

February 2024

Women of Reform Judaism Statement On Israel and Gaza

We Will Never Be Silent in the Fight for Women's Rights and Bodily Integrity, against Sexual Assault and Violence, and for a Democratic and Jewish State

Introduction

Since its inception, WRJ has stood by and supported Jews in the land known today as Israel. WRJ has unwaveringly recognized the legitimacy of the State of Israel and its right to defend itself while also advocating for peace and against war. We have consistently condemned the use of violence and mourned the suffering of innocents, and in particular, sexual violence perpetrated against women.

From our [first resolution in 1915](#) calling for support of the pioneers in the future State of Israel, to our most recent joining in the statement of the Reform Movement recognizing the crisis of "[The Moment We are In, The Future We Pray For](#)," WRJ has held in our hearts, our words and our work, the dream of the "*Yerushalayim Shel mala*" and the reality of the "*Yerushalayim shel mata*."

"*Yerushalayim shel mala*" - the Jerusalem Above - the spiritual, the eternal, the world that we partner with God to create. A world of justice and compassion for people of all backgrounds and identities, and a world in which women and all people experience full bodily integrity and protection in an environment of safety, respect, and equity in a Jewish and democratic State of Israel and throughout the world.

"*Yerushalayim shel mata*" - the Jerusalem Below - the real Jerusalem, Israel, and world of today in which we must never be silent, or allow others to be silent, in the face of injustice and inequality. In a world where perfect

answers do not exist, we must never desist from the work of *Tikkun Olam* (repairing the world) as we work to build our aspirational *Yerushalayim shel mala*.

We are now approaching 150 days since October 7, 2023, the savage and inhumane attack by Hamas on Israel, including its intentional rape, sexual assault, and brutal violation of Israeli women alongside people of all genders and nationalities. With hostages still under control of the terrorists, and the knowledge from released hostages that they are subjected to repeated sexual assault, every morning we awaken again with our sisters, siblings, and brothers in Israel to the feeling that it is still October 7. A traumatic “Groundhog Day” that carries with it seemingly daily new damage from the toxic and destructive denial and degradation of the victims, the survivors, and the evidence. We will not be silent. Not now, not ever.

True to our legacy of Zionism, women’s advocacy, and the fight for social justice, today WRJ stands in solidarity with Israel as it defends its homeland against Hamas and the false narratives created, supports the families of the hostages, and mourns the human suffering being inflicted by this war on the innocent victims of violence, including gender-based violence. And, because of our Reform Jewish religious values, we do so while also working to ensure Israel’s future as a Jewish and democratic state.

Background

WRJ’s core values demand that we speak out about the ways Hamas’ war against Israel has affected women and children in the region. WRJ has also been an outspoken advocate for the protection of women and girls against all types of violence. Most recently, we directly condemned the targeting of women and children by Hamas on October 7, with Executive Director Rabbi Liz P.G. Hirsch stating, [“the risk of sexual-based violence only increases during armed conflict.”](#)

During times of extreme suffering in Israel, WRJ has felt moved to declare solidarity. [In 1967](#), WRJ recorded the organization’s “profound respect for the courage of Israelis of all ages,” a sentiment we still share today. But as with anything we love, we strive to make it better. WRJ has often expressed

the desire for pluralism and stronger democratic norms in Israel, [recently co-signing a statement with other Reform Movement partners](#) in decrying the Knesset's vote to weaken the Israeli Supreme Court and, with it, checks and balances.

Today

WRJ's statements, advocacy, and philanthropic support and action on Israel, on war and peace, and on violence against women at times of peace and war, can leave no doubt of WRJ's continuing commitment to those same ideals today. Further, as a leading advocate for the rights of women and children**, WRJ must also specifically condemn the abhorrent gender-based violence by Hamas against women and girls on October 7. As we fight for reproductive rights and access, we observe in horror as Israel prepares for the possible return of hostages in need of abortions; as sexual violence continues during their captivity, the risk increases every day.

WRJ's duty now lies in continuing its important work of the last century by supporting Israel and the families of the hostages; supporting those who endured sexual assault on October 7 and its aftermath, alongside the families of those who suffered and did not survive; condemning gender-based violence as well as the silence and inadequate response of the world; and striving for peace above all else in the region. The October 7 attack on Israel by Hamas and the ongoing sexual violence against the hostages happening in Gaza demand these measures.

