

HOW THE JEWISH COMMUNITY WILL REMEMBER STEPHEN HARPER

By **Sheri Shefa, Staff Reporter**

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For those who revered outgoing Prime Minister Stephen Harper for his principled stance on the Israeli-Arab conflict and for his support of the Jewish community, the Oct. 19 election was a sad day in Canadian history.

Following three consecutive election victories in 2006, 2008 and 2011 – the first time a

Conservative party had accomplished this in more than 50 years – Justin Trudeau’s Liberals succeeded in winning a majority government, ending Harper’s decade-long run as Canada’s leader.

For better or worse, Harper’s legacy, in part, will be framed by his unwavering support of Israel and the Jews, and he’ll be remembered by many in the Jewish community as the best friend Israel ever had.

Avi Benlolo, president and CEO of Friends of Simon Wiesenthal Centre for Holocaust Studies, said Harper’s support of Israel and Canada’s Jewish community was more than symbolic.

"I think Mr. Harper's outspoken support of Israel benefited the Jewish state and the Jewish community in a substantial way. This support was perhaps no more tangible than when he withdrew financial support for pro-Palestinian NGOs, including the Canadian Arab Federation, Kairos and Palestine House, because he felt these organizations were perpetuating domestic and international anti-Semitism," Benlolo said.

"Most relevant to the Jewish community here in Canada was Mr. Harper's signing of the Ottawa Protocol to Combat Anti-Semitism. The protocol was a historic declaration that hatred will not be tolerated in Canada. It also set out an action plan for supporting initiatives to combat anti-Semitism and provided a framework for other nations to follow."

Shimon Fogel, CEO and president of the Centre for Israel and Jewish Affairs, agreed that Harper's support for Israel was significant.

"Beyond the advances in the bilateral relationship – and there were many, including, military and intelligence co-operation, trade, innovation and technology, health care, agriculture, cyber security and the like – the role played by Canada in the diplomatic arena was vital for Israel," Fogel said.

Nelson Wiseman, a professor of political science at the University of Toronto, said although all Canadian parties are supportive of Israel, "obviously, he was the most outspoken of all the prime ministers we've had... The difference is that Harper was the most forward in his rhetoric, and that was acknowledged in Israel."

In 2014, Harper became the first Canadian prime minister to address the Knesset, and later that year, he was given an honorary degree from Tel Aviv University.

Wiseman said Harper also brought an unprecedented number of Jews into the Conservative party, both as contributors and as voters.

Myer Siemiatycki, a professor of politics and public administration at Ryerson University, said Harper's legacy, as it relates to Israel and Canadian Jews, "will be highly polarized."

"There will be, in the Jewish community, a sentiment among some that he was the greatest friend to Israel and world Jewry that Canada has ever

produced, and there will be others who believe that his role was not a constructive one for Israel and that maybe even the whole enterprise of his approach to Israel had more to do with what Israel and the Jews could do for Harper than what he could do for Israel and the Jews,” Siemiatycki said.

He added that he doesn't want to minimize the significance of Harper's consistent affirmations that pro-Israel Jews were not alone in their concern for the well-being of Israel.

“But the bigger question, in a way, is did that support tangibly produce benefits for Israel and would a different approach to Israel and the Palestinians and the Middle East yield more benefits? I have no doubt that for some Jews, Harper represented, and was, a feel-good ally, but did it go beyond that? I think that's debatable.”

Karen Mock, former director of the League for Human Rights of B'nai Brith Canada and co-founder of JSpace, an organization that represents left-leaning Zionists, said Harper's outspoken support of Israel “was a benefit to the Jews in that it made us feel better to hear our prime minister say the kinds of things that he did. But in my view, there was not a tangible benefit to Israel in terms of moving the peace process forward and enhancing her safety and security, enhancing negotiations with neighbours who are hostile, or enhancing the functioning of the UN in terms of our ability to negotiate.”

She said Harper may also be remembered for the niqab controversy that stemmed from a 2011 Conservative government policy banning women from covering their faces while taking their citizenship oaths. Harper argued that it was a national security measure.

“Mr. Harper went crazy over two women in 10 years who wanted to wear a niqab when swearing an oath, after being identified by the authorities, and having a microphone so they can hear it verbalized,” said Mock, who ran unsuccessfully for the Liberals in Thornhill in 2011.

She added that if Harper has a legacy, in her opinion, it's not a positive one.

“The legacy is that some people felt good, but it's more a 'fallout,' because there was a fractiousness and divisiveness in the community, and now we need to embark on a healing process,” she said.

“Pitting one group against another – that is the legacy of Harper. Pitting Jews against Jews, Muslims against Jews, Jews against Arabs.”

Of course, there are many who disagree and will always be grateful to Harper for his steadfast, vocal support of Israel. In the hours following the election last week, Dan Illouz, a leading political strategist and analyst in Israel, and a former Canadian, started a campaign called, “The World Thanks Stephen Harper for his Leadership,” with a goal of collecting 100,000 signatures.

“Harper was seen as a great supporter of Israel, but also as a unique voice on the world stage, with many considering him the only world leader to put values before political calculations,” Illouz said.

“He stood up against ISIS, refused to automatically accept any nuclear deal with Iran and vocally opposed Russia’s invasion of Ukraine. His principled foreign policy was said to have cost Canada a seat on the Security Council at the United Nations, but Harper said he never regretted it.”

In two days, more than 12,200 people signed the online letter.

“Thank you for your steadfast support of Israel, for your opposition to radical Islam and to all other tyrannical regimes, and for your fight for freedom around the world and inside Canada,” the letter said.