



# LAPID



**Women  
taking  
the lead**



**World WIZO**  
*Organization and Tourism Division*

Special Edition for the  
**26<sup>th</sup> World  
WIZO EGM**  
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**Dear Chavera,**

On behalf of the World WIZO Organization and Tourism Division I would like to welcome the delegates of the 26th World WIZO EGM (Enlarged General Meeting). This hallmark event is entitled “Women Taking the Lead” – reflecting the predominant role WIZO women have played since 1920 and continue to play in advancing Israeli society. It promises to be an stimulating and meaningful week, a time to share ideas, network with friends old and new and experience the power of our extraordinary women’s movement which keeps the State of Israel, the “Start-Up Nation” in social innovation.

Nothing stirs our imagination and tugs at our heart strings more than those real-life, inspirational and life altering stories about ordinary people doing extraordinary things. In this edition of our Lapid magazine we share with you compelling and touching stories of women from all walks of life, who have made an exceptional contribution to Israeli society, and who are providing strong role models for future generations.

By shining the spotlight on these remarkable and trailblazing women; the challenges they have faced and the choices they have made we can share their wisdom, motivate and inspire others to act.

With warm WIZO regards,

*Janine Gelley*

**Janine Gelley**  
Chairperson, Organization and Tourism Division  
World WIZO

# “And G-d Created Woman....”

By Bat-Zion Susskind-Sacks



***The Biblical female role models have been an inspiration to many modern day Jewish leaders, both men and women and to the tradition that has produced many front runners in many fields. The miracle of Jewish survival owes much to these women and their legacy***

The story of creation recounted in the Torah is miraculous. Eve, the woman, “Mother of all living things” is the final handiwork of that miracle and probably the greatest of them all. To be the giver of the gift of Life is the greatest blessing, the ultimate bliss. The Tanach speaks highly of the strength and the virtues of women. Throughout it are strewn many stories and tales of their wisdom, their deep intuition, sensitivity and divine inspiration.

One of the most unsung heroines of the Torah is Miriam. How many of us remember her as the one who saved her brother, Moses, the greatest leader the Jewish people have ever had? Was it not for Miriam’s unwavering and never faltering perseverance, endurance and hope which ensured that he who would bring redemption to her people lived to fulfill his destiny? Was it not the courageous and brave Miriam who, after Moses and the children of Israel sang their song, acted as a cheerleader to infuse valor, liveliness and deeper faith in G-d among the children of Israel? The Torah tells us that “Miriam the prophetess, the sister of Aaron, took the tambourine in her hand; and all the women followed her with tambourines and dances. And Miriam called to them: ‘Sing to G-d, for He is most exalted; horse and rider He cast in the sea...’” A true muse! Deborah, the first judge who “held court under the palm,” was another Biblical heroine who has inspired many Jewish women over the ages. Deborah was also a prophetess and a warrior. During her time, the Israelites were oppressed by the people of Canaan. She declared a revolt against them and as she correctly predicted, the Israelites won.

The victory over the Canaanites would not have been won if not for the courage of another brave woman by the name of Yael, a shrewd warrior who used not only her female charms, but also her wisdom and strategic skills to bring a final smashing victory to the army of the Israelites. As the Canaanite soldiers fell by the sword, Sisera, their commander fled into Yael’s tent. She welcomed him, and resumed to play the

perfect hostess until he fell asleep. She then drove a tent peg through his temple and he died.

It is Esther’s, another celebrated heroine of the Jewish people, astute and brave diplomacy coupled with her wisdom of the heart that we acclaim each year during Purim. With the help of her uncle Mordechai, Esther won King Achashverosh’s heart. It is reasonable to assume that it was probably more the result of a calculated strategic move aimed at ensuring the safety of her Jewish people than it was her love for a King that was not known for his wisdom. Her intuition guided Esther in what was a very perilous and unfamiliar political terrain. Even though she knew that that approaching the king without being summoned carried the penalty of death, she did eventually approach him. Through an ingenious plan, after piquing the king’s curiosity and soothing Haman’s ego and gaining the trust of both, she was able to call out Haman’s conspiracy and get the king to side with her. The Biblical female role models have been an inspiration to many modern day Jewish leaders, both men and women and to the tradition that has produced many front runners in many fields. The miracle of Jewish survival owes much to these women and their legacy.

***Bat-Zion Susskind-Sacks - Bat-Zion, Hebrew for “Daughter of Zion” grew up in Israel in the nineteen fifties and sixties, the daughter of Holocaust survivors. She served in the IDF and then moved to the USA to further her studies. Bat-Zion has lived more than half of her life outside Israel, in the USA, New Zealand and Great Britain. She returned to her homeland with a rejuvenated love and pride, and ever since has endeavored to express those deep feelings within the pages of her first novel, On a Wing from the Holy Land.***

# Women Should be Seen and Heard Interview with Hana Rado

By Lisa Moss-Phillips

Hana Rado, one of the most respected people in the advertising business is working towards making Israel a better place. Beside her official job as chief operating officer of the Tel Aviv branch of global advertising agency McCann, she has become a social entrepreneur and crusader for women’s rights and gender equality.

Four years ago embodying the pioneering spirit of David Ben-Gurion and his vision of making the ‘desert bloom’ she launched McCann Valley, a digital advertising and media hub in the Negev Desert town of Mitzpe Ramon, together with the assistance of McCann Worldwide and Michal Romi, a local entrepreneur and editor of the culture magazine Route40. Home to the world’s largest natural crater (“Israel’s Grand Canyon”) and one of the most beautiful places in Israel this isolated town is also one of the poorest in the country, known for its high levels of unemployment. Today this agency which offers offer new media services for small and medium businesses all over Israel., including the management of Facebook and Twitter campaigns (in Hebrew, Arabic, and Russian); branding and design services; building of websites; and social-media advertising campaigns, has 40 employees, half of which have relocated to the desert town. The company is constantly growing and hiring more people with the aim of building the payroll to 120 by 2018, in the hope of changing Mitzpe Ramon’s secluded reality. Traditionally the Negev’s best and brightest have left the region for Tel Aviv and Jerusalem after graduating high school. This venture is a small but significant step in reversing this brain drain, drawing professionals away from Israel’s center and into the Negev, boosting business and infrastructure. It combines “pioneering and entrepreneurship”, two important ways to develop the periphery and is proof that innovation is not exclusive to the metropolitan.

