

Jewish World

'Herzl's vision of the Jewish state was for all Jews'

An interview with Gusti Yehoshua-Braverman,
head of the WZO's Department for Diaspora Activities

By Greer Fay Cashman

IN RECENT years, strenuous efforts have been made to reach out to Conservative and Reform Jews in the lands of Jewish dispersion, who for a long time were slighted by successive governments and parliaments of Israel, even when most of the members of these two state institutions were not religiously observant.

The present Knesset is likewise not exerting itself in reaching out to the Jewish Diaspora.

The outreach endeavors have been made by the National Institutions such as the World Zionist Organization, the Jewish Agency, Keren Hayesod, the Jewish National Fund and others.

It is important to differentiate between the Israeli parliament and the national institutions that collectively represent the parliament of the Jewish People, says Gusti Yehoshua-Braverman, head of the Department for Diaspora Activities in the World Zionist Organization.

Whereas the national institutions are traditionally part of a broad Israeli-Diaspora coalition, the government and the Knesset seem to be fostering division.

A passionate advocate for pluralism and the right of every Jew to identify as a Jew and a Zionist in accordance with his or her own beliefs, Yehoshua-Braverman is fearful that if Israel persists in non-recognition of non-Orthodox streams of Judaism, and refuses to accept conversions by non-Orthodox rabbis, there will eventually be no Jewish continuity in the Diaspora.

She admits that her viewpoint was shaped by her previous position as the Associate Director of the Israel Movement for Reform and Progressive Judaism.

Born in Petah Tikva to a secular family which attended synagogue twice a year on the High Holy Days, Yehoshua-Braverman recalls that they went to services at an Orthodox synagogue, "because that's all there was in Petah Tikva in those days."

There is some confusion between religious



Gusti Yehoshua-Braverman: Everything is colored by politics

conservatism and political conservatism she says. "Everything is colored by politics." The fact that someone is Conservative or Reform, does not make them any less of a Zionist she contends, noting that Conservative and Reform Jews give vast sums of money to Israel for hospitals, research, universities and more, without

asking that the institutes and projects that they support should serve only Conservative and Reform Jews. "We must embrace them as part of the Jewish people," she insists. "Excluding Reform and Conservative Jews from the Zionist table is a threat to Jewish continuity."

Yehoshua-Braverman, who has traveled



Yehoshua-Braverman makes friends with children in Uganda

extensively throughout the Diaspora in the slightly more than 10 years in which she has held office, has reached the conclusion that in the Jewish world there are more non-Orthodox than Orthodox Jews, and that there is something wrong with the minority having hegemony over the majority.

The alienating of Conservative and Reform Jews from Judaism automatically alienates them from Zionism. Not so long ago, there was a deep-seated belief that Israelis who chose to live in countries other than Israel were traitors. Just as people who immigrate to Israel are regarded as going up and are called *olim*, people emigrating from Israel are called *yordim*, meaning that they are going down. A *yored* used to be regarded with contempt, regardless of the fact that most Israelis living abroad, continued to socialize with each other, to speak Hebrew amongst themselves, to live in cluster communities with other Israelis and to remain strongly committed to Israel's future.

Any member of a Zionist youth movement in the Diaspora who failed to fill the aims of the movement, which was to eventually make his or her permanent home in Israel, was likewise treated with a certain disdain, even though the definition of a Zionist a half century ago and even more recently was one person who cajoles money out of a second person to send a third person to Israel.

But, in a changing world, what is more important than aliyah is bridge building between Israel and Diaspora Jewry, to maintain a mutually reliant connection, and to ensure that the gates of Israel will always remain open to every person who identifies Jewishly, regardless to what stream of Judaism that person belongs or

whether a person is a non-practicing Jew, who feels an historic and cultural affinity with the Jewish people, but is essentially an atheist.

"Herzl's vision of the Jewish State was for all Jews not only those living in Israel," declares Yehoshua-Braverman.

She acknowledges that some of the indifference or negativism that Israelis feel towards Diaspora Jews is based on ignorance. Unless they actually spend time in Diaspora communities, especially the smaller ones, get to know the people and become active in community events, they have no real inkling about Diaspora Jewish life.

For this reason, the WZO created a special volunteer program for post-army young people to go and live for a certain period of time in a Jewish community abroad. They come back to Israel with a much deeper understanding and a different viewpoint, Yehoshua-Braverman tells *The Jerusalem Report*.

By the same token, Diaspora Jews, especially those who are critical of Israel, "have to understand that Israel is not only about politics, even though they tend to identify Israel's separation of denominations and politics as one" she says.

As for Israel's relations with the Diaspora, she regrets the general tendency in Israel to look only at North America. "Every Diaspora is different," she insists, underscoring that each Diaspora community must be treated on its own merits and in relation to its own needs.

In this respect, she emphasizes that whatever the size of the community, Jewish education, with the accent on Zionism, must be a top priority.

"If we stick to the slogans of the past, we will lose them," she warns.

Although she appears to differentiate between Zionism and Judaism, she is actually taking people's Judaism at face value in all its manifold expressions, and takes it for granted that any Jews who want to call themselves Zionists are Zionists.

"To whom does Zionism belong?" she queries. "It is not a religion. "Zionism means that wherever you live, you can have Zionism as part of your identity."

Israelis have to respect the decisions of Diaspora Jews to live wherever they want, but must provide them with a connecting bridge, declares Yehoshua-Braverman, adding that the relationship must be based on mutual respect.

Having recently completed a 10-year term, Yehoshua-Braverman is hoping to be elected for a second term. All election results will be announced at the upcoming 38th World Zionist Congress that will be held from October 20-22.

She is worried about the politicization of the Congress, which she says is moving from a co-alition to becoming divisive.

"We cannot allow ourselves to be split," she insists.

This congress, which is a direct continuation of the First Zionist Congress convened by Zionist visionary Theodor Herzl in Basel, Switzerland in 1897 is the broadest representation of the interests of the Jewish People, and is the ideological policy making body of the Zionist Movement.

When it was initially planned, there was no pandemic, and it was thought that between 700 to 1,000 Jews from around the world would gather in Jerusalem for the excitement of the deliberations.

But now, for the first time ever, it's going to be a virtual congress, with a possibility of allowing more observers than in the past. To do so, would be an informal means of educating towards Zionism, and it would also teach people who consider themselves to be Zionists, more about how the different organs of the Zionist Movement work.

Even before the pandemic, President Reuven Rivlin and Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, who will each address the Congress, had considerable practice in video conferences, but much more on Zoom since the pandemic affected the over-all nature of the public forum.

What will become clear to all congress participants and observers, will be Yehoshua-Braverman's contention that "Israel belongs to the entire Jewish people. Everyone should be allowed to voice opinions, even views against Israeli politics, so long as it is showing their connection to the State of Israel." ■