

Obama, Israel & American Jews: The Challenge

**WE ASKED 31 PROMINENT AMERICAN JEWS TO
RESPOND TO THIS STATEMENT:**

THE OPEN CONFLICT BETWEEN THE OBAMA ADMINISTRATION and the government of Benjamin Netanyahu has created tensions between the United States and Israel of a kind not seen since the days of the administration of the first President Bush. And those tensions are placing unique pressure on American Jews, who voted for Barack Obama by a margin of nearly 4-to-1 in 2008 after being assured by Obama himself and by his supporters in the Jewish community that he was a friend and an ally of the State of Israel despite his long association with, among others, the unabashedly anti-Israel and anti-Semitic Reverend Jeremiah Wright. ¶ We argue that American Jews are facing an unprecedented political challenge, and at a crucial moment, with the need to address the existential threat to Israel—and by extension to the future of the Jewish people as a whole—from a potentially nuclear Iran. How will American Jews handle this challenge? Can Obama’s Jewish supporters act in a way that will change the unmistakable direction of current American policy emanating from the White House? Will American Jews accept Barack Obama’s view that the state of Israel bears some responsibility for the loss of American “blood and treasure” in the Middle East? Will they continue to extend their support to the Obama administration and to Barack Obama’s political party?

THEIR RESPONSES APPEAR ON THE FOLLOWING PAGES IN ALPHABETICAL ORDER.

ELLIOTT ABRAMS

AMERICAN JEWS like to support Democratic politicians in the U.S. and their rough equivalent, the Labor Party, in the State of Israel. When a Democrat seems close with a Labor government (as Bill Clinton did with Ehud Barak), they are supremely happy; when a Republican seems close to a right-wing or centrist Israeli prime minister (as George W. Bush was to Ariel Sharon and Ehud Olmert), they are satisfied; when a Democrat fights with a right-wing Israeli government, they are unhappy. They don't know which side they're on.

Poll data and impressionistic evidence suggest that American Jews are increasingly dubious about Barack Obama's Middle East policy. Most major Jewish organizations, except those that exist solely to support the Democratic Party, have weighed in with anxious complaints, and Democratic politicians also have backed away from public support for the Obama approach.

This is a useful test of American Jews and their leaders: which is the deeper commitment, to Democratic Party politicians regardless of their policies, or to the security of Israel? What do they do when a president presents a left-wing version of American security interests that not only says that the Iraq war was bad and we need to get out of Afghanistan (popular sentiments among American Jewry) but adds that Israel is a threat to American security? How do they react when a Democratic president seems intent on a personal rapprochement with the Islamic world and appears to view Israel as more obstacle and albatross than ally for our country?

How Orthodox Jews will react is clear; those who voted for Obama will abandon him, and the Republican candidate in 2012 will get a majority of Orthodox voters. The question is how Reform and Conservative Jews (and the unaffiliated who say they are "just Jewish") will react to a White House whose indifference to Israel's security is palpable. They will certainly not leave the Democratic Party, any more than they did when Jimmy Carter was displaying hostility to Israel and somewhat more Jews voted for Reagan. Many will even more energetically support Democrats in Congress, to prove to themselves that they are still "progressive" at heart, even if they cannot back Obama. But my own sad prediction is that among non-Orthodox Jews, the real divide will be between activists (whether leaders of community organizations, synagogue officials, major donors, or regular synagogue goers) and the broader majority of Jews. The activists will dump

Obama; the rest will not, for their commitment to Israel and, for that matter, to Judaism is simply less powerful than their secular religion—liberalism as represented in the Democratic Party. Whatever excuse they supply themselves (for example, the Republican candidate for president, or even vice president, will undermine "a woman's right to choose"), they will be displaying their priorities. Israel is simply not near the top of their list.

For which reason, more committed Jews can only thank God for the greater commitment of so many evangelicals—whose party loyalties have not become a religious faith and who will indeed dump Obama if he abandons Israel in a time of peril.

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MORRIS J. AMITAY

THE UNJUSTIFIED criticism of Israel by U.S. government officials, including the president, makes it absolutely necessary for Jewish supporters of Israel to speak out in opposition to this dangerous trend in U.S. Middle East policy. Given Obama's questionable past associations, this should have been expected.

What with all the other challenges Obama faced, who could foresee how quickly he would disparage Israel while moving toward the imposition of a U.S. plan? When the president linked the failure to solve the Israeli-Palestinian conflict to the loss of American "blood and treasure," he stepped over the reddest of lines. Israel should not take the president's growing hostility too personally, though; witness Obama's demeaning treatment of other allies—none of whom, however, is threatened with genocide.

The president's inept handling of foreign affairs is the result of a misguided worldview combined with an abysmal lack of experience and highlighted by his scant résumé. For political leaders to succeed in Washington, it is not necessarily about what they know, or even whom they know—but where they have been. In dealing with international issues, President Obama simply has *not* been there. And humility not being one of his strong points, Obama is displaying

the arrogance of power by dealing harshly with friends while seeking favor from our enemies.

Beginning with the Franklin Roosevelt administration, most Jewish Americans seem to have been born with Democratic DNA, making it difficult for them to see beyond Obama's rhetoric about "unbreakable bonds" between America and Israel. They must begin to realize that a U.S.-imposed plan would both fail to bring about the change needed in a region with multiple conflicts and despotic rulers and threaten Israel's future security and survival.

For Jewish-American Obama supporters, the time for giving this administration the benefit of the doubt should be over. We now have such "lovers of Zion" as Zbigniew Brzezinski and Brent Scowcroft advising the administration as to the outline of an American "peace" plan. Fortunately, the U.S. Congress remains overwhelmingly supportive of Israel's security, with more support now from Republicans than from Democrats. Forty years ago, when I worked in the Senate, the numbers were reversed.

A great deal of the responsibility for getting the administration back on the right course, for both Israel and America, now falls on Obama's Jewish supporters, who must make their concerns known. While maintaining their liberal orientation on social issues, Jewish Democrats should insist that our country work closely with Israel to achieve shared goals and put the onus for lack of progress on the other side. At a time when more attention should be paid to spinning centrifuges in Iran than to building homes in Jewish areas of Jerusalem, I fervently hope that Jewish Americans of all political persuasions let their views be known. Only time (which is quickly running out) will tell what effect this will have. I would be pleasantly surprised if my liberal co-religionists were up to this task—but I fear that I will be disappointed.

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PETER BERKOWITZ

AMERICAN JEWS are predominantly progressive, and like President Obama, they largely subscribe to a progressive interpretation of world affairs. Unfortunately, the progressive assessment of

Israel and of Middle East politics is based on a reckless illusion that thwarts worthy progressive goals and undermines vital American interests.

The illusion is that Israel's occupation of Palestinian land is the root cause of instability, violence, and war in the region. If only Israel were to withdraw from the West Bank and ease restrictions on the Gaza Strip, then, progressives contend, a democratic and peaceful Palestinian state would emerge. This would placate restive Muslim populations throughout the Arab world and enable the international community to concentrate on other matters, including Iran.

The illusion prevents progressives from grasping what our allies in the region see clearly. Not only Israelis but also Sunni Arab states across the Middle East—from Kuwait, the UAE, and Saudi Arabia in the Gulf to Lebanon and Egypt along the Mediterranean—view the Islamic Republic of Iran's sponsorship of Islamic extremism and pursuit of nuclear weapons as the chief threat to their interests and the great menace to the maintenance of international order.

The progressive illusion antedates Obama's presidency. The learned and the political classes throughout the United States and Europe subscribe to it, the Arab press promulgates it, and the United Nations holds it as an article of faith. By affirming it through deliberate, public, and one-sided imposition of pressure on Israel to make concessions in advance of negotiations, the Obama administration has baffled and demoralized Israelis, pulled the rug out from under Palestinian moderates, lent legitimacy to the demonizers of Israel around the world, and given Iran a windfall of precious time to promote terror and develop nuclear weapons.

On June 14, 2009, 10 days after President Obama's Cairo address, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu delivered a landmark speech at Bar Ilan University. While insisting on Israel's determination to establish secure borders, he declared his willingness to go anywhere to discuss peace, invited Arab leaders to come to Israel, and became Israel's first conservative prime minister to affirm the Palestinians' right to govern themselves in their own state.

Prime Minister Netanyahu's bold gestures have not been reciprocated.

Consistent with their professed values, progressive Jews should seek to persuade the president they helped elect to make progress toward peace. To begin again, President Obama should encourage Arab leaders to accept Prime Minister Netanyahu's invitation; convince Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas and Prime Minister Salaam Fayyad to declare in Arabic to their own people—as no Palestinian leader ever has—that they recognize Israel's right to

exist as a free, democratic, and Jewish state; publicly identify the war waged against Israel and America's Sunni Arab allies by the forces of radical Islam as the chief obstacle to the attainment of peace in the Middle East; and block Iran's arming and financing of Hamas, Hezbollah, and Syria.

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KENNETH J. BIALKIN

SINCE HARRY S. TRUMAN, all presidential candidates, including Barack Obama, have professed friendship for Israel. But the test lies in conduct, not rhetoric. Some presidents thought to be unsympathetic to Israel have delivered stunning evidence of understanding and support for the Jewish state's existential struggle.

President Obama has signaled a change in policy in a peace process designed to convince the Muslim world to think better of the U.S. by pushing harder on Israel. This new emphasis of seeking greater approval of America is hardly likely to soften Arab attitudes toward Israel and might actually reinforce existing hard-line views. It is increasingly obvious that the failure to make progress in Middle East peace lies primarily in the continued refusal of the Arab world (except Egypt and Jordan) to accept Israel as a peaceful neighbor. The president would be better advised to utilize his formidable persuasive powers and high standing in the world to lead the international and diplomatic community toward convincing the Arab world to accept the reality of Israel's existence and to welcome it as a friendly neighbor. He would be surprised at how friendly Israel could become if that realization were nourished.

Support for Obama from American Jews in the 2008 election was helped by several factors that will be absent from the 2010 elections: namely, disapproval of George W. Bush, opposition to the U.S. presence in Iraq, the McCain/Palin ticket, and excitement that America might elect a black president. Other factors that favored Obama in 2008 may yet persist in 2010, for example, Jewish liberal bias and traditional pro-Democrat drift. Recent polls of the Jewish community, however, reflect a clear decline of Jewish support from 2008. A Quinnipiac poll in April reported that 67 percent of Jews did not approve of Obama's

handling of Israel. Many Jews reacted with fury at the treatment accorded Israel's prime minister in the Biden affair and to the demands of the administration for concessions on Jerusalem. Initially, many who had supported President Obama were hesitant to be critical, perhaps for fear that they would offend the president or risk their newfound access to the White House. Also, Jewish organizations whose constituents include both Democrats and Republicans were slow in finding a balance of words to describe the concern that had spread throughout the community. The president's letter in April to a Jewish leader reaffirming U.S. support for Israel was a clear effort at damage control by the White House.

