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## ***Motherland of invention?***

### ***Jersey City offers high-tech fair showcasing Israeli innovations***

Joanne Palmer • Cover Story

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Ido Aharoni, Israel's consul general in New York, has a theory about why Israelis produce such a disproportionate number of technical innovations.

There are two intertwined reasons, he said.

"Israel is a young state, and even pre-statehood it always faced a crisis situation. Survivability became an essential thing for that small society. The innovative spirit in Israel springs from that. "And it also comes from Jewish tradition. In Judaism, you are given permission to ask questions, to challenge authority. The force that propels any creative mind is the ability to ask questions, and it fuels an incredible amount of creativity and inspiration. The proof is the way the Israel Defense Forces" —Israel's armed forces — "is an incredible incubator of ideas."

And those ideas, Mr. Aharoni added, are not all about science and technology. "You can find the Israeli creative spirit in Israeli cuisine, on the big screen and on the small screen, on the dance floor.... Wherever you go, you find that unique Israeli creativity, growing out of the Israeli ethos of individuality and entrepreneurship."

On Monday, Mr. Aharoni is joining with the mayor of Jersey City, Steven Fulop, in showcasing eight high-tech Israeli start-ups.

“We want to highlight Israeli creativity, and one reason to do it in Jersey City is to reach out to people who live outside Manhattan,” Mr. Aharoni said. “Part of our mission statement is to cover the entire tri-state area. We want to build bridges with the people in New Jersey by sharing with them technologies that are relevant to their daily lives.”

It is particularly fitting to offer the showcase in northern New Jersey because “the community has been extremely supportive of Israel over the years,” he said. “Our job is to broaden the connections between Israel and the Jewish community, and the New Jersey Jewish community is a partner in this process.”

Mr. Fulop, who is Jewish, and whose father lived in Israel for many years, said that he met Mr. Aharoni a few months ago, “and we started talking about things we could work on together in order to throw a positive light on Israel, to look at Israel from a positive standpoint, to make sure that Israel and our relationship with it on the local level are perceived as positive.

“We celebrated Israel’s Independence Day, we recognized that it is an important democracy, but it is also a technology innovator, and a global leader in technology,” he continued. “A lot of people don’t appreciate that — they don’t realize how small Israel is, and how disproportionate the amount of technology that comes out of it is.

“There have been fairs like this in other parts of the country, so I said, ‘Let’s do it here. You give me the technology, and I will promote it.’” (The Jewish Federation of Northern New Jersey and its Center for Israel Engagement have taken on the task of promoting the fair in its catchment area.)

The companies at the technology fair are start-ups, but none are looking for funds to begin their work. All are past that stage; “all of them are operational,” Mr. Aharoni said. “They are looking to increase their visibility. This is not an event to attract investors, but to increase the visibility of their products.”

Still, Mr. Fulop said, “Jersey City is fortunate to have a building boom going on now. A lot of people who are involved here have substantial wealth, whether they are the families of Holocaust survivors, Israeli immigrants,” or other people of means. We have promoted this to all of them.”

All the companies at the fair are promoting apps. Some are social, some are more practical, some seem elegantly inevitable now that someone else has thought of them, and others perhaps are less intuitive. All are clever. Each one demands persistence, creativity, and intelligence from its creators.

Spreo’s map of a building complex displayed on a user’s cellphone.

Spreo, for example, offers indoor navigation. Many large buildings are complex, and once they are inside many people find that their internal compasses are unable to find true north. Spreo,

which is “close to a large deal in the United States,” according its co-founder and CEO, Avi Sacajiu, began implementing its system in Haifa, where people can use it to get from a hospital parking lot to their own doctors’ offices, somewhere within a hospital’s internal maze.

Mr. Sacajiu, an Israeli who recently moved from Tenafly to Manhattan but still sits on the board at the Kaplen JCC on the Palisades, said that an internal navigation system does not work the way a GPS does. A GPS relies on satellites, but that technology does not work inside. “It’s hard to find a system that can do indoor navigation,” he said. Other companies also are tackling the problem, but he thinks that Spreo is winning the race to solve it — and then sell a system based on that solution — first.

He said that although he moved to the New York area, “which now is a hub for technology,” Spreo’s research and development still are done in Israel. “There is a big advantage to keeping it there,” he said. “Israelis are very skilled, they are very strong in mathematics, and they are risk-takers. It often is hard to replicate that outside Israel.”

Why is that? He laughed. “It’s the Jews’ problem,” he said. “They carry such a big head. Sometimes it’s a problem. Sometimes it’s an advantage.”

More seriously, he said, the experience many young Israelis get during their IDF stint readies them, both intellectually and emotionally, for start-up work. That background is not only useful in general, but it is particularly germane to Spreo’s work.

“Quite a bit of the army training these days is around intelligence, and the ability to connect pieces of information and to put them together into a picture,” he said. Young Israeli intelligence officers “are quite capable today of nailing down exactly where a terrorist is. They can locate terrorists exactly on the map. Mapping is very strong.

“Quite a bit of this technology is coming out of the army, from the Mamran” — the IDF’s elite intelligence and computer science corps, he said. Those veterans “are valuable, and people are looking for them. And then there is the Technion” — the university that is to some extent Israel’s MIT. “Israel is fertile ground for ideas and technology.”

