

Premises Of a "Jewish" Viewpoint Towards International Human Rights

The Jewish community has a double stake in the triumph of political freedom and human rights everywhere.

To begin with, there are religious commandments which outlaw violations of basic human rights. But there is another commandment which Jews must obey: to survive. This commandment also requires Jews to oppose violations of human freedom and rights everywhere, as a practical matter.

Political freedom is the key to Jewish security in America, and to Jewish survival in Israel. If the values of freedom, and if the countries which value freedom are diminished, Israel and Jews everywhere are directly threatened. Therefore, the first guideline for Jewish communal action is to oppose political oppression everywhere.

A second guideline necessarily follows: The concern is not with removing any given oppressor, but with removing oppression. Passing the baton of oppression from one oppressor to another is not the point.

As John F. Kennedy said: "To those new states whom we welcome to the rank of the free, we pledge our word that one form of colonial control shall not have passed away merely to be replaced by a far more iron tyranny."

A third guideline also follows: While every oppressive act and violation of human rights must be opposed, there must be special concern with governments which institutionalize acts of oppression and violations of human rights; and which do not institutionalize due process of law. And there must be special concern with closed societies, as distinct from open societies.

An open society is not one which is absolutely free, or absolutely good, or absolutely without violations of human rights. An open society is one in which political restrictions are not so great that they prevent change for the better, towards the will of the people. Thus, the mechanisms of a free society are free speech, free assembly, and democratic representation. Closed societies are those whose restrictions against speech, assembly and democratic representation are so severe that no change can peacefully take place. That is the meaning of Kennedy's reference to "a far more iron tyranny."

The "Free world" represents the values of the open society. The United States is the symbolic leader, and indeed the prime defender of the "Free world" and of the principles of the open society, although often in the breach.

Thus, in order to fulfill its imperative to oppose political oppression, the American Jewish community should become actively involved in moving American Foreign policy in this direction: To seek to modify or replace governments of oppression; while actively seeking democratic alternatives to that government; and actively opposing alternatives which are hostile towards political freedom or the free world.

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SUBJECT: Success and Failure Factors in Shaping Opinion About the Middle East

A. The Factors

There is a large body of knowledge about the shaping of public opinion/public policy -- in general, and about the Middle East -- which is often shockingly ignored.

This body of knowledge has been compiled in the past two decades by social research, survey analysis and America's leading experts in shaping public opinion and public policy.

While it is sometimes useful to re-invent the wheel, it is a particular waste of resources to re-invent the square wheel. In a highly distilled fashion, the conclusions of this body of knowledge are these:

1- A program to shape opinion is effective only to the extent that it is selectively aimed at special targets and not done broadside.

2- American public opinion on Israel is generally shaped by relevant political leadership; not by direct media assault.

3- The medium in which to work in order to effectively shape such opinion is the medium of "ideas," not the medium of "images" (see below).

4- The public's opinion on Middle East matters is generally unaffected by those "images" which many Jews (and Arabs) think is important. (Examples of images which do not seriously affect public opinion: the image of Jews or Arabs as illegal usurpers in Israel or on the West Bank; the image of Israelis as inflexible, or bombers in Lebanon; the image of the PLO as terrorists, etc.) At most, such images are usually after-the-fact supports of opinion already held.

5- The "ideas" which make a difference to most Americans have to do, not with the specific moral or legal behavior of Israel or the Arabs, but with Israel's importance in American national interest (that is, America's prestige, America's contest with the Soviet Union, America's access to oil, America's jobs). To complete the circle, these "ideas" about Israel's role are mainly impressed on the public mind by relevant public leaders -- not vice versa.

6- People don't read or listen to material about foreign affairs more than several minutes a day. People don't read or listen in depth to anything they're not interested in. People avoid hearing, seeing or believing those images which are contrary to the basic ideas they hold. People have a built-in resistance to opinions or information which are identified with a "highly interested" source.

7- The Jewish public and the Arab public obviously respond in a different way than the other publics in America. In assessing a proposed activity, the decision has to be made whether that activity is primarily designed to inform or stimulate or please the Jewish population -- in which case much of the above body of knowledge does not apply -- or whether the purpose is to affect American public opinion and public policy -- in which case the above body of knowledge does apply.