

Board Policy on the Process for Decision-Making on the issue of Signage – Board decision November 27, 2007

Background:

The fact that Darchei Noam now has its own building had lead to a request that we as a community join other Toronto synagogues and Jewish institutions in allowing signs in support of the Toronto Jewish Federation and other community organizations such as JNF /Israel Bonds to be erected on our property. Some members of our community are known to have strong feelings against allowing such signs.

The anticipated debate likely reflects much more than a debate about signage. In some ways it likely reflects differences within our community over attitudes towards the means by which Israel is supported. Some members of our community question the appropriateness of supporting Israel through traditional institutions. Some question the adequacy, or lack thereof, of the support our community is perceived by some of its members as giving or not giving to Israel, and the signs are seen as an external manifestation of that concern.

Opportunity

Instead of viewing this as simply a controversy to be resolved which is currently focused around particular signage, the Board believes that this process should serve as an opportunity to try and resolve matters based on the application of Reconstructionist principles and processes of decision-making. Generally as a Reconstructionist community we apply a process of values based decision-making which involves: ¹

- Study of Jewish sources and practice.
- Study of current information from the social and natural sciences, if applicable.
- Reflection on values.
- Analysis of the impact of each possible decision on each affected party.
- Democratic and inclusive process

The Board believes that an approach based on values based decision-making should be applied here as best it can.

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norms that might exclude some actions; 5) Assemble and weigh relevant attitudes, beliefs and values; 6) Formulate decision alternatives; 7) Seek consensus; and 8) Make the decision

Context for the decision: Commitment to the State of Israel

The Reconstructionist movement has recognized that tensions surrounding relations with Israel exist on the individual, community and movement level. Individuals and communities often grapple with difficult value choices which arise out of the the ongoing Israeli-Palestinian conflict and with Israel's identity both as a Jewish and democratic state. Our community like many others has being concerned over divisive viewpoints within our community.

However, our community discussions, debates and decisions have an overarching religious context, namely our Zionist commitment. A fundamental tenet of Reconstructionist Judaism is its commitment to the concept of Jewish peoplehood. For Reconstructionist Jews, the core of being Jewish is belonging to the Jewish People. "A people cannot be challenged to create for itself an ethical nationhood if it is not autonomous and responsible for the fulfillment of the social, human and civil rights of the inhabitants of its land. For the Jewish people, that primary place is Israel.² We believe in the unity of the Jewish people around the world and we consider Israel the birthplace of our heritage and the State of Israel the national home of the Jewish People. Accordingly it is part of our fundamental commitment and obligation to support the continued existence of the State of Israel as a democratic and Jewish state.

2 Report Of The Jewish Reconstructionist Federation
Israel Policies Task Force

Decision

The Board appoints a three person Task Force composed of Michael Mitchell, Myer Siemiaticki and Shirley Segev to:

1. Make recommendations to the Board not later than March 2008 with respect to signage;
2. Utilize to the extent possible a values based decision-making approach to this issue;
3. Seek input from the community and hold at least two community meetings on the issue.

In addition

4. No signs may be erected at 864 Sheppard while this process is ongoing. (Previously, prior to the commencement of construction, one organization simply erected a sign without permission)

The Importance of Dialogue

In addition, the Board recognizes that it is commonplace within Jewish communities and even within Jewish families for discussion on topics related to Israel and current events in the middle east to be heated and passionate. Just as Israelis debate and strongly disagree with each other on the difficult issues facing the State, so too, in a much more limited but nonetheless significant way, members of the same community and even the same family often have difficulty communicating with each other respectfully and ethically given the strength of the feelings and passionate commitments which exist.

The Board believes that the decision-making process set out above should be accompanied by activity wherein this community, which shares a dedication to common values, begins to learn how to engage in a respectful and ethical dialogue on issues related to Israel.

The Jewish tradition teaches that dialogue is a sacred activity. There are many rich teachings about dialogue and respectful communication to be found in Jewish texts, such as the concepts of "controversy for the sake of heaven" and "guarding the tongue." For example this is what Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, Chief Rabbi of the UK, has said:

In the course of a discussion about the origin of the afternoon prayer, the Talmud refers to Isaac who "went out to meditate in the field toward evening" and concludes that "meditate" must mean "to pray." However, the Talmudic statement, "ein sichah ela tefillah," can also mean "conversation is a form of prayer." That is a startling and powerful idea. A genuine encounter with a human other can be a prelude to an encounter with the Divine Other. The disciplines required are the same: to be open, to listen as well as speak, to be capable of empathy and humility, to honour the other by an act of focused attention. Nor is this a minor matter. The greatest command of all, Shema Yisrael, literally means "Listen, O Israel."

The Board has decided to support an intervention by the Jewish Dialogue Group to facilitate a discussion amongst members of our community who have different views on this subject. This Group is a non-partisan, grassroots organization that formed in November 2001 to foster constructive dialogue within Jewish communities about the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. It has facilitated more than 140 dialogue sessions involving

approximately 1000 people at synagogues, colleges and universities and even seminaries. These sessions encourage people to:

- listen to and understand one other, across political differences
- work through their feelings
- examine difficult and confusing moral and intellectual questions
- deliberate about the choices they face
- seek common ground

The dialogue consists of structured, facilitated small group conversations. Participants take turns responding to a set of questions, then hold a facilitated discussion.

The dialogue is a structured conversation, not a debate, a negotiation, or a mediation. People are encouraged to explore their disagreements and their own areas of uncertainty or confusion. People are asked to seek to understand these uncertainties and differences more fully, not to try to resolve or dismiss them.

The dialogue will take place in an environment in which participants can speak and be spoken to in a manner that respects their shared humanity and fosters mutual understanding