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The Unity Trip

18 Diverse L.A. rabbis traveled to Israel to show solidarity; while there they found new unity among themselves.

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From left: Rabbi Laura Geller, Rabbi Robert Wexler, Rabbi Sharon Brous and Rabbi Isaac Jeret peel potatoes at Hazon Yeshaya soup kitchen in Jerusalem.

Click here for to read the statements from the participating rabbis.

See a slide show of the trip below

Israeli Consul General of Los Angeles Jacob Dayan personally invited the 18 L.A. rabbis from Orthodox, Reform and Conservative streams of Judaism to come to Israel for 58 hours last week, but the consulate's mission to transmit a message of solidarity with Israel had other results too. By the end of the short trip, many of the rabbis expressed a deeper understanding of the important social problems facing Israel today, as well as a renewed hope for peace and a rejuvenated passion for the thriving Zionist dream.

The delegation of 15 men and three women included, to name only a few, Rabbi Marvin Hier of the Simon Wiesenthal Center; Rabbi David Wolpe of Sinai Temple; Rabbi Daniel Bouskila of Sephardic Temple Tifereth Israel, an Israeli citizen who served in the IDF's Givati Brigade in the First Lebanon War; Rabbi Stewart Vogel of Temple Aliyah; Rabbi Denise Eger of Congregation Kol Ami, the first woman and first openly gay rabbi to become president of the Southern California Board of Rabbis; Rabbi Yosef Kanefsky of B'nai David-Judea, a leading Modern Orthodox congregation; and Rabbi Sharon Brous, leader of the progressive and innovative IKAR congregation.

"It's not every day that you can pull together such a high-caliber group," Dayan said during a stop on the trip. "This is the dream team. With them, we can win the championships of the NBA." Although he admitted that most Israelis probably do not know who these rabbis are, he believes they can nevertheless serve as an important role model — especially since in Israel it is almost inconceivable for Orthodox, Conservative and Reform rabbis to discuss important issues together and even more far-fetched to imagine them praying together.

"I want the Israelis to see the headlines and realize that these rabbis, who are from such different streams, can engage in dialogue," Dayan continued. "They can transcend their differences in order to support Israel. The only way to confront the external and internal challenges Israel is facing today is to stand united."

Although even these rabbis remain clearly divided on many political, philosophical and theological issues — including AIPAC and J Street, how to handle the security threat from Iran, what morals Judaism imposes regarding treatment of the Palestinians and how one should pray — the delegation stood united in their public support for the state.

"For any Jew that is not in the part of Judaism that rejects modern Israel as a concept, we see the modern state of Israel as an actualization of thousands of years of national aspirations," said Rabbi Adam Kligfeld, senior rabbi of Temple Beth Am. "So whether my politics are left or right, whether I believe in the complete divine authority of the Torah or my sense of revelation is more modern or more liberal, I believe that for a Jew to be on this spot has a sanctity which transcends any denominational division."

List of Los Angeles area rabbis on the Unity Mission:

- Rabbi Daniel Bouskila, Sephardic Temple Tifereth Israel
- Rabbi Sharon Brous, IKAR
- Rabbi Kenneth Chasen, Leo Baeck Temple
- Rabbi Mark Diamond, Board of Rabbis
- Rabbi Denise Eger, Congregation Kol Ami
- Rabbi Morley Feinstein, University Synagogue
- Rabbi Laura Geller, Temple Emanuel
- Rabbi Donald Goor, Temple Judea
- Rabbi Eli Herscher, Stephen S. Wise Temple
- Rabbi Marvin Hier, Simon Wiesenthal Center
- Rabbi Isaac Jeret, Congregation Ner Tamid
- Rabbi Yosef Kanefsky, B'nai David-Judea
- Rabbi Adam Kligfeld, Temple Beth Am
- Rabbi Elazar Muskin, Young Israel of Century City
- Rabbi Kalman Topp, Temple Beth Jacob
- Rabbi Stewart Vogel, Temple Aliyah
- Rabbi Robert Wexler, American Jewish University
- Rabbi David Wolpe, Sinai Temple

Rabbi Eli Herscher, senior rabbi of Stephen S. Wise Temple, echoed that sentiment. "We know that official recognition and dialogue among the movements are rather rare here in Israel, which is unfortunate. The idea of this trip is to show a model with rabbis from Los Angeles who can in fact sit down together and talk about anything, possibly disagree on issues of importance to them, and yet when it comes to a passion for Israel and the centrality of Israel to the Jewish people, can put aside those differences. It's a trip about leading by example," Herscher said.

