

NCJW 2015 Israel Study Tour, by Susan C. Levine,

A sparkling blue sky welcomed us to Jerusalem as our study tour embarked on a deep dive into the life of Israeli women. Every day, our every visit and every meeting was devoted to unpacking the complicated lives facing women in every part of Israeli society. From our opening "book club" discussion with Elana Sztokman, NCJW colleague and author of "The War on Women", to the sensitive presentation of NCJW's Israel Granting Program grantee: the Jerusalem Open House (JOH) who updated our delegation about their groundbreaking transgender counseling program. Of particular poignancy, was the silent meeting room as we accepted the appreciative feelings from both the JOH Professionals and their clients who acknowledged NCJW as not only their first major donor but also the sender of their first check for emergency medical support following the tragic stabbing attacks and murder of Shiri Bank at last summer's pride parade.

Lobbying at the Knesset (photo below) we learned the difficult policy negotiations facing the women elected to the Knesset who work tirelessly to achieve fairness and raise up the personal status of women. Our meetings included:

- 1) MK Michal Rozen, former head of the rape crisis centers in Israel, who described the trafficking issue and gender mainstreaming;
- 2) chair of the Committee on the Status of Women, MK Aida Touma-Suliieman: the first ever Arab chair of the Committee. Aida is an MK from the Joint List and came to her election by way of the Hadash party;
- 3) MK Touma-Suliieman discussed the state budget from a gender perspective, including affirmative action, gender-based violence, and personal status issues including civil marriage.

Knesset Economic conversations: photo below:

Study Tour co-chairs Janet Neuenschwander and Nina Goldman with NCJW's CEO Nancy Kaufman.



Our belief in the value our Israel Granting Program was confirmed-again-as we learned of the major and courageous community accomplishments of IGP Granting Partner Grantee Yerushalmit who are achieving acceptance of women to engage in civic

activities in the public sphere.

At the Ministry of Economy, the two-term Equal Opportunity Commissioner, Tziona Koenig proudly described the department's success in implementing Israel's equality laws with jurisdiction over these 16 areas:



I hope this message gives you some understanding of what we are learning on our Israel Study Tour, and also fuels your pride in your generous support for NCJW's Israel Granting Program that every day is turning your NCJW beliefs into valuable, appreciated and on-the-ground-action!

And, finally, through our first days, while we feel safe and welcome in the big cities of Jerusalem and Tel Aviv as well as the small towns and settlements, we, like you, are very, very saddened by the recent terrorist attack in Paris.

Best to you from Tel Aviv,

PART 2:

November 22, 2015

Dear Friends:

Our NCJW Study Tour concluded last Tuesday, and I am happy to report that I, and my fellow NCJW travel companions, experienced many full days of provocative conversations and out-of-the-ordinary meetings. Each day was filled with NCJW pride as we met with and learned from so many Israeli thought leaders who, from grassroots activists to national policy-makers, are driving the Israeli social and cultural agenda.

As NCJW leaders, you can feel pleased and proud to support our NCJW Israel Granting Program: initiatives that reach into and connects with Israel's women and girls to a future of unlimited opportunity.

Meeting IGP Partners: Reflections from 5 whirlwind days.

Standing on any Jerusalem hill offers breathtaking and inspiring scenic views, and ours was accessed from our hotel's rooftop, where we took in the panoramic of both the old city, the surrounding land, and Jerusalem's bustling daily life filled with history and

possibility.



Every visit to Jerusalem is terrifically enhanced with a walk about the Machne Yehuda outdoor market: an ancient shuk with the chance to immerse yourself into real Jerusalem life. It was so easy to imagine shopping for my Shabbat dinner: from the Yemenite herbal healer to the King of Halvah (over 100 varieties!), the tastes and smells of the market were exotic and exciting!

During our made-by-our-own-hand-market lunch, Rachel Azaria, newly elected Knesset member of the Kachlon party, founder of the Yerushalmit movement (IGP PARTNER see below), and a women's right activist, joined us for a typical Israeli meal: intensely flavored good food mixed with equally intense conversation.

Rachel highlighted three major issues facing Israeli women:

1. The economic wage gap;
2. Personal status issues;
3. Prostitution.

As I mentioned above, our IGP Granting Partner: Yerushalamit (the Jerusalem movement) used their 2014 grant to fund "the bus posters" and this past year's (2015) grant funded a women's co-existence project where your NCJW grants brought together Haredi (ultra-orthodox) and secular women to learn how to take power and strengthen their community by "turning disadvantages into advantages".

Progress is slow-but-steady as these women understand the importance of recognizing "the humanity of the other" and the need to cut through the "theology of politics and gender and religious differences in order to find common ground."



Our Shabbat started early as we joined IGP Granting Partner "Women of the Wall"--who work tirelessly for ALL women to pray at the Kotel—for their monthly Rosh Chodesh service. What a thrill to pray together wearing our tallit without incident!

Our Shabbat concluded in Tel-Aviv with a joyous Kabbalat Shabbat at Beit Tefilah--an alternative Israeli-Jewish service of music and prayer.



Our Sunday visit to the settlement Ariel, the capital of Samaria in the West Bank and part of "Area A" (according to the Camp David Accords is part of the "consensus" in Israel that would be part of an ultimate "land swap" deal with the Palestinians) taught us why 20,000 residents love these Judean Hills of the Jordan Valley. Our visit was informational. And in that regard, we were glad to be there.

