

Conversation With a
GOODWILL
AMBASSADOR

An interview with U.S. Ambassador to Israel David Friedman

INTERVIEW

by **SARA LEHMANN**

THIS ROSH HASHANAH ushers in a new peace for Israel, in the form of the aptly named Abraham Accord. This extraordinary peace agreement between Israel and the United Arab Emirates, and a second one between Israel and Bahrain, have earned President Trump a nomination for the 2021 Nobel Peace Prize. But the historic triumph could not have been achieved without the tireless efforts of the President's team, chief among them Ambassador David Friedman, U.S. Ambassador to Israel.

For the past four years, Ambassador Friedman has used his legal skills and finesse to bring the major players in the Middle East toward more peaceful resolutions. And his fearless advocacy for Israel and the Jewish people was instrumental in advancing the many accomplishments of the Trump administration on behalf of Israel, including moving the American Embassy to Jerusalem, recognizing Israel's sovereignty over the Golan Heights, closing the PLO Mission in Washington D.C., cutting aid to the PA and UNWRA, and ceasing to view Israel's settlements as "inconsistent with international law."

The Orthodox Jewish ambassador touts a long-standing commitment to President Trump and to the State of Israel, and his dedication to both has translated into diplomatic success for one of the most sensitive and complex spots on the globe. In an exclusive interview with *Hamodia*, Ambassador Friedman spoke about the recent UAE deal and the personal and professional challenges of his position.



THE Israel-UAE peace agreement is a great achievement for the Trump

administration but it seems to have gotten scant media attention after it was first announced. Do you think this is because the media is looking to downplay President Trump's achievements?

No question about it. And not just with the UAE. You can barely find an article about what happened with Kosovo and Serbia. The deal with the UAE was the first agreement between Israel and an Arab nation in 26 years. Because they couldn't come up fast enough with an idea to dismiss it, there was one day that the media was very supportive.

Then efforts were made to undermine the deal both in Israel and the U.S. because people don't like either the Prime Minister in Israel or the President here. They began either ignoring it or arguing that it came with costs. Conspiracy theories were thrown up that were shot down. There was a real resistance on the part of the main-

stream media to applaud the deal because there is a real visceral desire to criticize Trump.

But there were also many Trump supporters, especially in Israel, who criticized the accord because they felt betrayed by its removal of annexation as a precondition. Can you comment on that?

I think that criticism is unfair for a couple of reasons. I've been consistent since the day I got into office — I believe that Israel should never evacuate any of the Jewish communities in Judea and Samaria nor should America ever suggest that Israel should do so. There are Israeli flags flying today over Chevron, Bet El, Ma'ale Adumim, Ariel and elsewhere in Judea and Samaria. Both the American government and I think they should be flying there tomorrow and forever. And we put our money where our mouth is because we published a peace plan that provides that all those Jewish communities will remain intact.

It is because we published that plan that the issue of sovereignty took off in the first place. The sovereignty movement may have existed



This picture was taken at the announcement of the Israel-UAE accord at the White House.

previously in small circles, but it really took off when the Trump administration published a plan with a map that showed all these communities would remain intact. So I think it is unfair for anyone to criticize the Trump administration as backing off on sovereignty.

I believe that the day will come when Israel will have political sovereignty. But let's be clear: Jewish communities are living there today with the support of the Israeli government. And the official position of the U.S. government is these settlements are not illegal, which is a big departure from the past, and they shouldn't be dismantled in any way. So we have advanced the issue of sovereignty in ways unmatched by any previous administration.

Although with a caveat, because the Trump plan provides for sovereignty within the framework of agreeing to a Palestinian state. Do you think that some on the Israeli right, who reject this premise, might see the UAE deal as giving them an opening for sovereignty outside the Trump plan?

What I always say to people who push sovereignty in a vacuum is, "What's your answer to two and a half million Palestinians who live there?" They don't have an answer and just dance around the issue. Ultimately, they say the Palestinians can't have an army, can't control the airspace, can't continue to pay terrorists, can't flood Israel with Palestinian refugees, should only have civilian autonomy and have to accept Israel as a Jewish state. Our plan provides for all that! Read our plan.

