

ANITA FRIEDMAN EGM SPEECH

JANUARY 10, 2024

Shalom to my dear chaverot, WIZO members from around the world,

Four years ago, in January 2020, at our festive EGM celebrating WIZO's 100th anniversary, I stood on the stage in the Hilton Hotel, humbled and proud. Proud to be chosen to lead this great movement. Humbled by challenges in front of me.

Standing on that stage, I had a plan. I was determined to lead WIZO into our second century with strength, resilience and sustainability. I was focused on the need to bring much needed changes and reforms to our organization: To streamline and modernize, and to implement a vision of WIZO's future that would ensure that we thrive, prosper, and be ever more relevant to the needs of Israel and its people.

That, my friends, was the plan.

But you know what they say about plans.

The Book of Proverbs teach us that "A man's heart plans his way, But the LORD directs his steps".

As always, though – it sounds best in Yiddish: "Der Mensch Tracht, Un Gott Lacht," – "man plans and God laughs." דער מענטש טראכט און גאט לאַכט.

Seven weeks after that EGM, in March 2020, as the corona virus was sweeping the planet, Israel shut down, triggering a series of cascading crises for WIZO, which consumed the first two years of my chairmanship.

The memories of those terrible times have faded somewhat, thank God, and have also been pushed aside by the events of the past three months, but the Covid pandemic created chaos, fear, and uncertainty unlike anything any of us had ever known. It turned our lives upside down, and sometimes seemed like it would go on forever.

And just as life was beginning to return to normal, enough so that we could hold our annual MOR last January here in Israel, and finally be together, face to face, in a joyous reunion of friends from around the world – October 7 happened.

Our world has been turned upside down again.

There are, of course, great and obvious differences between the pandemic and the Gaza war. But for WIZO, there are great similarities as well.

In both cases, we were compelled to act immediately, vigorously and decisively. We needed strong leadership, and this was critical to the success of getting through the pandemic, and getting through this war.

When I talk about leadership, I am talking about a collective. I am talking about “we”. Yes, I am the chairperson, and it is my fiduciary and moral mandate to stand at the head of this organization and movement. To quote Harry Truman – the buck stops here.

But to face up to the immense challenges we have faced in the past four years – in many ways the most challenging period for WIZO since the Holocaust – we needed, and will always need, a strong, united collective leadership. In WIZO, that means, first and foremost, the volunteer leaders that comprise the World WIZO Executive, the leadership of WIZO Israel, headed by Ora Korazim, and of our 38 federations around the world. It means a talented, devoted and hard-working professional management, headed by our CEO, Mira Mines, who has been at my side, steering the WIZO ship through ferocious storms, nearly from the beginning.

We survived the pandemic, and we will survive the trauma and shocks of this war and its aftermath. We have to survive, because Israel needs us to survive.

But survival is not enough. Not nearly enough.

Coming into this position, I had several major strategic goals:

First of all – sustainability.

As the Mishna teaches us, “without flour there is no Torah.” Without a sound and sustainable financial basis, WIZO cannot fulfill our promise to Israeli society. Therefore, we have devoted great efforts to streamlining our operations and minimizing our costs, not afraid to examine everything, including sacred cows that no one had dared to touch in the past.

Was it easy downsizing our staff, and saying a tearful goodbye to devoted employees? Of course not – but we had no choice.

And we had no choice but to close a number of projects and institutions that had become a permanent financial burden, including day care centers, and other WIZO institutions.

And we only closed these projects when we had exhausted every possible way to make them financially viable. But in a dynamic reality and a rapidly changing society, this is not always enough.

At the same time, we are always looking for new opportunities, especially to open new day care centers, when we feel the financial outlook is favorable to our long-term involvement.

In certain cases, we found ourselves losing money operating institutions on behalf of the national and local governments, either because the basic funding model was wrong, or the

government was not fulfilling its contractual obligations to us. Either way, we had no choice but to tell the government: WIZO cannot provide this service at a loss, and if you want us to continue to serve, you will have to pay your fair share. Sometimes that worked, and sometimes it didn't. But we are no longer willing to lose money operating services that the government has asked us to provide. Those days are over.

