

## Diaspora minister: To engage with young US Jews, we must advance Palestinian issue

Nachman Shai says he knows highlighting Israel's diverse coalition alone won't win over progressives, but insists that improved government social media presence is essential

By [JACOB MAGID](#)



Diaspora Affairs Minister Nachman Shai arrives at the President's Residence in Jerusalem, on June 14, 2021. (Yonatan Sindel/ Flash90)

HOLLYWOOD BEACH, Florida — If there is such thing as a preparatory course for becoming Israel's diaspora affairs minister, Nachman Shai says he passed it.

In this case, though, Shai was the instructor, teaching classes on Israeli public diplomacy for two years at Emory University and Duke University, in the US southeast.

Still, the veteran Labor party lawmaker — best known for his time as IDF Spokesman during the 1991 Gulf War — says the experience on American college campuses was just as much a learning experience for him as it was for his students.

In an interview earlier this month, Shai said his two years in the US, from 2019 to 2021, opened his eyes to how young people abroad view the State of Israel. He described a generation that will not warm to a Jewish state that feigns solving its conflict with the Palestinians and one that can only be engaged with via social media, where the new minister claims his government has long been absent.

“It may not be the case in Israel, but [in the US], the Palestinian issue is at the top of young people’s agenda, and I’m constantly being told that we’ll continue to pay a price in public opinion if we fail to solve it,” Shai said, speaking to The Times of Israel on the sidelines of the Israeli American Council’s national summit in Florida.

But if the new government, sworn in six months ago, wants to convey to today’s youth that its approach to the Palestinian issue is in fact shifting after years of stagnation, Shai, 75, insisted that it will not be able to do so through traditional channels.

“Social media is critical for interacting with today’s youth, but [the Israeli government’s presence] on such platforms is almost non-existent,” Shai lamented, adding that the Diaspora Affairs Ministry was now working to revamp Israel’s “digital” footprint.

## ‘iPads, iPhones and iWatches’



Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas (center) meets with Meretz ministers Nitzan Horowitz (center-left) and Isawi Frej (center-right), on October 3, 2021 (Meretz)

Shai admitted, though, that he still has much to learn, and that the trip — his third to the US since his cabinet appointment — was centered around listening to local Jewish community leaders and gauging their expectations of him.

“Until now, there haven’t been any [expectations], so I’m trying to raise them,” he said, ostensibly dismissing Israel’s engagement with Diaspora Jewry during previous government tenures.

This is not to say though that Shai entered the position with no ideas of his own.

Even though those he met through his university courses were a specific subset of more engaged, mainly Jewish students, the former college lecturer

said they still were representative of an inquisitive generation that scours social media for answers to global issues.

“They’re learning using their computers and their iPads and their iPhones and their iWatches... so we need to infuse stories and information about Israel onto these platforms in order to expand their knowledge of the issue and understand why Jews came to Israel in the first place,” he said. “The reason may come naturally to those living in Israel, but it doesn’t for the younger generations abroad.”

While he acknowledged that various government ministries have long run a variety of social media accounts aimed at engaging with audiences abroad, Shai retorted that “they’re apparently not reaching young people in the US because their opinions aren’t changing,” and said his office would approach the matter differently.



Illustrative: A soldier looks at the IDF's Facebook page at the army spokesperson's office in Jerusalem in November 2012. (AP/Sebastian Scheiner/File)

## The 'dead end' government

Shai said it will be essential that the content disseminated by his office emphasize the Palestinian issue, and that includes highlighting the steps the new government is taking in that realm.

“Even if we do manage to solve the conflict, there will still be all kinds of criticism against Israel. But I do understand that we have to advance the Palestinian issue. We cannot ignore it, we cannot give up on it,” he said.

Asked what he tells young progressives who raise concerns regarding Israel’s role in the ongoing conflict, Shai said he starts by explaining the complexity of the new government, which includes parties spanning the entire political spectrum.

Its prime minister, Naftali Bennett, opposes Palestinian statehood, along with at least one other party in the coalition, while Foreign Minister Yair Lapid, who is slated to inherit the premiership from Bennett in August 2023 as part of a power-sharing deal is a proponent of the two-state solution, along with other parties to his left.

