

JERUSALEM LETTER / VIEWPOINTS

Jerusalem Center for Public Affairs

VP:70 10 Adar 5748 / 28 February 1988

FOR OURSELVES AND FOR OTHERS: DEFINING JEWISH INTERESTS

Marshall J. Breger

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2,100 Jewish Organizations

In 1831, Alexis de Toqueville, the peripatetic French observer of the new American nation, wrote that "Americans of all ages, conditions, and dispositions constantly form associations." No group is better characterized by this statement than American Jews. There are over 2,100 countrywide Jewish organizations and over 700 local Jewish federations -- almost one organization for every 2,500 Jews. While many of these groups have little to do with the world of politics, a significant number participate in the political process on an intense and daily basis.

A few examples underscore the scope and degree of Jewish political activism. The Conference of Presidents of Major Jewish Organizations, created

to be the main address for Jewish groups in their representations before the United States government, is but one of many voices. There are three major community relations organizations: the American Jewish Congress, the American Jewish Committee and the Anti-Defamation League of B'nai B'rith. The American-Israel Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC) covers the Israel beat. There are the Zionist organizations. There are also 75 political action committees (PACs) organized to contribute money to elect officials who support Israel.

Today, these "Jewish lobbies" are considered to be among the most effective of interest groups. Wider margins of congressional support for Israel aid packages and successful efforts to limit

Daniel J. Elazar, Editor and Publisher; Zvi R. Marom, Associate Editor; Mark Ami-El, Managing Editor
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arms sales to Jordan and most recently to Saudi Arabia have underscored the real or perceived power of the "Jewish lobby."

Unfortunately, this Jewish political activism is often unfocused, if not diffuse. Moreover, as they deal with a variety of disparate political issues, Jewish organizations often fail to concentrate on specifically Jewish concerns when creating a political agenda or at least take an unusually broad view of what constitute Jewish interests. While this universalist approach has shifted dramatically since the late 1950s, even today little effort has been made to define what Jewish interests actually are.

Defining Jewish Interests

The following four definitions may be useful to test public policy positions from a specifically Jewish perspective:

1. Jewish interests are matters that affect Jews as a group.

In the 19th century, defining the Jewish agenda was rarely a problem for Jewish political activists. The central Jewish political issue was civil emancipation -- the effort to eliminate political disabilities from Jews as a class. Issues included the right to vote, the right to hold public office and the right to own land. These status disabilities were more easily susceptible to collective remedies.

In this century, the impetus shifted to assistance to distressed communities abroad and the removal of social and economic discrimination at home. After World War II and the Nazi destruction of European Jewry, all of the major Jewish organizations saw support for Israel as vital to Jewish communal survival. Efforts to win freedom for Jews in the Soviet Union, Syria, and Ethiopia are seen in similar terms. The recent use of racial quotas as official U.S. government policy in distributing government grants and contracts has been seen as detrimental to Jews as a group, even by those organiza-

tions that support the ultimate goal of compensating for past discrimination.

The defense of religious freedom has been a continuing concern of Jewish defense organizations. In America the increased interpenetration of the public and private sectors in our century has made this problem especially acute. In protecting religious freedom, government must at times promote specific practices or institutions that make religious expression possible. In the United States, government intervention has been used to require places of employment to protect the rights of Sabbath observers, to require nursing homes to make kosher food available and to protect the rights of students at every level of education to worship or not to worship.

At times this presents difficult choices. In Wilder vs. Sugarman, black children represented by the New York Civil Liberties Union attacked New York State's policy of permitting Jewish, Catholic, and Protestant children to be placed in foster families of the same religion through denominational family services. Since Jewish agencies provided high-quality services to primarily white Jewish children, the Civil Liberties Union claimed racial discrimination. Yet without the opportunity for a denominational focal point, the very *raison d'etre* of sectarian social services is undermined.

2. Jewish interests heed Jewish law and tradition.

From the perspective of traditional Judaism, the only area in which rabbinical statements carry religious authority is when they are interpretations of halakhah (Jewish law). It is very difficult to say that Jewish law should be limited to religious matters, because it is not. Its scope includes guidance and even legal decisions on commercial matters as well as social and political issues. It is therefore difficult to say that Jewish law is not relevant to political decision-making.

