



# Shalom

## Magazine

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### **AIPAC Policy Conference – A View from a “Veteran”**

*By Sherry Alpert*

The good news is that Donald Trump and his detractors did not hijack the 2016 AIPAC Policy Conference in Washington. The bad news is that they tried to.

I first attended AIPAC during the 2008 presidential campaign. It hurt to watch Hillary Clinton read a speech the morning after the California primary, when she had just lost the nomination to Barack Obama. I wondered if it were the same speech she would have given had she won.

Then Obama spoke, using the teleprompters on each side of the podium, enabling him to make continuous eye contact with the audience. That was when I understood the pervasive power of the teleprompter. Obama spoke rousing words supporting Israel, even about moving the U.S. Embassy from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem. But the next day he retracted the embassy remark - and has never again spoke at AIPAC during his presidency.

About 300 Reform rabbis, led by my former rabbi, had threatened to walk out during Trump's AIPAC speech. As a public relations consultant, I was concerned about their using the media the previous week to publicize their protest of Trump's "message of hate" and divert the spotlight from his views on Israel. A walkout would have undermined AIPAC's impartiality to all Democratic and Republican Presidential candidates, Congress and the White House.

To be clear, AIPAC's mission is to maintain a strong U.S.-Israel relationship, no matter who is in office. The organization neither endorses nor donates to any politician. It educates them from the local and state levels to the federal level, so that they will support the only democracy in the Middle East.

Throughout the conference, AIPAC made announcements asking us to show respect for all speakers. However, a record 18,000-plus people attended, requiring a venue change for general sessions, from the gymnasium-style Convention Center to the nearby stadium-style Verizon Center. The result was that all of us in the "cheap seats" (who do not make additional donations to AIPAC) would be seated in the rafters. That meant the media would not see the 300 rabbis walking out.

Noticeably absent from the conference was the only Jewish presi-

dential candidate, Sen. Bernie Sanders, who claimed a "scheduling conflict." None of the other presidential candidates had trouble arranging their schedules to accept AIPAC's speaking invitation. Sanders just didn't "feel the Bern" for AIPAC.

Each of the four presidential candidates took the floor for 25-30 minutes.

Governor John Kasich blundered by reading his speech, rather than the two teleprompters, minimizing his eye contact with the audience. Nevertheless, we loudly applauded his support of Israel for being on the frontlines fighting civilian terrorists on the street. He also called the Iran nuclear deal a delay, not a required dismantling, of Iran's nuclear capabilities.

Then Trump made a grand entrance from the side, surrounded by five security guards. I looked around the rafters and saw no one walking out. Isolated groups, including college students standing in front of us, howled. I cringed in my seat. [Reportedly, 100 rabbis walked out.]

Trump contradicted his earlier pledge to be "neutral" in the Israeli-Palestinian negotiations by announcing his support for relocating the U.S. Embassy to Jerusalem. The loudest howl from Trump's fans came when he declared, "President Obama is in his final year - YAY!" We looked at our friends in disbelief - that a presidential candidate could utter words fitting for a kindergarten classroom.

Senator Ted Cruz used a teleprompter, noting that Trump was mistaken in thinking that Palestinians existed in 1948. I did not recall Trump saying that. Cheers were loud.

Making a grand entrance hours earlier, Hillary Clinton gave one of her most rousing speeches. I listened carefully to discern any differences from the views she expressed while serving as President Obama's Secretary of State. For example, she told AIPAC a few years ago that Israel must stop building apartments in a Jewish neighborhood in East Jerusalem.

The only weakness I perceived in this speech was a cursory mention of the "benefits" of the Iran nuclear deal. Otherwise, she detailed her knowledge of how Israel gained its independence in a dangerous neighborhood, and why the U.S. must support it. Then she posed with the big givers on the floor for selfies.

Vice President Joe Biden also spoke. The previous times I had heard him address AIPAC, Biden seemed to be visibly uncomfortable speaking for the White House, but exuberant when he talked about his friendship with Golda Meir. He expressed outrage at the terrorist attack the previous week that killed an American tourist near where he was meeting with Prime Minister Netanyahu.

The morning after the presidential candidates' speeches, AIPAC National President Lillian Pinkus emailed us, stating that AIPAC "takes great offense" at both the raucous behavior of the Trump supporters and Trump's remarks denigrating the White House. Amen.

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