

Diplomat discusses challenges of 'branding' Israel



Israeli diplomat visits

Ambassador Ido Aharoni, Consul General of Israel in New York, shows polling results about perceptions regarding Israel. He spoke with local Jewish community leaders at the Jewish Federation building on June 11. Photo: Andrew Kerman

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By David Baugher, Special to the Jewish Light

A view of the State of Israel through the lens of marketing and public relations was the subject of a unique talk by a top Israeli diplomat during his visit to the Midwest last week.

“What happened to us over the years is that we became defined by our problems,” Ambassador Ido Aharoni, Consul General of Israel in New York, told a group of attendees at the Jewish Federation Building last Thursday evening. “We became defined by our imperfections. The implications of this are very serious.”

Supplemented by a slideshow presentation, Aharoni's talk covered what he called the rise of the "infosumer," a phenomenon that he says has profound implications for virtually every aspect of advocacy for the Jewish State.

He told the gathering that this new breed of information user processes, perceives and participates in content very differently than in the past, something that has made Israel's position difficult from a branding standpoint.

Aharoni said that today's infosumer is able to largely create their own news environment, a bubble of information tailored to their specifications and interests.

"There is no more editor telling us what to think or what's important," he said. "In the old days we picked up a newspaper and there was someone who made a decision for us that this is what's important. This is the front page of the paper. That's all gone. Today, we are looking at a flat world where we are our own editors."

The unprecedented volume and pace of information in this self-designed digital environment is staggering however it breaks down into smaller self-contained universes, which can be "narrowcast" to individuals with a given interest. It isn't the widest audience that wins public relations battles anymore but rather that group most likely to be moved to action.

"Today, in the world of information revolution, the task is actually to be able to craft a message that will target a certain niche market," he said.

Aharoni gave examples of digital giants who are doing well in the age of the infosumer – everything from Netflix to YouTube – because they are good at understanding and supplying their audience with relevant information in a world where quality is more important than quantity. He gave comedian Jon Oliver special kudos.

"He is perhaps the most interesting thing that is happening today in media because he gets it," Aharoni said. "He understands who these people are and he caters to them perfectly."

The ambassador outlined challenges this presents for Israel as a "brand". First, he said that infosumers care deeply about issues of fairness and social justice, mistrust governments and institutions and dislike the use of force.

Then he showed a picture of a Palestinian child hurling a rock at a tank, noting that this image has come to dominate views of the conflict and the conflict has in turn begun to dominate views of Israel itself. He talked about the idea of "twinning," a marketing concept in which the public perceives brands against their competitors.

"What the world sees is an unbalanced twinning," he said. "One side has the military might. The other doesn't. One side has the economic strength. The other doesn't. The more we try to make the case, the more we reinforce the twinning."

It all comes down to narrative and storytelling, he said. In the case of Israel, the story is accurate but bifurcated, confusing and hard for many to reconcile.

"In one story, Israel is the victor, the country that prevailed in every major military confrontation, the country that invented the Iron Dome," he said. "In the other story, Israel is the victim, the only democracy in the Middle East surrounded by enemies, constantly challenged, and of course, if you look at the story of the Jewish people in the 20th Century we were a victim."

The negative view created by this dual narrative is hampering the Jewish State. Aharoni said that Israel has about 3.7 million tourists but could have as many as 15 to 20 million. Meanwhile, he feels that the small nation's burgeoning technology industry should be able to attract 10 times as much foreign investment as it does now.

But solving the image issue is difficult. Aharoni said Israel cannot avoid or shy away from it. But he suggests that it can overcome the problem by stressing other aspects of the Israeli experience. The conflict is only one part of Israel. Others, like its progressive environmental policies, its scientific accomplishments, its cultural achievements and its racial and linguistic diversity can also be highlighted.

"Each and every one of them has to be relevant. Each and every one of them has to be attractive," he said of the other topics. "And in each and every one of those channels, the Palestinians cannot be our competition."

Aharoni said that market research on Israel reveals which adjectives Americans associate most with the country. "Daring," "independent" and "rugged" feature high on the list. But so does "unapproachable." By contrast, "stylish," "fun," "trendy" and "charming" figured much lower. He said that Israel tends to make its most positive impressions with older, wealthier Americans as well as those who are more religious and those who associate with either of the two major parties.

On the other hand, political independents, secular individuals and Americans under 35 are less supportive. About 22 percent of the population has strong feelings toward Israel while 8 percent are strongly against it.

His concern is the 70 percent in the middle.

"The risk is not that they will join Noam Chomsky and his friends among the unreachables," he said. "The risk is that they will be alienated from the 22 percent because the messages and the arguments and the stories that are music to the ears of the 22 percent are largely irrelevant to the 70 percent."

Aharoni said that creating a positive impression of Israel, which competes with the "boycott-sanction-divestment" movement's view is one key to success. He cited the example of Sacha Baron Cohen, a comedian who portrayed a journalist from Kazakhstan.

"To the best of my knowledge, Sacha Baron Cohen never set foot in his life in Kazakhstan. Yet he is the world's most famous Kazakh," he said. "If you will not take a proactive approach and define your own identity to the world, rest assured your competition will do it for you."

Attendee Sherry Shuman was impressed by Aharoni's talk.

"It's an interesting approach," she said. "There's a lot to sell about Israel and I think he highlighted it very nicely.

"You can influence the brand and stop reacting just to crisis," she added.

Harvey Wallace, another audience member, said that he learned a lot from the presentation. He said it often doesn't seem like Israel is focusing on building its brand but Aharoni told a different story.

“He spoke in very clear, simple terms about what they’ve been trying to achieve and the success they’ve been having,” he said.