

# **REPORT AND RECOMMENDATIONS OF SIGNAGE TASK FORCE**

**JUNE 13, 2008**

Michael Mitchell, Chair

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## **REPORT AND RECOMMENDATIONS OF SIGNAGE TASK FORCE**

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1. The Task Force Terms of Reference are set out in Appendix A.
2. The Task Force heard from congregants at two public meetings and also had numerous representations made to it by email.

### **A. Background to the Issue**

#### **(i) The Founding Culture of Darchei Noam**

3. At first blush one would have thought that the issue of whether a synagogue ought to have a sign outside its building would be primarily a question of practicality and aesthetics. Thus one would have thought a community could easily consider what it wishes to promote, or advertise and how it wishes to do so in good taste consistent with local bylaws.
4. The issue at Darchei Noam is not quite so simple. We seek to explain here from a historical perspective why that may be the case.
5. Darchei Noam as a Reconstructionist community began in Toronto in the 1970's as a tiny study group, and then a few people struggling to initiate and maintain a weekly minyan in various homes and modest rented premises. Those early members included a significant number of baby boomers who were products of growing up in the 60's. Indeed, it is no surprise that in a group of people who

chose to start their own unique religious community based on a barely known philosophy that had a presence in Canada only in Montreal, one would find some people who shared a culture of challenging conventional wisdom and practices, who cherished intellectual independence, and who shared a healthy scepticism of the accepted cultural norms and values of the time.

6. For that generation, taking a view of the world that challenged the traditional thinking and practices of community organizations was part and parcel of questioning the values inherent in how Judaism was practiced in established synagogues and temples of that time. In short, doing things very differently from other synagogues and other Jewish institutions was part of the *raison d'être* for the creation and existence of Darchei Noam.
7. Moreover, as a modest and small group, issues such as the responsibilities that come with the ownership of property never arose at Darchei Noam. If one could not erect a community sign promoting community values because one lived in rented premises where one did not control external signs, then one did not need to grapple whether one identified with and wished to promote those community values.

**(ii) Toronto Community Values and Community Practices**

8. The custom in Toronto evolved over the years of promoting community causes through the erection of promotional material outside of community organizations such as synagogues, schools and community centers. Thus, the United Jewish Federation of Toronto (UJA) together with traditional organizations such as JNF,

began to advertise their causes and activities on signs, especially where there was a lot of vehicular traffic.

9. Since Jewish Toronto has a high degree of concentration along the Bathurst corridor, signs promoting those Jewish causes were and are prolific near the Darchei Noam property and elsewhere in that corridor. Even though Darchei Noam could not as a tenant of the Bnai Brith building erect UJA or other signs, the absence of such signs outside a growing Reconstructionist community became a point of concern for many members as time progressed. Did Darchei Noam not embrace the fundamental values expressed by UJA? In particular, did Darchei Noam not support the fundamental identification of many Canadian Jews with the fate of the State of Israel? If we did support the State of Israel and the work and aims of the organized Jewish community, why did we not express our support through the erection of signs which demonstrated this identification? Once Darchei Noam owned its own building this became a more pressing issue.
  
10. However, just as Jews in Israel and elsewhere increasingly have disagreed over the emotional and existential questions concerning the appropriate course for the State of Israel to take with regards to fundamental questions of occupation, war and peace, religion and civil rights, so too members at Darchei Noam disagreed with each other over these issues. Indeed, Darchei Noam houses members with a great diversity of views on these issues.

### **(iii) Background Facts**

11. In most recent years, Darchei Noam has received funds from the Mercaz, (formerly the Jewish Board of Education), which supports our school. The Mercaz is funded by UJA.

12. Generally a myriad number of other Jewish organizations and charities do not advertise in this way because they do not have the resources to print signs and it is impractical to have one or two 4x6 signs produced. Israel Bonds used to, but no longer does have such 'lawn size' signage campaigns.

**B. Value Based Decision-Making**

13. Value based decision-making requires that we first identify the values that are at stake in any particular decision. In this case, we have identified the following values in no particular order:

**(i) Kehilah: Community**

14. We are a democratic community that attempts to create holiness, particularly in our sacred space; we attempt to act according to principles of democracy and menschlichkeit.

**(ii) Tzeddakah:**

15. We attempt to pursue justice in the world through Tikkun Olam and Tzeddakah, by trying to promote repair of world and trying to ensure social and economic justice for everyone.

**(iii) Shomrai Adamah: Protection of the Environment and Natural Beauty**

16. We have a concern for environmental protection and acting responsibly with respect to the utilization of all natural resources; we attempt to beautify and conserve our environment and avoid pollution of all kinds.

