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## At Passover This Year, Difficult Conversations About The Promised Land

*A sharply divided community limps toward the Passover seder.*

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With tensions between the United States and Israel running at a fever pitch, even the benign, ritually symbolic words of the Passover seder have suddenly become charged with divisiveness and political import.

For **Susie Henson Moskowitz**, spiritual leader of **Temple Beth Torah in Melville**, L.I., reading the words “Next Year in Jerusalem” at the end of the seder next week will take on a whole new, and unexpected, resonance.

“We pray that there will continue to be a Jerusalem that reflects Jewish and democratic values — and is safe and secure,” said **Rabbi Henson Moskowitz**.

Her statement, which seems to straddle liberal and conservative positions and reflect anxiety over controversial statements made by Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu on Election Day, epitomizes the concerns of a divided American Jewish community: that Israel continues to be the homeland of the Jewish people, that it can one day move forward with a two-state solution that allows Israel to end the occupation of its Palestinian neighbors and that it remain safe within secure borders.

**Rabbi Moskowitz** was reflecting, in part, the concerns of Sen. Marco Rubio (R-Fla.), who warned on the Senate floor last week that President Obama’s treatment of Israel could endanger Israel’s safety by emboldening its “enemies to launch more rockets out of southern Lebanon and Gaza, to launch more terrorist attacks, to go to international forums and delegitimize Israel’s right to exist.”

Rubio was responding to Obama’s promise last week to “reassess” America’s relationship with Israel in light of Netanyahu’s pledge on the eve of last week’s election that a Palestinian state would not be established under his watch. (Netanyahu’s Election Day statement that Arabs were “voting in droves” met with widespread criticism in Reform and Conservative circles.)

Although Netanyahu clarified his pledge after the election — saying he is still committed to a two-state solution but that current conditions make that impossible — Obama dismissed them in a phone call to Netanyahu. He later told the Huffington Post: “I indicated to him that given his statements prior to the election, it is going to be hard to find a path where people are seriously believing that negotiations are possible. We take him at his word when he said that it wouldn’t happen during his prime ministership, and so that’s why we’ve got to evaluate what other options are available to make sure that we don’t see a chaotic situation in the region.”

Such talk from the Obama administration continued this week, with his chief of state, Denis McDonough, telling a J Street conference Monday that Netanyahu's election eve comment was "troubling."

"We cannot simply pretend that those comments were never made, or that they don't raise questions about the prime minister's commitment to achieving peace through direct negotiations," he said.

At the State Department, deputy spokeswoman Marie Harf told reporters that the U.S. is now looking to Israel for "actions and policies that demonstrate genuine commitment to a two-state solution, not more words."

And Obama repeated Tuesday that his dispute with Netanyahu is substantive and not personal.

"We believe that two states is the best path forward for Israel's security, for Palestinian aspirations and for regional stability," he said. "This is a matter of figuring out how we get through a knotty policy difference that has great consequences for both countries and the region."

Rabbi Charles Klein of Merrick, a former president of the New York Board of Rabbis, said he had hoped that after the Israeli election the divide between the U.S. and Israel "would have been mended and healed. Unfortunately, it seems to be spinning out of control with each passing day."

He noted that the Obama administration has "threatened diminished U.S. support for Israel in the United Nations ... which affects the security of the state of Israel. No one in the Jewish community can be anything but alarmed about the increasing diplomatic isolation of Israel and what appears to be the decoupling of the [U.S.-Israel] relationship."

Further inflaming tensions was a Wall Street Journal report Tuesday claiming Israel had spied on the U.S.-Iranian nuclear negotiations and passed on the information to members of Congress. Israeli Defense Minister Moshe Yaalon heatedly denied the report.

The Jerusalem Post quoted him as saying: "Someone apparently has an interest in stoking conflict, or bringing a negative twist to relations between us, which are strategic relations from our perspective."

Dan Mariaschin, executive vice president of B'nai B'rith International, said the "temperature needs to be turned down" and the U.S.-Israel relationship restored.

