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On Israel, can U.S. Jews disagree nicely?

By Sue Fishkoff · December 13, 2010

SAN FRANCISCO (JTA) -- Laura Sutta says she doesn't feel safe talking about Israel.

Sutta returned to the United States in 2003 after 23 years living in Israel and found that while she was away, the vitriol over Israel had reached a fever pitch in her Jewish community in the San Francisco Bay area.

"I've lost two friendships over it," she said. "One was a friend from high school. When I talked to him about Israel, I could feel him judging me."

Sutta says she's dumbfounded by the "fury of the volleys being exchanged."

Cecilie Surasky also doesn't feel safe. The deputy director of Jewish Voice for Peace, an Oakland-based organization that says it supports security and self-determination for Israelis and Palestinians but whose detractors claim it is anti-Israel, Surasky says she has filed four police reports in the past four months.

Photos



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An interactive theater exercise was one of 18 workshops at the launch event for the "year of civil discourse" project in San Francisco, Dec. 12, 2010. (San Francisco JCRC)

In one highly publicized incident in November, members of Surasky's organization were pepper-sprayed at a meeting in Berkeley by a woman associated with StandWithUs, a pro-Israel activist group that often clashes with Jewish Voice for Peace. Other incidents Surasky reported to police included graffiti on the organization's headquarters.

"We fear for our safety," Surasky said. "The issue of Israel is really tearing this community apart."

To deal with the growing rancor, the San Francisco Jewish Community Relations Council has launched a "year of civil discourse" to encourage local Jews to agree to disagree on Israel without name-calling or violence.

The question now is whether dialogue will help heal the rifts. The effort, which was launched Sunday with an invitation-only, all-day conference in San Francisco, is being watched closely throughout the United States by communities considering similar efforts.

The kickoff event at Congregation Beth Israel Judea and the Brandeis Hillel Day School drew more than 200 people. Each invitee was asked to bring two friends who disagree on Israel.

"This is not about changing people's views but about listening respectfully and hearing divergent views, with the health of our community at stake," said Rabbi Doug Kahn, director of the San Francisco JCRC.

The civil discourse program here is being co-sponsored by the Jewish Community Federation and the Northern California Board of Rabbis.

"Dialogue has gotten a bad rap, that it's about glossing over issues," said Rachel Eryn Kalish, lead facilitator for the San Francisco initiative. "That's not what this is about. You can be an advocate and still be civil."

It's an uphill battle in San Francisco, a city where the Israeli Consulate is routinely picketed, where the Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions (BDS) campaign against Israel is very active, and where activists on both sides call each other Nazis, pigs and worse. One comment posted online under a Jewish Voice for Peace video suggested that the organization's supporters should have been taken away on trains to concentration camps.

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Dr. Mike Harris, spokesman for the local branch of StandWithUs, attended the Dec. 12 gathering. He says it's too soon to tell how useful the civil discourse effort will prove.

On one hand, he said it is "absolutely necessary" for people to "get beyond the tension, so Israel can be talked about." But he considers Jewish Voice for Peace outside the bounds of the Jewish communal conversation, saying the group "does not accept the ground rules" of Israel as the Jewish state.

"There is a conflict between the imperative for civil discourse and the imperative to name and shame those who are anti-Israel," Harris said.

Cities across the country report similar troubles, and they are turning to JCRCs and other community relations specialists for help in dealing with their internal conflicts.

"San Francisco is not the only place where discourse has devolved into something unpleasant," said Ethan Felson, who heads the civility campaign for the Washington-based Jewish Council for Public Affairs. More than 350 national Jewish leaders have signed onto the JCPA's civility pledge; some have reached out to the JCPA for programming ideas.

"Quite a few communities are interested in doing something," Felson said. "The breakdown of respect for different views, the demonization of fellow Jews -- it feels that engaging on issues that matter has become a blood sport."

In Atlanta, an Op-Ed in the local Jewish paper by an Israeli who noted that pursuit of peace is a Jewish value was followed by a letter to the editor accusing the author of supporting suicide bombers. In Boston, tempers flared when the local Workmen's Circle rented space to Jewish Voice for Peace and Adalah, a pro-Palestinian group that supports the Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions movement.

Alan Ronkin, deputy director of Boston's JCRC, says extremists on both sides shut down dialogue at times. Ronkin says he is worried not about how to bring those people into the fold, but how to reassure moderates who "hear the loudest voices and turn away from the Jewish community because they'd rather not be involved in a rancorous, divisive conversation."

The launch of San Francisco's civil discourse project on Sunday actually grew out of a 5-year-old initiative called Project Reconnections in which the JCRC trained groups of 20 to 25 people in three congregations to act as conversation facilitators.

"We emerged with a cadre of people who can lead tough conversations, who can be the voice of moderation and create safe spaces within their institutions," said the JCRC's associate director, Abby Porth.

The project was taken to Atlanta last month, and about a dozen cities have contacted the JCRC for information about bringing it to their communities, according to Porth.

The effort already has yielded fruit. At Temple Beth Israel in Aptos, Calif., 90 minutes south of San Francisco, Rabbi Richard Litvak said that by November 2009 things were so bad that members on both sides of the Israel divide threatened to quit if the temple's Israel policies weren't clarified to reflect their viewpoint.

Kalish, the lead facilitator for the San Francisco initiative, held several dialogue evenings along with another facilitator, and community members took the effort seriously. By this fall, leaders of the opposing sides managed to talk it out and come up with a policy setting boundaries for speakers invited to the congregation, Litvak said.

"A train wreck was averted," Litvak said. "There definitely seems to be more understanding between the members. We found a way to affirm each person's right to their point of view, yet not be drawn into inviting speakers or co-sponsoring events with groups who deny Israel's existence as a democratic, Jewish state."

In the Bay area, rabbis are taking the lead. Virtually every local rabbi has signed onto a civility pledge published in *J*, the local Jewish weekly, and many have joined a Rabbis' Circle to foster dialogue on an ongoing basis.

Ironically, several rabbis at Sunday's event said they no longer do Israel programming in their congregations, fearing it will lead to excessive divisiveness.

"If the polarization reaches a point where the subject of Israel is too difficult to discuss," said the San Francisco JCRC's Kahn, "we all lose."

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Sue Fishkoff writes about Jewish life for the JTA and is the author of the 2010 book "Kosher Nation."

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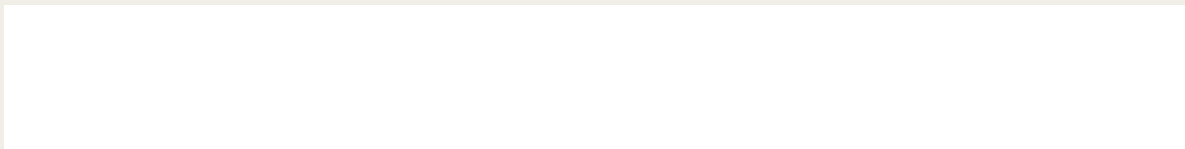
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