Inspired and mandated by these measures, WRJ leaders traveled to Israel in February 2024 to strengthen our partnerships with the Israeli people and institutions working for peace and justice, and to attempt to ease the grief and darkness cast by the long shadows of October 7.

What was witnessed makes clear that this attack will forever scar the soul and psyche of the Israeli people and Jews around the world. The pain of the victims, the hostages, and their families is incomprehensible. Looked at as one of the most documented atrocities of all time, it is even more appalling that supra-national bodies like UN Women remained silent to these war crimes. Their willingness to ignore, or to speak late, weakly or not at all,

turns back the clock on progress made in recognizing the trauma, believing victims, survivors and witnesses, and by the movement to set appropriate standards of proof and testimony in the pursuit of [justice](#). We stand with and believe Israeli women and affirm our passionate and longstanding commitment to securing justice for all victims of rape, sexual assault, and gender-based violence. We commend the victims and witnesses who have been able to come forward and lend them our strength in their pursuit of justice.

During WRJ's mission, WRJ leaders bore witness to the attacks firsthand by visiting with families of hostages, those who are now displaced within their own country, those who have lost family members and friends and all surrounding neighbors, and civil society leaders trying to find peace in a time so full of anger and darkness.

"As we heard from a woman who had to choose among five funerals every day to mourn her friends and neighbors, a grandmother who had to hide in her safe room for 35 hours knowing her family wasn't safe outside, a heroic Knesset member whose daughter is from Kfar Azza and is herself serving Israel while displaced from her home in Sderot, a civil society leader who is documenting every instance of sexual and gender based violence because our international partners have failed us, and a peace activist who still finds hope, WRJ's mission to Israel reopened my eyes to the deep connection between the worldwide Jewish people and Israel," WRJ President Sara Charney said.

"We received clear calls to action from the extraordinary, brave women we met throughout our journey. They are the following: Speak up and speak out until all the hostages are safe and home; never be silent about the violence against women that Hamas perpetuated on October 7 and continues today as the hostages remain in captivity, and never let go of the hope for peace.

"Hamutal Gouri of Mothers Against Violence spoke with us toward the end of our mission. She shared some words that a friend shared with her to remind her why it is so important to continue this sacred work. 'They say you can go for days without food, and several hours without water, and several seconds without air. But you can't last a second without hope.' I left Israel heartbroken from the past but hopeful for the future."

Along with Israel's vocal protest movement in support and defense of Israeli democracy, we also reiterate the vital and important role of women in helping to fight for pluralism, egalitarianism, and democratic values. We commend our partners at the Israel Movement for Reform and Progressive Judaism and the Israeli Religious Action Center for their work in safeguarding Israeli democracy, particularly for the independence of the Israeli judiciary and especially the Supreme Court of Israel. We stand in solidarity with our partners who are working to help repair sectors of Israeli society most impacted by October 7th and its aftermath through the unflagging devotion and efforts of all of their rabbis and leaders, including regional rabbis such as Sha'ar HaNegev's Rabbi Yael Vurgan, the humanitarian fund Keren B'Kavod, and ongoing work to build shared society and to fight against racism. At this critical juncture where tribalism, bigotry, and supremacy serve as hallmarks of the current government, pluralism, egalitarianism, and democratic values are more vital than ever before in Israel's history for Israel to achieve a just and equitable society and to be a nation capable of upholding the two-state solution and a lasting peace.

At this critical moment in Israel's history,

We pray for the swift and safe return of the remaining hostages.

We pray for their healing as well as for the healing of their loved ones.

We pray for justice for the victims and survivors of October 7.

We pray that those who fight for human rights, women's rights, and the rights of all who have been subjected to gender-based violence will awaken to the need to recognize and speak out about such violence perpetrated on Israeli women on October 7 and while in captivity.

We pray for the safety of the soldiers who protect and defend Israel.

We pray for humanitarian aid that alleviates the suffering of Palestinians and seek a better future for themselves and their children.

We pray for knowledge, compassion, and moral courage that inspires actions to make a two-state solution and lasting peace a reality.

