



Temple Micah's Relationship With Israel

February 2024

Temple Micah has a deep, rich, and committed relationship with Israel, and this relationship—our Zionism—is core to who we are as a congregation. We do this from a place of love. Our Zionism does not turn a blind eye to the complexity that characterizes the State of Israel. In fact, our Zionism demands that we confront the complexity head on, and our own Temple Micah [Roadmap](#) directs us to tackle tough conversations, with special consideration for Israel.

We have strived to bring diverse voices of Israel—both Israeli and Palestinian—to Temple Micah to educate, to deepen our understanding of the complexity, and to strengthen our relationship with our homeland.

This document strives to describe our relationship with Israel. In drafting this document, we drew heavily from the sermons and writings of our rabbinic leadership, as well as Temple Micah's actions over many years.

OVERVIEW OF OUR ZIONISM

Progressive Zionist Congregation

We are a proud progressive Zionist congregation. We sometimes refer to our Zionism as “Religious Ethical Zionism” or “liberal Zionism.” Fundamentally, this reflects our aspirational belief that Israel should be the Jewish national homeland, where people live in peace and security. We also believe in the inherent dignity of every human being. To that end, Israel must be a democracy that protects religious pluralism and the human and civil rights of all its inhabitants.

Our Zionism Embraces and Rests on the Three Classic Pillars of Zionist Thought.

Pillar 1: Religious/Peoplehood. Most simply put, the land of Israel and the idea of Israel are at the very foundation of our theology. Our people's story, as told in the Torah, is a story about our home (Israel), our exile from our home, and our return home. The framework for Jewish spirituality—home, exile, return—is a powerful metaphor for what it

means to live as a person in the world, and it informs the ethical mandate that motivates our pursuit of justice.

But this framework is more than an ethical metaphor. Israel, our homeland, is an actual place. Our homeland is described in great detail in the Hebrew Bible—such that the Bible remains a guidebook to anyone who travels to Israel today. The land of Israel is the subject of discussion in God's very first conversation with Abraham. We have no master story without the land of Israel. It is the place of Abraham and Sarah's tent, the land that we left to escape famine, the land to which the Israelites seek to return following the exodus from Egypt; the land that Moses can only see but never enters. It is central to who we are as a people. When our people were exiled from the land, and our community dispersed across various nations, we upheld our connection to our heritage by diligently studying the Torah. Despite being geographically scattered, our ties to Israel endured through the observance of our sacred holidays and the fervent recitation of prayers that bound us to our ancestral land.

David Ben Gurion, one of the original founders of the modern state of Israel and its first Prime Minister, in explaining the need for establishing Israel as a Jewish state, pointed to the unique nature of our relationship to the land of Israel, calling Israel the parent of the Jewish people:

“There is no precedent for the history of the Jewish People and there is no parallel to the fate of this land, no precedent for the special significance this land has for us...

One reason why Jews came over here is love of Zion, a deep passionate love, strong as death. There is no parallel to that in all of human history.

What is the source of this love? A man may change many things, his religion, his wife, even his name. There is one thing which a man cannot change, his parents. The parents of our People are this land. It is unique, but there it is.”

Pillar 2: Political. Our Zionism also rests on our need for a safe haven for the Jewish people. The father of political Zionism, Theodore Herzl, began making the case for the State of Israel in the late 1800s amid growing antisemitism in Vienna, where he was living. He argued that a Jewish state is the only answer to antisemitism.

Years later, the Israeli writer Amos Oz, an early supporter of a two-state solution, eloquently reiterated the need for a safe haven in his 1983 book, *In the Land of Israel*:

“I would be more than happy to live in a world composed of dozens of civilizations...all cross pollinating one another, without anyone merging as a

nation-state...No nothing. Only spiritual civilizations tied somehow to their lands, without the tools of statehood and without the instruments of war. But the Jewish people has already staged a long-running one-man show of that sort. The international audience sometimes applauded, sometimes threw stones, and occasionally slaughtered the actor. No one joined us; no one copied the model the Jews were forced to sustain for two thousand years, the model of a civilization without the 'tools of statehood.' For me the drama ended with the murder of Europe's Jew by Hitler."

