

REMARKS AT THE GALA DINNER

Jeremy Ben-Ami
March 23, 2015

Good evening.

Thank you once again for joining us this evening as we celebrate J Street's Fifth National Conference and honor some of the strongest champions for peace and justice in our ranks.

I want to take this opportunity to thank the hosts and sponsors who have made this incredible conference possible – you'll find a full list in your program so I hope you'll forgive me for not mentioning you all by name.

I want to thank Secretary James Baker and AFT President Randi Weingarten for speaking this evening. Your presence symbolizes the bridges and alliances we must build across party lines and if we're to change America's dysfunctional politics on Israel.

I would also like to ask all of you to join me in thanking the incredible J Street staff who've put this evening and the whole conference together.

I want to thank in particular Sarah Beller, Courtney Rohrbach, Sammi Sinsheimer, Madeleine Cereghino and the J Street Education Fund team as well as Tamar Ariel

and the entire development team for the great work in raising the money to support this conference.

Finally, permit me to single out four people by name.

First, I want to acknowledge Zel Lurie whose name graces the awards we are presenting this evening. At 101 years young, Zel can still match even the J Street U students in the room in his energy and passion to fight for the future of Israel and the Jewish people.

As we say – *ad mea v'esrim* – may you continue to serve as our role model for years to come.

To Charles Kremer – your calm, cool, collected demeanor and clear-eyed focus on strategy and outcomes made you a success in all aspects of your life we know.

You grace J Street by sharing your leadership with the pro-Israel, pro-peace movement. I think I speak for all your fellow board members and certainly for the staff in saying that getting to know and work with you is been one of the great pleasures of our engagement with J Street. It is an honor to call you my friend.

To the Goodwin family – Richard and Joanna – and to the enormous extended family here with you tonight. I want to take this opportunity to say publicly what I

have said privately to many in the weeks leading up to this conference.

There is no family I know that has made a more sustained lifetime commitment to working to ensure their vision and values are brought to life in the state of Israel than yours.

Your work and the incredible investment you make not just of money but time, energy, passion and good thinking don't necessarily get the public recognition that they deserve – but all of us working for peace and coexistence in the Middle East know that tonight you are getting just a small piece of the thanks and the acclaim that you deserve.

So thank you to each of our honorees. It is truly our honor to honor you.

Tonight's dinner caps off the biggest and most energetic J Street conference yet. With over 3000 people, 1000 students, 50 participating organizations – this is now the third largest annual gathering of Jewish Americans.

We've come a long way in under seven years.

We started J Street to provide a political home for pro-Israel, pro-peace Americans who recognize that preserving the dream of a secure national home for the Jewish people rooted in our values requires ending the occupation and achieving a two-state solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

We also set out to redefine what it means to be pro-Israel.

For us, being pro-Israel means standing for policies that strengthen the country's security, character and place in the world, not simply supporting without question every policy and action of its government.

We also said that supporting the right of the Palestinian people to a state of their own living side by side with Israel in peace and security is not only a core pro-Israel position, it's a fundamental interest of American foreign policy.

Over seven years, we've grown in size and influence precisely because the core positions of our advocacy are in line with the views of large numbers of Americans who didn't have a voice in the political debate before.

This year, we are for the first time, an \$8 million a year organization with 180,000 supporters, 50 chapters and advocacy networks, and the largest pro-Israel PAC in the country – which raised nearly two and a half million dollars last cycle for 95 endorsed candidates for the House and Senate.

I hope you've had the chance to say hello to some of the dozens of JStreetPAC-endorsed members of the Senate and House who are with us here this evening. I'd like to ask you to join me in thanking them for their outspoken leadership.

We're gaining traction across the Jewish community as well with chapters of J Street U on over 60 college campuses and over 850 rabbis on our Rabbinic Cabinet.

In recent weeks, as controversy has swirled around the Israeli elections, the Iran negotiations and the overall state of the US-Israel relationship, J Street's loud and growing voice has been at the center of the debate.

If you've been with us for the past couple of days, you'll know that emotions are running high.

There's real anger and pain in our movement over the Prime Minister's use of fear-mongering and scare tactics tinged with racism to claw his way to 23 percent of the vote in last Tuesday's election.

There's anger at having seen the Prime Minister confirm what so many of us long knew to be true – his utter and complete opposition to Palestinian statehood – only see him try to shamelessly and cynically walk it back days later.

And there's distress among those rightfully proud that while Jewish Americans play a vital role in fighting for the right of all Americans to vote – the Prime Minister of Israel turned the notion of Arab citizens exercising their right to vote into a scare tactic to turn his own supporters out at the polls.

And on the policy matter most directly at hand this week – Iran – we are giving voice to the large number of Americans who believe that a diplomatic agreement

between Iran and the rest of the world is the right way to prevent it from proceeding toward a nuclear weapon.

That's why we are particularly angry at the political shenanigans that are being played by the Prime Minister, the Israeli Ambassador and the Speaker of the House with the US-Israel relationship.

All of us value the traditional bipartisan nature of the relationship between the two countries and we don't like seeing the US Capitol turned into a backdrop for political stunts and ads.

Still, amid all the swirling emotions of recent weeks, it's important that we recognize that the Israeli election was exceedingly close and a vibrant opposition came within one weekend and a few percent of winning.

Israel remains – much as this country – a nation sharply divided over its direction and future.

