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News

New York

National

International

Israel

Short Takes

Briefs

Israel At 60

36 Under 36: TJW

Editorial & Opinion

The Arts

Jewish Life

Food

Travel

Calendars

Classifieds

Special Sections

Singles

Write On For Israel

Fresh Ink for Teens

Directories

Blogs

NY Resources

select below

[Home](#) > [News](#) > [New York](#)

04/29/2009

[Print this Page](#)

Black And White, Blue And White

by Sharon Udasin
Staff Writer

Moving between the soulful sounds of "Amazing Grace" and a rendition of the traditional Hebrew melody "Avinu Malkeinu," three local gospel choirs joined renowned Israeli singer David D'Or and the Israel Defense Force Orchestra Tuesday evening as they united to celebrate Israel's 61st birthday at Harlem's famed Apollo Theater.

After a standing-room-only pilot event on Israel's birthday last year, the Israeli Consulate here decided it would again celebrate Yom Ha'Atzmaut — Israeli Independence Day — with the local African-American community in "A Night of Harmony." The three African-American ensembles included Harlem's own Bethel Gospel Choir, a teenage group from The Allen Cathedral of Jamaica, Queens, and Christian soul rocker Hezekiah Walker & LFC.

This year's concert is part of a recent effort by the

consulate to engage with the African-American community and improve a relationship that grew increasingly tense in the decades following the civil rights era. Part of the effort, Media Consul David Saranga said, is taking place in Israel as well, as that government looks to improve the lives of its immigrants from Africa.

"We believe in diplomacy — it's not only relations between governments, it's also bridges between cultures," said Saranga, who has been using various social media outlets — like Twitter and Facebook —

an attempt to revamp Israel's public image. "We want to get grass-roots support," he added, noting that Israel needs to garner the support of niche populations around the world in order to bring about a mutual sense of respect for each culture.

The African-American community fills this niche, Saranga explained, because of the common histories of oppression that the two communities have shared and their intense work together during the civil rights movement. Saranga pointed out that as American Jews helped fight for racial equality in this country, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. praised Israel as a model democracy amid its less-than-friendly Middle Eastern neighbors.

"People relate to the Jewish and Israeli communities as only interested in themselves," Saranga continued. But he stressed how Israel has worked diligently to help African refugees, particularly those from Ethiopia. (The government has, in fact, come under some criticism for its handling of some of those refugees.) "Just as in the Jewish community here, Israel is also trying to make the world a better place, through tikkun olam," or repairing the world, he said.

In January, as war raged in Gaza, the consulate and Bethel Gospel Assembly held a joint prayer session for the Jewish state, where Senior Pastor Bishop Carlton T. Brown reiterated Bethel's unwavering commitment to Israel. In turn, Consul General Asaf Shariv briefed Harlem churchgoers about developments in the war, reminding them of Israel's dedication to bringing humanitarian aid to civilians in Gaza.

"It's a sharing of culture," said Ruth Ann Winter, director of ministry relations at the Bethel Gospel Assembly. "We as a church have always maintained a spiritual stance, not a political stance — the Bible tells us to bless the people of Israel."



For the past 18 years, the consulate — on behalf of the State of Israel — has been awarding members of the African-American community with a Martin Luther King Jr. Honor each February, in an effort co-sponsored by the Jewish Community Relations Council and the Jewish National Fund. Recipients have included Russell Simmons, Bishop Cesar, Eric Cooper and Rev. A.R. Bernard Sr. The Israeli government joined in the efforts in 2007, when the head of the Knesset's Christian Allies Caucus worked with an African-American Evangelical pastor to launch a similar Martin Luther King, Jr. award, The Jerusalem Post reported.

"Israel and America are the two democracies that celebrate Martin Luther King's birthday — the only two," said Eric Cooper, who referred to Israel as "the mother country" and serves as the president of the National Urban Alliance for Effective Education. In his organization, Cooper believes that anti-Semitism and racism can be decreased only through dialogue and he actively integrates bridge-building material into urban educational environments, such as classrooms right here in Harlem.

Cooper has worked closely with 90-year-old Reuven Feuerstein, who chairs the International Center for Enhancement of Learning Potential in Jerusalem, with the help of his brother, Rabbi Rafael Feuerstein. At the center, the Feuersteins have helped Down syndrome patients succeed in school and work and helped Ethiopian immigrant workers become highly professional lawyers and officers, Cooper said.

Cooper and Feuerstein have borrowed from each other's teaching techniques, and together they began researching the historical roots of black-Jewish relations.

"Anti-Semitism and racism rise up especially during times of economic downturn," Cooper said. He explained that his organization sends mentors into classrooms, aiming to nurture and guide young students away from racism as early in life as possible, and to take away feelings of jealousy and fear that often cause rifts between the two communities. "There is a tremendous need to break down the walls of prejudice that exist between African-Americans and Jews," Cooper said.

Seventeen years after the Crown Heights race riots, African-American hip-hop legends like Russell Simmons have begun championing Jewish-Israeli causes, and nearly 80 percent of American Jews voted to elect Barack Obama as president of the United States, noted Rabbi Marc Schneier, president of The Foundation for Ethnic Understanding and author of a book on the subject called "Shared Dreams."

"People from the African-American community have seen Jews involved from the beginning [of the civil rights movement], and Jews have seen other Jews support an African-American candidate."

"You can be black and get white votes and also have Jewish people working for you," agreed Nathan Rothstein, who is the political director for the New Orleans mayoral candidate James Perry's campaign. Perry, an African-American politician, has been working to bridge gaps between blacks and Jews in that city for years.

But tensions remain, and African American and Jewish leaders alike maintain the need for increased education and dialogue, as well as continued support for cross-cultural events like Israel's 61st birthday celebration this week at the Apollo Theater. This year's event comes at an ideal time, arriving just a few months before the 100th anniversary of the NAACP, the leading civil rights group in America, Rabbi Schneier said.

"As an ongoing yearly event, it reminds us of the historical relationship between people who have been enslaved," Cooper added. "Harlem is the capital of the African Americans — Harlem is our capital. What better place is there than Harlem to bring together the two communities?"

[Back to top](#)



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