Dispatches from the World Zionist Congress
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Preface

RRC President Deborah Waxman wrote these dispatches from Israel in October 2015, while she was serving as a delegate to the World Zionist Congress. The Congress is the legislative body of the World Zionist Organization (WZO), the very same institution founded by Theodor Herzl in 1897. Today, the WZO, along with the Jewish Agency, is the official link between the Israeli government and the global Jewish world. The organization debates and votes on resolutions; it also allocates funds. The WZO has a 50% share in the Jewish Agency, and at stake in the 2015 Congress were millions of dollars each year in funding to progressive Jewish issues in Israel. (Click here for some additional background on World Zionist Congress and its politics.)

Rabbi Waxman was elected as a delegate to the World Zionist Congress (WZC) with several other Reconstructionists, in a strategic partnership and alliance with ARZA (Association of Reform Zionists of America), which had put forward a platform of egalitarian values. During her time there she composed five dispatches, which were posted to the main websites of the Reconstructionist Movement, rrc.edu and JewishRecon.org. We’ve collected her dispatches as a unique and valuable record of what it means for Reconstructionist Judaism to appear in the Jewish public square. Throughout, she raises the question of how and whether that was valuable, ultimately concluding that it was. The Congress is filled with back office deals, with unresolved questions that are remanded to opaque committees with a lack of democratic transparency or accountability. And still, the
egalitarian platform gained support, and important connections were strengthened between our movements. In addition to her work at the WZC, during her time in Israel, Rabbi Waxman deepened connections with the vibrantly growing Israeli Jewish Renaissance, a revival of Jewish culture, text and religion by secular and progressive Jews.

The Congress also coincided with an upsurge of violence in Israel, and this too, is both a backdrop and foreground of these dispatches.

We hope you enjoy this short e-book, brought to you by the Reconstructionist Movement.
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1. Thoughts on Arriving in Israel

On the amazing mysteries of the universe: My old friend Rami picked me up today at Ben Gurion Airport to take me home to his family for my first Shabbat. We were roommates in Jerusalem nearly 20 years ago. I was studying at RRC and he was in law school, bound eventually for a career in the Israeli police. He is Mizrachi. His family came from Libya after Israel was established, and he was educated in Bnei Akiva schools. Though his then-girlfriend and now-wife Roni was educated in progressive Pelech schools under the amazing Alice Shalvi, I was the first liberal rabbi (rabbinical student) he had ever met. Over these last two decades, he has gotten increasingly involved in religious pluralism, recently serving as the head of the Yachad community in Modi'in. When we reconnected, he almost immediately told me that he plans to begin part-time studies at the Reform movement's rabbinical program for Israelis so that he can help to foster the Jewish Renaissance in Israel. Many of my meetings around the World Zionist Congress will be with leaders of the Renaissance, with the aim of bolstering the Reconstructionist movement's partnership with them. We traded ideas, practices, and names, and marveled that we had found each other all those years ago and that our journeys are now, still, so intertwined.

On the current situation of the new violence in Israel: Rami asked me how the American community is viewing the current situation. In Modi'in, where he and his family live, life feels fairly normal. And yet like so many others, he is startled by the new character of this situation, by the stabbings, and by how hard it is to respond or defend. I showed him some statements in my email inbox from various Jewish agencies. He was struck by how dated they
already were, referring to events that were already 24 or 48 hours old. In Israel, he remarked, the situation is always changing. I know things will be different when I go up to Jerusalem after Shabbat and for residents in both Eastern and Western parts of the city, but things feel "normal" for me as a Jewish visitor in Modi'in tonight. Even as I write, I fear that by the time this letter is published, it too will be very dated.

On my hopes for the World Zionist Congress: I think that the participants in the Congress will encapsulate the full range of opinions about the present and future of Israel and Zionism. I am intensely interested to see how the Congress conducts itself—there are several proposed resolutions calling for transparency and accountability—and how we delegates will conduct ourselves. Will we be able to talk and legislate across our differences? Will the gathering be substantive, even transformative, or will it be (yet another) opportunity to rehearse individual opinions using ever louder voices, drowning out those articulating different opinions? How amazing it will be if the Congress reveals itself as a space of relevance and substance at this moment in Jewish and Israeli life. I certainly will do everything I can to make it be so, and am honored to serve as a delegate.