But the genie is out of the bottle. With the fallout from the Biden affair, the struggle for Jerusalem has begun. The contretemps has forced all Jews to examine their deepest feelings about Jerusalem. It has obliged Jews and others to reflect on who has deeper claims in the Holy Land—Jews with an almost unbroken history in the region or the relatively recently arrived peoples now collectively called Palestinians. President Obama's speech in Cairo in June 2009 wrongly attributes Israel's claims solely to the horror of the Holocaust. He neglected to recognize more than 3,000 years of an almost continuous nexus to the land of the Bible. He ignored the patrimony of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Moses, King David, the prophets, Jesus, and others. The refusal to acknowledge Israel's connection to the Land of Israel is a deliberate effort by Israel's enemies and detractors to minimize the history of the Jewish people and their contributions to principles of justice, freedom, monotheism, and morality, which have seeded and fertilized the development of the Abrahamic religions.

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MATTHEW BROOKS

THE PREVALENT narrative that Jews voted for Barack Obama in high numbers because they felt comfortable with him on Israel is incorrect. The American Jewish Committee poll in late September 2008 showed Obama at 57 percent and McCain at 30 percent among Jewish voters. This demonstrated that the concerns the Republican

Jewish Coalition and others raised about Obama were, at the time, having an effect on the Jewish community.

There is little question that the U.S. economic collapse in October was the main impetus for Obama's receiving 78 percent of the Jewish vote. Without that game-changing event, I have every confidence that Obama would have received much lower support among Jews.

In light of this, Obama's decline in the polls and the buyer's remorse we are seeing now are not surprising. The AJC's annual survey of American Jewish opinion in March showed that only 57 percent of Jews approved of Obama's job performance. In early April, a McLaughlin poll found that a plurality of Jewish voters, 46 percent, would consider voting for someone else rather than re-elect President Obama. Also in April, a Quinnipiac poll showed that 67 percent of Jewish voters disapproved of the president's handling of the Israeli-Palestinian situation.

The challenge for the Jewish community going forward—in light of the pressure being placed on Israel to cease building in its eternal capital of Jerusalem, the demands for unilateral Israeli concessions to move the peace process forward, and an administration that continues to drag its feet as Iran moves closer to developing a nuclear weapon—is to stand up and to speak out.

What should be most troubling to the American Jewish community is that surveys show a widening partisan gap in support for Israel, with Republicans supporting Israel in far greater numbers. Low support for Israel among rank-and-file Democrats should set off alarm bells in the offices of every Jewish communal organization and in the Jewish community.

Underscoring that fact is that only a small handful of Democrats have put support for Israel above partisanship and have spoken out against the recent pressure of the Obama administration. The silence from party leaders like Harry Reid and Nancy Pelosi has been deafening.

U.S. Jewry must come together in a bipartisan fashion to stand up and speak out. The Republican Jewish Coalition and the National Jewish Democratic Council should work together, along with others in the community, to send an unambiguous signal to the Obama administration that pressuring Israel, our ally and friend, must stop.

There are times in history when the Jewish community is tested—and this is one of them. When we look back on this period, we must be able to answer the question "Where were you then?" by saying honestly that we stood up and spoke out and did everything we could.

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MONA CHAREN

DID AMERICAN JEWS need the "assurance" mentioned in your premise when they made the decision to support Barack Obama in 2008? That is not by any means clear. Sure, Obama mouthed a few bromides about Israel's security during the campaign, but Jewish voters, like other Americans, were aware that this candidate's history was uniquely hostile to Israel. They knew of Obama's tame attendance at Jeremiah Wright's church (which gave Louis Farrakhan a "lifetime achievement award" and offered space in its bulletin to Hamas). They were aware of his friendships with Bill Ayers and Rashid Khalidi and of his affection for Third World causes. They heard him promise to hold face-to-face meetings with Ahmadinejad, Castro, and Chavez "without preconditions."

Arguably, Israel's security was not a high priority for the 78 percent of Jews who voted for Obama. Though the Democratic Party has been (with the exception of the first Bush administration) the less pro-Israel of the two major parties for four decades, Jewish attachment to the Democrats has remained slavish. Even in the face of the ardent and even inspired support of Israel by President George W. Bush, Jewish voters were unmoved, handing 76 percent of their votes in 2004 to Senator John Kerry.

But until 2008, fuzzy-mindedness on the part of Israel's supporters, while it may have been unwise and even, in the case of Bush II, ungrateful, was something less than pivotal. A vote for Clinton over Dole, or even Kerry over Bush, would not have put Israel's very existence at stake. Many American Jews, along with many Israelis, put misplaced faith in the "Oslo process" and other chimeras seductive to liberals. But with an Iranian bomb looming, the stakes in 2008 became dire. Only a fool would deny that an Iranian bomb might spell the nuclear annihilation of Israel—a holocaust more comprehensive than the Nazis'. Yet most American Jews, staring this nightmare in the face, shrugged it off.

Does it trouble Jewish voters to see President Obama warmly shaking hands with Hugo Chavez, assiduously courting Bashar Assad, and flattering Ahmadinejad, while delivering the most stinging rebukes to Netanyahu? It's difficult to know. An American Jewish Committee poll found that Obama's support among Jews has declined by 22 points in

the past year. Yet 55 percent of American Jews still support the way Obama is handling U.S.-Israel relations—more than the 50 percent who approve his handling of health care.

Israel has better friends in America than American Jews. A 2008 poll found that 82 percent of American Christians believed they had a “moral and Biblical” obligation to support Israel (including 89 percent of evangelicals). A 2010 Gallup survey found that 85 percent of Republicans sympathize more with Israel than with the Palestinians. The figure for Democrats was 48 percent. The notion that America’s support for Israel is the result of sinister manipulation by Jews is risible. Millions of Americans of all faiths (and none at all) feel a warm attachment to a fellow democracy and an ally in the war on terror. If Israel’s relationship with its most important ally depended only on American Jews, a frightening situation would be even worse.

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ALAN M. DERSHOWITZ

THE LINE IN THE SAND, for me, has always been Israel’s security. I decided to vote for Barack Obama, having previously favored Hillary Clinton, only after Obama went to Sderot and affirmed Israel’s right to do whatever was necessary to stop rockets from targeting Israeli civilians. When Obama became president, I was not surprised that he took a tough stance against Israeli settlements on the West Bank, which I too have opposed since 1973. I noted with satisfaction that although Obama criticized the settlements on the West Bank, he did not criticize the security barrier that was built, in part, on land captured in the 1967 war. I also noted with satisfaction that the Obama administration categorically rejected the Goldstone Report—a report that was entirely inconsistent with candidate Obama’s statements at Sderot.

I began to get worried about the Obama administration when White House Chief of Staff Rahm Emanuel appeared to link American support for Israel’s security with Israeli actions regarding the settlements. I became even more concerned when Vice President Biden and General David Petraeus were quoted as suggesting that Israel’s actions could affect American casualties in Iraq and Afghanistan. Although Emanuel,

Biden, and Petraeus quickly distanced themselves from this linkage argument, it continues to have a life of its own, despite its falsity, as evidenced by the fact that while Israel was seeking to make peace in 2000-2001 by creating a Palestinian state on the West Bank and in Gaza with a capital in East Jerusalem, al-Qaeda was planning the 9/11 attack. So Israel’s “good” actions did nothing to make America safe from Islamic terrorism. On the other hand, when Israel took tough action against Gaza last year in Operation Cast Lead, Israel’s “bad” actions did not increase American casualties in Iraq and Afghanistan.

Such linkage is also dangerous because its implication is that Israel must cease to exist. The basic complaint that Muslim extremists have against Israel is not what the Jewish state does but what it is: a secular, non-Muslim democracy that promotes equal rights for women, gays, Christians, and others. Regardless of what Israel does or doesn’t do, its very existence will be anathema to Muslim extremists. The only action Israel could take to mollify such extremists would be to commit politicide.

Another source of concern for me has been the Obama policy regarding Iran. Defense Secretary Robert Gates wrote a memo in which he acknowledged that America has no real policy that is likely to prevent Iran from securing nuclear weapons. Instead the Obama administration is moving toward a policy of “containment,” which is no policy at all but rather an implicit admission of failure. At the same time that it has been weak toward Iran, it has been firm toward Israel in telling an ally that has been threatened with nuclear destruction that it may not exercise its inherent right to prevent its citizens from becoming victims of a second Holocaust advocated by a tyrant who denies that the first occurred.

So I am worried about the direction the Obama administration seems to be taking with regard to Israel’s security. I will not join the chorus of condemnation by right-wingers directed against the Obama policy with regard to the settlements, or even with regard to a divided Jerusalem. The Obama administration has not yet crossed my line in the sand. I hope it never does so, but if it does, I will be extremely critical. In the meantime, those of us who supported Obama must continue to press him against compromising Israel’s security and against suggesting a false and dangerous linkage between Israel’s actions and the safety of American troops.

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NATHAN J. DIAMENT

A CLEAR MAJORITY of American Orthodox Jews, the group that I am privileged to represent in Washington, do not have the political schizophrenia described by the questions framing this symposium. A majority of Orthodox Jews did not vote to elect Mr. Obama in 2008 precisely because of their concerns over what his policies would be toward Israel. Currently, most Orthodox Jews oppose President Obama's activist pursuit of Israeli-Palestinian peacemaking because our segment of the pro-Israel community, like most Israelis, do not believe that the Palestinians are either interested in or capable of concluding a peace deal any time soon.

Nonetheless, those who assert that there is an "unmistakable" anti-Israel "direction...emanating from the White House" are incorrect. In fact, the White House is schizophrenic.

Mr. Obama explicitly insists that he subscribes to the "special relationship" between the United States and Israel, is unshakably committed to Israel's security, and is actively pursuing an Israeli-Palestinian peace deal for the sake of, among other things, Israel's best long-term interests. Indeed, under the Obama administration, every aspect of the U.S.-Israel relationship—other than the Israeli-Arab peace process—has not only remained on track from previous administrations but also has flourished. Military cooperation, intelligence-sharing, trade relations, opposing the scurrilous Goldstone Report at the UN, even working to avert Iran from obtaining nuclear weapons are all areas where the Obama and Netanyahu governments are working well together. The disagreements over peace-process issues—even the feud over housing in Jerusalem—have not resulted in the Obama team's scaling back these other tracks of support, much less yielded any threats to cut off American aid to Israel, as Israel's enemies would wish.

In terms of the atmospherics of the relationship, we are indeed experiencing tensions between the American and Israeli leaderships "of a kind not seen since the days of... the first President Bush," and President Obama is responsible for this atmosphere. While the most recent and most disturbing catalyst for these tensions was the administration's escalated reaction to the Ramat Shlomo Jerusalem-housing announcement

issued during Vice President Biden's March visit to Israel, it spans a longer arc.

