

Jewish Unity and Disunity, Then and Now

by Aryeh Rubin

The following is the text of a lecture delivered by Aryeh Rubin at the conference, *Who Abandoned the Jews—And Who Tried to Save Them? A Conference on Religious Zionists and Rescue from the Holocaust*, held on May 30, 2010 at Bar Ilan University.

Mr. Rubin’s lecture, “Jewish Unity and Disunity, Then and Now,” focuses on current existential threats to Israel, specifically the multiple military threats and the global campaign of delegitimization. We, the Jewish people, despite our disunity, must collectively wake up, face the reality of our imperiled existence, and take action. We must learn from the example of the Holocaust, in which disunity and a failure on the part of American Jews to protest effectively enough on behalf of European Jewry had devastating consequences. If ever there was a time to transcend our differences, to address the weaknesses in our leadership, and to face and fight the threats bombarding us, it is now. The Israeli government is not equipped to fight delegitimization on its own. It is time to contract out to leading experts to create a massive publicity campaign based on cohesive, consistent messaging that will change hearts and minds, favorably influencing thought leaders globally about Israel, and turn back the rising tide of negative propaganda.

The text of the lecture is followed by Mr. Rubin’s bio. Text from the lecture may be reproduced in whole or in part only if taken in context, with proper credit given, and with a link to the pdf of the full text, to be posted on the Targum Shlishi website at www.targumshlishi.org. Please note that there are slight variations between the written text and the spoken lecture. Comments may be sent to info@targumshlishi.org.

Jewish Unity and Disunity, Then and Now

Good afternoon. I’d like to begin by thanking Dr. Medoff, Dr. Baumel, and Bar Ilan University for organizing this important conference.

As we know, and as we have heard today from several speakers, the lack of Jewish unity prior to and during the Holocaust had devastating consequences. Today we, the Jewish people, are again facing challenges to our continued existence, and yet we remain hampered from within by our disunity. We are geographically scattered, divided in religious and political ideology, subject to a fractured and ineffective leadership, and so concerned with individual survival that we fail to understand that individual survival is predicated on group survival, which is what all Jews should prioritize. And yet we are not placing a premium on group survival—not as a people, and not as individuals.

The events of sixty-five years ago offer up sobering lessons that are unfortunately strikingly relevant today. And yet, we, the Jewish people, do not seem to be paying attention. The continued existence of the State of Israel is under serious threat.

We need to heed the lessons of the Holocaust, lessons that should be fresh in our collective mind but that we, in our misguided complacency and in staking out our small bits of meaningless territory, have set aside. Perhaps we have, as a people, a skewed sense of continuity because there have been so very many threats to our existence throughout our history. We have survived every other threat, the thinking goes. We will survive this one, too. But today the weapons of annihilation are so very much more deadly—the unthinkable could happen in an instant. At the same time, the poisoning of worldwide public opinion against Israel and, by extension, the Jewish people, through a persistent and infectious propaganda campaign delegitimizing the State of Israel continues to gain significant ground. That it is based on skewed and deliberately misleading fragments of information is beside the point—there is a perception, for example, that Palestinian aggression is justified and in fact imbued with moral value, whereas actions to defend Israel from attack are viewed as unjustified and morally bankrupt. Israel is the only country in the world whose very right to exist is questioned by an increasingly global, persistent, and persuasive campaign. If ever there was a time to transcend our differences, to address the weaknesses in our leadership, and to come together as best we can to face and fight the threats bombarding us, it is now.

During the Holocaust, we did not acquit ourselves well in terms of banding together, of defending each other, or of exercising our collective power to

intervene on behalf of European Jewry, although that is not to diminish the remarkable efforts by individuals and small groups.

Looking back, the Bergson Group's efforts and those of others—courageous endeavors such as the Kindertransport, the Europa Plan, and the Rabbis' March on Washington—despite their nobility, in the grand scheme of the catastrophe were mere drops in the bucket. So much more could have been done. American Jews during World War II had power, they had resources. They could have made noise, they could have pushed for bombing the tracks to Auschwitz, they could have rocked the boat. The simple but sad truth is that during the Holocaust, the American Jewish community did not do nearly enough. The way one survived the furnaces of Europe was to be rich enough, smart enough, lucky enough, or a combination of these factors. You were on your own.

