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Israeli Arabs: A challenge to Israel's democracy

Editor's Note: This article was a keynote presentation at a Jan. 9 community forum entitled Arab Israelis: Challenge and Opportunity, sponsored by the Greater Washington Forum on Israeli Arab Issues. It was held at the DC Jewish Community Center.

By Rabbi Sid Schwarz

A few days ago, one person who got an announcement of the program sent me a somewhat challenging e-mail. He asked: Why are American Jews discussing a domestic Israeli issue? I welcomed the question because it allows me to address a fundamental flaw in the way the American Jewish community has approached its Israel agenda. From the very first days of the Zionist movement in the late 19th century, Zionists divided into two camps--political Zionists and spiritual Zionists. The former were most concerned about the safety and security of the Jewish people in the world and believed that a Jewish state was the only way to insure the future of the Jewish people. The spiritual Zionists were no less concerned with survival, yet they believed that equal attention had to be paid to the nature of the society that a Jewish state would create. It had to be true to the highest expressions of Jewish values as articulated in the Torah and later rabbinic tradition. Only then could Israel serve as a beacon to the Jewish people as well as a beacon to the world.

It has been the unfortunate fate of the state of Israel, that the threats to its existence have required the prioritization of the political Zionist agenda, sometimes at the expense of the spiritual Zionist agenda. Moshe Arens, former defense minister of Israel, once said: "We have often done what is necessary but forgotten to do what is important."

Similarly, the American Jewish community has done critically important work by building a lobby to insure a secure state of Israel. We have done much less well in helping American Jews understand why Israel should be central to our identity as Jews. Indeed, many younger American Jews are not sure that Israel has anything to do with their Jewish identity and would be just as happy not to deal with it at all.

I know that Zionism is a word that has fallen out of favor with many American Jews. When I was in college, in response to the UN resolution declaring that Zionism was racism, I and many of my friends wore buttons that declared: "I am a Zionist". Ironically, even though the UN rescinded that resolution in 1991, Jews have surrendered the term to its detractors. We simply stopped

teaching it and using it. It is most unfortunate. It is Zionism that links Jews, Jewish history and the state of Israel. Zionism is Jewish nationalism informed and elevated by the values of Judaism. Zionism signifies much more than simply being pro-Israel. It represents our commitment to the Jewish people and the heritage of Judaism, past, present and future. And it recognizes that Jewish life is immeasurably enriched because of the existence of the state of Israel.

The American Jewish community needs to aspire to being more than just a pro-Israel lobby. Some American Jews have built their entire Jewish identity around being pro-Israel. But others will no longer embrace that role for many reasons. I know that there are members of both camps in this room today. What then unites us?

This brings me to why the newly established Greater Washington Forum on Israeli Arab Issues created this Community Education Day. We are part of the Jewish people. Our history stretches back to Abraham. Our community stretches across the globe. At the center of that community is a modern nation state called Israel which we hope will be a society that will unite Jews for generations to come. To be a Jew today, dare I say, to be a Zionist today, means that we have a stake not only in Israel's security, but in the quality of Israel's society as well.

From a Jewish perspective, that means a society that honors certain principles:

- o Ahavat ger-We are taught to protect the stranger in our midst. This means that any minority that lives among us, any sector of the population that is vulnerable or at risk, deserves our extra attention and support. This commandment is the most often mentioned ethical rule in the Torah.

- o Ttzelem elohim -In the early chapters of Genesis we are taught that every human being is made in the image of God and should be treated accordingly.

- o The prophet Isaiah declared: tzion b'mishpat tipadeh, "Only through justice will Israel be redeemed." We would hope that Israeli society would embody that vision.

From a political perspective, Jews around the world have a stake in an Israeli society that respects individual rights, judicial due process and democratic values.

I doubt that I am going out on a limb by saying that we would have a hard time reaching a consensus in this room on any one of a dozen Israeli government policies, be they foreign or domestic. What I hope unites all of us, however, is the core commitment made in Israel's Declaration of Independence to be both a Jewish and a democratic state. No issue tests that commitment more directly than how Israel treats its Arab minority.

There are those who believe that these two aspirations--being both Jewish and democratic-- are essentially irreconcilable. One of the unpleasant realities of the contemporary American Jewish community--one that most leaders of this community are not in any way ready to deal with--is that a growing number of Jews (mostly younger) no longer believe that Israel should be a Jewish state because they do not see how the state can take on a religious label and still fully recognize the non-Jews who live in Israel as citizens. For such Jews, democracy is a more important value than Judaism.