## Addressing the gender gap

Rado noticed the magnitude of Israel’s gender gap exemplified by the lack of women headlining conference agendas



***Hana Rado who has never described herself as a feminist but rather a person who is aware of gender differences is changing the reality we live***

and sitting on speaker panels when she was invited to a conference to speak about women in advertising earlier in the year. She discovered to her dismay that of 220 speakers on the agenda only 22 were female. Conference organizers she approached across Israel confirmed that few women are included in professional panels, so she decided to take action and as a result, Persona was born.

Together with five cofounders she launched Persona, the non-profit database on March 8, 2015 International Women’s Day. Persona lists nearly 800 Israeli women qualified to speak on panels on a wide variety of professional topics. The Persona profile is a woman with a management and or entrepreneurship track record along with public-speaking experience. Each woman approved by the committee receives her own page with her educational and professional background, an ‘I believe’ statement, a short description of issues she would like to address, links to her social media and contact information.

The database continues to grow as each “Persona” is encouraged to recommend another “Persona” within her professional circles. A closed group, PersoNATION, provides a forum where members of the Persona community can exchange information and ideas.

Women have a good starting point being a majority in the population as well as over 50% at universities, but when it comes to key positions, on corporate boards etc. the ratio changes drastically. Persona has

a goal that goes beyond speaker panels and aims to achieve 50% representation for women on corporate boards, in government posts and on conference lineups.

## Raising awareness

In addition to launching Persona, Rado has spearheaded a large-scale effort to raise awareness about the lack of women’s representation in speaker lineups. Her group has actively campaigned against conferences where women are under-represented, often contacting high-level attendees to inform them of the event’s gender gap. They also fly banners with slogans such as “She has all the qualities to be a speaker except one thing—she’s not man enough.”

Hana Rado who has never described herself as a feminist but rather a person who is aware of gender differences is changing the reality we live. Determined to close society’s gender gap her entrepreneurial initiatives are sending Israeli society a clear message - **women must be seen and heard.**



# A Letter to Golda

By Rolene Marks



***You sometimes made decisions that were not always popular but as a true leader, you always had Israel's best interests at heart***

Dear Golda,  
I have often wondered what I would say to you if I ever was to meet you. What would a relatively new Olah (immigrant) say to one of the greatest leaders of all time? You were Israel's fourth Prime Minister and remain an inspiration to this day. You gave the impression that even though you were a formidable leader, you were still Savta Golda, with your trademark bun and cigarette, an approachable 'bobba' whom we could always count on for advice.

It is 2016 and the tiny little country that you helped birth is a thriving, cosmopolitan and beautifully flawed democracy. Women's rights have grown in leaps and bounds since you paved the way for us to realize we can become so much more than we ever thought we could. We are pioneers and trailblazers, entrepreneurs and home makers, politicians and doctors, ballerinas, soldiers and teachers. We are nation builders. In a neighborhood where women are silenced, persecuted, raped and denied basic human rights, Israel's women are the backbone of our great state. A lot of this we owe to you.

You mentioned in your memoir how emotional it was for you to sign the declaration of Independence next to another great woman, Rachel Kagan. She was a WIZO woman and today, we have over 800 projects across the country where we work very hard for an improved Israeli society. Day care centers and battered women shelters, women's leadership programs, youth villages and schools, Golda, what *naches* you would feel!

Dear Golda, Israel has always been the birthplace of ideas. You were so proud of this fact and always encouraged education and now we are world leaders in science, medicine, agriculture and technology. We have been renamed "The Start Up nation". You would be amazed at the incredible creativity bursting from our young, innovative citizens. We never lose hope that our neighbors will choose to educate their children to become members of the start-up generation instead of educating them with hate filled rhetoric.

