

Rabbi Yoffie's Remarks to J Street Convention October 2009

**Address to J Street Convention
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I am grateful for the invitation to be with you at J Street's first national conference. The growth of J Street has been extraordinary in every way. I offer my congratulations to Jeremy Ben-Ami and his associates, and I welcome the opportunity to address you and share my views.

Let us begin with a simple question: What is a pro-Israel organization?

I suggest that pro-Israel organizations are those that possess two characteristics.

First, they are organizations that support the idea that Israel must be a Jewish and democratic state. By "Jewish state" I mean a state with a stable Jewish majority, and by "democratic state" I mean a state that grants full political and civil rights to all who dwell permanently within its borders.

Pro-Israel organizations know that the creation and support of a Jewish and democratic state is the central value of Zionism-indeed, it is the very reason that Zionism came into being. And absent a two-state solution, there will be no such state. I am astounded that those who resist a two-state solution, who speak the language of permanent occupation, and who even refuse to reject expulsion of Arabs from Israel or the territories will be considered by some as pro-Israel, while advocates of a two-state solution will not.

Second, pro-Israel groups are those that stand in abiding solidarity with the State of Israel. To me this means seeing Israel as a cause for thanksgiving and rejoicing. It means feeling blessed to live at this moment when Israel has returned to history and the Jewish people have achieved real power and mastered the gun. It means recognizing that Jewish life cannot be sustained without Israel at its core. To be sure, it means telling the truth about Israel and speaking honestly to Israel's leaders; solidarity with Israel never means just singing Hatikvah. But it is also to battle Israel's enemies on the right and the left, to reject the trap of false moral equivalence, and to never, ever, express contempt for the State and its people. And it is to avoid like the plague the self-haters in the Jewish community who defend the rights of every group except their own.

I suggest that we need a broad, sensible, and inclusive definition of what it means to be pro-Israel, built on the two pillars that I have proposed. And let us beware of those who insist, in effect, that the only way to be pro-Israel is to be "just like me."

A few words on Gaza-since it was an exchange that J Street and I had on Gaza that generated so much attention earlier this year.

After Israel withdrew from Gaza in 2005, Hamas spent three years launching rockets and missiles into southern Israel-continuing attacks that had begun years earlier. These rockets traumatized children, terrorized the population, drove people from the cities, and brought normal life to a halt. At one point, the population of Sderot dropped from 24,000 to 10,000. Every playground in Sderot had a bomb shelter, and 75% of the children there suffered from post-traumatic stress syndrome-which meant, simply, that they were in shock, and that even six- or seven-year olds slept in their parents' rooms and frequently wet their beds. For years, Israel worked to generate

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support from the international community to stop the attacks, but diplomats clucked their tongues and did nothing. And for years, Israeli citizens in the south hated their own government almost as much as they hated Hamas, because, in their eyes, their government had abandoned them.

Yes, the situation was complicated; there were other factors at work-there always are. And once the war began, the people of Gaza suffered profoundly-which deeply saddens us all. Nonetheless, the reality that I have described is what led to the war. How many years would American parents sit by while their children were reduced to zombies, afraid, every morning, to walk out their front doors? How many rockets would need to land in your backyard before you demanded that your government act, and act decisively? We all know, in fact, that there is not a single American parent who would tolerate for a single week what Israeli parents tolerated for years.

If I have a complaint against the government of Israel, it is that I wonder if it should not have acted sooner in Gaza. There are those who think that targeted military action, undertaken earlier, might have been effective and might have reduced the terrible death toll of innocents that ultimately ensued. In any case, I want to be clear: I supported Israel's military action in Gaza then, and looking back, I reaffirm that support now. And I oppose negotiations with Hamas - which is rejectionist, religiously fanatic, and anti-Semitic - until such a time as it meets those conditions set forth by both the United States and by the Quartet.

This is not the time for a full discussion of the Goldstone report, which in my view was fatally flawed. There are many questions that one might legitimately ask about Israel's conduct of the war: Why was it necessary for Israeli forces to use so much firepower? How do you carry out a war against a terrorist organization that attacks your citizens and hides amid a civilian population? What risks are Israeli soldiers obligated to take, beyond those inherent in combat, to prevent harm to civilians? The Israelis that I know are asking these questions; it is right for them to do so, and it is right for the government of Israel to deal with these issues.

But the Goldstone report chose not to focus on these questions. Its central assertion is that Israel targeted Palestinian civilians, intentionally causing their deaths. This is a stunning and outrageous charge. I reject it, the people of Israel reject it, and - most important - it is not supported by the facts. This is not a thoughtful judicial report attempting to make difficult moral judgments. It is a political report based largely on unverifiable Palestinian claims that is meant to be used as a sledgehammer to bludgeon Israel.

