**[Time to Choose Peace: A Rabbinic Letter to President-elect Barack Obama](http://btvshalom.org/btvshalom.org/rabbiniccabinetcampaigns.shtml" \l "mccainobama) - Launched: 9/4/08**

**Text and Signers**

We the undersigned, call on you, President-elect Obama, to pledge to make resolution of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict a top priority of your Administration.

While you come into office with a long list of problems before you, the long-simmering conflict between Israel and the Palestinians is among the most urgent. After eight years of half-hearted diplomacy, there is no time left to walk softly and hope for the best.

The consequences of failing to establish a durable peace are grim. The influence of Iran and Hezbollah would grow among an increasingly bitter Palestinian population, and extremists would have further excuse to do vicious battle with the West. It is difficult to calculate the damage that a downward spiral into fresh waves of violence could hold.

American Presidents traditionally look to the Jewish community for insight on Israel-related policy. As Jewish clergy, we pledge to mobilize our people behind your leadership for a mutually-acceptable, two-state solution. We pledge to support you through difficult, trying times, and to celebrate with you when the job is done. We pledge to let the American public know: An American President who dedicates himself to the establishment of a durable Israeli-Palestinian peace acts in the best interests of Israel and the United States.

\* We call on you to dedicate yourself to the establishment of a viable Palestinian state living in peace alongside Israel early in your first term.

\* We call on you to appoint, within your first 100 days in office, a high-level, highly-regarded envoy to the region, an individual who has the ear of both Israelis and Palestinians, the respect of the American people, and ready access to your Oval Office.

\* We call on you to establish mechanisms of enforcement and follow-through, so that decisions made and agreements signed will be respected and brought to fruition.

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520. Rabbi Suri Krieger, Orange, CT
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522. Rabbi Irwin Kula, New York, NY
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531. Rabbi Stephen David Landau, Bloomfield, CT
532. Rabbi Yechiael Lander, Northampton, MA
533. Rabbi Lynne F. Landsberg, Washington, DC
534. Cantor Nancy Diamond Landsman, Glencoe, IL
535. Rabbi Karen Esther Landy, Brookline, MA
536. Cantor Frank Lanzkron-Tamarazo, Farmington Hills, MI
537. Cantor Shoshana Lash, Ansonia, CT
538. Rabbi Michael Adam Latz, Seattle, WA
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540. Rabbi Anson Laytner, Seattle, WA
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542. Rabbi Esther Lederman, New York, NY
543. Rabbi Saul Leeman, Providence, RI
544. Rabbi Barry Leff, Jerusalem, Israel
545. Rabbi Allan Lehmann, Newton, MA
546. Rabbi Benjamin Leinow, Escondido, CA
547. Rabbi Shoshana Leis, New York, NY
548. Rabbi Michele E. Lenke, Needham, MA
549. Rabbi David Lerner, Lexington, MA
550. Rabbi Michael Lerner, Berkeley, CA
551. Rabbi Joshua C. Lesser, Atlanta, GA
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**FAQ**

**1. What is a "mutually-acceptable two-state solution"?**

A two-state solution refers to a sovereign Palestinian state, living alongside Israel in peace. Such a solution has roots in the founding of Israel -- which was predicated on the 1947 UN decision to partition the land between its Jewish and Arab inhabitants -- and would allow each people to meet its nationalist goals without demanding the surrender of the other.

But for any solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict to be viable, it will have to be mutually-acceptable to both sides. Any unilateral decision making, such as the notion that Israel might unilaterally withdraw from certain areas of the West Bank and declare its borders final, has no real chance of succeeding. Both sides must acknowledge and respect the needs of the other, without denying the legitimate needs of their own people.

**2. How does the envoy requested differ from the envoys President Bush appointed during his tenure? How is it different from the role of Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice?**

Any envoy attempting to mediate any deeply-felt conflict will have to, at turns, cajole and demand, entice and push -- the resolution of decades or centuries of conflict cannot be achieved without difficult compromise, and that compromise is what the diplomat is there to attain. For such mediation to prove successful, any envoy will have to have the trust of all parties, as well as commanding their respect. Finally, such a diplomat will have to be able to function on a number of fronts and just under the radar, if need be, in order to keep sensitive information and developments under wraps until all sides are ready to reveal details.

The envoys appointed by President Bush tended to be focused entirely on one area of expertise (such as Retired Marine General James Jones, or Retired Marine General Anthony Zinni), and generally failed to command the attention and respect necessary to achieve change. A successful envoy will have both an independent presence on the world stage -- such as a former President or an internationally renowned diplomat -- as well as having the undivided attention of the President he or she serves.

The Secretary of State is thus not an "envoy," per se, but rather an official and very public representative of the U.S. government. One reason the Secretary of State is not in the best position to perform delicate mediation is that it is all but impossible for a government official to avoid the spotlight, no matter the Administration. In terms of Secretary Rice specifically, while it is clear that she has President Bush's respect, it is not as clear that he was willing to listen to her ideas or support them internationally -- witness the Rice-brokered Israeli-Palestinian transport deal of 2005, which was announced with great fanfare and immediately sunk into obscurity.

