

YOU WERE THERE

"In the past," writes Nahum Barnea, distinguished Israeli journalist who is returning to Israel after a long stint in Washington, "the average Israeli used to consider the American Jew as a UJA contributor first and as a tourist or relative second. That attitude has changed in the past four years. There is now in Israel an acute awareness that Jewish political influence in the United States is the most important contribution of the American Jewish community to the welfare of Israel."

While there is always the danger of over-estimating Jewish political influence in America, the truth of Barnea's observation stands. Within major policy limits, the government can sometimes be significantly swayed in the tactic it employs.

A prime example may well be one of the reasons for the Sadat peace initiative. When the Carter administration came into power, Sadat felt that America, with its new comprehensive foreign affairs agenda, might push Israel into a position more favorable to Arab interests. Thus, while the Soviet-American communique worried Sadat somewhat because of the equity it gave the Soviet Union, nevertheless that communique contained a new American push towards the P.L.O. and a Palestinian State.

However, the public "firestorm" which followed that communique caused the Carter administration to pull up short, and, through the "working paper" to relieve the new pressure on Israel. It was then that Sadat became convinced that the U.S. would not put ultimate pressure on Israel - and since the short-range military option was not promising, and since Egypt desperately needed peace - he took the only alternative, in a bold and imaginative style.

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So the American public protest not only "saved Israel," in Abba Eban's words, but was also a contributing factor in the current peace drive. It was also a factor in saving the United States from a serious tactical error with respect to its own national interest.

That public protest, that turning point, was not just a Jewish effort, but it was led by American Jewish protest. It was not a sinister, highly-placed, behind-the-scenes effort; it was a grass-roots outpouring from every corner of the nation, alerting Congressmen to the danger, and alerting the administration to the strength of feeling.

It was you who did it, in other words. We are no longer in a country, or in a time, when a few wealthy Jews can turn the tide - or even when a delegation visiting Washington can by itself turn the tide. Washington has become wise to "delegations;" they can be considered empty gestures without the evidence of popular support.

But such an effective effort does not emerge spontaneously out of thin air. It requires a kind of sophisticated knowledge, of information-sharing, of timing, of community. If rallies were held, or mass mailing stimulated every Tuesday and Thursday, such protests would lose their edge. If Clevelanders moved with one kind of message and timing, and San Franciscans with another, such protests would lose their edge.

These observations apply to Soviet Jewry as well as to the Middle East. While morale-building communications with Soviet Jews should be ad libide from every quarter, the

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kind of political action vis-a-vis Washington which will save Soviet Jews, must increasingly be informed by that same kind of community action and discipline, national and local.

But Nahum Barnea's quote, to the effect that the political action of American Jews is the "most important contribution of the American Jewish community to Israel" does not establish competition between your political acts and your financial contributions to the Jewish Welfare Federation - anymore than there can be competition between your heart and your lungs. If there was not a solid Jewish community to provide the framework, the information-sharing, the consensus, the timing, our individual political acts would be isolated and ineffective.

The Jewish Welfare Federations, aside from their massive direct welfare help to Israel, maintain the American Jewish public affairs organizations and network, national and local, which make the process work. And they also sustain the local educational and welfare institutions which make a Jewish community in the first place.

So, both by your political acts and by your contributions to the J.W.F. have you been a direct participant in the current peace offensive in the Middle East. Now, for the trials of 1978.

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