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POLITICAL ACTIVISM AND THE ORTHODOX JEWISH COMMUNITY

I

Kol Yisrael arevim zeh ba-zeh. This dictum of *Hazal* is well known and often repeated, an ancient expression of our belief that Jews everywhere are brothers and sisters, all part of a worldwide Jewish community. We also like to quote ironically the Yiddish expression, "*es is shver tzu zein a Yid*" (it is hard to be a Jew), as we ponder our good fortune and religious freedom in America, yet, as we observe the plight of Jews in many countries around the world, we understand very clearly, and without irony, what it means.

After 56 years of independence, and great achievement on so many fronts, Israel's very existence is still challenged daily by her enemies. The enemies of Israel attack Jews in Europe in a new strain of anti-Semitism coming under the guise of anti-Zionism. In Argentina, perpetrators of the horrific bombing of the Jewish Community Center in 1994 and the Israeli Embassy in Buenos Aires in 1992 have yet to be brought to justice.

Because of our unique participatory democracy that invites us to be involved in the political process and do everything we can to influence the shaping of public policy that impacts on Jewish life, we are in a special position to play a vital role in the preservation of endangered Jews and in the defense of the safety and security of Israel.

The American Orthodox community has a special obligation to seek to provide the American public, Congress and the Administration, and other policy-molders, the message that Israel deserves U.S. support as a sister democracy and the most reliable U.S. ally in the Middle East. This responsibility stems from the profound connection of the Jews to the land of Israel and the Torah's designation of The Land of Israel as a "*morasha*," a legacy, which means that we are obligated to

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cherish and safeguard it for future generations. Although Israel has already made painful sacrifices and taken major risks for peace with Egypt and Jordan as well as with the Palestinians, its problems are still numerous. Israel is all too often characterized as intransigent and expansionist and as an "occupying" power, with all its negative connotations. The total image of Israel has been grossly distorted by false accusations and misconceptions of militarism, religious fanaticism, and injustice, while Palestinian terrorists are characterized as militants and resistance fighters. All the Arab states, with the exception of two, remain in a state of war with Israel. The murderous terrorist organizations Hamas, Islamic Jihad, Fatah, and Tanzim are often believed when they portray the Palestinian Arabs as victims of Israeli brutality who are denied basic rights of self-determination. Except for Egypt and Jordan, what the Arab world is seeking is peace without Israel, rather than peace with Israel. Ever since negotiations at Camp David in July of 2000, when the Middle East peace process reached a dead end as Yasir Arafat refused to negotiate when a set of American proposals was put forth, it was clearly recognizable that he rejected a resolution of the conflict through negotiations, a fact that is ignored by many of the American people, the media, academics, and world bodies. Israel has been suffering an unrelenting campaign of terror since September 2000, when Arafat instructed his minions to throw stones on Jewish worshippers at the Kotel on the eve of Rosh Hashannah. While at this point American public opinion toward Israel is positive and Congressional support solid, these are not circumstances that can in any way be taken for granted. They demand that we nurture and sustain them.

Two main components of advocacy are for a) continued economic and military support at levels sufficient to assure Israel her economic viability and strategic advantage; and b) discouraging undue pressure on Israel as the U.S. tries to maintain its interests with other Middle East nations. That means we must not abide pressure on Israel to extract concessions that are not in her interests. It also means that we must not stay silent when it comes to proposed sales of advanced weaponry to Israel's enemies. Heirs to a long tradition of "*shtadlanus*," or government intercession, we realize that maintaining effective contact with Congress and the executive branch, as well as with state and local officials, media, academics, clergy, and other leaders is an imperative for our community.

II

Political participation became an integral part of Jewish life as a result of a bitter lesson. As Hitler systematically destroyed European Jews, American Jews failed to rescue many who might have been saved and did not or could not influence those who might have intervened. Six million Jews were murdered in the Holocaust and 600,000 Jews were living in Palestine by the end of World War II. American Jews knew they had to help establish and support a Jewish state. To accomplish this, they had to counter powerful forces, including Arab nationalism abroad, and groups at home with interests in Middle East oil. Despite the powerful opposition of Arab states and the petroleum industry, America recognized the Jewish state. Jews had become acutely aware of their responsibility.

The Israeli victory in the Six Day War became a catalyst for unprecedented American Jewish political activism as again the survival of the State of Israel was at stake. American Jewry mobilized into action as never before. The significance of Israel as a strategic asset to the United States was suddenly crystal clear and Jews became more open and visible in their activism. American Jews became more involved in political campaigns. Jewish voters, who tended to be Democrats, became more prominent in Republican politics, too. The Soviet Jewry movement took on added urgency as the Cold War escalated, and many Orthodox Jewish leaders were at the forefront of this struggle. It was evident that political influence was key to safeguarding the safety of Israel and of Jews overseas.