What I find out from these discussions is that the people with the loudest voices have never read our plan. They see the words "Palestinian state" and they say it's no good. But they should understand how that state is defined and created. Unfortunately, like so many other issues plaguing Israel and the U.S., these issues get entirely politicized. People take what they want and use it to fill their own political space, and that's not in the best interest of the U.S. or Israel.

Israel gains both economically and strategically from the Israel-UAE accord because of a shared enmity with Iran. We already see Israelis pursuing commercial contacts and looking to grow their businesses there. But the UAE profits as much or even more, since Israel is a regional hi-tech giant, has superior intelligence, and gains possible access to F-35 stealth fighters. Which country benefits more?

It's hard to say. I think there are tremendous benefits on both sides. Somebody recently threw out a number of \$4 billion a year of incremental trade for Israel. I think it's going to be more, but even that number is significant, especially when the Israeli economy has been severely damaged by the coronavirus.

Right now, Israel is receiving a huge amount of investment capital from China. It's a very bad partnership. We don't trust the Chinese and neither should Israel. We've communicated that to Israel on numerous occasions. But you have to replace that type of capital. Replacing it with the Emirates' money is a far safer and more benign path.

I also think the Emirates will be a great investing partner in Israel. They will benefit from access to great technology and innovation. There will be a lot of Israeli tourists going to Dubai and Abu Dhabi. And the Emirates of course have some real brain power of their own. So, I think it's win-win.

Can you comment on the controversy regarding the F-35 fighters?

I don't think this issue should be politicized. We've said many times that the normalization agreement between Israel and the UAE does not provide for Israel to concede the rights of the Emirates to get F-35s or any other weaponry. At the same time, the Emirates have been seeking F-35s for at least five or six years. If they were able to prevail upon the administration and Congress it would still take some number of additional years before they could get them.

All of that would be done in the overall context of the legal obligation that America

has to maintain Israel's qualitative military edge (QME). The QME is not a political issue; it's a highly technical discussion that involves sensitive security issues. It pains me to see this being subject to this public debate because it deserves everyone. I think it's been raised by people who want to undermine the significance of the event in a political season. But we've said many times that America will preserve Israel's QME. How it does that should be done by technical experts, not by politicians.

In addition to the UAE and Bahrain, Kosovo, Serbia, Malawi and Chad have since announced possible increased ties with Israel, and both Bahrain and Saudi Arabia have already agreed to have Israel use their airspace. But the Saudis are demanding that any future agreement with Israel be based on the 2002 Saudi Peace Initiative, which stipulates Israel's withdrawal from Judea and Samaria and the right of return. Has the Israeli compromise on sovereignty to the UAE upped the ante for future concessions?

I don't think so. The sovereignty issue was creating friction within the region and, from our perspective, if we had proceeded first with sovereignty that friction would have precluded these opportunities for regional treaties. I think once we settle down over the relevant period of time with these peace agreements, and there will be more, we can revisit



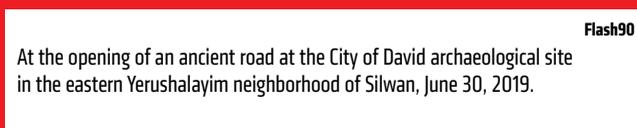
Gershon Elinson/Flash90

Mr. David Friedman, U.S. Ambassador to Israel (R), with the head of the Efrat regional council Oded Revivi and heads of local councils in Yehudah and Shomron during a visit in Efrat, Gush Etzion, February 20.



Yonatan Sindel/Flash90

At the Israeli-Palestinian International Economic Forum in Yerushalayim on February 21, 2019.



Flash90

At the opening of an ancient road at the City of David archaeological site in the eastern Yerushalayim neighborhood of Silwan, June 30, 2019.



this thing in a way which is much more compatible with peaceful relations.

To be clear, Israel has not in any way agreed to not pursue sovereignty in coordination with the U.S. And we have not asked Israel to take it off the table permanently. It seemed that if you couldn't do both at the same time you had to then establish a priority. Prioritizing peace made eminent sense.