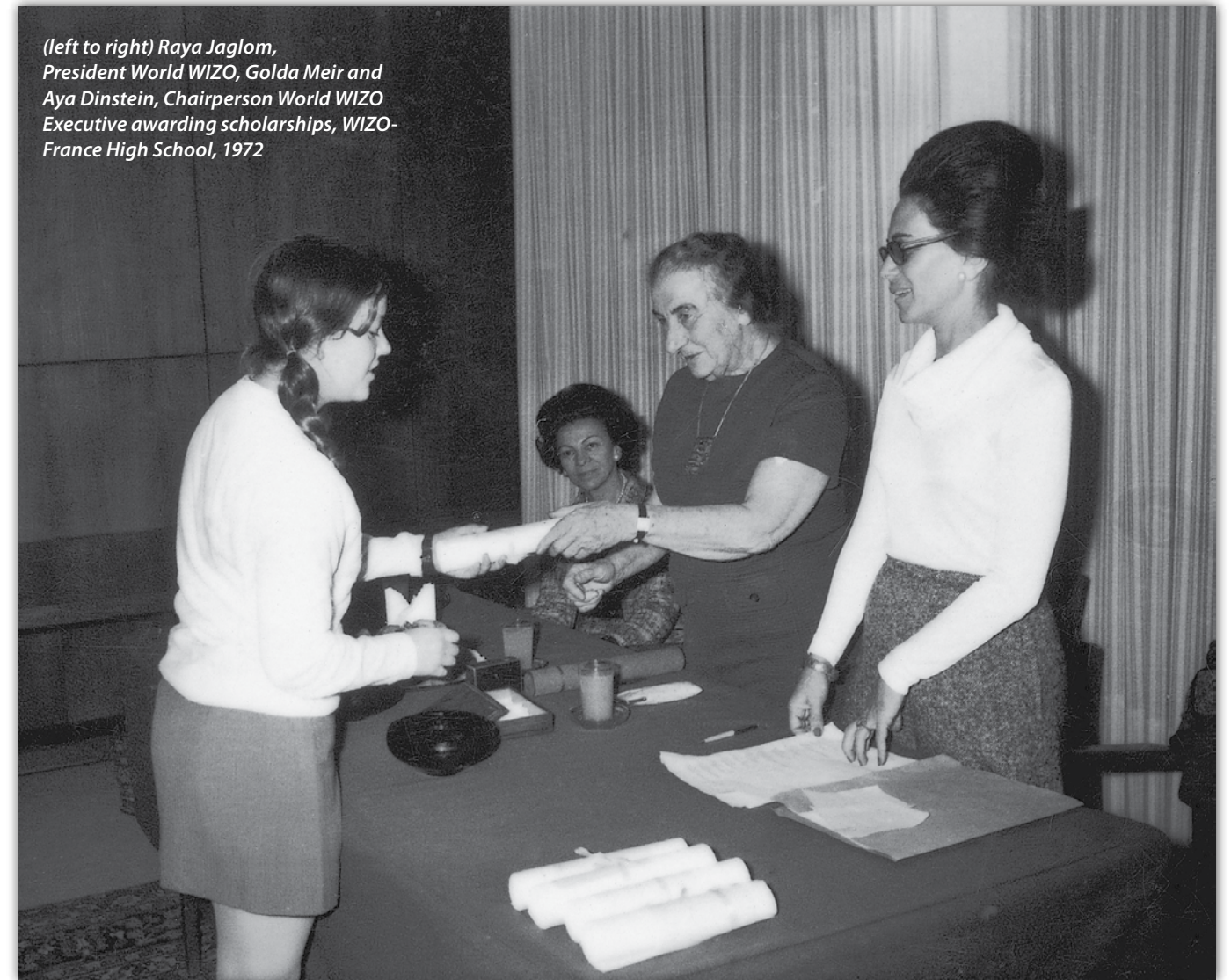
One of your most memorable quotes was "Peace will come when the Arabs will love their children more than they hate us. Golda, it breaks my heart to tell you that this has not changed. You wrote in your memoir "My Life" that you worried about preparing the next generation of 9 and 10 year olds for the army. As I write this, we are enduring a horrendous wave of terror. Sadly, the same incitement and terror that you worried and opined about has not stopped and we have had to fight several more wars and endure two "Intifadas" as a result of such hostility. But you know we are a stubborn people and we sanctify life and will never give up on our hope for peace.

We have mourned together and suffered loss as a nation. Our heads have been bowed but our spirits have never been broken. Our defiant love for life sustains and motivates us to carry on. At a time when stones are weapons of war, we use ours to build homes. When barbaric terrorists behead their victims, we use ours to look for groundbreaking solutions and at a time where women are maligned and mistreated in our neighborhood, we endeavor to follow in your trailblazing footprints.

Dear Golda, you raised the ire of some but I reckon if people applaud every single thing you do, you probably aren't doing your job effectively enough. You sometimes made decisions that were not always popular but as a true leader, you always had Israel's best interests at heart.

Africa held a special place in your heart and you believed that many of the countries shared a similar history and yearning for statehood that we did. You would be delighted to see the contribution Israel is making on the continent in helping with sustainability and growth. We pride ourselves in living up to the tenet of *Tikkun Olam* (repairing the world) and wherever there is a crisis or natural disaster, you will find Israel leading the way. Our enemy Syria has been engaged in a civil war for four years and despite this, Israel has saved over 2000 lives.

You would be amused that some of your most awe-inspiring quotes are used



*(left to right) Raya Jaglom, President World WIZO, Golda Meir and Aya Dinstein, Chairperson World WIZO Executive awarding scholarships, WIZO-France High School, 1972*

by us, generations later, to effectively communicate how much we love our country and how we share the same frustrations you did. You had a way with words and in today's technologically driven world I cannot help but wonder what you would have thought about social media and its importance in telling Israel's story? You even created some controversy lately when a media watchdog site posted a picture of you with one of your legendary quotes. Today we will not be silent in the face of adversity and anti-Semitism and even though you are no longer with us, your words continue to inspire us and give us fortitude.

Dear Golda, we may not share the same taste in shoes but I would so love to join you in a celebratory glass of your favorite Israeli wine and toast to Israel, to her pioneering women and to you, a venerable leader who burst through the ceilings, raised the standards and blazed a glowing trail. L'Chaim!

*Rolene Marks is a passionate advocate for Israel and appears on radio, television and has been published in numerous global publications. Rolene is a member of the Media Team Israel, an advocacy body that fights media bias as well as Truth be Told. Rolene volunteers for WIZO and is a*

*member of the World WIZO Executive and previously represented the organisation on the World Zionist Congress. Rolene can be heard every Monday on the Chai Drive on Chai FM, a Johannesburg based radio station giving political commentary on Israel and the Middle East.*

*In 2007 Rolene participated in the Israeli Ministry of Foreign Affairs Young Jewish Diplomats Leadership course and is the owner of Rolene Marks Consulting, specialising in Media, Public Relations, Social Media Marketing as well as Israel Advocacy Training. Rolene Marks is available for interviews and lectures upon request.*



# It is Never Too Late to Live Your Dream

## Interview with Tzipi Obziler

By Lisa Moss-Phillips

Tzipora “Tzipi” Obziler was not born with a tennis racket in her hand. In fact, by today’s competitive standards she was regarded a late bloomer only picking up a tennis racket for the first time at the age of nine. She trained for hours but was not very talented as a junior. Fifth or six in line at the time when they opened the first Tennis Academy in Israel, she was considered an underdog and excluded from the squad. This spurred her on to show everybody what she was capable of and prove that she had the makings of a champion. After completing her compulsory military service, Obziler decided to quit professional tennis (for the first time) and took a sport’s scholarship in the United States at Old Dominion University in Norfolk, Virginia. She had an exceptional year there, winning several collegiate titles rising to No.1 in the college rankings, and becoming the first Israeli to play in the NCAA (The National Collegiate Athletic Association).

