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## WORLD WIZO Chairperson's Division



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My dear Chaverot,

How quickly the time flies! Spring is in the air and Pesach is just around the corner. It has been a very productive few months since we hosted this year's Meeting of Representatives (MOR). I can honestly say that I believe it was our best MOR because we held it at our home here at the Rebecca Sieff World WIZO House, whose walls speak not only of WIZO's magnificent past, its vibrancy today but also of the firm foundations that we lay for all WIZO's tomorrows. And together we were able to share the '*nachess*' of our blessed work.

In our successes in empowering women, in our excellence of education, and high standard of care in our day care centers, in the letters of praise we have received from Israel's Ministry of Education and the Welfare Ministry, and letters of thanks from students and parents who have benefitted so greatly from WIZO's care, there is '*nachess*' - the only word that describes fully the joy that motivates us all in our WIZO work.

As I write this, I am proud to learn of the first prize won by our geography students at CHW Hadassim for their innovative solar-powered lawnmower, *The Aurora*, at the National Fuel Choices and Smart Initiative Competition. This thoroughly green invention, which ecologically echoes WIZO's commitment to a brighter tomorrow is a mere drop in the ocean of good that WIZO is - and with your continued support and solidarity, will always be.

Within these pages, I present to you stories from some of our projects. I hope they will assist you in your vital work for WIZO.

I wish you, your families, your friends, and all our WIZO Chaverot, a joyful Passover. May the joint power of hundreds of thousands of voices around Seder tables, usher in a period of peace and prosperity, unity and fulfillment, throughout Israel, WIZO and the Jewish world.

Chag Pesach Sameach.

*Rivka Lazovsky*

Prof. Rivka Lazovsky  
Chairperson, World WIZO

## Making the right choices

## EMPOWERMENT

Sixteen WIZO branches across Israel play an active role in the WIZO *Otzma Tzeira* program of empowerment of girls aged 13 – 18 who are at risk of making unhealthy life choices; girls who have suffered emotional traumas, social difficulties and dysfunction in the family. These are girls who often suffer in silence but whose school counselors have identified as being vulnerable. The essence of the program is to improve their personal identity, self-esteem, and coping strategies. Now in its 13<sup>th</sup> year, the *Otzma Tzeira* program has embraced and empowered many girls to aim higher and to be the very best version of themselves.

Osnat (not her real name), is one such girl who has benefitted greatly from the program. She explained:



Photo for illustration purposes only

*"It was not that I hated school, I liked it actually, and I used to get good grades, but when I was 14 my body changed, I put weight on and began to feel very awkward. Some of the girls were very mean to me. They would taunt me in the playground. They called me ugly, they gave me a name: 'Osnat the fatty' and from being a friendly kid, I became withdrawn. I could not stand the teasing, so I started to play truant. It was easier not to be there. My parents did not have a clue. They thought I was just going to school, but I just stayed on the bus until I got to town. I started to hang around the city center, in the bad areas where I knew I would not be seen, and I made friends with women who made a living on the streets. They told me that the men liked girls who had 'flesh on their bones' and they introduced me to Charlie, who promised me a future working for him.*

*Charlie encouraged me to wear makeup. 'You need to look older,' he had said. He bought clothes for me that were very revealing, clothes that my mother would have called common. He told me to depend on him for everything. I felt as if, at last, I was worth something."*

Osnat's parents were oblivious as she concealed her new identity as a prostitute from them. She was always home at the end of the school day, 'pretending' to study. Sometimes, she would go into school before leaving early with excuses of having to visit sick relatives, with her 'work' clothes hidden in her school bag. Enjoying her secret day job, she felt that she coped better with the taunts of her school mates, and yet deep down she felt dirty and degraded. Used.

*"My whole life became one big lie, and as much as I felt guilty about deceiving everyone, I never believed I was deceiving myself and I had no idea that the school counsellor had her suspicions until one day she came to me and spoke frankly. Apparently, I had been seen... I burst into tears and told her the whole story. I felt so dirty, so cheap! She referred me to the WIZO Otzma Tziera program.*

**Osnat, along with 14 other girls, attends the local WIZO women's center where the Otzma Tziera program takes place. She has found great comfort from counsellors who listen but do not judge, and from the company of the other girls, each with her own unique story. They are empowered by a dynamic series of lectures, one-to-one and group conversations on a variety of subjects designed to strengthen their resolve, to examine and improve their own self-worth.**