If you doubt this, read the report. Its reasoning is shaky in some places and more often absurd. The accusations against Palestinians are expressed in language that is understated and restrained, while the accusations against Israel are expressed in wording that is sweeping, bold, and absolute. And upon closer inspection, many of these charges include phrases such as "it seems that," "it would appear," and "we have no definite proof but..." In an interview in the Forward, Goldstone acknowledged that nothing in the report could be used as proof in a court of law and that it contained no actual "evidence" of wrongdoing by Israel. Among the public that heard about this report and the diplomatic community that seized upon it, I doubt if one person in a hundred is aware of what we are now told is the report's limited scope. Didn't Justice Goldstone have an obligation to make this clear from the beginning? And this too: you cannot be a moral agent if you serve an immoral master, and Richard Goldstone should be ashamed of himself for working under the auspices of the U.N. Human Rights Council.

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It will be important for Israel to continue with the investigations that it has already begun. Still, I suspect and I fear that the damage has already been done. This report, no matter how compelling the refutations that follow, will become a staple of U.N. gatherings and international meetings. It will be used to incite against Israel and to portray every Israeli leader connected with the military as a war criminal. It will become an instrument to inflame Palestinian extremism. And it will be invoked every time that Israel defends itself against attacks on its civilian centers. In short, it has made the work of peace much harder than it already was.

I would like to turn now to the settlement issue, which has received so much attention this year. Regrettably, in my view, the public discussion has not been enlightening; it has obscured far more than it has revealed.

The simple fact, absent from so much of this discussion, is that there are two kinds of settlements: those east of the security fence and those west of the security fence. Those west of the fence are in three major blocks, and in a sense are the extended suburbs of Jerusalem. Virtually all of those who support a two-state solution have recognized that these blocks will be part of Israel in any conceivable settlement, with the Palestinians being offered a land swap as compensation. If the settlement borders were to be defined by mutual agreement, there is no reason why additional buildings in these blocks should pose a problem for any of the parties.

East of the fence are the settlements around Hebron and between Nablus and Ramallah-what I would call the "ideological settlements." Approximately 100,000 settlers live in these areas-twice the number that lived there in the 1990s-and there is no way that a viable, contiguous Palestinian state can come into being unless they are removed. As I have said, without a Palestinian state living in peace and security alongside Israel, there is no way for Israel to remain both Jewish and democratic. And as you know, support for a two-state solution is the policy of the government of the United States and both of its major political parties, not to mention the policy of those governments in Europe and the international community that remain friendly to Israel and committed to her security. It is also the policy of the State of Israel.

But here is the problem: it is not clear that those 100,000 settlers can ever be removed. I have friends in Israel on both the right and the left who generally agree on nothing but who agree on this. It is too late, they say. It is simply not credible to believe that any Israeli government would be willing or capable to remove so many settlers from their West Bank homes.

I reject their thesis, because to accept it is to give up on the idea of a Jewish and democratic Israel. But I worry that even if it is not too late, time is fast running out.

The American government and the international community have accepted the Israeli occupation on the assumption that it is temporary. But after 40 years, that is a hard claim to make, especially when the number of settlers in what would be the heart of a Palestinian state continues to grow. And once it becomes clear that the conditions for a Palestinian state simply do not exist, Israel will face demands for a "one-state solution" based on the principle of "one-man-one-vote." And this, of course, is not a solution at all, because a single-state solution will soon yield a Palestinian majority. And Zionism did not come into being, I suggest, so that the Jews could be a minority in somebody else's state.

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Yes, I know, there are those who proclaim that Israel will simply defy the world. It will retain the settlements and Israeli rule, and the world be damned. I am among those who believe that it cannot and will not, and to suggest otherwise is to misread both what is happening in the world and the extent of Israel's power. And even if it could, how many of us would want a Jewish state with unrecognized borders that contains a large, hostile minority deprived of basic civil and political rights?

And for those who say that the "one-state solution" is a scare tactic and an exaggeration, I say: wake up. Look around. It is already happening, right now. And not only among certain Palestinian factions, but on our own campuses here in America. And I do not refer to campus anti-Semites and Israel haters, who will despise us no matter what. I refer to reasonable and moderate groups who are looking at the facts on the ground and are beginning to say: "We have tried for 40 years. A two-state solution would be best but it just isn't possible. Let's see if we can find a democratic framework to accommodate everyone."

