

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE
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ALAN DERSHOWITZ & JEREMY BEN-AMI SQUARE OFF IN HEATED DEBATE ON SHALOM TV

Dershowitz: J Street contributes to the atmosphere of delegitimizing Israel

Ben-Ami: Dershowitz drives young, liberal Jews away from Israel

October 22, 2010 (Fort Lee, NJ) -- Sparks fly in an often contentious, always interesting evening of discussion centered on the question "Who Speaks For Israel?" featuring Harvard Law Professor Alan Dershowitz, recognized by many as America's most articulate centrist defender of the State of Israel, and Jeremy Ben-Ami, founding president of J Street, the relatively new Jewish lobby on Capitol Hill that seeks to bring US pressure to bear on Israel to move the Middle East peace process forward.



From the start of the discussion, neither Dershowitz nor Ben-Ami is timid in expressing criticism of the other. The evening is a marked contrast from an earlier debate the two participated in at New York's 92nd Street Y, when moderator Elliot Spitzer tried to steer the conversation toward areas of agreement. In this exchange, Shalom TV President Mark S. Golub helps the speakers clarify the ways in which they support Israel from very different perspectives.

Although Ben-Ami begins the discussion by saying that both the Israelis and the Palestinians have contributed to a lack of peace in the Middle East, and "there is more than enough blame to go around; both sides have committed their fair share of errors," the J Street leader refuses to say that he would tell college students that "Israel is not the problem."

Citing J Street's refusal to condemn the Goldstone Report, its secretly taking money from George Soros, and its criticizing Israel's human rights record out of context, Dershowitz contends that J Street adds to current efforts to delegitimize the State of Israel and permits college students to think of Israel as an apartheid or Nazi nation.

"All human rights is comparative," insists Dershowitz. "Nobody is better than a C+ or B-. But no country in modern history has had a better human rights record faced with comparable threats than the nation of Israel. Not the United States, not Great Britain, not France. I will not let Israel be a scapegoat for divestment, for boycotts, for delegitimization, for demonization, for being singled out as human rights violators--and J Street contributes to that atmosphere."

Dershowitz also accuses J Street of failing to cite the positives in Israel's human rights record, pointing to the sterling record of Israel's Supreme Court.

"Let's look at Israel's Supreme Court compared to the United States' Supreme Court," says Dershowitz. "I would trade the two supreme courts in thirty seconds. The Israeli Supreme Court is much more sensitive to civil rights than the US Supreme Court. You wouldn't know that listening to J Street."

Ben-Ami counters with a claim that Dershowitz is distorting J Street's nuanced message and makes a point of saying he believes one of the travesties of the United Nations is its obsession with Israel's human rights record vis-a-vis the rest of the world. Ben-Ami also blames Dershowitz for pushing young people away from Israel by labeling anyone who dares to disagree with Israel as being anti-Israel or a self-hating Jew.

"You, and [your] manner of advocacy, are part of the problem, which is why so many younger, liberal Jews are walking away from Israel. You are creating an atmosphere where it is very difficult for us to feel comfortable coming forward and discussing very difficult and very troubling issues."

One of the most dramatic moments occurs when Dershowitz suddenly reveals large blowups of frames from a J Street video grouping him with Sarah Palin and Rush Limbaugh in the "Chorus of No" on the two-state solution, and in opposition to President Obama, General Petraeus, Secretary of State Clinton, and the "Chorus of Yes."

(MORE)

"Jeremy knows I've been opposed to the settlements since when he was still in diapers," says Dershowitz as he asks for an apology from Ben-Ami.

Ben-Ami responds by saying Dershowitz owes him an apology for saying that J Street had "gone over to the dark side" in a piece Dershowitz wrote for the Huffington Post. In the end, neither man apologizes to the other.

In a most telling interchange, Dershowitz declares, "I am J Street's nightmare because I am a liberal, Democratic Jew who strongly opposes the settlements, who strongly favors a two-state solution, who supports Obama, who supports Hillary Clinton, who supports Petraeus; but who does not support J Street. You have to create the illusion that anyone who opposes J Street is a member of the right and the Sarah Palin/Rush Limbaugh group. You can't explain me, Irwin Cotler, Elie Wiesel--who agree with your positions but who don't agree with the fact that you always emphasize your criticism of Israel and not your support of Israel; that you have many members of your organization who are virulently anti-Israel."

Ben-Ami: Name one! You always say we have many members of our group who are virulently anti-Israel. Name one.

Dershowitz: Students at Berkeley who refuse to include "pro-Israel" in their name.

Ben-Ami: That makes them virulently anti-Israel?

Dershowitz: Absolutely. Why would you not have pro-Israel in your name?

Ben-Ami: This is why we view the way in which you advocate for Israel as "the nightmare" for J Street. It is true. It is because people like you, and the way in which you advocate, act as a chilling factor for people to get involved with Israel in the first place.

The two men also disagree on Iran. Ben-Ami argues that solving the Israeli-Palestinian conflict would diminish Iran's strength and its desire to develop nuclear weapons. Dershowitz strongly disagrees and contends that Ben-Ami is positioning Israel to take the blame if Iran develops nuclear capability.

Dershowitz is especially critical of J Street's failure to condemn the Goldstone Report even though Ben-Ami confirms that he does not believe its conclusions which charge Israel with purposely plotting to kill civilians in Gaza and contends there is no proof that Hamas used human shields or fired from civilian areas.

"You know why you didn't criticize the Goldstone Report?" asks Dershowitz rhetorically. "Because too many of your members would have quit--because [J Street] members voted [in favor of] the Goldstone Report without reading it!"

Ben-Ami responds that Dershowitz distorts J Street's position, pointing out that J Street criticized the report as biased and urged the US to oppose any acceptance of the Goldstone Report in the UN Security Council. Ben-Ami also claims that the suggestion that J Street facilitated a meeting between Goldstone and members of Congress is a media lie perpetrated by a biased Washington Times.

Explaining J Street's lobbying philosophy, Ben Ami says, "We are American citizens and we have a right to influence American policy, especially in matters regarding Israel, because, as Jews, we have a stake in what happens in that country. We have a right to tell Israel the truth--that the path Israel is on is leading it off a cliff and is not securing the Israeli future as a Jewish and democratic home. And it is the most Zionist thing we can do."

Dershowitz summarizes his position by saying, "Criticize Israel. But tell college students both sides of the equation. Don't let them come away with the impression that Israel is a unique human rights violator. Put it in context--that's all I ask you to do."

The Dershowitz/Ben-Ami debate was sponsored by the Harold Hoffman Memorial Lecture, a free annual event open to the public at Temple Beth El in Stamford, Connecticut. This year the event drew an overflow crowd of more than 1,100 people who were split in their support of Dershowitz and Ben-Ami.

The entire debate will begin airing for four weeks on Shalom TV as free Video On Demand, the Jewish network available on cable systems throughout the United States and in Canada.

Shalom TV can be seen on Comcast, Time Warner, Cablevision, Verizon FiOS, Cox Communications, RCN, Bright House, Armstrong, Service Electric Cablevision, Service Electric Cable TV, Buckeye CableSystem, Metrocast, Blue Ridge Communications, Frontier, WOW!, and Rogers Cable (Canada).

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