

NIF News

A REPORT ON BUILDING A STRONG AND DEMOCRATIC ISRAEL

FALL 2008

Social Change is Changing

Barack Obama got his start as a community organizer. And although many years have passed since his days working as an activist to help Chicago residents improve their neighborhoods, he has not forgotten the lessons he learned nor lost a sense of his idealism.

Throughout the presidential contest, the Democratic nominee has used his grassroots organizing skills and experience to build up one of the most exciting campaigns in recent memory.

Whether or not he comes out the victor



A player from NIF's "Kick It Out" campaign.

this November, Obama has helped to reshape the national discourse and has inspired hope among millions. And it is his background as a social activist that has helped inform his worldview on implementing and inspiring change.

As Obama demonstrates, social change activists have the ability to achieve large-scale change and to transform policies, laws and thought at every level of society. And in both the U.S. and Israel, social change activists are making real differences. For the past twenty-nine years, the New Israel Fund has made social change our business. We know that achieving meaningful change means not being static; it requires activists to be forward thinking in their methodology, strategies and thinking. Putting this knowledge to work, the NIF family has revolutionized civil society and social policy in Israel – which is why this year's upcoming NIForum will showcase the

innovative ways that our family of activists are changing Israel for the better.

Project Runway, NIF-Style

Last summer, Israeli pop singers, supermodels, actresses, and other celebrities strutted down the runway at a Tel Aviv fashion show attended by hundreds. But this was no ordinary fashion show. Organized by NIF grantee ICAR (International Coalition for Agunot Rights), the event brought the personal and chilling stories of agunot, literally "chained women" who are refused a *get* or Jewish law divorce by their husbands, to the public's attention. Twenty of Israel's top fashion designers paired up with an agunah to design a dress that embodied each woman's struggle.

"One of our biggest successes is that

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(Un)Paving the Way for a
Healthier Environment

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The New Israel Fund Family
Wishes You
A Happy and Healthy
New Year



Message from NIF President Naomi Chazan



It is with great excitement, anticipation and no small measure of trepidation that I assume the office of President of the Board of NIF. The NIF is a truly exciting undertaking in so many respects: it has contributed more than any other organization to creating and empowering civil society in Israel; it has continuously nurtured democratic values and democratic practices in the country, it tirelessly promotes social justice for all Israelis and it constantly strives to assure tolerance and equality for all citizens of Israel.

The NIF is all this and more: at the most fundamental level it is a partnership—between Israelis (Jews and Arabs) of all hues and opinions within Israel, between different segments of Israeli society, between Israel and world Jewry. It has proven, time and again, that working together can make a difference.

The expansion of the scope and substance of NIF activities in recent years under the impressive stewardship of Peter Edelman as President of the Board and the highly professional staff in Israel, the United States, Canada and the United Kingdom has been nothing short of remarkable. Since its inception in 1979, NIF has distributed over \$200 million to over 800 civil society groups, and been instrumental in improving the lives of countless people. SHATIL provides services and capacity building programs to over 1,400 organizations annually. Israel is

a better place for these efforts.

Alongside this record of achievements are persistent challenges. Sadly, Israeli society today is more fragmented and more rudderless than ever before. The problems of governance that have plagued the country in recent years have now come to a head (the next few months will be marked by extreme political uncertainty). In the midst of plenty, there are simply too many working poor, who, however hard they try, cannot make ends meet. Pluralistic Jewish communities are sprouting up throughout the country, but the monopolistic hold of Orthodoxy continues unabated. Most recently, the conversion crisis has once again come to the fore, just as prospects for civil marriage have dimmed. And the relations between the Jewish majority and the Arab minority in Israel are more than strained. The tasks of maintaining public probity and assuring a just society are as daunting as ever.

Israel is now especially in need of creative solutions to these and other problems. This is where the contribution of NIF becomes particularly relevant. The secret of the New Israel Fund and SHATIL has always been a function of three critical traits: an unwavering belief in the ability of Israeli citizens to voice their concerns and empower themselves and their surroundings; a deep-felt conviction that justice is the key to human security; and a professional commitment to introducing and implementing innovative strategies for societal betterment.

