Social Justice Protests Catch Fire

Months before Occupy Wall Street began making headlines, nearly half a million Israelis took to the streets demanding social justice. Mobilized by extremely high housing prices and the soaring costs of consumer goods, the massive grassroots demonstrations this summer sparked a nationwide conversation and are influencing national priorities and agendas. From the first days of the protest, the New Israel Fund has been the only organization outside Israel to support the movement through emergency grants, on-site counsel to the protesters, dialogue facilitation, and policy analysis.

One Young Woman in a Tent
In July, a young video producer named Dafni Leef pitched a tent on Tel Aviv’s Rothschild Boulevard. Leef, who lost her apartment of three years due to rent increases, was unable to find an affordable home given the skyrocketing cost of housing in the center of the country. Almost facetiously, she asked her Facebook friends to join her, and soon drew a small protest gathering in tents along the Boulevard. The protest grew larger, joined by many other employed Israelis struggling to rent an apartment, and began to coalesce around the issue of reshaping Israel’s housing policy.

Leef is listed sixth in Haaretz’s list of the 100 Most Influential People of 5771. In first place are the protestors en masse: “You – the Israeli public who in the summer of 2011 took its own fate into its hands.”

 Shrinking Middle Class
The protest only seemed to come out of nowhere. Over the past twenty

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Change Is In The Air  By Naomi Chazan, NIF President

Israel is now in a state of flux on almost every conceivable front. Domestically, the social uprising of this past summer has set in motion processes which will far outlast the proliferation of tent cities. Externally, the universal acknowledgement of the Palestinian right to self-determination means that the attempt to realize a two-state solution is entering a critical phase. And, at the same time, the bedrock of Israel’s existence, its democracy, is undergoing substantial transformation. The challenge of channeling the direction of change in each of these areas and defining their interconnection is daunting; its outcome will have a lasting impact on the quality of life in the country.

The social protests unleashed on July 14th signaled not only a rearrangement of national priorities in Israel, but also a revitalization of its citizenry. Their message is clear: most Israelis are no longer willing to stand by quietly as their ability to live in dignity is constantly eroded, as social and economic inequities grow, as the prospects for a better future dim. The movement generated by young and old, center and periphery, veterans and newcomers, Arabs and Jews, Ashkenazim and Mizrahim, secular and religious is all about social justice and the construction of a decent society rooted in those human and Jewish values which guided Israel in its early years.

The official response to this social tidal wave, as anticipated, has been lukewarm at best. The government-appointed Trajtenberg Commission has recommended some adjustments in taxation, education and social welfare; of political necessity, its report falls short of the protestors’ demand for a major overhaul of the public agenda. It is reasonable to assume, therefore, that the social upsurge will not wane: through civil organizations, vigorous advocacy and spontaneous action Israelis will continue to call for more equitable, tolerant and compassionate policies for all the citizens of the country.

The ongoing social movement will build on the palpable achievements of the recent unrest: on the re-empowerment of citizens in extraordinary circumstances, on the appeal to social inclusiveness, on the insistence on the accountability of elected officials to their representatives and on a new, refreshing, public discourse based on mutual respect and tolerance. It will also have to come to terms with extension of the notion of justice beyond the Green Line.

There is widespread recognition in Israel and in Jewish communities throughout the world that the ongoing occupation of millions of Palestinians against their will is antithetical to Jewish, democratic and human principles. The inability to resolve the conflict, and the shifting international realities reflected in September’s request by the Palestinian Authority for UN recognition, compromises Israel’s global standing, its security, its own moral fabric and, ultimately, its survival.

This is a period of extraordinary uncertainty, rife with threats as well as replete with opportunity. In this highly charged atmosphere, with emotions running high, there is a particular need for large doses of prudence and good sense.

