

# Women of Reform Judaism

## 47th Assembly

### Toronto, ON, Canada

# Friday, November 6, 2009

### Joint URJ/WRJ Plenary Session Tackles Big Issues

The WRJ/URJ joint plenary session began with URJ's Chairman of the Board Peter Weinhorn's introduction of WRJ President Rosanne M. Selfon as a "remarkable leader of the Reform movement" who has had a "remarkable tenure as president."

Selfon then introduced Michael Oren, Israeli Ambassador to the United States who said "I want to talk about the connection between Israel and its connection to the Jewish people and its land. I want to talk about faith." He summed up his views on the meaning of faith to the Jewish people as "Our strength stems from the fact that we are a people with a history and with a purpose."

President of the URJ, Rabbi Eric Yoffie then introduced Former British Prime Minister Tony Blair who was speaking by video link from Yale University on the question "How to we make religion a force for good rather than a force for conflict?"

He spoke about trying to encourage "dialogue, understanding, and action" between people of diverse faiths and the "universal values of the human spirit" which are "here to be shared with others."

Rabbi David Saperstein director and counsel of the Religious Action Center then facilitated a question and answer with Blair using questions submitted through the Union's Facebook and Twitter sites. Questions ranged from his reaction to the movie "The Queen" in which Michael Sheen played Blair (he hasn't seen it), to the role that religious faith can play in political decisions ("It can give you the strength to do what you think is right, although



Rabbi David Saperstein (left) in conversation with former Prime Minister Tony Blair

it doesn't mean that you ARE right."). When asked about the significant contributions made by the Reform community to a variety of global issues, such as the purchase of \$75,000 of mosquito nets to stop malaria and whether there is more that should be done, he concluded "One could always do more but what you've done is certainly significant".

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### WRJ's First Film Festival A Hit



Popcorn, candy, and a variety of Jewish movies were the ingredients for the first ever WRJ Film Festival.

Four movies were shown including *Blessed is the Match*, a documentary of paratrooper resistance fighter Hannah Senesh; *Praying with Lior*, a questioning exploration of Lior Leibling who has Down

Syndrome and has spent his life praying with utter abandon; *The Longing*, which tells the story of a group of South Americans eager to affirm their Jewish faith; and the comical *The Gefilte Fish Chronicles* about a family's chaotic celebration of Passover.

### Plenary Session Honors Those Who Make a Difference

Past WRJ President Connie Kreshtool opened WRJ's Thursday evening plenary with the words "This is a day of inspiration" and praised the "leaders of yesteryears who paved the way and leaders of today, who heard the words and acted."

Some of those who are acting today were honored at this plenary. The Or Ami: Light of My People Awards were given to sisterhoods for excellence in sisterhood programming. "Each of them, in their own unique way, has helped make our world a better place to live," explained WRJ Vice President Katie Roeper.



Judy Feld Carr accepts the Jane Evans Award

The Dr. Jane Evans Award Pursuit of Justice Award was then given to Judy Feld Carr. Carr negotiated the release of over 3,000 Syrian Jews over a span of 28 years. She held the audience rapt as she told the story of just one such rescue that she was able to enable. "It is not easy to get medicine into a secret po-

lice underground cell. Our money paid for every piece of soap...I even paid the judges, including those of the Supreme Court. I often shudder at the burdensome responsibility that I assumed," she says. "The effort which I led was responsible for bringing out 3,228 souls out of a population of 4,500. To this day, most of those people do not know who the person was behind their exit."

A resolution on immigration was passed and WRJ's Executive Director Shelley Lindauer addressed the assembly on the growing concern about the increasingly disproportionate role of women in our congregations. "The problem", she explained, is not that women are more active in Jewish life, but that men and boys seem to have retreated.

The question becomes, she continued "Are men leaving the synagogue because women have as-



Executive Director Shelley Lindauer

sumed a more powerful role? Or, have women been able to come as far as we have because men WERE leaving the synagogue? This is an interesting question, for

in our incredible achievement we don't want to be held culpable for a weakening in the system, nor do we want our achievements to be minimized and the value of the work we do diminished because there are not enough men at the table."

"We cannot allow our leadership and our congregations to become primarily single gender. If we do, voices are left out...the role of our women will be marginalized...our children will not know that rabbis and cantors and synagogue leaders can be men or women."

For text of the resolution, Or Ami winners, Shelley Lindauer's speech and other materials from assembly, please visit the WRJ website later this month.