In the space of Mr. Obama's presidency, one can anchor the beginning of that arc in the president's Cairo speech, which contained phrases jarring to Jewish sensibilities. It continues with his administration's condemning as "settlements" "harmful to peacemaking" any Israeli construction across the Green Line—from an isolated hilltop to East Jerusalem—and supporting Arab demands for a total construction freeze as a precondition for peace negotiations.

It currently culminates in an administration spokesman reporting that, in reprimanding Prime Minister Netanyahu for the Ramat Shlomo housing announcement, Secretary of State Clinton said that the Israeli move harmed not the peace process but rather the "bilateral relationship" between America and Israel; and administration officials telling the *New York Times* that there has been a shift in the approach to relations with Israel precisely because of a belief that American "blood and treasure" are imperiled by a lack of resolution regarding the Israeli-Arab conflict.

As I am writing these words (in late April), the Obama administration is in the midst of a full-court press of Jewish-community outreach because of the outcry over these accumulated events.

The president's national security adviser, General Jones; his senior adviser, David Axelrod; and Secretary of State Clinton each addressed Jewish audiences in the space of a fortnight. Most notably, the president himself sent a public letter to the Jewish community, via the Conference of Presidents, in which he repudiated the view that "Israel bears some responsibility for the loss of American blood and treasure" (saying America's "alliance with Israel serves our national security interests") and rejected the calls for him to propose and force an "American peace plan" to resolve the conflict.

But the president also, in that letter, derided the "noise and distortion about my views" as opposed to "the actual approach of my Administration toward the Middle East"—as if the president and his team had contributed nothing to the negative narrative.

Thus, the outreach effort is sure to fail and will not preempt the next crisis unless two things occur.

First, the president must seize control of the message he wants to convey. If he wants there to be no mistaking his position that there is "no space" between the U.S. and Israel on matters of the Jewish state's security—whether that be in dealing with the existential threat of a nuclear Iran or the contours of a peace deal with the Palestinians he will press for—he not only has to say so clearly and repeatedly; he must also shut

down those within his administration who deviate from that message.

Second, the president must align his peacemaking efforts to practically serve that policy purpose and not an ideological predisposition.

The president has ignored the history of past Israeli-Arab peacemaking, which demonstrates that Israel will “take risks for peace” when two conditions are present: an Arab leader who is obviously a real partner for peace (think Sadat), and the Jewish state’s clear belief that the United States “has Israel’s back.” Neither of these conditions is present, and Mr. Obama’s approach to date has only made them further out of reach. The president must change course and press the Arabs not only to stop incitement against Israel but also to take steps toward normalization with Israel; and he must show Israelis that they can still count on America.

“How” *should* “American Jews handle this challenge?” Not by asserting the Barack Obama is anti-Israel, not to mention worse. American Jews should hold President Obama to the standard of his own words. American Jews, including Orthodox Jews, share his goal—ensuring Israel’s long-term security and Jewish character—and we must insist that his administration intelligently pursue that goal.

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IRA FORMAN

YOU LOST ME at “Reverend Jeremiah Wright.” The editors of COMMENTARY could have decided to conduct a substantive debate about the merits of the Obama administration’s policy toward Israel. Instead they decided to frame the “discussion” by positing that in Israel’s hour of need, we have a Reverend Wright-worshipping president who is blaming Israel for the loss of American “blood and treasure” and what are liberal Jews going to do to make up for the error of their ways...in other words, by asking the equivalent of “When did you stop beating your wife?”

COMMENTARY does not appear to want a real debate about the administration’s Middle East policy. So a related topic presents itself: how the bulk of Jewish conservatives have joined a movement that is much less interested in policy and intellectual debate and much

more interested in whipping itself into a lather over the perfidy of its opponents and bemoaning either the stupidity or the disloyalty of that opposition.

The evidence of this hysterical campaign can be divided into a handful of story lines.

Imaginary Policy Advisers: Throughout the 2008 election cycle, conservative Jewish circles fixated over Obama’s supposed Middle East policy ties to people like Rashid Khalidi and Reverend Wright. They warned the Jewish community that these types of people would be guiding Obama’s foreign policy. Now that the administration is stocked with people like Dennis Ross, Dan Shapiro, and Hillary Clinton, many of those same voices are, in defiance of all logic, yelling I told you so.

Historical Illiteracy: Historical analogies are great for analyzing complex current problems. But how credible is your argument when everything comes down to Munich and Chamberlain? Describing administration policies, as one Obama critic recently did, as the equivalent of Rome’s destruction of Jerusalem in 70 C.E. is laughable.

I Have in My Hands a List of Known Communists: Too many Jewish conservatives are loath to argue actual facts and so they resort to made-up facts. Recently, Jewish conservatives have spread blatant misrepresentations—such as claims that the administration was encouraging Palestinian protests in Jerusalem and that Obama had changed visa policies to obstruct Israeli nuclear scientists from entering the United States. This phenomenon is not confined to marginal characters. Elliott Abrams feels comfortable putting words never uttered into the mouths of both the columnist David Ignatius and President Obama when he says that “Obama came to the conclusion that he should impose a ‘peace plan.’”

The Jewish Masses Are Asses: Perhaps the most telling Jewish conservative behavior pattern is the reaction to the continued pattern of Democratic voting in the Jewish community. Jewish Republican analysts have spent years whining about Jews supposedly voting against their “self-interest.” According to these experts, only naïveté, ignorance, and worship of the false religion of liberalism can explain this perverse Jewish voting behavior.

Critical times demand cool analysis, reasoned discussion, and a profound understanding of the difference between enemies and friends. The hysteria, partisan one-upmanship, and painting of opponents as disloyal are a formula for Jewish disaster.

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ABRAHAM H. FOXMAN

I BELIEVE AMERICAN JEWS will mobilize if they truly believe the Obama administration is fundamentally changing the nature of the U.S.-Israel relationship and undermining Israel's security. They are not there now, partly because they haven't reached a definitive conclusion as to where the administration is going, partly because they admire the president, and partly because they don't feel very comfortable about the settlement issue and the Netanyahu government.

There is much to be concerned about regarding the assumptions and directions of the administration. Its unwillingness to see what Israelis have gone through in the past decade—three major initiatives to move forward met with rejection, terrorism, and extremism—is disheartening and leads to a misreading of options.

The administration's making the settlement issue a *sine qua non* of negotiations was a bad mistake, not only because it provided an excuse for the Palestinians not to come to the table, but also because it left an impression that America saw pressure on Israel as a way to curry favor with the Islamic world. (Israel has already made offers on settlements, but major change can happen only in the context of significant and unprecedented Palestinian steps toward peace.) The administration publicly making Jerusalem an up-front issue heightened the Jewish community's anxiety and concern.

Also, its comments suggesting that it buys the idea that American interests in the wider Middle East, including the ability to prevent Iran from getting nuclear weapons, are dependent on peace between the Israelis and Palestinians are equally misguided.

The piling on against Israel left an impression that America's long-held bipartisan policy was changing, having an impact on the Israeli public and Israel's enemies.

On the other hand, the administration has shown enough flexibility to back off certain positions. For example, on settlements and Jerusalem, after starting unnecessary brouhahas, it seems willing to compromise. Questions remain, however, as to whether this is a tactical move to pacify critics or whether it reflects a deeper understanding and policy changes.

For American Jews as a whole (there is already a certain segment that believes that the administra-

tion has gone too far), breaking points could come if the administration does not protect Israel in the UN Security Council should the Palestinians opt for a unilateral declaration of statehood; or if the administration comes up with its own plan leading to efforts to impose it on the parties; or if the administration loses its focus on seeing to it that Iran does not get nuclear weapons.

At any of these points, traditional American Jewish concern for Israel's well-being will kick in despite suggestions by some that the Jewish community has changed. I remember hearing back in the days of Menachem Begin's tenure as prime minister how things had changed, but Jews showed up when needed. I believe the same would happen now.

The question for me is not whether Jews will stand up but how effective we will be. In that respect, the key factor will be Democrats in Congress. Can the community mobilize the Democratic majority in both houses to take issue with the president of their party? This will be a major challenge that will require persistence, initiative, and creativity.

In the final analysis, I'm still hopeful that things never reach that point, that the relationship, despite ups and downs, will remain intact. If not, I'm confident we will rise to the occasion as we have many times in the past.

The fact that the president, the secretary of state, the national security adviser, Rahm Emanuel, and David Axelrod have found opportunities to rearticulate the strong U.S.-Israel strategic and special relationship indicates that the administration has begun to hear some of the concerns reverberating in the Jewish community, and not only from Republican Jews.

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JONATHAN GURWITZ

SOME AMERICAN PRESIDENTS have had an instinctive sense about the Jewish people, about the way defenselessness and vulnerability have contributed to the tragedies of Jewish history and about the role the modern State of Israel has played in giving sense to that history. Lyndon Johnson and Ronald Reagan, Harry Truman and George W. Bush—a diverse group of politicians from widely different back-

grounds—had this instinct. Barack Obama does not.

There were plenty of clues that, despite a substantial number of Jewish supporters and advisers, candidate Obama did not have a decent appreciation of the Jewish psyche: his membership in a church that honored Louis Farrakhan; his former spiritual adviser who had a deep animus for Israel and trafficked in conspiracy theories; his foreign-policy team, which was populated with people who were demonstrably insensitive to Jewish concerns.

But perhaps the best indication that for Obama the Jews and Israel are merely political issues, not instinctual or personal points, came in the summer of 2008. At the AIPAC policy conference on June 4 of that year, Obama delivered a speech in which he articulated a philo-Semitic autobiography and Zionist credentials, declaring, “Jerusalem will remain the capital of Israel and it must remain undivided.” Days later, Obama retracted his declaration, telling CNN’s Fareed Zakaria that his clarion call for a united Jerusalem suffered from “poor phrasing.” If his commitment to an undivided Jerusalem was contrived for the AIPAC audience, there was every reason to believe that the balance of his address was as well.

The defining characteristic of presidents who are respected as friends of the Jewish people and Israel is their willingness to put principle over politics. Think of Truman’s support for the nascent Jewish state over the strenuous objections of the U.S. national-security and foreign-policy establishment. The essence of Obama’s Jewish problem is his penchant for putting politics over principle.

What explains this penchant? First, nothing about Obama’s formative years in Indonesia or his politically formative years on Chicago’s South Side would suggest a principled attachment to the Jewish community or Israel. Those are locales hardly less devoid of philo-Semitic and Zionist sentiment than Plains, Georgia, or Kennebunkport, Maine.

Second, Obama’s political style is that of the perpetual campaign. Since moving into the White House, he has taken his operation to the world stage, seeking popularity and an enhanced relationship with the Muslim world. That’s a contest one wins by confronting Israel rather than by endorsing its existential concerns about Hamas, Hezbollah, and a nuclear-armed Iran.

Third, Obama consistently attempts to define his presidency in grandiose, unprecedented terms, from stimulus plans to health-care reform. In the foreign-policy sphere, nothing could appeal more to the vanity of a president who won a Nobel Peace Prize on the basis of potentiality than to untie the Gordian

knot of “Middle East” peace. And in Obama’s political milieu, Israeli security and the concerns of American Jews are dispensable to that worthy goal.

