

## **Boston-Haifa Connection International Conference: Engaging Jews on Both Sides of the Ocean**

*What does it mean to be Jewish today and how can we best engage Jews in Israel and in North America? Over 200 people from both sides of the ocean gathered at the University of Haifa in June to address these questions in a fascinating conference organized by the Oranim International School.*



Over 200 key stakeholders in the Jewish world, including academics, public officials, NGO leaders, lay leaders, Jewish communal professionals, and educators, from across the United States and Israel, attended the June 2016 conference entitled: “Developing Models of Judaism and Jewish Identity for the 21st Century: The Common and Interdependent Struggle of American and Israeli Jews.” Conference participants enjoyed lectures, panels, and roundtable discussions exploring the intersection of Jewish identity and modernity.

Oranim International School organized the conference in partnership with the Combined Jewish Philanthropies of Greater Boston (CJP), the Boston-Haifa Connection, the Ruderman Program for American Jewish Studies at the University of Haifa, and the Haifa municipality. Pictured above are (from left to right), Cheryl Aronson, CJP’s Vice President of Planning for Israel and Overseas; Vered Israely, Director of Haifa-Boston Connection; Barry Shrage, President of CJP; and Mayor Yona Yahav of Haifa.

### **Key Note Lectures: Calderon and Oz-Salzberger**

Highlights of the conference included keynote lectures from Dr. Ruth Calderon and Prof. Fania Oz-Salzberger. Calderon, a former member of the Knesset and leader in reviving Hebrew culture and pluralistic Israeli-Jewish identity, used the metaphor of Issachar and Zevulun’s relationship in the Shai Agnon story to illuminate the reciprocal partnership between Israeli and American Jewry. She spoke about the “conference call” of Jews throughout history, where each Jew can listen and contribute no matter where they are located, and the importance of joining that conference call through Jewish text study and other forms of Jewish engagement.

Oz-Salzberger, professor of history at University of Haifa and co-author of *Jews and Words* (2014) together with her father Amos Oz, spoke about how to connect the young generation to Judaism and

the Jewish library through fascinating and exhilarating them, and showing them that Judaism is fun. She urged the audience not “to take the Pew Report to bed with them;” Judaism is not all about demography, but about “demography of the heart and mind.”

### **Bringing Diverse Voices to the Table**

Panels brought together diverse Jewish leaders in dialogue with one another and the audience about partnership and Jewish communities now and looking forward. Panel members included Israelis and Americans, young people and older people, people with a range of religious beliefs and lifestyles, and people with a variety of professional roles. Bringing these different voices to one table created a rich and meaningful dialogue.

Conference participants also enjoyed interactive opportunities through roundtable discussions on a variety of topics addressing issues of Jewish Peoplehood and Jewish education, facilitated by a range of Jewish communal leaders, educators, and academics. Each roundtable discussion was facilitated by an Israeli and an American and enabled in-depth discussions in small groups.

In one fascinating session, “The Birthright Experience and Research Lessons: Two Vantage Points or One?” Prof. David Mittelberg of Oranim College and Prof. Len Saxe of Brandeis University presented research on the impact of Birthright from their complementary perspectives. Saxe discussed Birthright’s impact on American participants, and Mittelberg discussed its impact on Israeli participants. The impact on Israelis is only just beginning to be researched, as people in the field begin to realize that a program originally intended to impact young people from outside Israel also has the potential for wide-ranging impact on Israeli young people, and more and more Israelis participate in the program.

In addition, all participants participated in an online, real time quiz facilitated by Oranim International School staff including thought-provoking questions such as, “What is the main challenge facing the Jewish people today?” and “Which educational component is most important in Israel-Diaspora partnership?” Questions were multiple choice and participants could see the number of people who chose each option in real time, creating a fun and fast-paced experience.