

FEATURE

Bonding with Braverman

Meet the only woman among the six publicly elected members of the WZO executive

• By BARRY DAVIS

Gusti Yehoshua-Braverman is a busy woman. I am meeting with her at the Herzl Center in Jerusalem after she kindly rearranged a previous appointment to fit me in before she embarks on yet another transatlantic hop ahead of the anniversary of the November 29, 1947, UN vote on the establishment of the State of Israel.

Braverman earns her keep as co-chair of the World Zionist Organization's Department for Diaspora Activities. She is halfway through a five-year term, with a purview that focuses on reinforcing the Zionist identity of Jewish youth across the world and trying to keep them bonded with Israel. Braverman is proud of the fact that she is the only woman among the six publicly elected members of the WZO executive.

"I am delighted that my movement, the Reform-liberal movement, chose a woman to serve in this senior and challenging post," she declares. "I think that, especially in these difficult times of exclusion of women, that has a very important symbolic value."

It may seem a bit trite to start off by asking Braverman what Zionism means to her and, indeed, if Zionism actually still exists per se, but she handles the issue with a surprisingly refreshing and open approach.

"You know what? That's a question which I don't think has an answer to it," she proffers. "I am against neat formulae."

She says she also has a hard time with labeling. "I don't like people telling you what and who you are – all those definitions. People tell me how I should look if I am religious or how I should look if I am a Zionist. I don't like that at all."

This certainly fits with her religious and social leanings. "I represent a liberal way of thinking," she says. "I was elected at the World Zionist Congress, as a woman and someone who comes from the Reform movement. Mind you, I don't come from a Reform home. There was no Reform community in Petah Tikva."

But she did receive a strong dose of patriotism as a child. "I grew up in a Zionist household," she continues. "My parents came on aliya from Romania. It's true they didn't come from a wealthy country, especially not in the wake of the Holocaust, so you might think they had to come to Israel, but the transition to a new country and a new culture, it was a challenge for them."

Presumably Braverman adopts a different line of attack when she is confronted with the issue of Zionism here and in the Diaspora. "When I talk to people about it abroad, I make it clear



Gusti Yehoshua-Braverman. 'I am one of those who believe that Israel needs a strong presence of Jews in the Diaspora.' (Courtesy)

that being a Zionist does not necessarily involve making aliya. We would be delighted to have more Jews come here, but not everyone has to come here. I am one of those who believe that Israel needs a strong presence of Jews in the Diaspora. We maintain a very meaningful and complex dialogue with Diaspora Jewry, and we need them there."

We are now getting closer to Braverman's distilled take on contemporary Zionism. "In the broader sense, when I talk about having a Zionist identity, I think it is the recognition of the importance of Israel as a central part of their Jewish identity."

She also holds strong views on what having a Jewish identity entails. "It's not a matter of someone having a Jewish

father and mother, and everything else fits neatly into that. Today, when you sit in some auditorium full of Zionist activists, if you take the halachic standpoint, I think that probably 50 percent, or even 70% of them will not be Jewish according to Halacha. But they are still highly active, and Zionists, and, to my mind, they often maintain a dialogue with Israel that is very intricate. So, if you ask me, Zionism incorporates some of the tried and tested elements, like aliya, but primarily Zionists should constantly examine their connection with Israel."

To this end, Braverman recently initiated her Beit Ha'am (assembly hall) program, which is designed to provide a platform for discussing Zionism and related topics. Beit Ha'am activities take

place the world over, with young Jews sharing their views on what it means to be a Zionist and what place Israel plays in their life abroad.

According to Braverman, the Beit Ha'am activities must also address the matter of individual identity.

"As a Reform Jew, I talk about Jewish identity, which is not just the Orthodox one but also looks at the Reform-liberal Jewish identity. I believe I can be a Jew and religious, but not in the sense that Jewish Orthodoxy looks at that. But it is important to constantly examine the other component – my connection with the State of Israel, whether I live here or I live in the Diaspora."

Naturally, when discussing important topics, one tends to engage in terminology that is broadly understandable. But Braverman's aversion to pigeonholing comes to the fore once again.

"I am vehemently opposed to the idea of religious Zionism," she declares. "In the past, Zionism belonged to everyone. Once, everyone was Zionist in their own way. There were the national religious, who were differentiated from the haredim who were against the existence of the secular Jewish state, and such like."

Braverman's epithet radar was recently set abuzz in this very context. "A few months ago I heard the news and they talked about religious Zionism and I thought, 'If they are religious Zionists, what does that make me?' That, for me, is a grave danger for Israel. As soon as someone co-opts something, the others have to let go."

Braverman has a straightforward solution for this particular conundrum. "Let's get back to talking about 'national religious,' and leave Zionism for everyone," she suggests.

She says it is important for Israelis to get a handle on how Diaspora Jews relate to their Jewish identity in their non-Jewish surroundings, and that she learned a particularly important lesson Down Under.

"I was once with a group of young Jews in Australia and I asked them what common ground they thought we all shared, regardless of what government there was in Israel. They said all sorts of things, but one said that when he goes to university, he does not identify himself as a Jew. There was an outcry from all the others, but he said that he doesn't want to be labeled and wants to be free to act and express himself as he wants. That was a formative moment for me. We Israelis have to try to appreciate what it is to be a minority."

According to Braverman, the fact that Jews comprise most of the population of Israel comes with a price tag. "It's not just a matter of being a majority in Israel," she says. "We have to be a responsible majority."