

Shabbat Tzav 5776
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The Historic AIPAC Policy Conference 2016: Accomplishments, Challenges, and Celebrations

I recently returned from the historic AIPAC Policy Conference in Washington, D.C. It was a jammed packed and yet intimate gathering of 18,700 pro-Israel delegates. Among the delegates were 4,000 high school and college students, members of the African American and Hispanic communities and Christians of various backgrounds. The gathering was so large that the plenary sessions were held not in the Washington Convention Center, but in a nearby sports arena. Addressing the crowd were four of the five Presidential candidates, as well as Vice President Biden, Speaker of the House Paul Ryan, and other members of Congress. Israeli leaders, including Natan Sharansky and Isaac Herzog, also spoke, as did our very own Governor of Colorado, John Hickenlooper.

What would motivate thousands of people to pay for airline tickets, hotel rooms, and Conference registrations? Why would so many people travel so far to endure sleep deprived days, jostled dining in crowded halls and vitriolic anti-Israel protesters? The answer is easy: we all care deeply about Israel. Being involved in AIPAC is one of the best ways to advocate for a strong, supportive and enduring relationship between the United States and Israel. Unlike other advocacy groups, AIPAC is a non-partisan, single-issue organization. Speaker after speaker, from different political parties and ideological backgrounds, declared with absolute conviction that Israel is not only America's best ally in the Middle East, but that Israel is one of America's best allies anywhere. This relationship was not created overnight. This relationship did not grow because of a handful of powerful donors. Rather, the extraordinary relationship between Israel and the United States was built by the outpouring of tens of thousands of Americans who know that in this dangerous world, a true and loyal friend is both rare and precious. The non-partisan strategy of AIPAC is so unique that every politician noted with admiration and a bit of chagrin that just about the only place where Democrats and Republicans can stand together on an issue is at an AIPAC Policy Conference.

This unanimous support is deeply troubling to enemies of Israel and to those who have no tolerance for bi-partisan dialogue. Their criticism is both predictable and contrived. Well in advance of the conference, the anti-Israel, anti-AIPAC critics began a drumbeat in a vain attempt to tarnish the glow and significance of the Policy Conference. That obscure bloggers and marginal organizations indulge in this sophomoric stone-throwing is one thing. More sad and disappointing was the sparse and superficial media and press coverage. It seemed as if their only interest was on some “Trumped” up controversy or snide comment from an anti-Israel, AIPAC detractor.

Let me address two of this year’s “controversies.” One supposed brouhaha was the absence of Senator Bernie Sanders. His campaign and supporters flooded the blogosphere with puffed up “outrage” that his voice alone was excluded. Their cynicism knew no bounds. It is fact that every Presidential candidate was invited to personally address the AIPAC assembly. Four quickly agreed: former Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, Senator Ted Cruz, Governor John Kasich, and Donald Trump. Until the last moment we hoped that Bernie would come. And why not? Here he is, the first legitimate Presidential candidate who is Jewish, a man who spent part of his youth on a Kibbutz in Israel, a Brooklyn-born *landsman* who is the child of Holocaust survivors. Certainly he’d come to speak with us. But he declined, claiming that an urgent flesh pressing appointment in Idaho was keeping him away. We all were disappointed. There has been speculation that some J-Street supporters lobbied him against coming. Others saw the malicious hand of the pro-BDS movement (those who support Boycotting, Divesting, and Sanctioning Israel to death. Note that this movement is now officially persona-non-grata in Colorado and a growing number of other states---a fact that our Governor John Hickenlooper championed as he addressed the Policy Conference. Yeah Colorado! Indeed, every candidate declared his/her opposition to BDS and a willingness to legislate against it). Alas, there are BDS supporters on college campuses and, well, that’s where most of Bernie’s support is coming from.

Regardless, he didn’t come. In the end, he complained that in past years candidates were invited to speak by remote satellite transmission but that he was denied this privilege. Perhaps, but those were not this year’s ground rules. It’s like a chagrined kicker who complains that his muffed point after attempt would have been

good in the old days when the ball was placed at the 3-yard line, but now that it is at the 15-yard line---well. Hey, we all know the guidelines. Follow them or go home. Bernie stayed home. In retrospect, I believe his decision will prove to be a disaster. He's already hopelessly behind Hillary (who did not even deem it necessary to mention him in her speech). Surely Bernie's appearance at the largest gathering of Jews in the world would have given him a boost. *Chaval*, what a shame. Look, I like Bernie. Okay, I like Larry David a lot better, but Bernie's a good man. I'm just sorry that his anti-Israel advisors misled him.

The other "controversy" was the appearance of The Donald. Again, AIPAC invited all the Presidential candidates and Donald Trump is far and away the leading Republican candidate. Every fair voice acknowledges that AIPAC simply could not exclude the leading Republican candidate. Yet even before his appearance there were those who planned all kinds of self-aggrandizing displays to protest his inclusion. Let's face it: at best Trump is an unconventional political upstart at his first rodeo. At worst, he is an unrestrained populist who indulges in divisive rhetoric and bigotry designed to appeal to a crowd's crudest and coarsest element. At the Conference, Susan and I joined over 100 Reform Rabbis to discuss the situation. Some preached vocal and physical protest. Some counseled for quiet, reflective protest. Most of us just wanted to see for ourselves what The Donald was all about.

