Welcome to our slightly belated post Pesach newsletter,

You may have noticed some changes transpiring within our 'society', new projects, young voices, more voices, varied voices and clearer voices.

I am often asked by friends “What is the Australian Jewish Democratic Society?” After explaining the name, which is a mouthful of complex words my explanation is often convoluted, philosophical and cumbersome. I would like to take this editorial opportunity to remind myself and you all of the AJDS mission statement available on our website:

“We support social justice and human rights in all countries, non-violent conflict resolution and a negotiated solution of the Israel/Palestinian conflict. We particularly aim to offer a considered and alternative viewpoint to members of the Jewish community and others in Australia, a viewpoint that stays away from the stereotypes and fear-mongering that are all too common in public debate on both Left and Right. The hard line taken by many so-called official Jewish organisations does not in fact reflect the diversity of opinion here, or indeed in Israel itself. “

This edition touches a wide range of pluralistic topics written by passionate activists, young and old, all of whom are part of our community. These days forums for debate and discussion have become almost exclusively of the online world so it is a rare pleasure to be able to host them in our newsletter (also available in hardcopy). It never ceases to amaze me how many creative and motivated people are among us, who will not be silenced even when it means speaking outside tribal loyalty and the accompanying consequences.

I loved reading all the contributions but I was especially inspired by the piece written by Yoni Unger during his visit to Poland in 2009. In a letter to his family, the 18 year old’s words and expressions transported me through the rough and tumble of identity formation of a young Jewish man. I hope you enjoy the read, that it stirs you into action and a robust exchanges of ideas.

If you have ideas you wish to share with us please feel welcome to participate either through the newsletter or on our website.

Shalom - Sivan Barak

We're giving away 5 double passes to see the new Israeli film 'Footnote' thanks to Rialto Distribution.

Footnote is the story of a great rivalry between a father and son. Both eccentric professors, they have dedicated their lives to their work. Footnote is the story of insane competition, the admiration and envy for a role model, bringing father and son to a final, bitter confrontation.

Please email co.ajds@gmail.com with 'Footnote' in the subject line and your address. First in, best dressed. Footnote is released April 19.
Dear Senator Carr,

As an organisation within the Jewish community, we particularly aim to offer a considered and alternative viewpoint to members of the Jewish community and others in Australia.

The AJDS actively counters the false view that the Australian Jewish community speaks with a single voice on the Israeli Palestinian conflict. We have all complained at some time about the indifference of the world to the plight of the Jewish people at their most horrific period in human history. Neither can we then ignore the plight of Palestinians seeking their own self determination. Just as the international community supported the establishment of Israel, so too it is equally important that the international community support resolution of the conflict through a two state solution with the establishment of Palestine and resolution of the Palestinian refugee problem.

The public position taken by the main Jewish organisations such as the Executive Council of Australian Jewry (ECAJ), the Zionist Federation of Australia (ZFA) and the Australia/Israel & Jewish Affairs Council (AIJAC) downplays the complexities of the conflict and avoids casting a critical eye over Israeli policies that prolong the conflict, while readily highlighting Palestinian policies that do likewise. This does not in fact reflect the diversity of opinion in the Jewish community here, or indeed in Israel itself, particularly amongst younger people.

The AJDS believes that Australia can take a more forthright role through the power of international diplomacy, to bring an end to Israel's 45 year-long occupation of the West Bank, by encouraging Israel and Palestinians to negotiate a settlement based on UN resolution 242 and other key decisions internationally, including an equitable distribution of resources such as water. Australia's good relations with Israel and the Arab and Muslim world places Australia in a better position of influence than many other countries.

We know that you demonstrated an honest and even handed approach to Palestinians in the face of considerable opposition from some in the Jewish community, when you presented the Sydney Peace Prize to Hanan Ashrawi in November 2003. We hope that you continue to support Palestinian human rights and hold all parties to account for policies which breach international law and human rights conventions. The maintenance of robust democratic institutions and processes in Israel is integral to safeguarding the rights of all Israelis, whatever their background. In the same way, Australia should take a stronger role in the development of effective civil society and government institutions in the emerging Palestinian state. Supporting Israel and Palestine as partners for peace and democracy should be a positive activity by Australia.

AJDS Executive, 7th March 2012.
The AJDS in 2011: A year in review

Excerpts from a report presented at the 2012 AGM
Compiled by Harold Zwier

12th February 2012

In February 2011 the AJDS and particularly Sandy Joffe, played a prominent role in countering a campaign to stop a St Kilda Muslim prayer group from using the Alma Road community house. The prayer group had been using the community house for around 2 years, but the campaign made false claims about proposed changes to the community house.

