

The Jewish Week

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For Men Only?

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An elite gathering of Jewish leaders convened by the Jewish People Policy Planning Institute met this week with a mission no less grand than charting the future of the Jewish people.

But women apparently weren't a part of that future: None were on the list of participants.

To gender equity activist Shifra Bronznick, and quite a few of the 1,000 people she e-mailed about the imbalance, that just isn't kosher.

In her note titled "Close the Leadership Gap" Bronznick asked recipients to e-mail Ambassador Dennis Ross, chairman of JPPI (www.jpppi.org.il), and Avinoam Bar Yosef, its Israel-based director.

More than 60 did. Among them were some of the Jewish community's most prominent religious and organizational leaders, writers and thinkers.

"How can you do policy planning for the Jewish community when half the community is excluded?" asked Deborah Lipstadt, director of the Institute for Jewish Studies at Emory University in Atlanta.

Lipstadt wrote, in a note to The Jewish Week, "I have heard two general reactions from folks. The 'older' generation is outraged. Younger folks are laughing at them. Who are these middle-aged men, the 30-somethings say, to plan for me?"

"These are good people doing important work," Bronznick said in an interview. "People like this have to see that it's as important to be careful about including women as any of the other kinds of work they're doing."

The meeting at Maryland's Wye Plantation is one in a series of think tank-type gatherings convened by JPPI to take on the lofty goal of charting the course of world Jewry's future.

"You need to understand that it was meant to be a group of directors of major organizations. We need their input for our project. What to do where there are no directors who are women?" said Bar Yosef, in response to the outcry.

Of the 15 or so people originally invited, two were women. One was Carole Solomon, chairperson of the Jewish Agency for Israel, who is at its board meeting in Israel this week, and the other is Arlene Kaufman.

Kaufman, president of the Palm Beach County Jewish federation, said

that she was invited with her husband to observe, rather than participate in, the proceedings.

“When the organizations start to have directors who are female, as they should, then they will be invited. It’s a systemic problem of the Jewish world. Most of the large federations in this country have or recently had women presidents. But they still have a glass ceiling on the professional level. Until the community realizes women are equal and put them in positions that warrant invitations to certain conferences, then you’re going to have a problem.”