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Synagogue urges members to confront Israel differences

By Elise Kigner
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Before the High Holidays the clergy at Temple Israel of Boston sent a letter to their congregants explaining that they needed to talk. The subject: Israel.

In the letter, the rabbis and cantor laid out three reasons for the meeting:

Mentioning the word “Zionism” at Temple Israel makes an otherwise relaxed environment tense.

Some parents are asking why Zionism is being taught in the religious school.

A growing percentage of members “wonder as to Israel’s importance in the evolution of their lives.”

The congregants took note. About 250 members of the venerable Reform synagogue attended “A Congregational Conversation: Temple Israel and Israel” in October.

In discussions moderated by the shul’s four rabbis, people with views on the right and left expressed their perspectives on topics ranging from Israel’s security and the two-state solution to humanitarian concerns and the centrality of Israel to American Jewish identity.

Senior Rabbi Ronne Friedman said the discussions were a good start, but one thing was missing: active engagement, participants directly challenging one another’s views. Friedman said he hoped they would be less reticent at the next congregational conversation, which is scheduled for Dec. 13.

“There are a tremendous number of people who are eager for this larger conversation to take place in an atmosphere that isn’t so heavily politicized that differences aren’t valued,” he said.

“One thing that has occurred to me is if you really want to learn about a topic of interest – in this case, points of view around Israel – one of the best things you can do is not speak with people who agree with you, but to hear from people with opinions different than yours.

“It doesn’t mean you’ll change your thinking,” Friedman continued. “Your opinion will be sharpened by opening yourself to hear why someone comes at this with a different or opposite point of view.”

The congregational conversations come as the synagogue launches a three-year adult education program on Israeli politics, culture and history, dating from Biblical times.

Congregants have been asked to help develop programs to increase a sense of connection with Israel. These may include trips to the Holy Land and exhibits at the temple on Israel-related topics.

The kickoff speaker for the series was Peter Beinart, a political writer for the Web site *The Daily Beast* and the author of the controversial essay “The Failure of the American Jewish Establishment,” published last year in *The New York Review of Books*. Beinart spoke at the Burstein Scholar-in- Residence weekend in early November.

Stephen Subrin, chair of the adult education committee, said in the past Temple Israel had hosted such diverse speakers on Israel as members of the Israel Defense Forces and revisionist historians who maintained that Arabs were driven from their homes at the birth of the Jewish state.

Subrin said the current program series marks the first time synagogue leaders have made a concerted effort to address the difficulty

American Jews have in holding frank discussions about their differences over Israel.

“I don’t think we ever had anything as stark as Peter Beinart, who came out and said that the establishment Jewish community has failed to engage the younger Jewish community and has stifled dissent in a non-productive way,” Subrin said.

Subrin, 75, said he had seen evidence within his own congregation of the generational divide over Israel.

“Our older congregants are instinctively pro-Israel, no matter what, and our younger congregants, although sympathetic to Israel, are much more critical of the Israeli treatment of Palestinians and of the occupation of the West Bank and of the settlements,” he said.

Friedman said he hoped to bring in speakers both on the left, like Beinart, and on the right, with the goal of provoking discussion.

“I am more concerned about those who are apathetic in relation to Israel than about those who engage with Israel from the left side or the right side,” he said, adding that he wants to emphasize “how critically important it is to incorporate Israel in this larger exploration of individual Jewish identity and group Jewish identity.”

Israel is a charged subject, too, in the Temple Israel religious school. Friedman said some parents – many of them too young to remember pre-1967 Israel – were uncomfortable with the term Zionism.

“I think the disparagement of that term by the world outside, the contemporary world, probably creates some greater difficulty for some Jews,” Friedman said.

Debbie Betesh, the synagogue’s director of elementary education, said she was working with her teachers on developing curriculum to help students better relate to Israel.

Betesh recalled that five years ago first grade teacher Shahar Colt questioned whether it was useful to continue to have children take a virtual trip to Israel in which they pretend to get on a plane and tour the country. After teaching this curriculum for a year, Colt told Betesh, “I love Israel, but Israel is meaningless to the kids.”

The pair spent hours brainstorming, coming up with a yearlong lesson plan centered on community. First the students talked about their family community, then their classroom community. Next they addressed their temple community, prompting discussions on why the shul has a social hall, a library and a ramp next to the stairs. The children went on to talk about how they are part of a worldwide Jewish community that shares Hebrew, Torah, holidays and even some foods.

Around Tu B’Shevat in the winter, the class reached the point of talking about Israel. Colt explained that Israel is a country where many Jews live, and where they speak Hebrew.

After learning about the many paths that linked them to Israel, the students better grasped the relationship between Jews in Boston and those in Israel, Betesh said.

“It is hard to develop an emotional connection or an intellectual connection with something that is so far away,” Betesh said. “For adults, it is not any easier.”

For more on the lectures and classes about Israel, which are open to members and non-members, visit tisrael.org or call 617- 566-3960.