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Israeli Jews and Israeli Arabs. Both are citizens of the State we love and hold dear. Both peoples live within the boundaries of Eretz Yisrael, they raise children, attend school, shop, travel, receive healthcare, work and hold political office. Yet their lives couldn't be more different.

I was privileged to participate in January with 70 North Americans on a 3 day intensive study seminar in Israel to learn about the current situation of the Israeli Arab community. A British and Israeli delegation also participated. This seminar was sponsored by the Inter Agency Task Force on Israeli Arab Affairs. The Task Force is a coalition of North American Jewish organizations which work toward advancing civic equality in Israel for Israeli Jews and Israeli Arabs.

Our focus was on 4 main civic priorities: education, economic development, social services and leadership development. During our time together, our delegation visited Israeli Arab communities – Christian, Muslim, and Druze – including Bedouin - in the Galilee and the Negev, met with more than 100 Jewish and Arab leaders; civic leaders, grass roots organizers, top academics, students, philanthropists, business leaders, key Israeli government ministers, members of Knesset, and local municipality mayors and town council members, all of whom are committed to working on these complex issues and committed to making a difference.

For the past 60 years, Israel has been building a nation which is comprised of a multi-faceted infrastructure of schools, roads, utilities, agricultural settlements such as kibbutzim and moshavim, cities, towns and villages. During that time, Israel has been fighting for its existence as a nation while protecting its country and its citizenry. It has been beautifying a united Jerusalem, greening the Galilee, growing vineyards in the Golan, making the desert bloom, developing high tech industries and building an economically stable and viable nation.

There have been real survival and security issues throughout its 60 year history as a country and to this day, Israel continues to secure its borders and its people.

We, the Diaspora Jewish community, have helped for decades to build Israel's foundation as a national Jewish homeland through our Federation's support of UJC, UJA, JDC, JAFI, JNF, Hadassah and a host of "American Friends Of..." organizations affiliated with non-profits and universities throughout Israel. We, as a partner, helped to build the infrastructure; we helped resettle millions of Jewish refugees and olim from Arab countries, Eastern Europe, the Former Soviet Union, Ethiopia, Latin America and around the globe. We have been, and continue to be, an extended family reaching out our hands to our overseas relatives concerned about their welfare and intimately involved in creating a flourishing dynamic Jewish homeland. Certainly, our Federation's focus and the focus of Diaspora Jewry, has been and continues to appropriately be, to support the Jewish community in Israel.

For me, my work as a Jewish professional leader working for the Federation has therefore been focused primarily in raising funds and awareness regarding Israel as a Jewish State. It has only been through my participation and involvement in the planning of interfaith missions to Israel that I have come to know Israel also as a holy land to Christians and Muslims – but primarily

from a western perspective – not from an Israeli Arab Christian or Muslim viewpoint. This opportunity afforded me the ability to view Israel through yet another lens. A lens not often looked through by American Jews.

The Israeli Arab community – citizens of the State of Israel, today, comprises 20% of the total Israeli population, one of every five Israelis, 1.2 million members of Israeli society are Arab. To my knowledge, there is no comparable Israeli Arab Diaspora community, which exists, similar to the Jewish Diaspora which is involved in the growth and support of the Arab minority living within Israel's borders. Some statistics (The JDC-Brookdale Center in Israel provided much of these):

- While Israel's Jewish community was growing and thriving, the Israeli Arab community, comprised today of Druze (9%), Christians (10%) and Muslims (81% including Bedouin) was excluded and set apart from the Jewish community.
- The Israeli Arab communal infrastructure of villages, utilities, roads, social services and educational systems has been overlooked; even ignored. The Arab sector does not receive its fair share of state resources.
- Much of the indigenous Israeli Arab community is illiterate, poor and unemployed. 60% of Arabs fall below the poverty level.
- The rate of employment of Arab men is significantly lower than the rate among employed Jewish men (66% to 74%) and only 20% of Arab women work compared to almost 70% of all Jewish women. (some of this is due to culture) Israeli Arabs face great discrimination in hiring in the workplace. There are 10,000 unemployed Arab professors.
- Arab adults, age 18-64, have much lower levels of education than Jewish adults. For example, roughly 32% of Arab women have 8 or less years of education compared with less than 5% of Jewish women.
- Arab youth have much higher school dropout rates than Jewish youth. They attend school in classrooms that are severely overcrowded. More than double the number of Jewish students compared with Arab students pass matriculation exams enabling them to meet university entrance requirements. Israel's investment in the education of a Jewish child is 5 times greater than Israel's investment in an Arab child. There are inadequate facilities and a huge shortage of teachers and other school personnel.
- Compared with their Israeli Jewish brethren, despite the fact that they comprise 20% of the overall population, Israeli Arabs own only 2.6% of their own land. Many villages have not been given approval to expand beyond their 1948 borders.

