

# ***Speaking About Israel on the High Holy Days: A guide presented by the New Israel Fund Rosh Hashanah 5770***

## ***Talking about helping Israel... in a way that helps An essay by Rabbi Joshua Gutoff***

Many rabbis face a dilemma around the High Holidays when it comes to Israel. On the one hand, Israel and its welfare is a vital concern to them and their congregants. It is important for Jews to hear about what is going on, both so that they can feel more deeply connected and so that they can help where help is needed. And help is needed. Israel faces a variety of social problems, including growing class and economic divisions, religious and ethnic tensions, and the religious control of "personal status" laws. Of course, every country faces problems and many face more, but for Jews all over the world Israel is a special concern that requires knowledge, insight and understanding.

On the other hand, there can be dangers in speaking about Israel's challenges, especially on the Days of Awe. There are still many Jews who hear any criticism of Israel as an attack on its very legitimacy. Rabbinic supporters of the New Israel Fund frequently spend a great deal of time during the year talking about their love for Israel, but frankly many of the Jews they'll be speaking to over the holidays have not been around during the year to hear that, and while rabbis want and need to speak the truth from the *bimah*, they don't want to needlessly alienate people with whom they have little enough opportunity to communicate during the year.

There is another danger in talking about Israel, this one from the other side of the aisle. For many concerned friends of Israel – many of them supporters of the NIF – the news in recent years has seemed so unrelentingly bad that they are beginning to despair. We see that many longtime active supporters of Israel have become passive, not because they no longer care, but because they feel that the problems are too great and too numerous to address.

The twin dangers of speaking about problems – defensiveness on the one hand, despair on the other – are nothing new to rabbis. They are built into the dynamic of the Holidays themselves. Much of the Yom Kippur liturgy is just that, a check-list of failures, and Jewish tradition has long understood the difficulty in our confronting our own errors. Although the Torah demands that we confront our neighbors when they have sinned - *Hokhe'akh tokhiakh* - the Sages will limit that mitzvah to only those occasions in which the neighbor can accept the correction. And those occasions, they acknowledged, were few and far between. "Rabbi Tarfon said, 'I would be greatly surprised if there were someone in this generation who could accept rebuke...'" (Arakhin 17b).

How, then, do we talk about the need for self-examination, even on a personal level, in a way that can be accepted - in a way that can lead to action? One can almost see the development of the rabbinic understanding of *teshuvah* as an attempt to grapple with this. In the Mishna, repentance and atonement were seen in relationship to a specific event: something had been broken, and the break now needed to be repaired. The goal of *teshuvah* was a "return" to the way things were before.

Maimonides, though, looked at the issue from a different direction. Rather than looking backward at what one had done, he was concerned with what one would do in the future, and the process he described in Hilchot Teshuvah goes beyond healing a particular wound in the world *to a radical act of self-*

transformation. Not settling for the *status quo ante*, for him the point of *teshuvah* is that one comes out of the process better than one was before. Unless one is already a saint or a superman, the process of self-examination and self-repair isn't just a necessary evil like medicine, but a positive good like an exercise routine, and the "*al chet*" checklist is not something to be avoided but sought after. The process of *teshuvah* makes us better than we were before, even better than before we erred.

This focus on the process of repair and rebuilding is something we at NIF see in a lot of the organizations we work with. When SHATIL, the New Israel Fund Initiative for Social Change, convened a group of female Orthodox leaders to work on the problems facing their community, including dealing with the Rabbanut on issues effecting women's legal rights, the women themselves (again, these were Orthodox women) came to welcome a representative of Bat Kol, a lesbian Orthodox organization. Of course, the Rabbinat's control of certain aspects of civil law, especially in areas that affect women, remains a scandal. But in trying to deal with it in a wise and constructive way, these women found ways of opening themselves up to sisters they might otherwise have shunned, and that is as much a part of the Israeli story as is the Rabbinat.

*Mahapach*, a movement working to create local leadership in disempowered communities, started a program to improve the educational opportunities for the children there. In *Mahapach* centers, university students were brought in to tutor the children while the parents themselves volunteered time to the community and became active in local steering committees. Combining the traditional Jewish teaching that even those who receive *tzedakah* must themselves contribute with a vision of creating partnerships, *Mahapach* has found that everyone involved became enriched: many of the students tutors integrated into the community to the extent that they decided to move to and stay in the community they taught in, not as volunteers or "do-gooders", but as members.

Israel has problems, to be sure, but in many of the attempts to fight those problems we are seeing something else, something that some might even call holiness, and when the identification of those problems can lead to holiness, there should be nothing to be afraid of; nothing to be ashamed of. Survivor Corps is an organization that works with survivors of war and other violent conflicts; Tirza Leibowitz, their Director of Advocacy wrote us, asking us to ask American Jews to "Help Israel look itself straight in the eye; Help Israel see itself from a different perspective. Remind us of the fundamental questions: 'What kind of a country must we be, to be the country we have dreamed of?' Remind us of what we must expect of ourselves. Don't blind yourselves to our blindnesses. Help us strive for better."

## ***Selected Messages from Social Justice Activists and Leaders in Israel***

We asked several of our grantees in Israel to share their thoughts with us as we approach Rosh Hashanah 5770. We wanted to get their personal perspectives on current challenges and priorities, the connection between their work and Jewish values, how they see their work in the context of “tikun”, and what they wish the connection between Diaspora Jews and Israel to be built on.

Below are several examples we received. You can read all the responses – from activists working on everything from environmental justice to religious pluralism, disability rights and refugee rights – in the document titled “Grantee Statements”.

### **Accomplishments from the past year**

[IRAC’s] Supreme Court victory providing funding for Reform and Conservative conversion classes was our most significant victory last year as it set a major precedent that can pave the way for equal state funding for all Reform and Conservative religious services.

*Anat Hoffman – Israel Religious Action Center of the Reform Movement*

I would say empowering disenfranchised groups – from Ethiopian immigrants to Arab citizens of Israel; from cancer patients in the northern periphery to immigrant high school pupils from the FSU to *agunot* – and making sure justice is done to their needs.

*Rachel Liel – SHATIL/NIF Israel*

On a national level a significant accomplishment is the passing of Israel's Clean Air act. Finally after more the 60 years, Israel has a clean air act. In a country that over 1000 people die annually from air pollution in the Tel Aviv region alone, it is most necessary to create these frameworks for a sustainable future.

*Sigal Yaniv – Green Environment Fund*

One [major achievement for justice for women in Israel] was the rehabilitation of the law of "capital relations" which allows the division of the property of spouses that are in the process of divorce, prior to receiving the *get*. This will prevent extortion by husbands who obstruct the giving of the *get* in order to prevent the division of property.

*Dina Feldman & Hanah Kehat – Kolech: The Religious Women’s Forum*

In part due to our advocacy, 500 Darfur refugees received temporary residency status.

*Lisa Richlen – Hotline for Migrant Workers*

### **On the connection between social justice and Jewish values**

SHATIL's pluralism project is strongly embedded in Jewish values.... My partners in the Reform and Masorti movements say: "there's more than one way to be Jewish." My partners in Elul quote the Babylonian Talmud, "*Elu v'elu divrei Elohim Chayim*" (These and Those are the Words of the Living God).

*Shira Ben Sasson Fuerstenberg – SHATIL Religious Pluralism Project*

More than any other commandment, we are enjoined to care for the vulnerable in our midst because we were strangers in Egypt. That is our mission as an organization- we believe our work is inseparable from the humanistic and universal values that Judaism teaches and on which the State was founded.

*Lisa Richlen – Hotline for Migrant Workers*

Our work is in natural connection to Jewish values, respect for our land, heritage, moral values between people and people to place. There are environmental values in the bible that we need to open our eyes and see. A life truly led by Jewish values has the natural potential to honor the environment and protect it.

*Sigal Yaniv – Green Environment Fund*

...It is precisely our Progressive Jewish values that inform and direct our agenda and shape our vision for a Jewish and democratic Israeli society. For example, when we speak out against racism in Israel, we do so not just as good citizens but also as Jews.

*Anat Hoffman – Israel Religious Action Center of the Reform Movement*

The vision of Kolech is to promote women's rights, especially within Jewish Halacha and the religious community.... This idea is a fulfillment of the Jewish biblical statement: that man and woman were created equal: "כי בצלם אלהים עשה את האדם זכר ונקבה ברא אותם" (G-d created the human being in his image, male and female he did create). And the other commandment: "ואהבת לרעך כמוך", (Love your friend as yourself).

*Dina Feldman & Hanah Kehat – Kolech: The Religious Women's Forum*

Maimonides (Rambam) spoke of eight levels of *Tzedakah*, of which the highest level is providing the poor with employment. I believe that now that we are living in a Jewish State, and not only in Jewish communities, we should add a ninth level: ensuring that the state takes responsibility for creating the infrastructure and conditions to ensure that all citizens have an equal opportunity for work which enables them to earn their living in dignity.

*Ronit Heyd - SHATIL*

One of the many ways in which ACRI is so unique is our identity as an organization where Israeli Jews and Arabs work, argue, and build a more just future together. For me personally, as someone who cares deeply about his own Jewish identity, I find few things that I can do in this world that express this identity in a more genuine way than to be a part of a diverse team of committed Israelis who are together focused on human rights, social justice, and equality.

*Hagai El-Ad – Association for Civil Rights in Israel*

## **The most important thing American Jews can do for a better Israel**

The most important thing American Jews can do to create a better Israel is insisting that the State of Israel respect the different streams of Judaism and treat them equitably.

*Yuval Yavne – NIF Israel*

Help us create an awareness that environment is not a luxury for us to deal with in the far future, when the rest of the problems are solved, but this is a critical time to make a difference while we still can and create a future for our children and grandchildren, where they still have choices to make.

*Sigal Yaniv –Green Environment Fund*

American Jewry can serve as a wonderful example of diverse and pluralistic Judaism. And it is extremely important that this community's spirit of openness and acceptance will influence Israeli society and help to mitigate the polarization and divisiveness.

*Yonatan Benarroch - Ne'emanei Torah Va'Avodah*

American Jews can support causes that are working towards social change. Americans can help spread the culture of democracy, equality and human rights, issues that many Americans grew up with, such as through the Civil Rights movement, and take for granted as vital.

*Elana Sztokman – Mavoit Satum*

To promote the idea of partnership and solidarity between Jewish and Palestinian Israeli communities around the issues of social and economic justice and human rights.

*Tami Schneider –Mahapach-Taghir*

Be real, get involved, have a meaningful relationship. Blindly, or silently, "supporting" Israel can often be everything but. What is needed now is not automatic backing, but rather thoughtful engagement from real friends – the kind of friends that are sincerely involved and that will be openly outspoken about issues that they may find troubling.

*Hagai El-Ad – Association for Civil Rights in Israel*

## **On Tikkun**

Rosh Hashanah is a time of looking inward to see how we can improve ourselves as well as outward to see how we can improve the world. Many of SHATIL's hundreds of trainings for people around the country who want to make change begin with a look inward: who am I, what are my inherent strengths and what do I want to accomplish? Who can I connect with in order to make change happen and what tools do we all need to realize our dreams of a better society for ourselves and our neighbors... Once [activists] have the awareness, tools and skills, they add to the cadre of people... who are dedicating themselves to make Israel the country we all want it to be.

