

### Israel: The pattern of our diversity

Germantown Jewish Centre was founded in 1936, eight years before the establishment of the State of Israel. The people who created and built this place were mainly part of the huge wave of Jewish immigrants that poured into this country between 1880 and 1924, when the gates of immigration were largely shut. In the 1930's, these Jews were striving to become as American as possible, which may be the reason this synagogue was given a name with no Hebrew in it, and a British spelling to boot. It is also the reason that Jews were moving from areas of first and second settlement in places like South Philadelphia and North Philadelphia to areas like Northwest Philadelphia, which had previously not been open to Jews, and establishing synagogue centers like this one, trying to balance and fuse their American and Jewish identities. At the same time, they were facing a backlash against immigrants and growing antisemitism, which turned their attention to the movement to create a Jewish state in the Biblical Land of Israel.

During the 1930's, support for Zionism grew rapidly, reflected in increased membership in Zionist organizations and youth groups.<sup>1</sup> Even the Reform movement, which earlier had been firmly against the idea of a Jewish state, believing it weakened attempts to establish the American Jewish community, reversed course in 1937. But alongside this growing support for the idea of a Jewish state came an immense proliferation of ideas about what that state should look like. There were Labor Zionists and Cultural Zionists and Political Zionists, not to mention Religious Zionists, Revisionist Zionists, and Diaspora Zionists. And of course, they fought—bitterly, loudly, and at great length, both in print and in person.

The Holocaust and its aftermath, particularly the pressing issue of Jewish refugees and where they would go, sharpened the perceived need for a Jewish state and hastened its creation in 1948. But even the establishment of the state did not settle the question of what kind of state it would be, which of the competing visions of Zionism would come to fruition in it. Israel's Declaration of Independence gives voice to many competing visions, since it was the product of a fractious coalition of rival factions that agreed only that the state should come into being, including the insistence that the new state “will be based on freedom, justice and peace as envisaged by the prophets of Israel; it will ensure complete equality of social and political rights to all its inhabitants irrespective of religion, race or sex; it will guarantee freedom of religion, conscience, language, education and culture.”<sup>2</sup> How will that happen? We'll let you know.

Of course, that did not settle the matter. In fact, the competing visions of Israel even among its founders proved so difficult to reconcile that creating a constitution for the new state was put off to some future time when the conflicts would somehow be resolved; as we know now, that time never came. Here in America and at GJC, people continued to support the

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<sup>1</sup> See <https://www.myjewishlearning.com/article/american-jews-between-the-wars/>

<sup>2</sup> Declaration of Israel's Independence 1948, from [https://avalon.law.yale.edu/20th\\_century/israel.asp](https://avalon.law.yale.edu/20th_century/israel.asp)

version of the Jewish state that they hoped to bring to the fore as Israel developed, raising money and offering political support to target the vision they favored. This activity continued and increased through the 1950's and 1960's. The wars of 1967 and 1973 strengthened many American Jews' attachment to Israel, to the point where for many of us who grew up in the 1970's and 1980's, Israel became a central part of what it meant to us to be Jewish. Still, we varied greatly in what parts of Israel we connected to; some gravitated to the Labor Zionist vision of the kibbutz, while others variously saw Israel as a laboratory for democracy, a source of religious inspiration, a melting pot of Jewish diversity, or something else. At the same time, there was a growing recognition of the complex and often violent relationship between non-Jews living in and around the land and the Jewish population, and some began advocating for changes in how that relationship was managed by the government of Israel.

This complex history of diverse connections to Israel helps to explain what it means that GJC's mission statement says, "We support the State of Israel and Klal Yisrael." The term "Klal Yisrael" means "the whole of the Jewish people," and it is intended to encompass the immense diversity of Jews in all of the different places in which we may live. Pairing it with support for the State of Israel makes clear that what that support looks like may vary widely, an acknowledgement of the diversity that has always characterized GJC members' attitudes toward Israel. The GJC Values Statement adopts "Klal Yisrael" as one of this community's seven core values, and states: "We cherish our connections to Israel, and to other Jews and Jewish communities around the world, regardless of the differences between us. Those bonds form a covenantal commitment that transcends time and space." The idea that we have a special connection to Jews and to Jewish communities that may be not only geographically but also ideologically distant from us is central to our self-conception as a community. It is what it means to be not just a religious group, and not just a cultural association, but a part of the Jewish people, and I include in this embrace also the non-Jews who are such an important part of our community. We are connected to other Jews across time and space, as much as we may disagree fiercely with them about, well, nearly everything.

When it comes to Israel, and particularly to the actions of its government, it is no surprise that we continue to disagree about the wisdom of government policies and the actions of political leaders there, just as we do here in the US. Disagreement over Israel is nothing new in this community or in any other Jewish community, and I only had to review the Israel talk I gave just three years ago to confirm that that was a time of deep division over what it means to have a Jewish state, just as it has been since I began serving this community over 20 years ago. Of course, the attack of October 7<sup>th</sup>, the horrible plight of the hostages, and the war that has followed have intensified both our emotions about Israel and our divisions over what its government should be doing, just as it has among Israelis. We can see their disagreement reflected in the hundreds of thousands of Israelis who have taken to the streets in protest over the past 11 months. The anguish in their hearts is palpable, as is our own. We feel the pain of their suffering at the same time that we feel the pain of the thousands of innocents who have died in Gaza. We can all agree that war is horrible, and we pray for peace constantly, but how is peace to be found? What is the right strategy and the right approach? What will lead us

forward and what will only make things worse? In the shadow of death and destruction, and the continued suffering of both the hostages and the civilian population of Gaza, we continue to do what we have done since before Israel's establishment: we disagree.

Because we are in pain, and because we are feeling raw and emotionally vulnerable, our disagreements have the potential to become hurtful, to turn personal, to sever relationships and turn love to indifference or even to hate. Even though we have survived 88 years disagreeing over Israel in this community, that is no guarantee that we will continue to be a community that is able to encompass our differences. This conflict can tear us apart if we let it. It is up to us to make a different choice, to build on our long history of disagreeing with respect and even love, to care for each other's hearts even as we may differ with each other's opinions. Breaking our community into pieces will not help anyone in Israel or in Gaza; it will only hurt all of us deeply. Now is the time, as difficult as it is, to reach out to each other with love and to support each other personally, even as we may widely diverge politically. Supporting members of our community with whom we disagree is not a betrayal of our values. It is not weak and it is not cowardly. It is what we have been doing with and for each other since our founding, around Israel and many other issues. It is at the core of what it means to be a member of this community, and it is our greatest strength.

Psalms 147 speaks of God being the One who heals our broken hearts and binds up our wounds.<sup>3</sup> Today is the time we must do that for each other. We will probably not magically come to agreement about Israel this year, any more than we have in the last 88 years. But if we continue to care about each other and about Israel, and if we continue to talk to each other with respect and love, then maybe the hopes of our founders, like the hopes of Israel's founders, will not have been in vain. May the One who makes peace in the heavens, among the stars and planets, bring that peace to our hearts, to the hearts of all who are experiencing war, to Israel, and to all the inhabitants of the earth. And let us say: Amen.

עושה שלום במרומיו  
הוא יעשה שלום עלינו  
ועל כל ישראל  
ועל כל יושבי תבל

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<sup>3</sup> Psalm 147:3.