During the course of the past year, NIF and SHATIL have conducted a comprehensive strategic review with an eye to identifying cutting edge issues and developing dynamic tools to meet current challenges. Increasingly, efforts will be geared not only to

enhancing the capacity to effect social change, but to bringing about this transformation. Grantees, projects, and programs will be evaluated according to their ability to meet the objectives and attain the benchmarks that they have set for themselves. Coalitions of organizations working on similar issues will be encouraged, while at the same time individual agents of social change will be nurtured.

Shifts in how the NIF works are directly related to what it plans to do. Each year certain priority areas will be highlighted, and packages of grants, programs and projects will be designed to deal more efficiently with each issue. The right to housing, creating workable models for joint living, the social empowerment of the Negev and democratic reform are among the lead programs being pursued at this time.

The NIF family of organizations and projects, despite the mounting monetary constraints resulting from the slowdown in the world economy and the drastic drop in the value of the dollar, is therefore determined to push forward with new ideas and new methods to realize tangible change. We will continue to be responsive to specific ideas on substantive issues—ranging from religious pluralism and human rights to social justice and education for democracy—as well as to insights on how these ideas can best be implemented.

I welcome any thoughts and comments you might have, and look forward to working with each and every one of you. In the meantime, allow me thank you again for your guidance and support for NIF and for your ongoing commitment to a fair Israel. I wish you all a healthy, peaceful and prosperous New Year.

the issue is in the public eye,” said Robin Shames, director of ICAR, a coalition of 25 Israeli women’s organizations spanning the religious spectrum from secular to Orthodox. “At one point you would say agunah, and people wouldn’t know what you were talking about.” The fashion show made headlines in the country’s gossip columns and mainstream media.

Kicking Racism Out of the Stadium

Before NIF’s “Kick it Out” campaign began, there was a fatalistic approach to the blatant racism heard each week in the country’s stadiums. Going beyond simple jeers aimed at the opposition, chants such as “Death to Arabs” and “monkey” chants directed at black players were, unfortunately, not uncommon. Believing that behavior in the stadium reflected problems of racism in society at large, NIF knew it was time to act. Thus, the campaign to reduce racism in Israeli society through soccer was born.

NIF’s campaign has put the topic of racist invective and behavior on Israel’s public agenda. And the strategy of monitoring, reporting and public advo-

cacy has worked; legislation for which NIF acted as consultant outlawed racism at soccer matches two years ago. During the 2007-08 season, there was an overall 59 percent decrease in racist and violent incidents compared to the previous year. Additionally, the past season has seen more and more organizations, including major international soccer governing bodies, partnering with NIF in efforts to combat racism in soccer.

Selecting Discrimination

The Zubeidats, a newlywed Arab Israeli couple, looked forward to building a house and starting a family together. After Fatina was awarded a scholarship at the Technion in Haifa, they began looking for land in the middle-class rural village of Rakefet. However, deemed “socially unsuitable” by the regional selection committee, their application was denied.

Several NIF grantees joined together to petition the Supreme Court on behalf of the Zubeidats. While in this instance the victims of discrimination were an Arab couple, the petitioners claim that the selection committees filter applications from a range of other minority

groups, including Mizrahi Jews, single parents and the gay and lesbian community. In November of last year, the Court ordered Rakefet to allocate land for the Zubeidats.

The court order comes in the wake of the successful petition to the Supreme Court in the 1990’s by flagship NIF grantee Association for Civil Rights in Israel (ACRI) on behalf Adel Ka’adan, an Israeli Arab who was refused a home in the Jewish village of Katzir explicitly because he was an Arab.

A Progressive Way Forward

If, in business, refusing to change means losing share in the marketplace, the need to innovate is even more important in the non-profit sector. As a unique partnership of Israel and the Diaspora, NIF constantly surveys and implements the newest best practices for achieving impact, often far out of proportion to our staff and our financial resources.

To learn more about our issues, how you can get involved, or to sign up for our weekly e-newsletter, please visit www.nif.org.

The 2008 NIFForum will focus on the next wave of social change in Israel. Join NIF for a day of dialogue about Israel’s toughest social, political and cultural issues. Hear from a new generation of activists using innovative strategies – in the courts, the media, the corporate sector and in communities – to create a more just and equitable Israel.

