

A Split Community

US Jewish leaders are alarmed at the venom seeping in

Jan Jaben-Eilon Atlanta

IN APRIL, WHEN A SMALL, BUT vocal, group of US Jews attacked the nomination of Rabbi Richard (Rick) Jacobs, 55, for the position of president of the Union for Reform Judaism (URJ), they made the already-strict American Jewish litmus test of who is pro-Israel even more demanding.

Jacobs, 55, has been the influential senior rabbi of the prominent Westchester Reform Temple of Scarsdale, New York, for the past 20 years and is involved in numerous community efforts. A popular figure in the Reform and liberal communities in the US and Israel, he has been particularly outspoken on issues of social justice and Jewish inclusivity.

His nomination was welcomed by many. But within weeks of the nomination, some three dozen members of the Reform movement, brought together over the Internet and calling themselves “Jews Against Divisive Leadership” (www.jadl.org), were demanding that the nomination be rescinded.

In paid ads in several Jewish weeklies, the group cited three reasons for their protest against Jacobs: his involvement with the three-year-old, left-leaning, pro-Israel J Street, which opposes settlements and calls for a greater involvement by the Obama Administration in the Israeli-Palestinian peace process; his role on the board of directors of the New Israel Fund, the umbrella funding group that provides funding for and conduits funds to most of Israel’s social action groups; and the fact that, on a recent visit to Israel, Jacobs had participated in one of the weekly demonstrations held in the East Jerusalem neighborhood of Sheikh Jarrah run by a loosely organized group of left-wing activists to protest the takeover of Palestinian homes by Jewish right-wing settlers.

“We call on the Union for Reform Judaism to reconsider this divisive appointment,” the ad urged. “Do not drive mainstream Zionist Jews out of the Reform movement.”

A second ad, signed by about 100 individuals, is scheduled to be published in the week-

ly Los Angeles “Jewish Journal” in late May, *The Jerusalem Report* has learned. This ad “cites the positions of J Street and NIF and shows they are in direct conflict with policy positions of the URJ.”

The ads and the ensuing debates have reignited the smoldering, angry debate regarding the limits of acceptable discourse within the American Jewish community. The fact that the primary attacks against Jacobs came from members of the Reform Movement, generally considered the most liberal stream of Judaism in the US, underlines once again how deeply this debate has permeated the community. And this is raising concerns among some observers about whether the increasingly intolerant American Jewish community will be able to conduct the difficult political conversations that are expected to be an integral part of the upcoming 2012 presidential elections, especially with regard to the US’s foreign policy and policies towards Israel.

THE LOOSELY KNIT GROUP OF protesters, many of whom do not know each other, is led by Carol Greenwald, an economist and investment manager from Chevy Chase, Maryland, and was launched in mid-April. Greenwald tells *The Report* that they hope “to convince the URJ to have Jacobs step down from the J Street rabbinic cabinet and resign from the board of the New Israel Fund,” which she refers to as “divisive” and outside of mainstream Jewish opinion.

Vic Rosenthal and Stuart Weil, signees on the advertisement and members of the Reform Temple Beth Israel in Fresno, California, both tell *The Report* that they oppose J Street and the NIF because they are, in Rosenthal’s words, “inimical to the survival of Israel.” Karin McQuillan of Congregation Beth Israel in Carmel, California, tells *The Report* that “this isn’t an argument about whether Jacobs is right or wrong, but the nomination is making Reform members uncomfortable... We Jews clash with each other so much already. Why choose

someone who will make us clash on Israel?”

Expressing similar concerns about the Reform Movement, Yvonne Baehr-Robertson, a member of Temple Shalom in Newton, Massachusetts, acknowledges that her objection to Jacobs’s appointment has nothing to do with his rabbinical qualifications, but rather with his connections to Israel. “I don’t know him or his background... The Reform Movement is moving in an unhealthy direction for the State of Israel and the Jacobs nomination is a lightning rod.”

