



CAROL SMOKLER

Jews For a Just Society

OVER THE LAST EIGHTEEN MONTHS WHEN NORTH American Jews ask me why I support the United Jewish Communities' (UJC's) Social Venture Fund for Jewish-Arab Equality and Shared Society, I always answer with words from Israel's Declaration of Independence: "The State of Israel will foster the development of the country for the benefit of all its inhabitants; it will be based on freedom, justice and peace as envisaged by the prophets of Israel; it will ensure complete equality of social and political right to all its inhabitants irrespective of religion, race or sex."

Unfortunately, this kind of equality is not yet apparent in the everyday life of Israel's Arab citizens, who constitute 20 percent of the population. In 2007, 51 percent of Arab families and 62 percent of Arab children were living below the poverty line, compared with 15 percent of Jewish families and 24 percent of Jewish children. Fifty percent of unemployed young adults aged 18-24 live in the Arab sector, and participation in the labor force by Arab women is approximately 22 percent, compared with 76 percent among Jewish women. This double standard is particularly evident in the levels of education within the Arab community. The average annual expenditure per Arab pupil is NIS 862 as compared to NIS 4,935 for Jewish students. By age 17, 15.8 percent of Arab youth have dropped out of school as compared to 6.9 percent of Jewish youth, and there is a 15 percent difference between the two sectors in eligibility for high school matriculation. Seventy thousand Arab Israeli university graduates are unemployed or underemployed.

In December 2007, a group of 21 funders representing Jewish Federations, UJC, independent private foundations, NGOs and individual donors joined forces in setting up the social venture fund to make strategic financial investments in organizations that promote equality, social change and shared society. We believe in Israel as a democratic state and know that this is the way to ensure that the words of the Declaration become reality. In providing equal opportunities for all citizens of Israel we also embody the Jewish value of *tikkun olam*.

Moreover, we believe that given equal opportunities, Arab Israelis will be more invested in a shared future in Israel and that this, in turn, will contribute to Israel's safety and security. Israel's economy will also be strengthened by better integrating Arab Israelis into society. With this basic belief in mind, the venture fund has in the

last year funded 15 organizations in the areas of education and economic development. We are not the first group in this arena, but are following the lead of Israeli philanthropists and other NGOs, such as the Abraham Fund Initiatives, who are engaged in this important work, partnering with them and joining work in progress. After extensive research we felt that we could have the most impact by working with both indigenous Arab organizations and larger NGOs.

For example, we supported Alnuhud, a small Arab organization that provides educational enrichment to Beduin teenage girls so that they can go on to university, and the Rashi Foundation, to provide tutoring and mentoring to help Arab high school students graduate with a full matriculation certificate.

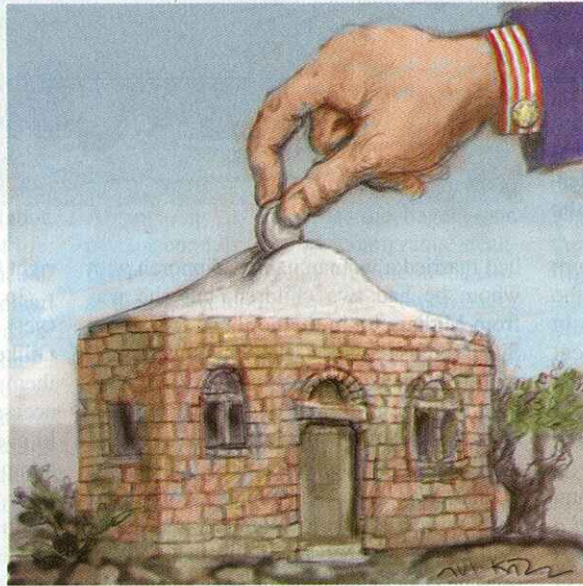
We also leveraged our dollars by pairing with organizations to extend their work in the Arab sector in cooperation with the government, such as Merchavim, which works to integrate Arab teachers into the Jewish schools, Kav Mashve, which provides career guidance, job training and placement services to professionals, and IsraCorps, which offers a volunteer year program for Israeli Arab youth.

Sometimes North American Jews question our work saying that

"Arab Israelis live better than Arabs in the rest of the Arab world." We believe that those kinds of claims are irrelevant. Arab-Israelis are entitled to the same benefits and opportunities as Jewish Israelis. They are Israelis after all. As a young person I marched on Washington for civil rights. I never would have dreamed that less than 50 years later Barack Obama could be president of the United States. It is possible to see society change. We have to take the small steps that build towards that change. As the *tanna* Rabbi Tarfon used to say, "It is not upon you to complete the task, but you are not free to desist from it."

The long-term goals of the social venture fund may seem far away. It isn't easy to help build mutual respect and understanding between Jewish and Arab citizens of Israel or to increase opportunities for Israel's Arab citizens to share equally in the social, educational and economic life of the country or to promote structural and institutional reforms that support the vision of Israel as a shared society that benefits all its citizens. We have taken our first steps toward these goals and hope that more North American Jews will join us on this journey.

Dr. Carol Smokler chairs the UJC's Social Venture Fund for Jewish-Arab Equality and Shared Society.



AVI KATZ