

FORWARD

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Between Conscience and Solidarity

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Calm, civic discourse, such as Americans take for granted, was not the currency at the recently concluded 34th World Zionist Congress in Jerusalem. It was therefore telling that in an environment of passionate ideological debate, Prime Minister Sharon's June 20 address to the Congress was received with a standing ovation. The delegates from over 50 countries who applauded Sharon's steadfastness in the face of terrorism included many who were not his fans. It underscored, during this difficult period, the importance of the Jewish people's solidarity with the State of Israel.

I am left troubled, however, as I compare the vigorous debate in Israel about appropriate responses to the current crisis and the lack of debate in the United States.

Yes, Israel faces an epidemic of murderous suicide bombings and must defend itself. But that does not mean we are forbidden to expect, as Israelis expect, that the Israeli army will uphold its commitment to *tohar haneshkek*, or "purity of arms," the classic Israeli doctrine that war must be conducted in accordance with the highest moral standards.

Yes, Europe has been unmasked yet again as a culture that can barely contain its anti-Jewish animus, which now cloaks itself in self-righteous posturing about Israeli settlement policy. But that does not mean that we are forbidden to ask the questions many Israelis ask about the wisdom of Israeli settlement policy in the West Bank and Gaza for the last 35 years.

Yes, the media fails in its Middle East reportage and falls back on the "Palestinian as victim" theme, disregarding the need for fuller, contextualized explanations of how Palestinians have come to this point in their history. But that does not

mean that we are forbidden to speak out, as many Israelis speak out, on the continuing discrimination against Israeli Arabs and humiliation of Palestinians in the territories, both of which have been features of Israeli life for decades.

Many will say that now is not the time for such breast-beating and moral reflection because we are in a war for our survival and our enemies will be encouraged by any sign

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of our internal lack of resolve. They are wrong.

This is precisely the time for us to pay special attention to our prophetic legacy, to show compassion for the stranger and those who are most vulnerable. Not at the expense of our own survival, God forbid. We must protect Jewish lives. It is the highest Jewish commandment. But we must also worry about the Jewish soul.

The organized Jewish community has no equal in its ability to mobilize itself to protect and defend Jewish interests. The April 15 rally for Israel at the Capitol was nothing short of miraculous. The American Israel Public Affairs Committee conference a week later broke all records in terms of attendance and gave Congress and the administration a healthy reminder of American Jewry's considerable political muscle. As the momentum grows, the community is beginning to take up the public relations campaign to build public sympathy for Israel's

cause. We can do more, and we must.

As we fight for Israel's future, however, we must not neglect our own community's future. If we are not vigilant, we may find that our effectiveness on Israel's behalf carries a domestic price in numbers of American Jews who will decide they do not want to be part of this Jewish community for the long haul.

For every Jew who is shaken out of his or her apathy by the current crisis and is motivated to act on Israel's behalf, I am convinced that there are five other Jews who decide that there is no place for them in this Jewish community. Some stand back because they dislike politics; others are deterred because of an aversion to things military. Many feel there is zero tolerance for any expressions of conscience that might reflect negatively on Israel. Our community is one that is quick to send a message of ostracism to any voice that breaks the communal consensus, especially in times of crisis. This must not be permitted. Even as we fight for Israel, we must fight to make room in our community for those who disagree.

Israel is in a fight for its survival. We need to be maximally supportive. But the American Jewish community's struggle for survival is no less real.

It would be ironic if, in the heat of waging an advocacy campaign on Israel's behalf, we alienated thousands of American Jews. We need to find a way to balance our instincts for solidarity with our commitment to conscience. It is sound communal policy. More important, it is also the Jewish way.

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