

AIPAC's 3 day Conference Washington, DC March 20-22, 2016

I would like to share with you some of the highlights of my experiences at the recent 3 day AIPAC conference that I attended in Washington, DC. I went there with my twin brother and my sister both from New Jersey. Bob Karasov and Hanna Bloomfield from our congregation as well as well over 100 others from the Twin Cities also attended the conference. It was an exhilarating experience for all of us, not to mention the extra opportunity it afforded me to bond further with my siblings.

Over the past 70 years things have changed dramatically regarding the political influence that American Jews have here. On Oct. 6, 1943, a group of about 400 rabbis marched on Washington, from Union Station to the US Capitol, Lincoln Memorial and White House, in an effort to raise awareness of what was happening to European Jewry. At the White House they sought a meeting with Pres. Roosevelt, to urge him to take immediate US action to rescue Jewish victims of the Holocaust. Unfortunately, Roosevelt would not meet with them and they were turned away. No coordinated rescue effort was launched. You all know the tragedy that followed. Now, however, we are not turned away. Fortunately, we have much more influence than we had then. On the last day of the conference, those attending were able to meet face to face with the leaders on Capitol Hill to help insure that the relationship between the US and Israel remains strong.

Every year more and more participants come to the AIPAC conference and this year approximately 18,700 attended. That is a huge number! In fact, this year for the first time there was not enough space to hold the general sessions in the convention center so they were held in the Verizon Arena. The attendees included Jews from across the religious and political spectrum, non-Jews, old, middle age, and young people, in fact lots of young people, over 4,000 college

and high school students, our future leaders. It also included Blacks, Latinos, gays, and active and veteran US military personnel. Americans of all stripes and colors who felt strongly about Israel were there. In fact, I was fortunate to have met and spoken to several Christians who were there, who felt as strongly about Israel as you or I do. Some of them told me about their trips to Israel and how moving it was for them. Others told me how they were in Israel when missiles were flying, but still felt safe.

To AIPAC's credit, it has always been a nonpartisan organization which does not take the side of the Democratic or Republican parties, but seeks friendship and support from both sides of the aisle. You may have heard of the embarrassing disturbance that occurred during the speech the Donald Trump gave to the conference. During his speech, Trump mentioned that President Obama only has a short time remaining in office, and followed that remark with a "Yay!" Many people in the audience stood up and started clapping after that remark. The following day the new President of AIPAC, Lillian Pinkus, offered a tearful rebuke and apology for the partisan behavior of many of the attendees which clearly went against what AIPAC stood for.

And besides Trump, there were many other famous speakers. Among them were Joe Biden, representing the President, Paul Ryan, Speaker of the House of Representatives, Mitch Mc Connell, Majority Leader of the Senate, NJ Senator Robert Menendez, who is one of Israel's best friends in Congress, and presidential candidates Hilary Clinton, Donald Trump, Ted Cruz and John Kasich. The only presidential candidate that didn't speak was Bernie Sanders. And Bibi Netanyahu also addressed those assembled via a video from Israel. Of course, all of these speakers were supportive of Israel, and that was good to hear. It was a real love-fest for Israel.

But there was much more to the conference than political speeches. In fact I learned so much from the conference. Much of what I learned was gained by my attendance at break-out sessions that took place in between the general sessions. The attendees were able to choose from among the nearly 100 different break-out sessions that were offered during the conference, covering a wide variety of topics. These included, among others, sessions on the Iran nuclear deal, how to hold Iran accountable, Israel and its relations with various countries such as Jordan, Egypt, Turkey, the Gulf states, India, Japan and other Asian countries, Israel's relationship with countries in Europe, the progressive case for Israel, Israel's gas finds, Israel's solution for a water-starved world, the Middle East's Jewish refugees, Syria's catastrophic civil war, the Islamic State and ISIS in Africa, the BDS de-legitimization campaign against Israel, how the IDF is preparing for new strategic realities, Israel's business innovation and its economy, Christian, Latino and African American support for Israel, advancing Israeli-Palestinian coexistence, and on and on and on.

Other highlights of the conference included a presentation by the CEO of the Israeli startup company SoftWheel, explaining how his company literally reinvented the wheel. With him was a high-level company representative who had been confined to a wheelchair for over 20 years. The representative dazzled the audience by rolling his SoftWheel all-terrain wheelchair quickly, safely and effortlessly down the podium stairs, it being the first-ever in wheel suspension system that others had tried but been unable to engineer. Another highlight was a film about how Israel is using autistic Israeli young adults to make a meaningful contribution to their country through military service. As it turns out, many of them have innate special skills that allow them to analyze in minute detail aerial photographs and see things that others may miss. There was also information presented about Israid, Israel's largest nongovernmental volunteer

organization that provides life-saving aid to Syrian refugees and others fleeing Middle East turmoil, and Mashav, an organization that provides Israeli know-how and assistance in varying areas to developing third world countries. It was inspiring and made me proud to hear how Israel really is “a light onto the nations,” despite all of the hardships that it is facing. A last amazing highlight, which may have been the emotional peak of the conference, was when they showed a film about Crissal, an Israeli girl from a troubled background who was born blind, but was gifted with an extraordinary singing talent. Sulamit, a program that provides musical education for Israel children from at-risk circumstances, helped her develop her astonishing voice. After seeing her sing in the video, suddenly the lights came on and there was Crissal on stage, signing in her astonishingly beautiful voice, “A Place for Us” from West Side Story. All those present leaped to their feet, and gave her a standing ovation, to boisterous cheers and applause.

With respect to tachlit, we engaged in lobbying efforts with congressional members on the last day of the conference. Senators and Representatives were urged to take certain concrete actions on behalf of Israel. These actions included responding to Iran’s regional aggression by imposing tougher sanctions for violations. They also included extending and potentially increasing the 3.1 billion annual security assistance that helps Israel protect itself from growing threats such as threats from Gaza, where terrorists are stockpiling more advanced rockets and reconstructing attack tunnels into Israel, from Lebanon where Hezbollah has reportedly amassed more than 150,000 rockets on Israel’s border, which the IDF estimates could bring 1,000 – 1,500 rockets falling on Israel daily in a renewed war, from the West Bank, where Palestinian incitement has spurred a rise in terrorist attacks, and from Iraq and Syria, where ISIS has seized territory and commits atrocities, inciting anti-Israel and anti-American extremism. We also urged our leaders in Washington to work with our trade partners in Europe to oppose the BDS

movement and the imposition of anti-Israel trade and commercial practices. Lastly, we urged our leaders to advocate for direct talks between Israel and the Palestinians, as the only effective path to bring a lasting peace between them, rather than allow solutions to be imposed on the parties through the United Nations or otherwise.

In sum, AIPAC is a wonderful organization and I urge all of you to become members and perhaps attend conferences in the future. It surely is something that shouldn't be missed.

Thank you and Shabbat Shalom.

Marshall Mintz