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When diaspora Jews speak, do Israelis listen?

by **Martin J. Raffel**
Special to NJJN
February 5, 2018

Many friends and colleagues complain to me that Israel too often makes decisions without appropriately taking into consideration the impact those decisions will have on American Jews and on our relationship with the Jewish state. This lament was on my mind when I recently read a report published last November by The Jewish People Policy Institute (JPPI), "Jerusalem and the Jewish People: Unity and Division."

The JPPI is an independent think tank associated with the Jewish Agency for Israel (JAFI). Israeli journalist Shmuel Rosner and former UJA-Federation of New York CEO John Ruskay led the project.

The report's findings and recommendations are based on existing research and dozens of Jewish gatherings in the United States, Israel, and around the world, that occurred between January and April of 2017. The participants in these gatherings heard a presentation about Jerusalem's current situation, responded to a survey, and took part in a structured and moderated discussion on the future of Jerusalem.

Not all the takeaways from the report are surprising. For example, participants expressed concern that Jerusalem is not heading “in the right direction,” primarily because of the state of Arab-Jewish relations and a lack of respect for religious pluralism. At least in that regard, charedi population growth in Jerusalem was of more concern to the respondents than Arab growth. In fact, participants wanted Israel to take “concrete steps to improve the lives of Jerusalem’s Arabs.”

The report also seems to suggest that Israel's treatment of its non-Jewish minority population in the city affects "the way Diaspora Jews view Jerusalem and their support for Israel's control of the city."

Also falling into the category of not unexpected, most of the participants were of the opinion that Jerusalem should never be divided, a clear Jewish majority should be maintained, and the Temple Mount must always remain under Israeli jurisdiction.

On the other hand — in what could be considered a contradiction — a small majority felt that Israel should be prepared to compromise on the status of Jerusalem as a united city under Israeli jurisdiction. This seeming incongruity in the political sphere can be explained as follows: Jews never want to return to the pre-1967 situation when access to the Western Wall and other Jewish holy places in Jerusalem was denied, yet the desire for peace is so strong that most would support a compromise that allows the Palestinians some measure of political authority in Jerusalem — so long as the city remains undivided.

This desire for peace, I suspect, also helps explain the findings of the American Jewish Committee's (AJC) 2017 survey of American-Jewish opinion. Forty-four percent of respondents disagreed with the prospect of moving the U.S. embassy to Jerusalem while only 16 percent supported an immediate relocation. Thirty-six percent supported a move, but only in conjunction with progress in the peace talks. (The AJC survey was conducted in August, well before President Donald Trump's December press conference in which he announced his intentions to move the embassy to Jerusalem.)

One of the JPPI report's recommendations is that an effort be made to advance the "diversity of Jerusalem's Jewish population" so that all Jews can find "like-minded" people in the city who share their religious and cultural sensibilities.

Given demographic trends, the JIPI report also calls for enhanced communication with charedi Jews, in Jerusalem and elsewhere. Israel has, in fact, launched an effort to integrate the charedi community into its economy and military. These initiatives, the report recommends, should be supplemented by additional opportunities for interaction between charedi and non-charedi Jews in "a non-confrontational atmosphere."

In addition, the JPPI report says it is "essential" that there be a resolution to the Western Wall prayer controversy, which intensified in June after the Israeli government reneged a long-negotiated compromise with representatives of world Jewry that would have expanded the egalitarian section of the wall, placed it under the authority of a pluralist committee, and given it a common entrance with the rest of the Kotel plaza egalitarian prayer. "Fulfillment of the agreement is seen as a litmus test of Israel's seriousness in declaring its intention to allow a more Jewishly diverse public sphere to emerge, and in being more considerate of world Jewry."

While decisions on Jerusalem should and will be made only by the Israeli public and its representatives, the JPPI report recommends inclusion of diaspora Jews as partners in discussing Jerusalem's future. To this end, there is a push to establish a "consultation mechanism" to enable the Israeli government to receive "input from the Jewish world" prior to making those decisions.

I wonder what such a mechanism would look like. Which Jewish groups would participate? How would it function? What issues would it address and how could consensus positions from the "Jewish world" be formulated? As he co-led the JPPI project, I reached out to Ruskay for answers.

"The issue is less about the mechanism and more about whether Israeli leadership truly wants such a mechanism in the first place," he told me in a telephone interview. "It's kavana (intent), not structure." There have been expressions from Israeli leaders about their desire for input, he said, "but very few concrete efforts to actualize it. If all we get is lip-service, the status quo will continue." Ruskay noted that the JPPI presents its annual assessment to the Israeli government, but he said there must be "more intensive and ongoing consultation" with diaspora Jews.

Keith Krivitzky, CEO of the Jewish Federation in the Heart of New Jersey, shared Ruskey's skepticism. "Israeli leaders have talked consistently for years about how Israel is the center of the Jewish people and that they consider Jews overseas stakeholders," he said. "But with the move away from the previous agreement on the Western Wall, they show just how much they really care about that. Not so much. Electoral politics in Israel is a far more important consideration."

