

# Far away, but close to the heart

During the recent Gaza operation,  
US Jews and expatriate Israelis  
organize to support Israel

By Judith Sudilovsky *Cleveland*

**IT WAS** a rough summer for Israelis all around – even for those who have long left their homeland for the safety of the United States.

“Israeli Americans are very sensitive to everything that is going on in Israel, not only in times of war but every day. They are very connected,” says Haifa native Sagi Balasha, 42, who came to Los Angeles three years ago to become the CEO of the Israeli American Council.

“Naturally when the war started people felt very strongly – they are very far away from their families, and some of their families were under rocket attack. When the sirens go off and you are on the other side of the phone you don’t know what to do. Friends were going into the army reserves and people here were extremely worried,” Balasha tells *The Jerusalem Report*.

Many were anxiously glued to television sets and computers, eager to keep updated on what was happening.

An initial sense of helplessness eventually led to a growing awareness of their own ability to become actively involved in supporting Israel, he says, though over the past three years the IAC, which was established

in 2007 to engage the 250,000 strong Israeli-American community in Los Angeles, has already increased its presence on the US scene in terms of vocal support of Israel and the Israeli-American community. Just as in Israel, Israeli Americans sent care packages for soldiers.

Working in conjunction with other American-Jewish organizations, such as the Stand with Us group and local Jewish Federations, IAC organized some 10 pro-Israel rallies with several thousand supporters coming out in Los Angeles, Boston, Miami, New York and Las Vegas. New York had the largest turnout with about 10,000 people participating. Some of the larger rallies also included congressmen and other politicians, says Balasha.

There were some counter demonstrations in some of the locations, he says, but they were mainly small in numbers. Balasha also brushes off the handful of hateful and threatening emails he says he received from pro-Palestinian supporters.

The IAC also launched a letter-writing campaign to Israeli soldiers and another to “Bring back the summer,” which sought to send residents, who had been on the frontline of the rocket attacks to the Red Sea resort



town of Eilat for rest and relaxation.

The conflict in Gaza served as a catalyst to further unite the Israeli-American community, Israeli lawyer Tal Rubin who is active in the Los Angeles Jewish Community, relates to *The Report*. “At every gathering, there was a palpable feeling of people wishing they could do something.” He and his wife Yael, a daughter of Israelis living in Los Angeles, organized a fundraising event through the Friends of the IDF (FIDF). The response to their call was indicative of the need people felt to help he says – they expected a turnout of 100 and ended up with more than three times as many.

FIDF National Director Jerry Gershon notes that the response to all their fundraising efforts during that time was “incredible,” both from people who traditionally donate to the nonprofit group, but also from many new

A Jewish father and son in Cleveland clearly demonstrate where their sympathies lie



COURTESY OF THE JEWISH FEDERATION OF CLEVELAND

donors, both Jewish and non-Jewish.

With 15 chapters in the US and Panama, the FIDF has launched its “Day After” campaign, which will concentrate specifically on providing for the well-being of the soldiers who participated in Operation Protective Edge.

The emergency funds they raised will now, among other things, pay for a group of lone soldiers to fly home to see their families, treat 50 army units to a vacation, support 1,000 wounded soldiers, will double support to the families of fallen soldiers from \$400,000 to \$1 million and will provide full university scholarships for 1,000 combat soldiers, who successfully completed their service and otherwise would be unable to attend university.

As a major general in the reserves, Gershon says he felt a “great sense of responsibility” to help the soldiers in combat, whom he calls

## AN INITIAL SENSE OF HELPLESSNESS EVENTUALLY LED TO A GROWING AWARENESS OF THEIR ABILITY TO BECOME ACTIVELY INVOLVED IN SUPPORTING ISRAEL

the “last line of defense” between Islamic extremists and the free world. After six years in New York, Gershon is returning to Israel—his wife and three children already returned in August, getting firsthand experience in run-

ning to bomb shelters. In one incident at the beginning of the conflict, a group of pro-Palestinian protesters broke into the FIDF headquarters in Manhattan and started shouting out the names of people killed in Gaza.

Nevertheless, presenting the Israeli position in the US is much easier than in Europe, where the pro-Palestinian movement has gained momentum and which saw numerous violent anti-Israel and anti-Jewish demonstrations during the conflict, Balasha says. Still, he adds, with media images full of wounded Palestinian children, explaining the Israeli position is “definitely not easy.”

One of the problems is the basic lack of knowledge of most Americans of the facts on the ground, he says – or at least the facts according to the Israeli narrative. People would shout slogans like “Free Gaza” without realizing that Israel left Gaza years ago and they had no knowledge about the blockade from the Egyptian side either, he notes.

