

## Community-wide Consultation: the Character of Israel as a Jewish and Democratic State

### 1. Introduction

Liberal Judaism is avowedly Zionist as set out in our 'Affirmations' document, seeing support for the modern State of Israel as a core expression of Jewish identity. When Liberal Judaism was created its leader, Rabbi Israel Mattuck, supported Jewish immigration to Palestine and hoped the country might become a model for a society run on Jewish lines. Our youth movement is a member of Netzer Olami and our community leaders regularly visit the State of Israel, maintaining close ties with Progressive Jewish movements there.

Our Movement's founders were, however, concerned that Zionism should not be seen as being "the totality or fulfilment of Judaism", believing that this could lead to an exclusivist and introverted view of the Jewish mission, at odds with Liberal Judaism's universalist and inclusive thinking.

Our rejection of a literal interpretation of a God-given Torah means that the Israel which Liberal Jews supports, must avoid these pitfalls and play a positive role in the world, sharing the prophetic vision and reflecting Liberal Jewish values. Our Israel is open to all, promotes equality, acts morally and ethically, and is committed to social action. In other words, it is the same vision of Israel as that of Israel's founders:

*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.*

This central passage from Israel's Declaration of Independence holds the key for Liberal Jews to the relationship between Israel and Diaspora.

### 2. Ingathering of Exiles

The principle of being open to Jewish immigration and the ingathering of the exiles must be applied equally to all Jews whatever their background or denomination. Clearly the intention of the founders of both Israel and Liberal Judaism was to include rather than exclude. To meet this vision Israel needs to continue to apply an open and inclusive interpretation of what it means to be Jewish. Indeed, since the Declaration of Independence was written in the shadow of the Holocaust and explicitly referenced the need to provide Jewish people with a homeland in the wake of those events, as a starting point Israel must never seek to exclude those who would be subject to persecution for their Jewishness.

But Liberal Jews go further: the historical context of the foundation of the State of Israel places on the country an obligation to be a haven to the oppressed and to offer sanctuary to all in need "for we

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*were strangers in the land of Egypt*" (Exodus 22:20). In other words, Israel has a particular moral obligation when it comes to providing sanctuary to refugees, irrespective of religion, race or sex.

What is more, we believe that this permissive approach to Jewish and non-Jewish immigration strengthens the relationship between Israel and the Diaspora, ensuring that Jews – wherever they currently live – share a stake in the future of the country.

### **3. Development of the interests of all Israel's inhabitants**

The Diaspora has had and continues to have the potential to play a huge role in Israel's development.

At different times throughout its history Israel's economy has hugely benefited from inward investment from the Diaspora, providing unparalleled support in particular in the development of education, health and public services.

Investment outside the Green Line is more problematic for some members of Diaspora communities, with the potential to act as a disincentive to invest in Israel as a whole and providing ammunition to the Boycotts, Divestments and Sanctions (BDS) campaign. As a response, in the UK, we have seen the development of initiatives, such as the UK Taskforce on issues relating to Arab citizens of Israel, which have identified that the equal development of all Israel's indigenous communities is not only a matter of fairness, but an essential ingredient for the promotion of peace and Israel's long-term security.

For this reason we see the Diaspora community as having a crucial role to play in supporting Israel through charities and not-for-profit organisations – from Magen David Olam to the New Israel Fund – that work across communities to promote the development of and support for all Israel's communities, regardless of religion or race.

Far from attempting to reduce the influence of non-Israeli NGOs in this respect, as some have recently done, we urge the Israeli Government to encourage inward investment in Israel's non-Jewish communities – as well as its Jewish ones – by the Diaspora. This is the fulfilment of the vision of Israel's founders, and a practical counterweight to the inequality which has been the accidental result of Diaspora inward investment in Israel's Jewish community.

But this should not be the limit of the Diaspora's on-going economic engagement with Israel. Through trade, investment and academic discourse, Israel should seek to move its international interactions away from the prism of conflict and towards economic collaboration and partnership. The Diaspora has a key role to play in developing this different type of relationship with the rest of the world. Israel needs to support the Diaspora in this work.

Furthermore, this type of economic partnership, whether with Israel's majority or minority communities, provides a new generation of Diaspora Jews with a practical opportunity to re-engage with Israel away from the complex issues raised by the conflict. Israel should actively work with the Diaspora to create opportunities – especially for young people – to become involved in Israeli education, social action and welfare projects working with all Israel's citizens including Arabs, Bedouin and new refugee communities.

