

President Obama, the Jewish Community and the Mid-East: Forging a Greater Understanding

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I am truly delighted to be here among so many new friends. And thanks so much for all you do for the Jewish community in Belgium.

Nineteen months ago, in April 2008, I received a letter in the mail from a Jewish woman from North Carolina, a Jewish community leader, whom I had never met or spoken to. She wrote in the letter that I would burn in hell for the memory of the victims of the Holocaust. As I stared at the letter, I wondered what I had done in my lifetime to merit such hatred from a Jewish community leader.

Certainly on paper, I did not seem like an appropriate target for total loathing from the Jewish community. In fact, unbeknownst to the writer, much of my family, including two grandparents, several aunts and uncles and many cousins – some born and some never to be – were part of the memory of the Holocaust victims for which the writer was wishing that I suffer eternal damnation.

You see, my father, Gitman Mogilnicki, grew up in a Polish town of Biala Rawska. As the Germans began to pressure the Poles, he left the town to try to join the Resistance. Having been rejected by the Resistance for looking too Jewish and having been gone but a week, he returned to find that the Jewish section of the town no longer existed. He spent the war with a few other escapees in the woods, never being caught, sleeping in dug out graves to avoid the bullets when the Germans fired along the ground, and stealing food in the middle of the night by risking missions to town.

He often wondered whether any from the town of Biala Rawska had been taken to camps rather than just having been slaughtered on the spot. But having spent the years after the war searching in vain for even one survivor, he finally concluded that, had the town been taken to camps rather than being killed then and there, surely one person would have survived. There was simply no one left.

Having searched in vain for both survivors and employment in Warsaw and Berlin until 1950, he decided to come to the United States and start again. But the United States had quotas limiting the number of immigrants from Poland. So my father arranged illegally to purchase a false passport in which he transposed his first and last names, and Gitman Mogilnicki of Biala Rawska Poland became Mosher Gutman first of Danzig and then Max Gutman of the Bronx, New York, and the garment district in the lower East Side of Manhattan. Certainly nothing in my legacy would hint that I should be hated by a Jewish leader I had never met.

Nor would a clue to explain such animosity be found in my upbringing. I attended public schools. My father died when I was 16, never having discussed the war with me and never having told me even his real name. Upon his death, I went to work after school cleaning tables in a restaurant and through the student loan program, I attended Columbia University and then Harvard Law School. Having finished among the top of my class, I then clerked on our highest court, the United States Supreme Court, an honor given to the top roughly 40 law school graduates a year, I spent two years as a Special Assistant to the Director of the FBI for counterintelligence and counter-terrorism, and 27 years

as a lawyer at a leading law firm and as an advisor to government officials and Democratic candidates for office. I was on the Board of the Washington Hebrew Home for seniors and a member of two different shuls in Washington DC -- a reform shul and an Orthodox shul. Indeed, nothing in my background to suggest becoming the target of fury from a Jewish elder.

But in fact the letter went on to explain my alleged transgression. It had been written to me and several other high profile Jewish supporters of then Senator Barack Obama. That support for Barack Obama amidst the Presidential campaign was our sin.

Indeed, although none were as extreme, many American, European and Israeli Jews were concerned by the Obama candidacy. I heard the concerns often. I worked hard during the campaign to address every single one.

In the case of the letter, many advised me to ignore it. I tried briefly to do so, but I could not. Instead, I called and then emailed the author. I sent her information about me and even more so about then Senator Obama. Because I believed, then and now, that the more understanding that exists, the more we can get on with the business of making progress in making the world more prosperous and secure for us all.

Plainly my pursuit paid off in that case as my attacker ended up calling me a mensch, wishing me a happy pesach, and corresponding throughout the rest of the campaign. I never asked her for whom she voted; the increased dialogue and understanding were the true reward.

And, truth be told, in some sectors of the Jewish community, to some columnists, to some at Seder tables, some concern still exists. There is of course much admiration, much support and much delight in the progress of my country. But some concerns still exist.

So the questions continue to be raised and must continue to be addressed. Who is Barack Obama? And how should Jewish communities – indeed how should the Arab communities or any community – understand his actions? Did Israel have a stronger supporter or better friend in the United States before this election? And why doesn't he just say what we want to hear?

They are questions about the President in whom I believe to my core and questions about the country I have long loved, raised here in the country I am growing to love. They have been raised as I walk through the Grand Place in Brussels, and as I tour in the diamond district in Antwerp. They are questions earnestly in search of answers. The questions certainly should not be avoided and deserved to be addressed. Without greater understanding, we cannot make progress on building our partnership with every corner of Belgium. The answers will come from each of you, but I have my thoughts on ways to approach them.