She decided to return to Israel after a year for personal reasons, and when she came back to Israel, aged 23, she could not find a sponsor and turned to coaching. Two years later, when a sponsor did show up, she returned to the pro circuit and got as high as 150th in the world. A shoulder injury in 2000 hampered her progress and when her sponsor halted the funding, she quit for the second time, disenchanted and returned to coaching. From 2000 to 2002, Obziler had retired from the game and dropped completely out of the world rankings. However, during this period she kept playing for Israel’s Fed Cup team and in the summer of 2002 something life-altering happened. Filling a spot on Israel’s national team as it faced the United States in a Fed Cup match. Obziler traveled with the squad to Springfield, Missouri where she nearly upset three-time Grand Slam champion Lindsay Davenport pushing her to a third-set tiebreaker. This in itself was not the life-changing event. What followed afterwards was the real trigger. Tennis legend Billie Jean King and US captain at the time approached her after that match



and in the presence of the Israeli team coach and the team’s main sponsor asked her how could it be that a player at her level isn’t in pro tennis and that she should return to the game.

Taking Billie’s words to heart and finding herself at a turning point in her career as a professional, Tzipi decided she did not want to wake up one day and regret missing out on the opportunity to become a full-time tennis player. So at the age of 29 she took the brave decision to make a comeback. It was not too long until she climbed back to her then career high of approx. 150th. Nevertheless, it would be another five long years before she really made her breakthrough. In 2007, she entered the top 100 for the first time in her career at the age of 34 reached a career best ranking of No.75. That season she also played a key role in elevating Israel’s Fed Cup team to the elite eight-country World Group competition.

Obziler currently holds the world record for most Federation Cup ties played, at 61, a record she shares with compatriot Anna Smashnova. She has also won 14 singles and 14 doubles titles on the ITF circuit and has been a proud ambassador for her country representing Israel at the 2008 Summer Olympics in Beijing, China, in both singles and (with Shahar Pe’er) doubles.

In 2009 at the age of 36 and after enjoying a remarkable 21-year playing career Obziler retired from the game. Never one to sit idle, she accepted an appointment as Advisor on Sports Affairs to then Minister of Sport Limor Livnat, a position she held for two years. She also served for a number of years as a member of the Givatayim City Council and dealt extensively with the improvement and promotion of sports in the city. Today Obziler is the director of the tennis academy and a professional coach at the Association for Sport Givatayim. She believes in a hands-on approach, giving personal attention to each individual student (adults and youth).

Since her retirement, Tzipi has associated herself with the sport collaborating with coaches to nurture the young generation of tennis players as the professional director of Athena – the national program for the advancement of women’s sport within the framework of the Israel Tennis Association. Tzipi coaches the players 16 and older who sometimes complete the cadre of Federation players alongside the senior Shahar Pe’er and Yulia Glusko. She hopes to create players who will reach the top 10 but also emphasizes the importance of values and sportsmanship.

In October, Obziler was appointed as Israel’s new Fed Cup captain replacing Amos Mansdorf. This appointment brings her immense pride and she carries out the task with energy and determination, motivated to help the team reach the level of success they have enjoyed in the past.

Over the last decades Israeli society has begun to show ‘awareness’ regarding women’s place in many domains including sports but it is far too early for a ‘victory lap’. The ‘Campaign to Promote Women in Sports’ vision is to create fair representation of women in the management of sports associations, so that women will be active in the decision centers and deciding the division of resources. The desire is to reach fair participation of women in Israeli sports, and significantly increase the number of women working as coaches and to expand exposure of women’s sports in the media.

Tzipi continues to work hard and dream big. She believes that perseverance and determination is the key to success and if your heart is in the right place, anything is possible.

***Over the last decades Israeli society has begun to show ‘awareness’ regarding women’s place in many domains including sports but it is far too early for a ‘victory lap’***

# Paying it Forward

## How my personal journey has led me to want to help others

By Oshra Friedman



***We must not step aside and wait for others to do the work. Our responsibility is to take action, to be a role model and lead by example.***

I would like to share with you my story. My name is Oshra Friedman and I made “Aliyah” from Ethiopia 31 years ago with the rest of my family during Operation Moses. Today I live in Kiryat Motzkin, a city in the Haifa district with my husband and three children.

I hold a bachelor’s degree in Criminology and Human Resources from the Zefat Academic College, originally an extension of Bar-Ilan University and a master’s degree in Immigration and Social Integration from the Ruppin Academic College.

For the past 15 years, I have been working at the Rashi Foundation as the Northern Regional Coordinator of the Katzir Scholarship Fund.

I would like to take a step back in time to my early years in the country. As I mentioned I arrived in Israel with “Operation Moses” the clandestine airlift of Ethiopian Jews from Sudan in the mid 1980’s. I believe that the “Aliyah” process facilitated a sense of ‘freedom’ and ‘growth’ for women in the Ethiopian community. For me personally, it opened the door to lifelong learning and access to higher education. In the first few years, I learned how to become ‘an equal among equals’ in Israeli society, thanks to my ability to ‘pick up’ the Hebrew language quite quickly but mostly due to my clear understanding of the dynamics of the Israeli social system.

When I graduated from Junior High, I applied to one of the best girl’s residential schools in the country and after being accepted, I found myself struggling to prove to society that we too – Israelis of Ethiopian origin – are capable of achieving high performance goals. Unfortunately, half a year later I dropped out of school and faced two untenable choices that would influence my life’s path; to join other neighborhood kids who are predisposed towards delinquency, or to consciously work towards achieving a better future. I eventually ended up at – “WIZO Hadassim Youth Village” and this had a big impact on my decision. The educational staff at

the youth village recognized my needs and personal abilities; nurtured my academic and social skills and encouraged me to fulfill my potential towards self-actualization and self-fulfillment. Taking inspiration from own family situation, they encouraged me to investigate the triangular relationship between parents – children – residential school, along with the Institute for Research on Nurturing in Education, Hebrew University of Jerusalem. This research not only saved me and the other youngsters at the boarding school, but also made the Ministry of Education and other residential schools recognize the need for an education mediator. The mediator’s role would be to prevent a severance off ties between the youth, their nuclear family and traditions, while at the same time reinforcing connections between family members and the youth village staff. I represented “WIZO Hadasim Youth Village” in different delegations and was happy to return to the boarding school for a short period as an adult, to counsel and mentor other youngsters.

