

1.2.2008

Israel is moving away from the right; So must American Jews

By Diane Balser, Executive Director

It's never been easy to talk within the American Jewish community about the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, particularly during those difficult years in which the Israeli government itself was obstructing or actively opposing substantive peace talks, and the U.S. government failed to engage on almost any level.

Annapolis, then, represented real change. Here were representatives of 20 Arab nations, the Palestinian leadership, Israel's Prime Minister and the U.S. President meeting to launch a new round of negotiations, with all sides expressing an understanding that the end goal is a two-state solution, one involving painful compromise.

In short, Brit Tzedek v'Shalom's long-stated position of a negotiated two-state solution is now official Israeli government policy, one that Israel is (at least in words) actively pursuing. Olmert is calling Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas a "partner for peace," and has spoken publicly about removing settlements from the West Bank. Vice-Premier Haim Ramon is talking about sharing Jerusalem and several Israeli security leaders have spoken about exploring the possibility of a ceasefire with Hamas.

Yet for all of these positive signs, it would be deeply dishonest to suggest that our feet are firmly set on the road to peace. Palestinian militants continue to fire Qassam rockets into southern Israel; Israel continues to take military action inside the occupied territories. Olmert may have discussed dismantling settlements, but new tenders were recently issued for building new homes in an East Jerusalem settlement. And while members of his cabinet might be interested in talks with Hamas, Olmert has rejected the notion.

The American Jewish right seeks to thwart Israel's peace moves...again

And what is happening in the American Jewish community? While the pro-peace groups like Brit Tzedek and our allies have been busy promoting the Annapolis peace process, the mainstream Jewish organizations have been almost entirely silent.

But on the right, among those very groups who once called on all American Jews to support Israeli government policy no matter what, there is a growing chorus of naysayers, people who now insist that current Israeli government policy, based on the ideas of compromise and negotiation, is ill-conceived and must be blocked. There is a flurry of activity surrounding Jerusalem in particular, calling for the city to never be "divided," though its current size and boundaries share very little indeed with the city's historic parameters, and in spite of the fact that the city is very much divided along cultural and political lines.

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In truth, however, this kind of inconsistency on the part of the American Jewish right is not new. During the Oslo peace process in the mid-1990's, groups on the right found ways to thwart former Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin's efforts. Then it was a campaign to move the U.S. embassy in Israel from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem – a move whose singular intention was to damage the peace process. Now we see moves by right-wing Jewish groups to declare Jerusalem the "united and undivided capital of Israel" and to demand changes to the Fatah party charter (a document made irrelevant by Israel-PLO agreements). Once again, the right is looking for absolutely any wrench that they can throw at the slowly moving wheels of the peace process.

Time for the pro-peace, pro-Israel movement to rise to the challenge

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Of course, the American Jewish right is not solely responsible for the failures of Oslo. Perhaps more detrimental to the efforts of Rabin and President Clinton was the lack of a solid base of American Jews standing behind them. This is, again, where things now are different. The pro-peace, pro-Israel movement is stronger than ever, and despite our previous disfavor with the policies of both Prime Minister Olmert and President Bush, we have no choice but to rally with them in their pursuit of peace. No U.S. President or Israeli Prime Minister is likely to take the necessary and difficult steps to achieve peace without substantial support from the American Jewish community.

And so those of us who know the urgency of finding a just, durable solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict must take on the task of rallying support for the Annapolis peace process (even as we continue to pressure all sides to live up to their commitments). It's not an easy job, and it certainly doesn't promise immediate gratification – but as Rabbi Arnold Jacob Wolf recently wrote, Jewish tradition teaches that we are permitted neither to give up hope, nor to abandon the work we've started, even if we can't complete the task ourselves.

Rather than wait for the next war to show our solidarity, we must convince the broad mainstream of our community to rally around Israel as she acts to prevent future wars.

Our Task: Reaching the American Jewish "center"

It's time for an honest, straight-forward conversation with the American Jewish center.

After all, for the first time since Brit Tzedek's founding in 2002, we aren't talking about what we want Israeli policy to be, but about actual Israeli policy. If the vast majority of us who support a two-state solution can't actively support Israel now, when will we speak up? Rather than wait for the next war to show our solidarity, we must convince the broad mainstream of our community to rally around Israel as she acts to prevent future wars.

We must have the courage to take a public stand against the misrepresentation provided by our right-wing institutions.

If we are sincere in our desire to see Israelis and Palestinians live in peace and security, we must rally the American Jewish community in support of the Israeli, U.S. and Palestinian governments' efforts at compromise. We must work to overcome people's understandable skepticism, and we must have the courage to take a public stand against the misrepresentation provided by our right-wing institutions. We must continue to be a moral voice in the halls of government, demonstrating to both Congress and the President – as well as the President who will replace him – that the American Jewish community does, in fact, stand for peace.

We will have to reach out to rabbis and cantors like the 528 across the denominational spectrum who signed our Hanukkah call to "Kindle the Light of Peace" – or, indeed, like orthodox Rabbi Yosef Kanefsky, who recently wrote in the Jewish Journal of Greater Los Angeles that American Jews should not interfere with Israel's ability to negotiate for itself, including on the status of Jerusalem.

It's time that we take our place at the mainstream table. Brit Tzedek members need to join the Israel and social action committees at their synagogues; help plan Israel 60th anniversary events with their JCRCs and synagogues; invite Brit Tzedek leaders to talk about the Annapolis peace process at community gatherings; and, as always, spread the message of peace one conversation at a time, by talking with friends and family at every opportunity.

With Israelis and Palestinians so discouraged, with extremists and rejectionists claiming the floor, and with an out-going Administration that has proven in the past far too hesitant to take a strong position on Israeli-Palestinian peace, the mainstream American Jewish community and its support for peace becomes more vitally important than ever before. We must be firm, we must be pro-active, and we must not let ourselves be thrown off track by the inevitable difficulties.

In the battle between peace and unending conflict, we must say to the American Jewish community: It's time to choose sides.

As Nadav Tamir, the Israeli consul general in Boston wrote in the Boston Globe in early November: "This is no longer an issue of being pro-Palestinian or pro-Israeli, but rather a confrontation between those who support peace and those who prefer chaos and bloodshed."

Precisely. In the battle between peace and unending conflict, we must say to the American Jewish community: It's time to choose sides.