The point Ruskay and Krivitzky make is well taken. For such a "consultation" to work, Israeli decision-makers must genuinely want to hear what we have to say about Jerusalem's challenges — and others facing the Jewish state.

That said, the failure here, in my opinion, lies on both sides. Our Jewish community invests enormous resources in trying to influence U.S. lawmakers and the American public opinion to support Israel. This is entirely understandable, given the vital role the U.S. historically has played in helping Israel to defend itself both militarily and diplomatically against its many adversaries.

Yet, when it comes to communicating our views to the Israeli government and public, the efforts have been sporadic and woefully under-resourced. Krivitzky reminded me that, in the wake of the Western Wall crisis, there was supposed to be a public relations campaign in Israel to underscore the importance of the Israel-diaspora relationship and the critical role world Jewry has played in supporting the state. "Nothing ever came of it," he said.

That means a more robust and sustained effort to influence decisions and opinions in the Jewish state.

If we want our Israeli brothers and sisters to take us seriously, then it's time for us to get serious.

Martin J. Raffel of Long Branch is former senior vice president at the Jewish Council for Public Affairs.

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Reader Discussion

Comments

Beer Baron
February 05, 2018

The very definition of irony: the same Reform Movement that wants an egalitarian prayer space at the Kotel also want to give all of East Jerusalem (including the Kotel) to the Arabs.

Consequently, Jews will no longer be allowed to pray there.

Aryeh Green
February 06, 2018

Martin - nice to have your commentaries returning to contribute to public discourse about important issues like these.

Aryeh Green
February 06, 2018

Oops. Don't press «return» until you're done. :-)

A decade ago, as deputy prime minister and minister for Jerusalem & Diaspora Affairs (note the confluence), Natan Shtransky proposed a few ideas for such a consultative mechanism. A 'council of elders' as it were, to be made up of Jewish leaders from around the world (not just America) to have a structured, regular, continuous platform for providing input into Israeli government decisions affecting Diaspora interests. Unfortunately, little came of the effort.

But Martin, two tachlis issues in reply to your article:

1. The rhetoric (hyperbole) used by most liberal Jews in America to protest or promote certain issues - from 'pluralism' in Israeli society to African economic migrants, from Jerusalem Temple Mount & Western Wall issues to the rights of Arab citizens - has become so overly divisive that it has become an 'anything goes' - lost cause. Jewish leaders in Israel are disincouraged, or just don't want to hear, the concerns of American Jewry. US Jewish leaders should be aware that when they use 'issues' in Israel to rally their troops (like protesting 'violations of religious freedom') or using Anne Frank as a focal point of objecting to Israel's policies towards those African illegal immigrants, and declaring (erroneously and slanderously) that Israel is 'violating' the Geneva conventions; or like declaring that if Israel were to withdraw and provide a 'Palestinian' state that it would become an 'anything goes' - lost cause. Jewish leaders in Israel, so at the expense of the very relationship they supposedly would like to strengthen. They both alienate (further) their adherents from Israel by demonizing Israel leadership, politics and society, and they alienate (further) average Israelis at the same time.

2. There *are* mechanism which today can be used much more effectively. The two most relevant, and promising, are the Conference of Rabbis and the High Level Dialogue. The High Level Dialogue, which, unlike the CoP, includes Jewish leaders from around the world). Two practical steps to take, relating to both of these are: (1) make the meetings and communications between them and the PM Office more regular - i.e. once a month, for instance; and (2) make the interaction much more substantial - i.e. not a speech by the PM once a quarter or twice a year to the JAFI BoG, but rather a real dialogue with time and participants (other ministers, and senior members of the PMO staff) to discuss only a few issues of mutual concern (or a list of 'concerns' by the Diaspora leaders, but rather a strategic and tactical exchange of ideas and work towards solutions of open issues).

You are correct that Israel's leaders must give these interactions more weight and more time and effort. And you're also correct that Diaspora leaders must also invest more: for instance, with the Federations' GA once every five years in Israel, Federations might send a delegation of large federations' leadership twice a year for this express purpose. But that's only a 'idea' (or whoever's idea it was) to do more PR in Israel is only a good approach if it's meant to educate Israelis regarding the reality of living in the Diaspora and reaffirms Jews' support for Israel (unequivocal and unconditional). If a PR campaign focuses on persuading Israelis that American-style Jewish "pluralism", for instance, is wrong considering in Israel society and public policy, it will simply backfire. That can only be done by personal and professional persuasion; PR and media alone will not do it. And if you're an American Jew, and you and American Jews don't understand our society, and want to change it with their money and influence, which breeds resentment. Just saying.

With respect and warm regards -

Aryeh

Marc
March 12, 2018

Most diaspora Jews are secular and many if not most of them are indifferent to or even hostile to Israel. Most of those Jews are Libs and their real religion is Liberalism not Judaism. Israelis should be equally indifferent to diaspora Jews.

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