

## A Meeting at the White House

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Fifteen rabbis go the White House for a meeting. Were the destination not the Roosevelt Room to discuss the nature of American-Israeli relations this could be the opening line of a joke with a punchline I have yet to write. But indeed it was a meeting that was taken very seriously by all who attended. My colleague and friend, Jack Moline of Alexandria, Virginia arranged the meeting and put together a diverse representative cross-section of rabbis from across the country, from all movements and different kinds of congregations.

The meeting was obviously a response to the response of the American Jewish community to the Obama Administration's response to the announcement during Vice President Biden's meeting by a municipal housing committee of the preliminary approval of permits to build additional housing in a vacant part of North Jerusalem known as Ramat Shlomo. All of which just goes to show that what we all learned in high school physics is really true. For every action there is an equal and opposite reaction.

I think the American Jewish community as well as Israeli officials recognized that the announcement's timing was clearly a mistake and even offensive. What I haven't heard anyone mention, and what struck me was that – more than anything else, the incident was contrary to the principle of *derech eretz*. Jewish ethics teaches us not to embarrass others, and this is what I found reprehensible about the announcement. Or as my wife Symcha said to a number of Israeli officials she has spoken with in recent months: “Why do you have to announce every little thing you are doing?”

But when after the fourth apology by Israel's Prime Minister and expression of regret, the Administration was still apoplectic and continued in its ongoing harsh public criticism of Israel as well as other questionable acts many in the Jewish community began to wonder whether this reflected something deeper. Was American policy changing, and was it the result of a visceral and critical attitude of President Obama towards the Jewish state.

The meeting came on the heels of several full page ads by prominent Jewish leaders critical of the Obama Administration's apparent distancing itself from Israel, a public opinion survey in Israel highly critical of the President, and other signs that the community and who had helped to put him in office with 78 % of its vote, and key backers who helped to provide critical funds to his campaign, and who are an important constituency for the Democratic Party were losing faith and were starting to express that skepticism.

That was the backdrop and context of the atmosphere which prompted the invitation. The meeting was part of an effort to reach out to the Jewish community which also included in recent weeks, Elie Wiesel's lunch at the White House, a meeting with Jewish members of Congress, and speeches by Hilary Clinton and others at a number of Jewish organizations to reaffirm the unbreakable bond between the US and Israel.

Any time you go into the White House it can be a bit intimidating. When we entered the Roosevelt room the door to the adjacent room was partially open, and the Oval Office was in view. We met with Rahm Emanuel, the President's Chief of Staff of the President, along with the person responsible for formulating US policy towards Iran, Ambassador Dennis Ross. We were joined in our second meeting by Dan Shapiro, who also works on Middle East issues in the White House. Attending both of our meetings were Susan Sher the Chief of Staff of the First Lady and Danielle Borrin, who are responsible for outreach to the Jewish community.

So what do you say to the people who have the ear of the President of the United States?

I was amazed by how comfortable all 15 rabbis were in openly expressing honest criticism and not shying away from raising difficult and even unpleasant concerns. I think about this week's Torah portion, Parashat Naso in which the offerings of the leaders of each of the twelve tribes is repeated. Although the offerings are identical and the repetition is verbatim, our sages tell us each was unique to the person who brought it. I am pleased to report to you that similarly the 15 rabbis each expressed in his or her voice a unified message on behalf of the Jewish community.

Our first meeting took place on the afternoon of Yom HaAtzmaut, Israel's Independence Day. I had just flown back from Israel earlier that morning, so my main concern was that jet lag not kick in in the middle of the meeting.

Rabbi Moline opened with a comment, which in its directness reminded me a little of Jay Leno's question a few years ago to actor Hugh Grant after a particular exploit. He quoted an email that said, "There is something wrong with a man who is more concerned with a Jew building an apartment in East Jerusalem than a Muslim building a nuclear weapon in Tehran."

That set the tone for the nature of the give and take.

