

Israel: With Friends Like These

Last year, I was invited as a guest to the Memphis Friends of Israel Festival (MFOI) to speak and promote Heart to Heart. I had no idea what I was getting into, and hadn't been to Memphis in more than 20 years, but I immediately agreed to join, and am sure glad I did. This year, I can't wait to go back, and hope you'll join me.

To give you an idea of why you should come and tell others to do so, let me share some background.

Not including guests like me, the Festival attracts residents from three states. Jews and Christians. Last year, there were an estimated 13,000 people at the sunny Sunday Festival, impressive for a city whose Jewish community numbers about 9,000.

One of the special things about the Festival is that it is run by a dedicated group of Jewish and Christian volunteers and their friends and colleagues. Having attended a Festival board meeting, it's clear the group has it down to a system, even though it's a lot of work, of course.

But it's a labor of love, and especially meaningful that Israel is the common denominator that brings so many people together. The work they do is awesome. The Festival is, well, festive. The warm feelings generated and positive message about Israel delivered are priceless.

Last year, special guests and speakers included Steve Linde, editor of the Jerusalem Post; Earl Cox, a Christian broadcaster that Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has deemed an Ambassador of Good Will from Israel; Memphis Grizzlies General Manager Chris Wallace; a host of local political and civic leaders, and me. This year's speakers are

just as impressive, if not more so: Mayor Benny Kashriel of Ma'aleh Adumim; Vida Velasco, a University of New Orleans student who works with Stand With Us; and Chloe Valdary, assistant director of the Institute for Black Solidarity with Israel (ISBI).

While Linde summed the Festival up very well afterward, there's nothing like being there in person.

"The main attractions included a hilarious falafel-eating contest and entertaining performances from Schmervis, a Jewish Elvis impersonator, psychiatrist Steve Wruble, the Meshugga Klezmer Band, Memphis Jewish teen rapper Jack Fargo, the Israeli Scout Caravan and the Memphis Bottle Dancers.

Scattered across the large lawns and in the tents were Jewish food stands, Israeli arts-and-crafts, a rock-climbing wall, a petting zoo, a three-point basketball shooting competition, an MDA ambulance brought in especially for the event by American Friends of Magen David Adom, and informative signs about Israel, its leaders and its achievements.

Some 13,000 locals attended the festival on a hot day in a clear expression of their warmth toward Israel. The festival is the brainchild of the Memphis Friends of Israel, a support group sponsored by local Jewish and Christian organizations and businesses.

"A grassroots event like this can bypass the media, which unlike *The Jerusalem Post*, are mostly biased against Israel," said organizer Scott Baum, a top radiologist. "We have the festival at a public, neutral venue in order to attract larger crowds and show our pride in supporting Israel. People need to be educated on their own about Israel so that they can make their own informed decisions, and I think this is the best way to do it." (The full article is [here](#).).

The MF0I Festival is also an exciting prototype of an event that's fun, meaningful, and allows all Americans to come out

and show support for and learn about Israel, regardless of religious, ethnic or national background.

Memphis is far from a Jewish Mecca (pun intended), so if this community can be an anchor for such an event, it can happen anywhere. And that's just what the MFOI wants; to franchise the model all across the country. Not to make money, but to multiply the effect in many cities and states across America. That's another reason to attend this year. Come see for yourself, then go back and make something happen like it in your own community. The MFOI will gladly serve as teachers and guides, happily sharing their recipe of success. The only recipe they probably won't share is for the award winning kosher bar-b-que.

Another reason to make it to Memphis on June 8 is because Heart to Heart is a partner and the charitable beneficiary of the MFOI Festival. As a non-profit itself, the Festival is not looking to make any money, just cover costs and give the thousands of visitors the best time possible. So, as Israel embarks on plans to build a new, state-of-the-art, modern blood center with a whopping \$100 million price tag, the MFOI leaders understand there's nothing more unifying when supporting of Israel—especially among Jews and Christians—than making sure Israel always has a safe and abundant blood supply.

Oh, and the Festival is free. You can sponsor it, donate to it, or simply show up and have fun for a day while supporting and blessing Israel. It won't cost you a single shekel.

As Israel celebrates its 66th anniversary of independence this week, MFOI is an incredible example how a diverse community can come together to celebrate so many of the wonderful blessings that Israel is, the prophesy that Israel fulfills, and its role as a light unto the nations.

Looking forward to seeing you June 8 in Memphis. I'll be the

happy one by the Israeli ambulance.

Jonathan Feldstein is the director of Heart to Heart, a unique virtual blood donation program to bless Israel and save lives in Israel. Born and educated in the U.S., Feldstein emigrated to Israel in 2004. He is married and the father of six. Throughout his life and career, he has been blessed by the calling to fellowship with Christian supporters of Israel and shares experiences of living as an Orthodox Jew in Israel. He writes a regular column for Charisma's Standing With Israel. You can contact Jonathan at firstpersonisrael@.