

BROADENING THE CONVERSATION ABOUT ISRAEL

“For too long, Israel Advocacy has been defined in terms of ‘hasbarah’, ie, ‘explaining’ Israel and its positions to its detractors. This approach has been based on the idea that if people who criticize Israel were only exposed to more persuasive arguments, better visuals, more impressive speakers, etc, they would naturally drop their objections and embrace the Jewish state.

The fallacy, here, however, is the assumption that one’s position on Israel is solely a matter of information or knowledge. But when we do the research on the American community, we find that this assumption simply doesn’t hold up. Yes, 30 % of Americans – Jews and non-Jews together – care for Israel, and for them all that is necessary is providing good reliable information to bolster their emotional connection to the Jewish State. And there is about 10 % of Americans who hate Israel and are not open in the slightest to any of the arguments on Israel’s behalf.

But then there is the group in the middle, the more than 50 % of Americans, who neither love nor hate Israel. They simply don’t care about Israel and, because they have no emotional connection, they don’t want to get involved one way or the other. Traditional hasbarah, thus, cannot reach them. Rather, we have to first create a positive connection with Israel and that’s what ‘Broadening the Conversation about Israel’ is all about!”

These are arguments that Ambassador Ido Aharoni, Israel’s Consul General in New York, brought as guest speaker to the

biennial MERCAZ General Council meeting that took place last month.

Aharoni has been involved in the field of “country branding” for most of the past decade. A career diplomat with Israel’s Foreign Service since 1993, he and others concerned with “Branding Israel” began to look for an alternative to traditional hasbarah efforts during the Second Intifada, the period from 2000 to 2004, when Israel was confronting suicide bombers in its cities and towns.

For Israel’s supporters, it seemed so obvious that the Jewish state had full justification to take whatever policies necessary to defend its citizens. But in the popular media, Israel continued to be portrayed as Goliath against the Palestinians’ David.

Enter the “Brand Israel” effort.

As Aharoni put it, “Branding itself is first about the stakeholders – the people themselves. It’s not about what we say. It’s about what they, the audience, hear. Branding is about putting a human face on a product. The key to a nation branding itself is to find out what it is good at and communicating that to the relevant audiences. We cannot allow the competition to define us; we have to define ourselves.

And when we take the positive qualities we can identify to brand Israel – images like “Start-Up Nation”, “Humanitarian Aid to Haiti”, “Gay-Friendly Tel Aviv”, etc, - and we formulate strategies to share these positive images about Israel with populations who care about these values, we are broadening the conversation about Israel in a way that ‘accentuates the positive’ and reduces, if not eliminates, the negative. Once that positive emotional connection has been generated, we can then turn to hasbarah, but not before or instead of the emotional connection.”

“Broadening the Conversation about Israel” is one of the prime activities that underlies the MERCAZ Israel Advocacy seminars. For information about the next scheduled seminar, visit the MERCAZ website.



Cong. Netzach Israel (Ashkelon) children enjoying MERCAZ/AZM Purim gifts

MAZAL TOV

... to **Rabbi Abraham Skorka**, Rector of the Masorti Seminario Rabinico Latinoamericano in Buenos Aires, Argentina, and Senior Rabbi of Benei Tikva Synagogue, whose book “Sobre el Cielo y la Terra” co-authored with Pope Francis I, the former Cardinal Jorge Mario Bergoglio, has now been released in English translation under the title “On Heaven and Earth”.

... to the **Masorti Movement’s Committee of Aliyah and Klitah** which has published a new “Masorti Guide to Aliyah”. The guide, available on the Masorti Movement’s website www.masorti.org.il, provides brief capsule descriptions of the many resources available to Conservative olim, such as the Masorti kehillot, institutions of higher education, TALI schools, etc.

CONSERVATIVE MOVEMENT *Israel Trips 2013*



July 17 – 29, 2013

Cong. B’nai Amoona, St. Louis, MO
Price per person: TBA
Contact: Lynnsie Balk Kantor
(314) 406-1214
lynnsie@lynnsie.com

July 17 – 29, 2013

Jacksonville JC, JAX, FL
Price per person: \$2,995 (land only)
Contact: Cassie Vichozsky
(904) 292-1000
cvichozsky@jaxjewishcenter.org

September 29 – October 13, 2013

Cong. B’nai Amoona, St. Louis, MO
Tour to Eastern Europe
Price per person: TBA
Contact: Mimi Wachsman
(314) 576-9900
Mimi.wachsman@bnaiaamoon.com

October 6 – 16, 2013

Rodef Sholom Temple, Hampton, VA
Price per person: \$2,540 (land only)
Contact: Steve White
(757) 877-0566
steveandmariewhite@yahoo.com

October 13 – 22, 2013

Temple Beth El, Somerset, NJ
Price per person: \$2,500 (land only)
Contact: Ira Messer
(732) 873-2325
iramesser@comcast.net

October 21 – November 3, 2013

Women’s League Israel Mission
Price per person: \$3,468 (land only)
Contact: Anna Tractenberg
(484) 433-3619
annatract@aol.com

October 30 – November 11, 2013

Seaboard Region FJMC Israel Tour
Price per person: \$4,000
Contact: Jim Sloan
(703) 561-0775
Seaboardisrael2013@gmail.com

November 3 – 14, 2013

HAZAK Journey to Israel
Price per person: \$3,500
Contact: Jo-Anne Tucker-Zemlak
(800) 600-5194
zemlak@uscj.org

December 25, 2013 – January 5, 2014

Cong. Sons of Israel, Briarcliff Manor, NY
Price per person: \$3,120 (land only)
Contact: Rabbi Steve Kane
(914) 762-2700
rabcsl@aol.com

GUARDED OPTIMISM FOR SHARANSKY’S PLANS

Several months ago, following nearly a year of highly publicized disturbances occurring during Rosh Hodesh services at the Kotel in Jerusalem, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu turned to Natan Sharansky, Chairman of the Jewish Agency’s Executive, in an effort to reach an agreement among all the parties that would end the dispute over the Western Wall’s religious character.

Just after Passover, the Jewish Agency head unveiled his recommendations “to make the Kotel a symbol of Jewish unity and diversity instead of a place of contention and strife”.

Conservative and Reform leaders both in Israel and the United States are reacting with guarded optimism to the proposed plan.

Sharansky’s plan calls for ending the artificial division of the Kotel into two spaces, the area north of the Mugrabi Bridge (known as the traditional Kotel) for religious prayer and the area south of the Bridge (known as “Robinson’s Arch”) for archeological exploration. Instead, the plan envisions the entire

area being transformed into “One Kotel for One People”, with equal access, status and services being provided on both sides: the northern half for traditional Orthodox prayer and the southern half, taking place on a new plaza to be built on the same level as the Kotel plaza, where egalitarian and women’s-only minyanim could take place 24 hours a day without charge.

Currently, non-Orthodox services may take place at Robinson’s Arch but only for a limited period in the morning and only with pre-registration.

In praising the plan as a “courageous step”, Masorti Movement CEO Yizhar Hess said: “We are facing a difficult task – taking the Western Wall and returning it to the hands of the entire Jewish people, allowing it to become a symbol and a national site, rather than a synagogue serving just one extreme faction. The process launched by Sharansky . . . is a welcomed move, but it is just the beginning of reaching a different reality.”

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