

March 2018

Dear Friends,

Following President Trump's pronouncement declaring Jerusalem to be the capital of Israel last December, I wrote an editorial in which I questioned Trump's motivations, and the implications of his pronouncement for the peace process, specifically, the perception of America as a neutral broker. I also raised a concern that the Arab street could erupt in response to his proclamation.

In response to my editorial, two congregant members sent me links to two articles in order to broaden my perspective on the matter. In "U.S. Liberal Jews Read it Wrong: Trump's Call on Jerusalem Was Good for the Peace Camp," Eric Yoffie, former president of the Union for Reform Judaism, writes about how he, a peace advocate and supporter of a two-state solution, reconsidered his initial negative reaction to the pronouncement. He cites three reasons for his reposition. (1) While Jerusalem is and has been the spiritual center of Israel, and while the State's institutions including the Knesset and Supreme Court are contained in its environs making Jerusalem Israel's *de facto* capital, it is comforting to have its legitimacy affirmed by the president of the United States. (2) Every Jewish member of the Knesset – members to the right and to the left – including Knesset members who are advocates for a two-state solution, endorsed the president's declaration. (3) Though the Right saw Trump's statement as a call for Jerusalem to be the capital of Israel alone, the president stated that Jerusalem's borders would be determined in bilateral negotiations between Israelis and Palestinians.

In "Why Trump is right in recognizing Jerusalem as Israel's capital," Alan Dershowitz argues that the Trump pronouncement must be considered within the context of the Obama administration's decision not to veto the recent UN Security Council's resolution declaring Judaism's holiest places in Jerusalem to be occupied territory. The resolution was particularly egregious considering the blatant and total destruction of synagogues and the desecration of Jewish cemeteries in the nineteen years that Jordan controlled the Old City and its environs. "It was President Obama who changed the status quo and made peace more difficult by handing the Palestinians enormous leverage in future negotiations and disincentivizing them from making a compromised peace."

I was in Israel with the congregation a few weeks after the pronouncement. Everyone was relieved that the Arab streets did not explode in protest. The demonstrations that did take place appeared to be impromptu affairs. There was even talk that Egypt, which had voted in favor of the UN resolution but is so dependent on American aid, secretly gave its nod to Trump's proclamation. Guatemala's evangelical president promised that his country, too, would move its embassy to Jerusalem. The streets outside our hotel in Jerusalem were festooned with banners celebrating America's president, although one of our guides questioned why Israel needs anyone to affirm what Israelis and Diaspora Jews already know.

I spoke about this issue yet again at a Friday night service a few weeks ago. I still questioned if the president's pronouncement advances the prospect for some accommodation – who dares speak of peace? – between Israelis and Palestinians. I question still if America's ability to be a broker as it has been irrevocably compromised by the pronouncement. But more critical to the possibilities, I turn toward the conclusion of Eric Yoffie's article: "Had Trump moved the embassy immediately, as he could have, any chance of negotiations in the near future might have been snuffed out. But he chose not to. The big question, for all parties, is whether or not he has a

strategy for what happens next.” Well, it seems that now there will be a semblance of embassy by Israel’s Independence Day in May. As for a plan, none has been forthcoming since the proclamation in December.

I was the penultimate speaker at the Friday night discussion in February. I ended my remarks by saying that for now, Trump’s pronouncement made no difference with regard to the peace process, because at present and presently there is no possibility for any accommodation whatsoever. Mahmoud Abbas, once again, showed his true colors as an anti-Semitic Holocaust denier, when he declared the Oslo Accords to be dead in response to Trump’s pronouncement. As for Israel’s prime minister, even if he were inclined to “give peace a chance,” as Yitzhak Rabin said on the White House lawn, he is not in a political position to do so. “So, for now, there is no hope,” I concluded. Fortunately, the congregant who sent me the Dershowtiz article spoke last. He corrected my perception by talking about Iran and its agents being the common enemy that would unite Israel with some of its staunchest foes, which would bring about a peace that has not been possible since the founding of the State. Fortunately for me and for the rest of us, RSNS is a community of rabbis.

Now with borrowed hope, I am, as always, warmly,

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