

Is J Street in the tent, or out?

27 May 2011 by Daniel Gordis

On May 3, Daniel Gordis addressed J Street Leadership Mission to Israel and Palestine. The following column is based on his remarks that day.

Good morning and welcome to Jerusalem. It's a pleasure to meet with this leadership mission; I understand that there are some first-time visitors to Israel among you, so a particular welcome to those of you who've never been here before.

Before we got seated, one member of your group conveyed a message from the Israeli consul-general in his home community. The message was that I shouldn't speak to you. As you can imagine, I received similar advice from a wide array of people after I received your invitation, but I've chosen to ignore it.

As most of you know, I disagree strongly with much of what you do. But I think that we have an obligation to meet with people with whom we disagree. Given the extent of the forces aligned against Israel, seeking to delegitimize the very idea of a Jewish state, the pro-Israel camp needs a big tent. Neither Israel nor the Jewish people will survive if we work only with those with whom we agree. A big tent, by definition, means including people with whom we disagree passionately, but who still share our basic goals.

Even a big tent, though, has its limits. There are things that one can say, or do, that place a person or an organization outside that tent. You know very well that there are many people who believe that J Street is outside the tent, not in it. I'm not yet certain. That's why I'm here.

LET ME begin with a basic assumption: I assume that we want the same thing. We seek two states in this region, one a thriving, Jewish, democratic Israel, and the other a thriving, non-Jewish, democratic Palestine. Of course, there are Israelis on both ends of the political spectrum who do not wish this. Some Israelis no longer believe in the importance of a Jewish state and would prefer a state "of all its citizens" between the Jordan River and the Mediterranean Sea. But as that would make Jews a minority in this country and thus end the Zionist project, I'm utterly opposed to that. There are also Israelis who still resist the idea of a Palestinian state and who would prefer to either exile millions of Palestinians or forever keep them under our thumb as non-citizens, either of which would be morally obtuse. But the vast

majority of Israelis, if presented with a genuine opportunity to live side by side in a democratic, transparent, peaceful, demilitarized Palestine, would accept it.

So, assuming that's what you also seek, I assume our disagreement is about how to get there. You believe that people who are not willing to make major territorial concessions to the Palestinians right now are not serious about a two-state solution. You think that those of us who claim that we favor a two-state solution but who are not willing to give up the store at this moment are bluffing. Or we're liars. Or, at best, we're well-intentioned but misguided. But bottom line, if we're not willing now to make the concessions that you think are called for, then we're not really pursuing peace.

But that is arrogance of the worst sort. Does your distance from the conflict give you some moral clarity that we don't have? Are you smarter than we are? Are you less racist? Why do you assume with such certainty that you have a monopoly on the wisdom needed to get to the goal we both seek?

IN PREPARING for this session, I did a bit of reading of statements that you've issued on a whole array of issues. One, just released, is a perfect example of the certainty and arrogance of which I'm speaking. Reacting to the most recent Fatah-Hamas agreement, this is what J Street had to say: "In fact, many who oppose a two-state deal have, in recent years, done so by arguing that divisions among the Palestinians make peace impossible. Obviously, reconciliation [between Fatah and Hamas] reduces that obstacle – but now skeptics of a twostate agreement have immediately stepped forward to say that a deal is impossible with a Palestinian unity government that includes Hamas."

"Obviously," you say, reconciliation reduces the obstacle to a peace treaty.

But I would caution you against ever using the word "obviously" when it comes to the Middle East. Nothing here is obvious. If you think that something is obvious, then you simply haven't thought enough. Why is it obvious that Fatah's signing a deal with Hamas, which rejects Israel's very right to exist, reduces obstacles to peace? Isn't it just as plausible that it makes peace impossible, or that signing a deal and returning large swathes of land to a group still sworn to our destruction would be suicidal? I suppose that reasonable minds could debate this matter, but how is it "obvious" that this is good news for peace? And then you go on to say that "skeptics of a two-state agreement have immediately stepped forward to say that a deal

is impossible with a Palestinian unity government that includes Hamas.”

There you go again, telling us that if we don't agree with you, then we're not serious or honest. If we think that the Fatah-Hamas deal is terrible news for peace, then we're just "skeptics of a two-state agreement." In your worldview, there's no possibility that we're just a bit more nervous than you are, that we do not want to make a mistake that will turn our own homes into Sderot, that we are frightened of restoring the horror of 2000-2004 to our streets, buses and restaurants.

No, that possibility doesn't exist, because anyone who doesn't agree with you is by definition a "skeptic of the two-state agreement."

I'd suggest that if you want to convince those of us still deciding whether you're part of the big tent that you are "in," that you drop this sort of condescension. It's arrogant and intellectually shallow; it doesn't serve you well.

