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Utah starts an America-Israel Friendship League

Formation marked by welcoming Israeli envoy to the U.S.

By Wendy Leonard

Deseret Morning News

Thousands of miles and at least one ocean separate the two countries, but a spirit of democracy and a yearning for peace are bringing America and Israel together, even on a local level.



Daniel Ayalon

The Utah chapter of the America-Israel Friendship League celebrated its formation Wednesday by welcoming Israel's ambassador to the United States. In its inaugural event at the 23rd Floor Events Center at the Wells

Fargo building, leaders of the worldwide organization's fifth and newest chapter expressed hopes of growing the most support.

"We have so many people here who already love Israel," said Loraine Pace, the organization's acting president. "It's part of our heritage. We share the same roots of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. Many people travel there to see where we come from."

For Utah, the friendship began in the '70s when Attorney General Mark Shurtleff attended a semester abroad program in Jerusalem. Not only did he meet his wife there, but he met Pace and her husband and learned to love the land.

Nearly three decades later, Shurtleff began meeting with members of the AIFL at its headquarters in New York who were expressing a need for expansion.

"If there's any place in the country with a natural affinity for Israel, it's Utah," he said. Small meetings followed and Pace suggested growing membership by bringing friends to each meeting, and from that, the chapter was born.

Its purpose is to join national efforts in sending missions of all kinds to Israel, to forge lasting business, technological, humanitarian and personal relationships with partners in Israel.

"It's all about peace," Shurtleff said. "Israel is a beacon of democracy surrounded by enemies. A city on a hill that is a light for all to look to. They are fighting for their independence like we once did."

Israel's Ambassador to the U.S., Daniel Ayalon, spoke of the efforts to sustain peace in his country. In his first visit to Utah, he said he realized the state "is not only Zion because of the canyon, but it is Zion because of the people."

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"I feel right at home here, not only because of the 90 degree weather, but the surrounding landmarks sharing names like the Jordan River, and I heard of Mt. Nebo, and Moab and while walking around I even saw the Shilo Inn." Ayalon said the bond between Americans and Israelis is important and dates back to the liberation of concentration camps in Nazi Germany. America was also the first country to recognize Israel as a nation.

He praised the U.S. effort in Iraq and said it was "high time" for other countries to join in the fight against terrorism.

"For Israel's government and Israel's people, there is nothing more that we want than peace," he said. Only by building a fence, outsmarting the enemy and taking preemptive action, he said, has Israel been able to maintain vigilance.

"I pray for the day Israel will be called the the first (instead of the only) democracy in the Middle East," Ayalon said.

The local organization is accepting new members and donations to fulfill its mission. More information can be found at www.aiflutah.org.

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