BALTIMORE
Jewish Times

January 20, 2017/22 Tevet 5777

Candle Lighting: 4:55 p.m.

A House Divided

The one place meant to unite the Jewish community is becoming one of its biggest rifts

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A House Divided

The one place meant to unite the Jewish community is becoming one of its biggest rifts

By Hannah Monicken

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TODAY, the country inaugurates its new president.

Due partially to a lack of government experience to draw from and partially to Donald Trump's propensity for holding competing positions on the same issue, it is hard to say how exactly the new president will govern.

For the Baltimore Jewish community — and American Jewish population at large — one of the main issues to watch will be that of its homeland: Israel.

It's hard to overstate the importance of Israel to many Jews. It is a key part of Jewish identity, and yet, the one place meant to unite all Jews has become possibly the community's greatest divide. For some, criticism of Israel undermines the Jewish history of overcoming oppression and anti-Semitism. For others, not to criticize the Israeli government's controversial policies violates Jewish values and the community's progressive track record.

For decades, supporting

Israel was a bipartisan effort in the United States. That has become less and less true in recent years, with approaches to Israel splitting more and more along party lines. The Baltimore Jewish community of more than 93,000 (at last count, according to a 2010 study by The Associated: Jewish Community Federation of Baltimore) is not immune to this trend.

"I think what we're seeing now is the beginning of a political shift," said Art Abramson, former longtime executive director of the Baltimore Jewish Council. "And I don't see it boding particularly well for the Jewish community."

Robert Freedman, a visiting professor of political science at Johns Hopkins University and a professor at the Baltimore Hebrew Institute, has edited a number of books about Israel and agreed with Abramson. He pointed to Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's speech before Congress (at then-Speaker John Boehner's invitation) two years ago as one of the first indications of Israel's move to a more partisan consideration.

"So what you're seeing is a major split in the American Jewish community — Orthodox voting Republican and Conservative/Reform voting Democrat," he said. "And I think you're going to see increasing alienation of Reform and Conservative Jews from Israel, not only because of the settlements, but also because of the Western Wall issue and their being treated as second-class citizens."

Many JT readers will be familiar, to some extent, with Israeli politics, but the crux of the issue is this: The Orthodox and Haredi Orthodox Jewish voice in Israel is amplified in politics and government beyond what it represents in population, often to the exclusion of those who identify with the Conservative or Reform or other non-Orthodox movements of Judaism. As of a Pew Research Center study released last year, those identifying as "Haredi Orthodox" and "Religious" were 18 percent of the Israeli population (for context, 19 percent of Israel is non-Jewish, with 14 of the 19 percent Muslim). The remaining 63 percent of Jews identified as "Traditional" (23 percent) or "Secular" (the largest single segment of the population at 40 percent). By contrast, the Jewish population in the United States, according to a 2013 Pew survey, is about one-third nondenominational (30 percent), one-third Reform (35 percent), and the remaining third Conservative (18 percent) along with Orthodox (10 percent); a small percentage falls into the "other" category.

There is a prevailing attitude among the more religious in Israel that non-Orthodox Jews are "not real Jews," Freedman said, and that plays out in ways both big and small that only serve to further alienate many non-Orthodox American Jews from Israel, as well as the non-Orthodox in Israel.

For example, non-Orthodox women are frequently made to dress in a way the more religious consider modest, even in certain public areas. Israeli religious authorities (the only ones allowed to perform marriages) are barred from marrying interfaith couples, and non-Orthodox Jewish couples can only be married under Orthodox rules.

But one of the main, ongoing discussions has been who's allowed to pray (and how) at the Western Wall. The main prayer plaza at the Wall separates visitors by gender, as dictated by traditional Jewish law. And the southern part of the Wall (around Robinson's Arch) was designated in 2000 to be an unofficial pluralistic prayer site for those wishing to hold mixed-gender ceremonies or prayers. An interdenominational group called Women of the Wall has also been working to allow women to pray at the Wall in ways traditionally allowed only to men — reading from the Torah, wrapped in a prayer shawl, etc.

Earlier last year, a government resolution would have formally recognized and expanded the designated space

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"Women of the Wall", an activist group that is challenging the Orthodox over rites at the Western Wall, has been working to allow women to pray at the Wall in ways traditionally allowed only to men, including reading from the Torah and wearing prayer shawls.