*Rachel Liel – SHATIL/NIF*

In April this year, NIF co-sponsored a solidarity march in Umm El Fahm, the Arab Israeli city which two weeks prior had been the sight of an ultra-nationalist, right-wing rally against Arab citizens of Israel.... This event to me was the epitome of "tikkun". Where two weeks earlier, Jews had come to this city with a message of hatred and intolerance, now Jews – many of them from the progressive Orthodox community – were coming with a message of equality and the desire for a true shared society.

*Eliezer Yaari – New Israel Fund*

As part of the process of helping women obtain their freedom, it became clear that women need to find their voice. Rather than have others speak on their behalf, we decided to teach women to speak on their own behalf. Through a program we developed called, "Speak up!", *mesuravot get* were trained in public speaking and the fundamentals of marketing and PR, and now women who were once victims are now the ones with the strong voices, working with the media, lobbyists, law makers and other organizations as their own advocates. It's about making a switch in how we see other people, really helping people transform themselves from victims to women of strength.

*Elana Sztokman – Mavoit Satum*

This summer has seen an unprecedented wave of demonstrations focusing on preventing the deportation of migrant workers' children.... The public outrage as a result of the possibility that children with a very real Israeli identity – speaking Hebrew, going to school here, self-identifying as Israeli – could find themselves deported has brought a new kind of *tikkun* to the table: not half-measures, not temporary solutions for some children. Rather, permanent status in Israel for all these Israeli kids: that is what we are continuing to fight for now.

*Hagai El-Ad – Association for Civil Rights in Israel*

[An example of *tikkun* is] ICAR: The International Coalition for Agunah Rights. The goal of the coalition is to promote the rights of *Agunot* and *Mesoravot get* [women who are anchored in marriage or refused a *get*, or Jewish divorce], and not to create a dialogue between the different Jewish streams. However, the fact that this coalition includes Orthodox, Reform, Conservative and secular women is in itself a *tikkun*.

*Yuval Yavne – New Israel Fund*

Kehilat Tzedek is the Israel Religious Action Center's social action training program for congregations of all streams. Reform, Conservative, Modern Orthodox, and Secular congregations take on more social responsibility in their communities, and make social action a core element of their congregational life.... this program is magical in that it unites all Jewish denominations in their shared values of *tikkun olam*. This is a rare program in Israel that focuses on what unites us rather than divides us.

*Anat Hoffman – Israel Religious Action Center of the Reform Movement*

## ***Background Information on Social Justice in Israel***

### **About the New Israel Fund**

The New Israel Fund (NIF) is the leading organization advancing democracy and equality for all Israelis. We believe that Israel can live up to its founders' vision of a state that ensures complete equality of social and political rights to all its inhabitants, without regard to religion, race or gender.

Widely credited with building Israel's progressive civil society from scratch, we have provided more than \$200 million to more than 800 cutting-edge organizations since our inception in 1979. We fight inequality, injustice and extremism because we understand that justice is the precondition for a successful democracy – and the only lasting road to peace. The New Israel Fund's founders wanted to connect with Israel in a way that reflected their progressive values, and thousands of Israelis and Diaspora Jews have joined with us for that reason. Our supporters love Israel, and see it clearly as striving for an ideal not yet attained.

Visit [www.nif.org](http://www.nif.org) to learn more, and to join the growing community of progressive supporters of Israel who think for themselves about Israel's future.

### **About SHATIL**

NIF is at philanthropy's cutting edge thanks in large part to SHATIL, The New Israel Fund Initiative for Social Change. NIF founded SHATIL in 1982 to complement its grant-making and provide NIF grantees and other social change organizations with hands-on assistance, training, resources and workshops on various aspects of nonprofit management.

SHATIL employs more than 100 ethnically diverse professionals, support staff and interns, with offices in Jerusalem, Haifa, Beer Sheva, Lod, Baqa Algharbiya and Rosh Pinah, serving nearly 1,400 organizations. SHATIL has gained international respect for its innovative work and official UN recognition as an NGO advancing issues of interest to the UN.

SHATIL's work brings together organizations in large coalitions to accomplish what no single group can achieve on its own. It also carries out special projects to foster citizen action on issues and among population groups neglected by other institutions. Today, SHATIL often takes the initiative in spearheading national advocacy and emergency campaigns.

## Social and Economic Justice

*Limdu heitev dirshu mishpat ashru chamotz shiftu yetom rivu almana.  
Learn to do good; seek justice, relieve the oppressed, defend the fatherless,  
plead for the widow.  
(Isaiah 1; 17)*

Israel's once-egalitarian society now has a gap between rich and poor second only to that of the United States among industrialized nations. Today, one in four Israelis lives below the poverty line and a new class of working poor hovers just above it. Moreover, of the 1.6 million people living in poverty, a disproportionate number are members of marginalized groups, such as Ethiopian and Russian immigrants, Bedouin and other Arab citizens, single mothers, and the ultra-Orthodox. Statistics show that more working people and more children now live in poverty, while Israel's middle class continues to shrink. The global economic downturn is also affecting the poor in Israel in disproportionate and damaging ways. In addition, for more than a decade, Israel's economic policy has resulted in massive cuts to education, health and welfare budgets, leaving marginalized populations in greater distress.

Poverty, youth-at-risk, social unrest and despair go hand-in-hand. A nation founded on the traditional Jewish concern for the less fortunate, and on a strong sense of social solidarity, is fracturing along socio-economic fault lines. Since the social safety net was largely dismantled in the late 1990s, income inequity has grown to the point where the gap between rich and poor is the second largest among all developed nations.

According to last year's report by Israel's National Insurance Institute:

- One in four Israelis lives below the poverty line and a new class of working poor hovers just above it.
- One out of every three children in Israel is living in poverty.
- A quarter of all Israel's elderly households live below the poverty line.
- Unemployment ranges from 9% to over 30% in some parts of the country, and 75% of the unemployed are not entitled to unemployment benefits.

Among other minority groups:

Women make up close to 50% of the workforce in Israel, yet are consistently paid an average of only 62% of men's salaries and constitute 70% of those earning minimum wage or less. Moreover, women in minority and disadvantaged groups have disproportionately high rates of unemployment, poverty, health problems and abuse of basic rights.

Arab citizens of Israel – approximately 20% of Israeli citizens – are at the bottom of the economic ladder – with the Bedouin on the very lowest rung. 48 of the 61 poorest towns in Israel are Arab towns. Arab schools receive half the budget, per capita, of Jewish schools. Arab students have the highest dropout rates and lowest achievement levels in the country. The 160,000 Negev Bedouin live in extreme poverty, with 66% living below the poverty line. Half live in 36 “unrecognized” villages and nine recently-recognized villages lacking basic services such as water, sewage, electricity, and health clinics.

Less than 20% of Arab women are employed, and one in seven Arab women is illiterate. On average, those who are officially employed earn less than half what Jewish-Israeli women do. Moreover, Bedouin women suffer from further economic challenges due to the prevalence of polygamy and one of the highest fertility rates in the world, with 6-9 children per woman on average. Most Bedouin girls do not finish high school, and most Bedouin adult women are illiterate.

Ethiopian Israelis – today numbering approximately 105,000 – grapple with issues of unemployment and under-employment, housing, youth at-risk and social alienation. 47% of community members aged 25-54 are not part of the workforce; 72% of children from Ethiopian families live in households below the poverty line; and high school drop-out rates for Ethiopian youth double that of the general population.

Many organizations provide *tzedakah* – charity – to the chronically underprivileged sectors of Israeli society. But there is a need to address the root causes of poverty – giving a voice to the voiceless by building and strengthening social justice organizations the length and breadth of Israel.

NIF aims to reduce the social and economic gap between rich and poor in Israel by cultivating grassroots leadership, and working for increased investments in creating broader opportunities for the less privileged segments of society. NIF supports:

- **Social Rights Advocacy:** Protecting labor rights and rights of the unemployed, housing rights, the right to food security, rights of the elderly, minority rights (FSU and Ethiopian immigrants, Mizrahim), and more.
- **Economic Empowerment Program:** Helping diverse, poor individuals and groups to establish micro-businesses and community economic development initiatives.
- **National Budget reform:** Making the State budget more transparent and accessible to disadvantaged groups
- **Public Discourse:** Raising public awareness of socio-economic challenges and promoting an alternative economic discourse among public policy and decision-makers.

NIF grantees include:

#### Housing Rights

- **The Organization for Housing Rights** is a grassroots organization founded by a single mother who had nowhere to live at the time. OHR runs community centers that provide those without a housing solution with professional guidance, an increased awareness of their rights and ability to influence government policy.
- **The Movement for Dignified Living** was established with SHATIL's help in 2004 by homeless families living in a protest tent city in Beer Sheva. With NIF funding it has expanded into a dynamic regional organization serving the entire Negev, including Bedouin towns. MDL operates an information center, helps mortgage victims (around 300 cases per year), and stages protests in homes threatened with eviction. It is advocating vis-à-vis the Inter-ministerial Committee of Debt Rescheduling to establish alternative housing solutions for those evicted due to non-payment of their mortgages.
- Projects focusing on the severe lack of housing solutions for the Arab sector in the North (**Neighbors for Joint Development, Alternative Voice in the Galilee** and the **Arab Center for Alternative Planning**), Arab Minority in the Mixed Cities (**SHATIL's Mixed Cities Project**), and Bedouin in the Negev (**Regional Council for Unrecognized Villages, Bimkom**).

#### Food Security

- **The Israel Center for Food Security** is a project run by student activists and faculty together with the Beer-Sova Association, which provides food services to needy persons in Beer Sheva. ICFS is unique in that it is the only organization in Israel that focuses squarely on the issue of food insecurity in Israel. Activities include advocacy, research and creation of grassroots groups in disadvantaged Jewish and Bedouin communities in the Negev, with a focus on schools and ensuring proper nutrition for children through proper implementation of the School Lunch Law.
- The **ADVA Center** plays a significant role in that it provides current analyses of the state budget with an emphasis on its impact on disadvantaged populations. Advocacy efforts surrounding position papers on fair budgeting have seen a number of successes regarding the taxation of homemakers and freezing the cutbacks of stipends.
- **Campaign for Social Solidarity** – a network of leading social change organizations in Israel organized by SHATIL to promote action on a range of social issues, including food security. The campaign is recommending that the State cancel the value added tax on basic foods

### Labor Rights

- **Kav LaOved (Worker's Hotline)** assists 40,000 people per year in demanding their rights from their employers and in clarifying employer obligations. The organization is also addressing issues of rights violations by manpower companies, workplace safety, especially with regard to industrial zones attached to settlements in the territories, and studying and developing international working condition standards.
- **Sot el Amel–Laborer's Voice** promotes rights of the employed and unemployed in the Arab sector. Its legal department focuses on the social protection of workers in family businesses (many of whom are women); access to public transport (a documented barrier for Arab women interested in entering the work force); opening a new employment office and more.

