



Photo courtesy of Rami Levi

# RAMI LEVI

## come onna' my house

by Aliza Davidovitz

In spite of the ravages of time and the savages of history, the Western Wall, emblematic of its beleaguered nation, still stands 19 centuries later in the eternal Jewish capital of the eternal Jewish homeland. As if in unison with the worshipers bowing and bending before it, the Wall, too, physically slants eastward, as though in deference to the Holy of Holies it once hosted. Folded into tiny pieces of paper, Jewish prayers and tears, questions and hopes, requests and dreams grout the great white stones of God's house. The stones and the people are interlocked in one destiny—past, present and future. They sustain each other, they need each other.

The symbiosis between the State of Israel and the people the world over who love the Holy Land renders the country's tourism catch phrase, "No one belongs here more than you," that much more gripping. And though suicide belts cannot blast eternal ties, they do make the job much more difficult for Rami Levi, Israel's Tourism Ambassador to North and South America, whose mission is to "keep the sky of Israel open and the multibillion tourism industry functioning so millions of tourists can enjoy the freedom of travel through the open gates of Jerusalem."

Rami Levi, aged 42, is tall, handsome and shaped like an athlete. Some may be inclined to say that he himself is Israel's finest tourist attraction. But, his wit, charm and inventive mind more practically reveal why he was appointed to this very difficult post based in New York City. His mission is so challenging that Charles Bronfman himself called Levi, "The man with the hardest job in America."

Levi made his entrance upon a chaotic stage when he assumed his current role in 2001. For starters, the messy intifadah was already impeding the flow of tourism to Israel. And then, just ten days after he started his new job, the horrors of September 11th unfolded and effectively stopped the flow of travel and tourism to all destinations altogether.

But true to the meaning of his Hebrew name, Rami, which means exalted, he was able to rise above the dark circumstances and ascend toward his goal like the radiant Mediterranean sun beaming with optimism and vibrant energy. The well-

traveled Levi points out that the Chinese word “crisis”—which is certainly what he was facing—also means “opportunity.” And so, he seized it. Realizing that the conventional methods of attracting tourists would fail post 9/11 and that dangling the scenic sites of the Negev, Eilat, or Galilee would not bait people onto airplanes, he based his appeal upon solidarity. Under Levi, the ministry sought to impassion both Jews and Christians with a sense of duty and invited them to show support, kinship, and brotherhood to Israel. “Travel isn’t always about relaxation, edification, or adventure,” Levi has been quoted as saying. “Sometimes it isn’t about you, but about more selfless reasons.” Thus the new campaign slogan was born, “I care. And I’m going!”

It turns out that lots of people really do care and are indeed going. Yet, it is not every man with a good campaign who can bring out that altruistic best in people. Rami Levi could!

Levi was born in Jerusalem in 1961. His father, a refugee from Egypt had immigrated to Israel in 1957. His mother, a Holocaust survivor born in Austria-Hungary, immigrated in 1946. Levi’s family, which then included his parents and two sisters, was always relocating because of his father’s profession as a geochemistry professor. And so his early life was marked by packing and unpacking.

After bouncing around Israel for many years, when Rami turned 12, his family moved to upstate New York, where his father worked with the American Nuclear Commission. Initially, it was a culture shock for Levi who didn’t speak a word of English. But with his warm, big smile and athletic abilities, he quickly ingratiated himself to his new American classmates. Levi, who in later years would practice swimming with the Israeli national team and swim in the U.S. Junior Olympics, joined the swim team at his new school and it was there that

he made most of his friends. Reared with the skills to adapt, he dove right into American culture. At the end of just one year, Levi delivered a class speech entirely in English.

As a teenager, Levi early showed his flair for diplomacy when he successfully convinced the principal that he could finish high school in only two



With Prime Minister Ariel Sharon.

years. Not only did he complete his requirements within that time, but he also graduated with honors.

At 17, Levi was back in Israel, taking Hebrew and biblical courses. He spent a lot of time at the beach until his army duty began, whereupon he was drafted into an elite intelligence unit.

But even when Levi’s military service came to an end, it did not mark the end of his battle for his homeland. Since he was a young child, Levi knew that he wanted to represent the Jewish State. Levi recounts how as a young teen he would sit in his parents’ living room and listen to the same political discussions with Americans, over and over again. The same questions would continually arise regarding the existence of the Jewish State, its defense strategies and human rights. “I always felt that I could donate a lot and give insight into certain issues that would strengthen the case of the Jewish State,” Levi tells.

But prior to joining Israel’s PR battle, Levi was determined to pursue

higher education, as academics were very important to his family. Levi received a bachelor’s degree from Tel Aviv University and a master’s degree with honors in political science from the Hebrew University of Jerusalem. Once again, he was able to convince the dean that he could finish his studies early, and sure enough he completed his masters in one and-a-half years.