**(iv) Shleimut: Integrity**

17. We attempt to live by our moral principles and obligations.

**(v) Ahavat Yisrael**

18. We recognize that we are part of and responsible for Am Yisrael, the Jewish people, and that Jewish peoplehood is a central concept of our religious outlook. We recognize our strong connection with and responsibility for Klal Yisrael, (the entire community of the Jewish people). Equally importantly, we value the land of Israel, and the State of Israel, which is the spiritual, intellectual and historical centre of the Jewish people.

**(vi) Yahadut Mithadeshet: Reconstructionism**

19. We recognize the importance of tradition and custom, but also recognize our obligation to struggle with our tradition and to keep it relevant; in acting with integrity, and daring to be different and critical, we are also determined to act with rationality, creativity and courage.
20. Clearly, one's view on the issue of signage will vary depending on which of the above-enumerated values is given priority. In our consultations with congregants, we heard from Darchei Noam members who took each of these positions as their fundamental reference point. There is then at Darchei Noam, a range of views on which value(s) should take precedence in shaping our signage policy.

**C. Practical Realities**

21. Our community has only one site on its property where a sign(s) can be placed, namely on the west side of the property. The area in front of the walls of the building is not Darchei Noam property, and cannot be used to place signs. By law restrictions also severely limit the ability to erect many signs. Further, Darchei Noam as a community has a need to advertise various events from time to time to the

larger community, including High Holiday services, school registration, and particular special events. In considering what kind of sign would be possible and aesthetically acceptable, our architects devised a plan for a simple permanent structure that would hold two 4x6 temporary signs, one on top of the other, which could be inserted and removed at will. The cost of this permanent structure is approximately \$7,000. A copy of the drawing and conception is attached.

22. A significant majority of Toronto synagogues, day schools and other Jewish institutions erect signs supporting the UJA and Jewish Federation. Many, although fewer, also have signs supporting JNF. Some synagogues carry signs supporting other particular causes such as Darfur, or advertise their own community. Most of these signs are 4x6. Many other community organizations advertise themselves and particular events up and down Bathurst St. using portable temporary signs typically using garish lettering to draw attention. The 4x6 institutional signs of the UJA and JNF tend to be replaced once a year or every 18 months.

**D. Application of Values and Practical Realities to the Decision.**

23. In this section we outline the considerations, many of them conflicting, that we believe operate in coming to a decision. In setting these out we reflect some of our own views and concerns but also views we heard expressed by members of our community, some of which we may or may not agree with.

**(i) Kehilah: Community**

24. As a community, we act in accordance with democratic principles, but that does not mean we should in all cases act only as the majority wishes. Although majority will is a primary aspect of

democracy, democracy also concerns itself with the respect for and protection of minorities, as well as with freedom of speech.

25. Creating holy spaces means that in attending Shul particularly on Shabbat and Yom Tovim, one looks for a sense of serenity and peace with the world. One does not wish to be confronted with signs that irritate either one's aesthetic sense or one's values.
26. Conversely, the failure of our community to identify with cherished symbols and aspirations of the Jewish people causes some people anxiety and even pain. However, because the rest of the community is or isn't doing something is not a good reason to follow suit.

**(ii) Tzeddakah:**

27. The UJA is the primary and broadest based fundraising vehicle of the Jewish community. While significant portions of the funds raised by UJA go to support activities in Israel, approximately half the funds in the last year remained in Toronto/Canada and were used for a vast array of community and charitable purposes. The precise allocation between local and Israeli needs is determined annually and varies depending on the circumstances. Sometimes the local percentage is much higher. Local needs include the provision of Jewish social services, support of educational institutions including tuition subsidies, support of Jewish communal organizations, support for the aging Jewish community, Jewish immigrant services, Jewish technical and vocational services, etc. UJA funds may be used in Israel for a vast array of services and particular causes, including the aid of Jews making Aliyah and providing for the needs of communities adversely affected by war, terrorism, and poverty.
28. Our synagogue community has an obligation to support the actions and activities of the main fundraising arm of the Jewish community

for social and educational services for the Toronto Jewish community and for the people of the State of Israel. If we believe in the repair of the world and the need for social justice in our own community and if we believe in assistance for the poor and needy in Israel, we can hardly ignore the UJA, which among other things contributes to the funding of our own school.