But the continuing schism in relations has Nancy Kaufman, CEO of the National Council of Jewish Women, concerned about the impact on young American Jews.

"I'm worried about our young folks totally checking out," she told The Jewish Week. "I'm worried about them rolling their eyes and saying, 'I don't want to be engaged with Israel or go there or talk about it or read about it.' ... I'm seeing more and more people saying they will not focus on Israel. It's very disturbing."

Kaufman added that she is certain this will be a prime subject at seder tables.

"People are worried," she said. "It's easier to support the American Jewish World Service [which works to foster human rights and end poverty in the Third World] than those working in Israel."

Rabbi Rick Jacobs, president of the Union for Reform Judaism, said of Obama's refusal to accept Netanyahu's clarifying statement about a two-state solution: "Politicians say different things. The key is to judge any partner by deeds. ... I think there has to be more openness on all sides, and the administration would be wise to figure out concrete ways we can work effectively for the things that are in the strategic interests of the United States and Israel."

But Alan Elsner, a vice president of J Street, insisted that Netanyahu was being “duplicitous.”

“His attempt at clarification was unconvincing and unacceptable and was clearly designed to avoid or mitigate the flood of international condemnation that his original statement rightly provoked,” he said.

Malcolm Hoenlein, executive vice chairman of the Conference of Presidents of Major American Jewish Organizations, said his office has been in touch with officials in the Obama administration “in the hope we can put things back on track.”

“In the heat of campaigns in America, how many things are spoken that are later reconsidered?” he asked rhetorically.

Despite the rift, Nathan Diament, director of the Orthodox Union’s Institute for Public Affairs, said that while the U.S. is reassessing, “the fundamental security aid the U.S. gives to Israel continues.”

Several area rabbis said they have or will discuss the subject from the pulpit.

Rabbi Moshe Birnbaum of the Jewish Center of Kew Gardens Hills said the last time he could remember such tensions was in 1956 when President Dwight Eisenhower “threatened sanctions against Israel” during the Suez Crisis.

“Israel is so dependent on American support, and I think there is a concerted effort on the part of well-funded people to undermine American Jewish support for Israel,” he said.

Rabbi Aaron Benson of the North Shore Jewish Center in Port Jefferson, L.I., said he has congregants who blame Obama for the continuing tensions and others who blame Netanyahu.

“I am not so excited about what was said during the last day of the election,” he said. “I am more interested in what plays out going forward.”

Rabbi Steven Moss of Oakdale and president of the Suffolk Board of Rabbis, said he plans to focus in his sermon “not on the divisiveness we are experiencing in the world of politics and Netanyahu and Obama, but rather to focus on a sense of hope that the future will be better than today.”

Rabbi Andy Bachman of Congregation Beth Elohim in Park Slope, Brooklyn, said he believes “a lot of people are pained and embarrassed by the public fight and would rather it go back under wraps. The U.S. and Israel are longtime allies, and the idea of a feud causes people a lot of anguish. There is enough blame to go around in most people’s eyes. ... I don’t think it’s going to have a lasting impact.”

But most people interviewed at random during a Hillel event Sunday at Stony Brook University laid the blame squarely on Obama.

Israel Kleinberg, 85, of Smithtown, said the rift stems from Netanyahu’s vociferous attack on what he called the “bad [nuclear] deal” being worked on with Iran.

“Obama takes the easy way out and the Israelis are standing up” to him, he said.

Laurel Hoffman, 61, of Smithtown, L.I., said she believes Obama is “changing U.S. policy to become anti-Israel.”

Shari Haber, 55, of Commack, said Obama is “setting a bad tone” that she fears “will have long lasting damage to the U.S.-Israel relationship.”

But Nathan Baum, 65, of Middle Island, L.I., said he blames Netanyahu because by addressing members of Congress to tell his concerns about a possible deal with Iran, he made Israel “a partisan issue in America.” And he said Netanyahu’s past actions belied the explanation he gave for his pre-election remarks about a two-state solution.

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