The Current Situation

The grace period that we the Jewish people had after Auschwitz is over. The playing field has changed. The political decision-makers and the citizens who elected them, whose gestalt was formed in the wake of Treblinka and Dachau, are gone. The children of Esau, whose collective conscious was jogged by the severity of the Shoah, have gotten over it. Anti-Semitism is back in all its regalia. However this time, rather than Christian religious anti-Semitism or Nazi racial anti-Semitism, the strategy is a pseudo-intellectual, self-righteous targeting of the State of Israel as the embodiment of all evil.

Ladies and gentlemen, the barbarians are at the gate. A sober assessment of today's situation, comparing it to events close to two millennia ago, leads me to the argument that we are close to being at the point of the seventeenth of Tammuz. The circling of Jerusalem has begun.

There are nuclear threats on the horizon and missile challenges that could be launched at any moment. From the east, Israel faces an existential threat from Iran. From the north, Israel faces a strategic threat from Syria and from Iran's proxy, Hezbollah, with its more than 40,000 missiles. From the west, Hamas is rearming and openly declaring its dedication to the destruction of Israel. The Palestinians are not showing any serious signs of a willingness to accept Israel as a Jewish state.

The survival of the Jews as a people is inextricably tied to the survival of Israel. Without Israel, we are in jeopardy, all of us, Jews from Austria to Zimbabwe, from the assimilated to the ultra-Orthodox. Regardless of geographic or ideological distance, regardless of our disaffection and disunity, in this way all Jews are united.

Delegitimization

There is another challenge Israel is facing, and that is the pervasive and growing campaign of delegitimization, a demonization of Israel led by the left that questions Israel's right to exist as an independent Jewish state.

The delegitimization of Israel has its roots and derives its energy from the academic left. It has offshoots in the old media and the new media, driven in part by online social networking. The delegitimization has become increasingly accepted among the intelligentsia of Europe, among both the left and the right. Consider that in March the appalling Israel Apartheid Week saw events held on college and university campuses in more than forty cities throughout the world. Or the ongoing Gaza Activist Sail. Or the singling out of Israel by the Nuclear Non Proliferation Conference a few days ago, or the very public demonstration calling for a boycott of Max Brenner's chocolate store in Union Square in New York on Friday. We must recognize the influence of the mass media, which has been readily manipulated by the delegitimization campaign and is largely acquiescing with it. In the media's selective coverage of certain stories and its biased portrayal of Israel, we are witnessing what amounts to an abdication of the media's role as watchdog, and in this we can discern disturbing parallels to the mass media during the Holocaust, which was essentially silent.

This corrosive questioning of Israel's right to exist cannot be underestimated—it is a very serious threat. Many, including the Reut Institute, the non-partisan Tel Aviv think tank, are sounding the alarm that the delegitimizers, despite claims that their goal is to end Israeli occupation of Palestinian territory and promote a two-state solution, are actually aiming for the same goal as the Islamist rejectionists—their objective is to weaken Israel politically and economically through their calls for boycotts, divestment, and sanctions, and to ultimately force a one-state solution in which there is a Muslim majority. The delegitimizers are engaged in a full-out campaign, modeled on the fall of supremacist white South Africa, to erode Israel's

legitimacy by insisting that it is based on segregationist and racist principles. And when delegitimazation reaches a tipping point, it can move very quickly.

I wish that was the end of my list of the challenges facing Israel, but it is not. Perhaps even more potentially devastating is the possibility that Israel's traditional allies will not stand by when they are most needed. Throughout its existence, Israel could count on the powerful backing and good will of the U.S. and to some extent its Western allies. Under the current administration—and we all hope that we are wrong—that is no longer assured.

Yes, today is *not* 1939. Today the Jewish people are arguably more powerful than we have been at any time in the past two thousand years. We are powerful because the Jews of the Diaspora have a voice in the U.S. and Europe but mainly we are powerful because we have Israel and its military might.

Disunity

Yet, at a time when we should recognize our strength, join our voices, and be up in arms in protest, we are essentially ineffective. Those of us who are alarmed and understand the need for immediate action should also acknowledge that regardless of the countless e-mails and articles we forward to friends, and how many conversations we have, we are not accomplishing much other than making ourselves feel marginally better—it is time to stop speaking only among ourselves.

One would hope that these serious threats to Israel would catalyse a coming together of Jewry worldwide, but that is a quaint and unrealistic notion. The religious and political disagreements continue. Even the once-plausible concept of a common fate is losing credibility. The traditionally steadfast bond between U.S. Jews and Israeli Jews is losing strength, particularly among members of the younger generation. While the distance in miles has not changed, the two communities are drifting ever-further apart. This division has been exacerbated by the current U.S. administration.

