



Jerusalem 6:29; Toronto 7:43

Commentary...

Time for a Genuine Mandate

By Evelyn Gordon

Last week's Likud convention vote against allowing Labor to join the government sparked vicious attacks from all sides.

Prime Minister Ariel Sharon accused his opponents of being "extremist, rebellious, and irresponsible," declaring that if the Likud refuses to support his policies itself, "there is no choice but to expand the coalition." Haaretz columnist Yoel Marcus termed the vote "an undemocratic and immoral act, and in my view also flagrantly unconstitutional" because it represented "an attempt to foist on Sharon a policy that is the opposite of that for which the majority of the nation elected him."

The Jerusalem Post questioned the vote's legitimacy and accused the convention of "consigning itself to irrelevance" by "deepen[ing] the rift between the party and its most popular leader." The Likud, declaimed the Post's editorial, "is nothing without a body, and that body consists of Sharon and the general public who last year gave him one of the most resounding mandates in Israel's history."

All of these comments, and numerous others in similar vein, share a common premise: that the convention had no right to disobey Sharon's wishes. One can certainly understand why Sharon finds this view convenient. But it is deeply worrying when two respected newspapers join him in demanding that the convention flout the fundamental principle of democracy: respect for the will of the voters.

Sharon, as readers may remember, won his landslide victory last year by running against unilateral withdrawal from Gaza, which was the flagship policy of his rival, Labor's Amram Mitzna. A year later, Sharon changed his mind and began advocating a unilateral pullout himself. When his party refused to back this turnabout, Sharon decided to bring Labor into the government to supply the needed votes instead. It was that move that the Likud convention vetoed last Wednesday.

Thus to say, as Marcus did, that the vote was "an attempt to foist on Sharon a policy that is the opposite of that for which the majority of the nation elected him" requires either unmitigated dishonesty or total amnesia. Sharon was elected to prevent a unilateral withdrawal – and to call the convention "undemocratic and immoral" for refusing to help him break this promise by bringing in Labor is positively Orwellian.

But the doublespeak goes even deeper – because the Likud convention is not elected to represent the public as a whole; it is supposed to represent the Likud's 200,000 members. And three months ago, those members overwhelmingly rejected Sharon's disengagement plan in a referendum. Thus in refusing to help Sharon implement the plan, the convention honored its own electorate's explicit wishes. And that is what Marcus terms "undemocratic and immoral"!

The Post's view is expressed in more moderate language. Beyond the bizarre accusation of "deepen[ing] the rift" – a rift that springs not from any action taken by the convention but from Sharon's contemptuous disregard for Likud members' views – it merely accuses the convention of "consigning itself to irrelevance" by daring to put the wishes of its electorate before those of its leader. But the common term for preferring the whim of the leader to the will of the people is not "relevance," it is "totalitarianism."

Like Marcus, the Post justifies its anti-democratic position by citing Sharon's popularity and the "resounding mandate" that he won in the last election. Yet many people vote for a policy rather than a person and would not choose to follow the person should he abandon that policy. Nothing demonstrates this better than the Likud referendum: The same 200,000 people who overwhelmingly elected Sharon as their prime ministerial candidate in the Likud primary refused to back him 18 months later when he sought their approval of his policy U-turn.

ISRAEL NEWS

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Finally, Marcus and the Post play their trump card: the public opinion polls showing that a majority of the country favors disengagement. Polls, however, are a notoriously poor predictor of reality, as Sharon learned to his cost this spring. It was the polls showing overwhelming support for disengagement among Likud members that persuaded him to call the May referendum – only to discover that people often vote differently in real

life, after giving an issue serious thought, than they do in off-the-cuff responses to pollsters. Thus the convention behaved both reasonably and responsibly in preferring the result of two actual votes – the 2003 national elections and the Likud referendum – to mere public opinion polls.

