

Why Detroit's "Walk for Israel" excludes progressives?

May is a celebratory month for supporters of Israel: Israel's Independence Day, the Israel Day Parade in New York, and smaller Walks for Israel in cities all over the United States. Detroit is one such city poised to host its eleventh annual Walk for Israel.

We at Partners for Progressive Israel wished to join this year's Walk for Israel in Detroit. But for the second consecutive year the Detroit Walk for Israel steering committee unilaterally decided to prevent us and Americans for Peace Now from participating. They say their mission is to "unite the metropolitan Detroit community to celebrate the establishment of the modern Jewish State of Israel and support its right to live in peace and security." So why are they dividing the community by deeming who is and isn't an adequate supporter of Israel's "right to live in peace and security?"

Who are we? Partners for Progressive Israel is a Zionist organization. It supports the Jewish people's right for national determination. It is a member of the American Zionist Movement (AZM), participates in the World Zionist Congress, and is affiliated with the World Union of Meretz within the World Zionist Organization.

Like most American Jews, we are progressive. We support a two-state solution and believe that Israel's occupation of the West Bank, illegal settlements and the suppression of Palestinian rights threaten its future as a Jewish and democratic state. For years, therefore, we have called for a targeted boycott of settlements' goods as a means to help end the occupation. To be clear, as Zionists we do not support a boycott of Israel proper. Rather we accept Israel's territorial distinctions, and boycott only those areas in which Israel itself exercises military rule and not extend civic governance to all its residents.

But Detroit's Israel Walk's steering committee disregarded the fundamental distinction between supporting the global Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions (BDS) Movement and advocating a limited boycott of settlement goods. Last year, they even demanded a notarized loyalty oath, testifying our support for Israel's right to exist and disavowal of the BDS Movement. We did just that, but they excluded us nonetheless.

The irony is that in its effort to institute its own criteria for "Zionism," the steering committee undermines the ruling of the only American organization that has the right to determine who is a Zionist – the court of the American Zionist Movement (AZM). Last year, the AZM's court ruled that Partners for Progressive Israel is indeed a Zionist organization.

So why would the Walk for Israel steering committee want to divide Detroit's Jewish community and not allow Zionists of all stripes to walk together in solidarity?

It's obvious that Detroit's Walk for Israel steering committee seeks to create an atmosphere of "us" and "them." They want reinforce the politically polarizing idea that you either support Israel or seek to destroy it. In their worldview, you cannot support Israel's right to exist and criticize its policies in the occupied territories. But why not? Why can't I love my daughter, celebrate her birthday, and criticize her when she misbehaves? Or has the American Jewish discourse on Israel devolved to such immaturity that debate has no room for political nuance? Has Zionism become so rigid that even critiques from a Zionist perspective, critiques made daily on the floor of Israel's Knesset, are perceived as existential threats?

Clearly, the steering committee seeks to discipline Detroit's Jewish community in its own image. They don't want the community to recognize the essential distinction between Israel proper and areas under Israel's military occupation. They want to maintain the fantasy that "There is no such thing, occupation" or argue that "If you boycott settlements' products, you boycott Israel." The steering committee wants to maintain the fiction that the American Jewish community speaks in one voice – a conservative voice dictated by AIPAC. It takes its inspiration from the anti-democratic scripts that if we don't walk alongside you, you won't know we exist, and never familiarize yourselves with the alternatives.

[Sign our petition](#): Ask Israel Walk's steering committee to reject the politics of "us" and "them," and demonstrate our unity as a Jewish community that supports Israel.