

# Michael Oren, Obama, J Street and the American Jewish Divide



President Obama and former Israeli Ambassador Michael Oren,  
July 2009

Source: White House Photo

Former Israeli Ambassador to Washington, Michael Oren is a native of West Orange, New Jersey best exemplifies the special relations between the two allies, Israel and the US.

With the publication of his memoir, [\*Ally: My Journey Across the American-Israeli Divide \(2015\)\*](#), he has another best seller. Previous ones were [\*Six Days of War: June 1967 and the Making of the Modern Middle East \(2003\)\*](#) and [\*Power, Faith, and Fantasy: America in the Middle East, 1776 to the Present \(2007\)\*](#). Having read *Ally*, I concur with praise from two pundits: Bret Stephens, the Tuesday *Wall Street Journal* columnist of note, and Vic Rosenthal, a former resident of Fresno, California, now a Jerusalem resident whose [\*Abu Yehuda\*](#) blog posts are a must read about an American living in Israel.

Bret Stephens' opening stanza in his June 29, 2015 *WSJ* column "[\*The President Against the Historian\*](#)" explains why Oren's memoir is a must read:

Michael Oren, Israel's former ambassador to the United States, has written the smartest and juiciest diplomatic memoir that I've read in years, and I've read my share. The book, called "Ally," has the added virtues of being politically relevant and historically important. This has the Obama administration—which doesn't come out looking

too good in Mr. Oren's account—in an epic snit.

Vic Rosenthal in his July 2, 2015, *Abu Yehuda* blog post, [Michael Oren is tired of American Jews, and so am I](#), addresses the yawning divide between Israel and American Jews, another of Oren's themes in *Ally*:

[Rabbi Eric Yoffie is offended](#) by Michael Oren, on behalf of (non-Orthodox) American Jews. These Jews, like America's "first Jewish president," turn out to be very easy to offend: just suggest that Israelis are more qualified than they are to decide the future of their country.

[Oren's new book](#) has offended both Yoffie and the Obama Administration, which has launched an all-out media blitz against him (as far as I know, Obama spokespeople haven't called him a 'chickenshit' yet, but give them time).

Yesterday morning, I dialed into an Israel Project (TIP)sponsored presentation by Oren . He told the listeners ,unlike the daylight between Obama and Netanyahu over the Iranian nuclear nightmare threat, that there is no daylight across the political divide in the obsessive democratic cockpit of the Knesset. As Oren tells it, whether Likud, Zionist Union and even Arab parties, all Israel is united that Iran achieving nuclear breakout is "a very bad deal".

Further, he said while some in the media, the Obama clique of "senior officials' and former aides have excoriated him for the early publication of his memoir, he was heartened that they haven't addressed the facts of what the Administration has perpetrated. [Listen](#) to this recorded TIP presentation by Oren and the following Q&A.



Oren's memoir has a lot to say about President Obama and his Administration acolytes isolating Israel over Iran and Netanyahu's vigorous defense of Israel sovereign right of

Israel to warn America and the untrusting world about Iran's nuclear threat and the very bad P5+1 deal. Perhaps a deal about to be announced in Vienna in a few days. Or if not simply kicked down the road. All while Iran's Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Khamenei and Mahdist acolytes of terrorism perfect the means of taking out the "little Satan", Israel, with one bomb and the "big Satan", the US, with a nuclear tipped ICBM.

Oren clearly takes pride that his well honed skills as a Columbia and Princeton educated historian who earned his PhD in Middle East Studies with the venerable Bernard Lewis. Not bad for a pudgy dyslexic, pigeon toed 15 year old who shook the hand of the late Israeli PM Yitzhak Rabin, when the latter was Ambassador Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary to the US. He exclaimed on that memorable occasion that some day he would be Israel's Ambassador. A late bloomer in high school Oren fulfilled his quest, slimed down hardened through rowing. Equipped with his backpack he made aliyah to Israel to go through grueling paratrooper training earn his coveted red beret along with an oath taken to defend Israel on Masada with his IDF comrades. He ends up in combat and later as a reserve officer during the Second Lebanon War as a military spokesperson to the foreign press. Along the way he meets his American wife Sally Edelstein, a Jersey girl, dancer and former San Francisco hippy groupie when she makes Aliyah to Israel and they ultimately form their Israeli family.

Ally depicts what it was like for an American-Israeli to fulfill his dream as his adopted country's Ambassador in Washington Israel's interests in the byzantine politics of the Obama era from 2009 to 2013. After leaving Washington, Oren turns home to Tel Aviv to lecture, teach at Harvard and Yale and write his memoir. Oren is now a member of the Kulanu party headed by former Likud Communications Commissioner and economic reformer Moshe Kahlon. Oren is a thinking liberal and both he and the family are members of a

Reform synagogue. His memoir culminates on a dramatic note when he and Sally attend a Bar Mitzvah celebration for 13 year olds at Kibbutz Na'an, with one of his former Washington Embassy aides, Lee Moser, mother of one of the bar mitzvah candidates when a red alert sounds, sirens wail and they scurry for shelter. He writes:

I held Sally's hand and glanced over my shoulder over my shoulder just as two Hamas rockets roared in. Then with twin booms that rattled the tin overhang and shook the ground below, the missiles exploded. Iron Dome interceptors, developed by Israel and funded by the United States, scored perfect hits. For moment afterward, as we emerged into the uncertain night, the glow of those bursts hovered over us, beaming like kindred stars.