The campaign, run by some local people and a group called the Q Society, claimed the Muslim prayer group was linked to Islamic extremists; that “social-cohesion” would be undermined by allowing Islamic ritual prayers to be recited; that ritual washing by Muslims would waste large amounts of water and that the “well documented” escalation of violence towards non-Muslims during Friday prayers would likely strike terror into the hearts of local residents.

Sandy Joffe, director of the Port Philip Community Group, which manages the Alma Road Community House, was fully aware of both the factual information about the use of the community house and the misinformation being circulated in the press, online blogs and in the Jewish community. She co-ordinated action by Port Philip Council, Professor Spencer Zifcak from Liberty Victoria, Deborah Stone of the Anti-Defamation Commission and a number of orthodox Rabbis who publicly supported the Muslim prayer group’s right to use the community house. Liberty Victoria made prominent mention of this issue during their AGM in November.

The Muslim prayer group continue to use the community house for their Friday prayers, and the Port Philip Council made changes to the rules of use of the community house that affirmed the use of the facility for the prayer group and also benefited all users of the community house.

Naomi Chazan visited Australia in June and the AJDS held a successful, well-attended function with her at a bar/cafe in Elsternwick. It was an informal gathering, largely advertised through Facebook. Naomi talked about possibilities for resolving the conflict with Palestinians. Following her address there were questions and then a general opportunity to talk over drinks.

In July Gareth Evans spoke at the annual Renate Kamener oration, about the United Nations principle Responsibility to Protect, which places an obligation on governments to protect their own populations. The term Responsibility to Protect has been in the news recently regarding the situation in Syria with its government killing thousands of its citizens. The opportunity to hear about ‘R2P’ from one of its originators was unique. We look forward to this year’s Oration with Professor Glyn Davis Vice-Chancellor and Principal of the University of Melbourne.

In August the Palestinian Authority moved to seek recognition of Palestine at the UN. The AJDS wrote an article, published in The Age newspaper on August 15, calling on Australia to support that recognition. The article elicited a positive reaction in the Jewish community and we were subsequently invited to write an article on that topic for the Australian Jewish News. Our article appeared in late August under an article by Ron Weiser who opposed recognition of Palestine. I think our arguments for recognition were much stronger and more intellectually based than the arguments put forward by Ron Weiser. We were also pleased to discover that both the AJN and Age articles were used in the year 10 curriculum at Bialik College.
In September the AJDS issued a statement criticising some of the tactics used by protesters who support the Boycott Divestment & Sanctions (BDS) campaign against Israel. The statement was controversial and after discussion in the AJDS executive a revised statement was issued. As with all documents, you can read our statements on the AJDS website.

Our annual dinner, in December, was at Almazett Restaurant. Speaker, Paris Aristotle, Director of the Victorian Foundation for Survivors of Torture, managed to discuss the issue of torture, and the arguments for and against its use, in a manner that avoided polemic. He argued strongly and intellectually why torture cannot be legalised. I hope there will be opportunities for us to have Paris as a speaker at other functions.

In November and December, SBS television aired a 4 part drama titled The Promise, set against the historical background of Palestine at the end of the British Mandate in 1947/48 and Israel in 2005. Many in the Jewish community regarded the drama as antisemitic and the Executive Council of Australian Jewry (ECAJ) made a 31 page complaint to SBS about it. While there are valid criticisms to be made of the drama, we don’t see these as amounting to antisemitism.

The ECAJ complaint was reported in The Age newspaper and the AJDS responded with a letter, published on January 18. Our letter showed that there are a variety of views in the Jewish community and that not all agree The Promise should be regarded as antisemitic. The AJDS also had articles published in The Drum on 17th January discussing the implication of the ECAJ complaint, and the Australian Jewish News (AJN) on February 3 about problems with the definition of Antisemitism in relation to criticising Israel.

Max Kaiser has been contracted as the community organiser for the AJDS. Max has an activist background, and strong family connections to the AJDS; his grandparents were Walter & Lorna Lippmann. We’re looking forward to an active year in the AJDS including the involvement of younger people. It is past time that the AJDS did some serious succession planning and we commissioned executive member Dr. Helen Rosenbaum to do some research to better understand how we might engage and interest younger people. You can read more about the research and its follow up in this issue of the newsletter.

Harold Zwier is a longstanding AJDS executive member
The Mainstream Jewish Leadership is out of Touch with Progressive Young Jews

A version of this article by AJDS Community Organiser Max Kaiser was published on www.galusaustralis.com on February 29 2012.

Research recently commissioned by the Australian Jewish Democratic Society shows the mainstream community is seriously out of step with the views of many Jewish young people.

In the research report, 13 people under the age of 45 years provide a snapshot of the views of politically progressive young Jews. Speaking frankly, they raise concerns about the exclusive nature of the Melbourne Jewish community and its domination by right-wing Zionists who block open debate about Israeli Government policy.

