

In Memory of Rabbi Israel ("Sy") Dresner, zt"l (1929-2022)

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Rabbi Israel Dresner, "Sy" to his friends and loved-ones, is best known for his indefatigable work as part of the American civil rights movement and the Black-Jewish alliance of the 1950s and 1960s, which helped propel it forward. The news media is right to recall Sy's participation in the first group of Interfaith Freedom Riders in 1961, and to focus on his close friendship with Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., who would speak on two occasions at Temple Sha'arey Shalom in Springfield, NJ, where Rabbi Dresner had a pulpit for 12 years. Sy would later serve for 25 years as the rabbi of Temple Beth Tikvah in Wayne, NJ.

But for Partners for Progressive Israel, Sy was first and foremost the champion of a vision for Israel based on social justice, human rights, equality, and peace.

Three decades ago, Sy Dresner was one of the founding members of Partners for Progressive Israel (known at the time as the "Education Fund for Israeli Civil Rights and Peace") and, between 1996-1998, he served as the organization's president. Sy remained an active and contributing board member until his final weeks.

Even before helping to establish our organization, however, Sy was one of the small, maverick band of American Jewish activists who defied the establishment and spoke out against occupation and settlement and on behalf of Palestinian statehood and Israeli-Palestinian peace. In the 1970s, he served as an executive board member of Breira, then vilified as anti-Israel for its support of a two-state solution. In the 1980s, he was on the national board of the U.S. Interreligious Committee for Peace in the Middle East, a group of Jewish, Christian, and Muslim leaders who encouraged the U.S. to promote Israeli-Palestinian peace.

Sy was an early critic of Israeli PM Binyamin Netanyahu. In 1996, just half a year after Netanyahu's election, Rabbi Dresner, on behalf of the "Education Fund," wrote passionately in the New York Times that Netanyahu's policies would "result in disaster," and he called on the huge numbers of American Jews who supported the peace process to "raise their voices in opposition." In 1998, he was part of the "national rally in support of the Oslo peace process," in Washington DC, a gathering of pro-peace American Jewish organizations marking five years since the first Israel-PLO interim agreement was signed on the White House lawn. Sy explained that both Jewish teaching and the history of

Jewish oppression were what informed his advocacy for human rights. So, he was deeply saddened that, in Israel, which he loved and traveled to at least three dozen times, Jews were now in the position of persecuting others. He called this “a corruption and corrosion of Zionism” that is in desperate need of correction. In that same spirit, we continue Rabbi Dresner’s lifelong, pioneering efforts.

Rabbi Dresner requested that contributions be made to [Partners for Progressive Israel](#) by those wishing to honor his work on behalf of Israel and Palestine.

Zecher tzadik livracha – May the memory of this righteous man, Sy Dresner, and his activism serve as a blessing.