Pillar 3: Spiritual. Finally, our Zionism rests on our hope for unleashing Jewish spirituality and culture. We draw from the thinking of Ahad Ha'am, a Russian Jew of the late 19th and early 20th century who died in Tel Aviv in 1927, having lived the last five years of his life in pre-state Palestine. Ahad Ha'am was not enamored about the creation of a state; rather, he envisioned a Jewish spiritual and cultural center. For him, the diaspora was a spiritual disaster for Jews because we regarded ourselves as an "other," a perpetual outsider to the host country wherever we lived. During this time, the Jewish soul wasted away. Ahad Ha'am's Zionism was an antidote: "It is not only Jews who have to come out of the ghetto, Judaism has to come out, too." According to Ahad Ha'am, Zionism is not only about saving Jews, but saving Judaism by returning to real life in a real land where Jewish culture will again become real.

Ahad Ha'am's vision has been realized. We now know Israel as a place of intense Jewish creativity in all areas of endeavor. Our Jewish lives in America are the direct beneficiaries of this overwhelming output in art, poetry, literature, and music. The contributions of Israeli artists have impacted our prayer life and culture in ways beyond measure.

Confronting the Complexities of the State of Israel

Our Zionism does not turn a blind eye to the complexity that characterizes the State of Israel. In fact, our Zionism demands that we confront the complexity head on.

We acknowledge that threats to Israel's security by terrorists are grave and numerous. Israel's security needs require our relentless support. And at the same time, we understand that extremist ideologies within our own community threaten Israel's existence as a liberal democracy. Recognizing these intricacies compels us to grapple with the challenge of safeguarding Israel's borders while simultaneously confronting the reprehensible acts committed in the name of Zionism, and also acknowledging Israel's infringement on human and civil rights. Additionally, it necessitates an acknowledgment of Israel's historical chapters marked by displacement and occupation.

We understand that in any democracy, we contend with results with which we disagree. However, as Rabbi Zemel has said, "We can love that which pains us most." From a place of love, it is our obligation to work to ensure that our people's return home is built on a moral foundation.

HOW DO WE LIVE OUR ZIONISM?

Symbols in Our Temple

We have chosen to fill our home with symbols that express our values, our Jewish story, and our relationship with Israel.

The Declaration of the Establishment of the State of Israel. Perhaps the most overt symbol is the standing poster of Israel's Declaration of Establishment that sits prominently in our lobby. Adopted on May 14, 1948, the Declaration envisions the establishment of a new state embodying the ideals of Zionism to which we aspire:

- It identifies Israel as the historic homeland of our people and the location of our story of home, exile, and return.
- It acknowledges the need for a safe haven from antisemitism, where the Jewish people can be "masters of their own fate."
- It embraces liberal democratic principles. Specifically, the Declaration states:

"THE STATE OF ISRAEL will be open for Jewish immigration and for the Ingathering of the Exiles; it will foster the development of the country for the benefit of all its inhabitants; it 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; it will safeguard the Holy Places of all religions; and it will be faithful to the principles of the Charter of the United Nations."

The Israeli Flag and Hatikva. Our sanctuary's bimah is flanked by the flags of the United States and Israel to mark our support of both countries. We sing *Hatikva*, Israel's national anthem, on Sunday mornings at Boker Tov with our Machon Micah students. The words of *Hatikva* remind us of our unwavering hope for peace:

"Our hope is not yet lost

*The hope of two thousand years,
To be a free nation in our land,
The land of Zion and Jerusalem”*

Jerusalem Stone in the Lobby. When we were building our temple, which opened in 1995, we special-ordered stone from a quarry just outside of Jerusalem. Not only is this stone a physical manifestation of our connection to the land of Israel, but it also captures symbolically our Jewish tradition of turning toward Israel during prayer.