As one participant expressed “Why can’t we oppose the Israeli Government without being labelled as self-hating Jews?” This participant also wants to hear “a fresh voice that is not centred on the experience of 1939-45 and is free from the self-centred, insular focus on Israel”. These sentiments were echoed several times over, with the young research participants unanimously valuing a socially progressive Jewish voice in the Jewish community to counter conservative and “myopic” views of the Jewish mainstream.

The ECAJ’s (Executive Council of Australian Jewry) recent 31 page complaint to SBS about the television series ‘The Promise’ illustrates this growing divide well. In my view and the view of my peers, it is not a good look for the Jewish community in the 21st century to seek to censor television programs because they are critical of Israel. The ECAJ pretends that it is a representative organisation of Australian Jewry when in actual fact they only represent a small segment, and reflect a very conservative set of politics.

Many Jews of my generation want to challenge the idea that Jews in Melbourne speak with one voice. We want to challenge mainstream Jewish positions on the Israel/Palestine conflict. We want to stand in solidarity with Indigenous people in Australia and their struggles for land rights and justice. We oppose the vilification and detention of asylum seekers seeking refuge in Australia. We support urgent action to combat catastrophic climate change. We want to build a feminist world and create spaces that are open to people of all sexualities.

The young people interviewed for the AJDS research project placed a lot of value on an organisation like the AJDS existing in order to provide ‘A Jewish voice amongst progressives and a progressive voice amongst Jews’. Progressive young Jews are crying out for organisations that reflect their values.

There’s a large vacuum that exists in the Jewish community for young people concerned about social justice and environmental sustainability. We aspire to fill it.

The AJDS research report, ‘Enhancing the AJDS’ Engagement with Young People’ was researched and written by Dr. Helen Rosenbaum. Max Kaiser (aged 24), comes from a social activist background and became the AJDS’ Community Organiser in October 2011.
Suddenly a Knock on the Door: A review

by Harold Zwier

“I’m from Vintage Books” said the voice at the other end of the phone. “Are you interested in reviewing a book by Etgar Keret that has just been translated into English?”

We’re always looking for material to include in our newsletter. So what, that I haven’t heard of Etgar Keret.

“Can you tell me something about the author? Yes, we do still review books in our magazine (it sounds more upmarket than a newsletter).”

Now I have Etgar Keret’s new book, Suddenly a Knock on the Door, a collection of short stories of the offbeat variety from an author born in Tel Aviv in 1967 with a dust jacket paragraph that tells me he is a leading voice in Israeli literature and cinema.

But I have heard his name before. In an article by Linda Grant published in Ha’aretz back in June 2010, Linda wrote: “I define my political orientation as being on the left - the same left as authors David Grossman, Amos Oz and Etgar Keret. Sounds kosher to me.

The book gets its title from the first story. It is the first of 38 short stories in 293 pages. “Tell me a story”, the bearded man sitting on my living-room sofa commands. Keret tells his story about a bearded man holding a pistol demanding to be told a story. He writes: “I’m someone who writes stories, not someone who tells them”. But a pistol is not to be argued with and so he begins his story:

“ ‘Two people are sitting in a room’, I begin. ‘Suddenly there’s a knock on the door’ “.And indeed, there is a knock on the door, and each time Keret starts to tell a story a new character pushes his way in. Perhaps Keret also read the article by Linda Grant because he writes: “I bet things like this never happen to Amos Oz or David Grossman”.

It reminded me a bit of Puckoon by Spike Milligan, with one of the characters in his book complaining to the author about the legs the author had written for him.

I’ve now read several of Keret’s stories and am thoroughly enjoying his style and imagination. You might too.

Harold Zwier is a longstanding AJDS executive member
My Poland Trip

An excerpt from Yoni Ungar's diary of his 2011 trip to Poland with youth group Hashomer Hatzair.

Saturday was our first truly intense day, it was when we visited the death camps of Auschwitz. We began our day at the Birkenau camp. It was a huge barb-wired area with rows of barracks and it also housed 4 gas chambers and crematoria. Most of the camp was destroyed however, and what we saw was generally accurately re-designed reconstruction. We wandered through the area with our group and witnessed the places where the prisoners of this death camp lived; condemned to life was how our leader put it. What we saw in this camp truly gave justice to this term, condemned to life. We saw the train line, on which they were brought, where the selections as to who lived and who died occurred, the bunk areas with hundreds of tiny bunks in small sheds, the bathroom which was just rows of benches with holes and finally we saw the gas chambers and crematoria. Most of these were bombed upon the liberation and were preserved in their dilapidated state.