**3. To what does "eight years of half-hearted diplomacy” refer? How can the next President provide “effective American leadership for peace”?**

The Bush Administration was characterized, first, by an absolute unwillingness to engage with the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, and later by repeated efforts to achieve dramatic results after seven years of neglect with very little effort. In the words of Aaron David Miller, a career diplomat who spent 20 years on the frontlines of Israeli-Palestinian peacemaking, President Bush "[has had] many 'if I do this on the peace process, don't bother me again' moments." [note: see The Much Too Promised Land, Aaron David Miller].

In 2001, then-Prime Minister Ariel Sharon flatly rejected President Bush's demands that a massive Israeli military operation on the West Bank be suspended "as quickly as possible"; in 2003, Sharon and Yasser Arafat signed the U.S.-backed Road Map to Peace, committing themselves to an immediate settlement freeze and containment of terrorism, but Israel continued to build settlements and nothing substantive changed in Palestinian security; in 2005, the Rice-brokered transport agreement was signed and ignored; in 2007, Bush announced at the Annapolis peace conference that his goal was an agreement by the end of his administration, but the talks netted little progress. And yet, at least with regard to Israel, the Bush Administration has not made serious efforts to back the President's words with actions, or create consequences for the regular disregard of promises made to the U.S. government.

For the next President to be effective, he will have to learn from these mistakes. For U.S. diplomatic efforts to succeed, they must be backed by an iron-clad commitment to the process that diplomacy involves. Mediation is a thankless task, until it is successful -- the next President will have to be willing to do the hard, occasionally unpopular work necessary, in order to achieve a just and durable resolution of the conflict.

Furthermore, it must be made absolutely clear to both parties that agreements signed and promises made are not to be taken lightly: Refusal to abide by accepted terms will bring unpleasant consequences, but progress will bring rewards.

**4. Why is it so urgent to resolve the conflict at this time?**

Israeli and Palestinian frustration with the utter lack of progress in negotiations is at an all-time high. Influential figures on both sides have begun to publicly lose faith in the process. It may well be that the next Administration will be the last to have a real opportunity to truly resolve the conflict.

**5. Why is the U.S. so important to the peace process?**

Nearly every success in the realm of Israeli-Arab negotiations has been with American involvement. The peace treaties with Egypt and Jordan were mediated by Presidents Carter and Clinton; the Madrid Peace Conference, the first time Israel sat down with the gathered Arab nations, came about under the administration of President George H.W. Bush. Even the Israeli-Palestinian Declaration of Principles (DOP), ostensibly achieved without American involvement, were negotiated with the United States in mind -- to the extent that then-Israeli Foreign Minister Shimon Peres suggested to then-Secretary of State Warren Christopher that the latter take credit for the achievement.

Moreover, with all the upheavals in the world over the past twenty years, the United States remains the world's one superpower -- and it has always served as Israel's most stalwart ally. The Palestinians and Arab nations look to the U.S. as a path to Israel and look to Israel as a path to better relations with the U.S. For all these reasons, if any peace agreement is to succeed, it will require complete American support.

**6. How can the President encourage the negotiation of a two-state solution when Hamas is still in control of the Gaza Strip?**

Negotiations with Israel are conducted not by the Palestinian Authority, per se, but by the chairman of the PLO, who is Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas. Abbas is a long-time moderate who has been calling for a two-state solution since 1988; it is with Abbas that Israel and the U.S. are conducting all negotiation efforts.

The fact that Hamas rules the Gaza Strip is undeniably problematic, however; any agreement Abbas achieves with Israel will only be successful if the majority of the Palestinian people stand behind it. If the nation is, in fact, split into two geographical and ideological camps, this won’t be possible.

However, some members of the Hamas leadership have indicated a certain openness to a peace deal with Israel; they would accept an agreement, if approved in a national referendum. Hamas has also maintained its current ceasefire with Israel (if failing to crack down on militants from other groups who have failed to respect the truce), and is negotiating over the release of captured Israeli soldier Gilad Shalit. Both of these facts indicate a pragmatism which could be made to serve the interests of peace.

Though Hamas’s most extremist policies are rejected by a majority of Palestinians, it cannot be denied that the movement holds an enormous amount of power on the Palestinian political scene. Bottom line, for peace talks to succeed, the U.S. will also have to work to close the gap between Fatah, the movement headed by Abbas, and Hamas.

**7. What  about Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert's August 2008 peace offer to the Palestinians?**

The Palestinians rejected Olmert’s offer as soon as it was made public as it did not adequately address most of the issues that are most important to the Palestinians: the status of Jerusalem, the status of refugees, and the issue of territorial contiguity on the West Bank. Rather, Olmert suggested an Israeli withdrawal from 93% of the West Bank, with a compensation in the form of land in the desert on the border of the Gaza Strip.

