

# NIF's Naomi Chazan Speaks: "We Can't be Silent"

DAN VERBIN

On Sunday, May 9, Toronto Reconstructionist synagogue Darchei Noam hosted the president of the New Israel Fund, Naomi Chazan, as part of a lecture series dealing with Israel, its domestic challenges and its relations with its neighbours and with the Diaspora.

Born In Jerusalem in 1946, Chazan, who described herself as the "mother of civil society in Israel," ironically addressed the packed audience in flawless English on Mother's Day; a fact that she lamented by mentioning with a tinge of sadness that in Israel Mother's Day has been replaced with Family Day.

Never one to shy away from debate or her mission to "fix" social woes, she spoke at length on the subject of the "Achievements and Challenges of Israel's Democracy."

Chazan began by saying that while she was initially concerned about how to get the Canadian community involved in the conversation that is taking place now inside Israel, a protest by the Jewish Defence League (JDL) outside the building made her immediately feel at home because "obviously people care. People's concerns burn them up inside."

Raised in Jerusalem, she recalled how her parents came to Palestine in late '30s from London – "a place from where very few Jews actually came voluntarily" – because they were "true Zionists in the full sense of the term."

"They believed strongly that political self-determination was the root to individual self-determination and freedom and justice. In other words, they linked in their mind the creation of the state of Israel with the creation of a just society in Israel."

At home, Chazan was brought up on one document: the Israeli Declaration of Independence. She noted how it talks not only about creation of Israel, but about essential values that the state should entrench; equality for all citizens, regardless of race, nationality, gender, religion; extending a hand of peace to your neighbours; the creation of social justice.

"(My parents) taught me that if there were

problems there was one obligation I had and that is to fix them. I've been fixing all my life."

The dilemma Chazan believes Israel currently faces? Sixty-two years after Israel's creation, one of its most important achievements is its "capacity to maintain its boisterous democracy." She quoted a remarkable figure – of the over 150 countries created after WWII, Israel and India are only two that have survived as democracies. A "tremendous achievement," she remarked.

However: "Democracies are like gardens. If you don't water them, they wither. They begin to flounder. They can disappear. And

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today, more than any time in my memory, there are serious challenges to Israel's democracy. It's beyond boisterous and uncivilized. It may be going further."

She then went on to examine the characteristics of the recent challenges, stating, "If you do not remember a word of what I said in next half hour, there is one sentence that is crucial. Anybody who is concerned about Israel's existence must first and foremost protect Israel's democracy."

According to Chazan, we are at a stage where we are "fighting for the soul of Israel" and we need to combat "very pernicious" trends overtaking the country, which in large part stem from disagreements over the future boundaries of the State of Israel.

"In the last five years, in a very concerted way, there have been attacks virtually on every aspect of Israel's democracy," she said.

It started with attacks on peace movements and leftist political parties, as these are "easy targets." The process continued systematically to Arab citizens of Israel then to human rights and civil rights groups.

"Democracies are measured by how they treat their minorities," she said.

In Chazan's view, the New Israel Fund is a current target because she said it heavily

funds Arab civil society in Israel (along with human rights, women's rights, Ethiopian rights and other civil society causes).

"Behind all of this is the key target and that is the justice system of the state of Israel," she said, explaining that the court system, the last resort of Israeli citizens, is "being attacked as being too leftists because it is protecting the human and civil rights of Israeli citizens."

The country is in the middle of a "process" that should worry everybody who cares about Israel, she said, adding that "we can't be silent."

What are characteristics of this process?

One: An attempt to circumscribe democratic discourse, with watchdog groups attempting to silence others by saying there is only one truth about what is good for Israel.

Two: An attempt to undermine democratic values.

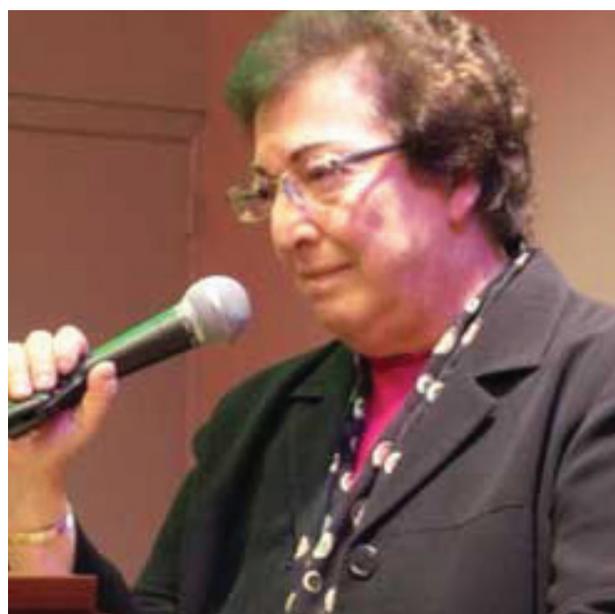
Three: An attempt to undermine democratic institutions, including the most democratic of all: civil society.

Four: The "scariest of them all."