Indeed, a representative of J Street was scheduled to speak at Temple Beth Avodah, also in Newton, last November, but the program had to be moved to a nearby public school at the last minute when members of that Temple expressed strong feelings against hosting the group.

The intensity of the attacks against J Street and the NIF and the attempts to brand these, and similar, organizations as anti-Israel and even anti-Semitic, have been intensifying in both Israel and the US. Yet the Reform movement was obviously caught off guard by the negative reactions to Jacobs’s appointment. Rabbi Eric Yoffie, the current URJ president, tells *The Report* that his initial positive response and his perception of Jacobs as a staunch Zionist indicate just how deep the schisms of feelings are even within the Reform movement and how unaware the leadership has been.

Jacobs has informed *The Report* that he will not speak with the media until the URJ board of trustees votes on his nomination in mid-June. But in early May, speaking at the Reform Movement’s Religious Action Center’s Consultation on Conscience, Jacobs declared that “leaders of the Reform Movement must never be defined by membership in outside organizations” – an obvious reference to the attacks on him due to his involvement with J Street and the NIF.

J Street’s President Jeremy Ben-Ami also declined to comment for this story. But they are among the very few not commenting, one



RABBI RICHARD JACOBS: Under fire

way or another, both inside and outside the Reform Movement.

IN A LENGTHY INTERVIEW WITH *The Report*, Rabbi David Ellenson, president of Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion (HUC-JIR), the Reform Movement's rabbinic college, says, "I'm struck virtually speechless that of anyone in the world, Jacobs would be considered anti-Israel. The ad was beyond simplistic and smacked of McCarthyism."

Ellenson continues, "The attack is the most despicable thing I've ever encountered in my life in the Jewish community. This brings great shame to the Jewish community. I'm just infuriated."

Rabbi Naamah Kelman, dean of the Jerusalem campus of HUC-JIR, tells *The Report* that she is "appalled" by the attack. Kelman, Ellenson, and Rabbi Michael Marmor, Vice President for Academic Affairs at HUC in Jerusalem, have written a response to the ad that was published in the "Forward" and several local Jewish newspapers. "We vehemently disagree with this distorted caricature of Rabbi Jacobs and his attitudes toward Israel," they write. They further charge that the ad is evidence "that a handful of Reform Jews have now joined previously right-leaning critics... Their claim is that Rabbi Jacobs's involvement with groups promoting human rights and social improvement aligns him with crazed extremists." They

refer to the tone and content of the ad as "tactics of witch-hunting and demagoguery."

More than one dozen presidents and leaders of the Reform Movement's Central Conference of American Rabbis (CCAR), the largest and oldest rabbinical organization in the world, signed a letter to the editor which expressed their enthusiastic support for the choice.

Rabbi Eric Gurvis of Temple Shalom in Newton, and Baehr-Robertson's rabbi, says "the campaign to discredit and delegitimize Jacobs is part of a bigger, ugly wind in the community that distresses me terribly... There are people in the world who want to delegitimize Israel and now we're trying to delegitimize Jews because they don't hold the 'correct' support of Israel... We are at a precarious point, at a crossroads. And are we going to walk to the crossroads together or walk away from each other?"

Support for Jacob's nomination – if not for his positions – has also come from the wider Jewish community. A letter of support for Jacobs, published in the newsletter "eJewish Philanthropy," was written and signed by several past and present leaders of organizations with a broad range of constituents, including past presidents of the Conference of Presidents of Major Jewish Organizations, rabbis from the Conservative Movement and president and CEO of the Jewish Council for Public Affairs (JCPA), Rabbi Steve Gutow.

"Some of us identify ourselves with J Street, others with (right-leaning) AIPAC (American Israel Public Affairs Committee) and others with neither," they write. "However, one should not doubt the firm commitment of each of us to the welfare of the Jewish State and the Jewish people."

Separately, Anti-Defamation League National Director Abraham H. Foxman was quoted by the JTA as saying the attacks are "harmful to the spirit of unity and common cause that unites the Jewish people."

