



Letter from the Rabbi

That Was The Jewish Year That Was: 2010 February 2011

Dear Haverim,

The year 2010 was full of serious political, religious and cultural issues as well as humorous and fun trivialities. Let me share both with you.

Under President Obama, United States military aid to Israel increased markedly last year, according to the Wall Street Journal. Despite a perception by some that President Obama wasn't as supportive of Israel as Presidents Bush or Clinton, former Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert declared that there was no difference between the positions of President Obama and President George W. Bush on Israel. (Surprisingly, Olmert also revealed that President Bush had offered to absorb 100,000 Palestinian refugees into the United States if Israel and the Palestinians were able to reach a peace deal.)

In an American Jewish Committee survey of Jewish support for President Obama, the President was in the 55-62% range, depending on the issue, and 73% of Jews saw United States-Israel relations as strong. However, Jews favored an attack on Iran by the United States (53%) or by Israel (62%), contrary to the expressed wishes of the Administration. (Through WikiLeaks's 250,000 revealed cables, it was learned that a number of Arab leaders, in Saudi Arabia and Qatar, agreed with Israel's stance on bombing Iran, urging the United States "to cut off the head of the snake.") At year's end, new reports were surfacing from Israel that Iran's nuclear capability was, at least, 5 years off due to a cyber virus, secretly released by either Israel, the United States or both.

In another survey immediately after the November elections, the following statistics were revealed: 66% of Jews voted Democratic, 71% viewed the Tea Party unfavorably, with Glenn Beck at a 67% and Sarah Palin at a 78% unfavorable rating. Sixty percent had a favorable view of President Obama, and 71% wanted the United States to play an active role in resolving the Middle East conflict, even if it meant publicly disagreeing with Israel. Moreover, the order of importance of issues was surprising (especially in regard to Israel), the economy (62%), healthcare (31%), the deficit/government spending (18%), education (12%), the environment (7%) and Israel (7%).

The GOP victory clearly empowered the only Jewish Republican in the House of Representatives; Eric Cantor has become the highest ranking Jewish lawmaker in history. However, the new American political landscape may be a mixed blessing for Israel. While Representative Cantor will be strongly supportive, many of those supported by the Tea Party are isolationists who want to cut foreign aid. Senator Rand Paul recently told AIPAC that they should move on to other topics with him because they were going to disagree on foreign aid. In addition, conservative blogger Andrew Sullivan favored an end of aid to Israel because of Prime Minister Netanyahu's intransigence on the settlements and since Israel's economy is thriving.

In another survey, 63% of Americans described themselves as more sympathetic to the Israelis than the Palestinians, the highest level of support since 1991. The New York Times declared in an editorial that while Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu may want to play Republicans in Congress against President Obama, "a peace deal with the Palestinians is not a favor to the President, (but) it is vital to Israel's national security interests. If he squanders this moment, the only ones who can celebrate are the extremists."

A controversial article, "The Failure of the American Jewish Establishment," in the New York Review of Books by New Republic editor Peter Beinart depicted the millennial generation/Gen X – people now in their 20's – as apathetic and even antagonistic to the American Jewish establishment, AIPAC and Israel. Even though

Birthright Israel and AIPAC's college student program have tried to have an impact, the Jewish community has to become more inclusive of diverse political opinions and less propagandistic in order to make sure that we aren't the last "attached" generation that feels involvement with Israel as a given. That's why "pro-Israel/pro-peace" organizations like J-Street and Americans For Peace Now (APN) are so important, even when they may be seen as too naïve or dovish, according to Beinart. (Surprisingly, APN actually had more "friends" on Facebook than AIPAC and even a relatively new peace organization, J-Street, had over 10,000.) Today's social media can jumpstart an organization faster than ever. In addition, APN unveiled "Facts On The Ground," a new smartphone app to keep track for Israelis of illegally expanding West Bank settlements.

At the time of the UN General Assembly, Palestinian President Abbas and Prime Minister Fayyad met with American Jewish leaders setting forth a moderate position on resuming Israeli-Palestinian peace talks and, in Washington, DC, the New Story Leadership For The Middle East program for 20-25 year old Israeli and Palestinian college students trained them in conflict resolution skills.

