

center scene

J C C O F G R E A T E R W A S H I N G T O N

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MESSAGE FROM MICHAEL

Israel at the Center



Michael Feinstein, CEO

Participating in a Passover Seder is the most practiced Jewish ritual, with about 70% of American Jews reporting that they follow this tradition. It is my favorite Jewish holiday because it is home-based and commemorates our liberation from slavery and the birth of the Jewish nation. The themes of liberation, memory and freedom resonate in different ways each year.

At this year's Seder, we ended with the same song that concludes every Haggadah that I've seen, "*L'shana haba'ah b'Yerushalyim*, Next Year in Jerusalem." For almost 2,000 years, Jews sang this song at the end of the Seder without any hope of it being a reality. That is clearly not the case anymore. There are so many opportunities to visit on organized trips with BBYO, JCC Maccabi, Taglit-Birthright, Honeymoon Israel, The Jewish Federation's "Israel Your Way," JWRP's Momentum, and many other organizations.

As we were singing, I thought to myself that I was just in Jerusalem last fall. Will I get to be there again in the next year? I don't like going for long

periods of time without visiting Israel. Despite never having lived there or being able to speak Hebrew, I feel a sense of being at home when I am in Israel. Regardless of the political or religious issue of the moment, I feel a deep connection with my heritage and people whenever I am there. Creating a connection to the people, history, culture and land of Israel is a core value of the Center that reflects our JCC movement's principle that "Israel is the birthright of the Jewish people, linking us to our past and to Jews around the world."

Almost 60% of the Jewish community living in the Maryland suburbs have visited or lived in Israel. This is significantly higher than the 43% of American Jews who have visited Israel. I believe that traveling to Israel is the best way to develop a personal connection to the land and history of our people. It provides an opportunity to get behind the headlines that are too often biased or over-simplified. When I discuss a political issue with my Israeli friends or colleagues, their response often begins with, "It's complicated." It certainly is. There are very few issues with black and white answers. There is a lot of gray and nuance to be considered.

This year we celebrate Israel's 68th year of independence and there is much to celebrate, including technology, art and culture, democracy and a free press. Whether you've lived in Israel, visited many times or have never been, the next best thing to being there is to join us on Sunday, June 5 for our annual Israel Fest celebration (see page 2 or visit www.jccgw.org/IsraelFest). We are partnering with The Jewish Federation of Greater Washington to bring Israel to our community through music, dance, art, food, sports and games, with plenty of activities for families with young children.

Throughout the year we provide many other opportunities to connect with Israel in a way that provides opportunities to learn, question and discuss difficult issues and experience Israeli culture. Many of these programs are coordinated by our Israeli *shaliach* (emissary), a pre- or post-university young Israeli who commits to working with us for one to two years. These programs range from Israeli films screened at the Center with follow-up facilitated discussions, to our new "Think and Drink" programs, launched by this year's *shlichah*, Danielle Flicker (see page 2 for an interview with Danielle), which brings an Israeli to meet with and discuss current issues with local young professionals at bars in the community. Also, new this year is a pilot of the Eitanim program which was developed and coordinated by the Israeli American Council. This leadership and entrepreneurship program helps American and Israeli high school students connect, explore and experience Israel while developing critical skills for college and beyond. And we offer beginning and advanced conversational Hebrew classes in our Ulpan Ben Yehuda program.

At the Center, we not only provide a space where Americans and Israelis can feel welcome, we are constantly looking for new ways to create deeper connections here and to Israel. From connection comes understanding and from understanding comes caring and our sense of shared identity and mutual responsibility. I hope that you will attend, and find meaning in, the Israel-related programming that we offer throughout the year.

Michael