

Alon Pinkas



Photos courtesy of Alon Pinkas

straight talking

by Aliza Davidovitz

In a war where sticks and stones can break your bones, but words can really hurt you, Ambassador Alon Pinkas' agile tongue cuts through Palestinian rhetoric and articulates Israel's position with the clarity of a bell. Since the *intifada* began 19 months ago, the Jewish State has found itself fighting two fierce battles: one on the ground for "homeland security," the other on the air waves for public opinion. This eloquent 41-year-old Consul General of Israel, who appears nearly nightly on the major networks and cable news shows, has stood at the forefront of the PR battle with an apparent endless repertoire of sound bytes which "bite" right back at Israel's detractors.

Although all is supposed to be fair in love and war, one opponent thought Pinkas "bit" too hard in a recent debate on *Larry King Live*. Hanan Ashrawi, chief Palestinian Legislative Council leader, now refuses to dialogue with the Israeli Ambassador alleging that he was rude to her. Pinkas

says only, "If exposing her lies means I was rude to her, then I was rude to her." The CNN transcript shows that Pinkas countered Ashrawi's anti-Israel "lie-attribution" with hard facts and a punchy presentation, prefacing his rebuttal by saying she would be more in her element on the Science Fiction channel. He then went on to expose how the Palestinians who purport to want peace, have never missed an opportunity to miss an opportunity: "This is not a cliché—this is 1947, and '67, and '73, and '82, and '91 and again in '93 in Oslo...and at Camp David. You are talking about a people who are neither a democracy, nor respect human rights, nor respect Israel's right to exist, nor do they exert authority, nor do they express sovereignty. You listen to Mrs. Ashrawi, and you think you're talking to some Thomas Jefferson who is founder of the university that she went to...There was an offer there, Larry. Mrs. Ashrawi, the offer was there at Camp David. You refused to take it. You refused to make the decisions. Your leadership never showed up."

Pinkas says that he does not find any of his Palestinian counterparts difficult to debate and says the biggest test comes from a good interviewer. He names CNN's Lou Dobbs and MSNBC's Chris Matthews as two of the best but most challenging journalists.

Pinkas, himself, was once a diplomatic correspondent for *Maariv* and a defense correspondent for the *Jerusalem Post* (from 1993 to 1995). And although he undoubtedly has a way with words, it is none other than Jews who weigh his every word. Hundreds of Jews call him and write to "advise" him about what he should have said, how he should have said it, and question why he didn't say what he could have. He cannot go to a reception or a dinner without being swamped by Jews with an opinion.

"Sometimes I find it a little annoying to listen to criticism; and sometimes I am very flattered by the great feedback," Pinkas says. "But at the end of the day what is most important and moving is that people care and they are committed enough to come over and express their feelings and suggestions."

Pinkas also receives critical feedback from his speech coach, the renowned Lillian Wilder who has trained some of America's most famous journalists. After most media appearances, Pinkas and his coach will analyze his on-

air performance and refine his obvious gift of gab. The Israeli government pays for these lessons, as they do for the training of any soldier who defends the Jewish State.

“You have to have control and learn from your mistakes,” Pinkas says. “It’s a question of experience and I’m gradually gaining it.”

Undoubtedly, the events of late have expedited his learning curve. Pinkas says that it is important to know how to cater to the media’s needs. He questions the conventional methods which dictate that no matter what they ask you, you just say what you have to say. “If you want them to invite you back again, you have to be considerate and polite to the questions they have,” Pinkas says. Indeed, in a recent debate with Palestinian Representative Hasan Abdel Rahman on *Larry King Live*, Pinkas differentiated himself from his evasive opponent by telling King, “Larry, I’d rather go on with the show the way you want to conduct it and you see fit to conduct it.”

Alon Pinkas, who was born in Tel Aviv in 1961, says that he started his “arguing career” as a kid by taking on his teachers. He grew up in a very politically aware home in Tel Aviv and has been debating politics all his life.

“I actually stopped doing so, realizing it’s a waste of time to argue politics in Israel, since the likelihood of changing someone’s opinion there is virtually zero,” he says. And though he often gets in the last word on the airwaves, he’d do best not to try that at home with his attorney wife, Revital. When asked who wins arguments at home, this sports-loving ambassador jokingly replies, “It’s a tie and now we are in double-overtime.”

Surprisingly, Pinkas says that he is not a stubborn person and actually avoids confrontation unless he feels particularly strong about something. “I think from an early age I tried to carefully choose the battles worth

fighting for and to give up what seemed unimportant.”

One battle that Pinkas chooses not to fight is over the controversial adjective “occupied” when it precedes “territories” in the Middle East. Others, such as Benjamin Netanyahu and Dore Gold, favor the phrase “disputed” territories and take issue with the word “occupied,” a modifier which the Palestinians have so successfully insinuated into the Middle East lexicon. “The difference between me and them is that I’m a realist,” Pinkas says. Although he does say that Israel has an



Alon Pinkas with New York City Mayor Michael Bloomberg and Israeli Defense Minister Benjamin Ben-Eliezer, February, 2002.

