

The American Israel Public Affairs Committee

Temple B'nai Shalom

Braintree, Massachusetts

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April 2, 2016

The American Israel Public Affairs Committee has a single mission: to strengthen, protect and promote the U.S.-Israel relationship in ways that enhance the security of the United States and Israel.

The acronym for American Israel Public Affairs Committee is AIPAC. But AIPAC is not a PAC, a Political Action Committee. AIPAC does not raise funds to help candidates win election.

The term PAC, or Political Action Committee, was unknown until 1974. AIPAC, however, goes all the way back to 1951, long before there were any political action committees.

AIPAC advocates to Congress and the Executive Branch of the American government policies designed to make Israel safer and America stronger.

AIPAC has more than 100,000 members and seventeen regional offices.

AIPAC describes itself as a bipartisan organization.

Alice and I attended the recent AIPAC policy conference in Washington, DC. Our experience was both inspiring and frustrating.

I will begin with the inspiration.

Wow!

That's how we felt. That's what almost every speaker said first when they addressed us.

“Wow!”

More than 18,000 people attended, including 4,000 students. The general meetings each day were so large we had to gather in a basketball arena, the Verizon Center, to accommodate all those people.

The public gatherings included stories that Alice and I will never forget. I want to tell you three of them. [I have also provided links at the end of this sermon to the videos that presented these three stories.]

We saw a video presentation by the daughter of Eddie Jacobson. He was the Jewish haberdasher in Kansas City, Missouri, who was the close friend and business partner of Harry Truman.

His daughter told us how Truman decided to recognize the State of Israel just moments after it announced its independence.

Jacobson got a call one night in March, 1948, in Missouri. The caller said, "Eddie! You have to come to Washington right away and speak with the President." Chaim Weizmann, the Zionist leader, was requesting a meeting with Truman but Truman was refusing.

Truman had been increasingly irritated by lobbying from Zionists. He had issued instructions that he did not want to see any more Zionist spokesmen

Jacobson immediately flew to Washington, arriving the next day. He went directly to the White House. He had no appointment. He spoke to the appointment secretary. He asked, "Does the boss have time for me?"

The appointment secretary went in to find out. He returned and said, "Come with me."

Jacobson entered the Oval Office and stood around. As Truman later recalled the moment, Jacobson didn't say much of anything. So Truman finally said, "Eddie, what in the world is the matter with you? Have you at last come to get something from me? Because you never have asked me for anything since I've been in the White House and since we've been friends."

Jacobson replied, "Harry. I have a hero. I'm talking about Chaim Weizmann. He's an old man and very sick. He has traveled thousands of miles to see you and talk to you about Palestine. And now you're putting him off. This isn't like you, Harry."

Truman turned his chair around, with his back to Jacobson. Truman drummed his fingers on the desk as he looked out the window. Then he turned back to Jacobson and said, "OK, you bald-headed son of a bitch, I'll see him."

Truman met with Weizmann for a long time. Partly as a result of Jacobson's efforts, two months later, on May 14, 1948, the United States became the first nation to recognize the new State of Israel. That probably would not have happened without the friendship between Eddie Jacobson and Harry Truman.

The video was moving and inspiring. When it ended, the introducer said, "Ladies and gentlemen. Please welcome Eddie Jacobson's daughter, Elinor Jacobson Borenstein, and his grand-daughter, Hazel Becker, and President

Harry S. Truman's grandson, Clifton Truman Daniel." Those three rose from their seats in the front row. The crowd gave a standing ovation.

The second story concerned a program in Israel called Sulamot – Music for Social Change. The Hebrew word "sulamot" means both "ladders" and "musical scales." The Sulamot program helps disabled children to make music in any way they can.

To assist these children, the IDF provides young soldiers who are members of a special Unit for Outstanding Musicians. The IDF lends soldiers from this unit to Sulamot. The soldiers meet with the children three times a week to help them practice.

Sulamot developed a musical instrument that can be worn on the body. The video we saw included a child with cerebral palsy playing with obvious joy the notes that the instrument made as she pressed on the brightly colored pads on the garment she was wearing.

We then saw on the same video a little girl named Kristel. Born without eyes, Kristel was abandoned on the street by her mother. Fortunately, a kind woman found her and decided to raise her as her own. Kristel is a beautiful, multi-talented girl. She is fluent in three languages and sings wonderfully.

Although Kristel is blind and will never see, the Sulamot program taught her to memorize music and to sing. We heard this little blind girl sing, on the video, beautifully, "There's a Place for Us" from West Side Story.

When the lights came on, the announcer asked us to welcome her. There she was on the stage with her piano accompanist, a soldier in the IDF. She then sang the same song just for us. "There's a place for us. Somewhere, a place for us." Not a dry eye in the entire Verizon Center.

One more inspirational moment.

