

JEWISH EXPONENT

— WHAT IT MEANS TO BE JEWISH IN PHILADELPHIA —

Point-Counterpoint | Israel Panel at NMAJH - Jewish Exponent

The Jewish Museum's Balancing Act

By Steve Feldman and Kevin Ross

You are visiting the playground with your kids or grandkids. Four kids are sitting on one end of the seesaw. The other side is empty. The seesaw, of course, is not moving, and the kids are just sitting there on the ground. Their guardians don't want any of your kids or grandkids to sit on the other side — that might spoil things.

A similar lack of balance played out at the National Museum of American Jewish History on April 17. The museum presented a panel discussion titled “America’s Israel Policy: Next Voices.” But with three avowed progressives and a fourth person left of center — and no one on the other side — it was (almost) pointless.

The museum billed the program as a discussion about “What matters to young American Jews when it comes to Israel?” with the following description: “In the last decade, new voices have emerged at the forefront of discussions and debate on U.S.-Israel policy — voices that are shaping conversations on college campuses and marching in the streets. In this lively discussion, students join policy experts for a discussion on the present and future of U.S. foreign policy in the Middle East (including Israel and Iran), what matters to young American Jews, and what’s at stake on all sides.”

But it really was not about “all sides,” and apparently was never intended to be.

The event perverted the state of affairs with regard to the Jewish state within the Jewish community. Any viewpoints from the right of center or from observant Jews were intentionally shut out by the museum. It is as if they did not exist. Out of sight — and hearing — out of mind?

The panelists were: Jeremy Ben-Ami, national president of [J Street](#); Matan Arad-Neeman, listed as a “Haverford College sophomore and member of the J Street National Student Board”; Amanda Berman, co-founder and president of [Zioness Movement](#); and Sophia Kruger, former head of [PIPAC](#), AIPAC’s on-campus presence at the University of Pennsylvania.

- While J Street describes itself as “pro-Israel,” its actions and activities are anything but. Notorious Israel critics such as George Soros, Bill Benter, Mehmet Celebi and the Foundation for Middle East Peace, the Ploughshares Fund and the Rockefeller Brothers Fund have been among J Street’s donors. J Street has collaborated with other anti-Israel groups such as Students for Justice in Palestine and Jewish Voice for Peace and it opposed the Anti-Israel Boycott Act.
- Arad-Neeman’s Facebook timeline includes a post opp-osing Birthright and another in support of the radical anti-Israel group IfNotNow.

- Berman’s Zioness Movement is a self-described “progressive” organization.
- Kruger made it clear that she no longer had a connection to AIPAC and was representing herself and not that organization. Some of her remarks included, “People can and should be critical of Israel,” “Being pro-Israel and pro-Palestinian — for me — very much go together” and an admission that she would not have voted for Benjamin Netanyahu in the Israeli election.

Does the panel seem balanced to you?

It did not seem balanced to [Greater Philadelphia ZOA](#) either.

In fact, when ZOA pointed out to museum officials the obvious lack of balance in the panel that they assembled, we were told that that was only our opinion, and that their “consultants” said it was balanced.

We even reached out to the foundation that funded the event. When ZOA pointed out the imbalance, a foundation official agreed that another perspective should be added to the panel. But museum officials still refused.

Thus, a distorted view of young Jewish attitudes about Israel, plus the J Street leader’s lies and distortions, were offered to the paltry audience and whomever may have been watching the event online.

Ben-Ami actually said, for example, that between the three parties in the peace process — the United States, Israel and the Palestinian Authority — it is only the Palestinian Authority that wants to reach “a diplomatic agreement.” In reality, the Palestinian Authority has rejected every diplomatic offer.

Yes, the majority of Jews are on the political left — but do those of you entrenched there really only want an echo chamber?

There are indeed Jews under 35 who agree with a majority of Israeli Jews and the positions of the democratically elected government of Israel headed by Netanyahu, and/or who also appreciate the moves that President Donald Trump has made thus far which recognize that Jerusalem is the undivided and eternal capital of Israel and which strengthen Israel.

