

Mission Accomplished

Sheldon Silver, Dean Skelos and Ido Aharoni recount a recent solidarity visit to Israel

By **SHELDON SILVER**

Last week's diplomatic mission to Israel to express our solidarity with the Jewish homeland had a profound effect on all concerned. The mission was important, which became abundantly clear when we boarded the EL AL flight to Ben-Gurion airport. The passengers on board, one after another, rose to thank Governor Cuomo, myself and our fellow delegation members for committing ourselves to demonstrating New York's solidarity with Israel. Their outpouring of support reminded us that this trip was not only critical but also an extraordinary privilege.

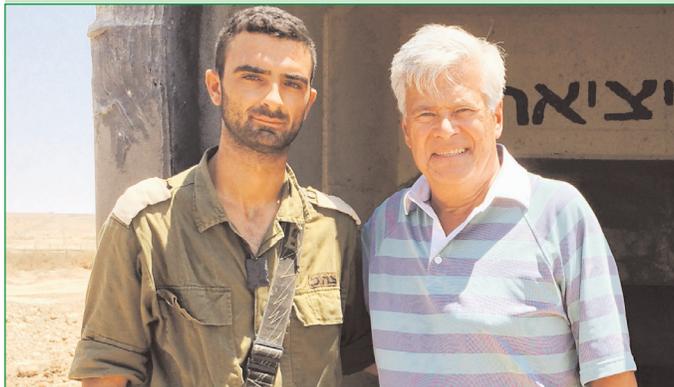
Although our stay was brief, our itinerary was packed



By **DEAN G. SKELOS**

Last week, I was proud to travel to Israel as a member of the unity delegation of New York State government leaders that included me, Governor Andrew Cuomo, Assembly Speaker Sheldon Silver and Senate Co-Leader Jeff Klein. Our mission was to reaffirm our support for the people of Israel as they defend themselves against the continued threat of brutal terrorist attacks by Hamas.

During our whirlwind, 26-hour tour, the delegation of state leaders had a first-hand look at an important moment in Israel's history. We met with Israel's top government and military leaders; saw some of the country's advanced defense systems; toured a terrorist infiltration tunnel; and spoke with Israeli citizens impacted by the fight-



By **IDO AHARONI**

Friends show their love in times of trouble, and not only during times of prosperity.

Last week, I had the privilege to accompany Governor Andrew Cuomo and the New York State Unity Delegation to the State of Israel. At this critical time, when our very existence is scrutinized internationally and our citizens face Hamas' threat of terror, it is essential for all of us to stand united and truly act on our pledge of solidarity and friendship.

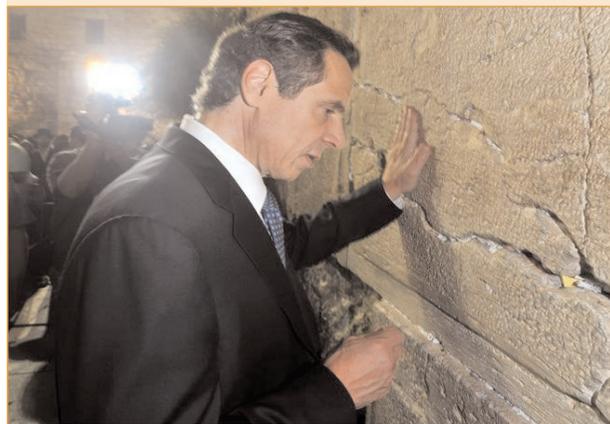
By traveling to Israel, and showing the world that New Yorkers will be at Israel's side through thick and



(Above, left, l-r): New York State Senate Co-Leader Dean Skelos, Governor Andrew Cuomo, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, State Senate Co-Leader Jeff Klein and New York State Assembly Speaker Sheldon Silver. (Above, center): Skelos with an Israeli soldier. (Above, right): Members of the delegation met New Yorkers living in Israel at Big Apple Pizza. (Below, left): Cuomo at the Western Wall. (Below, center): Enjoying Big Apple Pizza. (Below, right, l-r): Klein, Consul General of Israel in New York Ido Aharoni, Skelos, Silver, New York Daily News publisher Mort Zuckerman and Cuomo at the Western Wall.