“Not everyone can agree on... this issue, so we’re waiting. We cannot advance [the Palestinian issue] at the moment. If they want to annex, we won’t let them. If we try and advance the two-state solution, we’ll also be prevented from doing so. So it’s stuck in the middle,” Shai explained.

He admitted this disclaimer has not proven satisfactory to progressive audiences thus far, but said he tries to explain that the coalition is the result of how the public voted. “They chose to stick the country in a kind of dead-end, and this politically broad government was [the] natural [result].”



The newly sworn-in Israeli government poses for a group photo at the president's residence in Jerusalem on June 14, 2021. (Yonatan Sindel/Flash90)

As for the government's October [advancement](#) of plans for some 3,000 settlement homes in the West Bank, Shai was dismissive, saying that plans go through several stages of approval and that building has not actually been moving forward on the ground. That said, it is almost exclusively during these earlier planning stages that political officials are able to intervene.

But Shai highlighted the building permits the Defense Ministry advanced for Palestinians in Area C of the West Bank in parallel to the settlement homes. He also pointed to a recent government decision to allow 500 Palestinians from Gaza into Israel's high-tech workforce and said this has resonated with young American Jews and progressives abroad looking for examples of steps taken to improve the lives of Palestinians under its control.

## Boycott debacles

On the Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions (BDS) movement against Israel, which draws a significant amount of attention from pro-Israel organizations in the Diaspora, Shai spoke in favor of the “hundreds of millions” of dollars spent by recent governments to fight the phenomenon.

He said he did not encounter any BDS campaigns while he taught at Emory or Duke, but was aware of “incidents” that had taken place in the region since he left.

The decision by Ben & Jerry’s to stop selling its ice cream in the West Bank tested Shai’s position on the matter, but the diaspora affairs minister said his opposition to the decision was not a question.

“I’m against all boycott, so I don’t differentiate between a boycott of Israelis who chose to live in the settlements and [those who live within the Green Line],” he said.



Construction work for new housing in the settlement of Modi'in Illit. January 11, 2021. (Flash90)

In October, the government in which Shai sits [finalized](#) an agreement with the European Union that will allocate millions in research grants to academic institutions throughout Israel, sans the West Bank.

Asked to explain his support for the deal, the Labor minister explained that it had been negotiated by previous governments and that the significant sums of money Israel will receive through Horizon Europe outweigh the desire to interfere in the matter.

### **Compromising on the compromise?**

Shai spoke to The Times of Israel days before aides to Religious Affairs Minister Matan Kahana [told Zman Yisrael](#) that the latter had decided along with Prime Minister Naftali Bennett to shelve plans to implement a long-frozen agreement to formalize an egalitarian prayer pavilion at the Western Wall. The move has [infuriated](#) Conservative and Reform leaders in the US, who say they have been waiting long enough to see the deal through.

The diaspora affairs minister has since come out against Kahana's decision, saying a government that wants to last must stand by the promises it has made.

“We’re constantly being told how the plaza is empty and that nobody visits it. Fine, we get it. So they only come twice a week. So what?” Shai said emphatically during the earlier interview. “It’s a place where prayers are held in a different manner, so even if only 10 people come in a single week, they should be able to have this option available to them to hold egalitarian services.”



Reform female and male rabbis pray together at Robinson's Arch, the Western Wall site slated for future egalitarian services, on February 25, 2016. (Y.R./Reform Movement)

Yet, the new government, despite consisting of no Haredi or hardline religious Zionist parties that are most opposed to the so-called “Kotel compromise,” is having a harder time moving forward with the proposal than initially expected.

“We’re facing significant incitement from [opposition chairman Benjamin Netanyahu] and his gang who have managed to recruit large populations from Israeli society and they’re threatening public safety,” Shai claimed.

The Labor party minister admitted that it was not clear how important the Western Wall compromise is to the average Diaspora Jew, but he said it is a priority of the religious leaders he meets with and the symbolism of an official non-Orthodox prayer pavilion at the holiest site where Jews can pray is important in its own right.

While Israel's [relationship with the Diaspora](#) might not surmount issues like the Iran nuclear threat or combating crime in Arab society, Shai said that his goal in the government is to ensure that the matter is still raised toward the top of the agenda.