

Hello Temple Sinai!

I just got back from attending the AIPAC Conference in Washington, DC with a contingent from Sinai, and then going to New Mexico to lead the bat and bar mitzvah of one of our closest friend's twins. At the end of this email, I'll share a more in-depth reflection of my experience of the AIPAC Conference, and I welcome conversation about this. Temple Sinai is our spiritual home, and learning to see the spark of the Divine in people we disagree with is a valuable spiritual practice. Learning to build community across a range of views by focusing on what we share is also a valuable practice.

SERVICES THIS SHABBAT

COMMUNITY SHABBAT DINNER

Friday, April 5 — 5:30pm

Join us for a Community Shabbat Dinner hosted by the parents of Kindergarten and 1st grade Religious School students. Feel free to bring a dish to share, if you wish.

FOLK KABBALAT SHABBAT SERVICES

Friday, April 5 — 6:30pm

Join us for a folk Shabbat with our Kindergarten and 1st graders, led by Mark Leopold, while I am leading services at the Jewish Communities of Vermont Summit in Killington, VT.

SHABBAT MORNING PRAYERS

Saturday, April 6 — 9:30am

Our one hour Shabbat morning service is peaceful and uplifting service, mostly chanted in Hebrew, led this week by Bruce Chalmer, while I am away leading Torah Study at the Jewish Communities of Vermont Summit in Killington, VT.

TORAH STUDY

Saturday, April 6 — 10:30am-12:00pm

This week, we will be studying Parashat Tazria, which includes some practices that are very difficult for us, living now, to fully understand, but which can reveal a great deal about the worldview of our ancestors. Here is link to [TAZRIA, in Hebrew and English from Sefaria](#).

Here is a link to the [Union of Reform Judaism's page of commentary on Tazria](#).

OTHER IMPORTANT EVENTS:



JEWISH COMMUNITIES OF VERMONT SUMMIT

Friday-Sunday, April 5-7 in Killington, VT

This is a very important, education and fun event that brings together all the Jewish communities in Vermont, and we want Temple Sinai to represent! I'll be leading Friday Night Services and Saturday Morning Torah Study with help from my friends, so "come on down!"

Click [here](#) to register.

FINISH THE PLAYROOM!

Sunday, April 14 — 11:00am-3:00pm

We all agree we want to attract more young families with children, and one way to help is to make our synagogue and school more engaging for children. A fun playroom/childcare



space is key to that goal. We need your help to finish setting it up and painting so we have a childcare and play space for Passover Seder. Pizza lunch will be served and child care is possible if you let us know.



CHOIR, UKULELE and INSTRUMENT PRACTICE FOR PASSOVER SEDER

APRIL 14 — 4:00pm-6:00pm

Want to learn to sing or play some fun songs for Passover? Want to make some of the singing at Seder more harmonious? Wanna play Ukulele? Join us to learn songs and harmonies for some of the songs for our community Seder. It is a great way to enhance your experience at Seder while making Seder better for all.

REFLECTIONS ON THE 2019 AIPAC POLICY CONFERENCE

There have been many articles and news stories about AIPAC in the past weeks, and while some reflect my experience and the experiences of the group I took from Temple Sinai to the AIPAC Policy Conference last week (March 24-26), others seemed like they were talking about a completely different event. I thought it might be helpful to share my take on the conference with you. Since we will be taking a group again next year, I think it is useful for us to talk about this important event openly and honestly.

OUR YOUNG PEOPLE: First, I want to give a shout-out to the young people who came with Temple Sinai – Thomas Buckley, Shayna Larrow, and Allyson Tazbin. They were engaged and engaging, mature and complex in their thinking. I was very very proud of them, especially during the lobbying of Congress on the last day. They were articulate, smart, and respectful and it was inspiring to see young people wrestling with complex issues instead of giving into to knee-jerk partisan reactions.

AIPAC AND PARTISANSHIP: There has been a great deal written criticizing AIPAC for being partisan and dividing American Jews. That was not my experience, though it is certainly true that those attending AIPAC were more conservative and pro-Israel than the majority of American Jews, and certainly than Vermont's Jewish community. I would guess that about 60% plus of those attending were clearly pro-Netanyahu and supported President Trump's actions in Israel. There were many enthusiastic standing ovations whenever a Republican spoke, or when an AIPAC official praised Trump's recognition of Israeli sovereignty over the Golan Heights or his moving of the US Embassy to Jerusalem. Still, it seemed that around 35-40% of the 18,000 attending were not as supportive of Trump/Netanyahu's policies. Indeed, some of the longest ovations came for Senate Minority Leader Chuck Schumer, Speaker of the House Nancy Pelosi, and Majority Leader Steny Hoyer.

