

## Israel, From the Point of View of Israelis: How This Time It's Different

By Lori Winterfeldt

Over 50 people gathered at Temple Sholom in New Milford to hear Joel Chasnoff and Benji Lovett, two American-born, Israeli Jewish men and comedians. Sponsored by Temple Sholom and United Jewish Center of Danbury, in partnership with The Jewish Federation of Western Connecticut, Congregation B'nai Israel of Southbury, and the Jewish Community Center in Sherman. Chasnoff and Lovett shared insights on the Israeli psyche and the reality of life in Israel right now.

The two men discussed what ordinary Israelis are talking about and the extent to which daily life has been impacted. The two comedians were on a speaking tour for their book, "Israel 201: Your Next Level Guide to the Magic and Mystery and Chaos of Life in the Holy Land" when, as they put it, "the War changed their plans." Chasnoff from Evanston, IL, is a father of four children. He has served in the Israeli Army; two of his children are in the Reserves. Lovett from Dallas, TX, is single and, due to his age, was not required to complete compulsory military service.

Chasnoff and Lovett's purpose was clear. To all who were there to listen, they hoped to bring the Israeli experience into the room. All listened intently. All were drawn into their world as American Jews who also happened to be Israeli citizens. "We want to take you into the mind of the Israeli...What are they talking about? And to show you how Israelis are dealing with it because no matter how many times you check (media outlets) you will never get into the mind of the Israeli and what they're experiencing," said Chasnoff.

"We have a saying in Hebrew: 'The Army will win.... We always had this faith that as crazy as our politics are, and as much as our politicians can be characters, as expensive as the Country is and as challenging as it is to live in Israel, there is this one institution that we could always, always count on..." said Chasnoff. That faith has been shattered. The unthinkable happened and Israelis are feeling vulnerable in ways they never thought possible.

Lovett has lived in Israel for seventeen years. "These days--following the news--time is going slowly," he said. "It's hard to be abroad right now, but if we must be abroad, speaking to groups like you and trying to be the best representatives and ambassadors for Israel that we can be and help translate everything that is going on there to you. And as awful as the news is out of Israel, it's comforting to come together as a Jewish community together...People are united in a way that we have not seen in our lives."

Everyone is volunteering in any way they can...this volunteerism is good for those who are benefitting, but it is just as beneficial, possibly more for the people who are volunteering." Chasnoff added, "We believe in the Country, but we're also volunteering because we need to, we need to feel like we are doing something, that we're not just sitting on our hands during this very critical time. Everyone is doing something," said Lovett. "There are stories of Israelis waiting 10 hours to give blood."

Upmost on every Israeli's mind are the hostages. According to Chasnoff, "This is a game changer for Israelis. This is unthinkable and weighs on the Israelis. It has colored every conversation; it has given Israelis a sense of survivor guilt." Lovett added, "Israelis are also talking about how this is different than anything else before...it sounds hard for American ears to understand, but Israelis had gotten used to rockets. [But] the thought that terrorists could come across our borders was unthinkable."

Ever since her founding in 1948, Israel has been precariously set amid countries that would prefer she not exist. Lovett's assessment of the differences between living in Israel and being at war and living in America and being at war was stark and to the point. "Our wars are fought next door," he said. "When America was in Iraq, Afghanistan...if a soldier died, we as Americans did not always know their name. A soldier dies in Israel, it is front page news, and everyone sees his name. In this tragedy last weekend, everyone knows someone."



Temple President David Schaffer, Rabbi Mark Cohn, Benji Lovett, Joel Chasnoff, JCC President Henry Cooperman

At the conclusion of this inspiring and informative evening, Rabbi Mark Cohn of Temple Shalom spoke briefly to all assembled. "We put this program together so that we could learn, talk and just be ... together in solidarity. We were able to learn and laugh, pause and reflect." All rose to sing the Israeli National Anthem, Hatikvah (The Hope), in support of the people of Israel, before departing into the night. Reflecting on all that was shared about this difficult time in a country founded as a refuge and place of safety for the Jewish people, the words of Hatikvah resonated deeply.

Proceeds from the evening's book sales went to charities and funds established to assist with humanitarian efforts within Israel.