Thus, the Orthodox Union expanded its Israel Commission and dramatically increased the allocation of time and resources in pro-Israeli activity. Presence at the United Nations as an NGO demonstrated that Orthodox Jewry had much to say about world affairs and had earned its place at the table.

But functioning as a political player doesn't mean you don't encounter serious obstacles. Recent Administrations and the Congress have been very sympathetic to Israel, but there have been competing interests in the history of the U.S.–Israel relationship. Important U.S. ties to oil-producing Arab states and pressure from our European allies have had a profound effect on administration policies and their attitudes towards Israel. During the Shamir government, this was illustrated by the refusal of President George H. W. Bush to approve the much-needed loan guarantees that Israel was applying for to absorb a large Russian Jewish *aliya*. For the first time, an Israeli request for aid was linked to the issue

of settlement expansion in Judea and Samaria, creating a decidedly cool tone between the two heads of state and fear for the solidity of the America-Israel relationship. The Jewish organizations aggressively lobbied for the loan guarantees, which were eventually approved. The Orthodox community had a special stake in this episode because of our deep religious feeling for the biblical areas of Judea and Samaria, among whose residents number many *olim* from our community. Many who had begun to migrate toward Republican allegiances and inclinations were also deeply opposed to the Bush-Baker approach to Israel.

Circumstances in Israel often have their own complications. The widening divide between religious and secular Jews in Israel that reached a crisis stage with the assassination of Prime Minister Rabin has not disappeared. During the days of the Neeman Commission deliberations, the OU and the RCA worked hard with Israeli officials to calm the waters while still maintaining strong support for Israel. It will remain a challenge for rabbis and community leaders to navigate a difficult situation with sensitivity.

Policy differences with Israel aren't limited to religious status issues. During the Oslo talks, reports about the possible division of Jerusalem as part of a peace agreement were alarming to the Orthodox community. In 1995, Congress approved the Jerusalem Embassy Act, legislation that recognized a united Jerusalem as Israel's capital and required that the U.S. Embassy in Tel Aviv be moved to Jerusalem. It was passed by near-unanimous vote despite opposition from some sources. As the Oslo process limped along, many Orthodox Jews were faced with the unhappy task of choosing between their own wishes and Israeli government policies they deeply opposed. Those who consulted with rabbis often found that halakhic authorities held different views about the peace process, complicating matters. Still, basic Orthodox support for Israel never wavered, despite ambivalences.

But continual vigilance and involvement can effect change. Since the inception of the State, the United States had refused to list Jerusalem as capital of Israel on government documents. Instead, an odious legal fiction was created; a separate listing of "Jerusalem" between Japan and Jordan on all U.S. government documents. In the fall of 1993, the Orthodox Union broached this issue in a meeting with Donald Bandler, who was then head of the Israel Desk at the State Department and who was unaware of the problem. Changes were made with the help of Senator Daniel Patrick Moynihan, who had written Secretary of State Warren Christopher requesting the correction. Shortly thereafter, the

new catalogue of documents with the changed listing was issued.

Diligent attention to important issues is crucial and is effective. In the 1980s, as the race among Middle Eastern states to acquire weapons of mass destruction burgeoned, it became clear that Russia and some of our European allies were guilty of selling dual-use technology to Iran and Libya, thus supporting the oil income and helping to advance nefarious goals. The Iran-Libya Sanctions Act was introduced in Congress, which was an effort to stem the proliferation of nuclear weaponry in the Middle East by putting sanctions on companies that did business with those two notorious supporters of terror. The Orthodox Union successfully employed its vast grassroots constituency to help pass this landmark legislation and to underscore how urgent this was. But the reality of this problem did not really hit home until September 11, when the entire picture of the increasing volatility of the Middle East and its global reach came clearly into focus. Together with other Jewish organizations, the OU had previously participated in numerous meetings in Vice-President Gore's office, trying to convey our deep concern over the dangerous Russian sales to Iran. Tragically, time has borne out just how right we were.