Certainly, there are many reasons for disliking the Likud convention and for arguing that its choke hold on the party, which stems from its selection of the Likud's Knesset slate, must be ended. Directly elected MKs, who would be responsible to their voters rather than to 3,000 party hacks, would almost certainly serve the country better – if only because they would not need to spend their every waking moment, as graphically described in a Haaretz report last week, currying favor with these hacks by attending every wedding, bar-mitzva, or other affair sponsored by every convention member's every relative instead of attending to their legislative duties.

But that does not change the fact that last week, the convention honorably fulfilled its democratic duty. It told Sharon that it would not allow him to flout the will of party members, as expressed through a referendum, or of party voters, as expressed in the last election, unless and until he can prove that these electorates have changed their mind.

Instead of railing at the convention for doing its job, the pundits would serve democracy far better by pressuring Sharon to do his job: to finally offer the country a serious explanation of the reasons for his policy about-face – something he has hitherto refused to do, preferring to demand that the voters trust him blindly – and then to seek a genuine mandate for this program through either elections or a national referendum. (Jerusalem Post Aug 24)

Where is Appendix X? By Ze'ev Schiff

The authors of the Geneva Initiative recently got together in Jordan. At first, they wanted to hold the meeting in Jericho, but the Israeli security authorities would not allow the Palestinians from the territories to come to Jericho.

The idea of moving the meeting to Jordan did not meet with much enthusiasm, because Jordan has become unsafe for Israelis – as evidenced by the Jordanian police officer who shot at four Israelis at the Allenby Bridge crossing a few weeks ago. The four, among whom was a high-ranking official of the Defense Ministry, came to Jordan following an invitation from the American University and at the encouragement of the Jordanian government. Some of the Israelis were willing to testify at the police officer's trial, but the Jordanian press reported that he was given a perfunctory trial on minor and false charges.

In any case, after the Jericho option was called off, the authors of the Geneva document left for Jordan on a well-secured bus. Those that expected the meeting in Jordan to provide an opportunity to finally complete the Geneva document were in for a disappointment. Few are aware that this document, which made a great impact, is incomplete and missing a very important section.

It has been almost a year since the document was made public in the media in October 2003. A month later, hundreds of thousands of copies were distributed to the public. A careful reading of the initiative reveals that in about 30 different places, it notes that details of that particular section will appear in Appendix X.

One might imagine that mere technical details are involved. But an examination of the missing details that are supposed to appear in Appendix X shows that they are very fundamental ones. They include what the

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authority of the Palestinian state will be vis-a-vis the settlements that will remain in its territory; what real estate Israel will be required to leave in the settlements; how the Palestinian side will manage its side in the corridor between the Gaza Strip and the West Bank; which weapons the Palestinian security forces will be permitted to have in the context of the agreement with Israel (on the other hand, the document contains nothing about the confiscation of illegal weapons); how the border between the two countries will be marked; the size, composition and structure of the recommended international force and how its commander will be appointed; and how the observers that will be stationed according to the proposal in the areas near the border will be deployed.

Appendix X is supposed to stipulate the location of the two Israeli warning stations that will remain in Palestinian territory, and the structure of the Israeli force that will man the station. Additionally, it should contain a timetable for the evacuation of Israel from the territories.

Even details related to air force training runs in Palestinian airspace are missing, or the manner in which the broadcasting space surrounding Israel and the Palestinians will be divided.

Because of the absence of Appendix X, the commitments of both sides regarding Jerusalem are missing - for example, regarding the Old City, where there will be a special police force, or how the interreligious advisory board will act.

The preparation of the comprehensive appendix can of course be postponed indefinitely, but that will leave the Geneva Initiative with only the headlines. As long as the extremely important appendix, which includes sensitive issues over which there are conflicting opinions, remains incomplete, people who in principle support the Geneva Initiative are having difficulty making their final decision about it.

