A DAY TO REMEMBER

Mike Prashker

When the next history of North American Jewry’s ongoing contribution to the State of Israel and the Jewish People is written, a New York conference held on 26th April 2006, should certainly figure. I anticipate that the events will be recounted in section II, “Society Building” following-on from the epic story told in section I, “State Building”.

The event referred to was a forum convened by the Inter-Agency Task Force on Israeli Arab Issues, under the heading “Opportunities and Challenges Facing Israel as a Vibrant Community.” In the course of the day, more than two hundred representatives of many of North American Jewry’s most important agencies and philanthropies discussed, together with a leading group of Jewish and Arab-Israeli academics and NGO representatives, how to promote the full and successful integration of Israeli-Arabs who make up roughly 20% of Israel’s approximately seven million citizens.

As one of the Jewish-Israeli educators participating, I came away energized and optimistic, encouraged by a debate that demonstrated equal measures of courage, commitment and optimism from some of North America’s most influential Jewish leaders.

Critically for me, the discussion was framed as another great Jewish-Zionist challenge to which North American Jewry, as a minority that has worked hard to attain and ensure greater opportunity and full inclusion for itself and all North American faith and ethnic communities, is particularly well equipped to contribute.

The debate provided important recognition of what I know to be true: that while Israel has done a better job than most other young countries in affording minority rights, much remains to be done.

During the “town hall” discussion, I had the opportunity to point out that after almost sixty years, most Jewish-Israelis and hence not surprisingly most North American Jews, tend to use the terms “Israeli” and “Jew” interchangeably. This confusion is illustrative of the lack of shared civic awareness that still exists in Israel. It is as offensive to Arab-Israelis as any suggestion that “North American” means “Christian” would rightfully be to North America’s Jewish and other faith communities.

I think that my Israeli colleagues shared my sense that important North American Jewish leaders had finally “got it,” though it was only natural that, as Jewish and Arab-Israelis, we had different perceptions of what they had “got.” I think that my Arab-Israeli colleagues, all completely committed - as are the overwhelming majority of Arab-Israelis - to full civic integration while retaining a proud Arab identity, knew they had found committed and serious allies, who because of obvious historical parallels, empathized with their predicament.

As a Jewish-Israeli Zionist the conference was a reassuring sign that influential American Jews increasingly understand that an Israel that offers greater opportunities to all its citizens is a stronger, more sustainable, more Jewish and democratic homeland for the Jewish People. Moreover, as well as appreciating its importance for Israel, they also recognize its value for North American Jewry. The conference reaffirmed that one of Judaism’s most basic values— treating “Others,” Jews and non-Jews alike, with dignity and fairly—is well understood on both the pragmatic and moral level. The Torah itself, we were reminded, provides clear instructions on how we must treat “the strangers in our midst.”

On 26th April, Kaf Chet B’Nissan, key American Jewish leaders affirmed their understanding that encouraging the development of a more inclusive and cohesive Israeli society, with a successfully integrated Arab-Israeli minority, will make Israel both a stronger and better national homeland for the Jewish People. What a day to remember!

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