

Reconstructing Judaism joins Progressive Israel Network organizations in Letter to Biden

March 5, 2024

Reconstructing Judaism joins multiple organizations affiliated with the Progressive Israel Network in signing on to a public letter to President Biden at this critical moment in the ongoing Israel-Hamas war. The letter reads:

Dear President Biden,

We write to you as American Jews – member organizations of the Progressive Israel Network – who represent the vast majority of liberal American Jews.

We thank you for your sincere, deep, and ongoing solidarity with Israelis and the Jewish diaspora in the United States and around the world. You have stood with the victims of Hamas' October 7 atrocities, have shared the grief and pain of those whose loved ones have been taken hostage, and made clear – in word and in deed – that the United States will defend Israel from existential threats.

For your compassion, principles, and enduring support, you have earned the deep and abiding trust of the Israeli people and Jewish people around the world.

All of us invested in the fate of the ongoing war in the region stand at a critical juncture. As we come upon the Muslim holy month of Ramadan and stand on the brink of a potential Israeli military campaign in Rafah, where over 1.2 million Palestinian civilians are sheltering, the situation on the ground has the potential to deteriorate even further. As American Jews, we are profoundly concerned with the risks that this moment poses to Israelis, Palestinians, and the entire region.

We firmly believe that there is no military solution to this conflict; the only future for Israelis and Palestinians is a shared future; and we must raise up, not shut down, our shared humanity in this moment.

To that end, we, members of the Progressive Israel Network, stand together in support of your efforts to seek a viable path out of this nightmare — a bilateral ceasefire that brings a stop to fighting, a release of all hostages, and a surge in humanitarian assistance. We also turn to you for further leadership in laying out a plan for peace, security, freedom, and self-determination for all.

Out of this dark chapter in the history of Israelis and Palestinians we can write a new and better one. One that delivers the promise of safety, freedom and peace to Israelis and Palestinians now and for generations to come.

With gratitude for your leadership,

ALEPH
Ameinu
Americans for Peace Now
Habonim Dror North America
J Street
New Israel Fund
NYJA (New York Jewish Agenda)
Partners for Progressive Israel
Reconstructing Judaism
T'ruah: The Rabbinic Call for Human Rights

Why this particular statement, and why now?

Across our movement, Reconstructionists have been in deep pain since the horrific atrocities carried out by Hamas on October 7. During the past five months, as the war has progressed, in all of our communities and wherever Reconstructionist rabbis serve, people have worked incredibly hard to try to do several important things at once: show solidarity with our Israeli family and friends; discern what our Jewish values demand of us; and maintain our communities as places of belonging and inclusivity for Jews with multiple viewpoints about different aspects of the war.

As Jews, and in our own particular way as Reconstructionists, we seek a path that tries to balance particularism and universalism. We deeply feel our ties of peoplehood to the Jewish community in Israel – ties that drive our concerns for their safety and well-being. At the same time, we deeply feel the call of our highest Jewish moral values and spiritual beliefs – a call that tells us we cannot turn away in the face of the massive number of civilian lives lost so far in Gaza, or from the potential for the civilian casualty count to surge into the hundreds of thousands should a major military invasion of Rafah in the southern end of the Gaza strip go forward in the weeks ahead.

During these past months, some of our members have marched for the release of the hostages above all else, some have marched for greater solidarity with Israel and against international criticism aimed solely at Israel, and some have marched for ceasefire. Most of our members have not marched, but nevertheless have wrestled with the issues at stake. Among the leadership of Reconstructing Judaism and on our Joint Israel Commission, we have seen that same diversity of views on display. Acknowledgment of the breadth of opinion and valuing the mandate of staying together in community across difference has led Reconstructing Judaism's leadership to hold off on issuing position statements since last October. This decision has resulted in some critical feedback from both ends of the political spectrum among our members.

Now, as we conclude the fifth month of this war and after intensive consultation, Reconstructing Judaism's leaders have decided to sign on to this letter generated by the Progressive Israel Network, of which we are a founding member. The letter expresses support for the Biden Administration's efforts to "seek a viable path out of this nightmare – a bilateral ceasefire that brings a stop to fighting, a release of all hostages, and a surge in humanitarian assistance." The letter also urges the Biden team to do

what it can to lay out “a plan for peace, security, freedom, and self-determination for all,” referring to well-publicized diplomatic efforts underway by the Administration to develop a regional peace plan that would have the backing of multiple Arab nations including Saudi Arabia.

Why sign on to this particular message, and why now?

There are several reasons. First, the humanitarian disaster generated by the war is on a scale that our Jewish values require us to address. To be clear, Hamas bears significant responsibility for this state of affairs. And yet, Israel has responsibilities to avoid making an already catastrophic situation far, far worse. Israeli bombing has already killed roughly 10,000 Gazan children. If a full-scale military offensive aimed at Rafah, where 1.2 million Palestinians are sheltering in cramped space, commences in the coming weeks, the civilian casualty count risks being far more horrific.

Second, experts believe that only about one-third of Hamas’ fighters have been killed so far, despite the utter devastation and ruin that Israeli forces have rained down upon much of the strip. Meanwhile, multiple Israeli security experts are saying that total defeat of Hamas’ military forces is unrealistic, and that the attempt to achieve that goal is likely to lead to enormous numbers of civilian deaths and claim a large number of IDF soldiers’ lives too. In short, the stated war aims of Netanyahu’s government are unachievable, and the current nightmare cannot be ended solely by military triumph.

Third, the current Israeli government, with its ultra-nationalist far right ministers, does not have a credible strategy for how to end the war or what to do afterwards. Its most extreme factional members want to spread settlements further into the West Bank and reintroduce them to Gaza. Some are openly calling for ethnic cleansing. For his part, Prime Minister Netanyahu is showing no willingness to consider regional peace proposals that could be forthcoming from Saudi Arabia and other Arab states, because those proposals require Israel to agree to some kind of credible pathway towards a future Palestinian state.

The collective weight of these developments has affected many members of our movement. Many who have been uncertain until now about their views on how we should be addressing the war have moved to a place of believing that something more constructive needs to happen. This letter supports one clear avenue for action that meets that goal. At a crucial moment in this crisis, it aligns our movement with other progressive, pro-Israel organizations in calling upon the United States to use its credibility as a defender of Israel and its leverage as a powerful diplomatic force to achieve the goals listed in the letter. For Reconstructing Judaism’s leadership, the decision to sign-on to this letter is a decision to sign on to *the entire package* of goals that the letter encourages the Biden Administration to pursue with vigor: hostage release, bilateral ceasefire, humanitarian aid surge, and leadership in putting a regional peace plan forward that could help anchor Israel’s security in new alliances. In particular, the letter’s ceasefire message calls upon the United States to work towards that goal; notably, it is not aimed unilaterally at Israel, as some public calls for ceasefire

have been, and it stresses the importance of Hamas' as well as Israel's responsibilities to desist from actions detrimental to stopping the fighting.

There is no statement that movement leaders could make that would satisfy members across the spectrum of our movement. The hope is that this statement, and the care with which it has been crafted, express goals that most of our members share.