

Western Regional Conference Report

Building Israeli Palestinian Peace in Uncertain Times

(L to R) Brit Tzedek President Marcia Freedman, Stephen P. Cohen and Amjad Attallah at the opening plenary, "Israeli and Palestinian Elections: Negotiating the Conflict through the Ballot Box."

"Our work this weekend is to keep our eyes on the prize," Brit Tzedek president [Marcia Freedman](#) said as she opened up the Western Regional Conference held February 18-19 in the San Francisco Bay area. "There is only one way [toward peace] -- a negotiated agreement and international borders agreed upon by both sides." [See conference photos](#)

In the opening plenary, "Israeli and Palestinian Elections: Negotiating the Conflict through the Ballot Box," keynote speaker [Stephen P. Cohen](#) began by referring to Brit Tzedek: "It is one of the encouraging signs of the growing maturity of American Jews in taking responsibility for achieving peace between Israelis and Palestinians [in terms of] American public opinion and governmental policy." Cohen argued that although Kadima has no interest in negotiations, the Israeli public wants their government to negotiate, even with Hamas, to develop a stable, non-violent end to the occupation of the West Bank and Gaza. "The era of occupation has eroded too much of the nature of Israeli society. Killing and being killed will not be eliminated by military force. Israel must put this behind it."

Keynote speaker [Amjad Atallah](#) discussed the trend toward unilateralism on both sides of the conflict. He argued that both Kadima (the new Israeli centrist party expected to win the Israeli elections) and Hamas want calm, but neither wants negotiations. They believe they can achieve a better position through unilateral separation. Votes for Kadima and Hamas are for security and not peace.

He struck a hopeful note on Hamas' recent victory in the Palestinian elections, pointing out that it was not a vote "for violence, or a vote for armed resistance - there continue to be a majority of Palestinians who

support the path of negotiations to a two-state solution as opposed to armed resistance."

These speakers set the tone of keen analysis and resolute purpose which pervaded Brit Tzedek's first regional conference that drew 150 participants. The conference was a valuable time for networking with other activists. [Three plenaries \[listen here\]](#) and [twelve workshops](#) were held, on a variety of topics ranging from new developments in Congress and on Capitol Hill to the role of the Bible in the political debate in Israel to the role of water resources in the Arab-Israeli conflict, presented by leading scholars and activists, including [Jeff Albert](#), [Mayor Ruth Atkin](#), [Rachel Biale](#), and [Stephen Zunes](#). All workshops and plenaries were recorded and are available to order [here](#).

Brit Tzedek Executive Director [Diane Balseer](#) keynoted the plenary entitled, "Building and Sustaining an American Jewish Peace Movement in Uncertain Times." She said, "Either you are passive or you speak up. And while many think of Jews as outspoken, I would say that no, too many Jews have learned to keep quiet. We need loud advocacy for the long-term interests of the Jewish people, and that has to include seeing Jews and Palestinian living side by side peacefully."

At the workshop "Talking about the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict in Jewish Congregations," Rabbis [Roberto Graetz](#), [George Gittleman](#), and [Joshua Levine Grater](#) shared ideas on how to open up constructive discussion of the conflict in a religious setting.

Rabbi Joshua Grater emphasized the need for allowing time for dialogue both in large groups and in intimate settings where people can safely share their personal perspectives. He also encouraged travel to Israel: "Get your community to go to Israel and get some things on the agenda that are eye-opening. There is nothing like being there and hearing from Israelis and Palestinians on the ground."

Rabbi Graetz stressed the importance of listening attentively to opposing viewpoints while using a mixture of reason and commentary to express positions on the conflict without arousing hostile emotions. "There are some opinions that are emotional and some which are based on realities on the ground. We need to back up our opinions with Jewish text and let the other side know that in the Israeli Knesset there are other people who hold our positions and want us to express

that opinion because that is the voice they uphold in Israel."

Rabbi Graetz also cautioned that many Jews have stopped caring about Israel. "The question is how to bring more people in to being interested and concerned and have Israel as part of their daily lives."

In the conference's closing plenary, "What Are the Prospects for Negotiated Settlement?" [Omar Dajani](#), Professor of Law, at the University of the Pacific and a former Palestinian negotiator, stressed the importance of Brit Tzedek's work in fostering a climate in which Israelis and Palestinians could return to the negotiating table: "it is critically important for you not to carve out a place for the peace camp, but to undertake the critical work of convincing other Jews here and in Israel of the critical importance of negotiation and beyond negotiation, a two-state solution, based on basic principles of justice."

[Menachem Klein](#), a former advisor to Prime Minister Ehud Barak and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs echoed this, saying that "What is needed is to put forward an alternative to unilateralism - unilateralism as a strategy, and unilateralism as a state of mind." He went on to caution that one of the causes of Fatah's defeat in the Palestinian elections "was that they could not show their people that there was an Israeli partner." Once again the need to bridge differences and bring all parties to the negotiating table was made clear. As he concluded, "Moral imperatives are above national identities."