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with eye-opening experiences and unforgettable discussions. Our meetings with Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, President Reuven Rivlin, former president Shimon Peres and Defense Secretary Moshe Ya'alon



exposed us to the immense challenge of leading a nation and protecting a people faced with relentless attacks from terrorist forces whose primary goal is to erase Israel from the map of the world. The most poignant lesson we learned was about the vast difference between international media accounts of the conflict and the "on

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ing about our commitment to stand with them in solidarity.

This was my third trip to Israel and, as always, the Israeli people and the country's leaders were gracious and welcoming. I brought best wishes for peace on behalf of the people I represent in the Ninth Senate District. From the moment the delegation boarded our EL AL flight, I was overwhelmed as many people came up to me to just

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thin, Governor Cuomo, Assembly Speaker Sheldon Silver, State Senate Majority Leader Dean Skelos and the entire delegation did just that. The rallies and gatherings throughout our tri-state region in support of Israel have been heard and appreciated by millions of Israelis back home, and this delegation spoke volumes about New York's unwavering support for our country



and our people. It truly resonated with us, and on behalf of all Israelis and our Consulate here in New York, I thank you for your friendship and this tremendous act of appreciation and unity.

We saw this by simply walking the streets of Jerusalem. As Governor Cuomo and the rest of our del-

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Silver

the ground” reality of defending the Jewish state.

We viewed surveillance tapes showing Hamas militants firing missiles at Israel and then escaping in ambulances to protect themselves from an IDF response. The videos also show missiles being fired by Hamas militants from apartment houses, and they use hospitals and mosques as weapons storage areas and launching sites. We traveled to the Gaza border and climbed into one of the dozens of tunnels, uncovered by Israeli forces, which were built to enable Hamas terrorists to sneak into Israeli communities to commit their vile acts. The existence of these tunnels are particularly heart-breaking when you consider that the enormous amount of money spent by Hamas to create them could have gone to building schools, hospitals and housing for the residents of Gaza.

We were shown the incredible “Iron Dome” defense system and came away feeling proud that it had been developed by Israel in partnership with the United States. It was also clear that Prime Minister Netanyahu is right: Israel uses rockets to protect civilians, while Hamas uses civilians to protect their rockets.



Over the course of our visit, we were also blessed to meet a number of Israeli soldiers. These young men and women were from Israel, America and other nations around the world. Looking into their young faces and listening to their stories touched our hearts and reminded us that freedom and democracy often come with a price, sometimes a terrible price.

Our trip was not all business all of the time. We also met a number of Israeli citizens who, despite living in a place where sirens warn them, day and night, of incoming Hamas rockets, exuded warmth and optimism.

We left Israel both inspired and changed. Having visited there many times, I am always amazed at the beauty and the power of our Jewish homeland. The courage and devotion of its leaders and soldiers left an indelible mark on our minds and hearts. Surely, we had received as much as we had given, and left feeling that the ties that bind our respective states are stronger now than they have ever been.

We stand with Israel. May she endure, prosper and stand strong for all of eternity.

Sheldon Silver is Speaker of the New York State Assembly.

Skelos

say that they appreciated the delegation’s understanding of what Israel is going through right now.

Shortly after the delegation arrived, we had the great honor of meeting with Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, who thanked our New York delegation for “standing clearly with Israel, representing the American people and the people of the state of New York.”

Delegation members visited an Iron Dome site, a small, mobile arsenal made up of a radar unit and several launchers. The unit is actually located in a field near Ashkelon, rather than at a military base. Lt. Colonel Peter Lerner of the Israel Defense Forces briefed us on Iron Dome capabilities and strategic importance, explaining that Hamas missiles have the capability of quickly striking any part of Israel in less than a minute, and Israel has to be ready to react quickly to protect citizens.

During our visit to the Iron Dome battery, and also during a tour of a Hamas-built infiltration tunnel, our delegation was within only a mile or two of the Gaza border, and we were told that if a missile was released, we would have to get out of the bus and lie on the ground.



