

Transcript of Edited Interview of Shira Ben-Sasson Furstenberg, NIF, 3/2013

Solel: Women of Solel, I am very pleased to be bringing you, direct from Israel, one of our sisters, Shira Ben-Sasson Furstenberg. She will be addressing the issue of challenges to women in the public sphere in Israel. Shira, welcome to Congregation Solel and the 2013 Women's Seder. Shira, welcome to Congregation Solel, in High Park, Illinois.

Shira: Todah, todah, thank you. Ok, everyone, thank you for having me at your Seder table. This is really exciting and I am glad that the technical stuff is working out, hopefully. My name is Shira Ben-Sasson Furstenberg, here in Jerusalem, speaking to you from Baka, in Jerusalem. Born and raised here, actually. Raising my three children, with my husband, here in Jerusalem. I work for the New Israel Fund, and have been doing so for the past eight years, in different positions: with Shatil, our capacity-building arm; and with our grants department now, but always focusing on the issue of religious freedom and religious pluralism in Israel. This is my privilege to work on such an important initiative and to support such wonderful organizations and activists dealing with that challenge. I, myself, am an orthodox woman, as I said, born and raised here in Jerusalem in a liberal orthodox home (a moderate, moderate orthodox home) here in Jerusalem, 37 and a half years ago. Served as an officer in the IDF. Studied cultural anthropology at Hebrew U. And together with Yair, my husband, a founding and active member of Hakel (ph.), an egalitarian Orthodox congregation, where men and women sit separately, but we take part of many, various parts of the tefillah. This is a huge chunk of our lives, on a personal level. So this is me! Very nice to meet you guys.

Solel: Shira, could you give us a little bit of background on what is going on today, in Israel, with respect to women in the public sphere and the challenges that they are facing. And if you could give us a few specifics, I think that would be very helpful.

Shira: So, I think that the most burning issue, and crazy issue, is the buses. And when we talk about the buses, we talk about the inside of the buses, and we talk about the outside of the buses. In the inside of the buses, women were ordered to use the back door, and to sit in the second half of the bus. Separate but equal, using a special mechanism to pay from the back, so that they don't have to use the front door. And feeling violence turned to them if they did choose to sit in the front. This was inside the buses. Outside the buses, we had censorship, sometimes self-made censorship, of the advertising companies. Again, I am reminding you that the public transportation services in Israel are subsidized. We had an agreement between the public bus company and the advertisers not to have women's faces on ads glued to the outside of the bus. So, this was taken to court, by our organizations: the [Reform Judaism's] Israel Religious Action Center; the Korech, which is the Orthodox Women's Alliance; and ____, a Jerusalem-based movement, took it to court. And they said, not only bad inside of the bus, but about the outside of the bus, we can't have this. And the crazy thing that they reached is that the company agreed to

have no human faces in ads on buses. Because they didn't want to bring the women back, so they decided to take the men off. So, we're still struggling with this, we are still supporting organizations on the ground struggling against this. We are going to see humans back on ads. The separation inside the buses was ruled illegal. And something that is happening today, and something that you can do when you visit Israel, is to take Freedom Rides. The Reform Movement in Israel is inviting Israelis and tourists to take Freedom Rides on buses that are not supposed to be segregated, but on an everyday basis, if we're not there to choose where to sit, then ultra-orthodox women are going to be back in the back, afraid to take the step for themselves. So legal work, Freedom Rides, having our eyes open, helped us handle the bus issue.

I remember, number two is radio. A radio station receiving its air radio time from the State said they couldn't have the women on the air. Not women singing, not even looking at women, but just women's speaking voices can't be on this radio station, which is one of the five leading radio stations in Israel. So, again, the use of court work, legal work, was our way to tackle this. And also we conducted a survey of hundreds of ultra-orthodox women because the State said, "Women don't want to go on the air." So, we helped fund a survey among ultra-orthodox women who said, "Yes, we do want to be on the air. We don't want to fax our words in, we want to speak on the radio." So, this was ruled illegal and stopped.

And, occurrences of gas mask distribution having separate hours and separate lines [for men and women] is something our organizations have monitored and helped stop. And, I think one of the most terrible things were the separate streets, because on the holiday of Sukkot, there are a lot of people coming to Jerusalem. There were separate streets, with guards guarding the entrances, saying, "This way for men. This way for women." For two years in a row, we had our activists from the Jerusalem movement on the ground checking for these occurrences. We had them taken to court. The court said, "Ok, maybe we will stop it in seven days," which is when Sukkot is over. But, this year, the court agreed to rule that it's illegal and the municipality in Jerusalem stopped the segregation in the streets. So, we are stopping segregation inside buses, outside buses, on the radio, in State services, and even in the streets. We can get it done. We can stop it.

Solel: You sound very hopeful. What can women here in the United States do to support your efforts to monitor these issues?

Shira: There is a whole lot you can do. Because this is a problem with the State of Israel, but this is also a problem of the Jewish people. So, I think the first thing to do is to realize that it's your problem, too, and it's okay to get involved. Let's agree on that – it's okay for you to get involved. It's actually crucial for you to get involved, because Jews need to say, this is not Jewish, this is not the way of the Torah. This is one thing. But how can you make that voice be heard here in Israel? The fact that you are focusing on this now and being educated about this (and if you want more reading material, no problem) is step one. To hear about it, to learn about it, to tell people about it, to tell people that we are embarrassed that, in the year 2013, in Israel,

women need help to choose a seat on the bus; that a woman winning a prize for medical research couldn't be awarded the prize herself because the Minister of Health was an ultra- orthodox man and the prize was sent to her because she can't come up on stage. Talk about it, talk to your neighbors, talk to your rabbis, have them mention it when they give sermons, when they talk to other rabbis. Or when you visit Israel, ask people about it. Ask your relatives in Israel, ask your friends. Take a ride with a Freedom Ride; I can help you coordinate that no problem. Just call IRAC, Israel Religious Action Center, they have them every day. And with your own, pardon my French, "tush," you can desegregate a bus. You can choose where to sit and women will follow you. So, when Secretary of State Clinton said that she is worried about women's status in Israel, and she is worried that Israel is deteriorating to be like Afghanistan, that was a major wake up call for the government of Israel and a major catalyst for them to take ownership of the problem and start working on it. So if you can have your non-Jewish leaders or Jewish leaders in the government say things about the status of women in Israel, the status of religion in Israel, the connection between religion, women, and Israel, that is no less important than whatever it is you think about the occupation or any other issue in the Israeli society. Get the discussion going. Come on freedom rides. Talk to your leaders. You can always support organizations doing important work with funding, but you can also do things yourself.

We have a campaign asking you to take a picture saying, "Women Should be Seen and Heard," just take a picture. We will take care of having your face with that little sign "Women Should be Seen and Heard" hanging in the streets of Jerusalem, because Jewish women from all over the world should be seen and heard.

Solel: Thank you very much Shira. It was so wonderful to have your voice and face with us speaking for Israeli women at our Women's Seder.

Shira: Thank you. Have a wonderful seder and a wonderful hag.