



Participants carrying flags along Fifth Avenue during the this week's Celebrate Israel Parade in New York City.

AP

Big parade for N.Y. Jews on East Side, massive bash for Israelis on West Side

Controversial leftist delegation marches despite protests, which New Israel Fund director Stephanie Ives describes as marginal but 'louder' and 'a lot meaner' than previous years

Chemi Shalev

Close to 40,000 marchers walked up Manhattan's Fifth Avenue in sweltering heat on Sunday; Mayor Bill de Blasio danced with Hasidim; the controversial left-wing delegation was only sporadically heckled; the mock ultra-Orthodox anti-gay protesters showed up, as expected; and, finally, the rains came down, as they usually do, propelling the meeker to seek shelter and the bolder to dance and get wet, 1960s Woodstock style.

If you're a leftie in search of some Schadenfreude, you might find solace in the fact that the heavy rains forced the police to put a stop to the mostly right-wing/Orthodox Israel Day Concert in Central Park, in which Republican presidential candidate Mike Huckabee spoke. Otherwise, the annual Celebrate Israel Parade went off without a hitch, much to the relief – and to the credit – of its main organizer, Michael Miller, of the Jewish Community Relations Council.

The real news – perhaps a small bit of history, even – was being made across town, in Piers 92-94 on

Manhattan's West Side, on the Hudson River. In an impressive show of financial prowess and organizational strength, the recently enlarged Israeli American Council (IAC), whose main funder is casino billionaire Sheldon Adelson, hosted close to 10,000 mostly former Israelis and their American friends and family, at what may very well have been the biggest expat Israeli bash ever held in the city.

"The Israeli community has never been organized in such numbers," according to Sagi Balasha, the Los Angeles-based CEO of IAC. Balasha said the New York party was one of five similar events held in recent weeks across the United States: the biggest was in L.A., with 14,000 participants, as well as Miami (9,000), Boston (6,000) and Las Vegas (where Adelson lives), in which 4,000 people participated. Balasha said the five events cost about \$2.5 million altogether, covered by ticket sales and concession fees, local funding by Israeli businessmen and subsidies handed out by the group's national headquarters.

Balasha said IAC has

already made contact with about 200,000 Israelis, out of the half million that are said to reside in the United States. It has also taken under its wing 50 Israeli cultural and social organizations, including the scouts, subsidizing them generously, while maintaining their independence, according to Balasha.

Although many insiders in the Jewish community ascribe ulterior motives to the IAC – including Adelson's wish to eventually form a lobbying group that would work independently of AIPAC – Balasha maintains that one should take the organization at face value. "We are bipartisan, both left and right," he asserts, adding that groups such as J Street and even the New Israel Fund would be welcome to exhibit or have their own booths at IAC events. In the New York affair, the "left" was represented by a small group of Hashomer Hatzair, which attracted attention by virtue of its famous Shomria summer camp, held annually in the Catskill mountains, and the lollipops it was handing out to young children.

Things were a bit tenser,

but only sporadically, for the "progressive delegation" that marched in the parade. It has been the subject of an intense lobbying campaign by increasingly virulent elements on the right-wing fringe, including famous Islamophobe Pamela Geller: they have been pressing Miller as well as other sponsors of the parade, including the Israeli government and UJA, to eject the group – that also includes Americans for Peace Now, Partners for Progressive Israel and the rabbinical human rights group T'ruah – for what they claim is NIF support for BDS. The right-wingers were unimpressed by the fact that the NIF and others had signed the mandatory JCRC form stating that all participants in the parade "must identify with Israel as a Jewish and democratic state, and recognize Israel as the homeland of the Jewish people and must oppose, not fund, nor advocate for the BDS movement against Israel," and so on.

NIF's New York director, Stephanie Ives, who marched with her family, said she and her co-marchers were "extremely grateful for the unwavering stand" of the parade's organizers, "who

are our partners in making sure there is a big Jewish tent that remains open." She denied that protest against lobbying campaign by increasingly virulent elements on the right-wing fringe, including famous Islamophobe Pamela Geller: they have been pressing Miller as well as other sponsors of the parade, including the Israeli government and UJA, to eject the group – that also includes Americans for Peace Now, Partners for Progressive Israel and the rabbinical human rights group T'ruah – for what they claim is NIF support for BDS. The right-wingers were unimpressed by the fact that the NIF and others had signed the mandatory JCRC form stating that all participants in the parade "must identify with Israel as a Jewish and democratic state, and recognize Israel as the homeland of the Jewish people and must oppose, not fund, nor advocate for the BDS movement against Israel," and so on.

The parade organizers made sure the small progressive group would be among the first to march after the parade's traditionally punctual launch, thus ensuring it would also be among the first to finish – well before the midday crowds began to swell. Nonetheless, they were mostly well received, though they did encounter some boos on 57th Street, a few thumbs-down from the still-empty bleachers in the 60s and angrier heckling and abusive placards near 70th. "We are protesting against them because they support BDS and other anti-Israel groups," said Helen Freedman, of the Americans for Safe Israel (AFSI) group. When asked why she would seek to bar anyone from marching in what was obviously a show of support for Israel, Freedman re-

plied, "Let them act accordingly before they march."

Otherwise, it was business as usual: Close to 250 groups, with about 40,000 marchers – predominantly, though far from exclusively young and Orthodox – walked up Fifth Avenue, from 57th to 74th Street. Governor Andrew Cuomo and Senator Chuck Schumer were there, as well as De Blasio, who was caught by the intrepid reporter of JP Updates, Jacob Kornbluh, dancing with Hasidim. The perennial anti-Zionist Neturei Karta protesters were there, as well as the dozen "protesters for rent," donning makeshift Haredi gear, holding up signs against homosexuals. Contrary to last year, when they first appeared, they made very little effort to disguise themselves this time.

All in all, the Israeli delegation – led by new minister Ofir Akunis, touted as a possible UN ambassador – were probably gratified to see such an outpouring of public support. As the unidentified Walter's Mom tweeted, "I'm shocked but happy that a pro-Israeli parade could still occur. Good for them!"