

President's Comment

Note: The following is based on a recent discussion on the Israel/Left listserv regarding the challenge to the two-state solution (2SS) posed by President Trump's recent official recognition of Jerusalem as Israel's capital. The question being considered was whether this act has finally put the 2SS out of its misery and, if so, what is the alternative? These are my views.

For decades I, like most of the Jewish/Israeli moderate Left – and most of the world – have supported the 2SS, not just as the best ‘solution’ to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, but as the only one that makes any sense if your priorities are a Jewish and democratic state. Not that I think it's less important or less urgent currently than it was two decades ago, but it's pretty clear now that there's no politically feasible plan to get there. However, the label is less important than the goals. Gilbert and Sullivan wrote (in *The Gondoliers*), “When everyone is somebody, then no one's anybody!” Similarly, when almost everyone from very different parts of the political spectrum claim to favor something, then it's pretty clear we're not talking about the same thing.

In other words, the label currently means little as far as our actions and ideology. I and PPI are in favor of Palestinian and Jewish rights to political, civil and religious rights, including that of self-determination. I think the 2SS does that best, but the point is the rights and not the label.

Both individually and organizationally I think our current strategy has to be flexible rather than ideological, based on values rather than labels - and we have to carefully choose whom to work with to advance them. Thus, for example, I don't identify with Jewish Voice for Peace or support BDS, but I see them as allies in certain contexts, and oppose them in others. I continue my support for J-Street because we share values with them and they are the biggest tent on our area of the American Jewish spectrum. However, to the extent they emphasize the 2SS, I certainly don't disagree but I see it as currently barely relevant - a polite bow towards a distant ideal.

Perhaps more important is who we identify with and support in Israel - and I think the criteria has to be an emphasis on both 1) values and 2) effectiveness in mobilizing and building an effective Israeli Left. Of course that is necessarily a long-term strategy, but we have to remember that politics is unpredictable, and unexpected personalities and subsurface political forces can and do change things unexpectedly, sometimes in fundamental and even permanent ways. While all of us believe ending the occupation is the most urgent priority, that may mean working with groups not directly focusing on that but, rather, that are building a Left that can make it happen. Focusing political energy primarily on the Occupation itself seems currently unproductive, but I say, with feeling, *im eshkach hakibbush, tishkach yemini* (if I forget the Occupation, may my right hand lose its cunning), for however long it takes.

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I also think we have to work concurrently in the same way to build relationships within the American Jewish community. The J-Street strategy of pressuring a sympathetic administration became irrelevant on Jan. 20, 2017. Now we have to try to identify the anti-Bibi struggle with anti-Trumpism, the latter of which is already supported by all our real and potential allies in this country. In that, at least, we are in the majority, for a change.

I want to emphasize that I don't think that Trump's recognition of Jerusalem as Israel's capital or the recent Knesset decision allowing annexation of part of the West Bank are of decisive importance. What's done by one president can be cancelled by another and what one Knesset decides with 61 votes can be undone with 61 votes under different leadership. The current is flowing away from us on the Left now - and that's what we have to change. We can't worry about each individual wave, though of course we have to protest and build coalitions and educate against both the specific and the long-term outrages. For example, see the breadth and number of organizations that protested the Israeli government's decision to deport African asylum speakers that we reprint elsewhere in this issue of IH.

At this point we can only be in it for the long haul. I regret to say that I don't believe any more that the arc of history necessarily bends towards our values. What I do believe is that future history is surprising - and can be astonishingly malleable in unexpected ways and at unforeseen times. Flexibility (pejoratively labeled opportunism) is essential at this point to take political advantage of what we can. I think for most of us, both individually and collectively, our values are clear; so we have to leverage them in ways that are appropriate to the times. And that's hard and will be controversial. In less theoretical terms, that explains PPI's current strategy of identifying and working with groups oriented toward returning the Israeli Left to power,

disregarding partisan affiliation. That sets us apart from other liberal American Jewish groups whose values we share.

