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Responding to the New Reality

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I remember that 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*, and I feel that that 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.

When Professor Jack Fischel decided to ask a number of us to respond to the question of what is the most pressing problem facing the Jewish community in the coming year, he could not have known what was going to transpire on Sept. 11th. The attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon and the American political and military responses have certainly created an entirely new reality, to use just one of the expressions that have been repeated over and over again. Over the past number of years, much of our energy 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, as well as a number of others that I've not mentioned, remain central if American Jewish life is to continue to thrive. But in the aftermath of Sept. 11th there are also new challenges. Seemingly overnight, we live in a much more dangerous world. Not only may there be terrorists scattered throughout the United States and elsewhere throughout the world plotting mass destruction and mayhem, but there appears to be an individual or individuals sending anthrax through the mail for some unknown reason. Several Americans have died and others have become very ill. The cumulative

effect has been a dramatic shift in mood.

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 re-evaluate American foreign policy. The professor seemed to imply 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. As I write this, the news arrives that an explosion ripped through a bus on a main highway in Israel's north on Thursday, and police said at least three people were killed. An eyewitness told Army Radio he was driving behind the bus and that he saw the blast "rip the bus into pieces, and things were flying everywhere." Unfortunately, by the time you read this in all probability there will have been several other attacks. Not everyone sympathizes with what we believe is a just cause. We must work hard to convince them that the State of Israel is morally justifiable and deserves the political support of every American.

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 Israelis 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 our neighbors and United States and those living 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 Muslim leadership 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 it is an emphasis on how Jews and Muslims can work together to defuse the tension that certainly exists in our relationship.

What ever the exact number of Muslims in the United States, they are a significant force and are 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 against, 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.” Pipes has been criticized by many for his skeptical appraisal of the motives and goals of the American Muslim community. He may very well be completely off the mark. But we Jews 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, and so forth are all strategizing on how to capitalize on the unprecedented situation that we all face. For example, former Ku Klux Klan leader David Duke has rushed his book *Jewish Supremacism: My Awakening on the Jewish Question* into press for the American market. In response to the question of whether the book was being published in English at this time due to recent events, Duke’s press secretary told Mother Jones “it’s being released prematurely, absolutely in response to Sept. 11th and the overwhelming demand for it.”

We need to remain vigilant and fight these hate groups. But most Americans have not turned toward David Duke in response to Sept. 11th. Rather, there is a heightened social solidarity with a strong altruistic basis. We mourned with the families of the firefighters and the policemen and the 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 have seen this in the Kabbalah phenomenon, and we may begin to see Judaism having a broader influence in American society in the coming years. There is a search for meaning, with many no longer satisfied with a materialistic culture that glorifies celebrity regardless of content.

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 suburban 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. The New York Jewish Week reports that "The terrorist attacks that rocked America last month had an obvious physical effect — buildings were destroyed, thousands of lives were lost, many thousands more were left displaced or unemployed. But the spiritual ripples of Sept. 11 are more subtle. How do you measure shattered goals, lost faith? For some, the answer is tangible changes. They have invigorated their religious practice, initiated a modest religious affiliation, decided to begin new careers." 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