

## **Speech to Jewish Federation of Ocean County**

**July, 2005, UJC Presidents Trip to Israel**

September 15, 2005

Thank you! Erev tov! Good evening and shalom!

It is with distinct pleasure that I meet with you tonight to share some of my memories of my recent visit to Israel. It's not often that one actually gets *asked* to share travel memories with a willing and interested audience (as opposed to grumbling family members and neighbors)—and so my heart and mind are truly brightened by your expressed interest. In some ways, I am tempted just to show you my pictures so that we might enjoy together the beauty of the nation of Israel, but there are many important things to be said about Israel and my trip that I would like to share with you, so I will forego the photos for tonight. Also, I will provide some time after my talk for any questions or comments you might have.

The trip was called The Israel Institute for University Presidents and was conceived by the Israeli Embassy. It was sponsored by the Jewish Federation of Ocean County and other local Federations under the auspices of the Jewish Council for Public Affairs, an affiliate of United Jewish Communities and the UJA. The other participants in this inaugural mission for college and university administrators included: Dawood Farahi, President, Kean University, and his sponsor, Brad Young, Director of the Community Relations Council of the Jewish Federation of Central New Jersey; Rosanne Runte, President, Old Dominion University, Virginia, and her sponsor, Kevin Lefcoe, lay leader from the United Federation of Tidewater; Danny Goldberg, Executive Director of the Ocean County Jewish Federation, my sponsor; Jonathan Daube, President, Manchester Community College, Connecticut, and his sponsor, Robert Fishman, Executive Director of the Jewish Federation Association of Connecticut; Randy (Peyton) Helms, President, Muhlenberg College, Lehigh Valley, Pennsylvania, and his sponsor, Joseph Scheller, lay leader from the Jewish Federation of the Lehigh Valley; Jay McGowan, President, University of Bellarmine, Kentucky, and his sponsor, Marie Abrahms, Chair of the national United Jewish Council of Public Affairs; Robert Gross, Provost, Swarthmore College, Pennsylvania, and his sponsor, Asaf Romirowsky, Israel Affairs Associate, Center for Israel and Overseas, Jewish Federation of Greater Philadelphia; Jackie Jenkins-Scott, President, Wheelock College, Massachusetts; and Martin Raffel, Acting Executive Director of the NJ Jewish Council of Public Affairs.

The mission for me and my colleague college and university presidents was two-fold: to give us a sense of the issues the Israeli people have to confront on a daily basis and also to connect us with some of the most influential leaders of higher education and government in Israel. I'd like to talk to you tonight a little about both of these topics—about what we learned in our travels and also about some of the significant implications for Ocean County and Ocean County College as a result of educational partnerships that were established in Israel. And, as an aside, I want to acknowledge the extraordinary

service of my friend Danny Goldberg and his wife Debbie who gave up eight days of their vacation trip to Israel to be my escort, teacher, interpreter, guide and mentor, including a home made dinner with Danny's sister, Naomi, who lives in Tel Aviv, on the evening I departed for home.

May I say you are very fortunate to have such a perspicacious, personable, professional, and passionate advocate for the Federation, for Jewish causes, and for the State of Israel and its close ties to America? Because Danny is essentially an educator with impressive credentials from Hebrew University and a fluent speaker of Hebrew, not to mention an insightful student of the history and politics of Israel and the mid-east region, his companionship was a key factor in making this trip truly a life changing experience for me. I only hope Danny will continue to offer his help as we seek to work together here in Ocean County in furthering the values we hold in common as citizens of a world that is rapidly growing flatter, smaller, and more complex. I also hope he will forgive my really terrible mispronunciations of the handful of Hebrew words he tried to teach me to speak! I'm still trying though! Toda, Danny!

Our trip began on Sunday, July 10<sup>th</sup>, with a ten-hour flight from JFK Airport to Ben Gurion Airport. Some hundred or so young people from Mexico traveling to Israel to participate in the Maccabiah Games were our lively traveling companions during the flight and this created an early but vivid impression I keep with me: the energy and excitement that an association with Israel promotes for all the citizens of the western world, young and old...it is just electrifying! We spent our time in Israel housed in Jerusalem, guests at the lovely Inbal Hotel, with the exception of one overnight at Dan Carmel in the city of Haifa.

