

For American Jews, mixed allegiances

By Alice Rothchild, 9/14/2002

AS AMERICAN Jews continue the self-reflection that heralds the beginning of the New Year, we find ourselves caught in the anguish of our mixed allegiances, our fears for the survival of Israel and our horror at the year's accumulation of trauma and hatred. How has our community fared during this violent year? How has our experience of oppression and our tradition of defending social justice and human rights informed our community's behavior? Can we as Jews have as much sympathy for the medical officers of the Red Crescent who have been killed or wounded by the Israeli military as for the victims of suicide bombers? Can we as Jews understand that the word "massacre" applies to a West Bank refugee camp as well as the horrific events in a pizza parlor, a hotel, a university? Did we notice when the press started calling Jewish settlements "neighborhoods" or when overthrowing Saddam became "a regime change"? Did we flinch when President Bush called Ariel Sharon "a man of peace"? Did we realize that the Israeli military bombed the Gaza home of Hamas leader Salah Shehade, killing adults and children, less than 11/2 hours after three major Palestinian military groups announced a unilateral end to all actions against Israeli civilians?

While we rightly worry about the Israeli economy and raise funds to support our families in Israel, do we concern ourselves with the third of Palestinian children who suffer chronic malnutrition, with the curfews in the Occupied Territories that have kept 800,000 Palestinians virtual prisoners in their homes, unable to obtain food or basic health care? Do we worry that Israel is the only country that is urging Bush to attack Iraq and that analysts fear that Sharon will exploit that moment of military chaos to realize his desire to "transfer" Palestinians to Jordan and elsewhere?

As dissent has become unpopular in the United States, principled Jewish dissent has become even more difficult. In this time of reevaluation, perhaps we can understand that grieving for the suffering of Palestinians as well as for Jews is not a sign of Jewish self-hatred. Israeli peace activists and their American counterparts understand that working for peace with justice translates into working toward ending the Israeli occupation and empowering the growth of Israeli and Palestinian peace seeking factions to build the basis for a political solution. At home this means challenging the major Jewish organizations such as AIPAC that claim to speak for all of us.

Should we ask if the cause of justice is served when major donors withdraw support from National Public Radio for coverage that tells more than one side of this complicated story? American Jews also need to ask the difficult questions about US military funding that supports the policies of the Israeli government. If the Fourth Geneva Convention governing occupying forces not only forbids moving civilians into occupied territory but also forbids collective punishment, do

we want our Caterpillar bulldozers demolishing homes and destroying the infrastructure of towns and refugee camps? Will that experience build the forces of democracy and tolerance?

In this time of anguish and reflection, we must ask ourselves whose interests are served by this violence and how are we as Americans and as Jews complicit? Can we understand that this conflict is not only about creating a safe Jewish haven, but also about Palestinian self-determination, not only about Israeli security in a hostile region but also the persistent building of Jewish settlements, bypass roads, and the devastating consequences of checkpoints and closures.

Violence by Israelis against Palestinian civilians and violence by Palestinians against Israeli civilians both serve the goals of Sharon, the former intimidating the Palestinian population and destroying its infrastructure, the latter providing domestic and international cover.

Sixty-five percent of the Palestinian population lives below the poverty line. While most Palestinians are weary of their current leadership and sickened by the ongoing violence against civilians, can we acknowledge the irony that Hamas is now providing major social services that were destroyed by the Israeli military? While we condemn civilian attacks on Israelis, we also need to acknowledge that Israel remains unfettered by international law and shielded by our own government.

The Jewish New Year is a time for acknowledging missed opportunities and having the courage to refocus as individuals and as a community.

Perhaps this year we can turn away from demonizing the "enemy" and point our energies towards building the strength of the secular and religious Jewish peace organizations in the United States and Israel, dedicated to finding a resolution to this conflict through working for justice, human rights, and coexistence.

In the spirit of T'Shuvah, or repentance, let us understand that there are many ways to offer support, but to uncritically accept the plans of Sharon and Bush is neither in our own self-interest nor the interest of a vibrant, democratic, and peaceful Israeli society.

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