

EMBARGOED UNTIL 8PM, SATURDAY, MARCH 21, 2015

OPENING NIGHT REMARKS
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JSTREET'S FIFTH NATIONAL CONFERENCE
March 21, 2015

As prepared for delivery

Good evening everyone and, again, welcome to J Street's fifth national conference.

Robi and Bassam, thank you for the inspiration you and your work provide to us all.

Over the coming days, we'll hear from a lot of inspiring people, but few perform the miracle of transforming tragedy into a quest for peace, justice and a better world.

Thank you both for a powerful start to our conference.

There are a few other thank you's I'd like to make:

First, to J Street's Board of Directors and to our Chair Mort Halperin who has been an inspiration for this movement since day one.

Next, thank you to the hosts and sponsors who made this year's conference possible – in particular enabling so many students to join us tonight.

Thank you to the broader pro-Israel, pro-peace movement. This year, over 50 organizations are formal participants and exhibitors.

This conference is far more than just a J Street event. It's a homecoming for our movement, and I hope you'll visit the exhibit hall and learn about the great work all our partners are doing.

This room is filled with J Street and J Street U activists who carry our message into their communities and onto their campuses all across the country. Without you, J Street would never have the success it's had– so I thank all of you who devote your time, energy and resources to J Street's cause.

Three students served as conference chairs for J Street U and I'd like to thank them personally: Daniela Tolchinsky, Tali DeGroot, and Josh Boxerman.

Finally, please join me in thanking the incomparable J Street staff – in particular the conference team: Sarah Beller, Courtney Rohrbach, Madeleine Cereghino, Sammi

Sinsheimer and of course their leader Rachel Lerner. Seven years ago this April, we raised the J Street flag.

Our goal? To establish a political home for Americans who love and support the people and the state of Israel.

For seven years, we have given voice to those who want to help Israel fulfill the dream of a national home for the Jewish people rooted in the democratic ideals on which it was founded and the Jewish values on which we were raised.

We provide a home for those who believe that without a two-state resolution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, that dream will be lost.

We say that to be pro-Israel means to stand for policies that strengthen the country's security, character and place in the world, not simply to support without question every policy and action of its government.

And, sadly, for nearly all of our seven years, there's been an Israeli government taking actions and pursuing many policies we could not support.

We say that being pro-Israel doesn't mean you have to be anti-Palestinian. And because it is in Israeli and Palestinian interests, we advocate for the right of the Palestinian people to a state of their own living side by side with Israel in peace and security.

We urge American engagement and active leadership to achieve a two-state solution because it is a fundamental interest of the United States.

We oppose the occupation and the ever-expanding settlement enterprise because it runs counter to our Jewish and democratic values.

And never has the voice we've created been more important than it is this week.

I know emotions are running high here in this room and across our movement after this week's election.

It's not just disappointment we're feeling – though our hopes were raised for a brief moment that there might be much-needed change in Israel.

It's anger and it's pain we feel at having watched the Prime Minister of Israel use fear-mongering and scare tactics tinged with racism to claw his way to 23 percent of the vote.

I know and I share the anger in this room at seeing the Prime Minister – in order to save his political life – confirm what so many long knew – his utter and complete opposition to Palestinian statehood and then his shameless and cynical effort to walk it back only days later.

I feel the same deep distress as you – part of an American Jewish community rightfully proud of those among us who joined the Freedom Rides in the 1960s to fight for the right of all Americans to vote – and ashamed now that the Prime Minister of Israel would turn the

notion of Arab citizens exercising their right to vote into a scare tactic to turn his own supporters out at the polls.

And I am still furious at the damage done to the US-Israel relationship by the partisan gamesmanship of the Prime Minister, his Ambassador and Speaker Boehner surrounding the address to a joint session of Congress.

Yet, even in the midst of these swirling emotions, we need to recognize that together the parties of Netanyahu, Naftali Bennett and Avigdor Lieberman won 44 seats in this next Knesset, up only one from the 43 they held in the last.

