

*Administration of Barack H. Obama, 2010*

**Interview With Yonit Levi of Channel 2 News**

*July 7, 2010*

*Ms. Levi.* President Barack Obama, shalom, and thank you so much for talking with us today.

*The President.* Thank you. Thank you very much.

*Hope for Middle East Peace*

*Ms. Levi.* I'd like to actually open up by asking you about hope, which was such a prominent notion in your campaign and in your Presidency. And how can you convey that concept of hope to Israelis, who've seen so many failed attempts at a peace process?

*The President.* Well, look, it's always a challenge. And one of the things I used to say during the campaign, but also at the beginning of my Presidency, is, being hopeful is not the same as being blindly optimistic. I think you have to be clear-eyed about the situation. And Israelis, rightly, look at the past and have skepticism about what's possible. They see the enmity of neighbors that surround them in a very tough neighborhood. They see a track record of attempts at peace where, even when concessions were made, a deal could not be consummated. They see rockets fired from Gaza or from areas in Lebanon and say to themselves that the hatreds or history are so deep-seated that change is not possible.

And yet if you think back to the founding of Israel, there were a lot of people who thought that that wasn't possible either. And if Herzl or Ben-Gurion were looking at Israel today, they would be astonished at what they saw: a country that's vibrant, that is growing economically at an extraordinary pace, that has overcome not just security challenges but also has been able to overcome challenges related to geography. And so that should be a great source of hope.

*Middle East Peace Process*

*Ms. Levi.* Is a peace agreement, in your opinion, can—it can be reached in the first term of your Presidency?

*The President.* I think so. I had an excellent meeting with Prime Minister Netanyahu. And I think that he is somebody who understands that we've got a fairly narrow window of opportunity. On the Palestinian side, moderates like Abu Mazen and Fayyad are, I think, willing to make the concessions and engage in negotiations that can result in peace. But their timeframe in power may be limited if they aren't able to deliver for their people.

There's a constant contest between moderates and rejectionists within the Arab world. And then there's the demographic challenges that Israel is going to be facing if it wants to remain not only a Jewish state but a democratic state. So you look at all these pressures and you say to yourself, we probably won't have a better opportunity than we have right now. And that has to be seized. Now, it's going to be wrenching. It's going to be difficult.

*Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu of Israel*

*Ms. Levi.* Do you believe Benjamin Netanyahu is the right man? You believe that he can bring peace?

*The President.* I think that not only is Prime Minister Netanyahu a smart and savvy politician, but the fact that he is not perceived as a dove in some ways can be helpful in the sense that any successful peace will have to include the hawks and the doves on both sides. And in the same way that Richard Nixon here in the United States was able to go to China because he had very strong anti-Communist credentials, I think Prime Minister Netanyahu may be very well positioned to bring this about. And in our conversations yesterday, I had the impression that Prime Minister Netanyahu isn't interested in just occupying a space, a position, but he's interested in being a statesman and putting his country on a more secure track.

So I hope that opportunity is seized. But ultimately, one of the things you learn very quickly, whether you're President or a Prime Minister, is that your power derives from the people. And it goes back to your first question—the Israeli people are going to have to overcome legitimate skepticism, more than legitimate fears, in order to get a change that I think will secure Israel for another 60 years.

### *Israel-U.S. Relations*

*Ms. Levi.* You know, you met with him on Tuesday, and you both said that the meeting was excellent. And, you know, perfect photo—an idyllic photo notwithstanding, it wasn't exactly—hasn't exactly been smooth sailing in your relationship so far.

*The President.* Well, some of this has been greatly overstated. I mean, the last time that the Prime Minister came here, we had a terrific meeting. It was so good that it spilled over. And the reports then came out that somehow I had snubbed the Prime Minister, when in fact what had happened was the Prime Minister was interested and eager enough in working out some issues that he wanted to convene with his team, and then I came back and we had this meeting. That—

*Ms. Levi.* And the fact that there was no—there were no briefings, no photo ops in that meeting, it doesn't—

*The President.* Well, I mean, all of that fed this impression that somehow there were more strains than there were.

