

## Changing the Tone of Israel Advocacy?

Posted At : June 17, 2010 12:16 PM | Posted By : Seth Chalmer

Related Categories: israel advocacy

I think two of the many fascinating pieces we linked in our recent June newsletter deserve more focused attention: "**Israel in the Age of Eminem - A Creative Brief for Israel Messaging**" by Frank Luntz, and "**Needed: Real Zionist Education, Not Hasbara**" by Gil Troy.

Let's begin with the former. You've heard of Frank Luntz, right? He's a Republican pollster and marketing guru, specializing in the use of language. (Luntz is credited with popularizing the term "death tax" to describe/attack the estate tax, for example. His 2006 book is called *Words That Work: It's Not What You Say, It's What People Hear*.) Whether you love or loathe Luntz's politics, it is difficult to argue that the man doesn't know marketing. In 2003, The Andrea and Charles Bronfman Philanthropies engaged Luntz to conduct focus groups and interviews with young Jews in an effort to identify practices to cultivate, and those to avoid, when marketing Israel to young American Jews.

The result is **a thorough, detailed and well-crafted report**. As an under-30 American Jew, with many friends in the same demographic (both "affiliated" and "unaffiliated"), I think Luntz makes fantastic points:

The young Jews we listened to relate strongly to their identity but not in the same way as their parents and grandparents. For this audience, culture has replaced tradition and spirituality has replaced religion... Older Jews who grew up with the establishment of the state of Israel and the Six Day War witnessed a remarkable record of achievement. The reality of young Jews is informed by Rabin's assassination and the second intifada. The impact of this is immediately evident in their use of the word "they" rather than "us" when they talk about Israel. The Jewish state is tangible and emotional for most Jewish organizations but is an abstraction for many younger Jews...

**Younger Jews want to make their own decisions about support for Israel.** Although most of our respondents support Israel, they reserve the right to question the Israeli position. They do not respond to advertising they view as expressions of "group think." There are no simple truths for these young Jews. They view themselves as free thinkers, and making their own decisions and choosing their own paths are very important. Ads featuring long lists of Israel's supporters, or black and white analysis of the situation wash over this audience. There is real power in conversation. They value the chance to listen, learn, and speak in a non-judgmental environment. They hunger for more opportunities to think and question.

**Young Jews tend to view themselves as Americans first and Jewish second...**

**Secular Jews choose a non-religious path deliberately...** They will reject any message or messenger that comes across as overtly religious. At the same time, it is imperative not to mistake young Jews' rejection of traditional models of Jewish life for a lack of interest in Judaism. They are interested in exploring their Jewish identity, but on their terms.

**Young Jews desperately want peace...** [P]eace is a high priority, much more so than security. They recoil at images and words of conflict and respond positively to any plea for peace.

Luntz summarizes the take-away lessons for marketing Israel to youth:

**Less is more.** Make your point quickly or it won't be made at all.

**Capture their attention.** This audience is inundated by marketing. Competition is intense. Relying on old messages such as "Israel is a good nation" or "all Jews should support Israel" will not be heard or remembered.

**Talk peace.**

**Facts are more important than slogans.** This audience wants a historical road map that brings them to their own conclusion – not a supposition forced upon them.

**Relate both Jewish and Israel messaging to America.**

**Overtly religious appeals will fail.**

**Use visuals more than dense copy or worse, donor lists...**

**Ask for their participation.** Give them a chance to do something but don't demand it.

Some of this (e.g. use visuals) is just simple marketing common sense. But other points -- especially "talk peace" and "facts are more important than slogans" -- appear blindingly obvious to my under-30 eyes, and yet seem completely at odds with much of the pro-Israel messaging I see.

Another reaction I have to this report is to wonder whether the target demographic for these advertisements might not be poorly defined. The young (unaffiliated) American Jews I know tend to see themselves as thoroughly integrated with the general society around them, and don't like to think that being Jewish separates them from their Gentile peers. I think any ad campaign that seems to target Jews in particular is bound to trigger an alarm bell for many of my Jewish friends. There is a story which I have heard many times (though I can't seem to find any verification for it at present, so it may be apocryphal) that the great Rabbi Yisroel Salanter favored translating the Talmud into German, reasoning that assimilated German Jews wanted to study whatever respectable German scholars studied, and that therefore the most effective way to promote Talmud study for Jews might be to make it accessible to Gentile scholars! I think a similar reasoning might be needed for American pro-Israel groups: don't market Israel to young Jews, market Israel to young people in general. I think that will most effectively reach the young Jews who most need reaching.

