



INSS Insight No. 771, November 25, 2015

**The American Jewish Community and its Relationship to Israel,
Then and Now
Abraham H. Foxman**

Just as there is a tendency to glorify and idealize America's past, many people idealize the history of the American Jewish community and its relationship with the State of Israel. In light of the storm over the Iran nuclear agreement, many have publicly lamented the fact that current divisions among American Jews are worse today than ever before. Can this be true? And with a wider perspective, what is the historical context for this divide? What modern day forces are at work creating rifts within the community? What can be done to strengthen the community and its connection to Israel?

There are many examples over the course of Israel's 67 year history of disagreement and disunity within the American Jewish community over its relationship with Israel. From the onset, there were titanic ideological struggles within both religious and secular Jewish organizations in the United States, including the ADL, over their relationship with the nascent Jewish state. In those early days, the concept of a united Jewish community behind the State of Israel was a mere aspiration for the future. It was only during the post-Six Day War period that all or most American Jews became supporters of Israel.

In 1977, when Menachem Begin was elected Prime Minister of Israel, the unity of support for Israel within the American Jewish community fractured briefly. In the minds and hearts of many Israelis and American Jews, encouraged by comments made over the years by David Ben Gurion, Begin was an extremist who could never become a legitimate leader of the Jewish state. In a 1948 letter to the *New York Times*, Albert Einstein, Hannah Arendt, and other prominent Jewish voices described Begin's Herut party as "akin ...in its social appeal to the Nazi and Fascist parties." Looking back almost 40 years, the reaction of the organized Jewish community was astonishing. About half of the organizations threatened or implied that they would have nothing to do with the new right wing Israeli government.

In the end, unity and support for Israel was greatly restored when Alex Schindler, then Chairman of the Conference of Presidents, called for a meeting between all American Jewish organizations and made an eloquent plea as to why it was important to stand

behind a besieged Israel, regardless of its political leadership. The community responded by coming together, a critical turning point given the looming conflicts Begin's government would encounter with the Carter administration. The American Jewish community's support for Israel was further solidified when a few months later, the so-called extremist Begin signed a peace agreement with Anwar Sadat.

Thus the current perceived disunity within the Jewish community in America today is not without precedent. Nevertheless, during the Iran brouhaha over the past few years, we saw some of the worst manifestations of incivility, with accusations flying from both the right and left sides of the community. When Jerry Nadler, a longtime Democratic member of Congress and supporter of Israel, came out in favor of the agreement, he was accused by some of betraying Israel and of being a traitor to the Jewish people. When leading Democratic Senator Chuck Schumer came out against the deal, he was accused of putting Israel's interests ahead of those of the United States. As the battle raged, some on the left in the community even played into the comments of others about Jews and their relationship to money. Despite the hyperbole on both sides, however, what was most striking, though perhaps not surprising given the near consensual opposition in Israel to the deal, was the broad swath of organized American Jewish opposition to the agreement. One could therefore make the case that once again, in true moments of crisis, the American Jewish community unifies in support of the Jewish state.

Nevertheless, there appears to be a greater source of contention and potential fracturing at work within the American Jewish community today, which did not originate with disagreements over the Iran deal. The source of this friction seems to be the result of multiple challenges of unprecedented magnitude facing the community, including: (a) apathy and ignorance about Israel, a partial result of the decline in the strength of American Jewish identity; (b) a tendency among left wing Jews to see Israel as a human rights violator and oppressor of the Palestinians; (c) a tendency by some right wing Jews to see any disagreement with the policies of the Israeli government as anti-Israel and even anti-Semitic; and (d) a perceived unwillingness by the government of Israel to look at what it can do to mitigate divisions and tensions within the community.

By far the most important issue to deal with is the growing apathy among American Jews toward all aspects of Jewish culture, religion, and history, including the State of Israel. There is no magic formula to address this challenge. It is the classic story of an open America, a modern world with all its attractions and the question of "why be Jewish" when one doesn't have to be. Certain initiatives can help curb the trend, however. There should be more attention given to Jewish education, for example. There should be more programs like Birthright. We must look for more ways to incorporate and teach aspects of Jewish religion and culture and the value of maintaining a specific identity in the broader American landscape. Identifying ways to better engage the American Jewish community

to care about Jewish life will change the dynamic of the community in a positive way and be of great benefit to the State of Israel.

And what should Israel's role be in all of this? Israel of course, needs to think first and foremost about its security needs and counter anti-Israel and anti-Semitic efforts like the BDS movement. It is also important, as I advocated for many years as the head of the ADL, that the American Jewish community support Israel on a non-partisan basis. Nevertheless, I would like Israeli leaders to think more about what they can do to stop the growing anti-Israel sentiment abroad and the divisions within the American Jewish community. One way that Israel could help facilitate a stronger connection between American Jewry and Israel would be to declare Conservative and Reform Judaism as legitimate movements. The fact that the Orthodox rabbinate controls the religious establishment in Israel is a source of contention for many American Jews and there is no reason why Israeli leaders should not reverse this trend. In addition, Israel must look to take more creative initiatives vis-à-vis the Palestinians, whether suspending construction in settlements or endorsing parts of the Arab Peace Initiative. For many American Jews who support Israel's right to exist but are bothered by the Palestinian issue, more proactive attempts by Israel to change the status quo would go a long way.