First and foremost, President Obama tries to address the difficult issues and not to pander. It is often easier for politicians or leaders to say what specific audiences want to hear. It takes little courage. But saying the same truth to everyone is far more difficult. Try addressing difficult issues with more than platitudes designed to appease one audience without angering another. Try telling particular groups not what they want to hear, but what they should hear. It is often not easy, it is not politically expedient, but it is the path to short term incremental progress on the way to long term resolutions. And it is the right thing to do.

So on January 20, 2008, as primary season during our election was just beginning, then-Senator Obama chose to talk about anti-Semitism. He said boldly in a speech: "The scourge of anti-Semitism has, at times, revealed itself in our community." Where did he choose to so proclaim – in a speech at AIPAC? To the B'Nai Brith?

No, Senator Obama talked about the scourge on anti-Semitism in the community to an all-black church in Atlanta Georgia on Martin Luther King Day. He got no political flattery points from his frank talk that day. But in so doing and in his candor, he brought two cultural groups just slightly closer. Through his thoughts and his words – but mainly through his honesty and courage – Senator Obama brought us all just a bit further out of the shadows.

And then two months later, in March 2008, when the controversy over Reverend Wright was breaking everywhere -- remember that time? It was the news everywhere -- then-Senator Obama again chose not to take the easy way out. Political strategists and experts everywhere were calling for him simply to renounce Reverend Wright in the harshest terms, politically expediently wash his hands of the entire matter and get on with the carefully choreographed business of running for President. Few pundits believed that he should instead actually and seriously address the issue of racial and religious prejudice and hatred that exists among some in the shadows of U.S. and indeed European society, but is rarely even acknowledged. Why actually give a speech on race relations, applauding how far we have come but refusing to sugar coat how much further we have to go and assigning blame to us all? Because it was the right thing to do. And again, it brought us a bit further out of the shadows. If you have not read it, President Obama's speech, delivered in Philadelphia on March 18, 2008 entitled "A More Perfect Union" is an important for all, like many in this room, who think about the issues of racial or religious prejudice that has not yet fully been eliminated.

And through personal happenstance, I happen to know that then Senator Obama wrote the speech himself, while sitting home in Chicago over the weekend and on Monday before delivering it in Philadelphia on Tuesday, March 18. I was working the evening of March 16, 2008, in Boston on a campaign event and had arranged for Ben Affleck and Senator John Kerry to appear. Realizing that there were no events on then Senator Obama's campaign calendar for that evening and that he was scheduled to be at home, I emailed Senator Obama, telling him about the Boston event and asking him if he wanted me to arrange me to arrange for him to thank the Afflecks. Within a minute, he emailed back and said he was home working on a speech and could call to thank the Afflecks after the girls were in bed and asked me what time to call. But I estimated too little time for the speeches and when then Senator Obama called on my cell phone to speak to the Afflecks, Ben Affleck was still on stage speaking to the crowd. So I took my cell phone onto the stage – with the crowd wondering who this stranger was—and in front of a packed house, I handed my blackberry to Ben Affleck and indicated to the crowd that it was Senator Obama on the line. The place – packed with supporters – started as raucous chant of "Yes We Can" as Ben Affleck covered one ear and spoke to the soon-to-be President who was at home in Chicago, writing one of the most important speeches of my time, after putting his daughter to bed.

And then, after becoming President, President Obama delivered these words to a crowd at a speech. "America's strong bonds with Israel are well known. This bond is unbreakable. It is based on cultural and historic ties." And in the same speech, he continued later: "Palestinians must abandon violence. Resistance through violence and killing is wrong and it does not succeed. It's a story with a simple truth: that violence is a dead end. It is a sign neither of courage nor of power to shoot rockets at sleeping children, or to blow up old women on a bus. That is not how moral authority is claimed, that's how it is surrendered."

Again, where did President Obama choose to deliver these words? At an AIPAC meeting? In Tel Aviv?

No, in Cairo. To a packed house, with Arab leaders and students and members of a variety of Muslim communities. President Obama never minced words. He is not one to mince words. And at the end of the speech, an American President who proclaimed the bond with Israel to be unbreakable and decried blowing up buses and sending rockets into towns as an act of moral cowardice got a standing ovation. And I was standing and applauding in Washington, DC. And I hope they were standing and applauding in Jerusalem and Tel Aviv, and in Rabat and Ankara, and in Brussels, and in Mons and in Antwerp.