In the Negev today, the population consists of 70% Jews and 30% Bedouin

- Bedouins have the largest rate of natural population growth in the world: 5.5%. The population doubles about every 12 – 15 years. Today, it numbers about 170,000 people. 62% of the population is under 18 years of age. The average Bedouin family size is 10.
- Bedouins have the lowest socio-economic status in Israel – ½ of all Bedouin families live in poverty; there is no economic infrastructure in communities; communities are in despair.
- Traditional Bedouin tribal organizations are no longer present.
- The Bedouin community existed before the State of Israel but Israel only recognizes "registered" Bedouin villages. Land claims by Bedouins – can't be verified and so the State of Israel does not recognize ownership by the Bedouin community.
- 40 – 50% of the Bedouin population in the Negev live in "unrecognized" settlements – these are so called "squatter" settlements –which receive minimal public services except for those mandated by Israeli law.

There is much neglect and discrimination displayed by Israeli government policies toward the Arab citizenry in Israel. Rabbi Michael Melchior, a member of the Israeli Knesset told our group: "I am against a Jewish State that discriminates against its Arab minority. The Jewish people has a responsibility for this issue."

There is an inherent tension that Israel needs to learn to resolve between Israel's nature as a Jewish State and its role as a democratic state, which includes non-Jews who are citizens of its state yet who live outside the collective framework. Equality and shared citizenship, guaranteed by Israel's Declaration of Independence, is guaranteed not only for Israeli Jews but also for Israeli Arabs. Currently, in the Jewish State, Arabs are excluded from much of the national collective.

For example, Israeli Arabs face great discrimination in hiring in the workplace. There are 10,000 unemployed Arab professors. Israel's investment in the education of a Jewish child is 5 times greater than Israel's investment in an Arab child. Israel's Arab minority has never been part of a government coalition, and Arab directors are not appointed to head government-owned companies.

In the early days of statehood, the Israeli Arab population was viewed as a security threat – it was the "enemy minority" within the State of Israel. Elie Reckhess, a senior Research Fellow at the Moshe Dayan Center for Middle Eastern and African Studies at Tel Aviv University has stated: "We must heed the toll of this neglect, disregard, suppression and denial, especially when socioeconomic unrest in the Arab population has merged in recent years with the clear trend toward growing national awakening."

Today, the Israeli government is beginning to understand the importance of narrowing the socioeconomic gap that divides these communities, the importance of strengthening Jewish-Arab cooperation, of strengthening a viable communal leadership infrastructure within the Israeli Arab population, and of building a sustainable framework for majority-minority relations in Israel. After the uprising in October of 2000, the Israeli government appointed a commission of inquiry headed by Judge Theodor Or. The Or Commission sought to seek out the causes behind the rioting and killings which occurred and to recommend changes to the Israeli Government with respect to the Arab sector. The report clearly states that "any attempt to dismiss or underestimate the importance of discrimination and deprivation as a cause of these events is untenable....The Arab citizens of Israel live in a reality in which they experience discrimination as Arabs."

As Jews, we know all too well what it is to be discriminated against. We know what it is like to be powerless victims, and of second class citizenship. Israeli Jews and Israeli Arabs can not exist side-by-side unless they have mutual respect for one another's fundamental right to exist. We also know that by raising up the level of life of those around us, ultimately it raises up our own life. Israel, to be a light unto the nations, must raise up the Israeli Arab minority within its midst. To do otherwise will be to destroy Israel's credibility as a viable democracy in the Middle East.

## HOW TO RESOLVE THIS?

During the course of our journey, we heard from many different sources that the Israeli Government must take the lead with the assistance of Israeli and Diaspora non-profit organizations in the resolution of this issue.

Israeli Cabinet Minister Yitzhak Herzog, son of the late President Chaim Herzog, emphatically told us that he is “determined to change the course of events” and that “in order for this country to succeed, equality and equal opportunity are essential.” He admitted however, that ministers change portfolios so often that they are often not able to see their priorities and projects to completion.

We also learned about a Jewish-Arab mayor’s forum in the Galilee which has a very proactive agenda: enhancing the local environment, increasing tourism to the region, creating industrial zones for Arab and Jewish villages

There are a few examples of some positive governmental changes we learned about during our visits which include: the first Israeli Arab Cabinet Minister, MK Raleb Majadele, who was appointed in 2007, and in January of 2008, the first Muslim – Bedouin was appointed head of the Israeli consulate in an Arab Country – former IDF Lt. Col Hassan Ka’bia was named Consul General of the Israeli Consulate in Alexandria Egypt. In the southeastern US, we are proudly represented at Israel’s Atlanta Consulate by Ambassador Reda Mansour, an Israeli Druze. But these are not enough to sustain years of neglect. The government must insist upon sincere significant change.

Additionally, we also heard that a big challenge is how to mainstream this issue not only amongst the Jewish community but the Arab public in Israel. In a discussion about vision and leadership, I asked one of the speakers whether or not there was the equivalent of charismatic leaders such as Martin Luther King Jr. and Abraham Joshua Heschel within the Arab community. The answer: leaders and visionaries are in the making. “Leadership and leaders are not manufactured. Leaders will eventually arise – from the NGO’s (Israeli non-profits) who will play a major role in filling the gaps of government neglect. Unfortunately, leadership often arises out of crisis.”

