



Gratz Insider, September 2013 - Story Continuation

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A Letter from Israel by Professor Saul Wachs

Dear Readers,

Our annual trip to Israel is enriching on many levels for my wife Diane and me. Most importantly, we are able to spend time with our two married children and seven grandchildren who live there. Thanks to the blessings of a small country, we can actually see family more often in Israel than at home in the U.S., where the rest of the bunch is spread from Albany to California.

Our grandchildren are doing much to make us proud. The two eldest from Israel are in army intelligence. Our younger Israeli grandchildren were participants in a program called Seeds of Peace, which brings together youth from conflict-torn regions and encourages mutual understanding through dialogue. Finally, one of our granddaughters celebrated her bat mitzvah while we were in Israel, and we were delighted to see family members take on all the leadership roles in her service.

Given that all of our Jerusalem grandchildren are alumni of the Early Childhood Center of Congregation Kol Haneshma, I could not refuse the invitation to lead a workshop for the staff there during our trip. Otherwise, Diane and I had time to appreciate the always fantastic cultural life of Israel, taking in theater, concerts and movies.

Our appreciation of Israeli culture continued with the annual lecture memorializing my late wife, Barbara Eidelman Wachs. This year, the lecture focused on the famous song "Jerusalem of Gold," and was presented by a Gratz alumnus, Professor Shalom Paul. Held in a synagogue each year, this annual memorial lecture is co-sponsored by Orthodox, Conservative and Reform congregations, which represents a unique partnership in Israel.

In addition to enriching ourselves with Israeli culture, Diane and I made a point of reading three newspapers every day, getting right, left and ultra-right perspectives on the political and social issues gripping Israel today. Although Israel's achievements are

impressive and its intellectual and social capital remarkable, the country faces some serious concerns. The gap between the wealthy and the rest of the population is among the greatest in the developed world; the Israeli school system suffers from some glaring problems; and the country is polarized around the role of religion in politics.

Interestingly, religious, political and educational issues all come into play with respect to the Israeli Haredim, or ultra-Orthodox. The Haredi community is under pressure for more of its members to perform military or communal service and for revisions to be made to its school curricula so that students can study subjects important for future employment. While it is believed that many within this community would like to enter the job market to escape from poverty, their leaders fear that changes in curriculum or exposure to the army will jeopardize the Haredi way of life.

My son Hillel witnesses this cultural clash firsthand. He teaches a course in business English to Haredim in a program sponsored by Haifa University. Thousands of Haredim have completed this program, and many continue on at the university or at other academic institutions. In some cases, however, this effort to obtain a secular education pits students in direct conflict with their families' wishes.

On a geopolitical level, Israelis are also divided as to the prospects of resolving the ongoing conflict with the Palestinians. Some Israelis claim that the maximum concessions Prime Minister Netanyahu can offer do not meet the minimum demands of the Palestinians. Others believe that Netanyahu has made an inner commitment to break the logjam and counter the increased sense of isolation that Israelis are feeling from Europe and other parts of the world. Everyone believes that the United States government is behind the effort to forge a peace agreement, and Secretary Kerry certainly seems to have invested much personal capital in this effort.

If a two-state solution is in the offing, the Israeli government is promising to bring this issue to a referendum, which will show where most Israelis stand on this controversy. Perhaps the most disturbing aspect of our visit was the increasing number of Israeli Jews who doubt that the Palestinians will ever accept the presence of a Jewish state - or even the presence of Jews - in what they regard as their land.

Another concern that resonates deeply with me arose during a discussion I had one morning in Israel with my friend Professor Hanan Alexander and his son Yehudah. Professor Alexander and I both worry greatly about what we see as a widening gap between Israeli Jews and Diaspora Jews. In truth, Israeli education has never portrayed Diaspora Jewish life very positively. And increasingly, American Jews are distancing themselves emotionally from Israel, either out of withdrawal from Jewish

life or out of disappointment with the reality of Israel's domestic and foreign problems.

Professor Alexander likens the Jewish People to a family. As they may criticize their own family members, Jews also have the right to speak out when disappointed with the conduct of Israel's government. Professor Alexander acknowledges that Israel is not perfect and may never live up completely to the aspirations of the dreamers and activists who created and guided the country in its early years. However, while Israel may at times disappoint us, we must never give up on family.

Since dissent is built into Jewish tradition, I too believe that, as Jews, we have the right to speak up out of concern and love whenever we are disturbed by developments inside and outside Israel. But our ultimate love for Israel - like that for family - should be both great (*Ahavah Rabbah*) and eternal (*Ahavat Olam*).

Despite Israel's problems, I am grateful to live at a time when Jews are full partners in history, reviving an ancient language and struggling with what it means to be both a Jewish state and a democracy. I am also grateful to have spent another summer in such a remarkable place.

Shana tovah,

Saul Wachs