



## Finding a New Voice: American Jews and the Peace Process

By Roberta Fahn Schoffman

*The following is based on a presentation given by Roberta Fahn Schoffman, IPF Israel representative and CEO of MindSet Media and Strategic Consulting, at the recent "An Agreement within a Year Conference" in Israel organized by the Geneva Initiative.*

Waning interest in Israel, an American political wave toward moderation and change, and a Jewish leadership out of touch with its constituency—are the elements that are now setting the stage for a more proactive American Jewish engagement in the current peace process.

Operating within a nearly impossible time frame, President George Bush and Prime Minister Ehud Olmert have called for completion of negotiations and an Israeli-Palestinian agreement before the end of 2008. Such an agreement, having eluded the parties for more than forty years, would be difficult to achieve under the best of circumstances. But with each side stuck in its own internal political morass, and with ongoing violence emanating from Gaza and the ever-present threat of Hezbollah in Lebanon, the crippled process needs all the help it can get. The time has come for the American Jewish community to step up and be heard.

American pollster Stanley Greenberg's most recent research on American opinion, conducted for The Israel Project, concludes that the American people have become more moderate in their views in 2008. They reject the Bush strategy of military incursion to solve global crises; they trust Democrats more than Republicans to contend with the pressing problems of Iran, Iraq, terror, the environment and other key issues; and they strongly support non-violent means of conflict resolution. By a huge majority, according to Greenberg, 71% of Americans support negotiations, sanctions or increased diplomatic pressure on Iran, and not military action.

Jewish Americans, it turns out, are pretty much like all Americans. The 2007 American Jewish Committee Annual Survey of American Jewish Opinion shows that American Jews think the US should have stayed out of Iraq, and should not take military action against Iran. Jews, like other Americans, are worried about the economy and jobs, health care and terrorism and security. But overall, Jews as a group are even more moderate politically than the population as a whole, with 43% leaning at least slightly to the left and 74% identifying themselves as moderate or liberal.

At the same time, American Jews are increasingly likely to view their Jewishness through the prism of such American values as diversity, pluralism and free choice. This is especially true for the under-35 generation, who consider Israel far less central to their lives or identity than did their parents and grandparents. A startling statistic, to be found in "Beyond Distancing: Young Adult American Jews and their Alienation from Israel", a study commissioned by The Andrea and Charles Bronfman Philanthropies in 2007, shows that only 48% of the non-Orthodox respondents under the age of 35 agreed that "Israel's destruction would be a personal tragedy." Moreover, just 54% are "comfortable with the idea of a Jewish State." The sociologist Steven M. Cohen, who co-authored the study, put it succinctly in a remark quoted by the Jewish Telegraphic Agency: "We're seeing this growing phenomenon of Jews who have no problem saying the Sh'ma but won't sing Hatikvah."

The hard truth is that the unique relationship that fueled the extraordinary financial and political support of the Jewish community for the Jewish state for so many years may now be behind us. Fewer major Jewish organizations place the Arab-Israel conflict as a priority and instead focus on religious, educational or fundraising activity. This distancing is reflected in a political context by the AJC poll, in which only 6% of the respondents identified "support for Israel" as the most important issue in deciding who they would like to see elected as the next president. Indeed, according to the same poll, Jews support Democrats over Republicans by a huge 58%-15% margin, even though President Bush has been declared by many in the community as the best president for Israel in US history.

As the Bush era draws to a close, and "change" is the buzzword of the presidential campaign, the moment may well have arrived for American Jews to clarify their position on the peace process and speak out. Great numbers of liberals and moderates among Israel's supporters may refuse to be eclipsed any longer by those who have until now gripped the gavel of authority on this critical issue. Those who oppose Israel's need to compromise on territory in order to end the conflict, those who bang relentlessly on the doors of Congress in the name of a united Jerusalem, those who use political or financial threats to command political support—simply do not reflect the plurality of American Jews who, like the majority of all Americans today, are seeking compromise.

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Stanley Greenberg's survey revealed that Americans identify with Israel's democratic character, Western orientation, and efforts to protect human rights and freedoms. Most significantly, the study concluded that Israel's commitment to work toward a peace accord with the Palestinians by the end of 2008 and its withdrawal from settlements from Gaza and part of the West Bank were among the most "convincing reasons to be more sympathetic toward Israel."

In short, Americans like an Israel that is in search of peace. Americans support an Israel that actively pursues peace. Americans want to know that Israel can be part of the solution to America's global problems rather than part of the cause. Support for a two-state solution is solidly within the consensus of American thinking. Advocates for peace should ride the wave of moderation and create a shared language of compromise that will resonate with their fellow Americans and will energize the silent majority of American Jews who seek a peaceful resolution of the conflict.

In addition, the pro-peace Jewish community must go beyond such traditional allies as like-minded peace groups, and reach out to non-political grassroots organizations in the American Jewish community, especially among the Reform and Conservative movements, Federations and other communal organizations. It must also seek new coalition partners among the American mainstream. With targeted outreach to powerful lobbies and interest groups who are concerned about America's global challenges—relations with the Muslim world, rising oil prices, the sinking dollar—liberal Israel advocates should explore joint efforts with Chambers of Commerce, the AFL-CIO, the Democratic Party and other proactive American interest groups.

Finally, and perhaps most important, the prime minister of Israel must declare directly to American Jewry, as he has to the American government and the Palestinian Authority, his unwavering intention to aggressively pursue a negotiated two-state solution that will require painful compromises on all sides. Now is the time for the government of Israel to ask its powerful Jewish supporters in the U.S. to endorse unequivocally this historic move, to work with and not against the people of Israel at this potentially decisive moment.

Mobilizing America's Jews around a peace agenda is no easy task. With the holy city of Jerusalem on the table—and all of the emotions and sensitivities that arouses—the challenge becomes even more daunting. The troops of the right wing and ultra-Orthodox are aligned with Christian fundamentalists in a formidable coalition of obstructionists. It will take determined leadership and new partnerships to win the battle. By transforming the fundamental liberal humanism of American Jews into the predominant voice of the community, Israel will gain the critical ally it needs in its pursuit of peace and security—now, in 2008.

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