The Obama administration's relationship with Israel, to be polite, is not friendly. The president of the United States and his secretary of state have chosen to pursue a strategy that de-prioritizes Israel on multiple levels in an effort to appease the much larger, oil-rich nations of the Muslim world, despite the ongoing belligerent animus of this group. It is clear that the president has different priorities than the

Jewish people, and that, unlike some of his predecessors in the White House, President Obama does not endorse Israeli exceptionalism.

Only four to six percent of Israelis believe that Obama is a supporter of Israel. Yet, despite his recent performance, American Jews feel very differently about Obama. Seventy-eight percent of the country's Jews voted for him. While a recent survey tells us that of those voters, one-third regret their decision and feel that Obama is no friend to Israel, two-thirds of the Jews who voted for Obama still support him. Clearly, there is a disconnect between U.S. Jews and Israeli Jews.

What that divide between the politics of American Jews and Israeli Jews means, in the most basic terms, is that the overwhelming majority of American Jews either: 1) believed that Obama would favour Israel and did not understand what their decision could mean for Israel, 2) did not prioritize the well-being of Israel when making their voting decision, or 3) *did* understand the ramifications but had other priorities when electing their new president. Consequently, there is disagreement between what the Jews of U.S. believe should be done to defend Israel and what Israelis believe should be done.

Israel should act in its own interest, without hesitation, and without being influenced by American Jews or American Jewish leaders, who in their complacency can not fully comprehend the situation in Israel or may, in fact, have different priorities.

Liberalism and American Jews

How did this happen, this lack of unity between U.S. and Israeli Jews? It is part of a larger divide, one that includes an alienation from Jewish leaders, a growing gulf between committed and assimilated Jews, and the primacy of the liberal values in much of the American Jewish community. And unfortunately and potentially tragically, it echoes the divide between American Jews and European Jews during the Holocaust.

Much of American Jewry has become somewhat de-Judaicized. In lieu of our traditional belief or value systems, many Jews have adopted what is essentially a theology of universalism and *tikkun olam*, or social justice. These liberal values are so predominant that rather than being staunchly pro-the Jewish people or pro-Israel, much of American Jewry is pro-humanist. Those who fit this category either

do not understand or do not care that, at a time when the future of the Jews is at stake, if they do not step up to the plate in defense, they will be abdicating their responsibility as Jews. They are, in a sense, victims and products of a flawed system in which we have poor leadership, abysmal Jewish education, assimilation is the norm, and intermarriage is skyrocketing.

The liberal wing of organized Judaism, along with the broader Jewish establishment, long ago eschewed traditional religious beliefs and instead adopted the mantra of *tikkun olam*. So what we have now is a population that for one hundred years has been distanced from the larger core values of Judaism and can easily assimilate if it so chooses. This situation is not dissimilar in certain ways to the experience of the Jewish people of the Former Soviet Union, who after seventy years of Communism essentially lost their sense of Jewish heritage and history.

During World War II, Jews may have not done enough to save their brethren, but never before today have so many Jewish actions benefited the causes of our enemies. Most of these Jews are not consciously setting out to undermine Israel, but that is in effect what they are accomplishing. Throughout history there have always been a few Jews who opted out, and that is an acceptable reality. What is not acceptable is that today, entire legions of Jews are inadvertently working against the survival of the Jewish people, whether out of ignorance, out of misguided loyalties, or out of a lack of understanding of the global perspective. I believe that we can reverse this trend, or at the very least slow it down, as I will discuss in a moment.

I should make it clear that I, myself, have solid credentials on the left. Like seventy percent of the Israeli population, I supported Oslo. I've met with the Palestinian Authority leadership including Arafat, as part of a delegation of the Israel Policy Forum (IPF), an American Jewish group on the left. But after the intifada began, I came to believe that the IPF, and a number of other Jewish organizations on the left, were not protecting Israel as they should, and I withdrew from the organization. I personally believe that we continue the negotiating process until the Palestinians are ready to deal in earnest.

Leadership

That American Jews incorporated the religion of liberalism to the exclusion of the

traditional, multifaceted, rich practice of Judaism is a direct consequence of the continuing absence of effective Jewish leadership. Today the decision-makers, the ones on the boards guiding collective Jewish action, are predominantly the moneyed class, most of whom are unschooled in Jewish history and ritual, often unappreciative of the mystique and grandeur of our heritage, and lacking a solid grasp of what is most beneficial for the Jewish people and Israel. As a consequence, they often make ill-considered decisions that lead to poor outcomes.

