

Biden and the Jews (Excerpt)
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DENVER (JTA) -- Before he announced his vice presidential pick, Barack Obama said he wanted someone to spar with but who ultimately would be loyal enough to create a comfortable working relationship.

No one knew then that Obama had picked his U.S. Senate colleague Joe Biden (D-Del.), 65, but the Democratic presidential candidate's ad fit Biden's relationship with the Jewish community to a tee.

On Saturday, two days before the start of the Democratic National Convention here, Obama chose Biden to be the No. 2 man on the party's ticket.

The loquacious Biden, a senator since 1973, has sparred frequently with the pro-Israel community and with Israelis, particularly on the issue of settlements. But he has a sterling voting record on pro-Israel issues and as chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee has helped shepherd through key pro-Israel legislation.

His straightforwardness is considered an asset, even among those supporters who have disagreed with him.

"He's open minded, he votes his own conscience," said Gary Erlbaum, a Philadelphia-based real estate developer who is backing Republican candidate John McCain for president but has supported Biden's Senate campaigns.

"I don't always agree with him" -- Biden is a staunch critic of the Bush administration's Iraq policy, Erlbaum helped found the pro-Iraq war group Freedom's Watch -- but "he does not try to sugarcoat."

Biden has been especially sharp in criticizing the United States and Israel in their failure to support Mahmoud Abbas in 2003, when he was the Palestinian Authority prime minister attempting to establish a power base to challenge then-President Yasser Arafat.

Abbas eventually was sidelined by Arafat, allowing the Palestinian leader to continue his policies of corruption and stasis until his death -- and creating a vacuum ultimately filled in large part by Hamas terrorists.

"I've had my shouting matches over 25 years, privately, in my office and in the offices of prime ministers," Biden said in a March 2007 interview with the Forward. "I've had disagreements. Israel's a democracy and they make mistakes. But the notion that somehow if Israel just did the right thing, [the peace process] would work, I mean that's the premise, give me a break."

In that same interview, Biden firmly rejected calls for the United States to distance itself from Israel and assume a more neutral role in brokering Middle East peace talks.

"The suffering is real on both sides, but there is a side that can impact on ending it," he said. "The responsibility rests on those who will not acknowledge the right of Israel to exist, will not play fair, will not deal, will not renounce terror."

Just two months earlier, Biden took the lead in the Senate in rejecting the Iraq Study Group's assertion that the United States would not be able to achieve its goals in Iraq unless it "deals directly with the Arab-Israeli conflict."

"I do not accept the notion of linkage between Iraq and the Arab-Israeli conflict," Biden said during his opening remarks at a Jan. 17, 2007 Senate hearing. "Arab-Israeli peace is worth pursuing vigorously on its own merits, but even if a peace treaty were signed tomorrow, it would not end the civil war in Iraq."

Biden's longstanding relationship with the Jewish community should reassure Jews who still feel anxious about Obama, the Illinois senator who has deep ties to the Chicago Jewish community but has been on the national stage barely four years, said Cameron Kerry.

"I've seen the enormous respect [Biden] commands in the pro-Israel community," said Kerry, a convert to Judaism and a senior adviser to the 2004 presidential campaign of his brother, U.S. Sen. John Kerry (D-Mass.). "He has a well-established record, he knows the issues, and he can talk the talk. He may be the best goyishe surrogate I've seen in the Jewish community."

Biden's son married into a Jewish family, but his keen interest in the region dates back to his first visit as a senator, not long before the 1973 Yom Kippur. He met Israel's then-prime minister, Golda Meir.

In an interview with Shalom TV last year, when he launched his own presidential bid, Biden said he came away from that meeting understanding that "there is this inextricable tie between culture, religion, ethnicity that most people don't fully understand -- that is unique and so strong with Jews worldwide."

"When I was a young senator, I used to say, 'If I were a Jew I'd be a Zionist.' I am a Zionist," he said. "You don't have to be a Jew to be a Zionist."

Mark Gittenstein, who worked for Biden from 1976 to 1989, said no one matched his breadth of knowledge on Israel -- not even his Jewish staffers.

"He was much more knowledgeable about Israel and its problems than I was," Gittenstein said.

Biden has a keen understanding of the Holocaust, partly because of his relationship with Tom Lantos, the late California Democratic congressman who was the only Holocaust survivor elected to the U.S. House of Representatives.

Biden hired Lantos as an adviser in the late 1970s, a leap into politics that led the Hungarian-born economist to consider a political career.

At a memorial service for Lantos in February, Biden cracked up the somber crowd recalling how Lantos marveled at his son-in-laws very Middle American names.

"My daughters married Aryans," Biden recalled Lantos as saying.

More substantively, his tutoring by Lantos led Biden to take the lead on genocide issues. Biden now champions efforts to isolate Sudan over the massacre of hundreds of thousands of civilians in its restive Darfur province.

"Any country that engages in genocide forfeits their sovereignty," he said to applause at a National Jewish Democratic Council presidential candidate forum last year.

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