

Panelists discuss the future of Israel advocacy

By SHERI SHEFA, Staff Reporter

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TORONTO — For Israel’s image to improve on the world stage, advocates for the Jewish state have to shift their focus from defending negative perceptions to promoting positive accomplishments, Israeli consul general Amir Gissin said at a panel discussion last week.

From left, Liberal MP Joe Volpe, Canadian Jewish Political Affairs Committee research and outreach co-ordinator Hershel Recht, The House director Rabbi Rafi Lipner and Israel Consul General Amir Gissin.



Heebonics and *The Canadian Jewish News*, along with the Birthright Israel Alumni Community, The House (a centre that offers programming for Jewish students and young professionals of all denominations) and Hillel of Greater Toronto, organized a panel discussion last week titled “Israel after 60 – where do we go from here?”

Gissin, Liberal member of Parliament Joe Volpe, Canadian Jewish Political Affairs Committee research and outreach co-ordinator Hershel Recht and The House director Rabbi Rafi Lipner discussed the future of Israel, how to combat some of the negative images that plague Israel and how Canadian Jews can become involved in Israel advocacy.

Recht began the discussion, held at The House on May 14, reflecting on the fact that the situation in Israel is constantly changing.

“Last week was a week of celebration, and this week, it has turned into Hezbollah trying to take over Lebanon, a Katyusha rocket slamming into Ashkelon... Hamas saying they are never going to recognize Israel... In a New York minute, everything changes.”

He said in spite of this, we need to focus on the positives coming out of Israel.

Many Israeli accomplishments in academia and technology are known by the Jewish community in Toronto, he said, but they are not shared with the rest of the Canadian community.

Recht gave the audience of about 40 students and young professionals the opportunity to express their perceptions of what is going on behind the scenes in Israel.

One audience member noticed that when he visited Israel following the Second Lebanon War, Israelis seemed defeated. Another brought up the fact that the term “apartheid” in reference to Israel is gaining credibility.

The discussion quickly shifted to the atmosphere on many Canadian campuses where students, a woman in the audience said, either don't know how to be effectively involved or fear getting involved because of the backlash they suffer for openly supporting Israel.

"That is a big problem because of the sense of shame that is given to those who advocate for Israel," she said.

Gissin said the concerns voiced by the audience "touched" him because the diversity of their concerns is similar to that of Israelis.

"The mix of huge pride, a sense of being right, a sense of huge achievements [is coupled with] fatigue that comes from tense security situations, from a lack of belief in one government or another," Gissin said.

"There is a feeling of a lot of happiness on one hand, a lot of depression on the other and a lot of confusion in general."

But he added that he is optimistic for the future, as long as Israel, which he said is a "great product with lousy marketing," begins to present itself to the global community in a completely different way.

By changing the focus from the conflict to Israel's achievements, he said, people will start to perceive the country differently.

"The success of our adversaries is partly because they have managed to take away from us the human face. The face of an Israeli is either a tank or a soldier with a helmet."

Gissin suggested that if students are confronted about Israel, rather than talk about territorial concessions, they should present Israel as a more "attractive" way.

"Not right, attractive. We must start thinking in terms of attractiveness... Our only chance to become relevant and not be viewed from the angle of the conflict is if we become relevant to Canadians, if we bring in Israeli insights – successes and failures – in the areas of immigration, of water preservation, of high tech and gadgets, and of pop culture."

When someone in the audience asked how to respond to those who ask why Jews insist on inhabiting a sliver of land in the Middle East that is surrounded by hostile Arabs, Gissin said we should respond that we deserve to be there because of the price the Jews have paid.

"We have gained the right... We have paid a dear price for this country that was given to us... We, I believe, got it the hard way, not the easy way. As they say, it was not given to us on a silver platter."

In response to Gissin's new marketing strategy to "re-brand" Israel, Volpe said, "You are what others think you to be... It is how people see you, and they see you through what you do and not what you say."

"I see Israel as a flower that developed in the desert. I see it as a success historically. As a politician, we see it and I see it, as a triumph of the rule of law."

He said there are jealousies and conflicts, but, as a typical Israeli would say, so what?

"Canada will still be here when we're gone, Israel will be there when we are all gone, so the question is, what will you do, what will we do to make sure... that the value that others see in Israel and others attribute to the Jewish community outside of Israel are maintained with the same kind of ... firmness and

self-assuredness that we expect of any living, breathing, free, democratic, law-abiding individual?”

Rabbi Lipner offered his perspective on the future of Israel by reflecting on the points addressed by the other three panellists.

“The concept of change is not necessarily something that we have to try to make happen as much as we have to first realize that it can happen,” Rabbi Lipner said.

He added that the Hebrew word for year, shanah, comes from the word that means to change, and the Hebrew word for month, chodesh, comes from the word that means new.

“Our concept of time resonates with the ability for things to change.”