**Sign Disclaimer**

By signing this open letter, you agree to allow Brit Tzedek v’Shalom to publicize your name in pre and post-election publicity and paid advertising.  Your signature on this letter indicates support for the contents of the letter and does not constitute your agreement with all of the positions of Brit Tzedek v’Shalom. You may give us your general endorsement for our work by joining our rabbinic cabinet. To join, please [contact Rabbi John Friedman](mailto:rabbifriedman@btvshalom.org).

The post-election version of the letter will be changed as follows:

It will be addressed to President-Elect X.

In the last paragraph the High Holidays language will be dropped and the remaining text will read “We urge you to commit yourself to effective American leadership for peace.”

In the fourth paragraph, "As Jewish clergy..." may be changed to "As American leaders...".

**Press Release**

**FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE**

July 23, 2008

**1000 Activists Call On Obama To Make Peace A Priority *Letters to the candidate urge concrete, early actions to resolve the Israeli-Palestinian conflict***

CHICAGO—More than 1000 people this weekend weighed in with Senator Barack Obama in advance of the candidate’s trip to Israel and the West Bank, urging him to demonstrate his intent to put Israeli-Palestinian peacemaking at the top of his foreign policy agenda.

Brit Tzedek v’Shalom delivered the letters from activists across the country to the campaign on Monday encouraging Senator Obama to demonstrate a commitment to make the negotiated two-state resolution a top priority of his administration.

At a news conference yesterday in Jordan, Senator Obama, the presumptive Democratic presidential candidate, pledged to work for a breakthrough in peace talks between Israelis and Palestinians "starting from the minute I'm sworn into office." He added that a president could not "snap his fingers" and bring peace to the Middle East. But, he said, "What I think can change is the ability of … a United States president to be actively engaged with the peace process."

“Barack Obama spoke to the importance of U.S. engagement in facilitating a negotiated two-state resolution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict,” said Steve Masters, president of Brit Tzedek v’Shalom.  “The vast majority of American Jews believe that a negotiated two state solution offers Israel’s best and likely only hope of achieving true long-term peace and security.”

During his two-day trip to Israel and the West Bank, Senator Obama met with Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert, Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas, Israeli President Shimon Peres and a number of other political leaders in the region.

The group called upon the candidate to use his time in the region wisely to lay the groundwork for renewing the substantive negotiations necessary to resolve the conflict. In their letters to the campaign, the activists called on Senator Obama to:

* Listen to the perspectives of both Israelis and Palestinians and assess the security and humanitarian concerns of both sides;
* Avoid statements that could predetermine the outcome of peace talks or undermine the ability of the next American president to return the U.S. to its long-standing role as honest broker in the region; and
* Declare support for recent diplomatic achievements in the region, including the Gaza ceasefire, Israeli-Palestinian negotiations, Israeli-Syrian peace talks, and recent U.S. plans to engage with Iran.

Brit Tzedek also cautioned the candidate to avoid “repeat[ing] the mistakes of President Bush by waiting until the final year of an Administration to become fully engaged in the peace process.”

The campaign was directed at Senator Obama in light of his trip to the region.  Brit Tzedek is a non-partisan organization of 38,000 American Jews committed to active U.S. engagement in bringing about a negotiated two state solution to the Israeli/Palestinian conflict and does not endorse any candidate for office.  Brit Tzedek calls on all presidential candidates to commit to making Israeli-Palestinian peacemaking a top priority of their Administration.

“The vast majority of American Jews believe that a truly pro-Israel president, regardless of party affiliation, will do everything in his or her power to bring about a negotiated two-state resolution of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict,” added Masters.

*Brit Tzedek v'Shalom, the Jewish Alliance for Justice and Peace, is a national grassroots organization more than 38,000 strong that educates and mobilizes American Jews in support of a negotiated two-state resolution of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.*

**Media**

[**Op-ed: Obama administration must pursue Mideast peace**](http://btvshalom.org/btvshalom.org/pressrelease/2008/20081119a.shtml). By Rabbi Arnold Rachlis. *The Jewish Journal* . November 19, 2008.

Across America, the Jewish community is joining with the rest of the nation to congratulate our next president. President-elect Barack Obama ran a campaign promising change, and Americans have made very clear that they are anxious to take him up on that promise. He will enter the White House at a time of great uncertainty, however, and those who would see real change take root will have to be very clear with the administration about their hopes for the future -- particularly regarding the Middle East.

Many in our community have long prayed for Israeli-Palestinian peace, and in his acceptance speech, Obama sounded a promising note. "To those who seek peace and security," he said, an hour after winning the election, "we support you." As a lifelong advocate for a fair resolution to the conflict, I know the importance of such words -- and know even more the importance of action.

The past eight years have seen an unprecedented level of diplomatic neglect on the part of the United States government, as President Bush and Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice said all the right things but have done very little to back up their words.

As a result, rather than move forward toward the resolution that all sides have already agreed must be our goal -- a mutually acceptable two-state solution -- Israelis and Palestinians remain locked in despair, and among both people, frustration has reached new heights.

Oddly, the current president seems to have forgotten that Israelis and Palestinians are not the only people who need an end to their entirely resolvable conflict -- America needs it, too. Consider the blow it would be to Iran, Hezbollah and extremists across the globe if America were to mediate an end to Arab-Israeli fighting.

