Leah Shakdiel speaks on social protests

Born in 1951, Leah Shakdiel is part of a rare breed from Israel of a “Modern Orthodox” (non-Haredi and Zionist) woman who is also a tireless progressive and campaigner for peace. She was recently caught up in Israel’s summer protest movement for social justice, serving as the volunteer chairperson of a ten-person “vision committee” to frame a succinct statement of the movement’s ongoing agenda.

On the evening of Sept. 14, Partners for Progressive Israel hosted (at a private home in Manhattan) a standing-room-only crowd, which was enthralled by her wise and witty talk on the nature of Israel’s summer of protest and where this spontaneous eruption may lead Israel in the future.

First, she mentioned three noxious streams coming together, simultaneously, in a dangerous torrent today:

1. A racist version of Judaism (and of Islam among Israel’s neighbors), which must be countered by a humanistic approach to religion.

2. A mindset that justifies force and militarism (using Jewish victimhood during the Holocaust as an excuse); she argues for promoting a more positive sense of what it means to be a Jew, including among the non-religious majority of Israelis.

3. A business-oriented ideal of maximizing profit, even at the expense of vital social values and interests. For this reason, Israel’s vaunted traditional social safety net has been shredded and its previously high standards of education and health care are in precipitous decline.

She extols how the protest movement now legitimizes people taking social issues
seriously and expressing their views. She also explained how compromises have had to be made to keep the movement going. For example, her vision committee had to delete a reference to the “Hebrew prophets” from the 13th paragraph of Israel’s Declaration of Independence (regrettably in her view), while quoting other words from that document, in order to keep Arab Israelis from walking out. And instead of including a reference to the budgetary drain inflicted on Israel by subsidizing the settlements (which she would have favored), there was no mention of the Occupation. But even among the many protesters who are generally right-wing on this issue, there was an attitude she described as neutral on whether or not there should be a Palestinian state, and a feeling that what transpires in September at the UN, or even the terror attacks that occurred in the summer, were not their main concerns; these issues would not be permitted to divert them from pressing for the revival of a 21st century version of the “welfare state.”

It’s hard to say what all this may concretely achieve in Israel, but we are left with the following observations made by Ms. Shakdiel: A half-million of Israel’s seven million citizens took to the streets. This she says is not a vague “estimate” but an accurate measure stemming from the use of cell phone technology. And there are very conscious ongoing efforts for the movement to embrace an inclusive view of “communities,” instead of the previously separated ethnic, religious and geographic (center vs. periphery) “sectors” of the population.