

Aipac Policy Conference: An Objective Perspective

Each spring thousands of people gather in our nation's capital to attend one of the largest, if not the largest grass roots lobbying organization's policy conference. Although I have regularly attended the Aipac policy conference ever since I was a rabbi in Bowie in the 1980's, when it only drew a few thousand people, in all the years I have been going, I don't believe I have ever spoken about it before in a sermon.

Aipac is the American Israel Public Affairs Committee. Founded in the 1950's its name is somewhat misleading. It is not a Pac in the traditional sense of the word because it does not make contributions to political candidates. Rather, it pursues its goal of promoting a secure Israel by supporting a strong alliance between Israel and the United States. To that end, it lobbies, and educates the public and members of Congress about threats to Israel's security, the benefits of the relationship including the many things Israel does that make the world a better place.

It supports legislation consistent with its goal of ensuring that the Jewish state is safe, strong and secure. While it may make known who supports and who opposes the measures and policies it endorses, unlike other pacs, including JStreet, it does not actually endorse, support or contribute to candidates.

And one other thing unique to Aipac – it acts in a bi-partisan manner.

Unity is a tremendous source of the strength of the pro-Israel community.

I sometimes wonder if unity is a by-product of Aipac's efforts, or if it is a goal in and of itself. I say this because, believe it or not, contrary to what you may assume, one can find people of all persuasions at Aipac: liberals, progressives, moderates and conservatives; people who are straight and members of the LGBTQ community, Democrats, Republicans, and independents, people on the left and the right; Orthodox, Conservative, Reconstructionist and Reform Jews. Not everyone who attends is Jewish. There are Christians, Hispanics, Latinos and African Americans. What unites and brings this diverse constituency together, individuals who probably would not agree on many other issues, is an abiding love of Israel and the desire to do our part to work for a safe and secure Israel.

A saying of unknown origin states: "Tell me who your friends are, and I will tell you who you are." To look around the gathering of 18,000 who came to the Policy Conference, it is clear that Israel has friends of many different persuasions. And conversely, we can tell a lot about those who denigrate Aipac and oppose its efforts to strengthen the US – Israel alliance such as the caricature-like Neturei Karta and others whose efforts weaken Israel's position.

Each year the conference's timing seems especially charged. This year was no exception. With the recent unusual explicit attacks, laced with blatant anti-Semitic insinuations and false accusations coming from a member of Congress, as well as concern over whether support for Israel can remain bi-partisan, and in today's politically divisive atmosphere where there is such polarization, the stakes were especially high this year.

While a lot has been written and said about Aipac, and this year's conference, not all of it is accurate. I want to offer an objective assessment, and give you an insight into understanding and analyzing what you hear from commentators about what transpired – the comments, columns and assessments you read and hear usually tell us more about their own perspective than what actually occurred.

The charge for example that Democratic presidential candidates stayed away is disingenuous and just not true. With so many candidates, and being an off-year, they were not invited. It is kind of like saying you aren't going to a wedding you weren't invited to. In fact, many of these candidates who supposedly boycotted met with delegates, posed with them and posted photos. To those who characterized the crowd as leaning to the right, the truth is, and I listened and watched carefully, without prejudging the outcome – the reception for Democrats was as warm as the reception received by Republican speakers.

While there were some uncomfortable partisan moments and inappropriately partisan comments made by a few speakers, Aipac does not write the speeches or tell people what to say. The partisan comments were awkward precisely because they stood out as going against the grain of the bi-partisan spirit of unity that pervaded the crowd and atmosphere. A number of sessions featured people from different parties and persuasions united in their love for Israel. There were strong, clear unequivocal denunciations by leaders of the Democratic party of the anti-Israel sentiment expressed by a few on the fringe of their party as they made it clear that they do not intend to let this become the dominant voice in their party.

One comes away from an Aipac policy conference that much more energized and dedicated to advocating on behalf of Israel. In addition to learning about the very real security challenges and threats Israel faces, one is reminded of some of the reasons Israel deserves our support, especially when we are inspired to see Israel's achievements in the world of science, technology, medicine, agriculture, and so many other fields. The amount of important contributions Israel makes in these fields is remarkable. Equally remarkable and praiseworthy is the extent to which Israel shares its inventions and innovations with countries around the world.

Israelis have a unique can-do attitude. Undaunted, it is almost as if there is no such thing as the word "impossible" in their vocabulary. There is a word for this attitude. It is "chutzpah". Faced with the problem of not being able to launch satellites into orbit with the earth's rotation,

because it would go over enemy territory, Israel's scientists came up with a way to put them in space by going against the rotation of the earth – knowledge now shared with the United States.

Water is a serious problem, in Israel, and around the world. Faced with a serious water shortage, what does Israel do? It undertakes to recycle its water and becomes the #1 country in the world that recycles its water, at over 80%. In second place is Spain which recycles about 20% of its water. They have even come up with a way to make water out of thin air – technology that is now being shared with arid areas in Africa, bringing water and hope to impoverished regions suffering from drought. To help its soldiers who have sustained injuries preventing them from walking and limiting their mobility, Israel is leading the way in helping to devise devices so those suffering injuries can walk, and even dance again.

The bi-partisan approach which is Aipac's hallmark is important, for we dare not let support for Israel be the domain of one party or another. The party out of power is only one election cycle away from coming back. While I hear many people say these days that support for Israel appears to be stronger in the Republican party, I can recall a time when it was the Democratic party that held that ground, and the Republicans were deemed a hopeless, lost cause. This approach does not recognize the unwavering and strong support of the majority of Democrats for the alliance. If we want to support Israel we must work both sides of the aisle and cannot afford to write off one party, especially since Israel is the beneficiary of, relies upon and needs strong support across the board, in both parties. We have to play the long game and be in it for the long haul.

Aipac is a place where those who wish to work to support Israel can come together, while disagreeing on a number of issues, but united in the hope that our ultimate goal, to work for an Israel that will be strong and secure, will be blessed with peace.

Stuart Weinblatt
March 30, 2019
Potomac, MD