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Israel's Mormon Friends

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Stewart Ain

With an estimated Jewish population of 4,200, Salt Lake City is not exactly an outpost of Yiddishkeit.

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Nonetheless, the home of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints is expected to become a pillar of the American-Israeli Friendship League as the organization opens its chapter here.

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"We may have to turn away people because there is so much interest," said Mark Shurtleff of the organization's fundraising dinner as he prepared for the recent event in Salt Lake City that featured Israel's ambassador to the United States, Danny Ayalon. "Our goal is to raise \$100,000 that night and we'll get it."

JEWISH VACATIONS

Shurtleff, Utah's attorney general and board chairman of the new chapter — one of only four chapters in the United States — said one of the reasons for the interest in starting a chapter in Salt Lake City is because of the church's "strong relationship with Israel."

FRESH INK FOR TEENS

And that is the reason, he said, that Brigham Young University, almost all of whose students are members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, has had a longstanding relationship with Israel.

WRITE ON FOR ISRAEL

As a student at BYU in 1979, Shurtleff said he spent a semester in Israel.

SPECIAL SECTIONS

"I was delighted when, after 25 years of wanting to go back to Israel, I heard that AIFL was bringing a group of attorneys general to Israel," he said.

DIRECTORIES

Shurtleff said he was undeterred by the intifada and went with four other attorneys general in 2003. He said that a quick photo and handshake with then-Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon turned into a longer discussion when Shurtleff struck up a conversation with him.

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He said he is planning three other fundraisers this year and plans to use the money for a three-week exchange program between students in Israel and those in Salt Lake City. The two groups would spend a week each in Salt Lake City, Washington and Israel.

"The more money we raise for this exchange program, the more students we can send," he said.

Uri Bar-Ner, a special adviser to the chairman of AIFL, said that for the past 30 years the organization has sponsored a Young Ambassador Exchange Program for 11th- and 12th- grade students in both countries.

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“They stay friends forever,” he said.



Bar-Ner added that it had been agreed that there would be no attempts to proselytize any of the Israeli students. There have been complaints in the past about the Mormon church doing posthumous baptisms of Jews.

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