

National Conference Report From Gaza to Negotiations: The Role of American Jews

Brit Tzedek v'Shalom's 3rd National Conference February 19-21, 2005

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"Things are moving in the right direction," *Forward* newspaper editor J.J. Goldberg said about the Israeli government's planned disengagement from the Gaza Strip to the crowd gathered for the opening plenary of Brit Tzedek v'Shalom's national conference, "From Gaza to Negotiations: The Role of American Jews." "But," he cautioned, the day after the Gaza withdrawal, it "will be the time to work towards the next [settlement] evacuation

"If we fail to disengage from Gaza this time, it is difficult to see who will try again," added Member of Knesset and Israel's former Consul General of New York, Colette Avital, a co-discussant at the opening session. "This is our time, our new opportunity to bring about deeper changes in public perspectives. Now is the time to mobilize our energies to try to start changing the Jewish community in the United States. This is our job, this is your job; we can do this job together," she said, raising the bar still higher.

And so was the tone of cautious optimism and seriousness of purpose set for the two-day national conference held in New York City that drew nearly 700 participants from across the United States, Canada, Europe and Israel.

"We are at a critical juncture in Middle East history, and we in the American Jewish community who have said the occupation of Palestinian lands must end for a genuine peace to be possible now have the wind in our sails," says Brit Tzedek v'Shalom's president, Marcia Freedman. "We have a unique role to play in promoting a new paradigm of peace and reconciliation and in providing support for our government's efforts to hold the Palestinians and the Israelis equally accountable for any failure to honor their agreements."

Jeremy Ben-Ami, the former policy director for Howard Dean and a deputy policy advisor to President Bill Clinton, cautioned the conference attendees that despite their own growing awareness and enthusiasm about recent developments, they still have much work to do to change the mindset of Congress and the Jewish community. He recommended, "Let yourselves be heard. Turn up the heat on the mainstream Jewish community."

Conference attendees were urged throughout the conference to work with their local Jewish communities to encourage our national leaders to support Sharon's Gaza disengagement plan, and then to follow-up with more pressure to continue negotiations toward a fair and just two-state solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

The importance of reaching a two-state solution was emphasized by Amjad Atallah, an advisor to Yasser Abed Rabbo and the Palestinian Peace Coalition, who delivered

the keynote address jointly with Amnon Lipkin-Shahak, an architect of the Geneva Accord and a former Member of Knesset and Chief of Staff of the Israel Defense Forces.

Atallah cautioned the audience to be wary and watchful of the long-term direction of Prime Minister Ariel Sharon's intentions, saying that democratically elected Palestinian leaders could not accept a "one and a half state" solution. He noted, however, that there is a "unique opportunity today" for partnership between those committed to a negotiated resolution to the conflict given that the new Palestinian leadership is openly and unequivocally committed to a non-violent, two-state solution.

Amnon Lipkin-Shahak said it was the Geneva Accord-- the non-binding, non-governmental agreement which he and a group of Israeli and Palestinian political, military and grassroots leaders negotiated -- that started the Israeli political parties talking about alternative solutions to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Lipkin-Shahak said that Sharon's disengagement plan, while "not a solution,.. is dramatic," and he predicts that Israeli elections will soon follow the disengagement from Gaza and four settlements in the northern West Bank. He believes that if the question of whether to move to final negotiations is put to the Israeli electorate and there's quiet on the ground, then Israelis will vote for final negotiations.

In the conference's closing plenary -- "Organizing in the United States" -- four leading Brit Tzedek and Palestinian community activists discussed the impact of recent political developments on efforts to mobilize support for a negotiated settlement in both the Jewish and Palestinian American communities, as well as on the prospects for cooperative efforts between the two peoples.

Panelist Saffiya Shillo, president of the Palestinian American Congress-Chicago chapter, emphasized that the emergence of an organized voice for a two-state solution to the conflict in both communities has created the possibility for an historic realignment within this country. "We must act decisively on behalf of Israelis, Palestinians and, most of all, Americans--the line is now between moderates and extremists, not between two peoples, but among two peoples," she said.

"Now is the time," added Diane Balser, Brit Tzedek v'Shalom's vice president and co-chair of its Advocacy and Public Policy committee, "for us to build our own 'facts on the ground' in the form of a broad and deep grassroots movement in support of a negotiated resolution to this conflict, to create a situation from which we can only move forward." In addition to the three plenary sessions, over 40 workshops on a variety of topics related to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, ranging from the security fence to divestment to grassroots organizing techniques to debate and dissent on campus, were presented by leading scholars, politicians and activists, including Bernard Avishai, Alisa Solomon, Tony Klug, Cherie Brown, Rabbi Balfour Brickner, Jo-Ann Mort and Herbert Kelman, among many others.

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"Surge of Optimism in the Mideast also Breathes Life into Jewish Left," by Chanan Tigay, *JTA*, February 28, 2005.

"The Left's New Hero: Sharon," by Walter Ruby, *The Jewish Week*, March 4, 2005.