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Reform Jewish leader condemns Israeli occupation and settlements

Speaking at the Reform movement's biennial conference, Rabbi Rick Jacobs says occupation causes hardship to Palestinians and alienates Israel's friends.

By Allison Kaplan Sommer | Nov. 6, 2015 | 5:12 PM | 8

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The president of the Reform movement condemned Israel's occupation of the West Bank and its settlement policies as causing "pain and hardship to the Palestinians."

In his keynote address to the Union for Reform Judaism Biennial Thursday night, Rabbi Rick Jacobs said the occupation alienates Israel from friends and allies around the world and is fueling growing "intolerance" within Israeli society.

At the same time, Jacobs took pains to combine his message with strong support for Israel, denunciation of Palestinian terror, and a pledge to fight the BDS movement and other boycott efforts against the Jewish state.

"Many Jews, especially younger ones, feel that Israel has become too intolerant, not only of Arab citizens of Israel, but also of non-Orthodox Jews, Ethiopian Jews, LGBT Jews, asylum seekers, and others. Even as they may grieve for Israeli victims of terror, many cannot relate to the continued growth of settlements in the West Bank, or the weakening of democratic institutions like Israel's Supreme Court as a result of the constant attacks from some ultra-Orthodox and far right circles," Jacobs declared, speaking before the 5,000 Reform Jews gathered in Orlando, Florida, for the event.

"Our Reform movement has long opposed Israeli settlement policy in the West Bank. The occupation threatens the very Zionism that we hold dear – the living expression of a Jewish democratic state. It causes pain and hardship to the Palestinians and alienates Israel from friends and allies around the world."

At the same time, he added, "the Jewish state needs our movement to be staunch defenders of Israel. And we will never stop defending her right to exist, no matter the hostile arena."

"As the largest North American movement in Jewish life, we can and should play a key role in the efforts here against BDS – the boycott, divestment, and sanctions movement – a global effort to delegitimize the very existence of the one unique Jewish state, he said."

U.S. Vice President Joe Biden is set to address the Biennial at its Saturday evening plenary meeting. Jacob's speech took place on the eve of the arrival of Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu to the United States next week for a much-anticipated meeting with President Barack Obama and an address to the General Assembly of the Jewish Federations of North America.

In his speech, Jacobs tossed a barb at what he views as "well-funded campus anti-BDS efforts" — namely, Sheldon Adelson's hawkish group of "Campus Maccabees."

"Many Jewish students on campus believe, as do we, that their love for Israel not only justifies rebutting BDS, but requires them to challenge troubling Israeli policies that fail to live up to the Jewish tradition's highest ideals, and which alienate many who otherwise would more assertively support Israel," Jacobs said.

He reiterated his movement's support of a negotiated two state solution, which he said was being undermined from both right and left. "Too often, the Israeli and American Jewish establishment holds Palestinian leaders alone responsible for failed peace initiatives. But progressives are equally at fault for labeling Israel as the sole culprit in scuttling peace initiatives." A single state solution, he said, would be "unworkable and unsustainable."

He recalled his condolence meeting with Rabbanit Chana Henkin, after her son and daughter-in-law Naama and Eitam were killed by Palestinian terrorists in the West Bank last month, comparing it to his visit to Ahmed Dawabsheh, the young victim of the firebombing in the Palestinian village of Duma, who lost his entire family.

"Do we feel more pain for one of them?" Jacobs asked. Ultimately, he said, "the Zionism and Judaism we love and live require us to feel the pain of both families. Too much of our wider communal debate assumes that the chambers of our hearts have room for only one."

In relation to Israel, Jacobs said that the Reform movement presented an "alternative to the rigid and insular Judaism that permeates Israeli public life" that could "remind the Israeli state about the power and wisdom of a pluralistic approach to Jewish life."

The overarching message of Jacob's keynote speech was that U.S. Jewry in general — and the Reform movement in particular — needed to be about more than mere Jewish survival in order to attract and retain members. "We wouldn't be involved in Jewish life, let alone be here at this Biennial, if we didn't have a clearer, stronger reason. We're not just keeping the lights on. We're committed to doing something of ultimate significance.

"Today, being 'religious' has too often come to mean being intolerant and self-righteous, willfully ignorant of science, and deeply allergic to change. That's why many theologically liberal Jews and Christians have initiated a modern-day exodus from religious life," Jacobs said.

In his call for renewal and strengthening of Reform Judaism, he said that "those who hunger for social change and community may have retreated from religious life, but I don't believe for a second that they've lost their appetite."