



Photo by Gideon Lewin

AMBASSADOR DAN GILLERMAN

a bridge over troubled water

BY ALIZA DAVIDOVIT

As Mickey Mantle batted balls out of the stadium and Neil Armstrong launched into space, young boys watched starry-eyed, longing to one day emulate their heroes. Dan Gillerman was no different. As a child he too had a hero, but not one that inspired him to fall asleep wearing his baseball mitt or to hang mobiles of Apollo 11 over his bed. With a mature understanding of world affairs at the age of 10, Gillerman says the man he idolized most was Abba Eban, one of Israel's finest diplomats, orators, and politicians.

Today, Gillerman himself is one of Israel's most savvy, eloquent diplomats. He has not only risen to be Israel's Ambassador to the United Nations, but he has just been elected to serve as its vice president, a position held by only one other Israeli 53 years ago—his hero, Abba Eban.

Gillerman is spurred on by the pride, optimism, and concern he has for his country. And if desks could speak, his would certainly embolden every Jewish heart, renew love and appreciation for the Jewish homeland, and intrigue even the most brilliant of minds. For his very desk once belonged to Abba Eban and Golda Meir and is a silent oak witness to the backroom machinations that unfolded into modern Jewish history and into the State of Israel.



Many joys and sorrows have come and gone since the United Nations voted the Jewish state into existence on May 14, 1948, by a mere margin of one. The jubilation of Jews throughout the world was short-lived when on May 15, Israel was simultaneously invaded by the Egyptian army from the south, the Transjordan Arab Legion from the east, and the forces of Syria and Lebanon from the north. The Arab armies totaled 23,500 men, the Israelis had approximately 3,000 regulars under arms and 14,000 recruits. The invading Arab armies were equipped with tanks, airplanes, heavy artillery, spare parts, and ammunition. The Israelis had 10,000 rifles, 3,600 submachine guns, four ancient cannons smuggled in from Mexico, and no tanks. At the end of several months of severe fighting, the blood-soaked partition plan was laid to rest by Israel's territorial gains.

For 57 years now, Israel has been on a do-or-die defense. Thousands have died in wars and as victims of terrorism since the country's inception. Yet wars aren't only lost and won on the battlefield but also on the diplomatic front. Thus, in 2003, when Gillerman took up his post as Israel's 13th repre-

sentative to the United Nations—a body that routinely adopts about 20 anti-Israel resolutions a year—he knew there would be a barbed task ahead of him. “In the beginning it was a bit frightening to join a club where I believed everyone would hate me and no one wanted me,” Gillerman says. “No one wants to be the least popular kid in the class.”

And indeed, Gillerman's cutting

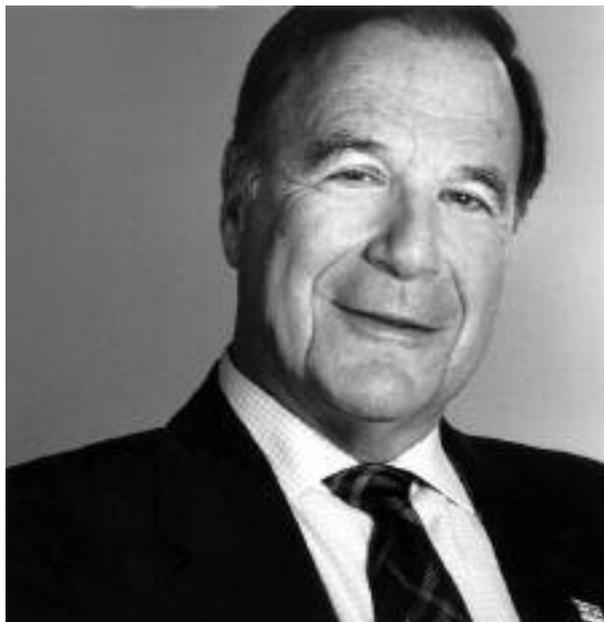


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eloquence, quick wit, and steadfast stance did not render him “the most popular kid in the class,” but they did make it quite clear he was not the kid to be bullied, either. When Gillerman arrived at the UN, many already believed that because of its hostile record toward Israel that any diplomatic efforts and initiatives were simply lost causes. Gillerman says, however, that neither he nor the foreign minister, Silvan Shalom, ever accepted that premise. “We believed that the UN was one of the most important stages for Israel,” Gillerman says. “It serves as a major public relations arena where Israel's voice can and must be heard.”

