



Compare it half's non-traditional models and women-only bars.



INSPIRING AND EMPOWERING

INTERNATIONAL WOMEN'S DAY, CELEBRATED AROUND THE WORLD THIS MONTH, WAS ESTABLISHED IN THE EARLY 1900'S TO INSPIRE WOMEN TO CAMPAIGN FOR CHANGE. IN ISRAEL, MANY ORGANIZATIONS WORK TIRELESSLY ALL YEAR ROUND TO PROMOTE A VARIETY OF WOMEN'S ISSUES

Liza Rosenberg

Now more than ever before, women are playing increasingly more prominent roles in Israeli society as successful businesswomen, social activists, politicians and more. The incoming Knesset has a record-breaking number of women in its ranks, and stories of women attempting to change the status quo in a wide range of areas are regularly featured in the local news media. And yet, the Israeli public is generally not very comfortable with the concept of feminism and women taking a stand. Moreover, on a personal level, the status of women in society is still far below that of men.

Israeli organizations that promote women's issues run the gamut with regard to operations and activities as well as target audiences. While some focus on personal or economic enfranchisement, and others advocate equality between the genders, women's empowerment is a motif that is championed by all these organizations.



David Alon

Fulfilling women's spiritual needs

The word 'empowerment' didn't even exist when Daniella Golan founded "Or Chaya – The World Center for the Jewish Woman" in Jerusalem 24 years ago. "It was a revolutionary concept," notes Golan, who directs the center in a volunteer capacity.

Golan sees empowerment as being a self-saving process, and created Or Chaya to give women of all ages the tools to work through that process by fulfilling their spiritual needs. Throughout the year, Or Chaya offers a series of programs, seminars, lectures and other activities that address the topics of Judaism, Torah, family and spiritual issues. These activities are all designed with the goal of assisting



OR CHAYA OFFERS A SERIES OF ACTIVITIES THAT ADDRESS THE TOPICS OF JUDAISM, TORAH, FAMILY AND SPIRITUAL ISSUES, AND AIM TO HELP WOMEN FIGURE OUT WHO THEY ARE

← women as they try to figure out who they are.

Even the center's location is significant. Or Chaya is situated at a crossroads where religious and secular neighborhoods meet, symbolizing its intent to reach out to women across the Jewish religious spectrum. While Golan acknowledges that most visitors are religiously observant, she emphasizes that the center is open to women from all backgrounds, whether they're secular and wear pants or religious and wear only skirts. Or Chaya programs are offered in several languages – Hebrew, English and French, among others – and many of the women who participate come from abroad.

Says Golan, “we have groups that come specifically to participate in our programs, but we also have participants who accompany their husbands on business trips and are looking for something special to do for themselves while their husbands are busy.”

Activities are geared towards affording participants with a “think positive” approach, providing an atmosphere that inspires women to do the maximum for themselves as they reflect on questions such as “Why am I here?” or “What am I doing here?” Or Chaya prides itself on the environment it has created. “It is a place where people listen to you and can relate to you,” remarks Golan confidently. “The attention we give is very important. We are a center of love, of attentiveness and of listening, and we open our hearts to all,” she adds.

Empowering women to open businesses

Another example of an organization that seeks to empower women is the Haifa-based Economic Empowerment for Women (EEW), a national organization whose mission is “to supply low-income women in Israel with the knowledge and tools to create their own small businesses as a means for gaining self-sufficiency and alleviating the cycle of poverty in which they live.” The EEW operates in and around Jerusalem, the center of the country, the Galilee, Haifa and the Israeli Arab communities in the area known as the “Triangle.”

According to EEW Director Khawla

Rihani, the organization tries to reach marginalized women living in these areas, where there is a high percentage of unemployment and many families at the low-income and poverty levels. Says Rihani, “the average age of the women we help is 40-42. These are women with 12 years of education and nothing beyond that. It is difficult for them to find their place in the labor market because of their situation.” Among the Jewish women in the program (who range from secular to ultra-Orthodox), 50% are single mothers.

