



Op-Ed: Where are the great American Jewish leaders?

By Aryeh Rubin · May 4, 2011

MIAMI, Fla. (JTA) -- We are living in a troubling and dangerous time, a time when we need courageous and insightful leaders more than at any point since the Holocaust. We are facing a potentially existential crisis for Israel and ultimately, I believe, for Jewish people worldwide. Yet our leaders for the most part have not responded in a forceful way.

Those among us who understand what is at stake must immediately light a fire under our current leaders. At the same time, we need to rethink the process of how we select our leaders and what we expect of them.

If we look squarely at the facts and are unflinchingly honest with ourselves, we will admit that we are confronted with substantial threats. Today we are experiencing two primary attacks. The Arab/Muslim/Persian drive to remove Israel as a Jewish state is a fact, as is the very real threat of catastrophe that a nuclear Iran poses to Israel.

The unsettling recent events in Egypt, Tunisia, Libya, Yemen and the entire Arab world add to the instability of Israel's neighbors. Increasingly, radical Islamists, who interpret certain edicts of the Koran as instructing them to kill Jews, are directing their vitriol and hateful propaganda not solely at Israel but at the Jewish people as well. Anti-Israel sentiment is simply a new twist on an old canard. The hate has migrated from Christian religious anti-Semitism to Nazi racial anti-Semitism to Muslim political anti-Semitism and, finally, to a leftist, intellectual form of anti-Semitism under the guise of political correctness.

There is a frightening groundswell of negativity in the Western and Muslim worlds toward Israel and the Jews resulting from a deliberate, pernicious and astonishingly effective international propaganda campaign to delegitimize Israel by portraying it as a colonial implant and oppressive occupier. We have a situation in which Jews everywhere are experiencing a level of insecurity that has not existed since the 1940s.

Many would agree that Jewish leadership has a poor record when it comes to the perennial American Jewish problems of Jewish education, assimilation and confronting modernity. Most everyone also would agree that American Jewish leadership during the Holocaust was abysmal.

Why, then, have we ignored the lessons of that era? We certainly have the wherewithal -- we have shown ourselves to be effective change agents and effective leaders in so many spheres

outside of the Jewish world, from the media to medicine to the sciences to the arts and humanities. Where is our “Jewish genius”?

To all who would argue that we already have been responding, I submit that we have not. Mass assemblies within our communities with the stars of the Israeli lecture circuit and American political leaders might make American Jews feel good, but won't make a difference -- preaching to the converted never does.

American Jewish leadership does a reasonably good job running nursing homes, feeding the poor and housing the homeless. It is essentially a model forged in the prewar Ashkenazic communities of Europe and in the Sephardic world of the Levant, when the Jewish people were in effect powerless.

But when it comes to issues of exercising serious power to prevent another catastrophe in which the unthinkable can happen in an instant, our leaders have been impotent. They have adhered to an outdated model based on powerlessness despite the fact that, since the founding of the State of Israel, we now have power and a voice that potentially can be heard the world over.

I am not denying that we have an effective group in AIPAC, which does a phenomenal job of lobbying Congress. Paradoxically, however, no Jewish organization has succeeded when it comes to lobbying the Jewish people -- and no organization has been successful in motivating the masses of Jews to action.

Where are our great, inspiring leaders who will be able to rally us, help us coalesce to work together for the good of the Jewish people and the world? Where is our Brandeis, our Martin Luther King Jr.? Where is our American Ben-Gurion or Jabotinsky?

Threats and insufficient response

We are running out of time. While the Arab leadership funded a well-thought-out campaign to sway the hearts and minds of the masses in Europe and the left in the United States; while they endowed chairs on college campuses and subsequently embedded like-minded professors sympathetic to their cause; we were marching at Israel Day parades singing “Am Yisrael Chai.”

While we were feeling warm and fuzzy, while we were asleep at the wheel, our enemies laid out and put into action a detailed and effective plan to destroy the State of Israel and the Jewish people. What they could not accomplish on the battlefield, they determined to carry out in the public arena.

We are now playing catch up -- we finally realized what was going on and have been making a belated attempt to fight delegitimization and promote Israel studies on the campuses, but our efforts are nowhere near the scope that is necessary to effectively counter the momentum in place from our enemies' efforts. It is a case of too little, too late.