American-born Jews also were very concerned about the situation in Israel and, throughout Jewish communities across the country, activists organized rallies, fundraisers, workshops, and speakers to express their support and present Israel’s position. Some, like the Ohev Shalom National Synagogue in Washington DC, participated in a joint Jewish-Muslim fast for peace together with a local mosque on the 17 of Tammuz fast, which this year fell during one of the days of the month of Ramadan.

However, some US Jews demonstrated against Israel. In Chicago, a handful of mostly young protesters, organized by the Jewish Voice for Peace, chanted “We are Jews, shame on you, end the occupation,” and disrupted a fundraiser for the Jewish United Fund’s Emergency Campaign featuring Chicago Mayor Rahm Emanuel and Illinois Senators Mark Kirk and Dick Durbin. The campaign still managed to raise more than \$8.7 million.

In Cleveland, the Jewish Federation of Cleveland decided to hold their big pro-Israel rally at the Mandel Jewish Community Center, secure from counterdemonstrations, where families could feel safe, Federation president Steve Hoffman tells *The Report*. Some 2,800 people attended the rally.

Early in the conflict, the Cleveland Federation started receiving phone calls from members of the community asking what they could do to help Israel, Hoffman relates. Together with the Jewish Agency, the Joint Distribution Committee and the Jewish National Fund, it was decided to raise money



SHALOM

SHABBAT

KEN

HAVER

YELED

When you practice speaking Hebrew with a personal teacher, you get a lot more than a language.

# IVRIT

Elyakim Herman

A personal teacher to help improve your spoken Hebrew, anywhere, at any hour...  
**Lessons via phone or Skype**

**Call now to schedule your free trial lesson**

For more information, please call:

ISRAEL: \*2423 | U.S. Toll Free: 1-888-576-7881 | U.K. Toll Free: 0-8000-283-945 | Other Countries: 972-2-531-5439 **THE JERUSALEM POST**



Demonstrators rally in support of Israel, during Operation Protective Edge, at Times Square in New York, July 20

EDUARDO MUNOZ / REUTERS

for psychological counseling services for Israelis experiencing trauma from the rocket attacks. The funds were raised quickly, he says. Cleveland also sent over several support missions of a few dozen people each to Israel to visit wounded soldiers and civilians.

A group of pro-Palestinians held several anti-Israel demonstrations, including one outside the Federation offices at the start of the conflict, Hoffman says, and they got more coverage from the Cleveland Jewish News than they did from the general media in the city, except for the demonstration in front of the Federation.

“Candidly, if the pro-Israeli counter-demonstrators hadn’t come out to oppose them (as we had encouraged), there would have been less attention paid to them,” says Hoffman. The pro-Palestinian demonstrators had come earlier to scout the property and the police were called in to remove them, he says, but during the demonstration itself they were “very orderly and careful” though some shouted “ugly things.”

“Then the story becomes the conflict in Cleveland and not the conflict in the Middle East and it doesn’t help our [efforts],” he says. “We believe our job is to focus the views of our elected officials in ways to make sure they understand how we feel about Israel’s righteousness and the fundamental position Israel has in the conflict. To make sure they understand that we want them to stand up to the issue of disproportionate use of force. We think it is crazy that Israel should be criticized because not enough people died on the Israeli side.”

As for dissenting points of view within the American-Jewish community, Hoffman notes that the US is “still a free country.” In general, however, he feels the conflict in Gaza unified the Cleveland Jewish community more than dividing it.

“People can say whatever they want,” he says. “There are always going to be opposing voices. I couldn’t care less. The question is what is the mainstream saying, and the mainstream clearly is backing the position of the Israeli government and of the

Israeli people.”

Their next project is to start addressing the United Nations investigation into Israeli war crimes, he says, and join efforts to oppose White House proposals to limit arms sales to Israel. “These are not onetime things; these are things we work on all year long. The war just sharpened our focus.”

Hoffman says he does not feel the American-Jewish community is “used” by the Israeli government. “We do what we do out of love, concern and commitment. We don’t do it to prop up a particular Israeli government over another,” Hoffman says. “There is dissent in the American-Jewish community over the settlements, for example... and probably one thing we have a consensus on is not giving something for nothing, but beyond that the understanding [of the situation] is pretty simple. Most people in the community don’t get into all the complexities that JStreet and AIPAC fall into.

“The average American Jew does not get into all that nitty-gritty,” he concludes. ■