

Report by David Elliott

“It was an outstanding meeting from so many perspectives and I think of it as a personally transforming experience ...(especially) the exposure to some of the political issues as well as the tangible (and very beautiful) exposure to the religious chaos of Jerusalem and the complexity this poses for any ‘solution’ “. These are the words of eminent child psychiatrist Dr Claire Sturge for whom attendance at the September 2009 AIA Colloquium in Kfar Maccabiah, Ramat Gan was her first visit to Israel.

The 2 day colloquium brought together lawyers, sociologists, child practitioners and commentators to discuss changing attitudes to the Family in Israel and the UK as reflected in their respective politico- legal systems. In particular, how successful is the present sharing of responsibilities between parents and the state in nurturing children into well adjusted adults?

They were presided over by 2 outstanding women. Former District Court Saviona Rotlevy, who chaired the committee charged with implementing the International Convention on Children’s Rights in the Israeli legal system. And Baroness Ruth Deech, Chair of the Bar Standards Board, formerly Principal of St. Anne’s College, Oxford and past Chair of the Human Fertilisation and Embryology Authority. The 3rd day was devoted to a tour of Jerusalem, a ‘must’ for anyone on a first visit to Israel. Needless to say there was some healthy disagreement (though more between co-nationals than between Israelis and Brits!) about how well or badly the 2 countries were preparing their next generations now that the ‘traditional’ family was not so prevalent.

This was the 8th colloquium since the first one (on Heritage) in 1997. Since then a ‘Whos Who’ of talent has been brought together on topics as varied as the Media, Universities, Environment, Arts, Multiculturalism and the ‘Politics of Happiness’. Of course, in the margins of the meetings, there has been plenty of discussion about the ‘situation’ (informed by after-dinner presentations from leading Israeli political figures as well successive British Ambassadors) and few will have left Israel without a better understanding of its complexities. However, the colloquia have done something else, and perhaps something more important, by revealing the other, more ordinary, facets of life in Israel.

How successful have they been in altering attitudes here in the UK?

‘ It was the most marvellous three days, and I’m so grateful for the opportunity to learn from such a hugely distinguished gathering. The trip to Jerusalem was a wonderful unexpected bonus, and I’m already boring family and friends with my vastly increased interest in Middle Eastern politics’ (Sue Palmer, a leading author on parenting and children).

The same, glowing, feedback came after previous events too ...‘ I found the Colloquium both eye-opening and mind-opening. Everyone I spoke to feels the same ...the weekend gathering was probably the best of its kind I have ever attended ‘(Sir John Tusa, former Managing Director of the Barbican Centre and the BBC World Service, writing after the 2000 colloquium).

What of the future? The Chair of the UK Steering Group, Lilian Hochhauser, and AIA Chair Sir Andrew Burns, along with their Israeli counterparts headed up by Viscount Samuel, are keen that the colloquia continue- but to do that they need to be put on a firmer financial footing . And no doubt, after 12 years, their format and organisation should be reviewed. However, there is little doubt about their impact ... ‘Fantastic food and hospitality, a fascinating tour of Jerusalem which I am still telling everyone about in far too much detail, and of course a robust exchange of ideas with interesting people from different disciplines and countries. What more could one want?’ (Claire Fox, broadcaster and commentator)

David Elliott

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