While going through school Levi also found time to make a little money. He worked in private investigations and ran a bodyguard business. He himself was a personal bodyguard for none other than Sylvester Stallone when he was shooting *Rambo III* in Israel in 1988. To this day the two remain in contact.

Always in a rush, Levi, was eager to pursue his dream of serving his country as a civil servant. But when the time came for him to choose what he wanted to do, he was conflicted. Ultimately, he decided that tourism combined two things that were very important to the country: PR and economics. The hotel and airline industry helps bring in billions of dollars and at the same time as ambassador he would be able to represent the country in front of millions around the world.

So by age 26, Levi was the youngest to graduate from the Ministry of Tourism’s Cadet Training Course. In his first diplomatic mission he served as Director of the Israel Government Tourist Offices in Scandinavia and Finland and as tourism attaché in the Israeli embassy in Stockholm, Sweden. He then served twice in Los Angeles as the Consul for Tourism and Director of the Israeli Government Tourist office in the Western United States (where he headed 42 international government tourist offices). He must have done something right because in 1995 the perpetually beautiful Raquel Welch presented him with the Best International Tourism Office in the

World Award. In that role, as in his current one, he hobnobbed with the who's who, continually advancing Israel's world image with the goal of filling Israeli hotel rooms and airline seats.

The tourism profession was perfect for Levi. Moving around the world was already second nature to him dating back to his childhood. Today, he and his beautiful wife, Michal, whom he met during his military service, have three children of their own. Thusly, he can truly empathize with his own three boys and wife what it feels like when "home" is but a temporary dwelling. But he says that his wife and children, like him, are very much into sports, society's equalizer, and are doing great.

In 2005, Levi and his family will be called back to Israel, as all diplomats must return to the homeland after serving abroad for five years. "It keeps you connected to the source," Levi explains. But in the interim, he has a job to do. He is currently the youngest consul to be appointed as Tourism Ambassador to North and South America, which is the most prestigious post just under the Minister of Tourism.

Levi reflects on the time he would spend in his father's lab where he learned the importance of research, gathering information, and analyzing the facts. "Research is the first step to success," Levi feels. His parents also taught him the importance of listening. Thus, when Levi embarked on his new mission, his first step was to accumulate all the facts, restudy the whole situation and examine all the options. He organized volunteer focus groups and think-tanks with a diverse array of professionals in order to listen to their thoughts and opinions. He soon realized that employing traditional marketing activities was tantamount to throwing money in the wind. So he immediately pulled the plug on previous methods and redirected all his

efforts to two core targets: Jews and Evangelical Christians, people with emotional ties to the Holy Land.

Levi, in conjunction with the Conference of Presidents, sent out letters to 2000 synagogues requesting that they join a Rosh Hashanah campaign and help distribute and gather



Photo courtesy of Rami Levi

With former NYC Mayor Rudy Giuliani.

pledge cards from attendees that they would go to Israel within the year.

Next, with Levi at the helm, the Ministry reached out to students at Yeshiva University and the Jewish Theological Seminary. They sent hundreds of students to Israel on the proviso that upon their return they would serve as goodwill ambassadors in their schools, neighborhoods and synagogues.

Levi says that he has been successful in conveying the vast importance of tourism to Israel, both as a means of reinforcing the partnership between Jews and Israel and also for Israel's sake. He explains that when a tourist spends \$1 dollar in Israel, 85 cents stays in the country, which is very important to the economy. Israeli exports do not provide such a big return. He goes on to say that the tourism industry is one for the most job-supplying industries in the country.

Levi is very encouraged by the partnership he has developed with the Jewish population of America. He attributes any success he has to the collective "we" and never to himself. He is grateful to the several Jewish organizations that have been partners in his cause and offers a special thanks to Malcolm I. Hoenlein, Executive Vice Chairman of the Conference of Presidents of Major American Jewish Organizations. "If I had a dream when I started, it was to keep the traffic moving and make sure that plains continue to fly and hotels don't go bankrupt," he says. "We've managed to really save a lot of that industry." (In 2003, 221,000 Jewish tourists traveled to Israel as compared to 150,000 in 1999. "That is in spite of terrorism," Levi says. "They care. And they are going!")

One special man who helped Levi's ambitions take flight is Gordon Bethune, the Chairman and CEO of Continental Airlines. After a year's negotiations and a joint study with Levi's office, Bethune decided to add seven weekly flights from New York to Tel Aviv. Levi, in turn, awarded Bethune with Israel's Tourism Ambassador Award. "I was honored to present Mr. Bethune with the award for his tremendous leadership, inspiration and moral clarity in supporting tourism to Israel," Levi says.

