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Israeli Students Reflect on Obama's Speech

President Obama gave a fervent address to students from universities in Israel on Thursday during his first presidential trip to the country. Some of the students shared their views of the speech with The Times.

The Power of Language

BY NANA ARIEL

Ms. Ariel, 27, is a graduate student and a lecturer in arts and humanities at Tel Aviv University. She lives in Tel Aviv with her partner and their 5-month-old daughter.

Obama's speech in Jerusalem can teach the Israeli leaders a thing or two about public speaking. A politician addressing the public directly, clearly and eloquently is not a common occurrence in the Holy Land. Obama presented an inspiring idealistic vision, bravely related to the immorality of the continuing Israeli occupation, and called for a deep change of consciousness, yet avoided any explicit criticism.

The expectation of many for Obama to be our rescuer from a leadership of peace refusers, to re-earn his Nobel Prize in the Middle East, is a false one. Obviously constrained by multiple interests, among them the bear hug of the Jewish American lobby, Obama can't, not now, maybe not ever, break the limits of polite diplomacy. The Israeli public could save itself only by actively and stubbornly demanding social and political justice. As Obama said himself, it is the public's responsibility to push its politicians to take risks.

Obama can't save the inhabitants of this land from self-destruction, but he can demonstrate, and did so in his speech, the power of language to build dialogue. It is the power to unite the people not on the basis of the victimizing collective memory of the Jewish past, but on hope for a better future. Obama called on the Israeli public to write its own history using empathy and identification with the suffering of others, to soberly see that peace is necessary, just and possible. The future will tell whether Obama's exiting rhetoric could be transformed into significant civil actions.