

March 28, 2005

Shalom,

As some of you may know, I recently attended the Small Federation Executive Institute (SFEI), which was held this year in Israel. Those of you who have been to Israel know that ***the sights, the sounds, the feelings, the atmosphere....are all just too incredible to put into words.*** Virtually everyone who returns vows to do whatever it takes to ensure the successful future of the Jewish state and the Jewish people throughout the world.

Prior to the SFEI, however, nine of us Small Federation Executive Directors had the unique opportunity to visit Kiev, Ukraine, for two days, sponsored and paid for by World ORT (www.ort.org). Harry Nadler, North American Representative for ORT, was our host. ORT, founded in Tsarist Russia in 1880, is a non-profit organization that is one of the largest non-governmental education and training organizations in the world. The ORT network extends to more than 50 countries and trains 270,000 Jewish students annually. ORT builds schools, develops curricula, sets up laboratories, develops high-tech educational systems, produces hardware, software and courseware and other teaching aids and publications.

In the Ukraine and other countries of the Former Soviet Union (FSU) as well as the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS), ORT has been active in the revitalization of these Jewish communities, principally through a network of schools that provide leading-edge standards of technology education within a Jewish learning environment. By offering a better education, these schools have succeeded in attracting large numbers of Jewish students who would otherwise not be associated with the Jewish community. Currently, some 40,000 students throughout the CIS and FSU receive an ORT education.

Visiting Kiev was a very emotional experience and highlighted for us ***how close Stalin came to wiping out all remnants of Judaism and Jewish culture in the FSU.*** Only through the “superhuman” efforts of organizations such as ORT, the Jewish Joint Distribution Committee (JDC), and the Jewish Agency for Israel (JAFI), is Jewish life being revived in these countries. It is slow, tedious and expensive work – but it is working.

Our activities in Kiev included the following:

- Being briefed by Mr. Naomi Ben-Ami, Israeli Ambassador to the Ukraine, on the political situation and the state of the remaining 350,000 Jews.
- Visiting the ORT Technology School (grades 7-11), meeting the students, participating in the classes, and being briefed by the Kiev City Education Minister, the school's director, and the director of ORT Ukraine.
- Visiting the tiny but comfortable apartment of a 9th grade ORT pupil.
- Touring Jewish Kiev, including the beautiful, refurbished Brodsky synagogue.
- **Visiting Babi Yar**, an infamous ravine in northwestern Kiev near the Jewish cemetery, where the Nazis brutally murdered 33,771 Jewish men, women and children on September 29 and 30, 1941.
- Visiting International Solomon University, the 1st Jewish university in the Ukraine, which is ranked 3rd in quality out of 1100 colleges in the country.
- Visiting the offices of JDC and JAFI and observing the desperately needed social services they provide to the Jews of Kiev.
- Visiting the Jewish Student Club "Hillel" and meeting many of the students.

Our activities in Israel included the following:

- Having daily study sessions with **Rabbi Sheldon Zimmerman**, the SFEI Scholar-in-Residence.
- Having discussion sessions between Small Federation Executives on subjects critical to our operations, and to compare what works and what does not work in our communities.
- Visiting the Ashdod Absorption Center and speaking with several of the new immigrant families.
- Visiting the **ATIDIM Program** and the **Ethiopian National Project** which both seek to help "at risk" young people, especially new immigrants, to advance academically and socially into Israeli society.
- **Taking a hilltop tour of Jerusalem and the security barrier to view the "security belt" of civilian neighborhoods along the seamline.**
- Visiting the new Menachem Begin Heritage Center and receiving a briefing from Dr. Reuven Chazan, Hebrew University Political Science Department, on challenges facing Israel today.
- Visiting our sister-city **Kibbutz Or Haner** where I spoke about our developing relationships, presented a "ceremonial" \$40,000 check to them from the money recently raised from "A Night to Honor Israel," and getting **an in-depth tour of the military bases and security measures in Northern Gaza and the Eretz Crossing.**
- Being briefed on the JDC "supportive communities" program that helps elderly and disabled Jews.
- Visiting an ORT school in Jerusalem that produces outstanding students who produce outstanding projects that win contests throughout the world.

- Meeting with Rabbi Adin Steinsaltz, one of the more brilliant Jewish scholars of our time.
- Visiting Pinat Shorashim, at Kibbutz Gezer, which is a JAFI-supported project to help Jews, especially new immigrants, learn about the role of Israel in their lives as Jews.

Among some of my observations and impressions are as follow:

- ***Israel is a very dynamic country.*** Its citizens are comprised of Jews from over 100 different countries, speaking over 80 different languages, which are “blended together” to make up very impressive citizens, especially the youth. Integrating all these immigrants has been difficult, expensive and challenging – but very successful. Israelis, by and large, are handsome, beautiful, tough, compassionate, friendly, smart, and determined – and most have a true desire for peace, but not at any price.
- ***Life is relatively normal in Israel, even after over four years of Palestinian terror.*** The streets are full of cars and pedestrians, the hotels are reporting higher occupancy rates, and shop owners are making greater sales. Everyone is thankful for the lull in Palestinian terrorism, ***but are wary that the Palestinians are using the lull to rebuild their terror networks and smuggle and manufacturing more and heavier weaponry.*** In fact, there have been sightings of the Palestinians shooting Kassam missiles into the Mediterranean Sea to test their ranges.
- ***Vlad Lerner, World ORT representative in CIS and Baltic States, is a true Jewish hero.*** Vlad and his father were privileged scientists in the Soviet Union – they had status, money, and large homes. But they were really not free and could not tolerate any more the rampant anti-Semitism in their country. In 1970, they became “Refuseniks” by applying to immigrate to Israel. Immediately, all their privileges were revoked, they were harassed and followed by the KGB, and even imprisoned for periods of time. The Jackson-Vanick Congressional Amendment was “created at his home.” This amendment prevented the President of the United States from giving favorable tariff treatment to nations that restrict free emigration – like the Soviet Union. Finally, in 1987, seventeen years later, they were allowed to emigrate. And, in 1991, Vlad traveled back to Moscow as an Israeli citizen, to become one of the leaders of a Jewish organization whose mission is to revitalize the Jewish communities.

Some significant happenings and facts in Ukraine are as follows:

- According to JAFI, 350,000 Ukrainian Jews have moved to Israel and about 350,000 remain. The yearly emigration has dropped from 20,000 per year to Israel to only 2000 per year. Ukraine has a total population of 48 million.

- Many Jews of the FSU are moving to Germany instead of Israel, because there are no quotas for Jews, and the German government is providing free apartments, jobs and financial assistance for them. Today there are approximately 200,000 Jews in Germany. Apparently, Germany is trying to rebuild their Jewish population to about 300,000, which was the number of Jews living in Germany when the war broke out in 1939.
- There are 40 Jewish day schools and 6 synagogues in the Ukraine today. Chabad runs 15 of those schools. Eleven years ago there was only one day school and one synagogue in the entire country.
- During the recent “Orange Revolution” in the Ukraine, the country’s Jews kept a low profile. The Ukrainian government is still somewhat unstable, but there is very little overt anti-Semitism at the present time. However, the beautiful, restored Brodsky synagogue that we visited just had a swastika painted on the outside.
- International Solomon University is looking to connect with American universities for teacher and students exchanges, etc.
- In the last four years, about 8000 Jewish circumcisions have been performed in Ukraine.
- There were 200 Nazi death camps in Ukraine during WW2.
- JDC takes care of over 1000 senior homecare clients in Kiev.
- The middle class, including many Jews, is growing fast in Ukraine.
- The wealthier Jewish businesspeople give most of their charitable contributions to the synagogues rather than JDC, JAFI or ORT.

Some significant happenings and facts in Israel are as follows:

- Most of the FSU Jewish students we met were Israeli first and Jews second. In contrast, most of the Ethiopian Jewish students are Jews first and Israelis second. The Ethiopians are much more religious than their FSU counterparts.
- 25% of Ethiopian immigrant youth do not finish high school.
- Prime Minister Sharon’s disengagement policy is facing tremendous opposition. A big fear is that the very “hard core” religious Jewish settlers in Gaza will resort to violence against the IDF to prevent their removal and may even commit suicide – like at Masada.
- 99.9% of Israel’s 1.3 million Arabs are not violent. But the situation is becoming more and more “edgier.”
- There are 230 security cameras in the old city of Jerusalem, which has dramatically reduced the terrorist and crime problem there.
- Because of the security barrier, housebreaking and car thefts by Palestinians has declined dramatically.

- The JDC runs 70 “Aging in Place” day care centers for many of the older and poorer Jews, especially those who have come from FSU and Ethiopia.
- Shaare Zedek Medical Center in Jerusalem has a brand new “state of the art” ER designed for mass casualties and chemical and biological attacks. Todd Zalut, the ER director, hopes to export the hospital’s expertise to the world. I hope to bring Todd to the Quad Cities for a Maimonides Chapter program.

It is often easy for us to forget how lucky we are to live in the United States in the 21st Century. As Jews, we sometimes bicker amongst ourselves over issues that in the “greater schemes of things” are really not that important. Whereas, in other countries of the world, Jews are being attacked, persecuted and vilified – very often just because they are Jews or that they support Israel’s right to exist. As you well know, we are witnessing the worst outbreak in anti-Semitism in over 60 years. These are the important issues “in the greater scheme of things.” ***We must never forget that each Jew is responsible for the other.*** And, we must do our best to help when needed.

How can we help?

- We can ***continue to be generous*** in our philanthropic efforts for Jewish causes. Support your synagogue, support your Federation, support Jewish life here, in Israel and throughout the world. Help our elderly, help our needy, help keep our kids Jewish.
- ***Ensure that Israel and the Jewish communities throughout the world are fairly portrayed in the media.*** Stand up against distortions, revisionism and bias.
- Continue to ***build strong bonds*** between the Jewish and the non-Jewish community. Accentuate our similarities, instead of our differences.
- Ensure that our elected leaders ***remain strong supporters of Israel and Jewish communities*** everywhere. Israel is the bastion of freedom in the Middle East and a key ally in the fight against international terrorism.
- Visit Israel soon and as often as possible.

In closing, I ask all of you to ask yourself the following: ***“What am I doing to help our Jewish community and Jewish communities throughout the world?”*** and ***“Am I doing enough?”*** If you are not satisfied with your answers, then find ways to do more.

Sincerely,

Allan G. Ross
Executive Director