Minister Herzog asked for partners to team up with the Israeli government to make necessary changes. There are 200 Israeli NGO’s which have developed over the past 20 years or so which are active in the field of Arab-Jewish co-existence and in raising up the quality of life for the Israeli Arab sector. We heard over and over again that it is the NGO’s which must show the Israeli government how to shift to a shared society; how to mature into a state for all of its citizens.

## OUR FEDERATION’S RESPONSIBILITY

Once, Jewish philanthropy for coexistence projects in Israel and lectures by Israeli Arabs for the Jewish community were considered to be within the purview of the left wing, but through conversations and on-site visits during this seminar, I learned that it has now gone “mainstream”. At the recent national Jewish Federation General Assembly conference, I chose to attend a session entitled: “Seeking Equality for Jews and Arabs in Israel”. I expected to see 50 people in the room. I was shocked when I walked in and there was standing room only and so many people on the floor that there was barely enough room to walk in the door. I counted over 200 people. Clearly, this is an issue which is drawing attention across a broader spectrum within our national Jewish community.

Over the years, our Federation has funded Israeli non-profits and visited Israeli-Jewish-Arab co-existence programs such as: Abraham Fund, Givat Haviva, Neve Shalom, New Israel Fund, The Open House and Yad B'Yad. Yad B'Yad, the Federation's newest overseas beneficiary, is an impressive school system which we visited during the December Young Leadership mission. These four schools have classes comprised of 50% Israeli Arab/Jewish students, teachers, and principals. We visited one of these schools in an Israeli village called Kfar Kara. This is the only school where Jewish students travel to an Israeli Arab village to go to school. It is also the only Yad B'Yad school which is comprised of students who are either Muslim or Jewish (not Christian). The principals, Noha Khatib, an Israeli Arab and Yochanan Escher, an Israeli Jew, told us that they teach teachers and students that acknowledgement and respect of "the other" is the critical piece to successful relationships. The themes they preach are: "I can believe in my story while hearing yours," "The future is much more powerful than the past," "There is no true story" and "The enemy is a human being just like me". These might appear to be slogans, but in fact, they are very powerful reminders that everyone is a human being with fears, feelings and family history which must be recognized and respected. There are huge challenges for these schools such as creating one shared curriculum incorporating both cultures and historical narratives. But they have begun the process of acknowledging the other in a very real way.

Many private family foundations within Israel and from abroad exist which are interested in funding programs to enhance the lives of Israel's Arab citizens. We can provide opportunities for individual donors who might be inclined to support these efforts – either directly or through the newly opened UJC Venture Fund for Jewish-Arab Equality and Coexistence. The first such fund of its kind, this initiative brings together federation and private foundation partners to provide both financial and strategic support to projects that address building Jewish-Arab relations and raising up the socioeconomic status of the Arab minority.

At the beginning of the seminar, Dr. Aaron Back, the Director of the Ford Foundation Israel Fund, a co-sponsor of our seminar, quoted Kahlil Gibran – "if you only see what light reveals, and hear only what sound announces, then in truth, you don't see nor do you hear. So, listen to what is left unsaid."

We have a deep, fundamental commitment to a Jewish democratic Israel and we have begun to address a central domestic challenge facing the State of Israel for the foreseeable future. We should continue to support Israel, to visit Israel and to be inspired by Israel all the while, by learning more about the intricacies of the delicate balance within Israel related to all of Israel's citizens and by supporting efforts to make changes so that all of Israel's citizens will bring light onto the nations.

When I first registered for this trip, I did not truly realize at that time the impact the trip would have on me personally and professionally nor the extent to which the attention given to this issue now will be critical to Israel's survival as a true democracy in the future. I was in for an eye opening experience that challenged me to truly begin to understand the reality on the ground and to question myself about how I can make change. Because, at the end of the day, it is really about how each one of us singularly can make a difference. In Pirke Avot, we are taught by Rabbi Tarfon: "You are not required to complete the task, yet you are not free to withdraw from it." This is an enormous task and we can easily become overwhelmed with its completion. But we must begin.

In closing, this stirring poem by Yehuda Amichai, Israel's Poet Laureate, best captures the issue at heart.

An Arab Shepherd is Searching for His Goat on Mount Zion  
and on the opposite mountain I am searching for my little boy.  
An Arab shepherd and a Jewish father  
both in their temporary failure.  
Our voices meet  
above the Sultan's Pool in the valley between us.  
Neither of us wants  
the child or the goat to get caught in the wheels  
of the terrible Had Gadya machine. (of the terrible cycle of violence)

Afterward we found them among the bushes  
And our voices came back inside us, laughing and crying.

Searching for a goat or a son  
has always been the beginning  
of a new religion in these mountains.