Brit Tzedek Rallies Thousands in Time to Choose Campaign

Brit Tzedek's 2008 Time To Choose Peace campaign rallied grassroots activists across America to renew their dedication to the active pursuit of Israeli-Palestinian peace. The campaign was launched with a Pledge sent to tens of thousands of supporters.

The response was terrific! Some chose to join their local Brit Tzedek chapter, others pledged to speak with friends about the issues, and some chose to meet with candidates to discuss our message. Time to Choose also encouraged activists to attend Brit Tzedek's "Advocacy Days" — the annual event at which we bring the message of a negotiated two-state solution directly to this nation's lawmakers — and many did.

The culmination of these efforts came in the hugely successful "Rabbinic Letter to President-elect Barack Obama," signed (as this newsletter goes to print) by more than 800 rabbis, cantors, and seminary students, including such prominent rabbis as Peter Knobel and Toba Spitzer, the presidents of the Reform and Reconstructionist rabbinical associations, Arthur Green, Elliot Dorff, Lewis Barth, David Gordis, and Ismar Schorsch, present and former leaders of prominent rabbinical schools, and prominent pulpit rabbis across the denominational spectrum, such as Sharon Kleinbaum and Jack Moline.

Our community's spiritual leaders call on the President-elect to over-turn the Bush Administration's policies of inaction and neglect by:

* dedicating himself to the establishment of a viable Palestinian state living in peace alongside Israel, early in his first term
* appointing, within his first 100 days in office, a high-level envoy to the region, an individual with the respect of Israelis, Palestinians, and the American people, and ready access to the Oval Office
* establishing mechanisms of enforcement and follow-through, so that decisions made and agreements signed will be brought to fruition

The Rabbinic letter was published in a full page ad in the Forward newspaper and in 15 community papers featuring prominent local signers. The story was also covered on 1557 radio stations. To date, twelve op-eds and news articles have appeared in press across the country about the letter including op-eds by Rabbi Arnold Rachlis in the Jewish Journal of Greater Los Angeles and by Rabbinic Cabinet chair Rabbi John Friedman in The Raleigh News and Observer. As a result of our work over the last year, Brit Tzedek is positioned to organize the Jewish grassroots to step up immediately, and act decisively to show the country, our Congress, and the next Administration that the clear majority of our community will actively support a two-state solution.

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BRIT TZEDEK AT THE DEMOCRATIC NATIONAL CONVENTION

A Brit Tzedek delegation attended the Democratic National Convention, including Denver Chapter head Mark Belkin and Rabbinic Cabinet member, Rabbi Stephen Booth-Nadav. The activists attended many events, several at the invitation of the National Jewish Democratic Council, including the Middle East Policy and Jewish Community Outreach Discussion, a reception for Jewish Democratic Congresspeople, and a panel discussion sponsored by the New America Foundation. "I spoke with a number of Congressional representatives," Rabbi Booth-Nadav reports. "I found a lot of receptivity to our work."
Grassroots Leadership Training Institute and National Advocacy Days 2008

"The only way to settle the problems of the Middle East is through the path that you are traveling, that you are leading." — Rep. Mike Capuano, at Brit Tzedek’s annual National Advocacy Days Congressional Reception

Brit Tzedek activists from across the country converged in Washington, D.C. this past June to take part in three and a half invigorating days of organizing, training, networking, and advocating to promote Brit Tzedek’s pro-Israel, pro-peace message. Nearly 150 strong, we met with inspiring leaders, learned from each other, and ascended the Hill with a renewed sense of purpose, one firmly founded in our successes of the past.

The conference began with opening remarks from President Steve Masters and Executive Director Diane Balser. They addressed the American Jewish peace movement, and the growth of our grassroots leadership, and the opening plenary, The Brit Tzedek Community: A Conversation Among Leaders and Activists From Across the Country, led us to vital discussions of our inspiration as we work for Israeli-Palestinian peace, and highlights of the past year.

Participants attended a variety of workshops to fortify their organizing skills, and hone their leadership on three tracks: grassroots skills, leadership and development, and media and communications. The challenges of organizing in the American Jewish community was the topic of the lunch meeting keynoted by Rabbinic Cabinet Co-Chair Rabbi Julie Saxe-Taller; Executive Director of the Union of Progressive Zionists, Tammy Shapiro; and Chapter Development Chair, Cherie Brown.