*"I am learning to respect myself and to love my body," Osnat explained. "I have so much more confidence and I am back on track to concentrate on my studies, because I want to serve in the IDF in the Oketz Unit, (canine unit). After that I will pursue the career I always dreamed about, which is to become a veterinarian. The Otzma Tziera program has made me realize that my future self is dependent on the choices that I make today, and I choose to make my parents proud of me, but more than that, I choose to make myself proud of me!"*

## *Shani's Savta Annie*

Shani (not her real name) was sound asleep and safe in her cot, oblivious to the fact that her doting parents had just been pronounced dead at the scene of a devastating car accident. Shani was just five months old, a first and much-loved grandchild to the proud maternal grandparents who, while they were babysitting for her, received the tragic news that their gorgeous grand-daughter had now become an orphan.

Shani, a happy, contented baby who had a big smile for everyone, had just started to attend the local WIZO Day Care Center, the same day care center that her mother and aunt had attended when they were small. It had always been a source of pride for Savta (grandma) Annie, herself a WIZO Israel Chavera who volunteered there. She explained, *"The WIZO Day Care Center takes me back to the good old days, and it keeps me young to be around the little ones – and having my own grandchild there is just an extra bonus!"*



The burial and the week of the Shiva was a blur through tear-filled eyes for Shani's savta and the family. The house was full of mourners and visitors. The parents and family of their dear late son-in-law, a new immigrant from America, had flown in from New York. Every morning, the director of the WIZO Day Care Center, Sigalit, came specially to pick up Shani and take her to the nursery, and Sigalit would bring her back home in the afternoon and stay with the family to help with the baby chores well into the night.

*"How could I not do this?"* Sigalit asked. *"Savta Annie is, to me, part of the family – and Shani is one of our WIZO babies. **Our work does not stop at the gates of the WIZO Day Care Center. It embraces the entire family and extends to their homes.**"*

Sigalit went on to explain how the staff at the day care center and many of the parents had rallied around her when her own son had been killed in active service in the IDF some years ago.

*"In Israel, we do for each other. We are all one community. It is this that defines us, not wars and conflict."* She said.

Sigalit was also very instrumental in advising the procedures required for Shani's grandparents to file for the adoption of their precious granddaughter and every step of the way, she held the hand of Savta Annie. Now, Savta Annie is back volunteering at the WIZO Day Care Center, and Shani thrives in the embrace of her loving grandparents who have now legally adopted her.

*"No, of course, she does not remember her parents, our beautiful children, but when she is older I will tell her how lovely they were, how much they loved her and how much we loved them,"* Savta Annie explained, a tear glistening in her eye. *"But for now, we just enjoy her and give her that piece of our hearts that was once broken. Through Shani, our beloved daughter and her husband, Josh, of blessed memory, live on."*

Shani has just started to walk. She toddles around clutching her teddy bear. Her grandfather follows her, his outstretched hand hovers over her head to protect her from banging into the furniture. *"She certainly keeps me on my toes. In fact, she keeps us both young!"* he said.

Their youngest daughter, Shani's aunt, comes in with Savta Annie. They had been for a fitting for her dress for her wedding next month. She sweeps Shani up in a big bear hug. *"Who's going to be my best and most beautiful bridesmaid?"* She asks.

Savta Annie is in no doubt that her experience of many years' volunteerism at the WIZO Day Care Center, and the support of Sigalit and her team have given her not only the strength to cope with such a tragedy of losing her daughter but also the vitality and energy to bring up baby Shani.





*Early Age Day Care Centers*

*Parental Support*

*Warm Homes for children at risk*

*Schools*

*Youth Villages*

*Vocational Training*

*Enrichment Courses*

*Youth Centers*

*Counselling*

*Welfare*

*Respite Care*

*Trauma Counselling*

*Community Care*

***Women's Shelters***

*Family Therapy*

***Women's Leadership***

*Citizens Advice*

*Legal Services to the family*

*Golden Age Home*

## *Daddy's ray of sunshine*

When Motti's\* wife, Lisa, died just six months after diagnosis from a very aggressive form of hereditary cancer that had robbed her of her own mother, he felt so alone and helpless. His only comfort was their beautiful young daughter, Moran. He would hug her closely and spend lonely hours in the middle of the night just watching her sleep. She became his whole world.

But how could he look after her and hold down his job at the same time?

The family had recently purchased their very own apartment, and Motti worked long hours to pay the mortgage.

