



Photo courtesy of Malcolm Hoenlein

BY ALIZA DAVIDOVIT

Israel's Prime Minister Golda Meir quietly pulled President Richard Nixon aside and insisted that her job was much more difficult than his. "You may be the president of 250 million people," she said, "but I'm the prime minister of five million prime ministers."

If you pause to laugh it is because that aged tale still reflects the fiber of the Jewish people, a nation deemed by their own God as stiff-necked. Perhaps no one can laugh—or cry—at that joke better than Malcolm I. Hoenlein, who sits at the head of an organization that represents 52 Jewish presidents. As the Executive Vice Chairman of the Conference of Presidents of Major American Jewish Organizations representing agencies from across the political and religious spectrum, the slightly more current joke is that Hoenlein quietly pulled Golda Meir aside and said his job was harder than hers.

Indeed, consensus is a difficult destination to reach among the educated, passionate, eclectic tribe called the Jews. Hoenlein says jokingly that he has nonetheless found the E-Z pass to agreement. "I bring all these organizations together by providing a common enemy." And it's not the Palestinians or the Iranians, it's him!

But as Hoenlein celebrates his 20th year at the helm of the world's most powerful Jewish organization, it's obvious that this man, who intermingles daily

with heads of state as well as heads of organizations, is doing something right. He is emphatic in his belief that the Jewish people "share one faith and one fate," and that unity has always been vital for God's chosen people. "It is an essential precondition to every miracle and every great thing that has happened to the Jewish people throughout history," he says. "From the giving of the Torah at Sinai, where the Jews stood as one person with one heart, or the miracle of Purim, or the rescue of Ethiopian, Russian, or Syrian Jews, when we stood together, we could overcome every challenge. When we were divided, we paid a heavy price."

# MALCOLM HOENLEIN

## united we stand

Hoenlein has spent his career in umbrella organizations because he believes in Klal Yisroel. He has turned down lucrative jobs in the private sector in order to work for the good of his people. Prior to taking the job at the Conference many years back, Hoenlein debated whether to join or take the offer of a better paying position at another important Jewish organization. His son, who was only 12 at the time, helped him make his decision. He knew his father would not be happy if he made a decision based on economics alone and advised his father to go where he could make a difference. That's exactly what Hoenlein did, and that's exactly what he has done.

Having worked in the organizational world for 38 years, the 63-year-old leader says that what unites the Jews far outweighs what divides them. Although already involved for many years, his career as a communal leader began in 1969 with his position at the Jewish Community Council in Philadelphia. Defying many pessimists on the issue of Soviet Jewry, he decided to leave Philly to become the first executive director of the Greater New York Conference on Soviet Jewry, which is credited with revolutionizing the Soviet Jewry movement. He then moved on to create the Jewish Community Relations Council of Greater New York, where he remained until he joined the Conference in 1986.

Over the years, Hoenlein's experiences with different organizations have kept him optimistic. "We can almost always find common ground where the vast majority can stand," he affirms. "Therein lies our strength."

He also attributes the strength of the Jewish community to its leaders. "We have a better quality of lay and professional leadership than we often recognize," he says. "I've been privileged to work with an outstanding array of people over the years, people for whom I felt deep respect and affection. They have been true partners. No other community can boast of such dedicated and committed leaders. I remain personally close to virtually all of them, even many years later."



**Hoenlein with President George and Laura Bush.**

Hoenlein's own strengths, which have led to the longevity of his position—a post that lends to sleepless nights and acid reflux—is his open mind and unwavering focus on maintaining and securing the Jewish people. In fact, throughout the interview—one interrupted by intermittent phone calls—he was so passionate about his cause and the works of the Conference of Presidents, that it was a chore to get him to speak about himself. "It's not about me," he says, "it's about the greater whole." And just as the individual grape yields its form to generate wine, so, too, Hoenlein submits ego for the greater good, as can be read on the

meaningful sign in his office: "There is no limit to what a person can accomplish if it doesn't matter who gets the credit." Hoenlein relates that Ronald Regan carried that motto on a piece of paper in his wallet throughout his life. Hoenlein tries to carry it in his heart.

