
The Unconsummated Political Flirtation of 2008

Shmuel Rosner

THE FLIRTATION of the American Jewish voter with the Republican party over the past quarter-century has been, like all great flirtations, a lure and a torment. Both were in evidence again throughout 2008. Barack Obama was dogged throughout the year by questions about his close associations with Rashid Khalidi, an academic profoundly hostile to Israel who served as an official of the Palestine Liberation Organization in the 1980's; with Jeremiah Wright, the pastor whose church issued flagrantly anti-Semitic literature; and with several aides and advisers who laid the blame for the failure of the Arab-Israeli peace process almost exclusively on the Jewish state. The controversy over these ties and Obama's offer to meet without precondition with Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, the Iranian President who sponsored a conference denying the fact of the Holocaust and whose aggressive nuclear program may pose an existential threat to Israel, together suggested that the 2008 election might prove a watershed for Jews and the GOP.

The Republican hopeful had data to boost their spirits. Early polls showed Obama lagging far behind previous Democratic candidates when it came to Jewish support. In April, a Gallup poll found Jewish voters favoring Obama over the Republican, John McCain, 61 percent to 32 percent—landslide

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numbers, to be sure, but worrisome ones for Democrats, who had come to expect a Jewish supermajority of around 75 percent. In June, a poll commissioned by J Street—the dovish new Israel-advocacy organization—had the race at 62 percent to 32 percent for Obama. In July, Gallup's numbers were 62 percent to 34 percent for McCain.

In a close election, those sorts of numbers could make a crucial difference in the electoral vote, since Florida and Pennsylvania are two states with sizable Jewish populations that do not automatically side with the Democratic camp. Obama thus appeared to have something of a "Jewish problem." On the flip side, McCain, whose platform was predicated on the need to fight Islamic extremism of the sort Israel has been struggling with for decades, was doing better in these polls than any Republican since Ronald Reagan.

BUT THE Jewish flirtation with the GOP proved to be just that and nothing more. Obama ended up receiving 53 percent of the vote nationwide, but around 75 to 78 percent of the Jewish vote. Only 20 to 23 percent of Jewish voters pulled the lever for McCain, who received 46 percent of the vote overall. Obama scored a greater share of Jewish votes than John Kerry did in 2004. More striking, his performance almost equaled that of Al Gore among Jews in 2000, when Gore's running mate was Joseph Lieberman, an Orthodox Jew.

In the end, Obama's Jewish problem proved to be

no problem at all, and the story remained what it has been over the course of the past seven national elections, with Jews voting for Democratic candidates by colossal margins. In the annual survey of American Jewish opinion released in November by the American Jewish Committee, 56 percent of Jews said they were Democrats, while just 17 percent professed fealty to the Republican party. Forty-four percent were willing to identify themselves as liberal, and only 24 percent confessed to being conservative.

Once again, Republicans and politically conservative Jews find themselves engaged in wrenching discussions about why the Jewish vote is so unyieldingly Democratic when the GOP can honestly claim it is a far better friend to Israel and the Jewish people than its rival. In fact, its support for Israel has earned it so little in the way of credit from the American Jewish community that it can *only* be seen as a matter of underlying principle.

The answer may be that there is a continuing, and fundamental, misunderstanding of the political issues that motivate American Jews. According to the American Jewish Committee's 2008 edition of its annual survey of Jewish opinion, conducted in September, a majority of Jews, 54 percent, wanted the presidential candidates to "talk more" about the economy. By contrast, only a tiny fraction, three percent, wanted to hear more about Israel. Similar evidence of the relative electoral unimportance of Israel comes from a survey taken by J Street, which asked likely Jewish voters to check off the two issues, from a list of thirteen, "most important for you in deciding your vote for President and Congress this November." Fifty-five percent chose the economy, 33 percent the war in Iraq, 15 percent energy, and 12 percent the environment. Just 8 percent chose Israel.

A study published at the beginning of November by Steven M. Cohen of Hebrew Union College and Samuel J. Abrams of Harvard University entitled "The Diminished Place of Israel in the Political Thinking of Young Jews" burrows even more deeply into the phenomenon. "Among those 65 and over, 54 percent rate 'high' or 'very high' the Israel-Palestine conflict as a consideration in determining their vote for Obama or McCain," Cohen and Abrams write. "This figure comes in contrast with far lower levels among younger non-Orthodox Jews: 39 percent among those 35 to 54 [years old], and just 29 percent among those under 35."

