

Let Truth Trump Fear in Our Community

By Jeremy Ben-Ami

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Bill Clinton liked to say that “a campaign based on hope will beat a campaign based on fear every time.”

For the better part of the past year, I’ve worried whether the campaign being waged against Barack Obama in the Jewish community might disprove that. Unable to offer a positive vision for Israel, the United States or the Middle East as a whole, Republican operatives like Matthew Brooks (“Don’t Shoot the Messenger”) have resorted to stoking fear – whether of the people Senator Obama has spent time with in the past, those he listens to now or those he would talk to diplomatically in the future as President.

The good news for the Jewish community, and for the United States more broadly, is that hope is walloping fear. The latest Gallup poll shows the Jewish vote breaking for Obama by 74-22 now, up from 62-32 in a J Street poll earlier this summer, mirroring a similar swing of 10-12 points toward in Obama among the general public.

The anti-Obama campaign of 2007-2008 has been waged relentlessly, starting last year in the darkest recesses of the online world with anonymous emails filled with lies about the Senator’s religion and upbringing through this fall’s multi-million dollar RJC ad campaign attacking Obama and his advisers. What has tied the whole campaign together has been an effort to frighten Jews out of voting for an African American with a funny name.

Brooks and his allies claim they are simply raising legitimate questions about Obama’s record. But they’re not. Rather than arguing the substance of whether the U.S. and Israel are more likely to deter an Iranian nuclear weapon through diplomacy than saber-rattling, they’d rather call Tony McPeak anti-Semitic and keep repeating the name of disgraced pastor Jeremiah Wright in close proximity to that of Barack Obama. Oh – and while a picture of Iranian President Ahmedinejad lurks ominously in the background.

Rather than debate whether Israel’s security is best served through a two-state solution and the attendant compromises it entails or by a never-ending military conflict, they’d prefer to call long-time peace negotiator and policy expert Rob Malley pro-Palestinian.

The good news is that none of this appears to be working. For all the name calling, for all the efforts at guilt by association, the Jewish community isn’t buying it.

Why? They know that Senator Obama supports Israel. They know that, in 2008, there is no such thing as an “anti-Israel” American politician – and certainly not one who is enthusiastically embraced by the national Jewish establishment and regional Jewish leaders like Robert Wexler, Abner Mikva and Alan Dershowitz. To claim otherwise is simply not credible.

The real victory in this campaign won't simply be Barack Obama getting more votes than John McCain, or even carrying more than 70 percent of the Jewish vote nationally.

Real victory would be to put an end to the notion that if someone disagrees with you about what might be good for Israel, that they are "anti-Israel" or anti-Semitic.

Poll after poll has shown that the overwhelming majority of Jews in the United States want peace in the Middle East, do not want a war with Iran, and would like to have a political discourse that focuses on issues, not fear-mongering.

Meanwhile, in Israel, the outgoing Prime Minister has spoken of the need to reach a two-state solution in the near term as an existential interest of the State of Israel, and the incoming Prime Minister is now signaling her interest in pursuing regional peace with the Arabs and supporting American diplomacy with Iran.

Matt Brooks and others with right-wing views on foreign policy generally and Israel in particular may not agree with these opinions – whether expressed by Ehud Olmert and Tzipi Livni or by Rob Malley and Zbigniew Brzezinski.

But they aren't going to win elections by avoiding an argument on the substance while relying on name calling and rumor mongering.

Let's hope the real victor in 2008 is the Jewish community – as it finally excises the politics of fears and smears and forces candidates to debate the issues on the merits. It is time to have a debate worthy of the Jewish people and to have a debate about the real issues. Too much is at stake.

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