It seemed like only yesterday when Motti and his wife Lisa had enrolled their baby Moran at a WIZO Day Care Center. Lisa had been excited at the thought of being able to return to work as a dental nurse and when she did, she was happy knowing that Moran was being so well cared for.

When Lisa became too sick to take care of Moran and Motti, the director of the day care center arranged help for the family and when Lisa died, Motti knew on whose shoulder to cry. The director, and staff as well as other parents from the day care center formed a support system on which the family could depend.

The day care center director also persuaded Motti to have Moran tested for the cancer gene, and even took the little girl herself as Motti just could not face the ordeal.

*"I was too scared of a bad result."* He said.

Thankfully, Moran did not have the defective gene that had killed both her mother and maternal grandmother.

Motti says, *"I do not have enough words to convey how grateful I am. The support I received from all the day care center staff was over and above expectations. It was as if they were acting on Lisa's instructions. They knew just what to do."*

It was this support system that Motti relied upon to get him through those first months, and the advice and assistance he received proved to be invaluable in practical as well as financial terms.

Now Motti can concentrate fully on his career knowing his beautiful Moran (who, by the way, is the image of her mother) is hugged, fed and doted upon by the loving staff at the WIZO Day Care Center.

when Motti collects Moran at the end of his working day, he is greeted with a broad smile that both warms and breaks his heart at the same time.

*"She's my little ray of sunshine,"* he says, *"and she loves to sing the songs she learns at day care. She sings them just for me."*



*Note: photo for illustration purposes only*

## *A Father's Promise fulfilled by WIZO*

EDUCATION

While the other kids spoke excitedly of their forthcoming Bar Mitzvot, Dov (not his real name) remained silent. They talked about discos, videos and new clothes, of the months of planning that their parents had invested, of menus and venues, of flowers and balloons. They discussed themes. Eli had a football theme; Yoni had a rock star theme. And the girls, too. They had their Bat Mitzvot to look forward to, their mothers equally busy with arrangements and invitations. Dov doubted he would even have a Bar Mitzvah, despite the fact that it was the traditional rite of passage from childhood to adulthood of every Jewish boy according to the Talmud.

Dov thought back to happier times, remembering his late father who had made a promise to him. "Son," he had said, "*Your Bar Mitzvah will take place at the Kotel (Wailing Wall). At the most important and most spiritual site of prayer on earth, you will become a man.*" But his pious and beloved father had died suddenly of a heart attack before fulfilling his promise and life for Dov, his little sisters and his mother, had taken a turn for the worse.

His mother, overcome with grief at the tragic loss of her husband, fell into a deep depression, which left her incapable of caring for her children. Dov was sent to a WIZO Youth Village, and his two young sisters were put into foster homes.

Despite this hugely traumatic episode, and with the help of the school's compassionate, professional staff, Dov adjusted well to life at the WIZO Youth Village. He was popular, a good student but it was in those quiet moments before he drifted off to sleep that Dov longed for the rite of passage his father had promised him. He imagined how he would 'lay tefillin' and kiss the sacred age-old stones of the Kotel with the fringes of his *tallit* (prayer shawl). He dreamt of how his mother would dance with joy and weep with pride.

Some months later, Dov added a new and very special memory - one that made him smile. He recalled how before he and other boys and girls from the dormitories rejoiced in their Bar Mitzvah ceremonies performed in the presence of family members and friends, they had received the gift of *tefillin*, *tallit* and *siddurim* (prayer books) for the boys and prayer books and candlesticks for the girls. His mother was present, as were his two sisters and grandparents, all celebrating his Bar Mitzvah with pride and happiness, together with friends and family of the other boys and girls. Their significant spiritual milestone was celebrated with an unforgettable trip to Jerusalem and to the Kotel. They were met and accompanied by a troupe of musicians who played the drums and blew the shofar in celebratory fanfare as they arrived at the Old City of Jerusalem. And Dov remembered that poignant moment when he approached the sacred stones of the Kotel, and he felt the jostle of the huge crowds. It was as if his late father was with him as he prayed at the wall. It was as if a promise was fulfilled. Fulfilled by WIZO.

***WIZO upholds the age-old tradition of holding Bar & Bat Mitzvah ceremonies for over 2,000 Israeli children every year***, who due to family or economic difficulties, would not otherwise have them. WIZO firmly believes that this 'rite of passage' is every Jewish child's birthright and is a fundamental part of their education and spiritual development, as the children gain a deeper understanding of their Judaism and Tzedakah. This ongoing and profoundly meaningful initiative is one of the flagship programs of local branches of WIZO Israel and by WIZO Schools and Youth Villages across the country, funded entirely by donations.