For in that standing ovation that day are the rest of the answers to the questions that I am asked, that you ask. And in that standing ovation is the lasting answer to my now friend in North Carolina who once wished my eternal damnation for my support of Barack Obama.

As to the question whether President Obama and my country are "Pro-Israeli or Pro-Palestinian," the answer, the answer found in that standing ovation all around the world, is of course "both." For they are the same thing.

For today we well know that there can be no "zero sum games." That for those willing to choose peace and be among the brotherhood of nations, we will either rise together or none can truly prosper.

Particularly when resolving disputes among neighbors and building peace and security, there can never be winners and losers for there could never then be true peace and security. Israeli and Palestinian mothers and fathers want the same thing -- a safe and increasingly prosperous future for their children. In which tomorrow is better than today and next week offers even more hope. Both Israelis and Palestinians deserve a just, lasting and comprehensive peace, including a settlement of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict that results in two states, in which both the Israeli and the Palestinian people can realize their dreams for their children.

And the answer to whether U.S. remains as good a friend and as strong a supporter of Israel today is also found in that speech and in that standing ovation around the world. As President Obama said in Cairo, the bond between Israel and the United States has been and fully remains today unbreakable. We have been and remain dear friends and dear allies. When analyzing trends, that is not the question. The question is not whether America and Israel are dear friends and allies, for we have long been and will remain so, but rather what is the value of that friendship in achieving security and peace. Having friends and allies is nice; having friends and allies with greater credibility and standing in the world, with the ability to play a meaningful role in a lasting solution is what is truly important. And on that score, there can be little debate about the direction. And in that regard, the fifty-seven minutes in Cairo was not just important for U.S.-Arab relations but just as much so for U.S. -Israeli relations. It was a step closer to security and lasting peace.

And that is what can be so frustrating in hearing some of the doubts. As a litigator for the past 27 years, whenever I had a mediation with another side, I had a simple rule in selecting the mediator. I always told the other side to pick the mediator. To pick the person who had the most credibility with them. The value of the mediator to me and my client was in the sincere credibility of the mediator with the other side. And when we held that mediation, I used to urge that mediator to spend less time with me and more with the other side. The value of the mediation was in the dialogue with the

other side. And while the analogy between the pursuit of security and peace in the Middle East and settling a legal case is not close by any means, for me, the lessons still remain instructive.

And so an important element of my work here in Belgium is to continue that outreach to the Muslim communities. From our Iftar to break the fast at Ramadan, to visiting community centers in Molenbeek, to visiting other Islamic venues throughout Belgium, we are going to increase the partnership with the Muslim communities. And in so doing, we are going to take increasingly important steps forward in our relationship both with such communities and with Israel and the Jewish communities. We are going to take steps towards security and peace. For all.

As my two bosses noted recently, my President at the Trilateral Meetings with Prime Minister Netanyahu and President Abbas in New York in September and Secretary of State Hillary Clinton during an interview in Cairo two weeks ago, much has been accomplished, but much remains to be done. Palestinians have strengthened their effort on security, but they need to do more to stop incitement and they need to move forward with negotiations. Israelis have facilitated greater movement and have discussed important steps to restrain settlement activity. But they plainly need to do more and they need to translate discussions into actions. And it remains important for the Arab states to take concrete steps to promote peace.

As President Obama said at the Tri-lateral meetings: "simply put, it is past time to talk about starting negotiations — it is time to move forward. It is time to show the flexibility and common sense and sense of compromise that's necessary to achieve our goals. . . . We have to summon the will to break the deadlock that has trapped generations of Israelis and Palestinians in an endless cycle of conflict and suffering." As Secretary Clinton made clear just two weeks ago in Cairo, "settlements have never been a precondition by anyone — Palestinian or Arab or the United States—to getting into negotiations, because the negotiations will resolve such issues on the long term basis." But the issue remains an "irritant, . . . a terrible flashpoint for people in the region."

Can you imagine if we let real peace and security escape again because we cannot get by the irritant and flashpoint? Can you imagine with the many serious and ongoing threats to peace in the Middle East, or basic long-term security and prosperity for the Israeli and Palestinian children, if we fail now to rise together. Paraphrasing Henry Kissinger, the solutions wait ahead, we just now need the participants. And as President Obama has long demonstrated to me, in reaching compromises and ever pushing forward, on economic reform, on health care and on every other vexing issue, we should never let the perfect be the enemy of the good.

We need to get this one right. We need to get this one right together. And we need to get it right now.

Thanks so much and all the best.