

THE FORWARD  
'If I Forget Thee...'  
Editorial  
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It always happens when Israel approaches a peace agreement with the Palestinians: Noisy voices of protest arise within the American Jewish community, arguing that Israel misjudges the Palestinians, doesn't understand the terrain, doesn't understand the Middle East as well as rabbis in Brooklyn or lawyers and electronics salesmen in Philadelphia. So it is today.

This time, though, the protests are on a different scale. This time it isn't individuals writing letters and carrying signs, but national organizations forming coalitions and lobbying Congress. They aren't saying that Israel may be misjudging the situation, but that Israel has no right to do what it's said to be planning — specifically, negotiating to share sovereignty over Jerusalem.

The holy city, they say, does not belong to the State of Israel but to the Jewish people. It's not for Israel to decide what it's willing to sacrifice for peace. No, Israelis must continue waiting — and continue dying — until Jews in Baltimore and Las Vegas approve the deal.

This time they're not merely issuing declarations or sermons. The so-called Coordinating Council on Jerusalem — including the Zionist Organization of America, the impeccably mainstream Union of Orthodox Jewish Congregations, the controversy-shy Agudath Israel of America, the National Council of Young Israel and Christians United for Israel — is lobbying the White House directly. Earlier this month they met with National Security Advisor Stephen Hadley to protest Israel's reputed plans. That's a first for a major group of American Jewish organizations. Hadley reportedly surprised them by telling them that the idea of sharing Jerusalem wasn't America's but Israel's.

Two weeks ago the protesters went a step further and engineered a vote in the 50-member Conference of Presidents of Major American Jewish Organizations, reaffirming that body's commitment to "a united Jerusalem as Israel's eternal, sovereign capital." In effect, it rejects the idea of sharing Jerusalem as the capital of two states.

Presidents Conference leaders say they're merely reaffirming longstanding policy. More candid participants say the vote effectively puts the organized American Jewish community on record against any emerging Israeli-Palestinian peace agreement. That, too, is a first.

One could reasonably counter that the protests are wrong on substance, that peace is worth more than a few extra blocks in the holy city. It's more common, however, to take the traditional American Jewish stance: that Diaspora Jews have no right to dictate Israeli policy. This page doesn't take that restrictive position, even though we don't make a habit of pretending we're smarter than the Israeli defense and intelligence communities. Still, tradition is tradition.

Nowhere was that traditional stance ever articulated better than in a 1994 dissent registered with the erstwhile National Jewish Community Relations Council (a coalition of Jewish policy groups now known as the Jewish Council for Public Affairs) when it voted to endorse greater democracy and pluralism in Israel.

“We have long believed that public debate among North American Jews on questions of Israeli foreign policy, domestic political structure and religious integrity are divisive both to our own community and the people of the sovereign State of Israel. North American Jews do neither themselves nor the people of Israel a service by such involvement on this issue.”

The dissenting organization: the Union of Orthodox Jewish Congregations. But that was before — as the Talmud might say — their ox was gored.