Prayer alone is not enough; we must also act. The Executive Committee of the Women of Reform Judaism calls on WRJ, its members and affiliated groups to

1. Continue to raise their voices directly and publicly, and call upon their representatives, governments, and fellow advocates in feminist and anti-violence spaces as well as the United Nations to:
 - a. Validate, bear witness to, and [support](#) the accounts of Israeli women victimized on October 7th and in captivity.
 - b. Denounce all acts of sexual-based and gender-based violence carried out against women and people of all genders during this war and beyond.
 - c. Oppose the intentional or inadvertent undoing of progress made in the protection and belief of victims and survivors of gender-based violence through the re-imposition of new and higher standards of proof.
 - d. Call for the immediate release of the remaining hostages. Act now:
<https://www.votervoice.net/URJ/Campaigns/111565/Respond>
2. Live the values expressed in the title of our solidarity mission, “We Will Not Be Silent,” by working to ensure that the names and images of the hostages and their plight remains a focus until every hostage is home.
3. Continue the work on combatting gender-based violence as stated in WRJ’s [2021 resolution on gender-based violence](#).
4. Continue to pursue peace and advocate for a two-state solution even in these most difficult and challenging hours, as stated in [“The Moment We Are In, The Future We Pray For.”](#)
5. Continue to educate ourselves, our congregations, and our partners in women’s rights and human rights about these truths and about the hostages, using this statement and resources including WRJ’s post-October 7 [“Supporting Israel from Afar”](#) resource.

Footnotes:

* 1923 Permanent peace among the nations (<https://www.wrj.org/what-we-believe/resolutions/recommendation-permanent-peace>); 1925 Protest Against Militarism in Press and Film (<https://www.wrj.org/what-we-believe/resolutions/protest-against-militarism-press-and-film>); 1927 Arbitration urged as a step to outlaw war (<https://www.wrj.org/what-we-believe/resolutions/arbitration-urged>); 1927 endorsing International Justice Court (<https://www.wrj.org/what-we-believe/resolutions/international-justice-court-endorsed>); 1927 urging International Disarmament (<https://www.wrj.org/what-we-believe/resolutions/international-disarmament-urged>); 1927 endorsing the Treaty of Traffic in Arms (<https://www.wrj.org/what-we-believe/resolutions/international-disarmament-urged>); 1931 Resolution on Peace (<https://www.wrj.org/what-we-believe/resolutions/resolution-peace>); 1934 resolution on world peace (<https://www.wrj.org/what-we-believe/resolutions/world-peace-1>); 1938 calling for peace education (<https://www.wrj.org/what-we-believe/resolutions/peace-education>); 1940 endorsing the national peace conference (<https://www.wrj.org/what-we-believe/resolutions/national-peace-conference>); 1944 re proposed united nations council (<https://www.wrj.org/what-we-believe/resolutions/national-peace-conference-proposal>); 1944 urging creation of UN (<https://www.wrj.org/what-we-believe/resolutions/international-organization>); 1963 in support of the UN (<https://www.wrj.org/what-we-believe/resolutions/united-nations-1963>); 1993 Declaration of Principles between Israel and the PLO (<https://www.wrj.org/what-we-believe/resolutions/peace-middle-east-0>); 2000 the signing of the Sharm el-Sheikh Memorandum (<https://www.wrj.org/what-we-believe/resolutions/time-peace>); 2011 in support of a two-state solution (<https://www.wrj.org/what-we-believe/resolutions/wrj-responds-current-concerns-regarding-israel>); 2007 on Israel 60th anniversary (<https://www.wrj.org/what-we-believe/resolutions/israels-60th-anniversary-and-arzas-30th-anniversary>)

** 1991 Crimes Against Women (<https://www.wrj.org/what-we-believe/resolutions/crimes-against-women>); 2014 Kidnapping of Nigerian Girls (<https://www.wrj.org/what-we-believe/resolutions/kidnapping-nigerian-schoolgirls>); 2021 Violence against Women (<https://www.wrj.org/what-we-believe/resolutions/renewing-our-call-rights-women-and-girl-children-afghanistan-and>); 2021 Gender Based Violence (<https://www.wrj.org/what-we-believe/resolutions/addressing-legacy-reproductive-gender-based-violence-against-black>)