I think that regarding the peace agreements, a lot of it had to do with the fact that these countries saw Israel's endorsement of the President's vision for peace as being willing to compromise to make peace with the Palestinians. But that compromise itself contemplated Israeli sovereignty over all the Jewish communities within Judea and Samaria. I think these things are all going to get done but you have to prioritize them.

Does that mean that the Trump plan is stalled?

No, I don't think it's stalled at all. I think all these agreements are incremental in providing strength to the Trump plan.

Even though the Palestinians are still not a viable peace partner?

They're not a viable peace partner. We've had several U.S. officials make that point recently. But we live in a world where we can get messages out now to the Palestinian people that you couldn't do a generation ago. And we'll be patient and work with people that are willing to work with us. Things are shifting in the Middle East and it might take some time. But I think we've set all the pieces in



motion to get to a much more peaceful outcome.

The UAE is the leading donor to UNWRA in the Arab world, to the tune of \$51 million. Was this addressed at all or will it be?

We haven't addressed it. America was actually by far the largest supporter of UNWRA until this administration cut it. UNWRA is a failed system that does nothing but perpetuate the misery and victimization of the Palestinians. We've been pushing for a better outcome but it's not part of the agreement with the UAE. I'm sure it will be discussed.

Some suggest that the UAE deal was enacted for Evangelical support in an election year. Did that play into it?

It really didn't. This was not a politically driven decision at all. There hasn't been a peace agreement between Israel and an Arab nation in 26 years. I would think any administration would take this opportunity, if it arose, as a badge of honor.

Israel needs all the friends it can get, and I am deeply appreciative of the Evangelical community and their support of Israel. The Evangelical leadership has been extraordinary in their support and we are very grateful. But this particular agreement was done because it was the best thing for America, for Israel, and for the UAE. No political calculations were part of it.

Unfortunately, that support of Israel is not

shared by everyone in the American Jewish community. Many non-observant Jews seem to have little connection to Israel and even less to authentic Judaism, but have an antipathy for Trump, despite everything he has done for Israel and the Jewish people. How do you explain this?

I don't want to delve into the conflicts within the Jewish community and add more fuel to that fire. I think that if you look at the polling, it suggests that the Democratic Party generally does not view Israel as a significant issue, whereas the Republican Party views it as one of the top five. And Jews are largely and have been historically Democratic.

I don't want to cast aspersions on any stream of Judaism, but I do think that the crisis in the Jewish community is not one of how observant one is or how one observes. It's a function of being illiterate about Juda-

AP Photo/Sebastian Scheiner, Pool
 Secretary of State Mike Pompeo (C), Israeli Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu (R), and U.S. Ambassador to Israel David Friedman, speaking in a *sukkah* at the Prime Minister's residence in Yerushalayim, Oct. 18, 2019.

ism, of not having a sufficient background in the history of Judaism. ... The illiteracy bothers me because it deprives the individual and their progeny and their progeny's progeny of really being able to identify as Jews and understand what it means to be Jewish.

We're a very small people and are shrinking in number in the U.S. Before the Holocaust there were 4 million Jews in America. Now there are about 5 million. No group has grown in such an anemic pace as the Jews. At the same time, before the Holocaust there were 300-400 thousand Jews in Israel and now there are almost 7 million. Everything has turned and the future of the Jewish people is driven by the success and growth in Israel. But the Diaspora trend is terrible and heading in the

wrong direction. It can only really be addressed by increasing Jewish literacy and education.

How concerned are you that this scenario affects Jewish support for Israel in terms of Jewish support for the Democratic Party, which is increasingly influenced by a progressive wing that promotes BDS, opposes any form of annexation and backs conditioning aid to Israel?

It's been a concern of mine from the day I started, when I saw the opposition to my nomination. I was not at all anticipating the level of opposition that I received during the confirmation process, which was the most contentious, controversial hearing for the appointment of a U.S. ambassador in history.

I was very surprised and disappointed that the Jewish community couldn't unite around a pro-Israel ambassador. Every other ambassador to Israel that had been appointed in the past had been much further to the left than me but the right-wing within the Jewish community accepted the President's determination. Now the President chooses a right-wing ambassador and the left-wing does not accept the President's determination. From that moment forward I was exposed in a fairly unpleasant way to the fracture within the Jewish community as it relates to Israel. And it hasn't gotten better.