Not only are Jews less concerned with Israel and its fate than they were in the past, but as the election came closer, they expressed far less concern about Obama's stance toward Israel than they had

during his primary contest with Hillary Clinton. According to a Gallup analysis in March 2008, she had the better of him with Jewish voters by a margin of 48 percent to 43 percent.

OBAMA AND his campaign understood they had a weakness they needed to confront, and he began to court the Jewish vote. Speaking regularly to Jewish groups, and giving interviews to the Jewish and Israeli press, Obama emphasized his strong support for Israel's security ("sacrosanct"), his determination to prevent Iran from obtaining nuclear weapons ("no option is off the table"), and even his opposition to the division of Jerusalem (a position from which he almost immediately had to back-track).

This pattern—of Republican hopes swelled by apparent Jewish concern about Democratic softness on Israel soon dashed by a savvy Democratic response—is now a recurring one. Prior to the 2004 presidential election, some Republican strategists believed that President George W. Bush was likely to outperform his Republican predecessors by receiving a Jewish vote similar to the record share (38 percent) Ronald Reagan received in 1980. In December 2001, a survey by the Republican Jewish Coalition (RJC) went so far as to conclude that "If the election were held today . . . more Jews would vote for Bush—42 percent—than for former presidential candidate Al Gore, who received 39 percent support."

Bush was then at the height of his popularity, of course, and his standing as an exceptionally good friend to Israel was confirmed when he made it clear he believed Israel had every right to defend itself as it saw fit during the terror war launched against the Jewish state by the Palestinians, and when he refused to surrender to the siren song of the Europeans and his own State Department on the matter of forcing an Israel-Palestinian peace deal in 2002. By May 2003, Virginia Representative Eric Cantor, the only Jewish Republican in the House, told *Business Week* that "The Jewish community is interested in strong U.S.-Israeli relations, and as they see those relations flourish, they've shown their support" for Republicans. Early in the summer of 2004, Bush campaign chairman Marc Racicot said he expected the president to receive more than 30 percent of the Jewish vote.

THE EXCEEDINGLY clever Democratic response was not to claim that Bush was no friend of Israel's but rather to offer praise of his stalwart support for the Jewish state. In October 2004, the vet-

eran diplomat Richard Holbrooke, an adviser to the Kerry campaign, told a group of Jewish activists that Bush's "support for Israel is, in my mind, unquestionable." Kerry himself took pains to retract his earlier opposition to the construction of the security barrier separating Israel from the West Bank: "President Bush," the Democratic candidate said, "is rightly discussing with Israel the exact route of the fence to minimize the hardship it causes innocent Palestinians."

In the end, Kerry did just fine with Jews, receiving 74 to 77 percent of their vote. In contrast, Bush's "unquestionable" support for Israel did not translate into the huge increase in votes his campaign had expected to garner. True, he did more than double his percentage of the Jewish vote from 2000, when Jewish voters were somewhat wary of the son of the president who had suspended Israel's loan guarantees, and when they could also vote for a ticket with a Jewish vice-presidential candidate—but his final tally was considered a profound disappointment by Jewish Republicans and was a great source of relief to Democrats.

Still, hope sprang eternal, albeit on a smaller scale, in the midterm election of 2006. Across the country, Republican candidates were trying to woo the Jewish vote by arguing that the Democratic party was less supportive of Israel than the GOP. The Republican Jewish Coalition was pushing this message hard, trumpeting poll data that have consistently shown Democratic voters to be more critical of and less favorably oriented toward Israel. In particular, Republicans tried to make Israel a salient issue in the Senate race in Pennsylvania. In the run-up to the election, the incumbent Republican Senator Rick Santorum—one of Israel's most vocal supporters on Capitol Hill—had emphasized his pro-Israel record in the hope that this would help him in Philadelphia and Pittsburgh. But not even the large donations (by some estimates more than \$2 million) Santorum received from pro-Israel sources could turn the tide. According to exit polls, only one out of five Pennsylvania Jews voted for the Republican. Santorum was simply unable to distinguish himself from his opponent, Bob Casey, Jr., who claimed to be an equally good friend to the Jewish state. In a conscious echo of Kerry in 2004, Casey praised Bush's pro-Israel stance, and even promised he would be as strong a backer of Israel as Santorum had been.