What I think they are missing is a political strategy to provide leadership for the Left in the next decade. All of them are doing good work but I don't think they are necessarily thinking in terms of changing Israel's political direction. They'd all like that of course, but that's not their path.

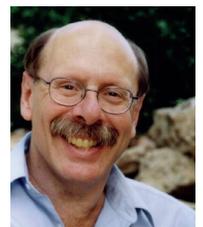
I am not chutzpadikh enough to think that we at PPI will orchestrate a grand strategy, at least not anytime soon. But we know - because we have met them - that there are a lot of organizations flying under the radar of the NIF and other worthy organizations, partly because NIF is not political and has strict guidelines for its grantees to make them stay out of politics. I believe that the only conceivable strategy that could have a chance of changing Israeli politics has to be a political one. Israelis who think like that are those whom we're making connections with.

We also seek to educate Americans by exposing them to people with a strategy who are actually carrying it out, which is why we're working with the Alliance for Israel's Future to help train Israel's young and liberal leaders of the near future.

It's not a slam-dunk strategy, but I think it's something different from all the other NGO's. But we also work with organizations like the American Zionist Movement, which includes groups of many political persuasions, some very far from ours. For historical reasons, we have access to them, while J-Street and other newer groups don't. That's part of the process.

It's a strategy that's partly cottage cheese (like the 2011 tent protests), but also including some class struggle (essential in an age of massive inequality both in Israel and here). We also add support for Mizrahi and Arab equality in Israel, a helping of religious pluralism and civil liberties, and at least a soupçon of working with several different parties. If we stir it for long enough, we hope it will end up with a progressive government in Israel, *bimhayrah b'yameinu* (speedily, in our time). ■

Paul Scham is President of Partners for Progressive Israel and a Research Associate Professor of Israel Studies at the University of Maryland.



Reflections on the PPI Symposium

By David Rush

Participants in a recent Israel Symposium. Our late president, Harold Shapiro z"l is standing at far left.



I am a retired medical professor, born in the depths of the depression, to immigrant parents from the Pale of Settlement in Tsarist Russia. I don't remember a time when the blue JNF coin box did not have a prominent place in our house. My first trip to Israel was in 1954 as a volunteer at an Hashomer Hatzair kibbutz. I have been back many times since, including six study tours in the last decade, the last three with PPI.

These PPI tours have been extraordinarily informative. We have been warmly welcomed by our hosts from Meretz. We have visited beleaguered Bedouin villages (Israeli citizens being treated with minimal respect by their government), West Bank Arab villages whose olive trees are periodically either denuded or destroyed by Jewish settlers, military courts in which Palestinian children are subjected to remarkable cruelty, but also have spent time with articulate (if – to us-unconvincing) settlers.

We have met experts on water and land rights, philosophers, ex-generals, courageous journalists, and spent several hours with President Reuven Rivlin, both before and during his presidency. Our visits to the Knesset have been illuminating, encountering a wide spectrum of the country's political elite, those with whom we are likely to agree as well as some with whom we were unlikely to agree. On the 2017 trip we met with each of the wonderful Meretz MKs, but we also had an unexpected extended session with Yehudah Glick, a Likud MK who is a leader in the drive to build a Third Temple on the site of the Al Aksa mosque. He was somewhat bizarre but, in some ways, compelling as well. This access to political

leaders was, in my experience, unique, and invaluable in expanding our understanding of Israel's politics and society

And by the way, the food was good and the buses fine, whether big or small, and the Meretz and other peace and social activists we met impressive and courageous. You may wish for time for a few more naps, but you will be better informed than all but a few Americans. I am very much looking forward to the June 2018 trip, which, realistically, may well be my last. I can promise you, if you join us, that you will encounter smart, engaged, wonderful people, who are making a difference in Israel and appreciate our support. I can also promise you will be more committed to making Israel a place of peace and equality, both Jewish and tolerant. Unfortunately, I cannot promise that you will be more optimistic at the end of trip than you were at the start. As we all know, these are not the happiest of times, but you will have more of a sense of what are our and Israel's most urgent priorities. ■

Registration for the June 2018 Symposium is open, with a 20% discount this month only. See the information on p.08.