Regardless of such inspiring quotes, the backroom machinations and meetings at the Conference of Presidents are often colorful. Not every member "grape" is jumping into the Kumbaya goblet. But a 50-year purview of the organization's success is something to raise a toast to and in heartfelt solidarity say, "L'chaim."

Photo courtesy of Malcolm Hoenlein

Throughout its existence, the Conference has played a key role in American and world Jewish history. From mass public events to private diplomacy, it has been in the forefront of mobilizing support for Israel and educating the public in times of war and in the pursuit of peace, as well as addressing critical foreign policy issues that impact the American Jewish community. The Conference has served to strengthen and foster the special U.S.-Israel relationship that exists today. It makes sure that Israel's interests are heard and understood by policy makers, opinion molders, and the American public, as it serves the underlying goal of protecting and enhancing the security, dignity, and well-being of Jews around the world. What is fascinating is the success it has been able to achieve with a tiny staff and without a PR person. Its numerous activities belie its budget and humble facilities. "Lean is mean," says Hoenlein, whose service on the board of Bank Leumi and other enterprises has helped him apply business models for efficiency to the Conference.

Hoenlein does say, however, that achieving the Conference's objectives are tougher now than in days past and that he finds himself working harder than ever. "The issues and challenges we face are in some respects the most serious that we have faced since I started doing this," he says.

Hoenlein is deeply worried about the "poisoning" of America's elites against Jews and Israel, especially the academic elite. He cites Great Britain as a nefarious prototype where this process has been underway and hateful efforts are fostered to delegitimize

The paper first appeared in the *London Review of Books* last year because various publications here had turned it down deeming it unworthy. Now these collaborators have gotten a contract from a top publisher with a \$750,000 advance for a book that is to appear in September. Hoenlein lists many other incidents which are systematic of this trend. "It is not a coordinated effort," he clarifies, but these sentiments are becoming increasingly acceptable in the mainstream."

Hoenlein grows visibly incensed as he expands on his point and turns to

world's greatest democracy, Hoenlein doesn't mind an equal playing field, encourages discussion, and doesn't want any side dominating the debate. "However," he says, "the pro-Israel side is being silenced in order to isolate Israel and intimidate its supporters."

Hoenlein, frankly, is deeply concerned. "Globalization makes everything more complex and everything is interrelated today," he explains. "When Hitler wanted to spread the big lie it would take months and years, now with the Internet, satellite broadcasts, and 24-hour cable news it takes a few



**Hoenlein with Israeli PM Ehud Olmert.**



**Hoenlein with former Israeli PM Benjamin Netanyahu.**

Photos courtesy of Malcolm Hoenlein

Israel's right to exist as well as its relationship with the U.S. Hoenlein likens it to a cancer, and is concerned it will spread in America, too. He says that there is already a coalition of groups that promote divestment from Israeli companies and lobby the U.S. Congress to end U.S. support for Israel. As an example, he points to the hateful paper written by professors John J. Mearsheimer of the University of Chicago and Stephen M. Walt of the John F. Kennedy School of Government at Harvard, entitled *The Israel Lobby and U.S. Foreign Policy*. Hoenlein, who did his Ph.D. work in international relations at the University of Pennsylvania and also taught there, says that the virulently hostile Walt-Mearsheimer team wrote a sophomoric paper filled with inaccuracies and baseless allegations.

talk about former President Jimmy Carter's book, *Palestine Peace Not Apartheid*, in which Carter uses the term "apartheid" to describe Israel's policies. It was on the *Times* best seller list and has sold over 700,000 copies. He, too, was invited to speak about his book on campuses.

What Hoenlein fears is an emerging trend to not only rally anti-Israel and anti-Jewish sentiment but to eat away at the pro-Israel support that does exist, which is at record high levels now, he says, but cannot be taken for granted. He reveals that he was approached about a professor who teaches at a prestigious Ivy League university who has been asked to resign because he is supportive of Israel. "And he is not right-wing," Hoenlein clarifies, "he is just supportive." Living in the

seconds." It is a high-tech, powerful war of attrition against Israel's right to exist, against Israel's supporters, and against the Jewish people. Hoenlein says that the current debates, whether it's 1932, 1938 or 1940, raise the wrong questions. The real issue is what lessons did people learn from those years that are relevant today?