THE FACT that Republicans have repeatedly been unable to play the Israel card is not solely due to the fact that Israel is no longer the central issue on the Jewish-American agenda. In the 2008

American Jewish Committee poll, a large majority of Jews still claimed that they felt "very close" (29 percent) or "fairly close" (38 percent) to Israel. The inescapable conclusion is that if a candidate claims to be a friend of Israel, the claim will be accepted and believed, so long as his positions on other issues are deemed acceptable. And given the extent to which the bar has been lowered, all one has to do to qualify as "pro-Israel" is not actively agitate for the country's demise.

Obama himself made this point implicitly when he declared that

there is a strain within the pro-Israel community that says, "unless you adopt an unwavering pro-Likud approach to Israel, that you're anti-Israel," and that can't be the measure of our friendship with Israel.

It was an odd choice of words—Likud has not been Israel's governing party for more than three years—but what Obama clearly meant was that an American politician should not have to express fealty to the most hard-line ideas relating to Israel's security to be considered a supporter of Israel's.

There is, and always has been, a basic tactical reason for Jews to feel more comfortable with the presidential candidate who is most forthright about Israel's need to defend itself. Presidents spend their time in office receiving a constant stream of advice on the Middle East, advice that inevitably centers on the notion that Israel must bend or be compelled to bend if the United States is to achieve its aims. Israel's security will therefore always be at some risk; a President with a history of understanding the unparalleled difficulties of Israel's strategic position would presumably be less inclined to intensify that risk.

But as the results of the 2008 election show, this tactical analysis does not hold sway in the American Jewish community. Jewish voters are now convinced that "support" can come in vastly different, yet still legitimate, forms. Jonathan Rynhold of Bar-Ilan University calls this phenomenon "pluralistic solidarity":

American Jewry no longer expresses its solidarity with Israel by automatically supporting the political line of the Israeli government of the day, as was largely the case until the late 1980's. Instead, it expresses solidarity in a more pluralistic manner, by supporting the advancement of various ideological agendas, Right and Left, Orthodox and non-Orthodox, each of which seeks to cast Israel in the image desired by its American Jewish proponents.

Expressing vague support for Israel's "existence," "security," or "special relationships," while avoiding harsh criticism of the country, is generally enough for a politician to pass the test. The growing cacophony of Jewish organizations attacking and defending the record of candidates on Israel—be it J Street on the Left, or the Zionist Organization of America on the Right—further encourages voters to shrug with indifference.

But even when details do concern Jewish voters, a Democratic politician can easily blur the issue. In the case of Iran, for instance, Obama obtained the advantage by convincing many voters that the difference between his and McCain's approach was merely a disagreement about which means to take to the same end. The way Obama spun it, both candidates wanted to stop Iran; it was just that McCain supposedly wanted to do it by force, while Obama wanted to rely on diplomacy. And in such a debate, Obama could, and did, win easily with Jews.

THE QUESTION now is whether Republicans have any hope of winning the Jewish vote at any point in the future. The answer is: Perhaps. In a generation. If certain demographic trends hold firm. In November, the Orthodox Union compiled a list of precincts "with high-concentrations of Orthodox Jewish voters," from which it was clear that the Orthodox tend to vote Republican in much higher numbers than the Jewish community over-

all. Indeed, it is even possible that the Orthodox constitute a majority of the Jews who vote Republican. Given that the Orthodox are younger than the Jewish average, and are proportionally growing much faster, over time one might expect the share of Jews who vote Republican to increase.

This is not to say that the efforts of politically conservative Jews and Jewish organizations to win support for candidates on the Right are of no value. There is a danger, in fact, that if such efforts decline in intensity, Democrats will be freed to take Jewish support entirely for granted whatever the positions they take on Israel and no matter what risky policies they are willing to experiment with that place Israel in peril. Following the Obama landslide among Jews, Republican activists such as Matthew Brooks, the executive director of the Republican Jewish Coalition, argued with some justification that by pressuring Obama on Israel-related issues, his group and others had forced Obama's hand, leading the Democratic nominee to speak full-throatedly on Israel's behalf and put himself on record before taking the Oval Office as a President who has committed himself to ensuring Israel's safety at a uniquely perilous moment.

For this reason, Republicans who care about Israel have a powerful incentive to continue to seek Jewish support for Republican candidates, even though the result for the foreseeable future is likely to be more flirtation, more rejection, and more heartbreak.