While the 29 Israelis that authored the document have managed to form subcommittees to formulate Appendix X, the 22 Palestinians have not. They are either putting it off, or are unable to form their committee.

Perhaps they are afraid of Yasser Arafat, who made a defiant speech at the very time tens of thousands gathered in Rabin Square to express support for the initiative. "No one in the world has the right to relinquish the right of the refugees to return to their homeland," Arafat said in that speech. "There will be no concession and no compromise."

Just the opposite of what the Geneva Initiative says. (Haaretz Aug 25)

Behind Every Rocket is a Story By Michael Freund

Glancing at the headlines, it is easy to think that all is quiet in Israel these days. With an occasional exception, there are hardly any more terrorist attacks grabbing the headlines, and daily life seems to be returning to normal.

Sure, every once in a while we hear something about a few mortar rounds being fired at Jews in Gaza, or about an attempted stabbing or two in Jerusalem. But for the most part, life in the Holy Land appears to be back on track.

Nothing, however, could be further from the truth.

Appearances notwithstanding, the Palestinian war against Israel continues, and it would be foolish to think otherwise.

Take, for example, the events of August 18, when Palestinian terrorists in Gaza launched a couple of Kassam rockets at the Jewish community of Neve Dekalim. The incident was duly reported, and then quickly forgotten, just another passing item on the media's radar screen.

But behind every rocket, there is a story. And in this case, it proved to be a painful, and tragic one.

August 18 was a quiet Wednesday afternoon, and Donel Benjamin was sitting at home, working on his computer, when the rocket struck.

Donel, a 25-year old who made aliyah from India in 1997, is a member of the Bnei Menashe, a group claiming descent from a lost tribe of Israel. He works in Neve Dekalim's supermarket, and decided to go home for a quick afternoon break before returning to work.

But the Palestinian projectile changed all that, when it blasted its way through the first floor of Donel's house, nearly destroying the structure and wiping out the family's belongings.

Miraculously, Donel's mother and brother, who were home at the time, were unharmed, but Donel himself was not so lucky. Shrapnel from the rocket tore its way through his flesh, causing grave damage to his legs and head. He was rushed to a hospital in Beersheba, and underwent emergency surgery, which may very well have saved his life.

Donel is now recovering from his wounds, his head wrapped in bandages. Thankfully, he remembers nothing of the attack, but complains of the pain that he still feels throughout his entire body.

His four siblings and his mother, a widow, are by his side, hoping and praying for his speedy recovery.

The local municipal council has already begun work to repair Donel's home, but the family now faces enormous obstacles, both financial and psychological, with which they must contend.

Of course, none of this was reported in the media, which incorrectly asserted that Donel was a foreign worker and that he had received "only" moderate wounds. And that is truly unfortunate, because while his current situation might be heartrending, Donel's story is in fact an inspiration.

As a member of the Bnei Menashe, Donel grew up in the far reaches of northeastern India, in the lush green hills of the state of Mizoram. There, he was raised to believe that he and the members of his tribe were descendants of Israel, the offspring of Jews who had been forced into exile many centuries ago, where they lost contact with mainstream Judaism.

Nonetheless, they continued to preserve the memory of their Jewish ancestry, and to live according to the laws of Moses as best they could, from circumcision to the Sabbath to the laws of family purity. From generation to generation, they passed down the tradition, clinging to it as best they could.

Donel, and others like him, dreamed of one day making aliyah, thereby closing a historical circle and returning to the land of their ancestors.

In the past decade, Donel and his family, along with some 800 other members of the Bnei Menashe, have made aliyah under the auspices of Amishav, the organization which I head. All of the immigrants undergo formal conversion and build new lives as Israelis and Jews in every respect. They are productive members of society, they serve in the army, support themselves, and live observant Jewish lifestyles.

But another 6,000 are still stuck in India, waiting to fulfill the dream of return. And the only impediment standing in their way is the refusal of Interior Minister Avraham Poraz to allow them to come.

