



ASAF SHARIV

The Best Face Forward

By Aliza Davidovit

If you love the Jewish State of Israel, then the last face you want to see on cable news is that of an Israeli consul general. It's not because they are not "pretty" enough for airtime, but because if they are on, it means that Israelis are dead, that a suicide bomber struck again, that human body parts are strewn across a blood drenched street, that mothers are grieving, that children are orphaned, and that a murderous blast has once again anguished the core of the promised homeland.

As *Lifestyles* made its way to the Israeli Consulate in New York City to interview Consul General Asaf Shariv, we were glad that in the seven months he has served his term we hadn't seen very much of him on TV as we did his predecessors, Pinkas Alon and Aryeh Mekeel. Unfortunately, this soon changed as I pulled into a parking garage around the corner of the consulate and my cell phone rang. "Shariv has to cancel," said Francine Raubvogel, Director for the Bureau, "He's dashing over to CNN." There was no need for an explanation.

All the networks were now running with the breaking news: Eight students were killed by a Palestinian gunman at a Jewish seminary in Jerusalem in the deadliest terrorist attack on Israelis in two years.

When Shariv finally does sit down with *Lifestyles*, he says that he'd be happy to never be on TV again—especially for such reasons. Nonetheless, he has since been

on the air countless times with his own positive initiative-- to show the softer and prettier side of Israel. But, the lively and dynamic Shariv, the youngest consul to fill that post at age 36, also has other places he shows his face to serve the Jewish people, i.e., Facebook, MySpace, college campuses and other venues where there too, he can put Israel's best face forward and reach generation NEXT. His youthful and vibrant tenure come at an essential time when a new generation has qualms and questions about Israel as it turns 60. He is proving quite savvy at addressing the contemporary crises. Quite simply he's cool and has the ability to endow ancient ties to Israel with modern appeal. Just click on his Facebook profile and see how. It's rather neat to be able to "poke" the consul, tag him on photos, write on his wall, and to connect with him via all the e-applications the trendy site has to offer. There is definitely something revolutionary about Shariv and his e-diplomacy.

"I'm trying to sell Israel beyond the conflict," Shariv says. "Israel has something for everyone, culture, sports, innovations, great universities, historic sites, as well as a great nightlife. As much as I love New York, the night life in Tel Aviv is even better."

The beautiful highs and lows of the country's landscape itself is emblematic of the range of treasures

Israel has to offer and Shariv intends to visit every university and platform in the tri-state area to let that be known. "The younger generation is less supportive of Israel because all it hears about is blood and terror," he explains. "But Israel is not only about Kassam rockets.



He points out that Israel's current military strength also contributes to its negative image. "Once we were 'the David,' but we became the Goliath," he says. "Now we have the tanks and they have kids with stones. He feels that nothing can beat a picture, and when people see a big army against kids with stones they get the wrong impression because they don't know the history or the context of the historic dispute. "Yes, we are stronger," Shariv says, "but if we won't be stronger then we won't be at all, period. We make no apologies for being stronger."

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In his current post, Shariv has no intention of preaching to the converted. He wants to open dialogue with Palestinian professors and other Zionist bashers and confront the liberal anti-Israel agenda that has metastasized across



campuses with viral speed and with the potential for malignant repercussions. He is creating lists of contact information of people he intends to engage or whom he might need to reach if an anti-semitic activity breaks out on a campus within his jurisdiction. But he's

not only looking to have a fat Rolodex, he's looking to animate those names and numbers into important relationships and to build bridges upon which Jewish wellbeing can traverse.

Though Shariv is young and has a fresh approach, he is hardly green. He got his start in public affairs in 1990, as a soldier in the I.D.F., during which time he was a reporter and senior editor for the weekly BaMachane, the official newspaper of the Israeli military. Eventually he was promoted to Acting Editor-in-Chief and managed a team of 30 reporters, editors, and producers and later worked as a deputy editor at Globes Newspaper. But the one time journalist then turned the hard questions on himself and asked whether his career path was one that was consistent with his talents and potential. "My parents always said to us, 'Do whatever you want to do—but be the best at it,'" he shares. "I had to ask myself, would I be the best at journalism?"

With the answer, he chose to put down his reporter's pad and pick up a legal one instead.

It was an auspicious choice. In 1997, he earned a degree in law from The Interdisciplinary Center of Israel and practiced as an attorney at the Tel-Aviv firm of Weissglass-Almagor until 2002. There he met his beautiful wife, Tzili, who is also an attorney. But the quick-witted Shariv, who can argue any opponent into a corner, says his wife wins every argument at home. "It's very simple," he explains. "She is much smarter than me."

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But Shariv's own smarts were much prized and noted by his law firm, and when his boss was asked by former Prime Minister Ariel Sharon to serve as his chief of staff, Shariv was asked to come along and serve as advisor to the chief of staff. Although he dreaded the commute that would accompany his new job, he decided to travel that road.

