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### Beyond the Silence: New Conversations about Israel's Future

By Shari Cohen

"We just don't talk about it -- the family is split," complained an Upper West Side couple at a recent dinner. Almost every Jew I speak with reports a similar experience. My family is the same way -- we cautiously hint at our positions, but conversation never really begins. The issue of Israel's future engages most Jews on a visceral level -- advocates of opposing sides may even see one another as traitors. But as a community and as individuals we hide this intensity and veil our disagreements behind a screen of silence. However, this is surely untenable in the long run. Quietly this issue is tearing apart the Jewish community. And this also includes the broad group of Jews who are not involved in synagogues and other Jewish institutions.

There is another source of silence as well, and in many ways this describes my own position until recently: Being strongly committed to Israel's security and to its being a democratic state, and feeling paralyzed by the seeming irreconcilability between these priorities, we exit the conversation both intellectually and emotionally.

Ironically, while there are ongoing efforts to create a dialogue between American Jews and Palestinians (the New York based Dialogue Project and the California based Jewish Palestinian Living Room Dialogue, to name two in

this country), there are few attempts to initiate dialogue among the polarized segments of American Jewry that are splitting institutions, families and friends and yielding a collective sense that we are at an intellectual and political dead end.

Of course, there is no reason to think that more or better conversation would help to speed up a resolution of the Middle East conflict, but clearly this lack of dialogue signals that something is wrong.

The positions of the two sides are well-known. One side argues that security must be first and foremost, that the very existence of the state of Israel is under threat and that only the force of arms can bring security. The other side focuses on human rights, contending that the moral character of Israel is eroding through the continued occupation of the territories. From this perspective, there is no choice but to withdraw from the territories and even contribute to the rebuilding of a Palestinian state.

While the policy spectrum in Israel is more nuanced, many Israelis like many American Jews are filled with despair in the face of what Ari Shavit in a recent article in *Ha'aretz* called a catch 22: "On the one hand, if Israel does not withdraw within a few years from most of the occupied territories, it will cease to exist as a democratic-Jewish state. It would become a decaying state of injustice.... On the other hand, if Israel withdraws in the near future under pressure of Palestinian violence, it is liable to bring upon itself the worst possible wars."

Most situations that are highly polarized are also highly complex. And typically the intensity of the polarization prevents the invention of new frameworks. To grapple successfully with such complexity takes imagination and intellectual flexibility, both of which are in short supply where polarization prevails. It also requires a readiness to take the long view which is the antithesis of the short-term thinking that tends to prevail in an atmosphere of crisis like the present.

Even those of us who are trying hard to integrate the seemingly irreconcilable priorities of security and human rights have great difficulty taking the longer view. It seems that we lack the methods for talking together about new options, about new ways of integrating or balancing these priorities.

At present, the only public conversation with a long-term focus concerns Israel's demographic challenge – that is, the future difficulty of maintaining Israel as a Jewish state as the relative percentage of Jews in the general population declines. But even these conversations do not seriously grapple with how Israel would need to change in the face of a smaller Jewish majority. Might

there be other ways of thinking about this? Might these conversations pioneer a new way of thinking about national identity?

Taking the long view and expanding the conversation requires considering unexpected scenarios which might, nevertheless, affect the shape of the situation in the future. Considering these possibilities might, in turn, shake us out of our existing assumptions.

While not exhaustive by any means, the following are some examples:

The political character of Arab regimes is critical. Whether or not the Arab world democratizes or becomes more fundamentalist is critical. Are there possible ways to affect this?

What if a successful formula was found for rebuilding and democratizing collapsed states such as Afghanistan? How might this affect our approach to creating a viable new state of Palestine?

While the issue of oil dependency is frequently part of the conversation, we need to think through the costs and benefits of reduced oil dependency for America's role in the Middle East.

The possibility of serious cultural and political conflict in Israel is another critical factor which often falls out of our considerations: Who would take which side? Would it be a nationalist underground versus the rest or would it be a battle between the religious and the secular populations?

The emigration of a large number of Israelis or the influx of a large number of people claiming to be Jews are other possibilities that should be considered. So, too, might we consider the impact of the simultaneous increases in the popularity of things Jewish and of anti-Semitism.

What would it mean to add these considerations to the discussions taking place, or to begin new conversations? I believe that Jews, both in America and in Israel, would welcome a new way of talking and thinking. But American Jews are especially well positioned to initiate this "longer view" conversation by virtue of not experiencing the day to day insecurities of life in Israel. If American Jews were to embark on this path and initiate such conversations, they might prove to be a resource for opening creative possibilities.

The absence of dialogue and the polarization that lies beneath it also have implications for the American Jews' sense of themselves both communally and individually. Some have even suggested that a fissure in the Jewish people

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could develop over support for Israel. In a less extreme sense, however, over the longer term this silence will probably negatively affect the character of American Jewish identity.

The deep split within each individual and our seeming inability as a community to integrate the values of security and human rights should be the impetus for conversation rather than silence.

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