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First Person Personal: An Israel Dispatch

In the Face of Absurdity, Laughter and Optimism

by SHARI ESHET

In the years before the Balfour Declaration, a member of the House of Lords asked Chaim Weizmann, “Why do you Jews insist on Palestine when there are so many undeveloped countries you could settle in more conveniently?” Weizmann replied, “That is like my asking you why you drove 20 miles to visit your mother last Sunday when there are so many old ladies living on your street.” I know exactly how he felt. When I first landed in Israel in 1969, something clicked — just like that. I knew it. I felt it. I was home. I knew that I would return to Israel the moment I finished my degree in the United States. And I did. That was nearly 30 years ago.



Today, I have two homelands. My soul is in Israel — yet I remain very much an American. After 30 years, waiters in Israeli cafes still offer me menus in English. Each time I'm called "a newcomer," after all these years, I remember my father's tales of how mortified he was that his mother — a greenhorn from the Old Country — never learned English well. And I smile when my children laugh at my mistakes in Hebrew.

It is impossible to live in Israel without a sense of humor. When my 20-year-old daughter comes home from the army on weekends, I hear myself saying, "Get your gun off my couch!" I can only laugh at the absurdity of it all.

This spring, my daughter — an officer in the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) — and I attended a ceremony celebrating the 41st anniversary of the city of Jerusalem's reunification; on the dais sat my husband, a veteran of four wars. I was late, she was hungry, and neither of us could find her cell phone. Yet the instant the band began playing *Hatikvah*, she snapped to attention. There were tears in her eyes as she saluted the Israeli flag. Who would have thought?

I listened as old friends spoke of the wars they had fought, their sons told of battles won, their grandsons and granddaughters talked about what serving in the IDF means to them. It was then that I turned again to my daughter, in her IDF uniform, and thought that this cycle of wars must end.

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Photographer/Getty

That was far from the first time I'd had this thought, but this time I found myself thinking that we are perhaps heading in that direction. For me, though, it will all depend on the women who are increasingly finding places for themselves in public leadership. And that's why I am committed to a groundbreaking initiative NCJW is helping to fund: the Center for Women in the Public Sphere (WIPS).

Part think tank, part strategic center, the Tel Aviv-based Women in the Public Sphere center already is working to design and implement a multifaceted strategy to raise the ranks of women across the public sphere. I can only hope that, like the NCJW Women and Gender Studies Program at Tel Aviv University, this center too will play a pivotal role in effecting change for women. And with two

Ultra-Orthodox women such as author Naomi Ragen are standing up and saying "No," refusing to sit in the back of gender-segregated buses. Bedouin women are saying "No," refusing to tolerate rape and sexual harassment. Israeli Arab women are challenging their religious and political leaders on their silence on the issue of honor killings. Secular women are challenging the monopoly of the Orthodox and revisiting the ancient scriptures with a modern outlook. Orthodox women are challenging the rabbinical courts and their stranglehold on women's rights.

It is women like these, women who bravely stand up for what they know to be true, who are transforming Israel. Women of every stripe who are bravely speaking

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amazing women who have worked alongside and with NCJW overseeing this project, it seems inevitable that the Center for Women in the Public Sphere will be a success. Naomi Chazan, a political science professor, was a member of Knesset from 1992 to 2003 and twice represented Israel at the United Nations Conference on Women, and Hanna Herzog, a sociology professor and the former chair of the NCJW Women Studies Forum at Tel Aviv University, has spent decades working on issues relating to gender and power.

The moment is certainly ripe. It's been nearly 12 years since a small group of activists — the Four Mothers — started a grassroots revolution that helped end the war in Lebanon and led to Israel's unilateral withdrawal. This protest movement changed the course of Israeli politics and legitimized the entrance of women into the decision-making arena of military strategy. Here, military strategy determines the majority of Israeli life. Today, more and more women are finding their voices and claiming positions of power, challenging and changing the status quo, and showing a whole new generation that change is possible, and that empowered women can — and do — have an impact.

But change isn't easy. Women's organizations like NCJW have been actively promoting representation during the past decade, and gender-sensitive legislation has been passed. Yet Israel ranks in the bottom third of 188 countries when it comes to women legislators, according to the Inter-Parliamentary Union.

The good news is that Israel is waking up to a new social agenda, brought on by the chaos of the Second Lebanon War, the corruption in our midst, and the lack of leadership. This new spring awakening for Israel is being led by women, women with whom I have worked side by side for three decades, women who remind me every day why the work we do is so important.

out, women who are bringing issues to the forefront of public debate in Israel — the plight of *agunot* ("chained women" whose husbands refuse to grant them a religious divorce), human trafficking, gender segregation on buses, poverty, and child care.

An Israeli saying comes to mind: If we cannot be a light unto the nations, for Heaven's sake, let us not be a source of darkness to our own people. Is there more sexual misconduct, domestic violence, and abuse of power in Israel today than ever before? No. What has changed is the public's reaction to it, the public is no longer willing to overlook these flaws, and women have helped usher this change along — as activists, and increasingly as legislators.

But we have so much more to do. The truth is that Israel still needs to make many serious legal changes, particularly to the laws governing personal status issues, like divorce and marriage, which affect the everyday lives of millions of Israeli women. To create reform, though, we need legislators who care about these issues. Israel needs its women — those in the women's movements and in political office. Together, we have the privilege and the responsibility to be the moral watchdogs of Israeli society. And despite the violence and everyday absurdities of Israeli life, I look forward to my next 30 years here — because already I can feel the impact we are having.

At 60, Israel's battle with survival is not so much a physical one but an existential one: Who are we, what are we, and what do we want to be? What do we want our children to be? To me, statehood means children who play games not fight wars, women who are content and self-fulfilled, and a society that honors the rights of all. >

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