It was a surreal site to see the place where 1.1 million people were gassed and murdered, dehumanized and disregarded. Our leader explained that in the Nazi’s eyes, Jews were regarded less important than dogs but more important than cats, which was seen as somewhat of an excuse or a systematically crafted and indoctrinated mindset that allowed for the atrocities to occur.

What was perhaps ironic and difficult to accept was the beauty of the place. The gas chambers were located in the forest, with the sun shining, the leaves golden brown and even a deer frolicking amongst the nature, it was a serene and beautiful place, yet such nature was so starkly juxtaposed to the unnatural cruelty and the ultimate exemplar of inhumanity that occurred there. The whole Hashomer group gathered for a ceremony to pay tribute to those lost. One by one, all those that wished to, stood up and stated the family name of those killed in the holocaust. I said Midler. Afterwards, some candles were lit and some words said and I believe it was somewhat of a fitting way to respect our family members.

Walking out of the camp was emotional for me, as I was contemplating the devastating effect that places such as Auschwitz-Birkenau had on our family and the sorrow that was ensured for the grandparents. Experiencing and seeing this camp was truly a daunting and challenging experience, one that was very emotionally difficult and draining, however, I think it was necessary in order to pay tribute to all those who were killed there, and in particular to Bubba’s father. I felt I was successfully able to pay some form of homage, which was an eerily nice feeling.

From Birkenau, we lunched in a park and then headed off to the Auschwitz-1 camp. This was mainly an administrative area during the war, with barracks for prisoners and one gas chamber. Also, there were prison areas where indescribable acts of inhumanity were carried out on prisoners for punishment. However, what was shocking though, was the commercial aspect of the place. It was very much museum-like, with Yad Vashem style exhibitions and displays, tour guides with headphones and tourists taking photos. Throughout, we discussed an interesting topic as to whether the Nazis could have exemplified humane actions to their loved ones, and tried to delve into understanding as to their psyche at the time. We ended with a communal ceremony and headed back to the hotel.
Krashinsky Park was our next stop, there we ate lunch and discussed the life of Mordechai Anilewicz who was the leader of the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising and the head of Hashomer Hatzair Warsaw at the time. The park was also very close to where the old Hashy meeting place was. We were taught about the life of a member of Hashomer at the time, how the movement ran and about its leadership; it was interesting to hear the differences and the many similarities between their lives and ours. We continued on our path and delved into attempting to understand the circumstances behind the uprising, how and why it was fought and who was involved. We learnt about various leaders, military tactics and events that occurred.

We saw the Rapaport monument; a great statue dedicated to the memory of the fighters and ended our journey at Mila 18- the commanding bunker of the uprising and the place where many of the warriors, including Anilewicz, died in battle. This was an inspirational and fitting place to end our journey as it represented a triumph of Jewish spirit and will, of maintenance of pride and dignity in a period in which one could be forgiven if they lost their innate sense of humanity. Furthermore, it was a place of much relevance and significance to all members of Hashomer Hatzair, as it is the place where our movement exemplified the ultimate form of resistance to authority, of standing up for what is believed to be right and of sacrifice for a noble cause. In short, I was proud to be wearing my movement shirt there. We conducted our ceremony there; saying my speech was truly a memorable and inspiring moment, one of unequivocally positive emotions. Yet, that was to be the end of our journey.

So, as I look back on my trip, I feel happy that I went and experienced what I did. There were definitely hard times, however I feel that the trip has somewhat opened my eyes to humanity and to how humans can behave and act and that I have benefited greatly from this. I’ve probably consequently matured in the way that I treat people and have generally acquired a much greater respect for those who resist, for those who were involved in any way in the Holocaust and in general to Hashomer Hatzair- which I think our whole group's attitude has positively changed towards and to which we can all say we are very proud members.

Yoni Unger travelled to Poland in 2009 as part of his Shnat year program with Hashomer Hatzair Melbourne. He is currently studying law at Monash University, and is leader of the junior groups as well as in charge of Hadracha (leadership) at Hashy.
The end of the world as we know it?

by David Rothfield

We live in uncertain times. That is perhaps an understatement. There is an ongoing global financial crisis and related social and economic issues about which much continues to be written. There is the ‘obesity epidemic’ and a range of other public health issues that place a growing burden on the public health system. There are festering issues of international security, terrorism, Middle East nuclear proliferation etc.

Those who grew up in the post war years in this country will remember the cold war. But they will also remember the confidence borne from the prospects of a secure job, in a world full of opportunity, progress and growth.

But no more. The last 5 decades has seen the world population jump from 3 billion to 7 billion. Australia’s population has more than doubled, from 10.8 million to 22.8 million. In western countries we have become ardent consumers in a flourishing, consumer, throw-away society. The rate at which we consume the planet's resources and pollute the biosphere has spiralled by a multiple of the population increase.

