

COMMENT & FEATURES

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Dysfunctional government

Israel could not have asked for a more positive beginning to US Vice President Joe Biden's visit this week. Positive body language abounded, with all the requisite hugs, warm gestures, smiles and general good vibes.

There were verbalized emotions, such as the vice president's comment to President Shimon Peres that Israel "captured my heart." Biden even made declarations with diplomatic ramifications. The cornerstone of the Israeli-US relationship, he said on Tuesday, "is our absolute, total unvarnished commitment to Israel's security," and then managed to top even that with the adamant declaration that "there is no space between the US and Israel when it comes to Israel's security."

After almost a year of distance – most notably contrasted with President Barack Obama's June 2009 Cairo speech that focused on reconciliation with Islam – the Biden trip, with its private meetings aimed principally at coordinating strategy for thwarting Iran's nuclear drive, was turning out to be everything that an embattled, nervous Jewish nation could dream of.

As Israeli Apartheid Week draws to a close, it sometimes seems that the only real friend Israel has in the entire world is the good old US of A, and the Biden visit was confirmation of that partnership. By sundown Tuesday, it would have been fitting to note that on another Tuesday, the third day of creation, God said "and it was good" twice.

But then it happened. A three-year chain of bureaucratic events climaxed to spectacularly damaging effect. In a staggering example of diplomatic obtuseness, the Interior Ministry's Jerusalem Regional Planning and Construction Commission announced the approval of 1,600 additional housing units in Ramat Shlomo, a haredi neighborhood of 20,000 in northeast Jerusalem – inside the sovereign city limits, but squarely over the pre-1967 Green Line.

Safeguards that some previous governments had put in place to ensure the careful handling of such sensitive issues were plainly not in effect this time. Interior Minister Eli Yishai (Shas), preoccupied with a coalition crisis over conversion policy legislation, said he was not informed of the decision, nor would he have expected to be. Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu had evidently failed to make it clear that he wished to be informed of any such developments, and thus was not alerted ahead of the announcement.

Biden and his wife Jill arrived over an hour late to dinner with Netanyahu and his wife Sarah on Tuesday night. And when they finally did show up, they brought with them what constituted a major league castigation. "I condemn the decision by the government of Israel to advance planning for new housing units in east Jerusalem," Biden said, in a statement released during dinner. "The substance and timing of the announcement, particularly with the launching of proximity talks, is precisely the kind of step that undermines the trust we need right now and runs counter to the constructive discussions that I've had here in Israel."

SUCH RIGHT-hand-not-knowing-what-the-left-hand-is-doing blunders strike a blow to Israel's image, and a blow on more substantive levels too.

For a start, the Netanyahu government looks completely incompetent. If the announcement on Ramat Shlomo had been a calculated, coherent decision aimed at torpedoing the fledgling "proximity talks", or aimed at expressing an unshakable commitment to the fast-growing haredi population desperately in need of housing, its merits or failings could have been legitimately discussed.

But the reality is much more prosaic – and worrying. The expansion of Ramat Shlomo accords with broad government policy. Differently timed, and ideally quietly explained to Washington ahead of time, it might have prompted public displeasure from the United States – that the administration had tried and failed to persuade Netanyahu to extend the settlement-building moratorium to east Jerusalem – but likely no more than that.

Instead, because of sheer ineptitude, the timing of the announcement immediately threatened the "proximity talks" in which Netanyahu has stressed Israel has a profound interest. It united the Palestinians, the Arab world and much of the international community in a chorus of anti-Israel condemnation.

And most unhappily of all, it embarrassed our most important ally at a time when this ally, as represented by Biden, was making a heartfelt effort to improve relations and assure Israel of its abiding support.

It seems fair to assume that, in the long run, the truly deep and significant bonds between our two countries will endure. The shared values and interests, many of them encapsulated in the commitment to freedom and democracy, plainly outweigh even significant missteps like this one. But to attain these common goals requires avoiding serious mistakes that embarrass our friends and strengthen our enemies. To attain these common goals requires profound trust between allies.

Now Israel must set about rebuilding that trust.



FAMILY REUNION. (From left) Ari Greenspan, Malka Dessi and her newly found brother, and Ari Zivotofsky in Ethiopia.

Ethiopia revisited

Two friends close circles in a more than 25-year relationship with Ethiopian Jews

• By ARI GREENSPAN and ARI Z. ZIVOTOFSKY

The same phrase said in almost the same place under different circumstances could have a very different meaning. We recently returned from a trip to Ethiopia where we visited the Adenite Jews of Addis Ababa and the remnants of the Beta Israel/Falash Mura community in Gondar. We had "been there, done that" before, but this trip, as each trip ends up being, was unique. The people we met and the activity we saw truly inspired us.

Malka Dessi also just returned from a trip to Ethiopia. She is originally from Ethiopia, has been living here for 17 years and this was her first trip back. Our paths had crossed in Ethiopia more than two decades ago and again on this trip, but we were all in very different circumstances this time around.

Our initial contact with Ethiopian Jews was in 1983 when, as college students, we received an urgent telephone call from a Jewish student organization that needed immediate help. We were told that a young Ethiopian Jewish couple had been smuggled out of Ethiopia via Sudan and were on a speaking tour of universities in the northeastern US. Their driver/escort had to leave suddenly and if they could not find a replacement to accompany them, the tour would have to be canceled.

At six the next morning, we were on a flight to Providence, Rhode Island. When we arrived at the motel, we did not immediately find them, but as we walked around the motel a young black couple approached and with our back turned to them, one of us sort of furtively muttered "shalom." Their immediate response of "shalom aleichem" told us we had found our couple and ignited a relationship for us with the Jews of Ethiopia that continues until today.

