

COMMENTARY

No. 306

Friday, 28 August 2015

Not in My Name!

Paul Scham

Partners for Progressive Peace

As an active member of the Washington, D.C. Jewish community since 1988 (except for six years when I lived in Israel), I want to express my indignation at the use of Jewish community institutions, locally and nationally, for the partisan political purposes of Prime Minister Netanyahu's government, and against the policies of President Barack Obama with regard to the Iran nuclear deal.

Two recent polls have shown that American Jews support the agreement by considerable majorities, 49 percent to 30 percent in one by The Jewish Journal of Greater Los Angeles, and 60 percent to 40 percent in one sponsored by J Street, which supports the deal. Contrary results were found by a poll taken by The Israel Project, which opposes the deal, 45 percent to 40 percent against the deal. All of these polls make clear that a considerable portion of American Jews support the agreement. Thus, I find it reprehensible that a number of Jewish community institutions are lobbying their members to oppose it and are making their facilities available to the well-financed campaign to defeat it, thus conveying the widespread impression that American Jews are united in opposition.

No institution or government can be run by opinion polls, of course. However, on an issue of this importance, the willingness of Jewish community leaders to kowtow to official Israeli policy against the wishes of those who they claim as their constituents is outrageous.

The arguments for the deal are well known and, to me and many others, including most retired Israeli security chiefs, overwhelmingly strong. The unanswerable capstone is the question, "What is the alternative?" No convincing response has ever been given, other than Netanyahu's facile and condescending quip, "A better deal." As is clear now, no other nation will go along

with the United States if it rejects the agreement, and Iran will then have no incentive to limit its nuclear ambitions. On the other hand, with the agreement in force, there are numerous incentives to comply with it, and Iran faces significant sanctions if it does not.

Unlike with most issues facing Israel, American Jews have a direct voice in this one, since the decision whether to accept or reject the deal is being made by our government through our own institutions. As Americans, we, of course, have the same direct line to our representatives in the House and Senate as with any other piece of legislation (except for those who, like me, live in Washington). As a Jewish community, we have also, over a period of many years, developed institutions that are supposed to represent us on issues in which we have a communal stake. On this supremely important issue, however, we are being betrayed by many of these institutions, which are misrepresenting our views.

Those who purport to represent the American Jewish community are taking a heavy and fateful responsibility upon themselves by going against a significant majority of American Jews on an issue that many of us (on both sides) are passionate about. The community is already being split over Israel, largely through the actions of those who refuse to recognize that those who call for less belligerent Israeli policies, love and appreciate Israel just as much as those who apparently believe peace is not possible with Palestinians and other Arabs. Jewish unity, already fraying, will pay a heavy price over the years for their reckless behavior.

The Jewish community has recently observed Tisha B'Av, which commemorates our national disasters, especially the destruction of the First and Second temples. The Talmud says that the Second Temple fell because of "causeless hatred" among the Jewish people and their leaders. The issues then were even more existential, and those leaders steered a course that ended up wrecking the national existence of the Jewish people for almost 2,000 years. Community leaders today have a duty to behave more responsibly and to resist pressures, whether from super-rich unrepresentative moguls like Sheldon Adelson or from official Israeli representatives, to take actions that, in effect, repudiate their own constituency.

It looks like the agreement will withstand its detractors, which will be better for all of us. But the Jewish institutions and leaders who betray their responsibility are likely to precipitate a historic split in our community.

Note: This article was originally published in *Partners for Progressive Peace* and has been reproduced under arrangement. Web Link: <http://progressiveisrael.org/not-in-my-name-2/>

Professor Paul Scham is the Executive Director of the Gildenhorn Institute for Israel Studies at the University of Maryland and he blogs Partners for Progressive Peace. Email: paulscham@gmail.com

As part of its editorial policy, the MEI@ND standardizes spelling and date formats to make the text uniformly accessible and stylistically consistent. The views expressed here are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the views/positions of the MEI@ND. Editor, MEI@ND: P R Kumaraswamy