

For an Open, Democratic Debate Concerning Israel's Policies

By David Kraemer

Recently, an ad appeared in *The New York Times*, sponsored by a new project of The New Israel Fund entitled the "Voice for Democracy," calling for a more open debate in the Jewish community worldwide concerning Israel's policies and politics. The argument of the ad was relatively simple: Israel, the only true democracy in the Near East, must stay that way. The health of a democracy can be judged by—and even depends on—the openness of political debate in that democracy. Thus, those in the Jewish community leadership who condemn the expression of "dissenting" opinions are weakening the democratic nature of Jewish "Israel-dialogue" worldwide. In doing so, they compromise the vigor of the international Jewish community and even of Israel itself.

The "Voice for Democracy" website also includes an open letter (for which it is soliciting signatures) to Jewish community leaders. In this letter, the project articulates its central thesis:

Democracy means more than casting ballots. Democracy means protecting the human and civil rights of innocent civilians - Jewish and Palestinian - even in war. It means closing the gap between rich and poor in Israel, one of the largest in the developed world. It means condemning and resoundingly defeating calls to forcibly transfer Arabs, including citizens of the state - calls too reminiscent of history's treatment of the Jewish people.

Those who love Israel and are concerned about these issues should not feel silenced. An open and vigorous debate within the Jewish community about the direction of the country will only strengthen Israel.

It is the latter paragraph that particularly interests me. Those in the American Jewish community who have held critical views concerning Israel's present policies have found themselves largely silenced. The American Jewish establishment has permitted little public dissent from the party line of Israel's current government. Dissenting opinions are rarely heard in the American Jewish press, and individuals who write for that press, and who might like to express contrary opinions, are afraid to do so for fear of jeopardizing their standing. As a consequence, the concerned American Jewish readership has been cheated of the fuller range of political options, and American Jewish political dialogue is immensely weakened as a result. None of this can be "good for the Jews."

Ironically, and by contrast, political debate in Israel is far more open and free-wheeling. In fact, many American Jews would be shocked by the kind of critical

opinion that regularly appears in the Israeli press. The openness of Israeli debate is the good news. American Jewish ignorance of this debate is the bad news. But the "Voice for Democracy" project shows that some, at least, have had enough of the tacit censorship that characterizes Jewish dialogue concerning Israel in this country, and that they are intent on addressing the problem. If we agree that democracy is strengthened by open dialogue and debate, we will rejoice in this project and pray for its success. If it succeeds, then we may hear things we would prefer not to hear. But that will be evidence of our strength, not our weakness.

In the same spirit, I have a proposal for those who control and edit the American Jewish press: begin to print, in every issue of each of your publications, selections (in English translation) from the Israeli press that reflect the range of opinions that are regularly expressed in Israel. Let American Jews know that there are Israelis who think Sharon is the best Jewish leader since King David, and others who think he is the most incompetent, bumbling leader Israel has yet known. Let American Jews read arguments for the necessity of the Israeli military crackdown in major Palestinian population centers, and other arguments for the folly of this military policy. And so forth.

The "Voice for Democracy" expresses certain definitive political views (such as its condemnation of those who advocate "transfer" of the Palestinian Arab population), but, more importantly, it argues for the need for an open political dialogue in Israel and in the international Jewish community more generally. Whatever our individual political opinions, we must endorse this goal. There can be no gainsaying the fact that our collective life would be strengthened by a respectful, broad-ranging debate. Those of us who live in a democratic society, and know its benefits, should support the fuller realization of the democratic ideal in Jewish life and the efforts of those who are working on behalf of this ideal.