In the course of his campaign, Obama turned to the Jewish community to declare his support for Israel, saying that Israel's security is "paramount."

But if he really believes this to be true, he will have to understand that words of support are not enough. He will have to work to achieve the one thing that can bring the Jewish state true security: true peace.

If the newly elected president truly wants to advance Israel's security, he will engage in genuine diplomacy from his very first days in office. He will vigorously pursue an agreement, appointing an envoy with the international credibility to do the hard work involved in negotiation. And he will make very clear to all parties that agreements made are to be honored.

It's hard to believe this will happen, though, unless the new administration has gotten clear indication that it will be supported in its efforts by American Jews. To that end, the more than 85 percent of us who have said that we back a two-state resolution of the conflict have to take it upon ourselves to tell President Obama unequivocally: We will stand by you as you pursue a just, durable two-state solution. We will make our positions known in the House and the Senate, and we will communicate them to the American public. Because we are pro-Israel, we will advocate for peace.

**American leaders have long turned to our community for guidance on the question of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, and for that reason, I recently signed an open letter addressed to the president-elect, calling on him to dedicate himself to achieving a viable two-state agreement by the end of his first term.**

**Spearheaded by Brit Tzedek v'Shalom, the Jewish Alliance for Justice and Peace, the letter has been signed so far by some 700 members of the American Jewish clergy, all of whom know that our highest calling is to "seek peace and pursue it."**

The potential costs of failing to achieve a just two-state solution to this bloody conflict are too awful to consider. We must apply ourselves to seeing to it that the decades of death and fear are brought to an end, and a new era begins. Tell President-elect Obama and those he names to his government: The time for peace is now.

*Rabbi Arnold Rachlis is the spiritual leader of University Synagogue in Irvine; a past president of the Reconstructionist Rabbinical Association; chair of MAZON - A Jewish Response to Hunger; and a member of the Rabbinic Cabinet of Brit Tzedek v'Shalom. He has served in Washington, D.C., as a White House Fellow and as a senior foreign affairs adviser in the State Department.*

[**Brit Tzedek wants a Middle East envoy soon**](http://btvshalom.org/btvshalom.org/pressrelease/2008/20081112a.shtml). *JTA*. November 12, 2008.

**JTA**  **November 12, 2008**

Another action alert is circulating, this time from a Jewish peace group. Brit Tzedek V'Shalom is urging its supporters to ask the president-elect to appoint a "high-level Middle East envoy in the first 100 days of his administration."

The letter the group will be sending, on behalf of those who respond to the appeal, states, "As you make decisions regarding your Cabinet, it is absolutely crucial that you also choose an envoy to the region, a diplomat empowered to mediate and negotiate on behalf of the administration and provide full-time, vigorous, on-the-ground engagement in the peace process. To be effective, your choice must have the respect of Israelis, Palestinians, and the American people, and ready access to the Oval Office."

[**Cambridge rabbis urge Obama to focus on resolving Israeli-Palestinian conflict**](http://btvshalom.org/btvshalom.org/pressrelease/2008/20081112.shtml). *Cambridge Chronicle*. November 12, 2008.

Cambridge - Three Cambridge rabbis joined 92 rabbis, cantors and rabbinical students in the Boston area, and almost 750 from across the country in calling on President-Elect Barack Obama to make vigilant U.S. leadership in resolving the Israeli-Palestinian conflict a top priority of his administration, reversing eight years of diplomatic neglect.

Rabbis Greg M. Epstein, Norman Janis, and Elizabeth Weiss Stern—joined other signers of a rabbinic open letter in pledging to mobilize support within the American Jewish community to the principle that "an American President who dedicates himself to the establishment of a durable Israeli-Palestinian peace acts in the best interests of Israel and the United States." The Rabbinic Letter was initiated by Brit Tzedek v'Shalom, the country's largest grassroots Jewish grassroots peace movement, and was sent initially to both presidential candidates.

For the text of the letter and a full list of signers, go to [**www.obamaletter.org**](http://www.obamaletter.org/).

Brit Tzedek released the letter, entitled "Time to Choose Peace" as part of a larger election-focused campaign to build political and popular support in this country for advancing several actions key to the tenable resolution of the conflict in the Middle East, including a freeze on settlement expansion, a ceasefire and an end to the blockade on Gaza, the sharing of Jerusalem, and sustained U.S diplomatic engagement in ending the conflict.

The letter asserts that while the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is but one in a long list of challenges that the next president will inherit, ignoring it will only exacerbate the instability and tension in the Middle East, by increasing the influence of terrorist organizations of Hezbollah and Hamas and other extremists groups. The letter states: "It is difficult to calculate the damage that a downward spiral into fresh waves of violence could hold."

To demonstrate his commitment to using American leadership to facilitate a negotiated end to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, the letter's signers are calling on the president-elect to take several immediate and concrete steps upon assuming office, including:

\* Call unequivocally for the establishment of a viable Palestinian state before the end of his first term \* Appoint ,within his first 100 days in office, a high-level, well-respected envoy to the region, dedicated to the resolution of the conflict \* Establish mechanisms of enforcement to ensure compliance on both sides with commitments made in the course of negotiations.

