

Too early in the morning I woke up and made my way to the group meeting point. We all checked in and then got onto the bus that would take us to Hebron. Though always a talkative group, we were quieter than usual with the early start we made. Once in Hebron, we got off the bus and looked around. I had never seen Hebron in person, nor the Machpalah, the burial place of Abraham, Sarah, Isaac, Rebecca, Jacob and Leah.

Our group was joined by representatives of both T'ruah<sup>1</sup> and Breaking the Silence<sup>2</sup>, and as is typical of one of their tours of Hebron, we spent time doing text study to understand the importance of the land we were standing on prior to engaging with the current reality. We talked about the closed market, where no Israelis were allowed, prior to going down the street with our American passports. We talked about the fighting between the Israeli settlers and the Palestinians. How we would only be allowed access to half of the Machpalah because Jews and Muslims are not allowed entrance to the same parts.

The trip was meant to educate us as future community leaders. That we would be able to share our story with our communities, as I am doing now. I can tell you that it was a painful experience being in Hebron, and it was a painful experience seeing how African refugees were living in South Tel Aviv, and it was really difficult to see how close the neighborhood of Israelis was to a Palestinian farmer's olive grove we helped plant. A farm that had no running water, while the neighborhood had swimming pools.

Life is complicated in Israel, as life is complicated in the United States. As a democracy we recognize that we have so much work to do to make life better for all of our citizens, Israel is no

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.truah.org/>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.breakingthesilence.org.il/>

different. While many of her citizens live in the tech world, many of her citizens do not. The realities of the different sectors of the Occupied Territories is complicated for those living there, all the more so for people visiting.

Yet there is hope, in Israel as there is hope in the United States, for those who wish to look for it. A democracy allows for citizens to work for the country they wish to live in, to work for a better world for all. Something we can all participate in.

A few weeks ago I learned about the organization Zazim, which is a grassroots group of Israelis working towards a more democratic Israel. They believe that a strong democracy must include the participation of all citizens in elections, and have organized themselves to get members of the Beduin community to the polls. They have also been active in bringing Israelis and Palestinians together to talk, and to educate one another about their realities - those in Israel, those in the West Bank and those in Gaza. Their vision includes being political but not partisan. Their members are brought together through their “shared values of human rights, social justice, combating racism and the occupation, environmental protection, government transparency and independent media.”<sup>3</sup>

Zazim is just one of many organizations that received seed funding, and continues to receive funding, from The New Israel Fund, which was founded in 1979. According to their mission:

The New Israel Fund (NIF) helps Israel live up to its founders’ vision of a society that ensures complete equality to all its inhabitants. Their aim is to advance liberal democracy, including freedom of speech and minority rights, and to fight the inequality, injustice and extremism that diminish Israel. From Israel’s first rape crisis centers, to

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<sup>3</sup> <https://www.zazim.org.il/en/about-us>

fighting discrimination, NIF-funded organizations have driven positive social change and furthered justice and equality.<sup>4</sup>

According to their press release, the New Israel Fund is now a part of a new coalition of ten leading organizations representing Americans who are committed to pursuing democracy, equality and peace in Israel called the Progressive Israel Network. “The new coalition will provide a strong, unified voice in support of its members’ common goals: democracy and equal rights, religious freedom and pluralism, and a two-state solution that would secure a peaceful future for Israel and end the 52-year-long occupation.”<sup>5</sup>

“The Network will weigh in on the significant challenges that face Israel and the US-Israel relationship. It will coordinate campaigns designed to mobilize the majority of American Jews who share its progressive values and goals, support the work of Israeli progressives, and urge the US government to adopt policies that further Israeli-Palestinian peace. The Network will fight against US and Israeli policies that promote annexation, entrench occupation and undermine liberal democracy in Israel.”<sup>6</sup>

One of the civil rights issues that The New Israel Fund has been active in supporting for decades is LGBTQ rights in Israel. They are one of the reasons I can share the following story.

Israel, like the United States, is not perfect. Israel, like the United States has citizens who disagree on issues of policy. Different cities feel very differently about the same topic.

