

NOTEBOOK

Obama's Jews By Bernard Avishai

Last May, as he claimed the Democratic nomination, Barack Obama was ahead among Jewish voters 2 to 1. Yet, according to cable-and-blog wisdom, that was a serious problem for him. Jews—you know, “the demographic”—had voted 3 or more to 1 for Clinton, Gore, and Kerry. Jews are only about 2 percent of the population, but they make up almost 4 percent of actual voters. There are, famously, almost half a million Jewish voters in southern Florida alone. If, say, 100,000 defected to McCain, Obama would likely lose the state, even if the chads don't hang this time. Jews are also nearly 5 percent of the Pennsylvania electorate, which Kerry carried by only 2.5 percent.

After the 1968 election, when Jews voted almost 5 to 1 for Humphrey over Nixon, the late Milton Himmelfarb groused in *Commentary* that Jews earned like Episcopalians and voted like Puerto Ricans. Are Jews finally growing aloof from the Democratic nominee—come to think of it, like Puerto Ricans—because he is African American? Will his fate hinge, as CNN's Jack Cafferty suggested, on “a few old Jews in Century Village”? As Obama himself joked at a February meeting with Jews in Cleveland (Ohio is another shaky “battleground”), doesn't every Jewish family have an uncle skeptical of the *schwartz*?

Not so funny, really, and not just residual tribalism. Early in the primaries, emails suspected of originating in ultra-rightist circles in Jerusalem

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spread virally among North American Jews (mine came via my sister in Toronto) alleging Obama's two degrees of separation from Louis Farrakhan and attaching a picture of Obama schmoozing at a 1998 dinner with the late Palestinian-American scholar Edward Said. Were not these “associations,” as one email put it, “worrying”? And was not worry itself the important reality? If the “perception out there” is that Obama has failed to bring Jews and African Americans together—he promised, after all, to unite loyal Democrats in a new and poignant way—is not his candidacy a false dawn?

What Obama had to do, so the argument went, was allay Jewish anxieties, as “electable” Democrats had done before him. William Kristol, Himmelfarb's nephew, all but instructed Obama in the *New York Times* on how to prove himself as “Zionist” as McCain: emphasize not only “current assaults on Jews” but also “sacrifices for the sake of freedom, the triumph of good over evil.” And what was Obama's speech at AIPAC, delivered the day after he won the nomination, if not his effort to better the instruction? He laughed off the emails. He spoke mistily of a Zionist camp counselor. In July, he traveled to Israel and pledged himself to a “special relationship.” Shouldn't

this be enough to satisfy Kristol and other skeptics?

This line of argument mischaracterizes American Jews. They do not amount to some organic whole, nor is their vote the expression of a “Zionist” DNA that Obama has somehow undernourished. If any-

thing, Obama's campaign is exposing the fault lines among Jews, which are serious, while implicitly challenging the great silent majority to repudiate Jewish organizational leaders (and neoconservative celebrities like Kristol), whose militant simplicities purport to represent them—and don't.

Since the term “American Jews” encompasses everyone from Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg to the Beastie Boys, moguls like Sam Zell to the (arguably deceased) Lubavitcher Rebbe, almost anything you might say about them will be wrong. But this, in a way, is my point. Most Jews see themselves as idiosyncratic citizens in need of a strong social compact. Polls show that 50 percent of Jews call themselves liberal or “progressive”; and only 21 percent, “conservative.”

These liberal impulses have a history. Immigrant and first-generation Jews, as Philip Roth puts it, assumed Democrats were for the underdog, the unions, the anti-Nazi war; liberal activism meant vigilance against anti-Semitism and more: “Our heroes were Roosevelt, La Guardia, and Brandeis,” Roth says; “we were against the Republican oppressor.” Which is why their children, the baby boomers, were drawn to the civil rights movement, the signal experience of their political lives.

“Our sense of wholeness,” Obama writes in *Dreams From My Father*, “would have to arise from something more fine than the bloodlines we'd inherited.” Most older Jews read such words about identity, or just observe Obama's body language, and sense a kindred spirit; that Obama admires Roth's novels hardly seems surprising.

As important, Obama is running at least 20 percent higher among voters under thirty than among those over sixty-five. Half of young Jews are marrying non-Jews; they see a competition among cultural forms as natural, an opportunity for vibrancy.

These attitudes extend to world affairs. Almost 80 percent of Jews still say that “remembrance” of the Holocaust is very important to one’s Jewish identity, but most do not draw strident conclusions from this. Pat Buchanan railed against an Iraq “war party,” top-heavy with Jews harboring “a ‘passionate attachment’ to a nation not our own.” Actually, 70 percent of Jews rejected the war in Iraq as early as 2005, a rate higher than that of any other American religious group. Some 70 percent today support America’s working to resolve the Arab–Israeli conflict and exerting pressure on both Israelis and Palestinians. About 60 percent under thirty-five feel an attachment to Israel, but an even greater proportion have never visited.