The Boston chapter of Brit Tzedek v'Shalom includes over 3,300 supporters. Nationally, Brit Tzedek, at more than 39,000 strong, mobilizes American Jews in support of a negotiated two-state resolution of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

[**Op-ed: Reach out for a two-state solution**](http://btvshalom.org/btvshalom.org/pressrelease/2008/20081111.shtml). *Kansas City Jewish Chronicle*. November 11, 2008.

DURHAM, N.C. — Recently the stars began to align for peace in the Middle East. Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice proclaimed that this year’s record growth of Israeli settlements on the West Bank is an obstacle to peace. An influential American Jewish advocacy group, usually associated with the politics of Israel’s right-wing Likud party, declared its support for a Palestinian state. And Palestinian and Israeli pundits began to call for quick movement on a two-state solution to the conflict.

Is it possible that our conservative administration, the Israel lobby and the Israeli and Palestinian left find themselves advocating the same vision?

Not exactly. Secretary Rice has been looking for a legacy for her administration -- but any agreement would do, if it helps move her president out of the red ink on his foreign policy balance sheet.

Among the conservative Jewish leadership, the growing willingness to acknowledge the obvious — a Palestinian state is necessary for Israel’s peace and security -- is simply a reflection of mainstream Jewish opinion. One gets the feeling that the shift in rhetoric is made out of desperation and a need for relevance, not ideology.

And finally, frustration among Israelis means that many peace advocates are coming to believe that the political viability of a two-state solution is rapidly diminishing due to unabated settlement construction and the Palestinian election of Hamas, among other factors. Many supporters of a two-state solution are wringing their hands that without strong leadership in the near future the opportunity may be slipping away.

**Urgent opportunity**

The notion that a two-state agreement is the only reasonable resolution of the conflict is not new to those American Jews who have long fought for it. What is new, though, is the fact that even while the world increasingly accepts the idea, the likelihood of bringing it to fruition is shrinking. Now is the time, more than ever, to apply ourselves to seeing to it this urgent opportunity isn’t lost.

Above all, now is the time to make sure that the presidential candidates understand this urgency; that the next administration must be in the game from Day One.

After the last eight years, we know that we cannot take this for granted. For most of its tenure, the Bush administration ignored this conflict as if engaging with it meant political doom. Only in the final months has the White House acted on its status as a full partner in peacemaking.

If our new president begins his administration as cynically as President Bush, refusing to recognize America’s historic responsibility, the current effort to find common ground will end dismally.

That is why John McCain and Barack Obama must understand that the consequences of failing to establish a durable peace would be grim. The influence of Iran would likely continue to grow, as terrorists gain further pretext for violence around the world. The extent of damage from further indifference is impossible to calculate.

But if we want the next president to engage with the process of resolving the conflict, we must also make sure that he sees the growing consensus among American Jews regarding a two-state solution. We must work as a community to make clear our intent to back him as he makes hard decisions and presses for difficult compromises and that we will also make sure that our representatives in Congress and the Senate know that such aggressive diplomacy has our support.

American leaders have traditionally listened closely to the opinions of Jewish leaders on the issue of Israel. That is why 660 American rabbis and cantors are urging the candidates to dedicate themselves to the establishment of a viable Palestinian state living in peace alongside Israel early in their term; to appoint a high-level, highly regarded envoy who will have the respect of both Palestinians and Israelis to work full time in the Middle East to achieve a breakthrough; to establish mechanisms of follow through, so that decisions made and agreements signed will be respected and brought to fulfillment.

There is now a groundswell of consensus, at home and abroad, for an end to the bloodshed. Most factions now recognize that the door to two states will not remain open forever. The stars are beginning to align.

*Kansas City native Rabbi John Friedman leads the Judaea Reform Congregation in Durham and is the chair of Brit Tzedek v’Shalom’s (the Jewish Alliance for Justice and Peace) rabbinic cabinet. This article was first published Oct. 16 in the Charlotte, N.C., News & Observer.*

[**Clergy sign Brit Tzedek peace petition**](http://btvshalom.org/btvshalom.org/pressrelease/2008/20081031.shtml). *The Jewish News Weekly of Northern California*. October 31, 2008.

A group of 35 rabbis and three cantors from the Bay Area has joined nearly 700 others from across the country in promising community support for U.S. leadership to resolve the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. They are part of an effort sponsored by Chicago-based Brit Tzedek v’Shalom, the Jewish Alliance for Justice and Peace.

In an open letter to Sens. Barack Obama and John McCain titled “Time to Choose Peace,” the signers pledged to mobilize support within the American Jewish community for “an American president who dedicates himself to the establishment of durable Israeli-Palestinian peace acts in the best interests of Israel and the United States.”

The San Francisco/Bay Area chapter of Brit Tzedek v’Shalom has more than 1,300 members and supporters, including clergy members from congregations in Berkeley, Palo Alto, Santa Rosa and San Francisco.

