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CONSENSUS AND THE JEWISH COMMUNITY

Does Consensus Still Count?

By Douglas Kahn

In 1984 a major controversy erupted in San Fran-cisco when Chabad erected a giant menorah in government-owned Union Square. Tempers flared as a raging debate ensued between those who foresaw a serious erosion in church/state protection and those who saw the menorah's placement in a prominent public place as a powerful statement of Jewish pride.

The Jewish Community Relations Council, established after the Holocaust to ensure that whenever possible the organized Jewish community speaks with a united voice, decided to convene a task force the next spring to try to develop a consensus position. After several meetings a proposal emerged that carried the day. The verdict: The organized Jewish community opposed the placement of religious symbols on government property in all situations except when it involved the temporary display on that government property traditionally used for free speech purposes. In that one narrowly defined situation, there was no consensus to oppose. Overnight the controversy ended as partisans on both sides realized that they had achieved what they wanted and what was particularly important to them.

Consensus is the process of seeking representation from widely diverse viewpoints. It helps maintain civil debate on highly emotional issues, and it is the product after reaching consensus that reassures a broad cross-section of the community that their concerns have been addressed. More importantly, a consensus-based decision dispels the myth that Jews cannot agree on anything. No single phrase in my line of work is more grating to the ears than: "There is no consensus on that issue." There is a consensus on every issue. The question is: Where does the consensus lie?

In 2000, a California ballot measure (the Knight Initiative) declaring that "only marriage between a man and a woman is valid or recognized in California" came before our JCRC for discussion. Again the lines were drawn – between members of the community who believe that we should affirm support for the traditional definition of marriage and those who saw the ballot measure as a blueprint for discrimination against gays and lesbians. Our consensus statement read in part, "The organized Jewish community supports the goal . . . of extending the common benefits and protections that flow from marriage to same-sex couples. In so doing, we are neither endorsing same-sex marriage, nor are we advocating a change in the definition of marriage, whether it be civil or religious. We are convinced that Proposition 22 represents a serious step backward in the effort to eliminate discrimination. We therefore oppose the initiative."

As with the consensus statement on religious symbols, our position on the Knight Initiative provided a clear path for members of our community without feeling as if they had compromised on fundamental principles.

Helping members of our community distinguish between core principles that are unshakeable and strongly held ideas that could budge in a spirit of compromise is the key to our ongoing efforts to obtain consensus. A good, well-constructed consensus statement can achieve all or some of the following:

1. Serve as a clear statement of where the overwhelming majority of Jews from the organized Jewish community stand on a particular issue, thereby assuring that the community speaks with a united voice.
2. Provide guidance and education to the broader Jewish community, helping to shape opinion.
3. Lead to the development of an advocacy strategy built around the key consensus points.
4. Provide the basis for talking points to the media and public officials.
5. Illuminate whether there have been significant shifts of opinion from previous positions.
6. Embrace positions that are sometimes in tension with each other without being watered down.

In February of this year, our JCRC culminated a several-months-long process with a consensus statement on "The Middle East Conflict: Global and Local Issues." Given both the passions and diversity of opinion within our community, revisiting our consensus position was a serious process. Yet, in the end, with the left and the right well represented, there was only one negative vote.

At one point in the debate I decided to convey to both the doves and hawks what they would find in the statement supporting their views. Some phrases spoke to both camps. An example: "While the primary responsibility for ending the deadly violence rests with the Palestinian leadership, the Israeli government should continue, through an articulation of its openness to compromise in exchange for a cessation of violence, to encourage Palestinian moderation." Similarly, "We support Israeli efforts to exercise great caution to minimize the deaths of innocent Palestinians who are caught in the cross-fire when Palestinian forces intentionally position themselves among civilian populations." (For the full text, go to www.jcrc.org.)

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At the culmination of the debate and vote, one could see in the room a great sense of accomplishment over the tone and quality of the discussion as well as a great sense of reaffirmation and reassurance – we do still have a consensus on Israel.

Consensus – yes; unity – hopefully; uniformity – no. In our subsequent meetings with public officials, we wanted them to know that the overwhelming majority of Jews subscribe to the position we espoused. At the same time we are under no illusions that some individuals and groups hold views that fall outside the consensus. We have no ability or desire to stifle their speech but rather a strategic mandate to ensure that their speech is not given disproportionate attention. This is particularly important because we have found a consistent pattern among fringe groups to try to exaggerate their numbers and influence. Loud protestations against a consensus position is no reason to shy away from developing such a position when the advantages of obtaining one are so clear.

Yet due diligence is always necessary to ensure that the position arrived at will credibly be viewed as representing the consensus. In recent years we have, on occasion, even acknowledged in our introduction to a policy statement that there are dissenting views. For example, in our 1995 statement on affirmative action, an introductory paragraph stated, "Among the synagogues, organizations, individual JCRC members and others active in the organized Jewish community there are dissenting views on some of the positions contained in the statement – both among those who felt the statement went too far and those who felt the statement did not go far enough. On the statement as a whole, there is clear consensus both with respect to the content and the importance of the organized Jewish community addressing the issue of affirmative action given our community's direct stake in our country's commitment to equal opportunity and enforcement of civil rights laws." Such an admission added credibility, enlarged the consensus – always a goal even after the final vote – and made clear that the issue did not pass without some dissenting voices.

In the end, it is a critical judgment call whether acknowledging dissent within the actual statement will strengthen the position or weaken it, encourage the voices of dissent or soften them. This judgment has to be done on a case-by-case basis. When it came to our Middle East statement, there is no specific mention of dissent. Why focus attention, the argument went, on the fact that there is not agreement on every issue when the existence of dissent within our community is a rather well known fact anyway?

The fact that obtaining consensus has become more challenging makes it more important than ever to try. Our effectiveness as advocates on key issues of importance to our community depends upon it.



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