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JEFF JACOBY

LONG BEFORE his election as president, it was clear that Barack Obama felt little of the traditional American warmth for Israel or any particular repugnance for the enemies that Israel and America have in common. As COMMENTARY’s editors suggest, his exceptionally close ties to the man he described as his spiritual mentor, the Israel-bashing Reverend Jeremiah Wright, should have given pause to any pro-Israel voter. So should the persistence with which he vowed to undertake direct presidential diplomacy with Mahmoud Ahmadinejad—the virulently anti-American, anti-Israel, anti-Semitic president of Iran—“without preconditions.” Yet many American Jews chose to give Obama the benefit of the doubt, telling themselves that he could be numbered, as Alan Dershowitz wrote at the time, “among Israel’s strongest supporters.”

Only the willfully blind could believe that now. And many American Jews are willfully blind.

Time and again, Obama has made clear both his lack of sympathy for the Jewish state and his keen desire to ingratiate himself with Arab and Muslim autocrats. The disparities in the administration’s tone and attitude have been striking. For the prime minister of Israel, there have been humiliating snubs and telephoned harangues; for the rulers of Iran, invitations to “engage” and sycophantic New Year greetings. When Damascus was reported to be arming Hezbollah with Scud missiles, Obama’s secretary of state observed mildly that the U.S. “would like to have a more balanced and positive relationship with Syria.” When Israel announced plans to build more homes in a Jewish neighborhood of Jerusalem, by contrast, the secretary of state angrily condemned the announcement as “an insult to the United States.”

Even more egregious is Obama’s insinuation that American troops are dying in Iraq and Afghanistan because Israel won’t agree to peace on the Palestinians’ terms. The Israeli-Arab conflict “is costing us significantly in terms of both blood and treasure,”

the president said in April—a claim not just false but also recklessly close to a blood libel. No wonder the number of Israeli Jews who see Obama as pro-Israel is minuscule: just 9 percent, according to the *Jerusalem Post*.

When the first George Bush was in the White House, he evinced a similar anti-Israel animus, and some of his advisers worried that his Mideast policy would hurt the president with Jewish voters. “F--- the Jews,” Secretary of State James Baker notoriously responded, “they don’t vote for us anyway.” They didn’t: when Bush ran for re-election in 1992, he drew only 11 percent of the Jewish vote—less than a third of those who had voted for him in 1988.

Is it likely that two-thirds of the overwhelming majority of Jews who backed Obama in 2008 would abandon him in 2012, assuming he runs for re-election and his animus toward Israel persists? To ask it another way: would most American Jews vote against a Democratic nominee out of concern for Israel?

There is no reason to think so. American Jews have been stalwart Democrats for nearly a century, and their partisan affiliation shows no sign of weakening—not even as the Democratic Party’s support for Israel grows steadily weaker. When Gallup earlier this year surveyed Americans on their sympathies in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, 85 percent of Republicans expressed support for Israel—but only 48 percent of Democrats did so. Reams of data confirm that solidarity with Israel is now far stronger among Republicans and conservatives than among Democrats and liberals.

That is why if they are forced to choose between standing with Israel and standing with the Democratic Party, many American Jews will simply deny that any choice must be made. As evidence, consider a recent Quinnipiac University poll, in which fully 50 percent of Jews described Obama as a “strong supporter of Israel”—a far higher proportion than the 19 percent of evangelicals, 23 percent of Protestants, and 35 percent of Catholics who said the same. Denial is not an uncommon response to cognitive dissonance, and a goodly number of Jewish Democrats will find it easier to keep telling themselves that Obama is strongly pro-Israel than to rethink their party loyalty.

To be sure, in 2012, Obama isn’t going to duplicate the 78 percent of Jewish votes he drew in 2008. But will American Jews turn away from him *en masse*? Don’t bet on it. “F--- the Jews,” Obama’s advisers can tell him. “They’ll vote for us anyway.”

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JEREMY KALMANOVSKY

THERE IS NO real love without criticism, the Talmud teaches. And if the United States always endorses whatever policies emerge from the unstable, often incoherent coalitions of Israeli governments—well, that’s not love; it’s indulgence and condescension.

Real friends hold their friends responsible for reciprocity and good judgment. It will sometimes be unpleasant, but ultimately we who love Israel and want her to flourish as a Jewish, democratic state should welcome honest American friends.

I see no cause for concern in an American administration that expects Israel to refrain from building as provocatively as possible, and shaming the vice president in the process. Foolishness like that entails consequences. If Israeli-American relations endure a rocky passage as a result, whose fault is that?

Similarly, I want my real friends to tell me the truth: that time is not on my side, demographically or geopolitically; that unilateral withdrawals in Lebanon and Gaza brought no peace but negotiated agreements with Egypt did; and that it is in my interest to encourage the leadership of Salam Fayyad, still relatively weak but the best we can hope for from the Palestinian Authority.

American Jewish discourse about Israel remains binary—with us or against us—and crude. But the truth is that Israel, like America, has partisan discourse over its important challenges. Although Benjamin Netanyahu was elected to power, consistent, large majorities of Israelis (71 percent, according to a March Hebrew University poll) nevertheless favor an independent Palestinian state. How can President Barack Obama be “against” Israel or “betray it” by advancing a position that most Israelis favor?

One can support Obama’s measured, friendly pressure without falling into the facile trap of linkage. It is just delusional to expect that American “blood and treasure” would be magically secured in Iraq, Afghanistan, and around the Gulf once Palestine is independent. Nor will Israel be welcomed into the Arab League once Kiryat Arba is evacuated. But unquestionably it is in America’s interest to ameliorate this intractable problem, both for the sake of its close Israeli friend and, yes, to enhance the goodwill of less dear friends and even mortal adversaries elsewhere.

I do not suspect the Obama administration's sympathies or some putative anti-Semitism. (Jeremiah Wright? Rahm Emanuel? Which one works in the White House?) Furthermore, Americans' sympathies continue to run more than 3-to-1, with Israel over the Palestinians, as a CNN poll found last month. This country is not about to shift its long-term alliances.

So there is much less to all the hubbub of the recent strained relationship than meets the eye. The worrisome element, it seems to me, is that this may distract Israelis as well as American Jews from the real issue that should be indelibly stamped on our minds: restraining a nuclear Iran. American Jews should hope not for American coddling over the territories but rather for real leadership on that existential threat. If the United States provides that, Israel and her friends will be happy to build their apartments on a different hill.

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JONATHAN KELLERMAN

THE ONLY SURPRISE about the tension between the Obama administration and Israel is that anyone is surprised.

While President Barack Obama was less than frank about his intentions to govern from the center, he never projected himself as a supporter of Israel beyond a few bland campaign clichés. There were certainly clear indicators of what to expect: he palled around with Palestinian scholar and Israel-basher Rashid Khalidi and sipped Chardonnay with “reformed” domestic terrorists who’d been overtly hostile to Israel for decades. He admired Edward Said. He sat in a church pew for years and blithely ingested anti-Israel and frankly anti-Semitic rhetoric without a word of protest.

The greater issue isn’t that Obama is no great friend of Israel and never will be. The fascinatingly perverse tendency of Jews to vote against their self-interest is. Even with my psychological training, I don’t understand it. However, it is nothing new. Our history is rife with fractiousness and the tendency to over-intellectualize and to complicate simple issues of self-preservation. To some extent, our ability to promote an infinite array of opinions has contributed to the richness of our culture. Often, however, it has led to tragedy. Let’s not forget that it was a certain

group of Jews that invited the Romans into Jerusalem.

My personal opinion—and I’ve written about this before—is that the bifurcation of Israel and Judaism is structurally fallacious. The Land of Israel is an essential ingredient of Judaism practiced fully. Thus, it is impossible to be anti-Israel and not be anti-Jewish. And in fact, the war being waged against Israel by the Muslim world is, at the core, a religious dispute. Radical Islamists no longer talk about Zionists; they come right out and broadcast their goal of eradicating worldwide Jewry. The same squarely theological cast informs Islam’s struggle against “Western values,” which is really a buzzword for Christianity. Failure to recognize any link between Israeli and Jewish survival is the same old pathological denial that has informed the most tragic chapters of Jewish history.

No doubt there are many people who will disagree, ranging from the pseudo-Zionists of J Street to the Satmar Hasidim. Hostility toward Israel engenders fascinating levels of Jewish “pluralism.”

Obama will come and go. Jewish antipathy toward Israel and Judaism itself will endure. And that is the challenge.

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ED KOCH

U.S.–ISRAELI RELATIONS are still reeling from the Obama administration’s smear campaign launched against the Jewish state in March following an Israeli government announcement that 1,600 new apartment units had been authorized to be built in an existing Jewish neighborhood in East Jerusalem. As part of that campaign, various administration officials, including Vice President Joe Biden, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, and the president himself, have blamed Israel for the lack of progress in the Middle East peace process, and the president has snubbed its prime minister, Benjamin Netanyahu, during a White House visit. Worse still, some administration officials have suggested that Israeli actions were endangering the lives of American military personnel in the Middle East.

Although the Israeli government's construction-approval announcement, which came during Vice President Biden's visit to Israel, was an exercise in poor judgment, it violated no previous Israeli commitments to the United States. Months before Mr. Biden's visit, Netanyahu's government had turned down an Obama administration request to stop all building in East Jerusalem, which is part of Israel's capital and home to some 280,000 Jews, as well as all settlement construction in the West Bank. However, in a move hailed by Secretary of State Clinton as "unprecedented," Netanyahu agreed to a 10-month moratorium on West Bank settlement construction to assist in getting stalled peace negotiations with the Palestinian Authority moving. In addition, he took other confidence-building measures such as lifting numerous roadblocks and checkpoints in the West Bank to improve the quality of life of Palestinians. Apparently, all this was not enough for the Obama administration, which ignored the Palestinians' repeated rejection of Israeli peace offers and their and the Arab states' refusal to make any conciliatory gestures toward Israel, and instead chose to label Israel as the obstacle to peace.

The Obama administration seemed bent on a course of diminishing the stature and importance of the U.S.-Israel alliance and redirecting U.S. foreign policy in a pro-Arab direction. The White House even suggested that if Israel did not agree to its demands for territorial concessions to the Palestinians, the administration would put forth its own peace plan and impose a solution on Israel.

As a result of the clear intention of the president to wring concessions from Israel that could jeopardize its security while encouraging the Palestinians and the Arab states to escalate their demands, a number of organizations and several individuals denounced the Obama administration for its hostility to the State of Israel, our only democratic and reliable ally in the Middle East.

