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J Street Expands the Pro-Israel Tent

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Let me confess. I attended the recent J Street conference, its first ever, held with much fanfare in Washington DC at the end of October. This must surely make me in David Weinberg's eyes, one of those Buddhist Seder attending, intermarrying, Ayatollah-loving, and Israel-bashing Jews – the kind he mocks in his article, "J Street's Spiritual Conceit" (BESA Perspectives 94, October 25, 2009). But this is a grossly inaccurate caricature of J Street's supporters. The reality is that J Street draws its support from growing numbers of American Jews who are deeply committed to the existence of Israel as a Jewish and democratic state; but they also recognize that the biggest threat to this is the continuation of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, and believe that strong American leadership is necessary to bring about a two-state solution before it is too late. Until J Street came along, many of these Jews felt politically marginalized within the American Jewish community. By mobilizing them, giving them a political voice in Washington, and a place in the pro-Israel community, J Street should be welcomed, not ridiculed.

Weinberg lampoons J Street's conference as a "hug-in" and a "soul-jamboree," and dismisses J Street's message as "spiritual mumbo-jumbo." But if he had attended the conference, or watched some of the video clips of interviews with attendees posted online, he would know that it was not some throw-back to a 1960s hippie gathering, but the beginning of a twenty-first century movement of Jews who care passionately about Israel, want to do all they can to ensure its survival as a Jewish and democratic state, and believe that a two-state solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is the key to this. That, in a nutshell, is J Street's position. This is not a matter of spirituality, but realism. Without the establishment of a Palestinian state,

Israel will soon find itself in the untenable position of ruling over more Palestinians than Jews. This would surely spell the end of the Jewish state, unless of course it ceases to be a democratic Jewish state.

The more than 1,500 people who came from all over the United States and elsewhere (including Israel) to J Street's conference did not come to hold hands and sing cum-ba-yah. They came to hear about the prospects for an Israeli-Palestinian peace process, the issue of Jewish settlements in the West Bank, the state of US-Israeli relations, and the challenge posed by Iran, among many other subjects. They also came to discuss the meaning of being "pro-Israel" and how they can advance J Street's "pro-peace, pro-Israel" message.

To claim that J Street's supporters want to "besmirch Israel and the mainstream Jewish community" and "engender a distancing in US-Israel relations," is not only deeply misleading, but also seriously misguided. Suggesting that J Street and its supporters, contrary to their own protestations, are in fact anti-Israel is to do exactly the kind of thing that J Street argues is all too common in discussions about Israel – narrowing the definition of what counts as "pro-Israel" to one's own views. Anyone who occasionally criticizes the Israeli government, supports the establishment of a Palestinian state, and wants the US to actively help bring this about, is labeled anti-Israel and cast outside the boundaries of the mainstream Jewish community. Ironically, Weinberg's attack against J Street's "apostasy" is clear evidence of the problem J Street identifies in how the Jewish world talks about Israel. Instead of having an open and civil discourse in which there is space for disagreement and dissent, we have diatribes in which groups and individuals are attacked and defamed. The result is the "chilling" of debate over Israeli policies and actions that J Street was set up, in part, to counter.

J Street's meteoric rise in its 18-month history from a tiny one-room operation to a major player in pro-Israel advocacy with almost 110,000 online supporters and a \$3 million budget is due in no small measure to widespread frustration among many American Jews over the stifling of debate about Israel and the imposition of a narrow definition of what counts as "pro-Israel" by defenders of the status quo. For young American Jews in particular the rigid orthodoxy of opinion that characterized the pro-Israel advocacy of the organized American Jewish community was profoundly alienating. In response, many have avoided engaging with Israel and channeled their activist energies elsewhere (to fighting for social justice in the US or stopping the genocide in Darfur), others have opted-out of the organized Jewish community altogether. J Street offers this generation a much-needed venue where they are welcome to question and debate, and where they can

fuse their commitment to universal values and human rights with their Jewish values and love for Israel. Whether or not you support J Street's positions, this is a positive development which strengthens the American Jewish community and, ultimately, its bonds with Israel.

Much has been written about the fraying ties between American Jews, especially younger ones, and Israel. While there are no doubt many reasons for this "distancing," one of them is the fact that many American Jews, overwhelmingly liberal and democratic in their political orientation, are not comfortable with uncritically supporting an Israel that appears increasingly less liberal and is in danger of becoming undemocratic as well. Not only does this weaken the bond between American Jewry and Israel, it also undermines the US-Israeli alliance in so far as American Jewry has long been an important source of support for that alliance.

Growing numbers of American Jews, young and old, are no longer willing to toe the party line on Israel. Instead of being silenced and ignored, J Street gives these people a collective voice. But it is hardly a radical voice. Contrary to the denunciations of its critics, J Street is not some radical leftist organization on the margins of American Jewish politics. Although its positions on some issues may be a little to the left of the dominant consensus within the organized Jewish community – over the Gaza war or the Goldstone report, for example – J Street represents a center-left perspective on the Israeli-Palestinian issue and US foreign policy more generally that is widely held by American Jews. It may not represent the "mainstream" of the *organized* Jewish community, but it can make a good claim to representing the mainstream of the *broader* American Jewish community. After all, J Street's positions are generally in line with those of the Obama Administration, which continues to receive strong support from the majority of American Jews.

By enlarging the pro-Israel tent, allowing more American Jews to identify themselves as being pro-Israel without having to be uncritical knee-jerk supporters of Israeli governments, J Street has already made a vital contribution to the American Jewish community. This is good for American Jewry, and good for Israel.

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