon the Jewish community to overcome "prejudices of the past" in order to respond to the "needs and realities of the present."⁴²

Graham's Contrition

In 2002, immediately following the release of the first tapes, the eighty-three-year-old Graham issued a four-sentence apology that many Jewish leaders felt was grossly inadequate. Graham never acknowledged uttering the statements; he said he had no recollection of it. Two weeks later, a more substantive apology was issued by his organization in which Graham stated: "I don't ever recall having those feelings about any group, especially the Jews, and I certainly do not have them now." Perhaps trying to protect his own reputation and his legacy, perhaps contrite and trying to help us reexamine his words in the context of his entire life, he continued: "My remarks did not reflect my love for the Jewish people. I humbly ask the Jewish community to reflect on my actions on behalf of Jews over the years that contradict my words in the Oval Office that day."⁴³

Graham's final meeting with Jewish leaders was initiated not by Jewish leadership but of his own accord. In the midst of one of his final crusades in Cincinnati in 2002, he requested a private

meeting with a group of Cincinnati's Jewish leaders: Neil Bortz, President of the Jewish Federation; Rick Marshall, Director of the Cincinnati Outreach; George Barnard, President of the Cincinnati Board of Rabbis; and Michael Rapp, President of the Jewish Community Relations Council of the Federation of Cincinnati. Battling Parkinson's disease, hearing loss, and other health problems, the humbled and apologetic Graham expressed genuine remorse. When Graham entered the room, the Rabbis stood in deference to him and he responded that it is he who should be on his knees. He acknowledged that his remarks from thirty years ago were unforgivable but he was nonetheless begging for forgiveness. The Jewish leaders accepted his apology.⁴⁴

There was no response by Graham after the 2009 release of the tape recording of the February 21, 1973, call. It was likely that his Parkinson's had caused such a decline that his family shielded him from the news.⁴⁵

Christian supporters sought to explain his taped remarks. Some proposed that Graham was speaking only of liberal Jews with whom he had political disagreements or of those Jews whom he viewed as unethical for distributing pornography. Regardless of whether Graham was speaking about a segment of the Jewish community and not its entirety, his words are offensive and dangerous. For a prominent evangelical minister to verbally assail Jews with the phrase "synagogue of Satan" could easily lead to violence against Jewish sanctuaries. That Graham's words were uttered in private and not meant for public consumption perhaps lessened the blow but still raised the issue of his genuine feelings towards Jews.

Leighton Ford, Presbyterian minister, evangelist, author, and Graham's brother-in-law (married to Graham's sister Jean) who worked with Graham for thirty years as associate evangelist and later as vice president of BGEA, shared that while Graham had outgrown his early fundamentalist influences, perhaps it was the remnants speaking in that room with Nixon. Ford said Graham was in awe of the leaders and presidents with whom he met. He was in the presence of power. "I think he was over his head in one sense and wanted to agree with Nixon," Ford commented, before continuing: "He should have challenged him but he didn't. How many of us would be willing to contradict him?"⁴⁶

In the midst of the 1973 Nixon call, Graham was feeling pressured by the Jewish outcry against Key '73, was no doubt frustrated, and

some of his early learned hostilities towards Jews emerged. Graham indeed failed, in the face of power, to muster the moral courage to call out Nixon's rage-filled rhetoric. But does his failure to refute antisemitic statements, his failure to muster moral courage in the Oval Office, warrant the full wrath of cancel culture?

Weighing the Record of Graham's Life

Like the social media culture of the early 2020s, that is quick to cancel leaders and celebrities, alike, the Jewish community, carrying the weight of the historical trauma from the Holocaust and the German Christian soil from which it emerged, is justifiably suspicious. Like many Jewish leaders across the country, on February 18, 2018, I (in my role as a Charlotte rabbi, professor, and Jewish leader) received a call from Charlotte's local newspaper's religion editor, asking for a comment upon Graham's death, reflecting on Graham's relationship with the Jewish people. At the time, I declined to comment. I didn't have enough background on the topic to answer the inquiry. Now, several years later, as I find myself immersed in the Tanenbaum archives as part of my graduate studies and engaged in the work of social justice and interfaith leadership in Charlotte (a city of 960 churches where one exits the airport onto Billy Graham Parkway), I see the value in knowing Graham's more complete story.

