

## Point of View no. 86

# The Pro-Israel Community: Navigating the George Floyd Protests, Corona & Annexation

## THE TACHLIS

The confluence of the George Floyd protests with the coronavirus pandemic may herald a global 'paradigm shift' and change the map of threats facing Israel and Jewish communities worldwide. These changes require a significant adaptation or as we refer to it, 'a grand pivot.'

As minority politics challenges white hegemony, Jews find themselves in a quagmire: While many identify with the struggle against systemic racism, Jewish socio-economic privilege and 'whiteness' fuels ideological disagreements and anti-Semitism. Indeed, anti-Israel groups strive to draw parallels between the police brutality in the U.S to Israeli conduct towards the Palestinians.

The pro-Israel communal approach towards the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement may have a far reaching impact on the status of these organizations within liberal circles. The decentralized nature of BLM, the authentic face of the protests, makes many organizations associated with the movement theoretically 'engageable' despite the anti-Israel positions of some of their members.

Bolstering Jewish community relations organizations, which focus on building relationships with outside groups may allow the Jewish community to restore its position among liberal and progressive circles, and change their common perceptions on Israel. Jewish organizations could build on their history of advocating for criminal justice reform, showing up as credible and legitimate allies to other disempowered populations.

Meanwhile, the coronavirus and the George Floyd protests are broadening the gap between Israel and U.S Jewry. Although it seems to be a tactical and temporary 'time-out,' powerful trends are expanding the gap between Israel and world Jewry, putting stress on this already fragile relationship. Against this backdrop, Israel's potential annexation of parts of the West Bank will be interpreted as a "point of no return" for certain segments of world Jewry.

Pro-Israel leaders feel as if they are fighting a rearguard battle: on the one hand, many of them oppose annexation, as it means losing control over their fundamental Zionist narrative that Israel is a democracy seeking peace; on the other hand, they carry a unique responsibility to dismantle the point of "no return" dynamic within the Jewish communities, that could lead to a beyond-repair rupture within the Jewish People.

Finally, the pro-Israel community needs to engage in a process of ongoing learning in these volatile times that will enable the repositioning of the community's place in the U.S and beyond, particularly within liberal and progressive circles. In rare moments of historical shifts, there exists greater reception to new conceptual frameworks and narratives.

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## CHALLENGES FOR THE JEWISH COMMUNITY

1. **In recent years, intersectionality<sup>1</sup> emerged as an organizing concept in the U.S,** evidenced in the prominence of identity politics and in the form of ad-hoc coalitions of different minority groups focused on a range of issues from police brutality to women's rights.
2. **The 2014 Ferguson Uprising marked a strategic benchmark in the evolution of anti-Israel campaigns within intersectional social spaces** in an attempt to draw parallels between the Palestinian issue and black struggle in America (see Reut's paper [Navigating through Intersectional Landscapes](#), July 2019).
3. **Black Lives Matter (BLM), 'the face' of the George Floyd protests, has been accused of promoting the anti-Israel agenda within intersectional social circles.** Pro-Israel groups often point out at the political platform of the Movement for Black Lives, one of the groups affiliated with BLM, which accused Israel of 'genocide', calling it an 'Apartheid state' and endorsing BDS.
4. **Indeed, anti-Israel groups strive to draw parallels between American police brutality and Israeli conduct towards the Palestinians.**<sup>2</sup> Israeli law enforcement is being called out for training American law enforcement, and by extension, carries some responsibility for American police brutality against African Americans. Yet, unlike during the Ferguson Riots, at this point in time, the protests 'anti-Israel thread is not front and center.
5. Moreover, **although the coronavirus has brought with it a wave of "classic" anti-Semitism,** the looting and damaging of several Jewish businesses and synagogues were broadly acknowledged and condemned within political and social discourse. (see: [Reut's document: A Guide for the Perplexed pro-Israel Network](#)).
6. At the same time, **the coronavirus and the George Floyd protests are broadening the gap between Israel and U.S Jewry,** although it might seem to be just a tactical and temporary 'time-out.' Yet, **powerful trends are compromising this relationship in the long-term:**
  - ❖ **The inward approach of many communities** as a response to corona and pressing domestic events **is amplified by a decline in the American ideal of Jewish Peoplehood** and tendency for an increasing number of Jews to disengage from Israel.
  - ❖ **Many within the Jewish community believe that the relationship with Israel will entail a heavier social price tag in America that will emerge from the protests,** where minority politics likely to be more dominant.
7. **The looming question of annexation** – The George Floyd protests have temporarily bumped the possible annexation of parts of the West Bank by Israel from the top of certain American Jewish groups' agenda. Israel's annexation of the West Bank could generate a new wave of anti-Israel sentiment and further polarize the Jewish community.
8. **Annexation would have an unprecedented effect on the relationship between Israel and world Jewry.** It is being interpreted by many as Israel's unilateral disengagement from world Jewry. **Annexation means, for many within the pro-Israel community, losing control over the fundamental narrative built into American Zionism that Israel is a democracy seeking peace.**

