



Religion and State in Israel: Community Objectives and Strategies of Engagement

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Approved by the Jewish Community Relations Council of San Francisco, the Peninsula, Marin, Sonoma, Alameda and Contra Costa Counties

Background

In recent years, issues of religion and state have occupied an increasingly prominent place on the Israeli political and societal agenda. Conflict between Orthodox religious political parties and other political parties has sharpened, and the cultural divide between Orthodox Jews on the one hand, and religious Jews of other mainstream movements, including the Reform and Conservative movements, and secular Jews, on the other hand, has widened.

This sharpening conflict in Israel has had a disturbing effect on American Jews in the Bay Area and elsewhere. That effect can be seen both in changing attitudes toward Israel and increasing tensions in intra-communal relations.

The Jewish Community Federation (JCF) and Jewish Community Relations Council (JCRC) have been called upon repeatedly by our community to address controversies arising out of the relationship between religion and state in Israel, particularly when legislation affecting the rights of non-Orthodox Jews is under consideration.

The JCF and JCRC have responded by articulating to Israeli decision-makers the impact proposed governmental action would have on our community and, in certain cases, by expressing opposition to such action. In addition, the JCF, through its “shared values” and “special projects” funding categories, has supported constructive change in Israel through grants to organizations that foster religious pluralism.

Growing concerns about the religion and state issue led to the creation of a joint JCRC/JCF Task Force on Religion and State in Israel. The Task Force’s mission is to develop a strategy to address these complex issues.

In the course of its deliberations, the task force distilled our community's perspective on religious pluralism in Israel as the basis for a set of long-range community objectives. That perspective includes the following principles:

1. Our community remains strongly supportive of Israel. Even while concerns mount over religion and state issues, our community is committed to developing innovative methods to connect Jews in our community with Israel.
2. Our community is deeply troubled by initiatives undertaken by Israeli Orthodox political parties and by the Chief Rabbinate that adversely affect the interests of non-Orthodox Jews, whether in Israel alone or in Israel and the Diaspora. Many Jews in our community are greatly concerned by measures in Israel that have the ultimate effect of denying them or their family members legitimacy, authenticity, or full rights of participation in Israel.
3. Our community believes strongly in the values of tolerance, pluralism, and democratic constitutionalism. Community members value the separation of church and state in the American context. Many believe Israel would be well served by greater separation of religion and state, while recognizing that Israel's essence as a Jewish state necessitates an approach to religion/state issues that varies from the American approach. Our community supports the role of Israel's Supreme Court in safeguarding democratic protections and is deeply concerned about attacks on the Court's authority. Our community is equally concerned about a rise in extremist rhetoric, stereotypes, and threats of violence, whatever the targeted group.
4. Our community places a high value on cooperative and collegial relationships among adherents of various streams of Judaism and secular Jews, and is concerned that religion and state issues in Israel are having a spillover effect on efforts to maintain a cohesive Jewish community here. Many in our Orthodox community already feel distant from the organized Jewish community. They are concerned that responses to incidents in Israel and inaccurate representations of the Chief Rabbinate's positions on issues of religion and state widen the gap and paint all Orthodox Jews with a broad brush of intolerance.

Long-Term Objectives

In light of this perspective, the overwhelming majority of community members want the JCF and JCRC to:

- help maintain the deep attachment between our community and Israel through active engagement on religion and state issues;

- convey effectively, consistently and forcefully to Israeli leaders and opinion-makers the views of our community on religion and state issues;
- reflect the values and views of our community through specific financial allocations to institutions in Israel; and
- minimize the spillover effects of the dispute in Israel on the unity of our community and on efforts to strengthen bonds among our community's diverse members.

To Achieve These Objectives, We Endorse the Following Approaches:

1. Find constructive ways to convey to Israeli leaders and opinion-makers the concerns of the San Francisco Bay Area Jewish community regarding legislative or other governmental efforts within Israel to oppose or hinder the development of mainstream non-Orthodox movements of Judaism, including Reform and Conservative Judaism.
2. Expand our community's financial support for organizations in Israel that promote the values of religious pluralism, diverse mainstream Jewish religious expressions, the democratic rule of law, and a strong independent judiciary.
3. Better educate our community about the complexities of religion and state issues in Israel by looking at the issues from historical, political, economic, religious and civil rights perspectives—and by increasing American Jews' understanding of the unique nature of Jewish religious life in Israel and Israelis' understanding of the unique nature of Jewish religious life in America.
4. Increase the active engagement of community members on religion and state issues and heighten their involvement with organizations in Israel that reflect their personal values and views on matters of religion and state.
5. Promote the inclusion in the curriculum of all Israeli and American Jewish educational institutions the teaching of Jewish traditions relevant to understanding and respecting pluralism, diversity and tolerance.
6. Promote a mutual climate of respect and tolerance between non-Orthodox Jews and Jews from all streams of Orthodoxy, in our community and elsewhere, as a way to strengthen our ability to reach out and rely on one another and to increase our sense of common destiny as Jews.