Have your personal feelings toward Israel and Judaism ever come in conflict with your professional obligations?

No, never. I thought long and hard before I took this job about what would happen if my own personal convictions came in conflict with my official responsibilities. Everyone needs to think long and hard before they take a government job about what their immutable values are and what will happen if, even with the best of intentions, the government decides to go in a different direction.

There are certain points that are debatable and others that are not. My view is that I will not sacrifice my personal convictions. Fortunately, the points I find to be nonnegotiable are shared by the administration so there's never been a conflict.

Has being an Orthodox Jew helped or hindered you in any of your responsibilities?

I don't think my personal observance has been



Noam Revkin Fenton/Flash90

On the first night of Chanukah at the Kosel on December 22, 2019, together with Israeli soldiers and PM Binyamin Netanyahu.



AP Photo/Tsafir Abayov, Pool

FILE: With White House Mideast envoy Jason Greenblatt (R) at the opening of an ancient road in the City of David in Yerushalayim, June 30, 2019.



Olivier Fitoussi/Flash90

Speaking during the Kohelet Forum Conference at the Begin Heritage Center, in Yerushalayim, January 8.





Jim Young/Pool Image via AP

L-R: Israeli Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu, U.S. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo and U.S. Ambassador to Israel David Friedman, at the Kotel during a visit to Yerushalayim's Old City, March 21, 2019.

relevant. What has been relevant is having had a Jewish day school education, studying the Hebrew language, Jewish texts and learning *Gemara*. That is what really grounded me in a deep appreciation of what Judaism is, what Israel is, and understanding the entire history of the Jewish people. I have continued those studies informally my entire life.

That type of education seems to be available only within the Orthodox community or maybe a small segment of the non-Orthodox community. That's the key — having the education and developing the understanding. I think how I personally observe is less relevant.

Many American Jews are increasingly worried about progressive values taking over America that are antithetical to both Jewish and American values. If Trump loses the election, some say they want to leave and move to Israel. Do you think this fear is justified?

I think the fear of America turning on its historical values is definitely justified and deeply troubling. We built a country based on personal responsibility, accountability, and freedom. We valued and celebrated success and tried to provide as much opportunity to everyone to become as successful as they could, based on their abilities. That's what has made America the greatest country in the world. The notion of blaming and punishing people for their success, and treating everyone the same regardless of effort or conduct is obviously heading towards a socialist environment. It will destroy America.

I'm optimistic that the vast majority of Americans are not of that mind, and I think that the Democratic Party selected Biden because they were petrified that they would be perceived as a socialist party. But Biden is stuck with his statements, his staff, his supporters, and his failure to condemn the violence until someone told him that there was a poll that suggested he should condemn it. So yes, this is all troubling to me.

With eight weeks left to the election, many Americans

feel muzzled about expressing support for Trump. What are your thoughts regarding these restrictions?

You're raising a point which is so sad. The progressive left has just drowned out the noise and people are afraid to speak their mind. It's so disturbing because we've seen this in history — the left initially appears as a movement for equality, justice and liberalism, but then it turns. And when it turns it gets very ugly.

Free speech should be the greatest value of liberalism. But as you get from the left to the far left, all the liberal values go out the window. What you're left with is an ugly angry mob pushing a movement that seeks to reallocate wealth from people who worked hard for it to others. It creates a notion that instead of standing for freedom, America now stands for free stuff.

What about specifically how this relates to American Jews?

History has told us that when the streets are full with angry people, Jews don't do well. That's one thing that's been consistent, whether the violence is on the right or the left. So we should be concerned about it. But I don't want to overstate the case that Jews should be afraid here. I don't think Jews in America are powerless or exposed like in other countries. America has enough safeguards and enough good people that believe in American values. I don't think America poses an existential threat to Jews, G-d forbid.

I understand that people said the same about Germany. We certainly have a history that tells us to be nervous and skeptical about the permanency of Jewish positions because we've been thrown out of almost every other country we've ever been in other than America and Israel. But I still think that America is different. It's the greatest and most successful experiment in self-governance. ■