

FORGING A GLOBAL JEWISH AGENDA

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In just a few years, our global Jewish priorities have changed dramatically. Today's top three priorities—ensuring the survival of Israel, combating anti-Semitism, and improving Jewish-Arab relations—are political priorities that have superseded philanthropic imperatives. The American Jewish community, which shares world Jewish leadership with the Government of Israel, will be called upon to meet these challenges.

Every once in a while I make a “Global Jewish Priorities” list in order to get a mental fix on what is most important in our changing and turbulent geopolitical environment. I create these lists from a non-parochial point of view, meaning not only as a representative of the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee (JDC).

Here is my list of global priorities from five years ago:

1. redeeming Jewish hostages
2. combating Jewish population loss
3. seeking restitution for Holocaust injustices
4. rehabilitating Jewish communities in post-Communist Eastern Europe
5. renewing Jewish life in the Former Soviet Union
6. keeping small vulnerable Jewish communities alive
7. continuing relief for impoverished Jews, victims of circumstance
8. helping Israel develop a model social services system through innovation, experimentation, and demonstration

Reviewing this 5-year-old list brought into sharp relief how much has happened in such a short space of time. Even my “end of the century” status report to JDC’s board of Directors three years ago was very different from today’s situation. In my report I reflected on the fact that JDC, a non-political agency, has had to respond to political events in every one of the eight decades of its existence. I speculated that perhaps for the first

time since our founding in 1914, we might enjoy the luxury of being proactive rather than reactive. And as someone once said, the rest is history.

TODAY’S GLOBAL JEWISH PRIORITIES

I rank today’s global priorities as follows:

1. Ensuring the survival of Israel
2. Combating anti-Semitism
3. Improving Moslem-Jewish relations
4. Combating Jewish population loss
5. Renewing Jewish life in the Former Soviet Union
6. Keeping small vulnerable Jewish communities alive
7. Redeeming Jewish hostages

Today’s top three priorities—ensuring Israeli survival, combating anti-Semitism, and improving Jewish-Arab relations—are political priorities that force themselves to the top of my cluster of philanthropic imperatives. **We are now probably in the most dangerous century, not only in the history of the Jewish people but of the human race.**

But for September 11, I would have listed an eighth Jewish priority; namely, combating the danger of Islamic radical terror. However, that is no longer a Jewish issue alone. It is **now the number one priority of the entire free world.** Radical Islam is today the greatest threat to world peace. September 11 was the end of our age of domestic innocence.

As micro-technology advances in weapons of mass destruction, we are all at risk, whether we live in New York, London, or Tel Aviv. I put the issue of nuclear proliferation neatly aside. That is left to greater minds than mine—the generals, the intelligence chiefs, the world leaders, and the strategists—and let us all pray they get it right! This issue out of our philanthropic hands.

The danger of course is that if a series of major attacks on the United States or Europe create unprecedented social and economic suffering, will there be the need for someone to blame? And will it be Israel and the Jews? Or the local Moslems? Neither scenario would be good. And will that perforce result in the loss of personal liberty, resulting in a post-democratic era? Autocratic regimes crush terrorism without mercy. Democracies tend to look for something to blame within their own society.

Meanwhile, our fate and future are interlocked with that of the United States. Our advocacy groups must be supported to the hilt to make sure that inextricable link remains strong. We must continue to forge strategic links with those who support us. We must continue to advocate for aid to ensure Israel's military edge over its neighbors.

Priority #1: Survival of Israel

Survival of Israel is once again the Jewish world's number one priority. Both we and the people of Israel have been shocked out of our recent mutual complacency. It is, however, somewhat comforting to note that Main Street Israel now realizes it needs us as much as we ourselves realize we need Israel. I remember Avrum Burg's much-quoted question: "Do we need a common danger in order to remain Jewish?" So far, sadly, it seems to help!

Meanwhile, as the current crisis plays itself out and as we respond full force with emergency aid, we also continue to help address Israel's "business as usual" social challenges through our regular programs. In the

family of nations Israel is five minutes old. It will take several decades longer before its society is fully consolidated. But as Barry Schrage keeps emphasizing our input into Israeli social issues, beyond the current crisis, should be value-added and therefore innovative and creative, not simply add on. At the same time, no matter how strong Israel becomes economically, there will always be donors wanting to plant their family name on a capital project or a favored program.

Priority #2: Combating Anti-Semitism

We must of course continue to fight anti-Semitism and anti-Zionism, the two now almost completely blurred by anti-Semites and the media. And, dare I say it, blurred also by us? Aggressive protests against slanted media reports have borne some fruit. But as important as those who shape the news reports are those who speak for Israel and how they come across to the audience. Here, for heavens' sake, we have been appallingly bad.

