

## Israel File :: Israel's Reality Show 'Ambassador' Has Real-Life Job Polishing Country's Image

By Rachel Pomerance

NEW YORK, May 10 (JTA) — The winner of Israel's most popular reality-TV show jokes that when he's in Israel, he feels like Elvis.

"People see me as some kind of national hero," says Eytan Schwartz, 30, who won the reality show "The Ambassador" in February. The prize was the chance to burnish Israel's image from the media metropolis of New York City.

The show, which drew top ratings this winter, tapped into the zeitgeist of a country desperate to polish its portrayal in the media, which many Israelis think unjustly depict them as oppressors.

With the good wishes of his fellow Israelis — and feeling a fair amount of pressure from them as well — Schwartz arrived here last month. His mission was to give a fresh young face to Israel's image.

The path to that goal is the job he won with New York philanthropist Joey Low.

Low funds Israel at Heart, which coordinates delegations of some 40 Israeli 20-somethings who tour college campuses around North America, South America and Europe, telling their life stories.

Schwartz's task is to expand the list of places where the Israelis speak and to come up with other activities for them. He's also speaking to as many people as possible, in lectures to Jewish and non-Jewish groups and through media appearances.

His goal: to show his audience the beauty and bounty of Israel, to give them a chance to understand that there is much more to Israel than just the conflict with the Palestinians.

That strategy dovetails with the approach that Israel's official mouthpiece abroad, the Foreign Ministry, has begun to take.

"There's so much more to our country than" the intifada, says Schwartz, who would rather people imagine the lively club and beach culture of his hometown, Tel Aviv.

Schwartz speaks fast and animatedly, barely touching his food at a popular Manhattan brunch spot on May 5, where, incidentally, Brooke Shields also was eating.

Wearing various dark shades — gray pinstripe pants, low black boots — and with his black hair moussed into short spikes, Schwartz looks like a fashion-savvy New Yorker.

In fact, he lived on Manhattan's Upper East Side before making aliyah with his family when he was 7. He returned to New York to earn an undergraduate degree in anthropology from Columbia University.

At that time, rallies in favor of ending the Chinese occupation of Tibet were in vogue on campus, though many students were clueless about the details, Schwartz says.

He draws an analogy to campus life today, where "Israel has become China," he says.

"I'm a very liberal person when it comes to Israeli politics," Schwartz says, noting that he is willing to concede missteps by the Israeli government and that he has some doubts about some Israeli policies.

But the Palestinians have set the agenda on college campuses, where Israel is unfairly judged to be the enemy, he says.

"Don't be against Israel because it's hip," he says.

"It's a fashion for you," he says of many American students. "It's my life."

In talking to students, including Jews, who question how it's possible to both support Israel and be liberal, Schwartz says he explains that Israel defends civil rights, human rights, gay rights and women's rights.

Having lived in America works to his advantage, Schwartz says.

Living abroad trains a person to adapt Israel's message to another culture, Schwartz says, noting that the other finalists on the show were also "bicultural" — an Ethiopian woman who made aliyah and a man raised in a British household in Israel.

But Schwartz had another edge: Performing is in his blood. Schwartz has traveled to Paris with a theater troupe and tried to make it as an actor in New York.

In Israel, he reported on entertainment news for Israeli TV and Army Radio, interviewing celebrities such as Sting and Elton John on their tours of Israel.

"I was used to the camera," he says.

Schwartz's debut comes as Israel's Foreign Ministry reworks its public relations effort.

"For 57 years we, the Israelis, excelled, concentrated, focused on the management of the Israeli-Palestinian crisis and its ramifications vis-a-vis Israel's image all over the world, but in particular in the United States," says Ido Aharoni, Israel's consul for media and public affairs in New York. "While we did that, we neglected the other dimension of what Israel represents, the other facets of life in Israel."

Consultants hired to do market research found that when Israel highlights news that is not related to the conflict with the Palestinians, it can create emotional resonance with the public. Israel's culture and economy can provide compelling stories, Aharoni says.

That's precisely the message of Israel21C, a nonprofit group that writes and pitches positive stories about Israel to the media. Their stories about Israeli technological innovations or human-interest features also

appear on the Web sites of the Foreign Ministry and of many American Jewish federations.

That's also the formula used by Israel at Heart, whose mission is to bridge the gap between Israelis and others. By introducing young Israelis to students on campuses all over the world, the group aims to foster a human understanding about Israelis that transcends the Palestinian conflict.

Aharoni praises the group and "The Ambassador" for showcasing Israel's diversity and the patriotism of its young citizens.

He calls Schwartz "a positive and welcome addition" to the landscape of public, private and communal efforts at hasbarah, a Hebrew term for public relations.

But "at the end of the day," he notes, "the people who the media looks to are Israel's officials."

Aharoni also says "The Ambassador" operated on a false assumption because it suggested that Israel is disliked in America.

"Israel's image in America is very strong," and "the level of political support for Israel in America is unprecedented," he says.

Furthermore, working to promote Israel's image is not glamorous, as the show suggests, but hard work, says Aharoni, who spoke to JTA from his car after a speaking engagement at Cornell University.

Schwartz appears ready to roll up his shirt sleeves.

"Every Israeli is an expert on hasbarah," Schwartz says.

He decided to try out for "The Ambassador," he says, because of a desire for "patriotism, adventure and putting myself to the test."

Like other Israelis, Schwartz says, he's good at complaining about how the world mistreats his country. Now, he'll have the chance to do something about it.