

Community

May 4, 2010

Beverly Hills' New Herzl Way

BY DIKLA KADOSH



Beverly Hills Mayor Jimmy Delshad and Israeli Consul General of Los Angeles Jacob Dayan unveil the Herzl Way street sign. Photo by Peter Halmagyi

For the first time in its history, the City of Beverly Hills has named a street in commemoration of a historic Jewish leader. On May 2, marking the 150th anniversary of the birth of Theodor Herzl, the man who first envisioned a modern Jewish state, the 300 block of North Clark Drive, in front of Temple Emanuel, was renamed Herzl Way. The renaming was marked with a street celebration that included speeches, musical performances, dancing and the official unveiling of the street's sign.

The initiative was a joint effort by Iranian Jewish Mayor Jimmy Delshad (currently in his second, nonconsecutive term) and Jacob Dayan, Israeli Consul General of Los Angeles, who said the proposal initially met with some tough resistance when it was first made a year and a half ago, requiring extensive discussions with each member of the Beverly Hills City Council before it was finally passed Feb. 3 with a 4-1 vote.

"Today Herzl, tomorrow Muhammad," Dayan said was one objection made by opposing council members. Other concerns involved separation of church and state and questioning the connection between the founder of Zionism and Beverly Hills.

"Herzl was a man of great courage and conviction who believed in tolerance and benevolence," Delshad said, addressing a sizable crowd gathered in front of Temple Emanuel on the warm Sunday afternoon. "Today, on behalf of the Beverly Hills City Council, we pay tribute to that spirit by renaming this block of Clark Drive in his honor.

"This is, by far, one of the best days of my life," Delshad added. "As a little boy growing up in Iran, I never would have imagined this day was possible."

Another initiative prompted by Delshad three years ago established Beverly Hills as a sister city of the Israeli coastal town of Herzliya — named for Herzl — and Delshad read a message from Herzliya Mayor Yael German, written for the occasion, that praised the gesture as marking the strong, unshakable bond between the State of Israel and the United States.

“Our vision is that Herzl Way will not only be a street sign,” Dayan said, “but a sign in our hearts and minds that Israel will always be the homeland for Jews all over the world.”

A mixture of families, Temple Emanuel congregants and neighbors turned out to participate in the ceremony, which included speeches by city dignitaries, musical performances by children from the Temple Emanuel Academy Day School, dances by the Keshet Chaim ensemble, and a short procession down the block with the Beverly Hills High School marching band and the Israeli Scouts to unveil the street sign at the corner of Dayton Way and what is now Herzl Way.

Sara Mason-Barkin, director of the temple’s religious school, snapped pictures of a group of giggling first-graders. “It’s one thing to teach kids Judaism,” she said, “but I want them to have Jewish experiences that they remember their entire lives. I think this day is going to be one of those memorable experiences.” Mason-Barkin said that in the weeks leading up to the ceremony, the school focused on Herzl and the history of Zionism in a way it had not done before.

“One day, a child walking along this street will ask his mom, ‘Who is Herzl?’ ” said Rabbi Laura Geller, senior rabbi of Temple Emanuel, who recounted a visit to Jerusalem when a walk home with her daughter turned into a history lesson prompted by streets named after historic Jewish figures. Geller then led the crowd in the Shehechyanu, the blessing for new beginnings.

Isaac Venouziou, 66, a Greek Jew who has been living in Los Angeles for 47 years, turned out for the event because he felt it was an important way of supporting Israel. “Israel is a security blanket for all Jews, so we need to support it in every way that we can,” he said.

At the end of the ceremony, classic Israeli folk songs blared, and people joined hands to dance in circles. Delshad and Dayan, both dressed in business suits, joined in, linking arms and spinning around in the middle of the circle.