There is also an unequivocal normative imperative: a reaffirmation of Israel’s vision and of its guiding values. The last couple of years have witnessed a disconcerting democratic recession in the country, exemplified by a corrosive mixture of repressive legislation, increased intolerance and racism, and the curtailing of civil liberties. These impulses continue apace, at the same time as the social uprising has provided an optimistic counterpoint highlighting a profound preference for participatory democracy through deliberation. Indeed, the confirmation of the fundamental democratic values of equality, justice, liberty and human dignity provides the critical link to the successful navigation of external and domestic change in the critical year ahead.

For the New Israel Fund family and all those who have a stake in Israel’s future, now is the time to rally around the struggle to formulate what it means to be a successful society committed to the values of equality, tolerance and justice for ourselves and our neighbors. It behooves us to remember that we are defined by more than our existential conflict and the latest diplomatic maneuvers. We need your continuing support in this period of flux as we embrace an inclusive and human vision—one which will help us make all of our lives better and realize our common belief in a brighter, democratic, just and peaceful future. ◄
years, Israel’s middle class has shrunk significantly; the country’s income inequality is among the largest in the developed world. Tax cuts for the highest income brackets, combined with the economic crisis, have translated into harsh cuts in social spending for the economic crisis, have translated into harsh cuts in social spending for the middle class and the periphery, and Jews and Arabs, joined with the common goal of obtaining financial stability.

“We see all types of people in the camp complexes, from students and young middle class couples to the disadvantaged and new immigrants,” said NIF/SHATIL’s Program Director Avi Dabush.

Supporting the Protest - NIF and SHATIL’s Involvement

Following the first protest, NIF allotted emergency grants to tent protestors in Be’er Sheva, Herzliya and Jerusalem. SHATIL staff advised protest leaders on sustaining and enlarging demonstrations, created initiatives to involve immigrant, ultra-Orthodox and Arab Israeli communities in protests, and highlighted the demand for genuine changes through media campaigns and advocacy.

The protest also drew international support; close to 4,000 people signed NIF’s petition in support of the protestors, a petition which ran in Ha’aretz and was covered by most major Israeli media channels.

Some 30 NIF grantees were integral in supporting the protests. In August, the Coalition for Affordable Housing presented recommendations to the government’s Trajtenberg Committee setting out demands for solving Israel’s housing problem. Working with tent dwellers, flagship grantee the Association for Civil Rights in Israel (ACRI) provided legal advice, while the Israel Religious Action Center for Progressive Judaism organized Shabbat activities.

Government Response

Initially, the government refused to take the protestors seriously; Minister of Foreign Affairs Avigdor Lieberman notably referred to them as “sushi-eaters.” An additional government response characterized the protest as a political plot of the left, specifically implicating NIF.

Once the protest grew to a size impossible to ignore, the government finally began developing concrete actions to address protestors’ concerns. Prime Minister Netanyahu set up the Trajtenberg committee, which gathered input from NIF grantees and protestors, as well as the government’s free-market, neo-liberal economists. The Trajtenberg report was greeted with skepticism by protest leaders, but there is no question that the protests will significantly impact Israel’s socioeconomic policy going forward. Even the ‘minimal’ Trajtenberg recommendations involve cuts to defense spending, widespread support for affordable housing and a rearrangement of budget priorities.

Moving Forward

NIF and SHATIL are working with organizations and activists, said NIF Israel Executive Director Rachel Liel, adapting new protest strategies “to ensure that the momentum is not lost and achievements will not just be cosmetic, but meaningful for generations to come.”

SHATIL staff and consultants have been utilizing the ongoing social protests to expand the model of participatory democracy. With such events as the NIF-sponsored “1,000 tables” designed to engage activists and further discussion of social justice issues as well as public hearings, NIF and SHATIL will continue to support Israel’s social awakening as it progresses.

For more frequent updates about NIF’s work visit www.nif.org and sign up for NIF News.
NIF Welcomes Knesset Rejection of Investigation of Human Rights Groups

In a landmark decision on July 20, the Knesset voted to reject a proposed parliamentary inquiry into the activities of Israel’s human rights community. Together with its flagship grantee the Association for Civil Rights in Israel (ACRI), NIF has been lobbying members of Knesset to defend democratic values since a spate of worrisome legislation began surfacing last year.