Who are the most precious victims of this insidious campaign? Jewish youth on college campuses across the country, according to Hoenlein. They are tomorrow's senators, tomorrow's journalists, tomorrow's leaders. Hoenlein hopes they won't be tomorrow's lost tribe. He reflects on the four sons described in the Passover Haggadah: one wise, one wicked, one simple, and one who doesn't know how to ask. But Hoenlein is most wor-

ried about the fifth son, the one who doesn't even show up. At this point, he inverts the standard Jewish guilt trip and newly places it on the parents. "Our kids don't know how to answer because they don't know the facts," he says. "By the time they get to campus and are confronted with the radical anti-Israel ideology and propaganda, it's too late. Our kids live in an educational vacuum that we can't afford to let others fill. They need to be taught the celebration and beauty of Israel and Judaism from a very young age. We need to inoculate them, to enable them to feel confident to respond and to do so effectively." He questions how many parents actually sit down and explain to their children what they saw

about tomorrow's Jews, it also pains him that the overwhelming majority of Jewish philanthropic money is going to universities, museums, and other non-Jewish causes. (He maintains that 95% of Jewish charitable gifts over \$10 million are non-sectarian.) With charitable funds going elsewhere, the task of saving Jews and Judaism becomes evermore challenging. That, too, sends a message of priorities to our kids. He is genuinely worried about the world that his grandchildren will grow up in. Quoting Shimshon Raphael Hirsch, Hoenlein says, "We will not be judged by our children but by our grandchildren." Elaborating on the point he says, "That is when we see come to fruition the decisions we make and the actions

Hoenlein told the chairman what had happened and they jumped into action immediately. In their support, a top American official interceded on Israel's behalf, putting his career on the line, and called the then-President of the United States warning him that if he'd allow the events to unfold, he would resign and tell the world why. The crisis was avoided. But back to Hoenlein's point, when it comes to Jewish *mazal*, sometimes even a seemingly innocent comment is *bashert* and complicit in changing history.

Hoenlein's commitment to the Jewish people is almost unbelievable. But when the hard-to-reach billionaire Mort Zuckerman takes time out of his day to talk about anyone, in this case

**"If our community doesn't wake up and adjust to the 21st century, we are in for trouble. If you want to win the hearts and minds of the people, you have to be where they are."**

on television and what really happened in the Second Lebanon War last summer. "We are going to pay the price for it 15 years down the line.

Hoenlein advises that to reach the new generation, its leaders and teachers must get with the program and relate to them in a way they understand, i.e., through the Internet and television. "We don't have one satellite or one studio under Jewish auspices in America," he says disappointingly. "If our community doesn't wake up and adjust to the 21st century, we are in for trouble. If you want to win the hearts and minds of the people, you have to be where they are." He says that American Jewry has a collective responsibility toward the next generation and believes the greatest danger to Jews is apathy, indifference, and disunity.

With his ever-growing concern

we take."

But in Hoenlein's experience action is not the only thing that brings results. "So many times things happen for which there is no rational explanation," he says. "They are just *bashert*, destined, and you can see the hand of God. He tells how on one occasion, while in a meeting with a European official, the presiding chairman of the Conference had to step out to use the men's room. The meeting became casual at that point and shifted from the issues at hand when the official began to talk about an action at the United Nations that was going to take place just 36 hours later that he presumed Hoenlein knew about. It was an action that would have had devastating consequences for Israel and more specifically Jerusalem. Hoenlein just played along and let the official keep talking. Following the meeting,

Hoenlein, you know he has something poignant to say. Zuckerman, the publisher of *U.S. News & World Report* and a past chairman of the Conference, says Hoenlein is the most dedicated, hard-working, comprehensive person you can want to work with on issues that you care about. "He is a phenomenally great speaker, knows all the issues inside out, is a tireless worker, and has a great sense of humor," Zuckerman says without pause. "Other than that, I can't think of anything nice to say," he jokes.