### Rights of the Elderly

- **Hazit Hakavod (The Respect Front)** works to expand the public movement for impoverished retirees by organizing protests, lobbying government institutions and increasing public awareness of their situation.
- **Adva Center** has provided leadership to coalitions of nonprofit organizations advocating for pension arrangements for all workers in Israel. With the global financial crisis, Adva has advocated for changing the pension system and creating a safety net for pension savings.

### Economic Empowerment

- **Ahoti (Sister)** works to help Mizrahi and other disadvantaged women realize their economic, cultural and employment capabilities. Ahoti focuses on creating models of occupational empowerment such as the Women's Community Kitchen project, which has trained women with cooking skills to set up a cooperative catering business, and an Ethiopian Embroidery cooperative (now being replicated by a group of Arab women as well) which has launched a fashion line with commercial retailer Comme il Faut. In 2009, Ahoti opened Israel's first Fair Trade store, located in Tel Aviv.
- **Lakiya** and **Sidreh** have established successful cooperative projects that employ hundreds of Bedouin women who work at home or in the factory to create rug weaving and embroidery products that are then sold at local stores and marketed to tourists.
- **Economic Empowerment for Women** and **Supportive Community** assist women in starting their own businesses by providing access to micro-financing, one-on-one and group mentoring, and a model that combines personal empowerment with professional training.
- **The Arab Jewish Center for Equality and Empowerment (AJEEC)** provides vocational training and personal empowerment to Bedouin women. Courses include jewelry design, fashion design, physical education instruction, and early childhood education training.
- **The Adva Center's** Women's Budget Forum closely examines the national budget from a gender perspective and advocates for equal treatment of women. It works to educate women on economic issues, to create public dialogue on the issue of gender and budget, and to achieve changes to the national budget that reflect the needs of women and girls.

### **Additional resources:**

- ACRI's 2008 Annual Report <http://www.acri.org.il/pdf/state2008.pdf>
- Adva Center: Information on Equality and Social Justice in Israel <http://www.adva.org/default.asp?lang=en>

## Religious Freedom and Pluralism

*Elu v'elu divrei Elohim Chayim  
These and Those are the Words of the Living God.  
(Babylonian Talmud)*

Many of Israel's Jewish citizens feel disconnected from their Jewish identity, and there is a chasm between religious and secular Jews in Israel, with significant implications for social cohesion - both within Israel and between Israeli and Diaspora Jewry. There are complex reasons for the increasingly polarized situation, including radicalization in the national-religious sector, a lack of exposure among non-Orthodox Jewish Israelis to alternative models of Judaism, and ongoing resentment of the Orthodox domination of many aspects of Jewish life in Israel – from family law and life cycle events to government funding for Jewish education in both religious and secular schools.

The monopoly of religious institutions and traditions by the ultra-Orthodox sector has resulted in the impingement of the basic rights and status of Jewish women in Israel – religious and secular alike. The ultra-Orthodox establishment that controls Israel's civil sphere continues to exclude other streams of Judaism on issues ranging from marriage to conversion. Although non-Orthodox Jews comprise 70 percent of Israel's population, a tiny percentage of the budget for Jewish culture and education is allocated to Reform, Conservative, Reconstructionist and other streams of Jewish learning. The Chief Rabbinate continues to have exclusive jurisdiction on issues of marriage and divorce for Jews. Civil and non-Orthodox weddings within Israel are not recognized, and inter-faith couples, as well as couples unable to prove their Halachic Jewishness, have no alternative but to leave the country in order to get married. Thousands of women are trapped in bad or abusive marriages because their husbands cannot or will not grant them a *get* (writ of divorce) as required by the Rabbinate, with serious economic and social ramifications for the women and their children.

Despite these obstacles, there are encouraging signs of Jewish renewal and in Israel today Jews of all types are reconnecting – or connecting for the first time – to their Judaism. Secular and humanist Jews are becoming more knowledgeable about Judaism and a new “alternative Israeli” Judaism is evolving. There are now eighteen *batei midrash* providing a year of Jewish studies prior to military service, and new “secular yeshivas” are combining Jewish study and social action. There is a growing interest within the Russian Israeli community in developing congregations based on their own unique identity. Increasing numbers of modern Orthodox are now calling for alternative rabbinical courts and other changes to the status quo regarding religion and state, and modern Orthodox women are taking a leading role in promoting women's rights within Orthodoxy, challenging the Rabbinate on women's rights, and redefining the roles of women in Jewish life.

There are major breakthroughs in NIF's efforts to challenge the ultra-Orthodox rabbinate's exclusive control over life cycle events and Jewish learning. Greater numbers of secular Jews in Israel are demanding more pluralistic Jewish education in State schools as well as options for civil marriage, conversion, burial and other religious services. Concurrently, NIF-funded liberal Orthodox groups – disillusioned by many actions taken “in their name” – are developing more tolerant and democratic Orthodox institutions willing and able to cooperate with other streams of Judaism on life cycle issues such as conversion and divorce.

Finally, the “Jewish renaissance” in Israel has reinforced the connection between social action and Jewish values, with a growing number of non-Orthodox and liberal Orthodox organizations incorporating the ethical and social values of Judaism and that focus on *tikkun olam* as an integral part of their mission.

NIF and its grantees maintain that Jewish pluralism is a necessary component of a strong democratic and Jewish state, as well as integral to reciprocal relations between Israel and Jewish communities around the

world. NIF is working to promote freedom of and from religion in Israel, and to foster a more tolerant society that embraces the rich diversity of Jewish identity, expression and practice.

NIF is working to:

- Foster diverse expressions of Jewish identity and practice
- Change the legal structure that limits religious freedom
- Advocate for equal allocation of resources to non-Orthodox services and education
- Strengthen a social justice agenda among all streams of Judaism
- Strengthen liberal elements in Orthodoxy

NIF grantees include:

#### Secular Jewish Renewal

- Creating Jewish-Israeli Spiritual Communities, a project led by **Midrasha at Oranim** and **Bet Tefila Israeli**, to establish secular “praying communities” in the Central Region (30 such communities have already been established in the North and continue to hold Shabbat services once or twice a month.)
- **Havaya**, which is developing the field of secular Jewish weddings in Israel by training officiates, conducting hundreds of weddings, and marketing the alternatives to young secular couples, both veteran and immigrant.

#### Jewish Social Justice

- The “Social Kashrut” project led by **Midrasha at Oranim** seeks to protect the rights of workers and disabled persons by awarding a social seal of approval to businesses that respect employees’ rights and guarantee access to persons with disabilities.
- **The Israel Religious Action Center (IRAC)** raises a strong Jewish voice against a wide range of injustices, including issues of African refugees, corruption in government, Bedouin home demolitions, and more.
- **BINA** has opened the world’s first “Secular Yeshiva” in Tel Aviv in 2007, with 20 full-time and 150 part-time students. The yeshiva was granted “hesder yeshiva” status by the IDF, enabling students to combine military service with their studies. The organization also runs “Bina in the Neighborhood” through which hundreds of young participants implement social action projects in neglected South Tel Aviv and Beer-Sheva neighborhoods and study Jewish texts in a pluralistic framework.

#### Religious Freedom

- **Israel Religious Action Center (IRAC), Association for the Protection of Mixed Family Rights and New Family** promote freedom of choice in marriage and other life cycle events. These organizations have had precedent-setting achievements over the past decade such as advancing recognition of Reform and Conservative conversions and protecting the rights of converts, promoting civil rights of all types of families, enabling appointment of women to local Religious Councils, and more. Most recently, IRAC secured State funds for the first time ever to build four Reform and Conservative synagogues throughout the country, breaking the monopoly of the Orthodox over the budget for construction of religious institutions.
- **Ne’emanei Torah Va’Avodah, Mavoi Satum, Panim** and others are working to establish alternative rabbinic courts that would deal with issues of conversion and marital status.
- **Panim** – which is an umbrella group for pluralism organizations in Israel – also plays a key role in assisting secular public schools to secure government funding for pluralistic Jewish education.

### Promoting Liberal Orthodoxy

- **Yod Bet B'Heshvan, Midreshet Kama and Shaked School** and parents groups and educators across the country are working to establish independent liberal Orthodox schools, as an alternative to the increasing religious and political radicalization, particularly in the State religious school systems.
- **Kolech** is creating a Gender Equality Curriculum, which has now been adopted by the Ministry of Education for a number of schools, including within the State religious school system.
- **Ne'emanai Torah Va'Avodah** is heading efforts to advocate for alternative rabbinic courts in protest of the ultra Orthodox monopoly, with a focus on conversions. The project is being conducted in cooperation with Bet Morasha in Jerusalem, which has the status and connections required to recruit rabbis for the court, and with US Orthodox rabbis who have established an alternative rabbinical court in the US and who wish to have their conversions recognized in Israel. The organization is also leading a new project to create a religious educational leadership within the existing school system through weekend seminars for veteran and new teachers to strengthen the liberal agenda, develop curriculum and establish a network for teachers with a progressive outlook.

### Status and Rights of Women

- **Kolech: Religious Women's Forum** is the leading Orthodox women's organization working to promote women's rights through a consensual process of change from within Orthodoxy. The organization now has 9 vibrant branches throughout Israel, actively fighting on behalf of "chained" and abused women, addressing the taboo subject of sexual harassment in the Orthodox community, speaking out against the Rabbinat on issues of women's rights, and promoting increased religious roles for women within Orthodoxy.
- **Yaakov Herzog Center** is creating Orthodox feminist discourse among women in the South through a variety of educational and leadership programs, including
  - Halelli project – an educational program for 40 Orthodox women with no previous exposure to Orthodox feminist discourse
  - Bnot Melech – a new program designed to allow women who have already consolidated an Orthodox feminist outlook to increase their knowledge of the subject
  - Bat Kol – a program for the general public (women and men) on Judaism and gender
  - Sister to Sister – an advanced Beit Midrash for women active in Orthodox feminism
- **International Coalition for Aguna Rights** (ICAR unites 25 diverse organizations working to promote halachic solutions and to raise awareness of the problem of *agunot* and *mesoravot get* (women whose husbands cannot or will not grant them a divorce) which affects Jewish women from across the spectrum of Israeli society, religious and secular.
- **The Center for Women's Justice** has achieved precedent setting legal rulings that impose fines on recalcitrant husbands and is working to disseminate a prenuptial agreement that will protect women from extortion.
- **Mavoi Satum (Dead End)** is working in parallel to Ne'emanai Torah Va'Avodah to establish alternative courts that will deal with marital issues. The project is working to establish a "Jewish Law Committee" that will formulate solutions based in Jewish Law for the problems of *agunot* and *mesoravot get*, and in establishing an independent arbitration entity where Rabbis will arbitrate cases of couples who are in the midst of the divorce process.