What are our leaders doing about these threats to the safety of Israel and the Jews? How loudly did our leaders protest when the world sided with the Turkish flotilla? How much is really being

done about the Iran issue? Were our leaders vocal enough in response to the Goldstone report? And it staggers the mind how our leadership is not clamping down on some Jewish federations as they continue to fund organizations that espouse anti-Israel activities.

Considering our recent history, it seems inconceivable that our leaders are not more vociferous in their calls for justice and protection, are not organizing marches on Washington and putting unrelenting pressure on the president, are not coordinating a voice of truth to counter the growing threats. Quiet, behind-the-scenes diplomacy did not work during the Holocaust, and it won't work now. The isolated voices of organizations like AIPAC, the Anti-Defamation League, American Jewish Committee, the Zionist Organization of America and others are not enough. The groups that are pushing for sanctions are not doing enough.

We need our leaders to be louder and more forceful, and for their actions to have real results. They need to motivate not only Congress and the administration to take action, but also Jews as a whole from apathy into action. We need more in-your-face Jewish activism. And we also need to form real partnerships with those that wish us well, i.e., the Evangelicals.

Would today's Jewish leadership have the wherewithal to call for Jewish civil disobedience if a nightmare scenario develops, as yesterday's leaders should have but did not during the Shoah?

Of course, there are some very dedicated and inspired leaders among us. There are those who are speaking out, those who are trying to apply the lessons of the Soviet Jewry model, which was one of American Jewry's successes (albeit only after impetus from the masses). But there are too few of them.

To understand, it helps to look back. The failure of American Jewish leadership during World War II was no doubt in part motivated by fear, by the conviction that not rocking the boat was the best course, by the desire to hold onto the relatively newfound security of living in America, a safe haven and an ocean away from the turmoil of Europe. During the Holocaust, there were grass-roots groups doing valiant work on behalf of Europe's Jews that were essentially silenced by America's mainstream Jewish leadership.

This is the legacy we have inherited. Our leaders today have additional reasons for choosing to keep silent. Raising the alarm about the threats to Israel runs the risk of being labeled a racist or Islamophobe. And certainly there are many leaders who simply don't know what to do. As a consequence they are doing next to nothing.

We know from modern Jewish history that people, organizations and leadership can change. In the 1940s, despite the horrific news coming from Europe, a number of individuals, organizations and rabbis were and remained opposed to the establishment of the refuge of the State of Israel. Some Jews opposed the United States entering and prosecuting the war. In hindsight, their opposition was ghastly.

Yet when prompted by their constituents, organizations do change, as do their leaders. Although the American Jewish Committee was not enthusiastic about Zionism before the State of Israel was declared, today it is one of the leading advocates for Israel and the Jewish people.

Choosing our leaders

Finally, we must reconsider how we choose our leaders. Our decision-makers today, the ones on the boards guiding collective Jewish action, are predominantly consensus builders drawn from the moneyed class, many of whom are unschooled in Jewish history and ritual, often unappreciative of the mystique and grandeur of our heritage, and lacking a solid grasp of what is most beneficial for the Jewish people and for Israel. When they do act, they often make ill-considered decisions that lead to poor outcomes.

To continue to choose our leaders from the same subset year after year and expect different results is not rational.

We should choose our leaders with different criteria in mind. Leaders should be people who are independent, creative thinkers and committed doers. They should be people of conviction and vision with the moral courage to rock the boat. We need leadership that is more diverse in terms of age and range of experience.

Our leaders should include members of the clergy, the academy and the creative community -- people who understand the lessons of history and believe that history has a purpose. They are the ones who can inject into our community the missing vitality, imagination and vision.

We are in dire need of leaders who are connected to core Jewish values and who are caring, have empathy, wisdom and a majestic vision to be part of the power structure. Their collective experience, combined with the acumen of some of the current leaders, should improve the process of decision-making and lead to better outcomes.

If we choose our leaders with these criteria in mind, we will increase the probability that charismatic and forceful leaders will arise.

We cannot afford to remain silent. It is up to us to speak up, motivate our current leaders and ultimately strengthen our leadership. That is our homework. Let us hope that there is still time.

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