

Our Year in Review

2018 has been another busy year for the Tree of Life Educational Fund (TOLEF). In January, 29 participants traveled to Israel/Palestine as part of our Right of Return: 70 Years of Refugees in Palestine, Israel and Beyond annual journey. While there they visited with Palestinian and Israeli voices of conscience working towards peace and justice. They also witnessed first-hand the ongoing struggles associated with life under military occupation.

In June we hosted a Tree of Life Homecoming at the First Congregational Church of Old Lyme (FCCOL). Journey participants from over the years (and a few new friends) met to share stories, listen to beautiful musical performances, enjoy a delicious Palestinian dinner and listen to guest speakers Mazin Qumsiyeh, former Yale professor and current Bethlehem University professor and founder of the Palestine museum of Natural History, and Susan Aboeid, former Journey traveler and political chair of Yale's Muslim Student's Association.

Board and volunteers have also stepped up advocacy efforts. In April TOLEF joined with the Middle East Crisis Committee and Jewish Voice for Peace (JVP) NH to protest Israel's brutal response to the Great March of Return.

In September TOLEF partnered with JVP New Haven and the Bridgeport Islamic Community Center (BICC) to organize a delegation to meet with Congressman Jim Himes, representing Connecticut's 4th District. The meeting was arranged to discuss support of H.R. 4391 – the Promoting Human Rights by Ending Israeli Military Detention of Palestinian Children Act.

This bill aims to prohibit U.S. financial assistance to Israel from being used to support the military detention, interrogation, or ill-treatment of Palestinian children. We also organized delegations to meet with Congressman Larson, Congressman Courtney, Congresswoman DeLauro and Congresswoman Esty.

More recently we mobilized supporters to contact Senator Murphy to encourage opposition to S.720/H.R.1697, the Israel Anti-Boycott Act.

And in October we hosted our annual fall lecture series Rachel's Children. Please see page 3 for a detailed recap of this year's series.

Last, but not least, thanks to our Scholarship in a Bottle program we are continuing to send financial aid to Palestinian students at Palestinian Universities, in partnership with the Middle East Children's Alliance (MECA) and Al Rowwad (Pioneers for Life) for Culture and Arts (ACTs). We sold more than one ton of Al'ard olive oil in FY 2018!



Top photo: TOLEF Board President, Ghoufran Allababidi (back) and Journey participant Leila Hussain (front) visit with Bedouin children in the Negev during the 2018 journey.

Bottom photo: Members of the TOLEF board, JVP New Haven, BICC and several labor unions, met with Connecticut's 4th district Congressman, Jim Himes (6th from left) to discuss H.R. 4391

Greetings From Our New Executive Director

By 2012 I had been following the news coming out of Palestine for 11 years, almost daily. I had long since lost all hope that things would ever change. And then I read an article in Mondoweiss about a man who had placed ads showing the Palestinian loss of land map on New York commuter train platforms. Millions of people saw them, and many tried to force the ad agency to have them removed. But they refused. For the first time in years, I felt a spark of hope.

Fast forward six years and my husband and I are at our first Tree of Life event, the 2018 Homecoming. During dinner, recognition was given to that very man, Henry Clifford, who had placed those ads in 2012. I was thrilled to have an opportunity to meet this person who had made such an impact, and who had reached so many with that very simple, but very powerful map. Before the evening ended, I made sure to shake his hand and say thank you.

Recently I visited Henry to talk more with him about those ads, about Palestine, and about why what he did mattered. But when I told him that in my opinion his action created a shift and that since then, and thanks to him, there have been more ads, more billboards, and more people reached, he shook his head and said, "No, there may have been a shift, but it's not good enough. Nothing will change."

Thank You Mary!

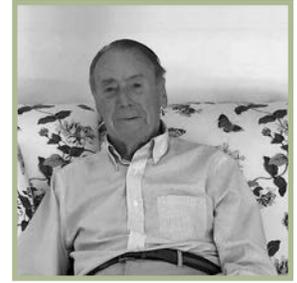
Since 2015, Mary Tomassetti has done an exemplary job leading our organization as our Executive Director. Recently she made the difficult decision to move on to new ventures, and so it is with some sadness that we announce her departure from our staff, although with her giving spirit she may continue to share her talents and energy with us when able.



Mary Tomassetti, center, and fellow travelers during the TOLEF March 2017 Journey to Palestine

Thank you, Mary, for your service, your guidance, and for facilitating a remarkable array of TOLEF events and journeys these past few years. Your unwavering support and hard work have been genuinely appreciated! We wish you all the best in your future endeavors and look forward to your continued friendship and support.

I share his sadness. It feels insurmountable, this battle for justice for Palestine. How can we maintain hope in the face of such well organized, well-funded, and well-armed opposition? How do we cope with a narrative that has been stolen and turned upside down? In the face of such suffering, how do we find hope that things will ever change?



Henry Clifford

For me, the hope lies with people like Henry who made a decision, followed through, made an impact, and inspired others to do the same.



And I find hope that there are organizations like Tree of Life Educational Fund, steadily working for years to change the narrative through journeys and lecture series and advocacy work and education.

So again I say thank you to Henry, who despite his sadness made an effort and created a shift, and thereby changed the world.

In Solidarity,

Ann F. Perry

Executive Director, Tree of Life Educational Fund

A Gift That Will Keep on Giving

We are incredibly grateful for a significant 2018 contribution from Ted and Becky Crosby! According to their wishes, this gift is now invested with United Church Funds, which prioritizes socially responsible investments. Each year a portion will be used to provide scholarship support for young people to participate in our annual journeys.

Inspired by their participation, many become volunteers working towards peace and justice or refugee aid upon their return. We are honored to help our youth mature and become the voices of conscience we all were created to be.