Israeli Compositions and Composers in Our Liturgy. Our worship team designs each of our services deliberately, selecting music—both the prayers, poems, and songs, as well as the compositions and composers—with great care and thought. From Yair Rosenblum to Naomi Shemer, Kobi Oshrat to Daphna Rosenberg, our rabbis feature Israeli compositions and composers frequently in our worship experiences, reinforcing our cultural relationship with Israel.

Visiting Israel and Its Inhabitants

We realize the importance of visiting Israel and building meaningful relationships with its inhabitants. We return time and time again to affirm our connection with the Jewish people, the State of Israel, and our vision of Progressive Zionism. Over the years, we have encouraged and supported our community in traveling and studying in Israel. In addition, Rabbi Zemel has led 16 Micah trips to Israel over 40 years.

Each of Rabbi Zemel’s trips is highly curated and intended to provide a broad, nuanced experience and engender an appreciation for Israel’s complexity. The trips explore the exceptional, the good, the bad, and the ugly. In doing so, Micah travelers have met with everyone from the American ambassador to Israel to mayors of Arab villages. We have met advisors to the prime minister, Palestinian activists on the West Bank, as well as journalists, rabbis, security experts, peace activists, and leaders of the 2023 social protest movement for democracy. Through these visits, Temple Micah has developed thick relationships with a number of people and organizations that share our vision of and hopes for Israel. These partnerships are discussed in more detail in the following two sections.

Bringing the Diverse Voices of Israel to Micah

Over many years, we have strived to bring diverse voices of Israel—both Israeli and Palestinian—to Temple Micah to educate, to deepen our understanding of the complexity, and to strengthen our relationship with our homeland.

Among the many people who have joined us at Temple Micah are:

- Sally Abed and Alon-Lee Green, [Standing Together](#), a grassroots movement for peace, justice and independence for Israelis and Palestinians
- Rabbi Steve Bernstein, [Kehillat Birkat Shalom](#), Kibbutz Gezer
- Naomi Chazan, chairperson of [New Israel Fund](#) Board of Directors
- Mohammed Darwashe, assistant director of [Givat Haviva](#), Israel's oldest institution for shared society
- Rabbi Miri Gold, [Kehillat Birkat Shalom](#), Kibbutz Gezer
- Lee Gordon, founder [Hand in Hand Schools](#): Center for Jewish-Arab Education in Israel
- [Riad Kamel Kabha](#), mayor of Barta, an Arab village in Israel that was divided by the 1948 border between Jordan and Israel, reunited in 1967
- Ambassador Sallai Meridor
- Rabbi Edgar Nof, Kehillat Or Hadash, Haifa
- Palestinian and Israel Student Representatives from [New Story Leadership](#) for the Middle East
- Ambassador Itamar Rabinovitch
- Gili Rei, Board member of [Shaharit](#), a shared society organization
- Yaniv Sagee, executive director of [Givat Haviva](#)
- Eilon Schwartz, [Shaharit](#) founder and president
- Dr. Jonathan Shimshoni, Retired General Israel Defense Forces
- Daniel Sokatch, president of [New Israel Fund](#)
- Rebecca Strober, [Breaking the Silence](#), Director of Education

Supporting Israel through the Zemel Fund for Israel and ARZA

Another way that we express our relationship with Israel is through our contributions to charitable organizations. Our Temple Micah Israel Fund (which the Board named the Zemel Fund for Israel in 2013) has donated to a wide range of causes and organizations. These include support for the [Israel Movement for Progressive Judaism](#), institutions devoted to shared society among Jews, Muslims, and Christians in Israel, and organizations that seek to mitigate the harmful effects of the settler movement, among others. Although there are many worthy organizations doing such work in Israel, we have focused our support on several with whom we have developed meaningful relationships. These groups have enriched our Micah trips to Israel by meeting with us, and we have hosted them when their representatives have come to the United States.

