

## The Canadian Perspective

My name is Ruthe Schipper and I am a past president of Holy Blossom Sisterhood in Toronto, Ontario. I did four years of a two-year term. I have just been installed as Corresponding Secretary of the Northeast District of WRJ.

When Trina Novak asked me to do the “Canadian Perspective,” I told her I was honoured – h-o-n-o-u-r-e-d.

When my cheque is in the mail, it is spelled c-h-e-q-u-e. When I see the word c-h-e-c-k, I want to check to make sure you are OK.

I live in a province, not a state. I have a postal code, not a zip code. My postal code has numbers... *and letters!*

When I order a Diet Coke, I am ordering a pop. When I hear the word “soda,” I think of Canada Dry Soda Water.

My wallet, keys, pens, and other miscellaneous items that I need to take with me each day go into my purse rather than a pocketbook.

My alphabet goes from A to zed.

Canada is now the world’s largest legal marijuana marketplace as pot prohibition ended on October 17, 2018.

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I learned an interesting tidbit since joining the Northeast District Board. In the Northeast, the main service at Reform temples takes place on Friday nights. There is usually only a service Saturday morning if there is a bar or bat mitzvah.

In Toronto, we have services Friday nights and Saturdays, regardless of whether or not there is a bar or bat mitzvah. There are services daily. Sunday through Friday mornings there is a Shacharit service at 7:30 in the morning. There is a Mincha/Ma’ariv service at 6 p.m. Sundays through Thursday evenings. The Friday night service is called Kabbalat Shabbat. This allows people to go to services during shloshim, for Yahrzeit, for an Aufruf, etc. There is a breakfast after the morning service each day.

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On Sunday October 14, 2018, there was a WRJ Northeast District Area Day in Toronto. Our theme was “Kol Isha – The Voices of Women Together for Social Justice.”

The speakers for this event included:

- Vivian Blumstein, immediate past president of the WRJ Northeast District
- Barbara Weinstein, director of the Commission on Social Action of Reform Judaism and director of the Religious Action Center (RAC) of Reform Judaism
- Eva Karpati, president of the National Council of Jewish Women of Canada, Toronto Chapter
- Fran Isaacs and Helen Poisner, co-chairs of the National Social Action Committee of the Canadian Council of Reform Jews (CCRJ)
- Judy Zelikovitz, vice president, University and Local Partner Services, Centre for Israel and Jewish Affairs (CIJA)

It was a very interesting and informative afternoon. I will talk about the Center for Israel and Jewish Affairs in a few minutes.

Fran and Helen spoke about the Brit Olam [covenant with our world], which is done through the Religious Action Center. It is an agreement signed jointly by Reform synagogues and the RAC. Together, they pursue social justice issues and lead the community in one or more of the following areas:

- Fostering a culture of sacred and civil dialogue in your congregation where all opinions are heard
- Acting in solidarity with vulnerable communities
- Building relationships across lines of differences within the community
- Acting at the local, provincial, and/or federal levels to address the root causes of injustice and advocate for systemic change
- Participating in one of National Social Action Committee's campaigns:
  - Responding to global refugee crisis
  - Developing and strengthening relationships with indigenous communities
  - Working to end poverty in Canada
- Mobilizing around an issue that resonates within our community

The Religious Action Center and the National Social Action Committee in turn commit to providing each congregation with:

- Training and resources for your leaders to cultivate and deepen the skills necessary to move your congregation into effective action
- Access to a network of leaders from diverse Union of Reform Judaism congregations to discuss strategies for success
- Ongoing communication to support your congregation's social justice network.

The Toronto chapter of the National Council of Jewish Women is spearheading a plan to come up with a multi-faith toolkit to assist clergy in dealing with victims of domestic abuse.

