

Report on the Herczeg Seminar for Jewish Education, May 14-17, 2017

Attending the Herczeg Seminar in Tel Aviv was a highlight I will not soon forget. The seminar was entitled: Striving for the Highest: from Ideals to Reality in Israel – Women Exploring Jewish Wisdom and Possibilities.

From the moment I met the group on Sunday evening, I knew that this was going to be an incredible experience. The International Council of Jewish Women (ICJW) is an amazing organization and the women who were in attendance were all intelligent, active and connected women from all around the world. The delegates from the various affiliates were there to learn about Israel's current problems and issues, its successes and future plans.

The seminar session began Sunday evening at the Diaspora Museum in Tel Aviv where we had the opportunity to see two exhibits; one of synagogues around the world and the other concerning the Ethiopian Jewish experience in Israel 30 years after Operation Moses.

Monday's sessions explored topics concerning Jewish Wisdom and Social Justice. Panels of experts and guest lecturers were in attendance. A panel discussion on Human Trafficking in Israel was an eye opener. Israel is experiencing problems with people being smuggled into the country to work in the sex trade and as slave labourers. Organ trafficking is also problematic. Surrogates are being forced to carry babies until delivery so that the infants can be sold. Victims of trafficking are being brought into Israel on visitors' permits and are then forced into this lifestyle. The commercial abuse of women and men in these ways was very disturbing. Discussion centred on the work being done in Israel to abolish this modern day slavery by bringing the perpetrators to justice and protecting the victims. An organization called 'Turning the Tables' offers prostitutes in Israel an alternative. The organization tries to give the victims a sense of self-worth by teaching them other vocations and then helping them to find employment.

A seminar on Family Law and the Gender War discussed the difficulties of women in Israel being treated fairly in divorce court situations. The rabbinic court always favours the men. There is an emergence of well-coordinated men's groups in Israel that lobby against women claiming 'false complaints' in relation to domestic violence. This is part of a global misogynistic movement. These same groups approach the UN with their false realities. This is one reason why it is so important that we have women from ICJW monitoring discussions at the UN and offering comments when appropriate.

Discussion about the Global Refugee Crisis was enlightening. Israel, like much of the world, is concerned about the wave of refugees coming into the country. Many are coming from Africa, seeking asylum. Others come as legal migrant

workers who stay in Israel, becoming illegal. Israel fears that too many refugees and illegal immigrants in the country could change the face of Israel. Talk about the Environment completed our day. In Israel the effects of Global Warming are taken seriously. Women, in particular, are taking a lead in creating and working on environmental initiatives.

Tuesday's session highlighted some disadvantaged populations of Israel. On a trip to Pardes Chana, near Haifa, we visited Neve Michael Children's Village and Crisis Centers, a segregated compound working with children and teens at risk (usually having experienced a major trauma in their lives). Later, we visited Haifa University, where the student population is very diverse, to learn about an Ethiopian folk heritage project aimed at preserving Ethiopian folk culture. This project was completed in partnership with our ICJW Australian affiliate. We also learned about some of the music, identity and political issues facing the Arab/Palestinian citizens of Israel.

On Wednesday the seminars focused on Israel and the World. We began the day with a panel discussing Israel and the UN. The speakers were from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, a woman who monitors the NGO's (Non-Governmental Organization) at the UN and a former Israeli Delegate to the UN. Time and again the importance of women having a voice, especially a Jewish voice, in government and at the UN was emphasized. ICJW, by being recognized as an NGO, has this special obligation, especially when discussing human rights issues focusing on women and children. Israel is also involved greatly in global development policies and commitments. Having been a living lab of success in overcoming developmental challenges itself, Israel has much expertise to share. Israel offers skills in pragmatic problem-solving and practical solutions to many global problems. In Geneva, Israel's presence is crucial, working against anti-Israeli/anti-Jewish sentiment. Israel is there to fight the biased resolutions put forth. The role of the NGO's at the UN is also very important, and its role is growing. Many NGO's amplify destructive ideologies, many promoting anti-Israeli sentiments. ICJW has an impact working together with other like-minded NGO's.

A lecture on Israeli poetry reflecting Women's Voices was thought provoking, and well appreciated by all.

The last lecture at the seminar was a talk on Global Awareness of Israel. New ways and thoughts on marketing the country on an emotional 'feel good' level was described by a most energetic and positive speaker. The message of the speaker was that Israel needs to market itself better to appeal to all, emphasizing that the Israeli experience is one of uniqueness, safety and belonging.

In Conclusion:

In between learning sessions, we had opportunities to share information from our home countries and learn what activities the affiliates involve themselves. This sharing of experiences and ideas was extremely valuable, providing some new areas for NCJWC to perhaps explore. This time gave me a chance to actually get to know some of these amazing women on a personal level, and saw the similarities among all affiliates with respect to challenges and successes. The program was varied and quick paced, so that there was no time to lose interest. Each session offered new glimpses into world challenges, especially with respect to Israel, through Jewish women's eyes.

To help us absorb as much information as possible, there were plenty of opportunities to feed our bodies as well as our souls. These times gave us more occasions to interact with one another, a most valuable part of the overall experience. The conversations were always engaging and thought provoking.

A highlight of attending this seminar, besides the phenomenal educational aspect, was, of course, the people involved. I came to the seminar as an outsider, and left as part of the whole. I aspire to one day be like these women. Speaking to many of them, I heard the similar difficulties of Jewish women's groups all over the world. The struggle to attract new, younger members and the lack of funds were the prominent obstacles for all. The issues sound so familiar. I also heard of the many successes. I bring back to Canada some new perspectives and ideas.

Once the seminar was over, I had the opportunity to attend the ICJW Executive Meeting as an observer. As exciting as the seminar was, the Executive Meeting gave me so much insight into the work of ICJW and a further opportunity to share information and experiences with these remarkable women. I am excited to take on my role, as an affiliate President, in the Fall. This experience made me realize the crucial role of ICJW, and how special it is that NCJWC is the only Canadian affiliate.

Having Sharon Allentuck with me on this journey, at first holding my hand and guiding me through the process, and later encouraging me to branch out on my own, making contacts with people independently, ensured I would get the most out of this experience. Because of this, I suggest that future recipients of the Bunny Gurvey Bursary also attend with a seasoned ICJW Canadian representative, if possible. The value of having a mentor by ones' side who has knowledge about the organization enriches the experience and enhances the enjoyment.

Thank you to the Gurvey family, and especially to Bunny Gurvey in whose

honour this bursary was established, for allowing me the chance to be its first recipient. Be assured, this opportunity benefits not only the recipient, but NCJWC as a whole, by giving those attending the Herczeg Seminar for the first time a new way to look at NCJWC's importance not only as an umbrella organization overseeing the sections, but as the link and integral part of the important global work of ICJW.

Respectfully submitted by Debbie Wasserman