

We are now faced with an apparently intractable, increasingly ferocious Israeli-Palestinian conflict. This issue of Sh'ma offers a series of perspectives on how American Jews might talk about the crisis. Some of the reflections might shock. These are shocking times, and that some are now thinking the unthinkable might well unsettle us. But the only way out of the present quagmire is to listen intently, to weigh previously inconceivable options, and to arrive at conclusions that contain just enough morality and just enough pragmatism.

At the Crossroads

Stephen P. Cohen

The collective narrative of American Jews is changing much faster than our collective consciousness and our way of thinking and talking about ourselves. We used to think of Jewish history as unfolding somewhere else. If it was the saga of victimhood, it was in Europe, or Russia, or maybe in North Africa or South America. If it was the epic of national rebirth and individual refuge, it was in Israel. We were passive spectators exhorted to become active in rescuing the endangered and aiding the effort in Israel. We were acting as responsible Jews insofar as we fulfilled the commandment of memory, and insofar as we advocated for Israel with our government. Some few of us felt keenly enough that this was inadequate and, searching for participation in Jewish history, made aliyah.

This was a narrative that ignored the American century as a Jewish fact. It treated the American Jewish success story as a story of individual achievement, not as a primary element of Jewish national life. It treated the ideology of center and periphery as if it were an existential truth. It was a Ben Gurionist hope for aliyah, based on his laser focus on his life's work

of founding the Jewish State, but distorted by his East European nationalist optical illusion that the emergence of Israel combined with the inevitability of anti-Semitism would guarantee the withering away of the Diaspora. We internalized the notion that we were a vanishing community, as we had already been so diminished in our understanding of our significance in Jewish history.

This misperception cannot survive September 11. On September 11, the enemy of Israel and the enemy of America became the same enemy, and the same allies became necessary for both countries to defeat that enemy. The two bastions of Jewish refuge and security were both shown to be vulnerable: New York and Tel Aviv, and their vulnerability came

from the same sources. American Jewry is at the crossroads of these two vulnerabilities, and seeing ourselves clearly at the intersection of these historical crises is what we owe ourselves, what we owe America, and what we owe Israel. This should be the great moment of American Jewry to understand we are now center stage — not behind the scenes, not in the audience, and not just the producers. We also have to write our own lines and direct our own performance. American Jewry's great American patriotism and voluntary,

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therefore creative, deep Jewish sensibility come together not as a dual loyalty but as a redoubled loyalty and responsibility. We should have a depth of understanding of what this war is and what peace after this war must be, and what “winning” this war requires and what “winning” it forbids. What this war means, not only militarily but conceptually and spiritually, is what we should help to articulate.

September 11, 2001, and September 28, 2000 (the beginning of the second Intifada), are two dates that should make American Jews uniquely able to understand both events and meet the challenges of each. We should be able to link the two without fear; to distinguish the two in strategy and tactics; to be awakened to the needs both of our own unbending resolve and of empathetic living with the other; and to know how to defeat hatred with superior force but not with superior hatred, to fight not with cruelty but with a common vision of a better future.

The American Jewish intellectual and communal leadership must have the wisdom and perspective to guide the war of ideas that is at the core of this battle. Within Islam and within the Arab world, there is a struggle we should understand well. The militant defense of a tradition that seems threatened is a problem for Islam as well as Judaism. The effort to defend Jews who seek a balance of tradition and modernity, of conservation and change, against the sneering and contempt and ostracism of fundamentalism is never completely over in any of the great religious traditions.

Neither America nor Israel can afford to confuse the projection of power to defend ourselves and our right to the wealth our societies produce with the refusal of dominance of others, the rejection of imperial ambition and practice, and the assumption of a proper role in economic development for others.

American Jews as a people with historical perspective should be reminding America and Israel of the long-term perspective of the consequences of historic, cultural, and religious hatreds while we fight our immediate battles. American Jews should have empathy for one of the great religious traditions, Islam. It is a monotheism that emerges out of the Jewish understanding of God. We know that separating extremism and extremists from the pious and the faith itself is a matter of enormous importance. It requires respect for the whole, while cutting out the rotten worm.

This is our time to be Americans to the Israelis and Jews to Americans. Being American Jews means being good citizens here, and good Jews everywhere, and carrying history with us, within us. This is our time.

Dr. Stephen P. Cohen has pioneered Track Two Diplomacy — behind the scenes efforts in bringing Arabs and Israelis together. He founded the Institute for Middle East Peace and Development in 1979 to act as facilitator and private intermediary in peace-making and peace-building, and has served as its President ever since. He also currently serves as the National Scholar of the Israel Policy Forum.

Taking on the Ideology of Islamicism

David Makovsky

I consider Stephen P. Cohen to be a good friend, and deeply admire his life-long devotion to Middle East peace. His commitment is rooted in deep concern for the future of Israel and its neighbors, and is matched only by his well-lit, analytical mind. My understanding of Steve’s core thesis is that American Jews should avoid the “clash of civilizations” confrontationalist school of thought, and recognize that clashes exist within civilizations. Since the United States, Israel, and American Jews have a direct interest in the outcome of that internal battle waged between Moslem moderates and extremists, the actions taken

in Jerusalem, Washington, and New York need to be guided with this uppermost in mind.

While I basically agree with this, it is important to be modest about the role of external factors in shaping such a largely internal, monumental, historic debate within Islam — one that has to be fully waged. I tend to believe that external factors are at the margins while the bulk of the effort comes from within. I want to emphasize this should not exempt any and all of us from acting judiciously.

There is no doubt that, for purposes of survival, several Moslem and in particular Arab regimes have, often ruthlessly, crushed people wanting to foment