III

A key to the success of our efforts is the fact that we work in coalitions with other groups who share with us common interests, and not only in Jewish umbrella organizations. As a minority within a minority, we are all too aware that we cannot wage a battle alone. Working with organizations and individuals on all fronts—left, right, and center—strengthens our positions and leverages our effectiveness in getting things done. Although the subject of much debate in various quarters, work with evangelical Christians has been central in the campaign to support Israel. The Orthodox community is in a unique position to connect with this vital American constituency. While at times we might stand on opposite sides of certain issues in the public debate, the "religious right" has been uncommonly steadfast in its support for Israel. Arguments for Israel with origins in biblical texts and history, which are often ignored by liberal groups, carry weight with religious Christian groups.

Orthodox Jews are visible in both Republican and Democratic camps, helping to assure that support for Israel does not become parti-

san and divisive. But coalitions, especially within our own American Jewish community, can present their own problems. The Orthodox community, though far from monolithic in views about the peace process, was on the whole greatly concerned about Oslo, particularly as terrorism increased. In Jewish umbrella organization meetings, Orthodox groups found themselves among the minority who expressed skepticism about the process as it was being carried out. Many others saw an opportunity for American-style pluralism in the Middle East and for the first time even backed the division of Jerusalem, calling Judea and Samaria "Palestinian lands." The Orthodox community saw this as a tragic diminishing of Jewish identity and tradition. Disagreements about the peace process began to mushroom into a kind of culture clash, which also exacerbated the developing crisis over the religious status quo in Israel. Left wing and non-Orthodox organizations tried to insert the issue of religious conversions in Israel into the agendas of the umbrella organizations that represent all Jews, citing "religious coercion." We had to fight to keep that divisive issue off the communal table. Issues that through the years had been sources of Jewish unity became bitterly contested and threatened delicate alliances. As Israeli government officials and American Jewish leaders vied for the spotlight, the rift in the community was under full media scrutiny and much damage was done.

A particular issue of profound disagreement is the Israeli settlements, no less in America than in Israel. At times, Jewish community umbrella organizations attempted to pass resolutions that were critical of Israel's settlement policies, in the name of the American Jewish community. Intense lobbying on our part defeated many of the attempts, but not always. When we did succeed, it was because we mobilized our broad network of relationships within the Jewish communal field, proving the necessity for building relationships with Jews across the spectrum of self-identity.

The unrelenting terror attacks in Israel since September 2000 disillusioned many about the realistic possibilities of a Middle East peace taking shape anytime soon, and impulses to pressure Israel into making concessions measurably waned. But pressures from a U.S. administration friendly to Israel demand our careful attentions too, as for example the Bush Administration's early criticism of the security fence which was being constructed to prevent the infiltration of terrorists, a criticism that has since faded. In the past, we found ourselves in the lonely position of defending Israel's policies. Now there is virtually a consensus supporting

Israel's right to self-defense, placing a large onus on the Palestinians to end the violence.

IV

The Oslo peace accords and the beginning of the peace process in 1993 presented a difficult dilemma for the Orthodox community in many ways. While as hopeful as any segment of the greater community for the prospect of the genuine and lasting peace, especially if it meant a complete cessation of violence and an end to the long and bloody conflict, we still had doubts and deeply mistrusted Yasir Arafat and his Palestinian Authority. Parts of our community identified with the position taken by the Meimad faction of the national religious camp in Israel, which called for Israeli withdrawal from certain territories in exchange for a solid and genuine peace, painful though it might be to withdraw from the biblical lands of Israel. Other segments of Orthodox Jewry were vehemently against surrendering land. But if impassioned discussions are a sign of intense democracy in Israel, in the Diaspora they are often misconstrued as rifts in the Jewish community. Dissent on the part of American Jews from the policies of a democratically elected government in Israel can be interpreted as weak or qualified support for the State of Israel, which can result in decreased financial and military support, imperiling the strength of the Jewish state.

While no one doubts that there are a wide variety of opinions about any number of Middle East issues among American Jews, it has always been a given that our role is to seek as much support as we can for Israel at any time. This stems from our allegiance to *Kedushat Erets Yisrael* and our awareness of Israel's role as world center for the Jewish people. For the sake of a Jewish future in our national homeland, the State of Israel must be strengthened. If we truly are to embody the ideal of *arevut*, we are bidden to transcend national borders and emphatically assert the centrality of Israel in the lives of the Jewish people. While Israel is an independent democracy, and its citizens, and not Diaspora Jewry, make the crucial decisions with respect to life-and-death security issues, we have long realized that the best way for us to influence U.S. policy is to present a united front on behalf of Israel.

This raises the question of the propriety of dissent—can American Jews ever criticize or dissent from the government of Israel on a key policy issue that affects the vitality of Israel?

