



No. 16 - Jan. 16, 1979/Tevet 17, 5739

AMERICAN JEWRY'S PURPORTED DILEMMA

Daniel J. Elazar

One of the most familiar themes of American journalism for the better part of 1978 was the "dilemma" of the American Jew with regard to the Middle East situation. On one hand, American Jews remained deeply committed to the security of Israel; while, on the other, they confronted an American president and administration increasingly at odds with the policy stance of the Israeli government. Since it was widely accepted by the media that the American Jews were substantively more sympathetic to the position of the American administration even while emotionally committed to backing the Israeli government, they found themselves in a dilemma of growing proportions. This dilemma was said to have reached its peak in the struggle over Congressional approval of the administration's decision to sell advanced military war planes to Saudi Arabia and combat planes to Egypt, which ended in an administration victory in May. However, the results of the Camp David meetings in September seemingly laid this dilemma to rest, at least for the moment as all parties greeted the framework for peace with Egypt and the comprehensive settlement of the Israel-Arab conflict with expressions of pleasure and mutual esteem.

The history of the emergence of this ostensible dilemma is itself of some importance. In the years between the Six-Day War and the Yom Kippur War, the very real differences between the Israeli and American government conceptions of the outlines of a peaceful settlement of the Israel-Arab conflict were papered over because of lack of any serious movement toward peace on the part of the Arabs. Basking in the warm glow of victory, most American Jews could join with the Israeli government in rejecting the Rogers Plan, which in any case did not become a live issue. In operational terms, the policies of the two governments tended to coincide.

The first changes in this situation came in 1973, even before the Yom Kippur War, but were too minor to attract much attention within the ranks of American Jewry. The October War accelerated the growing division between Israeli and American policies on an operational level. Virtually all American Jews found it easy to side with the Israelis over such matters as Kissinger's successful intervention to save the Egyptian army from collapse. But since the Israelis

did not make an issue of the matter, once again American Jews were not forced to make any hard choices.

The first real pressure on the American Jewish community came in March 1975 when the Israeli government under Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin rejected Kissinger's proposals for a second interim agreement with Egypt. In the six months between March and the signing of a modified version of the agreement in August, American Jews were given a taste of what was to come later in the Carter administration. A substantial and not very subtle campaign was orchestrated by the administration in Washington designed to place the blame on Israel for the failure to reach an agreement coupled with various pressures - also not very subtle - applied to the Jewish state. The rather blatant character of American pressure coupled with obvious Israeli willingness to reach an agreement which they deemed fair, led most American Jews and certainly the overwhelming majority of the American Jewish leadership to remain steadfastly with Israel during this period. Their steadfastness was uncomplicated by the fact that there were no particularly visible overtures from the Arab side that would lead anyone to believe that the Arabs were prepared to make peace on reasonable terms. The achievement of the second interim agreement in August 1975 put a temporary end to any visible American-Israeli falling out before an American Jewish dilemma could appear.

In essence, it was not until Jimmy Carter took office that the problem resurfaced in a serious way. It at first became an issue in the aftermath of the Carter-Rabin meeting of March 1977. It is well to recall that Menachem Begin was not the first Israeli prime minister to be termed intransigent by President Carter. After the Carter-Rabin meeting, the White House let it be known that the President thought the Israeli Prime Minister to be stubborn and intransigent, apparently because he discovered for the first time that the Allon Plan was not Israel's opening position but its final fall back for a settlement, the bottom line, as it were.

The May 1977 election results, which led to the toppling of the Labor coalition and a new Likud-dominated government headed by Menachem Begin, brought a brief hiatus in terms of American pressure but, at the same time, opened new doubts among certain segments of American Jewry. The Labor party had been dominant so long on the Israeli political scene and was so much considered the inevitable victor in the Knesset elections that the Likud opposition, from Begin on down, were unknown to American Jews, even to the American Jewish leadership, most of whom had come to accept the view of the ruling Labor camp that these were right-wing extremists of some kind. On one hand, Begin's own personal charm and grace helped dissipate this image, but at the same time his firm stance with regard to the administered territories of Judea, Samaria and Gaza sharply increased the gap between him and many American Jews who had come to accept the predominant view abroad in the world that Israel would have to evacuate most if not all of the West Bank so that some kind of solution could be provided for the Palestinian Arabs as a people.

Thus, by the end of the summer of 1977 the stage was set for the first real wrenching of the American Jewish community away from unqualified support of Israel since the days of 1948.

The catalyst was Sadat's visit. Sadat's very effective personal approach, a certain perceived ineptness on the part of Begin's response coupled with strong American administration support for the Sadat initiative and even stronger American media bias against the Israeli position led to a badly distorted, although not entirely dishonest, picture of subsequent events being projected to all Americans, including American Jews. Thus, what interests which all but the tiniest minority of Israelis perceived as vital were rejected in the United States as manifestations of excessive Israeli ambition or intransigence, while Sadat's very firm and uncompromising position was hailed as being flexible and moderate. American Jews, like other Americans, came to view Begin's advancement of Israel's historic claims to the administered territories as "mystical" while Sadat's references to "sacred Arab lands" in his demand for the return of all territory occupied by Israel after 1967 were accepted as a reasonable political position.