Now, I don't want to be disingenuous. There have been differences. I think that our view on settlements, for example, is consistent with all previous U.S. administrations. But the fact of the matter is, is that that view was always voiced not in the spirit of trying to undermine Israel's security, but to strengthen it. Because we believe strongly that if we can achieve calm on the ground that will help in the negotiations that lead to peace. And in fact, the moratorium that's been in place, I think, has been conducive to us rebuilding trust on all sides. And as a consequence, I'm more optimistic about the ability to get into direct talks.

### *Middle East Peace Process*

*Ms. Levi.* Will you, by the way, extend—request that Israel extends that settlement freeze after September?

*The President.* You know, what I want is for us to get into direct talks. Now, as I said yesterday, I think that if you have direct talks between Abu Mazen, Netanyahu, their teams, that builds trust. And trust then allows for both sides to not be so jumpy or paranoid about every single move that's being made, whether it's related to Jerusalem or any of the other issues that have to be dealt with, because people feel as if there's a forum in which conflicts can get resolved. And the problem, what we've had over the last several years is just a constant erosion of trust that has been counterproductive.

## *Israel-U.S. Relations*

*Ms. Levi.* Now, I must ask you this, Mr. President, there are people in Israel who are anxious about you—

*The President.* Right.

*Ms. Levi.* —and who—you know, I'm quoting their sentiments—feel like you don't have a special connection to Israel. How do you respond to that?

*The President.* Well, it's interesting, this is the thing that actually surfaced even before I was elected President, in some of the talk that was circulating within the Jewish American community. Ironically, I've got a Chief of Staff named Rahm Israel Emanuel. My top political adviser is somebody who's a descendent of Holocaust survivors. My closeness to the Jewish American community was probably what propelled me to the U.S. Senate.

And my not just knowledge but sympathy and identification with the Jewish experience is rooted in part because of the historic connection between the African American freedom movement here in the United States and the civil rights efforts of Jewish Americans and some of the same impulses that led to the creation of Israel.

And so I think what this arises from—some of it may just be the fact that my middle name is Hussein, and that creates suspicion. Some of it may have to do with the fact that I have actively reached out to the Muslim community, and I think that sometimes, particularly in the Middle East, there's the feeling of the friend of my enemy must be my enemy. And the truth of the matter is, is that my outreach to the Muslim community is designed precisely to reduce the antagonism and the dangers posed by a hostile Muslim world to Israel and to the West.

*Ms. Levi.* So that fear, the tangible fear that some Israelis have that their best ally in the world might abandon them is—

*The President.* Yeah, well, it's pretty hard to square with the fact that not only have I, in every speech that I've ever given, talked about the unbreakable bond to Israel, not only did I describe that special relationship and condemn those who would try to drive a rift between us in Cairo in front of a Muslim audience, but if you look at our actions—and Prime Minister Netanyahu will confirm this, and even critics, I think, will have to confirm that the United States, under my administration, has provided more security assistance to Israel than any administration in history. And we've got greater security cooperation between our two countries than at any time in our history. And the single most important threat to Israel, Iran and its potential possession of a nuclear weapon, has been my number-one foreign policy priority over the course of the last 18 months. So it's hard to, I think, look at that track record and look at my public statements and in any way think that my passions for Israel's survival, its security, and its people are in any way diminished.

## *Iran*

*Ms. Levi.* You mentioned Iran, and obviously, you instituted tough sanctions against Iran. You said that with the meeting with Netanyahu. How long are you going to give the Iranian President, and what are you willing to do if he continues with his nuclear program?

*The President.* Well, what I've said consistently is, is that it is unacceptable for Iran to possess a nuclear weapon, that we're going to do everything we can to prevent that from happening. What I've also tried to do is build a international consensus so that Iran can't somehow play a victim, can't suggest somehow that they're being singled out by the West. They

are the only country that has not been able to convince the International Atomic Energy Agency that they are pursuing nuclear power for peaceful means. It's not hard to do, but they haven't been able to do it because all indicators are that they are in fact pursuing a nuclear weapon.

So we just pursued the toughest sanctions that have ever been applied against the Iranian Government. We followed those up with U.S. sanctions that are going to be tough. Allies and partners are following up with those sanctions. We want to continually ratchet up the costs of them pursuing this nuclear program.

Now, will that work? We don't know. And we are going to continue to keep the door open for a diplomatic resolution of this challenge. But I assure you that I have not taken options off the table.