More and more, we understand our tremendous value to Israeli society. We understand how much our great expertise, our vast experience, our history of excellence, and our sheer size and reach, make us an indispensable actor in the provision of social welfare and educational services. Knowing this, we will stand strong and proud and demand our fair share.

Our fierce commitment to efficiency and to vigorous financial management has paid off. Despite the chronic underfunding of our services by the Israeli government, we managed to survive the financial crisis triggered by the pandemic, and for the first time in anyone's memory, we finished both 2021 and 2022 with budget surpluses. These surpluses were modest, and we are now, again, facing major financial challenges due to the war. But the important thing is that we have proven that we are capable of dealing with everything that comes our way. This has involved a significant amount of organizational learning, a change in organizational culture, and sheer hard work and sacrifice by our professional and volunteer leadership.

But sustainability does not only mean being financially responsible. It also means adapting to new realities. Initiating new services to meet evolving needs. This is something that WIZO has always done, and is why WIZO has always been such a central and relevant organization in Israeli life. From training women in agriculture; to establishing "tipot halav" baby care centers in pre-State Israel; to caring for new immigrants after the Holocaust, WIZO was always there. The first shelters for women. Youth centers all over the country. Day care centers in air force bases, hospitals and workplaces.

For 103 years, WIZO has always sought new opportunities to bring benefit to Israeli society, while ensuring that these are sustainable for us to operate.

And despite the crises of these past four years, we continue to initiate, to innovate, to grow, and to lead the way. Here are some examples: WIZO Nachlat Yehuda youth village joined Nahalal and Hadassim in hosting the Jewish Agency's Naaleh program, where Jewish teenagers from around the diaspora come to live and study in our youth villages. This is a great Zionist enterprise, and WIZO is proud to be part of it. Last year, these three youth villages took in 75 refugee children escaping war torn Ukraine, and have found a warm and loving home in WIZO.

Also in WIZO Nachlat Yehuda, last year we opened the Tabacinic Family Emergency Center, which a foster framework that is saving dozens of neglected or severely abused children who have been removed from their home by court order.

We have opened new day care centers, and introduced new programs and educational methodologies. We are investing heavily in our human capital, in training, in engagement, in recruitment, recognizing that the quality and motivation of our professional teams is the key to the success of our services. And we are always seeking better and more effective ways to care for and educate babies and toddlers, at this incredibly important age.

The Israeli federation, WIZO Israel, operates programs and services in communities throughout the country, through 38 centers and 45 bigudiots, or second hand shops. This army of thousands of devoted volunteers, who have done great work during the war, have taken important new social initiatives. One example is the innovative empowerment program initiated by WIZO Jerusalem, which brings together young ultra-Orthodox women and provides them with vocational training and life skills.

In the area of protecting women and protecting their rights, WIZO is Israel's leader, and is continually innovating new programs that address needs that the government has not provided responses for – especially in the prevention of domestic violence. In the past four years, for example, our Division for the Advancement of Women has created nationwide programs such as “The Invisible Children,” that trains medical professionals, teachers, law enforcement officers, social workers and others to identify children who are the silent victims of domestic violence, and help protect them.

Perhaps the most dramatic example of WIZO stepping up to meet critical needs happened at the beginning of the pandemic. When the lockdowns began, and domestic violence exploded, we sprang into action. In the middle of the chaos of the first months of the pandemic, we initiated the creation of a national emergency shelter in our Beit Heuss facility in Herzilya, in which abused women and their children could escape their violent partners, live in quarantine for two weeks, and then be placed in a regular shelter. No less than 430 women and children found refuge in this shelter during the year in which it operated. We will never know how many lives we saved, or how much pain and suffering we prevented, but what we know is that we did something of vital importance that nobody else could do. Only WIZO.

We also continue to advance women's rights in the public arena. In the past four years, we have been instrumental in passing two very important pieces of legislation: a law promoting equal pay for women in the workplace, and the electronic monitoring law, to protect women from violent partners by compelling the man to wear a monitoring device so that the police will know if he violates his restraining order.