For a list of participating rabbis and cantors, visit www.btvshalom.org and click on “Time to Choose Peace.” For more information, call Molly Freeman at (510) 524-1993.

[**Jewish Leaders Send Plea For Peace to Next President**](http://btvshalom.org/btvshalom.org/pressrelease/2008/20081017.shtml). *The Atlanta Jewish Times*. October 17, 2008.

Four rabbis and two cantors from the Atlanta metro-area are joining nearly 700 others from across the country to seize on this traditional time for communal evaluation and reflection in calling on the next president to make vigilant U.S. leadership in resolving the Israeli-Palestinian conflict a top priority of his administration, reversing eight years of diplomatic neglect.

In an open letter to the Democratic and Republican presidential candidates, the signers, convened by Brit Tzedek v’Shalom, the country’s largest grassroots Jewish grassroots peace movement, pledged to mobilize support within the American Jewish community “an American President who dedicates himself to the establishment of a durable Israeli-Palestinian peace acts in the best interests of Israel and the United States.”

Atlanta rabbis who signed the letter include: Rabbi Mario Karpuj, Congregation Or Hadash, Rabbi Joshua Lesser, Bet Haverim, Rabbi Scott Saulson and Rabbi Joab Eichenberg-Eilon.

Atlanta area cantors include Cantor  Mark Perman of Temple Kol Emeth and Cantor Steven Hevenstone of Greenfield Hebrew Academy.

The Atlanta chapter of Brit Tzedek v’Shalom includes 60 members and supporters. Nationally, Brit Tzedek, at more than 38,000 strong, educates and mobilizes American Jews in support of a negotiated two-state resolution of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

The Atlanta area signers join prominent national pulpit, academic and organizational rabbis, cantors and rabbinic students from all major streams of American Judaism, including rabbis:

**Rachel Cowan**, Executive Director of the Institute for Jewish Spirituality **David Gordis**, Immediate past president and professor of Rabbinics at Hebrew College **Peter Knobel**, President of the Central Conference of American Rabbis **Arthur Green**, Rector of Hebrew College's Rabbinical School **Elliot Dorff**, Rector and Professor of Philosophy at American Jewish University, Vice-Chair of the Conservative Movement's Committee on Jewish Law and Standards **Miriam Jerris**, President of the Association of Humanistic Rabbis **J. Rolando Matalon**, Rabbi of Congregation B'nai Jeshurun **Jack Moline**, Rabbi of Agudas Achim Congregation **Ismar Schorsch**, Chancellor emeritus of The Jewish Theological Seminary **Toba Spitzer**, President of the Reconstructionist Rabbinical Association

For a full list of signers, go to [**http://ga3.org/campaign/letter\_mccainobama/explanation#signers**](http://ga3.org/campaign/letter_mccainobama/explanation#signers)

Brit Tzedek is releasing the letter, entitled “Time to Choose Peace” as part of a larger election-driven campaign, which works through advocacy, media outreach and public programming to build political and popular support in this country for a referendum advancing several actions key to the tenable resolution of the conflict, including a freeze on settlement expansion, a ceasefire and an end to the blockade on Gaza, the sharing of Jerusalem, and sustained U.S diplomatic engagement in ending the conflict. The letter (text below) and a full list of signers will be published in the Rosh Hashanah edition of the Forward, the national Jewish newspaper.

The letter asserts that while the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is but one in a long list of challenges that the next president will inherit, ignoring it will only exacerbate the instability and tension in the Middle East, by increasing the influence of terrorist organizations of Hezbollah and Hamas and otherextremists groups. The letter states: “It is difficult to calculate the damage that a downward spiral into fresh waves of violence could hold.”

To demonstrate his commitment to using American leadership to facilitate a negotiated end to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, the letter’s signers are calling on the next president to take several immediate and concrete steps upon assuming office, including:

* Call unequivocally for the establishment of a viable Palestinian state before the end of his first term
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[**Reach out for a two-state solution**](http://btvshalom.org/btvshalom.org/pressrelease/2008/20081016a.shtml). By Rabbi John Friedman. *The News and Observer*. October 16, 2008.

DURHAM - Recently the stars began to align for peace in the Middle East. Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice proclaimed that this year's record growth of Israeli settlements on the West Bank is an obstacle to peace. An influential American Jewish advocacy group, usually associated with the politics of Israel's right-wing Likud party, declared its support for a Palestinian state. And Palestinian and Israeli pundits began to call for quick movement on a two-state solution to the conflict.

Is it possible that our conservative administration, the Israel lobby and the Israeli and Palestinian left find themselves advocating the same vision?

Not exactly. Secretary Rice has been looking for a legacy for her administration -- but any agreement would do, if it helps move her president out of the red ink on his foreign policy balance sheet.

Among the conservative Jewish leadership, the growing willingness to acknowledge the obvious -- a Palestinian state is necessary for Israel's peace and security -- is simply a reflection of mainstream Jewish opinion. One gets the feeling that the shift in rhetoric is made out of desperation and a need for relevance, not ideology.