2. Does Anyone Even Know the WZC Exists?

I travelled to Jerusalem on Sunday, yesterday. David Roberts, the board chair of RRC/Jewish Reconstructionist Communities and, like me, a delegate to the World Zionist Congress, was already here, participating in ARZA's
pre-Congress seminars. Rabbi Sharon Kleinbaum of New York's Congregation Beit Simchat Torah and our third Reconstructionist delegate, arrives Monday evening.

The streets of West Jerusalem are quiet and tense. I can only imagine how tense the streets of East Jerusalem must be. Given the instability of the situation, I won't be visiting there on this trip. I am staying near normally-bustling Zion Square, and it is clear from the unusually empty streets and shops that a great many Israelis are staying home. One acquaintance told me that she walks only to the bus stop to go to work, and carries pepper spray at all times. Yet I also see some tourists and Israelis going about their business with little outward anxiety. I have been walking among them to some of my nearby daytime meetings, while taking taxis at night. I rode the light rail to pick up my credentials for the World Zionist Congress and the train was full of Israelis, though not crowded.

My days have been filled by meetings with colleagues across the religious and political spectrum. I’ve also been teaching and recruiting on behalf of RRC at both the Pardes Institute (speaking on "Peoplehood, Particularism and Persuasion") and the Conservative Yeshiva (where my talk was "Reconstructing Torah"). All of these conversations have been interesting and lively.

It has been fascinating, though, to realize how little awareness Israelis have about the World Zionist Congress. More
than 300 delegates (and many alternates and observers) from the diaspora are joining 190 elected Israeli delegates to discuss the future of Zionism. This would seem like an event with tremendous significance for Israeli Jews. But not one of the Israelis I spent time with over Shabbat knew about the Congress, nor did my many cab drivers nor the staff of my hotel.

And in some ways I get it. Everything about the Congress seems archaic. Yet the stakes are high: political appointments, legitimate financial allocations and the ever-present likelihood of illegitimate ones. I am keenly aware that, beginning tomorrow, I will be participating in a political apparatus from the nineteenth century. As an historian, I am thrilled: it will be like entering a time machine to get a glimpse of the ways that much of Jewish political life operated in the past. As a contemporary Jewish communal leader, however, I am deeply perplexed. Is this truly a good use of resources? Can the Congress be reformed? Can it reflect contemporary needs and aspirations?

### 3. Parliaments and Progress?

Right before Yom Ha’atzma’ut (Israeli Independence Day) this year, a reporter asked me “Has Zionism changed since 1948?” The question startled me, because its framing implied the possibility that the answer could be “No.” A Reconstructionist perspective helps us recognize that everything evolves. This is especially true of an ideology like Zionism, which seeks to unite the Jewish people and to establish and sustain a nation-state, both of which are living entities. A Reconstructionist approach to Israel and Zionism is founded on *engagement* with Israel: engagement across the breadth of Israeli life and society, and engagement that can vary from person to person
based on their particular interests and commitments.

The World Zionist Congress is all about how Zionism has changed, and how it needs to continue to change. Delegates from all over the world have gathered to discuss the aspirations and obligations of Zionists and to set policy for its guiding institutions. One of the ARZA leaders described the Congress as the “parliament of the Jewish people,” and I am finding it deeply meaningful to experience face-to-face the people who make up “worldwide Jewish peoplehood.” I met a German woman who is the Conservative rabbi in Berlin, and a Russian Reform rabbi who studied at Leo Baeck College in London. I connected with the sole French delegate to ARZA, whose children went to Camp JRF due to his longtime friendship with Camp founder Rabbi Jeff Eisenstat and with his wife Rabbi Sarah Messinger, a Reform rabbi. I have met folks from New Zealand, Australia, England, Canada, and across Israel, South America and the US. Amazing. The international nature of this endeavor requires tremendous exertion by the organizers: for most sessions, participants are equipped with simultaneous translations into English, Hebrew, Spanish and French.

