

# ENGAGING PEOPLE

**Through 'Partnership 2000,' more than 300,000 Israeli and Diaspora Jews partner together to strengthen social ties between Israel and the Jewish communities abroad - creating indelible personal bonds across the Jewish world / Natalie Page**

**U**nder the umbrella of the Jewish Agency for Israel's Partnership 2000 (P2K) platform, hundreds of volunteers from Israel and around the world have greatly impacted on 45 regions in Israel and 550 Jewish communities overseas. Their dedication stems from a belief that their mission is not only important for the fortitude of Israel but also critical to the resilience of the Jewish people.

Through hundreds of programs undertaken by P2K, each of the partnership communities directly benefits, but the most important end-goal is the creation of true and longstanding relationships between members of the communities. "It is not an engagement of 'Come to Israel for a week and let's hope that you have a meaningful experience' but, rather, a deep engagement that touches people and involves them in a continuum of activity," explains Andrea S. Arbel, Director of the Division of Partnerships at the Jewish Agency for Israel, responsible for the P2K program.

Iris Feinberg, a businesswoman from Atlanta and Partnership 2000 co-chair for the past three years, considers that "one of P2K's biggest achievements has been to engage and incorporate Israeli lay leadership into the partnership process. From the North American side, the original partnership process was sort of 'us and them' and now it is 'us and us' from either side of the table. What the partnerships do so beautifully is build genuine relationships and that is precisely what P2K facilitates."

The Partnership 2000 model is unique. Each of the 45 partnerships is led by its own autonomous steering committee comprised of lay leadership from the overseas Jewish community alongside Israeli volunteers and local representatives. Led by two co-chairs, one from Israel and one from the overseas community, each partnership defines its own vision, based on shared values and interests, which it realizes through a long-term mission.

Among the many initiatives undertaken by the various partnerships are people-to-people programs devoted to connecting students, ed-



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ucators, artists, firemen, policemen, doctors, lawyers and more. Other joint projects include Jewish identity programs as well as activities designed to instill a broader understanding of the Jewish world, school twinning programs and leadership and volunteer development programs.

## A new vision

"Like any good program that hopes to be relevant over time, P2K has to evolve and change to reflect changing interests, trends and needs, as well as the dynamic Jewish environment in which the program is implemented," says Arbel. As such, having concluded 13 years of activity, the leadership of Partnership 2000 felt that it was time to revisit the P2K vision.

The person who spearheaded the vision process is Raya Strauss-Bendor, co-owner of Strauss Investment Company and Israeli co-chair of Partnership 2000. Strauss-Bendor's active civic involvement in P2K, first as co-chair of the Nahariya/Northern New Jersey partnership and now also as international P2K co-chair (together with Feinberg), stems from her desire to lead social change and her deep concern for the future of the Jewish people. "I feel that I have been entrusted with an important mission. Today, the Jewish people is facing a serious problem: the Jewish nation is shrinking as a result of a high degree of assimilation - over 60 percent, both in the traditional Jewish communities and now among Israelis

living overseas," says Strauss-Bendor.

"Here in Israel too, many secular Jews have become disconnected from their heritage and Jewish culture because of their negative perception of Orthodox Jews. In a generation and a half we have managed to lose the wealth of knowledge that the Jewish people amassed over 2,000 years. We are one nation that is located in different places, like tribes; we don't have to be all situated in one place, but our soul is Jewish, and that is what has held us together for thousands of years," believes Strauss-Bendor.

"During my involvement with P2K, I visited many Diaspora communities and have realized that without them we would not have accomplished all that we have, that they are our most important asset," continues Strauss-Bendor. "We owe them a huge debt of gratitude. Today, the important thing is not only the money but the people, our people, our family."

## Reconnecting Jewry

Raya Strauss-Bendor is particularly concerned about the younger generation in the Israeli expatriate community. "I have observed from my visits abroad that the Israelis - currently one million in the United States alone - prefer not to send their kids to a Jewish school or join the established local Jewish community, with many of their children marrying non-Jews, and I do not want to lose them," she remarks. "I tell them 'You speak Hebrew and you visit your family in Israel



Far left: A living bridge project unites Israeli and Diaspora youth.

Left: A delegation of policemen from the United States at a joint workshop with colleagues from the Western Galilee

but your children are Americans and they do not know what their identity is. To ensure that they retain their Jewish identity you must connect, and P2K is a great way to do that.”