Recent anti-democratic legislation has included the passage of the widely-criticized “boycott” law in early July, which imposes a civil penalty on anyone who calls for a boycott of Israel, including settlement goods and services; similar parliamentary inquiries, all of which have been rejected; bills that would codify second-class citizenship for Palestinian Israelis; and loyalty oaths legislation.

NIF Blocks an Anti-Democratic Investigation

During the winter session, the Knesset voted on a weakened version of a bill to constrict overseas funding for human rights groups, which passed. “The goal [of these inquiries] is to eventually weaken human rights groups and make them less effective in exposing, questioning and affecting government policies,” said ACRI Director Hagai El-Ad.

In support of Israeli civil society, NIF mobilized the American Jewish community, dedicating efforts to influence Knesset members to reject these anti-democratic measures. More than 1,800 North American NIF supporters emailed wavering Likud leaders in July, urging them to vote against legislation designed to penalize and defund progressive civil society. Of the four targeted lawmakers, two voted against the measure and two abstained from the vote.

This rejection of the parliamentary inquiry is significant because it is the second time that the Knesset has rejected such a measure, and because it was rejected by a united opposition including prominent Likud members. Said NIF CEO Daniel Sokatch, “Not only did Israel’s progressive NGOs rise to collectively and effectively challenge this so-called inquiry, but the voice of civil society grew stronger in the process. NIF and its action-arm SHATIL, along with ACRI, played a key role in representing the interests of civil society in working to defeat the inquiry, which aimed to put internationally-respected human rights organizations out of business.”

Challenges for the Upcoming Session

The rejection of the inquiry left NIF and its grantees cautiously optimistic. Although this development signals some support for Israel’s democratic institutions, the Knesset is still considering several pieces of legislation that would curtail dissent and basic rights. The Knesset’s summer session ended on a discordant note, with a number of bills proposed which take aim at social-justice organizations, the independence of the High Court, and freedom of expression. In August, when the Knesset was preparing for its recess, a bill was proposed which would support legislation to emphasize Israel’s Jewish nature over its democratic roots, enshrining halacha, or Jewish law, as inspiration for civil law. According to this new bill, in evaluating a law or government practice, even if it is judged to violate democratic norms, judges would be able to affirm its validity based on its support of the state’s Jewish character.

Despite intensive lobbying which resulted in postponed deliberations, bills proposed by Yisrael Beiteinu and Likud would require non-profits that do not receive Israeli government support to pay a 45% tax for each donation from a foreign state entity, and would impose a NIS 20,000 ceiling on foreign donations to non-profits if they deal with political or security issues. (The bills specifically do not address foreign donations to extreme settler and other right-wing groups, which receive millions of dollars in private funding from the U.S. and elsewhere.) These measures would decrease by almost half the amount of money received by NGOs working...
to protect human rights, and would significantly reduce their ability to serve marginalized populations.

Other laws would increase restrictions and punishments for illegal residents, significantly affecting refugees and migrant workers. After discussion of the Prevention of Infiltration Law was postponed several times thanks to an effective public campaign that included NIF grantees, the Knesset has once again discussed an updated version of the law with a recommendation of minimum imprisonment of three years for “infiltrators.” The stated objective is to deter other “infiltrators,” however most of these people are actually asylum seekers, and will be imprisoned in Israel without benefit of a trial.

The Influence of the Social Protest Movement
With the growing momentum of the social protest movement (see story page 1), the Knesset may promote fewer of these ultra-conservative and anti-democratic bills during the next session in an effort to respond to the overwhelming positive sentiment for addressing socio-economic inequities.