Thanks to this extraordinary gift, we now have the opportunity to strengthen this very important part of our Tree of Life ministry. Thank you Ted and Becky for your wonderful generosity!

Thank You for Supporting Our Rachel's Children Fall Lecture Series!

Since January of this year, more than 900 Palestinian children under 18 have been arrested or detained by the Israeli military. Most are charged with throwing rocks. Many of these children are arrested from their homes in the middle of the night – a terrifying experience that can forever destroy their sense of home as the place of safety and sanctuary that most take for granted.

This past October, our annual Tree of Life Fall Lecture series, Rachel's Children, explored this issue and more. Attendees learned that most of these children are subject to verbal and physical abuse, deprived of legal aid, and not allowed visitations from family members.

Guest speaker Ruba Awadallah, a researcher for Defense for Children International – Palestine (DCIP), shared important data and heartbreaking stories highlighting the tragic costs of living under military occupation. Since 1991, DCIP has worked to protect and advocate for Palestinian children by monitoring and documenting abuse, raising awareness and providing legal services.

Former IDF soldier, Eran Efrati, now Executive Director of Researching the American-Israeli Alliance (RAIA), shared his deeply personal account of the moment he understood that as an IDF soldier he was not making the world a better place, but rather subjugating an innocent population.

While on duty during one of the middle of the night house raids, he realized that the vulnerable child standing before him was one he had tried to befriend just the day before. Suddenly it became clear to him that he was terrorizing this family. Since then he has dedicated his life to speaking out against the occupation. At RAIA he supplies vital research for the movement for justice for Palestine by actively monitoring American law enforcement training in Israel. Data from his research is being used for the Jewish Voice for Peace Deadly Exchange initiative which aims to end the U.S./Israeli police partnership.



Above: Our speakers l to r – Eran Efrati, Ruba Awadallah, Lara Kiswani

Below: Eran Efrati shares his message with attendees at The First Congregational Church of Old Lyme.

"We are making an impact. We have learned from the freedom fighters that ended apartheid in South Africa."

Lara Kiswani, executive director AROC

And speaker Lara Kiswani, Executive Director for the Arab Resource and Organizing Center (AROC), inspired all with her direct action success stories. During the 2014 assault on Gaza, AROC helped to mobilize more than 6000 activists and, in cooperation with the International Longshore and Warehouse Union (ILWU), who refused to cross the picket line, managed to prevent an Israeli cargo ship from docking in Oakland and Long Beach, California - permanently.

In addition, AROC also convinced the City of Oakland to stop hosting Urban Shield, the largest militarized police training and weapons expo in the world.

All in all, approximately 250 individuals attended our Rachel's Children conferences at four venues. We at TOLEF are immensely grateful to our sponsors, venue organizers, volunteers and supporters who helped us to make this series a great success!

Spring 2019 Journey Announcement

Mothers of a New Creation

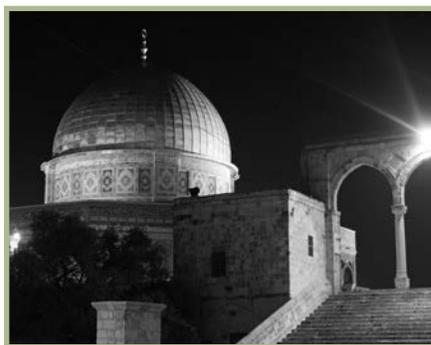
A Tree of Life Journey • March 12–23, 2019

Planning continues for our annual journey to Israel/Palestine in March 2019, and there is still time to join us! Come see first-hand the beauty of Palestine and the resilience of her people.

This year’s Journey, Mothers of a New Creation, will have a special focus on the role of women, past and present, who by their love, courage, resilience and determination endeavor to make their communities a place where all God’s children might learn to live together in peace.

It will be led by Ghoufran Allababidi, President of Tree of Life Educational Fund, and Ann Perry, Executive Director. Serving as chaplains will be Colleen Keyes, a Muslim leader in the interfaith community, and Laura Fitzpatrick- Nager, Senior Associate Minister, The First Congregational Church of Old Lyme.

To learn more, contact Ann Perry at aperry@tolef.org or visit <http://www.tolef.org/journeys/tree-of-life-journey-march-2019/>



Dome of the Rock – photo taken during the 2017 TOLEF Journey

Taking Action: Success Stories

Advocacy efforts are paying off! We congratulate the Stolen Homes Coalition (many of whom are TOLEF partners) for their successful campaign to persuade Airbnb to stop listing homes in Israeli settlements. After several years of sustained advocacy, which included a petition with more than 150,000 signatures, Airbnb has decided to remove approximately 200 listings from illegal settlements in the occupied territories!

In addition, for the first time since the ADL began organizing and funding its Leadership, Resilience and Counter-Terrorism Seminar in 2002, which brings members of the police, F.B.I, US Air Marshals and ICE agents to Israel for militarized tactical training, two delegations have withdrawn after being urged to “Skip the Trip” by TOLEF friends in the New England Network for Justice for Palestine (NENJP) and many others.

Organizers used information from RAIA’s and JVP’s Deadly Exchange program to convince Vermont State Police Director Colonel Birmingham and Northampton, Massachusetts Mayor David Narkewicz to both withdraw their delegates from the December trip.

Congratulations to all of our friends who are organizing, persevering, and making a difference!



Amplifying voices of conscience for social justice

Mission

The Tree of Life Educational Fund, a 501(c)(3) non-profit corporation, was established by The First Congregational Church of Old Lyme to provide cross-cultural and transnational travel experiences, interfaith conferences, and educational opportunities to help participants become more enlightened and engaged in making this a more just and peaceful world.

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