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<sup>4</sup> <https://www.nif.org/about/>

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.nif.org/press-releases/ten-organizations-launch-new-progressive-israel-network/>

<sup>6</sup> *ibid.*

In June of 2013 I marched in the Tel Aviv Pride Parade. According to more recent numbers, it is the largest Pride Parade in Asia. Regardless, there were thousands of people in attendance. Most of them with very little, if any, clothing on their bodies. Tel Aviv is on the Mediterranean, the parade itself ends at the beach where there are parties that last well into the night. Marching through the streets of Tel Aviv with people of all shapes, sizes and colors was inspiring - if also a little overwhelming. Here was a massive celebration of diversity and difference, in a country that walks a fine line with same-sex marriage - one is not allowed to get married in Israel but Israel will recognize your marriage if it occurs in a country that recognizes it. This is the same for Jewish couples who are opposite sex but who do not meet the regulations for an Orthodox Jewish marriage - or who do not want to be married in an Orthodox Jewish ceremony. For non-Jews, they have regulations governed by their religious leadership - as issues of birth, marriage and death are regulated by the various faith communities within the State of Israel.

Just a few months later, in August of 2013 I marched with classmates in the Jerusalem Pride Parade. This parade was almost called off because of trouble between the more liberal and more conservative members of the Jewish community. In comparison with Tel Aviv, Jerusalem Pride was calmer, more family centric and everyone was fully clothed. It concluded in one of the large parks with music and food, and significantly fewer people. Yet, it was a day filled with joy and celebration too.

There are many ways to be involved with issues we care about, some of us like to shout from the rooftops and others prefer to speak quietly over a cup of coffee. Both types of people are needed, are necessary.

But the New Israel Fund and partners are not the only way to engage in Israel. A major player in American-Israeli relations is AIPAC: American Israel Public Affairs Committee.<sup>7</sup> They have a simple mission, they are a bipartisan organization of U.S. citizens committed solely to strengthening, protecting and promoting the U.S.-Israel relationship. And they have developed the relationships to have an impact. To see Israel thrive as a democracy, we need other perspectives too - from all segments of the American Jewish community. The diversity of views expressed in the sessions throughout AIPAC's annual conference, which I last attended in Spring of 2016, gives everyone the opportunity to hear their opinions expressed as well as have their opinions challenged, an excellent example of democracy at work. As it is an election year, I also look forward to hearing what the candidates have to say at the upcoming conference in March. In 2016 I was present to hear a number of the candidates speak, and though it is always difficult to hear differences of opinion I also think it is important to be in a space that believes bipartisanship is key.

Another political option, and one of the New Israel Fund partners in the Progressive Israel Network, is J Street<sup>8</sup>, which was founded in 2007. J Street works to organize and mobilize pro-Israel, pro-peace Americans who want Israel to be secure, democratic and the national home of the Jewish people. Working in American politics and the Jewish community, they advocate for policies that advance shared US and Israeli interests as well as Jewish and democratic values, leading to a two-state solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

Though some believe that AIPAC and JStreet are two opposing forces, the reality is that they have different missions and purposes. AIPAC generally does not take policy stands because it

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<sup>7</sup> <https://www.aipac.org/>

<sup>8</sup> <https://jstreet.org/>

does not serve their interests of working with whomever is in the government in both the U.S. and in Israel. They are invested in the long term relationship. JStreet is working towards a two state solution for the conflict with the American government as an important mediator at the table for peace.

All of the organizations mentioned so far work closely with Israelis and many are deeply concerned with changing the reality on the ground for both Israelis and Palestinians. All do important work. Many progressive Jewish Americans give to the New Israel Fund because they know their money is helping people on the ground do important work.