### **Additional resources:**

- Israel Religious Action Center of the Israel Movement for Progressive Judaism [www.irac.org](http://www.irac.org)
- Kolech (Hebrew) <http://www.kipa.co.il/kolech/default.asp>
- Yod Bet B'Heshvan Forum (with information on Kolech, Ne'emanai Torah Va'Avodah, Bina, Center for Women's Justice and other organizations [http://www.12heshvan.org/eng\\_index.asp](http://www.12heshvan.org/eng_index.asp)
- Bina <http://www.bina.org.il/english.htm>

## Disability Rights

(Based in part on information from the website of NIF grantees, Bizchut: The Israeli Human Rights Center for People with Disabilities, and the Association for Civil Rights in Israel)

*“All people are entitled to the same basic rights... the needs of people with disabilities must be met on the basis of entitlement, not as a function of charity or pity,” Bizchut (by right) and not B’chesed (due to benevolence/charity).*

*(Based on the mission statement of Bizchut: The Israeli Human Rights Center for People with Disabilities)*

People with disabilities, including IDF veterans, make up over 10% of the Israeli population. Despite their numbers, people with disabilities often face discrimination and deprivation in many aspects of life. Many services are inaccessible or unavailable to them or do not provide for their needs; people with disabilities are severely discriminated against in the labor market, including in the public sector; and a host of difficulties confront children integrated into the general school system.

From ACRI’s 2008 Annual Report (<http://www.acri.org.il/pdf/state2008.pdf>):

In 1998, on the initiative of Bizchut – the Israeli Human Rights Center for People with Disabilities, a law was passed in Israel, the Equal Rights for People with Disabilities Law (1998). The Law is unique in that it applies to persons with all kinds of disabilities – physical, sensory, cognitive, mental, and psychological, as well as temporary or permanent disabilities. At the core of the Law is the principle of human dignity: a person with a disability is equal to any other person in society and entitled to be an active member of it. In order to achieve this objective, it is not enough to prohibit discrimination, but equal opportunity must be created for people with disabilities to enable them to exercise their rights by providing a proper solution for their special needs. The law affirms the right of people with disabilities to equality in employment and accessible transportation services as well as the duty to make every place open to the public and every service provided to the public accessible to people with all kinds of disabilities.

.... However, according to data from Bizchut, despite intensive activity in the area, it is still impossible to point to significant changes or any major improvement in the situation of people with disabilities in Israel. Thus, for example:

- The proportion of people with disabilities in employment is extremely low, and declines as the severity of the disability increases. The average income of people with disabilities is less than 70% of the average income of people without disabilities. A survey of employers conducted by the Commission in 2007 reveals that 85% of Israeli employers do not employ people with disabilities and almost a quarter (23%) state that they do not want to employ workers with disabilities....
- The economic situation of people with disabilities in Israel has deteriorated in the last few years and is the worst of all western countries. More than 30% of people with severe disabilities and 21% of people with moderate disabilities report having a sense of being poor compared with less than 10% of people without disabilities....
- There is an especially high concentration of people with disabilities among the poorly educated. In 2002, on the initiative of Bizchut, the Special Education Law was amended and a section was added to it on the integration of children with special needs into the general education system. The Supreme Court also issued important rulings in this field. Nonetheless, serious systemic obstacles prevent the integration of children with disabilities into the general education system. In general, children with complicated disabilities who learn in the standard education system are not budgeted for according to their disabilities and are funded to a considerably lesser extent than they would be if they were learning

in the special needs education system, nor do they receive the assistance necessary to ensure their successful integration.

- In 2000, the Welfare (Treatment of Persons with Mental Disabilities) Law was amended to give preference to integrating a person with a mental disability into housing frameworks within the community over housing in an institution, as is accepted practice in developed countries. In effect, of 7,500 people with mental disabilities living away from home in State-maintained housing, 6,000 were sent to live in institutions and the State is intent on opening more and more institutions.
- More than half of the population requiring treatment in the area of mental health, and of those more than two-thirds of the minors, does not receive it in the existing public health frameworks. Since mental health services are not included in the national health basket, the State provides only what it can, and services are markedly inadequate.

The situation on the ground shows that legal progress alone is insufficient to bring about a real integration of people with disabilities into Israeli society. To do so, the Law must be applied in practice, by changing the public's attitudes and strengthening its commitment to changing them, and through real and effective equal opportunity policies in the areas of education and employment.

NIF's Disability Rights Program supports efforts to make Israeli society more tolerant and accessible for people with all types of disabilities. NIF grantees include:

- **Bizchut: Center for Human Rights of Persons with Disabilities** unites dozens of groups representing Israel's 600,000 citizens afflicted with a range of physical, psychological and emotional disabilities. Bizchut's achievements have changed the lives of many Israelis over the past decade: From landmark legislation such as the Equal Rights Law for People with Disabilities, to subsequent amendments, laws and court cases including a law entitling Israel's 160,000 special-needs children to study in regular schools with assistance paid for by the State.
- **Mateh Ma'avak Hanechim: Organization of People with Disabilities** is a member-based organization that enables the voices of people coping with disabilities to be heard by policymakers and professionals.
- **Midrasha at Oranim** is funded by NIF to promote social justice from a Jewish perspective. The Midrasha is developing and running a "Social Kashrut" project which gives a "seal of approval" to businesses that are accessible to the disabled.
- **SHATIL** is playing an important role in promoting leadership among people with disabilities. Following on the heels of highly lauded disabilities courses, SHATIL branched out its leadership development to include people with many types of disabilities including mental illness, autism and polio.

**Additional resources:**

- Bizchut: The Israeli Human Rights Center for People with Disabilities <http://www.bizchut.org.il/eng/>
- ACRI's 2008 Annual Report (<http://www.acri.org.il/pdf/state2008.pdf>):

## Migrant Workers and Refugees

(Based in part on information from the website of NIF grantee, Hotline for Migrant Workers)

*"You shall not wrong a stranger or oppress him,  
for you were strangers in the land of Egypt."  
(Exodus 22:20)*

### MIGRANT WORKERS

In the 1990s, Israel opened its borders to migrant workers, many of whom replaced Palestinians in the bottom tier of the labor market. Migrant workers in Israel currently number about 180,000 (some 7% of the local labor force), approximately 50% of whom lack legal status. They are one of the weakest groups in Israel; as non-citizens, non-Hebrew speakers, and non-Jews, they are an invisible 'other.' They are vulnerable to abuses and violations of their human and legal rights, including withheld payment, confinement, and criminal abuse. Most migrant workers have no representation or access to help from the authorities.

Migrant workers pay illegally charged fees of \$5,000-\$25,000 for the privilege of a legal work visa in Israel in one of three sectors: construction, agriculture or car giving. However, in many cases their visas are issued to their employers leaving migrants dependent on their employers for legal status. Work termination for any reason results in migrant workers losing their legal status and puts them at risk for detention and deportation. Similarly, lack of enforcement against violating legal employers leaves workers wishing to maintain their legal status ready victims of exploitation and trafficking.

Furthermore, Israel has no immigration policy for non-Jews. Even if one has resided in Israel for many years, naturalization is virtually impossible. This issue is particularly acute when it comes to children of migrant workers. These children were born in Israel or came at an early age, speak Hebrew as a first language, and consider themselves Israeli and Israel to be their home. Thanks to the work of Israeli NGOs (foremost the Hotline for Migrant Workers), some 900 children have been granted legal status. However, this was as the result of a one-time government resolution, not a permanent solution to the problem. Today, some 2,000 children and their families are eligible for deportation. In many cases, they are very young children being raised by single mothers (their fathers have already been deported).

Following a campaign by the Hotline for Migrant Workers and other NGOs, which garnered the support of President Shimon Peres, a plan to expel the hundreds of children of foreign workers and refugees who have spent most of their lives in Israel has been at least temporarily halted. In a letter to Interior Minister Eli Yishai, President Peres wrote: "Who better than a people who have suffered bitterly in exile to be sensitive to the fellowman living its midst." The president wrote of his visit to Bialik Rogozin School in Tel Aviv, where many children of foreign workers study: "I sensed in them the taste of Israel, where they were born. I heard ringing Hebrew come from their mouths. I felt their connection to and their deep love of Israel and their desire to live here, to serve in the army, and to contribute to its fortification." The plan has been suspended for three months, but clearly this issue needs long-term resolution.

NIF is supporting:

- Crisis intervention – Para-legal representation and counseling to protect the basic rights of detained and exploited foreign workers: Volunteers run a hotline and write letters on issues such as the rights of workers in conflicts with their Israeli employers and with public authorities. When necessary, civil rights lawyers pursue legal action.
- National advocacy - Promoting legislation to criminalize all forms of trafficking, and advocating more vigorous enforcement of existing bans against recruitment fees and withholding of passports; Lectures and tours for government bureaucrats, academics, lawyers, judges, students, etc.; Articles,

reports, films and other media to raise awareness among the public of human rights issues, to combat xenophobia and to promote the integration of newly-naturalized children.

NIF grantees include:

- **Hotline for Migrant Workers (HMW)** is the leading NIF grantee active in issues of migration including the defense of African refugees and asylum seekers, migrant workers, unaccompanied minors and victims of human trafficking. HMW conducts legal and advocacy activities on behalf of all three groups, coordinates humanitarian assistance and raises awareness of the issues among the Israeli public. HMW works to find the refugees appropriate shelter, to facilitate release of clients from prison, and is the lead partner in a forum advocating for refugees and political asylum.
- **Association for Civil Rights in Israel (ACRI)**, which addresses a full range of human rights issues and works alongside Kav LaOved and HMW to protect the rights of migrant workers and combat trafficking in women.
- **Kav LaOved (Worker's Hotline)**, which provides legal aid to disadvantaged workers and acts for systemic change in labor policies.

**Additional resources:**

- Hotline for Migrant Workers website <http://www.hotline.org.il>
- Association for Civil Rights in Israel (ACRI) website <http://www.acri.org.il>
- Article in Yediot: "Peres to interior minister: Reconsider deporting children" <http://www.ynetnews.com/articles/0,7340,L-3754555,00.html>
- Article in Yediot: "Human rights groups: Deporting children inhumane" <http://www.ynetnews.com/articles/0,7340,L-3754359,00.html>

## REFUGEES

Israel has seen a significant increase in asylum claims in the last few years. Problems with refugee protection in Egypt lead refugees from Sudan, Eritrea and other African countries to cross into Israel. In 2007 alone, some 5,000 refugees crossed the Egyptian border into Israel. Currently, the vast majority of refugees entering Israel are placed in detention. Those who were previously released also risk re-arrest and detention.

In the shadow of the Holocaust, Israel was among the authors of the UN Convention on Refugees. Despite this, Israel does not have a coherent policy regarding refugees and asylum seekers, and the country's nascent refugee system is collapsing under the weight of recent arrivals. Thus, many are being held in detention, and all humanitarian aid is currently being provided by NGOs. Since 2003, around 12,500 African asylum seekers have entered Israel, of which about only 1,000 have received UN refugee status and 600 from Darfur have been granted temporary residency by the Israeli government. The rest are stuck in limbo regarding their futures.

Most refugees are held in former or current military prisons in Israel's south, including Nafcha, Ramon and Shikma. The vast majority, over 1,000, including some 150 women and children, are placed in Ketziot prison near the Egyptian border. At Ketziot, they are 'housed' in eight large tents. Exposed to the elements, they lack sufficient access to phones, hot water, bathrooms and other basic items. Furthermore, the staff, used to working with security prisoners, are unaccustomed to the unique needs of this population. The process of release from detention is complicated and problematic. Those in the process of applying for refugee status are living in squalor in overcrowded shelters.