Rabbi Elazar Muskin of the Modern Orthodox Young Israel of Century City pointed out the dramatic need for such unity right now, due to the delegitimization of Israel both inside and outside the Jewish community. To support his point he cited a recent study by professors Steven M. Cohen and Ari Y. Kelman, which reported that 50 percent of American Jews below the age of 35 believe would not be a tragedy in their life if Israel disappeared.

"The worst delegitimization of Israel is happening within our own community," Muskin said. "We wanted to reignite the passion and reinstate a sense of unity. Let

the citizens of Israel fight the politics. We have to back the state." Muskin related Jews in the Diaspora to parents who should unconditionally love their children despite not always sanctioning their actions. "There is an unconditional love for the state of Israel that unites all of us."

As the first Israeli consul general in Los Angeles to reach out in such a personal way to the rabbinate, Dayan served such an integral part of the mission that at the final meal together Rabbi Mark Diamond, executive vice president of the Board of Rabbis of Southern California, announced that a \$1,000 scholarship will be given in his honor to the Ayalim project in the Negev. Called the New Zionist movement, the Ayalim initiative provides young students opportunities to settle in Israel's peripheral areas, such as the Galilee and the Negev. In exchange for housing and academic scholarships, the youth volunteer with disadvantaged children from nearby communities and lead educational and social activities. Every year, over 5,000 youth apply for the 500 available positions.

For more than a year prior to the trip, Dayan worked on the packed itinerary designed to expose contemporary social problems regarding foreign workers and hunger as well as introducing the New Zionism and current advancements in technology. During the visit the delegation met well-known author and journalist Meir Shalev, professor Ruth Gavison of the Israel Democracy Institute, President Shimon Peres, Ben-Gurion University President Rivka Carmi, Yeruham Mayor Amram Mitzna, professor Eilon Adar of the Zuckerman Institute for Water Research and a host of other top Israeli professors and intellectuals.

There were moments of tension, but they were brief, and many mentioned that their favorite moments came in the discussions on the bus, when they got a chance to know their colleagues better and hear other perspectives. Together they peeled potatoes and served warm meals side by side at the Hazon Yeshaya soup kitchen in Jerusalem, where thousands of needy Jewish and Arab citizens are fed every day. They toured the Ayalim project in the Negev to hear about the new pioneers. They were inspired by the sharp mind and inspiring advice of Peres, who at 86 is still looking forward and asking for patience.

Many noted the emotion evoked on their visit to Rabin Square where, over the noisy din of bus engines, whining mopeds and boisterous pedestrians on Ibn Gvirol Street, Dalia Rabin-Pelossof (Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin's daughter) informed the group that on this very spot nearly 14 years ago to the day her father walked down the steps and was shot by a Jewish religious fanatic who disagreed with the Oslo accords. She explained that the pieces of cracked stones illuminated by a fiery orange light symbolize the earthquake that his assassination caused both for the Israeli people and for the peace process.

"And the earth is still shaking," added one of the rabbis. Indeed, before coming to Rabin Square to lay a flower wreath, the delegation had already confronted one of the most contentious social problems making headlines in recent weeks — Interior Minister Eli Yishai's demand for the deportation of illegal foreign workers' children, many of whom were born in Israel, speak Hebrew fluently and have no connection to their homelands. At the Bialik-Rogozin School in south Tel Aviv, where some of the approximately 1,200 children study, a well-spoken but shy 10-year-old Filipino boy asked the rabbis to pray that he won't be sent away.

For many of the rabbis, this was a chance to see firsthand some of the difficult issues concerning policymakers in Israel today.