James Tisch, CEO of Loews Corporation and the most recent past chairman of the Conference, characterizes Hoenlein as a peripatetic Jewish civil servant, always on the move. Tisch says, "Malcolm is someone with great insight; he really knows what's going on. He is a Jew through and through to his very core. He works hard for the religion, for the culture, and for the

people.” Tisch believes that Heonlein’s success is a result of his ardent commitment to the issues. “He is so knowledgeable, and also knows how to deal with people—from politicians, to diplomats, to the man in the street.”

Magnate Ronald Lauder of the Estee Lauder empire and the Ronald S. Lauder Foundation, also a past chairman of the Conference, calls Hoenlein one of the great Jewish leaders of the 20th century. Although Lauder had long admired Hoenlein’s work, he says he never appreciated him

insight,” says Benjamin Netanyahu. “He has done an excellent job at leading the Conference and translating the divergent points of view of its member organizations into a united and coherent position on important issues that affect the Jewish community and U.S.-Israel relations. His competence, professionalism, and integrity, as well as his concern for the Jewish people, are highly valued by all decision makers in Israel.”

Israel’s former ambassador to Washington, Danny Ayalon, is also in

caliber—from his staff, to waiters, to dignitaries. Not everyone he interacts with is a prime minister, but he treats them as if they were. In addition, as a Fox News Channel producer, I also had the opportunity to book Hoenlein on my show to comment on breaking news in the Middle East. His knowledge and articulateness left my production team very impressed and he was ranked highly as the expert “to definitely call again.”



Hoenlein with Shimon Peres.



Hoenlein with President Bill Clinton.

Photos courtesy of Malcolm Hoenlein

more than when he himself became chairman and witnessed Hoenlein’s tireless efforts on a daily basis. “He works day and night,” Lauder says. “There is not an issue that involves Jewish life where he doesn’t try everything possible to be of help.” Lauder says that Malcolm Hoenlein has a rare combination of winning qualities. “He knows when to be diplomatic, he knows when to be tough, and he knows the sensitivity and the history of all the issues,” Lauder tells. “Frankly, I haven’t found anyone else in the Jewish world who has all those abilities.”

Even former Israeli prime ministers wouldn’t pass on the opportunity to offer Hoenlein due praise. “I have known Malcolm Hoenlein for many years and have always valued his

line with the prime ministers’ thinking calling Hoenlein a quintessential Jewish leader—a visionary, forceful, wise, and compassionate. “His commitment, care, and action for our people’s security and wellbeing through strengthening the relations between Washington and Jerusalem is most important,” Ayalon says. “I have always appreciated his good counsel and his friendship. What a *mensch!*”

And then there are the humble perceptions of this *Lifestyles* journalist who has observed Hoenlein, not only during our interview, but at numerous events and in many scenarios throughout the years. What has always struck me about him is the warm, gracious, and gentlemanly manner in which he interacts with people of every

The Conference executive vice chairman, however, has received more than just praise and kind words for his hard work, which incidentally included playing a key role in organizing the unprecedented National Solidarity Rally for Israel in Washington, D.C. in 2002. He’s been the recipient of many awards and tributes. He was conferred a Doctorate of Humane Letters Honoria Causa by Yeshiva University in 2002, as well as from Touro College in 2007. He received the Private Sector Initiative Award from President Ronald Reagan. American ORT honored him with a special “Man of the Millennium” Tribute. He has also received the first Quittman Award for Jewish Professional Excellence and the Defender of Jerusalem Award. The State of Israel Bonds awarded him for his “valiant and extraordinary ser-

vice to Israel and the Jewish people.” And these tributes are but a few among the many plaques, medallions, certificates, and testimonies of appreciation that congest his conference room and office. He has become one of the most sought after speakers both in the U.S. and abroad and is frequently a guest on TV news programs. He’s been listed by *The Forward* as the most influential Jewish leader.

