

Drifting Apart, A Dangerous Divide

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I've had a growing sense of foreboding in recent days about the very real dangers to the State of Israel, internally and externally, and what I perceive to be an increasing emotional distance between American Jews and Jerusalem. Just when Israel needs us most to act and speak out vigorously in its defense, I fear that many among us are questioning, if not doubting, some of the bedrock beliefs we've held about the Jewish State, including its actions and purpose.

Israel is not faultless here. No state is. But examples abound of our enemies' ability to turn reality inside out, demonizing Israel as militarily immoral, and its political leaders as unwilling to make compromises for peace and unwilling to support a peace process that everyone knows is unworkable as long as Hamas controls Gaza. Equally disturbing is that such brazenly false charges have caused too many American Jews to feel embarrassment toward Israel rather than outrage at the willful twisting of the truth. And with it, I sense a certain distancing within American Jewry regarding Israel's fate. Part of it is due to circumstances beyond our control, like the economic crisis that has caused the Jewish federation system to focus on domestic needs, leaving fewer dollars for Israel. The contraction of funds also could jeopardize the ability of projects like Birthright Israel to strengthen connections between young diaspora and Israeli Jews just when they are needed most.

At a "community conversation" last week sponsored by UJA-Federation of New York and *The Jewish Week*, table discussions were held on the issues that the more than 200 participants felt were most important at this time of crisis. Of the 15 topics put forward, none dealt with Israel. I don't think that would have been the case a year or two ago.

And then there was the murder of an Israeli teenager at the hand of an Arab terrorist last week. What was particularly sad about this latest tragic attack in Israel was that there didn't even seem to be much outrage among our own people when an innocent youngster was axed to death by a Palestinian 50 yards from the boy's home.

The horrific killing in the West Bank community of Bat Ayin, in which a seven year old was also wounded, quickly became yesterday's headline, now almost forgotten. Is it because Shlomo Nativ, the victim, was a young "settler"? If the reaction was not exactly ho-hum, it certainly seemed to accept that such brutal killings of Jewish civilians, including children, are par for the

course, and “pity, but what do you expect?” How sad that we’ve been dehumanized by our enemies.

In the American media, far more attention focused on how right wing and anti-peace the new Netanyahu government is. Never mind that the prime minister and even the alleged racist foreign minister, Avigdor Lieberman, continue to confirm their commitment to seek peace with their Palestinian neighbors. And beyond that, Netanyahu has a track record of making peace agreements with the Palestinians as prime minister a decade ago. He may have held his nose when he ceded Biblical territory around Hebron, but he did it.

What sacrifice has any Palestinian leader made for peace?

Doesn’t anyone hold Palestinians accountable for continuing to praise killers of Jewish civilians as martyrs and taking no action against the terrorists? Political leaders should be judged by their actions more than anything else. That applies to Prime Minister Netanyahu, who has been in office only a couple of weeks. Fortunately, the Obama administration seems to agree, and though there no doubt will be tensions between Washington and Jerusalem, there is every indication that the relationship is solid.

But it seems clear that efforts to undermine the very legitimacy of Israel, which began in intellectual quarters in Europe several years ago, have made their way to these shores. The Walt-Mearsheimer attack on “the Jewish lobby” as harmful to American interests has given way to calls for war crime trials against Israel for its military actions in Gaza last winter.

Critics portray the Israeli army as the new Nazis, a cold-hearted killing machine when in fact it endangers its own soldiers in its efforts not to kill innocent Palestinians. What do we know of the countless civilians killed by American troops in Iraq and Afghanistan? Ignorance is, if not bliss, at least a sedative to the senses. Media blackouts have a way of sanitizing brutal warfare; just because we have no visual images of the Falklands War between Argentina and the United Kingdom in 1982, for example, does that mean that 900 people were not killed in battle? Mideast conflicts, though, are broadcast around the clock among the Arab media.

Certainly Israel has been responsible for the deaths of innocents when at war against terrorists. But the IDF tries to avoid such killings, while for Hamas and Hezbollah, the goal precisely is to murder Jewish women and children, and to hide among its own civilian population. Intentionality should count for something. And it’s the matter of fairness and context that is so frustrating for those defending Israel.

Political and military leaders in Jerusalem make the mistake of speaking of their “right” to take action when the real question should be whether those

actions ultimately are in Israel's best interest. But that's a matter of strategy. At issue here is the growing notion that of all the nations in the world, only one should have its legitimacy questioned, criticized and, as some would have it, removed.

Such criticism of Israel, and only Israel, is the very definition of 21st century anti-Semitism, and we must raise our voices now, before it is too late.

American Jews on the fence about Israel should be reading a new book by Daniel Gordis, an author and senior vice president of the Shalem Center in Jerusalem. Entitled "Saving Israel: How the Jewish People Can Win a War That May Never End," it argues that the survival of the State of Israel is more important than peace and that the destiny of all Jews is linked with the Zionist homeland.

Among his politically incorrect points are that waging war is an element of Jewish history and law, that self-defense is part of statehood, and that power is as important as ethics - it's all about maintaining balance.

"When the commitment to decency is so overwhelming that Jews grow fearful of defending themselves," Gordis writes, "Jews have actually abandoned the tenets of their tradition and have created a weak, almost pathetic, version of what Jewish life ought to be." In Jewish life, survival is a prime value, and that applies to the collective as well as the individual. It's a mitzvah to give of one's self for others, but not to lose one's head.

So don't believe those who would say that willfully killing a youngster simply because he is a Jew is not an act of terror but an expression of political outrage. Say a prayer this Shabbat for the family of Shlomo Nativ, the latest victim of the kind of hatred that, we need to remind ourselves, is inhuman.