Pro-Likud debater exploits Boston Marathon bombing

Last Tuesday, on Yom Ha’atzmaut (Israel Independence Day), I debated an American supporter of Likud in front of 200 students at the Kushner Academy yeshiva high school in Livingston, New Jersey. It was a very pro-Israel, modern Orthodox environment, in which the day was entirely given over to celebrating Israel’s 65th birthday.

Everyone — including my opponent — was polite and friendly, and the teachers repeatedly exhorted the students to be civil and open to hearing a view they may disagree with. Three boys came up to me after to shake hands and tell me that they were perhaps the only “liberals” in the school.

The debate consisted of the two of us responding briefly in turn to a few questions composed by a student (a young woman identified to me as active in AIPAC), with a couple of follow-up rebuttal arguments. I don’t feel that I adequately emphasized the urgency of Israel’s need to negotiate a two-state solution, but I think I succeeded in conveying that one can care about Israel’s welfare while holding dovish views on solving the conflict.

Although personable, my opponent was loose in his interpretations and uninformed on relevant events in Palestinian-Israeli relations. I mentioned the 1995 Abbas-Beilin framework agreement to exchange territories to compensate the future Palestinian state for Israel’s retention of the “settlement blocs” contiguous with Israel; he confused this with the Geneva Accord of 2003 and also had a muddled recollection of the Taba conference in 2001. He even referred to the Boston Marathon bombing of the previous day, before we knew anything about the perpetrators, as if this were relevant to our debate. I don’t recall his exact words, but he insinuated that it proved how violent and undependable “they” are, by which he must have meant Muslims, Arabs and/or Palestinians.

Mind you, the extremist Jihadi script is out there; it’s a behavioral model for disaffected and maladjusted individuals to embrace for meaning in their lives. From what we know of the Tsarnaev brothers, this seems to be true of the older brother, with the younger pushed along by the overpowering force of the older’s personality. I’m impressed with JJ Goldberg’s thoughtful piece on this in The Forward, “The Deadly Identity Crisis Along Islam’s Borders.”

And before the story of the Tsarnaev brothers broke, Goldberg noted the bitter ideological division in how Americans look at the issue of terrorism. He statistically compared Islamist/Jihadist versus “white” Christian
terrorist incidents in recent years: “Seeing Our Own Bitter Division Through the Prism of Boston Marathon Bombings.”