While Luntz focuses on the medium of printed or otherwise visual marketing materials, Gil Troy focuses on person-to-person and organizational interactions with young Jews. Writing under the auspices of **CAJE, the Coalition for Advancement of Jewish Education**, Troy argues that the traditional model of *hasbara* (which might be translated as explanation, interpretation, or even propaganda) has failed. Troy's reasoning as to *why* it has failed parallels Luntz's conclusions in many ways:

That functionalist and all-too-often propagandistic approach is actually part of the problem. We need true education and real ownership by our students of the facts and ideas, not a "line" we peddle to them to pass on to others...

Most Jewish students enter college with a superficial and brittle understanding of Israel and Zionism. This brittleness has negative consequences both left and right. For most, their happy-dappy, hava nagilah, blue-and-white stereotype of Israel is so fragile that it shatters at the first hit from a questioning roommate, let alone a hostile professor. For others, the same fragile construct leads to a smothering "Israel, right or wrong, love it or leave it" approach that stifles dissent and helps perpetuate the popular campus stereotype of Israel advocates and Jews as remarkably close-minded on the complex challenges facing Israel.

These "brittle" students, by the way, are usually the Israel "experts" on campus. An overwhelming majority of Jewish students enter college without even that superficial support of Israel, with their feelings for Israel first diluted by the ambivalent and distant approach of their parents to Zionism, then beaten down by media reports about Israeli "oppression."...

By having a broad, deep, intense identification with Israel, students can learn how to be "pro-Israel" without agreeing with every Israeli move, just as we are U.S. patriots without approving every mistake or misstep. By having a rich, balanced understanding of the relationship between Israel and

the Jewish people, we can disprove the ever-more-popular slur that Zionism is colonialism and assert our rights as an "indigenous people," people with a 4000-year-old link to a land that is consecrated by our history, by our theology, and by our identity. By studying Israel in context and with balance, our students will emerge with a robust Jewish and Zionist identity, one that can tolerate dissent and ambiguities, one that can sustain assault and doubt, one that can be dynamic and open rather than static and defensive.

**If I had to summarize the insights these two authors present with only one sentence, it would be this: *it is not enough to be right.***

It is certainly *necessary* to be right (i.e. it is not okay to be wrong), but it is not *sufficient* to be right. Speaking from personal experience (and, as in this entire post, not as a representative of BJPA), **I have often felt deeply uncomfortable with the tone of pro-Israel advocacy groups, even when I agreed with the positions they were advancing.** I had this feeling during the 2006 war against Hezbollah terrorism, during Operation Cast Lead against Hamas rocket attacks, and again now during the flotilla backlash. In all these cases I have agreed with the Israeli military actions in question, and have found most of the world's criticisms of these operations to be either misguided or unfair, and in some cases, virulently hateful. But in all these cases, I have also felt that the Jewish community has responded to the unreasonable rhetoric with unreasonable rhetoric of its own.

You can be right without taking on an alarmist tone, verging on the hysterical. You can be right without painting anyone who disagrees as either an antisemitic villain or as a fool being duped by antisemitic villains. You can be right without invoking Hitler every ten seconds. Persuasion is a form of seduction. It requires seeking out those who don't agree with you yet, and meeting them where they are, so that you can then lead them to where you want them to be. Project names like "Campus Watch," "Fuel for Truth," and "Stand With Us," as well as idioms like "winning the PR battle", tend to cast the discussion in terms of a war -- a war in which those who disagree presumably need to be *watched on campus*, or need their lies to be countered by *fueling the truth*, or to be *stood against*. That isn't going to win very many people over from the other side. Where is the seduction?

**Maybe there should be a sort of reverse J Street.** **J Street** wants to change the definition of "pro-Israel" to mean favoring a liberal view of the situation, including heavy doses of criticism of Israel. *A reverse J Street* would change the definition of "peace activism" to mean favoring the country actually pursuing peace (i.e. Israel). The reverse J Street would not be nominally pro-Israel at all -- it would be genuinely focused on building peace, but with the philosophy that security is an integral part of peace, and that peace and pacifism are not actually compatible. (Pacifism being another name for refusing to stand up to thugs who threaten peace.) Such an organization would seek, for the sake of Palestinians and Israelis alike, to build support for policies that weaken Hamas and Iran, the major players standing in the way of peace. It would not wave the Israeli flag, nor seek to promote Jewish nationalism, nor would it see Jews as its only, or even its primary, target audience. It would rather show favor to Israel because of Israel's genuine standing as the party in the Middle East which most wants and most seeks actual peace.

That's quite enough of my personal opinions. **What do you think?** Are Frank Luntz and Gil Troy right about how to reach young Jews? Am I right that we need to change the tone of our advocacy and build a "reverse J Street?"

