

The Significance of Growing Relations Between Israel and Hispanic Nations

I was driving in Jerusalem last month and saw a colorful flag flying. The horizontal bars of yellow, blue and red had a coat of arms in the middle, but I was not familiar with which country it represented.

What I did know is that there was a visiting head of state in town, and flying that country's flag was a way to show honor and respect.

A few days later, I read that Ecuadorian President Guillermo Lasso was visiting and had announced the opening of an official innovation office in Jerusalem, and he undertook to maintain a more balanced approach toward Israel at the United Nations. Both are welcome announcements, particularly given that in the past, Ecuador had been part of a group of countries that frequently voted against Israel at the U.N. President Lasso's visit marked the first time an Ecuadorian president came to Israel since the countries established diplomatic relations in 1949.

Celebratory statements and tweets came from both Israeli and Ecuadorian leaders. When I read that the new office will be located in the trade office Columbia that opened in Jerusalem last year, I realized that something big and good was afoot between Israel and Latin America, and the Hispanic community in general.

A week later, I read about Israel's embassy in Mexico opening the Israel-Mexico tech acceleration program, designed to connect innovative enterprises in Israel and Mexico for high-level high-tech collaboration. The Israeli and Mexican announcement is part of the countries celebrating 70 years of

diplomatic relations in July.

As the 15th-largest economy in the world, this program will connect Mexican and Israeli entrepreneurs working on solutions to respective local challenges and needs including health, communication and the very important issue of water management.

This comes in the wake of two other central American countries, Guatemala and Honduras, being among those to move their embassies to Jerusalem, and is an important way to increase cooperation and build regional ties.

Given these news items and my growing relationships among Hispanics, it's clear I made a mistake studying French in high school. In these cases, however, entrepreneurship is a common language that will overcome linguistic barriers and build warm, ongoing and mutually beneficial relationships.

When I think about recent developments, I am pleased but not surprised. The truth is that they all are part of a trend in Latin America and among Hispanics in general to seek to build deeper connections with Israel.

Many countries understand that close relations with Israel bring many benefits and blessings to the table. Individually, with strong roots in Christianity, Hispanics all over the world look at Israel as the fulfillment of biblical prophecy. Biblical principles such as blessing Israel, praying for the peace of Jerusalem, being watchmen on the wall and more are not mere words but God's playbook.

This was why Guatemala and Honduras quickly followed the United States to recognize Jerusalem as Israel's capital and to move their embassies there. As these diplomatic pillars strengthen, it's no surprise that last year, six Central American countries took part in establishing the Central American Forum for Israel. Doing so, Guatemala, Panama, Honduras, El Salvador, the Dominican Republic, and Nicaragua

signed a declaration of support for the Jewish people and the State of Israel.

Part of this initiative highlighted their commitment to educate future generations about the Holocaust and fight anti-Semitism. Together, they adopted the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance definition of anti-Semitism, declaring "We stand against anti-Semitism and hatred of all kinds. We support the IHRA as countries and institutions around the world do to simplify law enforcement and deal with the consequences of anti-Semitism in a correct and just way."

All this activity is especially noteworthy not just in the strengthening of diplomatic and trade relations with Israel but as a way to take the war on terror to another front. Iran has long sought to increase its reach to and presence in Latin America, and indeed has established itself in places like Cuba, Venezuela and others.

These are not as threatening as Iran's presence in Argentina, where it was responsible for two major terror attacks—one on the Israeli embassy (March 17, 1992, killing 29 and injuring more than 250) and another on a Jewish community center (July 18, 1994, killing 85 and injuring more than 300).

Iran's terrorist reach is not limited to major bombings. On January 18, 2015, Argentinian prosecutor Alberto Nisman was found dead in his Buenos Aires apartment. "Coincidentally," days earlier he had filed a report implicating former President Cristina Fernández de Kirchner and other officials of covering up Iran's involvement in the 1994 Jewish community center bombing. More recently, a Venezuelan cargo plane with "car parts," and previously owned by Iran, arrived in Argentina, rousing suspicion with a larger than necessary crew, including several Iranians.

The growing relations between Israel and a number of Latin American countries is important and embodies the biblical

model of Israel being a blessing to the families of the world. But more than on a national basis, religious support for Israel among Hispanics worldwide is a cornerstone of support within their nations. This of course includes Latin America, but also the U.S. While Christian support for Israel is wide and growing in general, it feels much wider on a per capita basis among Hispanics.

There are many ways in which this is expressed, but one of the most unique, dynamic and impressive that I've seen was when I visited Nashville this year and had the privilege of attending services and speaking at Casa de Dios. I am accustomed to seeing the Israeli flag flying in the church parking lots of a number of ministries. However, Casa de Dios raises the bar: Before each of their services every Sunday, they sing Israel's national anthem, "Hatikvah." I was moved beyond words.

Something big is happening among Hispanics relating to Israel. Exploring this, I hosted two back-to-back conversations discussing a range of reasons why that's happening and the significance of how Hispanics are awakening to their deep Jewish roots as well. I pray it will continue and be a mutual blessing to us all. If nothing else, I am hoping that Central American pineapples will begin to flood the Israeli market, bringing down the price and bringing up the quality. {eoa}

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