

AIPAC  
Temple B'nai Shalom  
Braintree, Massachusetts  
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April 1, 2017

Last Saturday afternoon, Alice and I were in the airport in Washington, D.C.

We never travel on Shabbat. But we did last Saturday.

We traveled despite our Shabbat observance because we were going to the three-day Policy Conference of the American Israel Public Affairs Committee, known by its acronym, AIPAC.

As I stood in the terminal I noticed two couples engaged in conversation a few feet away. One woman gestured to a man I took to be her husband. She made a gesture like this [do it] and said, “You know what we forgot, Honey? Our credentials.”

AIPAC sends in advance to policy conference participants credentials that look like this. [show]

The woman walked toward me. She said, in a distinct Southern accent, “Are you goin’ to AIPAC?”

I said I was. She got excited and pulled me back to the other conversation. “Honey! This man is goin’ to AIPAC, too!”

We introduced ourselves. She told me her name is Renee Firesheets and introduced me to her husband, Bill.

She said, “We love AIPAC. We’re here from Baton Rouge. We’re comin’ to policy conference because we love AIPAC and we love Israel. We’re Christian, and we think it is so very important to support Israel.”

I thanked Mr. and Mrs. Firesheets for their support. I also said I had overheard her conversation about the forgotten credentials. I told her where she could replace them at the conference.

That conversation was like many Alice and I had over the next few days, with people who identified themselves as Christians and with many more who were Jewish. They came to Washington from all over America, like Mr. and Mrs. Firesheets, and from abroad as well. Because of our shared passion for Israel, we easily became friends.

There were over 18,000 delegates there, including 4,000 students from high schools and colleges. Among the students were the presidents of student government

at 290 colleges and universities, including 50 who were presidents of student governments at historically black colleges.

AIPAC has over 100,000 members. It describes itself as “a bipartisan organization dedicated to strengthening, protecting and promoting the U.S.-Israel relationship in ways that enhance the security of the United States and Israel.”

AIPAC Policy Conference presents inspiring speakers. It also serves as a showcase for amazing Israeli innovations. The first one we saw was a machine that seems miraculous: it generates clean water out of thin air.

Professor Alan Dershowitz presented this machine to us. An example of the machine sat there on the stage as he spoke. It looks like a water cooler, but there is no bottle of water on top of it. It’s made by a company called Water-Gen Ltd.

Water-Gen has developed water generating technology and a line of products for household use as well as large-scale atmospheric water generator units for generating clean drinking water from the air.

Water-Gen taps the unlimited resource of the air we breathe to provide an abundant, renewable source of fresh and clean drinking water.

The World Health Organization has reported that tainted water every year contributes to the deaths of 1.7 million children under five years old from diarrhea, malaria, and pneumonia. These diseases are preventable in part by access to safe water.

Professor Dershowitz noted, “Unavailability of clean water affects mortality and creates a deadly environment.” He was confident Water-Gen will change this and succeed in its mission to save lives.

To cap the presentation of the Water-Gen machine, Dershowitz put an empty glass under the spigot. In a few moments, it was filled with water produced from the air in the convention hall. He drank from it and joked, “Tastes just like water.”

AIPAC has had stunning success recruiting supporters both within and beyond Jewish communities to support its mission. We saw that in Washington, with presentations by Hispanic supporters, African-American supporters, and passionate Christian supporters.

As one example, we heard a presentation by the President of Rwanda, Paul Kagame. He was the first African head of state ever to address AIPAC.

He said, “My message today is simple: Rwanda is, without question, a friend of Israel.”

Kagame is credited with putting an end to the 1994 genocide in his country in which Hutu tribe members slaughtered more than 800,000 men, women and children, mostly members of the Tutsi tribe.

Kagame told us that the history of tragedy for both Jewish and Rwandan populations brought Israel and Rwanda closer.

“No tragedy is so great, so vast that human ingenuity and resilience cannot give rise to a better future,” he said. “The survival and renewal of our two nations testifies to this truth.”

For Rwanda and many other countries in Africa, Kagame said, engaging productively with Israel has opened new horizons.

“We are happy that Israel is engaging with Africa, has come back to Africa, and Africa is responding in a good way,” said Kagame.

Three years ago, Rwanda sat on the United Nations Security Council. It abstained from a resolution that advocated the end of the Israeli occupation of Palestinian territories.

Explaining that vote, Kagame said, “We thought this was going to be prejudicial to other things that had to be addressed.”

Kagame said Israel has the right to exist and thrive, as a full member of the international community.

Another presenter early in the conference was a young African man whose name is Yannick Tona, a member of the Tutsi tribe in Rwanda. He told us he was four years old when the Hutu tribe committed genocide against the Tutsi tribe. Yannick saw the murders and rapes taking place.