Sunday, September 21, 11am-5pm
Kimmel Center at NYU - 60 Washington Square South, New York City

For more information and to register, visit www.nif.org/niforum08

innovation!

NEW STRATEGIES FOR SOCIAL CHANGE IN ISRAEL

NIF Battles Extremist Ultra-Orthodox

Deferring to the ultra-Orthodox has emerged as 2008's hottest trend for Israeli right-wing politicians. As has frequently been the case in the U.S., it seems that Israeli conservatives can't do enough to jockey for the religious fundamentalist vote. And just as in the U.S., the consequences for civil liberties and democracy are staggering. As a result of the hardening intransigence of the ultra-Orthodox, the gap between them and the rest of Israeli society is widening and dangerously threatening Israel's social cohesion. Two recent events exemplify the issue – the opening ceremony of Jerusalem's Chords Bridge and the annulment of thousands of religious conversions.

Modesty Police

The opening ceremony of the Chords Bridge in Jerusalem was supposed to be a joyous affair in which speeches and performances by dancers celebrated the new construction. Not long before the ceremony commenced, however, the troupe of teenaged dancers were forced into a wardrobe change. Instead of the t-shirts and full length pants they had originally intended to wear, they were now told that they would have to perform in sack dresses and wool hats, hardly conducive to the freedom of movement required by a dancer. The reason? The Haredim watching the dress rehearsal were horrified at the "prostitutes" scheduled to dance. With upcoming elections, and leaders desperate to wrangle ultra-Orthodox votes, the Jerusalem leadership acquiesced.

Ha'aretz Correspondent Yair Ettinger described what transpired as "yet another stage in the city's ongoing fall into the hands of ultra-Orthodox extremists."

Other commentators drew parallels

with Afghanistan's Taliban regime, likening the dresses to burquas and decrying the inordinate power of the ever more conservative minority. "These extremists are dangerous to women and also to Judaism," commented Shira Ben Sasson Furstenberg, NIF Coordinator for Religious Pluralism. "Asking girls to dress like the Taliban - that is Jewish law taken to an extreme, to an ugly and ridiculous place. That is not what is written, but an add-on that is not consistent with Jewish thought."



Susan Weiss, the Founder and Executive Director of NIF grantee Center for Women's Justice, represents the Danish-born Israeli whose divorce trial began the conversion controversy.

Annulled Conversions

The latest salvo in the long-running-conversion wars began with a Danish woman who converted to Judaism in 1993. In accordance with Israeli law, she underwent a conversion deemed acceptable by Orthodox standards, and was recognized as Jewish by the State of Israel. Last year, she and her husband began proceedings for an uncontested divorce hearing in the Ashdod Rabbinical Court. Despite the couple having agreed to divorce terms in advance, Dayan Avraham Attia, the religious court judge who presided, ruled

that the woman was not Jewish because her conversion was invalid, and therefore she had never married in the first place and did not need a divorce. When the case reached the Rabbinical Court of Appeals, it was not only upheld, but the Court went a step further and annulled thousands of conversions carried out by Rabbi Druckman's Conversion Authority.

The real issue: a power struggle between the modern and more moderate Orthodox Jews, who have traditionally held the position of chief rabbinate, and the ultra-Orthodox. The rigorous attitude towards conversion held by the Rabbinical Court of Appeals, which is controlled by ultra-Orthodox rabbis, was at odds with the more realistic approach of the Zionist national Orthodox movement. The latter espouses flexibility, especially following mass immigration from the former Soviet Union when so many newcomers are not halachically Jewish. In what is viewed as a cynical ploy by Prime Minister Ehud Olmert to gain support from ultra-Orthodox political parties, the Prime Minister's Office has since fired Rabbi Druckman.

Strengthening Moderate Voices

In the wake of the annulment controversy, NIF has seized the opportunity to strengthen and expand liberal Orthodox organizations. This summer, NIF provided Ne'menai Torah V'Avoda with emergency funding to organize a July conference on the concept of Alternative Rabbinical Courts, which now have the support of much of the Zionist national Orthodox establishment. The conference was attended by many liberal Orthodox organizations supported by NIF, which will continue

to support the battle for pluralistic conversion. Additionally, another NIF grantee, the Center for Women's Justice, is appealing the matter to the Supreme Court contesting the Rabbinical Court's authority to annul the conversions. A verdict is expected within the coming months.

