American Jews and Israel: A Relationship in Transition

April 19, 2015

Session Three: Tiers and Tensions – The American Jewish Leadership and Israel

Takeaways:

- All three panelists felt that American Jewish public discourse concerning Israel has taken a turn for the worst. They all remarked on the fear-mongering, vitriol, and intolerance that has come to dominate the conversation, and all stressed the importance of greater acceptance and representation of differing viewpoints and more civility in public discourse.

- All highlighted the central place of education in their roles as American Jewish leaders. All three recalled times where they had to engage with board members or constituents who expressed views that opposed their own, with varying degrees of success.

Discussion Summaries:

Moderator: Amir Shaviv, JDC

David Ellenson, HUC-JIR

Ellenson dwelled upon the conflicts that arise between a leader’s personal views and the demands of the institution or body of people the leaders represents. Ellenson surmised that at some politically driven organizations like ZOA or JStreet the conflict is less apparent. However, at diverse communal institutions like HUC or UJA, personal views and institutional demands can conflict. When funds for the institution come from a wide group of people with differing backgrounds and views, as it did at HUC, things get complicated. He recalled moments of tension over columns he was publishing or over his views on intermarriage where donations were jeopardized.

Ellenson also dwelled on the topic of personal status and the Orthodox rabbinate in Israel, arguing that it is a major point of contention for non-Orthodox American Jews that has the potential to alienate many. Ellenson also bemoaned the vitriol and fear-mongering that attends discourse on Israel in America today. He felt that the injection of fear into debates over Iran or the conflict makes it impossible to have thoughtful discussions.

John Ruskay, UJA
Ruskay began by recalling his time working in the executive committee of UJA. Many of his colleagues saw Israel as actualizing their core values, while only a smaller group was more interested in policy issues. On policy, around sixty percent were hardliners, whereas forty percent were troubled by the conflict and interested in diplomacy and taking risks. Around fifteen percent were pro-settlement always, twenty five leaned towards supporting settlements under present circumstances, but sixty were deeply skeptical of the settlement enterprise. He did not see a significant generational divide at the leadership level.

Along the lines of what Ellenson spoke about, Ruskay admitted that you must make certain sacrifices regarding personal views when you take a position like one at the UJA. His public role was to mobilize the New York Jewish community to “stand with the people of Israel in resisting violence and pursuing peace,” regardless of his personal views on Israeli government policy (and hence the distinction between the “people of Israel” and the state). But Ruskay also felt that there were many opportunities in private where he could advance some of his views, like once in a closed-door meeting with Sharon where Ruskay warned Sharon of the perils of occupation as it relates to American Jewish support.

Joy Levitt, JCC Manhattan

Levitt remarked that the biggest challenges in her job when it comes to Israel are to not get distracted by “bullies and the emotionally disturbed” so that you can engage the genuinely interested. Levitt maintained that there is a pluralism of views among the folks who sit on the board of JCC Manhattan, but that there is no place for this who hurl ad hominem attacks or vitriol. Her goal has been to foster meaningful debate and represent a wide range of views, a task that can be challenging because it requires you to face constructive and sometimes fierce criticism.

Levitt regretted the current state of American Jewish discourse on Israel and the high level of intolerance that has crept into the community. She recalled what happened when she invited Jodi Rudoren, chief Israel correspondent for the New York Times, to come speak at an Israel Independence Day event. She received a letter accusing Rudoren of being anti-Israel, and accusing Levitt of making a grave mistake in inviting her. While Levitt invited Rudoren because she thought it would be a good opportunity for the community to hear from someone at the NYtimes, regardless of people’s personal views, the letter writer saw the invitation as endorsement of all of Rudoren views.