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Series A: Writings and Addresses. 1947-1991

Box 3, Folder 8, AJC 70th anniversary meeting, 13-16 May 1976.





THE AMERICAN JEWISH COMMITTEE'S SEVENTIETH ANNIVERSARY MEETING

MAY 13-16, 1976 • THE WASHINGTON HILTON, WASHINGTON, D C

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to such appeals, but even we are not immune to near panic at times. In other quarters in Jewish life there has been similar questioning. Rabbi Alexander Schindler, head of the Presidents Conference, has asked for greater selectivity of the issues and the use of more critical judgment when it comes to confronting our Administration on behalf of Israel.

So this is one area for greater independence. More important is the larger question of the involvement of American Jews in Israeli decision making -- the nature of this relationship and the opportunities for, and limits of, the two-way communication and mutual interaction. To explore such problems in some depth, AJC last year created a special Task Force consisting of about a dozen American Jews and an equal number of Israelis from many walks of life. This Task Force held its first conference in Jerusalem last February. The sessions revealed an Israeli openness to freer and franker communication and collaboration with Jews from the Diaspora and, moreover, a receptivity to the notion that Diaspora Jews should exercise a judgmental and critical role in many areas of Israeli life.

As many here know, this was also the experience of our Board of Governors in February, in extensive travels within Israel and discussions with Israeli leadership. The general view in Israel then was that such a critical role is both appropriate and necessary.

There are a host of domestic problems besetting Israeli society today -- economic, social and cultural -- on which the experience and professional and technical know-how of American Jews can be most useful. Even broad questions of Israeli foreign policy should, in my judgment, not be excluded from joint discussions and critical but friendly intercessions. This is a role that AJC leadership is uniquely prepared to play, but as part of -- not instead of -- its unremitting efforts to sustain American public attitudes and official policy in support of Israel. This is the direction I believe we will move toward in the year ahead.

REMARKS

by Marc H. Tanenbaum

Shaping and influencing public opinion in America will be decisive in terms of the way that the new administration perceives Israel in its foreign policy. Americans need to understand deeply and sympathetically how fundamental are the challenges that face Israel and this country as well.

One statistic that is very important to keep in mind in this connection is that, according to the population figures of 1975, 135 million Americans

identify themselves as either Roman Catholic, mainline Protestant, Evangelical Christian, Greek Orthodox or members of black churches. The churches are the largest system of organized communication in this country. One of my Protestant friends reminds me periodically that there are more Methodist churches in America than there are post offices.

And so, a priority emphasis for us during the coming period will be to continue and intensify our in-depth interpretation in systematic ways with major centers of Christian organizational leadership and public opinion in every city in the United States.

Of the Jewish organizations, the American Jewish Committee has the largest and most extensive network of communication with all of the major denominations in the United States. If Carter is elected, AJC will have a major responsibility, precisely because we have almost a corner on the market of strengthening Jewish relationships with the Evangelical world. And the Evangelical community will emerge as a critical factor in the event that Carter is elected

I hope what I am about to say does not sound apocalyptic. I think we are facing a serious and sustained effort literally to dehumanize Israel and the Jewish people in the international community. The Zionism-racism attack is what Professor Gordon Allport has called "verbal violence" in his study on racial prejudice. To say a large thing in a simple way, Allport reminds us that the lynchings in America always were preceded by verbal violence against the blacks. They were called niggers, coons, they were stripped of their humanity; they became abstractions. Then, Allport declares, it was a very easy thing to hang an abstraction from a tree. A dehumanized abstraction makes very small claims on the conscience of mankind

The campaign to convert Israel into the Zionist abstraction and to link it with racism is a major effort to dehumanize the people of Israel and now to dehumanize the Jews -- to make us into abstractions. It is an effort to put Jews outside of the pale of human sentiment and compassion.

Exposing that Nazi Streicher-like effort is going to be a central part of our interpretation in the American religious community. When Christians hear about the analogy between the current attacks on Israel and Jews and the racist techniques of the Ku Klux Klan and the Nazis, they begin to comprehend the seriousness of the Zionist attack.