*Dov at the Kotel*

## *Ivan at home at Ha'Ahuza Haktana*



Ivan (not his real name) was placed in the care of Ha'Ahuza Haktana by the courts when he was nine years old. His mother, an alcoholic, is an illegal immigrant from the Ukraine. She married an Israeli much older than herself. Ivan has a brother who is three and a half years old. The pair were hungry. There was no food in the house. Once, when Ivan was left to babysit his baby brother, he handcuffed the crying baby to the bed. One night, after police investigated a complaint by neighbors, the children were removed from their home for their own protection. During that episode, the parents were drunk and fighting, throwing furniture. Ivan's mother had struck Ivan. The police found him, bloodied and bruised, cowering in the corner shielding his baby brother with his body.

Ivan was taken to an emergency center, and his little brother was taken to a foster home. Shortly afterwards, Ivan came to Ha'Ahuza Haktana accompanied by a social worker. He was reticent, and his expression was vacant, and although he was cooperative, he was barely able to respond to questions. At this time, his father was in prison on charges of domestic violence. His mother continued to drink.

Before he came to Ha'Ahuza Haktana, Ivan was unable to read and had significant communication difficulties. In the first year there, he was emotionally closed and shy, and at first, he did not interact with the other children. He worried about his mother, and he missed his little brother. During the time that Ivan was at Ha'Ahuza Haktana, his brother was in various foster homes and a boarding school, but the WIZO social workers took Ivan to visit him, and they accompanied Ivan to supervised visitation centers to meet his mother.

While at Ha'Ahuza Haktana, Ivan started school in the third grade, and throughout the three years he was in the care of WIZO, he was able to successfully close the educational gaps, under the watchful eyes of WIZO staff who helped him with extra tutoring. When he left, he had finished the sixth grade successfully.

Ivan did not go home for weekends or vacations. Parents' visits and phone calls were supervised (by court order). His mother would promise to visit and not turn up, and when she did come, she would bring bags full of food and insist that Ivan ate only her food, as if a test of loyalty that Ivan had to obey. The phone calls were also difficult. Ivan's mother would use manipulative, bullying tones in her native Russian tongue and Ivan would answer, 'da, da, da' (yes, yes, yes), with tears rolling down his face. Often the WIZO staff would have to halt the conversation, and Ivan's mother would scream and curse at them.

As time went on, Ivan understood that Ha'Ahuza Haktana was a safe haven where all his physical and emotional needs were met. He knew that a warm meal and a warm hug always awaited him, as well as extra-curricular activities and remedial education. And as he opened up, he became more friendly and independent. He attended scouts and was popular. One of his friends' parents hosted him often at weekends and for the holidays.

When his father was released from prison, Ivan started to go to his home for weekends. The WIZO staff assisted Ivan's father in re-establishing his relationship with Ivan and provided Ivan with the coping strategies to face this new beginning. Despite the fact that Ivan's parents were extremely hostile towards the staff of Ha'Ahuza Haktana and cursed and screamed at them, the WIZO team was determined to work with them to harmonize the relationship with Ivan.

Ivan was almost 13 when he left Ha'Ahuza Haktana to attend a boarding school closer to his parents who continued to rely on the professional counseling staff with whom they are still in contact for advice on relationship building. Ivan also keeps in touch with the school staff, chatting easily and articulately about himself and his future plans. He dreams of working in Hi-Tech and there is little doubt that, armed with his new self-esteem and enthusiasm to learn, Ivan has all the tools needed to succeed.

***Ha'Ahuza Haktana is part of Ahuzat Yeladim sponsored by WIZO Australia.***

## *Sound advice from Lieutenant Yonatan*

For Ethiopian student, Yonatan (not his real name) who started at the **WIZO Nir Ha'emek Youth Village** in the seventh grade, his new home in the dormitory was a place where he finally 'found himself' away from the noisy, over-crowded apartment that he shared with his single mother and his many siblings. Yonatan's father had abandoned the family when the children were small, leaving his mother with the struggle of holding down a job and bringing up her six children.



*Image for illustration purpose only*

Despite many emotional and educational shortcomings, Yonatan settled in well at the dormitory, and with one-to-one support and tutoring he began to appreciate the merits of education and he studied hard, showing a high aptitude for mechanics and electrical engineering.

