

Jeremy Ben Ami tries to silence critical documentary

By Charles Jacobs and Avi Goldwasser June 23, 2014

J Street was launched to facilitate the Obama administration's attempts to pressure Israel into urgently accepting a Palestinian state by undermining the American Jewish community's support for Israel. It works toward this mission in the guise of 'tough love,' which is dressed up in a series of focus group tested feel-good slogans like: "pro-Israel," "pro-peace," "pro-democracy," pro-everything. With strong backing from the White House and the media, J Street leaders launched well-financed and well-executed P.R. campaigns to influence Congress, Jewish community leaders, and young Jewish students on campus. The resulting schism within the Jewish community was predictable. The mainstream Jewish leadership response, as one would expect, was to instruct all in civility and politeness, showing a determined unwillingness to allow Jews to criticize a fellow Jewish organization. J Street, then, was given a clear field to spin its way into the big tent of Jewish organizations in major cities and into Hillels on campuses. Only a few journalists and scholars were willing to take the heat of exposing J Street's real agenda.

Meanwhile many pro-Israel activists in the community were incensed, as J Street began to dominate Jewish venues throughout the country with speakers, town hall meetings and related events. While J Street has enlisted very capable PR specialists, former journalists, lawyers and seasoned leftist community activists to spread their messages, those who opposed it found it difficult to organize efforts to publicly challenge J Street's arguments. Compared to the numerous spokespeople J Street could marshal, there are a limited number of effective speakers to counter them. It is difficult for local activists to import such eloquent and powerful speakers as Alan Dershowitz, Rabbi Daniel Gordis or Harvard professor, Ruth Wisse. To respond to this situation we produced a documentary film, "The J Street Challenge."

"The J Street Challenge" assembles outstanding scholars, journalists and activists to debate J Street's assertions and agenda. It creates a virtual counterpoint to J Street speakers in the community and on campus.

From the start, we've invited J Street's leaders to come to the film's screenings, engage us in dialogue, and publicly respond to the questions raised by the film: Why does J Street seem to disrespect Israel's democracy? Why does it provide a platform to hateful BDS (Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions) organizations that spread lies about Israel? Why does J Street consistently adopt the Palestinian position that Israel, almost exclusively, must make concessions for peace? Why is J Street (except for token half-hearted statements) silent about Palestinian incitement and anti-Semitism? Why the ambiguous, inconsistent double-talk about sanctions on Iran? Why does J Street almost always give the Palestinian leadership the benefit of the doubt but always question Israeli government intentions? Why would virulently anti-Israel billionaire George Soros be funding J Street if it truly was a pro-Israel organization?

Unable to respond to these concerns, and wanting to discourage attendance, J Street has chosen to attack the film labeling it as "divisive," claiming it is full of "distortions."

Two days after the film's premiere to a sold-out crowd in Miami Beach on Feb. 17, 2014, J Street released a statement that it would not waste time responding to the film, claiming that it contains "lies and deceptions." No one from J Street had at that point seen the film and the statement didn't offer one single example of a supposed lie. As experienced 'spin-masters', J Street leaders understood that their first step should be to smear-and-ignore. As the film gained popularity, J Street sent its friends and proxies in the media to demonize the film as right wing propaganda, again through ad hominem smears lacking specifics and facts. Recently, however, J Street has noticed the overwhelming demand for the film all across the country, with local activists sending alarming reports about the large turnouts for the screenings in cities such as Philadelphia, Chicago, Nashville, Detroit, and Boston. J Street leaders realized that ignoring the film has not worked and that it was time to shift strategy to direct and frequent attack. So on May 13th, J Street president Jeremy Ben-Ami directly addressed contentions in the film in an op-ed published in the Times of Israel. Let's look at his statements.

J Street is pro-Israel. Well, that's been the claim all along, but just saying it does not make it so. J Street deliberately set about to change the meaning of "pro-Israel" to include criticism of Israel's democratically elected government, and *only* the Israeli government, lobbying Congress and the US administration *against* the

elected Israeli government, circumventing the will of the Israeli electorate, and claiming that those who criticize J Street don't really want peace. J Street leaders like Ben-Ami think that they know what is best for Israel, and that what Israel needs is "tough love." So J Street proceeds to undermine support for Israel in Congress.

BDS

Ben-Ami claims that J Street opposes the BDS movement and that J Street's practice of giving platforms to BDS activists at its conferences is part of its big tent approach of letting all voices be heard. He also boasts about providing BDS supporters a platform at J Street events, in order to confront them.

If it opposes BDS, why did J Street host a panel of "progressive bloggers" in 2009 that included Max Blumenthal, a veritable poster child for BDS? Why did it cosponsor a Congressional mission with "Churches for Middle East Peace," a key supporter of the "Kairos Palestine" document, which is a proof-text for BDS and modern Christian antisemitism? Why did it host a book launch for Peter Beinart, who advocates boycotting Israeli communities in the West Bank? J Street is clearly trying to have it both ways on BDS -- proclaim opposition but also enable the BDS movement to increase pressure on the Israeli government to comply with "the J Street solution."

It's clear that J Street thinks it benefits from a strong BDS movement which increases the pressure on the Israeli government to establish a Palestinian state.

Iran

Ben-Ami claims that J Street has supported "every piece of Iran sanctions legislation that has passed Congress." Here Ben-Ami is being a little too clever; time and time again J Street has blindly followed the Obama administration and argued loudly *against* stronger sanctions on Iran. Enter the words "J Street Iran sanctions" into Google and the first five results include two *from J Street's own web site*, "[J Street Strongly Opposes Introduction of Senate Iran Sanctions Bill](#)," and "[Tell Your Senators You Oppose the Menendez-Kirk Iran Sanctions Bill](#)." Another is a news item from the left wing opinion site *Slate* called "[How hubris \(and J Street\) stalled the Iran sanctions bill](#)." So it may be that J Street has supported Iran sanctions bills that *actually* or *eventually* pass Congress, but its opposition to proposed *stronger* sanctions bills *in* Congress that were ultimately killed by Harry Reid at the request of the Obama administration, has been consistent.

J Street's funding

Initially, J Street [actively denied](#) that it had received support from the Soros family. Ben-Ami joked about this allegation, saying "[We got tagged as having his support without the benefit of actually getting funded!](#)" That was until someone leaked J Street's IRS forms showing massive Soros donations. At that point, Ben-Ami described his mendacity unblushingly, as being "less than clear" – a locution which itself is less than honest. Now that he 'clarified' the Soros connection, maybe he can help explain why Consolacion Esdiful, a resident of Hong Kong donated over \$800,000 to J Street.

Ben Ami's attempts to discredit the film are clearly reflective of the film's success, which could include prompting the J Street leader to make some of the strongest condemnations of Palestinians we've ever seen. In his response to our film, Ben Ami comes out against Holocaust denial and incitement, against denials of Jewish national rights, and against Palestinian terrorism. That is a good thing, especially if he keeps it up.

We know that the film has put local J Street activists on the defensive, forcing them to confront the contradictions of J Street's statements and actions. Ben Ami's op-ed is a dishonest attempt to provide his supporters with talking points as he sends them to call for censoring screenings of the film in Jewish communal venues. The man who, prior to joining the Jewish communal big tent, complained that the Jewish community is silencing his voice, is now actively trying to silence ours. It's not working.

Charles Jacobs is President of Americans for Peace and Tolerance which he co-founded with Avi Goldwasser who is Executive Producer and Director of "The J Street Challenge."