"There are now conversations in Israel that say, 'Democracy, what do we need it for? If it's a question of the Jewish existence of Israel or its democratic existence, let's give up the democracy.'"

Chazan told the audience that she has been living with this battle "very intensively" for the last four months. In January and February of this year, Chazan was attacked by a group called Im Tirtzu in posters that depicted her with a horn jutting from her forehead as "Goldstone Chazan" (in Hebrew, the word for "fund" and the word for "horn" is the same). She said the accusation stemmed from the fact that "human rights organisations posted findings which were then used by the Goldstone commission."

Since then, the self-described "middle aged, rather boring, professorial type" has been trying to understand why people are "troubled to write outrageous things against



Naomi Chazan

a fellow Jew. Why is this happening?"

She gave three reasons. One: We live in a time of great uncertainty, which scares people to do things they wouldn't otherwise do. Two: We distrust ourselves due to fear and paranoia and a "very deep-seated sense of victimhood." Three: "You cannot continue to be democratic when you rule over another people against their will."

"The inability to end the occupation and to create a Palestinian state alongside Israel is not only deeply hurting the Palestinians and Israel's relations with Arab states but it is now eating away at the core of Israeli society and therefore has to be resolved."

Where do we go from here? She said the first thing needed is to protect civil society to fortify engines of changes, social justice, and decency in Israel.

She feels a personal obligation because of her stature. "Every time I see something that needs correction, there are organizations to do it and they have to be supported."

Furthermore, democracy needs to be protected and improved: "If we don't succeed, there won't be an Israel."

Lastly, the conflict has to be resolved. "There's not much time and we know what the solution is. If we don't do it now, that solution will dissipate."

"Undermine our democracy, undermine ourselves, and we will be totally isolated. But, respect our democracy, respect the other, we will be able to find respect worldwide," she said.

## Comments on Prof. Chazan Speech – May 9, 2010

MICHAEL DOBNER

In her speech on Sunday May 9, 2010 in Toronto (Darchai Noam) Prof. Naomi Chazan eloquently expressed the desires of many Israelis for a two state solution and a more just society in Israel that would be a light to all nations. But Prof Chazan has taken her message a step further which raises serious questions regarding her true motives.

Prof. Chazan went out of her way to depict Israel as an "odd ball" among mature democratic states. She claimed (with a lot of authority in her voice) that she does not know any mature democratic country that took the steps that Israel takes against fellow citizens (i.e. Arabs). She emphasised that being in war is no excuse for a true democratic society to violate civil rights. She then made the claim that Israel's

democracy is under very serious threat and to support her argument she pointed out to the following facts, amongst other:

1. The 15 seats won by Yisrael Beiteinu,
2. Schools in Israel put a wall between Ashkenazi and Sephardic girls
3. Women in many bus lines have to go to the back of the bus.

Prof. Chazan maybe is a brilliant political science professor but she probably skipped her history classes. Her supportive audience made mainly of Canadian Jews probably also forgot that when Canada was last involved in a serious war (World War II) the government rounded up Canadian citizens of Japanese, Italian and German origin and sent many of them to internment camps. Canada was not under existential threat comparable to Israel but took measures that have not been

taken by Israel in any of its wars. The US and the UK did similar things during that war. Some of you might say this happened a long time ago, but in 1970, Mr Trudeau (the most beloved prime minister by the left in Canada) suspended civil rights in Quebec in order to break the separatist movement in that province.

It is true that Yisrael Beitenu won 12.5% of the vote in Israel. Prof. Chazan failed to mention that a significant portion of its voters were non Jews that were looking to rectify a human right violation against them in relation to their marriage rights. Moreover, Prof. Chazan demonstrated that she is not aware of the increasing support for pure Nazi parties in Europe including Switzerland (29% of the voters), Austria (30%), Holland (over 20%) France (23%), and Hungary (15%) to name a few, all of whom are not under any exist-

tential threat. I do not think that any serious expert including Prof. Chazan would claim that the democracies of these countries are in serious danger.

Her claim regarding schools in Israel putting a wall between Ashkenazi and Sephardic girls and women being put at the back of the bus, amounts to storming into an open door. These acts are done by a group of ultra orthodox and the large majority of Israelis are against them. Moreover, Prof. Chazan as part of the left movement that believes in moral relativism (i.e. we should not enforce our western culture on other groups) should know better. For example, the left is very careful of condemning some Islamic customs that discriminate against women. For example the left is against banning burkas, although it is clear that they are degrading women (ironically banning of burkas and minarets is

happening in enlightened Europe and not in dark Israel). The ultra orthodox Jews in Israel belong to a group that does not believe in Western culture values and they are the one who want to see their men and women separated in busses and girls of different background (according to them the Sephardic girls are not orthodox enough). What is the moral justification of the left to impose western culture on this group and not on Muslim group for example.

The way I see it, Israelis believe (for good reasons) that they are under existential threat and as such their ability to maintain democratic values when compared to other democracies that were tested during distress times is exemplary, although admittedly there is lots that can be done to improve it. Prof. Chazan has at best shown ignorance and at worst demonstrated intellectual dishonesty.