Ms Ashrawi, Mr Erekat, and their friends come across as moderate, balanced, spokespersons as opposed to some on our side who appear strident, defiant, and hostile. Despite this contrast it is to the credit of the American public that the majority still favors the Israeli position, even though most are probably not fully aware of what exactly it was that Barak offered so generously to Arafat. Has anyone seen a clear, *short*, and crisp statement, explaining this offer to Main Street America, to the ones who do not watch the in-depth television programs, and who do not read the *Wall Street Journal* or the *New York Times*?

We should also take care to identify precisely who are committing terror attacks in Europe. In the main they are Arabs and skin-heads. The threat to life and limb comes from this quarter, not the general population. Has anti-Semitism increased in Europe, or has it simply been revived after decades of guilt and shame? Those who have always been anti-Semitic, and those who have harbored such feelings but kept them to them-

selves certainly feel freer to express these feelings now. It's become kosher again 57 years after the Shoah.

Priority #3: Improving Jewish-Moslem Relations

We have to show the Moslem world that Jews have nothing against them as Moslems and that we respect their right to dignity. "Face" is extremely important to Moslems. We have to build dialogues with them at several levels. As James Zogby of the American Arab Institute recently wrote in *The Forward* we can disagree over the Middle East yet continue to communicate.

Jewish philanthropy can be a helpful means of promoting rapprochement. There is a coalition in place of over forty Jewish organizations that provide disaster relief in Moslem and other countries.

JDC, ORT, and the American Jewish World Service have been providing disaster relief on behalf of the coalition for several years, funded out of mailbox appeals. When Sarajevo was under siege we provided the entire city with free medicines for the duration. We evacuated 1,000 Moslems in our bus convoys, along with 1,200 helpless Jews. In Albania we planted a Jewish flag between the Saudi and Turkish flags, building a refugee camp for Kosovars.

And when the Kosovars returned home, we repaired over 40 Moslem schools, under contract to UNESCO, that had been bombed by the Serbs. We rebuilt a bomb-damaged mosque in partnership with the local Reis-Um-Ulema, Kosovo's senior Moslem cleric. We built a new school in Turkey after its earthquake.

Small steps admittedly, not by any means earthshaking, but we certainly created considerable good will. And to those detractors, who say this is futile and gets us nowhere I would ask, "Where does the alternative lead us?" A permanent standoff between our two religions goes nowhere. We surely have to try.

Moslems in the free world will become politically stronger as time passes. Already

their populations exceed those of Jewish communities in most of Europe and their numbers are burgeoning in the United States. They will become strong voting blocs especially when majority margins are small. Will the Pakistanis in Britain, Arabs from the Maghreb in France, Libyans and other Arabs in Italy, and Turks in Germany become more moderate as their children succumb to Western influences? Can we find better ways to engage them, people to people? Is there a light at the end of the tunnel? Renegade states certainly understand that the free world possesses the most terrible deterrents against those who would release weapons of mass destruction. But it's their surrogates we have to fear most.

Autocratic Arab regimes, both religious and secular, must surely understand that they are the second-line targets. And even responsible Shiite and Sunni leadership must realize that, fantastic as it may seem, in the crazed minds of their fanatics, Islamic Armageddon is yet to come. It will settle once and for all the age-old dispute as to whether the followers of Hussein or the Caliphs are the true successors to Mohamed; namely, the final battle between the Shiites and the Sunni.

Priority #4: Jewish Population Loss

Jewish population loss is still a top concern. The pool of "replacement Jews" from the Soviet Union to replenish the population has become smaller. Our system rightly focuses on more resources to expand Jewish schools. Hillel struggles valiantly on campuses in the face of the radical Left. And we still struggle to find the magic formula to compete with the tantalizing distractions of our affluent and, so far, free society. But while expending necessary energy and resources in bringing Jews on the margin back to the fold, let's not forget those already within the family. Let's make sure that they are not neglected in the process. Resources are also needed to keep Jewish life rich, varied, and vibrant.

Priority #5: Renewing Jewish Life in the Former Soviet Union

In the Former Soviet Union JDC, the Jewish Agency, Lubavitch and ORT, and others have made great inroads into replenishing Jewish infrastructure, restoring Jewish memory, and bringing that last great frontier of the Jewish people back into the mainstream. **JDC and the Claims Conference are presently bringing relief to over 260,000 impoverished elderly Jews**, the majority of whom are the double victims of both the Nazi era and Communism. But we are nowhere near completing that task.

Nor is the Jewish Agency done with facilitating aliyah for those who wish to leave. But as Nettie Gross in a recent issue of *Jerusalem Report* points out, about 270,000 non-Jewish Russians are presently in Israel, and many would convert if the obstacles were less formidable. Hopefully reason will ultimately prevail so that this unnecessary stigma can be removed.

