The great debate at Beth Protea on countering the media assault against Israel

COMMENT

• By DAVID E. KAPLAN

“I don’t care if you are telling me the hall is overbooked; the issues are larger than you, me or my comfort; I’m coming and I’ll bring my own chair if I have to.”

And many did as they joined some 265 English-speakers who packed into the dining room of Beth Protea Retirement Village in Herzliya on Monday night to hear a riveting panel discussion on “Countering the Global Media Assault on Israel.”

Fueling the high attendance was people’s anxiety at the unrelenting media assault on the image of Israel and its legitimacy.

The government came under heavy flack as failing in the counter-offensive to this “war on Israel,” as panelist Prof. Gerald Steinberg termed it, beset by “declining budgets and mindless mindsets,” as expressed by this writer in opening the panel discussion.

(organized by Truth Be Told (TBT), a new grassroots organization committed to proactively articulating Israel’s narrative to the outside world, the evening commenced with five Ethiopian-Israeli students from the Interdisciplinary Center, Herzliya, who reported on their successful mission to Cape Town in March during Israel Apartheid Week.

“For me it was like completing a circle,” said Samuel Taseima, a recent graduate and the only male member of the mission. “I arrived as a child in Operation Solomon on the back of my mother,” and returned to Africa, employed in “one the most prestigious investment firms in Israel. Israel for me is freedom, not apartheid.”

“Describing our success to South Africans as the sons and daughters of Africa,” said Dvora Desta, “exposed the lie of apartheid in Israel.”

She related how she adroitly neutralized one Saudi woman student at the University of Cape Town who burst into

TALKING HEADS: Panelists Gerald Steinberg, David Olesker and Simon Plosker, and debate moderator Leah Zinder. (Courtesy David E. Kaplan)

“Abraham’s Tent,” organized by the university’s Jewish students, belittling “I am pro-Palestinian.”

“So are we, but we are also pro-peace, replied Dvora, who followed up with the clincher, “By the way, can you as a woman drive a car in your country?”

Hurriedly leaving the tent unnerved, the Saudi – covered up from head to foot in her burka – could not escape hearing the stinging truth, “It is you that lives in an apartheid state that shamefully discriminates against women.”

Moderated by Israel Broadcasting Authority English News anchor Leah Zinder, the four panelists were Trevor Asserson, a Jerusalem-based international lawyer who successfully challenged the BBC on issues of media bias, David Olesker (founder and director of the Jerusalem Center for Communication and Advocacy Training), Simon Plosker (managing editor of Honest Reporting) and Gerald Steinberg (president of NGO Monitor and professor of Political Studies at Bar-Ilan University).

Each, battle-hardened in the trenches of media warfare, addressed the audience on his experiences and tactics in fighting this unrelenting onslaught on the character of the Jewish state. Underlying the debate was the realization among today’s Israelis that “despite what Israel does or Israel does not do; it is simply a case that Israel is.”

Referring to the success of the IDC student mission to South Africa, David Olesker said, “Sometimes just pitching up and telling your story will make a difference,” because for the most part, “folk out there know diddly-squat – totally ignorant of the issues.”

In his broad Scottish accent, he related how at a meeting at a university in Glasgow, a Saudi diplomat was ranting about Israel’s treatment of the Palestinians, when one student belloved, “Donna talk to us about human rights. In your country, you canna get a bloody drink!”

So while partly “the problem is ignorance,” it also said, Olesker, is stamina. “The anti-Israel advocates are at it all day, every day. They never sleep.”

Critically significant was how strategically the term “the Arab-Israel conflict” is hardly today in usage. It has been reframed as the “Palestinian-Israeli conflict,” with enormous implications.

“I can show you a cartoon from 1967 from a French newspaper that depicts the Six Day War with a huge ugly Arab Goliath bearing down on a skinny little Israel wearing a loin cloth and an eye patch armed only with a sling shot.”

With Israel perceived the underdog, the support and sympathy from most the Western world was overwhelming. However, today with the conflict depicted as a Palestinian-Israel conflict, Israel is easily portrayed by the global media as the brutal Goliath and the Palestinians as the vulnerable and defenseless David. Today’s narrative has cunningly switched the imagery of these iconic biblical characters. In the eyes of most the world media, Israel is the arch-villain.

All speakers agreed on the need not only to be reactive but to go on the offensive, and welcomed everyone to enlist in Israel’s “citizen’s army.”

One of the most pertinent and poignant comments by an inspired participant was “I felt it was not a political evening; it was an Israeli evening.”

It sent a resounding message that led Harris Green, one of the members of TBT, to remark “that Left and Right and everything in between could work together to protect, project and strengthen Israel.”

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