

Israeli MKs: Boston Trip Made us Better Listeners

*By Leah Burrows
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The Ruderman Fellowship program, which brought six Israeli Knesset members from different parties to Boston last month, was meant to teach Israeli politicians about the American Jewish community.

It did – but it also taught the MKs about each other.

“It was a bit like group therapy,” said Daniel Ben Simon of Likud, who took part in the week-long program. “In Israel, the political divide becomes a personal divide, we are entrenched in our views. ... We are becoming closed camps. But in going to America, we had opportunity to work together.”

The program was sponsored and organized by Jay Ruderman and the Ruderman Family Foundation. The MKs – two each from Likud, Kadima and Labor – spoke with Brandeis University students, attended lectures by professors and met leaders of the Jewish community and Jewish organizations. They also visited Jewish leaders in New York.

“The goal was to understand the Jewish community and its role and how Israel makes discussions that impact this community here in the Diaspora,” Ruderman said over the phone from Israel.

It’s a lesson that seemed all the more relevant this past week when the sometimes quarrelsome, always complex relationship between the United States and Israel took center stage in Washington, D.C.

Ruderman was quick to distinguish between governmental and communal relationships – that between President Barack Obama and Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu versus that between Israelis and the American Jewish community. But Ruderman said one can influence the other.

“It’s important for Knesset members to have a significant understanding of the American Jewish community so that when they become prime ministers or foreign ministers it’s not completely foreign to them,” Ruderman said.

The feedback from the MKs has been overwhelmingly positive, according to Ruderman.

The biggest lesson Ben Simon took away was the civility of the American debate. “The same arguments exist [in Israel and in the US], but the way you handle it is more much sophisticated,” Ben Simon said. “Here we fight, we fight, we fight.”

In a phone interview, Ronit Tirosh of Kadima said fighting is “normal” in Israeli politics, but the Ruderman experience could soften personal attacks — at least among the fellows.

Recently, she said, she saw Ben Simon interviewed about a bill Tirosh had purposed in the Knesset. Before the trip, Tirosh said Ben Simon, who is left-wing, might have attacked Tirosh personally for the bill.

Instead, he limited his criticism to the bill itself.

“He said, I know you, I can’t say anything bad about you,” Tirosh recalled.

“The media could make me out to be something I am not, but now [Ben Simon] knows me and he understands me.”

The trip also changed the way Tirosh viewed American Jews, especially younger Jews, she said.

Many Brandeis students told Tirosh of their concerns over human rights in Israel. She said many Israelis are concerned as well, but look at human rights differently. “We share the same values, but not the same way of thinking,” she said. “We are living under threat, and we have to be more suspicious and more precautionous. In America you are very, very generous because you have nothing to loose. You are not living in threat.”

Understanding those differences can help officials explain some of Israel’s more controversial policies to American Jews, she said.

Tirosh is creating a caucus in the Knesset to teach other members what she learned in the United States. “It is important for us as legislators because we have a very specific example when we discussed who is a Jew. but in the US there is a variety of ways of being a Jew,” Tirosh said. “We don’t have to be a burden for [American Jews]. We have to be more flexible to keep the Jewish people inside, not outside.”

Avi Dicter, also of Kadima, said he was used to working with the American Jewish community, but in a very different capacity.

As head of the Shin Bet, the Israeli security forces, Dicter would brief American organizations like AIPAC 10 to 15 times a year. This time he came to listen, not to talk. “We sometimes take the Jewish community in the States for granted,” he said. “I’ve learned that it is something to be maintained and improved.”