



Photo by: Joe Yudin

## Editor's Notes: It's now or the Negev

By STEVE LINDE  
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JNF focuses on developing the desert at its "most successful conference" in Orlando.

ORLANDO, Florida – There was something surreal but inspiring about the Jewish National Fund's National Conference in the theme park capital of the world earlier this week.

In the warm setting of the plush Hilton hotel in the lush city of Orlando, it brought together more than 550 delegates and donors from across the United States.

And although the event was held on the eve of the final presidential debate, also in Florida, their sights were set on the Negev, on which terrorists were firing rockets from Gaza and on which the JNF has focused its fund-raising campaign.

"David Ben-Gurion once said that if we fail to settle the Negev, we will lose Tel Aviv," Efi Stenzler, the chairman of *Keren Kayemeth Lelsrael* (as JNF is known in Hebrew) told the audience over breakfast on Monday. "Today, we know how right he was."

JNF-KKL, which this year celebrated its 110th anniversary, has taken upon itself to realize Ben-Gurion's vision and "lead the transformation of the face of the Negev, turning the desert into a flourishing region," Stenzler said. "We are working on an eighth community, Carmit, and a ninth community is in the planning stages."

"Our goal is to bring 500,000 new residents to the Negev."

The Negev, which is 13,000 square kilometers (55 percent of the country), is home to some 650,000 people, almost 200,000 of whom live in Beersheba.

Among the ground-breaking projects under way in the city are:

- The Beersheba River Park, a massive environmental and economic development project.
- An artificial lake that will be Israel's second largest, after the Kinneret (Sea of Galilee).
- A 12,000-seat amphitheater that will be the biggest in the country.
- An Abraham heritage center, commemorating the first biblical peace treaty between Abraham and

Abimelech.

In addition, Stenzler said, JNF-KKL is pressing for the construction of a canal connecting the Mediterranean and the Dead Sea.

“This is a huge project that the whole Jewish world should unite to implement,” he said. “It will help Israel, the Palestinians and Jordan, as well as save the Dead Sea.”

Stenzler called Israel “an oasis of stability, democracy and the rule of law...within a desert of totalitarian states.”

“Today more than ever, we have to stand united behind Israel,” he said.

“Not only because it is the Jewish state, but because it is a free country that is fighting for our values.”

Beersheba Mayor Ruvik Danilovich welcomed a cabinet decision earlier this month to declare his city, the capital of the Negev, “a national priority.”

“Beersheba is the national project of the State of Israel,” he said, eliciting warm applause from the audience.

“The government understands that we need to produce another metropolis in Israel besides Tel Aviv. It is the most Zionist act possible to turn the Negev into an alternative, exciting place for young people.

“I think the JNF is the symbol of the dream that we can create a new reality,” Danilovich said.

Ofir Fisher, the dynamic young leader of the OR movement that has partnered with JNF to develop and populate the Negev, coined the slogan, “It’s now or the Negev.”

“This is the time to develop the Negev,” said Fisher, the son of singer Dudu Fisher. “It’s actually too late, but it’s better late than never.”

Fisher noted that the cabinet had recently allocated NIS 300 million for OR’s project to create a “cyberpark” in Dimona.

“If you would like your child to study cyber, you’ll send him to Dimona, from elementary school to college,” he said.

“We are now joining forces with others to establish the first cyberpark, which will eventually host a number of top computer companies and create jobs,” Fisher said. “We would especially like to attract English-speaking immigrants.”

OR, which this year marked its 10th anniversary, has more than 30,000 families in its database, 6,000 of whom have already moved to Negev communities.

JNF held a gala dinner at the Hilton on Sunday night titled “Negev Nights,” which featured Beduin decor (a quarter of the Negev’s residents are Beduin) and Moroccan food.

Chairman of the Board Ronald S. Lauder quipped that the organization had chosen to invest in the Negev because “it was the only area that nobody had anything against.”

Lauder said he and the organization’s new leaders had managed to take it out of the bankruptcy it had been in just a few years ago, and made it an exceptionally effective NGO.

Its campaign target for next year is \$100 million, up from \$73m. this year and \$28m. in 2001.

“Today, 80 percent of our money is sent to Israel, and it’s amazing what we are doing,” Lauder said.

“Without the 241 reservoirs we built, Israel would have run out of water,” he added. “Today the JNF is probably the strongest Jewish organization, not only in Israel, but also in the world.”

Asked to explain the organization’s success, JNF President Stanley M. Chesley said its leadership had realized that donors today wanted to give to specific projects.

“People don’t want to bundle money any more. They want to know where it goes,” Chesley said. “A good example is the 9/11 memorial we have in Jerusalem. The theory behind why Ed Blank built it is because the country that really knew terrorism was not the United States, but Israel, and it’s the only place where we have all the victims’ names.”

Environmental Protection Minister Gilad Erdan, who was presented with a special award by the JNF on Sunday for his contribution to Israel’s environment, praised it for its immense contribution to the country – and beyond.

“The JNF is the greatest Zionist organization in the world today,” he said, and added, causing the crowd to laugh: “I assure you that the dollars you donate to the JNF are the greenest dollars in the world.”

Noting the importance of the construction of the amphitheater and artificial lake in Beersheba, Erdan said: “It is our duty to express through action and not just words that we are safeguarding God’s gift to the Jewish people with a sense of awe and enormous responsibility.

“In her early years, few people could have predicted that in just 64 years, Israel would stand alongside the most advanced countries in the world and enjoy a worldwide reputation for her achievements in scientific and technological research,” he said.

Erdan mentioned desalination and drip irrigation techniques, the restoration of polluted streams, more efficient agricultural technology and the development of fuel alternatives as examples of areas in which Israel had made breakthroughs for the benefit of all its citizens as well as the rest of the world.

“My vision is to change Israel’s branding from a country of conflict to a green nation that provides advanced solutions to improve the quality of life for all humanity,” he said. “Most importantly, we have spared no effort to share our unique experience with both developed and developing countries.”

Responding to a Jerusalem Post editorial on September 1 after the JNF had received the Magshim Israel Yafa award, the organization began handing out a new version of its iconic Blue Box, in which Jews across the world traditionally collected coins for Israel, in Orlando.

The JNF issued a statement saying that the Orlando conference had been its “most successful to date... attracting a record number of attendees from all across the country.”

“The conference really hit home with a lot of people in showcasing our mission and what we’re doing,” said National Conference co-chair Bruce Gould. “It was a rousing success, in terms of the quality of the speakers, the quality of the presentation, and the attendance. And you couldn’t ask for better weather.”

“It was absolutely fantastic,” concurred co-chair Louise Dabrow. “Everyone came away feeling energized, wellinformed, and interested. The response was tremendous. The conference reaffirmed each and everyone’s commitment to our voice in Israel.”

*The writer was a guest of JNF.*



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