NIF is supporting:

- Crisis intervention and direct aid: Provide shelters and long-term housing solutions for refugees, particularly those most vulnerable – single parents, children, the sick and wounded and pregnant women, many of whom are rape victims.
- Strengthening civil society groups: Providing capacity building training and support for 25 refugee community leaders and nine community groups..
- Education and Integration: Helping parents to register their children in school, and providing Hebrew and life skills lessons for parents including job counseling.
- Working for more humanitarian policies

NIF grantees include:

- **African Refugees Development Center(ARDC)** -Assistance to asylum seekers in finding housing, gaining employment and securing their basic rights.
- **Hotline for Migrant Workers (HMW)** is the leading NIF grantee active in the defense of African refugees and asylum seekers, migrant workers and victims of human trafficking. HMW conducts legal and advocacy activities on behalf of all three groups, coordinates humanitarian assistance and raises awareness of the issues among the Israeli public. HMW works to find the refugees appropriate, to convince the Ministry of Justice to release refugees from prison, and the Ministry of Interior to grant them political asylum.
- **Association for Civil Rights in Israel** – ACRI lawyers specialize in issues of citizenship and residency status, and work to address policies and practices of the Interior Ministry and population registry, pushing for more transparency and ensuring non-discriminatory policies with regard to non Jewish spouses, stateless people and unaccompanied minors.

**Additional resources:**

- Hotline for Migrant Workers website <http://www.hotline.org.il>
- Association for Civil Rights in Israel (ACRI) website <http://www.acri.org.il>.

## Environmental Justice

(Based in part on information from the website of NIF grantee, Green Environment Fund)

*When the Holy One created the first person, the Holy One took that person before all the trees in the Garden of Eden and said: 'See how lovely and how excellent my works are. All that I have created, I have created for you. Consider this carefully. Do not corrupt or desolate my world, for if you corrupt or desolate it, there is no one to set it right after you.'*  
(Midrash Rabbah)

As a nation that has compressed its development into little more than half a century, Israel has made spectacular gains and suffered equally staggering environmental losses. Israel's environmental quality ranking dropped recently to 45th globally, a new low. From air pollution to contaminated water supplies to diminishing green spaces, environmental hazards threaten everyone in Israel.

As Israel's consumption of electricity and motor fuel has doubled over the past decade, so have the levels of carbon monoxide and other pollutants in the air; and Israel's citizens now suffer from increasing rates of environmentally-caused cancers and chronic respiratory diseases. While water is Israel's most endangered natural resource, a lack of sufficient industrial effluent controls, neglect of sewage treatment, and irresponsible agricultural policies have put the country's water sources at risk. Moreover, with the population expected to reach 8.7 million by 2020, Israel's recreational and pristine open spaces are being devoured by unfettered development, traffic gridlock throughout the country and illegal dumping of garbage and industrial wastes in once out-of-the-way places. While environmental pollution knows no boundaries, those living in Israel's geographic and economic periphery lack resources to move away from polluting factories, toxic waste and other hazards and they lack political clout to challenge polluters or press for enforcement of regulations.

While these dangers know no boundaries, citizens from affluent neighborhoods are becoming increasingly well organized and effective at protecting their own backyards. But those living in Israel's geographic and socio-economic peripheries often lack the money and political power to challenge polluters or press for enforcement of government standards. There is a need to ensure that Israel's vulnerable populations, including Arab citizens, new immigrants and other economically disadvantaged groups, have the skills to access their rights and the clout to influence government decision-making.

In its strategic partnership with other foundations, NIF sponsors the Green Environment Fund to spearhead environmental activism and accomplishment throughout Israel. The Green Environment Fund (GEF) is a unique and expanding partnership of funders, guided by Jewish and humanitarian values, joining resources to leverage and promote their vision for an environmentally-sustainable Israel. GEF envisions an Israeli society that prioritizes the environment, social justice and quality of life; that utilizes its limited resources effectively and strategically; and that takes a comprehensive approach to managing regional ecosystems for this and future generations. GEF's mission is to promote environmental sustainability through equitable, responsible and comprehensive environmental policies and actions, which benefit all sectors of Israeli society. GEF pursues this mission through its advocacy, education and outreach to the environmental movement, civil society, and public and private sectors of Israel.

### **Additional resources:**

Green Environment Fund <http://www.gef.org.il>



## ***Messages from Social Justice Activists and Leaders in Israel***

### **Social and Economic Justice**

**Rachel Liel – Incoming Executive Director of NIF Israel**

*Rachel Liel began her tenure as Director of SHATIL, the New Israel Fund Initiative for Social Change, in 1998, as part of a long and distinguished career in public service. Rachel has been publicly recognized for her outstanding leadership: In September 2007, Haaretz newspaper named Rachel as one of seven Israelis who "influence for the greater good." This followed Haaretz naming her, in January 2007, as one of the 40 Israeli women making the most significant contributions to Israeli society, and Globes choosing her as one of Israel's 50 most influential leaders in 2006. She was recently appointed to become NIF's Executive Director in Israel.*

#### **What is one accomplishment from the past year you consider to be significant for Israeli society?**

I would say empowering disenfranchised groups – from Ethiopian immigrants to Arab citizens of Israel; from cancer patients in the northern periphery to immigrant high school pupils from the FSU to *agunot* – and making sure justice is done to their needs. Concrete examples include bringing together influential Arabs and Jews in Acre, Haifa and nationally to promote true shared living; inspiring the government to launch a major national domestic violence prevention campaign in Amharic; getting the government to appoint a special trustee so the education budget in the Negev Bedouin town of Rahat will be used to actually meet the needs of schoolchildren there; training, strengthening and supervising immigrant organizations in six cities so they can keep immigrant youth at risk in school, strengthen their motivation, sense of and belonging and academic achievements; being a partner in getting the Knesset to pass a precedent-setting bill which permits the division of property before a divorce is granted, thereby minimizing recalcitrant husbands' ability to use extortion as a condition for divorce.

#### **In the New Year, what is one thing you would most like to accomplish for a better Israel?**

I would like to see the forces for social change unite in one movement in order to most effectively accomplish our goals for a just, egalitarian, pluralistic Israel at peace with her neighbors and within our country. The SHATIL-facilitated "Another Society is Possible" is a step in that direction.

#### **How do you see your work in relation to Jewish values?**

If I had to summarize in two words what SHATIL's work is about, I would say "*tikkun olam*." Justice and righteousness are inherent in our sources and our tradition. We can probably take the credit for giving this concept to the world! Everything SHATIL does – from community organizing in poor neighborhoods to lobbying for just laws in the Knesset to working for human rights in all sectors are in the spirit of *tikkun olam*.

#### **What is the most important thing American Jews can do to work for a better Israel?**

Make others aware that Israel has many voices; that a great many Israelis yearn for a peaceful and just society – and to support those efforts with words, visits, exchange of knowledge and expertise and, of course, contributions.

#### **On *Tikkun*:**

Rosh Hashanah is a time of looking inward to see how we can improve ourselves as well as outward to see how we can improve the world. Many of SHATIL's hundreds of trainings for people around the country who want to make change begin with a look inward: who am I, what are my inherent strengths and what do I want to accomplish? Who can I connect with in order to make change happen and what tools do we all need to realize our dreams of a better society for ourselves and our neighbors? Every day, through its consulting, trainings, networking and coalition building, SHATIL recruits more people – like the Arab women teachers in the northern town of Tuba-Zangaria who this year trained to become environmental activists – to work for social change. Once they have the awareness, tools and skills, they add to the cadre of people, most of whom are affiliated with the many NGOs we strengthen – who are dedicating themselves to make Israel the country we all want it to be.

## Social and Economic Justice

Ronit Heyd - SHATIL Social and Economic Justice Initiative Project Coordinator

*Ronit Heyd is the director of the Social and Economic Justice Initiative at SHATIL, the New Israel Fund Initiative for Social Change. Ronit joined SHATIL in September 2001, where her work centers on providing consultation and training for organizations that advance alternative social and economic policies. She holds an MA in Social Psychology from the Hebrew University and lives in Jerusalem.*

### **What is one accomplishment from the past year you consider to be significant for Israeli society?**

The establishment of "A Different Society is Possible", a forum of 50 organizations from all sectors of Israeli society promoting social and economic justice. This unique collaborative effort, which is facilitated and supported by SHATIL and led by members of the organizations, is the first of its kind of such a large and committed group of professional and grassroots organizations. The Forum has compiled "Our Shared Story", in which a joint vision for a better and more just society in Israel was formulated and expressed. Aiming to build a true grassroots, inclusive movement, the group has already initiated two very successful campaigns – one putting social justice issues on the political agenda during election time, and the second advocating for a just and equitable state budget ("A different [state] budget is possible"), which was promoted by an internet campaign as well as a lively event at the Mahane Yehuda market in Jerusalem.

### **In the New Year, what is one thing you would most like to accomplish for a better Israel?**

Bringing together people from all sectors, cultural groups, economic levels and geographical locations to collaborate and build their power together, in order to promote a more just and equitable society.

### **How do you see your work in relation to Jewish values?**

I see *Tikkun Olam* in each and every small step we take for closing the social and economic gaps in Israeli society – whether it is formulating a position paper for policy change, having people sign a petition, or helping a group of underprivileged workers to create a union and be able to stand up for their rights. Maimonides (Rambam) spoke of eight levels of *Tzedakah*, of which the highest level is providing the poor with employment. I believe that now that we are living in a Jewish State, and not only in Jewish communities, we should add a ninth level: ensuring that the state takes responsibility for creating the infrastructure and conditions to ensure that all citizens have an equal opportunity for work which enables them to earn their living in dignity.

### **What is the most important thing American Jews can do to work for a better Israel?**

Support the promotion of social, civil and economic rights of all citizens in Israel, including creating or advocating for direct pressure on the Israeli government to ensure the responsibility of the state for the welfare and rights of all citizens.

### **On Tikkun:**

In the Protest Against the State Budget event organized by "A Different Society is Possible" in Shuk Mahane Yehuda, members of the partner organizations wearing t-shirts with the slogan "A different society is possible – choosing equality and justice" approached the buyers in the market, telling them about our activities and our objections to the decisions being passed in the state budget. For many of them, lawyers, organizational managers and research coordinators, this was the first opportunity to experience a one-on-one conversation with people in the streets. The initial apprehension ("how will I approach someone and just start talking to them?") gave way two hours later to an excited spark in their eyes: "It was amazing!" one of them, a lawyer, said, "just to see the way that they really **got** what I was talking about and identified!" Taking our big issues to court is many times much easier than engaging people in the street in a conversation about the importance of social and economic rights. This event was an opportunity for us to really feel the pulse and connect and talk to people about what it means to have a better and more just society in Israel.

## Social and Economic Justice

Tami Schneider – Co-Director of Mahapach-Taghir

*Tami Schneider is Co-Director of Mahapach-Taghir, a movement working to close social gaps, advance social rights and create local leadership in disempowered communities in Israel. Through its innovative community projects, Mahapach aims to create educational opportunities for children and youth in disempowered neighborhoods while promoting community activism and nurturing independent local leadership for social change. At Mahapach “hubs”, students tutor the children, while the parents contribute time to the community and are active in local steering committees. The organization is active in seven communities: two low-income neighborhoods in Jerusalem, the Florentine quarter in Tel Aviv, Kiryat Shmona, Sderot and the Arab villages Tamra and Yefiyah.*

### **What is one accomplishment from the past year you consider to be significant for Israeli society?**

A significant accomplishment was increasing awareness of the process of tracking students in the education system, and the exclusion of students from disadvantaged communities who suffer from a low standard of education and high dropout rates. As a result, parents are organizing in each of our communities in an effort to improve their children's education.

