

COMMITTEE FOR ISRAEL ENGAGEMENT AND SOCIAL JUSTICE

Update on CIESJ Activities: December 2024

This has been a fraught year for Israel and for supporters of Israel as a Jewish homeland. After the October 7, 2023, massacre, the trauma to Israel has continued with ongoing threats to Israel's security, the unresolved release of the hostages, and the failure to end the war in Gaza that has also brought enormous suffering and loss of innocent Palestinian lives there. On top of this, the ongoing war has been used by Israel's far-right government to continue its assault on Israel's democratic institutions and to accelerate displacement of Palestinians from their land on the West Bank toward the goal of total annexation.

Temple Sinai's Committee for Israel Engagement and Social Justice (CIESJ) has responded to these crises by continuing its support of social justice values in Israel, promoting a shared society among Jews and Palestinians, supporting the Reform Movement, and responding to the impact of the war. CIESJ has done this through a variety of activities:

- Providing educational content and programming that informs the congregation about Israel, its democracy, and the war;
- Making donations to important Israeli nonprofit organizations that support progressive Jewish values; and
- Working with the Reform Movement to strengthen its presence in Israel and for Temple Sinai members to have a more personal relationship with the Reform Movement there.

Educational Programming

CIESJ has organized a series of programs this year that have focused on the ongoing war and have shed light on numerous issues: the impact of the war on Israeli society and its democratic institutions; increased pressure for annexation of the West Bank; the importance of supporting the Reform Movement in Israel and its Jewish values; and the impact of U.S. foreign policy. Our speakers were:

- Orly Erez-Likhovski, Executive Director, Israel Religious Action Center (IRAC)
- Rabbi Michael Marmur, Hebrew Union College, Jerusalem
- New Story Leadership, young Jewish and Palestinian leaders present their Phoenix Plan
- Ben Samuels, U.S. correspondent for *Ha'aretz* and Jeremy Ben-Ami, President of J Street
- Mickey Gitzin, Israel Director of the New Israel Fund, and Dr. Yasmeeen Abu-Fraiha, doctor, human rights activist, and NIF board member
- Anna Kisklanski, CEO of Israel Movement for Reform and Progressive Judaism (IMPJ)
- Nadav Tamir, Israel Director of J Street

CIESJ has been instrumental in bringing to Temple Sinai the Tovanot education program for the confirmation class and adult education in early 2025. Tovanot encourages a rigorous understanding of Israel and its significance to Jews and Israelis, alongside a concern for Palestinian lives and narratives. Program participants will gain the knowledge and tools to hold nuance and multiple narratives of Israeli Jews, Palestinian citizens of Israel, and Palestinians.

In addition to these programs, CIESJ initiated the publication in the weekly Sinai News a set of recommended readings about the war to provide a range of thoughtful opinion and analysis that supplement the basic factual reporting that people follow in their regular media intake.

Donations

Through the contributions of many Temple Sinai members, CIESJ has been able to make donations to worthy Israeli Reform and civil society organizations through its CIESJ Fund. This year, CIESJ donated \$23,600 to five organizations that have supported humanitarian needs of victims of the October 7 attack, advanced the Reform Movement's organizational hub in Israel, protected the rights of pro-democracy demonstrators, grew grassroots organizing for a shared Jewish-Palestinian society, and planned for a future Middle East peace. These organizations are:

- Joint Jewish-Arab Relief Center in Rahat (largest Bedouin community in Southern Israel), <https://israel.co.il/en/prtners-in-fate-partners-in-aid-the-joint-jewish-arab-emergency-relief-center/>, \$5,000
- Israel Movement for Reform and Progressive Judaism, <https://reform.org.il/en/>, \$3,600
- New Israel Fund's Civil Society Protection Hub, <https://nifcan.org/emergency-funding-protecting-civil-society-in-israel-now/>, \$5,000
- Standing Together, <https://www.standing-together.org/en>. \$5,000
- Mitvim Institute for Regional Foreign Policy, The Israel Initiative, <https://mitvim.org.il/en/the-israeli-initiative/>, \$5,000

Strengthening Israel's Reform Movement

CIESJ supports the Reform Movement's efforts to expand its presence in Israel by growing the number of Reform congregations there, applying Jewish social justice values to Israeli social policy, and by ensuring that Reform Judaism is fully accepted as an equal in Israel's Jewish life. CIESJ is active in ARZA, the home of the U.S. Reform Zionist movement, and the American Zionist Movement.

In July, Temple Sinai began a twinning relationship with Temple Ramot Shalom, a small, growing Reform congregation in Be'er Sheva, the largest city in the Negev and home to Ben Gurion University. Some of the activities that we engage in together include attending virtual services, holiday celebrations, and cultural experiences (movie and book reading discussions). We also look forward to joint social action and b'nai mitzvah projects.

In March-May 2025 the World Zionist Organization will hold its quintennial elections that will have a crucial impact on the policy and expenditure of \$1 billion annually on projects supporting Israel. Driving strong turnout of the U.S. Reform movement is crucial to ensuring that the priorities of the Reform Movement in Israel are met. CIESJ will lead the effort of Temple Sinai to have our congregants vote in this election in support of our Jewish values in Israel.

Moving Forward

The committee is committed to continuing its work to support Israel. Its work is based upon the mission statement that was approved by the Temple Board in February 2023. The main pillars of its mission statement are:

1. Realizing the Zionist ideal of Israel as a secure and lasting home for the Jewish people
2. Celebrating Israel's vibrant history, culture, education system, and economy
3. Affirming our commitment to Israel as a democratic pluralistic state, including respect for religious freedom, women's rights, LGBTQ+ rights, and ethnic minority rights, including for its Palestinian Israeli citizens
4. Securing full religious pluralism and rights in Israel, including for the Reform Movement
5. Advocating for an end to the conflict with the Palestinian people, an end of the occupation, and pragmatic solutions that will afford Palestinians a viable independent state alongside of the State of Israel.
6. Enhancing the participation of Temple Sinai members in Israel-related activities and the work of the committee

The effectiveness of the committee's work depends upon the involvement of and support from Temple Sinai members. That includes attending committee-organized educational programs; joining in public vigils that support our Zionist and democratic ideals; participating in programs with our twin Israeli congregation; joining as a member of our committee to enhance your and our impact; and donating to our CIESJ Fund to support our work.

Our CIESJ Fund enables the committee to bring speakers to Temple Sinai and to make donations to Israeli nonprofits like the ones described above. If you would like to make a donation in addition to your annual dues checkoff, please do so here:

https://templesinaidc.shulcloud.com/payment.php?donation_type_id=7464027.

If you have any questions about our work, please contact CIESJ Chair, Robert Snyder at bob@robertgsnyder.com or Vice Chair, Ellen Kurlansky, at ellenkurlansky@gmail.com.