

Presentation at Gala Acceptance of Lee Bender Defender of Israel Award

Thank you to my friends, family and especially to Lee Bender, who I know personally suggested this award to me. He is the one who should be receiving it. When I was asked to accept the award, I talked with Steve Feldman and I initially refused. Steve and I had a long heart to heart talk and Steve convinced me that it is what Lee wanted and that, in fact, it was being named for him. I agreed to accept it solely and exclusively on the fact that I would dedicate it to Lee and his memory.

I knew Lee a very long time, long before ZOA days. In fact, there is only one other person in this room, other than myself, and it's Joshua sitting there at the table, who shares this fact with Lee: that he had a United States Coast Guard License and made the shores of Great Neck, New York safe from enemy invasion. Lee is from my hometown of Great Neck, New York and when I first met him in the Trial Lawyers, I knew instantly that we would be friends.

Lee was a young lawyer coming up the ranks in the Trial Lawyers when I was in line to be President. He was one of that respected new generation who we all knew would make a difference.

Lee confided in me when he was diagnosed with cancer and he told me that he would be dropping out of the Trial Lawyers and in fact cutting back completely on his practice to devote his time full-time working on behalf of Israel. He took an amazing and heroic stand and sacrifice in order to spend his remaining years in such important work. Who could say anything about such a great leader and example to us? He was a well published author and a total Mensch. His sacrifice has benefited all of us.

It goes without question that my family has made it possible for me to do this work, along with my unbelievable, marvelous staff. By the way, even though I am not permitted to do this and I was strictly banned from it, Happy Birthday Kim. It is Kim's birthday today. I did promise her, however, that I would not sing Happy Birthday to her.

Thanks to Morton Klein, Steve Feldman and Len Getz and so many others too numerous to mention for making it possible for me to do the work of the Zionist Organization of America.

In particular, I want to thank Susan Tuchman. She certainly was one of my best hires, if not the best. I certainly made the right decision there. Thank you, Susan, for your warmth and incredible commitment and bravery under fire.

Thank you to the Rabbis, friends, family, I know my sister and her husband came down from Great Neck, and others who made it here tonight.

We in ZOA walk the razor's edge all the time. According to the New York Times, what my father called the Uptown Daily Worker, one of the great new books on Ben Heck is Julian Gorbach's *Notorious Ben Hecht, Iconoclastic Writer and Militant Zionist*. Of course, always following the advice of the New York Times, I bought the book and it is absolutely a terrific read. I recommend it to everyone.

Ben Hecht, for those of you who do not remember or did not know, was a play write and Jewish activist. He was one of the greatest screenwriters that Hollywood has ever known.

According to the book, none other than the Anti-Defamation League in 1933 helped to torpedo a film called "The Mad Dog of Europe" about the threat to the Jewish community from Adolph Hitler, ya'mach sha'mo. Their motive was fear. We at ZOA will never be afraid to speak out. Never! Never again. We cannot and should never be paralyzed by fear. Imagine the number of Jews that could have been saved if in 1933 and throughout that period there had been aggressive action to inform the Jewish community and the nation at large of the impending threat to the Jewish community in Europe. Millions might have been saved.

Along the lines of to what extent we should be involved in such political agitation are two seemingly inconsistent passages in Pirkei Avot: on the one hand, we are advised not to withdraw from the community, and, on the other, we are warned against involvement with government which, we are told, supports a person when they need him but will abandon him just as soon as the government no longer needs a person. So, how do we address this inconsistency? This represents a certain duality in Judaism, which the Rabbis generally reject. There are many ways to interpret the fact that we should not withdraw from the community, and perhaps it pertains to the Jewish or religious community, but by the same token we should be suspicious of government.

I believe that what Pirkei Avot is talking about when it speaks about community is Klal Yisrael, the community of the Jewish people and the requirement of learning. We should never withdraw from that community, but rather we should appreciate the dangers of the secular environment.

Wisely the Pirkei Avot understood the risk of becoming involved with government, especially for the Jew, while growing and educating our own community.

My message to you here tonight, however, is that without Judaism, Jewish learning, and Jewish observance, without Shabbat and without our way of life, there would be no Israel as we know it and there would be no ZOA.

We can do a tremendous amount for Israel through our work in ZOA, but we must never stop improving as people and we can never accomplish our goals without a serious relationship with Judaism; without observing its precepts and without being knowledgeable.

In my home we talk frequently about what is happening with young people and why they do not support Israel and how they frequently repeat the obscenities and defamation of our enemies, as though that was the truth. How can there be such ignorance in our community? Where have we failed?

We obsess tremendously about the plight of our young people and their failure to support Israel and sometimes their support of terrible schemes like the boycott, divest and sanction movement.

We have all kinds of studies by Pew and others speaking of assimilation and the loss of interest by Jews in Judaism. However, all the studies show that we do not see that in the observant community. It does not matter whether one is reformed, conservative or orthodox; it is crucial and necessary that we observe Judaism. Without Judaism we would not have Israel, we would not have ZOA and all of this would be superfluous. Everything flows from Torah and from the learning of the Talmud and our Sages. Without that we have nothing to talk about here.

The message is that without Torah, there is no Israel and there is no life.

It may not be popular in every venue to say this but we know that observance of Judaism is the keystone to the future. The holidays are just around the corner and this is an opportunity for us to observe the holidays, to learn about Judaism and to participate. Chabad well understands that we live in a post-denominational age; and that one could be a knowledgeable and observant Jew regardless of their politics or denominational affiliation.

As Pirkei Avot further states, none of us are obligated to complete the work, but neither can we neglect it. That is the work of building and educating our Jewish community.

I thank all of you for your support and friendship. Remember that Pirkei Avot teaches us that a tree with many roots and few branches will be able to endure any storm, but a tree with lots of branches and few roots will be knocked over by the most moderate of winds.

May Hashem give us the wisdom and understanding to have deep and abiding roots in Judaism so that we can withstand the consequential, ideological and secular political storms that may swirl about us in the future.

To all of you I wish a healthy, happy, sweet and prosperous New Year and thank you all again for your support and friendship.

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