It is quite true that some of the speakers at the General Session of the conference were profoundly and infuriatingly partisan. AIPAC had asked speakers to avoid partisanship, and to a person, the Democratic speakers honored that request, while to a person, the Republican speakers did not, and instead used the opportunity to be brazenly partisan, criticizing Democrats and praising President Trump as the greatest friend Israel has ever had in the White House. AIPAC invited people mostly based on their position in government, and with a Republican Senate and White House, that meant there were many speakers from that side of the aisle. If Democrats controlled more government institutions, there would have been more Democratic speakers. That is not in AIPAC's control. They balanced this by inviting bipartisan groups of elected representatives, and highlighting programs in Israel that are *tikkun olam* oriented, and included Jews, Arabs, Bedouins, Druze and Christians.

Still, I will admit that I was quite uncomfortable at times. Sitting while all around is a standing ovation from some hyperpartisan line or another, I could not help but reflect on how rare it is these days to be in a room where people come together across a rather huge political divide. Being in the Vermont “bubble,” I think it was good to be in a minority and experience both sides of the debate, and acknowledging how much we all agreed on. That does not mean it was comfortable, but as far as I saw, both sides of those attending were respectful to one another, and civil. There is so little of that in our society today, and I think in terms of modelling working together across difference, AIPAC is an excellent example.

It is also important to point out that these partisan speeches only took place in the large General Sessions, where the press corps had a strong presence. The bulk of the conference consisted of much smaller panel discussions, caucuses, and workshops, and these did not seem at all partisan. There were sessions on Israeli technology, the threat of Iran’s activities in Syria, etc. I myself attended workshops on Feminism, Intersectionality and Zionism, and caucuses of Reform rabbis, etc.

REFORM JUDAISM IN ISRAEL: In the meeting of Reform rabbis, we learned that in a recent poll, 13% of Israeli Jews identify as either Reform or Conservative, a very significant increase. And the Reform Movement in Israel plans to add 20 congregations to the existing 53 congregations in Israel. They are also opening many new pre-schools that are in the Reform movement due to *popular demand*. The Israeli Religious Action Center, our legal arm in Israel, has won several crucial court cases to establish more religious pluralism in Israel, as well as winning cases for Palestinian and Druze complainants against Israeli actions.

Also, there will be an election for the World Zionist Congress in 2020, and it is crucial that progressive Jews vote in large numbers, as that impacts the distribution of funding in Israel. I will be writing more when the time comes, but Reform Judaism is at last taking root in Israel, and there is every reason to believe that growth will continue.

PROTESTS: While there were many predictions of massive protests against AIPAC, they did not materialize. There were a very small number of protesters, and they showed up late and left early. Those of us attending the conference arrived between 7 am and 9 am, and left at dinner time.

I understand the complaints against AIPAC, and think some of them are valid. AIPAC views are usually in line not only with the Israeli government, but with the majority of Israelis, and those views differ in some areas from the majority of American Jews.

However, it is much easier to protest against an organization than it is to build a proactive organization. It can be seductive to dismantle institutions, to be an iconoclast, to be part of a revolution. However, as Edmund Burke pointed out in his *Reflections on the Revolution in*

France, dismantling institutions rarely leads to positive change. Indeed, it often leads to chaos followed by more reactionary elements gaining power.

When I attended AIPAC in the 1980's it was only about 1500 people. It is now 18,000 and growing. This year there were large contingents of people of color, particularly African-Americans. There were elderly people and young people; there was a sizable LGBT contingent, and the average age was younger than I would have anticipated. That took organization, commitment, and hard work by AIPAC over decades.

It seems to me a wise strategy to work within AIPAC for the shifts we hope for, and so that this extremely effective institution more closely aligns with progressive Zionist priorities. We could do this easily by increasing the number of progressives involved in the organization. If every progressive that attended brought a friend next year, it would mean progressives would be in the majority. If they remained involved, did the work, progressives could be more represented on the AIPAC Board and effect change without dismantling an already effective institution. This requires a long-term strategic view and a willingness to engage those with whom we disagree over the long haul.

OVERALL: While it was noticeable that the majority of AIPAC and I disagree about much, it was also clear that we agree, despite our differences, on some key issues. We agree that Israel has a right to exist within secure borders, and the Israel-American alliance benefits both nations significantly. We agreed that the BDS movement is rooted in anti-Semitic tropes and seeks to delegitimize the Jewish people's right to self-determination in our ancestral homeland. We agreed that Israel has accomplished amazing things in 70 short years. We agreed that it matters to us that Israel continues to exist as a refuge for Jew being persecuted.

For me, that is enough so that we can work together toward common goals, and leave the rest to other organizational involvement. I have profound differences with much of current Israeli policy, (as I do with current US policy, for that matter), but strategically, AIPAC has a place at the table, and I don't think it is wise for Reform Jews, the largest Jewish movement in North America, to cede our place at that table. Instead, it is there that our voices are particularly needed.