Gilad Rotem is one of the five co-founders of Cups, an app that matches would-be coffee drinkers and coffee-shop-sitters with independent coffeehouses. Cups launched in Tel Aviv about a year and a half ago, but although the app was successful, the coffee world there proved itself to be too small.

The app is not unlike the one Starbucks provides, which uses global tracking software on people’s phones to point users to the closest Starbucks stores. Instead of indicating chain stores, however, Cups highlights the independent coffeehouses that chose to join its network. “Besides developing the app, we are uniting the stores,” Mr. Rotem said. “In essence, we are creating a new chain of independent coffee stores.”

Part of the app's appeal is the "community aspect," he said, as well as the chance it offers users "to discover and enjoy new coffee shops."

Another part of its appeal is that it allows consumers to pay in advance, and offers them a 20 percent discount.

"On the one hand, it is a very American product," Mr. Rotem said. "There is nothing Israeli built into it. But on the other hand, the fact that five Israelis thought that they could come to New York and make it work — that's pretty Israeli."

When the developers first came to the United States, their goal was to find a "more fitting market," Mr. Rotem said. "And after some research we realized that New York is the best place to start." Cups now has about 200 coffee shops in its network; most of them are downtown, centered around the financial district, but the company's goal is to expand uptown in the next few weeks.

Farmigo, which "connects you as a customer to local farms in your area, to sources for all your fresh produce," as Benzi Ronen said, is a socially driven organization. It was created to improve the relationship between people and their food, and therefore between people and their world. Using its software, "You can get everything, from fresh vegetables and fruits and cheese and breads from a local baker," Mr. Ronen, who is a Farmigo co-founder and its CEO, said. "Everything is fresh from small local farms, and direct from harvest."

Farmigo's model is complicated and multilayered; it is somewhere between Fresh Direct and a CSA. "It is hyperlocal," Mr. Ronen said. "We use technology to form networks of farms, and you can have a direct connection with it."

"When you place your order, you know exactly what farm it is coming from," Mr. Ronen said; similarly, farmers know how much to harvest. (The system cannot yet tell them what to plant, although such information will be available eventually, Mr. Ronen said.)

"Your order goes to a farm, they harvest it, and they bring it to a warehouse that we have. It can come from any of 25 different farms and local artisans. Your bag gets built in the warehouse, and then pushed out to a Farmigo community.

"We are on a trajectory not just to make it more convenient for you to buy good food," he continued. "We think that people need to be brought back to the experience of getting food." To that end, consumers must join communities, and pick up their bags at a central place. That pick-up place is inviting, and often people stay there for a while, talking, making friends, renewing connections, putting emotion back into the often joyless chore of food-shopping. And it's economical to shop through Farmigo, Mr. Ronen added; often, it is up to 20 percent cheaper to buy food through Farmigo than elsewhere.

Although until now Farmigo has been mainly in New York and northern California, it is about to open three new communities, two in Hoboken and the third in Englewood.

Mr. Ronen is Israeli-American, and Farmigo's co-founder is Israeli. "We started the company in Israel, but then I moved here to launch our headquarters," he said. "Israel is a tiny country, with fairly limited resources, so it is not a good target market. It's too small.

"You have to raise money and get to scale, and the most obvious place to launch is the United States." That, he said, is why so many Israeli start-ups make their way here.

He feels strongly that Farmigo belongs in New Jersey. "It's called the Garden State, but really it's not," he said. "You guys have amazing farms — but New Jersey is small country, and national chains have infiltrated everywhere." As a result, the "traditional hub-and-spoke" food delivery system ensures that on average, food moves about 2,500 miles and sits on a shelf for about two weeks before it finds itself in a consumer's refrigerator.

"It's a paradox," Mr. Ronen said. "You can be right next to a farm, but you don't get to eat that produce."

Farmigo's website is [www.farmigo.com](http://www.farmigo.com).

Five other start-up also are slated to be at the fair.

Mr. Aharoni, the consul general, mentioned another start-up, which could not send a representative to the fair but fascinates him nonetheless. It is called TaKaDu, and Mr. Aharoni said that it "invented something simple yet brilliant.

"They analyze existing computer data regarding water systems," he said.

Admittedly, this is not glamorous work — but it addresses a real problem. Water systems around the world spring leaks, which can be hard to diagnose until they grow big, and hard to locate without expensive drilling. "Thanks to a very sophisticated algorithm that TaKaDu developed, they can tell a municipality or the owner of a water system whether they have a leak, how bad the leak is, and exactly where it is.

"That can save an incredible amount of money. They don't have to drill until they know exactly where the leak is."

The other start-up companies scheduled to be at the fair include the self-explanatory Get Taxi ([www.gettaxi.com](http://www.gettaxi.com)); Pango, a parking app ([www.mypango.com](http://www.mypango.com)); Appcard, a shopping-rewards-card app; Cellolo, which allows more dialogue between performers and their audiences ([www.cellolo.com](http://www.cellolo.com)), and Loyal Blocks, a consumer loyalty app ([www.loyalblocks.com](http://www.loyalblocks.com)).

The fair is certain to have ingenuity and resourcefulness on display, along with a combination of pride and pragmatism that has served both New Jersey and Israel well. And who knows? It also might be a showcase for the Next Big Thing.