When he grew older, he learned about Israel. The story of Israel’s founding after the Holocaust genocide inspired him.

He is now enrolled in Texas Christian University and is a passionate speaker who urges young people to take action against abuses.

As the announcer mentioned his work at TCU, delegates from Texas cheered and applauded. We heard Yannick murmur under his breath, “Go Frogs.”

That is the motto of the TCU athletic program.

Yannick has become a speaker and organizer who shares his story to inform others about the horrific consequences of discrimination, prejudice and intolerance at their most extreme. He tells young people that Israel is an inspiration because it has overcome the genocide against Jews that took place before the founding of Israel.

Later in the conference we heard from two Israel Defense Force Colonels who are also doctors. The first was Dr. Ofer Merin. In civilian life, he is the Director of the Trauma Unit at Shaare Zedek Medical Center in Jerusalem. In his IDF role he is Commander of the IDF Field Hospital.

We saw pictures of the field hospital. It is a series of seventeen large interconnected tents covering a huge area. When Israel receives word of an emergency anywhere in the world requiring its assistance, Israel responds immediately. It can deploy the hospital within 24 hours.

Dr. Merin informed us that the World Health Organization of the United Nations conducted a rigorous review of all the field hospitals in the world and ranked Israel's as the best.

Israel has often sent humanitarian aid to disaster-struck areas of the world such as Haiti, Japan, Nepal and the Phillipines. Teams from the IDF Medical Corps have set up field hospitals in these areas and treated masses of injured victims.

Out of hundreds of field hospitals operating throughout the world, only 16 have been accredited by the World Health Organization. Israel not only joined their ranks, but won the organization's highest rating.

We heard also from Dr. Elon Glassberg. He is the head of IDF Medical Services and Deputy Surgeon General for Health.

Dr. Glassberg spoke to us about the work of the hospital he operates in the north of Israel, near the border with Syria.

He told us that Syrians in need of treatment come to the border fence separating Syria from Israel. Dr. Glassberg's workers bring the patients from the fence to the nearby Israeli hospital, where they receive first-class treatment. When they have recovered, they return to Syria. The discharge papers are written in Arabic with no indication that the hospital where they were cured was in Israel. If they need clothing, the hospital supplies them with whatever they need, but removes the tags in order to hide the fact that the patients were in Israel.

Dr. Glassberg told us, "On the other side of that fence, they celebrate death. I live on the side of the fence where we celebrate life. It is my job to protect life. As Israelis, we feel that it is our obligation to help those who are in need. At the end of the day, we want peace and security for everyone who is on both sides of that fence."

Israel has treated at this hospital 3,000 victims of the Syrian civil war. Dr. Glassberg concluded, "We are not their enemy. We are their doctors, nurses and social workers."

There were many more speakers and presentations during the three-day conference, including speeches by political leaders of both parties. The best and most inspiring of these was the speech by Nikki Haley, now the United States Ambassador to the United Nations.

The crowd on the last night of the conference gave its greatest and most sustained applause to her. She was introduced as a person who was determined to change the way the U.N. constantly and unfairly attacks Israel.

Ambassador Haley had recently demanded that the U.N. retract a report attacking Israel as an apartheid state. She succeeded. The Secretary General required retraction of the report.

Following a U.N. Security Council meeting on the Middle East, Ambassador Haley expressed her outrage at the constant focus on Israel. She said on that occasion, "The discussion today on the Middle East was not about Hezbollah's illegal buildup of rockets; it was not about the money and weapons that Iran provides to terrorists; it was not about how we defeat ISIS; it was not about how we hold Bashar Assad accountable. Instead, the meeting focused on criticizing Israel, the one true democracy in the Middle East. I'm here to say, the United States will not turn a blind eye to this anymore."

She closed her remarks at the policy conference this way:

"I'm not at the U.N. to play. I want to make sure the United States starts leading again. And leading isn't saying and doing things when it's comfortable. Leading is saying and doing things when it's not comfortable.

"We will have the backs of our allies. We don't have a greater friend than Israel. I want to change the culture of the U.N. by telling them that the United States will not tolerate attacks on our allies.

"I wear heels. It's not for a fashion statement. It's because if I see something wrong, we're going to kick them every single time. The days of Israel-bashing are over. We are not going to allow the U.N. to beat up on our number one democratic friend in the Middle East.

"For anyone that says you can't get anything done at the U.N., they need to know: there's a new sheriff in town."

The AIPAC policy conference and the daily work of AIPAC powerfully renew our pride in Israel and reaffirm the value of American support for the relationship. Next year, please make every effort to attend the AIPAC policy conference.

[Click on the following link to view videos of some of the proceedings at the 2017 AIPAC Policy Conference: <http://video.policyconference.org/> ]