From the perspective of Reform Judaism, the pursuit of social justice is a religious imperative. From this vantage point, Jews must take a Jewish position on the full range of social and economic policy issues.

3. Jewish interests promote the self-interest of many individual Jews.

The fact that significant numbers of individual Jews may be affected by particular government policies may create a Jewish interest in preserving the deductibility of state and local taxes since many Jews live in high tax areas, a Jewish interest in maintaining current levels of student aid since a high percentage of Jews go to college, and a Jewish interest in federal urban grants since many Jews are city-dwellers.

Though these matters affect large numbers of Jews, they are not uniquely Jewish issues. They affect the economic well-being of individual Jews and thus have an indirect impact on the financial strength of communal institutions.

4. Jewish interests are what Jewish leaders say they are.

New Liberal-Conservative Tension

Historic Jewish liberalism is now being challenged by a new generation of "neo-conservative" intellectuals. As a result, it is now far more difficult for Jewish leaders to equate their personal policies with the Jewish interest, however broadly conceived.

As one example of this new tension, the decision of the Los Angeles Jewish Community Relations Council to support the National Organization for Women's march on Washington may reflect an interest in developing alliances with feminists on behalf of Israel. However it is hard to see how support of the march is within the purview of a Jewish organization dedicated to developing public support

and sensitivity for Israel, Soviet Jews and Jewish tradition. On the other hand, Jewish conservatives must face the challenge of explaining how support for the Contras or the Strategic Defense Initiative can be defined as a Jewish interest.

In another example, the National Jewish Community Relations Advisory Council (NJCRAC) issued a statement in 1985 which reflected its belief that since Jewish security depends upon a society "committed to equal rights, justice and opportunity" and that denial of these values "breeds social tensions, conflicts and dislocations" and threatens democracy in general, thus Jewish security is also threatened. Therefore, "the stake of the American Jewish community in a strong democratic society" depends upon Jewish opposition to cuts in social programs, support for federal job creation efforts, government funding of day care, and increased federal support to local schools.

Minimalist vs. Maximalist Interests

Such generic appeals to Jewish values or Jewish law are fraught with difficulties. The minimalist position is succinctly embodied in the slogan -- "Never Again" -- and Jewish interests lie in insuring that the Jewish community does everything it can to sustain itself. The maximalist position justifies taking public policy positions that reach beyond an immediate Jewish interest. Hence the Reform "social action" view uses Jewish tradition to justify participation in the grape boycott, while Orthodox groups rely on halakhah to oppose a New York City executive order prohibiting organizations with city contracts from discriminating against homosexuals.

The maximalist position is difficult to sustain where the relationship between Jewish law and a specific policy is often tenuous. The appeal to Jewish values often collapses into a wholesale endorsement of policies that can be justified by

values or rationales drawn from other sources as easily as they can be rationalized from a Jewish perspective.

The suggestion that Jewish interests be restricted to core Jewish issues in no way means that Jews as citizens should limit their range of political activity. On the contrary, Jews should be urged to support important non-Jewish causes as citizens of their country and this is what actually happens. Jews have been among the most generous contributors to liberal causes over the last decades and they are beginning an involvement with conservative causes as well. The fear expressed by Hyman Bookbinder of the American Jewish Committee and others that a focus on Jewish self-interest for Jewish organizational activity will cut Jews off as citizens from across-the-board political activity is simply not warranted.

The Problem of Priorities

Perhaps the most difficult challenge to the organized Jewish community is the need to set priorities among the issues on its political agenda. The NJCRAC policy statement has the organized Jewish community taking an "official" Jewish stand on almost every issue before Congress. This melange of public policy interests does a disservice to Jewish communal interests and blurs the message sent to policy-makers. When a group of Jewish organization leaders met with President Reagan's Chief of Staff, Donald Regan, the first half of a 40 minute meeting was taken up by a discussion of pending legislation regarding aid to dependent children (AFDC), leading Regan to inquire whether this was a specifically Jewish issue. This extension of the Jewish imprimatur to issues outside the core scope of Jewish concerns weakens community unity. Nearly all Jews support Israel, but they differ on AFDC. The failure to set priorities mutes the intensity of focus on the central concerns of the Jewish community.