An additional accomplishment is the shift of consciousness in the disadvantaged communities around inter-community partnership and solidarity. Today we have Jewish and Arab women who have chosen to work together on a joint campaign to improve their children's education.

### **In the New Year, what is one thing you would most like to accomplish for a better Israel?**

To get the issue of tracking and exclusion in the education system firmly onto the public agenda. To promote the idea of partnership and solidarity through our national conference, which we expect to draw 30 Jewish and Arab women who are grassroots activists in our communities.

### **What is the most important thing American Jews can do to work for a better Israel?**

To promote the idea of partnership and solidarity between Jewish and Palestinian Israeli communities around the issues of social and economic justice and human rights.

### **On Tikkun:**

Our students come to Mahapach-Taghir neighborhoods in their community centers to teach the kids, organize activities etc. But inevitably, they find themselves becoming a part of the community – many even decide to stay permanently in the neighborhood – so in the process of creating change they themselves were changed. Rather than just helping the local residents, they themselves become a part of the community and strengthen it and are strengthened themselves. The other aspect of this is the partnership created between the students and the local residents which empowers the residents; they realize how vital their contribution is to the partnership in terms of their unique knowledge and power, and this gives them a real sense of empowerment. What starts from just a conversation about the kids and their education leads to them initiating joint community projects and campaigns.

## Civil and Human Rights, Tolerance and Democratic Values

Eliezer Yaari – Director of the New Israel Fund in Israel

*Eliezer Yaari is the Executive Director in Israel of the New Israel Fund. Yaari, a native of Jerusalem, has been with NIF since 1997. Before coming to NIF, he had a distinguished career as one of Israel's leading television journalists with the Israel Broadcasting Authority. During his last three years at the IBA, he served as Director of Programs, with responsibility for all television productions. Eliezer was a Wexner Fellow at Harvard University's Kennedy School of Government, where he studied Public Administration. He is also an author and a blogger.*

### **What is one accomplishment from the past year you consider to be significant for Israeli society?**

NIF was the first organized group to identify the growing pressure on Human Rights organizations, and the ugly tide against anything that may stand for pluralistic Israel.

### **In the New Year, what is one thing you would most like to accomplish for a better Israel?**

What I would most like to accomplish is the re-establishment of more effective system of checks and balances which will protect minorities and disempowered communities.

### **How do you see your work in relation to Jewish values?**

I'm guided by a strong faith and awareness to my place in the Jewish tradition of those who seek *Tikkun Olam*.

### **What is the most important thing American Jews can do to work for a better Israel?**

I hope American Jews will re-emphasize their commitment to a Democratic and Pluralistic Israel, and be outspoken about the issues that they want to see changed.

### **On Tikkun:**

In April this year, NIF co-sponsored a solidarity march in Umm El Fahm, the Arab Israeli city which two weeks prior had been the sight of an ultra-nationalist, right-wing rally against Arab citizens of Israel. Our partner was Yud-Bet B'Cheshvan, an Orthodox organization established in 2007 to promote tolerance in the aftermath of the Rabin assassination. This event to me was the epitome of "*tikkun*". Where two weeks earlier, Jews had come to this city with a message of hatred and intolerance, now Jews – many of them from the progressive Orthodox community – were coming with a message of equality and the desire for a true shared society. Member of Knesset Afu Aghbaria, who lives in Umm El Fahm, told the marchers, "This visit is important for both Jewish and Arab society. You today are a 'light unto the nations' and those who came with Marzel [member of the Jewish National Front and formerly Meir Kahane's spokesperson] last month only brought darkness to the Jewish people."

## Civil and Human Rights

Hagai El-Ad – Executive Director, Association for Civil Rights in Israel (ACRI)

*Hagai El-Ad joined ACRI as Executive Director in 2008. Most recently, he served as the first Executive Director of the Jerusalem Open House, the community and advocacy center for the city's LGBT community. In 2002, he launched Jerusalem's Annual Pride and Tolerance March. The Association for Civil Rights in Israel – NIF's flagship grantee – is Israel's oldest and largest human rights organization and the only one that deals with the entire spectrum of human rights and civil liberties issues in Israel and the Occupied Territories. ACRI's work encompasses litigation and legal advocacy, education, and public outreach, as effective ways in which to build toward a long-term vision of a just and democratic society that respects the equal rights of all its members.*

### **What is one accomplishment from the past year you consider to be significant for Israeli society?**

The past year was filled with challenges for human rights, social justice, and equality in Israel. Of ACRI's many struggles, achievements, as well as setbacks from this tumultuous year, the opening of the *Center for the Rights of the Unemployed* at ACRI carries special significance. Especially during these dire economic times, with unemployment rates steadily rising, employees – and people who lose their jobs – are particularly vulnerable to abuse. Social justice these days means that we are able to continue defending workers' rights and the rights of the unemployed, and to see these not as welfare, but as an inherent part of a universal human rights vision.

### **In the New Year, what is one thing you would most like to accomplish for a better Israel?**

The growing trend in Israel that undermines core aspects of our democracy must be reversed. In the coming year we will not yet be able to completely change how democracy is protected in Israel; but we must be able to begin reversing the current wave of attacks on the High Court of Justice, antidemocratic legislation, the undermining of human rights groups, racist rhetoric, and an overall sense that the democratic space in Israeli society – for civil discussion, expression, and thought – is shrinking. Israel must be a democracy in which our democratic space is self-evident, strong, and ever-expanding.

### **How do you see your work in relation to Jewish values?**

One of the many ways in which ACRI is so unique is our identity as an organization where Israeli Jews and Arabs work, argue, and build a more just future together. For me personally, as someone who cares deeply about his own Jewish identity, I find few things that I can do in this world that express this identity in a more genuine way than to be a part of a diverse team of committed Israelis who are together focused on human rights, social justice, and equality.

### **What is the most important thing American Jews can do to work for a better Israel?**

Be real, get involved, have a meaningful relationship. Blindly, or silently, "supporting" Israel can often be everything but. What is needed now is not automatic backing, but rather thoughtful engagement from real friends – the kind of friends that are sincerely involved and that will be openly outspoken about issues that they may find troubling. Israelis can withstand such honest conversation and should welcome it. The price of the alternative – knee-jerk, blind "support" – *that* could actually prove to be dangerously high.

### **On Tikkun:**

I am thinking of ACRI's work as part of the coalition of organizations working to defend the rights of refugees and immigrant workers. This summer has seen an unprecedented wave of demonstrations focusing on preventing the deportation of migrant workers' children. The pending deportation of these 1,200 children was supposed to begin August 1, and has been now postponed for three months, while the government rethinks. The public outrage as a result of the possibility that children with a very real Israeli identity – speaking Hebrew, going to school here, self-identifying as Israeli – could find themselves deported has brought a new kind of *tikkun* to the table: not half-measures, not temporary solutions for some children. Rather, permanent status in Israel for all these Israeli kids: that is what we are continuing to fight for now.

## Religious Pluralism and Freedom

Shira Ben Sasson Furstenberg – SHATIL Religious Pluralism Project Coordinator

*Shira Ben Sasson Furstenberg is the Religious Pluralism Project Coordinator at SHATIL, the New Israel Fund Initiative for Social Change. Her work focuses on assisting three target populations: the general pluralistic public (secular, Reform, Conservative, etc.), the liberal Orthodox public, and immigrants from the former Soviet Union. Born and raised in a liberal Orthodox family in Jerusalem, Shira was an officer in the IDF and received her BA and MA in cultural anthropology from the Hebrew University. She is married with two sons and a daughter.*

### What is one accomplishment from the past year you consider to be significant for Israeli society?

The precedent-setting Division of Property Law was adopted by the Knesset, allowing for the division of property before a divorce is granted, thereby minimizing the recalcitrant husband's ability to use extortion as a condition for the provision of a *get* [legal Jewish divorce].

The *International Coalition for Agunah Rights* has been leading this battle and continues to fight the good fight for *agunot*. This particular victory, though very long and hard fought, was accompanied by SHATIL all the way.

### In the New Year, what is one thing you would most like to accomplish for a better Israel?

Three key personal status issues continue to be threatened: conversion, marriage, and civil burial. Veteran pluralism organizations have been collaborating together, aiming to bring about a vast change in public policies and public awareness. This year, key pluralism organizations (IRAC, the Reform and *Masorti* movements, *Menucha Nechona*, *Panim* and others) are looking to better organize and create more focused taskforces that will work to achieve these changes. It is SHATIL's role to accompany and guide this process and to equip the partners with new mechanisms and strategic work plans.

A group of liberal Orthodox organizations joined together and were awarded a grant from an NIF supporter in order to jointly hire a spokesperson who will work with the media to bring the voice of liberal Orthodoxy to the fore. In the coming year, SHATIL will assist in two ways: i) laying the underlying infrastructure and guiding principles for the partnership, and ii) utilizing SHATIL Center for Policy Change expertise to provide intensive one-on-one guidance and training to the incoming spokesperson.

### How do you see your work in relation to Jewish values?

SHATIL's pluralism project is strongly embedded in Jewish values, as I understand them. My partners in the Reform and *Masorti* movements say: "there's more than one way to be Jewish." My partners in *Elul* quote the Babylonian Talmud, "*Elu v'elu divrei Elohim Chayim*" (These and Those are the Words of the Living God). It has been a great *zchut* [privilege] to work with more than 50 organizations each year to promote these values. I'm now leaving SHATIL for the year, and this is an opportunity for me to be grateful for working for an organization that is so pluralistic in hiring me, an Orthodox woman, as its Pluralism Project coordinator.

### What is the most important thing American Jews can do to work for a better Israel?

All matters of State and Religion in Israel directly affect US and world Jewry. Those of us who care about pluralism and tolerance as Jewish moral requisites must partner, from both sides of the ocean, to promote our joint objectives. We need to make this voice heard by the establishment, especially the Rabbinic establishment, and American Jewish communities can play an important role in making this happen.

### On *Tikkun*:

This year, SHATIL had the opportunity to convene a forum of 15 hand-picked directors of organizations, all Orthodox women, for a 3-day Facilitative Leadership workshop. There were two great, unexpected byproducts of the learning process.

We separated the directors into two groups in separate rooms and asked them to reach consensus on the five most important issues that Orthodox women should be promoting and struggling for as a joint force. We were amazed to find that the two groups identified the same five goals: (1) *Get* refusal struggle, (2) Empowering orthodox women as a sector, including gaining political and public power, (3) Sex education for both boys and girls in orthodox system, (4) Improving women's economic situation, and (5) Developing and promoting women's options for Tefila, Limmud Torah and rituals.