“P2K is particularly influential in connecting the overseas Jews who do not want to be part of the community, which usually revolves around a synagogue. They see that being part of P2K is fun and rewarding,” asserts Strauss-Bendor. She gives as an example a wealthy Israeli she met in Los Angeles: “His son was chosen by his school to go on a mission as part of the Tel Aviv/Los Angeles partnership school twinning program, but he didn’t want to visit Israel. He ended up going, and while in Israel fell in love with an Israeli girl and with the country, and he now wants to come back for three months, and plans to enlist in the Israeli army.”

Indeed, the bonds created through the various P2K programs help reconnect overseas Jewry. One example is the Beit-Shemesh-Yehuda Plains/South Africa-Washington partnership’s Bicycle Project. An economic development project designed to establish biking infrastructure in the Beit Shemesh area, it has led to deep friendships between bike-lovers from all three partner communities, many of whom were not active in their community beforehand. The relationships that formed between project participants have led to bikers going on bike-riding missions to their partner communities, and the project designers are now intent on establishing a joint annual bike race in the Beit Shemesh region.

## Mutual responsibility

Raya Strauss-Bendor has also noticed P2K’s influence in Israel. “The Israeli teachers who visit their partnership communities are impressed by how the teachers abroad incorporate Jewish tradition into the curriculum and, feeling that it is lacking in their own schools, have chosen to adopt the practice. When I visit public schools in Nahariya I now see posters with information on the weekly Torah por-

tion, and the teachers tell me that they want to do ‘*Kabbalat Shabbat*’ with their students. It is a great example of how our Jewish identity is strengthened by choice. Also, many of our Israeli participants come back from their missions saying ‘We left as Israelis and returned as Jews and Zionists,’” she says.

This concern for the loss of Jewish identity is one of a number of shared Israel-Diaspora issues highlighted during the process of redefining the P2K vision, which will be completed by the end of this year. Another is the sense of mutual responsibility. “We have evolved to the point that our Israeli counterparts do not think only about programming and issues in Israel; they now also think about programs and issues in their partner communities, and

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North American communities don’t think only about programming and issues in Israel, but also about programming and issues in their own community,” explains Iris Feinberg. “It is a real sense of responsibility, coherence and mutuality that happens when you are really concerned about a whole and not just a part. The idea that you can really mutually benefit and influence each other is critical, because that will allow for ideas and solutions to be shaped by many voices.”

“We are also addressing the needs of both sides of the ocean for more Jewish identity and Jewish culture in the programming,” notes Feinberg. “It cannot, for example, just be ‘let’s help kids learn how to read,’ but ‘let’s make

them literate in Jewish history.’ Children all over the world are not being given an opportunity to learn about their Jewish history and culture, and the more opportunities we have to infuse our programming with those elements, the better it is going to be.”

## Long-term impact

“Another issue that is coming out very strongly is the centrality of Israel; that even though we are talking about Jewish peoplehood and mutual responsibility, on the Israeli side there is an understanding that the centrality of Israel is critical to that end,” notes Andrea Arbel. “There is still a role for overseas Jewry in the continued upbuilding of the still very young Jewish state. The involvement of overseas Jewry in cutting edge initiatives to advance and strengthen Israeli society helps fortify Israel, which in turn deepens the bonds and strengthens the Jewish people,” asserts Arbel.

Therefore, a new initiative being advanced by P2K is designed to position Israel among the top 15 countries in the world when it comes to quality of life - a cause championed by the Reut Institute, an Israeli public policy planning think tank. The Beit-Shemesh-Yehuda Plains/South Africa-Washington partnership was the first partnership to get involved in this grassroots project and is now followed by the Western Galilee/UJC Central Region Consortium partnership.

“The process involves identifying the unique narrative of each region and developing it,” explains Raya Strauss-Bendor. “We cannot compete with China or India; we have to focus on what we are good at and work to enhance it. To outside observers, Israel appears to be a finished product, but when you show them what more can be accomplished, it fully captures their imagination.”

Both co-chairs are enthusiastic about Partnership 2000’s long-term impact. “We are all in this big pot together and P2K is the glue that is really going to keep Israel and Diaspora Jewry together,” says Iris Feinberg. Raya Strauss-Bendor adds her own perspective: “I see P2K as the platform that can lead to a positive change in Jewish peoplehood. I am fortunate to be part of a group of volunteers that shares a great love for Israel and the Jewish people - a group determined that it will not be our generation that breaks the chain uniting the Jewish people.” ■

For more information about Partnership 2000, please visit [www.jewishagency.org](http://www.jewishagency.org).