All of which brings us to why he has frosted the J Street fawning rabbinic leadership of the Reform Movement in America and earned both Vic Rosenthal's and my admiration. This came on the cusp of having orchestrated a recent viewing and panel discussion of the Americans for Peace and Tolerance documentary, [J Street Challenge](#) with Pensacola pro-Israel colleagues; Rabbi Eric Tokajer of Brit Ahm synagogue, Mike Bates, 1330amWEBY general manger of "Your Turn host and Florida State Representative Mike Hill, a US Air Force Academy grad.

Vic Rosenthal notes a similar experience in his Fresno in his *Abu Yehuda* [column](#):

We tried to bring the local Jewish community – the organizations, the synagogues and individual Jews – along with us. With a few exceptions, mostly people like us who had lived in Israel or had relatives there, we had to drag them kicking and screaming. Most of our pro-Israel events drew the same few supporters.

The local Reform temple was probably the most frustrating.

A film critical of J Street, followed by a discussion? Absolutely not, it would be 'divisive'! The Jewish Federation and Hadassah were better, but it was always easier to organize an event about Jewish culture than Israel.

Is Oren right that American Jews are more interested in helping others than their own? Certainly they were far more upset about terrorism in Charleston than Jerusalem, and far more ready to criticize our Prime Minister than their own Administration. The Reform rabbi threw himself into activities to help the poor and homeless. He is seen on TV on panels with the Imam of the Islamic Cultural Center. He is an outspoken advocate of liberal causes, but he did not give a sermon in favor of PM Netanyahu's speech about Iran before the Congress.

In preparation for the recent *J Street Challenge* Pensacola event, we culled excerpts from Oren's *Ally* about his views on J Street and its defenders inside the Obama Administration, illustrative of what concerns Vic Rosenthal.

**On J Street's inclusion in Major American Jewish organizations meeting with Obama in 2009 p. 78**

He promised to be more evenhanded in asking all parties, not just Israelis, to make sacrifices for peace. Yet the meeting would be remembered as a turning point in the administration's approach toward the Jewish State.

Included for the first time with the mainstream Jewish leaders were the heads of Americans for Peace Now and the newly founded J Street, both organizations stridently critical of Israel and its traditional American supporters. Their presence rattled the other participants, many of whom had been personally slighted by these parvenus.

The President concluded, "When there is no daylight,

Israel just sits on the sidelines and that erodes our credibility with the Arabs”.

Commenting on the discussion, J Street founder Jeremy Ben Ami cited Obama’s ability to connect with the Muslim World and his immense standing in America and the World. “He was very clear that this is a moment that has to be seized and he intends to seize it. By contrast the other American Jewish leaders emerged from the meeting concerned about Obama’s departure from the long standing principle of “no daylight” in U.S. –Israel relations.

### **On J Street’s promotion of the Goldstone Report that Maligned Israel in Operation Cast Lead in 2008 – 2009 p. 102**

Though J Street refrained from formally endorsing the [Goldstone Report], activists in the organization escorted Goldstone to Congress for meetings with progressive members. Assistant Secretary of State Michael Posner told the UNHRC of America’s disappointment with the document’s double standards. But he also cited Goldstone’s ‘distinguished record of public service” and called on Palestinians to investigate Hamas abuses. This, for Israelis, was tantamount to asking al-Qaeda to investigate 9/11.

### **On the contretemps between the Israeli Embassy and J Street P. 107**

Irksome was the embassy’s continued imbroglio with J Street. Unlike my predecessor, Sallai Meridor, who had shunned the lobby, I initially engaged it in a dialogue. I had no illusions about the group, which received funds from anti-Israel contributors, supported every legislator critical of Israel, and stridently attacked mainstream American Jewish leaders. Though J Street defined itself as “pro-Israel” and “pro-peace”, its logo bore no connection to Israel whatsoever, not even the color blue, and

portrayed other pro-Israel organizations as anti-Israel. Before becoming Ambassador, I chanced to meet one J Street board member and asked him why he had joined. "I'm uncomfortable with the special relationship," he told me. "I want to normalize U.S.-Israel ties."

Outrageously, J Street members hosted Goldstone in Congress and lobbied against sanctions on Iran. These actions were deeply deleterious to Israel's security – "they endangered seven million Israelis," I said –and made interacting with J Street virtually impossible. Both the Prime Minister [Netanyahu] and the foreign minister [Avigdor Liberman] vetoed my participation in its annual conference.

### **On the Obama White House relations with J Street p. 108**

J Street ...fashioned itself as the Administration's wing in the American Jewish Community. Obama acknowledged that fact by sending his National Security Advisor [former Marine General] Jim Jones, one of Washington's most powerful officials to greet the organization. "I'm honored to represent President Obama at the first national J Street conference. And you can be sure that this administration will be represented at all other J Street conferences..." Obama's newly appointed advisor on anti-Semitism, Hannah Rosenthal, an early J Street supporter, issued her first denunciation not of anti-Semites, but rather of me for boycotting the summit.

Michael Oren's *Ally* might be considered a 21<sup>st</sup> Century version of Emile Zola's *J'accuse*. Oren, like Zola in the fin de siècle [Dreyfus affair](#), addresses the calumnies of President Obama, nurtured in Muslim Indonesia, creating daylight isolating Israeli PM Netanyahu over nuclear Iran and recognition of a Faux Palestinian State. Daylight promised to Obama's Chicago anti-Israel confreres, [Rashid Khalidi](#), holder of the [Edward Said Endowed Chair on Modern Arab Studies](#)

at Columbia and Ali Abunimah , editor of [\*The Electronic Intifada\*](#) blog, that he wouldn't forget them. Oren chronicles how Obama delivered on that promise.