

Home from home



With some 12-18,000 Israelis living in Australia, set to celebrate independence day here, it's more a case of Yom Ha'ozmaut than Yom Ha'atzmaut. Peter Kohn investigates the changing nature of Israelis in the Diaspora.

ISRAELIS want in down under. They have special needs as a community, but are seeking to be part of the wider Jewish community. Now a roof body tying together diverse Israeli social and cultural groups is being formed. Spearheading the initiative are two emigrants, Ran Porat and Eitan Drori.

Porat is completing a doctoral thesis through Monash University's Australian Centre for Jewish Civilisation on how Israelis are handling life in Australia. He is a reporter for *Maariv* and an editor of *Iton*, a publication for Israelis in Australia.

Drori is executive director of Friends of Hebrew University, holds the office of Hebrew culture with the Zionist Council of Victoria, and has a number of senior positions with other communal organisations.

The Association of Israelis in Australia (AIA), will be a not-for-profit federal roof body for Israeli groups from all states.

Porat says the body will be multi-faceted. "We are planning a wide variety of activities, importing the best culture from Israel, supporting Israeli emigrants to Australia, Israeli-style cultural and social activities for families and much more."

Drori adds the organisation will be a

support network for Israelis, organising speakers and entertainers from Israel, providing advice for business and job hunting, and offering scholarships for young Israelis to attend local Jewish schools.

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Eitan Drori
co-founder of the Association
of Israelis in Australia

AIA will also act as an outreach to the local Jewish community – it wants to assist local Jewish activities, but it also wants endorsement of its own activities.

Drori gives an example. "When we bring out an Israeli entertainer, we'd like to think the Zionist Federation of Australia's logo will be one of those on the publicity."

Israeli organisations have thrown their support behind the concept, but Porat

and Drori also hope a re-energised Israeli community will draw in unaffiliated Israelis who have chosen this far continent to fade out.

"We are on the eve of a comprehensive federal start-up for all Israelis and Hebrew speakers in Australia, and the first of its kind worldwide," says Drori.

AIA arrives on the scene at a seminal time – globally, Israeli expatriates are organising like never before.

Israelis in Australia have taken the lead on forming the World Council of Israelis Abroad (WCIA), an organisation to promote their interests to their fellow nationals in the diaspora and in Israel.

At a Toronto conference earlier this year, Melbourne communal figure Menachem Khoen, an Israeli who has called Australia home since the 1970s, urged Diaspora Israelis to plant their feet on the accelerator and establish their world council by next year.

It was a "yala" moment. Representatives of expatriate communities – which number between 500,000 and 1 million globally – wanted to take it more slowly,

but the Australian Israelis urged them on.

Israelis in Israel need to change their approach to their expats,

local Jewish communities need to accept Israelis, and Israelis need to merge more deeply into the Diaspora fabric, said Khoen, who is president of Merkaz Halsraeli, a support group.

For Porat, who was part of the Australian delegation, the most surprising development was the attitudinal change in Israel, with Diaspora Minister Yuli Edelstein, and Jewish Agency chair Natar Sharansky participating in the conference. In fact, Sharansky spoke of mutual support between Israelis within and beyond the Jewish State.

"This is a 180-degree reversal from the 'yored' image," said Porat, describing the pejorative word for those who "step down and away" from the Jewish State. "Yored is always in the back of our mind as Israelis, but it is being wiped out."

Sharansky's speech "is the first hands-on acceptance that some Israelis are not destined to go back to Israel but to develop themselves in their ne-

host countries or to join hands with the local Jewish community. It's an historic opportunity to do this, not from a point of weakness, but as equals, for the benefit of all sides."

Traditionally, Israelis living permanently outside the Jewish State have been regarded by local communal Zionist organisations as the blue-and-white elephant in the room that nobody acknowledges, because it is a principle of Zionism that Jews belong in Israel. But Israelis around the world are tiring of their official invisibility.

Porat says Israelis who have migrated here over the past 20 years are highly educated and motivated. "There are 20 million Indian natives living abroad – it's not a problem, it's a force. Israelis abroad used to be considered a problem, but nowadays Israel is strong, with a vibrant economy and society, and Israel can utilise for its own benefit this very qualitative human force."



Israelis flying the flag at the Australian Open.

Photo: Peter Haskin

ANAT Goldstein and her husband Meir live at Woodside in the Adelaide Hills. Parents of two, the Goldsteins run an import business dealing with Israeli irrigation technology.

In 2009, Anat and others, including Massada College president Yuval Yarom, established Tarbut, a cultural association for South Australia's Israelis. The association was launched with a concert by visiting musician Yoni Rechter. Tarbut, of which Yarom is president, has since organised Yom Ha'atzmaut celebrations for the SA Jewish community, and is compiling a Hebrew library for the community.

