



## CENTER FOR SMALL TOWN JEWISH LIFE

May 2019; Iyar 5779

Dear Friends,

It is not a coincidence that Maine has become my Jewish home. Aside from Israel, there are few places in the world where I feel as comfortable and empowered as a Jew. Why? Maine, by design or circumstance, makes places for folks like me who do not fit easily into predefined categories or boxes of identity, belonging, or political affiliation. One of the many reasons that Maine is my Jewish home is because it makes space for the complexity of my commitments, opinions, and values.

When we discuss Israel, we often express ourselves by 1) describing our positions with the shorthand of which political organizations we support, and 2) superimposing a discussion about our own identity as Jewish-Americans onto the unique complexities of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. These two trends in Jewish discourse about Israel, in my opinion, have had a deleterious impact on our ability to discuss Israel as a real place with real people who live in a deeply complicated reality. For the past few years, I have been searching for partners who are willing, able, and honest enough to discuss Israel, the Palestinians, and the greater region with an eye toward intellectual rigor.

Increasingly, our approach at the Center for Small Town Jewish Life has been to invite individual Israeli artists, musicians, and thought leaders who bring the richness and complexity of Israel's reality to our corner of the world. We have moved away from inviting speakers from political interest groups, or even speakers who talk about Israel in geopolitical context. Not only did those invitations cause division, they also provided relatively shallow approaches to the nuances of Israel, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, and American discourse about those topics. In general, our educational approach on most Jewish topics has been exploration, not persuasion. We want that same spirit to inform our approach to Israel. Until this point, we have not been able to find the right partner in this endeavor .

This past fall, I was selected as a fellow with the Israel Policy Forum. The Israel Policy Forum will be involved in two major ways in the upcoming Maine Conference for Jewish Life. It has provided us with an incredible keynote speaker, Amir Tibon, the Washington correspondent for the Israeli newspaper, *Ha'aretz*. *Ha'aretz*, quite rightly, has the reputation of being a paper with a clear left-wing slant read by a minority of Israelis, but Tibon does not fall into easy political categories. After reporting on the impact of the last Gaza war on Israeli border communities, Tibon made the unusual

and courageous decision to move his family from Tel Aviv to Kibbutz Nahal Oz on the Gaza border. He chose to leave the well-protected bubble (and political echo chamber) of Tel Aviv, and move his family to a community that had to face the daily reality of rockets falling into homes, explosive balloons falling into kindergarten courtyards, and traumatized communities trying to live normal lives despite it all. He will be talking about his experience of living in a border community, and how it has impacted his identity as an Israeli. In addition to our keynote, the Israel Policy Forum staff will also be offering two general sessions during the conference.

In the spirit of advancing high-quality Israel education tailored to the particular interests and identities of Mainers, I am also excited to announce that the Center for Small Town Jewish Life will be partnering with the Conservative Yeshiva in Jerusalem to run a trip for small-town American Jews that will include an introduction to small-town Jewish life in Israel and intensive text study in Jerusalem. The trip will take place January 27-February 9, 2020. If you are interested in being part of it, please contact me at [risaacs@colby.edu](mailto:risaacs@colby.edu).

No organization, the CSTJL included, will ever be perfect or please everyone when exploring a topic as complex and emotionally charged as Israel. At the same time, we are making thoughtful steps at the conference to better engage our Maine community in conversations that are pressing and compelling for the greater American Jewish community. I hope you will join us in this educational and spiritual journey, and provide feedback to our staff and on our evaluations about our new Israel education programs. I look forward to leading, learning, and innovating with you in the year to come, and charting a new course in our community's engagement with our homeland.

With deep thanks,



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