Coalitions Have Not Worked

One argument in support of the maximalist approach claims that Jews need to form coalitions with other interest groups in order to maintain power and that they must therefore take on non-Jewish issues in exchange for support on Jewish issues. Senator Carl Levin (D-Michigan) has stated: "If we do not fight the injustices that affect others, will they fight the injustices that affect us?" On the conservative side, Irving Kristol has noted that for Jews to expect conservative support for Jewish concerns, they "must have a large portfolio of issues with which to deal."

For Jews to be part of such coalitions, they have to make policy concessions and take on the causes of other groups. In short, participating in such coalitions requires a diversion of resources to non-Jewish issues. In addition, such coalitions often have little direct control over the policy-making process so that the advantages which accrue from this distortion of the Jewish agenda are either indirect or tangential.

Outreach efforts designed to forge or reinforce coalitions have not produced any measurable increase in support for Israel. The best attempts to increase conservative support for Israel barely altered the fact that most conservative congressmen supported the AWACS sale in 1981 and the recent Saudi arms sale. Similarly, the American Jewish Congress and the Union of American Hebrew Congregations (UAHC) joined the 1983 March on Washington commemorating the 20th anniversary of Martin Luther King's march in order to preserve the Black-Jewish alliance and, by extension, Black support of Israel, despite the fact that the sponsors of the march included PLO supporters and leaders who condemned Israel and Zionism.

Jewish support of an event tinged with anti-Semitism suggests another drawback to a coalition strategy. Many of the

issues for which other groups seek support can divide the Jewish community. When issues on which Jews disagree such as school prayer, quotas, Central America and women's rights are defined as Jewish and added to the Jewish agenda, it contributes to needless discord and diversion of resources.

It is not clear that coalitions are more essential to Jewish political effectiveness than the direct grass roots support reflected by the ability of the Jewish community, in Bookbinder's words, "to mobilize influence within their local constituencies." Nor are coalitions the best mechanism for advancing particular Jewish interests. Indeed, when forced to choose between maintaining an alliance with Jewish groups and pursuing an area of specific concern, other interest groups have not hesitated to part company. Why should Jewish groups behave differently than did organized labor, normally one of Israel's staunchest supporters, when it lobbied vigorously against the Free Trade Agreement with Israel? As an American Jewish Committee task force concluded, "in any coalition of interests, if one party pursues the 'general good' while the other parties advance their constituents' interests, the result must invariably be the victimization of the constituency whose representatives pursue the 'general good.'"

The fact is that a minimalist notion of Jewish interests is the most effective way to get policy-makers to pay attention. The important coalitions are those formed by PACs with key policy-makers and political parties seeking Jewish backing precisely because Jewish support is targeted to potential allies who support Jewish issues in particular.

Parochialism Is Legitimate

An additional argument for a minimalist definition of Jewish interests recognizes that on the really significant issues, American Jews have had to manage

largely alone because the prevailing opinion in America was either indifferent or opposed to the Jewish interest. Hence, being parochial should be considered neither sinful nor impolitic. As former AIPAC lobbyist Aaron Levine has stated: "Parochialism is a legitimate and necessary fact of political life. It affects Jews no less than other groups. It requires neither apologies nor handsprings to show how universal we are. Using Jewish access to promote the views of a broad coalition of Jewish and non-Jewish organizations is an abuse; it confuses how Jewish priorities are received and thereby dilutes Jewish power."

When Norman Podhoretz suggested some 15 years ago that the criterion for judging Jewish political activity should be "Is it good for the Jews?," his challenge was met with squeamish embarrassment. That the question is now an accepted part of Jewish communal discourse reflects the awareness that the Jewish state and the survival of all Jews depends largely on Jewish efforts. It follows that the appeal from communal self-interest must be separated from other appeals. At the very least, it is incumbent on all parties which purport to represent the Jewish community to make clear with what voice they have chosen to speak, and to defend their positions within the parameters of their perspective. We cannot afford the luxury of equating the public interest with the Jewish interest on all fronts. This may seem overly cautious to some, but both history and the workings of politics provide no real alternative.

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Marshall J. Breger was the White House liaison to the Jewish community for President Reagan and is presently the Executive Director of the Administrative Conference of the United States.