David Rush is a professor emeritus at the Friedman School of Nutrition Science and Policy, Tufts University.



Rethinking US-Israel Partnership: Community, Identity, Politics



This discussion and webinar “Rethinking US-Israel Partnership: Community, Identity, Politics” was held on Dec. 20, 2017, sponsored by Partners for Progressive Israel and the Alliance for Israel’s future and moderated by Hannah Ellenson, Associate Director of the New York Tri-State Region for the New Israel Fund. The panelists were Rabbi Jill Jacobs Executive Director of T’ruah, the Rabbinic Call for Human Rights, and Mikhael Manekin, Director of Israel Tomorrow, a strategic communications company in Israel, affiliated with the Alliance. He has previously been director of Molad, a nonpartisan progressive think tank based in Jerusalem, and also of Breaking the Silence.

Ellenson: Why is the connection between the American Jews and Israel so important?

Jacobs: I still believe in Jewish peoplehood. I still believe that as Jews, we have certain responsibilities to Jews around the world, especially including Israel. The relationship has gotten more complicated as too many Jews, both outside and inside Israel, identify Israel with the occupation.

Manekin: I think what we’re encountering now is not necessarily a negative phenomenon but a historical one, in which as time goes by, Israel is perceived both within and outside the country less as an idea, and more as a place which has different partisan sides who believe in different things

Jacobs: Israel is a place and not a concept... We have to figure out how to be able to talk about Israel that will recognize that we’re also sifting through a lens of 3,000 years of trauma and yet can somehow separate it from that. It’s unfortunate that this era is what we needed to bring us there, but I now feel there is this worldwide fight against fascism and attacks in

democracy. We might not be able to fight it worldwide, but at least there’s a lot of potentially shared work that can be done between Israel and the US.

Manekin: I agree, but I would add at least a danger of that type of conversation which is that support becomes ownership which is something that I feel less comfortable with... I think that question becomes even more crucial when we talk about Palestinian citizens of Israel who are not a tiny minority. They’re over a fifth of the population. How do we make sure that our conversation on peoplehood doesn’t trump the conversation on citizenship? I think that’s a challenge

Jacobs: What do you mean by ownership?

Mikhael: It definitely is a challenge when you have large groups of American Jewry or worldwide Jewry that feels the country is theirs by virtue of the fact that they’re Jewish.

Ellenson: How has Trump’s election changed the dynamics between American Jews and Israel?

Jacobs: I think as we’re looking around the world and seeing the rise of the far right, and the rise of -- God help us -- Nazi parties, I think that there’s, hopefully, a sense that there’s more room for partnership there and also that we’re more able to see these trends in both places... The other piece is that there’s always been a break in the US between the right-wing Orthodox and the rest of the Jewish community and it’s only becoming more pronounced.

Manekin: It’s pretty common knowledge at this point that American Jewry and definitely its progressive side, are by and large a bit less interested in what’s happening in Israel because what’s happening in the US is sort of crazy. Obviously, it’s frustrating and upsetting but I think that’s not necessarily unhealthy. I’m actually very supportive of that move meaning Israel doesn’t and shouldn’t need to be constantly the center of attention.

Ellenson: What role does the Israeli government’s dismissal of non-orthodox American Jewish leaders play?

Jacobs: This is very much about the break between American liberal Jews and the current Israeli government really coming into focus... What I really wouldn’t want is that we get too focused on the Kotel and actually can’t look beyond that to the bigger issues. That’s the danger. That we just go down this little tiny rabbit hole and don’t realize that it’s really something larger.

Manekin: I totally agree. To put it bluntly, if American Jewry and the Reform movement and others want to fight issues of that nature, they need to be on the front line of the Jewish Nationality bill currently before the Knesset.