The Jewish museum of course is not the only place where there is imbalance when it comes to Israel.

ZOA officials recently met with the University of Pennsylvania’s [Middle East Center](#) representatives to discuss the center’s bias as well as its lack of diversity — a violation of Title VI rules.

The Middle East Center rarely brings in a speaker or offers a program that could be described as pro-Israel, yet offers a cornucopia of anti-Israel programs, presenters and information. In the last year, for example, it has hosted Breaking the Silence, Juan Cole, Rashid Khalidi and other anti-Israel academic luminaries.

The center’s presenters for its K-12 teacher training have included instructors who have signed online anti-Israel petitions. Materials on its website are decidedly Islam-centric.

While we do not expect organizations and institutions that have an ideological or political tilt to have balanced programs, ZOA expects more of communal, cultural and

educational institutions. We all should.

But since apparently they do not always, ZOA will continue our vigilance. When the Jewish museum and other supposedly apolitical institutions ignore or shut out voices and perspectives from the center or the right of center, then each of us who resides there ideologically — one-on-one or in other forums — must educate those we communicate with the facts about Israel's enemies.

Steve Feldman is executive director of the Zionist Organization of America's Greater Philadelphia Chapter. Kevin Ross is a co-president of Greater Philadelphia ZOA.

Museum as Safe Space for Civil Disagreement

by Ivy L. Barsky

Our recent program "[America's Israel Policy: Next Voices](#)" featured a lively conversation by college students, recent graduates and policy experts on current and future U.S. foreign policy in the Middle East, what matters to young American Jews and what Jewish students are experiencing on campus. The event was free and open to the public and livestreamed on Facebook.

"America's Israel Policy: Next Voices" was designed to address a complicated topic and provide a platform for young people who are often talked about but not included in this discussion. It has become increasingly difficult for American Jews to talk to each other about Israel because it sparks so much passion and disagreement. We are proud of the program that included articulate, smart, respectful participants — including impressive young voices. Our established organizations must do more to lift up these young voices and help them navigate their complex environments and shape the American Jewish communities of the future.

Our museum strives to be a "big tent" and trusted source of information to have these conversations. But if we want to fully explore the stories of American Jewish life, we have to be able to tackle conversations like this one, fully admitting that they will always be imperfect and that it is impossible to represent every opinion on the spectrum.

We sought expert opinions from across the political spectrum in creating a balanced, substantive conversation. The panel we assembled reflected a genuine diversity of perspectives, with real, material disagreement among the discussants — all of whom passionately support Israel but have widely disparate views on how to secure its future. The audience question-and-answer session also reflected a variety of viewpoints. Responses to the program were generally appreciative — attendees thought the conversation was meaningful and were glad they attended, though of course, they heard things they agreed with and those with which they disagreed.

We don't endorse one viewpoint over another, but we value being a forum for them. This happens in our Core Exhibition every day, where a wide range of information is presented and discussed, and participants have the chance to think about its relevance in their own lives and form their own opinions.

Programs like "America's Israel Policy: Next Voices" are just one part of what we do to educate visitors of all backgrounds about the American Jewish experience. We work to break down barriers and combat hate through education, welcoming more

than 10,000 schoolchildren each year and providing teacher professional development that reaches thousands more. We are recognized by leading Jewish funders for our American Jewish history curriculum, used in classrooms around the country. And we create original, widely respected special exhibitions, many of which go on to tour the country, that reach a broad public about how Jews have shaped and been shaped by America.

We will continue to ask hard questions and invite criticism in our endeavor to be a safe place for civil discourse, healthy debate and respectful disagreement around the challenging and often divisive issues affecting the Jewish community and beyond. We are privileged that the same freedoms that have made it possible for Jews to thrive in this country enable us to continue this civil discourse in the *Jewish Exponent*. We look forward to welcoming your readers — and visitors of all backgrounds — to find ways to connect to the Museum that are meaningful for them as we continue to explore, preserve and celebrate 365 years of Jewish life in America.

Ivy L. Barsky is the CEO of the National Museum of American Jewish History.