

## What American Jews Think



The American Jewish Committee recently released its *2006 Survey of American Jewish Opinion*. Released several weeks before the November election, press reports tended to focus on the political orientation of the American Jewish community. But there were many other topics of interest, and some remarkable revelations of the opinions held by American Jews.

For me, the most notable results revealed an American Jewish community that is ill at ease in the world we

live in today, whether here at home, or abroad. The respondents were asked "Do you think that anti-semitism in the United States is currently a very serious problem, somewhat of a problem, or not a problem at all." Twenty-six percent said that anti-semitism is a very serious problem, and 65% said it was somewhat of a problem. Ninety-one percent, then, believe that anti-semitism is a problem of note in America. And 53% believe it will increase over the next several years.

What leads to such a startling conclusion? Is there a rash of anti-semitic incidents in America today? Is it a knee-jerk reaction to Jewish history, that we should never allow ourselves to feel too secure anywhere, so we, almost by definition, cannot allow ourselves to believe that anti-semitism is not a threatening problem?

Or is it a reflection of our identification with Israel, and our concern for Israel's future? The survey showed that 74% of the respondents feel that Israel is "a very important part of" being a Jew. But most are more than a little concerned about Israel's welfare. Sixty-six percent believe that the United Nations does not treat Israel fairly. With the exception of the United States, most nations, including Western European nations, are not seen as sympathetic to Israel.

The respondents are pessimistic about the possibility of peace in the Middle East. Fifty-six percent believe that there will never be a time when Israel and the Arabs "will be able to settle their differences and live in peace." Eighty-one percent believe that "The goal of the Arabs is not the return of occupied territories but rather the

destruction of Israel." Still, 54% favor the establishment of a Palestinian State. Interestingly, while 54% oppose any American military action against Iran "to prevent it from developing nuclear weapons," 57% would approve of Israel taking such action.

As I read these results, they portray an American Jewish community whose self-image is entwined with the welfare of the Jewish state. Especially after the summer war with Hezbollah, and the capture of three Israeli soldiers in Lebanon and Gaza, who are still in captivity, we face a very uncertain future. The peace process as we have known it is bankrupt. It was collapsed by Arab intransigence, the clear indication that no amount of compromise will bridge the gap between Israelis who are looking for a secure co-existence with the Arab world, and those Palestinians whose goal is the utter destruction of Israel's existence. We are made all the more uneasy by the international community, which is increasingly responsive to Muslim demands, and foreign policy makers who are looking for a way to get this intractable problem off of the table.

And all of these things make us more insecure and apprehensive, even here in America, where the Jewish community has known unparalleled success — political, economic, social, and cultural. Perhaps, it is as the poet Hyam Plutzik wrote "how even when at ease [we are] somehow anxious, like a horse who sniffs smoke somewhere nearby faintly." Perhaps a Jew can never truly feel secure.

No one can know the future. History has taught us not to be too comfortable anywhere. But we do not want our apprehension to become a self-fulfilling prophecy. We cannot ignore threats to the security of the Jewish people, but we also cannot ignore the tremendous accomplishments of the last century.

I believe that we must not exaggerate the threat. Fear leads to despair and isolation, not creativity and positive solutions.

The AJC survey reveals a strong strain of insecurity in the American Jewish community. Our challenge is to find approaches to vexing problems that will enable us to overcome that insecurity, not accept it as our fate.

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