Since I had been away in Israel for the two weeks prior to our meeting and wanted to be sure that I understood the pulse of our community I had sent out an email asking people to let me know what they would want me to convey to the White House. I got an astonishing 75 responses, and remarkably, as I reported to Rahm Emanuel and Dennis Ross, there was an amazing consensus, especially among Jews: 72 of them were critical of the Administration.

When I had my chance to speak I raised the disproportionate response of the Administration in singling Israel out for criticism and pressure while giving the Palestinians a pass. I pointed to several specific provocative acts by the Palestinians, indicative of their unrelenting hateful incitement and antagonistic hostility towards Israel and the double standard that Israel must do certain things, while the Palestinians merely need to try to live by certain commitments. In light of the denial by Arafat and the Palestinian Authority of a historic Jewish presence in the Holy Land or Jerusalem, and

their having been caught numerous times in outright lies, how could Israel be expected to negotiate with them in good faith?

I reminded our hosts that when the President had thanked the nations of the world for their aid and response to the earthquake in Haiti, Israel was noticeably absent, and that his comment at a press conference about Israel's possession of nuclear weapons could have been phrased in more reassuring terms.

In our second meeting I asked about Egypt's push to challenge Israel's nuclear policy, and reminded them that it is not Israel that has threatened to wipe out its neighbors. I also made reference to the poisonous atmosphere on college campuses today and finally I said that reluctantly I needed to raise, in the open and honest spirit of exchange the fear that based on recent actions the flurry of emails that circulated in the Jewish community prior to the election questioning the President's feelings about Israel were accurate.

My colleagues each spoke articulately and passionately and raised concerns about Iran, inappropriate linkage of the Palestinian-Israeli issue to other matters, the need to keep disagreements more private and civil and various other critiques. In retrospect, I regret that for whatever reason, while we briefly mentioned that our second meeting took place on Yom Yerushalayim, we did not speak out enough about Jerusalem.

While I believe my primary responsibility, especially in going to the White House is to represent the legitimate concerns and understandable anxiety of the American Jewish community to these officials, it is important, appropriate and only fair to share with you their response to our concerns. Not every point was addressed or answered, but here is the gist of their perspective.

The members of the Administration felt that the problem was primarily one of messaging, and that their message was not getting out. They pointed to a number of specific actions taken by the Administration which show an ongoing commitment to Israel's security.

As Rahm Emanuel stated, on the major issues the Administration has been steadfast in its support, primarily: on supporting Israel's admission to the European community, the OECD, on condemnation of the Goldstone Report at the United Nations and elsewhere, on not participating in the Durban conference, and most important of all: on isolating Iran and on matters of defense cooperation. Defense Minister Ehud Barak had just expressed his pleasure with America's support, including the announcement that the US was going to give \$ 205 million to fund half the cost of one of Israel's missile defense programs, "Iron Dome."

Dennis Ross pointed out that there had been no change in US policy on these or the other issues, including the building of settlements. He calmly explained that one of the problems with the settlements is that unilateral actions taken by either side undermine trust and thus make progress in negotiations more difficult.

Were we convinced? Were they convinced? Time will tell. I think we are more interested in actions than promises. I asked one of the officials we met with after the meeting if the United States would react as harshly again if some administrative committee made some kind of crazy announcement again? He responded with words expressed several times in our meeting: they clearly recognized that mistakes had been made.

We spoke and they listened. They spoke and we listened. And this is as it should be in a democracy. Most important of all, I felt that the system had worked. We American Jews had done exactly what we should have done. We took our concerns to the seat of power. We acted within the political system to share our feelings that nothing should be done to damage or harm the long-standing relationship between the United States and Israel. And in fact, on that note, the meeting ended. Rahm Emanuel pointed to the other high ranking members of the Administration who were in the meeting, all of whom were Jewish and assured us that if President Obama were not supportive of Israel none of them would be there.

I cannot judge what is in another man's heart. I, for one however, am willing to give them and this administration a second chance. Hopefully the vision of today's Torah portion will come to pass, "*Yisa Adonai panav alecha veyasem lecha shalom*: May God lift us His countenance upon you, and grant you peace."

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