

SUMMARY OF THE 33RD WORLD UNION INTERNATIONAL CONVENTION

The largest and best-attended World Union international conference – Connections 2007 - wrapped up this week in Jerusalem with laughter and tears, song and inspiration, an honor for one of Israel's best-known authors, and word of the biggest Reform initiative ever – a seven to 10-year effort to raise \$100 million in order to make Progressive Judaism an undisputed reality in Israel.

The 550 registered delegates from some 30 countries on six continents, together with hundreds of day-participants, brought the total attendance at the five-day convention to well over 800. Among the delegates were some 100 teens and twenty-somethings participating on behalf of Netzer Olami and Tamar, Progressive Judaism's youth and young adult movements.

“There have never been so many people, so many languages, at a World Union convention,” said Lesley Sachs, vice president for administration, who had overall responsibility for convention logistics. “And there have never been so many young people.”

Continuing with the figures, there were 105 speakers/moderators/facilitators, 33 workshops and panel discussions, 15 field trips and study sessions, and three large events - the opening ceremony, held Thursday night at Jerusalem's historic YMCA; a Saturday night concert by Connections 2007's artist-in-residence, Danny Maseng, held at Mercaz Shimshon-Beit Shmuel, the World Union's education/culture complex and headquarters, and the main convention venue; and gala closing festivities, which took place Monday night at the world-class Israel Museum.

Impressive and Colorful Opening Ceremony

The convention officially got underway on Tuesday evening, March 15, with an opening ceremony in the theater at Jerusalem's historic YMCA, where old friends busily greeted one other and new friends became acquainted before filling the 650 seats to overflow. The program began with the blast of a *shofar*, which was quickly followed by an exciting video presentation on Jerusalem accompanied by music with a dramatic biblical motif featuring drum, violin and solo voice. There were other musical presentations that evening by Danny Maseng, who led a series of popular prayer melodies; by a choir of youngsters from the Tali Bayit V'gan elementary school; and by Evgeny (Leshiy) Lezhenko, coordinator for Netzer Olami in Russia, who reprised the reggae rendition of *Mode Ani* he performed to wide acclaim at the previous international convention in Moscow.

After welcoming remarks by Connection 2007 co-chairs Paula Edelstein and Helene Waranch (respectively immediate past chairperson of the Israel Movement for Progressive Judaism and immediate past president of the Women of Reform Judaism), 42 young flag bearers representing each nation with a World Union constituency filed in to resounding applause and song. An opening benediction was delivered by Rabbi Ada Zavidov, spiritual leader of Israel's oldest Progressive congregation, Kehillat Har-El, and chairperson of MARAM, Israel's Progressive rabbinic assembly. She was followed by Steve Bauman, chairman of the World Union, who spoke of the convention's locale by saying, “We have sacred work to do for the State of Israel.”

Olmert Throws Down Gauntlet

Rabbi Uri Regev, president of the World Union, “introduced” Prime Minister Ehud Olmert, who in recorded greetings thanked convention goers for coming to Israel and Jerusalem, and expressed gratitude to all of Progressive Jewry for its outpouring of support for Israel during last summer’s fighting in the north.

Regev also released details from a “friendly, cordial and helpful” meeting earlier in the day between Olmert and members of the World Union Executive Board, during which the delegation declared that the World Union’s commitment to the State of Israel is “unwavering.” Regev said he explained to Olmert that the movement, its rabbis and the status of its conversions in Israel suffer from clear discrimination, and that there should be an effort to find modes of dialogue that can eliminate the existing confrontation and lead to full recognition. Olmert replied that, regarding issues important to Progressive Jewry, his hands were tied by politics, but said the way for the Progressive movement to effect change in Israel is by even greater involvement both inside and outside the country.

The opening ceremony continued with short presentations on Progressive programs in Israel for teenagers and young adults. The presenters were participants in Netzer Olami’s Shnat Netzer gap year programs for high school graduates from the northern and southern hemispheres; the Eisendrath International Exchange program for North American high school students; the Carmel gap year program in Haifa; “Machon,” the World Union’s three-year program for community workers in the FSU, which sends second-year students to Israel; the Jerusalem campus of Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion, which sends rabbinic and cantorial students for a year of study in Israel; and the *mechina*, the Israeli Progressive movement’s gap year program that focuses on preparation for military induction, community activism and study.