In Israel, more and more Jews are making the opposite choice. Polls over the past decade show that an increasing number of Israeli Jews would choose to limit the extension of full civil rights and equality to non-Jewish citizens if it would threaten the Jewish character of the state. That view is now expressed by about 50 percent of Israeli Jews.

Many of you are aware of the recent controversy over the rabbinic ruling, endorsed by some 30 Israeli ultra-Orthodox rabbis, that it is not permissible to sell or rent property to non-Jews. The letter was condemned immediately by Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu and President Shimon Peres. One of the leading Orthodox rabbis in the world, Aharon Lichtenstein, issued a point by point rebuttal of the letter, exposing it as a shameless expression of bigotry disguised as a well considered ruling on a matter of Jewish law. Within a week over 1,000 diaspora rabbis signed a petition expressing the view that central to Judaism is the commitment to tolerance and equal rights.

Let me be clear. In my view Islamic extremism is the single greatest threat to peace and democracy in the Middle East today. Nevertheless, we cannot allow that phenomenon to blind us to dangerous anti-democratic tendencies coming to the fore in Israel. If we don't speak out against such bigotry and encourage Israeli leaders to do the same, it will destroy our most important asset--the reputation of Judaism and Israel as institutions with high moral purpose and ethical resolve.

Virtually every country in the world is challenged by how it creates social equality. Israel is hardly alone in having a minority that does not believe that it receives fair and equal treatment by the government. We could compare it to America's legacy of racism. Even 50 years after historic civil rights legislation in this country, African-Americans remain mired at the bottom of virtually every index of social equality in this country.

In Israel the phenomenon is made more complex because Arab citizens have ethnic, religious and family ties to people who live in jurisdictions that are in conflict with the state of Israel. The loyalty question is far more complicated than anything the U.S. ever had to grapple with in regard to its minorities.

None of this is to excuse or defend Israel for not doing enough to support its Arab citizens in the areas of employment, health care, housing and education. But it does help us understand the complexity of the issue and the resistance of many Israelis to advocate for public policies that would bring about greater equality for Israel's Arab citizens.

It makes it all the more remarkable that Israel's current government has made the discrimination against Israeli Arabs one of its highest domestic priorities. Avishai Braverman, former president of Ben Gurion University, has been given a cabinet post of minister for minority affairs to advance this agenda. Several workshops today will offer more details on what the Israeli government is trying to do to address this social inequity.

All of which brings me back to the stake of American Jews in this issue and the purpose of today's program. The Zionism that I believe in is inspired both by my understanding of Judaism and my commitment to democratic principles. While the two principles are often in conflict in Israel, we know that one cannot be sacrificed for the other. It is critical that those of us who identify as members of the Jewish people lobby, not just for a secure and safe Israel, but for an Israel that reflects the noblest values of the Jewish tradition and of democracy.

The best way for Israel to fend off the increasing challenges in the international community to its legitimacy is for the country to be a beacon of justice and liberty for all the world to see.

Several years ago the Israeli Supreme Court declared illegal the practice using force to extract information from captured terrorists who might have information that might lead to the death of innocent Israeli civilians. The decision included a statement that was a shining example of what Israel can, and often has, represented. Chief Justice Aharon Barak wrote:

"The fate of a democracy is that not all methods employed by its enemies are open to it. Sometimes a democracy must fight with one hand tied behind its back. Nonetheless, such an approach gives the democracy the ultimate, upper hand. Preserving the rule of law and the recognition of individual liberties constitute an essential approach to our security. At the end of the day, upholding these democratic principles are what will strengthen our country's spirit and fortify its strength."

This, my friends, is spiritual Zionism, at its best and it has huge implications for how Israel might deal with the complex issue of its Arab minority.

I hope that today's program leads all of us to an appreciation for the challenges that Israel faces with regard to its Arab minority. If you are looking for a simple answer to the question, you've come to the wrong place. There is good news and not so good news. It is a nuanced picture. Yet I do believe that our engagement with this issue as an American Jewish community can make a difference.

Finally I hope that today's program will introduce to our personal and communal agendas the Zionist principles that will help make Israel a source of pride for Jews and the kind of beacon of light to the nations of the world that was envisioned by the prophets of Israel.

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