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: A diplomatic village

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GRAPEVINE
• By GREER FAY CASHMAN

■ PERSONAL CONTACTS are essential to most diplomatic endeavors. No one knows exactly how many binational, tri-national, and multinational agreements have been influenced by the frequency with which members of the diplomatic community get together. What is known is that there are ample opportunities for such meetings.

These include the Ambassadors' Club of Israel, the Israel Council on Foreign Relations, the Abba Eban Institute for Diplomacy and Foreign Relations at Reichman University, Imuna – the Israeli Model United Nations for Youth Diplomacy, opening sessions of the Knesset, special events at the Foreign Ministry, and among regional diplomatic groups, such as ones from Asia and the Pacific, Europe, the Baltics, Africa, Muslim-majority countries, and Latin America.

Then there are the binational chambers of commerce, the national day receptions hosted on the appropriate date by individual ambassadors with the aim of promoting their respective countries as tourist destinations or enhancing their relations with Israel, and international conferences hosted by universities, embassies, foreign foundations operating in Israel, and Israeli human rights, cultural, and economic organizations. This is just an indicator. There are certainly additional opportunities, and they don't relate purely to ambassadors but also to other embassy officials with diplomatic status.

Among the Israeli organizations that bring diplomats together is the B'nai B'rith World Center in Jerusalem, whose executive director, **Alan Schneider**, several years ago formed a club of Hebrew-speaking foreign diplomats. While English has replaced French as the universal language of diplomacy, seasoned diplomats know the value of learning the language of the country to which they have been posted.

Though Hebrew is a somewhat esoteric language for diplomats without a Middle East background, increasing numbers are beginning to learn and master it. So when speaking to someone in Hebrew in the presence of diplomats, be careful not to say anything insulting about them or the countries they represent. You never know which of them is a fluent Hebrew speaker.

Over the past two years, the general situation has been too tumultuous for diplomats to focus on learning Hebrew, so at an outing that Schneider's group had in Jerusalem last week, there were diplomats who knew a smattering of Hebrew, but all who participated were eager to learn.

In the past, study sessions were combined with outings, and last week, some 35 diplomats and spouses from Hungary, the Czech Republic, India, Panama, Ecuador,

Costa Rica, Latvia, Japan, Korea, the US, Guatemala, and China attended a study session at the City of David, where the group was hosted for an extensive VIP tour, including some of the sections of the site still closed to general visitors, particularly the underground Pilgrimage Road.

Schneider was thrilled with the interest shown by participants.

The group's founding was embraced by the Foreign Ministry's Protocol Office, he said, and the inaugural meeting took place at the ministry's headquarters in Jerusalem on April 19, 2023, with noted Hebraist **Avshalom Kor**, winner of the Prime Minister's Hebrew Language Award for 2016, as the guest speaker. He gave a wide-ranging presentation under the title "I speak with King David" about the lesser-known advantages of the Hebrew language.

Schneider is proud of B'nai B'rith's contribution to the revival of Hebrew as a functional language, an initiative led by Eliezer Ben-Yehuda, who served as the first secretary of the B'nai B'rith Jerusalem Lodge. Other noteworthy breakthroughs included the establishment of the forerunner of the Israel National Library.

Schneider conceived the idea of a Hebrew-language club for diplomats as an informal forum to serve as a foundation for understanding how the State of Israel ticks. Earlier sessions of the club were held at the National Library, the Knesset, the World Zionist Organization, Mount Herzl, the National Security Council, and the Knesset Museum, among others.

■ DESPITE THE surge in antisemitism, or possibly because of it, Mount Scopus College, the pioneer Jewish communal day school in Australia, which was founded in 1949, is now going ahead with its plans for consolidation and the creation of the Centre for Jewish Life.

Mount Scopus started with a small elementary school within walking distance of Melbourne's inner city, adding classes year by year until it reached matriculation level and had to move to a much larger campus in an outlying neighborhood far from the main hub of Jewish life.

Prior to the establishment of other day schools in Melbourne, the student population ran the gamut from totally secular to ultra-Orthodox. With the establishment of additional schools to suit the diverse religious and secular ideologies of the Jewish community, children from specific groups were sent to schools that conformed with beliefs and traditions of their respective streams.

