



November 29, 2017

11 Kiselev, 5778

Dear Congregants:

We are pleased to inform you that we have reached a resolution with Book Culture that allows the synagogue to move forward with the Early Childhood Center Book Fair scheduled to begin Thursday, December 7.

After a productive meeting, the owners of Book Culture—Chris Doebelin, Annie Hedrick, and Rick MacArthur—have agreed to the statement below:

1. *We regret that we did not fully appreciate the political or communal ramifications of the children's book, "P is for Palestine", by Dr. Golbarg Bashi, nor did we anticipate the pain and distress it has caused in our community. We now understand these much better.*
2. *We oppose terrorism or other forms of violence perpetrated against Israeli civilians during the intifada or thereafter. Any impression from the book to the contrary, is not our view.*
3. *We support Israel's right to exist.*
4. *We do not endorse the Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions movement (BDS).*

### **Background**

Book Culture on Columbus helped to fund and promote a children's book by Dr. Golbarg Bashi, *P is for Palestine*. It is an alphabet book geared towards toddlers and pre-readers. Each letter of the English alphabet is followed by a brief description of an element of Palestinian culture.

Upon publication of the book, Book Culture publicized and promoted [a public reading by Dr. Bashi for children and parents that took place at their Columbus Avenue location on November 18](#). This caused a wave of criticism from Jews and non-Jews alike, primarily—but not exclusively—due to the entry for the letter "I," which reads: "I is for Intifada, Intifada is Arabic for rising up for what is right, if you are a kid or a grownup!" [The page contains an illustration of a young child sitting on her father's shoulders, in front of barbed wire flashing a peace sign](#). The controversy became so heated that it drew the attention of the local media and caused [the shutting down of a Facebook group of 27,000 people](#).

At that time, it came to our attention that our annual Early Childhood Center Book Fair had arranged with Book Culture to supply books and toys. We faced a particular dilemma: Was it right to host Book Culture, the funders and promoters of this book, in our synagogue at a book fair for Jewish children?

For reasons we describe below, we considered the book, and in particular the reference to the Intifada, to be beyond the pale for a pro-Israel synagogue. We would have felt this way under all circumstances, but given the public attention and controversy, we felt obligated to respond publicly. If we had ignored the book we would have neglected our public responsibilities to you, our members, and to the broader New York community.

Rabbi Hirsch extended an offer to Book Culture to meet with us in effort to resolve matters so that we could continue with the book fair. On Monday, November 27, we met with Book Culture's three co-owners in Rabbi Hirsch's office. We had an open, honest, and friendly exchange of views that led them to their statement.

### **This Is Not About Free Speech or Palestinian Rights**

We want to emphasize that we do not consider this issue to be one of free speech. Every bookstore makes decisions about what books to carry. These decisions are based on many factors that include financial and ideological considerations. Some books are beyond the pale even for bookstores dedicated to free expression.

In our discussions with the owners of Book Culture, we did not ask them to pull the book. Nor did we ask others to boycott the store. We are fierce believers in the right of free expression. Bookstores have a critical role to play in free societies, and in particular, in our increasingly polarized country. If Book Culture wants to carry and promote Dr. Bashi's book, it is for them to decide.

We felt that it was not the synagogue's place to condition our relationship with Book Culture on its refusal to sell the book. It is, of course, up to each of us, individually, to make our own determination how Book Culture's support for this author affects their relationship with the store.

This is also not about Palestinian national culture or rights. We support a two-state solution. We believe that it is important for American Jews to hear the views of Palestinians. On all of our missions to Israel, we go out of our way to introduce our congregants to Palestinian spokespeople. Palestinians are entitled to write any book they want and to promote any view of Israel or Jews that they want, even if false.

