

# They're Doing the J Street Jive

**A new liberal Jewish lobbying group attempts to gull Washington into believing that pressure on Israel is the best form of friendship.**

By Noah Pollak

**I**N DECEMBER 2008, two weeks before Hamas abandoned the six-month lull in its rocket war against Israel, the founder and executive director of the new lobbying group J Street delivered a message via YouTube to potential supporters. Appearing in a crisply pressed pale blue button-down, Jeremy Ben-Ami offered a personalized explanation for why, eight months earlier, he

had launched a self-described “pro-Israel, pro-peace” organization that hoped to change the way the United States government dealt with Israel. In an earnest, confessional style, Ben-Ami explained that in past years,

I felt that I didn't have a voice in American politics when it came to Israel and the Middle East. . . . When I came back [from living in Israel in the late 1990's] and I told people that I favored a Palestinian state, that I was a supporter of peace, and in recent years when I've

---

NOAH POLLAK, *a new contributor, is a graduate student at Yale who writes regularly for COMMENTARY's blog, contentions.*

said that I don't think it makes sense for us to militarily attack Iran, I was told that I was insufficiently pro-Israel. Well, I'll tell you, I find that unacceptable. I don't find it Jewish. I don't find it American to not allow people to express alternative opinions, and I certainly don't find it to be pro-Israel. . . . I've decided that I had to speak out.

The group Ben-Ami founded seeks to be the vehicle for this protest. It has sought to challenge the ascendancy of the American Israel Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC), the hub of the legendary "Israel Lobby" in Washington that critics of strong American support for Israel see as a key obstacle to their goal of Middle East peace. While J Street is a tiny operation that cannot match AIPAC in terms of influence and money, in its first year of operation it has gained an inordinate amount of largely favorable press coverage.

The inauguration of a President whom J Street openly backed during the campaign has encouraged the group's supporters to embrace the conceit that they, and not more established groups, will be more in tune with American foreign policy in the future. As such, its rise must be seen as a development whose impact may well affect the future of pro-Israel forces in this country.

Groups allied with J Street, such as Americans for Peace Now, Brit Tzedek v'Shalom, and even the well-funded Israel Policy Forum, have all previously jostled with the pro-Israel establishment. But they merely fashioned themselves as openly dovish in policy. J Street's goals are even more ambitious. It seeks to make its advocacy mainstream by re-branding policies that had been thought to be discredited by the demise of the Oslo Accords as moderate, thus effectively labeling the Jewish mainstream as right-wing and self-destructive.

The first step in this re-branding process is the fastidious attachment of the phrase "pro-Israel" to describe almost every statement that J Street makes. Professions of deep concern for Israeli security can be found in virtually all the group's statements, despite J Street's rejection of the security consensus of the Israeli government on most matters. Its slogan is "The New Address for Middle East Peace and Security," and its mission statement says:

J Street represents Americans, primarily but not exclusively Jewish, who support Israel and its desire for security as the Jewish homeland, as well as the right of the Palestinians to a sovereign state of their own—two states liv-

ing side-by-side in peace and security. J Street supports diplomatic solutions over military ones, including in Iran; multilateral over unilateral approaches to conflict resolution; and dialogue over confrontation with a wide range of countries and actors when conflicts do arise.

Unlike other advocacy organizations, J Street intends to deliver its message directly into the political arena by forming a political-action committee that endorses candidates and awards money to campaigns. Other lobbies like AIPAC seek to influence policymakers quietly. J Street models itself on a Moveon.org-style of activism, cultivating notoriety and, it hopes, political power from the involvement of a cast of bloggers, journalists, and activists who frequently promote and defend J Street on popular liberal websites. Ben-Ami served as national policy director of Howard Dean's 2004 presidential campaign, and found its "people-powered" model a perfect fit for an organization with J Street's agenda:

The revolution afoot in 21st-century American politics enables the silent majority of American Jews to do what hasn't been done before—namely to mobilize a broad and less organized base of moderates in a politically meaningful way. Today, for the first time, technology enables a large number of small political donors to challenge—and topple—the status quo.

The status quo that Ben-Ami and his followers seek to topple is, roughly speaking, the character of the U.S.-Israeli alliance that has prevailed since the Six Day War. Ben-Ami, assisted by a British-Israeli named Daniel Levy (who worked for the leftist Israeli politician Yossi Beilin before arriving at the New America Foundation in Washington), believes that Israeli political decisions are largely responsible for Arab terrorism and hatred, and that the U.S. has played the role of enabler of this self-destructive state of affairs. In an interview with *Salon's* Gary Kamiya during J Street's launch, Ben-Ami explained his theory of Palestinian terrorism:

We're not doing a very good job at creating a secure home by conducting ourselves in this manner towards another people that are a minority, and that are powerless, and treating them in a way that forces them essentially to become terrorists, and leads to us being again in danger.

