

The CDI Mexico Senior Leadership Seminar in Israel
September 2008
Summary Report

Looking at the accomplishments, challenges and future prospects of “Israel at 60” provided a unique opportunity for members of the senior board of CDI Mexico, to reexamine their own Jewish identity, their commitment to Jewish life in Mexico and to the prosperity of Israel and the Jewish people.

CDI Mexico is one of the largest Jewish Community Centers in the world. Out of a Jewish population of 40,000, it provides programs to more than 20,000 Jews. In a community, divided by various synagogues and ethnic Jewish groups, CDI is the central space where all Jews congregate on a regular basis. Yet, like many Jewish communities around the world it also faces challenges: How to continue attracting young Jews to the institution? How to address growing financial needs? How to confront demographic and geographic developments? How to make Jewish life more relevant and welcoming? How to develop new avenues of attachment to Israel?

The Israel seminar offered an opportunity to delve into these issues and confront new angles and points of view. It was also an opportunity for Israeli decision-makers, scholars and social activists to learn about the Mexican Jewish community.

The program began in Jerusalem, with an opening dinner that brought them together with senior members of the World Confederation of Jewish Community Centers, The Israel Association of Community Centers and the Israel Federation of Community Centers. **Avinoam Armoni**, Chair of IACC and IFCC, shared with the participants, his view of community life in Israel and the importance of building bridges with Jewish communities around the world. Following this festive encounter, the participants visited the Citadel Museum and experienced the newly opened

audiovisual show depicting the history of Jerusalem throughout the ages.

Contrasting Bookends: Israeli Reality

David Horvitz, the editor of the Jerusalem Post, opened the day's activities with a succinct description of Israeli reality. He described some of Israel's strengths, such as the strong economy, the ability to quickly rebound from the war in Lebanon in 2006, the relative quiet times, the positive effects of absorption and more.

At the same time, he also outlined some of the mid-term and long-term challenges. Socially, the outstanding concern was the growing gap between rich and poor and its effects on the fabric of Israeli society. Politically, the major concern was the "negative momentum" in the region vis-à-vis the prospect for peace and the feeling regarding the current leadership. He also shed light on some of the inner politics within Palestinian society.

David outlined the values that are at conflict, when coming to suggest a possible solution to peace with the Palestinians: The Jewish identification of the state, keeping Israel democratic and the sentiments towards the ancestral Biblical land.

That 'disputed' Biblical land was where the group headed next. The Kfar Etzion Community Center, where the group met with **Dani Dayan**, the Chairman of the Yesha Council, representing a Jewish population of some 300,000 Jews who dwell beyond the 'Green Line'. According to Dani's world view, settlements in these areas are essential for Israel's survival due to strategic reasons, fear of an unstable Palestinian state and spiritual, religious and Zionist sentiments. Dani believes there can only be one Jewish state between Jordan and the sea.

From Gush Etzion the group returned to Jerusalem, for an in-depth tour of the 'Separation Fence' and an attempt to understand its complexities. The tour was led by **Yehudit**

Oppenheimer, the Executive Director of **Ir Amim**, an organization that promotes understanding and coexistence. Participants had a chance to see first-hand how the Jewish and Arab populations in this area are intertwined.

The events of that day raised more questions than answers and proved that seeing first-hand the reality in Jerusalem and its surroundings, is not the same as reading about it in the newspapers.

At night, the group visited the underground Kotel tunnels for a sense and a glimpse at Jerusalem's rich Jewish history.

Layers of Jewish History and Memory

The next focus was on our shared memories as Jews.

The day's program began with an in-depth meeting with **Adolfo Reutman**, the Director of the Shrine of the Book at the Israel Museum, who brought to life ancient Jewish texts and proved how meaningful and relevant they are for today. Adolfo also explained the significance of the Israel Museum and the Shrine of the Book, in shaping the national collective.

From there, the group continued to **Yad Vashem**, Israel's National Holocaust Memorial for a specially prepared program that was designed by **Perla Hazan**. The group split into two sub groups: first timers visited the main museum itself and second timers visited additional exhibits and were introduced to innovative educational programs. All the participants then gathered to hear the moving testimony of **Haim Refael** from Saloniki, who survived the concentration camps and rebuilt his life in Israel. Haim Refael shared with the group his life story and his special talents for music and singing - a talent that helped him survive the darkest moments. Not a dry eye was left in the room.

