

# Making Sense Of The 'Pro-Israel' Label | The Jewish Week

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## Gerald M. Steinberg

In the effort to win the growing political war against those seeking to delegitimize Israel, unity and coordination among diverse groups is essential -- just as in a shooting war involving guns, tanks, missiles, and terror. On university campuses, among church groups (the Presbyterians are voting on an anti-Israel divestment resolution in June), labor unions, and other venues, these attacks are multiplying. A divided Jewish community, fighting over the definition of “pro-Israel,” is not what we need now.

But divided we are. The New York community, for example, is dedicating a great deal of energy to debates over who should be allowed to march in the annual [Celebrate Israel Parade](#) (June 1), organized by the [Jewish Community Relations Council](#), and funded, in part, by the Israeli government. All sides agree that in order to march, an organization must be “pro-Israel” but disputes over the definition and limits of the “Zionist big tent” are intense. For some protestors, groups that support different forms of boycotts, including against “settlement products,” are considered over the line. But for others, criticism and protest are seen as vital in helping Israel in the long run.

Like the parade, the debate over the decision by the [Conference of Presidents of Major American Jewish Organizations](#) to reject the application of [J Street](#) also revolves around these issues. [Jeremy Ben-Ami](#), the founder and executive director of J Street, claims to be entirely “pro-peace and pro-Israel,” but many deeply committed supporters of Israel are not convinced. J Street’s case was not helped when it allied with a lobbying group for the Iranian regime, or defended Secretary of State Kerry’s use of the term “apartheid” (for which he quickly apologized).

In debates like this taking place in many communities, the need for clear definitions is increasingly important. Adopting the label of “pro-Israel” is not enough – it is too easy to present different faces to different audiences, or to remain silent on critical issues.

The obvious and most basic condition is the acceptance of the legitimacy of Israel as the independent state of the Jewish people, with status equal to the other 191 members of the United Nations. Jewish sovereign equality in the Land of Israel is the fundamental underpinning of Zionism, and rejection or hesitation regarding any part of this formulation invalidates the claim to the label “pro-Israel.” Thus, groups that are allied with or promote the BDS [boycott, divestment and sanctions] campaigns that seek the destruction of Israel and promote a “one-state” formula -- meaning the end of Jewish national sovereignty - - cannot be considered “pro-Israel.” They might be naively utopian or anti-Semitic, but they are not Zionists.

In addition, as Mideast expert Mitchell Bard has written, pro-Israel means respecting Israeli democracy and not lobbying the U.S. or any other government to substitute their views for the decisions made by Israeli voters and their elected representatives. After 2,000 years of exile and many sacrifices, the Jewish people fought hard for independence, which includes the right to make mistakes. Whether well-meaning or not, those who are convinced that Israelis are unable to run their own lives, that outsiders know what's best, and

are convinced that they are acting “to save Israel from itself ,” are paternalistic. They are responsible for major damage, and not “pro-Israel.”

Then there are the supposedly “pro-Israel” voices that bombard the Jewish community, the non-Jewish media, and other audiences with messaging that constantly criticizes Israel, far out of proportion and without context. Instead of celebrating Israeli achievements, they harp on the imperfections – and no society is perfect.

Furthermore, the term pro-Israel indicates pro-active support. So groups that have a “take it or leave it” attitude towards Zionism also do not qualify as pro-Israel. The “pro-Israel” critics, in particular, need to be much more visible in all of the battlefields where Israel is being demonized and singled out for attack. Recognition of pro-Israel status is not simply a matter of packaging; it is very much an issue of substance. The designation must be earned and displayed with pride.

*Gerald Steinberg is professor of political science at Bar Ilan University and heads NGO Monitor. He and Prof. Gil Troy will be participating at The Jewish Week-Bar Ilan Forum on “How Israel Can Win the PR War” on May 28 at 7:30 p.m. at Park Avenue Synagogue.*