

## Unlike in some places, flying flag of Israel not much of a flap in Austin

By **Tonya Cone**

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Although displaying the Israeli flag in Jewish organizations like Hillel and synagogues is a heated topic in some communities, it apparently has not been at in Austin.

While Texas Hillel is a big umbrella for many smaller student groups — one of the most active of which is Texans for Israel — and it is apparent upon entering its facility that the organization is pro-Israel, no flags are flown in the building, said Rabbi David Komerofsky, executive director.

“It’s not a conscious choice,” he said. “Our facility does not have a sanctuary per se, but if it did I’m sure we’d have an Israeli, a Texas and a U.S. flag.”

Congregation Beth Israel also does not fly any flags on the bimah or at events. Jennifer Pierce, executive director, said the issue really has not been discussed for at least the past 16 years.

“There is no policy in place one way or another,” Pierce said.

Flags have not been displayed during Rabbi Steven Folberg’s 16 years with the Temple, she said, and the practice probably took root before he joined Beth Israel.

The Israeli flag has a presence at the Dell Jewish Community Campus, where the Jewish Community Association of Austin flies the U.S., Israeli and Texas flags on the outside of the Education Building at all times. U.S. and Israeli flags are flown at the Harry and Jeanette Weinberg Campgrounds, home base of Camp Shalom, and during the week of Israel Independence Day, Israeli flags line the entrance to the JCC.

Also, U.S. and Israeli flags are available on request for any program, religious service or special event at “The J.”

Jay Rubin, JCAA chief executive officer, said that, to his knowledge, the association’s policy has been uncontroversial.

Congregation Tiferet Israel has U.S. and Israeli flags in its synagogue. Prayers are said during Shabbat services for the state of Israel, the U.S. government and Israeli soldiers who are missing in action.

Rabbi Eliezer Langer said that this practice was already established when he joined Tiferet Israel in August and that most Orthodox synagogues take this approach to the issue. He has not heard any controversy or debate within his congregation about this.

Congregation Agudas Achim displays U.S. and Israeli flags in its lobby, but not the sanctuary. Hazzan Neil Blumofe said there really has not been any debate over the practice.

“We don’t, just as a matter of course, put anything in our sanctuary,” Blumofe said. “We try to have minimum other things in there so we can concentrate on our prayers and being together as a community. It’s just how we designed and conceptualized that space. It’s not a flag-flying policy, per se; it’s just our sanctuary.”

Rabbi Yosef Levertov of Chabad-

Lubavitch of Greater Austin declined to comment, saying, “I would rather focus on other issues.”

Beth Israel’s Pierce said that, while she recalls both flags being displayed on the bimah in her synagogue when growing up, she never thought about the issue in terms of politics.

“It surprises me that it’s an issue in synagogues,” Pierce said. “I can understand Hillel a little bit more because it’s so tied into the college campus and they like to challenge everything, but never thought that a synagogue would have a problem identifying itself with Israel and would use that reasoning not to have a flag.”

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*Tonya Cone of Austin is a regular contributor to The Jewish Outlook. Contact her at [tonya76@gmail.com](mailto:tonya76@gmail.com).*

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