For over a year, Poraz has adamantly refused to budge, citing, among other reasons, the Bnei Menashe's religious observance, and their desire to live in the territories, as things he finds objectionable.

Recently, the Sephardic Chief Rabbi of Israel, Rabbi Shlomo Amar, sent two rabbinical emissaries to India to visit the Bnei Menashe, study the community and its background, and report back to him on their findings. I accompanied the rabbis on their visit, and we have every reason to believe that the result will be favorable, and that the Bnei Menashe will at last receive the official recognition from Israel which they have sought for so long.

But in the meantime, as Donel recovers from his wounds, his countless friends and family members still in India wait impatiently, hoping they too will be given a chance to come home to Israel.

They are undeterred by the violence, nor are they dissuaded by the obstacles which Poraz puts in their path. Their goal is to rejoin the Jewish people after centuries of separation, and they are confident that this will come to pass.

So as much as the Palestinians might wish to scare the Jewish people with their rockets and their missiles, Donel and the Bnei Menashe stand as living proof that they will never succeed. Because come what may, the dream of returning to Zion lives on. (Jerusalem Post, Aug 25)

The writer serves as Director of Amishav (www.amishav.org.il), a Jerusalem-based group which reaches out and assists "lost Jews" seeking to return to the Jewish people.

UN Dollars for Terror By Arlene Kushner

Reading the material on the website for the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine (UNRWA), one gets a picture of "a relief and development agency, providing education, healthcare, social services and emergency aid..." This benevolent view of the UNRWA is the one that most people embrace.

But this vision, unfortunately, is not the reality, since this supposed humanitarian enterprise contains substantial links to terrorism that have been incontrovertibly documented. The record is clear: UNRWA policies foment terrorism, UNRWA practices allow it to flourish, and American money donated to UNRWA ends up in terrorists' hands.

In February of 2002, the Israelis arrested Ala' Muhammad Ali Hassan, a member of Tanzim (Fatah's armed faction) in Nablus. Hassan admitted he had carried out a sniper shooting from the UNRWA-run school run in the al-Ayn refugee camp near Nablus. More significantly, he reported that bombs intended for terrorist attacks were being manufactured inside the school's facilities.

Shortly thereafter, in the spring of 2002, during Operation Defensive Shield, Israel Defense Forces entered the UNRWA camps in response to horrific terrorist attacks and discovered there small-arms factories, explosive laboratories, and suicide bombing cells.?

A report made by the Fatah unit in Jenin to Marwan Barghouti, then head of the Tanzim, was picked up by the IDF during this operation. It said the Jenin refugee camp is "characterized by an exceptional presence of fighters", while it was also not surprising that the camp is known as the "suiciders' capital."

But even beyond this, there is substantial evidence of UNRWA employees' direct connection with terrorism.?

Nidal abd a-Fattah Abdallah Nazzal, an UNRWA-employed ambulance driver and a Hamas "activist" in Kalkilya, was arrested in August, 2002. He confessed to transporting weapons and explosives to terrorists in an UNRWA ambulance. Another employee, Nahd Rashid Ahmad Atallah, a senior UNRWA official in the Gaza Strip was also arrested the same month. He had used his UNRWA car to drive armed men to carry out attacks, as well as to transport a 12-kilogram explosive charge.

And as of September 11, 2003, Israel was detaining at least 16 other UNRWA staff members for various security-related matters, while the Israeli military court has already convicted at least three UNRWA employees for terrorist-associated activities such as throwing firebombs at a public bus.?

Precisely what is going on? Actually, several things at once.

A predilection for terrorism within the Palestinian Arab refugee population is not surprising, coming from a culture that condones a considerable degree of violence to begin with. As well, the Palestinians have been living in UNRWA camps for more than fifty years without final determination of their status or an opportunity to get on with their lives. Frustrated to the point of rage, they have been told that resolution of their problems will come only with their "return" to Israel, drawing them to the ideology of groups that openly condone Israel's destruction.

