

## Democracy, women’s rights at risk in Israel

By Sharon Sutker McGowan

On Saturday evening March 25, Gali Etzion joined hundreds of thousands of Israelis in the streets to protest the government’s plan to overhaul the judicial system, a move she says would put democracy at risk and cause irreparable harm to women’s rights.

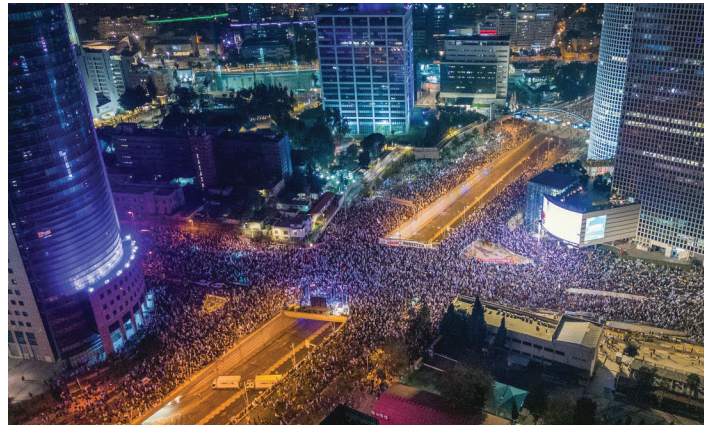
Etzion, the director of legislative affairs for NA’AMAT Israel, was energized by the protest. “It was unbelievable that so many people are getting out of their houses. I can’t understand why the government doesn’t hear the voice of the people... I am hopeful that with more than a half million people demonstrating that someone will hear it in the end.”

Two days later Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu announced he would delay the plan to “avoid civil war” and seek a compromise with political opponents. As of this writing, the delay continues.

Netanyahu’s coalition government, which came into power in December, is the most right-wing and religiously conservative in Israel’s history. “The coalition...presents a real threat to the rights of Israeli women,” said Shirli Shavit, director of NA’AMAT’s International Department.

NA’AMAT Israel is part of a coalition of women’s rights organizations from across the political spectrum that sought the help of President Isaac Herzog to reach a compromise that reaffirms the principle of gender equality “as a supreme principle in democracy.” Other members include WIZO, Israel Women’s Network and the Rackman Center at Bar Ilan University.

In a meeting with Herzog in early March, the Women’s Coalition noted: “Not a single letter has been changed in the law book, and women have already been harmed by the lack of representa-



Israelis flooded the streets to protest proposed changes to the country’s legal system. (Amir Terkel, Creative Commons Attribution-Share Alike 3.0 Unported)

tion, by stopping legislation about violence, by expanding the powers of the rabbinical courts, and more.”

Netanyahu’s judicial proposal would give his coalition the ability to select judges. “It means the judicial system will be chosen totally by politicians,” said Etzion. “The judicial branch will be very weak. We won’t allow ourselves to have a weakened judicial branch,” added Etzion. “We don’t want to go backwards.”

In addition, the overhaul would end judicial review of Israel’s Basic Laws by the Supreme Court and enable the Knesset, controlled by the executive branch, to overturn Supreme Court decisions with a simple majority. For example, the court could uphold legislation prohibiting women from entering stores at certain hours, or allowing universities to separate students by gender, Etzion explained.

The Israeli Supreme Court has historically protected the rights of women and minorities. In a landmark 1994 case, Alice Miller, a woman who wanted to become a combat pilot, successfully pe-

—Continued on back page

### 75th anniversary fundraiser huge success

Our \$75,000 for 75 years of Israel fundraising campaign featuring world-renowned performer Neshama Carlebach was a fantastic success! Thanks to sponsors whose combined contributions equaled nearly \$60,000, we were able to offer a triple match for any donation on May 9. Our National Board and leadership from across the country mobilized friends, family members, and colleagues to help us surpass our goal by raising \_\_\_\_! All donations support NA’AMAT’s mission of building a diverse, vibrant society founded on equity and inclusion. Thank you to all who participated.

### Inside

NA’AMAT Reports.....	2
Support NA’AMAT; save on taxes .....	2
Did you know? .....	2
Message from the President .....	3
The Zionist Congress: Unity, Friendship, Peace.....	3
Join NA’AMAT at any time.....	4

## Fundraising

### Become a GEM

By Susan Miller, VP, Fundraising

The GEM program was developed to create a consistent stream of donation income for NA'AMAT. GEM stands for “giving every month.” Those who have made the commitment to participate recognize the positive impact they are making on the lives of all Israelis — Jews, Christians and Arabs. The GEM levels range from \$10/month to \$100/month and ensure that the mission of NA'AMAT USA continues.

NA'AMAT USA partners with NA'AMAT Israel to provide a wide range of services for women, children and families. Services include quality daycare, alternative high school education for at-risk teens; mental health services; legal services and career counseling for women; and professional scholarships and research grants for women pursuing higher education. Your donations go directly to

Israel to support this mission.