29. The JNF has been the mechanism whereby Jewish people in modern times contributed to and provided for the purchase of land in Israel. Symbolized by the blue box, the JNF became a cherished symbol of the modern Zionist enterprise. In recent times it has been identified with the opening up of the Negev and has made many important investments in reclaiming and developing the land of Israel. Also, however, in recent years, the JNF has been criticized by some, for among other things, its activities in the West Bank, and especially after the War of Independence for its role in the ownership of land owned at one time by Arab residents of Israel.
30. While there are some members who criticize JNF policies, there are, at least equally, others who strongly defend JNF's overall policies and objectives while not necessarily agreeing with every element of them.

**(iii) Shomrai Adamah**

31. Concern for the environment and responsibly taking care of our natural resources means that we attempt to act with a strong concern for aesthetics and not creating further environmental pollution, including sign pollution. The presence of political signs and advertising signs up and down Bathurst dealing with the Jewish community can be a source of information, but also a source of aesthetic concern and dismay. On the other hand, the failure to

advertise and advise people of issues and events can undermine the very success of our own institution and its causes. Aesthetics cannot necessarily trump all other values, but like everything else, this concern has to be balanced in a broader context. However, we can take into account that these kinds of signs already appear in many places.

**(iv) Shleimut: Integrity**

32. The desire to act with integrity and to live by our moral principles and obligations affects both those who oppose and support signs in this context. Those who oppose and support signs believe that they are acting with integrity and acting consistently with their moral principles. Many believe that we can and ought to support organizations like JNF, for example, even if we are ambivalent or opposed to one particular policy. We can support an organization and allow it to promote its values without supporting each and every last policy it has or action that it takes. In short, we cannot demand perfection.

**(v) Ahavat Yisrael**

33. For many people, a decision not to have any sign would equate to a refusal to identify with core community values for the welfare of the Jewish Community at large and the State of Israel. In many peoples minds the issue of the signs is correlated to supporting Israel and people in our community have different and often opposing views about Israeli policies and issues affecting Israel. Some believe that as Israel's security is threatened, it is necessary for the Jewish community to show its support for the State and important, in particular that our religious community do so. Others would take exception to the fact that the presence or lack of presence of a sign

would equate to some kind of test of loyalty or a failure of commitment. Some would feel uncomfortable with any sign that contains a message that they personally find problematic and would want our community to vet every sign to see if we approved of each particular message. Others would have us put up every sign regardless of the contents.

**(vi) Yahadut Mithadeshet: Reconstructionism**

34. Some consider that our Reconstructionist identity always means that we “march to a different drummer” and we have no need to copy the practices of the general community; indeed, we show our differences by not doing so. Some believe that since we cannot say yes to everyone that wants to have a sign, and since it is not practical for many organizations to have a sign, unless we are going to say yes to everyone, then we should say no to everyone. Others believe that our failure to conform to core community norms which in this respect, would be a failure to demonstrably support UJA, would take us unacceptably outside the mainstream, and make us hypocrites for accepting the communities money for our school while not supporting their fundraising efforts.

**E. Recommendations:**

35. The task force unanimously recommends the following to the Board:
36. Darchei Noam ought to have an external sign location that can serve the purpose of advertising Darchei Noam’s own institutional interests and events, and at the same time supporting central community norms and practices.
37. We consider that there was a reasonable consensus that the structure suggested by the architects which involved placing 4x6

signs inside a permanent structure would not be unaesthetic, and represented a reasonable compromise which rules out separate individual signs for each organization appearing at various places on our property, and confines the signs to one specific area in a permanent structure where the signs themselves can be replaced. We strongly recommend against the use at any time of portable signs which appear from time to time on major thoroughfares, and which we think would be a blight on the beautiful exterior of our building, and which amount to very unpleasant sign pollution in our judgment.

38. We believe that our commitment to identification with the larger Jewish community is extremely important. We also believe that Ahavat Yisrael is a fundamental Reconstructionist value and that the role of the Jewish peoplehood and the State of Israel in Reconstructionist philosophy cannot be overemphasized. Accordingly, we consider it would be completely inappropriate for the synagogue to reject putting up a UJA sign on philosophical or political grounds. Darchei Noam has reached a level and maturation which many thought it would never achieve. Part of Darchei Noam's growing up is taking its place as an important institution in the overall Toronto Jewish community as recognizing that it indeed accepts and will promote community values. We cannot conceive of failing to support an organization which is the central fundraising organization for all the broad social, educational and social action needs of the Toronto Jewish Community, as well as the central organization which expresses the community support for the State of Israel.
39. In addition, we believe there is broad consensus within the Darchei Noam community for support of the UJA and for installing a UJA