During past years in Israel that Likud governments were in power, there were Jewish organizations on the left that criticized Israeli policies, publicly at times, and on occasion lobbied against Israel's positions in the State Department and the Congress, to the dismay of many American Jews. There was a perception of division in the community that was unprecedented, projecting an erosion of support for Israel during a very difficult time.

The divided voices did not in themselves reflect a historical change, as there had always been a range of views. For the most part, the American Jewish community believes in supporting the democratically elected government of Israel. During Oslo, however, many in the Orthodox Community with deeply-felt religious and ideological views were conflicted. For the very first time, the notion of automatic support for an Israeli government with (as many saw it) radically different views and a disturbing new agenda was questioned. The tension was worsened by the suddenness and speed with which the Oslo process was thrust upon the Israeli population and the Jewish community abroad, alarming many long-time loyalists.

As a result, an element of bitterness was injected into the debate, thus stripping away any appearance of a united front, and leaving elected officials and media with the impression that the Jewish community was significantly divided.

This conflict was present within the Orthodox Union itself. The OU has held a long-standing policy of supporting the democratically elected government of the State of Israel, even when there is deep disagreement with the policies of that government. The OU has held closely to the principle that matters of foreign policy and security are for the people of Israel to decide. It is only with respect to religious issues affecting the integrity of Jewish identity (such as personal status), that the OU would publicly express dissent and disagreement. Throughout the Oslo years, many in our own organization publicly criticized the OU for not opposing Israel's policy.

When there is disagreement, we find ways to express our views while maintaining leadership and support. For example, as the Oslo Accords were accompanied by a chain of terrorist attacks on the communities of Judea and Samaria, we organized a mission of the presidents of all the Orthodox organizations to meet personally with Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin to register our dismay. We had an honest and respectful conversation and our message was heard clearly. We resolved to continue to communicate to Congress and the Administration our

appreciation for America's continued support. Simply put, support for Israel in difficult and tumultuous times meant even more support and more activism so that we could remain an influential political force.

Respectful dissent, however, does not mean silence. A recent example is the issue of the illegal digging by Palestinians on the Temple Mount. It is well known that the Six Day War restored sovereignty over the Temple Mount to the Jewish people. It is also well known that, almost immediately, the State of Israel went to great lengths to reassure the Moslems of its peaceful intentions, and the Moslem Waqf was given the keys to *Har Ha-Bayit*. In the last several years, the Waqf has engaged in a determined effort to permanently change the status and character of *Har Ha-Bayit* by removing thousands of tons of earth and discarding it in a local garbage dump. The OU became primary promoters of Congressman Eric Cantor's (R-VA) Temple Mount Preservation Act that proposed to cut off U.S. aid to the Palestinians until the desecration of the Temple Mount came to an end. There can be no silence in the case of an intolerable situation such as this.

V

Our agenda is replete with issues that demand attention and action on the part of American Jews and their leaders. Since September 11 terrorism has occupied center stage and concrete steps must be taken to help defeat this scourge. There are things that we must do that can help to bring about terror's demise. Legislation such as the bi-partisan Syria Accountability and Lebanese Sovereignty Restoration Act that holds Syria accountable for its support of terrorism, its fostering of terrorist groups such as Hamas and Islamic Jihad and Hezbollah, its occupation of Lebanon, and its continued development of weapons of mass destruction is an example of a recent effort. This law imposed sanctions against Syria for serving as the primary transient point for Iranian weapons destined for Hezbollah, as well as its continued efforts to develop biological weapons with the assistance of North Korea. If we are ever to make the rogue states of the world accountable for their support of terrorism, we cannot wage this battle half-heartedly, and it is our job to make sure that U.S. policy will strengthen the battle against global terrorism.

The issue of aid to Israel continues to be crucial to Israel's survival. Annual requests to Congress for foreign aid that will assure the preservation of Israel's qualitative military edge, and economic aid that will enable

Israel to deal with an ailing economy that has suffered a great blow as a result of three years of a sustained war of terror are more important than ever. Though Congress has so far approved these aid packages, we cannot take these for granted as opponents of foreign aid increase and become more vocal. Our community is the strongest supporter of aid to Israel, and any sign of lessening support puts Israel at risk.

Jerusalem's recognition by the United States as the eternal, undivided capital of Israel continues to be an unresolved issue. Even though Congress passed the Jerusalem Embassy Act of 1995, official U.S. policy does not consider Jerusalem as the capital of Israel, and has yet to move the American Embassy from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem. The message in effect is that Israel is not entitled to choose her own capital as other countries of the world do. The message must be sent unrelentingly to elected officials, opinion molders, and policy makers, constantly restating that united Jerusalem is Israel's capital and needs to remain an indivisible city under Israeli sovereignty. We cannot take for granted our right to visit the Kotel and other holy sites while entertaining the prospect of a divided Jerusalem. Only under Israeli sovereignty can it be assured that all holy places are protected and freedom of access to all holy sites of the city to members of all faiths will continue.