PRIOR TO that whirlwind speaking tour, we knew relatively little about Ethiopia or its Jews. In facilitating their speaking tour, we had an on-the-job crash course in the subject, but realized that there was ever so much more to learn and do. We made contact with the North American Conference on Ethiopian Jewry and its heroic director, Barbara Ribikove Gordon, and signed up for a mission to Ethiopia in 1987. Then we went on a second mission in 1988. The Israelis were then trying to get the people out.



THE DESSIS in Ethiopia, 1988.



THE DESSIS in Israel, 2000.

Others had trekked to Sudan, a trek that cost many lives.

In those days the dictatorial Mengistu government was oppressing the nation and our people in particular. The Jews were afraid of torture and imprisonment. We arrived in Bahar Dar, a city on the southern end of Lake Tana, having been briefed to try to find a certain Sheffero Dessi and inform him that the "bus stop in Sudan" – evidently a known collection point for the refugees by the Israelis – "was no longer active." We went to a simple house with a dirt floor that we were told was his house, and it was definitely a house and not a tukul, traditional straw hut, like the Jews in the villages in Gondar lived in.

On the mostly bare wall was a poster of a scantily clad white woman, which, as was evident from the Hebrew writing, they had clearly hung up because it was from an Israeli newspaper. We knew we had reached our destination. Sheffero invited us to his house the next day, and we met part of his family and exchanged addresses. The oldest daughter had already made her way

to Israel, but the other eight children were still with the parents. We parted ways with "lehitraot ba'aretz" – may we see each other in the Land of Israel. We knew we were headed straight to Israel, a land we knew well. For them, Israel was a distant dream, a religious aspiration, an unknown place that they had never seen and knew nothing about.

Ari Greenspan made aliya shortly thereafter; Sheffero and family came later, piecemeal. Four of the children escaped to Sudan and were airlifted out in 1990, while the parents and other children came as part of Operation Solomon in 1991, at which point Greenspan reconnected with them. Over the years, Greenspan, as a dentist, has treated Sheffero's son, and just two years ago, he helped an Ethiopian mother of two with some dental care and totally by chance she turned out to be Sheffero's oldest daughter.

When Ari Zivotofsky came on aliya several years later, he moved to Beit Shemesh and Greenspan informed him that Sheffero Dessi and family lived there, and he visited them with his children.

WHEN WE decided to return to Ethiopia in July, we called Sheffero to see if he had any relatives still there. To our surprise, his youngest daughter Tziona answered the house phone and told us that her mother, Malka, was at that moment back in Ethiopia visiting a brother she had not seen in decades. We knew then that we had to meet her and close this circle of 25 years. What brought her back to Ethiopia? We were told that she had a brother who had "disappeared" in Sudan and had now been "found," and it was he whom Malka had returned to visit.

Finding Malka would be much easier this time – we all had our cellphones with us in this more modern and free Ethiopia. The family reunion was taking place in Gondar, and we told her what day we were scheduled to arrive there. We called Malka from the Addis Ababa airport after our 6 a.m. flight was postponed to 10 a.m., and continued to update her as the Air Ethiopia flight was continually delayed until takeoff for the 45-minute flight finally occurred at 4 p.m.

Arriving in Gondar as it was getting dark, we dropped our bags at our hotel and headed immediately to the city center, excited to meet her and her long-lost brother in the hotel where they were staying. The hotel was not fancy and there was no electricity that evening due to a power outage, an almost nightly occurrence. The story we had heard was that her brother had disappeared 20 years ago in Sudan and had not been heard from since. Suddenly he appeared after being released from a Sudanese prison and she had gone to meet him. Yet when we arrived at the hotel, we saw her with a teenager whom she introduced as her brother.

We were temporarily confused until she clarified that she had come to see not one but two long-lost brothers. Her parents, who are no longer alive, had separated when she was young. Her mother had remarried, and it was this son who she had known and who had disappeared in Sudan. He had spent a year in a Sudanese jail, two years in an Egyptian jail and then many more years in Sudan. Finally, last year he had returned to Ethiopia, and they had now reunited. However, we missed that reunion which had taken place several days earlier in Addis Ababa.

Her father had also remarried, and had given Malka a brother – the teenager we saw her with and whom she had never previously met.

WE ASSUMED that for her this visit to Ethiopia must have been like coming home. She speaks the language, knows the customs and has family. We wondered whether she would be happy to be back. Might she have regrets about having left and moving to new challenges in Israel?

The answer was obvious from the moment we saw each other. She was thrilled to see us, but so homesick for Israel that it was painful. Her new 15-year-old brother sat by her side not wanting to let go of her. She, however, wanted nothing but to go home – to Beit Shemesh.

So there we were, closing an amazing circle of life. Having been there 21 years ago to try to help people escape the oppression of Ethiopia and get to the Holy Land, we now met by choice, both lucky tourists visiting a spectacular but sad place.

As we said good-bye in Gondar, we sadly left her to her obvious loneliness and despair. We asked her when she was going to Israel and she answered very sorrowfully that it was two more weeks. The two weeks she had left were going to be tough. When we asked her how it was for her, she responded that she loved Israel and that it was the best thing that had happened to her. Her family's absorption has not been without its difficulties, but they are glad that they are in Israel.

Her brothers in Ethiopia have no connection with Judaism while her family in Israel is in close contact with the Ethiopian kesim (religious leaders) and although they are not religious in the Western sense, they feel a connection to Judaism.

Her trip was difficult in many regards: financially, leaving the family, having to meet and then leave her brothers, but she felt it was important to go. The time in Ethiopia was even more difficult that expected, and she rescheduled and went home less than a week later.

When we parted it was with smiles and the wish of "lehitraot ba'aretz" – this time knowing that we all lived there and were all headed home in a short time. And indeed, several weeks after returning we met again, this time in Israel.

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