In the latest Obama flare-up, about two months ago, we did witness some examples of strong and appropriate Jewish leadership when a few individuals notably spoke out on the treatment that Israel and its leaders received. Unfortunately, their response was not the norm. The reaction of the vast majority of our leaders was abysmal—they kept quiet. These same leaders are not speaking out about the global jihad and its implications for the Jews. Perhaps they are silent because, as during World War II, they think it is in the best interests of world Jewry to keep quiet, or perhaps they are silent because their true religion is universalism and humanism and not Judaism, or perhaps they are silent because they simply don't know what to do. History will treat many of today's Jewish leaders with scorn, much as we look upon Stephen Wise or some of the ludicrous antics by the rabbis discussed in Rabbi Haskel Lookstein's lecture today.

Some Solutions

Clearly, we need to change the way we choose our leaders. Our leaders should be learned, wise, accomplished, compassionate, ready to speak out and fight for the good of our people and Israel, and whether they are Orthodox, Conservative, Reform, unaffiliated, or secular, they should be Jews who are connected to core Jewish values. I have long advocated for a diverse leadership that includes members of the clergy, the academy, and the creative community. Their wisdom, combined with the acumen of some of the current leaders, should improve the process of the decision-making and lead to better outcomes. Those who donate the big bucks should not be chosen exclusively over the learned and committed Jews among us. It is time to change the rules of the game.

That is what we in America need to do. That is our homework, and it will take some time.

But we have to act now. What can the Jewish people of the Diaspora and the people of the State of Israel do *right now* to avoid catastrophe? To me one thing is clear. If we continue to do things the way we have done them in the past, and are reactive rather than proactive, we are in deep trouble. Radical Islam and delegitimization present formidable threats. I believe that part of why we are not sounding the alarm is because we are at a loss as to what to do. At the same time, calling for Jewish unity is a pipe dream. It did not happen during the Holocaust and it is not going to happen now unless specific actions are undertaken.

As is clear from the growing momentum around the propaganda of the delegitimization of Israel, we are losing the public relations battle. Make no mistake—propaganda can be used both as weapon of attack, as so many totalitarian regimes including the Nazis have demonstrated time and again, and as a method of defense, which is what Israel must now do.

We must try something that has been attempted piecemeal, privately and institutionally by both Israelis and Americans, with very little success. Israel must establish a world-class propaganda machine like no other country or people has ever attempted before, the goal being to foster a positive perception of Israel based on cohesive, consistent messaging. It is important to note that I am not talking about manipulation and lies, but about positively influencing people with the truth conveyed persuasively.

I and others believe that the Israeli government has not fully grasped how devastating the wave of worldwide negative propaganda is and can yet become, and at the same time, is ill-equipped to respond to it. The American Jewish community is asleep at the wheel as well and too fractured to effectively defend Israel against delegitimization. The development of anti-delegitimization techniques needs to be formulated with the same intensity, forethought, and action that, for example, goes into tactical battle plans, strategic war modeling, or the development of the Merkava tank. Big bucks have to be spent on changing the hearts and minds of the people. And while Jewish unity is an unattainable goal, becoming *more* unified is not—this campaign should strive to foster old-fashioned Jewish unity, along the lines of the pride that was forged in the aftermath of the Six Day War. This needs to be an all-out campaign.

Israel's current "rebranding" program is handled by the Foreign Ministry, which is not well versed in dealing with the soft power of NGOs and the left. The government can not turn the tide of delegitimization on its own. The Israeli government needs to appoint a propaganda czar, if you will, to supervise a massive campaign that will cost billions of dollars over the next several years, to change the hearts and minds of multiple audiences globally. The campaign must be geared to reach people, rather than reaching out to other governments, as has been the primary approach to date. The tourist ads running in the States saying, "Shalom, Welcome to Israel" are not going to change anyone's mind.

The campaign should contract out to world leaders in the fields of marketing, public relations, advertising, branding, social networking, old media, new media, and more. We need to harness *genus ha Yehudi*—the Jewish genius—that has been so successful in so many fields, and apply it to the existential threat. The campaign must incorporate cutting-edge research on the science of influence from social psychology, cognitive psychology, biology, neuroscience, and related fields. These scientists analyze behavioral responses and examine neurological responses with data drawn from sources such as intracranial EEG recordings and MRIs. We need to gain a solid understanding of how the lies told by the delegitimizers have such power, and how to counter those lies with the truth. This is not an outlandish proposal—consider that retail giants and software companies routinely apply these types of technologies with great success. The knowledge exists. We need to synthesize and apply it.