He is also credited with numerous “firsts.” Many point out that he was first, in the late ‘80s, to warn of the growing danger of Islamist fundamentalism and in the early ‘90s to raise the danger of Iran, especially a nuclear Iran. He is credited with starting the first pro-Israel PACs in the ‘70s and the first

2002, 50 broadcasters have participated. Upon returning from the most recent trip this past March, *Talkers* magazine publisher Michael Harrison wrote about the experience in his popular publication: It is “a program that provides broadcasters, commentators, journalists, and media personalities with firsthand experience of Israel—the society, the culture, and the geography—in order to generate informed public discourse about the country and the region.” He feels the mainstream media is deficient in providing “the American public with the depth, details, and analysis necessary to adequately serve the needs of a healthy democracy.” The Conference also has related programs that bring UN ambas-

campus. In addition to that, there is a weekly e-newsletter for high school students, *israelhighway.org*, which includes an in-depth examination of issues behind the headlines, as well as student-authored articles, Israel school projects, programs and trips, and sections on Israeli music, art, technology, and sports. Recently, they launched the *Iranalert.org* website and “Strictly Conferential” to keep the Conference’s members informed.

Among other recent initiatives, the Conference led the creation, with the UJC, of SCAN—Security Community Network—to address the security needs of American Jewish communities and facilities.

These bold, important initiatives

## “The war on terror will define this century. Victory can be hard to define, but failure will be obvious.”

Jewish voter registration drive, recognizing that young Jews did not follow their parents’ pattern. His critical role in regard to the rescue of endangered communities in the FSU, Yemen, Syria, and Ethiopia are frequently cited. Most recently, his coordination of the successful international efforts on behalf of 13 Jews incarcerated in Iran was widely recognized.

Hoenlein, however, is well aware that Jewish survival cannot rest on past laurels and is continually churning out new ideas to further his goals. One of the initiatives the Conference has instituted to educate the public is through American Voices in Israel, a program where U.S.-based radio talk show hosts are invited to visit and explore Israel in an in-depth way and then broadcast their programs live from Jerusalem. The broadcasters are exposed to all facets of Israeli society. They also get to meet with political, cultural, business, and scientific leaders. Since its inception in

sadors, high profile entertainment figures, and key ethnic media leaders to Israel.

Through the *Daily Alert*, the Conference has found another very successful means of disseminating information. An online publication, Hoenlein says that it’s the most widely read of its kind in the world with hundreds of thousands of people reading it every day. Providing comprehensive daily information on all matters relevant to Israel, the Middle East, and around the world, the *Daily Alert* provides insight, analysis, and clarity on very complex issues. It is delivered to computers each weekday morning and prepared by a team of experts who scour the U.S., Israeli, and world press for the most timely and important information.

The Conference, with the ICC, also has an e-publication targeted to university students, *israelcampusbeat.org*, which serves as prime source for what’s happening in Israel and about Israel on

are a relative drop in the bucket, but the miracle of Chanukah taught that even a “drop” provided eight days of light. And Hoenlein says that Judaism teaches that even a small amount of light—knowledge and information—can dispel much darkness. He reveals that studies show most people’s image of Israel is different from reality. Polling shows that people, even academics, perceive Israel as a closed society, super-Orthodox, and always under threat. The objective, for Hoenlein, is to keep shedding light on the truth and the issues.

With the rise of terrorism, radical extremism, and nuclear proliferation, the 21st century has been cast into darkness. “The world now faces an enemy that doesn’t fight by the rules that bind democracies. They go after women and children; they are cowards by nature who probe for weakness and then exploit it,” says Hoenlein. He believes that the war on terror will

define this century. "Victory can be hard to define," he says, "but failure will be obvious."

Many have tried to blame the dark cloud on Israel. "People say if only Israel didn't exist or would make concessions many problems would go away, as if Israel was the panacea for these problems when the opposite is true," Hoenlein explains. "Bush got it right when he reversed the order in a recent speech. First you solve Iraq; you solve Iran. Then you will be able to solve the Israel-Palestinian problem."