What also exacerbates the situation here is that UNRWA hires from within its client population. Out of 23,000 employees, all but a handful of "international" high-level administrative employees are Palestinian Arab refugees. It is from this population that UNRWA draws managers; teachers; social workers; custodial workers; clerks; and medical personnel.

There is a general rule of thumb, however, that it is not appropriate for an agency to do large scale hiring of staff among the population it serves. Certainly no other UN agency does this; the United Nations International Children's Fund and United Nations High Commission for Refugees, by design, maintain a certain distance from their client base.?

The argument is made by the UNRWA that refugees best understand the situation of other refugees and can thus best provide them with services. But a conflict of interest is almost guaranteed in a situation as professionally incestuous as this. Staff, rather than maintaining a professional objectivity, shares the passions and perceptions of the other refugees, and sometimes acts on them inappropriately .

However, it even goes beyond this. Yoni Fighel, a former military governor in the territories, has stated unequivocally that UNRWA workers are permitted to openly affiliate with terrorist-advocating radical groups: "As long as UNRWA employees are members of Fatah, Hamas, or PFLP [Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine], they are going to pursue the interests of their party within the framework of their job... Who's going to check up on them to see that they don't? UNRWA?? They are UNRWA.

So pervasive is this situation in the camps that Hamas has gained control of the UNRWA workers' union. In the Gaza Strip, the 2003 elections for union representatives saw Hamas-affiliated candidates gain substantial majorities in all union sectors, securing control of all seats in the teachers' sector. Moreover, Hamas candidates fully constitute the union's executive committee.

In Lebanon, Syria, and Jordan (all places where UNRWA operates), the UNRWA does make an effort to secure information from the respective governments on the terrorist connections or history of prospective employees. However, for political reasons, UNRWA does no vetting of prospective employees in the West Bank and Gaza. While it is the Israelis who have, and if requested, would share pertinent information, the UNRWA refuses to recognize Israel as having any jurisdiction in the territories. ? Imagine, if you can, the Palestinian Authority — which UNRWA does recognize as having jurisdiction — giving up information on terrorists. This extraordinarily perverse situation would be funny if it were not so serious.

And when it comes to the issue handling evidence of terrorism within its jurisdiction, the UNRWA stonewalls and dissembles.

Peter Hansen, Commissioner-General of UNRWA, is clearly in deep denial on the question of UNRWA-terrorist connections. In his (mandated) annual report to the UN General Assembly for July 1, 2001 —? June 30, 2002, the period that included Operation Defensive Shield, Hansen managed to avoid any mention of what was uncovered in Jenin. What makes this all the more incredible is that he alluded to damage done by Israeli soldiers to UNRWA facilities in Jenin, but did not place this damage in its context by explaining that it was collateral to Israeli pursuit of terrorists. So blatant are the report's omissions that it is possible for someone not in possession of the facts to conclude that the Israeli soldiers simply conducted themselves with arbitrary malice.

This spring, at a conference at the Van Leer Jerusalem Institute, Hansen was equally astonishing. When asked about terrorism in UNRWA camps, he drew quotation marks in the air as he said the word "terrorism," thereby delivering his message. ? It is all "made up," he explained, "to delegitimize" the

UNRWA's work. ? Then he added, "There hasn't been a single case documented.?"

When asked what this meant, he replied there has not been a single case of actions by an UNRWA employee "that would lead to conviction in a military court." A stunning answer, as it implies that UNRWA is "clean" with regard to terrorism as long as a military court can convict none of its employees of terrorist activities. It treats as irrelevant evidence of weapons factories and storage areas, terrorist training locales and places for terrorists to hide in UNRWA facilities.?