Priority #6: Keeping Small Jewish Communities Alive

Sustaining small Jewish communities is an ongoing task. For very little money we are helping Jewish communities survive in Bombay, Casablanca, Belgrade, Tunis, Sofia, Bratislava, to name but a few cities receiving aid from overseas. Without our help these historic communities would be lost forever. Some might say, "Why bother?" Because despite dire predictions made to me in the past twenty-five years that most of them would die out, Jewish communities have clung tenaciously to life and have persevered.

Reclamation of Jewish communal property in Eastern Europe will help rebuild their Jewish communities and make them infra-structurally self-sufficient. Budapest, Prague, Zagreb and Warsaw are well on their way toward rehabilitation. Bucharest, Sofia, Bratislava, and Belgrade have some way yet to go. But they'll get there in the end with our technical help.

The current crisis in Argentina, with its "new Jewish poor" initially posed a new challenge to care providers. Why should we come to the assistance of Jews in a Western democracy? Traditionally, most of our welfare recipients were victims of the Holocaust or of Communism or living in inhospitable host environments. Would we provide direct relief if, say, London or Paris suffered a recession? We came to the conclusion that Argentina had suffered a series of catastrophic mishaps that warranted our assistance as a special case: the bombing of the Israel embassy, destruction of the Buenos Aires federation building and the deaths of most of the personnel, collapse of several community Jewish banks, and finally Argentina's economic meltdown. In Argentina we discovered two new categories of needy; the newly poor and the sudden poor.

Priority #7: Redeeming Jewish Hostages

During the last decade we have been phenomenally successful in redeeming hostages. We have rescued Jews from Iran, Syria, Ethiopia, and Yemen. We have pulled out of the line of fire Jews from Albania, Chechnya, Sarajevo, and Belgrade. We have moved hundreds of thousands of Jews from the Former Soviet Union. Most of those who remain in these countries do so by choice. However, the status of aliyah has changed in the Former Soviet Union and Ethiopia from rescue to emigration. We no longer "save" Jews from those regions; we help them emigrate.

Yet, there are still Jews in potential danger, depending on what happens in the international arena. Over 20,000 Jews remain in Iran. Jews in Morocco and Tunisia depend on those country's regimes for protection against the Moslem street. Similarly the well-being of the 30,000 Jews of Turkey depends on the stability of the army. In all these countries there is a seething undercurrent of tension generated by radical Moslems

seeking to supplant their governments with Islamic states. Surprisingly, Iran is an exception as it protects its Jewish community provided the latter defers to that country's anti-Israel stance. Continuous monitoring is still needed in all these countries.

Restitution for Holocaust Survivors No Longer a Priority

Restitution has disappeared from my priority list, thanks to the efforts of the Claims Conference the World Jewish Congress, and the World Jewish Restitution Organization. We, the Jewish people, have demanded and by and large received at least some degree of recompense from the perpetrators and exploiters of Jewish suffering. Hundreds of thousands of survivors have benefited and will benefit from these efforts. While we were right to seek justice there has been one unavoidable downside—it has ruffled some feathers in Europe. That old anti-Semitic canard—"The greedy Jews are at it again"—has been given renewed life.

We must continue to help Nazi victims until the very last one has passed away, hopefully with as much comfort and dignity as we can bring to their bleak lives. Having been helped by our American Jewish community during the Communist era, when they were shut off from Nazi reparations they too have benefited from new agreements with the German government, thanks to the sustained efforts of the Claims Conference and the World Jewish Restitution Organization. This new infusion of aid helps supplement our own continuing assistance for this population.

CONCLUSION

Despite all these concerns, I take comfort that the American Jewish community is the best-organized and most effective community in the history of the Jewish Diaspora, despite occasional gripes and "family" disputes. We have seen Israel grow into a regional superpower. We are much better prepared for the challenges of the future than our forbears were 100 years ago at the dawn of the great tragedy to come. The American Jewish community, which shares world Jewish leadership with the Government of Israel, will be called upon to play a major role in the struggle to overcome those obstacles.

At the 2001 General Assembly, at a plenary, I was asked if I had any dreams for the Jewish world. I said my dream was for the JDC to go out of business. That would mean we, as a Jewish people, would have attained parity in the family of nations. We have not yet reached that stage, and my dream remains just that. Once again, adversity has brought us all closer together. So for the foreseeable future, we, the American Jewish philanthropic community, joint leaders with Israel of the Jewish people, will need to soldier on, rescuing Jews at risk, helping needy Jews, strengthening Jewish communal infrastructure, and rehabilitating communities that have been damaged by political events.

While we set about tackling the super priorities, it is also business as usual for us professionals. It is up to us, in our tens of thousands worldwide, to keep a cool head, help create and navigate strategic positions in our communities, and keep our institutions running smoothly. As the backbone of Jewish communal life, it is expected of us.

Mazel Tov

to

Steve Solender

A great guy and professional colleague



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FEDERATION**
LOS ANGELES