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<sup>1</sup> Intersectionality theory holds that different forms of oppression and discrimination overlap and are experienced in a unique manner by individuals that fall within several biological, cultural, and social categories. Kimberley Crenshaw, **Feminist legal theory**, (pp. 57-80), Routledge, 1989 .

<sup>2</sup> Molly Boigon, [Forward](#), June 1<sup>st</sup>, 2020.

## INSIGHTS AND SUGGESTED BASIC APPROACH

Community relations organizations possess greater experience and sensitivity to local contexts and nuances, enabling them to articulate how to effectively engage in this new reality (as in the following articles [here](#)<sup>3</sup> or [here](#)<sup>4</sup>). The below represents several macro-principles or issues we believe should particularly highlight.

9. **The confluence of the coronavirus pandemic and the George Floyd protests may constitute a watershed moment for the pro-Israel community. The global paradigm shift obliges the Jewish community and pro-Israel organizations to engage in a process of learning in order to go through a ‘grand pivot.’** Here are some insights and recommendations:

### A Need to Revitalize the Community Relations Field

10. **Corona’s economic downturn hit the Jewish community relations field hard** – The community relations field has experienced a decline since the nineties largely due to the belief that anti-Semitism in the form of discrimination against the Jewish community was declining. The coronavirus brought about a further dramatic decline in the field’s activity and centrality.
11. **Yet, bolstering the community relations field is the order of the day.** In times of social unrest, it is clear that the community relations field is the strongest tool within the Jewish establishment that can engage with other communities and mobilize the Jewish community around the cause.
12. **An opportunity to rebuild “street-cred”** - As American Jewry improved their socio-economic status, Jewish communal organizations seemed to gradually lose their ability to be genuinely identified with progressive causes based on an ‘on-the-ground’ presence. Through building on their history of advocating for criminal justice reform and by offering social, political and economic capital against systemic racism, Jewish communal organizations can position themselves as credible, legitimate allies.
13. **Efforts should be focused on bringing about the diversity of Jewish communal organizations,** taking direction from voices looking to work within Jewish institutions.<sup>5</sup>
14. This moment offers an excellent opportunity to intellectually reframe the discourse on Israel in a way that creates room for both connection to Israel along with the struggle against systemic racism.

### The BLM Dilemma: A Time for Unconditional Solidarity

15. **The approach of communal organizations vis-à-vis BLM during the current protests can have a far reaching impact on the position of Jewish communal organizations among liberal circles, and on latter perception of Israel** - The progressive credibility of Israel, and increasingly of Jewish communal organizations who support it, is being challenged by anti-Israel groups. Jewish communal organizations, for example, have largely been excluded from the discourse regarding intersectionality and have contended with anti-Israel groups’ abuse of this ideology.
16. **Within intersectional social circles, Reut differentiates between ‘ideological adversaries’ of Israel and their ‘solidarity supporters.’** Reut recommends the adoption of a much more nuanced approach towards ‘solidarity supporters’ who are potentially engageable (see Reut’s paper [Navigating through Intersectional Landscapes](#), July 2019).
17. **As such, this is not the time to call out BLM regarding the movement’s record on Israel, as BLM belongs to the category of ‘solidarity supporters’:**

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<sup>3</sup> Jeremy Burton, Josh Sayles, Lindsey Mintz And Rori Picker Neiss, [Forward](#), June 3<sup>rd</sup>, 2020.