And finally, frustration among Israelis means that many peace advocates are coming to believe that the political viability of a two-state solution is rapidly diminishing due to unabated settlement construction and the Palestinian election of Hamas, among other factors. Many supporters of a two-state solution are wringing their hands that without strong leadership in the near future the opportunity may be slipping away.

The notion that a two-state agreement if the only reasonable resolution of the conflict is not new to those American Jews who have long fought for it. What is new, though, is the fact that even while the world increasingly accepts the idea, the likelihood of bringing it to fruition is shrinking. Now is the time, more than ever, to apply ourselves to seeing to it this urgent opportunity isn't lost.

Above all, now is the time to make sure that the presidential candidates understand this urgency, that the next administration must be in the game from Day One.

After the last eight years, we know that we cannot take this for granted. For most of its tenure, the Bush administration ignored this conflict as if engaging with it meant political doom. Only in the final months has the White House acted on its status as a full partner in peacemaking.

If our new president begins his administration as cynically as President Bush, refusing to recognize America's historic responsibility, the current effort to find common ground will end dismally.

That is why John McCain and Barack Obama must understand that the consequences of failing to establish a durable peace would be grim. The influence of Iran would likely continue to grow, as terrorists gain further pretext for violence around the world. The extent of damage from further indifference is impossible to calculate.

But if we want the next president to engage with the process of resolving the conflict, we must also make sure that he sees the growing consensus among American Jews regarding a two-state solution. We must work as a community to make clear our intent to back him as he makes hard decisions and presses for difficult compromises and that we will also make sure that our representatives in Congress and the Senate know that such aggressive diplomacy has our support.

American leaders have traditionally listened closely to the opinions of Jewish leaders on the issue of Israel. That is why 660 American rabbis and cantors are urging the candidates to dedicate themselves to the establishment of a viable Palestinian state living in peace alongside Israel early in their term; to appoint a high-level, highly regarded envoy who will have the respect of both Palestinians and Israelis to work full time in the Middle East to achieve a breakthrough; to establish mechanisms of follow through, so that decisions made and agreements signed will be respected and brought to fulfillment.

There is now a groundswell of consensus, at home and abroad, for an end to the bloodshed. Most factions now recognize that the door to two states will not remain open forever. The stars are beginning to align.

*Rabbi John Friedman leads the Judaea Reform Congregation in Durham and is the chair of Brit Tzedek v'Shalom's (the Jewish Alliance for Justice and Peace) rabbinic cabine*

[**Another Rabbinic Letter, This One For Peace: 700 Rabbis for Chicago’s Brit Tzedek Call for Urgent Focus on Mideast.**](http://btvshalom.org/btvshalom.org/pressrelease/2008/20081010.shtml) By Gila Wertheimer. *The Chicago Jewish Star* . October 10, 2008

Following right on the heels of a letter of support issued last montht by the newly-formed Rabbis for Obama, a second rabbinic letter—this one directed to both presidential candidates—was released just prior to Rosh Hashanah.

These two independent initiatives show “that rabbis are an important moral and political force in the community,” Aliza Becker told the *Jewish Star* this week.

Becker is deputy director of the Chicago-based group Brit Tzedek v’Shalom, whose Rabinic Cabinet initiated the second letter. At the same time, they were unfamiliar with the effort of Rabbis for Obama, she said.

While he Rabbis for Obama letter, which also was started by Chicago-area rabbis, aimed to counteract negative material that has been circulated about the Senator (*Jewish Star*, Sept. 19), the Brit Tzedek v’Shalom letter urges the candidates to make resolving the Israeli-Palestinian conflict a priority in the next administration.

This second letter has been signed  by nearly 700 clergy, including cantors and rabbinic seminary students. Rabbis for Obama was signed by some 400 rabbis.

At press time, 32 Chicago-area clergy had signed on to the Brit Tzedek v’Shalom letter. The Rabbis for Obama letter had 31 rabbis from the Chicago area.

In both initiatives, the vast majority of supporters are affiliated with the Reform movement.

While acknowledging that the new president will face “a long list of problems”, the Brit Tzedek v’Shalom letter calls the Israeli-Palestinian conflict “among the most urgent.”

It goes on to offer support for its resolution: “As Jewish clergy, we pledge to mobilize our people behind your leadership for a mutually-acceptable, two-state solution. We pledge to support you through difficult, trying times….”

An Israeli-Palestinian peace, the letter states, is “in the best interests of Israel and the United States.”

The letter urges three initiatives by the new president: to call “unequivocally” for the creation of a Palestinian stte in his first term; to support a high-level envoy to the region in the first 100 days; to create mechanisms that will ensure any agreements are carried out.

Brit Tzedek v’Shalom, the Jewish Alliance for Justice and Peace, was founded in Chicago in 2002. Nationally, members and supporters number 38,000, with 1,595 in Chicago.

The group calls itself the largest “Jewish grassroots peace movement” in the country.

[**Rabbis sign peace letter to candidates**](http://btvshalom.org/btvshalom.org/pressrelease/2008/20081003a.shtml). *JTA*. October 3, 2008.