Israeli teens with autism used to be exempt from military service in Israel, making it hard for them to find a role in contemporary Israeli society. Now, however, a special unit in the IDF welcomes autistic teens and allows them to excel and provide valuable support to soldiers in the field.

Neta Geffen is a young Israeli man on the autism spectrum. He has wanted to join the IDF since the time he first learned about the IDF.

Israel has determined that people with autism have special visual abilities. The IDF created a unit called Roim Rachok, meaning "Seeing from a Distance."

Neta was admitted to Roim Rachok. There he was given tasks for which he is particularly well qualified: reviewing aerial maps in satellite images and inspecting microscopic images of electronic equipment.

Roim Rachok is also known as “Eye of the Country.”

We saw on the video this autistic young man proudly putting on his uniform and we saw and heard his parents joyfully describe his enlistment and thank Israel for the way the country values his service.

And then, yet again, when the video ended, the announcer said, “Ladies and gentlemen. IDF Sergeant Neta Geffen and his parents.” Sergeant Geffen, in his IDF uniform, stood between his parents and raised his arms in great excitement. We welcomed him with our loud applause.

I mentioned earlier that our experience at AIPAC was both inspiring and frustrating.

Our frustration came when the crowd in the Verizon Center cheered and applauded the presidential candidates: Hillary Clinton, Ted Cruz, John Kasich and Donald Trump.

I know some of the people who joined in the cheering. Some of them are my friends and I admire them otherwise. But I thought they were wrong and Alice and I did not join them.

They told me later that they cheered only when these candidates made statements with which my friends agreed. That might make sense in another context. But not here. The world would not understand that the cheers were only for messages we liked and were not endorsements of the candidates themselves.

The coverage afterward made clear that, just as I feared, the cheering was understood as one might expect: it meant to those who saw it in the news coverage that the members of AIPAC approved the candidates whose messages they were cheering.

The worst example was one statement in particular that Donald Trump made. He said, in an introductory remark to another point, “With President Obama in his final year – yay!” The crowd interrupted him and jumped to its feet and applauded.

When the crowd quieted down, Trump went on, “He may be the worst thing to ever happen to Israel. Believe me. And you know it. Believe me.”

Again the crowd rose to its feet and applauded. Apparently both Trump and the crowd forgot about the 1948 and 1967 and 1973 wars and Hizbollah and

Hamas attacks and the two, or maybe now three, Intifadas. Trump’s hyperbole overcame the mob mentality of the crowd. His words drew deeply undeserved applause.

As I wrote later to AIPAC, that experience was a true shanda. One can agree or disagree about President Obama on any issue, including whether he has helped Israel as much as one might have liked or even done and said things that may hurt Israel. But he is the sitting President of the United States. That is an office to which Trump aspires. It was wrong of Trump to mock the President with that “Yay!” and to issue a wildly exaggerated claim against him under any calculus, and the crowd should have remained seated and silent.

The applause was wrong, and those moments were frustrating because there was nothing we could do. Alice and I sat in silence through Trump’s entire speech. I wish the crowd would have done the same with all the candidates, and particularly in those moments.

Trump spoke on Monday night. On Tuesday morning Lillian Pinkus, President of AIPAC, stood on the stage with lay and professional leaders of AIPAC and made the following statement, which I heartily endorse:

We speak on behalf of the Board of Directors and professional staff.

From the moment this conference began, until this moment, we have preached a message of unity.

We’ve said, in every way we can think of, “Come Together.”

But last evening, something occurred which has the potential to drive us apart. To divide us.

We say unequivocally that we do not countenance ad hominem attacks, and we take great offense to those that are levied at the President of the United States of America from our stage.

While we may have policy differences, we deeply respect the office of the President of the United States and our President, Barack Obama.

There are people in our AIPAC family who were deeply hurt last night, and for that, we are deeply sorry. We are disappointed that so many people applauded a sentiment that we neither agree with nor condone.

Let us close this conference in recognition that when we say we must “Come Together,” we still have a lot to learn from each other. And we still have much work to do—because broadening the base of the American pro-Israel movement is essential and our unity is our strength.

Let us pledge to each other that, in this divisive and tension-filled political season, we will not allow those that wish to divide our movement—from the left or the right—to succeed in doing so.

The AIPAC members who were present applauded that statement repeatedly and with enthusiasm. Alice and I would have joined them if we had remained for the closing session.

For my closing, I urge everyone to join us at the 2017 AIPAC Policy Conference in Washington, DC, March 26 to March 28, 2017. You can take advantage of a special discount of \$200 if you register before Tuesday, April 5. To register, click [HERE](#).

AIPAC is good for Israel and good for America. Please learn more about it and join Alice and me in supporting AIPAC.

VIDEOS SHOWN AT AIPAC POLICY CONFERENCE 2016

Elinor Jacobson Borenstein – click [HERE](#)

Sulamot and the young singer Kristel – click [HERE](#)

Neta Geffen and Roim Rachok – click [HERE](#)

Collection of other videos – click [HERE](#)