

THE JEWISH PRESS

America's Largest Independent Jewish Weekly

www.jewishpress.com

Friday, January 13, 2012 • 18 Teves, 5772

Metro N.Y.C. \$1.50

A Haunting Visit To The Gush Katif Museum

By Devora Spitzer

In the doorway of the museum stand a haredi husband and wife. Nearby are young people from a kibbutz in the Galilee. They glanced at each other hesitantly and entered, walking quietly through the museum's rooms, looking at the various exhibits.

The haredi husband and wife both admit they had never realized the enormity of the atrocity.

"We have never been shown these sights," says one of the kibbutz members to his companion. "When they were expelled, I didn't understand what they wanted. What's the problem? They'll get other homes elsewhere. Seeing these videos here help me understand what a great tragedy it was and how much compassion we should feel for them."

Near the museum's side entrance, high-school kids crowd around two pictures. One asks, "Did you ever realize it was so terrible?" Another replies, "I never paid much attention to it. I thought the residents were just crybabies. Now I'm starting to understand that the injustice done to them cries out to the very heavens. Only now do I realize their expulsion brought about the continuous Kassam rocket attacks we're getting from Gaza."

(Continued on Inside Back Page)

New White House Chief Of Staff 'Go-To' Person For Jewish Groups

By Ron Kampeas

WASHINGTON – President Obama on Monday announced that Jack Lew, his director of the Office of Budget and Management – a Cabinet-level position – would replace William Daley as White House chief of staff.

Lew, 56, was chosen for his long years in government and his reputation as a skilled multi-tasker – he was top-budget cruncher for Bill Clinton before reprising the job for Obama – but Jewish officials were offering a sigh of relief for a subsidiary reason: Their who-we-gonna-call pleas were answered.

Since Dennis Ross, Obama's top Iran adviser, announced his departure late last year, communi-

ty officials wondered who was left to call in a White House that has hemorrhaged top Jews over the last year or so. Lew, an Orthodox Jew, is close to the community and is a go-to person for Jewish events in the capital.

"The reports that there's no one to talk to have always been exaggerated," said Malcolm Hoenlein, the executive vice president of the Conference of Presidents of Major American Jewish Organizations.

Hoenlein pointed to Peter Rouse, a counselor to Obama who has served as acting chief of staff, as someone who has always been accessible.

Still, Hoenlein added, "Jack being there will be beneficial, it will foster communication."

(Continued on Page 3)



U.S. Ambassador to Israel Dan Shapiro visits the Mir Yeshiva in Jerusalem on Tuesday.

Special Fares to Israel from JFK or Newark

Travel now thru March 27, 2012

\$1041 (includes all taxes and fuel surcharge)

For details/restrictions visit www.elal.com

Or Call EL AL at (800)223-6700 or any travel agent

EL AL



IT'S NOT JUST AN AIRLINE. IT'S ISRAEL.

LANDLORDS Vacancies? Guaranteed Rent!

ProgramRentals
M.Z.S. Realty Corp.
Government Subsidized Rentals Our Specialty.

718-252-2022

info@programrentals.com

programrentals.com

HOT OFF the PRESS

WE GUARANTEE THE BEST RESULTS!

Solving Debt Related Problems

- Since 2004 -

No matter what the DEBT we will find a solution.

- Collections & Lawsuits
- Reducing Equity Lines of Credit
- Foreclosures & Liens
- Reducing Mortgage Principal

Angels of debt

Who can you trust more than an Angel?

CERTIFIED ARBITRATORS MEDIATORS

Norman Nissim Balassiano | WWW.ANGELSOFDEBT.COM | HELP@ANGELSOFDEBT.COM

Toll Free: 888-514-1085 • T: 718-766-5193 • F: 718-247-9564

1994 CONEY ISLAND AVE. (BETWEEN QUENTIN & AVE. P) BROOKLYN, NY 11223

Religious Extremism in Israel..... 4,6

Op-eds from Rabbi Ron Yitzchok Eisenman, Ziona Greenwald and Rabbi Berel Wein

Women and Bris Milah 26

Rabbi Raphael Fuchs's Taste of Lomdus column

A Pair of Pitchers... and Some Welcome Changes 50

Irwin Cohen's monthly Baseball Insider column

Community Currents
Page 31

South Florida Section
Page 44

Travel Section
Page 47



A Haunting Visit To The Gush Katif Museum

(Continued from Front Page)

The Gush Katif Museum in Jerusalem was established by Rabbi Shalom Dov Wolpo, head of the Rambam Hashalem Torah Institute, centered in the town of Beitar Illit. Rabbi Wolpo has authored many highly regarded works of *halacha*, including two that research the halachic prohibition of forfeiting territories of the Holy Land to non-Jews.

At the time of the so-called Gaza disengagement, he and his colleagues invested tremendous effort in attempting to derail the expulsion of nearly 10,000 Jews. As the disengagement was implemented and while the fires were still burning, they resolved to establish this museum. But their resolution took three years to come to fruition.

The museum's early visitors, back in 2008, were mostly from the national religious segment of Israel's population. But gradually this changed. Both haredim and secular leftists had remained largely ignorant of what actually happened to Gush Katif's residents. As they heard about the museum, more and more started visiting and were deeply affected by the exhibits.