But even more pertinent is the fact that UNRWA employees have been convicted for terrorist activities in Israeli military courts. Hansen himself seemed to acknowledge this. Hesitating after making this statement, he then equivocated: "Well, there was one case.?" However, the data above makes clear that there have been not one but several cases, and they are a matter of public record.?

Nor does this represent the end of Hansen's official denials. ? The money provided via USAID comes with legal constraints. Section 301(c) of the 1961 Foreign Assistance Act, as amended, states that "all possible measures" must be taken to ensure that no US contributions are used to help refugees who have engaged in acts of terrorism, or have undergone guerrilla-type or Palestinian Liberation Army military training

In 2003, the US General Accounting Office did an on-site assessment of the UNRWA and issued a report, in which Hansen attested that: UNRWA has no evidence that would justify denying beneficiaries relief or humanitarian aid owing to terrorism.?

How could the head of the UNRWA put out such a statement?

The answer lies with the word "evidence." We are looking at a "don't ask, don't tell" situation. The UNRWA does not note terrorist convictions on refugee registration cards, does not receive (or seek out) information on terrorist related convictions of beneficiaries, and does not ask beneficiaries if they have engaged in terrorism.?

The identification of UNRWA staff with Palestinian radicalism suggests the possibility that UNRWA simply has adopted a policy of turning a blind eye. The UNRWA, however, presents another reason for looking the other way, which is also credible: There is a fear that UNRWA staff would be in danger if questions were asked or benefits cut, especially since staff is vulnerably housed in or near the camps and their families are known to terrorists.

The GAO report refers to widespread consensus regarding this vulnerability. It also indicates that the US has refrained from defining the phrase "all possible measures", which perhaps giving the UNRWA some leeway in recognition of this problem.

The UNRWA, then, by its own admission, is allowing itself to be held up by terrorists in order to continue to function. At a bare minimum (best case scenario), this means UNRWA is out of control. ? Its Deputy Commissioner-General, Karen AbuZayd, is on record as saying "[everything] is upside down. The refugees are the armed elements.?"

As matters stand, American taxpayers have solid reason for concern, for the US, via USAID, is the UNRWA's single largest donor. In addition to paying approximately one-third of the UNRWA's regular budget, America donates millions to the several emergency campaigns the UNRWA runs each year, all of which total sums in excess of \$100 million annually.??

The UNRWA may believe that paying extortion money to terrorist refugees is an acceptable price for sustaining its operations. Whether American citizens, whose tax money is involved, would agree is another issue. (FrontPage Magazine Aug 18)

What 'Friends'? Jerusalem Post Editorial

The Non-Aligned Movement foreign ministers meeting in Durban, South Africa, last week adopted by acclamation one of the nastiest-ever anti-Israeli resolutions to have come out of that anyway automatically pro-Arab forum.

Setting this resolution apart from its notorious predecessors is a recommendation that all members "decline entry to Israeli settlers." Signatories to the resolution include most of Africa, Asia, and South and Central America, as well as two new EU members — Cyprus and Malta. NAM foreign ministers congregate annually on the eve of the UN General Assembly session to coordinate policies. This may be a foretaste of the bitter fare awaiting Israel at the UN this fall. Our Foreign Ministry, forever focusing on the ever-diminishing filled portion of the glass, notes that the resolution is declarative, non-binding, and unlikely to be implemented — especially by NAM members maintaining any sort of ties with Israel. True, in the past most Latin American and sub-Saharan African countries ignored their pro forma NAM undertakings.

Moreover, as the Foreign Ministry points out, any country that bars certain Israelis will be cutting off its nose to spite its face. Nations are

unlikely to willingly cause themselves financial damage. Besides, how are they to tell which bearer of an Israeli passport hails from where?

Herein lies the danger, though. We have seen how the EU twisted Israel's arm into marking its produce to disclose which goods come from the territories on pain of imposing tariffs against all Israeli exports. It is not inconceivable that at some point seemingly anti-settler strictures will impact on any and all Israelis. In-house settler-bashers ought to consider that we are all in the same boat.