All humans are imperfect, so all relationships are imperfect, and that of Graham with the Jewish community is no exception. The words he spoke privately to Nixon in 1972 and 1973 caused deep wounds when revealed to the public, but the solid foundations he built for evangelical-Jewish relationship remain salvageable. The Jewish community would be wise to reopen the pages recording the relationship and determine how to weigh Graham's use of his public voice of boundless influence to support the Jewish people, to affirm their place in God's covenant, and to denounce antisemitism against the hurtful, careless words he spoke to Nixon during two Oval Office encounters.

Graham's actions in support of American and worldwide Jewry really did speak louder than his two recorded antisemitic exchanges with Nixon. And perhaps it was his actions over decades and not his recorded words from the Oval Office that reflected his true spiritual wisdom and heart. For Jews seeking to build bridges

today with their local evangelical communities, many of Graham's thoughtful words and actions can serve as a foundation for today's dialogue. But for such a dialogue to take place, we have to be willing to construct a balancing scale that allows for human imperfection rather than one that tips towards cancel culture.

Acknowledgments

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Notes

1. On July 10, 2003, the National Archives released a 1947 diary penned by President Truman in the back pages of a real estate book. He stated, "The Jews, I find, are very, very selfish. They care not how many Estonians, Latvians, Finns, Poles, Yugoslavs or Greeks get murdered or mistreated as D[isplaced] P[ersons] as long as the Jews get special treatment. Yet when they have power, physical, financial or political neither Hitler nor Stalin has anything on them for cruelty or mistreatment to the underdog. Put an underdog on top and it makes no difference whether his name is Russian, Jewish, Negro, Management, Labor, Mormon, Baptist he goes haywire. I've found very, very few who remember their past condition when prosperity comes." The US Holocaust Memorial Museum director at the time of the diary's release noted that Truman's comments reflected "a sort of cultural anti-Semitism that was common at the time in all parts of American society." And yet, Truman's actions benefitting Jews spoke louder than the antisemitic words he had secretly penned. Monty Noam Penkower, professor emeritus of Jewish History at the Machon Lander Graduate School of Jewish Studies in Jerusalem, whose expertise is on the establishment of the State of Israel, notes that Truman's active rescue of Holocaust victims and refugees, Truman's ongoing support as US President of Jewish settlement in Palestine, and his being the first statesmen to recognize the State of Israel eleven minutes after its creation, qualifies him "as a great president." Monty Noam Penkower, "The Venting of Presidential Spleen: Harry S. Truman's Jewish Problem," *The Jewish Quarterly Review* 94, no. 4 (2004): 615–24.
2. Rafael Medoff, Holocaust historian, notes that while Jews electorally supported President Franklin Delano Roosevelt at the highest levels (85 percent–90 percent), Roosevelt's disparaging and

antisemitic comments are captured in transcripts and memos. First, at the 1943 Casablanca Conference, Roosevelt voiced support for denying the full restoration of rights for Jews living under the former Vichy regime in order to prevent Jewish domination in many professions as happened in Germany. Second, in a private memo recorded by Senator Burton Wheeler capturing a 1939 conversation between him and Roosevelt regarding the potential presidential candidacy of Secretary Cordell Hull, Roosevelt said that Hull's wife was partially Jewish, which would be a liability. Roosevelt said to Wheeler, "You and I know what kind of blood we have in our veins," referring to the alleged superiority of their Dutch blood in contrast to Jewish blood. Rafael Medoff, "The Jews Should Keep Quiet: Franklin D. Roosevelt, Rabbi Stephen S. Wise, and the Holocaust," *Jewish Broadcasting Service*, September 24, 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kV0Esqn90RQ>.

3. Grant Wacker, *One Soul at a Time: The Story of Billy Graham* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2019), xi.
4. In evangelical Christianity, one is not born Christian but one becomes one when he freely commits his life to Jesus. David Van Biema, "Billy Graham, the Father of Modern Christian Evangelism, Dies at 99," *Time Magazine*, February 21, 2018. Billy Graham, "The Evangelical Christian and the Jew in a Pluralistic Society," National Interreligious Award American Jewish Committee, October 28, 1977, in MS-603: The Rabbi Marc H. Tanenbaum Collection, 1945–1992; Series C: Interreligious Activities, 1952–1992, Box 21, Folder 6, Graham, Billy, 1977.
5. David Firestone, "Billy Graham Responds to Lingering Anger Over 1972 Remarks on Jews," *New York Times*, March 17, 2002.
6. Doctrinal Watchdog, "Billy Graham and Richard Nixon Discuss the Jews," YouTube video, August 11, 2019, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lumOWK0xS_A. Ironically, in its first century context, the references to "the synagogue of Satan" in the New Testament's Book of Revelation speak not to a building but to an assembly, and not to Jews but to gentiles fraudulently pretending to be pious Jews. Nonetheless, this phrase has been weaponized to justify hatred of Jews and fuel the fires of antisemitism. According to David Frankfurter, while interpreters have customarily assumed the "synagogue of Satan" (Rev. 2:9, 3:9) refers to Jews who ignored or denied Christ, it is John's declaration to "Gentile God-fearers claiming an affiliation with Judaism as a basis for Christ's salvation." Frankfurter suggests that "notwithstanding the phrase's anti-Semitic history as a condemnation of Judaism, John means 'synagogue of Satan' only as a rejection of those pretending to be Jews. The real Jews are the ones who, like John and his confederates, cleave to a strict, priestly interpretation of purity laws."

