

Hadassah Presents: Women of Vision

Season 1, Episode 5: Sivan Yaari: Using Israeli Technology to Change Lives in Africa

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And now...

Zev Brenner:

Thank you for tuning in to TalkLine with Zev Brenner, the TalkLine Network in conjunction with Hadassah, The Women's Zionist Organization of America, is pleased to bring you a new radio series, Hadassah Presents: Women of Vision, a series of interviews conducted by Hadassah's CEO Janice Weinman, which highlights women whose visionary leadership and innovative approaches to the challenges in their respective fields have resulted in noteworthy successes for their organizations. And now your host, Janice Weinman.

Dr. Janice Weinman:

No one knows better than Sivan Yaari that light and clean water are the most important tools any community can have. Without them, communities cannot function. That's why in 2008, she founded Innovation: Africa with the goal of using groundbreaking Israeli technology to provide humanitarian assistance to African countries lacking these critical resources.

Dr. Janice Weinman:

Over the last 13 years, Sivan and her team have used such technology to bring solar power, clean water and electricity to villages across Africa. As we sit here now, Innovation: Africa has completed more than 300 solar and water projects, transforming the lives of more than 3 million people across 10 African countries.

Dr. Janice Weinman:

The COVID-19 pandemic shone a spotlight on the fact that most African countries don't have the energy needed to pump water and power schools, medical centers and the refrigerators needed to transport and store vaccines. Despite the immense challenges created by the pandemic, Innovation: Africa has continued its work, bringing access to light and clean water to 1 million people across Africa in the past year alone.

Dr. Janice Weinman:

It is worth noting that in 2012, Innovation: Africa was granted special consultative status at the United Nations Economic and Social Council, an honor Hadassah was also proud to have received, and it is the highest status granted by the UN to non-governmental organizations and allows them to participate in the work of that body. Sivan Yaari was born in Israel, raised in France and educated in the US where she received a bachelor's degree in finance from Pace University and a master's degree in international energy management and policy from Columbia University.

Dr. Janice Weinman:

And it was at that time that I met her many, many years ago. Named one of the 50 most influential women in Israel by *Forbes Israel* and one of the top 100 people positively influencing Jewish life by *The Algemeiner*, Sivan lives in Tel Aviv with her wonderful husband and three children. She is an inspiration to me. In fact, I established the lighting system in a synagogue in Uganda because of Sivan.

Dr. Janice Weinman:

To future generations of female entrepreneurs, and to everyone who wants to make the world a better place, thank you so much Sivan, for being here. It is really an honor for us to be able to host you. Thank you. I'm now going to turn to the questions that we would like to discuss with you. And the first one I would like to really delve into is, what inspired you to start Innovation: Africa?

Sivan Yaari:

Well, first Janice, allow me to say thank you, thank you for inviting me. Thank you for allowing me to share the work that I've been doing for the past 20 years. And to answer your question about what inspired me to go ahead and found Innovation: Africa, is the simplicity of the solution to the challenge that I saw in Africa while I was still young in my early 20s.

Sivan Yaari:

I was then working for Jordache in one of their factories in Africa, and I spent time in the villages and very quickly I realized that the main challenge why many of them are still living in poverty is because of the lack of energy. Unfortunately, even today over 600 million people,

Janice, are living in Africa without access to electricity, which means that in most medical centers, doctors, nurses are using candles or kerosene to treat patients. There are no refrigerators to store vaccines and medicines. In most schools, there is no electricity.

Sivan Yaari:

But truly what inspired me the most to try to do something about it, is when I saw mothers and daughters walking for hours every day searching for water and when they found water, the water was dirty. Most of the time, even contaminated, and they knew it, but they kept drinking it because that was the only water they had.

Sivan Yaari:

And yet, Janice, when you think about it, when you know that there is plenty of clean water just below their feet, anyone can then be inspired to try to do something about it, especially when we know that you only need a source of energy to power a pump to pump water. And this is why I said that we have to do something about it.

Sivan Yaari:

And I remember growing up in Israel and seeing solar panels across everywhere in Israel, and just thinking about how, when the Jews came back to Israel and they had to innovate and pump water and grow food, I was inspired to maybe to try to do something about it by learning about what Israel has done and then to bring it to Africa. And so, I founded Innovation: Africa.

Dr. Janice Weinman:

Sivan, that is such a wonderful personal account of why you did this. And we all certainly are very, very moved by what you've just said. It's such a large undertaking that you have pursued. Where does someone begin when confronted by the scale of a problem, like the one you wanted to solve? How did you really build this whole social and economic system that would affect people across so many countries?

Sivan Yaari:

You're correct Janice, that the challenge is so big. So many people are living without access to electricity and water. We're talking about over 400 million people waking up every day, mostly women trying to find a little bit of water to take care of their family, to grow food, but yet, because you only need a few solar panels in order to harness the energy from the sun to power a pump, this solution make it so it's easy to move and do one village at a time.