Levy has articulated a similar view. Writing in the *Guardian*, Richard Silverstein, an American writer and blogger whose work focuses on condemning Israel, recounted a dinner in Seattle at which Levy

emphasised that while Israelis realised that they were primarily responsible for resolving the conflict, they also needed a good swift kick in the rear from an energised American Jewish community and U.S. president. An Israeli prime minister like Ehud Olmert might welcome pressure coming from America to adopt a more forthcoming approach to the idea of compromise. He could then turn around to the Liebermans (Avigdor, not Joe) on his right and say: “If you want to buck our American friends, be my guest. But where will you turn once you do and they’ve abandoned you?” Levy believes that this narrative will resonate in Israeli political circles.

In order to transform relations between the U.S. and Israel, J Street intends to provide political cover for an American campaign to pressure the Israeli government into making more concessions for the sake of what it believes will be peace. In his op-eds and speeches, Ben-Ami frequently cites his family’s history in Israel as evidence of the depth of his commitment to the Jewish state, but he nonetheless considers the sovereign nation incapable of making healthy decisions for itself. As he told a *Newsweek* interviewer,

[I]t’s time [for the United States] to act like the big brother or the parent and to say “enough is enough and we’re going to take the car keys if you don’t stop driving drunk.” We’re not talking about simply business as usual. There’s got to be some sort of intervention here where the U.S. says to Israel the time has come to finally do something. . . . And within Israel, the Israeli prime minister may have a tough time because of their domestic politics fulfilling their commitments. It’s going to be a lot easier if they say to their coalition partners and to the rest of the government, “I have to do this because the president of the United States is telling me to do it.”

And what J Street hopes the President of the United States will tell Israel to do is immediately commence peace talks with Syria and Hamas, and support the inclusion of Hamas in a Palestinian unity government. The group also advocates for Israel’s adoption

of—that is, for the U.S. government to force Israel to adopt—the Arab Peace Initiative. Originally proposed by Saudi Arabia at the 2002 Arab League summit, the Initiative would require Israel to evacuate the West Bank, give the Golan Heights to Syria, and admit unspecified thousands of Palestinians currently living in Arab countries into Israel. In exchange, Israel would receive diplomatic recognition from the current Arab holdouts. Ben-Ami is so taken with the plan that he declared Israel would be committing “national suicide” if it did not accept it.

As for the Iranian nuclear program, something that most of Israel’s political parties from right to left see as a source of existential national peril, the group’s spokesmen are primarily concerned with making a case against the use of force to stop Iran even in the event that diplomatic efforts fail. Though acknowledging that a nuclear Iran is a real threat, Ben-Ami has made it clear that he believes the larger danger comes from the bellicose threats emanating from pro-Israel groups.

**J**EREMY BEN-AMI’S CREATION is best understood not as a source of foreign-policy coherence, but as an example of the new liberal politics in America. Over the past decade, a narrative was adopted among liberals to explain their political defeats. This narrative holds that liberals were repeatedly bested by conservatives because of their unwillingness to employ the same kind of hardball tactics that conservatives used against them. It started with the inability to protect Bill Clinton from impeachment—this is when Moveon.org was founded—and escalated in the years that followed. Liberals believed George W. Bush stole the 2000 presidential election, that the neoconservatives lied America into war in Iraq, that conservatives bulldozed critics of their war on terror tactics by questioning the patriotism of dissenters, and that the Right ensured Bush’s re-election by making charges they believed to be scurrilous about John Kerry’s Vietnam-era military experience as a captain of a swift boat. The “swiftboating” of Kerry proved to be the watershed moment that convinced the Left that the conservative way of political warfare was not just dishonest and insulting, but actually depended for its success on the refusal of liberals to fight back.

From this reading of a decade of political defeats, liberals extracted several lessons: First, that their misfortune was a result of liberal purity, or acquiescence to dirty tricks; second, that these tricks must be countered by equivalent tactics; and most important, that liberalism and liberals themselves were not to blame for their political misfortune. Instead, the problem was

how liberals talked about the issues, how they framed the debate, and what they permitted their rivals to say about them. A final derivation of this view of American politics becomes possible: Victory can be achieved—and the re-framing of the issues accomplished—if you create large, energetic factions that can be quickly mobilized over the Internet.