However, the battle against such bills is no small task, and recent events illustrate the difficulty of standing up to anti-democratic measures. Just before the Jewish Festival of Sukkot, Jerusalem City Council Member Rachel Azaria petitioned the High Court of Justice to enforce a ruling ordering police to prevent gender segregation on the streets of the Haredi neighborhood of Mea Shearim. On October 17, less than 24 hours after the Court issued its ruling in her favor, Jerusalem Mayor Nir Barkat stripped her of her City Council portfolios that concern community councils and early childhood issues.

NIF is planning a long-range campaign for the defense of Israeli democracy. For more frequent updates on NIF’s fight to defend democracy, and to find out ways to take action, please visit www.nif.org and sign up for our emails.

DONOR PROFILE

A Different Truth: Interview with Joan Kuriansky

Social change has always been a part of Joan Kuriansky’s narrative. Her family had always placed a deep emphasis on community activism. Coming of age during the civil rights era and women’s movements, she worked to deepen her commitment to creating social change.

A life-long activist, Kuriansky’s work has helped to empower countless women across the globe.

In 1978, Kuriansky helped create My Sister’s Place, the first battered women’s shelter in Washington, DC. “I was so moved by the strength of the women who brought their families to the shelter and out of their homes. I felt that we had to offer them a chance to create change in attitude toward the issue of domestic violence, an issue which highlights gender imbalances in society.”

For Ms. Kuriansky, the most effective means of solving these imbalances is building up civil society and supporting organizations that promote social and economic justice, especially for women. She sees that in Israel, like those countries where she has worked – Russia, Southeast Asia, and the US – a disproportional number of the poor are women.

“To me, the real passion in my work is being able to make legal and political systems change to create greater opportunities for people to live in dignity with their civil rights intact and to be economically secure,” Kuriansky said. After the death of her parents, Ms. Kuriansky became involved with the New Israel Fund through the Louis J. Kuriansky Foundations because of NIF’s commitment to social change. “The New Israel Fund resonates with my vision and the work that I have done throughout my life.”

Most recently, Joan Kuriansky served as Executive Director of Wider Opportunities for Women (WOW), a national organization which leads various networks and initiatives to support economic independence for women throughout their lifetime. Today, she is on the NIF International Council.

Ms. Kuriansky was able to take a closer look at NIF’s work during the 2010 NIF board meeting in Israel, visiting grantees and various NIF programs. Meeting with several Bedouin women was particularly powerful, as they had directly benefited from NIF initiatives and had succeeded in starting their own businesses (NIF currently runs several programs for Bedouin women, including SHATIL’s Bedouin Women Leadership Project). For her, this experience exemplified NIF’s dedication to addressing marginalized communities and commitment to investing in Israel’s potential.

“To see how the vision of the New Israel Fund translates to specific programs and actions, is inspirational. As someone who has been engaged with NGOs in my career, I know that we, in the United States and elsewhere, can learn from the extraordinary work of the NIF grantees and the support that SHATIL offers the grantees.”

Ms. Kuriansky was particularly inspired by the NIF-supported protests this summer (see story page 1). To her, this movement is increasingly relevant “in light of the leadership in Israel right now and the uplifting of Israeli voices that speak a different truth” about Israel’s challenges and strengths.

“I think Israel will be able to survive, despite many challenges to Israel itself, if it is a true democracy and has the ability within its own borders to create the kind of change that the New Israel Fund envisions.”
More Rabbis Speaking Out with NIF

Last year, dozens of Israeli rabbis, including a number of municipal rabbis employed by the state, declared that Jewish law forbids the rental of homes to non-Jews, a ruling that specifically targeted Arabs. In response, the New Israel Fund organized a letter from rabbis around the world to their colleagues in Israel. The letter, which was signed by more than 1,000 rabbis, declared:

Statements like these do great damage to our efforts to encourage people to love and support Israel. They communicate to our congregants that Israel does not share their values, and they promote feelings of alienation and distancing. Further, these attacks on the principles of our prophets, which form the basis of Israel’s law and society, provide justification for anti-Jewish and anti-Israel sentiment across the world.