After graduating from high school, I joined the IDF. My preferred area of service was in the Education Corps working with immigrant soldiers, especially those of Ethiopian origin. I chose this unit because of my desire to help reduce suicide and desertion rates among Ethiopian soldiers, and increase recruitment to the IDF amongst this sector of the population. I served as an education officer and had the honor to establish a department that dealt entirely with these issues. I was also privileged to share in its success, which in those days in the IDF was a “distant dream”. After a successful career in the permanent force, during which I served in various positions and after witnessing significant change I retired with the rank of first lieutenant.

Immediately thereafter, I joined the Rashi Fund and in 2000 established the Katzir Scholarship Fund in memory of Professor Efraim Katzir z”l whom I had the great privilege to work with. The fund targets economically weak niche populations of Israel’s periphery, provides personal guidance as well as financial aid,



giving them opportunities for academic achievement designed to lead to social mobility and economic independence. We established two unique tracks within the Katzir Fund—one designed to bring college dropouts back into the fold, and the second designed for single mothers to acquire higher education and for which we received the 2014 Yaffa London Yaari Prize of the New Israel Fund.

My relationship with WIZO came full circle when I participated in “A New Social Order”, the women’s leadership program created by WIZO in cooperation with the U.S. Embassy in 2012, which forges a new cadre of women executives and leaders who will advance Israeli civil society. Today I am looking to pursue new avenues of personal growth.

I have to admit I was surprised that one of the outcomes of the WIZO leadership program was to acquire such a significant “toolbox” which assisted me greatly in developing unique programs:

“Asuka” (Employment) – This program is based on the premise that education is a cornerstone for leading a normative, stable and satisfying life and to facilitate successful integration into the workforce.

Here single mothers acquire essential work skills and competencies that empower them to succeed and become positive role models to their kids, their nuclear families and their community. The program’s goal is to prove to potential employers that despite the obstacles these women might face, they are highly motivated and capable of dealing with complicated and new challenges and by employing them they will bring added value to their workplace.

“B’Ahava” (With love) – a retirement consultancy which offers assistance in identifying appropriate living solutions for the elderly, thus preventing loneliness and feelings of rejection. Thanks to several collaborations, the company is the process of being set up. Participating in ‘A New Social Order’ provided the impetus for my entrepreneurship aspirations and resources-raising skills, along with the ability to develop and mentor social programs that are compatible with my own world view.

My opportunity for personal growth would have been very limited, if I had not encountered some good people along the way, individuals who noticed my abilities and guided me towards “the light at the end of the tunnel”, without erasing

my identity or my cultural heritage.

A few months ago, controversy erupted over protests by the Ethiopian community in Tel Aviv. As one of the initiators, I maintain that this demonstration was not about the Ethiopian community, but about Israeli society in general, as it raised awareness to many painful issues such as equality for all, in areas of employment, residence and education. I truly believe that Israel has come a long way in the short time it has been in existence, but it still has a long way to go and we, as citizens, activists and initiators, should work together in order to realize change. We must not step aside and wait for others to do the work. Our responsibility is to take action, to be a role model and lead by example.

My story is only one of many, from the Ethiopian community in Israel and I hope that by telling it, the challenges I have faced, choices I have made, and what I learned from the outcomes I will be able to inspire others to follow my example.

Skepticism and speculating on why things go wrong is always easy. One should rather focus on the positive and reasons for success – just look at me!



# Farwell to the Wrong Side of the Mechitzah

By Yiscah Smith



**May 2004:** As my body was beginning to change, I knew I had to visit Jerusalem and say goodbye forever to the left side, the men's side, of the *mechitzah* at the Western Wall. During the past 12 years, I returned to Israel many times. Each departure brought me pain. I never wanted to leave Israel, and each time I did it was gut wrenching and heart breaking. Likewise, each time I did visit Israel, the Western Wall illuminated my indecisive behavior. Regardless of how expert I had become in rationalizing my irresponsible behavior away, standing before the Wall made it impossible to lie. I felt completely naked, vulnerable, and a total fraud every time I stood before that mirror made of stone.

Now the time had finally arrived to bid farewell. I didn't know when I would be returning again to Israel, but I knew I would only return after my gender transition journey was complete. I would only return as a woman, my body externally testifying to the truth that always existed internally.

So that Friday night in May I went to the *Kotel*, the Western Wall. I felt the familiar cloud of agitation hover over me as I approached closer and closer to the Wall on the men's side. Since my first momentous walk in 1971, I had experienced this countless times. Each time I felt disgusted with myself. Each time I hated myself for not being honest in such a sacred space. But this time was different.

I could not *daven* – pray. I did not feel any joy in being there. It was Friday night and the peaceful Sabbath energy embodied everyone there—except me. Undoubtedly, I had encountered a new inner demon. All other inner demons paled in comparison. This one dared to rob me of the one moment that had always provided me a tiny ray of spiritual awakening and respite. I felt more of an imposter than ever before. After all, I had already begun my transition journey, and yet here I was again, on the wrong side of the *mechitzah*.

But it was more than that. I was angry! So angry! Like a bolt of lightning suddenly lighting up a thick black forest, I became acutely aware how angry I was with the rabbis who I empowered for all those years that I was a practicing Orthodox Jew. I admitted to myself that, except for the rare rabbinic figure, I seldom felt safe around them. Expressing my true feelings was unacceptable and prohibited. I always felt that if they knew the real me they would have done everything in their power to push me away. All my residual rage surfaced that night. I had allowed other people, those who claimed to be leaders and role models, to push me away from Torah observance, from Jewish community, from my homeland, from Judaism and from God.