During the 2008 presidential campaign, the liberal rhetoric of political victimhood was at its high-water mark, and it encouraged an ethos of defiance: In the face of an onslaught of character assassination and delegitimization from conservatives, liberals told themselves, it was vital to remain unintimidated and to fight. This is where Jeremy Ben-Ami's YouTube speech came in, which sought to rouse the Internet masses in order that liberals would no longer be silenced.

Those who join J Street, of course, may view themselves as bravely raising their voices in a political environment that is controlled by conservatives to silence, ridicule, and excommunicate heretics. If this sounds like a gross exaggeration, simply listen to how J Street officials and supporters talk about the bravery required merely to be publicly "pro-peace" in contemporary America. Here is Ben-Ami, feeling the pea of pro-Israel oppression under 40 mattresses, in the *Forward*:

Somehow, for American politicians or activists to express opposition to settlement expansion—or support for active American diplomacy, dialogue with Syria or engagement with Iran—has become subversive and radical, inviting vile, hateful emails and a place on public lists of Israel-haters and antisemites. For the particularly unlucky, it leads to public, personal attacks on one's family and heritage.

Elsewhere, Ben-Ami has said that when Israel goes to war, "our side gets cowed into silence" because the discourse on Israel is controlled by "a small number of large donors essentially holding the [Jewish] community hostage." Ezra Klein, a blogger at the liberal *American Prospect* who backs J Street, declared that those who "dishonor" the ideals of human rights are the "voices [that] control the conversation" about Israel. "Even more to the point," Klein intoned, this "is no time for silence."

In their imaginations, the dark night of authoritarian suppression may always be descending on peace

activists in America, but it is apparently so unreliable in arriving that J Street officials and their supporters are able to complain about being intimidated and silenced on the pages of major American newspapers and magazines and on dozens of highly trafficked websites. (Former President Jimmy Carter and *Israel Lobby* authors Stephen Walt and John Mearsheimer have suffered exactly such oppression as their books sell briskly and their appearances in the media multiply.) Of course, views identical to J Street's are expressed regularly in think tanks, on the op-ed pages of almost every American newspaper, by academics and policymakers, by street picketers, and by former Secretaries of State, Presidents, and ambassadors.

---

## Gaza would become J Street's first real-world test of the popularity of its ideas. On the first day of the operation, J Street posted a statement on its website calling for an immediate cease fire.

---

Yet the delusions of oppression persist. Here is *Salon's* Kamiya, lauding the creation of J Street and engaging in just such an absurdity: "Nothing is more urgently needed in our political discourse than for the taboo against speaking forthrightly about Israel to be overthrown." The website on which these words were published garners 50 million page-views per month. What Kamiya really means is that he wishes people who challenge his opinions about Israel would stop doing so.

**O**PERATION CAST LEAD, which commenced on December 27, 2008, would become J Street's first real-world test of the popularity of its ideas. On the first day of the operation inside Gaza, J Street posted a statement on its website calling for an immediate cease fire and making the remarkably blasé claim that "only diplomacy and negotiations can end the rockets and terror." A few days into the conflict, the group released a statement that combined abject moral equivalence, heroic self-flagellation, and anguished false introspection. "As friends of Israel, we felt immediate pressure from friends and family to pick a side," the statement said. "Couldn't we see who's right and who's wrong?" The monthly War and Peace poll conducted by Tel Aviv University found that 94 percent of Israeli Jews had no difficulty either picking a side or determining who was right and who was wrong. Public opinion was so uniformly in favor of the

operation that even the ultra-dovish Meretz party—for which Daniel Levy once worked, and which typically earns only about 5 percent of the vote in Israeli elections—supported the campaign.

For J Street, the opening days of Cast Lead were not just a time to declare an inability to make moral distinctions between Hamas and Israel, or aggression and self-defense. Cast Lead also provided an opportunity to accuse the 94 percent of Israeli Jews who supported the operation of insanity:

At this moment of extreme crisis, we're showing that, among those who care about Israel and its security, there is a constituency for sanity and moderation. There are many who recognize elements of truth on both sides of this gaping divide. . . . We recognize that neither Israelis nor Palestinians have a monopoly on right or wrong. While there is nothing "right" in raining rockets on Israeli families or dispatching suicide bombers, there is nothing "right" in punishing a million and a half already-suffering Gazans for the actions of the extremists among them.

This was too much for even Rabbi Eric Yoffie, the president of the Union for Reform Judaism and a self-proclaimed American dove. Writing in the *Forward*, he leveled both barrels at J Street:

It is not easy for me to write these words. I welcomed the founding of J Street and know many of those involved in its leadership. . . . [J Street] could find no moral difference between the actions of Hamas and other Palestinian militants, who have launched more than 5,000 rockets and mortar shells at Israeli civilians in the past three years, and the long-delayed response of Israel, which finally lost patience and responded to the pleas of its battered citizens in the south. . . . [J Street's] words are deeply distressing because they are morally deficient, profoundly out of touch with Jewish sentiment and also appallingly naïve.