#### **4. Freedom, Justice and Peace**

As Liberal Jews we are inspired by the Prophets who combined a sincere commitment to Judaism with a constant regard for the universal values of freedom, justice and peace which we believe should guide all ethical behaviour.

The robust nature of Israel's constitutional arrangements and the strength and independence of its Supreme Court and its judiciary, is a matter of great pride. It has done much not only to preserve and protect Israel's democracy, but to protect the rights of all its citizens and ensure that Israel stands alone in the Middle East in its support for minority rights, free speech and dissent.

Israel's founders included these values in the Declaration of Independence, not only to align the country with Judaism's prophetic tradition, but because they inherently recognised the value of the dissenting voice. This voice challenges the accepted 'wisdoms' and conventional practice and spurs innovation and development. For this reason legislative and other attempts to silence and delegitimise dissenters within Israel is not only in opposition to Israel's founding values, it is ultimately self-defeating and should be resisted.

Therefore, to seek to limit dissent to those that choose to make their homes in the land of Israel is to miss an opportunity to strengthen the State. Israel should welcome comment and input from the Diaspora whatever its content so long as it comes from those that are speaking out of love for Israel. Israeli institutions and politicians are of course not obliged to act upon Diaspora concerns, but they will benefit from the respect of hearing them.

#### **5. Equality of social and political rights**

The Diaspora – largely based in countries with strong democratic traditions of their own – shares Israel's pride at being the only determinedly democratic country in the region. The fundamental rights of Israeli citizens, as embodied in the Declaration of Independence, are at the core of its legitimacy and Diaspora support.

Anything which might diminish the nature of this democracy – limiting the right to vote of groups of Israeli citizens on whatever grounds, or indeed extending that right to those in the Diaspora who do not hold citizenship – will in the end diminish Diaspora support for the country.

Furthermore, to deny the rights of equality and democracy which are embedded in Israel's Declaration of Independence to our Palestinian brothers and sisters is also to diminish Israel. It cannot be right to apply one set of principles to our own national self-determination, while not extending them to the right to self-determination of others.

For this reason, in common with the vast majority of Diaspora Jewry, Liberal Judaism is a strong supporter of a two-state solution which includes a Palestinian State. This is not only a fundamental issue of fairness but also, ultimately, is the only means by which to secure Israel's own autonomy, peace and security.

#### **6. Freedom of religion, conscience, language, education and culture**

The progressive movements have long held a diminished status in Israel, the result of the overweening power of the religious parties in previous governments dating back to the establishment

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of the State. It is quite clear that this was not the intention of Israel's founders who put equality at the centre of their Declaration of Independence.

The exclusion of religious parties from the current coalition provides the space for action and we welcome the moves of the current government, bolstered by the judiciary, to provide equal status to the non-orthodox movements and their leaders. In the long term, we strongly believe that this approach will not only benefit the non-orthodox Jews in the Diaspora - who are in the majority - but also the State of Israel itself. Strengthening the affiliation of Liberal and Reform Jews with the State provides protection against a slide into the religious fundamentalism and extremism which threaten to engulf much of the rest of the region.

### **7. Faithful to the principles of the Charter of the United Nations**

This pledge within the Declaration harks back to a time shortly after the UN's establishment and is a reminder of an optimism for its role and impartiality, which many would regard as being yet to be fulfilled.

Nevertheless, adherence to the values of and respect for international institutions is both principled and practical, serving the current State well. Israel owes its creation to the UN, and the values of its own Declaration of Independence mirror those of the on-going institution, the International Court, the UNCHR, as well as other international treaties and agreements.

The politicisation of such institutions - against the aims and objectives of their creators - as vehicles with which to attack Israel, must not be allowed to undermine the principle of international law. With Israel's support the Diaspora can play an active role engaging with these institutions, to promote an adherence to their founding principles, so long as Israel also continues to value the principles embodied in the country's own founding Declaration.

### **8. Conclusion**

The Diaspora has an active and legitimate interest in Israel's future. It should be encouraged to engage not only with the Israeli State but also with its own home governments and institutions to protect and promote Israel's interests and concerns.

To do this effectively Israel must demonstrably value the input of the Diaspora and uphold the values on which Israel was founded and which the vast majority in the Diaspora share.

These values include:

- the right to intervene to promote equality and opportunities for minority communities
- the right to dissent and criticise from a position of support
- the right to respect for its own institutions and for all Jewish traditions

**Prepared as a contribution to the JLC Community-wide consultation: The Character of Israel as a Jewish and Democratic State.**

**Approved by Lucian J. Hudson, Chairman of Liberal Judaism and Rabbi Danny Rich, Chief Executive of Liberal Judaism. Dated 06-02-2014**