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## **Members of Knesset Discover America**

**By Shmuel Rosner**

### **A philanthropic foundation will fly six Likud, Labor and Kadima MK's to the US to learn about American Jews**

The story of Purim, recounted in the Book of Esther read yesterday in Tel Aviv and today in Jerusalem, is the story of the Jewish Diaspora. It is the story of a very vulnerable community; yet, a community that also knows how, during the good times, to find a way into the right places at the right times. Some American Jewish public opinion makers have learned some important lessons from this story. For instance: "Do not desert your Jewish relatives who have married non-Jews. They might save your life." Or: "Mixed marriages can potentially help us more than they can destroy us."

Compare these statements to the standard Israeli narrative that warns us of the dangers of assimilation threatening to annihilate American Jewry. Compare them to Likud MK Tsipi Hotovely's recent remarks regarding data on "mixed" families in Israel, and her demand that the authorities explain what they are doing "to prevent the phenomena of assimilation in Israel." A phenomenon that she probably does not see in a positive light.

In a few weeks, Tsipi Hotovely will get on a plane and register a short absence from Knesset life in favor of an intensive seminar on American Jewry, where she will discover a thing or two that she did not know about assimilation. She is one of six MK's chosen to receive this benefit from The Rudermnan Family Foundation, whose president, Jay Ruderman, is attempting to reduce the level of ignorance that impedes dialogue between Jews in Israel and America. "These MK's," says Ruderman "will make decisions in the future that will have an impact on Jews across the Jewish world. Therefore," he explains, "they should know something about this large community that lives on another continent."

Hotovely will fly with members of the Likud, Kadima and Labor: Avi Dichter, Ronit Tirosh, Daniel Ben Simon, Eitan Cabel, and Carmel Shama-Hacohen. The schedule is tight. At Brandeis University they will learn from the best of the experts, including historian Jonathan Sarna, who will speak to them about the past and future of the community; researcher Ted Sasson, who will explain "Who We Are;" and Len Saxe, who will provide data on "Americans and Israel." And when they won't be sitting in academic lectures, they will be hearing from the people on the ground such as Howard Kohr, from the AIPAC lobby; Barry Shrage, President of the Boston community; and Jerry Silverman, from the Jewish Federations and more.

Ruderman, who has met quite a few Israeli politicians, understands that they know very little about the American Jewish community. "It is natural," he says, "that public officials who focus on serving their own constituents concentrate on local audiences. Nevertheless, Israeli public life has an impact on the life of Jews in the Diaspora, so the leadership should be educated."

Ruderman is also equipped with a poll, perhaps to prove to the MK's that there are benefits to the studies he offers. 87% of Israelis believe that "the American Jewish community is vital to the security of Israel and its political existence." 82% support

the need to educate MK's on the community. That was an easy question—how can one object to the MK's learning something? The response is not entirely convincing, if we take into account the fact that the ignorance of Knesset members is a reflection of the general Israeli ignorance regarding American Jewry.

Even more interesting is the positive response of 73% of Israelis who believe there is much to be learned from the religious pluralism of American Jewry. So these six MK's have an opportunity to start learning. (No worries: The schedule leaves a bit of time for shopping.) Not a moment too early.