Too many American Jewish groups have their heads in the sand on these matters. They talk to each other or to themselves, but not to their own children on campus. They embrace those elements of the American religious right that endorse settlement as a religious principle without realizing that the influence of these groups is not growing but declining. But those of us who do the actual work of making Israel's case with religious groups, communal groups, and local leaders know full well the damage that the settlement issue causes in grassroots America.

You can convince Americans of the miracle of Israel's founding and the justice of her struggle against terror and rejection.

You can convince them that it makes demographic and political sense for Israel to trade settlements near Jerusalem to the Palestinian Authority in return for land elsewhere in Israel.

But you cannot convince Americans that it makes sense for an Israel that supports a Palestinian state to maintain a large settler population in the heart of the West Bank where that state must come into being. The simple fact is that it makes no sense at all, and Americans, being a sensible people, know that.

Too much of the American Jewish community responds to this problem by saying things that convince no one.

Settlements are not the issue, they say. I agree that they may not be the issue, but they are certainly an issue-and one that threatens the Zionist enterprise and that we ignore at our peril.

Jews should be able to settle anywhere in the Land of Israel, they say. I agree, if those Jews are prepared to live under Palestinian sovereignty. But the overwhelming majority of settlers are not willing to live in a Palestinian state-which means that what they are really calling for is permanent occupation.

Israel has shown that it can withdraw settlers, they say. In theory true, but the withdrawal from the "ideological settlements" would be ten times larger than all of the withdrawals carried out in the past, each of which was profoundly traumatic for the people of Israel. Historical experience is more of an argument against the possibility of such a withdrawal than it is in favor.

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American Jewish leadership is right now focused on the threat of Iran. I share their fears, and I favor the immediate imposition of tough economic sanctions-multilateral if possible, unilateral if not. In my view, our government is right to affirm that sanctions are the preferred response, but that no options should be taken off the table. This is not the time for a full discussion of this matter, but I will say that if Iran becomes a nuclear power, some Arab states will quietly drift into Iran's orbit, while others will move quickly to acquire nuclear weapons of their own. In these circumstances, any possibility of an Israeli-Palestinian peace will evaporate.

Time is not the ally of peace in this situation, and inaction is not an option. The stakes for Israel are much too high. I am therefore puzzled by those on the left who appear content to allow the situation to continue as it is. They seem far more prepared to tell us what should not be done than what should be done to deal with this grave threat to Israel's very existence.

But for those on the right, my question is: if you fear that you will wake up in two, three, or four years and confront a radical Iranian state brandishing nuclear bombs, why do you not fear that you will wake up in two, three, or four years and confront an emerging consensus - not only from our enemies but also from our friends - that a two-state solution must give way to a one-state solution? The latter possibility is no less likely and in some ways no less dangerous than the first.

Given the dangers posed by settlements in the heart of the West Bank, and the slow but inexorable increase in the number of their residents, it is not enough to propose that Israel should build no additional settlements there. What I would hope to see is an Israeli Prime Minister who will look these settlers in the eye and say: you will have to leave your homes because the settlement map contradicts any conceivable two-state solution map. What I would hope for is a government of Israel that will offer generous incentives for them to leave so that the process can begin now. And if need be, let military installations be put in place to deal with security issues that may arise from the settlers' departure.

We should not demonize the settlers. They have done what Israeli governments, of both the right and left, have permitted - and in some cases encouraged - them to do. With strong government leadership, I believe that most will be prepared to relocate. But to those who will not-those who embrace an ugly fundamentalism and misread the Torah for their own purposes-we must be prepared to say: Maspeek. Enough. We must put an end to the appeasement of those whose messianic dreams have too long held Israel hostage. We do not accept that a small group of fanatic holy men, probably numbering no more than a few thousand, know what God wants for us, and we must not put the destiny of the Jewish people in their hands.

And what of the Palestinians and the Arab world? Are they ready for peace?

There are those in our community who are certain that they are, and there are those who are certain that they are not. I come down firmly in the "I don't know" category.

Mahmoud Abbas is a moderate man, committed to creating a state for the Palestinian people. He has promoted economic reform, brought a measure of stability to the Palestinian street, and been effective in curbing the threat of terror. On the other hand, Mr. Abbas is politically weak; we do not know if he can impose his will on the chaotic politics of Palestine - a politics that is too often hate-filled and bloody-minded. The Arab states, meanwhile, have done far less than they might

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have to move us in the direction of peace. The Saudis put forward a peace plan but then made it a "take it or leave it" deal, refusing to negotiate with Israel in any way.