Some members participate by providing their credit card or bank account information on the [www.naamat.org](http://www.naamat.org) website. Others use their RMD (required minimum distribution) and send a check from their financial institution. *(See below for more information about RMDs.)* Whatever is easiest for you works for NA'AMAT USA!

## Advocacy

### Be responsible, be informed

By Randye Sable, Advocacy Chair

Hundreds of thousands of Israelis have been demonstrating their concern over the Netanyahu government's push to change the makeup and autonomy of the Israeli Supreme Court *(see article, page 1)*.

Throughout, Israeli media has helped keep us informed.

As supporters of Israel, it is our re-

sponsibility to read and listen to a variety of sources — both domestic and Israeli — for a well-rounded understanding of the facts. We can remind friends and acquaintances that the country is a democracy whose elected officials are not always popular with the opposition. In that way, Israel is no different than the U.S.

Also make note that the great majority of demonstrators—both those who oppose the coalition government and those who support it—are conducting themselves in a peaceful manner. The vast display of Israeli flags is evidence of a love of country, despite conflicts with elected officials.

In Israel's 75th year of sovereignty, let us joyfully join in the celebration. The modern miracle that Israel is should not be diminished for us by the display of democracy we are witnessing in the Knesset and in the streets.

*Yom Huledet Sameach, Israel. Am Yisrael Chai!*

## Support NA'AMAT; save on taxes

If you are 73 or older and would like to make a donation to NA'AMAT that will also reduce your taxes, you are in luck.

You are required by law to withdraw a specified amount of money from your tax-deferred retirement accounts, such as traditional IRAs or 401(k)s. Typically, you would pay income tax on this withdrawal, which is known as a required minimum distribution (RMD). However, funds that you donate to a charitable organization such as NA'AMAT are deducted from your investment proceeds, thus reducing your taxes.

Life member Sybil Flom, of Seal Beach, California, took advantage of this opportunity at the suggestion of her financial advisor.

### Did you know?

Paula Ben-Gurion, wife of Israel's first prime minister, David Ben-Gurion, is believed to have suggested adding the concept of gender to the Israel Declaration of Independence: “The state of Israel will promote the development of the country for the benefit of all its inhabitants...will uphold the full social and political equality of all its citizens without distinction of race, creed or sex...”

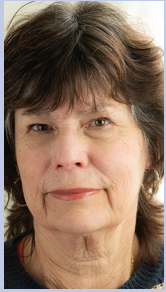
She used her RMD to become a \$1,000 sponsor of NA'AMAT's fundraising campaign in honor of Israel's 75th birthday. Flom's late mother, Ida Michlin, was a longtime NA'AMAT member who earned a gold bracelet full of charms from her Pioneer Women activities. Flom still has most of the charms.

Laurie Merel, of Skokie, Illinois, joined NA'AMAT in 1964 and served as president of the Ilana Club and co-president of the Greater Chicago Council. Merel makes most of her charitable donations from her RMD, including generous annual contributions to NA'AMAT. She said the process is easy. She sends her brokerage firm the name, address and amount of the donation. “They send forms and I sign them. It's not complicated.”

You can get an idea of how much your RMD will be for this year using the Required Minimum Distribution Calculator at [aarp.com](http://aarp.com). The financial institution that holds your tax-deferred retirement account can send the distribution directly to the charitable organization, at your request.

NA'AMAT Fundraising Vice President Susan Miller has made it a top priority “to educate everyone about the options they have to continue to support NA'AMAT and reduce their tax liability. “It's a win-win that people should know about.”

## Message from the President



By Jan Gurvitch

*“How good and how pleasant it is for sisters to dwell together in unity”*

In April, about 25 NA'AMAT members from five countries — the United States, Argentina, Brazil, Canada and Mexico — joined our sisters in Israel for an amazing three-day solidarity conference. Our delegation included national board members Esther Friedberg, Donna Levin, Susan Miller and Selma Roffman; Western Area Director Ellie Cohen and Finance Manager Marcy McKenzie; and members Melanie Gladstone and Yvonne Rodriguez.

The conference began on Sunday, April 16, at the Kanot Agricultural Youth Village. There we heard from Uzi Rabi, director of the Moshe Dayan Center for Middle Eastern and African Studies, and Dr. Hezi Yosef, director of Kanot. We were happy to hear that the student population has grown from 250 to more than 700 students, with an impressive 95% matriculation rate.

On April 17, we visited Sderot, which sits perilously close to the Gaza border. We viewed Gaza from an observation post that memorializes the soldiers who died protecting this community. While in Sderot we visited our multipurpose day care center, for children from 1-3 years old. Many of the children come from troubled homes. We are so proud of NA'AMAT's work to support them, and we're confident that this early intervention makes a difference in their lives.

In the evening we attended the Memorial Ceremony at Yad Vashem commemorating Holocaust Remembrance Day. It was a deeply moving experience to hear the stories of Shoah survivors and to know they found a home for themselves and their descendants in Israel. The following morning we participated in a national minute of remembrance. As the siren blasted, traffic stopped and people got out of their cars and stood at attention, remembering the 6 million souls who died.