Photos courtesy of Alon Pinkas

living in refugee camps (camps which the oil-rich Arab world chose to keep poor to use as a political pretext against Israel) is very frustrating for the Palestinians (although most have been living under Palestinian control since 1996). But he reminds all who will listen to him that Israel offered the Palestinians 97% of the West Bank, a foothold in Jerusalem, recognizable borders and a vibrant economy.

“Now, let’s assume that the Palestinians found some issues in that plan not to their liking or objectionable. So you’re telling me that the gap between

what President Clinton endorsed at Camp David and what the Palestinians wanted justifies 58 suicide bombers?” he asks Larry King in a recent interview.

Pinkas feels that if the Palestinians want to extricate themselves from their situation, they need to demand answers from their own leadership, not from Israel. “Arafat may be willing to die like a martyr, but he is certainly not willing to live like a

statesman,” he says. “But Israel cannot be made to pay for their mistakes.” Nor will Israel make the same mistake by dealing with Arafat, according to Pinkas. “We are ready to offer them another opportunity except for one thing,” Pinkas informs. “No political accommodation which is durable and viable can be reached with the current Palestinian political leadership, Arafat and Company—the Sopranos.”

This articulate consul general, whose English language skills were solidified during the three years that he, his parents and two sisters lived in Queens, New York (1969-1972), not only calls for a change in the Palestinian Authority’s infrastructure, but also that of Israel’s political system. He would like the current system to undergo an overhaul in breadth and depth. “It is very sectarian,” Pinkas feels. “People represent themselves and a small group of people who they think they represent.”

He also says that big national debates no longer take place in the political system, but only between a very small group of policy makers. He adds that such a format is not a healthy sign of a democracy.

If anyone knows something about democracy, it is Alon Pinkas, who graduated *summa cum laude* from Hebrew University with a Bachelor's in political science in 1986 and has his Master's in American Government and Politics from Georgetown University, where he says that King Abdullah was his student and Madeleine Albright was his teacher. Even one of Pinkas' favorite quotes, from Winston Churchill, explores the concept of democracy: "Many forms of government have been tried and will be tried in this world of sin and woe. No one pretends that democracy is perfect or all wise. Indeed, it has been said that democracy is the worst form of government except all those other forms that have been tried from time to time."

Pinkas admits that his biggest fear (other than the Giants not making it to the playoffs again), is the future of Israel and what kind of society it is going to become. But the future of a state depends on who leads it. When asked if he thinks Binyamin Netanyahu will be the next prime minister, he answers that he is less certain of it than the pundits seem to be. As to his own political aspirations, he says that he needs to gain some more experience before he would consider filling the Knesset's most prestigious seat. But as far as Pinkas is concerned, both the right wing and the left stand for things which are no longer relevant since the peace process began in the early '90s.

"The traditional right wing has no platform and has no idea what it wants," Pinkas opines. "The traditional left has been devastated because a lot of its arrogant assumptions on how things would turn out with the Palestinians didn't happen either."

Pinkas, who was an active partici-

pant in the peace process, says that he supported it without any illusions about who they were dealing with. And not out of compassion for the Palestinians either, but rather because he felt it was in Israel's best interest.

A prodigy of the "left," many of Alon Pinkas' feelings and views have been shaped by the great men in his life, beginning with his father (who was a journalist and also worked for the Israeli government), Shimon Peres, Ehud Barak, and Shlomo Ben Ami, who was foreign minister during the Camp David negotiations. "From my father I learned



(l-r) Jerusalem Mayor Ehud Olmert, former New York City Mayor Rudolph Giuliani, Ambassador Pinkas, New York Governor George Pataki and Mayor Michael Bloomberg at Sbarro's in Jerusalem.

that the greatest idea in our lifetime is the idea of a sovereign Jewish, independent state," Pinkas avows. "Our goal is to maintain its values. Everything we do should serve that purpose."

And so with the values he learned at home, Pinkas embarked on a career in foreign relations which began in 1987 at the Israeli Embassy in Washington, DC, where he served as an assistant military attaché. During his tenure there he developed a close relationship with Shimon Peres, who was then the Finance Minister. When Pinkas returned to Israel he started to work for Peres as a political advisor, and then when Peres became the Minister of Foreign Affairs after the 1992 election, Pinkas became special advisor on arms control to the director general of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. During that time he got to know Ehud Barak very well.

He later served as Barak's foreign policy advisor and was Chief of Staff to both Foreign Affairs Ministers Shlomo Ben-Ami and David Levy.

