

Top Jewish Funders Gather to Discuss Israeli-Americans

“Philanthropists will be a big part of the change” in discourse

Dozens of philanthropists and foundation heads gathered Thursday to discuss ways of leveraging the Israeli-American community both in relation to the Jewish-American community and as a living bridge between it and Israel. The event, which took place in Hollywood, Florida, before the start of the Israel-American Council’s National Summit, allowed for some of the biggest supporters of Jewish and Israeli causes to exchange ideas with each other and deepen their knowledge on current challenges.

Sheldon and Miriam Adelson, Irina Nevzlin and Adam Milstein were among the philanthropists at the event, which was chaired by Charles Bronfman and Shira Ruderman. In addition to individual funders, the executives of foundations and local Jewish federations were also present.

Shira Ruderman, Director of the Ruderman Family Foundation, explained the importance of the event: “The Israeli American community is growing, and we need to address its role on two fronts: how does it relate to the broader Jewish American community, and how can it help all of us better connect to Israel.” Addressing the decision to hold a special conversation among funders, Ruderman said philanthropy was a key component in American Jewry’s communal life, and it also had to be part of the conversation on the “challenges” straining its relationship with Israel. “Crisis has brought the topic to the headlines for the wrong reasons – but it provides us with an opportunity to address it properly. We view it as a challenge, not an obstacle,” she said, adding: “I cannot predict the future. But I do know, that however things play out, philanthropists, foundations and federations will be a big part of that change.”

Renowned businessman and philanthropist Charles Bronfman, said: “All Jews are created equal. It doesn’t matter where you born or what language you speak at home. Jews are Jews and need to all work together.” Addressing the questions of Israeli-Americans, Bronfman chose not to use the bridge analogy. “Israelis living in the US are not important as a bridge, they are important because they have the empathy we sometimes lack towards the other side. Empathy towards American Jews, whom they live among and understand, and empathy towards Israel, which they know and love.”

“I fear a major historic Jewish split, and history will judge us for it,” said Isaac (Bougie) Herzog, Chairman of the Jewish Agency. One way to ensure Jewish continuity among Israelis, he said, was to make sure they “are involved with their local Jewish communities and organizations,” in the United States and around the world.

Sheldon Adelson spoke about his decision to support an organization of Israeli-Americans, saying the Jewish communities are strategic assets for Israel – and even more so the Israelis living in the United States. “The IAC became a home for the Israelis, who would fight over the opportunity to help Israel if it needed them,” he said, adding, “now it needs to become home also to the non-Israeli Jews who want to connect to Israel and support it.”

Incoming Chairman of the IAC Board, Naty Saidoff, said the emergence of the IAC presented a “historic chance” to open a new chapter in the relationship between Israelis and the veteran American Jewish community. In the past, he stated, “Israelis made mistakes and the community made mistakes. It is time to unite and help both sides, because we need one another. Simply put, we have a joined and bright future – because we don’t have a choice if we want to survive.”