The outward form of our work is discussion and parliamentary procedures. This may seem academic, but the consequences are concrete. We are reflecting together on Zionist ideologies and their real-world translation into programs. In particular, the ARZA slate and its allies are deeply committed to reforming the World Zionist Organization to function with greater transparency and accountability.

On the first day, we heard panels that: drashed on Hatikvah; discussed what it means “to be a free people in our land”; considered the failures and the
mandate of Zionism; and reflected on anti-Semitism and anti-Zionism.

On the second day, delegates broke into cross-party committees to work through the 152 resolutions proposed by the various Zionist parties. Until early October, the ARZA slate—the delegates who would vote on the resolutions—only knew about the resolutions submitted by our resolution committee. The complete set of resolutions was not distributed until five days prior to the start of the Congress, leaving very little time to prepare. Some committees were highly functioning (mine!). Others were full of controversy and filibustering; this was the case for those of both David Roberts and Sharon Kleinbaum.

Ninety-one resolutions made it out of committee for consideration by the full plenum. Some were voted down, and others never made it to the floor due to filibustering. More than half were directed at reforming Zionist institutions
and procedures. We wouldn’t be told until later what will happen if additional filibustering happens on the floor of the plenum, and whether and where any unaddressed resolutions will get handled. Everything about this process demonstrates the current lack of transparency and how deeply problematic it is.

When I am speaking in North America, I talk a lot about how democracy has changed Jewish life. The main point I emphasize is that in democracy we use persuasion, not coercion. In a monarchy or autocracy or religious state, coercive methods can be used to enforce behavior. In pre-modern Jewish communities, *herem*, excommunication, had real power to ensure that people stayed in the Jewish community and obeyed *halakhah*. In our day, we embrace individual autonomy, with communal mandates mediated through democratic methods, not autocratic means. Progressive Jewish communities don’t want coercion, which means we must use persuasion and make our case—effectively, we hope—in the open arena of ideas.

My participation in the World Zionist Congress has made me think about another mode of democracy: legislation. This really is a congress. It seeks to legislate and to have impact. Yet parliamentary procedures can be manipulated, and we spend endless time on motions and minutiae. None of us on the progressive side can quite tell if this process is truly meaningful and effective, or just tremendous exertion serving to distract and mask other activities. Is this a constructive way to act? At this point in the proceeding, I’m not entirely sure. And still, I am sure that we need to be here. Liberal Zionists have historically opted out these institutions because of their bad practices. Yet the only way to change anything is to show up, exercise our votes, and insist on accountability and transparency in addition to our
substantive demands of a commitment to religious equality in Israel, women’s rights and gender equality, and working toward a just and secure peace through a two-state solution. *(You can read the full ARZA platform here.)*

I’ll write again during the airplane ride home, and look forward to our ability to reflect back on this experience. With any luck, I’ll have good news to share about the success of ARZA’s platform.

   Click here for my full interview with the Jewish Ledger.
   Click here for a link to Rabbi Jonathan Kligler’s reflections on our movement’s Israel Task Force.

### 4. After the Vote: Measured Progress

First, let me report on successes. The 37th World Zionist Congress, comprised of diverse political and religious groups from Israel and around the world, passed resolutions committing the World Zionist Organization to:

- educate world Jewry about the principles embedded in Israel's Declaration of Independence and to refine Israel's democratic character
- enhance recognition and tolerance of different streams of Judaism, including in its partnership with the Israeli government
- support the establishment of an egalitarian prayer space at the Western Wall
- refrain from working with groups that support hate crimes
- reduce its own the carbon footprint and that of related agencies, including the Jewish Agency and the Jewish National Fund
- prevent fracking on JNF-administered lands
- support equality for the LGBT community in Israel

The Congress passed several resolutions, some with overwhelming margins, insisting on greater transparency and accountability within the organization (with important impact on the distribution of its massive yet opaque budget).