Ultimately, the campaign must appeal to people's emotions in order to change hearts and minds about Israel. It must have multiple messages for multiple audiences across the world. I would start with the general population of the U.S. and Europe—the people of instant opinion; the creative class globally, the thought leaders who are people of considered opinion and are generally very liberal; Christians on both the right and left; the Arab masses; and the Jewish audience in the U.S. and Europe. It must portray Israel truthfully, to counter the tsunami of misinformation. It must connect with each core audience.

I have no idea if the following ideas are the ones that would be the most effective. Extensive testing and research would determine that. But as food for thought, I would suggest that for the general population, the ultimate objective is to

undemonize Israel; for the creative class, it must not only counter delegitimization, but must clearly demonstrate that the apartheid argument is entirely false and deliberately misleading; for liberal Christian denominations, who are so politically influential, it must forge a solid connection; for Christians on the right, who are in large part staunch supporters of Israel, it is important to reinforce that crucial relationship; for the Arabs, it could emphasize the Koran's support of the biblical claim that Israel was given to the Jews by God and promote an alternative to jihad; and for the Jewish people, we must forge a connection with our rich heritage, and demonstrate the reality that Israel is a wellspring of positive Jewish values, creativity, and positively channeled energy.

The difficulty of this task should not be underestimated. What this campaign must do is change the course of current events, literally change the course that history teaches us we are moving in. With a massive campaign using the same application of Jewish genius that Israel has demonstrated on the battlefield and in the workplace, we can undo the legacy of inaction that we earned during the Holocaust, and we can change the course of history.

If delegitimization continues, if the military threats to Israel escalate and there is an attack that forces Israel to retaliate, it could have catastrophic results that affect the entire world. We must do all we can to reach out to the world. We must take action because if we save Israel, we save the Jews, and in the process we just may save the world. Should the Israeli government issue a call for suggestions on what to name the counter-delegitimization program, my recommendation would be to call it Operation Light Unto the Nations.

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Aryeh Rubin's bio

Aryeh Rubin is the founding partner and managing director of The Maot Group, an investment company established in 1991. Previously, he was the publisher of the New York-based KSF Group, a medical publishing company. In 1974, Mr. Rubin visited eleven concentration camps throughout Europe, an experience that helped influence his decision to found and publish *Jewish Living* magazine in the late 1970s.

Mr. Rubin is also the founder and director of Targum Shlishi, a foundation dedicated to fostering positive change in the Jewish world. Targum Shlishi has undertaken several initiatives related to Holocaust knowledge, awareness, and justice, including: conceiving and funding Operation Last Chance through the Israel office of the Simon Wiesenthal Center, a campaign that provides a cash award for information leading to the arrest and conviction of Nazi war criminals; spearheading a fundraising initiative for Father Patrick Desbois, a Catholic priest who is systematically locating mass graves of Jews massacred in Ukraine and Belarus and uncovering the history that occurred there; and sending out 1500 complimentary copies of David Wyman and Rafael Medoff's book *A Race Against Death: Peter Bergson, America, and the Holocaust* to decision-makers in the Jewish world.

Targum Shlishi's recent grants awarded include support for video documentation of an archeological investigation of Sobibor, the concentration camp in Poland that was closed in 1943 after a successful revolt; Voices from the Ashes, a project to translate and publish very early Holocaust testimonies from a previously unexplored archive at the Jewish Historical Institute in Warsaw; and a forthcoming documentary on the history of Nazi hunting by Jonathan Silvers.

In addition, Mr. Rubin is the editor of *Jewish Sages of Today: Profiles of Extraordinary People* (Devora Publishing and Targum Shlishi, 2009). His opinion pieces have appeared in *The Jewish Week*, *The Jerusalem Report*, and *Moment Magazine* and he has been profiled in articles in several publications, including *The New York Times*, *The Miami Herald*, *The Daily Business Review*, and *The Jewish Star Times*. His opinion piece "What Did You Do After the War, Dad?" appeared in *The Jewish Week* and has been downloaded multiple thousands of times. Mr. Rubin received a B.A. from Yeshiva University. He is married, has three daughters, and lives in Florida.

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