By reaching across continents and denominational lines, NIF’s letter allowed rabbis throughout the world to declare that this ruling does not represent the Judaism they know and teach. To encourage an equally powerful Israeli rabbinic response, they called on their colleagues in Israel to take a forceful public stand against the attempt by some Israeli religious leaders to advance an agenda of discrimination by using Jewish tradition as a pretext. Many rabbis in Israel did precisely that, and their statements received wide coverage in the Israeli and world Jewish press.

For NIF, a strong relationship with rabbis is vital. From their pulpits and other key positions in Jewish communal organizations and elsewhere, they reach a large number of diverse constituents. Rabbis are spiritual and moral leaders, educators, and opinion leaders for their communities and beyond.

Over the years, NIF’s connection with rabbis has evolved into a strong, mutually supportive relationship. Rabbis have multiple demands on their time, and keeping up with events in Israel, per the expectations of congregants and constituents, is a constant challenge. To that effect, and to support stronger advocacy for a just and democratic Israel, NIF provides rabbis with multiple ways to connect to Israel and keep up to date on the issues by way of special email updates and briefings on current events.

Such initiatives for rabbis include conference calls on topics as diverse as the social justice protests in Israel and the vote on Palestinian statehood at the UN, ideas for how to mark Yom Ha’atzma’ut (Israeli independence day) in a celebratory and thoughtful way, and the provision of materials for Jewish holidays. This summer, NIF will host its third one-day study tour in Israel for rabbis, which aims to engage rabbis in the work done by NIF and our grantees.

Rabbis worldwide gain meaningful experiences from these study tours. “Though I live in Israel,” said Rabbi Jim Lebeau of Jerusalem, “I am often unable to have firsthand knowledge of the issues that concern me and for which I give my support.... Because of NIF’s tour to Bedouin communities, I now fully understand the need to support their rights to their land and their homes.” “Each summer I look forward to taking a day-tour with NIF to learn more about the important work being done in Israel,” said Rabbi Donald Goor of Tarzana, California.

This year, NIF will embark on a new program to educate rabbinical students studying in Israel about social justice issues and to introduce them to leading Israeli social activists and organizations.

Many rabbis find that NIF’s work has special resonance. A recent survey of Conservative rabbis and rabbinical students showed NIF ranked most favorably of all Israel-related groups mentioned in the survey, with a full 80% of current rabbinical students professing a favorable view of NIF (compared to 42% for AIPAC and 58% for J Street). As people seek ways to honor both their love of Israel and their commitments to democracy, justice and equality, these Jewish leaders see NIF as an organization that champions and integrates these two sets of values.

As we continue to build our network of rabbis, we ask you to help us. Please reach out to your rabbi to tell him or her about NIF’s programming and suggest that he or she join our rabbis email list. Alternatively, send an email to NIF’s rabbinic intern, Mikie Goldstein, at mikie@nif.org to suggest we reach out to your rabbi.
This summer’s massive social protests expressed a great upheaval in Israeli political and social life. Increasing numbers of people made their voices heard as they fought for a more just and cohesive society, culminating on September 3rd, when 450,000 people took to the streets in a plea for social justice. Old and young, Arab and Jew, religious and secular people joined together from the country’s center to its periphery. Citizens responded in massive numbers to this call for action, and Israeli society will never be the same.

NIF not only provided funding and organizing help for this summer’s protests, but it is also involved in the serious process of shaping the movement’s next steps.

At the same time the forces of ultra-nationalism and religious extremism jeopardize Israel’s democracy and social fabric. Powerful blocs of Knesset members are pushing legislation that would chip away at the democratic underpinnings of Israel from freedom of expression to minority rights. Some anti-democratic bills have already become law.

The struggle for the future of Israel is underway. NIF needs your support to help strengthen the Israel articulated in its Declaration of Independence, an Israel of justice and equality.

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