

WHO SPEAKS FOR JEWS

Who can speak for the Jews?

To answer the question, traditionally, with another question: "Can the Pope speak for the Catholics?" The Pope can speak ex cathedra for the Church always; he can speak for the Catholics, as political beings, only on certain subjects. The chances are that he can speak for most Catholics in his support of the Polish Solidarity movement. He can speak for the Church on birth control. But he does not speak for most American Catholics on birth control; the beliefs of American Catholics on that subject split about the same way as do the beliefs of the rest of the population.

If a Jewish leader says he is speaking ex cathedra for Judaism, one can hardly argue with him. There's no Jewish Pope, but there were Jewish prophets who were privy to Higher Authority. However, if a Jew says he is speaking for Jews as political beings, he must be asked: "for which Jews, on what issues?"

There are only two ways with which to determine what American Jews believe about public issues. One simple way is to ask them. A properly designed random sample of American Jews will determine the opinion pattern of all American Jews on any issue, within several percentage points one way or another. That is done, in some fashion, occasionally on a national scale, periodically in the San Francisco Bay Area.

The only other method of determining prevailing "Jewish opinion" is to assemble delegated representatives of all "engaged" Jews -- that is, the more than half who belong to some organization or congregation. Those delegates, then, act somewhat like any democratic body which votes on an issue about which there has been no referendum. Presumably they are reacting with backgrounds and general values which reflect their constituencies. The JCRC\$ of the country

are set up somewhat along those lines; and one of their functions is to reflect organized Jewry, whenever (and only whenever) a profound consensus emerges. The surveys, when they are taken, almost always confirm that consensus.

On what issues does such a consensus exist? On domestic issues, for example, it still exists on most church-state issues, and other basic constitutional issues such as freedom of speech. A heavy consensus among Jews exists on simple issues of social compassion, such as increased medical care for the aged. Such a heavy consensus does not exist on larger economic issues, such as tax policy for the repair of inflation. "Reaganomics," whatever that is, is not an issue of Jewish consensus.

On American foreign policy, with regard to the Middle East, there is a documented list of consensus issues. There is heavy consensus that the U.S. should not recognize or deal with the PLO, at least not until that organization believably and radically changes its direction that while the U.S. should try to maintain relations with Saudi Arabia, it should not do so by appeasing the Saudis: by giving without getting, by over-arming, by risking the security of Israel that the U.S. should treat Israel as the only politically stable and militarily viable ally the U.S. has in the Middle East, with necessary economic, military and diplomatic support that the U.S. should actively support the Camp David process.

There are fewer consensus items about Israeli foreign policy -- partly because, as American citizens, American Jews don't as often try to reach such a consensus. There does seem to be a consensus that Israel should not give up the "West Bank," except for hard security considerations -- but that Israel should not retain the "West Bank" for ideological reasons alone. And there is certainly a consensus that

Earl Raab
"Who Speaks for Jews?"
page 3

Israel should not give up Jerusalem for any reason. But there is no consensus among American Jews, anymore than there is among Israelis, on a myriad of Israeli tactical moves, such as the recent action on ^{the}Golan Heights.

Individual Jews and Jewish groups do not have to remain silent on matters about which there is not a clear Jewish consensus -- but, in those cases, they should make it clear that they are only speaking for themselves or their own special group; and that, despite their differences, they are part of the consensus on other related matters. But Jewish "spokesmen" should not attempt to speak for the "general Jewish public" except where they are authorized, by one of the methods indicated, to say that a general Jewish consensus, in fact, exists. No Jew can speak ex cathedra about public issues on behalf of "the Jewish community."

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