Hundreds of U.S. Jewish clergy urged the next president to make Israeli-Palestinian peace a priority.

"The consequences of failing to establish a durable peace are grim," said the letter sent this week to Sens. Barack Obama (D-Ill.) and John McCain (R-Ariz.), the presidential candidates. "The influence of Iran and Hezbollah would surely grow among an increasingly bitter Palestinian population, and extremists would have further excuse to do vicious battle with the West. It is difficult to calculate the damage that a downward spiral into fresh waves of violence could hold."

The letter, signed by close to 700 rabbis, cantors and seminary students and put together by Brit Tzedek v'Shalom, a dovish pro-Israel group, decried what it said was the neglect of the issue by the Bush administration.

"After eight years of half-hearted diplomacy, there is no time left to walk softly and hope for the best," said the letter, timed for the 10 Days of Awe, the period of repentance and reflection between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur.

[**We Do Need Change—In U.S. Policy In The Middle East**](http://btvshalom.org/btvshalom.org/pressrelease/2008/20081002.shtml). By Rabbi Marc Gopin*. The Washington Jewish Week* . October 2, 2008.

It is settled: The election is about change. Sen. Barack Obama had made that his central motif all along, but now Sen. John McCain is onboard. Now that everyone is using the word “change,” it begs a question. The question is not “Who stands for change?” but rather, “Whose changes are really going to really make a difference, and what are those changes?”

One place where change is desperately needed is in the disastrous United States policy toward the Arab-Israeli conflict that has been in effect for the past eight years. It is a policy of studied avoidance, coupled occasionally by heavy-handed intervention decisions that lost Gaza and set back the possibility of a two-state solution. Israelis and Palestinians need White House leadership and leadership on the ground. Which candidate will provide that leadership is an essential and fateful question for the Middle East and for the world.

The president must be a person who sees the need for constant engagement on the ground in Israel, so that both sides have a third party they can rely on to push for compliance to agreements. Both sides of the conflict need a U.S. president who understands that there is no military solution to this conflict, and that careful negotiation has yielded the most hope and progress over the years. The president must have a keen understanding of the Jewish community of Israel, but also of the Arab world.

I once had a conversation with Sen. George Mitchell about what worked in his successful intervention in Northern Ireland. The answer was deeply committed engagement in which he as a special envoy could personally represent the president’s wishes and guarantees. This meant that as he negotiated, he could help both sides commit to a step-by-step process of positive change.

Why do both sides of any conflict need Sen. Mitchell’s kind of engagement? Because if the president is half-hearted or uninterested, then both sides have no guarantees that the other side will follow through on their promises. If either side does not follow through on their promises, then their leadership will be embarrassed politically and lose all possibility of leading their people in the direction of peace and a settlement. In a more positive sense, the American president is there to provide leadership, hope and a faith that we can successfully move the Israeli-Palestinian relationship in a better direction. The leaders of the region need to hear this, and the suffering populations need this kind of hope and leadership in order to resist the tempting promises of militant politicians and fringe groups. Americans need, therefore, to look for a president who has the qualities of care and compassion, but also a broad understanding of global conflicts.

There is an ancient story told in the Talmud from almost 2,000 years ago. It tells the tale of Aaron, the high priest and prophet, brother of Moses, the foundational lawgiver of Judaism. Despite his highest status of ritual purity, Aaron inserted himself into the dark depths of human conflict. Aaron was famous across the Jewish world for his capacity to resolve conflicts and turn hate into love, so much so that thousands of children were named after him because he successfully reconciled so many husbands and wives.

How did he do it? Aaron would first go to one person and say, “Look at your neighbor, look at how he is suffering, and how he really wants peace with you.” And then he would go to the other and say exactly the same thing! When the two met, they would fall into each other’s arms and weep with regret.

The world needs people of the highest stature to immerse themselves in the darkest problems of humankind. No one is more powerful than the president of the United States. Nothing is darker than the senseless violence and waste of life that we have witnessed in the Arab-Israeli conflict. We need an Aaron, we need someone with compassion, with care, with cleverness, who can take the risk of engagement and thereby bring peace to a Holy Land thirsting for leadership.

On Yom Kippur, the Jewish community contemplates failures, and dedicates itself to change—change that that is sincere and powerful, change that will make the world a truly better place. Let us dedicate ourselves to bringing about the change so desperately needed by Israelis and Palestinians, and let us hope the Jewish community, along with all Americans, allows for this change by choosing the future leader of the United States widely.

*Marc Gopin is the director of the Center on Religion, Diplomacy and Conflict Resolution at George Mason University in Fairfax and a member of the Rabbinic Cabinet of Brit Tzedek v’Shalom*

[**Broadcast Media**](http://btvshalom.org/btvshalom.org/resources/20081007_au.html)

The news announcement below played on 1557 radio stations a total of 2116 times on Tuesday, October 7, 2008. Networks included: American Urban Radio Network, Democracy Now Radio Show, Dial Global Radio Network and Metro Source.