President Obama once again held a Seder at the White House with and for White House staffers. Also, at the White House, for Jewish American Heritage Month, President Obama praised Sandy Koufax, who was in attendance, along with Justices Breyer, Bader Ginsberg and Kagan, many Senate and House members, the Presidents of AIPAC and J-Street, athletes Dara Torres and Dolph Schayes, and singers Theodore Bikel and Regina Spektor. (Rahm Emmanuel couldn't be there because of the Bar Mitzvah of his son in Israel.)

One of the biggest private social/political events of the year was the wedding of Chelsea Clinton and Marc Mezvinsky with a huppah, ketuba, tallit-wearing groom, breaking of a glass and a rabbi (and minister). Traditional Jews and others were critical of the rabbi's officiating, but many Jews understood how different this wedding ceremony was from the Schlossberg/Kennedy Catholic Church wedding. This time, the "royal" wedding ceremony was 90% Jewish!

The new United States Senator from Connecticut, Richard Blumenthal, is Jewish and with the loss of Arlen Specter and Russ Feingold, there are now thirteen Jewish Senators – Blumenthal, Boxer, Cardin, Feinstein, Franken, Kohl, Lautenberg, Lieberman, Levin, Sanders, Schumer, Wyden and Bennett (who doesn't identify a religion, but notes that his mother is Jewish and a Holocaust survivor.) In the new House, there are 28 Jewish Representatives. David Cicilline became the third openly gay Jew in Congress along with Barney Frank and Jared Polis. President Obama appointed Orthodox Jew, Jacob Lew, to be Director of OMB, the same position he held in the Clinton administration where he moved the federal budget from a deficit position to a \$236 million surplus.

In the realm of political anti-Semitism, one of the most shocking stories was former Secretary of State Henry Kissinger, a Jewish refugee from Nazi Germany, telling President Nixon, on newly revealed tapes from 40 years ago, that "if they put Jews into gas chambers (in the USSR), it is not an American concern nor an objective of American foreign policy." He was also silent as Nixon described Jews as "very aggressive, abrasive and obnoxious."

Former CNN correspondent Rick Sanchez was fired from CNN for anti-Semitic rhetoric as was press veteran Helen Thomas who said that Jews "should get the hell out of Palestine and go home to Poland, Germany and America." Glenn Beck referred to billionaire progressive George Soros as "Jewboy" and FOX News president Roger Ailes had to apologize to the Anti-Defamation League after he called NPR executives "Nazis."

One of the strongest supporters of the Lower Manhattan Islamic Cultural Center was Mayor Michael Bloomberg. Perhaps he remembered that when Jews first arrived in New York in 1654, they were denied the ability to build a synagogue. It took until the turn of the 18th century to get approval. Imagine what New York's governor at the time, Peter Stuyvesant, would have said about several Jews serving as mayor of New York City!

In order to attract Jews to Dothan, Alabama, known as "the peanut capital of the world," the Jewish community of 43 (out of 65,000 people) offered \$50,000 to each Jewish family who would move there (to be paid over 5 years).

There was even a Jewish connection to deported Russian spy Anna Chapman. At the time of her arrest, she was dating Michel Bittan, a Sephardic New York businessman.

Chilean-American Leonardo Farkas Klein, Chile's most prominent philanthropist, gave each trapped miner's family \$10,000 even before all 33 of them were pulled from the mine, even though he was not the mine's owner. In America, Klein had been a lounge singer in the Catskills, Miami and on cruises, who then became a millionaire at age 24. Twenty years later, he has become a vocal critic of Chile's Catholic conservatives, a populist hero to the poor and is considering a run for Chile's presidency.

In business news, Israeli pharmaceutical giant, Teva, filled 630 million prescriptions – more than Pfizer, Novartis and Merck combined – to become the largest generic drug maker in the world, primarily for the American market. In embarrassing and tragic business/rabbinic news, Orthodox Rabbi Sholom Rubashkin was sentenced to 25 years in jail for bank fraud and labor violations at his kosher meat plant Agri-processors in Pottsville, Iowa, while his son-in-law, Rabbi Yaakov Weiss, pleaded guilty to the sexual molestation of a 13-year old boy at a mikvah. The case was publicized by the Awareness Center which advocates, within the Orthodox community, against rabbinic sexual abuse by Chabad and other Orthodox rabbis. In addition, Rubashkin's brother-in-law was recently held on hedge fund extortion charges and, before that, fraud over a government grant to a day school.