Recent breakthroughs in religious pluralism have also inspired hope for mending the rift in Israeli society. In July, the Knesset enacted a new law creating a pluralistic educational program for state schools, a program that encourages secular and observant Jewish students to learn together. Labor

MK Rabbi Michael Melchior, who initiated the bill supported by MKs from the right and left, described the law as "an educational revolution and response to the divide in society."

The Unspeakable Issue: Torture, Security and Human Rights

Eliahu Frank Abram, an American by birth and long-time human rights activist, serves as the Legal Director for NIF grantee the Public Committee against Torture in Israel (PCATI) and was among the team of lawyers instrumental in winning the landmark 1999 High Court ruling ordering Israel's security forces to stop torturing detainees to obtain information. He spoke with NIF News from Jerusalem last month.



Eliahu Abram

What Does PCATI do?

The Israeli Security Agency (GSS) responsible for protecting Israel has a hard and crucial task in trying to prevent the very serious threat of terrorism. They do work that is crucial for the security of every Israeli. But like many security organizations, there is tremendous temptation for them to overstep the boundaries. We are trying to prevent the trampling of fundamental human rights and preserve human dignity in the course of security investigations. We have an international mandate - Israel is a party to the UN Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment - and we see that document as our platform.

What did the 1999 High Court ruling on torture mean in reality?

The great victory of this organization, together with other organizations - all of which were supported by NIF - was the 1999 decision of the Supreme Court, which held that the GSS has no authority to use physical means in interrogations. It was a courageous decision by the Court. Since then, however, there are two problems: A lack of compliance - and our organization is trying to force the government, GSS and police to comply with both the letter and the spirit of this decision -- and gaps in the decision. For example, the Court held that if it's essential due to the urgency of the investigation, you can interrogate a suspect for long hours; this is an example where the GSS has taken the exception and typically will interrogate suspects by depriving them of sleep even when the only real purpose is breaking their will.

What is the public opinion in Israel on the use of force in interrogations?

One of the problems in Israel is that the understanding of human rights and its importance is skin deep. Particularly when faced with security vs. human rights, and of someone who is not a Jew and is accused of being an enemy of the Jewish people. We're trying to educate the public by finding ways to reach out to people to get a deeper understanding of what's at stake. We're not attacking Israel; we are attacking the failures and calling for reforms, which will ultimately strengthen Israel.

Has the issue of American use of torture at the Guantanamo Bay facility had any impact on the issue in Israel?

The problem with the US abuse of prisoners in Guantanamo Bay is that the US' moral authority to tell other countries to stop torturing has evaporated. But we can teach the US through our legislation and litigation. In Israel, a country confronted with the gravest possible threats, we continue to maintain that judges have to oversee what is happening. This is what Bush was trying to circumvent.

(Un)Paving the Way for a Healthier Environment

The typical Israeli cityscape is characterized by an integrated mix of steel and stone, of ancient and modern. And while each city is unique, there is one unifying characteristic – cranes. The Israeli skyline is not summed up by an olive tree or ancient building, but with the behemoth machines that construct new neighborhoods, office buildings and commercial districts. While development, a signifier of Israel's booming economy, is positive when regulated, the country's unfettered development has come with a price. Israel is experiencing the accelerated loss of open spaces, contamination of shorelines and bodies of water, and a significant increase in every kind of pollution.

Taking on Israel's daunting environmental problems is no easy task. But the New Israel Fund, working with and through the Green Environment Fund* has proven itself up to the challenge. Three recent, major environmental victories typify the successful fight for a cleaner and greener Israel.

Jerusalem's Central Park

In June, Jerusalem's District Planning and Construction Committee approved plans to preserve 64 acres in the heart of the city as protected parkland. The Gazelle Valley – so named for its herd of seventeen gazelles – was, until recently, slated for housing and commercial development. Together with the Society for the Protection of Nature in Israel (SPNI), an ad-hoc residents' committee drew up the plans for preservation. "This will be the first urban nature park of its kind in Israel," explains SPNI landscape architect Yael Hammerman. "People will be able to observe nature without infringing on it."