Following the presentations, the opening night throngs stood to sing Hatkiva before braving harsh late-winter weather to march behind the flag bearers back to Mercaz Shimshon-Beit Shmuel for a festive reception.

Wide Variety of Workshops, Panel Discussions, Shabbat Activities and Other Convention Programming

On Friday, Sunday and Monday there were keynote addresses by Rabbi David Ellenson, President, HUC-JIR; Rabbi David Saperstein, director and counsel of the Religious Action Center of the Union for Reform Judaism; and Professor Naomi Chazan, head of the School of Government and Society at the Academic College of Tel Aviv-Yaffo. There were also daily workshops – on such subjects as leadership development, changing family dynamics, prayer and spirituality, anti-Semitism, interfaith dialogue, gays and Reform Judaism, women’s issues, successful *Tikkun Olam* programming and more – as well as special box lunch sessions featuring presentations on subjects ranging from immigrant absorption models to successful regional programming.

On Friday evening there was home hospitality for Kabbalat Shabbat and Shabbat dinner. On Saturday there was Shabbat worship, featuring the presentation of two Torah scrolls from the U.S. to Progressive communities in Feodosiya, Ukraine, and Halle, Germany. (Our thanks to

Rabbi Menachem Youlus, the Save a Torah Foundation and the Herson family of Maryland, and to Rabbi Melanie Aron and Congregation Shir Hadash of Los Gatos, California, respectively. A third Torah scroll, from Rabbi Irwin Zepowitz and Community Synagogue of Port Washington, New York, was presented to Mercaz Shimshon-Beit Shmuel during a meeting of the World Union's International Assembly.) Later on Shabbat there were Jerusalem walking tours, *Seudah Shlishit* study sessions and Havdalah, and a special concert in the evening by Danny Maseng.

On Sunday, there were field trips and site visits to such venues as an army base, the Israel Religious Action Center, a school operated by Congregation Yozma in Modi'in and a segment of Israel's controversial security barrier, as well as an update by members of the Knesset. All of these activities culminated with dinner at Mishkenot Ruth Daniel, the exciting new Progressive guesthouse and community center in Jaffa, where a *mezuzah* was affixed to the doorpost. This was followed by an on-site panel discussion on the Progressive movement's rabbinic future.

On Monday, the convention's last full day, the morning workshops were followed by a lunchtime presentation on the Butterfly Project, an initiative begun by World Union leader Sue Klau to memorialize the child victims of the Shoah. Lunch also featured an address on future challenges for the world Progressive movement by Rabbi Joel Oseran, World Union vice president for international development; a special tribute to Norman and Noreen Elijah of the Jewish Religious Union of Mumbai, India; and the presentation of a *shofar* to Rabbi Mikhail Kapustin and Anatoly Gendin, spiritual leader and president, respectively, of the Progressive congregation in Simferopol, Ukraine. The *shofar* was donated by Maurice L. Kamins of San Francisco and brought to the convention by Steve and Laura Olsen.

Sue Klau speaks of butterflies and the child victims of the Shoa.

Launch of the Rabbi Richard and Bella Hirsch Atid (Youth Futures) Fund

To mark the 80th birthday of Honorary Life President Rabbi Richard G. Hirsch, the World Union, along with the Israel Movement for Progressive Judaism, launched the Rabbi Richard and Bella Hirsch Atid (Youth Futures) Fund, aimed at promoting Progressive youth programming in Israel. "Rabbi Hirsch has devoted his life to humanity, to the Jewish people, to Israel and to the Reform Movement," it was declared of the former World Union executive director at a special ceremony before the concert on Saturday evening. "His passion for Jewish learning, Zionist commitment and justice is one that can inspire young Israeli Jews and equip them to face the challenges and opportunities of the 21st century."

Rabbi Levi Weiman-Kelman, spiritual leader of Jerusalem's Congregation Kol Haneshama, was a speaker at the Friday morning workshop on prayer and spirituality. He called the Atid fund kick-off "the most moving part of the convention," noting that Hirsch's first posting was as junior rabbi at the Chicago congregation led by his maternal grandfather, the late Rabbi Felix Levy. Weiman-Kelman added that his grandfather took part in one of the first World Union conventions. "As the grandson of a Reform rabbi and with a daughter in the Israel movement's *mechina* army preparatory program," he said, "it filled me with great joy to celebrate true continuity by participating in Connections 2007."

