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
Chairperson, Organization and Tourism Division
World WIZO

Edited by: Rolene Marks, Lisa Moss-Phillips
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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 and sang a song of praise” (Ex. 15:20). The Biblical female role models have been an inspiration to many modern day Jewish leaders, both men and women over the ages. Deborah was also a prophetess and a warrior. During her time, the Israelites were oppressed by the Canaanites. She declared a revolt against them and as she correctly assumed 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 man 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.

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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 never lost 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 when women are maligned and mistreated in our neighborhood, we endeavor to follow in your trailblazing footsteps.

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.

One of your favorite Israeli wine and toast to Israel, ‘L’Chaim!’

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 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 afterwards was the real trigger. Tennis

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as high as 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 Peer) 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 Peer 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.
Paying it Forward
How my personal journey has led me to want to help others

By Oshra Friedman

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 Kryat 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 Hadassim 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 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 was to acquire such a significant “toolbox” which assisted me greatly in developing unique programs.

“A’suka” (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 mentor and 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, 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 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!
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 inductive 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 peacefull 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 respirate. I felt more of an impostor than ever before. After all, I had just 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 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 for love 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 *HasHeem* 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 rob me of the one moment that had always provided me a tiny ray of spiritual awakening and respirate. I felt more of an impostor than ever before. After all, I had just begun my transition journey; and yet here I was again, on the wrong side of the *mechitzah*.

It took me fourty 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, to experience the energy of the place 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 — welcoming 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.
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.

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.

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.

Together with 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 the first Knesset. Today, WIZO remains active in this field.

Some 95 years after her inception, she is the win-win, go-to movement for any woman who 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 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.

Tricia Schwitzer serves on the World WIZO Executive and the Executive of Friends of WIZO. She is a member of Truth be Told, an organization that strives for balance in the media working with grassroots organisations. Her areas of expertise are Israel advocacy, social media marketing material and promotional writing.
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; Karmit Rugu, 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 undeniably based on the fact that women today represent about 32% 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, these percentages were, respectively, 45%, 42%, and 49%. 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.

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 constrains 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 infliction 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 the number of Arab women belonging 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”.

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

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