Question from Audience: Do you think folks on the left in the US would be interested in working with Zionist progressives in Israel around issues that don't touch the occupation?

Jacobs: I think it's challenging because the story that we see in Israel is overwhelmingly about the occupation. We have to talk about how we can work on poverty and other kinds of issues...But it's a pretty hard sell.

Manekin: I think that question is actually the fault, or really the challenge, for Israeli progressives....We need more than people coming here representing the progressive model and saying, "We need to keep Israel a Jewish democratic state." That's fine but it really isn't the progressive answer to why to end the occupation. What we believe in is the self-determination of Palestine people, which is a much more progressive way of looking at things, but one which we haven't been successful enough in manifesting either in Israel or to you guys.

Question from Audience: Among young progressive Jews today there seems to be a massive walking away from things Jewish. How do we respond to this?

Manekin: think we have supreme challenges ahead of us. Perhaps the biggest one is creating a progressive leadership that is much more engaged, much more exciting, and much more uplifting for Israeli audiences.

Jacobs: In the US, I don't think progressive Jews are the minority. They might be a minority in terms of where the money is, but in terms of where the people are, I don't think that's true. In T'ruah we have close to 2000 Rabbis who are members, which is basically about half the liberal Rabbinat, including open Orthodox, modern Orthodox and left Rabbinic. Also, I really don't see younger Jews walking away from Judaism. People might be walking away from traditional modes and affiliation with synagogues or with federations...I just feel like we're in this incredibly creative time in terms of Jewish artistic expression. I see more and more of that and not people who are walking away at all. I see people who are owning their Judaism.

I think there's been this parody of Zionism both on the far left and on the right here. On the one hand, to be Zionist is to

agree with the current Israeli government and support for its policies... From the far left, there's a story of Zionism that reduces it to ethnic cleansing of Palestinians. I think that we have to push against both of those extreme parodies... I have zero patience for people saying, "Well, we have no choice. We can't end the occupation until we get the absolute perfect Palestinian leader. Until every single Palestinian agrees that there should be a Jewish state."

Question from Audience: What about the problem of American Jews parking their Jewish identities overseas in Israel instead of building a positive relationship with Judaism?

Manekin: Far be it from me to talk about American Jewry. But whenever I come to the US, I meet young American Jews who are thinking about their Judaism in a fascinating way regarding and regardless of Israel...There are a lot of questions being asked which we didn't ask 20 years ago - and that's a wonderful thing. I'm constantly surrounded and inspired by young progressive Jews, both in Israel and abroad.

Jacobs: There are -- let's say, 'funding forces' -- some coming from the Israeli government, some coming from places, that are suggesting that Israel should be the center of our identities. I definitely see Jews, especially younger Jews pushing back against that.

On the other hand, some American Jews are saying, "Well, Israel shouldn't have any part of our identity," which for me is way too far. I think that we need to figure out how Israel can be a piece of our identity without being everything that our identity is about. ■

*Peter Eisenstadt is a PPI
board member*



Letter to the Office of Prime Minister Netanyahu

Below is the letter that PPI and a number of other American Jewish organizations sent to the Office of Prime Minister Netanyahu protesting against the Government's announced plans to deport thousands of African asylum seekers to third countries. The alternative to deportation is indefinite imprisonment. PPI will

continue to work actively with this coalition of organizations to demand that Israel meet its international legal and historic responsibilities to provide asylum to those who are escaping atrocious conditions in their home countries.

Dear Representative of the Prime Minister's Office,

We thank you for your response (dated 19 Dec 2017) to our letter (dated 30 Nov 2017).

Again, we would like to reiterate our deep concern as Jews and as human beings for the welfare of those who have sought asylum in Israel as well as our readiness to help in addressing the issue.

In your reply, you write that "the overwhelming majority of the illegal migrants who have arrived in Israel over the past decade are neither refugees nor asylum seekers." We recognize that it is possible that not all of the Eritrean and Sudanese migrants who have arrived in Israel are true refugees, but we know that many of them are indeed asylum seekers and refugees deserving of protection, and we are deeply concerned for their welfare.