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at the southern end of the Wall and Robinson's Arch as a pluralistic prayer space. The Haredi Orthodox leaders in the coalition later got cold feet and instead introduced a bill to the Knesset that would essentially criminalize progressive prayer services across the whole Wall.

"Acting as if it's an Orthodox monopoly means Israel and the Wall are not for all Jews, but a special kind of Jews — the ultra-Orthodox Jews — and that's very unfortunate in terms of Jewish unity," Freedman said, continuing that all of this adds up to increasingly mixed views on Israel, especially from non-Orthodox Jews. So, within this already-fraught religious (and political) divide steps the seemingly interminable conflict with the Palestinians.

The conflict has been bloody and long. Since just the turn of the century, more than 1,300 Israelis and, exponentially larger, 9,200 Palestinians have died, according to the Israeli Foreign Ministry and B'Tselem, an Israeli human rights group, respectively.

The international community has, in recent weeks, made moves that appear to be both criticizing Israel's occupation of the West Bank and attempting to renew a stalled peace process aimed at a two-state solution. Just last weekend, representatives from 70 countries in Paris for a Middle East Peace Conference endorsed renewed talks and the existence of a two-state solution, a move largely seen as warning Trump and Netanyahu not to ignore this process.

And then there was the U.N. resolution. The most recent measure to reveal the divide specifically in the American Jewish population, United Nations Security Council Resolution 2334 condemned Israeli settlements on the West Bank and was passed unanimously. The United States abstained from voting, a break from usual policy when it would frequently veto any resolution seen as too critical of Israel.

AIPAC, the staunchly pro-Israel group, was quick to speak out against the resolution, calling it "destructive" and "one-sided."

Conversely, J Street, the more liberal, relative upstart pro-Israel group to AIPAC, welcomed the resolution, saying it "reaffirm[ed] the need for a two-state solution and call[ed] for a halt to actions by both sides that serve to undermine the prospects for peace."

Even further left, Jewish Voice for Peace issued a statement from its executive director both celebrating the resolution and saying the U.S. should have voted for the resolution as opposed to abstaining. "As the only country that abstained, the evidence of the U.S.'s isolation from the global consensus during the vote was stark," the statement, posted on the group's website, says in part.

Perhaps tellingly, the BJC fell on the AIPAC side, issuing a statement — made by the executive committee on behalf of the full board — that it was "profoundly disappointed" in the U.S. abstention. "The BJC believes that the United States' strong support for its most steadfast democratic ally in the Middle East is both principled and strategic," it went on to say. "Unfortunately, the abstention from last week's U.N. resolution was neither."

Howard Libit, executive director of the BJC, says the council is always striving to bring the community together and weigh in on issues they think their voice can make a difference.

"I hope we will continue to be an advocate for the community," he said. He also said the BJC is committed to interfaith cooperation and standing with the local Muslim community against rising Islamophobia, but did not go into detail on where the council might stand in the coming

Some point to Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's speech before Congress in March 2015 (pictured) at the invite of then-speaker John Boehner as an indication that Israel was becoming a partisan issue.

Win McNamee/Getty Images

Trump administration's future.

"It's just kind of a confusing time politically, so I think everyone is trying to figure it out," Libit said. But he does want the council to be a voice for everyone. "I think the BJC is really broadly representative of the community."

Abramson does think the Baltimore Jewish community is divided on Israel but cautions against equating the Orthodox vs. non-Orthodox divide with the political right vs. left one. He points to broad Jewish support for Republican Gov. Larry Hogan that didn't translate across the community into support for Trump.

This tracks for Baltimore Zionist District president Robert Slatkin, who is a member of a Conservative congregation. He said BZD includes people from a spectrum of Jewish denominations, but its membership leans more religious. BZD aims to both advocate for Israel's continued security and educate about the challenges still facing it.

"We're very clear: We continue in our unwavering support of a democratic state of Israel," Slatkin said.

Siding with Slatkin is Dr. Gary Applebaum, who is involved locally with both AIPAC and Friends of the Israel Defense Forces. Though he is a staunch supporter of Israel — he criticized the Palestinians for not coming to the table and for their lack of leadership — he believes it still has some unifying power.

"Those of us who love Israel and want to do right by Israel often realize Israel is the one issue that can bring Congress together," he said.

And yet, Al Mendelsohn, GOP chairman for Baltimore County, said he's seeing more local Jews come over to the Republican Party, partly, he feels, because of the Israel issue.

