

An Iron Fist in a Silk Glove

An Interview with
The Honorable Miriam Fierberg-Ikar,
Mayor of Municipality of Netanya, Israel

EDITORS' NOTE *Miriam Fierberg-Ikar is also Honoree President of the Netanya Foundation. She began her career as a social worker in 1972 with the Social Welfare Department of the Netanya Municipality. She moved into management of the City Welfare Department, and then took over as Manager of the Social Services Department. In 1998, she was nominated and served as Director of the Education, Welfare and Health Division of the Municipality. Her education includes an M.A. in Social Work and a B.A. in Sociology and Criminology both from Bar Ilan University.*



Miriam Fierberg-Ikar

What has made the city of Netanya work so well, and how have you encouraged its growth?

I was the first female Mayor in Israel put in via direct elections. It was not a simple challenge for me. The city was facing a dire situation at the time on many levels; there was a terrible deficit and economic situation. There are economists today on campuses that use Netanya as an example of how you take a city in great deficit and put it on a path of growth.

There had been a negative migration out of the city and the economic situation had led to a terrible infrastructure, and that is not an inviting environment for entrepreneurs. We had to stop the negative movement and, at the same time, reverse it altogether which required a lot of effort.

The slogan for my first election was "Power with Soul." Throughout my career, I have always been perceived as an iron fist in a silk glove.

My background is in social work. My position in the city was to be in charge of education, sports, culture, and welfare – as a professional, not as an elected official.

But that's my advantage. Because I come from that social place, I have the courage and ability to stand among newly elected mayors and voice my opinion.

Here I am, the new kid on the block, and I say, "The city's focus should be on industry, the economy, and tourism." The opposition was railing against me, and I said, as someone who comes from those fields of welfare and

education, I know that welfare and education cost a lot of money, and that money needs to be produced somewhere. The way to bring in that money is to work on industry, development, trade, and tourism. Therefore, my first term will be dedicated to promoting these issues in Netanya.

From that point on, the minute I heard about a company looking for a home, I jumped on it. I called them up, and said, "You're coming here, to Netanya, on a one-way ticket, and you're going to set up shop."

I started by bringing in Ikea, which is now an anchor for industry and development in my city. Then I brought to Israel one of the leading cellular companies, Cellcom; then high-tech and security industries like Elbit. Ebay has also made the move to Netanya.

It is a core value of mine to lay a red carpet for any entrepreneur. Some people treat entrepreneurs as if they are a nuisance but, for us, they're a treasure.

When a company is in discussions on whether or not to come to Netanya, we take the representative of the company on a tour of the city. We show them the different locations, and explain the importance of Netanya's geographic location. We are at the very center of Israel with easy access to the rest of the country. Netanya is also a very inviting and green environment, as well as spacious.

It has gotten to the point where I would call the contractors and developers of the city and tell them, "If you want to continue to have a good relationship with City Hall, I suggest you work to portray this new community favorably. We have a company with a large staff coming to possibly relocate to Netanya, so make it happen."

We bring these developers to a marketplace where they offer their developments to the workers, and then they can choose where they want to go and how to do it. These companies also receive discounts for coming to the city.

We have gone from a location with negative migration to where, during the first week following the arrival of Cellcom, 150 families purchased apartments. Slowly, we turned a vast region of about 50,000 people to one with young, up-and-coming middle class families with kids, and we have developed all of the

relevant services in that community to create a higher quality of life. All of the children bring a younger image to Netanya.

Now instead of a negative image, we have a positive one, because one friend brings another; it's word-of-mouth. It's the talk of the town how Netanya changed its face, and now Netanya is the center of attraction not only for businesses because of the open-door approach of City Hall, but also for young families seeking quality of life in an accessible, beautiful place.

We prepare the infrastructure before the residents arrive and it awaits the residents rather than vice versa, which was traditionally done in the past.

Netanya has natural advantages: 14 kilometers of one of the most beautiful strips of beaches in the world with extensive promenades. A very big part of the city is on a high cliff so we have several amazing views. Netanya is known as the State of Israel's Riviera.

Would you talk about your focus on the sports component in Netanya?

We decided to develop the notion of sports in Netanya around the fact that we have the Wingate Academic Center for Sports.

As I mentioned, I come from a social welfare background and that has a direct impact on sports. For example, all over the city, we have scattered mobile gyms: by the beach and near the neighborhoods, especially those that don't have the strongest economic profile. We created an open gym where people can engage in sports without having any expenditures required, which is essential in addressing the needs of these communities. Kids have a lot of energy, so it's about having them engage in sports to contribute to their health.

This is a social center and a health center; it's about addressing real community needs.

We also have two soccer schools, the most famous in Israel. Many of the children who come to these schools have the talent but come from nothing, so they at least get a hot meal at these schools. Many of the children are immigrants.

At these schools, there are two areas in which immigrants can find success and feel engaged in the community: sports and music. These are easy for them to get into and make them feel a part of society's fabric. So it was important for me to develop these fields.