The full impact of this onslaught on the planet’s ecology is manifesting itself in many ways, climate change being but one of them. One of the world’s most astute investors, Jeremy Grantham, has observed that, “we now live in a different, more constrained world in which prices of raw materials will rise and shortages will be common”. He talks of a, “paradigm shift” needed in our thinking. The reality is, we are not just running out of oil, we are running out of ‘planet’.

The scarcity of finite resources extends to the two most basic of commodities, food and water. Much has been made of the ‘Green Revolution’ of the post war era. Better seed selection, the widespread use of chemical fertiliser and pesticides, the building of large irrigation schemes has all contributed to the phenomenal boost to global food production in this era.

But that success has come at great cost. Modern agriculture has played havoc with natural eco-systems. Vast amounts of precious, fertile topsoil have been washed away. Fertilisers have contaminated waterways, and coastal waters such as The Great Barrier Reef. Pesticides have caused loss of bio-diversity within soils, reducing their fertility and resilience. Land clearing has accelerated loss of bio-diversity and destabilised whole ecosystems.

The global demand for meat, the most carbon intensive and water intensive of food products, is rapidly increasing. Today, the world’s cattle consume more food than is needed to feed the entire world human population. The sharp increase in the price of grain over recent years is due to increased global meat production. Meat production is a prime emitter of methane, a greenhouse gas far more potent than carbon dioxide. Today, tropical forests, ‘the lungs of the earth’ and one of the best greenhouse gas absorbents are being cleared to satisfy our demand for beef as well as a range of other commodities. The Head of the International Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) has pleaded with us all to eat less meat as the best way to reduce our individual carbon footprint.
Whilst the growing appetite of a growing human population is stressing the capacity of our finite world to provide for us humans, a new more sinister threat to global food security has emerged. Traditional food crops, most notably corn, are now being diverted to the production of fuel because of rising fuel costs. Many inhabitants of poor countries will be pushed closer to starvation because those in rich countries want fuel for their private vehicles.

Climate change adds yet another dimension to the insecurity both of food and water resources, such as in the Murray Darling basin. It also threatens to destabilise the entire web of life as we know it. That includes the world’s oceans. Ocean acidification is one under reported effect of rising CO2 levels. Coral reefs and other whole marine eco-systems are already under severe stress and many, including the Great Barrier Reef could disappear by 2050.

We are already on a trajectory for a 4-degree rise in average global temperatures by the end of this century. Record breaking droughts and fiercer storm and flooding events are having devastating effects on millions of people in poor countries. Waves of climate refugees crossing oceans on leaky boats are just around the corner. Western society is so busy dealing with the ‘petty’ problems of the present, that we seem unable to comprehend the enormous risks to our future implied by carrying on, as we are, with business as usual.

Some believe that ‘technology’ will come to our rescue. Indeed technology has seemingly always delivered solutions to problems and brought us prosperity. What we overlook, is that technology has usually been the cause of many problems in the first place. Technology tends to fix one problem by creating another, further down the track. Most of today’s existential problems, from climate change to the threat to food security can be traced back to the results of technological innovation. Human civilisation is at a critical crossroad. We do indeed need a paradigm shift in our thinking.

The politics of environmental protection is not merely about protecting the outdoors, the place to spend our leisure time, it is about saving the natural environment on which all life depends, including that of humans. It is about saving us from ourselves. There is an increasing urgency attached to environmental politics. Time is running out and we won’t get a second chance, if we get it wrong, or if the solutions we accept turn out to be too little, too late.

Awareness about and support for environmental issues has increased dramatically over the last decade. The younger generation provides most of this new awareness and interest. These people tend to be cynical about the operations of the old political institutions. Hence The Greens as a political movement is appealing to these younger people.

It is incorrect to assume that The Greens are a ‘one issue’ party as some perceive it to be. Greens policies have been encapsulated by the twin headings of ‘Care for The Earth’ and ‘Care for The People’. Neither can exist without the other. Together they encapsulate a complete raft of policies aimed at securing the future health both of our environment and our society.

David Rothfield is a member of the Australian Greens and a longstanding AJDS member.
The Mosque on Christmas Island turns Fifty

by Howard Goldenberg

By far the most elegant structure on Christmas Island is the mosque. I come across it while running, shortly before sunset on a Sunday afternoon. It is time for me to recite Mincha, the afternoon prayer. I descend to the shore and gaze out to sea. Empty for now of smugglers and pursuers, the sea is a wide place of peace.

The unmistakeable sung sound of the call to prayer penetrates my silent devotion. There in front of me is the sapphire sea; behind me the towering slope; and in my ears the voice of the muezzin: I might be in Haifa.

I find myself musing on that word, muezzin. How homophonous with the Hebrew ma’azin, ‘to make hear’, to announce.

I complete my prayer. And on that day, the Lord shall be one, and His name one.

