

Responding to the New Reality

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*During the years that I lived in Cape Town, South Africa, one of the most popular books on the peaceful transition to democracy there was entitled *Tomorrow is Another Country*. I feel that same title could aptly be applied to our current situation. European Commission President Romano Prodi stated it succinctly: “Nothing will ever be the same.” We are sickened by the magnitude of the destruction that no one imagined would occur. Enemies who blend into the local population threaten us with further acts of mass murder.*

Over the past number of years, much of the Jewish community has been devoted to the struggle for continuity. A number of promising efforts have been launched to stimulate a renaissance in Jewish religious, social, and cultural life. We have struggled to define and redefine our relationship with the Jewish state and with each other. At the same time, we have continued to fight against anti-Semitism and for the proper commemoration of the Nazi Holocaust in which 6 million of our people perished. All of these priorities remain central, if American Jewish life is to continue to thrive. But in the aftermath of Sept. 11th there are also new challenges.

As Jews, one of our most important priorities is to do what we can to ensure the security of the state of Israel. In recent months, we have had reason to fear that the American government might pressure the Israelis to make far-reaching concessions that

might undermine their ability to defend their country and their civilians. In mid-October, I was asked to be on a panel in a large church in Independence, Missouri to discuss the topic of how we should respond to terrorism. A political science professor stood up and immediately spoke of the need to reevaluate American foreign policy – the implication being that our support for Israel was in some way responsible for the terrible tragedies of Sept. 11th.

At the same time that we face terrorist threats at home, Israel continues to suffer an ongoing assault of violence. American Jewish must work hard to convince every American that the state of Israel deserves our political support.

ON the other hand, many Americans have commented on how they understand for the first time how Israelis must have felt all these years. For many, Israel has suddenly become a model

country. Experts on TV talk about how Israel deals with terrorism, how El Al interrogates travelers, how Israeli civilians cope with uncertainty and fear. Israelis are being seen as pioneers, as the one nation that has confronted the full force of terrorism and learned how to adapt.

Domestically, we need to pay a great deal more attention to Muslims and Islam, both in the United States and throughout the world. We need to ensure that Muslims are not ostracized because of their religion, their national origin, or their skin color. We also need to evaluate how effective our dialogue with American Muslims has been, and how we can make it more productive. Much of the interfaith work that has been done focuses on theological education. Perhaps what we need now is an emphasis on how Jews and Muslims can work together to defuse the tension that certainly exists in our relationship.

WHATEVER the exact number of Muslims in the United States, they are a significant force and likely to become more so in the coming years. It is incumbent upon us to develop a rational and effective policy to communicate with and, if necessary, counteract, American Muslims and American Islam. Daniel Pipes has argued recently that “The Muslim population in this country is not like any other group, for it includes within it a substantial body of people – many times more numerous than the agents of Osama bin Laden – who share with the suicide hijackers a hatred of the United States and the desire, ultimately, to transform it into a nation living under the strictures of militant Islam. Although not responsible for the atrocities in September, they

harbor designs for this country that warrant urgent and serious attention.” As Jews, we need to evaluate what is really going on around us, and how we should respond.

We must be vigilant, keeping a close eye on political as well as religious groups that potentially threaten us. In the aftermath of the attacks, hate groups have used the events of Sept. 11th to recruit new members and supporters, Neo-Nazis, white supremacists, militia groups, etc. are all strategizing about how to capitalize on the unprecedented situation that we face. For example, former Ku Klux Klan leader David Duke has rushed his book *Jewish Supremacism: My Awakening on the Jewish Question* into print. In fact, Duke’s press secretary verified that the book’s early release was “absolutely in response to Sept. 11th and the overwhelming demand for it.”

We need to remain vigilant and fight these hate groups. But, in fact, rather than turning toward hate after Sept. 11th, most Americans have responded with a heightened social solidarity with a strong altruistic basis. We mourned with the families of the firefighters, policemen, and other volunteer workers who lost their lives trying to save others. Judaism has a profound message of love and compassion that we need to convey. Our faith has a unique spiritual orientation that can make a contribution to the nation in our hour of crisis and mourning. Judaism can help Americans to see themselves in a new light, irrespective of whether or not they are Jews or are interested in becoming Jews.

WE need to take advantage of the new search for meaning that seems to be

present in the aftermath of the attacks. Many people feel that their comfortable lives have been shaken, their assumptions undermined, their routine disrupted. Many are attending churches and synagogues more frequently than before, a trend that may dissipate soon. But right now, we have a chance to make an impact on Jews during this transitional moment. Our community has invested tens of millions of dollars in Inreach as well as Outreach. Now is the time to use the programs and institutions that we have built to draw in those seeking Jewish spiritual meaning in the aftermath of the tragedies that have befallen our nation.

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