On this issue he says that Israel needs a viable partner with whom to negotiate. "The onus is on the Palestinians," he says. He points out that the past five Israeli PMs were ready for a two-state solution, but it is the Palestinians who are not ready. "They have a unity government led by a terrorist organization sworn to the destruction of Israel that incites vicious hatred and calls for the death of Jews and the end of the Jewish State." In addition to that threat, he enumerates others: Hezbollah regaining its prewar power in the north; Hamas's building terrorist infrastructure in the south; Syria arming itself in a very dangerous way and becoming evermore influenced by Iran; the maniacal-Holocaust-denying president of Iran who also calls for the obliteration of the Jewish homeland; as well as the growing and threatening Islamist movement.

For these reasons, the State of Israel must remain strong. Hoenlein, the son of Holocaust survivors, emphasizes how lucky world Jewry is to have the State of Israel and quotes the late Abba Eban, who said during WWII, "Jews had influence in many places, but power in none." But not today; Israel does have power, both militarily and politically as a strategic democratic partner with the United States. And Israel should make no apologies about defending itself. As Hoenlein explains

how Jews have triumphed over their troublesome history and merciless enemies, he points to a picture hanging on the conference room wall. Wide, black train tracks lead the viewer's eye through a looming open gate into Birkenau, the Nazi death camp. But flying above this imposing people-less scene are three Israeli F-15s. The picture was taken during a visit to Auschwitz by Israeli Air Force pilots. Hoenlein first saw the picture hanging in Prime Minister Ehud Olmert's office and was so moved by it that he asked where he could get one. For him it summarized the polarity of Jewish history. "Just when our enemies thought it was the end of the Jewish people, we triumphed," Hoenlein says with great emotion. "Our enemies are in the ground and the Jews fly high." Over the gates of death, he points out Olmert's inscription which reads: "This will never happen again because of this," referring to the F-15s. Hoenlein makes clear that the flight of the F-15s was not a statement of military prowess but of moral victory.

And as the issue of Israel's defense and military comes up so does the question, "Why does America have to help pay for it? Hoenlein goes on to explain something most people don't know. Of the over \$2 billion America gives Israel for defense purposes, the majority of it stays in the United States and creates tens of thousands jobs for Americans. He says that 25 to 30 states benefit from these expenditures. Israel uses only \$400 million for offshore spending. Hoenlein also says that military development is a two-way street between the U.S. and its critical democratic ally in the region, an ally that also provides the United States with vital intelligence, expertise, and technological developments. As for other financial aid, the 10-year-old economic aid agreement between the two countries is set to expire with economic aid

phased out. Now that relationship has yet to be defined and there are ongoing discussions.

But some relationships have definitely been established, such as Hoenlein's close-working relationship with Israeli prime ministers. He has met with almost all of them and says that each was so different except in one important way. They all felt they were not only prime ministers to their Israeli constituents but also had a responsibility to Jews all over the world. He has met with them to discuss very important issues, but has also shared private time with them. Some of his more memorable moments with Israel's leadership was speaking with Golda Meir about the Soviet Jewry problem, or being in the room in Los Angeles when Begin learned that his wife had passed away. Hoenlein was also moved by observing Rabin's grief when he learned that soldiers were killed in Lebanon. He was with Rabin just three days before the prime minister was assassinated. On the day he was shot, a picture lay upon Rabin's desk of him with two past Conference chairs and Hoenlein. He had intended to sign it and send to Hoenlein in the U.S., but fate intervened.