Parties vibrantly opposed to the hard right will hold a near equal number of seats – with Labor turning in its strongest showing in a generation and the Joint Arab List garnering 13 seats – and bringing out significantly more Arab citizens to vote than in 2013.

In the end, the race was 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.

The stakes 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, and I commit to you tonight that we at J Street have 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.

More than that, we see it as our role to advocate that Jewish communal leaders and institutions speak out and reflect these sentiments, held by large swaths of the American Jewish community.

On that note, I want to publicly thank Rabbi Rick Jacobs, head of the Union for Reform Judaism for his leadership. Perhaps no leader in our community has spoken out as boldly and clearly on issues affecting Israel and its future.

I also want to thank the Rabbinical Assembly for the courageous statement it made late this week challenging the Prime Minister's divisive campaign tactics.

Every day, our message and our movement are gaining traction throughout the Jewish community.

We have grown our support in the rabbinate so that here in this room are over 100 rabbis, and our rabbinic cabinet now numbers over 850.

We have grown our support on campus – and it's not just the 1000 students here who deserve your cheers, it is the professional staff from over 40 Hillels who are in the audience and the dozens more who work closely with our students and welcome them as partners on campuses all over the country.

That's why, when the head of Hillel International refuses to speak to us publicly, it doesn't challenge J Street's legitimacy; it calls into question whether Hillel is appropriately engaging its target audience and providing a welcoming home for all on campus.

Similarly, when we're blocked from joining the Conference of Presidents, it says far more about what's wrong with some existing communal structures than about our place in the communal conversation.

So why are we growing and gaining traction? Because every day, every week more and more people are choosing J Street as the path for building a better future for our community and our people.

Today our 50 chapters and advocacy networks are leading the way in showing Members of Congress and Jewish communal leaders that our positions are shared by the majority of Jewish Americans.

Over the coming days, you'll be hearing a lot about two words – **FUTURE** and **CHOICE**.

The theme of this year's conference - A Clear Choice for a Better Future – reflects our belief that we have reached a critical fork in the road.

Either we continue down the present path of occupation, settlement and conflict or change course toward a two-state agreement and long-term security.

On your seats and at your tables, you will find a one-page document titled Our Future Our Choice.

On one side, it lays out opportunities and challenges ahead:

- Can Israel live by the principles on which it was founded and be both the homeland of the Jewish people and a democracy for all its citizens?
- Can Israel overcome the moral challenge posed by deepening occupation and unchecked settlement growth?
- And, as these problems become ever-more daunting, will we – as friends of Israel – choose to help find solutions or will we choose to walk away? Will we fight for our beliefs or will we give in to despair?

As supporters of Israel invested in building a nation that embodies the vision of its founders and the values of "freedom, justice and peace as envisioned by the prophets," I say we don't have the luxury of throwing up our hands.

Let us make clear what our choice will be.

Let us choose to create the change that we seek.

Let us choose to take responsibility for building our future rather than lament the present or the past.

Let us choose to shape American politics so it reflects our views and the Jewish community so it acts in accordance with our values.

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

There are many ways to put these choices into action.

One, of course, is being here tonight. The back of your sheet outlines a few others.

For example, we plan to challenge Jewish communal institutions to remember the physical and symbolic significance of the Green Line.

How can the American Jewish community hope to promote a two-state solution if we don't distinguish between the state of Israel within the Green Line and the land occupied in 1967?

The settlement movement and successive governments of Israel have effectively blurred and even erased the Green Line from Israeli public consciousness.

But you don't have to travel to Israel to witness this erasure of fact from our communal conscience.

Next time you're in your synagogue, in your Hillel, in your Jewish Community Center or at any other Jewish institution in your community, take a look at the map of Israel on the wall.

The odds are that map doesn't include the Green Line.

So, in your conference bag, you'll find a wonderful map of Israel that includes the Green Line.

In the coming months, our chapter leaders and local activists will join J Street's Rabbinic Cabinet in asking communal institutions use this map or another that clearly includes the Green Line.

Let me give you another example.