These days, most of the processed kosher meat consumed in America comes from South America, primarily Uruguay, where PETA has called attention to their less humane method of slaughter than is often used in the United States. Although American and Israeli Orthodox rabbis have promised to improve the situation, little has been done.

A U.S. Airways flight attendant caused a pilot to divert a La Guardia flight to Philadelphia because of a "disruptive and suspicious passenger." The 17 year old had strapped on his tefillin to daven on the early morning flight. The flight attendant, in this age of flying anxiety, didn't believe the boy's story and called the cockpit about an item "wrapped around his head with straps, wires or cables running through his fingers."

In DNA news, a genetic relationship was discovered between Albert Einstein and director Mike Nichols (not surprising), but then an added link of theirs was found to Meryl Streep and Dr. Mehmet Oz.

Forbes list of the world's most powerful people included Federal Reserve Chair Ben Bernanke, Google co-founders Sergei Brin and Larry Page, New York City Mayor Michael Bloomberg, Israel Prime Minister Netanyahu and Facebook founder Mark Zuckerberg.

In religious news, although Americans claim to be a deeply religious people, the Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life found that they are also deeply ignorant about religion and could only answer about half the questions in a survey on the Bible, Christianity and other world religions. The groups with the best scores were atheists and agnostics, followed by Jews and Mormons. (However, 43% of the Jews didn't know that Maimonides was Jewish.)

"Jewish, Religious and Atheist" (religiouatheist.com), a new website, was created by Israeli Tzemah Yoreh who teaches at American Jewish University. He keeps kosher, observes Shabbat, fasts on traditional days and has created "Liturgical Experiments: A Siddur for the Skeptical." An admirer of Reconstructionism, he goes much further.

According to a report, the Reform movement, after previous decades of growth, has declined by 18% over the last decade. The Conservative movement's size has diminished even more, while Orthodoxy and Reconstructionism have grown. Still, Reform is America's largest Jewish religious movement. The Reform movement also ordained its first trans-gendered Rabbi and the first conference to be held in Los Angeles of LGBT Jews was welcomed by all, but the Orthodox.

Conservative Judaism began to contemplate a name change last year. Once the largest American Jewish movement, it hopes that a new name might better express its identity and reverse its dramatic decline. (Comedienne Judy Gold's suggestion was: The "I Eat Treyf Outside The House" movement.) Other, more serious, suggestions included "Covenantal Judaism," "Historical Renewal Judaism" and "Masorti (traditional) Judaism." While the Reform and Reconstructionist movements actively reached out to be more inclusive to non-Jews and the intermarried, the Conservative movement's big legal decision of last year was to permit non-Jewish spouses to be buried in a Jewish cemetery – but only if they were six feet from the nearest Jewish grave!

Interesting religious developments that began or increased significantly last year were: "Mothers Circle" – an educational support group for non-Jewish women raising Jewish children, and "Wilderness Torah," a new organization that celebrated Passover in the desert, Shavuot on a mountaintop and Sukkot on a farm. The Jewish Farm School, another project, connected Jews to sustainable agriculture and food justice issues.

In New York, "Sukkah City," an outdoor exhibit, was erected as a design competition at Sukkot time. Tens of thousands of people learned about Judaism as they marveled at the innovative and imaginative designs.

"Limmud FSU, New York" was an opportunity for almost a thousand Russian-speaking Jews in their 20's and 30's to attend a Jewish educational conference. As one of the participants noted, "American Jews take Judaism for granted. But here we are, the immediate descendants of a people who were persecuted in the FSU. We appreciate how special it is to gather freely in a synagogue."

Hopefully, we too appreciate our freedom as Jews, especially the opportunities that we have in the general society – politically, socially, religiously and culturally. Next month, I'll describe Jews in the world of culture, sports and entertainment and their innovations and achievements in 2010.

B'shalom,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Arnie Rachlis". The signature is written in black ink and is positioned below the typed name.

Rabbi Arnold Rachlis