Yet even if the ill will emanating from Durban is nothing but bluster, it's still no reason to downplay patently hostile moves by nations which profit from Israeli aid, know-how, business, and tourist dollars.

It's high time that Israel tells countries like India, Thailand, or Kenya that they cannot have it both ways. They cannot continue to expect Israel to resume business as usual, in effect turning the other cheek whenever they deliver yet another stinging slap.

Our silence risks being voluntarily acquiescing to the role of a pariah, an international punching bag, and this at a time when we remain under attack in an illegal and unprovoked terror-war that itself should be censured by law-abiding nations.

Indian officials indeed often privately excuse their anti-Israeli votes in international forums by telling Israeli interlocutors that they don't really mean it, but have to pay lip service to the Arabs to get them off their back.

The question that ought to be put to our Foreign Ministry is whether, by tolerating such double-dealing, Israel doesn't aggravate its predicament. It signals nations with which it has increasingly meaningful dealings that any relations with Israel can be conducted covertly, as if by sinful assignation. Israel becomes a mistress-state, whose favors may be enjoyed but in whose company others mustn't be caught in public.

Passivity may be quasi-prudent in the very short term, but in the long run Israel taints itself as illegitimate in the company of nations and by inference ascribes to itself a considerable measure of guilt.

The more lies are repeated and go unchallenged, the more they'll stick. As time passes, Israel's company will become less and less desirable and its position more untenable. We have seen near-alarming deterioration in Israel's international standing in the past few years, despite over 1,000 Israeli casualties in the terrorist offensive against us.

The time perhaps has come to tell nations who benefit from all that Israel has to offer them that friendship isn't one-way. Nations who threaten not to admit given categories of Israelis ought to be told that, unless they officially and publicly dissociate themselves from inimical declarations of intent, Israel will warn its citizens against visiting them. The very least our Foreign Ministry can do is issue a travel advisory warning Israelis against choosing popular destinations where they may be unwelcome.

If we do not ask the nations that claim to be our friends to speak out now, we should not be surprised if they continue to vote against us in the UN General Assembly, on incrementally more damaging resolutions. The Palestinians have learned that such "meaningless" declarations do matter. So should we. (Jerusalem Post Aug 25)

Game Over? By Jonathan Tobin

No, a few swing votes are up for grabs

To listen to the National Jewish Democratic Council last week, there seemed to be little doubt about the outcome of 3 1/2 years of Republican efforts to improve upon their dismal showing in the 2000 presidential race.

For them, the meaning of a new poll could be summed up in two words: Game over.

The poll commissioned by the Democrats showed their candidate Sen. John Kerry beating President George W. Bush, 75 percent to 22 percent, among Jewish voters. That was virtually a repeat of the election results of four years ago, when exit polls showed Bush getting just 18 or 19 percent in his race with former vice president Al Gore.

This has to be considered a big disappointment for the GOP, considering all the time and effort they put into improving their standing among American Jews. If the Democrat poll is taken at face value - and there is good reason it should - then all the progress the Republicans thought they'd made via close relations with Israel and a post-Sept. 11 emphasis on the war on terror was in vain.

The inescapable conclusion would seem to be that Jews, after African-Americans - the most consistently Democratic portion of the electorate, and almost as liberal - are incapable of being lured away from their loyalty to the party they've given most of their votes to since Franklin Delano Roosevelt. Whatever inroads might have been made on Israel were lost, the poll seems to be saying, over domestic issues where Jews are as predictably as liberal as ever. Even more to the point might be the conclusion that though reasonable Democrats can't deny that Bush is a good friend of Israel, fewer Jewish voters consider that issue to be a determining factor.

All this would seem to be leading the Republicans to one inevitable conclusion: Give up on the Jewish vote.

But should they? Not if they want to win!