In addition, when creating the makeup of the group, after much consideration we decided to include a representative of Bat Kol, a lesbian Orthodox organization. The other participants were open and natural with her. No judgments. No disrespect. Her organization's vision was analyzed and dealt with just like everyone else's. This was an amazing display of the openness and inclusiveness these women have developed while working to further their goals. (In general as well, the Liberal Orthodox community seems to be gradually opening up towards the gay issue.) I see it as both a privilege and a duty to include Bat Kol in these forums, until they become a natural member of our public sphere, just like Atira was in this workshop.

One small hope for the coming year is to help this group to not only learn Facilitative Leadership together, but to really develop into a force that works together for all those goals they miraculously managed to set.

## Religious Pluralism and Freedom

### Yuval Yavne – Grant Officer of the New Israel Fund's Jewish Pluralism Pool

*Yuval Yavneh is a New Israel Fund Grants Officer in the field of Jewish pluralism. Aiming to address the growing schism in identity between Jewish Israelis, his work focuses on the NIF grantees that assist three target populations: the general pluralistic public (secular, Reform, Conservative, etc.), the liberal Orthodox public, and immigrants from the former Soviet Union. A writer, activist, and musician, Yuval has published two prize-winning collections of short stories and recorded three albums. He holds a bachelor's degree in law and philosophy from the Hebrew University, and is the married father of four.*

#### **What is one accomplishment from the past year you consider to be significant for Israeli society?**

The most significant accomplishment of the past year is the Supreme Court ruling (following a petition by IRAC) that the State of Israel must allocate equitable funds for the Reform and Conservative conversion programs.

#### **In the New Year, what is one thing you would most like to accomplish for a better Israel?**

For the new year, I would like to see the end of the Orthodox monopoly in the State of Israel.

#### **How do you see your work in relation to Jewish values?**

A central Jewish value (which sadly is often not prominent in the understanding of Judaism in today's Israel) is pluralism and respect for different paths. All NIF's work (with all communities in Israel, Jews and non-Jews alike) is deeply connected to this value.

#### **What is the most important thing American Jews can do to work for a better Israel?**

The most important thing American Jews can do to create a better Israel is insisting that the State of Israel respect the different streams of Judaism and treat them equitably. I believe that advancing pluralistic Judaism in Israel will also advance Israeli democracy – the more Israeli Jews are exposed to a pluralistic and moderate understanding of Judaism, the easier it will be to advance democratic values.

#### **On Tikkun:**

I'd like to mention two examples of cross-stream partnerships that deal with issues of pluralism.

One is ICAR: The International Coalition for Agunah Rights. The goal of the coalition is to promote the rights of *Agunot* and *Mesoravot get* [women who are anchored in marriage or refused a *get*, or Jewish divorce], and not to create a dialogue between the different Jewish streams. However, the fact that this coalition includes Orthodox, Reform, Conservative and secular women is in itself a *tikkun*. (Two years ago, the chair of the coalition was a representative of the Reform movement – and this is not something to be taken for granted from the point of view of the Orthodox members.)

The second example is Menucha Nechona, an organization working to promote the opening of a civil cemetery in Jerusalem. Their board included representatives of the Reform and Conservative movements, secular organizations and Orthodox. The chair is the chair of Ne'emanai Torah Va'Avodah – one of the leading liberal Orthodox organizations.

Unlike many other funders, bringing together Jews from different streams is not one of NIF's direct goals. However, we believe that supporting the development of different pluralistic models for Jewish identity (the secular model, the Liberal Orthodox model, the Reform and Conservative models) will eventually lead to collaboration and a more pluralistic approach among the different streams.

## Religious Pluralism: Liberal Orthodoxy

Yonatan Benarroch – Chair, Ne’emanei Torah Va’Avodah

*Yonatan Benarroch is the chair of Ne’emanei Torah Va’Avodah, which seeks to return Religious Zionism to its roots, works to create a thinking religious culture that is open and self-critical, and encourages a courageous halakhic discourse that deals with the challenges of contemporary times. The organization works to promote the values of tolerance, equality, and justice in religious society and to have a real influence on the Jewish-democratic character of Israeli society. Yonatan is a doctoral student in Jewish Philosophy at the Hebrew University, and a research fellow at the Scholion Interdisciplinary Research Center in Jewish Studies. He lives in Jerusalem.*

### **What is one accomplishment from the past year you consider to be significant for Israeli society?**

Our most important achievement this year was in organizing a group of leading educators from around the country for a series of sessions during which we trained them to work to strengthen values of pluralism and tolerance in the religious school system. Our goal is to counter the trend towards “haredization” [adoption of more extreme religious views] and extremism in the religious education system in Israel.

### **In the New Year, what is one thing you would most like to accomplish for a better Israel?**

What we would most like to accomplish this year is the establishment of an alternative rabbinical conversion court which will grapple in an open, empathetic, inclusive way with the issue of conversion, which is one of the most critical challenges for Israeli society and world Jewry. In the future, the rabbinical court we establish will also contend with finding solutions for the suffering of *agunot* and women who are refused a *get*.

### **How do you see your work in relation to Jewish values?**

Everything our organization does is closely deeply rooted in Jewish values – since we are committed to empowering a tolerant and pluralistic Judaism in the religious community undergoing growing radicalization, a trend which presents a significant threat to the delicate fabric of Israeli society.

### **What is the most important thing American Jews can do to work for a better Israel?**

American Jewry can serve as a wonderful example of diverse and pluralistic Judaism. And it is extremely important that this community’s spirit of openness and acceptance will influence Israeli society and help to mitigate the polarization and divisiveness.

### **On Tikkun**

The tikkun I am privileged to experience by virtue of my activities in Ne’emanei Torah Va’Avodah is the close and intense encounter with the representatives of the other streams in the Jewish People (the Reform, Conservative and secular leaders). My role has given me the rare and exciting opportunity for forming a true collaboration between the Orthodox movement and the other, pluralistic movements in the Jewish People. Such collaboration would not exist in the Israeli reality, and I hope that this cooperation will create a great connection and affinity between the different movements, and within Israeli society – where divides and dissent are so prevalent – more generally.

## Religious Pluralism and Freedom

Anat Hoffman – Executive Director of the Israel Religious Action Center

*Anat Hoffman became Executive Director of the Israel Religious Action Center in April 2002. Previously, Ms. Hoffman served as a Jerusalem City Councilwoman for 14 years, carving out a niche for herself as an untiring warrior for justice and equality. She has dedicated her adult life to the Jewish principle of tikkun olam. IRAC, the public and legal advocacy arm of the Reform Movement in Israel, was founded in 1987 with the goals of advancing pluralism in Israeli society and defending the freedoms of conscience, faith, and religion. IRAC occupies a unique place in the social and religious landscape of Israel, infusing social justice advocacy with the spiritual energy and humane worldview of Progressive Judaism.*

### **What is one accomplishment from the past year you consider to be significant for Israeli society?**

Our Supreme Court victory providing funding for Reform and Conservative conversion classes was our most significant victory last year as it set a major precedent that can pave the way for equal state funding for all Reform and Conservative religious services. Today, because non-Orthodox Judaism does not receive government support (as Orthodox Jewish services do), Israelis do not see that they have a choice in how to be Jewish, with many turning away from Judaism all together. This Supreme Court victory represents a significant step in bringing more religious equality and Jewish pluralism to Israeli society.

### **In the New Year, what is one thing you would most like to accomplish for a better Israel?**

Over the past couple of years, IRAC has identified a troubling trend of religiously motivated gender segregation in public spaces. This has occurred most notably on nearly 100 public buses where women must board and sit only in the back but it is also happening in health clinics, stores, and even city center streets. In the coming year we hope to put an end to this religious coercion.

### **How do you see your work in relation to Jewish values?**

Unlike most other civil and human rights organizations in Israel, the Israel Religious Action Center is self-identified as a Jewish organization, and it is precisely our Progressive Jewish values that inform and direct our agenda and shape our vision for a Jewish and democratic Israeli society. For example, when we speak out against racism in Israel, we do so not just as good citizens but also as Jews. We believe it is precisely the advancement of Progressive Jewish values in Israel that makes our role so important in Israeli society.

### **What is the most important thing American Jews can do to work for a better Israel?**

Be informed, visit Israel, make your voice heard, and support social change.

### **On Tikkun:**

Kehilat Tzedek is the Israel Religious Action Center's social action training program for congregations of all streams. Reform, Conservative, Modern Orthodox, and Secular congregations take on more social responsibility in their communities, and make social action a core element of their congregational life. Through this process, they become more aware of their own congregational community, and begin to help others there, reaching out to those who are struggling just beside them, and ultimately building a stronger congregation in the process. In addition, this program is magical in that it unites all Jewish denominations in their shared values of *tikkun olam*. This is a rare program in Israel that focuses on what unites us rather than divides us.

## Religious Pluralism: Orthodox Feminism

Dina Feldman, *Executive Director*, and Hanah Kehat, *Founder of Kolech: The Religious Women's Forum*

*Kolech works to promote women's rights through a consensual process of change from within Orthodoxy. The organization now has 9 vibrant branches throughout Israel, actively fighting on behalf of "chained" and abused women, addressing the taboo subject of sexual harassment in the Orthodox community, speaking out against the Rabbinate on issues of women's rights, and promoting increased religious roles for women within Orthodoxy.*

### **What is one accomplishment from the past year you consider to be significant for Israeli society?**

Last year we had two major achievements for justice for women in Israel. One was the rehabilitation of the law of "capital relations" which allows the division of the property of spouses that are in the process of divorce, prior to receiving the *get*. This will prevent extortion by husbands who obstruct the giving of the *get* in order to prevent the division of property. Kolech was one of the main instigators of this law. Another achievement was the precedent-setting rulings giving compensation to wives who were refused a *get* by their husbands. These cases were fought by "Justice for Women", an organization that was funded by Kolech's members.

### **In the New Year, what is one thing you would most like to accomplish for a better Israel?**

We hope to accomplish more laws that will prevent "*get* refusal", such as the law of expropriation of the money of the Kiddushin (the sanctification of a marriage), and the law of minimum time for a *get*.

### **How do you see your work in relation to Jewish values?**

The vision of Kolech is to promote women's rights, especially within Jewish Halacha and the religious community. The women of Kolech daringly speak out about issues that lay dormant for years, decades, perhaps even centuries. They have brought to the fore vital issues of communal concern around justice, social equity, empowerment and equality within Jewish practice. This idea is a fulfillment of the Jewish biblical statement: that man and woman were created equal: **כי בצלם אלהים עשה את האדם זכר ונקבה ברא** "אוֹתָם" (G-d created the human being in his image, male and female he did create). And the other commandment: **"ואהבת לרעך כמוך"**, (Love your friend as yourself). So this is a basic Jewish idea.

### **What is the most important thing American Jews can do to work for a better Israel?**

The most important contribution of American Jews would be to support groups and organizations (most of them NGOs) to initiate more social justice in general, and the equal rights of women in particular.

### **On *Tikkun*:**

In Kolech we see the process of *tikkun* at three levels: The first one is that we see that women that were victims of sexual harassment or domestic violence became activists and volunteers in social organizations. They grow to be able to help others, after being treated and after becoming empowered through their divorce or their legal actions.

