

February 8, 2016

## A federation agenda for Israel engagement



by **Keith Krivitzky**

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Like many of you, I am deeply concerned by the news we see emerging from Israel. It is small comfort that many of the challenges and threats that have been faced by Israel for years — including rejectionism and

extremism — are now seen in a broader international context.

Yet those of us who yearn for an Israel living in peace and security with its neighbors are frustrated. And those of us who hope for Israel to be viewed as a light unto the nations are troubled.

Many question and wonder what we can do.

I am also concerned about growing numbers in our community who don't know what they think about circumstances in Israel — or even why they should care. This is a fundamental challenge that we as a community must address — and which has become a top priority of the Jewish Federation in the Heart of NJ.

I want to share with you some of what our federation has done and what we are doing in the near future to engage and educate our community about Israel's hopes, successes, struggles, and challenges.

- In the past year, we helped send more than 300 young adults to Israel — 250 on Birthright Israel and another 50 teens on experiential programs. In addition, more than 30 adults attended our mission to Cuba.

- We sponsored multiple showings of *Beneath the Helmet*, a film documenting five new recruits in the IDF, and made available other curriculum and educational materials for free to schools and youth groups throughout our area, touching thousands more.
- The federation sponsored Axelrod Performing Arts Center's Israel Film Festival at the Jersey Shore and further connected Freehold and Monroe. Each year, the festival helps audiences understand Israel and build empathy between Israelis and Americans while showcasing the best of Jewish and Israeli films from across the world.
- We provided targeted funding for Israel advocacy programs and the Center for Israel Engagement at Rutgers Hillel, teaching college students models for excellence in engagement, education, and advocacy on campus.
- This is over and above the philanthropic work we do in Israel helping vulnerable populations and Jews in need. Educating and advocating for Israel has become a top priority for us.

Looking forward, this is our five-point plan for this year:

- *Encourage as many people as possible to visit Israel and to forge a personal connection with our extended Jewish family.* We are offering even more teen Israel scholarships this year, continuing support of Birthright Israel, promoting a community Journey to Israel this May over Israel Independence Day, and exploring future trips to Israel.
- *Engage key influencers and opinion leaders outside of the Jewish community to be involved and learn more about Israel.* The rationale: Given the challenges Israel faces in the public sphere, we need to expand our circle of friends and begin to build empathy and a better understanding of the current issues surrounding Israel beyond the headlines.
- Thanks to additional support from some key donors, we have already sent a lieutenant colonel from the NJ State Police to Israel on a security mission.
- We are sending several local legislators in late February on a state legislative program in Israel.
- We are supporting more than 20 local non-Jewish clergy at the same time on an interfaith clergy mission, chaired by Rabbi Bennett Miller in conjunction with our community's Rabbinical Association.
- *Offer advocacy programming and PR to respond to anti-Israel rhetoric and to suggest more accurate views and provide context and perspective for Israel in the public sphere.* We have an increasingly active Israel committee undertaking these efforts. If you are interested in getting involved, please let me know.

- *Provide targeted programs educating young advocates and training sessions for Jewish educators and other key populations.* Earlier this month, community and synagogue representatives convened for a second work session to identify and prioritize target populations and craft action plans based on youth, Jewish partners, and general public sub-groups.

The federation also invests in efforts to educate, train, and support teens to advocate for Israel, especially critical as teens find themselves on college campuses that are steeped in anti-Israel rhetoric. These initiatives create an atmosphere where teens can safely take pride in being pro-Israel, as they understand the history and background of, for example, the Boycotts, Divestment, and Sanctions movement.

Through a focused and targeted approach like this, we can start turning the tide in terms of engaging people in positive ways about Israel, in our own community and beyond.

Bottom line: There is no other organization in our area with the means, motive, and opportunity to address these challenges in an effective way. I want to be sure you are aware of these efforts and to say that we need your support to enable this critical impact.

Thank you for your help in expanding Israel ties in the Heart of New Jersey.

**Keith Krivitzky is executive director of the Jewish Federation in the Heart of NJ.**