

Tragedy as Fundraising Fodder

Posted At : March 30, 2011 2:05 PM | Posted By : Seth Chalmer

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The Jewish Week reports on an email **AIPAC** sent following last week's terrorist attack in Jerusalem, treating the bombing as an opportunity to raise funds. Critics were quick to pounce: Matt Duss of **ThinkProgress.org** called it "crass". "It is disgraceful," **he wrote**, "that AIPAC's first response to this tragedy is to try and monetize it." Within hours, AIPAC sent an apology, saying that "it was wrong of us to mention this terrible tragedy the same day it occurred in the context of this email."

What, in particular, was wrong with this email? As Steve Lear, founder of the Jewish disaster response organization **NECHAMA**, told the Journal of Jewish Communal Service in a **2009 interview**, "When disaster strikes, people want to help, but they need an avenue by which to do so." Furthermore, it surely can't be the timing; as the Jewish Week notes, **American Friends of Magen David Adom** and **ZAKA** both created similar emails mentioning the attack, on the very same day. Was there any outcry related to their fundraising pitches?

The Jewish Week quotes Jeffrey Solomon as explaining the difference thus: "there must be a connection between the mission of the charity and the immediate reaction. ... The response is usually to help those affected by the tragedy, and that is the disconnect in this situation." But is there really a disconnect? Those who disagree with AIPAC may believe that AIPAC's lobbying activity does not provide immediate and vital assistance to the victims of this attack, but I imagine AIPAC and its supporters would say otherwise.

In fact, the text of the offending email itself included this sentence: "This recent upswing in terror attacks reminds us why it is so important that we work to strengthen the U.S.-Israel relationship and help keep our ally Israel safe and secure." The assertion seems to be that the political work AIPAC does is just as necessary to help traumatized Israelis as is medical attention. One may agree or disagree with that assertion, but it is disingenuous to claim that AIPAC is *not trying* "to help those affected by the tragedy". The only matter of real debate is whether the kind of help they provide is really the kind of help that is necessary, and I doubt anyone's opinion on that question really hinges on the timing of an email.

Imagine a parallel situation: what if it had been **J Street** who sent out a fundraising letter that day, arguing that this attack makes it ever more urgent to pursue peace? AIPAC supporters would have gone mad criticizing *them* for crass opportunism, but one can easily imagine that many dovish Jews may have had precisely this reaction to the terrible news. Is there really any basis for declaring one pitch crass and the other vital, other than the observer's pre-existing political beliefs? And if both sides are thinking these "crass" thoughts anyway, are we just asking them to shut up about it? If so, for how long? One day? Two days? What, precisely, is the half-life of "crass"?

As David M. Pollock **noted in 2007**, Jews have always treated catastrophes as opportunities to build something of greater, transcendent meaning -- whether spiritual projects for the religious, or more earthly and political projects for Zionists, for example. Does good taste and sensitivity demand that our responses to these tragic events must not be controversial or divisive in any way? And if so, are we willing to

extend this principle to our own side of these difficult issues, or only to those crass opportunists on the other side?

As always, these points reflect my own musings; the BJPA itself takes no position. But in addition to the two JJCS articles linked above, you can browse other BJPA publications on the topics of **Disaster Management** and **Fundraising**.