"The people of Israel have been experiencing disillusionment," says Rabbi Wolpo. "The Kassam rocket attacks, the Hamas ascent to power, the revolutionary changes in surrounding Arab nations, the enormous danger from terror organizations based in the Sinai desert – all these have brought Israelis, including many who once supported the expulsion, to rethink their positions. Now they're opposed to further expulsions of Jews from Judah and Samaria, God forbid. I'm sure the museum has played an important role in this, because when people visit, they start to understand what really happened there."

The museum's curator, Shlomo Wasserteil, welcomes me. Six and a half years have passed since he was expelled from his home in the Gush Katif town of Ganei Tal, but he has not yet become accustomed to his new situation.

"For thirty years I lived in Gush Katif," he says. "I had one of the world's largest flower hothouses, with fifty employees. We exported flowers to Europe for tens of millions of dollars. After we were expelled, I became unemployed. My wife and I were both at home with nothing to do. It plunged me into a terrible psychological state. I couldn't understand why they had done this to us. These wounds haven't healed. At times I even sank into deep depression."

Four years after the expulsion, Shlomo was offered this position at the museum. Now he feels that at least he can do something so that the expulsion won't be forgotten.

"When Rabbi Wolpo established this museum, he called the artist Yankele Klein and told him, 'Set up a museum.' He had no funding, and incurred vast debts. But it all seems to have been worthwhile."

"Tens of thousands visit here – ordinary Jews, educators and their students, Knesset members and government ministers, soldiers and their officers, members of European parliaments, and U.S. congressmen. And after their visits, something happens in the minds of all of them. Even left-wing Knesset members, with tears in their eyes, have written in the visitors' book, 'Never again!'"

We pass through the rooms. Pictures document the history of Gush Katif, revealing that ever since the time of the Hasmoneans, of Chanukah story fame, there was a continuous Jewish presence in Gaza and its environs. This continued until the terrible 1929 Arab pogroms. Only after the 1967 Six-Day War did Jews return. They built thriving communities, never dreaming that one day they would be cruelly uprooted by their own government.

In February 2001, the first rocket was fired at Gush Katif. At the time, the news was widely featured in the Israeli and international media. But later, if news accounts of rocket attacks appeared at all, they were relegated to the back pages.

Two months passed. One day a 15-month-old baby named Ariel was playing outside his home in the town of Atzmona. Three rockets fell on the town, and one sent pieces of shrapnel into Ariel's brain and body, injuring him grievously. His mother, hanging laundry nearby, was also wounded.

A picture of Ariel hangs in the museum. Now a big boy, he is still healing from his wounds. "Everyone helped in his rehabilitation," explains Rabbi Yigal Kirschenzaft, who is also visiting the museum, "and now he's studying in a regular class."

For many years Rabbi Kirschenzaft ran the Chabad House in Neve Dekalim, the largest town in the Gush. "I lived in Gush Katif for twenty-four years," he says simply, leaving no need for further explanation.

"When Yigal first visited here," Shlomo recalls, "he simply couldn't conceal his deep emotion. Every picture 'spoke' to him, and he couldn't stop explaining every picture's background. Locating his house on the aerial picture of Neve Dekalim, he pointed it out, saying, 'Every house in this picture arouses memories. I knew the map of Gush Katif like the palm of my hand!'"

A month before the expulsion, Yigal was injured by shrapnel from a rocket attack. Pointing to the cemetery of the Arab city of Khan Yunis, he explains, "From here they used to fire rockets at us regularly. That morning I was standing in the middle of my town with a friend from Los Angeles, and a mortar fell on the car park and injured us."

More than 5,000 rockets fell on Gush Katif. Those attacks, along with so many other terror acts and shootings, claimed the lives of dozens of Jews; hundreds more were injured. The dead were buried in the sand of Gush Katif, but even they were dragged out of their repose when the Israeli government carried out the disengagement.

Rabbi Shai Gefen, one of the museum's founders and directors, gives me the honor of lighting the eternal lamp perpetuating the memory of Gush Katif's martyrs, whose names and pictures are exhibited in the Memorial Corner.

"Despite all the attacks," says Rabbi Gefen, "the idealism of the residents would not let them leave. The terror could not convince them to give in, because you don't give in when this concerns the Holy Land. They always insisted that if they wouldn't be located there, the rockets would be fired at the population centers in the heart of Israel."

"Sometimes visitors surprise us," says Shlomo. "We might have expected only right-wing people to come. But ever since it opened, the museum has attracted visitors from the entire political spectrum, including many media figures, who cover the museum in a sympathetic manner."

On the day the government established a commission of inquiry to investigate the treatment of the Gaza evacuees, Yaakov Achimeir of the Israel Broadcasting Authority paid a visit. In an article for the Israel Hayom newspaper he wrote, "Before my visit, I thought I would soon be subjected to a barrage of acrimonious ideological propaganda. But no! What I saw consisted of pictures, facts illustrated by modest graphic design, an exhibition of paintings, and videos of the evacuation of Gush Katif. The museum has the atmosphere of an art gallery, with revealing documentation that leaves one with a most painful sensation."