In the shadow of these great men Alon Pinkas emerged as the primary candidate for the New York post of Consul General, to which Barak appointed him in August of 2000, replacing Shmuel Sisso. Pinkas' appointment was delayed for four months because Sisso had appealed his dismissal in court. Sisso lost because the person who had appointed him was no longer holding his political post; Pinkas got the green light. But as

Israeli politics would have it, Israel was calling for a new election and the person who had appointed Pinkas, Prime Minister Barak, was soon to be out of a job as well. Pinkas dashed off to New York nonetheless. "I told my wife this is either a three year thing, or a very long weekend," Pinkas recounts. Luckily for Pinkas, a unity government formed and it was safe for his wife and two children to unpack their bags.

This Israeli ambassador says that working with Barak and Peres was the best university in the world. From Peres he learned the art of diplomacy and politics and the "Ten Commandments" of what you can and cannot do. "Never lie," Pinkas advises. "If you get away with it today it will haunt you tomorrow." From Barak he learned how to intellectualize and how to think very clearly and with focus. He compares these two former prime ministers to David Ben-Gurion, who Pinkas says was the greatest prime minister Israel ever had. "Peres has the intellect and vision that Ben-Gurion had," Pinkas notes. "Barak has both the moral clarity and the courage to do things."

But this green-eyed blonde ambassador is not lacking courage himself. He came to New York at a critical time in Israel's history when his every effort would

Photos courtesy of Alon Pinkas

be carefully scrutinized. In addition to appearing on all the networks and cultivating media sources, he must also keep close ties with the organized Jewish community, such as the Conference of Presidents, the UJC, the Jewish media, etc. In addition, he has the responsibility of reaching out to governors, senators, and local politicians. What does he say in the face of all the pressure? "I love my job and there is no one who is happier than I am."

There were times, however, which brought Alon Pinkas more tears than joy. During the Lebanon War in 1982, Pinkas, who was a tank commander at the time, watched as a Syrian artillery shell hit an armored personnel carrier twenty yards from his tank and instantly killed his high-school friend, Erez Mizrahi. But true to his own name, Alon—which means oak tree in Hebrew—Pinkas stayed strong and rooted.

The Lebanon War brought him some funny memories too. Pinkas, who admits that he loved soccer more than girls when he was growing up, remembers in 1982 during the Soccer World Cup, when an army jeep raced in front of his tank and blocked him. Out came a reservist with long hair carrying an anti-tank missile launcher screaming about something. When Pinkas turned off the tank engine the reservist asked, "Do you know what the score was in the Yugoslavia-Northern Ireland game?"

Pinkas' own soccer playing days are long gone, but being the sports lover that he is, he admits that Yankee Stadium is his favorite place in New York and where he is most happy. Last season he went to 25 games.

While enjoying America's favorite pastime, Pinkas also appreciates the special dynamic between America and Israel. He has thoroughly studied the evolution



President Bill Clinton, Prime Minister Ehud Barak and Pinkas in Israel, 1999.

Photos courtesy of Alon Pinkas

doesn't even know the name of the Prime Minister of Israel or in what year the State of Israel was founded. He says that these are the congressmen and senators of tomorrow. "Unless these people are nurtured and cultivated, their relationship with Israel will be greatly diminished." He feels the Jewish organizations should deal more with the nuts and bolts of getting young people attached to Israel

and the mechanics of the relationship between the two allies and considers it his field of specialty. He notes that despite disagreements throughout the years, the U.S. has stood behind Israel and adds that America and Israel share a profound commonality of values.

"It is an absolutely unparalleled relationship in modern history between a mighty superpower and a small democracy out there in the Middle East, in a region where that same superpower has other interests." But like most strong relationships, it can't be taken for granted. "It is sturdy and strong but it needs to be constantly cultivated and nourished," he feels. "Otherwise it will go away." He adds that American Jewry plays an essential role in sustaining the bond between the Promised Land and the Land of the Free.

Without mincing words, Pinkas says that he is scared about the future of American Jewry and its weakening ties with Israel. There is a new generation that

and that the Israeli government is there to help them any way they can.

Yet, in the past, Pinkas has also taken issue with the Israeli government's outreach methods and information campaign. He ridiculed the policy of sending Israeli ministers to New York and Washington while ignoring the rest of the United States. He once wrote: "...another breakfast with ADL in New York only adds calories—bagels and lox. If anything threatens the world's salmon population, it is Israel's PR policy." According to Pinkas, the information campaign needs to be waged on the ground—in the local federations and local media. He feels that 400 Jews in Miami are more important than the President's Conference. He feels they should reach out to all the Jewish communities and local stations throughout America: Chicago, Miami, Atlanta, Houston, Philadelphia. He pointedly says that not every meeting with three Jews in New York is a meeting with American Jewry.

While Pinkas is busy building bridges with American Jews, he proposes building walls between Israel and the Palestinians. "The demographic reality and political impossibilities are such that if Israel is to remain a Jewish state and a democracy, it must disengage from the Palestinians. For lack of a viable and durable political process, unilateral steps should be seriously considered." Since all else has failed, perhaps high fences would make for good neighbors.



Pinkas with Prime Minister Ariel Sharon.

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