

THE JEWISH JOURNAL

May 18, 2010

L.A. Latino Leaders Visit 'Real' Israel

BY MEREDITH PRICE LEVITT

http://www.jewishjournal.com/community/article/la_latino_leaders_visit_real_israel_20100518/



Photo by Edward Banks

When Gil Artzyeli was hired in 2008 as deputy consul general of the Israeli Consulate in Los Angeles, his mission was clear: to strengthen ties between the Latino and Jewish communities. Last week, that mission took a big leap forward as 21 non-Jewish community leaders toured Israel and the West Bank.

The trip, which was co-sponsored by the consulate and The Jewish Federation of Greater Los Angeles, aimed to introduce the real Israel — warts and all — to leaders in the Latino community. By presenting a clear picture of Israel's pluralism and its struggles beyond the Arab-Israeli conflict, the organizers hoped to forge important new relationships, exchange ideas and influence American policy.

"When we brought them to Israel, we didn't expect them to take an Israeli flag and start singing 'Shalom Aleichem,'" Artzyeli said last week in an interview during a visit to the Bialik-Rogozin School in South Tel Aviv, the delegation's final stop on a six-day visit. "Our goal was to show them the challenges that Israel faces on issues that matter to them — like immigration, absorption, education, poverty and housing."

Relations between Los Angeles' Jewish and Latino communities have been bolstered in recent years by strong support from L.A. Mayor Antonio Villaraigosa, who helped lead Israel's 60th anniversary celebrations in Los Angeles, has made three trips to Israel during the course of his political career and has even been known to show up at synagogue services. But despite the mayor's backing, according to Artzyeli, some in the Latino community see the Palestinians as the "underdogs" when it comes to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

"The Latinos, like the entire population at large, get their information about Israel from the news, and what they get is terror, war and discrimination," Artzyeli said. "Our goal is to show them what Israel is all about without coloring everything rose. We wanted them to see that the issues are not black and white. It's far more complicated than that."

They took the group to the Western Wall, Yad Vashem, the Knesset, several multicultural schools in Jerusalem and Tel Aviv, the Ayalim Project in Beit Shemesh, Bethlehem and Ben-Gurion University. Along the way, the group heard lectures about contemporary Israeli society and life in Israel from community

leaders, politicians, scholars and journalists, including Jerusalem Post Editor-in-Chief David Horowitz and Haaretz's Palestinian and Arab affairs correspondent Avi Issacharoff. What seemed to most impress the group, however, were their chats with young people on the street — soldiers completing their obligatory service, youth in the Negev devoted to Zionist initiatives, Ethiopian students and even shopkeepers in various towns.

"The Latino community is quickly becoming a majority in the United States, so our role in leadership is important, and this trip was a way for us, as leaders in our communities, to experience Israel through the eyes of the Israelis and the Palestinians. To see, feel and taste it for ourselves," said Robert Garcia, the youngest Long Beach City Council member and the first Latino to ever be elected there. "It's a beautiful country with beautiful people. I've been very impressed with the level of volunteerism, the involvement in the military and the service in the army. The people have been very friendly, and I felt very safe, even when we went into the West Bank, which is not what you might expect from watching the news about Israel."

Garcia was most impressed by the visit to a cooperative restaurant in Be'er Sheva run by youth volunteers. Built in a traditionally poor community, the restaurant is run as a nonprofit.

For Cuban immigrant and television producer Anely "Nely" Galán, the experience was a chance to gain insights that might inspire content she creates for multicultural audiences (she already has some ideas about new shows involving conflict resolution). But it was also an opportunity to learn more about forging a new country, something she hopes to be part of in her native Cuba.

"We [Americans] live on an island," Galán said. "We think we're the center of the world, and we have been living with this narcissistic notion. And when you come here to this little country that is a microcosm of all the problems in the world, you realize how little you know."

As the visitors spoke, children from the Bialik-Rogozin School stopped their game of basketball to ask what language we were speaking. Among the students are Sudanese refugees who fled to Israel after their families were killed, while many others — the children of foreign workers from the Philippines — face deportation almost daily and only feel safe within the confines of the school walls.

"We think we have it bad, but what we complain about is nothing compared to what happens here," Galán continued. "And it's important that we all help resolve the issues here. If something goes wrong in this little teeny country, it will have the effect of a tidal wave on the rest of the world."

For Gisselle Acevedo, CEO of Para Los Niños in Los Angeles, a social service agency for at-risk children and their families, the trip was an opportunity to learn about different cultural and educational models. "We face similar issues about parenting, and many of our children are undocumented," she explained. "When you're [working] in the field of children, you want to see how to best educate them, how to prepare them to be citizens of the world instead of being myopic." Creating a dialogue between children from different backgrounds is one way to instill a respect for differences, a skill Acevedo sees as critical to the global future and maintaining world peace.

"They need to be understanding ideas and concepts instead of ideologies," she said. "I want my kids in the U.S. who are really challenged to be on equal footing with children from other parts of the world."

Paul Turner, president of Save Africa's Children, a nonprofit that aids orphan and vulnerable children impacted by HIV/AIDS, armed conflict and poverty in Sub-Saharan Africa and the Caribbean, noted that exposure to the cultural nuances and dilemmas of the peace process here put both sides of the conflict into a new context.

"We are grappling with many of the same issues as Israel about how to make room for new immigrants and treat them justly," Turner said. "As a young country that has absorbed people from so many different places, Israel provides a great model for this."

Although the mission's non-Jewish delegates were more interested in Israel's social and economic models than in the religious and political conflicts here, at least one heated debate, with Palestinian scholar Rami Nasrallah, struck an emotional chord for Galán.

Nasrallah predicted in a lecture about the current political climate that without some Israeli compliance, there would be continued violence in the region. He also explained that many Palestinians regard Americans

as puppets.

"We [Americans] have been through a traumatic experience, and we don't have the stomach for that kind of violence," Galán said. "They [the Palestinians] would have a much easier time if they did a hunger strike or something nonviolent. In the U.S. we don't live like this on a daily basis, so we go into denial, but it was shocking to hear someone stand right in front of your face and say they are going to blow you up if you don't comply."

Despite moments of tension and political debates, the trip was seen as a clear success by Artzyeli and Andrew Cushnir, The Federation's associate executive vice president and chief program officer. The delegates also visited numerous community projects supported by The Federation that are bringing about real change.

"We've brought numerous delegations from beyond the Jewish community to Israel over the years, but this trip was the largest and most diverse of its kind in many years," Cushnir said in an e-mail after returning to Los Angeles. "The Jewish Federation's goals were to bring greater understanding of Israel to Los Angeles and to bring our community closer to our neighbors in L.A. The trip worked on both fronts. ... Together we addressed issues ranging from the peace process, to immigration, to nonprofit leadership, to the formation of personal and community identity. We realized that all of our communities are different, yet it was also clear that we share so much."

"Trips like this achieve things that you cannot explain by talking about them," Artzyeli said. "Ideally we would bring 300 million Americans to Israel and show them what life is really like here. Since we can't do that, we did the next best thing and brought inspiring leaders and media moguls who we hope will help bring a deeper understanding about Israel to their respective communities."

© Copyright 2010 Tribe Media Corp.