For certain, the most heart-wrenching experience was the day Hoenlein landed at the airport in Israel with the intention of going directly to Prime Minister Ehud Olmert's office. As Hoenlein touched down in the Jewish homeland his phone rang. It was Olmert. There had been a bus bombing and their meeting was to have a new location, the bombing site. It was a first for Hoenlein. By the time he got to the location it was carefully cleaned up and he and Olmert went directly to Hadassah Hospital and visited every victim room by room. What touched Hoenlein deeply was that not one person he met ever asked anything for himself. "All they said to me was, 'Tell President Bush, don't let there be

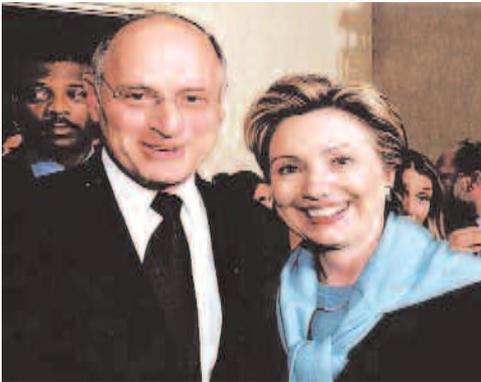
further victims, tell him to stand up to the terrorists.”

The second time Hoenlein experienced a homicide bombing, it would be right outside his hotel where he and a large group of Conference leaders were being briefed by the Israeli Chief of Staff. When he went outside in the company of Congressman Jerry Nadler and Jim Tisch, a young colonel insisted that the three distinguished Americans go behind the police lines. They looked down and saw pieces of flesh and body organs at their feet. The dead bodies

being a “Zionist spy” and “CIA agent,” detained, and put under house arrest. But Hoenlein escaped. “I walked through the front door and then went out the back door of the hotel and through the Mandelbaum Gate to the Israeli sector of Jerusalem.” He was certain he would be shot in the back at any moment as the Jordanian’s were screaming behind him. And just as he safely made his way out into Israel, a soldier greeted him saying, “I think I could say, welcome home.” Malcolm got down on the ground and kissed it.

a blessed testament to the triumph of “laughter” over tears.

Hoenlein says that he is blessed to have a job that allows him to work for the things he cares most about and to help shape Jewish history in some measure. He says he is also blessed to have a wonderful wife, Fraydie, who supports his efforts and makes personal sacrifices so that he can do the work of the Jewish people. His ties to the past are symbolically reknotted every morning as he dons his father’s *tefillin*, and his dedication to the future is ever-



Hoenlein with Senator Hillary Clinton (D-NY).



(l-r) James Tisch, Malcolm Hoenlein, and Pakistan's President Pervez Musharraf.

Photos courtesy of Malcolm Hoenlein

were lined up along the street and all Hoenlein could see of them were their shoes—big shoes, small shoes, children’s shoes, women’s shoes, etc., “All these people started out their day going to school, going shopping, going to work,” he says with grief in his voice. “And they died only because they were Jews in the wrong place.”



Hoenlein will never forget the first time he traveled to Israel in 1966, before the Six-Day War, when he worked for the Foreign Policy Institute. He cried when he discreetly went to visit the Kotel. On that same trip he also visited several Arab countries—Lebanon, Syria, and Jordan—and, after stumbling upon something he wasn’t supposed to see, was accused of

To this day, every time he travels to Israel and Jerusalem he gets increasingly exhilarated. “I see God sending us a message every day,” the religiously observant Hoenlein expresses citing the frequent archeological finds which validate biblical accounts. “Israel’s existence is a miracle. There is no rational reason for it to be there.” His own grandparents were murdered by the Nazis because Israel wasn’t there. In fact, Hoenlein’s Hebrew namesake, Yitzchak, which means laughter in Hebrew, is after an uncle who was murdered during the Holocaust. Certainly, he was an uncle who never dreamed that one day he’d have a nephew who would be on intimate terms with prime ministers of a Jewish homeland. Indeed, Malcolm “Yitzchak” Hoenlein stands as

more fortified by the love for his grandchildren. They and his children are the proudest achievements of his life. He says that everything he does today is out of concern for the kind of world, the security, and the quality of life they and their counterparts will enjoy.

His mission is hard, the road ahead unpaved, enemies lurk in many places, and Jewish unity is a challenge. But who has the harder job? Hoenlein says he wouldn’t want to be an Israeli prime minister for one second and will gladly continue to lead as the executive vice chairman of 52 Jewish presidents. [lifestyles](#)