The EEW runs a series of programs geared towards empowering these women by giving them the tools they need to build their own businesses and teaching them about entrepreneurship. Its flagship program, Business of One's Own, is a year-long program that offers participants business training, personal empowerment, technical assistance and mentoring. The program teaches women how to organize and believe in themselves as well as providing them with financial and business planning skills. What it doesn't do is provide actual job training. “Our goal is to teach women how to use the skills they already have to build their own small businesses,” Rihani points out. “We don't help them find jobs elsewhere,” she notes.

Once the program is complete, participants are encouraged to attend additional lectures, seminars and other activities that the EEW offers. “We know from our experience that it can take approximately five years for a business →





EEW'S YEAR-LONG FLAGSHIP PROGRAM OFFERS WOMEN BUSINESS TRAINING, PERSONAL EMPOWERMENT, TECHNICAL ASSISTANCE AND MENTORING.

← to be profitable and survive," explains Rihani. "During this time, we continue to follow up with participants, teaching them about savings and asset development," she adds.

The EEW confronts a number of challenges, as working with these populations requires a great deal of effort to motivate women to commit to joining the program, once potential candidates are identified together with local social workers. Much of the organization's time is spent building partnerships with participants as well as with various local bodies in the 75 different municipal authorities in which the EEW operates.

Another issue that the EEW faces is the lack of higher or technical education among its target population, which means that the women build their businesses based on the skill set they already possess – skills that are, in many cases, similar to those held by other women in similar situations. This becomes problematic because there are limits regarding how many people may require these kinds of services. "You have many women turning to more 'traditional' businesses such as child care, cosmetology

and sewing. As a result, the growth potential is limited," says Rihani.

According to Rihani, 40% of the women succeed in their business activities, though some of the women find jobs and choose not to run their own micro-businesses. A staggering 90% of program participants feel empowered, with a stronger sense of self-confidence and security.

Business of women, for women

Comme il faut, a Tel Aviv-based company that specializes in women's fashion and operates other women-oriented interests as well as a popular restaurant, is a strong proponent of the power of women to influence and take a stand in terms of both business and personal responsibility. Its vision, created by 24 managers during a collaborative process in 2007, is very specific in terms of its goals and direction. "We believe in what we do and believe in going with our truth until the end, even if it doesn't pay off financially," notes Shlomit Ravid, Media and Marketing Coordinator for *comme il faut*.

The company has a comprehensive code of employee ethics that strongly reflects its

feminist agenda and the importance it places on women's empowerment.

Comme il faut was founded in 1987 with the goal of designing quality, tailored clothing for career women. The company's feminist stance and social agenda were formulated later. While working with customers on the shop floor, founders Sybil Goldfainer and Carol Godin realized that women were often unhappy with how they looked because they were adhering to standards dictated by male society, and decided that they would attempt to change this critical perspective reflecting how women saw themselves.

Says Ravid, "We receive a lot of love and support from our customers and from the press with regard to certain projects, but when it comes to others – such as our decision to use very tall, very skinny models showing archetypal signs of femininity like stiletto heels and heavy makeup during our fashion show last summer – we are on the receiving end of very harsh criticism."

To date, *comme il faut* has eight stores in various locations around the country as well as *Coola* – a spa for women only, the *comme il faut* café and *Bait BaNamal* ("Home in the Harbor"). "Bait BaNamal is the natural continuation of our initial shop and in-house café on Tel Aviv's Dizengoff Street," says Ravid. "It is a home, and as such, meals are served (in the restaurant)," adds Ravid with a grin.

One of the more interesting elements at *Bait BaNamal* is "Sisters," run by two women and billed as "the most advanced and professional sex toy supermarket in Israel." The company decided to bring Sisters on board because it believes in the importance of breaking the male monopoly on sexuality. "Women also deserve to deal with this significant and interesting issue in a pleasant, comfortable and friendly environment, and we encourage them to do so," explains Ravid. The shop has its supporters – and it also has people who aren't so supportive. "Fortunately for us, our customers already know us, so this entity doesn't surprise them," she notes.

When asked what messages *comme il faut* feels are important to share with women, Ravid offers the following. "We have indeed come a long way, but there's still a lot of work to be done. It is important for us to say that anything is possible; no social convention is obligatory and everything can change. Just change the fixed pattern of thought to see all the options."