

THE MEDIA ARE NOT ALL-POWERFUL

It is about time to debunk the Power of the Media. The Jews should know something about this subject from their experience with Israel-and-the-media. And Americans in general should know a little more about the subject, following the recent presidential "debates."

Most of the people who were going to vote for Reagan before the TV debate, and thought that Mondale "won" the debate, were still going to vote for Reagan anyway. The biggest effect of the Mondale debate victory was probably on some unyielding anti-Reagan people who had been uneasy about Mondale. Of course, they would never have voted for Reagan in any case; and few of them, at the last moment, would have stayed away from the polling booths.

Is that a cynical view of the matter? No, quite the contrary. The cynical view has been that the American public can easily be bamboozled by a slick TV image. Some people, for example, saw Reagan as "The Great Communicator," and felt that his slick actor-background image on the TV tube would sweep the unthinking public -- even though, many of them believed, he was empty of substance.

It turned out that Mondale was "The Great Communicator," relatively speaking; and Reagan presented the fumbling non-slick image. People noted this, in some abstract way, but did not change their votes.

Let us recall the experiences with Israel and the media. During the Lebanese war, the American media generally lacerated Israel. There were those pictured results of Israeli bombing. And in a situation which was enough filled with ambivalence, the media did not seem to provide the kind of reflective background which would at least have given some larger perspective on what was going on.

Of course, that is the nature of the mass media. As a Jewish poet, Karl Kraus, once wrote: "Newspaper jobs would be easily sought; if all that was needed were printer's ink. It is not enough that one cannot think; one must also know how to express lack of thought."

But the people are capable of doing their own thinking. And they are not so easily manipulated. Their basic values and beliefs do not go skittering like bowling pins every time there is a media impact.

As long as we have an open society, and can get enough information through touching on basic values and beliefs, the public is not going to get knocked over by any single set of media impacts. In the long run, the media report what our public officials say about the importance of Israel to America. Even in San Francisco, our local Jewish

community mass media project reaches a cumulative audience of tens of millions on radio and TV each year. That is on top of the national programs and the films. So the public has the basis on which to make up their own minds.

Sure, many Americans were unhappy about what they saw on the Lebanese war. Most Americans were critical of Israel as having gone too far. But that did not alter their basic support of Israel.

Perhaps the best single rule in avoiding media hysteria, whether we are considering presidential debates or media coverage of Israel, is to apply a little modesty: by and large, the American public is no more foolish than you or I. If you are not manipulated, misled, bamboozled or bowled over by some media impact, however "slick," neither will the American public.