

Goodwill Ambassadors or Ugly Israelis?

We are all familiar with the pejorative term *ugly Israeli*, which refers to those who behave according to negative stereotypes of individuals and groups in Israeli society. Over time, the phrase began being tossed around in public dialogue and began to encompass many negative attributes.

And rightfully so—no sane person can understand what prompts an Israeli tourist to draw our national flag on a memorial to Japanese war casualties, to hold parties at an archeological site, or to pray loudly with other Israelis in the lobby of an Austrian hotel. Imagine what would happen if a group of Muslim tourists decided to pray, according to Islamic tradition, in the lobby of an Israeli hotel.

These actions are covered in depth by the media, and the involvement of Israelis is felt and makes an impression. The negative international opinion of Israeli tourists has ramifications on the political sphere—aggression in a hotel becomes associated in their eyes with aggression in diplomatic conduct. As far as Europeans are concerned, it's the same thing.

It is important to fight anti-Semitism. Public opinion must be changed, but most importantly, we must change our behavior. Statistics show that close to 300,000 Israelis will soon be leaving to spend Passover at vacation spots all over the world. This is a good opportunity to remind those hundreds of thousands of Israelis that their behavior—good and bad—represent all of us, even those spending the holiday at home, and that abroad, we are the state.

When we leave the gates of Ben-Gurion International Airport, we become nothing less than ambassadors. Internalizing this is

a small step for us but a much bigger step for the reputation of the state of Israel itself.

Still, what causes some Israelis to behave like there's no tomorrow when they're abroad? Some might say it's the weather; others might say it's the constant pressure under which we live—the army, terror attacks, survival, the mindset of “Why not? Why should I be a sucker?” It's not certain that there is one definitive answer, so I will just say this: Foreigners' opinions about Israel and its future are determined first and foremost by their personal acquaintance with good or bad “ambassadors” of our country. And the opinion of private individuals influences the opinion of decision-makers and can even, in the end, affect how we are treated.

Israel has 100 official foreign offices. Over 4 million citizens travel abroad each year. These citizens, if they are aware of the consequences of their behavior, can be a great help to Israeli public diplomacy and to the nation's image.

Goodwill Ambassadors, my organization, was established by Israelis who are particularly concerned about this—businesspeople, student leaders, educators, artists, media professionals and many others who believe that it is time for Israelis abroad to revolutionize their behavior for the good of our quality of life and our future.

Change is possible. We must fight the negative image that has been created and placed around our necks, but here there is no need to use weapons or violence. The opposite is true—we believe that if we smile more, are patient and count to 10 before getting angry or responding, things will look different. The magic words *please*, *thank you* and *excuse me* are the solution. Remember—things can be different. Represent us with honor.

Lior Varona founded the nonprofit group Goodwill Ambassadors with Yuval Limon. For the original article, visit [http://www.goodwillambassadors.org/](#)