



DANNY AYALON

the might of return

Photo by Gideon Lewin

BY ALIZA DAVIDOVIT

Israel's hippest and "hottest" former ambassador to the United States, Danny Ayalon, could easily adopt the chorus from Bon Jovi's recent hit song "Who Says You Can't Go Home?" as the anthem for his new mission: to revitalize immigration of Diaspora Jewry to the State of Israel. And although Ayalon is not about to become a singing ambassador, he wholeheartedly echoes the sentiments of the popular lyrics: "Who says you can't go home / There's only one place that call[s] me one of their own."

In his new role as co-chairman of Nefesh B'Nefesh (NBN), Hebrew for "soul to soul," he represents an organization that doesn't merely offer heartstring invitations to encourage immigration, it facilitates the process from A to Z, or more importantly, from *aleph* to *taf*, by removing the financial, professional, and logistical obstacles that prevent many individuals from making the big move. Nefesh B'Nefesh cuts right through the red tape—which at times can be more difficult than redefining the green line. Practically speaking, it means that if a doctor holds a medical license, or someone holds a degree or certificate, it will automatically be valid in Israel. Today, the head of hematology at Hadassah Hospital is an NBN immigrant, an *oleh*.

Before their plane even lands at Ben-Gurion Airport, newcomers' identity papers, drivers' licenses, and necessary documentation are all processed. Within 24 hours of touchdown, they are ready to be absorbed into Israeli society without hassle, without lines, and without worry. To date, since its inception in 2001, NBN has sponsored the immigration of 10,000 North American Jews to live in Israel. About 99% have stayed and 20,000 more candidates now dwell in anticipation on the NBN waiting list.



The miracle of Nefesh B'Nefesh was born in tears, as are many Jewish triumphs, and the fate of a few good men intersected to make it possible.

When Yehoshua Fass, the very popular rabbi of the affluent Boca Raton Synagogue, got the news that his cousin was murdered in a homicide bombing in Israel, his immediate reaction was that perhaps he should move to Israel to replace the life that had been taken by terrorism. One *Shabbat*, he approached one of his congregants, Tony Gelbart, a very successful businessman known for his philanthropy and love for Israel. Rabbi Fass and Gelbart, who is also president and CEO of Old City Partners LLC, an investment company with holdings in the U.S. and Israel, went for a very long walk that afternoon. By its end they had conceived of the idea of Nefesh B'Nefesh, an organization that would facilitate immigration of Jews to Israel.

Gelbart, being the businessman that he is, decided to approach the issue of *aliyah*—immigration to Israel—in a pragmatic manner. He conducted market research on who and how many people really wanted



Photo courtesy of Danny Ayalon

Anne and Danny Ayalon.

The success and importance of NBN was acknowledged by then prime minister Ariel Sharon himself, who brought about a Cabinet resolution to recognize and support the organization. Today, the State of Israel pays for one third of the NBN budget. To date, the 10,000 *olim* who have passed through its program have cost the program \$30 million, but they have already contributed half a billion dollars to Israel's GDP, a number that only marginally reflects the veritable "might of return" of Jews to their Promised Land. Now there is the task of raising \$60 million more in order to send over the 20,000 Jews who are currently on the waiting list.

And here is where the destiny of the third good man, former ambassador Danny Ayalon, intersects with that of Tony Gelbart and Rabbi Fass, to make Nefesh B' Nefesh's goals possible.

Ayalon served as Israel's ambassador to the United States from July

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to move to Israel, and more importantly, what was stopping them from doing so or making those who had already made the trip come back. The conclusion: Zionism sparked the desire to go, but the practicalities of life quelled it. Thus NBN was created with a four-pronged tactical approach to deal not only with matters of employment and bureaucracy, but also to provide community support by grouping together like individuals, helping *olim* find appropriate schools for their kids, finding the right community for their families, as well as offering social ser-

vices. NBN also takes into account financial needs and gives up to \$25,000 grants to families who prove they need it.

Because of its dedication, about 90% of the NBN participants get a job within the first year or even before arriving. "We have the best employment agency in the country," Ayalon points out. "Companies such as Motorola, Hewlett-Packard, IBM, and Ernst & Young all call us to get placements from our American, English-educated immigrants. We have more job offers than *olim* we can bring in."

2002 to November 2006. With a brilliant mind, profound devotion to his country, affable charm, and unwavering integrity, he established very close and meaningful relationships with the highest echelons in Washington, D.C. During his tenure, relations between the United States and Israel reached an all-time high. Strategic, political, and economic ties were deepened and expanded across the board. The ambassador played a leading role in securing the agreement for \$10 billion in U.S. grants and loan guarantees to Israel; bilateral trade that reached \$20 billion

and another \$10 billion in investment; the Roadmap for Peace; as well as the historic exchange of letters between President Bush and PM Ariel Sharon in which Bush formally accepted the Sharon disengagement plan.

But the humble ambassador is reluctant to take full credit for these historic achievements and proudly bestows it on Sharon. "PM Sharon knew how to relate to Bush and to both American as well as Israeli interests," Ayalon says. "What Bush liked about Sharon is that he was a great warrior but also a man of peace. He knew that Sharon would be tough to negotiate with but once he gave his word, he would keep it. He knew with Sharon a yes was a yes and a no was a no."