Yoffie's bracing op-ed ricocheted around the blogosphere and provoked further backlash. Yet J Street's spokesmen continued to appear as if they were taking pains to irritate and condescend to anyone who did not share their faith in the benefit to Israel of returning to a state of war in which only Hamas was permitted to fight.

"We believe that *real friends of Israel* recognize

that escalating the conflict will prove counterproductive," Ben-Ami sneered. J Street's online director said the group "wants to demonstrate that, among those who care about Israel and its security, there is a constituency for *sanity and moderation*." This steady stream of commentary was so arrogant and tone-deaf that even J Street's allies criticized the group. As reported by the *Forward's* Nathan Guttman, "officials from some of the other dovish groups voiced fury with Ben-Ami. 'He should have his head handed to him,' one said, fuming." Ami Eden, the editor of the Jewish Telegraphic Agency, cut to the heart of the matter in a post on his blog:

For those keeping score, according to J Street officials, if you support Israel's current course of action, you are: (1) not a real friend of Israel, (2) do not support sanity and moderation, (3) don't discern nuances, (4) don't feel compassion for dead and wounded Palestinians, and (5) might be a latent racist.

Yet there was even more damage done to J Street during Cast Lead. Its efforts to influence congressional resolutions expressing support for Israel were roundly ignored, especially by the group's most prominent liberal endorsees. In the early days of J Street, M.J. Rosenberg, the policy director of the Israel Policy Forum, a group that Rosenberg says works "in parallel" with J Street, speculated that Jewish Democrats such as Barney Frank would become more critical of Israel if a liberal Jewish group existed to provide them moral and financial support. "They hear from the right-wing AIPAC crowd on this issue, but the people on the left talk to them about other issues," Rosenberg said. "They don't talk to them about this one. So I think all it takes is them hearing that this is what their constituents want, and I think that they will moderate their positions."

Rosenberg thought wrong. Barney Frank defended Cast Lead vigorously, saying that it is "a terrible thing to have happen but I think Americans ought to think about this, frankly, as analogous to what we did in Afghanistan." Other J Street endorsees in the House of Representatives, such as Adam Schiff of California, Robert Wexler of Florida, and Charles Rangel of New York, made similar pronouncements.

J Street aimed an e-mail and telephone campaign at the House and Senate in the hopes of introducing "more nuanced" language into the Gaza resolution—that is, J Street wanted Congress to demand an immediate Israeli cease-fire regardless of whether Hamas continued to fire rockets. This campaign was

not given the slightest consideration, and the final congressional resolutions reiterated the position of the Israeli and American governments and the mainstream American pro-Israel groups. No immediate cease fire was mentioned; the House called for “a durable and sustainable cease fire in Gaza, as soon as possible, that prevents Hamas from retaining or rebuilding its terrorist infrastructure.” After the resolutions were passed, J Street advertised its inability to influence Congress as a victory. The group’s website proclaimed: “We were pleased to see language in the congressional resolutions that called for an immediate cease fire.” No such language exists.

Indeed, J Street’s congressional friends were simply echoing the opinions of most American Jews with regard to the fighting in Gaza. A survey of American Jewry conducted in the week following the end of the fighting in January showed that 79 percent of the respondents thought Israel’s response to Hamas rocket fire was “appropriate,” and not “excessive.”

**J** STREET has developed a useful and forward-looking mechanism for spreading its message, but it faces a far graver problem: the message it uses the Internet to send is ancient and discredited. J Street, like its sister organizations, is a captive of the post-Oslo malaise that afflicts the Zionist Left. In Israel itself, the Left has already moved on to the idea of unilateral withdrawal from territories in which Palestinians constitute a majority, and the few stubborn holdouts, such as Yossi Beilin—who just retired from politics and who was Daniel Levy’s mentor—still attempting to live the Oslo dream are finding themselves facing ever-dwindling electoral prospects.

Beilinitism now has a central imperative, which is to absolve itself of blame for the failure of Oslo and the ensuing disaster of terrorism that it spawned in the Second Intifada. To do this, the Beilinites need to believe that the Palestinian “no” at Camp David in 2000—when Yasir Arafat turned down a peace deal offered by then-prime minister Ehud Barak that would have given him an independent state comprising almost all of the West Bank, Gaza, and part of Jerusalem—never happened. Fittingly, the major salesman of this claim, Clinton administration staffer Robert Malley, is a member of J Street’s advisory council.