I jog over to the mosque. A gold minaret rises from creamy walls and catches the setting sun. The green slope beyond darkens toward blackness. A great quiet falls upon the world.

I walk towards the mosque’s open door and count shoes at the threshold: there are ten. How many is a quorum, I wonder?

Outside, on the grass, a plaque of stainless steel bearing the Australian coat of arms announces the assistance of the Federal Government of Australia in the construction of the mosque. I read the date: fifty years ago. The plaque is fixed to a mount by iron bolts that have rusted. Across a widening stain of brown that flows down the plaque, the emu and the kangaroo stare at each other.

My imagination begins to work. Nowhere on the island have I seen Islamic dress. How many Muslims live on the island? How many of them live their faith? How does a remnant faith survive here, cut off from the root in Malaysia and Singapore?

There is a second mosque on Christmas Island, within the detained persons’ compound. It is little patronized by the seekers of asylum. Grotesquely, the chaplain for all these unhappy Muslims is a Greek Orthodox priest.

Late on my final morning on the island, I return to the Kampong. I approach the mosque and peer inside. A man crosses the lawn in the direction of the mosque, wearing a knee-length robe in beige, a sort of kaftan over harem pants of the same material. He has an ample tummy, a beard that has given up hope of prosperity, and a small smile of curiosity.

He asks: “Can I help you?”

“I hope so. I am a visitor to the island. I’ve been working here for a short time. I’d like to speak to a member of the mosque about the congregation.”

“You are welcome”, he says, “Please come inside. What work do you do?” I tell him.

He turns and limps away to wash his hands and his face. He returns and waves me into the vestibule, a large, open cool area with white floor tiles. “I am visiting too. I used to live here, now I have come from Singapore to be with my brothers. I have been here a week, eating the good food, Doctor.” He smiles in wry confession: “Now I have gout.”

He invites me to enter the inner chamber where prayers are about to begin. I hold back. Unsure of mosque protocol, I want to avoid error and offense.
As the man limps away to pray, he adds: “We have a service now. It is quite short. If you can wait, we will be glad to speak with you.”

I watch and listen as a small flurry of latecomers breaches the threshold. It is just past noon. Sober, slowly articulated, the prayers in Arabic are punctuated by bowing and prostration. Most worshippers wear traditional garb. One wears the khaki of an Aussie tradesman. Unlike synagogue services, there is no social chitchat. The worshippers speak only to God.

Soon it is over and my host returns. He introduces me to a younger man in a kaftan of smart grey. He is the youngest brother, here from Perth for the family reunion. We shake hands. I meet the entire congregation of eight people, one an older man in a wheelchair, dignified in his traditional dress. He looks familiar: he was the elder wheeled onto the stage last Saturday, to be acknowledged by the community. His face is skew-whiff. Has he suffered a stroke? “No, not a stroke” – his wide smile melts all sobriety as it angles across his face – “My knees don’t work. One is artificial, one is real. Both no good. But, hamdalalah, no stroke.”

The tradie in khaki joins us. He is the middle brother of the three, aged about fifty. His broad brown face rises to a wide brow over which wisps of curly black hair hang like a frayed curtain. He looks like the recipient of a botched hair transplant. He listens while his brothers speak. They explain that all three of them grew up here; their family has been here for generations; but about fifteen years ago two of them left here to marry. I ask: “Has it been difficult for you to be Muslims here, a minority cut off from the big centres of your faith?”

It is the middle brother who replies, saying, unexpectedly: “No difficulty. September eleven happened, people asked us what we think. ‘It’s not us. We are Australians, we are Muslims. We have nothing to do with that.’”

I am taken by the younger brother’s smart patterned hat: “Where on the island can I buy a hat like that one?” “Singapore”. He smiles. “But you don’t need to buy one. Here, my hat is yours.”

He removes his hat and hands it to me. I look admiringly at the rich chocolate brown and the white lines that criss-cross it. I remove my own hat, exposing my kippah. I hand him the kippah. “Will you accept this in return?” We each try on the other’s religious headgear, both of us beaming.

The khaki brother now speaks, his face serious: “Do you know why this place is unique?” I don’t know what sort of answer he has in mind. I shake my head. He continues: “Where else in the world can a Jew and a Muslim meet in a mosque and exchange prayer hats?”

Howard Goldenberg describes himself as a “failed mohel, promising writer”.

The mosque on Christmas Island
Not in my name

This opinion piece by Robin Rothfield was originally published online on the National Times on December 15th 2011, the week after the ALP national conference.

You may have missed it, but the Labor Party made history last week by passing a policy to support, for the first time, the offshore processing of asylum seekers. But for card-carrying Labor supporters in particular, and fair-minded Australians in general, it was a bitter pill to swallow.