So it is a fair guess that the approximately two thirds of Jews who support Obama, like the Democratic electorate generally, do so more passionately than they supported various Democrats in the past five presidential elections. The majority certainly do not expect candidates to pander to them regarding Israel. Ask American Jews to list issues that determine their vote and almost three times as many choose “health care” as choose “Israel” (about 8 percent), though very few of them lack health care. Nor—if you look closely, which ardent Zionists do—has Obama argued for giving Israel a free hand; rather, he has insisted on reviving “existing American initiatives” for Israeli-Palestinian peacemaking early in his administration. He promised an “undivided” Jerusalem—a capital without barbed wire—not the Likud’s “united” Jerusalem under exclusive Israeli sovereignty. Obama visited Ramallah; McCain did not. And yet the vast

majority of Jews have stuck with Obama.

What has been so deceptive about American Jewish attitudes is how out of synch majority opinion is with the very public views of many Jewish organizational leaders—people who’ve seemed

at odds not only with Obama’s approaches to the Middle East but with his liberal and globalist demeanor. Some of these leaders—Abraham Foxman of the Anti-Defamation League, David Harris of the American Jewish Committee—made a show of condemning the most scurrilous emails about Obama. But for years, Foxman’s ADL could be counted on to attack as anti-Semitic any critics of Likud’s occupation policies. The American Jewish Committee until 2006 underwrote *Commentary*, which “spouts a Likudnik bellicosity” (says *Time*’s Joe Klein) in addition to having led the 1970s charge against affirmative action and feminism. Malcolm Hoenlein, head of the Conference of Presidents of Major American Jewish Organizations, has orchestrated an endorsement by his umbrella group of a “united Jerusalem” under Israeli sovereignty. Hoenlein complained that “there is a legitimate concern over the zeitgeist around [Obama’s] campaign.” It was an open secret that AIPAC strongly supported the Iraq war and, more recently, advocated for the use of force to embargo Iran.

All of which raises a question. Why should the Jewish community continue to tolerate this leadership? Isn’t Obama’s campaign the occasion for repudiating it? Discontent has been building anyway. The head of America’s 1.5 million liberal “Reform” Jews, Eric Yoffie, publicly rejected Hoenlein’s Jerusalem statement. The new J Street lobby, founded by a peace coalition of Jews and non-Jews to counter AIPAC, is growing fast. But the Obama campaign itself offers a coalition for liberal Americans to organize on a broad scale for the first time in a generation. It has brushed back such African-American leaders as Al Sharpton, who have drawn lines around, and made careers from, tired ethnic grievances. It has invited the majority of Jews to dissociate themselves from Manichaean demagoguery parading as “Jewish interests.”

Make no mistake, the Jewish right—though a minority—is rooted in a political culture of its own that will deny Obama historic levels of Jewish support no matter what he does. Surveys have made it clear that the 25 percent of Jews who shade into varieties of orthodoxy, who stick

to homogeneous Jewish neighborhoods and schools, tend to embrace a vicarious neo-Zionist identity. The American Jewish right—for example, philanthropist Ronald Lauder, president of the World Jewish Congress—opposes the Israeli government *only* if it negotiates over Jerusalem.

Rightist attitudes, like liberal ones, also have a history. The Six-Day War in 1967 was a watershed for Jews celebrating what they took to be Israel’s purpose. Jews everywhere were swept up by the victory, and faith in the justice of Jewish armed power helped, subtly, to shape Jewish attitudes toward American politics and foreign policy. Community leaders began insisting on the “centrality” of Israel for Jewish identity. They pointed to a valiant Israeli democracy and shrugged off the occupation, which they assumed would be temporary. The preeminent organizations in American Jewish life, local philanthropic federations, began to devote as much as half of their funds to Israel (which is still more or less true).

After 1967, more and more Jewish leaders assumed the responsibility of protecting Israel’s good name—during exchanges of fire on the Suez Canal, terrorist attacks, and, most horribly, the 1973 war. In the back of their minds was the need to reverse the U.S. State Department’s continuing tilt toward the Arab oil regimes during the 1950s and ’60s. Many Jews were drawn to political allies of Washington Senator Henry “Scoop” Jackson, who argued, flatly, that Israel was to be promoted as America’s key regional ally against the Soviets.