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Continuing on the social justice and advocacy theme:

- Canada's Charter encompasses many groups of people, including the LGBT community.
- All Canadians are equal under Canada's laws regardless of sexual orientation. Gay marriage has been legal since 2005.
- All Canadians are guaranteed freedom of religion and peaceful assembly. Rabbi Yael Splansky, the senior Rabbi of Holy Blossom Temple (my synagogue), was the leading force behind the "Rings of Peace" initiative in Toronto where Jews held hands and circled local mosques in support of Toronto's Muslim population.
- Canada's Charter guarantees equal rights, regardless of gender. Holy Blossom's Leadership Council supports Women of the Wall in their struggle for parity in Israel.
- Security of the person is one of the Charter's central themes. The health and welfare of everyone, including the homeless, is a recurring and important theme. Many religious groups, including Holy Blossom, reach out to the homeless through the "Out of the Cold" program, where people can have a warm meal and warm clothing.

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I would like to focus on two groups that are Canadian.

The Centre for Israel and Jewish Affairs (CIJA) is the social advocacy arm of the Jewish Federations of Canada – a national, non-partisan, non-profit organization that represents approximately 150,000 Canadian Jews affiliated with the local federations.

Their mission is to improve the quality of Jewish life in Canada by advancing the public policy interests of Canada's organized Jewish community. They connect the power of a strong national network to regional efforts across Canada. CIJA is the Canadian affiliate of the World Jewish Congress, which expands their efforts internationally.

They build relationships with leaders in government, media, other faith and ethnic communities to allow for greater understanding of the issues that impact the Jewish community. They work to combat anti-Semitism and discrimination, and advocate for the rights, freedoms, social justice, and support for the people of Israel.

To quote CIJA, “they believe in Canada’s foundational values of freedom, democracy, and equality. They are committed to working with the government and all like-minded groups to ensure that Canada remains a country where all citizens irrespective of gender, race or creed enjoy equal protections and opportunities.”

One group that focuses on the homeless is a Toronto initiative called Ve’Ahavta, which is a mobile Jewish response to homelessness in Toronto.

The homeless are divided into two groups – those temporarily homeless and those who are chronically homeless – living on the streets for more than one year. They lack accessible and sustainable resources for health and safety. They especially lack compassionate care and support.

According to statistics on Ve’Ahavta’s website, over 235,000 Canadians experience homelessness in a year, including 5,000 in Toronto. Toronto has the second highest homeless population of any Canadian city.

Their theory of change includes:

- By providing health support, referrals to shelters and essential supplies, the basic needs of the homeless and under-housed individuals can be met and their safety can be ensured.
- By providing consistent, frequent and compassionate service, Ve’Ahavta can decrease social isolation, and build trusting relationships that provide the emotional support needed to create change.
- By engaging and educating volunteers, they can raise consciousness about homelessness, reduce the stigma and inspire people to seek solutions to end homelessness.

Ve’Ahavta uses an outreach van, which is one of the most effective ways of responding to the needs of people living on the streets of Toronto. An outreach worker and volunteers go out in the van five days per week. The outreach worker goes out with three volunteers who have received hands-on education and volunteer experience. They deliver coffee, food, clothing, hygiene supplies, and companionship in the downtown core. They offer counseling, health care, correctional services, and access to secure housing.

Ve’Ahavta has a “harm reduction” component, which includes the provision of kits (needles and crack pipes) to substance users on request. Harm reduction supports positive hygiene practices, which has been shown to reduce the risk of HIV, AIDS, and hepatitis dramatically.

They work with a number of shelters and health support services to share resources and knowledge, and to develop specific programs for the people that use their services.

Ve'Ahavta is also committed to international crisis response. They belong to the Jewish Coalition for Disaster Relief, which embodies Jewish humanitarianism by bringing together the expertise, experience, and resources of mostly North American Jewish organizations that work to assist victims of natural or human-made disasters on a non-sectarian basis.

In the past they have been involved in crisis response to Haiti, Japan, Haifa, Philippines, Pakistan, Syria, and Nepal.

They are currently working on a crisis fund for Syrian refugees and the food crisis in East Africa.

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I would like to end my Canadian Perspective on a personal note. Pnina Margoless was one of my sisters in the hood at Holy Blossom Temple Sisterhood. She was also on the Northeast District Board. She was the one who delivered the "Canadian Perspective" for a number of conventions, including the last one in 2016. October 23 marked the first anniversary of her passing. I honour Pnina by dedicating this, my first, Canadian Perspective to her.

Thank you.

Ruthe Schipper  
Holy Blossom Sisterhood  
Toronto, Canada