As you are well aware, Israel is a beautiful and varied country, of 6.5 million people, slightly larger than the state of New Jersey, less than 300 miles from top to bottom, with a climate something like Arizona, hot and dry in July, but not in winter when rains soak the Mediterranean coastal area. Because of its size and good roads, it was an easy country to travel. We had a delightful guide, Yoram Preminger (born and raised in North Jersey), a full-time security guard and an air-conditioned bus exclusively at our disposal, for which we were most grateful.

Following a general tour of Jerusalem in the afternoon after our arrival on Sunday, we enjoyed a delightful welcoming dinner and then a round-table meeting with the Press, including *NY Times* correspondent, Steve Erlanger, Yossi-Klein Halevy, Senior Writer for the *New Republic*, and an Arab journalist Khaled Abu Toameh, senior writer for the *Jerusalem Post and US News and World Report*. For the rest of our time in Israel, we took daily trips in and out of the city and explored both the history and the current issues of the modern Israeli state.

And this is one of the many things about today's Israel I had not fully understood or appreciated...although it is a mere 57 years since achieving independence in 1948, Israel is one of the world's most technologically advanced, thoroughly contemporary, best educated, modern and affluent states in the world. Those of you who are veteran visitors

understand the effect; from the El Al security system to the facilities at Ben Gurion to the modern hotels and resorts on the Mediterranean, to the impressive universities and high tech industries that dot the highways from Haifa to Tel Aviv, you would think you were on South Beach in Miami or Research Triangle in Raleigh Durham, NC. And the impression is made even more indelible by the contrast to the Arab settlements of the West Bank and Gaza.

This trip was one of the most comprehensive and engaging experiences imaginable. We were busy from 7 a.m. to 7 or 8 p.m. daily and met with such major figures as Avraham Infeld, President of Hillel, and Itamar Rabinovich, President of Tel Aviv University. On our first full day, we visited the Supreme Court and sat briefly in a live trial court session with three justices, all of them women. We then spent well over an hour with Aharon Barak, the President of the Supreme Court since 1995. Barak, formerly Dean of the Law Faculty at Hebrew University, visiting professor at Yale, and Israel's attorney general during the 1978 Camp David Peace Accords, spoke on the topic: "Democracy in an Age of Terrorism, Striking a Balance between Security and Personal Freedom." As we talked of this most delicate balance, it struck me with what great courage Israelis face daily life and how they provide a model for civil behavior in a terrorist age.

We also visited with the Minister of Foreign Affairs where disengagement in Gaza was a major and current topic. We learned that there is a huge cost, both financial and political, in closing Gaza, but it seemed to the government of Prime Minister Ariel Sharon a cost that now must be borne to avoid the loss of the Jewish majority and to maintain American and European partners in the peace process.

On Tuesday afternoon, we visited the Knesset where we met with Yaakov Levy, political advisor to the Speaker, and with four Knesset members as well. The topic of conversation continued to be the challenge presented by the Gaza relocations and the concerns it raised especially within the Gaza settlements and for ultra-orthodox Israelis. All members we met spoke sympathetically about the settlers' sense of betrayal but all felt that the separation trauma could be eventually absorbed through kinship with the larger Israeli society. We also heard opinions expressed about the Palestinian State and about Hamas and Islamic Jihad, and heard an informal debate among the Knesset members of Hamas' role, both as a dangerous terrorist organization and as a less corrupt influence than several other Palestinian organizations and one perhaps even capable of evolving from delivering some minimal social services to the Palestinians into a more constructive agency for peaceful and responsible political leadership.

On subsequent days, we traveled to the Ein Karem campus of the Hadassah Hospital and delighted in the Marc Chagall windows there, installed back in 1962; and we also visited the Jewish People Policy Planning Institute headed by Dennis Ross, U.S. Envoy to the Middle East under President Bill Clinton, author of *The Missing Peace: The Inside Story of the Fight for Middle East Peace*. Ross explained the Israeli desire to be both a Jewish and Democratic state and how Israel cannot afford to lose its Jewish majority and retain these fundamental characteristics, hence Sharon's support for a separate Palestinian state, Gaza disengagement, and a resolution of West Bank settlement issues.

