

Spotlight: Shirli Shavit



May 7th, 2015 Carousel, Featured 10 comments

A PASSION FOR WOMEN AND ISRAEL

Shirli Shavit is the Director of the International Department of NA'AMAT, a position she has held for 17 years. As such, she serves as the lynchpin connecting NA'AMAT Israel with its sister organizations around the world.



Shirli describes her career with the organization and the work that it is doing in Israel. She also discusses the Scholarship Fund, which was initiated 40 years ago by NA'AMAT USA and has since benefitted thousands of young Israeli women, NA'AMAT's position as a world movement, its every day impact in Israel and the challenges of maintaining a strong and growing organization.

NA'AMAT USA: How long have you been working with NA'AMAT?

SHIRLI SHAVIT: I've been involved in NA'AMAT for about 30 years. I grew up in a Labor household. The National Labor Federation (*Histadrut*) was part of my life. I knew about NA'AMAT from a young age, and I admired what they did very much. I thought the status of women was a very important issue for Israeli society. The work NA'AMAT was doing to help women, children and families was something that I wanted to be involved in. I wanted to do my part to help. When I was a student at Hebrew University, I worked part-time for NA'AMAT. I served as a lobbyist to the Knesset from 1983 to 1988, promoting issues at the legislative level and getting in touch with members of parliament about bills important to NA'AMAT. After that, for about ten years, I worked in other places, while continuing to volunteer for NA'AMAT.

NA'AMAT USA: What is your role today?

SHIRLI SHAVIT: Since 1998, I am Director of the International Department and the NA'AMAT Scholarship Fund. I've held this role for 17 years. I am in constant contact with leaders of NA'AMAT in the Diaspora. I keep them informed regarding mutual projects, fundraising, and all the work being done by NA'AMAT Israel: our programs, campaigns, legislative initiatives and other activities.

I'm also responsible for our leadership seminars. Every year, we conduct a seminar or two from a different country. The countries send 15 to 20 women who are potential leaders. The seminars last about 10 days and they give these women an opportunity to learn what NA'AMAT in Israel is all about, and to motivate them for their future leadership roles.



Also, every year in the summer, NA'AMAT holds an international meeting for the presidents of NA'AMAT from around the world. We meet for two days and discuss our programs and the future of NA'AMAT. We get reports from all the countries.

We get a lot of visitors from abroad, not necessarily Jewish, who come to learn about NA'AMAT and the services we provide. Last year, for International Women's Day, we hosted a delegation of 30 diplomats from all over the world. We took them to our installations and we had interesting discussions about how NA'AMAT promotes the status of women in Israel.

NA'AMAT USA: You were closely involved in the International Solidarity Conference that was held in Israel this past February. Were you happy with the results?

SHIRLI SHAVIT: Yes! It was the first time we had held such a conference in 30 years. It was attended by close to 120 members from eight countries. We proved that we are a strong world movement. We visited different NA'AMAT installations. We attended groundbreaking ceremonies for new day care centers in Beersheba and Karmiel, and other special ceremonies. We were guests in the home of the President of Israel, Mr. Rivlin. It was a great experience, very meaningful and motivating for everyone who participated.

NA'AMAT USA: You are very proud of NA'AMAT's Scholarship Fund. Can you tell us about it?

SHIRLI SHAVIT: NA'AMAT's Scholarship Fund was established about 40 years ago by NA'AMAT USA. Every year, we grant 180 scholarships to women studying for their bachelor's or master's degrees. Each scholarship is for about \$550.00. Thousands of young women have benefitted from these scholarships. We offer scholarships to women involved in all areas of study—law, political science, humanities, social work—but we give preference to those studying science: biology, medicine, chemistry, physics and

engineering. One of the problems in the labor market in Israel is that there are so few women in scientific fields. There are many women doctors, although not so many who are heads of departments, and there are quite few women engineers. We want to encourage women to pursue high tech careers.



June 23rd, 2015 Carousel,

BUILDING A STRONGER INTERNATIONAL

NA'AMAT USA: You have described NA'AMAT as a "world movement." What do you mean by that?

SHIRLI SHAVIT: NA'AMAT is a world movement whose centrality is Israel. Israel and Zionism are its essence. NA'AMAT has approximately 300,000 members in Israel and close to 20,000 members in nine other countries around the world. We are in the United States, Canada, Argentina, Brazil, Mexico, Peru, Uruguay, Belgium and Australia. We are the largest women's movement in the world.

We are also represented in the World Zionist Organization. That is very important. We achieved independent status with the WZO eight years ago as one of the world's leading women's organizations. Masha Lubelsky, a former president of NA'AMAT Israel, and former Deputy Minister, serves as our representative to the Executive of the World Zionist Organization.

I see my mission as a triangle. NA'AMAT is the top point of the triangle; Israel and Zionism are the other two.



NA'AMAT USA: Having been part of NA'AMAT for 30 years, can you summarize the impact it has made on Israeli society?

SHIRLI SHAVIT: NA'AMAT provides social services across Israel through our day care centers, our domestic violence centers and shelter, our technological schools, our two youth villages, our legal bureaus and 4 women rights' centers and our scholarship program for university students . We assist 40,000 families in Israel. That's about 200,000 people who benefit from our services – children, students, women and families.

We promote legislative issues affecting the status of women before the Knesset. We are making a positive impact on laws regarding women's rights and labor issues, and we have an ongoing campaign to empower women in the workforce. We want to enable women to work and have careers, while also supporting and caring for their families and their children. We want employment to be responsive to the needs of women and families. We recently supported legislation to provide incentives to employers to create a family-friendly workplace. We believe that more workers ought to have flexible hours so that they can be with their children as they grow up.

We recently conducted a campaign related to International Women's Day. We encouraged women to vote in the Israeli election. We did not tell them whom to vote for, but we called on women to get out and vote. If you do not vote, you do not have a say, you cannot influence, and you are not part of the democratic process.

NA'AMAT USA: I believe that membership is a big concern for you, especially among the sister organizations in the Diaspora.

SHIRLI SHAVIT: This is not an easy issue. We are working hard to increase membership and to find new and more creative ways to attract members. One reason we conduct leadership seminars is to teach future leaders how to build membership. We discussed this issue at the Solidarity Conference.

Attracting new members is a problem in all countries—the United States, Canada, Mexico, Brazil and Belgium —especially younger and middle aged women in their 30s, 40s and 50s. Today, everyone is busy making a living and raising children. It is not easy to get people to volunteer. When I speak with women from other organizations, I find that membership is a problem for them too. It affects non-profits everywhere.

I hope the movement will grow in the Diaspora. I hope that new countries will join NA'AMAT. Years ago, we had NA'AMAT in England and also in France. Their members grew old and there were no new members to carry through, so they disappeared. I hope that NA'AMAT will once again flourish in Europe and other countries around the globe. Growth is especially important in the United States. The majority of our international members are from the United States and we rely on them for fundraising and other support. We are encouraged by how strong NA'AMAT has become in California and we would like to see that extend to other parts of the country. We want it to grow and grow.



NA'AMAT USA: What would you say to a young woman who is thinking of joining NA'AMAT?

SHIRLI SHAVIT: If she is a young woman who feels attached to Zionism and Israel and wants to make a difference in the future of the Jewish people, NA'AMAT is a wonderful experience. Through NA'AMAT, she can feel part of an organization that is affecting real change in the lives of people, and not just Jews, but also Muslims and Christians. She can be part of an organization with a rich history. (Before the founding of

the state of Israel, Golda Meir served as the first president of NA'AMAT.) She will be inspired by the work that we do and enjoy the friendships she makes within the organization.