<sup>4</sup> Rabbi Susan Talve and Sarah Barasch-Hagans, at [T’ruah](#).

<sup>5</sup> Not Free to Desist, [eJewishPhilanthropy](#), June 12<sup>th</sup>, 2020.

- ❖ **BLM is an extremely decentralized movement without any campaign goals around Israel this year.** In fact, Israel policy does not appear on its website.<sup>6</sup> The mainstream broad support for the protests ensures that mainstream messages rise to the top.
- ❖ **‘Black Lives Matter’ is the slogan and idea of the protest, which aims to abolish systemic racism, a cause the Jewish community should not refrain from supporting** (though not always to the extent that certain groups suggest, such as defunding the police force).
- ❖ **During the current protests, BLM is positioned in the center.** For the first time since its establishment, BLM is enjoying broad support from the public and mainstream media.
- ❖ **Engaging with and on Israel and fighting for racial justice are not mutually exclusive, and there is no need to choose between them.**

### What is the Approach towards Annexation?

18. **Israel’s possible annexation of parts of the West Bank could re-energize the boycott campaign while undermining the Jewish communal cohesion required to effectively combat anti-Semitism and anti-Israel sentiment within intersectional circles.**
19. **Many Pro-Israel leaders oppose annexation and feel it undermines their ability to defend Israel. At the same time, they carry a unique responsibility to dismantle the ‘point of no return’ in the Jewish discourse that could lead to a beyond-repair rupture within world Jewry.**
20. **As such, adopting a narrow definition of what constitute ‘delegitimization’ in the discourse around annexation allows the pro-Israel community to focus on the Jewish people and the State of Israel’s actual enemies rather than the wide range of Israeli policy critics..** The common broad definition of what is delegitimization in the pro-Israel community, has narrowed the pro-Israel’s network of available allies.

### Double Down on Israel Engagement

21. **Israel became an increasingly polarized topic within some Jewish communities.** The confluence of corona, the current protests and the discourse on annexation **may create a perfect storm that will fundamentally damage the relationship between Israel and world Jewry.**
22. **Jewish leadership should withstand the tide and invest more on Israel engagement, as:**
  - ❖ **Disengaging from Israel is a honey trap, disastrous to the future of the Jewish people.** Due to Israel’s centrality to Jewish identity and its role in building up the concept of “peoplehood,” distancing from Israel further will only exacerbate the Jewish identity challenge.
  - ❖ **Disengaging from Israel will send the wrong message to young Jews regarding the core Jewish value of solidarity and collective responsibility.**
23. **Instead of disengaging, there is a need to create a new and updated framework for a future world Jewry-Israel relationship that acknowledges and elevates both centers of the Jewish world, e.g.:**
  - ❖ **Lean in to opportunities to engage with and build partnerships between civil society leaders in Israel and North America.** In Israel, a growing number of Israeli civil society leaders and organizations are looking to listen to and support world Jewry. Engage Israeli partners on current events happening in America and why it matters to the Jewish community.
  - ❖ **Be a part of advocating for minority voices in Israel and within the Jewish world using the ‘Wider Bridge Model’.** While Israel’s challenges regarding Ethiopian Jewry, African refugees, Israeli Arabs and Palestinians are unique, the potential to engage around these issues as a shared challenge offers a unique opportunity for collaboration between Israel and North American Jewry based on a shared agenda and set of values.

**End.**

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<sup>6</sup> Carly Pildis, [Forward](#), June 10<sup>th</sup>, 2020.