Now, let me reflect on the…how shall I say it? …madness of the voting session of the 37th World Zionist Congress. Robert's Rules of Order were nowhere to be seen-in fact, its unique parliamentary procedures seemed tailor-made to produce disorder. Meaningless official speeches and endless filibustering ate up voting time. The electronic voting system had not been adequately tested and inspired little confidence, leading to several moments of outright chaos as groups of delegates shouted that they hadn't been counted, even rushing the stage a couple of times. The pièce de résistance: four hours into the proceedings, all voting was suspended to make time for an awards ceremony before the Congress's conclusion. In the end, more than a third of the 91 resolutions were left unaddressed, instead being sent to the General Zionist Council. This blow to transparency left most of the delegates deeply dissatisfied, especially those of us from Jewish communities around the world. (A truly hysterical and sadly accurate account of the proceedings by Gabriel Webber, a British delegate to the ARZENU bloc, can be found here.)

Throughout the Congress, many of my colleagues and I came to question whether our involvement in the WZO elections and Congress (and the time and money invested) had been worthwhile. While the theme of the Congress was "Non-Stop Zionism," the official proceedings at best demonstrated little
relevance to the revitalization of Zionism. The outrageous conduct of the election plenary lent credence to the suspicion that most decisions were made behind the scenes. This demoralizing proceeding cast doubt on whether the resolutions that passed will be carried out, or whether they will remain mere words without financial and programmatic effects.

Despite these real reasons to be dispirited, the Reconstructionist contingent is taking heart from responses we heard from our colleagues in Israel who are working toward civil and democratic society there. For example, the director and board chair of the Jerusalem Open House for Pride and Tolerance reported the air of excitement at the passage of the resolution supporting LGBT rights, particularly in the wake of the murder of Shira Banki at the Jerusalem March for Pride and Tolerance this past summer. They tell us that the symbolism of the vote by a substantial majority (62%), among other signals of support, was itself meaningful. However frustrating the Congress's proceedings had been, we received a helpful perspective from a delegate from South Africa at the wonderful Reconstructionist minyan on Shabbat
morning. Having attended three Congresses, she assured us that despite their flaws, this week's proceedings were significantly improved from past years, both in how they were conducted and in what we accomplished. Hers was a helpful and hopeful perspective.

Even so, the three Reconstructionist delegates on the ARZA slate—David Roberts, Sharon Kleinbaum and I—know we speak for other Reconstructionists and for Reform Jews when we insist that we want more than symbolism. Words are not enough. Time will tell whether the WZO will fulfill its obligations, and whether our efforts to reform the organization will bear fruit. We leave hopeful that our participation made a difference, inching the organization a bit in the right direction. We leave the Congress and Israel grateful for the extraordinary opportunity to connect with passionate Jews from around the world.

5. Bringing the Israeli Jewish Renaissance Home

While the World Zionist Congress was the centerpiece of the Reconstructionist delegation's visit to Israel, we all did many things in addition to the Congress. David Roberts, our Board Chair, was accompanied by his wife Sue Fischlowitz, who studied Hebrew in an individualized ulpan. The two of them spent a lot of time with beloved family and friends.

Fellow Reconstructionist ARZA delegate Rabbi Sharon Kleinbaum, and her partner Randi Weingarten (who served as Hatikvah delegate on behalf of the
Jewish Labor Committee) invited me along on their visit to Hand in Hand/Yad BeYad, the award-winning school for Jewish-Arab coexistence that was firebombed last fall. They also met with the leaders of the Jerusalem Open House for Pride and Tolerance, and many other social justice activists.

I divided my time away from the Congress in four ways. I visited with Israeli friends. I taught at Jewish studies institutions. I had many fruitful meetings with US-based leaders of other streams of Judaism and Federation leaders who were also attending the Congress. Last, I met with leaders of several Israeli organizations helping to create the renewal of Jewish society and foster Jewish identity, and this is what I want to tell you about now.