Sivan Yaari:

And I must tell you that although at the beginning there was uncertain about what and how we will do it, and I also failed many times and I had many challenges and I made many mistakes.

Today, after 13 years, I can tell you, Janice, that I'm still going village by village and doing something that is quite simple, using the energy that exists in order to pump water.

Sivan Yaari:

And it is so rewarding to go back to the villages and to see the changes that it makes in the lives of so many people. It kind of motivates us to go ahead village by village, to try to help as many people as we can.

Dr. Janice Weinman:

Sivan, you mentioned women a few times in your answer to the last question. And in many traditional societies, like the ones that you work with, women are responsible for providing the community with water. How does alleviating the task of water collection open new opportunities for women and girls in these communities?

Sivan Yaari:

It is quite incredible to go back to a village a few months after you give it access to clean water and to see the changes that it does, especially to women, where now women and girls no longer have to wake up at 3 am, 4 am, and walks for hours to search for water. Girls can finally go to school and get education. People are healthier. Less people are now going to medical centers.

Sivan Yaari:

But what inspires me the most, Janice, is the number of businesses that the women are creating now that there is access to clean water. The village is becoming rich. And I would like to mention maybe two of the businesses that we are seeing in the villages that women are operating.

Sivan Yaari:

The first one is agriculture, because now that there is access to clean water, and there is time, they're able to grow food, to provide a better nutrition to their children, but the extra they're selling in the market and they're generating income.

Sivan Yaari:

The second business, which I believe it's just terrific, is that now that there is access to clean water, they can actually build homes. And when you go back to a village after a year, you no longer see mud homes, the way they lived before. Now you can see the women making bricks, selling bricks, making money and also building a home for their families, for the children. And with that money, they're able to pay for the education of the children.

Sivan Yaari:

Everything is changing, and most of them keep telling me, "Thank you for bringing Shalom bayit, because now we can be better mothers, now we can be financially independent, now our children are not sick." Many of them have lost so many of their children because of the water that they were drinking. Things are quite different, they gain their dignity and they are proud of being mothers now.

Dr. Janice Weinman:

So you have not only changed communities, but you've empowered women and you've raised the ability for these women to really broaden their horizon, it is absolutely wonderful. Let me ask you something a little bit different now that COVID has actually occurred.

Dr. Janice Weinman:

Like Innovation: Africa, Hadassah has always been rooted in bringing social, medical and humanitarian relief to underserved people and countries as was the case as you know, with Henrietta Szold, when she cared for children with eye disease in Palestine, thereby starting the modern medical system in Israel. In the US and Israel, we've often taken clean water for granted. What have you learned through your work and how has the COVID-19 pandemic impacted communities that were already struggling for access to clean water?

Sivan Yaari:

First, allow me to say Janice, that I commend the work that Hadassah has been doing across Israel, across the world, and when it comes to COVID-19, when it started, when we knew that we needed to bring more clean water and work faster we were a bit panicked, because when COVID-19 started I was quite worried because we heard that in order to stop the spread of the virus, we need to clean our hands.

Sivan Yaari:

And I was wondering, how will they do in Africa? Those vulnerable communities that do not have access to clean water, how will they be able to stop the spread of the virus without access to clean water? And how will they do to treat patients in medical centers, where there is no electricity, where doctors are not willing to go to the villages because there are no medical equipments. And I started to worry about how we will be able to continue our work and even do more in order to bring clean water to more villages.

Sivan Yaari:

And I'm pleased to say, Janice, that regardless of the fact that we from Israel, we couldn't travel as much as before because of all the restrictions, our local teams in the seven countries where

we operate, our teams of engineers, field officers, managers and contractors, they continued, they understood the urgency, they went ahead and drilled and constructed and brought clean water, I'm pleased to say to over 200 villages only in 2020.

Sivan Yaari:

And during that time, it was the strength of our local team and their understanding of the importance of our mission, which is to bring Israeli know-how and share it and do, and bring clean water to those that are most in need, especially in that period that was quite uncertain for so many.

Dr. Janice Weinman:

You help women, and you are a woman who has really stood out as an example to others. How do you feel representing Israel as an Israeli woman?

Sivan Yaari:

I'm proud to be Israeli and a woman. When we look at Israel, it's a resilient and innovative country. I believe in Israeli technology, and I know that many of our innovations help to make this world a better place. And I feel that it's our moral obligation to share our knowledge and technology and help others.

Sivan Yaari:

And you know, Janice, Innovation: Africa, the work that we do, oftentimes it's the first face of Israel that people in Africa see. When I get to a village and I mention Israel, many of them have not heard of Israel. And those who have heard, they have read it in the Bible and they believe that it's God answering their prayers, and it's God that now brings them access to light and to water.

Sivan Yaari:

And I'm also pleased to say that at the government level, they're so appreciative of Israel. They admire Israel and the country it has become, and they are pleased to know that we're coming to share our knowledge, technology, build infrastructure, hire people, train people. And for me, this is also a big motivation to continue.

