



A Need for Leadership

Brian Lurie

While Stephen P. Cohen's call to action for American Jewry is important, on the macro-level, it will fall on deaf ears. American Jewry is not well enough organized to take on this leadership role. As individual Jews, we may play a role as we have in the past (e.g. Senator Dianne Feinstein, who spearheaded a recent resolution sent to President Bush to support Israel) as American Jewry, however, we continue to lag behind.

I recently met with a cross-section of young Israeli leaders. They were only too willing to look beyond the narrow confines of Israel to find comfort in an involvement with the Diaspora. One can hardly blame them. Thus, if American Jewry were willing to take on Cohen's challenge, the stage is set and I would be personally thrilled.

Could we rise to the occasion? Where would we start? Conceptually, we have to understand that as Israel goes, so goes the Western world. If terrorism wins in Israel — suicide bombers triumphing over a strong nation-state — we, the United States and Europe, are going to fall victim to the same sort of terrorism. September 11 was just a beginning. The terrorist demands might be different but the quality of our lives will suffer the same fate as our counterparts in Israel — clearly the front line for all Western societies. This is the role we can play in fighting against terror.

Just as America needs to rebuild Afghanistan, so too American Jews must find a way to reach out and help our Moslem brothers and sisters. The Israeli-Arab population is an obvious place to begin. Twenty percent of Israeli citizens are Israeli Arab Palestinians. They are considered a major security concern by all the security agencies in Israel. The number of Israeli Jews who think that "transfer" is a viable option has grown from what was once considered an extremist fringe to 45 percent. Ultimately, Israel's acceptance in the Middle East might well be

measured by how successfully it integrates Israeli Arabs into Jewish Israeli society.

American Jewish institutions can play a major role in helping this integration. First, they can advocate on behalf of the Israeli Arab to the government of Israel. In its Declaration of Independence, Israel spoke of equality for all its citizens. This must not be expressed only in words but in deeds — equal education, health services, infrastructure, and jobs are areas where Israeli Arab communities are under-funded and vastly inferior compared to the resources allocated to Israeli Jews. More national Jewish organizations — like the Joint Distribution Committee, the San Francisco Jewish Federation, the New Israel Fund, and the Abraham Fund — could support projects that help raise the quality of life for Israeli Arabs. Second, American Jewry should provide greater material and human assistance to aid the integration and quality-of-life improvement of Israeli Arab communities. Many Israeli Jews agree that integrating Israeli Arabs into the culture of Israel is imperative, and they will become our partners in this endeavor.

By and large the American Jewish community is frightened and dispirited like most Americans at this time. Israel is truly at a crossroads, facing its most difficult challenge since its creation. Cohen is right that we must provide leadership to break out of this morass. This includes individual Jews sharing their ideas in the public and Jewish press, as well as the organized Jewish community taking real measures to galvanize, guide, and implement the "war of ideas" that Cohen raises.

Rabbi Brian Lurie, former Executive Director of the Jewish Federation of San Francisco and CEO of the United Jewish Appeal, is currently working on Arab-Israeli issues and building a Jewish identity center for Israeli youth.

Fighting for Clarity in an Unclear World

Daniela Gerson

If, as Stephen P. Cohen suggests, American Jews are indeed at a crossroads, perched to take the stage in a new dramatic role in Jewish history,

why then are Jewish student activists not acting as beacons of change? Young Jewish activists are at the forefront of secular causes, such as the anti-war and anti-

globalization movements. But the voice of young American Jews is barely audible concerning Jewish issues.

As a young Jew recently out of college, I believe we have been too long on the sidelines. But to become players we need to have something to contribute. If I had sensed the opportunity to shape history by being Jewishly active on campus, maybe I would have given Jewish activity on campus a chance.

I moved to New York a month before September 11, after spending close to a year in Israel during the second Intifada. Personal experience has taught me how to live under the threat of terrorism, but I don't think I have gleaned any intellectual clarity on how to win a war against it. Certain critical truths that Cohen asserts are important: limits to violence, empathy for Islam, rejection of imperial ambitions. Other than that, we really don't know how to win the war, neither as Jews nor as Americans.

Still, American Jews can shape the dialogue in the war against terrorism. Our greatest insights grow from the challenges we have faced in the past. And our role for the future is best served by nurturing debate in the Jewish community, engaging each other, and most of all showing young people that playing an important role in creating a vibrant Jewish community begins by articulating the values we treasure, and then striving to apply them. Not having the answer is no reason not to seek the answer; perhaps that is the ultimate Jewish value: fighting for clarity in an unclear world.

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