The Obama administration was counting on its support in the Jewish community, which gave him 78 percent of its vote in the presidential election that elected him—a percentage second only to that of the African-American community. It is true that for several weeks, Jewish and Christian supporters of Israel in Congress and elsewhere were dangerously silent. Then people began to wake up. In a poll taken on April 22 by Quinnipiac University, the Jewish community replied with 67 percent disapproving of Barack Obama's "handling [of] the situation between Israel and the Palestinians." In another poll, support for President Obama in the Jewish community went down to 58 percent, a loss of 20 points. In the Quinnipiac poll, it was revealed that

sympathies of Americans were greater for Israel among Republicans—70 percent—while for Palestinians it was at 8 percent; whereas among Democrats, it was 46 percent for Israel and 19 percent for Palestinians.

At this point, the Obama administration decided it had gone too far, certainly in view of the upcoming biannual congressional election and the fear of losing either one or both Houses. So, on April 20, the president wrote a letter to the chairman of the Conference of Presidents of Major American Jewish Organizations in which he assures the Jewish community of his commitment to Israel and pledges that the U.S. will not seek to impose a peace agreement on Israel, which some observers have suggested was his motive in creating the crisis.

Some have argued that the president's efforts to restore the U.S.-Israel relationship to what it was—one of total trust—are insincere and should be rejected. For now, I am willing to give the president the benefit of the doubt. But I also believe we must be ever vigilant and prepared once again to stand up and oppose efforts to bludgeon Israel into engaging in any actions that threaten its security and defensible borders. Whenever President Obama asks Israel to make a concession to the Palestinians to advance peace, he should simultaneously require the same of the Palestinian Authority. Indeed, he should now demand of the Palestinian Authority that it state in Arabic, Hebrew, and English that it accepts the legitimacy of the Jewish state of Israel to exist side by side with a Palestinian state.

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MARTIN KRAMER

WHILE "I-told-you-so" vindication feels good (I was senior Middle East adviser to Rudy Giuliani's campaign), it is no substitute for the urgent re-education of Barack Obama.

No American president has ever entered the Oval Office with so many bad ideas about the Middle East, half-baked in the ovens of the Middle East departments at Columbia and the University of Chicago. Two of these ideas are particularly pernicious and might be described as the Khalidi Doctrine, after Rashid Khalidi, the Palestinian-American professor who gave Obama his Middle East primer at Chicago. First, the American resort to force in the Middle East

is always counterproductive; second, the unresolved Palestine problem is the hinge on which the entire Middle East turns.

Guided by these two ideas, Obama's ship ran aground almost as soon as it left port. The diplomatic drive to tame Iran was bound to stall without the back-up of a credible military threat—the willingness to use force, despite its downsides. The implosion of Plan A, “engagement,” has left a strategic vacuum, which only now the administration is beginning to fill with stiffer rhetoric. And putting the Palestine problem front and center has only incited the intransigence of the Arabs in general and the Palestinians in particular. By declaring a peace deal a “vital American interest” and tussling with the Netanyahu government, Obama merely jacked up the Palestinian asking price for renewing negotiations and everything else.

As the two pillars of the Khalidi Doctrine crumble under the weight of reality, champions of an alternative approach are finally getting some traction. They insist that U.S. diplomacy toward Iran is doomed, absent the threat to use force if talks fail. And they argue that tinkering with the Israeli-Palestinian “peace process” is a dangerous distraction from the main event: Iran.

How do we know whether these ideas are making inroads? First, there was the “dual loyalty” smear of Dennis Ross by an anonymous administration official, which looked like a desperate lunge to head off just this kind of rethinking. Second, the president of the weather vane called the Council on Foreign Relations and suddenly reversed direction: chasing an Israeli-Palestinian deal, he announced, is “a distraction that would benefit neither the U.S. nor Israel, given an Iranian threat that is close at hand and a promise of peace that is distant.” To judge from these gyrations, the re-education of Barack Obama has begun.

What can American Jews do to accelerate it? They must keep their and Obama's eyes squarely on the ball. When Obama visited the town of Sderot during his campaign, he declared that “a nuclear Iran would be a game-changing situation not just in the Middle East but around the world. Whatever remains of our nuclear non-proliferation framework, I think, would begin to disintegrate.” That is the Obama for whom most Jewish Democrats cast their votes: a president who would secure the greater peace. Call it the Sderot Pledge: American Jews must unite around it and hold Obama to it.

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WILLIAM KRISTOL

“HOW,” THE EDITORS of COMMENTARY ask, “will American Jews handle” the challenge of a potentially nuclear Iran? My (somewhat dyspeptic) answer: poorly. Just as poorly as they have handled so many other real-world challenges that can't be solved in accordance with conventional liberal pieties.

Fortunately, neither American nor Israeli foreign-policy need be guided by the head-in-the-sand political views of much of the American Jewish community. If the U.S. does act to prevent the Iranian regime from acquiring nuclear weapons, it will be due to a drumbeat of criticism of the Obama administration's lack of a serious Iran policy. That criticism is coming from American hawks, most of whom are not Jewish, more than from American Jews. So if the Obama administration is shamed into doing something effective with respect to Iran, perhaps the Jewish community will one day thank the Christian hawks. But I wouldn't bet on it.

For that matter, if the Obama administration is pressured into treating Israel, as previous administrations have, as an ally instead of as a problem, American Jews should be grateful to non-Jewish Americans for being so pro-Israel and for doing the pressuring. But I wouldn't bet on much in the way of expressions of gratitude in this instance either.

And of course it is possible that dovish and pro-Obama Jews are finally awakening to reality. But I can't say I'd recommend betting on this happening on a massive scale either.

Now if Israel acts against the Iranian nuclear program, it will of course be thanks to the foresight of the Israeli government and the fortitude of the Israeli people. One does hope, if Israel does act, that she will receive the support of the American Jewish community. One knows she will have the strong backing of American conservatives and evangelical Christians.

It's sad that the American Jewish community is so lacking in political wisdom and in ecumenical gratitude. It's fortunate, on the other hand, that so many Americans and Israelis tend toward good sense and political courage. That's why I'm optimistic about the future of both the Jewish and the American state. I'm even hopeful that things will work out

in the short term vis-à-vis Iran, and with respect to American-Israeli relations.

But I'm doubtful that this will be due to the American Jewish community rising to the challenge. I hope I'm wrong.

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MICHAEL MEDVED

AT HIS CORE, Barack Obama is a leveler—an eraser of distinctions. Most Americans savor his unique ability to blur divisions based on race, or to demolish barriers between the impoverished and the privileged. In other areas, the president's leveling instinct creates far more controversy, particularly when it morphs into a stubbornly nonjudgmental form of moral relativism. On national-security issues in particular, his denial of distinctions has led to dangerous confusion between the decent and the degenerate, between friend and foe, and, ultimately, between right and wrong. The administration has offered new protections to terrorists at Gitmo while threatening criminal prosecution of counterterrorist operatives who helped protect us from their murderous schemes. With similar blindness, the Obama team seems determined to punish the Israelis despite their innumerable risks for peace, while rewarding the Palestinians for their unshakable intransigence.

Mr. Obama's obtuse approach to Israel doesn't reflect anti-Semitism or anti-Zionism so much as it expresses his refusal to consider the overriding moral dimension to the Middle East conflict. In this, he presents a painful contrast to his predecessor. George W. Bush made his share of foreign-policy errors, but he never lost sight of the irreducible difference between nations that sought a peaceful, stable, democratic world and those he unabashedly called the "evil-doers"—gangster regimes and terrorist bands bent on domination and destruction. When it comes to Israel and her enemies, Alan Dershowitz (who supported Obama's presidential campaign) memorably drew the crucial distinction on my radio show: "If the Palestinians put down their weapons, there would be peace tomorrow. If the Israelis put down their weapons, there would be genocide tomorrow." In other words, there is no moral equivalence between those who seek only security within

their own borders and those who yearn to annihilate a neighboring people.

Assuming that President Obama continues to ignore or obscure the contrasting agendas of Israeli and Islamic combatants—that he continues to worry more over Jews building apartments in Jerusalem than over Muslim fanatics building nukes in Teheran—will Jewish voters wake up to the administration's threat to our interests and our values?

That seems doubtful, since so many secular Jews share the president's discomfort with moral judgments and recoil from the imposition of absolute categories of good and evil on contemporary affairs. For one thing, talk of ultimate right and wrong smacks inevitably of religiosity, and Jews remain disproportionately disengaged from organized faith—they are vastly less likely to affiliate with congregations, or even to profess belief in God, than their Christian neighbors. The most conventionally religious elements in the Jewish community, the Orthodox, display no reluctance to uphold clear distinctions between good and evil, and they voted overwhelmingly *against* Obama—just as their less stringent compatriots unblushingly backed their fellow relativist by similarly lopsided margins.

A major shift in the Jewish vote would require a deeper shift in Jewish attitudes and an unlikely new willingness to reaffirm the most rigorous, judgmental aspects of our tradition. The sad fact is that most Jews like Obama's leveling approach, and his eradication of differences, including the existential distinction between Jew and Gentile. Consider the goofy pride with which so many besotted liberals pointed to the recent White House seder, led by Jeremiah Wright's long-time congregant in his conspicuous yarmulke, presiding over the annual ritual of particularistic national origins despite his admitted ignorance of Jewish tradition. By contrast, when George W. Bush hosted menorah lightings in the White House, he never presumed to kindle the lights himself but instead assigned the task to Jewish offspring of fighting men who were serving their country in Iraq or Afghanistan.

This president, unlike Mr. Bush, would feel profound discomfort with the uncompromising Jewish emphasis on separation—between pure and impure, kosher and nonkosher, Sabbath and weekday, good and evil. After all, the Book of Genesis shows God beginning the work of creation through the process of division—between light and darkness, waters above and waters beneath, earth and seas, and so forth. The Havdalah ("Separation") prayer recited by religious Jews at the conclusion of every Sabbath emphasizes this crucial aspect of the sacred: "Blessed are You, Lord

our God, King of the universe, Who separates between holy and secular, between light and darkness, between Israel and the nations, between the seventh day and the six days of labor.”

When more Jews resonate with this eternal imperative to draw crisp distinctions, they will rally to Israel’s uniquely compelling case as a singular example of decency in the most desperate, depraved corner of the earth, but until then they will probably continue to make common cause with our relativist-in-chief.

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AARON DAVID MILLER

JEW S WORRY for a living. Their dark and catastrophe-laden history compels them to do so. But American Jews, paradoxically freed from the existential threats faced by their co-religionists around the world, particularly the Israelis, seem to worry more.

I put forward a notion in my last book, *The Much Too Promised Land: America’s Elusive Search for Arab-Israeli Peace*, called the cosmic oy-vey. The phrase is designed to capture the persistent capacity of some (maybe even many) American Jews to elevate their worries on almost every issue to the level of an existential concern. Jimmy Carter writes a bad book that makes the *New York Times* bestseller list, and the sky is falling; professors Walt and Mearsheimer make a grossly flawed and oversimplified argument about the pro-Israeli lobby, and you’d think the world were coming to an end.