### **Our Synagogue's Responsibility**

The issue is, are we obligated, in the name of free expression of ideas, no matter how absurd or offensive such ideas are, to host the owners of a bookstore that funds and disseminates—and agrees with—an author's morally troublesome views? Should an historic synagogue, among the first in the United States to express Zionist values, a model for the Reform movement, host an entity that showcases an author who glorifies violence against innocent Israelis? Is our synagogue, in the name of tolerance, obligated to provide a forum for those who promote the view that the Intifada was “a rising up for what is right whether you are a kid or a grownup?” And even if we wanted to offer such a forum, is a pre-school book fair the place for it?

Aren't we bound by our loyalty to the legacy of our synagogue, our Jewish values, and our love and support for Israel, to stand up for what we believe and to express it as broadly as we can, countering the false and at times immoral Palestinian narrative of the conflict and the nature of the Jewish state?

For these reasons—and since [Dr. Bashi, herself supports the Boycott, Divestments and Sanctions movement \(BDS\)](#) and [considers Israel to have “apartheid policies”](#), we sought clarification and assurance from Book Culture. If they, too, support BDS and believe that terrorism against Israelis is an acceptable form of resistance, then we are not obligated to host them. Therefore, we asked the co-owners of Book Culture to state their views for the record.

### **The Intifada**

Since most (but not all) of the public criticism of Dr. Bashi's book is focused on the Intifada, we feel that it is

important to share why we object so vociferously to Dr. Bashi's portrayal of it.

We object that children who are not yet able to read are being taught to associate the letter "I" with "intifada." It strikes us as an effort to extend to our shores the indoctrination of Palestinian children who are educated from the youngest age to hate Israelis and Jews, and are encouraged to glorify violence, murder, and "martyrdom."

We forcefully reject Palestinian efforts to persuade us that "intifada" has a peaceful connotation. These are apologetics, at best, and more likely, attempts to confuse, whitewash, and distort. It is easy to philosophize from afar about the Arabic origins of the word "intifada" if you have never experienced its murderous wrath or lived under its constant violent threats.

For many of us who have never experienced anything but Western freedoms, "intifada" is just a word, subject to interesting philological debates. We can apologize for, and even justify, wanton cruelty because we, ourselves, have never experienced the immediacy of the intifada: Our grandmother was never knifed in the back; our children have never been the targets of suicide bombers. We have never been at the scene of a mass murder or had to pick up the body parts of a baby.

There was nothing romantic about the Intifada. It was not some grand uprising to usher in an era of human rights, tranquility, and peace. It was not freedom fighting. The Intifada was the purposeful targeting of men, women, children, and babies in schools, hospitals, restaurants, pubs, dance halls, buses, trains, theaters, hotels hosting weddings, bar mitzvahs, and Passover seders—any place a crowd of Israelis gathered.

In short, the Intifada was not a "standing up for what is right." It was a descent into everything that is wrong about the Palestinian national movement. The Intifada was morally repugnant. Liberals and progressives, especially, are obligated to reject its methods and have no business supporting murderers who reject Western liberalism, human rights, women's rights, gay rights, minority rights, and civil rights.

None of this diminishes our support for Palestinian national rights. We have always supported a Palestinian state, at peace, side by side with Israel.

On this very day seventy years ago—November 29, 1947—the United Nations voted to create a Jewish state. For our founder, Rabbi Stephen Wise, who led the Zionist movement in America for decades, Israel's creation was a miracle of biblical proportions. He played such a prominent leadership role that when future prime minister, Golda Meir, came to America to raise money for the nascent Jewish state that was surrounded by enemies and soon to be under attack, each million dollars she raised was called a "Stephen," in honor of Rabbi Wise. This is the legacy of our synagogue that we strive to uphold.

Hanukkah will soon be upon us. It is the festival of light, joy, Jewish self-determination, and gratitude for our blessings. We wish you and your families much happiness in this season. See you at the book fair!

Rabbi Ammiel Hirsch, Senior Rabbi

Rabbi Diana Fersko, Associate Rabbi

Rabbi Samantha Natov, Associate Rabbi