The following is a list of some of the organizations we have supported through this fund in recent years:

- [Bavat Ayin](#), reform congregation in Israel
- [Birkat Shalom](#), a reform community at Kibbutz Gezer
- [Breaking the Silence](#)
- Bridges of Hope, a social action group committed to interfaith dialogues and activities
- [Friends of IMPJ](#) (Israel Movement for Reform and Progressive Judaism)
- [Givat Haviva](#)
- [Hand In Hand](#), bilingual schools for Arab and Jewish students
- [Jerusalem Foundation](#)
- [New Israel Fund](#)
- [Rabbis for Human Rights - Israel](#)
- [Shaharit](#), a shared society organization
- [Torat Tzuket](#)
- [Truah](#): The Rabbinic Call for Human Rights (to support Palestinian and Jewish rights)

In addition to donations from the Zemel Fund for Israel, during our membership renewal process, we invite members to donate to [ARZA](#), the Association for Reform Zionists of America. ARZA membership supports the Reform Movement's voice within Israeli institutions and promotes equality, democracy, and religious pluralism in Israel.

Standing with Israel, Critiquing Israel

As discussed above, our Zionism is complex, and it asks us to hold seemingly conflicting views at the same time. It demands that we love Israel, we support Israel, and we stand by Israel in difficult times. It also demands that we call out Israel when it falters, that we bear witness to the suffering it causes, and that we criticize Israel's political leadership when it seeks to undermine the very Zionist principles that we hold dear.

Our rabbis have used the pulpit and Temple publications to address this:

- [The Fight for Democracy in Israel](#) (2023), sermon by Rabbi Zemel.
- [Israel: A Story Greater Than the State](#) (2023), article by Rabbi Beraha
- [The Banner of the Declaration](#) (2023), sermon by Rabbi Crawley
- [Whither Israel?](#) (2021), sermon by Rabbi Zemel.
- [The Liberal Zionist Bridge](#) (2018), sermon by Rabbi Zemel.
- [Hatikva for my American Jewish Soul](#) (2017), poem by Rabbi Crawley.

- [Israel: The Place I Love that Does Love Me in Return or I Am Still a Zionist](#) (2014), sermon by Rabbi Zemel.
- [Israel: Three Empty Chairs](#) (2006), sermon by Rabbi Zemel.
- [Why Israel?](#) (2004), sermon by Rabbi Zemel.

Since October 7, 2023, our rabbis have spoken about Israel in numerous sermons, included below. In response to this moment in our history, the community also came together for small group listening sessions, “Ask the Rabbis” Q&A on Israel, group conversations for parents and teens, and small group book studies to explore and discuss the history of the modern State of Israel.

- [Explaining Zionism: Responding to Moser](#) - a sermon by Rabbi Daniel G. Zemel (Jan. 12, 2024)
- [Every Wordless Scream: Responding to the Sexual Violence of October 7](#) - a sermon by Rabbi Crawley (Jan. 5, 2024)
- [Defeating Enemies of Peace \(Letter to Ida\)](#) - a sermon by Rabbi Stephanie Crawley (Nov. 18, 2023)
- [My Oldest Zionist Story](#) - a sermon by Rabbi Daniel G. Zemel (Nov. 17, 2023)
- [View More Sermons on YouTube](#)

Our rabbis also have provided leadership beyond the walls of Temple Micah. The following are some examples:

- [North American Rabbis: U.S. Must Pressure Israel to Return to Negotiations, End War](#), T’ruah (2023), Rabbi Zemel serves as vice chair.
- [Anti-Semitism must be confronted, but silencing legitimate political criticism goes too far](#), Washington Jewish Week (2021), by Rabbi Zemel.
- [An Open Letter to the Israeli Prime Minister](#) (regarding African asylum seekers), Washington Jewish Week (2018), by Rabbi Zemel.
- [Response to ‘Rabbinical and Cantorial Students Appeal to the Heart of the Jewish Community’ from an elder colleague](#), ejewishphilanthropy.com (2018), by Rabbi Zemel.
- [Returning to Rabin’s Zionism, The Forward](#) (2012), by Rabbi Zemel.