

## CROW'S CAWS

by crow cohen



## More Reflections on Israel

At this time of year, I find it a little difficult to assert my Jewish culture, so I thought I'd bring you more reflections on Israel—especially since, I'm sure, by the time this article comes out, there will still be a depressing war raging over there. It cheers me up to pass on little-known information about that tiny country, the size of New Jersey, that is the site of so much turmoil. Consider this article an effort to humanize the country, which, in my opinion, is the most effective way to promote peace.

I interviewed a good friend of mine, Lani Ravin, an American feminist who spent 17 years in Israel, from 1977 to 1995. From 1985 to 1988, she was the coordinator of a feminist woman's center in Haifa, *Isha l'Isha* (Woman to Woman). She was an architecture student at the *Technion* in Haifa, and read an article in a local newspaper entitled "10 Percent Lesbians" unfavorably describing the place. (When the reporter had asked the activists running the center, how many were lesbian, they replied, "The same as in the general population—ten percent." In fact the center was 90 percent lesbian.) Lani figured, "If this is described as such a nasty place, it must be great!" so she checked it out.

At the time, Lani was having a hard time landing a job as an architect, because the interviewers asked questions such as: Are you married? Do you have any children? If so, how can you work overtime? She knew these questions were illegal in the U.S., but what could she do? She was being discriminated against because she was

married, so she started doing volunteer work at *Isha l'Isha*.

Soon, she was asked to be the coordinator. There, at least, nobody asked if she were married.

"I came to the center wanting to promote activities that included the mainstream," she said. "I wasn't as afraid of the media as a lot of the women involved. I felt I could communicate with a diversity of women. I especially wanted Arab women to be as comfortable at the center as Jewish women. We were bilingual [Arabic/Hebrew], which was completely radical for a woman's center in a Jewish city."

However, Lani did not shy away from labeling herself a feminist, which was equivalent to coming out as a lesbian. "When I mentioned 'the f word,' [feminist] sometimes I thought I'd be physically attacked. Some guy would yell, 'My wife left me because of your type!'"

Yet Lani said she never felt a lot of pressure from the lesbians she worked with to declare herself one. It was understood that claiming a lesbian identity was often a fluid, unpredictable process. "You didn't have to take sides. However, if a reporter from the outside asked who was a lesbian, we said we all were, in solidarity, to support the lesbians."

The more strident separatists could be found in the bigger cities of Tel Aviv and Jerusalem, where the movement was subject to painful splits between straights and lesbians. Why was it different in Haifa? Perhaps because

Haifa has a strong socialist history. It was the only large city in Israel where Arabs and Jews lived together in the same neighborhoods.

"I wanted to promote coalitions," she said. "Heterosexual women were starting to regard their heterosexuality as a choice [rather than a given] because now they had so many role models at the center." Lani also felt it was a good education to sometimes allow men to attend events. "All the men who showed up were pretty cowed," she said. "After all, they were in 'enemy territory.' They were very, very polite."

Lani helped launch some exciting programs. She started a hotline for women who felt they were being discriminated against in their jobs, and received calls from both Arab and Jewish women. *Isha l'Isha* also offered a basic car mechanics class for women offered by a teacher from the vocational school down the block from the center. "A lot of men were disappointed that they couldn't join the class," she said, "but we told them they could learn these skills all over the country. This was about empowering women."

One of her favorite protests was against a national labor union (the *Histradrut*), which sponsored a beauty contest in the workplace. "I figured we wouldn't be heard if we were seen as just a bunch of angry, hairy-legged women," she said, "so we staged a male 'beauty contest' of our own as a counter-demonstration. Here were all these hairy-legged men parading around. The police were relieved it was such a good-natured protest

instead of the usual tumult they had to contend with in Israel."

I asked Lani what she thought about the situation over there now. "For the past 10 years, it's much easier to be a lesbian," she said. "You can actually find predominately lesbian neighborhoods in Tel Aviv, where women can walk down the street hand in hand."

As a matter of fact, Israel has the most liberal national laws protecting homosexuals in the world. In 1988, the criminal code was amended to no longer prohibit male homosexual relations. In 1992, an amendment to the Equality in Employment Law made it illegal to discriminate on the basis of sexual orientation in hiring, promotion, dismissal, and other aspects of employment.

In 1993, an order from the Personnel Department of the Israeli Defense forces lifted restrictions on the military service of lesbians and gay men. And in 1997, an amendment to the law of "Libel and Slander" has forbidden disgracing a person based on sex or sexual orientation. Granted, these laws are difficult to uphold in a country so influenced by religious fundamentalists, but at least they're on the books.

"Of course it is still a macho country," Lani said. "I still get

*Isha l'Isha's* newsletter. They are tackling the issue of female slavery. Ever since the breakdown of the Soviet Union, Russian women are being 'imported' for Israeli brothels. Unfortunately, Israel is one of this international ring's biggest 'customers.' The other women's centers haven't wanted to touch this scandal.

"It's hard to put women's issues on the public agenda, because security is such a priority. At times like these, the Left becomes paralyzed because you can get shot at from both sides. You no longer have Arab partners to work with and vice versa. It's like being in a bomb shelter. You just wait until it passes. Even though I say bad things about Israel, it's because I love the place, and I have hope that it can and will change. In the meantime, I just don't want to shove anything under the carpet."

*Crow Cohen is a lesbian feminist who lives in Winooski. ▼*

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