Dr. Janice Weinman:

I think it's wonderful that they not only appreciate your role as a woman, but also your role as an Israeli, and that they recognize the contribution that Israel's making to their own development, I think it is terrific. Dealing with your role as a woman again, though, let me ask you something. You've spoken about involving your children in your work, but you've also said

you sometimes felt guilty about leaving them when you travel for work. Do you think this internal conflict is felt more by women than by men? And how do you address this matter?

Sivan Yaari:

Janice, I think that every parent struggles when leaving their children, however, I would like to say that I got quite lucky, because I married a wonderful man that from the beginning kept telling me, "Sivan, don't worry about our children, they are fine, they're okay, go ahead and help the children that truly need help."

Sivan Yaari:

And he allowed me to continue with the traveling, and spending time in the villages and doing the work. So, I would like to say that without his support, most likely I would have not been able to bring clean water to so many people. But it's true that over time, as you know, I have three children, I was missing them and then, I decided to take them with me to the villages.

Sivan Yaari:

And that was a good solution because they were able to see, firsthand, the work that we're doing, met the children that were walking without shoes, that do not have as much as they have. And I think today they understand me when I leave. Oftentimes, they even want to keep joining me in the villages. And I'm pleased to say that my daughter only last week, she celebrated her bat mitzvah and she decided to donate all the gifts to help KKL, here in Israel the charity KKL, in helping to restore the Carmel forest. As you know, 10 years ago, there was a big fire that destroyed part of it and she decided to also give back. And I think this is a testament of what my husband and maybe also myself I've tried to put to our children, is to give back, because truly we have too much.

Dr. Janice Weinman:

I don't know that when you're giving to others that you ever have too much, but really what you have done both for this generation and the next one is amazing. And I want to ask you in that vein, what advice do you have for young entrepreneurs, particularly young female entrepreneurs, who want to make a long lasting impact on helping others?

Sivan Yaari:

First and foremost, marry well, find a good husband, and this is absolutely crucial, I can tell you. And then of course, my second piece of advice will be, keep it simple. And if you come to my office, you will hear me saying it so many times a day, and take it one step at a time and you will see your success flourish from there.

Sivan Yaari:

And my third advice: Do not be afraid to fail and make mistakes. I made so many of them. This is how I learned to grow. I would like to say that actually failure became a real part of my story and my success. And so, that is the advice. Don't have a big vision. Go village by village, step-by-step and you will build what you want to accomplish.

Dr. Janice Weinman:

That was so beautiful, it really was. And I want to just ask you one last question, Sivan, and that is, women in leadership roles often have mentors. What role has mentorship played in your career?

Sivan Yaari:

Janice, of course, there are many female role models in my life, but the specific woman who I have looked to for inspiration is Golda Meir. Golda Meir, because in 1957 when Israel was only nine years old, she flew to Africa, to Ghana, to celebrate their independence. And when she came back, she decided to open and to create MASHAV, part of the foreign ministry in order to help developing countries.

Sivan Yaari:

Again, Israel was so young and she decided regardless of all of the challenges that we have in Israel, we have to go and help others. And she started something that I hope that with the work that we do, we are able to fulfill what she wanted to accomplish. And by sharing Israeli innovation, by sharing Israeli knowledge, I believe that we're actually fulfilling our destiny of Jewish people. And there is one sentence from the Bible, Janice, that keeps me going, that inspires me, and some of my team members here in my office and it is from Genesis.

Sivan Yaari:

From the beginning, when God promised Abraham, God told him, "I will make you a great nation, you will be a blessing and through you, through your descendants, all the families on Earth will be blessed." And today, when we think about Israel, such a small country yet so many innovations is coming out of it. You cannot but think that God has something to do with it, because only now, only now that Israel is strong, you can truly share Israeli innovation and bless the families on Earth, in the world. And today we have this opportunity, this privilege, our generation is the generation that was blessed to be able to do it, because Israel is now strong and we can fulfill our destiny. And I think it's a big opportunity for all of us to be living at that period of time.

Dr. Janice Weinman:

Sivan, it is you who are really contributing to the destiny of so many people. We thank you so very much for everything that you do, for really, really making a difference, for being on today

and I must say personally for the inspiration you have provided me and so many others, thank you very, very much.

Sivan Yaari:

Thank you, Janice. Thank you. And Janice, I would like to commend the work that Hadassah has been doing. And while we are working toward helping to improve the well-being of people across Africa, what Hadassah has been able to do across Israel and across the world, it's quite remarkable. And I'm just honored to be part of Hadassah and this program, and to be able to continue and even try to contribute to the work that you're doing, it is truly a remarkable work.

Dr. Janice Weinman:

Thank you. Thank you. Thank you so much.

Zev Brenner:

You've been listening to a new series airing on TalkLine with Zev Brenner, Hadassah Presents: Women of Vision, with Hadassah CEO Janice Weinman. The program is a production of TalkLine Network and Hadassah, The Women's Zionist Organization of America. Thanks for listening.

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