- Amy-Jill Levine and Marc Zvi Brettler, *The Jewish Annotated New Testament* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 469.
7. Adam Wambold, "Operation Nickel Grass: Turning Point of the Yom Kippur War," Richard Nixon Foundation, October 8, 2014.
 8. As his daughter, Susie J. Tanenbaum shared in *Lilith* magazine, Rabbi Tanenbaum was a source of great pain for his family. Susie J. Tanenbaum, "Confronting My Father's Legacy," *Lilith*, April 16, 2021.
 9. Arthur Gilbert, "Conversation with Billy Graham," *ADL Bulletin*, December 1967, 1.
 10. Religious News Service, "Billy Graham to Jews and Christians: 'Let us Strengthen one another,'" October 31, 1977. Tanenbaum Collection, Series C, Box 21, Folder 6.
 11. Press Release, "Billy Graham Confers with Jewish Leaders," *Religion News Service*, June 23, 1969. Tanenbaum Collection, Box 21, Folder 1.
 12. Arthur Gilbert, "Conversation with Billy Graham," *ADL Bulletin*, 2.
 13. Leonard Yaseen, *The Jesus Connection: To Triumph Over Anti-Semitism* (New York: Crossroad Publishing, 1985), ix.
 14. Edward Fiske, "A 'Religious Woodstock' Draws 75,000," *The New York Times*, June 16, 1972.
 15. "Billy Graham and Judaism," WINS Religion Commentary, Rabbi Marc H. Tanenbaum of the American Jewish Committee, March 4, 1973. Tanenbaum Collection, Box 21, Folder 4.
 16. "Press Release by Billy Graham," March 1973, Tanenbaum Collection, Box 22, Folder 7.
 17. Edward Trandahl, "Two Leaders Agree: Dream of Key 73 Unrealized," *Omaha World Herald*, January 19, 1974, Box 21, Folder 5.
 18. Gilbert, "Conversation with Billy Graham."
 19. Tanenbaum reported that there were about three hundred press people in attendance. Tanenbaum Collection, Series H: Media, CD-1042. Transcription Introduces Billy Graham; Graham speech, circa 1982. Bader Mansour, "When Billy Graham Visited Israel," *Baptists in Israel*, February 21, 2018, <http://www.baptist.org.il/news/post/173/When-Billy-Graham-Visited-Israel-%E2%80%93-Bader-Mansour>.
 20. Graham felt deeply connected to Jerusalem and Israel on a personal basis in addition to valuing its biblical and political significance. His oldest son had been to the Middle East twenty-seven times. His eldest daughter and her husband went to Hebrew University and lived in Jerusalem for a year. His eldest son-in-law's grandmother is buried in Jerusalem. Graham, "The Evangelical Christian and the Jew in a Pluralistic Society." Gilbert,

“Conversation with Billy Graham.” The 1970s release of the film “His Land” by Billy Graham’s film studio popularized Christian theological support for Israel and marked the beginning of a liberal Jewish and evangelical Christian pro-Israel lobby. That support by the broader evangelical community was rooted in a theological understanding that Israel’s regathering presaged the second coming of Jesus and the end of history. Daniel G. Hummel, “His Land and the Origins of the Jewish-Evangelical Israel Lobby,” *Church History* 87, no. 4 (December 2018): 1119–51.