All of the rabbis had previously visited Israel multiple times, and many of them have lived here for extended periods of time; nevertheless Dayan succeeded in showing them new perspectives on a land they already know well, they said.

"This is not Paul Newman emerging from the water," said Rabbi Morley Feinstein of University Synagogue at the end of

the trip, referring to the film "Exodus." "This is the real place, where there are issues of hunger, poverty and pain."

Rabbi Laura Geller of Temple Emanuel of Beverly Hills agreed. "This isn't Disneyland, and it's a mistake for us to pretend that it is," she added. "American Jews need to understand that just as they wrestle with God, they can wrestle with the truth of this country and its challenges."

Bouskila said he had been hesitant to come here as a tourist. But by the end of the journey, he appreciated the perspective others had gained. "I'm pleased that we got an insider view of the hard issues about immigration and that we heard from some intellectuals," he said. "It gave a view beyond the Arab-Israeli conflict, AIPAC, Iran and settlements, and I think these American rabbis will leave with a new appreciation for this country."

For Geller, who was the first woman to lead a major metropolitan-area synagogue and serves as a strong advocate for racial and cultural harmony, one of the more poignant moments occurred outside of the Yad Vashem museum in Jerusalem. A local Israeli observing the passing group commented in Hebrew that a woman is not allowed to wear a kippah. "One of the male rabbis, and it could have been any one of them, turned to the woman and replied, also in Hebrew, 'Lamma lo? Why not?'" Geller recounted.

Another memorable moment occurred during the meeting with President Peres. As Peres greeted Eger, he was confused about her title. "What does one call a female rabbi? A rabbinson?" he asked politely. It led to a barrage of questions about how many female rabbis there are in Los Angeles and in the United States, and Eger was pleased and flattered by his curiosity and interest in the subject.

Much discussion of how to negotiate public prayer in a mixed-gender group preceded their arrival at the Kotel, where women are divided from men. Yet the moment was anti-climactic. For Geller, the Western Wall is a sacred place full of history and conflict, and yet it remains problematic as a symbol of the politicization of religion. In order to avoid conflict, the group decided that each individual should follow his or her own course. For the Orthodox rabbis, that meant heading down to the actual wall, but the majority of the group remained together. They stood high above the dividing partition facing the rugged wall and stayed together for a quiet and unassuming prayer. Like beacons of hope for peaceful co-existence, two mosques with neon green lights illuminated the space behind the hallowed wall.

Afterward, as they walked through the cobblestone streets of Jerusalem's Old City to the Sephardic Education Center (Bouskila's synagogue's extension here), Dayan looked pleased. His first measure of success, to put the team together, had been accomplished at home. But his second measure, to receive local media coverage, had been highly uncertain. Two short television pieces were aired and articles appeared in the Jerusalem Post and Yediot Aharonot and on Internet news sites Ynet and Walla. The group gave eight live radio interviews during their visit, and their trip was later covered by the Los Angeles Times.

"For me, this means the message got across," Dayan said. "Now we need to look forward to how we can harness this power and influence and build on it. My hope is that other cities will imitate this initiative."

At the Sephardic Education Center, jovial dancers in a local wedding were just beginning to kick up their heels to the upbeat tunes of a live klezmer band. A banquet hall below had been prepared especially for the delegation, and glasses of red wine were raised in toasts to the rabbis and Dayan. During the meal, each rabbi shared thoughts on upcoming sermons stemming from the trip, including everything from new perspectives on the Zionist dream to the deep bonds that had been formed on this trip. For some, the emphasis would be on the centrality of Israel. For others, the importance of dialogue back home. Herscher reminded the group to leave feeling challenged rather than too certain of unity.

"We didn't come to strengthen Israel. Israel strengthened us," Hier said.

Added Vogel: "We came to give a message to Israel, and we are taking a different message home about the Zionist dream and the passion of the faculty."

"We are leaving with a renewed sense of optimism and hope, with a recommitment to Israel."

For more information about the Rabbis Unity Mission and the Consulate's other activities, visit: israella.org.

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