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THE TIMES OF ISRAEL

EXCERPTED FROM Diana Lipton's Blog post of May 27, 2016, 4:08 pm. [See reference to the Umm el-Fahem Gallery on page 2 below.](#)

Dear Catherine Hall,

You've cost me a lot of money this week. Not nearly as much (unfortunately) as the \$300,000 you gave up when, citing the Israel-Palestine conflict, you [rejected your share of the Dan David prize](#) administered by Tel Aviv University. But more than a drop in that bucket.

I hold no hope that academic boycotts, like the one to which you've just added your name, will help to bring peace and justice to our tiny corner of the fractured Middle East. In fact, at this point I find BDS pretty terrifying in all sorts of ways. But setting all that aside, I want to tell you how much I wish you'd had your cake and eaten it, as Hebrew University Professor David Shulman did when he donated his [\\$20,000 Israel Prize money to Ta'ayush](#), an Israeli organization that works with Palestinians in the West Bank.

Reflecting on what you could have achieved here with \$300,000, my eyes burned with tears of sheer frustration. But then a verse of a psalm popped into my head, complete with the [beautiful tune](#) to which it's often sung in Hebrew: *Turn from evil and do good. Seek peace and pursue it* (Ps 34:15).

There's plenty that's wrong in Israel but, if my experience is anything to go by, we have the world's highest per capita ratio of social and political activists, and of ordinary citizens from all sectors of society who take moral responsibility for their country and work to make it a better place. When I left my job — just down the road from you! — at King's College London, and moved to Jerusalem, I decided to throw in my lot with them — not by trying to break down what's bad, crucial as that is, here and everywhere, but by trying to build up what's good.

My choice to be constructive emerged in part from my experience as a teacher. In my own higher education, I regretted the disproportionate emphasis on what was wrong as compared to what was right. We academics are so good at pulling things apart. When I was fortunate enough to encounter teachers who went against the grain and issued praise, I flourished. When I met only criticism, it took all the energy I had to pick myself up and go back to the library. I have self-criticism enough to go around.

So when I became a teacher myself, first at Newnham College, Cambridge, an all-women's college, and then at King's College London in a department (Theology and Religious Studies) where the majority of students were female, I tried to teach as I love to be taught. I didn't ignore the weaknesses in my students' work, of course, but I focused on their strengths. We all need criticism; for some it's even a spur. But for those already gasping for breath, it's like a hard punch in the stomach.

That brings me back to you and the Dan David prize. Inspired by the psalmist, I forced myself to turn away from what seemed to me bad — your last-minute rejection of the prize you had accepted, your wasted opportunity to make a positive contribution, and more I won't go into — and do something constructive myself. I made three equal donations to organizations working in that sector of the population to which you — as a historian of gender and a feminist activist — could have contributed so much: women. If anyone else reading this wants to join me, you'll find information at the links below.

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2. [Umm el-Fahem Art Gallery](#)

The Umm el-Fahem Art Gallery is located in the Israeli Arab town of Umm el-Fahem. It was founded in 1996 by Said Abu Shakra in response to local interest in bringing contemporary art to the city. Above the exhibition space is a ceramics workshop run by Rina Peleg for Arab women from the community. The workshop provides its artists with financial, social and psychological support. I was there when a birthday cake was brought in for one of the ceramicists, a young woman from the neighborhood. We all began to sing. She looked around, confused; it was the first time anyone had ever celebrated her birthday.



I learned about Umm el-Fahem from an [inspiring article](#) in Forward by my friend Toby Perl Freilich. My first visit was with Toby, a documentary maker, and our friends Naomi Schacter and Susie Sawicki, both dedicated social activists. Between us, we were able to help Ruthi Oppenheim, the gallery's Director for External Relations, make connections (with curator Deborah Frizzell and artist [Samira Abbassy](#), for instance) for a forthcoming fundraising trip to New York.

My next visit to Umm el-Fahem, also with Toby, was on the occasion of the gift to the gallery of two beautiful paintings by [Ruth Kestenbaum Ben Dov](#), an artist represented in Jerusalem by [ArtSpace](#), a gallery run by Linda Zisquit in her own home. These are the paintings, portraits of Ruth's neighbors in Karmiel. (For the next two weeks, you can see more of her work in a [show](#) that's just opened in Jerusalem.)





Welcoming Guests: Hasna (above top) and Sigal (immediately above)

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Given your academic interests, you must have factored women into the equation when you rejected the Dan David prize. You must have considered the implications for your field when it comes to future prizes (I fear it may be some time before gender studies gets serious consideration again). You must have thought about the exceptional educational opportunities for Arab women in Israel, and their freedom of choice here, with respect to the government and wider population, about issues of religious observance such as head covering. You must have tried to find out what Arab women living in Israel think about all this. As a historian of gender and colonialism, you know all too well how rarely that happens. When did we hear from or about Iraqi women before the allied invasion of Iraq? Who asked women — half the population! — what they could expect to face post-Saddam Hussein, how they felt about it, and what they wanted?

I don't imagine you'll reply to my letter — you must be inundated. But I hope you'll at least have time to watch a very [short documentary filmed in a Haifa hair salon](#) that appeared this week in the New York Times (I'm grateful to Gene for sending me the link). You may not love it as much as I do, but I hope you'll appreciate this serious attempt by a young female director to give the world a chance to hear the distinctive, beautiful voices of Arab and Jewish women in Israel.

Yours sincerely,

Diana Lipton

Blogger <http://blogs.timesofisrael.com/dear-catherine-hall-woman-to-woman-on-israel-boycotts/>



Diana Lipton read English at Oxford and has a PhD from Cambridge in Bible, on which she's published several books. She was a Fellow of Newnham College, Cambridge and a Reader at King's College London. Since making aliyah in 2011, she's taught Bible at Hebrew University's Rothberg International School and gives weekly shiurim at two homes for the elderly. Diana once thought of calling the autobiography she'll never write 'From the Bima to the Balcony', but now she sits in a separate room in her Moroccan synagogue of choice. She is the very proud mother of Jacob and Jonah, and lives in Jerusalem with her husband Chaim. Diana is working now on 'From Forbidden Fruit to Milk and Honey: A Commentary on Food in the Torah', forthcoming with Ktav.