*“At Nir Ha'emek, they did not see me as the sad Ethiopian kid with no future, no! They instilled in me a sense of ambition, and they provided me with the tools to achieve,”* Yonatan explained, *“and at weekends and public holidays, they encouraged me to stay at the youth village, so that I would not be led astray by my older brother who was doing drugs.”*

When Yonatan graduated, he continued his education at a prestigious school of further education, where he attained excellence in mechanics and electrical engineering, gaining valuable accreditation. All through that time, he spent much of his free time on the Nir Ha'emek campus, where he felt very at home.

Yonatan was enlisted into the army in the maintenance division as an electrical engineer. From there, he was selected for officers' school. Now, he is a lieutenant and serves as a tutor in electrical engineering and maintenance in the officers' school. He attributes his successful army career to the valuable life lessons he learned at WIZO Nir Ha'emek, and he takes great pride in visiting the youth village and speaking to the students about his time spent in the dormitories and how impactful school days are in preparation for meaningful service in the army – and beyond.

Yonatan stands erect and tall, resplendent in his army uniform. His eyes glow with pride.

*“I used to think that good fortune was something that other kids had, but not me – and maybe you think that too.”* He says, addressing students from the dormitories. ***“I have been, where you are now – and I can tell you that you are the luckiest kids so take advantage of everything that Nir Ha'emek has to offer, and listen to your teachers. Know that they are there for you, for your future, for your success. It worked for me. It will work for you, too.”***

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***The WIZO Nir Ha'emek Youth Village is sponsored by WIZO USA and WIZO OSFA Argentina.*** It is located in the Jezreel Valley near Afula and is attended by more than 1,000 students. It is one of the largest schools in the north. Two hundred students live in the village dormitories. Some are new immigrants, some of whom are of Ethiopian descent and others are Israelis who come from dysfunctional homes.

WIZO Nir Ha'emek was established in 1927 as a working farm and has developed into a leading school in cultivation and agriculture. The village has a farm, a dairy farm, chicken coops, therapeutic riding stables, an ecological garden and more. The school also specializes in science education and technology. A high percentage of graduates are accepted into the army. WIZO Nir Ha'emek is committed to providing students with as wide a variety of resources as possible in an effort to enable them to reach their academic and personal potential.





Tricia Schwitzer  
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## *Home is where the WIZO heart is*

I am of the firm belief that the stories that touch the heart are the biggest motivator for us women to reach into our pockets and donate and I have a little saying that demonstrates this - *"it is the heart that opens the purse."* Everything we do is based on emotion, and there is no stronger emotional (and indeed spiritual) connection than that of a Jewish mother to the children of Israel.

I am that typical Jewish mother, probably just like you. I 'kvell' when I see the little ones sitting down to a proper, nutritious meal cooked with love in a WIZO Day Care Center. My face takes on (as my husband calls it) the 'sad puppy' expression, and when I listen to the day care directors and parents telling me the stories, it is generally me that ends up in floods of tears. And when I come home and type out these stories, well, I just continue weeping – which brings me to another one of my sayings, which is: *'At WIZO, you smile a lot, you cry a lot – and you eat too much cake.'*

It is the Jewish mother that is also the WIZO Day Care Center director who, despite my weak refusals, makes it her business to ply me with her delicious home-baked cake whenever I visit. She never fails to break my diet. She never fails to make me smile, and as I reiterate, the stories of many of those in her care, never fail to bring on the tears.

I am sure you will agree with me when I say that visiting a WIZO project is like coming home. There is a positively-charged energy of warmth and hope, and at the same time of security. From the refuge of a women's shelter or the nurturing of a day care center, from the community spirit of WIZO centers throughout Israel, or one of WIZO's warm homes or in the dormitories, WIZO creates a loving environment, the archetypal Jewish mother's touch. It is unmistakable and inescapable.

**Israel is at home in WIZO**, and so are we, every chavera all over the world who dedicates her time and resources, who volunteers tirelessly for a cause that has touched, and continues to touch her heart. For the tens of thousands of Israeli citizens for whom WIZO really is home, it is the heart of the Jewish mother that keeps that home alive – because *'home is where the heart is.'*

Wishing one and all Chag Pesach Sameach. Wherever you are in the world, when you sit with family and friends around your seder table and say, *'next year in Jerusalem'* - mean it. Come home to where your heart is. Visit the WIZO projects, listen to the stories and you will 'kvell' too!

Tricia



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