Today, there are 19 Jewish day schools in Australia. Most are in Melbourne, but there are also some in Sydney, Perth, Brisbane, and the Gold Coast.

Notwithstanding the additional schools, Mount Scopus continued to grow, and it now has campuses in three neighborhoods. Two of the campuses are in predominantly Jewish areas, while the largest



DIPLOMATS IN the City of David. (Courtesy BB World Center)

campus remains in the outlying neighborhood of Burwood.

Possibly because so many of the school's alumni have children and grandchildren at Mount Scopus who come together for many of the school's activities, it was decided to consolidate all three campuses and to simultaneously provide a Jewish cultural and ideological outlet for adults in the heart of Jewish Melbourne, with the college incorporated into the Centre for Jewish Life so that there is a sense of continuity and no real break-away when high school graduates go to university.

Incidentally, one of Melbourne's universities is named for a Jewish leader, Sir John Monash, who, in 1927, was the first president of the Zionist Federation of Australia.

At Mount Scopus, when the writer of this column was a student there, Monash was also the name of one of the competing student houses.

The master planning stage for the Centre for Jewish Life is near completion, and the international architectural team includes Studio Libeskind, headed by prize-winning Jewish architect **Daniel Libeskind**, who was in Melbourne last month. In planning the consolidated campus, the architectural team was extensively involved with more than 750 teachers, students, administrative staff, alumni, and foundation members of the Centre for Jewish Life, all of whom contributed ideas of what they hoped to see once the project was completed.

Polish-born Libeskind, who lives in America, like Mount Scopus College itself, has a strong affinity with Israel, having lived on a kibbutz as a child, when his Holocaust survivor parents made aliyah. Among his best-known designs in Israel

is the Wohl Centre at Bar-Ilan University, though he is probably best known for designing the Jewish Museum in Berlin and the reconstruction of the World Trade Center in New York.

Libeskind is reportedly passionate about the Centre of Jewish Life project in Melbourne, possibly because he feels at home there, as many members of the Jewish community are of Polish descent. He believes that the Centre for Jewish Life will be a testament to the resilience of Jewish communities everywhere, who celebrate family, education, and community.

Commenting that he had been born in a homeless shelter to Holocaust survivor parents, Libeskind reflected on how that experience has given him a unique perspective on architecture throughout his prolific career. He spoke of spirituality being essential to architecture and a Jewish life and that the most important aspect of a school is allowing children to feel that anything is possible.

■ YOU KNOW that most Jews, both in Israel and the Diaspora, are under the impression that the war is over when you are flooded with emails requesting donations that have nothing to do with the war effort.

This new rush of funding requests was exacerbated by Giving Tuesday. These requests come from both organizations and individuals. In the latter case, they are usually heartbreaking stories of children with life-threatening illnesses, orphans left with a widowed mother or a sick father who can't work, or a bride who comes to her wedding without a bridal gown.

It's hard to tell which of these individual requests are bona fide and which are not. Some are sent by rabbis on behalf of the

sick and the needy, with names but without contact details other than an address to which donations should be sent, so good-hearted people who want to help are left wondering whether these are genuine cases or simply a scam.

The one about the bride on her wedding day, headed by the sentence "The wedding is tonight," has been repeated word for word over the years. According to the text, she comes from an ultra-Orthodox community, so there is no reason for her to be without a bridal gown and a minimal dowry. It's a given in ultra-Orthodox communities to help a poor bride, and there are charitable organizations that lend out wedding dresses for free or for a symbolic cost.

The big question is how do all of these organizations and individuals get the email addresses of the people to whom they write? And how do they know to appeal to the recipient in English, even when the request is from Israel? Not everyone has a social media account beyond email. Many of the requests come from the US, so this means that even if recipients send a modest amount of \$18, this international crowdfunding effort could make the senders very wealthy.

Now with AI as the flavor of the month, privacy is nothing more than a word in the dictionary. Anyone will be able to find you and find out about you. Yes, there are many benefits to AI, but like almost anything else, it has its negative side effects, so BEWARE.

Interestingly, European, Asian, Canadian, and Australian Jewish organizations and individuals conduct their appeals among themselves, and few, if any, requests for funds come from these regions.

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