We met Professor Alice Shalvi who has been described as the author of the women's movement in Israel. She established the English department at Ben Gurion University, and was the founding Chairwoman of the Israel Women's Network, and was Debbie Goldberg's teacher a few years back. Now, almost 80 years old, Dr. Shalvi was a lively and knowledgeable source of information on various cultural and educational topics.

We traveled to Yemin Orde, just south of Haifa in the Carmel Mountains, a youth village that is home to more than five hundred disadvantaged and at-risk immigrant Jewish children and youth from twenty-two different countries. We dined one evening at the delightful Yemini Maganda Restaurant in Tel-Aviv, following which we enjoyed a performance of the Batsheva Dance Company which had been founded by Martha Graham and Baroness Batsheva De Rothschild.

One of the most moving sites we experienced was Yad Vashem, with its magnificent architecture built with major assistance from the NJ Wilf family, Israel's official Memorial to the six million Jews who perished in the Holocaust. Most of us left our guide after a short while, preferring to wander about at our own pace and with our own deep thoughts. None of us was without tears as we walked through the memorial to the one and a half million murdered children.

We also did lots of touristy things toward the end of our visit—walking to the Old City of Jerusalem, through the Christian Quarter and the Via Delarosa, to the Church of the Holy Sepulcher, the Western Wall (“wailing wall”), and the Arab bazaar-market. We encountered, as we did everywhere, thoughtful, bright, strong and interesting people, surely the soul of this vibrant and successful society.

The focus of our trip, however, and the largest number of sites we visited were university-related. We had meetings and events at Tel-Aviv University, The Technion (the MIT of Israel), and Emek Yezreel College. The latter is a close counterpart to the American community college, so naturally my visit there and conversations with Dr. Aliza Shener, its president, were of particular interest. Following our visit there, we went to the University of Haifa, occupying a beautiful and dramatic site overlooking the Mediterranean. This was also an interesting visit for me because the University of Haifa has a large population of foreign students and dubs its university “a meeting place” where its sixteen thousand students come together and, at some level, work with a curriculum that is socially aware, dedicated to creating a society that is different, not (as they say), a better place, “but a place that's trying to be better.”

We also visited Ono Academic College and the offices of Al-Quds University, the Arab university in Jerusalem. There is a great deal of security around the university located in the West Bank, and because of concerns about the impending Gaza disengagement, we met with university officials in Jerusalem. As a result, we were able to gain no real sense of its mission or of the organizational structure that gave it order.

From all of these visits, and others, I was able to explore, thanks to Danny Goldberg's introductions and guidance, a number of initiatives, each with implications for both Ocean County and for Ocean County College. Before I close this evening, I'd like to share some of these with you and invite you or your children and grandchildren to become participants where and when time will allow:

- ❑ I was able to make preliminary arrangements for a semester length and summer session study abroad agreement with the University of Haifa for OCC students;
- ❑ Also with the University of Haifa, we are exploring the possibility of establishing an archeological summer institute at the Dead Sea through the University's School of Archeology;
- ❑ We are establishing formal collaborations between the Ocean County College Center for Peace, Genocide and Holocaust Studies and the Arab/Israeli Institute at the University of Haifa on Peace issues that have prominence in Israeli-Palestinian relations.
- ❑ Through the Interdisciplinary Center at Herzilya, which I also visited with the Goldbergs on my eighth day, we are creating an opportunity for a summer homeland security institute for local police professionals with coordination provided by our Criminal Justice Department;
- ❑ And, at long last, I am happy to announce that we are re-establishing our professional development summer visits to Israel that were offered years ago and are now again possible as a result of improved relations between Israeli and Palestinian authorities.

As you can no doubt tell from my remarks, this was both an educational and a profitable trip for me, for the college, and for the people of Ocean County. But it was more. It was in many ways a spiritual journey for me as well. The beauty of the land, the warmth and intelligence of its people, and the courage of their outlook were nothing short of inspirational and it is due to this latter sense of spiritual growth that I can honestly say this was one of the best travel experiences I have ever enjoyed. It has been a pleasure to share some small part of it with you this evening. Oh, and by the way, if you have time later, I have about 1,400 pictures I'd love to show you!! Toda raba! Shalom!

And now, if anyone has question, comments?