The 74 page study we have prepared of Christian reactions here and abroad illustrates that very well. Although Christians may have ambiguous feelings about Zionism as an ideology, and critical attitudes about some of Israel's policies, they have understood that these attacks are nothing other than a Nazi-like, anti-Semitic campaign against Israel and the Jews. And they have been willing to stand up and be counted against such vilification. That understanding and support will have to be deepened in the months

and years ahead and AJC's Interreligious Affairs Department will be programming on every level of our work with Roman Catholics, mainline Protestants and Evangelicals toward that end.

I believe that Ambassador Herzog's reference to Christian response to the Lebanese situation requires some further comment. The Christian world has, in fact, responded. Perhaps, the response has not been as loud or as dramatic as one would think ought to be called for by that massacre. However, the Pope has hardly missed an opportunity to make a public statement. Archbishop Bernardin, President of the National Conference of Catholic Bishops, made a very forthright and thoughtful statement on the situation in Lebanon. But the issue is not the response of Christian leadership. The issue is the response of the Islamic world to the intervention of the Pope. The Pope has sent his most effective diplomatic emissaries to Lebanon to bring about negotiations, and they were told by the radical Moslems, "Pack your bags and get the hell out of here on 24 hours notice, we have no use for you."

The Christian world must be helped to understand what is at stake here -- the fundamental issue of pluralism in the Middle East. In the fanatical minds of radical Moslems, as Bernard Lewis documented in Commentary, there is no theological and therefore no ideological conception of pluralism and co-existence. That is why the Kurds can be wiped out. The Middle East is perceived as Dar al Islam. It is a unified, homogeneous Arab world and, in that conception, there are no ideological categories for co-existence with the non-Moslem world. The way you deal with non-Moslems is either to convert them or drive them out.

The meeting with the Vatican in Tripoli ended up (and it was never reported in the press) in a salient moment of confrontation. A Moslem scholar stood up before the head of the Vatican and said, "We want the Vatican and the Christian world to know that Africa is an Islamic world. Islam is the religion for the black people." And the Catholics sat in the room overwhelmed, and then they mumbled something about co-existence and the pluralistic future for Africa.

And here, I think, AJC has a unique role to play programmatically. I believe that we have a major responsibility to contribute to the education of the Western Christian world that beneath all of the issues is the fundamental question of an absence of any commitment by the Islamic world to pluralism and co-existence, not only in the Middle East, but in Africa and in Asia as well. This will not be something that we can do in several weeks or even several months. It is a long-term obligation which we must undertake, if ultimately we are to make some contribution to modifying that world view.

No matter how the conflict in the Middle East is worked out, and hopefully it will be with peace and some form of stability in the area, we American Jews will need to confront the emergence of a whole new reality, namely, the penetration of Islam into American society, Western culture and Western civilization.

Where there are the major concentrations of Moslem populations in this country, Islam is now beginning to claim that it be acknowledged as one of the three or four major faiths of America. Moslems are now members of Interreligious Councils in several key cities. They can sit on these bodies and veto resolutions supportive of Israel.

As Arab money begins to set up chairs of Islamic and Near Eastern studies at major universities throughout the United States, we may have similar situations to the one they face in England, where every chair of Near Eastern studies is dominated by Arab money and Arab scholars, and there is a policy of excluding Jews.

Another of our long-term obligations will be to work with Third World people in this country. We recently had a meeting with a leader of the World Council of Churches, who came to our office from Nairobi. He told us how he was struck by the degree to which black African people are sympathetic to Israel. There is complete disparity between the policy taken by their governments and many of the black African people. The people have had good experiences with Israel and they see Israel as a model of self-determination.

There are possibilities for us to exploit that reality. We need to develop personal human relationships with Africans and Asians in this country through business contacts, university contacts, and so on, as part of our contribution to trying to return black Africans to a more rational relationship with Israel and with the Jewish community.