Today the cosmic oy-vey is at work again, even subtly intertwined in the assumptions advanced in the COMMENTARY Symposium, assumptions with which I am now wrestling.

There’s plenty for American Jews to worry about concerning Israel: Iran’s possible acquisition of a nuclear weapon; the increasing lethality, range, and precision of Hamas and Hezbollah high-trajectory weapons; and the fact that given the grim prospects for any serious peacemaking, a continuation of the Arab-Israeli conflict is virtually certain.

I would argue, though, that what is not worth worrying about is the current administration’s brouhaha with Israel. If you want to worry about something

related to President Obama, worry about the fact that his administration still lacks an effective strategy to deal with Iran; worry about the fact that the president has no serious strategy for resolving the Arab-Israeli issue; worry about the fact that America is bogged down in two costly and unpopular wars in which victory is measured not by can we win but by when can we leave; and worry about the fact that al-Qaeda, over time, is bent on acquiring and detonating a nuclear weapon in the United States.

It’s true that the United States is going through a tough patch in the U.S.-Israeli relationship. Of the three worst periods of tension in that relationship, the current crisis still doesn’t approach 1956 (over Suez), 1975 (the reassessment of the second Sinai disengagement agreement), or 1991 (over housing loan guarantees and settlements). In these three cases, sanctions against Israel were either threatened or used. And while the current tensions are not just a bump in the road (and could even worsen), the U.S.-Israeli bond has proved remarkably resilient over the course of the last 60-plus years. The marriage of interests and ideology creates a powerful and enduring bond that links Israel and the United States together.

No, what worries me is that unlike previous periods of tension in the U.S.-Israeli relationship, this time around, nobody on either side seems to be in charge; nobody knows how to climb down, let alone how to use the current crisis to his advantage, or how to get back on track. The Israeli prime minister is a prisoner of his own ideology and his coalition; the president is a prisoner of his own transformational goals and his illusions about certain issues pertaining to Arab-Israeli peace.

Right now, both the president and the prime minister see the world more in terms of how they want it to be, rather than how it is, and neither seems to appreciate the reality in which the other lives. The honeymoon is over; divorce is not an option. So, until Obama and Netanyahu are able to find common ground on some policy initiative that matters to them both, restoring a functional partnership will be extremely difficult. And the next six months will resemble more a soap opera than serious cooperation between the United States and Israel. And that would be a terrible outcome for two nations that face profound challenges in an angry, turbulent, and dysfunctional region.

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TOVA MIRVIS

ARE YOU STILL GLAD you voted for Obama?” my grandfather is asking my mother over the phone, in his pre-Passover call from Jerusalem. With the time difference, he has precious little time before the start of the holiday; in America, we have hours still.

I slink away to avoid being pulled into the conversation that I know is to follow. In the days leading up to the election, my grandfather and I had our own heated discussion about Obama, my fervor for his candidacy contrasting with my grandfather’s immense dislike, and it’s not an argument I’m eager to repeat. My mother’s response, which I can’t avoid hearing, comes as no surprise: “I’m very angry at Obama,” she says, having reluctantly voted for him, one of many American Jews who were lifelong Democrats yet worried about his stance on Israel. I, like many American Jews, voted for him without reservation.

Once my mother gets off the phone, there’s no time to talk politics in the swirl of Passover preparations—too many bitter herbs to be sliced—but it’s still on my mind at the seder, where Jewish history is compressed into past, present, and future at once. The eternal optimist who says *Next year in Jerusalem* is side by side with the doomsayer who reminds us that in every generation, an enemy will rise up to destroy us.

Whether the perceived Obama shift away from Israel will translate into a concrete policy still remains to be seen. Even so, it’s the beginning for me of a painful, reluctant disenchantment. I’m feeling the classic discomfort of cognitive dissonance, supporting the Obama agenda on most other issues but adamantly disagreeing with much of the liberal political world when it comes to Israel. Whose blind spot, whose contradiction, is this? Mine or theirs?

“I get it,” Obama famously said in his State of the Union about the economy, and it is those words I want to hear him say, and say sincerely, regarding Israel’s history, its all-too-valid fears, its current plight. Without those words, these are lonely, uncertain times for this Obama loyalist. I feel this most keenly at the end of Passover when, at my Republican in-laws’ I await the subject of Obama and Israel to be raised. Whereas before I would have argued vehemently in his support, now, closing my mouth, not sure what to think anymore, I’m reminded of a line from Shalom Aleichem, as Teyve the Dairyman grieves at having said goodbye to one of

his daughters: “Let’s talk about something more cheerful. Have you heard any news of the cholera in Odessa?” As I sit at the table, tired of matzoh, I know what to say. “Have you heard any news of global warming?”

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DANIEL PIPES

THE GENIUSES in the Obama administration have now twice provoked and twice lost the same gratuitous fight with the Netanyahu government. Unfortunately, these defeats don’t deter them from persisting with their misconceived goals.

The first fight began in May 2009, when Secretary of State Hillary Clinton demanded an end to Israeli building activity on the West Bank and in Jerusalem. Four months later, after figuring out that this policy obstructed the Israeli-Palestinian diplomacy they fervently sought, the geniuses backtracked and returned to Democratic Party policies-as-usual, meaning good relations with Jerusalem.

In March 2010, Vice President Joe Biden, Clinton, and Obama then picked the same fight with Israel all over again, now over Jerusalem specifically. This time, the administration needed only six weeks to retreat from its foolishness, as signaled by National Security Adviser James Jones’s speech at the Washington Institute for Near East Policy and Elie Wiesel’s lunch at the White House.

Notwithstanding these tactical retreats, the policy of “linkage”—belief that the well-being of the Middle East depends primarily on an Israeli-Palestinian accord—remains very much in place and will bedevil U.S.-Israel relations at least through the next two and a half years of Obama’s presidency.

At this difficult time, three facts console me. First, Israelis take more “risks for peace” and offer more “painful concessions”—i.e., they make more irreversible mistakes—when U.S.-Israel ties are warm and strong. In contrast, tense U.S.-Israel ties render such bad decisions less likely. This is one silver lining in Obama’s missteps.

Another silver lining is the apparently permanent damage these fights have inflicted on Obama, who in the eyes of many Zionist Americans is seen as insufficiently supportive of Israel.

Third, Obama's fights with Israel occur at a moment of particularly strong American support for Israel; one recent poll, for instance, shows a 10-to-1 preference for Israel over the Palestinians. Add to this the deep fabric of U.S.-Israeli religious, family, commercial, and cultural ties—as symbolized by the just-signed bilateral open-skies agreement—and it appears that a president, especially one who has cascaded in the polls and must be deeply concerned about the forthcoming midterm elections, can go only so far to antagonize the very large body of pro-Israel voters. Thus, I am worried but not acutely so.

The title and questions in this symposium focus on American Jews. But the Arab-Israeli debate in the United States has changed to the point that “Jews” no longer adequately defines the actively pro-Israel camp. As Jewish defamers of Israel grow more prominent and organize themselves (think J Street), so do ardently pro-Israel non-Jews (think Christians United for Israel). I therefore suggest rephrasing the discussion, substituting “Zionists” for “Jews.”

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NORMAN PODHORETZ

AND THE LORD SAID unto Moses, I have seen this people, and behold, it is a stiff-necked people.” Yet in our own time in America, it is within a political rather than a religious context that the undying stubbornness of the Jewish people manifests itself most blatantly. Their early ancestors had the golden calf; they have the Democratic Party.

Consider: since 1928—before Franklin Roosevelt, be it noted—a staggering 75 percent of Jewish voters have on average gone for the Democratic presidential candidate. In all those years, and long past the point where the Democratic Party served either their interests or their ideals, whether as Jews or as Americans, only one of its candidates—Jimmy Carter running for a second term against Ronald Reagan—failed to get a majority of their vote, and even he scored a plurality in a three-way race.

There is no more telling example of the stubborn persistence of this pattern than the 2008 election. Thus, in spite of Barack Obama's close association with the anti-Semitic likes of Reverend Jeremiah Wright and

Professor Rashid Khalidi, the Jewish vote for him was 35 points—35 points!—higher than the pro-Obama white vote in general, and it was even 11 points higher than the Hispanic vote. Broken down by religion: the Jewish vote was 33 points higher than the Protestant vote and 24 points higher than the Catholic vote. Only with blacks (95 percent) did Obama do better than with Jews.

Nevertheless, except for the heartbroken disavowals of Ed Koch and the angry attacks of Marty Peretz over Obama's betrayal of the soothing assurances they had given to their fellow Jews of his great friendliness toward Israel, his army of Jewish supporters has greeted this betrayal with a disgracefully tepid response (which is at least less dishonorable than the sycophantic apologetics of a leading Jewish cheerleader like Martin Indyk). More disgraceful still is how Obama's Jewish supporters have treated his evident willingness to accept an Iranian bomb in spite of repeated declarations that it is “unacceptable.”

The American Jewish community of the 1930s and 40s has often been excoriated for its “silence” in the face of Roosevelt's failure to do much about Hitler's threat to rid the earth of Jews. But compared with the response of today's community to Obama's treatment of Ahmadinejad's threat to do unto the Jewish state what Hitler did unto the Jews of Europe, the voice of yesterday's “Jews of silence” sounds like a mighty roar.

And so, even though the 2012 Jewish vote for Obama is unlikely to reach its astronomic 2008 height, it is a good bet that a majority will support him once again. “F--- the Jews,” said James Baker to George H. W. Bush in 1992, “they won't vote for us anyway.” I can easily imagine Rahm Emanuel (who is famously fond of the F word) saying to Barack Obama, “F--- the Jews; they will vote for us anyway.” After all, Emanuel knows as well as Baker that when it comes to the stiff-neckedness of the Jewish people, the Democratic Party is a worthy descendent of the golden calf.

NORMAN PODHORETZ's 12th book, *Why Are Jews Liberals?*, was published by Doubleday last fall.

DENNIS PRAGER

HERE ARE FIVE POINTS that may help to explain current American-Israeli tensions and American Jewish attitudes toward Israel.

1. To understand President Obama,

one must understand that he is the first leftist—not liberal, *leftist*—to serve as president of the United States. While President Franklin Roosevelt was also a man of the left regarding economic policy, social policy, and expanding government, today he would be considered “conservative” regarding foreign policy and the nature of American civilization. FDR believed in American exceptionalism and advocated fighting for others’ liberty. Even before the war, he regularly spoke of America as, in his words, “the guardian of Western culture.” The Democratic Party would not consider for nomination a man who said such things today. Today’s left rejects such notions. For example, when asked last year by the *Financial Times* if he believed in American exceptionalism, President Obama replied: “I believe in American exceptionalism, just as I suspect that the Brits believe in British exceptionalism and the Greeks believe in Greek exceptionalism.” The left wants America to be like other countries—particularly the social democracies of Western Europe. Therefore, a leftist president simply cannot be as pro-Israel as a president who believes in American exceptionalism. Rather, he will likely be as pro-Israel as the Europeans are.

