

## Supporting Israel Without Dividing the Jewish People

**By CLAL Faculty**

During the past four weeks, as reports of violence in the Middle East have become a regular feature on the evening news, members of the CLAL faculty have heard reactions from thousands of North American Jews. What can be said after seeing images of Israeli soldiers lynched by mobs, Palestinian mothers weeping for their children, American seamen returning from a bombing, and acts of hatred against Jews around the world? In each city we visit, our faculty members have heard the voices of people who desire to air their frustrations, express their concerns and do something to foster change.

From the very beginning of the present crisis, Jewish organizations have tried to be a voice for American Jews. Out of their love for and commitment to Israel, leaders have issued strong statements expressing the American Jewish community's support for Israel and its current government. Our emotional energy is clearly behind those in power who seek a peaceful resolution to the crisis, but in the face of complex political realities, American Jews need to hear more than such rhetorical statements of support. We need to hear firsthand accounts from Israel and to discuss practical strategies for the future. Considering that Israelis themselves are bitterly divided over what should be done, and that they live day-to-day with a government that must shift positions to build coalitions, oversimplified statements of American Jewish unity and support run the risk of glossing over a serious debate on the future of the peace process. This debate matters because, on this issue more than any other, the American Jewish community can have an impact on world politics – and ultimately on the lives of the people who are caught in this crisis.

The events of the past weeks have generated intense feelings of grief, compassion, rage, hopelessness, and the desire to act. Not surprisingly, the Jewish voices answering “What should we do?” are diverse.

There are those who say that there should be no more compromises, and those that place our only hope in renewing a commitment to deal making. Some say that America should force both sides to the table, others that America should back off. Some say that we have no partner, others say that we must work with anyone willing to negotiate. Some want to protect the rights of Jewish settlers, others want to give them new homes. Some want to go to war, others prefer to live in a perpetual stalemate.

If CLAL has learned anything from twenty-five years of working in local communities, it is that meaningful Jewish unity can only emerge through a deliberative process that respects the community's real diversity of opinion.

In the past, when American Jews have been unified behind political causes, Jewish communal leaders have drawn upon this unity to achieve results. Whether the challenge was providing settlement assistance to Jewish refugees from war-torn Europe, defending a beleaguered Israel against annihilation in May of 1967, or rescuing Jews from the Soviet Union or Ethiopia in the '70s and '80s, the community as a whole was in basic agreement about the legitimacy of these goals.

On the current issue of Israel and the Palestinians, American Jews are divided not only by tactical challenges, but also by the deeper values that inform our understanding of peace and security. Do we want an imposed peace? A peace based on military superiority? A peace based on mutuality? What price are we willing to pay for peace? And what are we willing to give up to achieve it? American Jews are asking these questions and they are coming up with a variety of answers. So today the challenge for leadership is as much to elicit the range of opinion within the community, as it is to issue a rallying cry.

The reality is this: No one person or organization has all the answers for all the questions Israel must face. Each organization expresses a single facet of the complex matrix of feelings and opinions that are coursing through American Jewish communities. For that reason, we need to be open and to listen closely to the diverse opinions and sentiments being expressed. Israelis and Americans need to speak to one another. So do historians and policy strategists. Those who have supported the peace process and those who have been critical of it must now be in dialogue. People who define themselves as religious, and those who define themselves as secular, should be brought to the table for a respectful conversation. From these conversations, we can break out of the old models of political posturing and in-fighting, and constructively respond to meet the new challenges that face Israel in the coming years.

For Jewish organizations that do not aim to be the voice of the Jewish people as a whole, but do have a particular stand on the issues, this is a challenging time. The rhetoric they use can be self-defeating, and even destructive, splitting the Jewish world into competing factions and imparting a bitter tone to public discourse. These organizations, which need to be heard, have a better chance if they can develop a way of engaging with one another that is honest and respectful of genuine differences of opinion. In particular, to accuse those with whom one disagrees of being disloyal or traitorous to Israel is ultimately destructive of Jewish community.

For the newly constituted United Jewish Communities (U.J.C.) and the National Conference of Presidents of Major Jewish Organizations who formally represent American Jewry as a whole, the task is especially daunting. To be truly representative, they must find a way of communicating that reflects the complexity of feelings and diversity of opinions that characterize the people that they represent. They must not speak out in a single voice that suppresses or

marginalizes, even unintentionally, the full range of opinions in the debate about Israel's future.

Solidarity rallies convened by these organizations ought to include as many voices as possible, reflective of the full range of opinion within the American Jewish community. Perhaps they might even come close to reflecting the range of opinion in Israel itself.

Press releases and advertisements that evoke unity by articulating the lowest common denominator of support for Israel may obscure important differences that are essential to the debate. The result will be that those who feel that they are not included in the 'consensus' will eventually stop trying to participate in the conversation. They will drop out, turn away, and go elsewhere. In short, they will cease to pay attention. Is it any wonder that so many Jews in America are no longer connecting to the Jewish community?

Today the greatest challenge facing the American Jewish community is not the lack of consensus about what is to be done, but the lack of open, honest, inclusive and respectful conversation. Creating such conversations across the American Jewish world should be the top priority in community centers, synagogues, boardrooms, and even around kitchen tables.

We are not so naive as to suppose that such conversations will resolve all differences of opinion. Embracing diversity without imposing a premature or false unity is the greatest challenge we have in both America and within the Jewish people.

In the coming weeks, CLAL faculty will be addressing these concerns, and fostering inclusive dialogue in the cities across North America where we work.

Jewish solidarity does not have to be a thing of the past. It is our hope that through our dialogues, and through others that we can spark, we will foster a new model of solidarity – one that encompasses our differences without undermining the feeling of unity. This model of solidarity would make our diversity our greatest asset and would serve us in the years ahead as we face the complex task of realizing our shared dream of a Middle East where all people can live without fear.

In remembering that dream, we may find comfort in the words of an ancient midrash: "Redemption will not come suddenly, but gradually, like the sun as it slowly rises at dawn."