Onward to Haifa for a meeting with two (2) IGP Grantees.

Turning the Tables, originally based in Tel Aviv, and now, with NCJW support, has opened a second fashion-training studio and shelter for trafficked women who have left one life and are working hard to create a new one.

NCJW also funds Isha L'isha a women's collaborative focused on anti-trafficking legislation and advocacy. Both Turning the Tables and Isha L'isha are part of a women's coalition of organizations trying to advance social change for women.



As the sun settled into the Mediterranean Sea, we met with the leaders of Vital Voicwa: Liron Peleg Hadmoni and Noa Satuch. Together, they lead groups of Jewish and Arab women to deepen the dialogue as they share their respective narratives to deepen connections and understanding.

Final Days

As if all the above were not enough to fill our heads with ideas, politics, and policies, our final days were all about possibility.

It is always a thrill to meet the brilliant NCJW scholarship students – who offer us hope for the future of gender equality--and the dedicated professors of The NCJW Women and Gender Studies Program at Tel Aviv University (TAU) that is not only the first such degree in the Mid-East, but also the largest graduate program in the University.

The Women and Gender Studies Program boasts hundreds of alumni, men and women, Arabs and Jews, religious and secular; and offers amazing learning opportunities for people wanting to advance social justice through a gender lens.

In the old port of Jaffa is nestled The Peres Center for Peace and Justice. Physically stunning with its layers of concrete and glass symbolizing both the weight of the conflict and the hope for the future, the Center honors the legacy and life of Shimon Peres who, at 92, continues to advance dialogue and peace between people who have fought each other for thousands of years, but find themselves sharing the same holy land together.

Me and Peres holding hands for peace.



Our all-too-short-meeting with Nadav Tamir, Director, International Affairs at Peres Associates, former Israel Consul General of Boston and friend of NCJW's CEO Nancy Kaufman, spoke about Peres' philosophy and shared his vision for moving forward with the peace process: even in these troubled times.

NOTE: A fuller report from this meeting is found at the end of this message.**

Only 3 miles from the Gaza border, and within easy reach of Hamas launched rockets, mortars and missiles, finds NCJW grantee, Eden Village, a boarding school for at-risk girls from disadvantaged families who have suffered violence, abuse and neglect.

For many years NCJW's IGP has funded Eden programs and projects, including a new bomb shelter, and most recently, in Summer 2014, during Operation Protective Edge, our NCJW Grant supported the 6 week evacuation of 65 students AND their teachers away from Eden into the Negev.

NCJW friend, outspoken advocate for freedom to marry as well the separation of religion and state in Israel, Tel Aviv city council member and executive director of NCJW Grantee: IsraelBFree, Mickey Gitzen joined our farewell dinner.

Final Reflections

As you can tell, I felt so much pride in NCJW's imbedded interests in so many parts of Israel Life. My only regret is more people like you have not yet enjoyed the NCJW/Israel experience. In the meantime, until you can travel with NCJW, I hope you will enjoy the photos and the videos that will soon be posted on the NCJW website as well as a PowerPoint presentation soon to be ready for you to share with your sections, your synagogues and your friends.

2015 NCJW Israel Study Tour at The Peres Center for Peace and Justice



Moving Forward

The NCJW Israel Granting Program Committee will soon meet to deliberate the 2016 IGP grantee allocation. I hope these recollections from the 2015 NCJW Israel Study Tour helps fuel your pride and passion for either your personal or your Section's support of the many vital IGP programs and projects that greatly and genuinely depend on our NCJW funding to bring their ideas and ideals to life.

Our support fuses the grantees' on-the-ground activism with official Israeli-law-making helping to move our NCJW social and cultural agenda forward.

Sending my best personal regards,

Susan

**Detailed report from Peres Center for Peace and Justice:

The Personal Thoughts from Nadav Tamir, Director, International Affairs at Peres Associates

Nadav stressed the importance of dialogue and of listening to the “others” narrative and the willingness to take responsibility in order to build a better future. He shares Peres’ philosophy that “the best way to change anything is to begin by changing ourselves” and the importance of not getting stuck in old stories and paradigms.

One of the most important messages Nadav offered was his belief that “Israel wants negotiation but no agreement”, while the “Palestinians want an agreement with no negotiation.” He was clear in sharing his and Peres’ belief that we must continue to advocate for a 2-state solution to the conflict because the alternative, a one-state solution will be neither Jewish or democratic and both are intolerable ends to the conflict and would mean the end of Zionism.

Nadav also expressed his opinion that Jerusalem must be the capital for both peoples and believes that until and unless that is recognized along with a return to the 1967 borders with some land swaps, there will be no peace. He stressed that the skepticism that is rampant among both Israelis and Palestinians could be allayed by a change in leadership with a willingness to take bold steps for peace as both Rabin and Sharon demonstrated in their respective governments.

Nadav also talked about the importance of empowering moderate Muslims and building relationships across the divide between Jews and Muslims within and beyond Israel’s borders. He acknowledged that the way Israel left Gaza may not have been the best approach, but that Israel had to leave and unfortunately nothing was built to support the Gazans who took over. He surprised many of us when he said that most of the European countries of friends of Israel and cautioned us not to equate constructive criticism of Israel with anti-Israel or anti-Semitic beliefs. Since many of those in the BDS movement are Jews he asked the question “how can they be anti-Semitic”. Nadav is “on leave” from the Foreign Ministry so all his thoughts were his own and not representative of the current government.