A critical choice must be made between the path the present leadership has chosen – of occupation, settlement and conflict – and an alternative path that leads to two states through diplomacy, negotiation and compromise.

The stakes around that choice could not be higher – the survival, the security, the character and the soul of the national home of the Jewish people.

There is no sign that the opposition in Israel is giving up in their struggle for the future of the country. And we have committed at this conference that J Street has no plans to give up our fight either.

We say to Prime Minister Netanyahu – who claims to speak for all the Jews of the world – no Mr. Prime Minister you do not speak for us.

We do not agree with the course you are charting for Israel, and we will oppose what you stand for when we feel it is not in the best interests of the United States, of world Jewry or of the state of Israel.

As supporters of Israel invested in building a nation that embodies as its founders envisioned, the values of “freedom, justice and peace as envisioned by the prophets,” we don’t have the luxury of throwing up our hands and walking away.

We choose instead to create the change that we seek.

We choose to take responsibility for building our future rather than lamenting the present or the past.

We choose to shape American politics to reflect our views and the Jewish community so it acts in accordance with our values.

We choose to lead opposition to the ever-deepening occupation that is eroding Israel's security, democracy, and Jewish character.

And we support the Obama administration in reconsidering its approach to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

It's time the US put forward – with broad international support – the parameters for a reasonable resolution of the conflict grounded in two states for two peoples.

It's time to support a Security Council resolution proactively laying down a marker for both sides as to how their conflict needs to end.

Finally, when it comes to settlements, it's time for the US to restate its view that the settlements are illegal and to take action to give meaning to those words.

Tomorrow on Capitol Hill, we'll be asking our representatives to publicly reaffirm their commitment to the two-state solution and to the democratic values that underlie a strong US-Israel relationship.

And, in the face of the Prime Minister's opposition to negotiations to limit Iran's nuclear program, we are asking our representatives to support a strong deal that limits Iran's program with tough inspections and a gradual rollback of sanctions.

The theme of our conference has been "A Clear Choice for a Better Future." Our work coming out of the conference is being organized under the banner Our Future Our Choice.

Choice and Future. If you remember only two words from this evening, please take those two home with you.

We each have a choice as to how we will act in the face of challenges and opportunities.

We each have a responsibility to shape the future of our community and of the world in which those we care about will live.

I hope you will join J Street in choosing to fight for a future that promotes the interest of the American, Israeli and Palestinian people to live in peace and security and the values and principles on which we were raised.

Thank you so much for joining us and for supporting this important cause.

INTRODUCTION OF RANDI WEINGARTEN

It is now my pleasure to introduce our final speaker for the evening Randi Weingarten.

Many of you know Randi as an unparalleled champion for public education in the United States.

For over 25 years, Randi has been at the forefront of every major battle for the rights of American students and educators.

In 2008, she was elected President of the American Federation of Teachers, one of the largest unions in the United States. At the AFT, Randi represents 1.6 million members nationwide.

At a time when organized labor and advocates for worker's rights face tremendous pushback and hostility, the AFT under Randi has expanded and thrived - and her achievements have drawn notice.

According to the New York Observer she's one of the most influential New Yorkers of the past 25 years.

Washington Life magazine calls Weingarten one of this town's 100 most influential leaders.

That is the Randi Weingarten you know.

But what you may not know is Randi's long-term connection to and passion for the state of Israel.

In fact, she is the latest in a long line of Jewish social justice and labor leaders who were deeply engaged in Israel's founding and support for it over the last six decades.

They brought values core to the identity of so many Jewish Americans – a passion for justice, righting wrongs and ensuring equal access to opportunity for all – to their pro-Israel activism.

In the 21st century, passionate Jewish social justice leaders like Randi remain pivotal our work ensuring that Israel lives up to its founding principles, remaining a place of dignity and equality for all of its citizens, whatever their profession, whatever their race.

And they are critical to our work countering those – particularly in the BDS Movement – who argue that you can't be pro-Israel and progressive at the same time.

This past fall, Randi and I discussed the many challenges and dangers now imperiling that vision of Israel.

The events in Gaza combined with the rejectionist and alienating attitude of the Netanyahu government made it clear to her, as to J Street, that Israelis and

Palestinians are moving down the wrong road, in danger of forever losing their way toward peace.

She decided that she and the AFT's leadership needed to travel to Israel and the Palestinian Territory to see the situation firsthand.

In January, Randi and I, along with members of our staffs and AFT Presidents from around the country, set out on a week-long joint leadership mission.

For some, like Randi and her partner Rabbi Sharon Kleinbaum, it was a return visit after many previous trips. For others, it was their first time in the region.

We saw so much - from the modern delights of Tel Aviv to the nightmare of Hebron; from the sacred places of Jerusalem to an embattled moshav on the Gaza border, from the settlement of Efrat to the PLO headquarters of Ramallah.

Through it all, our group strove, as Randi put it, to bear witness - to take in the beauty and complexity of the place, to listen to the stories of its people, to try to understand their pains, fears, hopes and dreams.

It is as we know a difficult time in the region, and it was at times a very difficult trip. But through it all, Randi and her team showed a dogged enthusiasm for listening and learning - and for finding solutions.

Like J Street, Randi and the AFT are solutions-oriented - and we look forward to working further with them, as we all strive to reach a solution that will guarantee peace, prosperity, and dignity for the place and the people that we love.

Ladies and gentleman, after a short video showing highlights of our trip, we'll welcome the President of the AFT Randi Weingarten to the stage.