The second level is relevant for almost all of us – Orthodox feminist women, especially women who are lawyers or rabbinical lawyers. Our rise from our low status in our community, where we had felt oppressed and inferior, caused us to go out and fight for women's rights. It gave us a new status in the State of Israel. We are much more involved in promoting laws and social entrepreneurs, we do many projects of empowerment of Orthodox women, and these women become social leaders in their communities.

The third level is the changes that we see in rabbis who are open-minded and enter into a dialog with us. It's amazing to see how they start to see us, the women, to understand the evil of the traditional chauvinist life, and we get a lot of encouragement and support from them. Two weeks ago we had a very large conference (over 1000 participants) and Rabbi Yehuda Amital came to express his support for our activities. It was exciting - because he accepted our point of view and finally joined us in our struggles.

## Religious Pluralism and Freedom: Agunah Rights

Elana Sztokman – Founding Member, Mavoi Satum

*Elana Sztokman is a founding member of Mavoi Satum, and a writer, researcher, educator, and activist and blogger. Mavoi Satum is a leading Israeli organization advocating for a permanent solution for agunot and mesuravot get (women denied divorce). Mavoi Satum believes that divorce is a basic human right, that it is every woman's right to leave a bad marriage and live her own life as she chooses. Mavoi Satum has as its core mission to aid mesuravot get on the individual level while promoting broad legal-religious reform in order to prevent the problem from afflicting others in the future.*

### **What is one accomplishment from the past year you consider to be significant for Israeli society?**

Mavoi Satum's most significant accomplishment this past year was forming a strong coalition for the creation of an Arbitration Body that would form a real, viable alternative to the rabbinical courts for matters of divorce. This project will ultimately free women (and men) from the monopoly of the state-backed rabbinical courts, and offer citizens a non-Haredi option for issues of divorce, as well as other important matters.

### **In the New Year, what is one thing you would most like to accomplish for a better Israel?**

We would like to see the status of women in Israel improved, across all sectors of society, through legislation, awareness, and commitment of leaders to the betterment of women's lives.

### **How do you see your work in relation to Jewish values?**

The most fundamental ethic of Torah is compassion. Shabbat, as mandated in the Torah, is about creating social equality – everyone is equally entitled to rest, from landlords to workers to animals, social hierarchies are temporarily set aside, and all forms of ownership and control over technology and the environment cease and desist. It's all about kindness and compassion towards one's surroundings.

Similarly, the biblical dictate that has been interpreted as "separation of meat and milk" is actually based on a much more straightforward precept: do not cook a kid in its mother's milk. That is, animals have relationships and feelings, and we need to think about animals not merely in terms of our own lustful needs but in terms of living creatures. It's about learning to feel compassion for the mother.

These concepts are so fundamental that the Torah tells us 36 times to be compassionate to the stranger for we were strangers in Egypt. And this is why, when the proselyte came to Hillel to ask to be taught the entire Torah while standing on one foot, Hillel replied, "Do not do unto others as you would not want to be done unto you. The rest is commentary."

In our work on behalf of *agunot* and *mesuravot get*, we strive more than anything to bring compassion back to the center of Jewish life. Women should not have to suffer in marriage, and they should not be tortured when they try to exit painful marriages. These women's horrific struggles to obtain their freedom are the antithesis of Torah, a distortion of what Judaism is meant to be. Our goal is to bring back compassion and create a culture and practice which is built upon compassion for women, who are God's creations, too.

### **What is the most important thing American Jews can do to work for a better Israel?**

American Jews can support causes that are working towards social change. Americans can help spread the culture of democracy, equality and human rights, issues that many Americans grew up with, such as through the Civil Rights movement, and take for granted as vital. Israel needs help in forming a deeply rooted consciousness of basic civil liberties, and Americans can help embed these values to Israeli society by supporting the organizations that are working on these very issues.

**On Tikkun:**

As part of the process of helping women obtain their freedom, it became clear that women need to find their voice. Rather than have others speak on their behalf, we decided to teach women to speak on their own behalf. Through a program we developed called, "Speak up!", *mesuravot get* were trained in public speaking and the fundamentals of marketing and PR, and now women who were once victims are now the ones with the strong voices, working with the media, lobbyists, law makers and other organizations as their own advocates. It's about making a switch in how we see other people, really helping people transform themselves from victims to women of strength.

## **Rights of Migrant Workers and Refugees**

**Lisa Richlen – Associate Director for Resource Development, Hotline for Migrant Workers**

*Lisa Richlen is Associate Director for Resource Development at the Hotline for Migrant Workers, which works to (1) promote the rights of undocumented migrant workers and refugees and (b) eliminate trafficking in persons in Israel. Hoping to strengthen human rights in Israel, Richlen joined the Hotline for Migrant Workers in 2004. A native of Seattle, Richlen moved to Israel in 2000. She holds an M.A. in Interdisciplinary Studies with a focus on Conflict Resolution and Education from Lesley College in Boston.*

### **What is one accomplishment from the past year you consider to be significant for Israeli society?**

In part due to our advocacy, 500 Darfur refugees received temporary residency status.

In March, The Hotline for Migrant Workers received the *National Prize for Combating Trafficking in Persons* bestowed by the Israeli government. This honor is particularly significant as it is the first year of this prize's establishment.

### **In the New Year, what is one thing you would most like to accomplish for a better Israel?**

As the new year approaches, we most hope that children of migrant workers- who were born and raised in Israel and who identify as Israelis in every way- will not be deported. Rather, the country should recognize its responsibility to non-Jews and adopt a more humane policy towards those seeking opportunity and safety in the country.

### **How do you see your work in relation to Jewish values?**

More than any other commandment, we are enjoined to care for the vulnerable in our midst because we were strangers in Egypt. That is our mission as an organization- we believe our work is inseparable from the humanistic and universal values that Judaism teaches and on which the State was founded.

### **What is the most important thing American Jews can do to work for a better Israel?**

American Jews are a vital source of support for Israel; through their advocacy, they can influence policy (such as the decision to award Darfuri refugees temporary residency status or combat trafficking). They also provide financial and moral support which is instrumental in promoting the values we both share.

## **Environmental Justice**

**Sigal Yaniv – Director of the Green Environment Fund**

*Sigal Yaniv Feller is Director of the Green Environment Fund (GEF), a partnership between the New Israel Fund, the Andrea and Charles Bronfman Philanthropies, the Nathan Cummings Foundation and other funders. The GEF is the leading supporter of the environmental nonprofit sector in Israel, fighting to protect and preserve Israel's scarce environmental resources, spearhead environmental activism, promote sustainable living and achieve environmental justice. In 2006, Sigal was chosen as one of the 10 most influential people on the environment in Israel in the "The Marker" Israeli financial magazine.*

### **What is one accomplishment from the past year you consider to be significant for Israeli society?**

On a national level a significant accomplishment is the passing of Israel's Clean Air act. Finally after more the 60 years, Israel has a clean air act. In a country that over 1000 people die annually from air pollution in the Tel Aviv region alone, it is most necessary to create these frameworks for a sustainable future. The Green Environment Fund has supported these efforts for the past 8 years, led by IUED and a coalition of environmental NGOs, up to the successful passing of the law. Now we face the next challenge of implementation....

On a local level, many local environmental victories took place recently in Israel, supported by GEF's Sheli Fund, including fighting wide-scale development plans both in the Timna valley by Eilat and Palmachim beach south of Tel Aviv. These victories prove that even a small group of committed citizens can change their world and make a difference.

### **In the New Year, what is one thing you would most like to accomplish for a better Israel?**

The understanding, that each one of us can make a difference, if we devote more thoughts to our actions and more action to our lives.

### **How do you see your work in relation to Jewish values?**

Our work is in natural connection to Jewish values, respect for our land, heritage, moral values between people and people to place. There are environmental values in the bible that we need to open our eyes and see. A life truly led by Jewish values has the natural potential to honor the environment and protect it.

### **What is the most important thing American Jews can do to work for a better Israel?**

Help us create an awareness that environment is not a luxury for us to deal with in the far future, when the rest of the problems are solved, but this is a critical time to make a difference while we still can and create a future for our children and grandchildren, where they still have choices to make.

## **Rights for Persons with Disabilities**

### **Tirza Leibowitz – Disability Rights Activist**

*Tirza Leibowitz, Director of Advocacy at Survivor Corps that works with survivors of conflict to promote their rights; formerly of Bizchut, The Israel Human Rights Center for Persons with Disabilities. Bizchut, is committed to advancing the rights of people with physical, developmental and emotional disabilities and enabling their full integration into mainstream society and participation in all areas of life. The name Bizchut (literally: 'by right') reflects the belief that all people are entitled to the same basic rights and that the needs of people with disabilities must be met on the basis of entitlement, not as a function of charity or pity.*

#### **What is one accomplishment from the past year you consider to be significant for Israeli society?**

The trickling both in the Israeli and in Arab society, of the "survivor" perspective (according to which each side acknowledges the responsibility it has towards its own actions and conduct, can rise above the vicious cycle of violent responses that continuously change sides and provide a vision for a different way), rather than of the "victim" one (according to which the other side is to blame, the root of action is fear). No longer only a grudging acknowledgment that there is "another side" which must be taken into account, but first signs of willingness to consider that it may be actually enriching for each side to live with the other, something to look forward to, cherish, see as a stepping stone for materializing each side's aspirations to secure and viable nationhood, a mutual gain.

#### **In the New Year, what is one thing you would most like to accomplish for a better Israel?**

That progress in human rights in one area of concern in Israeli society cascade and influence human rights in another area. That progress in inclusion of one marginalized group will naturally break down barriers to inclusion of another marginalized group in Israeli society. Human rights are after all indivisible.

One area where progress is slow is in inclusion of persons with disabilities in society, in particular where it counts most: one's home. The majority of people with disabilities who need support in order to live independently are still relegated to institutions as a home for life! -- instead of receiving support to live like anyone else in society, in a home of his or her own: alone, with a flatmate/flatmates, with a partner, in an apartment building or in a house within the neighborhood -- any living setting which is a "given" for you and me. A major landmark has been the striking down of criteria of the Ministry of Welfare that severely narrowed down eligibility for assistance in a home in the community rather than in an institution. This happened as a result of a case Bizchut brought before the Supreme Court on behalf of young men and women with intellectual and physical disabilities who fought for a home in place of an institution. Still, they have not been guaranteed a home in the community. The struggle continues to cause the Ministry to incorporate truly inclusionary policies, enlist the general public to internalize that this goes to the heart of human rights.

#### **How do you see your work in relation to Jewish values?**

Jewish tradition is rich -- so rich it at times contains conflicting values. It should be used carefully, because values that stand in conflict with human rights can also be derived from it; it calls for interpretation and opinions can vary and even contradict. Jewish tradition can constitute another tool to promote human rights. It can be a powerful tool, because it connects with strong convictions, with readiness to go to great lengths for the sake of something. And it is layered with generations of thought, writing discourse, and debate which can lend themselves well to nuanced thinking.

#### **What is the most important thing American Jews can do to work for a better Israel?**

Help Israel look itself straight in the eye, assess itself critically. Help Israel look at the current situation from a more distant perspective. Remind us of the important and fundamental questions, such as -- "what kind of a country must we have in order to justify holding onto it," "is this the country we dreamed of." Remind us of the expectation we should expect of ourselves. In no case give us your blind support. Always encourage us to strive for better.