

Needed: A Bold Response to Four Decades of Israeli Control of the West Bank

By Rabbi Herbert Bronstein

After four decades of control of the West Bank by the State of Israel, we are in desperate need of an open, systematic discussion among the main sectors of American Jewry – an honest look at the consequences of “the occupation,” beneficial or harmful, for Israel, for Jewry, and for the world.

That such a discussion has not taken place within deliberative bodies of American Jewry is among the more damaging consequences, some would say. Such a discussion, in various forums and publications, should focus on this one issue, though of course the question of the ultimate solution of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict will inevitably come into play.

Any such process, pursued in a group of significant Jewish communities, would have to be planned by a committee approved by representatives of an array of groups: community Jewish Federations, organizations representing American Jewish religious “movements,” main-line Zionist organizations, the Jewish “community relations” organizations and the “dove” organizations such as Brit Tzedek v’Shalom and Americans for Peace Now. A few well-known and respected American Jewish community leaders might serve as “patrons” getting the process started.

Planning on this level, necessarily painstaking, would be itself a real step forward in the American heartland of democracy, where there has been little, if any, democratic process in Jewish community decision-making or policy discussion, especially since the demise of such a process through the National Jewish Community Relations Council. Extreme groups, for which no such discussion is possible, would have to be excluded: those who will fight to the death or even kill for the retention of the occupied territories on the one side, and those who are no longer committed to, or are even opposed to, the security, continuity or viability of a Jewish State on the other.

It is a sign of the extent of the divisions within our community that even the way I set forth the issue will necessarily reveal to one side or the other a preliminary bias.

The current mainstream position is probably best stated as follows: The secure existence of the State of Israel is necessary for the safety of post-Holocaust world Jewry; the security of Israel is jeopardized by open criticism of its policies; the unremitting Arab (now wider Muslim) opposition to any Jewish autonomous presence in “their Palestine” will not cease, even if control of the West Bank, which would further threaten Israel and the lives of those living within the pre-’67 borders, and thus Jews everywhere. Violence against Israel has long, long preceded Israel’s control of the West Bank territories; and on leaving Gaza and Lebanon violence has continued.

On the other side: The cruelties inflicted upon generations of Palestinians who yearn for and are passionately fixed upon self-determination only increases a cycle of violence, puts Israel in the position of governments which are eventually defeated in “Wars of Liberation,” and in the meantime jeopardizes all the truly great on-going humanitarian, scientific, and cultural achievements of the Jewish State, to which World Jewry continues magnificently to contribute. The security of the State of Israel is, in fact, threatened by the occupation.

Moreover, the Zionist ideal of a culturally Jewish and moral democracy are lost; policies of a Jewish state created to protect Jews from vicious anti-Semitism have become a tool in a new virulent wave of anti-Semitism; the moral base of a Jewish state, once enthusiastically supported by many nations, has been eroded; significant segments of the Christian community, of academia, and even the Jewish community; have been alienated; and finally, the occupation makes Israel vulnerable to blame by its enemies, who use it to mask all the problems of the Middle East, from corruption to virulent inner conflicts. In short, the occupation is not good for Israel, the Jews, or the world.

Perhaps most disturbing are the occupation's effects on American Jewry. Criticism of Israeli policies – even that which arises from considerations of a Judaically informed conscience – has been muted, and groups which represent an endeavor to join Zionist or pro-Israel stances with a social consciousness or universalistic outlook have been marginalized. Even in Rabbinic organizations, discussions of these issues is muted, or even out-of-bounds. Among a significant body of Jews, Jewish identity is now centered on Holocaust remembrance and unquestioning support for Israel. In these groups, any criticism of Israel is often considered to be ethnically disloyal and even self-hating. Criticism of some of Israel's policies has been labeled anti-Semitic. Surely our heritage has more than this to offer our people.

Such a discussion, pro and con, openly voicing and examining **all** of these views, and others as well, has become the most pressing item on the agenda of American Jewry today. It could also – conducted in the proper manner – contribute to the strength and unity of our people everywhere.

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