The magnetic ambassador has also been very successful in reaching out to the Evangelical Christian world and fomenting a relationship that has flourished over the past 13 years. Today he has a close relationship with Pat Robertson and other leaders in their community. "The love and support of these people is very important to me," Levi says. "The Jewish community has come to appreciate their support as well." He addressed 20,000 evangelicals at Madison Square Garden and has appeared on numerous evangelical TV shows addressing millions of viewers. During the millennium, he orchestrated a broadcast from Israel, Israel's largest, to more than 500 million people across the

world with the help of TV Evangelist Robert Schuller. Levi has recently finalized with Benni Hinn, the world's most viewed tele-Evangelist, the chartering of a 747 jet from El Al for a group of 1500 evangelicals to travel to Israel. This year, the NRB, the most influential Evangelical broadcasters organization which represents more than 1600 TV and radio stations, has presented Levi with its award.

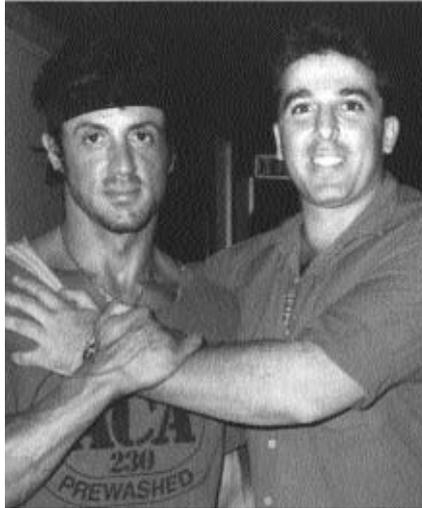
Perhaps the only job harder than Levi's is that of the person trying to catch up to him. His weeks are efficacious whirlwinds spinning a multifaceted campaign for his cause. In one day he flies from New York to Houston to meet with Continental Airlines execs and then to the West Coast to meet with Larry King to help plan the CNN reporter's broadcast from Israel. Then in L.A., he meets with The Jewish Federation to discuss a Hollywood producer's visit to Jerusalem. Afterward, in preparation for the "Material Girl's" trip to Israel, Levi meets with Guy Oseary, Madonna's partner. Upon returning to New York, he hooks up with Hollywood stars such as Natalie Portman, and solicits their extremely important support for Israel's PR campaign when dealing with the press. In the past year, Israel hosted both Christopher Reeve and Eric Braden in cooperation with Continental Airlines, Lufthansa and Sony Pictures which resulted in positive PR for Israeli tourism on networks such as CNN, CBS and FOX worth millions of dollars.

As ambassador of tourism, he is constantly asked, "What about terrorism?" "Is it safe to travel to Israel?"

"If you compare Israel to most western cities around the world, you'll see that it is at least as safe as they are," Levi reassures. Although he doesn't suggest people walk up and down the streets of Gaza, he does point to Israel's safety strong points: El Al, by universal standards, is considered the safest airline in the world; Continental Airlines has special security measures when flying to the region; Ben Gurion has been listed by Condé Nast as the safest airport; all tourist guides are in live con-

tact with a centralized information office advising of any unusual activity; every restaurant, mall and theater has security guards and bag checkers.

"Post 9/11, what is stopping any terrorist from walking into a New York hotel



Rami with Sylvester Stallone.

and blowing it up, God forbid," Levi questions. In Israel, he points out that the hotels have the highest level of security. "My background in security shows me not only how to measure the threats, but also the solutions to them." He insists that if people will look at the entire picture, they would realize that Israel is safe.

Levi is tirelessly trying to get the State Department to look at the "entire picture" and thus remove its general travel advisory against going to Israel. He urges them to distinguish between



With Raquel Welch.

dangerous areas and the rest of the country. "As democracies, we can't give into terrorism," Levi says. "By imposing an advisory for the entire State of Israel, they are succumbing to terrorism." He insists that in order to defeat terrorism and effectively combat crime, it is imperative to understand that the "bad guys" use fear as one of their main weapons. "The travel warnings feed into that fear," Levi explains. "However if countries prepare themselves to meet the new challenges of international terrorism and crime, as Israel does, terrorists and criminals can, and will, be defeated," he says. "It's not easy, but it is certainly doable." He wishes that bureaucrats would take the time to appropriately evaluate the situation.

He continually takes his mission to Washington, D.C., where he meets with congressmen and decision-makers at the Department of Homeland Security, as well as members of the administration, to discuss the implications of the State Department's Travel warning on worldwide travel, insisting the system must be changed. He incessantly points out to the policy makers that in the past two years alone there have been multiple terrorist incidents around the world. "If we include crimes against tourists in such countries as Mexico, Brazil, Venezuela, Peru, Columbia, France, Jamaica, Poland, Zimbabwe and elsewhere across the globe, then soon the whole world of tourism will be under a travel warning, including the U.S.," Levi cautions.

Rami Levi continues to fulfill his personal promise to represent the Promised Land. With his homeland in his heart and wisdom on his tongue, Levi continues to travel the world and put Israel's best face forward. Yet, even as the ambassador of tourism, he cannot find the choicest words to express what he feels about Israel. "When I go to Jerusalem there is a feeling of deeper meaning that is beyond words," he says. "I haven't yet found the lyricist or copy writer who could describe it."

Indeed, only God's wonders can leave a politician with nothing to say.

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