You can take almost any topic that, on its face, doesn't seem to have anything to do with education, and you can find ways to leverage it so as to strengthen the fabric of society.

What was the percentage of public approval you received in the last election?

I was reelected for the fourth time with 73 percent of the vote. I have also spent time mentoring newly elected female mayors of other cities.

What programs have you put in place to enhance accessibility for the handicapped?

First, it was to provide elevators to give the handicapped access, and that was a focus during my first term. But assuming we provide a way for them to access the beach, how do we give them access to the water? Those in wheelchairs need to be lifted by hand, which isn't pleasant.

So here was my social approach: We spent over \$300,000 in building an access route, but the last part of that route is made of wood, and it allows handicapped persons to access the water through the tide.

A handicapped individual can reach the water by himself, including the showers that are fitted for wheelchairs. We also have special French-made wheelchairs so the lifeguards can take the handicapped individual and move him to the chair, and he can float in the water in that chair.

What direction have you taken with technology development in Netanya?

We try to leverage all means of technology to provide a better quality of life for our people – meaning not just bringing in technology for the sake of technology. I put a lot of emphasis on technological education in the schools. We have a very advanced robotics class in our high school, for instance.

One of the great examples in Netanya is one of the high schools that was adopted by the Israeli Air Force. The students attend classes, studying everything related to aviation. Of the students in that school, 40 percent are from the Ethiopian immigrant community – they come from a place where aviation could not be further from their imagination, but these are the kids who are now learning to fly small planes under the guidance of the Israeli Air Force.

This has led to a collaboration between the high school and Israel's leading universities, similar to what you would see at the Technion and the Tel Aviv University.

The neighborhood where the school is located is not the strongest socially or economically, so it is beautiful to see this program power change there.

What programs have you put in place for young people to participate in during their summer vacations?

We take students to spend time with professors from the university. The interaction they have with these academicians, who are all leaders in their fields, really touches these kids.

I encountered a 20-year-old who is a graduate of that high school. She is paralyzed – she moves only her eyes. The students were engaged over the summer, trying to figure out a way to help her. As a result, they created a helmet filled with sensors that she can put on, and by using her mind, she can give instructions to move her chair all by herself.

What moved me, of course, was the high level of technology involved, especially considering this is from high school students. It also moved me that these children chose to use their summer vacation to do this for a member of their community, and to spend so much time and effort with their minds in the service of the heart.

It's about values, which is a word not often equated with technology. It's about creating a change in the way you think about things, and using these technological advancements for the benefit of humanity.

So we give them the opportunity to use their energy positively.

The value of a community that comes together to help one another is also a significant value that I want to promote. The right way to collaborate and work together for betterment builds a synergy that will lead to 1 plus 1 not equaling 2, but 11. People need to realize that, on their own, they can never accomplish what they can by working together, and that is an important value I'm inculcating in people.

What other achievements are you most proud of?

The new tennis center is a great achievement. We also built the soccer stadium, which in a competition with stadiums from around the world, came in ninth. So I'm very proud of what we have already done for the city, and I'm excited to do more.

We're putting a special focus on academic institutions beyond high school or colleges and universities. We have another higher education establishment, ORT, which attracts engineers for research. We also have cockpit simulators developed by Elbit, in our city, so pilots come from all over, including from the Army, to experience these simulators.

We also have a hospital in Netanya, and we have channeled ideas to help humanity. We look at what we can do for patients to give them

a better quality of life, and to help doctors give better service. We also engage with Teva, which is a huge medical factory.

But I don't just take responsibility for what I can do as a bureaucrat. I engage the community and see what other needs they have, and work to resolve them. I use City Hall as a focal point for all other agents of the city.

How are you able to be so successful in maintaining amicable relations?

When Elbit was looking for a location, they were negotiating with the developer who was building one of their structures, and they had disagreements. I told the developer that Elbit would not leave Netanya because they had suggested an unreasonable price. I advised them not to make this major mistake with City Hall.

When I hear of conflicts, I address them head on. We have adopted the American perception. We don't just face difficulties, even though there are many; we work to overcome them. The positive approach helps us find solutions, and trickles down from my level to those who work around me and with me. You can see that vision with everyone in my administration.

The relationship we have as a municipality with the surrounding environment is a wholesome one. We respect everyone and welcome everyone. We call it the United Nations of Netanya.

With regard to technology, we have the Ramon school, named after the Israeli astronaut who lost his life on the shuttle. The idea is that when you look at earth from above, there are no limits – there are just human beings and the human race. This is the universal message he wanted to ingrain. So we took the elementary school named after Ramon and we're complementing it with a planetarium that is being built in collaboration with NASA, so children from a young age can begin to develop interest and expertise in the space sciences.

There is a tie that binds the high-tech companies that come to Netanya but, for us, the process just begins there. We want to see technology at work from the early life of an elementary school child through high school, through the air force, and through the high-tech companies. We continuously feed the technological environment.

What are you hopeful for as you look to the future?

That we will experience more women in leadership positions in Israel – it's still a tough environment, but Israel is a very modern society, and we are proud of that. ●