"You can certainly say something you don't agree with regarding Israel without being an anti-Semite, but I think that the national Democratic Party has become very accepting of that crowd," he said, adding that he feels even Sen. Ben Cardin sometimes goes out of his way not to offend those Mendelsohn saw as anti-Israel. "I'm finding an awful lot of people who are Jewish who aren't afraid to say, 'I voted Republican last time.'"

Cardin, the senior senator for Maryland, a Democrat and member of Beth Tfiloh, took issue with that characterization.

"No, I don't accept that there is a difference in passion of support for Israel," he said. "In reality, we all want to maintain bipartisan, bicameral — executive, legislative — support of Israel."

Cardin co-introduced the Senate resolution opposing the U.N. resolution. There are always people, on both sides, who will try to make Israel a partisan issue, he said, though he doesn't see it as one.

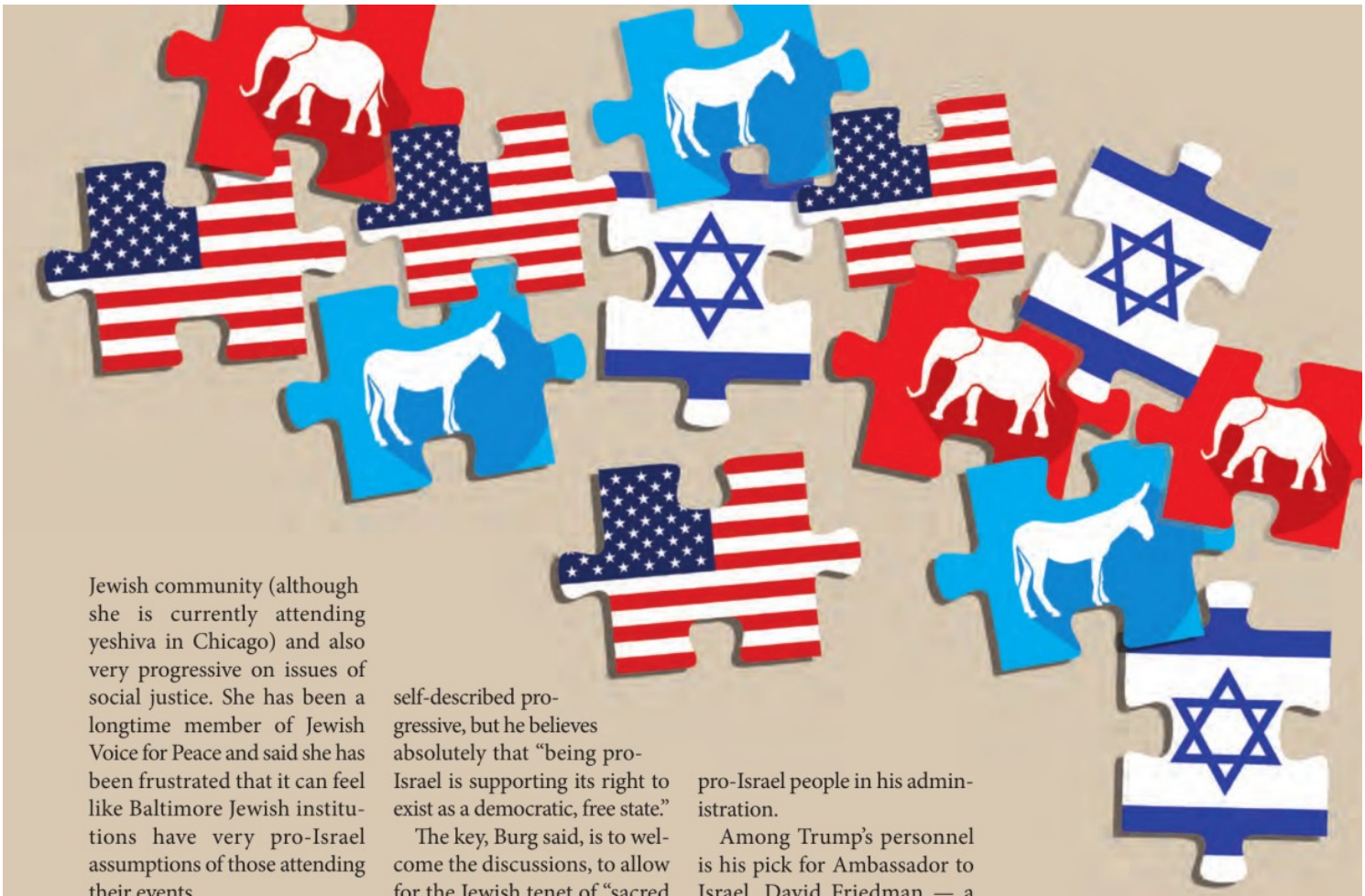
"It's not unusual to see different views in the Jewish community," he said. "That's in our DNA. I don't think there's any disagreement on support for Israel."

