

SUPPORT AND LOVE

How does Progressive Jewry stand with Israel?

DAVID KNOLL &
BRIAN SAMUEL



ALTHOUGH Zionist activity took root in Australia in the 1920s, the Australian Jewish community as it stood during World War II was fundamentally British in origin and British in outlook.

When most leading rabbis in Australia were opposed to Zionism, Temple Beth Israel's Rabbi Sanger (along with Rabbi Falk of the Great Synagogue) were actively Zionist. The term "Zionism" was coined in 1890 by Nathan Birnbaum. Zionism is the movement which asserts that the Jewish people, like other peoples on earth, has a right to self-determination in their own homeland.

From inception, Zionism has been neither left-wing nor right-wing. Jews of all persuasions – left, right, religious and secular – have long worked together towards its goals, albeit not always harmoniously. The debates have been vigorous, and regrettably, not always respectful. Since at least 1937, the Progressive movement has been openly Zionist.

That the Jewish people are entitled to their right of self-determination in their ancestral homeland transcends which party is governing Israel. It is a fundamental right, a fulcrum of Zionism, enshrined in Israel's Declaration of Independence.

But how do we express our support at a time when many in our community have some angst at some of Israel's current policies, whether issues of peace-making and security, corruption and undermining the rule of law, lack of gender equality and racism emanating from parts of Israeli society, the failure to honour agreements relating to the Kotel, or the ever worsening sore over the failure to extradite Malka Leifer? That we are concerned about such issues shows that we think about them and we care about them.

The Union for Progressive Judaism is a Zionist organisation. Support and love for Israel is at the heart of 21st century Progressive Judaism. We are active in the Zionist Federation of Australia through ARZA. Our vision for Israel is a pluralistic state, where all religious practices are treated fairly and equally and where the rights of minorities are protected. We express our support for these ideals through support for our institutions in Israel, such as the Israel Religious

Action Centre and the Israel Movement for Progressive Judaism.

We work hard to ensure that Israel is a home for all Jews, and have succeeded, for example, in ending gender discrimination on public transport, so that no longer can there be any requirement that women sit in the back of public buses or have to give up their seats on El Al flights.

On the last day of 2019 we received wonderful news that for the first time in Israeli history, the Israeli government will fund Progressive and Conservative rabbis in cities and metropolitan areas, albeit for now at reduced rates and without acknowledging them as rabbis. A petition to the Supreme Court seeking equal treatment is pending.

We want all Jews to have a place to pray, learn and build their communities, a right far from given in Israel. Just recently, after many years of delay, the local council in Shoham finally allocated a building to the local Progressive congregation! The Orthodox Chief Rabbi of Shoham had advocated against the community for years, preventing them from getting a permanent building.

The need is growing. In 2018, the Jewish Peoplehood Policy Institute revealed that today 13 per cent of Israelis

identify as Progressive or Conservative Jews – more than double in comparison to a decade ago. The vast majority of these are Israeli-born "Sabras". More and more Israelis recognise that there is more than one way to be Jewish.

And we encourage healthy, respectful conversation about what is best for Israel, decrying anti-Zionist rhetoric from the outside and expressions of racism and lack of respect for the different streams of Judaism from within.

Encouraging our members to learn about the issues that Israel faces, both externally and internally is essential to enabling a positive conversation about the kind of state that we want Israel to be. It is only when we are educated about the issues that it is possible to engage in constructive discussions about the future.

The conversations that take place in our schools, through our youth movement, Netzer, and in our congregations, and ARZA are founded in a concern for the welfare of the state and a desire to see it continue to fulfil the prophetic vision to be a "light unto the nations".

**David Knoll and Brian Samuel are
co-presidents of the Union for
Progressive Judaism.**