### *Israel-U.S. Relations*

*Ms. Levi.* Are you concerned that Prime Minister Netanyahu might try unilaterally to attack Iran?

*The President.* You know what? I think that the relationship that—the U.S. and Israel is sufficiently strong that neither of us try to surprise each other, but we try to coordinate on issues of mutual concern. And that approach is one that I think Prime Minister Netanyahu is committed to.

### *The Presidency/President's Historical Significance*

*Ms. Levi.* You know, I must ask you—I was—forgive me for getting nostalgic—I was here—well, not here—in Chicago the night of the election. And I remember seeing that great mass of people and looking at them and looking at you and thinking, there is no man on Earth that is capable of living up to those expectations. [*Laughter*] Do you feel that burden every day?

*The President.* Oh, absolutely. Look, our campaign, I think, became a repository for a lot of hopes and a lot of dreams, and I think that's a good thing. But we understood that governance is different from campaigning. It's hard. It's complicated. It involves making choices, some of them not very attractive choices, and that at any given stage, there are going to be some people who are disappointed.

But what keeps me hopeful is not any oversized view of my own capabilities; what keeps me hopeful is that the more I meet people here in this country, the more I meet people abroad, the more convinced I am that there is a common humanity, a common set of aspirations that people have for their children. I think there's a core decency to people that sometimes history, institutions, lack of opportunity prevent from being realized, and that the general trajectory of history is in a positive direction. But it takes time. And so my job is to do my small part to move the ball forward.

One of my favorite phrases is from Martin Luther King, who said, "The arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends towards justice." And I believe that. And I think that that's consummate with Jewish traditions, that sense that if we are working hard, if we apply the principles of *tikkun* and repairing the world, that it's possible for us not to create a perfect world, but one that's a little more just, a little more fair, a little better for our children. I continue to believe that.

*Ms. Levi.* My final question, Mr. President. Much has been made about, obviously, your historic victory and being the first African American President. Can I ask you to share with us that moment, where the enormity of the historic significance sort of hit you?

*The President.* I don't think it still has hit me yet.

*Ms. Levi.* Really?

*The President.* We were just talking about how you broke some ground as a woman anchor, and I'm sure that's not what you think about every day. You think about, can I get this story done? Am I performing in a way that meets my standards?

And that's how you feel when you're in the Presidency. I think you have a lot of responsibilities and a lot of concerns, and each day you are just trying to make sure that you are, A, doing the best you can; B, making sure that you're making decisions for the right reason.

And I do think that there have been moments in the Presidency when I'm making a decision about deploying young men and women into the battlefield, or we're making very consequential decisions about the world economy, where the answers are not always a hundred percent obvious, and you're making judgment calls, and it's during those moments where you are reminded that you can't behave like a politician. You can't put your finger out to the wind; you can't base your actions on polls. You have to make a decision on what you think is right, and then let history judge how you did.

*Ms. Levi.* Can you tell us what is the thing you miss most about your life before the Presidency?

*The President.* Taking walks. There is a value to anonymity in terms of just being able to wander around, sit on a park bench, take your kids to get ice cream without having Secret Service and helicopters over you. That part of this life I'll never get used to. In fact, I remember when I first visited Jerusalem, I could wander through the Old City and haggle for some gifts to bring back to Michelle or stand at the Wailing Wall and people didn't know who I was. And that is a profound pleasure that is very hard to experience now. The last time—the second time I went to the Wailing Wall, I put my prayer, and somebody pulled it out, and the next thing I know it was printed in the newspaper.

*Ms. Levi.* Yeah. [*Laughter*]

*The President.* And that, I think, was——

*Ms. Levi.* We have to do our job. [*Laughter*]

*The President.* ——that was a pretty good metaphor for the changes that you experience as time goes on.

*Ms. Levi.* Indeed a change. Thank you so much, Mr. President.

*The President.* Thank you. I enjoyed it.

*Ms. Levi.* Thank you.

*The President.* Take care.

NOTE: The President spoke at 5:23 p.m. in the Diplomatic Reception Room at the White House. In his remarks, he referred to President Mahmoud Abbas (Abu Mazen) and Prime Minister Salam Fayyad of the Palestinian Authority. Ms. Levi referred to President Mahmud

Ahmadi-nejad of Iran. The transcript was released by the Office of the Press Secretary on July 8.

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