From Israel, Rabbi Donniel Hartman, president of the Shalom Hartman Institute in Jerusalem, succinctly states on the institute's website, "I have known Rabbi Jacobs intimately and personally for more than 15 years, and if he is not a friend and lover of Israel, then these categories have no meaning."

But Rabbi Lance Sussman, senior rabbi at the Reform Congregation Knesseth Israel in Elkins Park, Pennsylvania, tells *The Report*

that Jacobs's nomination is "problematic." The Reform Movement is in a statistical decline, Sussman warns, and Jacobs's relationships with J Street and NIF create a PR problem for the Reform Movement. "I don't know if Jacobs... is a consensus-building person, but at the starting blocks, it puts him in a difficult position," he says.

Despite the CCAR's support for Jacobs, Sussman argues that at least some of the objection to Jacobs's appointment stems from vested interests. Jacobs was among 18 rabbis of large Reform congregations around the country who founded a group known as the Rabbinic Vision Initiative (RVI). The group, which became public in March and has since expanded, has issued a position paper that includes a strong critique of the URJ. Many Reform rabbis are concerned, Sussman says, that the RVI, represented by large wealthy congregations, will weaken CCAR.

IN AN EXTENSIVE E-MAIL, Jonathan Sarna, professor of American Jewish history at Brandeis University tells *The Report* that "support for Rabbi Jacobs is actually very broad within the Reform community... It is widely known that the opposition was organized outside the Reform movement, not by members who are on the inside."

This is not really a story about Reform divisions, Sarna says. Rather, the controversy is about boundaries within the American Jewish community. "Once upon a time, non-support for the Israeli government put one outside the boundaries of communal norms. Those days have passed, since both those on the right and on the left have at different times publicly dissented from Israeli government policies. At the other extreme stand those who insist that the boundaries should be all-inclusive, including even Jews who promote boycott and divestment or those who refuse to support the idea of Israel as a Jewish state... Realistically, it is hard to write out of the community those who hold views that are articulated and supported within Israel. Rabbi Jacobs, who has a home in Israel, cannot reasonably be seen as standing outside the bounds of legitimate viewpoints."

He further points out that this is not the first debate over boundaries. "In the late 1940s, the supporters of the American Council for Judaism were effectively written out of the community's consensus. In the 1950s, the Jewish communists were written out. In the

1970s, the leaders of Breira [a left-wing group that called for Israel to make concessions and to recognize Palestinian national aspirations] were written out. In retrospect, the Breira positions were widely adopted (and most of its members welcomed back), while the ACJ and the communist positions remain marginalized. “The question is whether we will look back upon J Street as more similar to Breira and well within communal consensus or more like the American Council for Judaism, which ultimately lost communal credibility.”

The issue of political perspective on Israel has gained attention even outside the Jewish community, as indicated by the on-again, off-again, on-again decision by the City University of New York board of trustees to approve an honorary degree for Pulitzer Prize-winning playwright Tony Kushner. At a May 2 meeting, trustee Jeffrey S. Wiesenfeld argued that Kushner should not receive the degree due to some of the playwright’s anti-Israel comments. A week later, after a vote to approve the degree, “The New York Times” quoted CUNY’s chancellor Matthew Goldstein, saying, “The basic misstep was there wasn’t a counterpunch” to the remarks by the one, questioning trustee. I’m not sure why the appropriate people didn’t chime in at that time.”

The answer to Goldstein’s comments is key to understanding why civil discourse within the American Jewish community, particularly about Israel, has become so toxic.

Gurvis believes that the lack of civility in the Jewish conversation is “part of the broader culture. We’re living in an incredibly instable time... I think that fear is driving this. When will we stop living only by fear?” He says that there’s legitimate fear of Iran as an existential threat to Israel, “but there’s another existential threat if Israel doesn’t find a way to make peace with the Palestinians. This is not binary; it’s not simple. And... I’m not sure people are being realistic.”

JCPA’s Gutow warns that “as the US enters the volatile 2012 election campaign, venom will flow. It’s not as serious in the Jewish community as the non-Jewish community, but it will be strong, even on domestic issues.”