This is the same magic trick that Israel’s New Historians have already attempted with the “three no’s” at Khartoum in 1967, when the Arab states vowed

never to negotiate with, recognize, or make peace with Israel following the Six Day War. Daniel Levy offered a useful précis of the New Historian view by characterizing the “three no’s” as just an “opening position” on negotiations with Israel, not the flat denial of the possibility of negotiations that the Arab nations themselves said it was.

Both the “three no’s” and the Second Intifada provide stark proof of the unwillingness of Israel’s foes to make even a compromise favorable to them if the price is acknowledgment of the Jewish state’s legitimacy and permanence. This is a crucial point, because if observers can convince themselves and others that it was Israel, and not the Arabs, who

---

**They see the situation as one created by conspirators—the mainstream pro-Israel community, abetted in the last eight years by the Bush administration—who are causing all the problems.**

---

deliberately chose to avoid peace, the conclusion follows that the Palestinians still genuinely want peace and that the continuing violence is the fault of Israel—and, by extension, of the American cheering section that J Street wishes to knock off of its preeminent perch. The Beilinites don’t believe Israel is simply evil, as so many on the left do, because they retain some belief in the justice of Zionism. Instead, they need to see the situation as one created by conspirators—the mainstream pro-Israel community, abetted in the last eight years by the Bush administration—who are causing all the problems and standing in the way of a resolution of the Middle East conflict. This conceit contains a healthy dose of American Jewish arrogance and no small degree of contempt for Israelis, who are considered too childish and provincial to understand their own situation or solve their own problems.

J Street’s standard-bearers are gathered from the fringes of the policy, journalism, and activist communities, and the group evinces no qualms about making common cause with anti-Zionists such as Avram Burg, the onetime Israeli politician, and the journalist Bernard Avishai, both of whom argue that Israel’s existence as a specifically Jewish state is the source of its problems. “Obama’s Jews,” an essay by Avishai published in *Harper’s* magazine last fall, sought to prove that the overwhelming support of Jewish voters for Obama in the presidential election proved

that most Jews were as critical of Israel as J Street, and therefore that J Street's view, and not AIPAC's, was the new mainstream. But, as the reaction to the fighting in Gaza proved, this was false. Jews voted for Obama not because they saw him, as perhaps some on the left did, as being less likely to support Israel, but because they were convinced by his year-long effort to prove he was reliable on the issue.

**Y**ET J STREET still believes the presidential transition will vindicate the hopes of the group's founders, and it may be on to something. It is possible that the Obama administration will seek, as the Bush administration did in its final two years in office, to manufacture something that will resemble "progress" toward peace to bolster its reputation in the Arab world. Obama's willingness to go further to mollify Muslim sensibilities than his predecessor and to cooperate more closely with Europe may make diplomatic difficulties with Israel inevitable.

Recent history has shown that the only actions seen by Washington's peace processors, such as Obama's new Middle East envoy George Mitchell, as "progress" are Israeli concessions. Should a new Israeli government seek to back away from the promises about territorial withdrawals made during the course of the post-Annapolis summit talk by Prime Minister Ehud Olmert, or show unwillingness to contemplate new "confidence building" measures aimed at propping up Obama's credibility with the Arab world, complications may ensue.

It is in just such a context that J Street may at-

tempt to insinuate itself more deeply into the foreign-policy debate. While it found itself isolated in the heat of an active war, its ability to position itself as a supporter of a potential Obama push for peace during a protracted diplomatic tangle may work to its advantage. In such a scenario, the president's popularity and the fatigue that decades of having to stand up for Israel's right of self-defense has engendered among American Jews may give new life to a group that can brand itself as being more "pro-peace" than those that see their primary obligation as backing the judgments of the Jewish state's democratically elected government. It is only under these circumstances that we will see whether J Street's hope to gain ground as the "anti-AIPAC" will prove as quixotic as it appeared to be during the Gaza fighting.

Still, the primary obstacle to J Street's ambition of displacing AIPAC will continue to be its willingness to disparage acts of Israeli self-defense that are supported by overwhelming majorities of American and Israeli Jews. Groups and individuals that do so can gain, as J Street has done, the attention of media in search of Jewish voices that will provide cover for attacks on Israel. Yet it is still doubtful that innovative organizational tactics and a reawakened sense of liberal grievance can make support for engagement with Hamas and acquiescence to a nuclear Iran popular. Because its conception of Israel, the Palestinians, and the obligations of American power are driven by ideological fantasy, J Street will likely remain, like the Oslo Accords, a permanently thwarted ambition, but at least one with a large email list. 🍷