21. Tanenbaum discusses Billy Graham with Q & A, circa 1981. Tanenbaum Collection, Series H: Media, CD-1041.
22. The airlift took place from October 14 to November 14, 1973 (even though the ceasefire occurred on October 24) during which American aircraft flew approximately 570 missions and transported 22,395 tons of material to Israel. Adam Wambold, “Operation Nickel Grass: Turning Point of the Yom Kippur War.” Walter J. Boyne, “Nickel Grass,” *Air Force Magazine*, December 1998.
23. In 1970, his intervention with friends in Washington helped release Ruth Aleksandrovich, who was imprisoned by Soviet authorities in a Siberian labor camp. Correspondence from Tanenbaum to Graham, November 12, 1971, Tanenbaum Collection, Box 21, Folder 2. “Marc H. Tanenbaum book proposal, chapter drafts & notes for Billy Graham, *Graham, Billy—The Jews and Israel, 1984–1985*,” Box 22, Folder 9. Correspondence from Tanenbaum to Graham, July 5, 1972, Box 21, Folder 3. “Dr. Billy Graham New York Press Conference, Tuesday, September 25, 1984,” Box 21, Folder 9.
24. “Dr. Billy Graham Meeting with Hungarian Jewish Leaders,” Tanenbaum Memo to AJC Area Directors, September 15, 1977, Box 21, Folder 6.
25. Transcript of statement by Dr. Billy Graham on his visit to Auschwitz, Thursday, October 12, 1978. Tanenbaum Collection, Box 21, Folder 7. Transcription Introduces Billy Graham; Graham speech, circa 1982, CD-1042.
26. “Billy Graham’s Telephone Call with President Reagan,” Confidential memo from Marc Tanenbaum to Howard Friedman, David Gordis and Leo Nevas, April 19, 1985, Box 22, Folder 1.
27. William R. Doerner, “Paying Homage to History,” *Time Magazine*, June 24, 2001, accessed January 2, 2021, <http://content.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,141740,00.html>.
28. “Reagan Masterpiece: 1985 Bergen-Belsen Speech,” *WSJ Video*, May 5, 1985, accessed January 2, 2021, <https://www.wsj.com/video/reagan-masterpiece-1985-bergen-belsen-speech/2E64EDA1-1704-4A1E-AFDF-419587348A68.html>.
29. Graham, “The Evangelical Christian and the Jew in a Pluralistic Society.”

30. Tanenbaum Collection, CD-1042. Transcription Introduces Billy Graham; Graham speech, circa 1982.
31. Sarah Pulliam Bailey, "Q & A: Billy Graham on Aging, Regrets, and Evangelicals," *Christianity Today*, January 21, 2011. "Mellowed Billy Graham Has World View," *Daily Herald* (Arlington Heights), August 31, 1981, Tanenbaum Collection, Box 21, Folder 8. David Van Biema, "Billy Graham, the Father of Modern Christian Evangelism, Dies at 99," *Time Magazine*.
32. Stephen J. Whitfield, "Nixon and the Jews," *Patterns of Prejudice* 44, no. 5 (2010): 432.
33. Firestone, "Billy Graham Responds."
34. Firestone, "Billy Graham Responds."
35. Firestone, "Billy Graham Responds."
36. Eric Fingerhut, "Nixon: If only the Jews would behave . . .," *Jewish Telegraphic Agency*, June 24, 2009. Doctrinal Watchdog, "Billy Graham & Richard Nixon discuss the Jews."
37. Firestone, "Billy Graham Responds."
38. Firestone, "Billy Graham Responds."
39. Firestone, "Billy Graham Responds."
40. Georgette Bennett, telephone by author, April 11, 2021. Georgette Bennett, "Billy Graham, Then and Now," Letter to the Editor, *The New York Times*, March 19, 2002. Georgette Bennett, e-mail message to author, March 12, 2021.
41. Bob Schneider, "Billy Graham Proved That One Can Support Israel and Still Be an anti-Semite." *ChicagoNow*, February 21, 2018, <https://www.chicagonow.com/politics-now/2018/02/billy-graham-proved-that-one-can-support-israel-and-still-be-an-anti-semite/>. David Hollinger, "Billy Graham's Missed Opportunities," *New York Times*, February 21, 2018.
42. Jonathan Tobin, "What We Thought of the Rev. Billy Graham," *Jewish News Syndicate*, February 22, 2018, <https://www.jns.org/opinion/what-we-thought-of-the-rev-billy-graham/>.
43. Firestone, "Billy Graham Responds."
44. Latonya Taylor, "Jewish Leaders Accept Apology," *Christianity Today*, August 5, 2002. Grant Wacker, *One Soul at a Time: The Story of Billy Graham*, 233.
45. Leighton Ford affirmed that family protectiveness was the likely reason. Leighton Ford, interview by author, Charlotte, North Carolina, October 15, 2020.
46. Leighton Ford Interview.