Despite formal denials, it seems clear that President Carter began a more direct campaign to split American Jews off from their unwavering support of Israel as part of his overall plan to isolate the Jewish state so that it would have to accept the terms viewed as reasonable by the Americans. In this he was following in Kissinger's footsteps. This time conditions brought him closer to momentary success. The administration combined an effort to woo American Jewish leaders outside of the normal "Israel lobby" with, at times, almost gross hints that American Jews were beginning to run the risk of being accused of dual loyalty. Carter began to bring in leaders of the major Jewish community federations in an effort to bypass the Conference of Presidents of Major Jewish Organizations, traditionally the spokesman for the American Jewish community in matters relating to Israel. When he found that, flattered as they were, these locally based Jewish leaders were no more open to his designs than their representatives in the Presidents' Conference, Carter and his administration turned towards flexing the stick.

Since there were enough Jewish leaders who rejected what they saw as Begin's extremist position, the problem for them became a very difficult one. On one hand, they were not about to abandon Israel, especially in the face of American pressure which they rejected on its face. On the other hand, they wanted to avoid simply being forced into Begin's arms. That, indeed, became the real dilemma of American Jewry. American Jews were not afraid of being in opposition to an American administration. Since Vietnam, no American administration has been able to claim that opposition to its policies is per se opposition to American interests. It was the fact that Begin's policies were less than acceptable to American Jewish leaders that created the problem. The real leadership of the American Jewish community resolved that problem by continuing to back Israel, in part because the pressures of the Carter administration were counter-productive, reawakening in Jews latent fears about religious fundamentalists' attitude towards Jewish interests rather than making them worried about their position in American life.

Thus, on the eve of Camp David, the major dilemma facing the American Jewish leadership was one of how to best proceed with the defense of Israel's interests without in every respect supporting the policies of the Israeli government,

particularly with regard to the settlement of Judea, Samaria and the Rafiah approaches. The unexpected results of the Camp David talks brought matters into line once again. Menachem Begin's willingness to support the relinquishment of the Israeli settlements in Sinai in order to achieve what amounted to a separate peace with Egypt squared perfectly well with the perceptions of the American Jewish leadership, who might very well have been willing to support an even harder line with regard to Sharm el Sheikh and an overland link to it, had Begin made that the issue rather than the Rafiah settlements.

As for Judea, Samaria and the Gaza district, American Jewish leaders had never properly understood the autonomy plan, in part because the American media had paid very little attention to it and the Israelis were notably lax in explaining their conception. Once it seemed to have become the basis for a signed tripartite agreement, they had no trouble with it. Indeed, for those among them who advocated substantial Israeli withdrawal from those territories, the plan seemed to offer every potentiality for such a withdrawal, while for those who were seeking a way to enable Israel to retain some position within those portions of the historic land of Israel without inheriting its Arab majority, the plan also offered some prospects. The Knesset decision to support the Camp David agreement made matters even easier for the American Jewish leadership so that, as the peace conference convened in October, Israel was able to count upon the full support of the American Jewish community without the latter fearing that they were in danger of coming into conflict with the President and his administration.

In many respects, then, the presumed dilemma of the American Jew was a creation of the American mass media which, following their own sense of what American Jewish views and Israeli policy should be, went out of their way to emphasize the stance of that small number of American Jews who were willing to come out against the Israel government's position at certain critical moments and who then projected the actions of those groups onto American Jewry as a whole. It is significant that even the ostensibly staid New York Times saw fit to headline an advertisement of 36 American Jewish intellectuals, a few of whom did occupy leadership positions in the American Jewish community but most of whom did not, attacking the Begin stand, as worthy of a front page story in its own right, when those knowledgeable about the American Jewish community knew that this was not a representative group by any means.

Although there are no hard data available on the subject, it is likely that a majority of American Jews were in some disagreement with Begin's initial policies in the administered territories but neither were they pleased with the policy of the new American administration vis-a-vis Israel. In the aftermath of Vietnam, no group of American citizens is so convinced of the rightness of a government policy a priori to feel threatened if they happen to disagree with it. American Jews are no exception, as was shown by the fall-off in Jewish support for President Carter in the polls and the drop in Jewish contributions to the Democratic Party on the hustings. Thus, the real dilemma of the American Jew was how to continue support for Israel without seeming to endorse all of Begin's positions on certain key issues, not how to combine their American and their Jewish interests.

The subsequent American-Egyptian retreat from the Camp David agreements made the presumed dilemma fade even further into the background. After the brief glow of September, American Jews were even more outraged at what they perceived as a clear attempt by the Carter administration to force Israel to make even greater concessions on a unilateral basis. If 5739 entered with a renewal of Jewish solidarity with Israel based upon new hope, 1979 entered with an intensification of that solidarity based upon old fears.