We know, according to data presented by the Population Immigration and Border Authority to the Knesset last month, that over 12,000 Eritreans and Sudanese have submitted formal asylum requests while only 11 have been accepted as refugees. We also know that thousands more requested asylum orally upon entry to Israel or have been prevented or inhibited from presenting written asylum applications in Israel. We also know that outside of Israel approximately 56% of Sudanese and 84% of Eritrean asylum applicants have been accepted as refugees. The fact that fewer than 1% of Sudanese and Eritrean asylum applicants in Israel have received refugee status casts serious doubts on the validity of Israel's asylum process as it currently stands.

We are especially concerned that although Israel was one of the first countries to recognize the genocide in Darfur, only one Darfuri has received refugee status in Israel, and even last month Israel's High Court criticized the Refugee Status Determination Department for its lack of policy regarding Darfuri asylum seekers. We believe that Israel should rectify these faults in its asylum system before deporting those who have been rejected by it, lest innocent lives be harmed.

Your letter also assures us that you will continue to work "with the utmost sensitivity to the welfare and well-being of these migrants". These assurances are unfortunately difficult to believe in the face of continued testimonies that those deported from Israel have faced exploitation, human trafficking, and even death.

We look forward to a direct reply from the Prime Minister - one that honestly addresses our sincere concerns and offer to help. Thank you.

Sincerely,

(In alphabetical order; affiliations listed, on the next page, for identification purposes only)

Affiliations:

Jeremy Ben-Ami	<i>President</i>	<i>J Street</i>
Kenneth Bob	<i>President</i>	<i>Ameinu</i>
Rabbi David Ellenson	<i>Chancellor Emeritus</i>	<i>HUC-JIR</i>
Lauren Fortgang	<i>Co-Founder & Policy Director</i>	<i>Never Again Coalition</i>
Elliot Glassenberg	<i>Co-Chair</i>	<i>Right Now: Advocates for Asylum Seekers in Israel</i>
Rabbi Seth Goldstein	<i>President</i>	<i>Reconstructionist Rabbinical Association</i>
Paul Golin	<i>Executive Director</i>	<i>Society for Humanistic Judaism</i>
Rabbi Art Green	<i>Rector</i>	<i>Rabbinical School of Hebrew College</i>
Mark Hetfield	<i>President and CEO</i>	<i>HIAS</i>
Rabbi Jill Jacobs	<i>Executive Director</i>	<i>T'ruah: The Rabbinic Call for Human Rights</i>
Nancy K. Kaufman	<i>CEO</i>	<i>National Council of Jewish Women</i>
Alexis Karpf	<i>General Secretary</i>	<i>Hashomer Hatzair North America</i>
Karen R. Mock	<i>President</i>	<i>JSpaceCanada</i>
Rabbi Jonah Dov Pesner	<i>Director Vice President</i>	<i>Religious Action Center & Senior Union for Reform Judaism</i>
Rabbi Shalom Schachter	<i>Vice President</i>	<i>OHALAH The Association of Rabbis and Cantors for Jewish Renewal</i>
Paul Scham	<i>President</i>	<i>Partners for Progressive Israel</i>
Daniel Schild	<i>Co-Chair</i>	<i>CHAI: Canadians Supporting Asylum Seekers in Israel</i>
Mike Slotznick	<i>Counsel</i>	<i>The America Team for Displaced Eritreans; Board Member, HIAS Pennsylvania</i>
Rabbi Deborah Waxman, Ph.D.	<i>President</i>	<i>Reconstructionist Rabbinical College/Jewish Reconstructionist Communities</i>
Rabbi Joshua Weinberg	<i>President</i>	<i>ARZA: Association of Reform Zionists of America</i>
Rabbi Dr. Shmuly Yanklowitz	<i>Founder & President</i>	<i>Uri L'Tzedek: The Orthodox Social Justice Movement</i>

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