Susan and I scoped out prime seats to hear all of the Presidential candidates. We sat about 120 feet from the rotating stage and only two feet from the aisle where the candidates were ushered in. Like the arch villain at a pro-wrestling show, in came Trump, the man, not the brand. Earlier in the day we heard from Hillary Clinton, John Kasich, and Speaker Paul Ryan. Ted Cruz was scheduled to speak after Trump. All of the candidates, except for Trump, received loud, standing ovations when they entered the arena. The Donald was greeted with the most tepid response of all. Many were silent and did not stand up. It was my impression that those who stood did so out of courtesy or curiosity. His speech was, by nearly every credible account, tame. Later, the Washington Post marveled that he had so toned his rhetoric down that perhaps he had accepted some coaching to present himself as more Presidential.

Trump had a few cheap shots about President Obama, but again, it was far tamer than we had come to expect. After seven-plus years in office and a few bruising battles with AIPAC over the controversial Iran Nuclear agreement, there are many who are really looking forward to a new President. Overall, President Obama has been remarkably supportive of Israel in regard to military aid and coming to Israel's defense at the United Nations and around the world. The vast majority of us will be forever grateful to him.

Still, there were those in the crowd who cheered loudly and rose in approval at some of Trump's remarks, which seemed specially crafted to appeal to this pro-Israel crowd. Is it a surprise that in a bi-partisan assembly of 18,000 that the runaway leading vote getter in the Republican primaries would be cheered? The man has millions of supporters. While I vehemently disagree with much of what he says and how he says it, we have to acknowledge that there is a chance that Trump could be our next President.

Missing from the press accounts is the fact that Trump also received a stinging rebuke from most of the crowd. Many of us laughed *at* him for his ridiculous remark that he has studied the issues more than anyone else. The laughter visibly shook him, as was quite apropos on the eve of Purim. That being said, his unfortunate remarks about the President certainly were not laughable. Rather, they were ill-considered and inappropriate. The AIPAC leadership immediately expressed regret that Trump misused the event to degrade the President and threaten the bi-partisan spirit that is at the heart of AIPAC's mission.

All but missing from the press accounts is the fact that both Republicans and Democrats at the AIPAC conference cheered wildly and gave ovation after ovation when Hillary Clinton spoke. All cheered and gave ovation after ovation when Vice President Joe Biden spoke. We did the same for John Kasich and for Ted Cruz. It is a bi-partisan crowd, all of whom were there to convey our profound love for Israel and to support the ever strengthening bond between Israel and the United States. Our current and future leaders need to hear that message. Because of AIPAC they have, they do, and they will continue to.

Speaking of cheers, perhaps the loudest and longest of all were for the special guests.

A young girl born blind, who now is a student at the Sulamot School in Israel for the handicapped, received a long and sustained ovation when she sang "There's a Place for Us." Israeli innovators wowed the crowd with high-tech inventions that will make the world a better and safer place. Palestinian and Israelis spoke about their cooperative efforts. The loudest, longest cheers of all went to Elinor Borenstine, the daughter of Eddie Jacobson. You may recall that Eddie was Harry Truman's old friend and business partner. When President Truman was on the fence about the creation of Israel in 1948, Eddie Jacobson paid him a visit. Consider that visit the first AIPAC conference! Yes, it was a conference of one, but it worked. Because of Eddie's lobbying, President Truman was the first world leader, and the United States was the first nation, to announce support and recognition of Israel as the Jewish Nation.

One voice can matter. One lobbying appointment can bring lasting and positive change. That is what AIPAC is all about. From one Eddie Jacobson we have grown to 18,700. Over the years we have had ups and downs, successes and setbacks. But by every measure possible, Israel is stronger, safer, and better off today because of AIPAC. We stood and cheered Elinor because without her father, Israel may have remained a dream. We stood and cheered Elinor because we know that it would have been easy enough for her father and her family to simply shrug their shoulders and shy away from getting involved. They could have concluded that one man's voice would not make a difference. They could have concluded that the anti-Semites back home would make it uncomfortable for them if they stuck their necks out for a Jewish cause. They could have concluded that they were American Jews and that whatever happened to Jews in other countries was no concern to them. But that's not what they concluded. Rather, they dared to care. They risked criticism and failure because they knew that others depended on them.

This week we have been reading the Book of Esther in celebration of Purim. Esther and her cousin Mordechai courageously stood up in defense of their people. When powerful forces sought to destroy the Children of Israel, Esther and Mordechai lobbied the King to save the day. In each generation we have needed Esthers and Mordechais to rise up and save the day. Sometimes they arose in time.

Sometimes they were too late. The 18,700 who lobbied for Israel this year are determined that we will never, ever, be too late.

Do you want to know what the AIPAC Policy Conference is all about? Go on their websites and watch the videos. See for yourself. When you view the videos and read the transcripts you will see people like you: people who care about Israel, people who will not be bullied into silence.

Susan, Jakob and I already are signed up to attend next year's AIPAC Policy Conference on March 26-28 in Washington, D.C. Several other Sinai members also have registered. In the coming months, I hope you will decide to join us.