The campaign to protect the land began in the 1990s, when the Jerusalem Municipality agreed to let real estate companies plan housing and commercial

developments for the area. A vigorous battle was fought by local NIF-supported environmental groups to preserve the valley as an open space. In 2001 the housing development plans were dropped, though some commercial developments remained. With its recent approval of the preservation plans creating the alternative parkland, the District Planning and Construction Committee has now agreed to scrap the commercial developments and retain the area as unblemished green space.



Green Course demonstrators protest the level of industrial pollution in Israel's air.

Protecting Lake Kinneret

Lake Kinneret, or the Sea of Galilee, is one of Israel's most precious national assets. Only thirteen miles long and seven miles wide, the lake provides about one third of Israel's potable water and sites along its coastlines are considered sacred to both Jews and Christians. But unchecked development and pollution pose a threat to this vital body of water and its shore.

This spring, however, the future of the Kinneret improved dramatically with newly enacted legislation designed to protect the Lake. The law comprises two parts: establishing the Kinneret Urban Union to unite the twenty bodies which manage the lake's coastline; and the extension of the 2004 Coastline Protection Law to the Kinneret, prohibiting construction within fifty meters of the waterfront. SPNI and other GEF-support-

ed organizations such as the Israel Union for Environmental Defense (IUED) and Green Course helped formulate the Coastline Protection Law and have been lobbying for the establishment of the Kinneret Urban Union. The legislation also had major grassroots support, with tens of thousands of activists lobbying for its passage.

Breathing a Sigh of Relief

In July, Israel's environmental movement scored a third victory with the passage of the Clean Air Law. Originally drafted by IUED five years ago, the legislation is desperately needed. A recent European Union report cited Tel Aviv as the third worst city for air pollution in the European and Mediterranean region. And according to IUED, one in five children in the greater Tel Aviv region suffers from respiratory illnesses related to air pollution, while over 1,100 people die each year as a result of air pollution in Israel's largest metropolitan area.

The Clean Air Law, which will be implemented in 2011, sets out strict emission standards and regulates procedures for monitoring air quality, which will be transparent and available to the public. Most important, the law has teeth and stipulates heavy fines for polluters. "This is an important day for the Israeli public who can look forward to cleaner air and a healthier environment," commented Tzvi Iser Itzik, Executive Director of IUED. But he also noted their work was yet over. "A major challenge ahead," Iser Itzik said, "is to ensure the enforcement of the law by the Environment Ministry."

* NIF is a key partner in the Green Environment Fund, which is at the forefront of Israel's environmental movement and the largest funder of environmental NGOs in Israel.

MORE THAN EVER IN THESE UNCERTAIN TIMES, NIF AND THOSE WE SERVE NEED YOUR SUPPORT

With the generous support of tens of thousands of concerned supporters worldwide, the New Israel Fund (NIF) has accumulated an impressive list of accomplishments in its 29 years. Every day, our supporters make it possible for us to continue our work to improve the lives of countless Israelis on the social, geographic and economic margins of society by supporting local and national initiatives to advance civil rights, social justice and pluralism and tolerance in Israel.

All of us face the uncertainties of a sluggish economy. As a result, many have delayed their giving for a “better” time. But your commitment to the furtherance of progressive change in Israel is crucial to the future of Israel. Those who are working to achieve a better life for all Israelis look to us. Indeed, for a great many grassroots organizations fighting for change in Israel, we are the only source of support. Your support is needed today more than ever.

The easiest way to make a charitable gift to NIF is by making an outright gift (by mail with the attached coupon, or online at www.nif.org/donate). You might also consider the tax advantages of transferring appreciated securities or State of Israel bonds. In addition to gifts that advance our work today, we are also happy to discuss ways in which you can perpetuate a legacy of your support for NIF by naming NIF beneficiary of your will, retirement plan or life insurance policy.

If you would like a copy of our wire instructions for a gift of securities or information about the other giving opportunities we offer, please visit our website at www.nif.org/giftoptions or contact your local NIF office.

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