The sweetener - such as it is - was an increase in annual visas for humanitarian refugees to 20,000 a year, on condition of a reduction in the number of boat arrivals. This increase should be unconditional and not entwined in a quid pro quo formula that turns persecuted and vulnerable human beings into cold statistics as the government bids to make offshore processing Australia’s new reality.

Ultimately, offshore processing of asylum seekers – during which some victims may have to wait as long as nine years in detention – will not stop the boats. We now have the harshest and cruelest policy in Australia’s history, with more than a third of detainees having been incarcerated for more than a year and many committing acts of self-harm.

Labor’s new policy is thus nothing but a political capitulation to the politics of fear and smear waged by Tony Abbott and his opposition.

In his speech to the national conference in Sydney, Immigration Minister Chris Bowen said Labor’s new refugee policy was “compassionate” and “pro-refugee”, a balance between a “soft heart and a hard head”. He is either delusional or in denial. For how else to read this statement after his performance at the conference. Asked to justify the jailing of Indonesian villagers coerced into crewing boats bound for Australia – some of whom are teenagers and don’t even know they are engaging in people smuggling – he simply deferred the issue to the Attorney-General. This was either politics at its cynical best or the best cop out in the book.

Further pressed as to whether it is justifiable to sentence an asylum seeker to life in detention when they have committed no crime, he responded that the High Court had ruled that indefinite detention of asylum seekers is legal. A sidestep to be sure, but hardly outright opposition to such draconian measures. Worse, arguably, was his cold-hearted retort about the government’s right to repatriate failed asylum seekers even when there is a risk of death as the Taliban have made brutally explicit in Afghanistan.

Bowen and the government’s spin-masters have tried to sell the public the fiction that its policy, while maintaining a balance between humanitarianism and border security, is a deterrent for people smugglers. But in reality it smacks of political expediency because the government knows that the Malaysian solution is stillborn – rejected by the judiciary and deadlocked in the legislature.

It may be true to argue that, by dint of a High Court ruling and a hung parliament, Labor is processing refugees on Australian soil and in a more humane manner.

But this is neither morally sustainable nor politically defensible. It’s nothing but a false sense of security. For the first time in its history Labor’s official policy is now to promote offshore processing as the solution.
And to add insult to injury, the rank-and-file party members were denied the right to a conscience vote on this issue even though they were granted it for the hot-button issue of gay marriage. Indeed, it seemed Bowen was acutely aware it would be a close-fought battle because two prominent members of the Right faction, including refugee advocate Shane Prince, were denied permission to speak at National Conference.

Nevertheless, Labor For Refugees, with the backing of the Left faction, did manage to secure policy reforms that may improve the lives of asylum seekers processed in Australia. Labor has abandoned the policy of treating those who arrive by boat more harshly than those who arrive by air.

Mercifully, Labor has also committed to releasing children and, where possible, their families from detention centres. And for asylum seekers detained while their health, identity and security issues are checked, Labor will strive to ensure that detention is for a maximum of 90 days. But striving is not good enough. They should be released within 90 days unless there is evidence of a security risk endorsed by a judge.

Nevertheless, these specific reforms pale into insignificance compared with the government’s overarching new policy. Prime Minister Julia Gillard and Tony Abbott are now jostling in their race to the bottom on this critical issue. Former prime minister John Howard must be bemused at how the politics of panic he manipulated so expertly are edging Labor closer and closer to Howard-era policies.

As David Marr writes in his new book, Panic: “Hearts are hardened. Terrible things are done in the name of protecting the nation. It is not the first wave of boats and won’t be the last, but the politics are more rancorous than ever.”

Ordinary Australians should be ashamed that our government supports abdicating our responsibility to a third party. Australians need to deal humanely with refugees on Australian soil without compromising border protection.

By backing offshore processing, Labor has crossed the idiomatic Rubicon. It’s a subtle but significant shift – one that alters the party’s DNA. In short, Labor has abandoned defending human rights in favour of trading the human rights of asylum seekers with other countries.

Not in my name.

**Robin Rothfield is secretary of Labor for Refugees (Victoria) and a longstanding AJDS member.**
About the New Israel Fund (Australia)
by Mandi Katz

NIF Australia was established to support the New Israel Fund, the leading organization committed to equality and democracy for all Israelis. The New Israel Fund is a partnership of Israelis and supporters of Israel worldwide, dedicated to a vision of Israel as the Jewish homeland and a shared society at peace with itself and its neighbours.

The New Israel Fund is widely credited with building Israel’s progressive civil society and has provided more than $250 million to more than 850 cutting-edge organisations since its inception. The Fund’s action arm SHATIL provides Israel’s social change community with hands-on assistance and builds coalitions, empowers activists, and takes the initiative in spearheading national advocacy campaigns.