Israeli self-defense also seemed an inspiration to ethnic realpolitik in America: on many minds, too, was the violence in U.S. cities, like the confrontation in 1968 between Jewish teachers and black parents demanding community control of schools in Brooklyn’s Ocean Hill-Brownsville. Indeed, the seeds for an agonistic view of American Jewish power were evident as early as 1964—the year Jews voted 9 to 1 for Johnson over Goldwater. The previous year, *Commentary* editor Norman Podhoretz had written his notorious article “My Negro Problem—and Ours.” Podhoretz acknowl-

edged how the civil rights movement was cardinal for Jews, but that was precisely his “problem.” He implied that Jews were soft but had made it; that their support for the economic empowerment of black toughs (“who act as though they have nothing to lose”) was if not self-destructive then at least disingenuous. That certain black militants came to rationalize anti-Semitism as a form of rage against ghetto storekeepers and landlords seemed to make his point.

For the Jewish right, then, there was a universal Jewish vulnerability that required a universal Jewish toughness. It was as if there were an ongoing referendum on the virtue of Jewish power, whose implicit foils were Great Society initiatives at home and United Nations’ resolutions abroad. When Ronald Reagan was elected, neoconservatives joined the revolution and pro-Israel leaders cozied up to the administration. Liberalism, which purports to mitigate conflict, was viewed as a kind of schlemiel faith in the conscience of the world. And after 9/11, if you were managing the brand of the West’s key strategic asset, the “clash of civilizations” became useful.

This rhetoric has become entrenched among Jewish leaders. Local Jewish federations have more or less succeeded in sustaining a big tent, but after thirty years of Israeli governments that increased by tenfold Jewish settlements on the West Bank, the most activist leaders drifted to the right. Too often, Jerusalem has seemed for many Jewish leaders not a mythic object of desire but a kind of world-historical Epcot Center, while Israel has seemed something between a bastion against gentile hatred and a great Jewish convention to which they imagine themselves superdelegates. Supporting this leadership, aside from the Orthodox, are recent Russian-Jewish immigrants, free-market radicals, Joe Lieberman admirers, and some considerable part of the half a million Israelis living in America.

The point is, most Jews identify not with Lieberman but with Jon Stewart’s send-ups of Lieberman. One recent poll showed Obama almost twice as popu-

lar as Lieberman among Jews. Yet this majority has never confronted their rightist leadership—not, at least, within the precincts of institutional politics—because to do so would have meant engaging in the very parochialism most wished to distance themselves from. Besides, why embarrass Israelis, who were making sacrifices American Jews were not? What did American Jews really know of Israel’s politics and perils anyway? What did they know of Hebrew culture? The majority poured their energies into their universities, their professions, their families—that is, into their America.

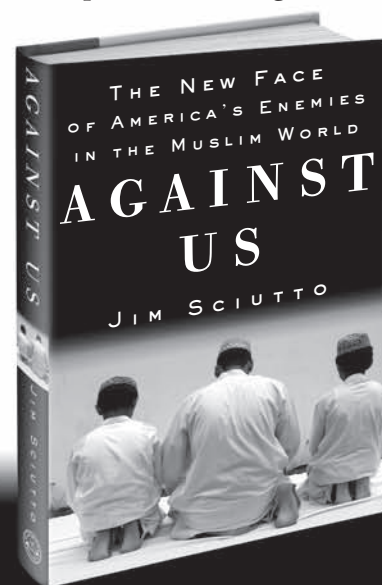
This indifference is just what the current election must begin to change. Rightist notions like “the global war on terror” have shown how Israel’s conflicts are consonant with America’s. The Israeli government’s ambivalence about ending its occupation, its default to military force, its tensions with Iran, etc., have seemed a kind of U.S. policy agenda in microcosm. And if America approaches its Middle East problems, as Obama insists it must, not with military preemption but with an emphasis on collective security, patient alliances, containment, the power of the global economy, and so forth, how can this not imply a verdict on Israeli occupation?

Obama’s campaign is an implicit opportunity for a new leadership to emerge, a contemporary equivalent of Rabbi Heschel locking arms with Dr. King. The campaign has given the Jewish majority a new way to focus their political energies, which looks much like their former way—organized work toward a tolerant commonwealth. Today, over 35 percent of Jews earn more than \$100,000; at least 40 percent contribute to political campaigns, amounting to a staggering one fifth of Democratic donors. Not coincidentally, the Obama campaign has sponsored a dozen Jewish outreach committees in major cities. Obama’s agenda, interracial symbolism, grass-roots organization, and vast fund-raising network have all the trappings of a movement. The new movement, like the old one, stands for integration—not just in American society but on a global scale. Who if not American Jews have had that dream? ■

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