I was excited to accompany the director of our Israel program to visit with the leaders of BINA: Center for Jewish Identity and Hebrew Culture on their new Tel Aviv campus. Several of our students have studied alongside Israelis in BINA’s Tikkun Olam year course, which combines secular text study and social justice work, and we are working on ways to collaborate together on programs in the US. BINA’s Elliot Valsrub Glassenberg will be visiting RRC the week we return.
We also visited Alma, an institution founded as a home for Hebrew culture by Dr. Ruth Calderon, who received RRC's Doctor of Humane Letters at our 2015 graduation ceremonies. (I had the opportunity to spend Friday morning with Ruth at Tel Aviv's magical harbor.) We met as well with the director of Oranim College's International School, and I am looking forward to connecting in New York next week with leaders from Hamidrasha Center for the Renewal of Jewish Life, also based at Oranim. When a request for a meeting near Haifa results in a commitment on the Upper West Side, it is evidence of the interconnections between the US and Israel (as well as the craziness of Jewish leaders' schedules in both countries following the high holidays)!

Institutions like BINA, Alma and Oranim are part of a movement in Israel to reclaim Jewish identity for non-Orthodox perspectives. This movement began to coalesce shortly after the assassination of Yitzhak Rabin, as a generation of Israelis understood in a new way that they had ceded the rich legacy of Jewish wisdom and practice to the ultra-Orthodox. Seeking a different path, they began to explore these Jewish treasures through lenses of culture, text study from a secular orientation, and social justice work infused with Jewish values. Alma, for example, creates a fellowship for Israeli artists, poets and intellectuals to study Jewish texts. BINA calls itself a "secular yeshiva" to distinguish itself from religious ones, which frequently focus inward, and focuses on immersive tikkun olam work drawing on Jewish values. Hamidrasha creates life cycle rituals for secular families, and sponsors song-filled Shabbat services. There are many more such examples.

Groups like these are creating an indigenous expression of non-Orthodox Jewish life in Israel. Their work is fascinating, exciting, interesting, and akin
to what we Reconstructionists aim to do in America. All these organizations welcome our interest and our encouragement.

Our movement is committed to partnering with these and similar organizations of the Israeli Jewish Renaissance and to supporting their work. We believe it is critically important in the current climate to bring news of their vision to North America. These creative Jewish expressions expand our too-simplistic image of Israeli religious life as fiercely divided between Orthodox and secular, with the religious realm dominated by the Chief Rabbinate. We can draw on these groups' creativity in our own efforts to vitalize Jewish life in North America. (And for more explanations, click on and "like" our Facebook page Gateways to the Israeli Jewish Renaissance, which offers many fully-translated examples of this creativity.

Everyone I met felt grateful to be in Israel during an intense and challenging time, even as the circumstances altered some of what we did and how we spent our time. Most Israelis I spoke with are struggling with questions of how to understand and/or cope with the newly individualized violence. Jerusalemites seemed to stay in their homes: usually crowded streets, shops and restaurants were largely deserted, though things were picking up as Shabbat approached. In contrast, Tel Aviv was business as usual. When I visited the Sarona area on Wednesday evening for one of our meetings and
Tel Aviv Harbor on Friday morning, both were thronging with people enjoying themselves. Both hunkering down and refusing to do so are part of the complexity of Israeli Jewish life, hard to describe when you are there and harder to imagine when you are not.

It was especially sweet to end our visit with the once-a-month Reconstructionist minyan on Shabbat Lech Lecha. The RRC students here for their Israel year led the service. Several Reconstructionist rabbis living in Israel made the journey into Jerusalem to attend, WZC delegates came, and we were joined both by many young people studying in Jerusalem for the year and by Israelis from various walks of life. We offered up our songs of praise, talked with each other in the Torah discussion and over a delicious lunch, and created holiness in both space and time. Altogether ordinary. Altogether extraordinary. I can't wait to return.