WIZO cares for Israeli from the crib to old age, and in the past four years we have devoted special attention to our Parents Home, a facility for the elderly, with 110 residents between 75 – 105 years old, including 35 Holocaust survivors. We were very successful in protecting the residents during the pandemic, and with the help of a number of WIZO federations, we have invested considerable resources in improving the Parents Home's facilities and physical environment.

In the administrative sphere, we have implemented many reforms and changes, most importantly – the overhauling and modernization of our information technology systems, through the implementation of a new ERP – or Enterprise Resource Planning system, embracing all of WIZO's projects, divisions and services, and radically upgrading our technological abilities and the service we provide our employees, customers and volunteers.

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In leading WIZO into our second century, I knew that there were many things that needed to be changed and reformed. WIZO is a very large and complex organization, one of the biggest non-profits in Israel, with 6,000 employees, thousands of volunteers and 38 federations abroad. Many of our organizational structures and processes were outdated and inefficient, and the overall organizational culture needed to be adapted to today's world.

In other words, WIZO urgently needed a fundamental strategic assessment, with the aim of formulating a plan that would modernize, streamline and reform the way we operate, even if that meant implementing painful changes.

I felt strongly that this process was absolutely critical to the future of WIZO.

So, despite the pandemic crisis, we undertook a far-reaching strategic evaluation and planning process, with the help of one of Israel's leading organizational consulting firms. In November 2021, the World WIZO Executive approved this strategic plan, which included five main areas, or what we call pillars:

First, we have strengthened our relationships with the government and its agencies, and be more proactive so that the government will see WIZO as a central and dominant force for providing solutions to the social and educational challenges facing Israeli society;

Second - Social activism and advocacy for women. In order to strengthen our relevance and position in the coming years, WIZO needs to be more proactive in advancing an agenda that focuses on women's rights and status.

Third – Developing new sources of income. In order to preserve and fortify our financial stability, now and in years to come, WIZO can no longer depend solely on our traditional sources of income, and must develop new sources of revenue. This effort has taken many forms, including creating, for the first time, a professional fundraising operation for the Israeli market. There is much wealth and philanthropic potential in Israeli society, and there is no reason or justification to be completely dependent on our federations abroad for fundraising. It has also provided an opportunity for members of the World WIZO executive and other volunteers and staff, here in Israel, to get involved actively involved in fundraising, by giving themselves, opening doors to new opportunities, or both.

The first year of this effort has been very promising and successful.

Fourth - Strengthening the WIZO brand: The scattered, disjointed and non-uniform presence of WIZO in the press and new media created confusion about WIZO, undermined the WIZO brand, and weakened our public image and our organization. We have made great progress in this area, and we are delighted that the federations have joined hands with us and are benefitting from our transformation in marketing. We will soon be launching new World WIZO website, in English and Hebrew.

The fifth pillar is the focus on “One WIZO”: the idea, and practical implementation that WIZO, despite its size, diversity and geographical spread, is one unitary organization, and that all its diverse parts, projects and divisions belong to that single organization.

We have also updated WIZO’s Vision, Mission and Values statement, to reflect how we see ourselves and our role in Israel and the Jewish world now and in the future. Our mission: WIZO is a global Zionist and activist women's movement. We are committed to volunteerism and strive for excellence in education and for innovative social action to benefit all of Israeli society. We prioritize the evolving needs of individuals at every stage of life.

One area of which I am particularly proud is our dedication and investment in cultivating our human capital – our volunteers and 6,000 employees. After all, an organization, especially one like WIZO, is only as strong and effective as the people who do the work. We demand a great deal from our staff, especially our senior management, and we must create the conditions in which they can succeed.

We have devoted extensive resources and intention to the cultivation and empowerment of our volunteer leadership, beginning with the WIZO executive. For example, the executive took part in a comprehensive course specially tailored for the directors of non-profit organizations, with the aim of providing a deeper understanding of how WIZO operates and what our role as board members is. The course, and additional initiatives, are also aimed at acquiring practical tools and best practices, to help members be more effective in their work.