The visit ended with a remembrance ceremony and a visit to Yad Layeled, the memorial for the children who perished during the Holocaust. The Mexican Jewish community has a strong bond with Yad Vashem and the visit helped reaffirm it.

From engaging with historical issues, the group then visited the Shalem Institute and met with former Chief of Staff, **Moshe (Bugi) Yaalon**. Yaalon presented a comprehensive and firm worldview regarding security and regional issues that Israel faces. The group became very involved in the discussion and raised many relevant questions and concerns.

The Negev: Ethos and Reality

The group left Jerusalem for a two-day visit to the Negev, eventually agreed by all to have been the highlight of the entire seminar and a unique opportunity to meet current day visionaries and idealists.

The first meeting was with **Alon Shuster**, the Head of the Shaar Hanegev Regional Council, an area that has been undergoing years of daily attacks by *kasam* rockets from nearby Gaza. Interestingly, the focus of Alon's presentation was not on their hardships, but on his optimistic vision for the future of this region. Alon concentrates his efforts on developing high level education, addressing ecological concerns and strengthening the sense of community and belonging.

A short stop at Kibbutz **Or Haner** for lunch gave the group an insight into kibbutz life today. Here again, the residents of the kibbutz did not dwell so much on their security concerns, but rather on the large murals, which they commissioned to beautify the kibbutz. What a contrast to the impressions raised by the daily headlines in the media.

From there, the group journeyed to **Yeruham**, a development town that was built in the fifties for

immigrants from North Africa and Romania, and which has had for many years the image of being 'left out'. "The End of the World, then Turn Left" was the title of a movie that was filmed in Yeruham, telling the stories of families who arrived there in the fifties. Having suffered from problems of unemployment and lack of education, we were lucky to meet current leaders, who are trying to secure the town a better future.

Rafi Abergil is the charismatic and energetic Community Center Executive Director who grew up in Yeruham and proudly showed us the various programs that the Community Center offers to people of all ages. In addition to the recently renovated main building, which offers a wide range of activities, the Community Center also operates at various locations throughout the town. The group was then taken to a special youth club that was established in the middle of an industrial zone. The youth director explained how this club became the center of youth work in the town. It provides a very "cool" and "safe" space where youngsters can pursue their talents and dreams.

Rafi also arranged a meeting for the group, with the Acting Mayor of Yeruham, former Major General **Amram Mitzna**. Mitzna was brought to Yeruham, to help rehabilitate a town that was in the midst of a political crisis. Mitzna vividly described the town as a real melting pot, with people coming from 70 different countries, speaking many different languages and practicing different customs. His main goal is to change the image of the town and again, concentrate on education and employment. He would like to change the habit where youngsters leave the town after military service and has designed a special project that accompanies them after the army and way into adulthood.

The visit ended with attending a special event held by the Community Center at the Ramon Crater, where families from Yeruham came to enjoy an afternoon doing arts and crafts and signing up for activities that the Community Center offers.

After listening to so many idealistically motivated people, it was time for the 'Silence of the Desert'. A full-moon walk at **Nachal Havarim** was a special spiritual and social experience that reminded the participants the origins of the Jewish people, the special impact of the desert and an opportunity to reflect and meditate.

The following day, the group returned to Yeruham for lunch at the home of the **Dadon Family** that hosted the group as part of a special project: "The Cooks of Yeruham". Mrs. Dadon told her own personal story of coming to Yeruham, raising a family and feeling committed to the town. The director of the projects is **Debbie Golan**, originally from the US and now a resident of Yeruham. Debbie directs many projects that connect Jewish themes and values, with life in the desert and in Yeruham. It became apparent that in that small town of some 9,000 people, the personal connections and relations are close and unique.

The New Zionists

Continuing the theme of the first day, the group visited the Jacob Blaustein Desert Research Institute and met with **Prof. Eilon Hadar**, who presented a comprehensive analysis of the water problems in the area and the connected scientific research, as they relate to the politics of the region. Hadar reaffirmed the notion, that water is a major problem in the region and gave examples of how Israel exploited the desert and used scarce resources to bring life to the desert. He proved that collaboration is a must. His own personal story of coming to Sde Boker with a young family when the place was just beginning is a true example of Zionism.