Connections 2007 came to a close on Monday evening, March 19, with private tours of the Israel Museum, a cocktail reception, and a rousing and, at times, emotional closing program in the museum theater - which, according to museum director James Snyder, is "rarely as overfilled" as it was that evening. The air was electric as convention goers viewed video highlights of the previous five days and heard World Union president Steve Bauman proclaim his wonder at looking through the panoramic windows of Blaustein Hall at Mercaz Shimshon-Beit Shmuel and viewing the city of Jerusalem "with modernity all over and with tradition all over – that's who we are."

Oz Receives World Union Honor

Next, Rabbi Regev introduced Amos Oz, called by many Israel's foremost modern novelist - and by Regev, "Israel's conscience" - to present him with the title of *Maggid*. The award commemorates the itinerant preacher and skilled story teller of European tradition and is the World Union's way of recognizing prominent members of the arts whose work embodies its core Jewish values. Oz said he was "deeply moved" to receive this "great honor," adding he believes Israel has "millions" of Progressive Jews. "They don't *call* themselves Progressive Jews," he said, "but Progressive Jews they are." He concluded by saying that Israel's Declaration of Independence is the "platform of Progressive Judaism," and called on Progressive Jews everywhere to strengthen their presence in Israel.

Oz was followed by Isaac Herzog, Israel's minister of Diaspora affairs, as well as its outgoing tourism minister and incoming minister of social affairs. "The entry of the Reform movement into all echelons of the Zionist arena is important," said Herzog. "The social challenges on our plate are enormous...this is a golden opportunity for your movement [to get involved]." He also appealed to the Progressive movement to further promote tourism to Israel among its ranks.

Major New Initiative Announced

Following Herzog came exciting news of the Israel Development Commission (IDC), a mammoth initiative already being called the biggest ever for the Reform movement. The objective, said Stanley P. Gold, CEO of Shamrock Holdings and a former chairman of HUC-JIR's Board of Governors, is to raise \$100 million over the next seven to 10 years in order to strengthen Progressive Judaism in Israel and raise its profile for the large segment of Israelis who identify with its tenets but have as yet had little access to its congregations and institutions.

"The good news," said Gold, citing the results of 18 months of research, "is that Reform Judaism receives a good response from secular Israelis. The bad news is that over 50% of the secular Israeli public has lacked contact with Reform Judaism."

The goal of the new initiative, he said, is to attain "an accelerated expansion of the Reform movement in Israel." To do this, the IDC will seek to:

- Enhance access to Progressive Judaism for Israelis
- Encourage the use of Progressive programs and activities by the Israeli school system
- Make the Progressive movement a leading proponent of Israeli social change

- Strengthen the Israeli Progressive movement's rabbinic and professional leadership corps
- Reinforce the Israeli movement's ties with Reform and Progressive movements around the world
- Establish an Israeli Progressive fundraising mechanism.

"We are the authentic Judaism, and we need to start proving it here in Israel," proclaimed Gold to rousing applause. "I believe this is do-able."

Following an announcement that the next World Union convention will take place in San Francisco March 18-22, 2009, Connections 2007 was brought to a close by artist-in-residence Danny Maseng, who performed the same heartfelt rendition of Ma Tovv with which he helped open the convention on Thursday night.

"Closing *Kesharim* – Connections 2007," says World Union chairman Steve Bauman, "I was struck by how many lives we were affecting around the world, and that we are truly a movement – of so many languages, cultures and nations – united by our pluralistic, egalitarian values, beliefs, and by our Jewish traditions. The sense of family was palpable as we listened to our young leaders describe how their lives had been impacted by Netzer, Tamar and *mechina*. The experiences that the delegates shared belie the assertion that our Reform movement will result in the assimilation of our people. Quite the opposite – as evidenced by vibrancy of the Judaism practiced at the convention."

"At this best-attended WUPJ convention ever," he continued, "we focused on making real the Israeli Declaration of Independence as we unite Jewish religious tradition, inclusiveness, gender equality and individual autonomy in an Israel that is a democratic and pluralistic Jewish state."