For our 2011/12 fundraising focus, we have chosen several specific Israeli projects where Australia’s contribution can be seen to make a difference over time. These are our selected projects.

The Israeli Human Rights Organisation of People with Disabilities (IHROPD)
IHROPD promotes equal rights for people with disabilities through advocacy and by raising awareness among the general public and people with disabilities.

The Yerushalmim Movement
Yerushalmim was formed in 2009 and works to foster pluralism, openness and tolerance in Jerusalem and opposes coercive attempts by ultra orthodox groups to impose gender segregation in public spaces.

The Coalition for Affordable Housing
The Coalition was formed by the New Israel Fund in 2009 to provide a roof body for like-minded organisations that promote solutions for the chronic housing crisis, an issue that became the centrepiece of the tent protests in 2011.

The Negev Coexistence Forum for Civil Equality
The Forum was formed in 1997 by Jewish and Arab residents of the Negev with two major aims: to defend the rights of Bedouin in the area whose villages are not recognised by the government and to bring Jews and Arabs together through cultural programs. The unrecognised Bedouin village of Al-Arakib is the focus of the Forum’s current campaign. Its residents are Israeli citizens whose homes have been demolished by the government more than a dozen times since 2010.

Achoti (My Sister)
Achoti was formed in 2000 to support grass roots initiatives helping economically marginalised women to generate income for themselves and their families, through programmes that support women to develop skills and community networks.

Friends of the Earth Middle East (FOEME)
FOEME promotes a combination of peaceful cooperation and environmental sustainability in the region and is unique in bringing together Jordanians, Palestinians and Israelis to work together to advance vital research, build peace and promote environmental preservation.

Mandi Katz is a former Victorian chair of the Australian Union of Jewish Students and married to Ashley Browne, a former editor of the Australian Jewish News.
Beyond Tribal Loyalties

by Sivan Barak

Beyond Tribal Loyalties: Personal Stories of Jewish Peace Activists
Editor: Avigail Abarbanel

IN 2009 I was one of seven Australians invited to participate in this book, to write about our journeys to becoming activists.

The Australian participants are Ray Bergmann, Margot Salom and Nicole Erlich from Queensland, Vivienne Porzsolt and Peter Slezak from NSW and David Langsam and me from Victoria.

At times I found the process difficult, often reconsidering which parts of my private personal journey I would be comfortable sharing in public. What will ‘they’ think? How will I be seen? Could I forge my path through the pressure and criticism that would likely arise in response to my words?

The book is a collection of 25 inspiring personal stories of Jewish peace activists working each in their own way for Palestinian rights and opposing Israel’s occupation of Palestine.

From the back cover of the book:
There is an expectation in Jewish communities around the world that all Jews embrace Zionism and offer unquestioning support for Israel, ‘right or wrong’. Jewish identity and Zionism are commonly and deliberately blurred. Jews who criticise Israel or question Zionism are often excluded, vilified and threatened. If they express sympathy for the plight of the Palestinian people, they risk being branded as traitors and accused of ‘supporting the enemies of Israel’.

Beyond Tribal Loyalties is a unique collection of twenty-five personal stories of Jewish peace activists from Australia, Canada, Israel, the United Kingdom and the United States. There is an age difference of more than fifty years between the oldest and the youngest contributor. The stories focus on the complex and intensely personal journey that Jewish activists go through to free themselves from the hold of Zionist ideology and its requirement to support all Israeli policies. Like many Jews, most of the contributors were once unquestioning supporters of Israel and Zionism. Something happened in the life of each of these extraordinary people that caused them to question and re-evaluate their understanding of the conflict and their relationship with Israel and the Palestinian people. In many cases this journey involved a reassessment of personal values, belief systems and identity. Beyond Tribal Loyalties seeks to discover what makes it possible for Jewish peace activists to follow through with this transformative journey and their activist work, despite fanatical and sometimes violent opposition.

The book will be launched around Australia during the month of June. Avigail Abarbanel, the editor and a contributor will be visiting at the many events planned. The launch will be held on Tuesday the 12th of June at Readings bookshop at 309 Lygon st, Carlton from 6.30 pm.

Sivan Barak is a contributor to ‘Beyond Tribal Loyalties’ and an AJDS executive member
AJDS SUBSCRIPTION
AJDS PO Box 685 Kew Vic 3101 Tel: 0423234069

Name: ___________________________ (New/Renew)
Address: _________________________
Email: ___________________________
Phone: ___________________________

Amount Enclosed for Dues: $________
Donation: $________
Total: $________

Date: _____________________________

Membership (due 1 January each year): $40 single person, $50 family, $25 Concession. Subscription only - $30.

AJDS NEWSLETTER
Australian Jewish Democratic Society

PO Box 685
Kew
Victoria 3101