Yossi Beilin, one of the foremost experts on Israeli-Palestinian peace negotiations, a former chairman of the Meretz-Yachad party, and the chief Israeli architect of the Geneva Accord, keynoted the evening session. He closed with a clariion call, that for the sake of Israel and the United States, the next U.S. president must reinstate America’s role as a trusted broker for peace in the region.

Participants were trained in preparation for meetings on Capitol Hill the following day. The training included a panel discussion on the role of Congress and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, featuring Purneet Tabwar, chief Mideast adviser to Senator Joe Biden (DE) and the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, and Tommy Ross, foreign policy adviser to Representative David Price (NC).

Activists then trained on the “how-tos” of a successful advocacy visit, discussing advanced advocacy strategies. To close out the training, Daniel Levy, Senior Fellow at the New America Foundation, gave an up-to-the-minute briefing on the latest events from the region.

That evening we raised our glasses at Brit Tzedek’s annual National Advocacy Days Congressional Reception on Capitol Hill, featuring three esteemed Members of Congress: Reps. Mike Capuano (D-MA), Charles Boustany (R-LA), and Henry Waxman (D-CA). In the words of Rep. Capuano, “the only way to settle the problems of the Middle East is through the path that you are traveling, that you are leading.” [continued on p. 4]
Activism in a Jewish Community Near You —
A 2008 REPORT

Chapters Nationwide Host Gershon Baskin
and Hanna Siniora Brit Tzedek hosted a
ten-city speaking tour with Gershon Baskin
and Hanna Siniora, the co-directors of
Israel/Palestine Center for Research and
Information (IPCR), the only joint Israeli-
Palestinian think tank in the world. Tour
stops included synagogues in Atlanta,
Denver, Detroit, and San Francisco.

Brit Tzedek Leadership Speaks Across the
Country Brit Tzedek Board President Steve
Masters spoke in Boston at the
Reconstructionist Biennial Convention, in
Chicago and Milwaukee with policy analyst
Ghath Al-Omari, and in Philadelphia with
former MK Yossi Berlin. Executive Director
Diane Balser spoke at the conference “Jews
Uniting to End the War and Heal America”
in New York, as well as with Palestinian
peace activist Aziz Abu Sarah in Albany
and at a chapter event in Seattle. Deputy
Director Aliza Becker and Palestinian
activist Saffiya Shillo showcased a dual
narrative discussion program at four
Chicago-area synagogues. Executive
Committee member Aaron Ahuvia led a
conversation in Ann Arbor, “How to Talk
With your Jewish Friends about the Israeli
Palestinian Conflict,” and headlined
inaugural events for Brit Tzedek’s two new
Maine chapters. Treasurer David Albert
spoke about his doctoral thesis on the
American-Israeli relationship with chapters
in Boston, New Haven, and New York City.

Israel 60th Anniversary Chapter Tabling
Chapters in Boston, Chicago, Minneapolis,
NYC, Portland, and Providence tabled at
local 60th Israeli Anniversary community
events. They shared literature including
our newest publication, “Pointing the Way
to Peace & Security: A Resource for Rabbis
and Cantors on Israel’s 60th Birthday” and
had conversations with many attendees
about Brit Tzedek’s pro-peace work.

New York City Chapter Runs with Home
District Advocacy Following a home district
meeting with the NYC Chapter, Rep. Jerry
Nadler stated during an NPR interview
that he was supporting the “position of
Brit Tzedek on a negotiated solution for two
states, Israel and Palestine, because it
would be our best possibility of long-term
peace and security in that area.”

Rep. Charles Rangel met with a delegation
at Brit Tzedek’s NYC office during which
he offered to facilitate closer relationships
between Brit Tzedek and members of
the Black Congressional caucus.

Boston Chapter Organizes Election Forum
The Boston chapter organized, “Election
08: The Presidential Candidates’ Vision of
U.S. Foreign Policy” held at Harvard Hillel
on October 30th. Steve Grossman, former
National Chair of the Democratic National
Committee, spoke for Sen. Barack Obama,
and Kerry Healey, former Massachusetts
Lieutenant Governor spoke for Sen. John
McCain at this interactive event.

Six Years of Grassroots Power —
Local and National Advocacy
By Diane Balser, Executive Director,
Brit Tzedek v’Shalom

Brit Tzedek can take great pride in the successful
establishment of a national advocacy organization
based in the American Jewish grassroots. We began
at the height of the second intifada; amid the grassroots
of popular discontent among American Jews with the
status quo in Israel and the Palestinian territories.
We understood the need to build a uniquely American
organization within the Jewish community around the
issue of Israeli-Palestinian peace, and over the past
six years — in the face of the enormous failures of Bush
administration policies — we established a firmly-rooted
Brit Tzedek presence in over 35 states, advocating
within our community and in the halls of Congress.