It is also true that the Right of Return remains an absolute article of faith for the entire Arab world. I do not see this issue as incidental but as a major stumbling block. The Jewish people will not accept, in principle or practice, the return of refugees to the territory of a Jewish state. Furthermore, the demand for such a return raises fundamental questions about Arab intentions. Why exactly do you demand that millions of people return to a state that is utterly foreign to them in nationality and culture - not to mention that we are talking about a return to houses and land that in fact no longer exist? Some of my friends on the left, knowing the intensity of Arab feeling on this matter, believe that the best way to resolve the issue is through studied ambiguity; let's devise a formulation, they say, that is sufficiently vague that all sides can claim victory. But such an approach would be a disaster and would be rejected by any government of Israel. Absent an unambiguous agreement to resolve all issues, including this one, and to end the conflict once and for all, peace will not be achieved. Reaching an agreement on these terms, therefore, needs to be our explicit goal.

So yes, I am troubled by the positions of Arab and Palestinian leaders. I do not know if they are ready for an agreement, or what can be reasonably expected of them. While I am convinced that the great majority of the Palestinian people yearn for peace and an end to bloodshed, they have not been well served by those who speak in their name.

But none of this is an argument for maintaining or expanding ideological settlements. If it is true that peace is not possible at this moment, this is not a reason to advocate policies that will make it impossible for there ever to be peace.

And it is certainly not an argument against the President of the United States doing all that he can to promote an agreement. Precisely because the prospects for peace are uncertain, it is more important than ever for the Administration to search out every possibility for moving forward. The President has been right to reach out to Palestinians, the Arab world, and the Muslim world. He, Secretary Clinton, and Special Envoy Mitchell know that Middle East peace requires an American presence and that nothing happens unless the United States is involved. And they are absolutely correct that the status quo does not serve Israel's interests.

And this too: despite the somewhat grim picture that I have painted of Palestinian politics, there are, of course, Palestinian leaders who seek dignity and peace for both sides in this conflict. And if these moderates are not strengthened, the only party left will be Hamas. Therefore, reaching out to the moderates and strengthening their hand is a vital and pressing interest of the government of the United States.

And if, despite everything, a true peace remains beyond reach, then what?

My hope is that the government of Israel, with the support of the American Jewish community, will do everything that it can to maintain the support of the American government and the American people.

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My hope is that the government of Israel, with the support of the American Jewish community, will do everything necessary to demonstrate her commitment to a two-state solution and a Jewish and democratic Israel.

And if I had to propose a political strategy for these purposes, it would be the following: let the government of the United States and the government of Israel embrace the proposal put forward by David Makovsky and others to arrive at an understanding with the Palestinians on the final borders of the Jewish and Palestinian states. Such an agreement would be far short of an actual peace, but its advantages would be many: it would send a message to the world, reaffirming the principles of a two-state solution; it would provide a political horizon for Abbas and hope for the Palestinian people; it would enable Israel to build in the settlement blocks close to Jerusalem and would prepare the ground for evacuating settlers in the heartland of the West Bank; and it would strengthen Israel's internal unity and her position in America and the world.

If Israel and the United States were to agree on these borders, even if the Palestinians did not, it would shift the focus back to the obligation of the Palestinians to come to terms with a Jewish homeland. Let Israel make the offer, and let the Palestinians choose between peace and fanaticism. A comprehensive peace is surely preferable, but a "borders first" strategy may be the next best alternative.

Let me conclude by reminding you that even in these difficult times, there are reasons for optimism.

First, the Prime Minister of Israel has affirmed his commitment to a two-state solution, creating a new reality on the Israeli right. Extremist voices in Israel are perhaps less prominent than they once were. And most Israelis, while skeptical of Arab intentions, remain sensible, pragmatic, and supportive of a two-state approach.

Second, the President of the United States has decided, wisely, to engage the issue of Israeli-Palestinian peace now, and not to wait until the end of his term. While the Administration has stumbled a few times along the way, it has given high priority to its search for an agreement, and has understood that the status quo is unacceptable and dangerous to Israel's security and well-being. And while I may not agree with all of J Street's positions, your commitment to and advocacy for the two-state solution, the peace process, and the issues surrounding settlements are an important contribution to both American politics and American Jewish politics.

And third, the Iranian threat, as deeply troubling as it is, creates a convergence of interests between Israel and her Arab neighbors, and offers a small window of opportunity that, we hope, all parties will be wise enough to exploit.

So yes, we need to affirm our optimism and our hope. We need to remember that Israel's fate rests not only in the hands of Israel's citizens, but in the hands of the Jewish people. We need to join, as untiring partners, in the building of Zion. And we need as well to ask for God's guidance, and to pray that peace and redemption will come to Israel's borders and that harmony will hallow Jerusalem's gates - bi'meheira u'viyameinu, speedily, and in our day.

Thank you.