The highlight of the seminar was the visit to the Ayalim Village in Dimona, another development town in the Negev. **Miriam Lasry**, a charismatic young professional, vividly described this social service program, where young

students come to live in the Negev, study at Ben Gurion University and volunteer in the various local communities. The hope is that in the future, these villages will form the basis for permanent settlement. The group visited the village, met some of the residents and also saw another project, where students live and volunteer in a very poor neighborhood of Yeruham. They are committed to bring a positive change to the Negev.

At sundown, it was a good time to pay a visit to Ben Gurion's grave and reexamine his leadership and vision. Coincidentally, a women-soldiers' end of training course ceremony, was taking place on the mountain and it helped frame the day which ended with a joint singing of Hatikva.

After a short break, the group visited Tzel Midbar and met **Ziv Spektor** who dedicates his life to empowering young Bedouins and bringing the Negev closer to the rest of Israel.

Connecting with Partners

During the course of this day, the group had an opportunity to meet with three important organizations; the army, the Jewish Agency for Israel and Maccabi World Union.

The visit to **Chatzor Air Force** was a particularly special experience, meeting the young airmen who safely guard the security of Israel and hear at first hand their individual opinions.

Zeev Bielsky, Chairman of the Jewish Agency for Israel, met with the participants and expressed his appreciation of their commitment and dedicated volunteerism.

Then the group met with the leaders of **Maccabi World Movement**. They had a chance to reconnect with friends and colleagues and discuss shared agendas and plans for the upcoming Maccabiah.

Zionism and Judaism

On the Friday, the day began with a meeting with **Dr. Gadi Taub**, a young and upcoming historian, who gave an overview of Zionism and how it relates to modern Jewish life.

The group then visited the **Palmach Museum**, to better comprehend how the Jewish state came about and what great efforts and sacrifice it took to make it happen.

As Shabbat approached, it was time for developing new friendships. The group was hosted for Kabbalat Shabbat and dinner by Hochmat Halev, a secular community that was initiated by high-tech entrepreneur **Edwardo Shoval** and is part of a country-wide phenomenon of Jewish renewal, in an attempt to connect Israeli secular Jews to their roots.

Wrapping up the Experience

Shabbat was the time to reflect back on the experience and connect all the components together. A visit to Caesarea exemplified the challenge of life in early times when Roman and Jewish culture confronted each other, and how one can accommodate these two conflicting entities. At night, the seminar concluded with a cultural event, the music of **David Broza** and the Mayumana Ensemble, combining Israeli and Latin cultural influences and encounters.

What did the participants have to say about the program?

The CDI Board was a very dynamic group raising many questions and holding on-going discussions throughout the program. All during the seminar, they were very cogniscent of this special opportunity and showed their appreciation warmly and openly.

Here are a few vignettes from their own personal impressions:

Lenny: I was impressed to see how people in Israel are concerned about their fellow Jews and non-Jews and how they give from themselves. It helped strengthen my dedication.

Guillermo (Memo): This was a trip for the soul. It was very emotional and meaningful to me. It is very impressive to have been able to speak to so many important people that were kind enough to give us their time to teach us. It is a once in a lifetime trip.

Esther: It was interesting to discover the new Israelis. It was fascinating to hear so many different points of view.

Benny: This was an incredible experience. We heard so many different points of view and grasped the plurality of the society.

Mickey: [At the Yeruham Community Center] Although we serve 20,000 Jews, we could definitely learn from the youth programs at the Yeruham Community Center.

[After the tour at Ir Amim] Although I may not agree with their political view, I am proud that there are Jews that care for other people and I hope that there are also people on the other side who care about us.

[At Ayalim] We saw in Ayalim a new beginning. We would all join this project if we were younger.

[At Shabbat dinner in Ramat Hasharon] We had the good fortune of meeting peers. We could have seen in these people an image of ourselves, if we had chosen to live in Israel.

Sylvia: I was thrilled. I thought I knew Israel as I have been here many times but I gained new perspectives. The program was excellent.

Ishie: This was a very special trip. We were both students and teachers.

We will now go back home and bring this message back to the Jewish community but also to the media. Some of us have good connections with the civic society of Mexico. I believe they can learn a lot from community centers in Israel. There are 50 million people under the poverty line in Mexico, and they urgently need community centers to help them.

The group expressed their deep thanks to David Waisman, the tour educator, to the World Confederation of JCCs and to UJA Federation of New York and promised to engage in a serious follow up upon their return back home. Special thanks were also expressed to Routes Travel and Tours for the smooth operation of the seminar.

Smadar Bar-Akiva