This has not been easy. We have seen dramatic
developments: the Geneva Accords, the Gaza
withdrawal, the Second Lebanon War, the elections
of Mahmoud Abbas and later Hamas, a major shift in
Olmer’s position on peace negotiations, increased
settlement building, and the largely “hands-off the
peace process” policy of the Bush administration.

And yet, by working from the ground up, we have
extended our reach, organizing ever greater numbers
of American Jews to encourage strong U.S. leadership
in establishing a negotiated peace agreement and a viable
Palestinian state alongside Israel. This success has a
direct corollary in the success of President-elect Obama’s
campaign, and as we prepare to welcome a new
Democratic Administration, we are perfectly positioned
to build on our ties with the President-elect.

We will continue to build on the relationships
with members of Congress we have cultivated — with
key players as Sen. Nancy Pelosi, Sen. John Kerry,
and White House Chief of Staff Rahm Emanuel.

Americans made their choice for fresh policies
in the Middle East. Now it is time to act.

Where Obama Stands on
Israeli-Palestinian Peace Issues

The two-state solution Obama has shown real commitment to a negotiated,
two-state solution. From his campaign website: “Obama and Biden... will make
a sustained push — working with Israelis and Palestinians — to achieve the goal
of two states, a Jewish state in Israel and a Palestinian state, living side by side
in peace and security.”

Role of the U.S. government in peace-making Obama has made
it clear that he understands America’s central role in the peace process, saying
“diplomacy in the Middle East cannot be done on the cheap. Diplomacy is
measured by patience and by effort. We cannot continue to have trips consisting
of little more than photo ops... Neither Israel nor the United States is served by
this approach.”

Priority of the conflict Speaking to the Jordanian press in July, he said:
“My goal is to make sure that we work, starting from the minute I’m sworn
into office, to try to find some breakthroughs.” Obama believes, “we have a
national-security interest in solving this... the status quo is unsustainable.”

Jerusalem Obama has tried to hedge his bets on Jerusalem, telling AIPAC
that “Jerusalem will remain the capital of Israel, and it must remain undivided,”
and later clarifying that “it’s going to be up to the parties to negotiate a range
of these issues. And Jerusalem will be part of those negotiations.”

Settlements Obama has called on Israel to “advance the cause of peace”
by “refrain[ing] from building new settlements — as it agreed to with the Bush
Administration at Annapolis.”

Israeli security Obama has called Israel’s security “paramount,” but has
also indicated that it conceives of security in other than strictly defensive terms.
Speaking to a Jewish audience in Ohio, he spoke of the need for a functional
Palestinian state, saying “that’s in Israel’s interest... If you have a balkanized,
unsustainable state, it will break down and we will be back in the same boat.”

Hamas Obama has shown little flexibility regarding Hamas: “Since they are
a terrorist organization, we should not be dealing with them until they recognize
Israel, renounce terrorism, and abide by previous agreements.”

Relationship between the conflict and regional stability “We’ve
got to have an overarching strategy recognizing that all of these issues
are connected. If we can solve the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, then that will make it
easier for Arab states and the Gulf states to support us when it comes to issues
like Iraq and Afghanistan. It will also weaken Iran... maybe at the same time
peeling Syria out of the Iranian orbit.”
Your tax-deductible membership contribution to Brit Tzedek v'Shalom will strengthen the voice of the American Jewish community in its call for a negotiated, two-state resolution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

Help us continue to do our work in communities across the United States.

Make a donation now.

Make a secure donation online at www.btvshalom.org or send a check, payable to "Brit Tzedek":
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Brit Tzedek v'Shalom is funded in part by:

David and Barbara B. Hirschhorn Foundation ★ Edlis/Neeson Foundation ★
Michael and Alice Kuhn Foundation ★ Foundation for Middle East Peace ★
Nathan Cummings Foundation ★ Obermayer Foundation ★ Peace Development Fund ★
Rita Poretsky Foundation ★ Rotonda Foundation ★ Sagner Family Foundation ★
Samuel Rubin Foundation ★ Stanley and Dorothy Winter Fund ★ Topol Family Fund ★
Victor and Lorraine Honig Fund ★

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