Through my gender transition journey I began to reclaim my Judaism. I realized that I was not created any less (or more) in the image of God than anyone else, even if at one time the rabbis convinced me to feel otherwise. At the Wall that night I vowed to *HaShem* that I would never again worship the foreign god of rabbinical pressure to conform, to behave as a robot without spirit and integrity. I said farewell to those rabbis who erroneously and arrogantly assumed the right to judge me and behave towards me as God's personally appointed emissaries. For 20 years I allowed these people to define for me the most personal, intimate relationship a human being can ever hope to experience --- my relationship with God. For another 10 years I let them make

me feel shut out and pushed away from my own spiritual center as well as from God. No more. Never again!

Rage ran through my veins. In an agitated but clear state, I said once and for all goodbye to much more than being a fraud masquerading as a male on the left side of the *mechitzah*. I said goodbye to people whom, out of ignorance, arrogance, and fear, would dare to hurt their fellow Jews.

I would no longer seek another human being's permission to live an honest life ever again. Only God blesses me with the breath of life, which in essence, is His way of granting me permission to live. I would learn from others, yes. I would study the Jewish law from educated and God loving and respecting rabbis, of course. I would remain open to their guidance, and be grateful to them, absolutely. However, I would not seek their permission ever again to live my life as a Torah observant Jewish individual, especially as a Jewish woman. That evening at the Wall, I pledged to God that it was to Him I was returning, and only to Him. My return would be to God and not the Orthodox Rabbis who brazenly claimed to speak on behalf of God.

As I respectfully backed away from the Wall and took my final step leading away from the men's section, my very last step, it was the part of me that was so hurt, so angry, and so desperate that I left behind. The inner rage at myself though was what I truly said goodbye to that spring evening. I realized that in the end I pushed myself away from traditional Jewish life. At the time I simply lacked the inner resources to keep myself engaged, so I left.

Since that spring evening, I've never returned, either physically or emotionally, to that hurtful, horrid, and demeaning space ever again.

## Hello To The Right Side Of The Mechitzah

**June 2011:** I arrived in Israel for the first time as Yiscah Sara forty years to the day since my feet first touched the Holy Land in 1971. Forty complete years led up to this miraculous moment. That first

summer in 1971, I celebrated my twentieth birthday in Israel and now I was poised to celebrate my sixtieth. The years had been full and complex, to say the least. And here I was, back at home, feeling lighter than ever before.

It was time. I spent forty years journeying through my emotional and spiritual wilderness in order to arrive to this day. It was time to return to where the journey began, only this time I was noticeably different, inside and out. The one harmonious and authentic me, entered the Old City through the Jaffa Gate. I walked through the Jewish Quarter, where I had lived with my family for so many years, to the overlook where I again beheld the Mount of Olives. I then descended those very same steps to the *Kotel* plaza - just as I had done forty years ago and countless times since then.

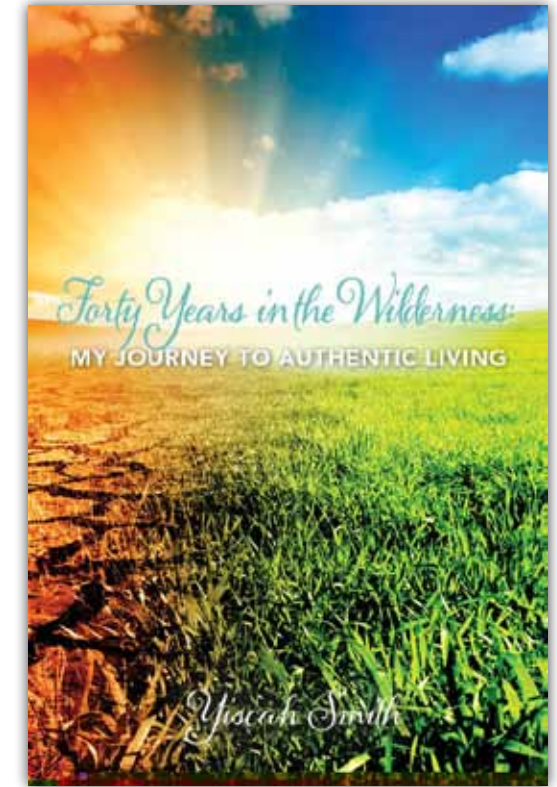
Only now, everything was different. I looked at everything around me for the first time through a new lens. I beheld what had evaded me for most of my life. I beheld God's presence in a way that allowed me to approach His Wall in truth, in purity. The past forty years crystallized in that one second, in that moment, when I could miraculously approach this sacred space cleansed and healed.

It took me forty years to move just a few centimeters from one side of the *mechitzah* to the other.

At the moment when my feet touched the women's space for the first time in my life, nothing I ever did until that moment felt as natural and right. It was as if everything that preceded this moment became my own personal prologue, leading me to this redemptive, almost surreal experience. In the most eerie of ways possible, I heard a faint voice from within gently whisper, "Welcome home, Yiscah. Welcome to the right side of the *Mechitzah*."

With intention and mindfulness, I walked slowly towards the Wall. I felt the same familiar, undeniable pull to touch the stones I had experienced a lifetime ago on my first visit, and every time since. As I approached closer and closer I felt the *Shechinah* – the female aspect of the Divine Presence – welcome me with open arms. She hugged me with her Infinite love and compassion.

As I touched the stones and buried my face in their crevices, I immersed myself



in the oceanic space of the Divine. I then thanked God for returning me home, only this time healed. What I felt at that moment was what I had hoped for, yearned for, and prayed for every single time I approached the *Kotel* since 1971. As shivers ran through my body, as the tears fell, and as I uttered words of gratitude and praise, I knew in the deepest recesses of my very being, in the marrow of my existence, that my transition was God's loving and compassionate expression of bringing me back home—to Him, to me, and to my spiritual center. This all culminated in that very day, at that very space at the *Kotel*.