(Left): Cuomo tours a tunnel in Nahal Oz.

(Above): Skelos with an Israeli commander.

(Right): Silver and Cuomo meet a soldier near Big Apple Pizza.

I was very pleased that former Israeli prime minister and former president Shimon Peres joined us for a tour of the tunnel. I previously met Peres during my first visit to Israel in 1986. He is now 92 years old, and he thought it was critically important that we see what is happening in Israel.

Prior to this tour, I imagined that the tunnels were crude structures in which you’d have to get down on the ground and crawl to get into. However, these are not small, dirt tunnels, but rather large, sophisticated cement tunnels that included electricity. The tunnels, stretching from Gaza to Israel, enabled Hamas to enter the country to commit terrorist acts.

One of the most important commodities to Hamas is the cement used to build the tunnels. They spent millions of dollars to build tunnels to kill people, rather than spending that money to build hospitals, infrastructure and schools. That clearly illustrates the mindset of Israel’s enemy.

Hamas considers both Israel and the United States as enemies. That is why it is so important that we remain vigilant and continue to invest in our homeland security to protect ourselves, just as Israel is protecting itself today.

Delegation members also learned about some of the procedures Israel uses to protect civilian citizens in Gaza. We were fortunate to be able to listen in as a pilot communicating with people in Israel was being told to abort a mission.

Our unity trip also included meetings with Israeli President Reuven Rivlin and U.S. Ambassador to Israel Daniel B. Shapiro, as well as a visit to the Western Wall with Jerusalem Mayor Nir Barkat.

The New York unity delegation traveled to Israel bringing words of encouragement that reflect our shared values. We came home with a better awareness of the threats faced by Israel and how the country is protecting itself, as well as an even greater appreciation for the strong ties between our two nations.

We felt strongly that it was important to show support and stand together with our nation’s closest ally in a time of war. As countless others have done, I left a prayer for peace in the Western Wall. Peace for Israel and peace for our country.

Dean G. Skelos is New York State Senate Co-Leader.

Aharoni

egation passed by local shops and restaurants, we felt the passion

and emotion from local Israelis, expressing their gratitude for the delegation’s presence and support. It was particularly special for our New York leaders to sit and meet with so many New Yorkers who are now living in Israel, at — where else — “Big Apple Pizza” in Jerusalem.

The bond between Israel, the Israeli people and the state and people of New York is unbreakable and everlasting, as it is between Israel and the United States. What strengthens and maintains this bond is not only the large Jewish population across New York and the tri-state area, but more so the shared values, morals and democratic principles that we all believe in, which bind us together against enemies that wish to tear us apart.

The enemy Israel is facing in Hamas and other terrorist groups in Gaza is the same enemy that the U.S. is currently trying to stop in northern Iraq. The Islamic State and Hamas share the same ideology and the same terrifying goals. With a more advanced weapons stock and broken governments in Syria and Iraq, the Islamic State has been able to commit the most extreme acts of terror and genocide in its effort to establish an Islamic Caliphate.

Were it not for Israel, the only democracy in the Middle East and the only nation in the region that shares the same values as the U.S., Hamas would



be on a similar rampage as their terrorist brothers in the Islamic State. Governor Cuomo and the New York State Unity Delegation understand this reality. They realize that these enemies are one and the same, which threaten not only the State of Israel but also the U.S. These Islamic extremists are not only anti-Semitic, but also anti-freedom, anti-democracy and anti-modernity.

That is why New York’s leaders came to Israel, to show their support for the nation that stands on the front lines in our shared fight against terror.

I was proud to be a part of this special delegation, and even prouder still knowing we were just the latest group to travel to Israel during this latest conflict. Mayors and Congressmen from diverse political backgrounds have come to show their support, as well as youth groups, synagogues and Jewish organizations.

Together, we are showing the world that New York’s leaders and their constituents are true friends of the State of Israel. We thank you all for your friendship and for standing with us as we fight for freedom over extremism and peace over terror.

Ambassador Ido Aharoni is Consul General of Israel in New York.