Ayalon defined his own skill as the ability to capitalize on Sharon's vision and great policies and to leverage them

to prime ministers Benjamin Netanyahu and Ehud Barak, as well as chief foreign policy advisor to Prime Minister Ariel Sharon. As a member of Israel's foreign service, from 1989 to 1997, he also represented Israel as a consul in Panama and as a member of Israel's Permanent Mission to the U.N. It was a career that



Photo courtesy of Danny Ayalon

With President Bush at his ranch.

during a very crucial period for both Israel and the United States, it is quite a challenge for anyone to find out what they want to do afterward. It was hard to find something as fulfilling and exciting."

One thing was certain, he was determined to step out of public office and glad to be outside the glass-house scrutiny that accompanies it. Within milliseconds of parting from his post, he received countless offers. Ayalon, who has an M.B.A. from Bowling Green State University in Ohio, had worked in the private sector as a senior financial executive prior to his government service. From positions in political office to academia, from philanthropy to business, opportunities came knocking on Ayalon's door. But only one offer came knocking upon his heart, and he opened it. *Nefesh B'Nefesh* stood for everything Ayalon believed in

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into strengthening Israel's position with the administration, with Congress on a bipartisan level, and with the American public. Ayalon, who looked up to Sharon, says that he also learned a lot from Israel's legendary leader, primarily to never give up, to never lose heart, and to always be calm under attack and stress.

Perhaps it is his deserved confidence that allows him to defer credit, as Ayalon has often been called upon himself by Israel's top leaders to offer insight, advice, strategy, and his own visions. From 1997 to 2002, prior to his appointment to the United States, Ayalon served as foreign policy advisor

culminated, at the very early age of 47, with the prestigious and important appointment as Israel's ambassador to the United States.

But then one morning Ayalon's term came to an end. His interactive role in affecting Jewish history was now in someone else's charge. He had gone from being part of the power-pack decision-making group to obtaining most of his information from the newspapers and media.

"Representing Israel in Washington is the pinnacle for any diplomat and a great privilege," Ayalon says. "But after that challenging and very exciting stay in D.C.

and he thus joined forces with Rabbi Fass and Tony Gelbart to help bring Jews home.

The Hebrew word *oleh*, "immigrant," when strictly translated, means "to raise up." That has become Ayalon's life mission, to continually "raise up" the well-being of the Jewish people and the Jewish state. Ironically, Ayalon's own beautiful blonde wife of 26 years, Anne, is an *olah* from the United States. He understands better than most the difficulties of the transition but also the wonderful rewards that ensue. "I deeply believe every Jew should live in Israel,"

Ayalon declares. "It's their home and they are safer there than anywhere else in the world. It's where their past is and it's also where the future is."

Ayalon's task is to raise awareness both in Israel and North America about Nefesh B'Nefesh as well as to help raise money, which he does unabashedly. He regards it as the most important cause of our time. Within the few months that he assumed his post, he has already helped raise approximately \$1 million. Ayalon does so by explaining how the *olim* will change the face of Israel. To begin with, they will affect the demography by ensuring a Jewish majority. Secondly, those who come with good education and advanced skills will enhance the economy, and finally, over time, will change the political and social culture.

And Ayalon is not one to deny that the Israeli political system needs changing. "I think

rounded by oil. As Warren Buffett recently stated, "If you are going to the Middle East for oil, then don't stop in Israel. But if you are going for brains, energy, and integrity, then it is the ONLY place to stop."

Ayalon says that Israel has much to offer and much to be proud of. It has more university graduates—and particu-



Photo courtesy of Darny Ayalon

With Condoleezza Rice and Colin Powell.

and an increase in demand by the international market for its technological expertise. In 2005, high-tech exports represented 45% of the country's industrial exports. Both Checkpoint, the leading firewall Internet security system, and Teva Pharmaceuticals, the largest generic drug manufacturer in the world, are Israeli companies. Comverse, ECI

Telecom, Keter Plastic, Iscar, Netafim, Amdocs, and Orbotech are also Israeli companies and have become known and respected around the world.

Forever a soldier for his people and state, Ayalon is, to say the least, a frequent flier, a consummate campaigner for Zionism, an eternal ambassador, a tireless patriot, and an exemplary model of strong, determined, and unequivocal Israeli leadership. Many question why he himself doesn't run for the office of prime minister. His eyes, however, are

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we have a handicapped political structure," Ayalon says. "We need a constitution that will be the underpinning of a new political framework and a system more like America's, with a strong executive and a strong parliament with checks and balances." Ayalon also believes the country would benefit by directly voting for representatives in an election system because then governments would endure for more than the usual two years.

Regardless, Ayalon points out that Israel still rises to the top in a region sur-

larly more engineers—than any other country on earth (135 per 1,000 engineers, compared with 85 per 1,000 in the United States). Israel also has the highest rate of research and development investment per GDP in the world and as a consequence has the largest concentration of high-tech companies outside the United States' famed Silicon Valley—68 companies listed on the Nasdaq stock exchange, more than any other country in the world (followed by Canada with 59 companies listed). It continues to show economic growth

not set on the Knesset, but rather on the excited emotional faces and sparkling eyes of the *olim* as they touch ground at Ben-Gurion Airport. It is a new generation of Jews who flow into their homeland, not because they are running from something but because they are running toward something, a journey that has meaning and beauty beyond the five senses.

So if you ever hear Ambassador Ayalon singing the Bon Jovi song "Who Says You Can't Go Home?" please, don't tell him to quit his day job. [lifestyles](#)