Despite well-founded optimism, the Democrats still have a problem. They know their candidate will win the Jewish vote. Even in 1980, when the Republicans got their highest total ever with Ronald Reagan's 40 percent of the Jewish vote, Democrats still won a majority of Jews. But the silver lining for the Bush camp in all of this is that it really doesn't have to do all that much better among Jewish voters in order to have an impact on this election. If this race turns out to be yet another squeaker, then all the Republicans need are a few more votes to put them over the top in key states like Florida or even Pennsylvania. The question is what issues can possible motivate the few swing voters left?

The clue lies in the Democratic poll itself, which showed that of all issues, the GOP does best among Jews on Israel. Their sample showed that 34 percent trusted the Republicans more than the Democrats on relations with Israel. Granted, that still left 66 percent saying they relied more on the Democrats, but it was better than any other issue for the GOP.

It isn't likely that domestic issues will convince many Jews to abandon the Democrats. On topics such as the separation of church and state, abortion, gun control and even taxes, the overwhelming majority of Jews seem to be invulnerable to the siren call of the Republicans. For good or ill, most American Jews still seem to consider the liberal "social justice" agenda as inseparable from their religious beliefs. Indeed, for some, the liberal catechism has long since been a very comfortable substitute for religion, and virtually nothing Bush can do will win them over. But for a small number of Democratic centrists, Israel looms large.

For this group, that tiny sliver of the electorate that can be called "Jewish Reagan Democrats," Israel is a decisive issue. These are the nominal Democrats who have shown they will abandon their party's presidential nominee if they are given a good reason.

Some leading liberals, such as columnist Leonard Fein, can write that Bush's "pro-Israel" stand isn't good for the Jewish state. That's because he, as well as some former Clinton-administration officials who anticipate returning to office under Kerry, tend to think that pressure, rather than support, for the current government in Jerusalem is what's needed to achieve peace in the Middle East.

But the few Jewish swing voters aren't likely to agree with them. These Reagan Democrats have been impressed by Bush's shunning of Yasser Arafat, coupled with his unprecedented support for the right of Israel to hold onto parts of the territories and his denunciation of the Palestinian right of return. Skeptics can point to contrary stands by others in the administration, as well as the possibility that policy will change if he is re-elected. But events such as last week's revelation that Bush is willing to support Israel's right to build in existing settlements, such as Ma'ale Adumim and other places, that are not on the bargaining table for abandonment remain meaningful for some Jewish voters.

Of course, if the Democrats are smart, they can keep these Reagan Democrats loyal. Kerry should - as he has on other points where Bush has taken a strong pro-Israel stand - pointedly endorse the administration's position on settlements, and redouble his efforts to convince voters that it is a first Kerry administration rather than a second Bush one that will be better for Israel. That might be tough for those like former peace envoy Dennis Ross (who will likely return to that job if Kerry wins) to swallow, but it's smart politics, as well as good policy.

If they don't, will Bush be able to peel off enough Democrats to give himself a few more Jewish percentage points? It's far from certain, and plenty of time exists for Bush to stumble further on this issue and other ones. But if he does, and if it comes down to another thriller in places like Florida, that might be all he'll need for another term.

One small indicator that points to good news for Bush was widely ignored last week. That was the poll among Israelis that showed, in contrast to American Jews, a large majority preferring Bush to Kerry. In a race that wasn't close, this item might be as insignificant as a poll of Frenchmen. But given the possibility of another dead heat in November - and the fact that there are thousands of Israelis with American citizenship and the ability to cast absentee ballots in their home states - it isn't so trivial.

The odds are against a small number of pro-Israel Jewish votes being the difference in the election. But this year, a few cast overseas in, say, Ma'ale Adumim, for example, might be as decisive as any cast in Palm Beach or Broward counties.

Stay tuned. The battle for the Jewish vote isn't over yet. (Jewish World Review Aug 26)

The writer is executive editor of the Philadelphia Jewish Exponent.