Thus the Israeli ambassador and

minister of foreign affairs devised a three-prong approach. Firstly, they would fight for every position and resolution and would not regard anything as impossible or unreachable regardless of past experiences with the UN. Secondly, they would no longer allow Israel to be placed in a position where it was on the defensive or reacting or apologizing. Rather, they would be proactive and aggressive in bringing resolutions to the table.

Thirdly, they would stop being a one-issue mission and would attempt to present to their colleagues and the world the real Israel—not just the one on TV, a place of bloodshed, terror, and destruction. Rather, they would show Israel as a country of excellence, beauty, creativity, a country that has contributed more to the world than most of the other UN member countries.

Gillerman believes that this three-prong approach is finally paying off. He says that Israel had a relatively good year at the UN, claiming that

in the past Israel has hardly had even good moments at the UN, never mind weeks, months, or years. He points to the seminar on antisemitism at the United Nations last June where Secretary-General Kofi Anan gave a strong historic condemnation of antisemitism. In October there was the adoption of a resolution against antisemitism adopted by 177 countries. In 2005, for the first time in 60 years, the General Assembly held a special dedication in honor of the liberation of Nazi death camps in Europe, and exhibited photos from Yad Vashem depicting the horror of the Holocaust. The ceremony began with the recitation of *Kel Maleh Rachamim*, a prayer of mourning and ended with the recitation of *Hatikva*,

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Israel’s national anthem. It was the first time in UN history that any prayer was ever recited. And this past March, Kofi Anan participated in the inauguration of a new Holocaust museum in Jerusalem.

“[These events] do not herald a new era and mean the UN is becoming a branch of B’nai B’rith or a member of the ADL, but it does signify change,” Gillerman has said. “We are becoming a more active and normal member of the UN.” American Jewish Committee chairman Jack Rosen, who lobbies world leaders on Israel’s behalf, says “the Jewish community is really pleased that Israel is getting some semblance of normal treatment at the UN, which is long overdue.”

Gillerman has learned that success doesn’t only come down to politics, but to people. He has forged many friendships during his tenure at the UN, even with ambassadors whose countries don’t recognize the State of Israel and are even hostile toward it.

“I am often fascinated by the incredible discrepancy between the relationships you develop with colleagues and their speeches and votes. There is a big gap between our personal relationships and the official policies they have to follow.”

But the elegant ambassador seeks to bridge the gap by making people realize what Israel is really all about. He points out that there have been cases where ambassadors have become more conciliatory toward Israel and have even changed their votes.



Israel’s good year at the UN has recently culminated in Gillerman being elected

vice president of the General Assembly. He laughingly says that as much as he would like to attribute all strides forward to Israel’s incredible ambassador, meaning himself, he says that the world has been changing dramatically since 9/11, and even more since the war in Iraq. As the world is changing, Israel is being recognized as the only democracy in the region and the main force fighting against terrorism. In addition, he believes that Prime Minister Ariel Sharon has made bold decisions regarding disengagement and the world community is very supportive of it.

As vice president he will have a seat on the general committee which decides the agenda of the General Assembly. The 60th General Assembly, which began September 2005, is expected to be the largest and most important because of the initiation of widespread reforms at the UN. As vice president, he will promote many issues, including the fight against poverty, AIDS, and other issues that affect the world at large. He feels the UN has not lost its legitimacy but rather is on the brink of being reborn. He insists that despite the diplomatic fiasco that preceded the war in Iraq, the UN has since gained much influence and power and adds that even the Bush administration is seeking consensus and multilateral cooperation and sees it as a place for conflict resolution.

“When the UN was established 60 years ago, it was established by good people with good ideas but was diverted from its course and hijacked into a wrong direction departing from its original goals,” Gillerman explains.

“The mere fact that there is an automatic immoral majority against Israel and anything Israeli at the UN, and that majority is represented by autocratic terrorist-supporting regimes, is very disturbing,” Gillerman points out.

“However, at the end of the day, 191 countries—from Cuba to North Korea, from Norway to Sweden, from Libya to Switzerland—can get together, and that is vitally important.”