sign. The UJA sign does not need to be permanent, as there may be occasions from time to time during the year when Darchei Noam's own needs and interests require that both the signs promote Darchei Noam's own congregational interests. However, on a regular basis throughout the year, we recommend that a UJA sign be one of the signs that exists. As for the other sign, practical considerations dictate that there be only one community sign from one community organization. Since we only have room for two signs in the first instance, and since one of them is likely always to be one which promotes Darchei Noam's interests, the question arises as to whether the second sign should be shared amongst different organizations or be confined to the UJA. The UJA is in the unique position of being the central Jewish fundraising organization both for local and State of Israel needs. If there is one organization around which all communities can unite and all parts of the Jewish community should be able to unite, it is that one. Practically speaking, we do not think that our community should act as a censor, passing judgement on the merits of other Jewish organizations advertisements or public stance. We certainly do not believe that the Board or our community should pass judgement as a community on the merits of supporting the JNF or not supporting the JNF, and the task force offers no point of view in this regard whatsoever. We simply believe it is impractical to have signs of many different organizations, and the fact is that many organizations which some members of our community do support do not have the financial means or wherewithal to have a sign. In this regard, we think of Mazon Canada, the New Israel Fund, Canadian Friends of Peace Now, and numerous others whom members of our community have supported from time to time. In this regard, while we have said that we believe it is vital that our community demonstrates its support for UJA as the single most important and

most comprehensive Jewish organization, we also believe in a practical sense that since Darchei Noam has to promote its own interests with the second sign, and since we cannot say yes to everyone else, we should say no to everyone else save and except for Darchei Noam and UJA.

40. We believe that these recommendations reflect a balancing of the important values which we have set out above. We believe that our recommendations reflect the views of a large majority of congregants, while being sensitive to the aesthetic and other concerns of a minority. We believe that making our support for UJA manifest is consistent with our obligations of Tzedakah and encouraging members of our own community to support broader vital Jewish causes at the same time as we urge others outside our community to support the same causes. We believe that a tasteful signage policy which restricts other more irritating signs is consistent with allowing for reasonable promotion of important values while at the same time restricting unnecessary pollution and being sensitive to aesthetic concerns. Finally, we believe that this policy is completely consistent with Reconstructionist philosophy and decision-making, and reject any notion that Reconstructionism means that we must *ipso facto* reject broader community values.
41. Additionally, our impression from our consultations is that should the Board agree to permit signs from organizations reflecting particular positions related to Israel, then congregants with differing views would request signage display for organizations holding different positions. Since we believe it would be untenable for Darchei Noam to approve and/or reject such requests on an ongoing basis, we believe that a divisive practice would ensue whereby at any given time some members were troubled by a sign our shul was

promoting. By contrast, our recommendation to permit only the same UJA sign that almost all other Jewish institutions in Toronto also display confirms our role as an integral and important part of the overall Jewish community.

42. In this regard, we do not think it appropriate to vet the particular messages each year the UJA chooses to promote, and if we happen in any year to be uncomfortable with a particular message for any reason that we cannot anticipate at this time, either that can be addressed then, or, we would prefer that we simply say we accept as part of our overall responsibility to the Jewish community that our particular way of expressing the generalized community ideals and norms will not always be reflected in the UJA, but we can accept it as part of our responsibility in being a vital part of the overall Jewish community.
43. Finally, we think that the cost of a permanent sign is modest and we believe that it should be ordered and approved as soon as possible. From a practical stand point, Darchei Noam should also begin to prepare its own signs advertising high holidays, attendance in our new building, registration in our school, and other events as are necessary from time to time. As we have already indicated, we do not believe it is inconsistent for Darchei Noam to take up both signs in its own interests from time to time, so long as the UJA sign is displayed reasonably often and prominently throughout the year.
44. All of which is respectfully submitted.

Michael Mitchell, Chair

Shirley Segev

Myer Siemiatycki



## Appendix A

### 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.

<sup>1</sup> Another formulation of the same process is: 1) Determine facts, alternative actions and their outcomes; 2) Examine relevant scientific and social scientific approaches to understanding these; 3) Consider the historical and contemporary context, including the history and rationales of Jewish practice; 4) Look for 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 ongoing Israeli-Palestinian conflict and with Israel's identity both as a Jewish and democratic state. Our community like many others has been 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."<sup>2</sup> 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.

### **Decision**

The Board appoints a three person Task Force composed of Michael Mitchell, Myer Siemiatycki 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)

2 Report Of The Jewish Reconstructionist Federation Israel Policies Task Force