2. A fundamental characteristic of the left is a desire that America be loved, or at least liked, by the world. That is far more important than being strong, and it may well preclude risking world opprobrium for backing Israel.

3. This president particularly wants to be liked in the Muslim world. He feels that he has a great advantage in changing the Muslim world’s views of America because he has a Muslim father, a Muslim name, and spent some of his early years in Indonesia. A president seeking singlehandedly to change the Muslim world’s attitudes toward America and the American president is not likely to be as strongly pro-Israel as was the last president, who was prepared to have himself and America disliked by Muslims who hate the Jewish state.

4. If President Obama watched MEMRI or Palestinian Media Watch, and thereby viewed the daily Palestinian and other Arab television broadcasts of Nazi-like Jew-hatred, perhaps he would realize that the overwhelming obstacle to Mideast peace is a hatred that has no parallel anywhere in the world. Until then, however, he will continue to hold the left’s belief that Israel is as responsible, if not more responsible, for the lack of peace in the Middle East.

5. Finally, most American Jews are not nearly as passionate about Israel as they were a generation ago. Many are indifferent because being Jewish is of no particular significance to them. Many are liberal / left and may loathe the right more than they love Israel. And

some are leftist more than Jewish in their values and passions. Therefore, many American Jews will support an American president on the left against an Israeli prime minister on the right.

Add to these five observations Iran’s developing nuclear weapons while America’s president—not to mention the United Nations Security Council—is not as nearly as tough as necessary on that country’s fanatically anti-Israel regime. One then appreciates why many of us believe Israel is in danger.

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GARY ROSENBLATT

THERE WAS A TIME, not so long ago, when support for the State of Israel was what most bound together the American Jewish community. Now, sadly, it is Israel that most divides us.

How did that happen, and what can be done about it?

As long as Israel was the underdog in its conflict with the Arab world, and particularly in the early years of the state, the overwhelming majority of American Jews were firmly in the Zionist camp, giving their energy and primarily their dollars toward ensuring a safe haven for the remnants of European Jewry after the Holocaust, the immigrants from Arab countries, and other fellow Jews living in the holy land.

The Six-Day War marked the high point of pride in and identification with the Israeli people, widely seen as Jewish Supermen in the heady days after the defeat of the mighty Arab nations. But gradually that image changed. After the Yom Kippur War of 1973, the Lebanon War of 1982, and the first intifada five years later, Israel increasingly was seen in the eyes of the world as Goliath rather than David, no longer the plucky little nation surrounded by 100 million hostile Arabs but instead the mighty war machine preventing Palestinians from having a state of their own.

American Jews who lived through the Holocaust and the creation of the State of Israel, and who witnessed its early struggles, identified with Israel in their *kishkas*. Not so, though, a young generation that has grown up long after the Six Day War miracle and the

euphoria of the Entebbe rescue. Their memory is of the Rabin assassination, checkpoints, intifadas, and widespread condemnation of Israel as occupier, and worse.

Too few of our young people receive a serious Zionist education, even in our best Jewish day schools. They may learn about Judah Maccabee but don't know Menachem Begin from Natan Sharansky. Most find the Mideast conflict confusing as they watch the Palestinians become the darlings of their liberal friends, particularly on college campuses. Lacking the historical knowledge and moral confidence to make Israel's case, too many of our sons and daughters tune out of the discussion.

Birthright Israel has been a great success this past decade, reintroducing Israel in a positive light to tens of thousands of young people, but there is only so much a 10-day visit can do.

The prospect of confrontation between Washington and Jerusalem today is deeply troubling to our young people, and perhaps a losing proposition for pro-Israel supporters. Those who helped elect Barack Obama, moved by his vision of transformation and of restoring respect for America among the nations of the world, may well believe that "tough love" rather than creative advocacy is what Israel needs.

For a generation that has done little to teach our children the history, ethical imperative, and moral passion of Israel, we have no one to blame but ourselves.

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JONATHAN D. SARNA

AMERICAN JEWS have always been happiest when the policies they espouse comport with those that their government espouses. When America battled the Nazis during World War II, when it battled Arab terrorists and al-Qaeda, when it fought Iraq in the Kuwait war, and when it overthrew Saddam Hussein, Jews cheered; their interests and Washington's interests seemed in perfect alignment.

At other times, though, Jews have significantly differed from government policy, and this was true long before the State of Israel came into existence. In the wake of brutal anti-Jewish pogroms in Russia in

the first decade of the 20th century, American Jews campaigned to abrogate an 1832 treaty of commerce with that country. President William Howard Taft, influenced by business leaders, strongly opposed this move and sternly lectured American Jews on the folly of their dissent when they met with him to discuss the issue. Nevertheless, the Jewish community courageously stuck to its guns. Taft was compelled to abrogate the treaty in 1911, and many Jews (including the powerful Jacob Schiff) punished his party and supported the Democrats or the "Bull Moose" Progressives led by Theodore Roosevelt in 1912.

Jews likewise consistently dissented from government policies that sought to limit immigration. Restrictionists who favored literacy tests and tight immigration quotas during the 1910s and 20s regularly charged that Jews put their own interests ahead of the country's best interests, but Jewish leaders stood firm. Rather than cowering before those who defined "national interests" differently, they advocated for what they believed right, even when this put them at odds with presidents whom Jews had helped to elect.

So there is nothing unique or unprecedented about the current conflict with the White House. Indeed, Jewish disagreements with White House policies, particularly concerning the Middle East, characterized the Eisenhower, Kennedy, and Johnson administrations as well, and in those days Israel was a good deal weaker and more dependent than it is now.

The last Democratic president who was perceived (correctly, as we now know) to be an opponent of the State of Israel and its policies was Jimmy Carter. His weak-kneed, idealistic, and naïve foreign policy—uncomfortably similar, in some ways, to that of Barack Obama—alienated millions who had previously supported him. In 1976 he had garnered fully 71 percent of the Jewish vote. Just four years later, he became the only Jewish Democrat in 80 years to receive less than 50 percent of the Jewish vote, and was driven from the White House by Ronald Reagan, who won a higher percentage of Jewish votes than any Republican since Dwight D. Eisenhower.

Could something similar happen to Barack Obama?

Much could change between now and 2012, but signs abound that Jewish support for the Democratic administration is waning. The real question, looking ahead, is whether the Republicans will be able to use this to their advantage. To do so, history suggests, they will need to nominate a candidate whose views on American policy, foreign and domestic, comport with those most Jews hold dear. If Jews decide that the Republican candidate in 2012 more closely aligns with their views than Barack Obama, it is a safe bet that

the Republican candidate will win many more of their votes than McCain and Palin did in 2008.

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ROBERT SATLOFF

THE CURRENT TENSION between the United States and Israel is less than a crisis (for example, Suez 1956) and more than a passing tempest (the Israel-China “Phalcon” episode, 2000). In my view, it registers a 5 or a 6 on the diplomatic Richter scale. But that relatively good news should be cold comfort—the potential for mistrust and recriminations to morph these early tremors into a level-9 earthquake are depressingly real. In the meantime, even the current modest level of tension has had the nasty side effect of giving intellectual terrorists, like Harvard professor Stephen Walt, free rein to use mainstream publications to engage in McCarthyite “dual loyalty” attacks on dozens of patriotic Jewish Americans, myself included.

While COMMENTARY has asked respondents to focus on the role of Jewish Americans in this evolving U.S.-Israel relationship, it is a mistake to overlook the crucial role played by non-Jewish Americans. I am not speaking about the “silent majority” of Americans that still poll in support of strong U.S.-Israel ties in overwhelming numbers. And I am not speaking about the rise of pro-Israel sentiment among conservative evangelicals or its drop among liberal Christian groups. Rather, I focus on what I call the non-evangelical Christian Zionist policymakers. (I haven’t figured out a catchy acronym yet.)

Historically, the role played by these courageous friends of Israel—from Clark Clifford to Alexander Haig—was critical. But who at the highest levels of our foreign-policy elite, especially those outside the ranks of elected officials, play this role today? Among Republicans, George Shultz remains an exemplar. Among Democrats, Evan Bayh, a soon-to-be-ex-elected official, retains a powerful voice. There are, of course, others. But compared with a generation ago, the bench is pretty thin.

There are many reasons for this sad state of affairs, not all of them negative or regrettable. To a certain extent, for example, this is an unintended consequence of the growing acceptability of Jewish foreign-policy practitioners, especially as concerns the U.S.-Israel relationship and

wider U.S. Middle East policy. But at the same time, among many in the foreign-policy elite, there has been an unmistakable decline into indifference toward and detachment from Israel and the fate of the U.S.-Israel relationship.

When times are good, this doesn’t matter very much. But when times are bad—and especially when they are getting worse—the absence of this critical layer of robust, sophisticated, and influential advocacy of strong U.S.-Israel ties can be devastating.

So as Jewish Americans analyze their relationship to Israel, Obama, and American politics on the pages of COMMENTARY and elsewhere, let’s please remember a larger reality—if U.S.-Israel friendship becomes viewed solely or even predominantly as an indulgence to the American Jewish community, without vocal and effective champions among non-Jewish foreign-policy practitioners who rally to its defense because U.S.-Israel friendship advances U.S. strategic interests, the chances that it will survive the level-9 earthquake are slim. Rebuilding that sort of support (starting with support among the Democratic foreign-policy elite, given the current administration) is where we need to refocus our efforts.

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DAN SENOR

THE PROBLEM with President Obama’s approach to Israel is that he means well. Pressuring Israel has no political benefit for him, only risks. Yet he seems to believe that it is the right thing to do for peace, since peace—in his view—comes from raising the stakes to a near rupture in the U.S.-Israel relationship. His administration argues that the U.S. knows Israel’s best interests better than its own elected prime minister. It is ironic, to say the least, that an administration that has gone to extraordinary lengths to listen to almost every other nation has no qualms about dictating to Israel.

All this would be bad enough in isolation, but it is not. The flap with Israel has distracted from the central global security challenge of our time: Iran’s race to obtain nuclear weapons. If Iran succeeds, the first casualty will be the Arab-Israeli peace process, since Hamas and Hezbollah will be greatly strengthened, and no Arab player, including the Palestinians, will risk normalization, let alone making peace, with Israel.

Under normal circumstances, American Jews would turn to other political forces to compel a course correction.

Indeed, the shock absorber in the U.S.-Israel relationship has historically been the Congress. Whenever there has been tension between a U.S. president and an Israeli prime minister, Congress has stepped in. Even in the recent flare-up, House Majority Leader Steny Hoyer co-authored a letter to President Obama reminding him that the U.S. “must be both a trusted mediator and a devoted friend to Israel.” Senator Barbara Boxer penned a similar letter.

The good news is that these letters were signed by overwhelming majorities in both bodies—333 House members and 76 senators. But digging a little deeper reveals a worrisome trend: while 96 percent of House Republicans signed the letter, only 64 percent of House Democrats signed it; similarly in the U.S. Senate, over 90 percent of Republicans signed on, but only 64 percent of Senate Democrats would join.