Josh Greenfeld is a local representative of J Street, which supports working toward the two-state solution, and said there's a reason the organization is growing and becoming more visible. Since Trump's surprise election, J Street has seen some of the biggest gains ever, both in membership and finances, according to Greenfeld. And he says he is having more and more people from the Baltimore community reach out to him about being involved.

"When J Street started, it was like a breath of fresh air," he said. AIPAC has done great work, he added, but more recently it has "failed to represent views of many in the community."

Many of those in the community who are more critical of Israel tend to fall in younger demographics — look at J Street's fairly large presence on college campuses (this includes a chapter at Johns Hopkins University). Those who are more hardline pro-Israel often dismiss these groups as simply "less educated" on the facts or saying they don't remember all the violence Israel has faced in getting where it has (specifically the 1948 Arab-Israeli, 1967 Six-Day and 1973 Yom Kippur wars).

This is true to some extent, but it also does a serious disservice to young Jews, many of whom ground their criticisms of Israel firmly in their Jewish faith. Annie Kaufman, 38, is an active member of the Baltimore



Jewish community (although she is currently attending yeshiva in Chicago) and also very progressive on issues of social justice. She has been a longtime member of Jewish Voice for Peace and said she has been frustrated that it can feel like Baltimore Jewish institutions have very pro-Israel assumptions of those attending their events.

"They try to make it look like all Jews in Baltimore stand with Israel and that it's a big part of what it means to be Jewish," she said. "But I know from many of my friends that there is a lot of diversity of opinion regarding Israel."

Kaufman, who recently led a progressive-minded Talmudic study session in Baltimore, thinks some synagogues are now engaging with discussions that vocalize and support criticisms of Israel.

Local Rabbis are as divided and diverse in opinion as the community they serve. Rabbi Daniel Cotzin Burg of Beth Am Congregation supports Israel, but also thinks too many people conflate the Israeli government with the whole State of Israel.

"Israel is not an issue, it's a state," he said. He may disagree with some of its policies as a self-described progressive, but he believes absolutely that "being pro-Israel is supporting its right to exist as a democratic, free state."

The key, Burg said, is to welcome the discussions, to allow for the Jewish tenet of "sacred arguing" to take place respectfully among the community.

Rabbi Mitchell Wohlberg of Beth Tfiloh Congregation was actually in Israel when the JT reached out to him. He characterized both his and his congregation as a staunchly pro-Israel group. Or, as he put it, "I wasn't put on this earth to be critical of Israel."

"This is not a J Street congregation," he went on to say. "We take great pride in our support for Israel."

How someone approached Israel also tended to predict how he or she viewed the potential for the new administration. Those hardline Israel supporters are optimistic about Trump, and hopeful for improved U.S.-Israel relations. If personnel are policy, Applebaum said, then he saw it as a positive sign that Trump was surrounding himself with pro-Israel people in his administration.

Among Trump's personnel is his pick for Ambassador to Israel, David Friedman — a controversial choice due to his support for far-right groups in Israel and previous statements likening J Street members to kapos, Jews who supervised their fellow Jews in concentration camps. Friedman also supports moving the American Embassy from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem, a move at odds with longtime U.S. policy. Those more critical of Israel have numerous concerns, not only for the future of Israel, but also for those minority groups here at home, including the Jewish community.

"I'm very nervous about Trump's presidency in general and his appointees, including David Friedman," Burg said.

Cardin, who is the Ranking Member on the Senate Foreign Affairs Committee, which will be overseeing Friedman's confirmation, said he always reserves judgment until the hearings, but assured that Friedman will be asked to address head-on his "unacceptable statements about Jews who disagree with him."

Almost everyone the JT talked to about this subject predicted the divide in the Baltimore Jewish community, and larger American Jewish population, would only widen. And they all also said something else: They love Israel. Almost all of them had visited at least once, more often a double-digit number of times.

The community may not agree on Israel, maybe ever, but they all still have something that unites them — their Jewish heritage. JT

hmonicken@midatlanticmedia.com