Yet, there is also much work to be done here in the United States. In the past few years especially we have seen more divisions arise in progressive spaces because of the reality of intersectionality. Intersectional feminist theory maintains that we are all made up of many identities. As an example, I am an American woman who is white, Jewish, and queer. These identities work together to create who I am and my outlook on the world. Many progressive spaces have become uncomfortable for me because my Jewish identity, which includes being a Zionist, is viewed as negative in spaces that identify with the Palestinian cause. Though most people have never asked me my view on the Palestinian cause. Personally, I believe strongly in a two State solution, and that the current realities in Gaza and the West Bank are not sustainable. I believe that I can be a Zionist and participate in numerous progressive activities in the United States. My Jewish values are my guide in what causes I am active in, and I hope that each one of us have causes that are near and dear to our hearts. That our Jewish values guide each one of us as we work in our various communities. This is why I would like to invite you to join me this year in studying about Israel. I hope to be able to announce after the holidays the schedule for the

year, and that it will include a multi-week course, a book study, as well as opportunities to engage with Israel through film.

For that is what I ultimately would like to see in my lifetime. An end to the Occupation. An end to the terror. An end to the bombings, the tunnels, the check points, the education that the other side are less than human, an end to terrorism. I hope to live to see the creation of a Palestinian State that thrives alongside the Jewish State. That all have the resources they need, that there are open borders, that the surrounding countries recognize the importance of lasting peace in the region. Yes, I am an optimist. Yes, I believe that American Jews have a responsibility to help support Israelis and Palestinians in the work of peace. And yes, I think we do have skin in the game.

I am not here to tell you who to support, or who is right, I am here to say that I believe strongly that as American Jews, we should be involved with causes relating to Israel if we wish the Jewish State to remain a democracy and if we wish it to reflect our Jewish values. One of the ways we can make our voices known in Israel is to participate in the World Zionist Congress elections.<sup>9</sup>

ARZA, the Association of Reform Zionists of America, is the Zionist arm and voice of the Reform Movement, serving 1.8 million Reform Jews in North America. ARZA is responsible for organizing our members to vote in the election of delegates to the 38th World Zionist Congress. The Congress is scheduled to meet in Jerusalem from October 20-23, 2020. The elections will

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<sup>9</sup> All of the information about the World Zionist Congress is from ARZA, as is the majority of the wording. <https://arza.org/who-we-are/world-zionist-congress-elections/>

determine the size of the various delegations to the Congress and are scheduled to be held from January 21 to March 11, 2020 (which happens to be from MLK Day to Purim).

The WZC, also known as the Parliament of the Jewish People, comprises 500 delegates and meets in Jerusalem every five years. It enables delegates to exert ideological influence on both Israeli society and the global Jewish agenda, as well as allocate financial and other resources to various organizations – including the Reform Movement – in Israel.

Participating in the World Zionist Congress elections is this single most effective way North American Jews can weigh in democratically about issues in Israel. Currently, the United States has 145 delegates in the WZC, the largest single delegation outside Israel.

Through our success in the past elections in 2015, we were able to have the largest number of seats, 56 out of 145. We were then able to ensure that over \$4,000,000 a year of financial support went to the Reform movement in Israel. By comparison, the Israeli government annually provides nearly \$1.1 billion to Orthodox and Haredi institutions in Israel. In addition, we were able to appoint key professionals to carry out our Reform Jewish values within Israel's National Institutions that help implement Reform values such as Equality, Pluralism, and commitment to a Two-State Solution.

We also joined forces with Israeli political parties to influence Israeli society in matters of conversion, marriage and divorce, religious pluralism, gender rights, and combatting racism; as a result, we have passed key resolutions in the World Zionist Organization's policy body for equality, transparency, and pluralism.



I hope that each one of you will find a way to be involved with Israel in the next year. Whether you choose to engage in the congregation through educational learning opportunities or through one of the many organizations working towards a better Israel. Regardless of what else you choose to do, I hope you will help increase participation of Reform Jews in the World Zionist Congress, which will help make our values a priority in Israel.

As Americans we know what it means to participate in the great experiment that is democracy. The State of Israel is also working towards proving democracy a successful experiment, and in order to succeed will need support and guidance from her friends. Let us hold hands and work together to build a better tomorrow for all peoples, regardless of where they call home. Let us all learn from one another and build a better world together.

Shanah tovah u'mitukah - may it be a happy and sweet New Year.