

Letter from Beth El Synagogue Board of Trustees

Beth El President [president@betheldurham.org]

Sent: Thursday, June 21, 2018 10:08 AM

To: Council Members

Cc: Daniel Greyber [RabbiGreyber@betheldurham.org]

City Council Members and Mayor Schewel,

Please find below a letter from the Beth El Board of Trustees and Rabbi Greyber regarding the City Council's statement

passed in April that related to both police exchanges with Israel specifically and the militarization of police generally. Beth El is the only conservative synagogue in Durham and has been part of the city since 1887 (you can read a little about our history

[here](#))--we now number about 400 families in our membership. We hope you will take our concerns seriously and will take us up on our request to have individual meetings with each of you to begin building a better dialogue and ongoing relationship. We look forward to beginning a conversation with each of you.

Sincerely,

Debbie Goldstein, President, Beth El Synagogue

June 21, 2018

Dear City Council members,

As the Trustees and Rabbi of Beth El Synagogue, we are writing to express our significant disappointment with the vote of the City Council to adopt a statement that combines a prohibition on police exchanges with Israel and a prohibition on military-style exchanges with any foreign country.

We want to state clearly that we understand the concerns that council members have about policing issues in Durham, particularly in regard to communities of color. We share those concerns and welcome the opportunity to work with you to solve them. But we do not believe that singling out Israel was an appropriate response to those issues.

This resolution has caused significant pain for our congregation.

Many of us care deeply about the State of Israel, which represents many things to our members— a spiritual center for our faith, a place of safety and security for Jews who are persecuted or feel threatened, the home and birthplace of family members, and more.

Our congregation is also concerned about human rights broadly, and we acknowledge concerns about the suffering of Palestinians. We are committed to attempting to understand the complex facts and important values that are relevant to the ability of Israel and Palestinians to create two States for two peoples. These matters of foreign affairs do not, however, seem within the realm of City Council action. If the City Council were going to debate the public policies of the State of Israel, then it seems that more study and considerable opportunity for input

would be appropriate
before the Council took a position.

The Jewish community has long identified with other oppressed minorities and has partnered to overcome many forms of injustice and discrimination, including a long history supporting civil rights in Durham. The militarization of the police is something we abhor and fear. We want to continue collaborating to fight against such practices. But this resolution did nothing to move Durham in that direction, and in some ways moved the city backwards in its disrespect for the Jewish community.

We are not aware of any effort to reach out to the Jewish community prior to the vote on the resolution, and this contributed to a feeling that our community was not valued. Behind this feeling are concerns about recent anti-Semitic incidents in Durham and elsewhere that suggest that anti-Semitism is a growing and present threat for our community and beyond. We hope that in the future, if similar issues arise that affect any minority community, City Council members will reach out to leaders of the affected communities to seek their input and involve them in the discussion.

While the resolution was held out as an example of taking action on local policing, it is not clear to us how the resolution actually related to policing in Durham. As the police chief noted in her original statement, her experience with such training was not about police operations, and she was not contemplating any such exchange. Instead of acknowledging this statement by the Police Chief, the City's statement ties any exchange with Israel generally to the militarization of policing, making a false connection that, though unintended, could fuel anti-Semitism. Last month, Rabbi Jill Jacobs, a prominent human rights activist who often speaks on issues of Palestinian rights, [writing in the Washington Post](#), used the Durham resolution as an example of action that draws on historic anti-Semitic themes, falsely accusing Jews of connections to violence and nefarious power.

Rabbi Jacobs' op-ed is just one example of the negative national and international attention the city's resolution has received. Further, though likely unintended, the city's statement has also been held up by BDS proponents and anti-Israel groups as an example of a city supporting their aims. Surely this is not the national or international image that Durham wants to foster.

Members of our congregation are passionate about contributing to the wellbeing of Durham and all who live here. Our congregation's efforts are to build a thriving and growing Jewish community in Durham, one that also establishes and maintains meaningful relationships with the rest of our community, including many organizations and interfaith collaborations. Our individual and congregational efforts contribute regularly to making Durham a healthy, vital, and welcoming community with equity and respect for all residents and groups. We feel that this resolution devalues our collective voice at Durham's community table.

We will be reaching out to each of you to request an opportunity to meet and explore the ways we can build a stronger relationship between Beth El and the City Council. We hope

we can begin a continuing conversation with council members about the issues that are most important to you, to us, and to all of Durham as we work toward our mutual goal of understanding and wellbeing for all Durhamites.

Sincerely,

Beth El Board of Trustees and Rabbi Daniel Greyber