Do the Jewish institutions that you donate to make any effort to ensure that the money you, your family, friends and neighbors contribute stays within Israel proper and doesn't go over the Green Line to support settlements in occupied territory?

What is the policy of your local federation on sending money to settlements? Does your federation even have a policy? Is that policy public? Has it changed in recent years?

These are questions that J Street U students started to ask a few months ago, and are meeting with federations around the country to ask. For instance, if the Jewish community

says it supports a two-state solution, why would funds flow through its accounts to projects that make that outcome less likely?

Make no mistake: funding settlements means defunding Israel's very real needs within the Green Line and it diminishes the chances that Israel will know peace, security and equality.

Under the Our Future, Our Choice banner, we will ask federations and others in the Jewish community to clarify and publicize what their policies are and where their – our – money goes.

You can join this effort by enclosing the bookmark-sized card you'll find in your materials with any check you send to an organization working in Israel and you can start an important conversation in your community about funding over the Green Line and its impact on Israel's future.

This is – however – not an initiative about simply maps or funding.

It's about getting our community and its institutional leadership to understand our responsibility towards Israel, towards the conflict and towards finding a resolution.

All of our work in the Jewish community – together with all our work in American politics – is geared to one end: to impact American policy in the Middle East.

We are glad to hear that the Obama administration is 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.

And at the United Nations, it's time for the US to do more than block one-sided actions targeting Israel, which we believe it should.

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.

Now let me be clear that as we talk about ratcheting up the pressure – we mean not just on Israel.

There are two parties to this conflict. It isn't only Israel that has responsibility.

It is time as well for the US to make clear that the Palestinians too have very difficult choices and actions they must make and demands and concessions they will have to put before their people.

There must be an end to violence; there must be an end to terror. There must be an end to rockets. There can be no tunnels coming out of Gaza that threaten Israeli homes.

Israel has the right to defend itself against terror.

We say there must be a Palestinian state. The Palestinians must say that there must be a state of Israel.

There must be two states for two peoples.

And there are concessions and compromises on both sides.

In the face of Netanyahu's renunciation of the two-state solution and the undemocratic tenor of his campaign, we'll go to Capitol Hill Tuesday to ask our representatives to publicly reaffirm their commitment to the two-state solution and to the democratic values that underlie a strong US-Israel relationship.

In the face of the Prime Minister's opposition to a negotiated deal to limit Iran's nuclear program, we will ask our representatives to support a strong deal that limits Iran's program with tough inspections and a gradual rollback of sanctions.

These are just some of the actions we'll take in the coming months under the Our Future, Our Choice banner.

The future really is determined by actions and choices we make every single day.

And one choice too many who share our worldview and values are making in light of today's challenges is to throw up their hands and walk away.

For those of us here tonight and watching at home, let us commit that the state of Israel as a great project of the Jewish people cannot and must not fail or be abandoned.

For two thousand years, our people yearned for the rebirth of a Jewish homeland. Now we have that state, and we must ask, what kind of state it is and will be. And can it endure?

Short-sighted policies have put not only the security and survival of the state at risk – but its character and soul.

That is why we must fight *for* what we believe and *against* that which we oppose.

We will oppose racism and discrimination wherever it appears – whether anti-semitism around the world, Islamophobia here at home or racism against Arabs in Israel.

We will oppose efforts to roll back Israel's democratic character and make no mistake they will be back in this upcoming Knesset.

We will oppose all efforts by Israel's Prime Minister to play partisan politics in this country and to undermine the President of the United States, and to turn Israel into a partisan wedge issue.

We will fight for a future that is grounded in the values on which we were raised.

A future that respects the right of the Jewish people to a nation of their own.

A future that respects the right of the Palestinian people to a nation of their own.

It's a future that provides security and strength against the very real threats and prejudices that exist in the world.

And it's a future that sees diplomacy, negotiation, coexistence and compromise as powerful tools for ensuring survival and security over the long run.

That is a future worth choosing to fight for.

Thank you all very much and I look forward to an extraordinary national conference and to working with you in the months and years ahead.