

Biennial 2015 Reflections from Irene Metz

The Biennial was an amazing experience, especially as a first time attendee. It was hard to imagine what to expect but my experiences far exceeded my expectations. To be immersed with 5,000 other Reform Jews for several days in an environment of learning, worship, and shared knowledge was a privileged opportunity. The worship services were filled with music, singing, and teachings from wise leaders, visuals, and communal prayer. The huge expansive hotel ballroom was continually filled with our voices and spirit during the Friday night and Saturday morning Shabbat services. Imagine Community Synagogue High Holydays multiplied by 5 with everyone singing in unison.

The Biennial gave us an opportunity to learn about the Israeli-Palestinian situation from knowledgeable Israeli experts such as Ari Shavit, author of "My Promised Land" and Stav Shaffir, a young member of the Knesset. They spoke in panel format about the complex situation in the Middle East, but also offered possible hopes for peace by taking steps toward a "Two State Solution." They explained the importance of the political leaders of Israel and the United States to hear the opinions and have the support from the Jews of North America.

We experienced on a large scale at the Shabbat Services and plenary in the ballroom, but also had the opportunity to learn in smaller breakout sessions. I attended breakout sessions on Post-Middle Age Engagement and Beyond Counting Heads: New Measures of Success. A panel of speakers from synagogues across the country spoke on the challenges and successes in their own synagogue, encouraging us to spark ideas within our own community.

One of the many highlights of the Biennial was hearing from the speakers: Rabbi Rick Jacobs, Rabbi David Saperstein and Vice-President Joe Biden. Each a well-spoken and dynamic leader, they shared their enthusiasm with us for positive change and awareness in our country and movement. They applauded the positive changes we have already made over the years, but reminded us that there is still work to be done. We are energized to go back into our own community, synagogue, and life with the tools of Tikkun Olam, Social Justice, and the support of the Reform Movement and the notion to continue using Jewish values to make positive strides in the world.

It was exciting that the URJ passed a Resolution on the Rights of Transgender and Gender non-conforming people at this Biennial. It affirms our commitment to the full equality, inclusion, and acceptance of people of all gender identities and gender expressions.

I was amazed at the talent, knowledge, and energy of the NFTY kids. They are the next generation of Jews in our country - and they were impressive at the Biennial. The NFTY camps and leadership programs create a safe, creative, teaching, place for kids to explore, learn, and develop. The URJ is adding new camps each year, giving more children an incredible opportunity. The NFTY teens are involved in important topics such as gun control in our country and can raise awareness and hopefully change American laws over time.