An elderly Jewish couple examines the exhibits, groaning audibly. "Where are you from?" I ask. "From Sderot," they reply. "This is how [then-Prime Minister] Ariel Sharon brought us to this great pitfall. We, who have endured years of Kassam attacks, understand better than anyone else how this entire operation was a bad joke right from the start! Sharon knew the Arabs will never change."

They find it difficult to endure the museum's pictures. When they see, in the wing called the Black Room, a picture of soldiers dragging an elderly Jew from the synagogue of Kfar Darom, the woman nearly collapses, crying out, "How could they possibly do this?" Her husband tries to calm her.

Shlomo has his own memories of that terrible time. A week before the evacuation, two New York Times reporters visited him at home. During their conversation they asked, "Haven't you packed yet?" He told them he hadn't. "I won't do the executioner's job for them," he said. "Don't you believe the day of expulsion will come?" they persisted. "No," he had answered confidently. "I can't believe it."

A year later, the reporters came back, this time to his decrepit mobile home at Yad Binyamin. "You said then that you couldn't believe it," they reminded him. "What do you say now?" He replied, "Jews answer one question with another. Let me ask you: If you had been told, after the expulsion, that our worst enemies would gain control of the Gaza Strip, would you have believed it?" They had no answer.

"Who would have believed that hundreds of Kassam rockets would be fired from the Gaza Strip at Israeli towns all the way up to Beersheba?" Shlomo asks rhetorically. "Who would believe that our best youth, expelled from Gush Katif, would have to return there to fight in Operation Cast Lead? My own son was drafted into one of the elite units and entered the Gaza Strip during the war. After returning unharmed, he told us, 'I got a "whiff" of our old home.'"

Two years ago, on Chanukah, the late Rabbi Menachem Porush, who had been a long-time Knesset member, visited the museum. He was 95 years old at the time and in a wheelchair. As he was led through the rooms, he burst into tears. After his two-hour visit, he wrote in the visitors' book, "What can I say or speak? The feelings experienced in this museum, which commemorates the life of 25 flourishing Jewish settlements in the land of Israel, are indescribable. The houses destroyed, the families expelled, the life shattered for thousands of wretched families who have been cruelly plucked from their communities and land, and thrown into mobile homes until today – without livelihood, homes, or the wherewithal to support their families as they had until this cruel expulsion."

My visit is coming to an end and I ask Rabbi Wolpo what the museum is doing now to help the evacuees.

"Many of the expelled families have already used up all the compensation received from the government," Rabbi Wolpo replies. "They're paying the bank a mortgage for their destroyed home in Gush Katif, together with high rent for their present leaky mobile homes in Nitzan or Yad Binyamin. Many simply don't have money to buy bread."

"That's why we established a Kindness Center to supply food baskets for these families for *Shabbat* and *Yom Tov*. It also helps their children get school bags and other school supplies."

On a table I notice an eight-page multi-colored bulletin under the name *Eretz Yisrael Shelanu* – "Our Land of Israel."

"Whoever observes the results of the previous withdrawals, and considers the present revolutionary upsets in the Arab world, yet still speaks of further expulsions from Judah and Samaria and the establishment of a terrorist state in the heart of this land – is either insane or is an agent of our enemies," Rabbi Wolpo tells me.

"That's why we publish a biweekly bulletin which gives the true picture of our security situation, our right to the entire Land of Israel, and the ways to reach a true peace. Every two weeks, 100,000 copies are disseminated throughout Israel. The bulletins are snatched up like hot cakes. If we could afford it, we would publish it every week and could easily distribute many hundreds of thousands of copies."

I notice a page in the bulletin about "A Day of Fun for Children."

Rabbi Gefen explains, "The children of Gush Katif, expelled from their homes, and experiencing every day their families' unfortunate situation, have become broken in spirit. It's our duty to encourage them to hope for better times. The children of Judah and Samaria as well are deeply afraid that if a Palestinian state is established, God forbid, their settlements will be uprooted. So we arrange for them, at least three times a year, a "Day of Fun." We rent an amusement park for the kids to enjoy themselves, and we invite them all to come with their parents, at our expense. They enjoy themselves and forget about their troubles."

I ask Rabbi Wolpo how the museum and its many projects are maintained.

"Without help from the public, it's difficult to maintain and expand these vital activities," he says. "Many Jews around the world believe in the integrity of the Land of Israel and identify with the themes expressed here at the museum, in our bulletin and at the Kindness Center. We're sure they'll offer help by becoming partners in this important cause."

He adds that plans are underway for a dinner in Brooklyn on February 22 in honor of the museum and its activities, with the participation of important guests. Full details are still being ironed out. He urges all interested individuals to e-mail him (wolpo@012.net.il) or visit www.sos-israel.com or www.gushkatif.022.co.il for more information.

Devora Spitzer lives with her husband and six children in the settlement of Mata, in the Eila Valley. She is a sixth-generation resident of Israel, descended from Jews born in Hebron. Many of her family members were murdered in the 1929 Arab pogrom.