In fact, the findings of a recent survey of 2,300 self-selected Jewish voters conducted by HUC Religion Professor Steven Windmueller points to the emergence of a distinctive

American Jewish conservative voice. According to Windmueller, more than half of the survey respondents indicate that they had contributed over the past year to one of the political parties – 50 percent to the Republican Party and 48 percent to the Democratic Party; 19 individuals say they had contributed to the Libertarian Party and some 25 respondents have made gifts to one or more of the Tea Party groups.

Windmueller says the most significant divisions among voters centered around domestic issues and with regard to same-sex marriage, gun control and the Muslim proposal to construct a community center near Ground Zero in New York, where the September 11 attack occurred, one can identify a sharp political divide. And although he

qualifies his survey, noting that because it was self-selected and unscientific it precludes any defining conclusions, Windmueller also points to the declining percentage of Jews supporting President Obama.

“The survey reflects the conversation we hear on the street. We are no longer able to talk to each other; that’s the bottom line,” Windmueller tells *The Report*. “If political conservatives used to feel uncomfortable speaking

out in the past, now I hear the reverse.”

ONLINE COMMENTS FROM American Jews in response to the article authored by Ellenson, Kelman and Marmor mix American politics with Israeli politics. Many of the talk-backers claim that J Street and NIF don’t support Zionism and even funnel money to Israel’s enemies. At least one of the writers is a member of an organization called Jewish Task Force (www.JTF.org), which is described on its website as “an organization of right-wing Jews and righteous gentiles who follow the teachings of the late Rabbi Meir Kahane,” whose party in Israel was outlawed for being racist. The website also expresses strong views against Obama.

The toxic talk seeping into the Jewish community from the wider American society – merging controversial domestic issues with the question of Israel’s future – has many Jewish leaders alarmed.

“I understand that the people upset about Jacobs are concerned about the best interests of Israel, but they are dangerously wrong to crush dissent and call everyone else traitors. This will bring a split in the American Jewish community,” Daniel Sokatch, CEO of the NIF, tells *The Report*. “The people who are coming after Jacobs, NIF and J Street, are operating under faith and belief... Extremists on both sides don’t care about the facts. This isn’t opinion, but faith.”

Referring to the vocal opposition of Jacobs’s nomination, Sokatch continues, “This small group of American Jews doesn’t realize that support for J Street and NIF is part of the consensus. That’s why this will fail. There’s litmus test that a small hard core is trying to hoist on the community and the community is rejecting it. But the bullies are on the defensive and that’s why they are more vocal.”

JCPA’s Gutow says he is afraid that Israel will be used as a wedge issue to divide the Jewish vote. If that happens, he fears “it will tear up our community. And if Israel is used as a wedge issue in the general election, it will be hard to stop at the line of the Jewish community.” He is concerned that if Jews use Israel to divide the Jewish community, support for Israel could also be used to divide the wider American community, with detrimental effects for Israel.

Jane Schiff, a leader in the Jewish Community Relations Council of Atlanta and a JCPA board member and member of the JCPA’s Civility Task Force tells *The Report*, “I hear less and less from the Jewish community,” about controversial issues. She continues, “Some of that is due to concern over losing the organization’s tax status. But when it comes to the subject of Israel, the organizational leaders are worried that whichever way they express their feelings, it will create a backlash organizationally.”

Schiff says these difficult conversations penetrate personal friendships, as well. “I have friends who say, ‘We cannot ever talk about a subject’ because they assume they know how the other person is thinking and feeling. Unless people are open to hearing other opinions and other positions, they cannot determine if their own opinions have merit.”

Ellenson tries to find a silver lining in the controversy. “On the positive side, people obviously care deeply.” But then he concludes, “on the negative side, they fail to reflect on the humanity and integrity of people who have different views.”

‘Do not drive mainstream Zionist Jews out of the Reform movement’

– ad placed in several US Jewish newspapers