Like any board, the WIZO executive must grow and evolve. Our veteran members, with their organizational memory, experience and sheer love and devotion to WIZO, have much to give, and will continue to do so for the next four years. At the same time, I have begun to integrate new executive members from with relevant professional expertise and experience. This an important process towards professionalizing our board and volunteer leadership, and I plan to continue on this path in the coming four years.

We have also devoted much attention, energy and resources to the welfare, training and advancement of our staff, and to cultivating in them a sense of belonging, pride and of ownership. We have adapted to the new realities of the workplace brought about by the pandemic and by generational change.

WIZO is as international movement of women volunteers, devoted with all their hearts to the people of Israel. This has been our DNA, our soul, from the very beginning. I don't have to tell you this, because I am talking about you: our beloved chaverot in 38 federations.

For these past four years, throughout the Covid 19 pandemic, when you couldn't leave your homes and gather together in WIZO sisterhood for months on end, when being together meant looking at faces on a computer screen – you have maintained your deep connection to one another, to your communities and federations, and to us, here in Israel.

You have continued your blessed work as members of WIZO, as members of your federations. Even in the darkest moments of the pandemic, you never stopped being WIZO women.

If someone had said at our last EGM, four years ago: “chaverot, hug each other tight, and remember how this feels, because this is not going happen again for three years” – you would have thought she was crazy.

And one year ago, when we finally – finally – had the chance to be together, in a wonderful, emotional MOR – every other sentence was “next year at the EGM in Tel Aviv”. Here in Israel, we started the preparations and the planning. This was going to be an amazing EGM, together again here in Israel, here in WIZO.

And then – October 7th.

I am recording this message a few weeks in advance, and we cannot know what will happen between now and January 10th. We live in a time of deep uncertainty.

But one thing I know for sure: The response of the international WIZO family to the devastating and life changing events of October 7, was overwhelming.

You rallied behind Israel, you organized and protested, you fought against the vile hatred of Israel and Jews that has exploded in every corner. You gathered together, gave each other support and strength. You organized incredible events, bringing Jews and non-Jews together, as people of decency and morality, outraged at the atrocities committed against us, and at the unforgivable and inconceivable stupidity, ignorance and moral bankruptcy of those who justified Hamas and negated our right to defend ourselves against a modern, Jihadist version of Nazi barbarism and anti-Semitism.

You stood at the head of the international chorus of people of good will the world over, chanting “bring them home”.

You screamed out at the hypocrisy of international women's organizations, led by the UN Women, who were silent in the face of the most horrific crimes committed against women. It was your unrelenting pressure that finally forced the UN, 57 days too late, to admit that maybe something was wrong, and maybe it needed to be investigated.

You have provided loving support and invaluable solidarity for the hundreds of thousands of Israelis forced from their homes in the Gaza envelope and in the north, and for the soldiers

of the IDF, who carry the existential burden of restoring Israel's security, of avenging the atrocities of October 7, and of defeating an enemy who would slaughter us all.

And of course, you also responded with unprecedented efforts and personal generosity, in raising millions of dollars in a few short weeks for WIZO's emergency campaign. Being here in Israel, and seeing the money pouring in every day, seeing your expressions of solidarity – was one of the most moving experiences of my life, and I know that all of us here in Israel feel the exact same way.

Never in my life have I been prouder to be a Jew, to be a part of this great people and nation, and to be part of WIZO. Never has the expression "Am Yisrael Chai", had more profound, urgent and existential meaning.

Sometimes it takes terrible tragedies and events to clarify, for the world to see, what is true and what is false. What is good and what is evil. And if we can say that there is a silver lining to October 7th – this would be it. There can be no doubt any more of the true nature of the world we live in, and of the peoples and nations we live among. There can be no doubt that Israel must always be strong and vigilant, that we cannot take our fundamental security in this land for granted, and that the State of Israel is essential and fundamental for the future of the Jewish people.

And there can be no doubt that we can survive and flourish, recover and heal, only if we are united.

ביחד ננצח

Together, we will prevail.

Thank you.