In his new position, he sat on the prime minister's committee that discussed strategic issues with the American government, and was instrumental in formalizing the MOU between Israel and the United States regarding the Road Map for Peace. He was also a member of the special task force which dealt with issues such as the route of the security fence, the disengagement from Gaza, and the U.S. guarantees on Israeli bonds. He became the Director of Media and Public Affairs to Prime Ministers Ariel Sharon and then to Ehud Olmert. He was also the prime ministers' personal media advisor and a member of the senior staff supervising the Government's Press Office and Advertising Bureau. He was also the spokesman for various

government agencies, such as the Institute for Intelligence and Special Operations (Mossad), the Atomic Energy Committee, the National Security Committee, and the Counter-Terrorism Unit.

“During the years I was in the prime ministers’ office, I had a war, an intifada, a disengagement, a road map, ten budgets, 20 ministers replacing jobs, and a PM who had two strokes,” Shariv recounts. “I had everything but one thing, I didn’t have peace. I pray the guy who replaced me will have it.”

But that optimism is losing steam from generation to generation. Shariv recounts how when his brother was born in 1962, the grownups would say that when he grows up there will be no more army and there will be peace. Eleven years later, when Asaf was born, they said the same thing. “When my kids were born nobody said this,” he deeply laments. “I know there won’t be peace for my kids.”

As he looks to the future, he is also nostalgic for the past. He says that he is honored to have worked for such a legend as Ariel Sharon. “Sharon is nothing like his rough image. He is the nicest and most generous person I ever met,” Shariv says. “I miss him like he is my own family.” He shares how Sharon was supersensitive to the feelings of his staff and was concerned about their wellbeing and that of their families, too. There were days when Shariv spent more hours with the former prime minister than with his own

wife. “I learned a lot about history from him,” Shariv says. “He loved to tell stories about Israel and I loved to listen. All who worked for him knew we were working for a Bar Kochba [a Jewish hero and the last king of Israel in history].”

Shariv admits that he learned a lot from Sharon and calls him the “best manager” he ever knew. He reveals how every important ministerial decision was made with a calm and rational mind. In addition, Sharon didn’t think he knew it all, as do some leaders, and solicited and respected suggestions and opinions of those he trusted.

As consul general, Asaf Shariv seems to emulate the managerial style of his beloved hawkish prime minister who has been in a coma since January of 2006. “The consulate is not a pyramid where everyone is here to serve me, we all work together as a team,” he says. The consulate, it appears, is more characteristic of the Western Wall than the pyramids, each person is an essential stone interlocked in one mission, one destiny—they sustain each other, they need each other—every initiative, every effort, every personal sacrifice, every prayer, helps build and fortify the House of Israel.

Prior to assuming his post, Shariv went to speak to his predecessors to



learn more about what lay ahead of him. None of their words set him running for the door, either because misery loves company or because it's a worthwhile position. He will not tell. But Shariv says that for him, it is not even a job, it's a mission, "I'm giving my soul to the Jewish people."

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Shariv, the youngest of three siblings, is the only one in his family who did not pursue higher military ranks and didn't take an officer course. Both his parents were born in Israel. His father, Meir Shreiber, was a brigadier in the Israeli army and a commander in the antiaircraft unit. When David Ben-Gurion made his high officers change their names to Israeli ones, Shreiber became Shariv. Shariv senior was a hero who fought in the 1956 war. He survived the enemies, but, sadly, he died of a heart attack while jogging on the treadmill seven years ago. He never got to see Shariv's two kids, his precious grandchildren, his flesh and blood legacy for whom all those devastating wars had to be won. Shariv's mother still lives in Tel Aviv.

On a lighter note, after speaking with this steadfast advocate of the Jewish people at length, Shariv's fun and funny side come through. It becomes easier to believe that this charismatic political appointee, with the mischievous twinkle in his eye, was a trouble maker as a kid. He'd often sneak out of class preferring to play basketball or soccer to studying. Such behavior is hardly acceptable from most students, but what augmented the hilarity of his behavior was that his mother was the principal of the school and later the inspector general of all the schools. His report cards often claimed that he wasn't fulfilling his potential. He is now. And today when he is caught at a ballgame, it's never on his nation's clock.

What's next on his watch? "I'm still thinking of my current job," Shariv says. "I've learned that life is what happens when you're making plans."

As I set to leave the busy consul general, he pointed to the Israeli flag hanging on the wall. He explains that it isn't just any flag, it's a survivor of the Twin Towers. The flag was found in a Staten Island garbage dump among the ruins of 9/11. It was given to Mayor Bloomberg who gave it to Shimon Peres who gave it to the Israeli Consulate of New York. It's clear to the consul general and I that this flag is a veritable symbol of it's people—persecuted, yet no enemy, no thing, no circumstance can destroy it. It's a chilling departure.

Shariv thanks Lifestyles for the interview and as I leave the consul general's office he says, "Hey, I'll see you on Facebook."