The increase in levels of anti-Semitism around the world has alarmed us all. While Congress has passed important resolutions condemning anti-Semitism and calling upon European governments to punish those who commit anti-Semitic crimes, still, elected officials must be reminded to keep a watchful eye on this situation. Attacks on Jews have been exacerbated by the hostility expressed toward Israel by European government officials and by the negative media coverage of the Middle East. Representatives of European countries in the United States such as consuls and ambassadors should be contacted so that they hear our concerns about the safety and well-being of their Jewish communities. When anti-Semitism rears its ugly heard, *arevut* is more important than ever.

There are many more issues. Arab and Islamist anti-Semitism and incitement; the plight of the missing Israeli soldiers (some of whose families have been waiting for their return for over two decades); anti-Israel activity at the United Nations; the unresolved terrorist attacks on the Jewish community in Argentina—these are only a few. It is only through continual and effective political activity on the part of a vigilant community that our voice will be heard in the halls of power. If we speak up, we may succeed in making a difference. If we are silent, we will truly fail.

Sixty years ago, American Jews were helpless to relieve the plight of their brothers and sisters in Europe. Our generation will be held up to scrutiny by future Jewish generations, and it is incumbent upon us to show that we have really learned the lessons imposed upon us by the tragic chapters of our history. Rabbis are looked to as leaders and must assert their leadership when it comes to public affairs even though their schedules are more than overfull. Rabbis will be called upon to advise and guide in making decisions, to help mobilize their constituents, to be the voice of our community in the media, and to represent us at the table with the wider Jewish community. This is no longer a choice but an obligation.

VI

In the early 1960's, the Soviet Union was arming Arab states with their most sophisticated bombers and missiles, which represented the greatest military worry to Israel at the time. Israel was urgently requesting American-made Hawk missiles, then the only effective defense against the Egyptian bombers, which the U.S. had been providing to Jordan. Israel and the American Jewish community successfully lobbied hard, and America agreed for the first time to provide Israel with the weapons she needed to counter the threat. In July of 1963, on the day of Tisha B'Av, Meyer Feldman, an important advisor to President John F. Kennedy, arranged a meeting for the Jewish members of Congress and leaders of the Jewish community with the President. Among those attending the meeting were Moses Feuerstein, president of the Orthodox Union, Rabbi David Hill, president of the National Council of Young Israel, and Rabbi Moshe Sherer, president of Agudath Israel. President Kennedy apologized for holding the meeting on the fast day, and at the conclusion he announced that he would allow Israel to purchase the Hawk missiles, a decision strongly opposed by his State Department. As the President was leaving, Rabbi Hill turned to him and added, "Mr. President, is there something that you could do to address the plight of the Jews in Russia?" Kennedy turned to Meyer Feldman and said, "Make a note of that and let's see what we can do." About a month or so later, the President appointed Senator Abraham Ribbicoff, Senator Jacob Javits, and Justice Arthur Goldberg to meet on his behalf with the Russian Ambassador to discuss the plight of Soviet Jewry. That Tisha B'Av was a turning point in the growth of the friendship between Israel and the United States and a major step forward in helping to make

Soviet Jewry a critical human rights issue of the time. And Orthodox Jews were at the forefront.

Political realities continue today to demand our involvement, and we find ourselves blessed to live in a country that grants us the privilege of participation in the political process. Even though the special relationship between America and Israel is strong, there is never lack of disagreement between the two countries, with either Republican or Democratic administrations. The need to gain the attention of high-ranking policy makers and nurture relationships with them is ever present and our influence on U.S. foreign policy has never been so urgent. It takes a great deal of commitment, delicacy, and diplomacy. As a stronger Arab-American lobby emerges, and "anti-Zionism" becomes a rallying cry all over the world as a disguise for underlying anti-Semitism, our responsibility becomes more serious and our actions must be exercised with care and integrity. We must have the interests of Israel and the Jewish people at heart and we must not fail to act.

There is much to be done, and the Orthodox Jewish community must increase its efforts and not let opportunities pass for helping to shape policies that will have an important impact on Israel and the world Jewish community. While we rely on *Ha-Kadosh Barukh Hu*, we also know that we must take an active part. Let us seize the opportunity so that future generations of Jews will be able to point to us with pride and follow our example.