



Jewish Community Center of Paramus
Congregation Beth Tikvah
304 E. Midland Avenue ~ Paramus NJ 07652- 201.262.7691

A Shabbat Message from Rabbi Arthur Weiner

Friday July 12, 2024 ~ Parsha: Chukat

Dear JCCP/CBT family,

Israel and Zionism are Not Negotiable

I want you to imagine the following scenario. Let's say our synagogue was searching for a new member of our religious leadership team. In addition to whatever personal and professional qualities we might hope they would possess, I think we would all agree that a commitment to our deeply held religious values would be non-negotiable. In fact, I might say it was self-evident that someone who opposed them would not be a suitable candidate.

Last summer, our synagogue invited Cantor David Krasner to serve as our synagogue *Chazan* (he began his responsibilities after the High Holidays, but was hired last summer). Now imagine that during the interview process, we discovered that he publicly disseminated opinions expressing his contempt for our synagogue standards and religious policies. Despite his many gifts, we would never have hired him. We have standards, values, principles and beliefs that may not always be practiced by the members of our community, but must reflect the behavior of our synagogue leadership. We stand for things, and those who work for the synagogue must reflect these values.

The same applies to the issue of Israel and Zionism. Our synagogue embraces a wide variety of opinions and beliefs regarding Israel and Zionism and so many issues related to it. Yet there are positions regarding Israel that we both cannot and will not tolerate among our leadership. Think Israel's current government is great? That's fine. Think Israel's current government is terrible? That's fine too. Should Israel stop its military operation in Gaza right now? Great. Should it continue its campaign until its

objectives have been realized? Also great. Prioritize the release of the hostages? That's perfectly reasonable. Prioritize the destruction and dismantlement of Hamas? That makes perfect sense as well. The Israeli government and the Israeli public in the best of times are divided over these and so many other serious issues. They are debated every single day in Israel's Knesset, and in its media. But what we cannot accept is a small but sadly growing movement of Jews who are avowedly anti-Zionist, who have embraced the rhetoric of the Palestinian national movement and Hamas and demand that such views should be disseminated and embraced by the Jewish institutions with which they affiliate.

The answer to them must be a clear and unambiguous no. Israel and Zionism are not negotiable

We are a community that must encourage a great diversity of voices when it comes to the challenging issue of Israel, its meaning, and its place in Jewish communal life. But anti-Zionism must not find expression in our institutions. For us, the meaning of Israel and the value of Israel is akin to the other major religious commitments that our synagogue stands for.

Camp Ramah in New England, one of the leading summer camps affiliated with the Conservative Movement, recently faced this issue. What to do if some of its most committed community of counselors wished to return to work at camp as they had done for years, only now self-identified as anti-Zionist. How does a summer camp, which since its inception in the 1950's has held Israel and Zionism as a core value, react to such a challenge? Is radical inclusion the correct course of action, making a place for those who publicly oppose and denigrate the core values that the entire Ramah camping movement holds dear, or to assert the importance of these values and maintain faith with the thousands who have chosen to send their children to this network of camps precisely because of the Jewish values it espouses?

Camp Ramah in New England is not alone. All types of Jewish institutions are wrestling with where to draw the line with regard to Israel. Sadly, non-orthodox Rabbinical schools have avoided articulating a boundary, allowing students who

identify as non-Zionist as well as anti-Zionist to enroll despite those institution's significant commitment to Zionism. Our legacy organizations have been forced to deal with anti-Zionists who work for them. Again, we are not talking about people who have views outside the Jewish mainstream. We are not talking about ambivalence regarding Israel. We are not talking about people who have been public with their criticism of Israel. We are talking about complete opposition to Israel and adopting the positions and the rhetoric of those trying to destroy Israel and murder Jews. Stories of such tensions in Jewish organizations have made their way to the front pages of some of our leading newspapers, including the *New York Times*, the *Wall Street Journal*, and others.

Now back to Camp Ramah. After October 7th, a long serving counselor shared a post to her Instagram page saying that Jews ought to oppose "genocide" in Gaza. This upset many among the staff as well as the large contingent of Israelis who work in Jewish summer camps throughout the nation each summer. This counselor's anti-Israel views, beliefs she had held for many years but had not shared with camp leadership, were now public knowledge. Now the camp had to decide if there was a place in its senior leadership for someone who had publicly aligned herself as anti-Zionist (and with a particularly vile anti-Zionist organization).

Soon after October 7th, Rabbi Ed Gelb, the CEO of Camp Ramah in New England, wrote the following to the Ramah community.

Ramah New England is a Zionist Jewish Summer Camp. We support self-determination and statehood for the Jewish people in our ancestral homeland, the Land of Israel. Within our community, there are a wide range of acceptable opinions on what precisely this State of Israel should look like, what the government's policies should be and how Israel acts [toward] the Palestinian people and on the world stage.

There are also limits to what is acceptable debate in a Ramah context. Like a multilane highway, there are double yellow lines on both sides of the highway that we must adhere.

When the counselor who had shared the anti-Israel screed met with Rabbi Gelb for her job interview, he asked her whether that Instagram post accurately reflected her views. When the counselor, who had grown up at the camp as a child and had spent the three previous years on staff, affirmed that the post did reflect her views, Rabbi Gelb responded that she would not be invited back to camp. When some current staff and alumni objected to this, he made the following public statement. "Camp Ramah cares deeply about our alumni and values personal connections to members of the community who have contributed greatly over the years, and we welcome direct dialogue to find shared understanding. **At the same time, we make a sacred promise to our community that we will faithfully adhere to our public educational goals, including that we are a Zionist camp (unapologetically so).**"

Rabbi Gelb made the correct decision. In clear and unambiguous language, he made it clear that there would be no compromise on the importance of Zionism and significance of Israel within that community. Would it be that all Jewish organizations would respond with such clarity.

Shabbat Shalom,

Rabbi Arthur D. Weiner