When asked whether his new post will limit his ability to criticize the UN’s treatment vis-à-vis Israel, Gillerman says, “Criticizing the UN is a privilege I will never give up.” He has been quoted as saying that he made it very clear to many countries and colleagues and UN leadership that Israel will not consider any reform complete without dramatic reform in the way the UN treats Israel. “We will not stand for it.” He also says that Israel plans to push for one of the rotating seats on the Security Council.

The newly elected vice president acknowledges that the job ahead of him is daunting. Nonetheless, Israeli diplomats worked very hard to make the appointment happen, and when it did, Gillerman says that he was extremely moved. “I was filled with emotion and pride,” Gillerman shares. “The reaction in Israel to the news was as if Israel had won the gold medal in the Olympics. It was that reaction that made me feel the weight of the responsibility, and it made me shudder.”

But it was not just Israel that applauded Gillerman’s election. He received congratulatory notes, e-mails, and phone calls from friends and world leaders across the globe. He received no such congratulatory feedback, however,

from Abu Mazen, the Palestinian prime minister. To that, Gillerman says, he'd much rather the Palestinian leader keep himself busy fighting terrorism than writing notes. Conversely, Gillerman says he did not receive any threats from Israel's foes, who certainly reject him, his election, and the country he proudly represents. He jokingly says he didn't even get a death threat from his wife, Janice, who recognizes the immense amount of time and dedication his new post will demand of him.



Perhaps Gillerman's successes as Israel's ambassador to the UN is because nothing about him is politics as usual. In fact, Gillerman was never a politician

Organization). He has played a prominent role in helping to steer Israel towards a free market economy.

But not everything came down to the bottom line for Gillerman. He often echoed his strong belief that Israel's business sector has a big responsibility to the next generation and to history to make that tough neighborhood a better place. "I always felt that business people should get much more involved in public life and politics," Gillerman tells. "But I probably said it one time too many." In 2002, Shimon Peres approached Gillerman and reminded him of his preaching: "Now we want you to go and do it," Peres said.

Gillerman's business experience had taught him that even in today's high-tech world there is still no substi-

four years before it became a state. As a young man, he was sent to study at a boarding school in England, where he would meet the love of his life, Janice, when just 17 years old. But his army duty beckoned him back to the Promised Land and the promises of love between him and Janice were put to the test. Janice, who was not Jewish at the time, wanted to join her sweetheart in Israel, but her parents didn't want their daughter going to what they perceived as a mosquito-infested country. So the determined young lady held two jobs, seven days a week for six months, until she earned enough money to take a train from London to Marseilles, where she then took a Turkish boat to Haifa. They married after Janice converted to Judaism, and inspired by the

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at all, but rather, a business man. His appointment was the first time Israel reached into the private sector to find an ambassador. For 15 years he had served as chairman of the federation of the Israeli Chamber of Commerce; he was a member of the board of the first international Bank of Israel, and a director of Bank Leumi and the Central Bank of Israel. Prior to his appointment as ambassador, he had been CEO of Nagum Ltd. and Agrotechnology Ltd.

He has also served on the Prime Minister's National Economic and Social Council, the President's Committee of the Coordinating Council of Israel's Economic Organizations, and Chairman of the Israel-British Business Council, as well as being a member of the executive board of the ICC (the International Chamber of Commerce—the World Business

tute for the human touch and face-to-face interpersonal relationships. During his tenure at the Chamber of Commerce he was often involved in negotiations and dialogues with world governments. He headed many economic delegations accompanied by Israel's prime ministers and president, where he had established close relationships with world leaders. He learned how the personal touch and human compassion can tear down walls and build bridges. He never imagined, however, that one day his interpersonal skills would be called upon to build bridges between his small country and 190 other countries represented at the United Nations.



Gillerman was born in Israel in 1944,

movie *Exodus*, they eventually named their two children after its main characters, Karen and David. The Gillermans have now been married for 38 years and have four grandchildren.

The ambassador says that the greatest lesson he can teach his children and grandchildren is the love of family and the great pride and responsibility of being Israeli. "It's very important to do things for your country and not just for yourself," Gillerman says.

And as Gillerman sits at Abba Eban's desk "doing things" for his country, surrounded by photos of great Israeli leaders past and present, it becomes abundantly clear that nothing is impossible for the tiny Jewish homeland that blossomed on desert soil—not even at the UN! [lifestyles](#)