

Beating Ploughshares into Swords: A New Jewish Politics After 9-11?

By Tsvi Blanchard

Since 9-11, there has been increasing Jewish concern about how Islamic terrorism, especially in the United States, will affect Jews. First, there is a worry that greater political pressure will be exerted on the United States government to alter its foreign policy toward the Middle East in general and toward the Israeli-Palestinian conflict in particular. Second, American Jews are worried about the rise of global anti-Semitism and are considering how to confront mounting anti-Semitism at home and abroad. Given these concerns, how should American Jews be thinking about explicitly Jewish involvement in American politics?

For ethnic, religious and cultural subgroups, there have essentially been three approaches to politics. Of course, all subgroups use a combination of these approaches, shifting their approach to fit the nature and context of the problems they encounter. Nevertheless, generally speaking, Jews active in American politics tend to emphasize one of the three.

The first approach proceeds on the assumption that the United States is composed of self-interested groups that compete with one another for power and resources. Each group is regarded as acting strategically to further its own interests through the prudent application of its political power and the formation of mutually beneficial alliances with other subgroups. This is the *strategic approach*

Those espousing this approach argue that, even for those who prefer one of the other approaches, terrorism, the Middle East conflict and increased anti-Semitism have changed the nature of the American political playing field. Jews are being politically repositioned and will become “losers,” or even unwelcome, in the present multicultural mosaic. With this view, the only *realistic* approach is one that accepts that Jews are in a serious conflict with other subgroups and will have to openly and actively struggle against these opposing subgroups.

The second approach—call it the *multicultural approach*—is based upon a multicultural, multiethnic vision of the United States. As Michael Walzer suggests, multiculturalists “want the state enlisted on the side of difference.” Since “in modern society *no group can make it on its own*”, a common political commitment to a pluralist multiculturalism can provide the resources -- money, time, social capital -- necessary for sustaining ethnic and cultural groups. Even for strategically successful groups, cooperation is better than an ethnic and cultural war of all against all.

For Jews, the multicultural approach has a clear downside. On Israel issues, Jews do not have that many friends among the ethnic groups—primarily people of color--that have actively argued and worked for a multicultural agenda. Jews who take a multicultural approach can, however, still argue that terrorism and the conflict in the Middle East are in part due to the lack of a compelling *political* version of the multicultural vision that might form the basis for coexistence between Jews and Arabs in the Middle East. This approach to the Middle East conflict might appeal to the ethnic groups that are looking for an alternative to what they see as an American “power politics” approach.

The third approach advocates a *politics of universal ethical vision*. It is primarily concerned with the policy implications of this vision in major areas of American concern (e.g., law, education, the arts, government, the environment, immigration, health care and social welfare). Preferring universal principles of justice and/or fairness, its proponents often actively oppose any policy that favors or even distinguishes between people on the basis of ethnic or cultural differences.

This approach is the least relevant as a response to movements -- Islamic terrorism and anti-Semitism -- that result from a hostile overemphasis on ethnic, religious and cultural differences. To be more than a politics of moral purity, an effective universal ethical vision must have opponents who, at the very least, are prepared to seek political solutions that appeal to some notion of *mutual* interest. Anti-Semites, suicide bombers and Islamic radicals do not appear to be those kinds of opponents.

What political approach should Jews adopt, then, as Islamic terrorism and the related global anti-Semitism increase the political pressure on the United States government? First, we should not be naïve about the highly adversarial, even hate filled, nature of our situation. Islamic terrorists and anti-Semites are the direct parties to this conflict and they are not interested in negotiating. They want us to lose and lose big. As a result, explicitly American Jewish involvement in politics must most often take what is essentially a strategic approach.

Second, despite the pressure to go it alone, we must not surrender our commitment to build and sustain a mutually supportive multicultural society. Practically, this multicultural vision can help us build the necessary strategic inter-group alliances. More important, we need to widen our vision of “self-interest.” We must recognize that our long-term interest is best served by a successful American multiethnic society. That long-term interest means that even a strategic approach will need to intensify its efforts at positive outreach to other ethnic and cultural groups that are not direct parties to the conflict.

Finally, we need to insure that this strategic multiculturalism is informed by a universalistic moral commitment, without this commitment resulting in a misguided (and largely irrelevant) politics of moral purity. Given the hostility and intractability of our opponents in this struggle, we should expect that we will often have to settle for lesser evils in order to avoid greater evils. But allegiance to a universal ethic should help us to

keep our strategic choices within moral bounds, however context dependent these choices may be.

Unfortunately, the demands of the present situation make it difficult for Jews to pursue *tikkun ha-olam* -- our mission of transforming and redeeming the world. Life and death struggles -- like the struggle in which we are presently engaged -- tend to reduce our faith in politics as a vehicle for creating a better world to almost nothing. But we cannot afford to succumb to this tendency. Indeed, it is at times like these that we must strive to remain true to our deepest understanding of the moral values and political principles that we cannot surrender -- whatever the strategic advantage -- without fundamentally compromising our integrity.