And if you want those of us who are still unsure to become convinced that you are part of the big tent, then I have another piece of advice for you – recognize that not everyone can be part of it. There are groups who are clearly opposed to Israel's existence as a Jewish state; they are our enemies. It doesn't matter if they are in Israel or outside, or if they are Jewish or not. If they are working to end Israel, or to end it as a Jewish and democratic state, then they are our enemies, plain and simple. There are enemies who cannot be loved or compromised into submission, and you need to recognize that.

The BDS (Boycott, Divestment, Sanctions) movement is a case in point. No one in their right mind doubts that BDS is opposed to Israel's continued existence as a Jewish state. So why were they invited to your annual conference? There need to be limits to those you'd welcome into your tent. You need to show us that you care about Israel more than you care about dialogue with Israel's enemies.

I still remember the first time I was struck by this tendency of yours to assail Israel when you'd been silent about what Israel's enemies were doing. It was the first day of the Gaza war at the end of 2008. Sderot had been shelled intermittently for eight years, and relentlessly in the days prior to the beginning of the war. It was obvious that this couldn't go on, for the first obligation of states to their citizens is to protect them.

For years, Israel had been failing the citizens of Sderot. But when Israel finally decided to do what any legitimate state would do, J Street immediately called for a cessation of hostilities. The war was only hours old, nothing had been accomplished and the citizens of Sderot were still no safer than they had been. But J Street had had enough.

Why? Why had you said almost nothing for all the years that Sderot was being shelled, but within hours of the war's beginning were calling for it to end? What matters more to you – the safety of Israel's citizens, or advancing your own moral agenda in our region of the world? IF YOU want us to be convinced that you're in the big tent, show us. Show us that there are times that you will stand up for Israel, not its enemies. Explain why you lobbied Congress against a resolution condemning incitement in Palestinian schools. Explain why, when Israel is marginalized as never before (a recent poll showed that Europeans rank Israel and North Korea as the greatest threats to world peace!), you pressured the US not to veto a UN resolution on settlements, which the mainstream of American Jewry all thought needed to be vetoed.

And ask yourselves this: If you were to take all the money you're spending in the United States and do your work here in Israel, trying to strengthen the political parties who are more inclined to do what you seek, how much traction would you get? We all know you would get a pretty chilly reception. Ask yourself why that is. Is it that we Israelis really don't want to end this conflict? We enjoy sending our children off to war? We look forward to the next funeral at Mount Herzl? We're not aware that time is not on our side?

Or is it that we live here, and that even rank-and-file Israelis know a bit more about the complexity of this conflict than you give us credit for? Why would you assume that we're stupid, or immoral, or addicted to the conflict? Why do you insist that the Fatah-Hamas agreement is a good thing, or that it's best for Israel if the US twists its arm even harder? At a time when Israel is so alone, can you see why it's hard for many of us to buy the argument that you're genuinely pro-Israel, or that you should be part of the big tent?

It's time for you to show us. Show us that you seek peace, that you care about the Palestinians, but that even more (yes, more, because that's what the particularism of peoplehood requires), that you care about us. It's one thing to put "pro-Israel" in your tag line, and another to be "pro-Israel." You certainly don't need to be a rubber stamp for Israeli policy

– that’s not what’s at issue. Israel desperately needs critique, and Israelis issue it all the time. So, too, should Diaspora Jews.

No, what’s at issue is for us to see you pressure someone, anytime, to be in Israel’s camp on something. That’s what we want to see. When we see that, more of us will believe that you’re part of our tent, and then, even with all our disagreements, we’ll be convinced that we could work together for a better future for all the peoples of this region.

POSTSCRIPT: In the Q&A session that followed, J Street founder Jeremy Ben-Ami asked the first question. He said that he found it “astounding” that I had given an entire presentation “without mentioning the occupation of another people.”

But interestingly, in the May 12 issue of **Globes**, Vered Kellner, who traveled with the group and went with them from my session to their meeting with Salam Fayyad, noted that Fayyad didn’t mention the occupation either. “Is it possible that the occupation conversation simply doesn’t interest anyone anymore?” she asked.

“True,” Ben-Ami answered, “neither Gordis nor Fayyad raised the occupation, but we’re here to remind Israelis that you can’t pretend that the occupation isn’t part of reality.”

So here’s my final question: If the way that you’re framing the issues is no longer the way that Israelis and Palestinians are discussing them, is it possible that you are not even addressing the core issues that matter to the people actually in the conflict? Perhaps the time has come to ask yourselves what matters to you more: actually moving the policy needle, or assuaging your own discomfort with the undeniably painful complexities of this conflict. If what you want to do is affect policy, how effective would you say you’ve been thus far?

The writer is senior vice president of the Shalem Center in Jerusalem. His latest book, Saving Israel: How the Jewish People Can Win a War that May Never End, won the 2009 National Jewish Book Award. He blogs at <http://danielgordis.org>