From where I always belonged, and from where I now stood, I replied to the *Shechinah's* welcome, "*Shalom*."

Excerpts from "*Forty Years in the Wilderness: My Journey to Authentic Living*", Yiscah Smith, Wooded Isle Press 2014

*Yiscah Smith is a spiritual activist, and recently published her memoir, 'Forty Years in the Wilderness: My Journey to Authentic Living'. In Jerusalem she teaches Jewish spirituality at the Conservative Yeshiva, as well as online. She also provides private spiritual guidance for authentic living.*

***It took me forty years to move just a few centimeters from one side of the mechitzah to the other.***

***At the moment when my feet touched the women's space for the first time in my life, nothing I ever did until that moment felt as natural and right***

# The Collective Power of WIZO

by Tricia Schwitzer

***WIZO's strength lies in her emotional appeal to every Jewish woman, everywhere. She is the win-win, go-to movement for any woman who cares about her family, who cares about Israel***

"Individually we are just one drop, but together we are an ocean," these words by Japanese writer Ryunosuke Satoro, are the very essence of the WIZO movement. WIZO transcends oceans in an ingathering of Jewish women from all over the world who proudly wear her badge and for whom WIZO is their vehicle of choice, in which they steer with steadfast determination towards Israel, towards her people. WIZO women all over the world know that by strengthening the people, the State of Israel itself is fortified.

And so it is with WIZO. Her strength is in the sheer numbers of her volunteer force scattered over continents, poles apart and yet simultaneously together. This passionately Zionist sisterhood sings from the same song sheet at full throttle in a unified voice, as she stands shoulder to shoulder with not only her Israeli counterparts but also every man, woman and child, who comes under the protection of WIZO's vast welfare umbrella in Israel through its 800 projects.

The WIZO *chavera*, whether she lives just around the corner in Tel Aviv or down under in Sydney or any place in between, knows that she is an integral part of something much larger than herself and that her inclusion and unity is as crucial to WIZO's success as any other woman who serves the movement. It is only in the collective strength of unity under the WIZO banner that gives WIZO its edge in answering the calls from an increasingly needy Israeli society whose challenges are great.

The WIZO *chavera* is, bar none, an ambassador for the State of Israel. She is an agent for social change in Israel. By her membership to WIZO, she has pledged loyalty to the people of Israel, by wearing a WIZO badge she is holding the megaphone and articulating loudly and proudly that she is one of many who care enough to belong, who care enough to volunteer and who care enough to be visual, audible and, above all, credible in her passion for this most worthwhile of causes. For who are we, if we are not for our own people?

WIZO is a collective, a global community comprised of women from all walks of life, of all ages and cultural backgrounds. Some 95 years after her inception, she continues to realize the ideology of her founding mothers but at the same time, WIZO has evolved to address the issues, and provide effective, manageable solutions for a growing and diverse population. The weight of such a huge burden on her shoulders is distributed evenly throughout the entire WIZO world; some 50 federations, comprising of around 250,000 volunteers each with their fair share of the load.

The largest federation, WIZO Israel, works directly with and on behalf of the local population, including those of minority communities. Her aims are to advance the status of women, defend their rights and achieve gender equality in all fields; to combat domestic violence; to assist in the absorption of new immigrants and to contribute to family and community welfare, with special emphasis on single parent families, women, children, and the elderly. Elevating the status of women has always been a priority of the Israel federation. The Equal Rights for Women Law of 1952 was passed on the initiative of then WIZO Israel chairman Rachel Kagan, who represented the organization in Israel's first Knesset. Today, WIZO remains active in this field.

Together with WIZO Israel, worldwide federations strive to donate much needed revenue for the movement, both for the provision of crucial benefits to Israeli society and in the support of their own sponsored projects. The engagement of the Jewish heart into giving is reinforced by identity with the people of Israel. WIZO is the embodiment of the Jewish mother looking after her brood. These days, as anti-Israel sentiment rages and anti-Semitism rears its ugly head in frightening proportions around the world, the defence of Israel's integrity is a crucial precursor and it is important that WIZO *chaverot* are active in their Zionism in order to educate and enlighten and bring value to the WIZO table - not just as a fundraising



organization but as a movement proud of its underlying principles. Constant regeneration of commitment, of passion and ultimately of membership is key to preserving WIZO as the powerhouse that she is today. World federations actively network with local Jewish and non-Jewish members of their communities in social and fundraising events, thereby increasing exposure to WIZO's endeavours both on the ground and on social media platforms.

On the world's stage WIZO is recognized by the United Nations as a non-governmental organization with consultative status with the UN Economic and Social Council and the International Children's Emergency Fund. She is a member of the World Zionist Organization and has the power to influence decisions crucial to the wellbeing of all sectors of the population of the Jewish State.

WIZO is a people's movement, she cares deeply for the baby, the child, the adolescent, the young parents, the unmarried mother, the abused woman, the great grandmother - her family. She cares for all the people, without prejudice towards creed or colour, providing in equal parts, wherever the need arises. WIZO's strength lies in her emotional appeal to every Jewish woman, everywhere. She is the win-win, go-to movement for any woman who cares about her family, who cares about Israel. It is easy to identify with WIZO's ethos. It is the ethos of every Jewish mother who treats her children equally while striving to strengthen the weakest and nurture the neediest.

As relevant as ever, as spirited and as forceful, WIZO constantly looks to the future with the engagement of young Jewish women to take up the gauntlet

to become the leaders of tomorrow and on whose shoulders the weight of responsibility for the world's largest women's Zionist organization can, and will, rest easily. The State of Israel and her people deserve no less than that.

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# Women Taking the Lead and (Re) Visioning the Future

By Prof. Sylvie Fogiel Bijaoui



Women taking the lead, i.e. having a vision, sharing that vision and inspiring others to support that vision, has always been part and parcel of the Zionist Enterprise. If Zionism is understood as the modernization of the Jewish people in Eretz-Israel/Palestine, it is clear that women took an active part in this national enterprise by transforming their traditional role in the public sphere.