On April 18, we gathered at the NA'AMAT headquarters in Tel Aviv. There each of the participating countries reported on



*The NA'AMAT USA delegation.*

their activities and plans. We also heard from NA'AMAT leadership, including Hagit Pe'er, Israel's President. This was followed by a tour of Ayanot Youth Village, which included the Ada Maimon Visitor Center, where we heard about Maimon's fight for the right of women to equally participate in early kibbutz life.

Our conference ended on April 19 with a visit to Meshanot, the NA'AMAT Center for Gender Equality. The center is both a museum dedicated to women's empowerment and a place to learn about gender roles and how equality remains an ongoing challenge. Workshops are available to companies, schools and tour groups. We are very proud of the museum, which represents NA'AMAT's aspiration of empowering women to build a society founded on the principles of social justice and gender equality.

The Solidarity Conference allowed us to witness firsthand what NA'AMAT has done to change the landscape of Israeli society. We then joined with 2,000 delegates from 40 countries at the Extraordinary World Zionist Congress. Please see below..

## The Zionist Congress: Unity, Friendship, Peace

By Selma Roffman, Vice President

On April 19, 2023, 75 years after the establishment of the State of Israel, NA'AMAT delegates met in Jerusalem to join more than 2,000 Jewish leaders and youth from around the world to celebrate the birthday of Israel and adopt resolutions to strengthen both Jewish identity and the bond with Israel.

Imagine a room filled with a colorful mosaic of people from all different backgrounds and views tackling “Unity, Friendship and Peace,” the theme of the Congress. Yaakov Hagoel, chairman of the World Zionist Organization, kicked off the event by pondering: “Does Zionism still have a mission?” His answer was a resounding

yes. “Zionism in 2023 must do exactly what it was doing in 1897,” he said. “It has to stand where the people of Israel most need it.”

Uniting the diverse groups represented at the Congress — from religious to secular, right wingers to left wingers, Ashkenazi and Sephardi, Israeli and Diaspora Jews, young and old — was a challenge! Shouts filled the assembly hall as differing groups lifted their voices to support their views.

Following heated discussion by affiliated members of the WZO over resolutions about improved representation of women in the government, the Law of Return, recognition of Reform and Con-

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[naamat.org/waystogive/donate-now](https://naamat.org/waystogive/donate-now)**

## Join NA'AMAT at any time

We are now accepting annual members on a rolling basis. Memberships at the \$36 and above level are now good for one year from the time of payment.

Traditionally, annual memberships have expired at the end of our fiscal year. Now, for instance, if you become a member on Nov. 15, 2023, your membership will be good through Nov. 15, 2024. Your annual membership provides you with a one-year subscription to all things NA'AMAT. From our printed newsletter, NA'AMAT NOW, to e-blasts, to programming and special events, an annual membership to NA'AMAT keeps you connected to our community while helping to support our mission in Israel. If you are not already, become an annual member today to subscribe to NA'AMAT USA!

Contact Director of Engagement Amy Taus at [engage@naamat.org](mailto:engage@naamat.org) for details and to learn how to make a greater impact on the lives that NA'AMAT touches. Thank you for your support. We need you now more than ever!

## Democracy at risk

*Continued from first page*

tioned the Supreme Court for the right to take a qualification test for an aviation course in the Israel Defense Forces. Miller did not qualify for the course, but she paved the way for the women pilots who came after her.

In 2021, the Supreme Court upheld a law protecting the rights of a woman to half of the family's residential property during a divorce proceeding. Her husband claimed she had been unfaithful and was not entitled to share the assets. The Rabbinic Court agreed with the husband, but the Supreme Court overturned its decision, thus entitling the wife to her share of the residential property.

"Achievements which have been accomplished by means of tremendous efforts are now, literally, facing immediate danger," not-

ed Shavit. "To remain a Jewish state Israel has to be a democracy. There has to be equal rights for Arab citizens; we don't want to live in apartheid," she added.

Netanyahu's judicial overhaul also would cede the authority of matters such as labor law and finance to the Rabbinical Court, said Etzion. "NA'AMAT has been working for years to 'try to reduce the influence of the Rabbinical Court and religious laws on our lives.'" Increasing the powers of the religious courts would increase gender segregation and hamper initiatives combating violence against women, Shavit added.

As tens of thousands of Israelis take to the streets in support of democracy and women's rights, NA'AMAT USA members also have a role to play, Shavit said. "The U.S. is an important actor — pressure from U.S. Jewry can make a difference."

## Zionist Congress

*Continued from previous page*

servative conversions, support for LGBTQ Jews, the vote was postponed until a later date, and will be held remotely.

NA'AMAT voting members stood up for improving women's representation in all areas of the Israeli government and society. At one point, some of us marched to the Supreme Court building to express deep concern about the future of Israel's democ-

racy and the relationship between Israel and world Jewry.

At the Congress, Hagoel noted that while the population of Israel was just over 800,000 in 1948, it now has over 9 million. "For its birthday, my wish for Israel is that in another 75 years, it will have a much larger population, with many Jews from the Diaspora moving here, in order to develop as a glorious country that is a light onto the nations and more united than ever," he concluded..