Goldstein hopes the group will attract local Israelis who have gone it alone. "Some come to Australia and mix only with non-Jews and speak only English. But we've found that later on, many want some link with other Israelis and other Jews."

She was perturbed that only a handful of non-Israeli Jews attended the Rechter concert, as it showed a gulf between them and Adelaide's Jewish community.

So she was encouraged by Porat's project and hopes AIA will form a bridge between Israelis and other Jews in Adelaide.

Zionist Federation of Australia president Philip Chester speaks of "yored" as a past stigma. "The situation has changed a lot, both in terms of how the Diaspora communities look at Israelis and how Israel itself looks at them.

"The situation is more global, people move around more, and there's been an acceptance that Israelis, like others, will move," he told *The AJN*.

"We very much welcome more involvement by the Israeli community here. I think, to be honest, some feel they want to remain apart. I don't know if that's because they have issues of their own about having left Israel. It's something we want to change."

A new conversation

In a landmark article in *The Jerusalem Post* last September, Kadima party leader Tzipi Livni said the traditional relationship between Israel and the Diaspora had to undergo a significant transformation. Here are some key extracts.



Tzipi Livni

LIKE any good family, the Jewish people have shown time and again how we can unite in times of crisis. When Israel faced its enemies on the battlefield or when Jewish communities abroad have been threatened, we have come together and recognised our collective responsibility for one another.

But if this alone is the nature of the ties that bind us, it constitutes a failure of vision and of leadership. To define ourselves only by the threats we face is to allow our adversaries to define us. It is a definition founded in fear. This may be a mechanism for Jewish survival, but it is not a prescription for vibrant and meaningful Jewish living.

For too many young Diaspora Jews that I meet, Israel is not the source of pride or inspiration that it was for their parents' generation. Living in vibrant Jewish communities abroad – within states that embrace multiculturalism and respect religious and minority rights – too many Jews no longer feel they need Israel as a safe haven or as an anchor for their identity. What's more, they feel they have been taken for granted – their loyalty to Israel is expected, but their voice and their concerns are not heard.

Within this country, identity is increasingly pulled between two poles: one, a secular Israeli identity

centred around army service and the Hebrew language; the other a growing but narrowly defined Orthodox or haredi Jewish existence. In the process, a common commitment to the ideas and values that unite us as a people and that can resonate with Jews here and around the world seems increasingly tenuous. These trends should alarm anyone who cares about the unity and future of the Jewish people. This state of affairs requires a dramatic reframing of the role of Israel in Jewish life and the nature of the relationship between it and world Jewry that should be built around four key principles: First, if Israel is to realise its mission as the national home of the Jewish people, it must act like one. It must find ways to welcome rather than alienate Jews regardless of their opinions or the stream of Judaism with which they are affiliated. While Israel must retain its sovereign authority to determine its own future, decisions taken in Jerusalem that affect the Jewish people as a whole require that we listen to, consult with and take account of the concerns and interests of Jews beyond our borders.

Second, the relationship between Israel and world Jewry cannot be founded on *shilat hagola* (negating the Diaspora), nor on the mistaken idea that Israel is no longer central to Jewish life. As Zionists, we must continue to encourage aliyah, but we also have a vital interest in the vibrancy and welfare of Diaspora

communities. Similarly, Diaspora Jews have a critical stake in Israel's success and prosperity.

Third, if we are to encourage a common sense of purpose and belonging, there must be a place within Jewish discourse for responsible criticism of Israel's policies, even from overseas, without it being considered an act of betrayal. To equate supporting Israel with supporting the policies of any given government at any given time risks distancing Jews by forcing upon them a false choice between their commitment to Israel and their personal world view. Israel is a confident and strong democracy and it is able to withstand and contain this kind of criticism.

At the same time, those who criticise from within the family – those who criticise out of love – have responsibilities as well. They must be conscious of the fact that their criticism may be exploited for more sinister ends by Israel's enemies, and they should shape the context and form of their criticism accordingly. They must also show sensitivity to the excruciating dilemmas and constraints under which Israel operates and not fall victim to the double standards that so often characterise its critics.

Fourth, and most important, while in many ways Israel has realised the Zionist vision of establishing a Jewish state, we have yet to succeed in creating a Jewish society ... a society that is a source of meaning, identity, culture and spiritual growth for Jews around the world, and a source of leadership and moral example for the world as a whole. It is a society that answers the questions of what we stand for and what we contribute, not because we are threatened by enemies that seek to delegitimise us, but because we owe it to ourselves and our children. This is not just a project for Israelis, it is a project for Jews worldwide – it is a responsibility that both communities share and neither can abandon.