

We the Individuals

Bethamie Horowitz | Fri. Oct 14, 2005

For a generation of American Jewish baby boomers who grew up looking east toward Zion from the West's leafy suburbs, Israel has always come off as the poorer relation enduring scrappier circumstances. America had what Israel lacked: a Constitution, and good plumbing.

American bathrooms were tidy and porcelain, with soft rolls of Charmin; the typical Israeli facilities involved plastic, a metal chain and rough pink sheets of paper. Both in terms of the society's political underpinnings and the sewage system's piping, there was a sense that more basic infrastructure needed to be put in place before Israel could claim to have achieved a steady, dependable and ultimately banal form of government.

But much has changed over the past few decades, as has been evident in the last two months. Both Israel and the United States have faced difficult national challenges: the successful disengagement from Gaza, and the floundering mobilization in response to hurricanes Katrina and Rita. There was so much to admire about Israel's preparedness, while FEMA's bumbling effort made clear that things in America aren't working the way they're supposed to.

In the lead up to the August disengagement there was every reason to fear that the growing tensions between the settlers and the state would not end well. With each passing day, the pressure mounted as protesters stole through closed borders to barricade themselves in, while the Israeli army mobilized to move the settlers out.

Yet the exit from Gaza was carried out remarkably smoothly, concluding in only a quarter of the time that the army had anticipated. It proceeded without any of the complications that were expected: There were no widespread demonstrations, there was very little violence, injuries were light, the country continued to operate. No Palestinian violence against Jews erupted, though there was a case of Jewish terrorism against Palestinians.

In retrospect, the Israeli army and its soldiers stood out for all of the right reasons. The political purposes of the mission were clear and legitimate. The planning was thorough, the training was rigorous and the implementation was smooth. The soldiers listened, embraced and helped the settlers move out; it was heartening to see this happen with both compassion and resolve.

In the aftermath of Katrina, by contrast, the government has displayed ineptitude in the face of sheer misery and destroyed property. The Bush administration's response has only compounded its previous failure to anticipate and plan for such a disaster, despite ample warnings.

The star of the debacle has been the president himself, whose own aerial gesture over New Orleans underscored the distance between him and the people. It gave the impression that Bush saw himself as being above it all, without anyone below to really take charge. Sharon, on the other hand, went straight to the settlers and said, "I am responsible for this.... Don't blame the soldiers, blame me."

Bush's removed way of running the ranch in Washington has lent him the image of a cowboy who can fend for himself. But he has come across as aloof toward the people of New Orleans, just as he had earlier in the summer toward "soldier mom" Cindy Sheehan. By contrast, Sharon's owning of the Gaza disengagement helped make it a positive part of Israel's national story.

In Israel more so than in America, one gets the sense that people feel they have a stake in the public sector — that the government, its problems included, is "ours." This intimacy allows for more public scrutiny, thereby keeping the question of "why" more front and central.

It's a different story here in America. With a volunteer army and no national service requirement, our civic involvement is expressed through voting, volunteering and contributing to charity. Such has been the case with Hurricane Katrina relief efforts, to which Americans have privately donated a reported \$1.2 billion.

But while contributions to philanthropy are certainly laudable, we cannot rely on voluntary action alone to solve complex problems. The aftermath of the hurricanes here has shown that the people's generosity cannot make up for the government's incompetence.

Perhaps most upsetting of all, however, is the overwhelming sense that the government isn't doing right for the country as a whole. The problems that worry us all are familiar by now: the morass in Iraq, rising inequality, enduring poverty, lack of affordable healthcare and good schools, to name just a few.

Yet on these and other issues facing our nation, American Jews — now 350 years in this country — are retreating from taking public stands, except as individuals.

With our generally high affluence and influence, not to mention our leadership in a number of areas in American life, American Jews are uniquely positioned to make a difference. We have a history of voting on the basis of our sense of social justice and commitments to the greater good, rather than merely according to our pocketbooks.

Now, then, would seem about time for American Jewry's organizational leaders to think more broadly about the kind of country we inhabit. Now would seem about time to vigorously assert our commitment to making America a decent place for all its citizens, and not just for those who can best afford it.

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