Even more striking were some of the individuals who refused to sign, including Senate Majority Whip Dick Durbin, a much-talked-about possible majority leader, and John Kerry, the chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee. The same is true in the House, where many of the party’s leading lights took a pass. The uncomfortable fact is that there are real divisions among congressional Democrats over Israel, and those divisions are widening and cementing in ways not seen in decades.

Another shock absorber could be the grassroots constituencies that form the basis of a political party. But sadly, outside the Jewish community, there is not a single constituency within the Democratic coalition for whom Israel is a priority. To the contrary, most of the Democratic base regards a strong Israel as counter to American interests and values. As far as powerful groups that care deeply about Israel, there is simply nothing comparable in the Democratic Party to the cultural conservatives, evangelical Christians, and national-security hawks, all of whom are highly influential blocs in the GOP and all of whom view a strong Israel as a priority.

Today, Democrats in Congress, in the executive branch, and at the grassroots level are at best deeply divided over Israel and at worst deeply hostile, and the need to confront Iran has fallen off their radar screen entirely.

This presents Jewish Democrats with a question: will the Democratic Party be a party that is pro-Israel and internationalist, or a party that confronts Israel while allowing real global threats to grow? If it is the latter, then the Democratic Party is not a pro-Israel party. Make no mistake: it might have some pro-Israel members in office, but that is different from being a pro-Israel party.

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TEVI TROY

TWO RECENT *Jerusalem Post* headlines on the same April day encapsulate our current moment. The first declared: “Most Americans unhappy with Obama’s handling of Israel ties.” The second: “Jewish leaders caught between criticizing, defending Obama.”

What a contrast. The U.S. has now reached a point where American citizens are so comfortable with Israel that they prefer the policies of Jerusalem to the policies of Washington. And yet, at this moment, American Jewish leaders are *struggling* over the question of criticizing the administration’s policies toward the Jewish state.

American Jews now differ from the rest of America—and the world—in understanding President Obama’s coldness towards Israel. Despite the president’s words and not-unsubtle actions, American Jews remain a loyal voting bloc in a party whose supporters are far less likely to be supportive of Israel than are those in the rival party (48 percent among Democrats, 85 percent among Republicans).

This seemingly unshakable loyalty has a real-world impact on Israel’s future. If Obama knows that he can take for granted the Jewish vote, then he has very little incentive to take Israel’s side in questions about the peace process, terrorism, or even its right to exist. In effect, Obama can invert James Baker’s dictum “F--- the Jews, they didn’t vote for us any way” to “F--- the Jews, they will vote for us anyway.”

In this, American Jews are serving as critical enablers for Obama’s ability to pursue his political interest and personal ideology. From his perspective, the Jews are in his corner and will remain there regardless of his behavior. To take just one example: Obama saw how a simple White House “seder” photo op could quiet stories about his poor treatment of Netanyahu. This leaves Obama free to pursue deeper relations with Israel’s enemies with little fear of losing his Jewish constituency.

Jewish Republicans have long been simply watching events, like Vladimir and Estragon in *Waiting for Godot*. With each new development—the failure of Oslo, 9/11, Bush’s staunch support for Israel, and Obama’s coldness towards Israel—we hope a massive and dramatic shift is around the corner. We hope one event will cause Jewish voters to find a home in the Republican Party. Yet, as in *Waiting for Godot*, the awaited moment never arrives.

In contrast, opinion in Israel has experienced a tectonic shift. Israeli Jews have rejected the Obama approach, probably because their lives are directly on the line. Various polls have shown Obama's approval among Israeli Jews as low as 4 percent. This shows that Obama does have a considerable talent to unite the famously fractious sons of Abraham—in America for him; in Israel, against.

Still, Obama's shift of American foreign policy away from Israel may not be entirely costless. The saving grace, as it were, for Israel is not the Jews but the Gentiles of America, who see in Israel a kindred spirit in favor of modernity and opposed to terror. To the extent that Obama suffers for moving away from Israel, it will be because non-Jewish Americans reject his policies. In the meantime, Israeli Jews will continue to wonder why their American counterparts lag behind the rest of America.

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RUTH R. WISSE

THE ESSENTIAL QUESTION for Israel," writes editor David Remnick in a recent issue of the *New Yorker*, "is not whether it has the friendship of the White House—it does—but whether Netanyahu remains the arrogant rejectionist that he was in the nineteen-nineties." This triple twist (a) guarantees Israel the friendship of the flagrantly unfriendly president, (b) manifests corresponding contempt for Israel's elected leader, and (c) pins Arab "rejectionism" on the rejected party. Remnick's bow to Obama is deeper than Obama's bow to the Saudi King, and his antipathy to a strong Israel is greater than Obama's contrition over a strong America. The president is a certain kind of American, and Remnick is his kind of American Jew.

Fortunately, there are also other kinds. Never before in the Jewish Diaspora has a political group worked as efficiently as AIPAC in defending the Jewish polity against its enemies. The Conference of Presidents of Major Jewish Organizations has likewise managed to work on behalf of Israel rather than against it, no small feat in the swamp of Jewish political infighting. Anti-Semitism—now in its new and improved form of anti-Zionism—is sharply resisted

by public thinkers, Jewish and non-Jewish, as it never was in the 1930s. America encourages Jews, along with all its minorities, to defend their rights at home and abroad. America will not be at fault if they fail to do so.

There is much at stake in this challenge. By now it is obvious that the organization of modern politics against Jews is a catch-all for ideological warfare against whatever Jews are thought to stand for—free-market competition, equal rights, liberal democracy, "the West." This proxy war has been waged by Arab and Muslim rejectionists against Israel for 63 years. "Little Satan" is a handier target than big America. A war so preposterously unilateral calls for unprecedented powers of resistance from Israel and political support from democratic allies who recognize the threat to themselves. Since scapegoating Israel prevents meaningful improvement in Arab and Muslim countries, the essential question is not whether Israel has the friendship of the White House—right now it doesn't—but what the world suffers on that account.

I appreciate the bumper sticker that reads "DON'T WORRY, AMERICA: ISRAEL IS BEHIND YOU!" Far from putting American lives at risk, Israel has so far borne the brunt of anti-Western hostilities. America "brings its soldiers home"; Israel is the home that soldiers. American Jews bear a double responsibility to get behind both Israel and America in their common struggle against hostile leaders and rotten ideologies. Will some prefer the Remnick twist? Probably. But the Russian Jewish immigrants I've come to know in Boston did not vote for the most left-wing member of the Senate. My faith in the future of democracies lies with them.

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DAVID WOLPE

AWISH: that there should be less noxious speculation about the president's origins and less invidious speculation about his "real" views. I assume he views the prospect of a nuclear Iran with horror, as any sane man would, and wishes to forestall it if possible. I assume he wishes Israel to survive in peace. I am heartily sick of the invective that loads my in-box imputing to the president traitorous, anti-Semitic, or conspiratorial motives, usually allied to pseudo-psychological diagnoses.

A belief: that the following political calculus is profoundly mistaken—the Bush administration warmly embraced Israel and there was no peace. Therefore, chilliness and pressure on Israel will bring peace. The opposite of an unproductive policy is not automatically a productive one. The president who cannot sustain the confidence of both sides will not succeed. The administration's posturing is unworthy; alienating a steadfast ally through neglect or carping achieves nothing and risks a great deal.

A surprise: that the government of Israel would permit anything—anything—to separate it from the United States at this time. Iran's designs should push parochial agendas to the side. In this battle, Israel needs to count on as much cooperation as possible. This is a nuclear bomb; you don't talk housing units in Hiroshima.

A fear: that even if there is regime change in Iran, its desire to be a nuclear power will not abate. Nor will the influence of that part of the population for whom Israel is a temporary and unjust intruder. This is the most terrifying development in the postwar world, and talk of "containment" is acquiescence to Armageddon. It is not certain that Iran will explode a nuclear device should it acquire one. Even the devout can be pragmatic. Men are not machines, nor does sharia—or halacha or the expectation of the eschaton—make them so. But the temptation to an apocalyptic mind is present and dreadful. And that which you do not explode you can still exploit.

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ERIC H. YOFFIE

I BELIEVE THAT there is no "Barack Obama policy" on Israel, just as there was no "George W. Bush policy" on Israel. There is an American policy, and it has been remarkably consistent for nearly two decades: a Palestinian state alongside Israel, under conditions that will guarantee peace and security for both—and that will enable Israel to remain both Jewish and democratic.

President Obama is a friend of Israel, and his administration is filled with friends, with Joe Biden, Hillary Clinton, and Dennis Ross leading a long list. His concern about Israeli settlements does not reflect fundamental differences with past administrations; it reflects the simple fact that settlers outside the major settlement blocks that will remain part of Israel have grown in number from 50,000 to 100,000 since the

mid-1990s, thereby calling into question the viability of the two-state solution on which American policy rests.

The Obama administration has made many mistakes. It should have been more emphatic in articulating its support for Israel and far more assertive in publicly demanding Palestinian concessions. But the president supported Israel on Gaza, withdrew from Durban II, increased military cooperation with Israel, and has done much else to produce a strong pro-Israel record in word and deed.

The administration is right to encourage Palestinian moderates; the alternative to the Palestinian Authority is Hamas. American Jews, I believe, welcome their government's activism and see it as an opportunity, not a danger. Nonetheless, I am skeptical that PA leaders have the courage to make real peace. Thus, the challenge for Israel—and American Jews—is to keep attention focused on Palestinian obstructionism. This will best be accomplished not by confronting the administration but rather by cooperating with it. An Israel that settles beyond the security fence, builds in the Arab neighborhoods of Jerusalem, and refuses to remove illegal outposts will be playing into the hands of its enemies. An Israel that works with the U.S. to develop a common strategic understanding, including the red lines that it cannot cross, will defuse current tensions.

The prime minister of Israel has expressed his support for a Palestinian state. By telling the United States specifically how it hopes to get there and putting the burden on the Palestinians to respond, Israel will advance and deepen the American-Israeli alliance.

A nuclear Iran is a profound threat to Israel. Any conceivable response to this threat—economic sanctions with real teeth or military strikes—will require strong American backing. The administration has taken positive steps on Iran, and American Jews must now focus their attention on working with their government to gain support for decisive action in the days ahead.

I don't speak for American Jews and neither does COMMENTARY. The poll data that we have on their views is conflicting and inconclusive. But if the past is any guide, American Jews want pro-Israel advocacy to be firmly bipartisan. Those who prefer to see the American government as the enemy and to demonize the president may be serving their own political agenda, but they are not helping Israel. U.S. Jews want to avoid showdowns, to stress shared values, and to strengthen the ties that bind the U.S. to Israel and that have been the heritage of both Republican and Democratic governments for half a century. Their agenda should be our agenda today. ➤

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