Struggling to be part of the new chapters that were being written in Jewish history, the New Hebrew Women were, from the end of the 19th century onwards, teachers, writers and journalists and contributed largely to the renewal of the Hebrew language. They were also artists, painters, sculptors, actresses, participating actively in the renewal of the Hebrew culture. Of course, they were also innovative agricultural workers in the Kibbutzim and the Moshavim and leading professionals in the urban centers of the Yishuv and the Moshavot, working as nurses, doctors, social workers or lawyers.

In addition, they fought for women's equal rights as citizens of the Jewish National Home, and volunteered, not without difficulty to be integrated into the different military organizations of the Yishuv. They were also politically active, in the different political parties, or established several women's /feminist parties and women's / feminist organizations.

The epic struggle of the female pioneers in the pre-state period to fulfill not only the

Zionist vision but also their own dreams of living in a new, progressive society, on equal footing with men paved the way post-Independence for Israeli women to make their voices heard in the public sphere promoting their rights and needs as human beings and citizens.

In this context, the consensus is that Israeli society is now actively progressing towards an era of full gender equality. No doubt, this is based on the achievements of outstanding women such as Ada Yonat, winner of the 2009 Nobel Prize in Chemistry; Tzipi Livni, a leading voice in Israeli politics; Karnit Flug, Governor of the Bank of Israel; Adina Bar-Shalom, the founder of the Haredi College in Jerusalem, geared specifically for the ultra-Orthodox community, or Aida Touma-Sliman, the second Arab woman elected to the Knesset on an Arab party's list and chair's the Knesset's Committee for Advancement of Women. This assumption is also undoubtedly based on the fact that women today represent about 27% of the Knesset members (a record number); that Israeli women seem to be among the most educated in the world – As an example, in 2011, amongst the OECD countries, an average of 31% of people aged 25–64 years held an academic degree: 29% of the men and 33% of the women aged 25–64, while in Israel, in the same year, the percentages were, respectively, 45%, 42%, and 49%. To that, we can add the fact that women's participation in the job market is constantly increasing and in comparison to the OECD countries, it is even higher. In 2012, for people aged 15–64 years, the OECD average employment rate was 70.9%: 79.7% for men and 62.3% for women, while in Israel the average rate was 71.5%, 75.9% for men and 67.1% for women.

My argument, however, is that although there has been significant progress towards achieving gender equality in Israel, women still face substantial gender discrimination. Actually, this discrimination and inequality are in my opinion, the issues which should be tackled on the feminist agenda by women taking the

lead and envisioning the future. In the last part of this short essay, I will address only some of these feminist issues.

An important issue to be raised is the child poverty rate, which escalated from 25% in 2001 to 36% in 2011 and amounts to nearly three times the poverty rate in the 34 OECD member countries, [which stands at 13% (2010)]. Feminist contributions could be a move from micro-level interventions to a concern with gendered macro-level economic, political, legal and cultural forces, which produce and reproduce poverty among children and their families.

A special focus should also be given to hundreds of children of migrant workers who remain without legal status in Israel, most of them raised by single mothers, as the fathers have already been deported from Israel.

No less urgent is to address the issue of the family laws in Israel, that deny hundreds of thousands of people the right to marry or to divorce, in violation of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. This legislation also constructs married women as the property of their husbands, under the principle of women as "different but equal" to men. People, and among them feminists, who hope for the emergence of a different kind of society here, one that does not institutionalize the infraction of human rights, must continue to raise public awareness to these issues and to create an alternative discourse centering around the human rights of every one living in Israel.

Moreover, regarding families, especially violence in the families, a campaign should be led so as to amend the penal code in order to include mandatory reporting of abuse of women, as it exist in many countries. Obviously, this approach could be of some help to the current 200,000 battered women and 600,000 children exposed to domestic violence.

In the political arena, the issue to be addressed is that of political representation: Although a record



number of women were elected to the Israeli Knesset in the last elections, the percentage of women cabinet ministers, is very low: and amounts to only 15%. The statistics for municipal elections are even more disturbing. In the 2013 municipal elections, only six women (2%) were elected as heads of local councils: four as mayors and two as heads of regional councils. In the municipal councils, women comprise only 14% of the elected members. Furthermore, among the 330 women elected in the municipal councils, only eleven are Arab while no Arab woman is head of a local authority. This situation should lead women's/feminist/democratic organizations to demand upon 50/50 gender quotas, mandated by electoral law, at the national and local levels, instead of the existing voluntary party quotas. This might impose, according to the basic democratic ethic, women's representation on the ultra-Orthodox and Islamist parties - a development that would be more than welcome if we remember that women who belong to these sectors are struggling for the right to be elected - until now without success.

I would suggest that another very important issue to be addressed is the

citizens "Strengthening Israeli society by strengthening Israel's people."

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***My argument, however, is that although there has been significant progress towards achieving gender equality in Israel, women still face substantial gender discrimination***

Fourth Amendment to the Women's Equal Rights Law on Women, Peace, and Security (2005), implementing Security Council Resolution 1325 and calling—thus far unsuccessfully—for increased participation of women at all levels of decision-making for the prevention of conflict and in peace negotiations.

As explained on the UN-Women site: "Women's participation (in conflict prevention and resolution) can provide a more comprehensive understanding of the causes of and alternative solutions to conflict, and bolster actions addressing varying needs and sustaining peace over time.( ... ). This helps ensure that peace agreements are not narrow, elite pacts, and are supported and sustained by nations as a whole".

The WIZO website proudly states that: "WIZO was founded in 1920 in direct response to the needs of women and children in Israel. Today, WIZO continues to identify the needs of Israeli society and creates solutions to meet them". My short article and the issues I have addressed are a modest contribution to WIZO's exemplary social enterprise as it strives to provide a better future for many of Israel's