

Meir Shitrit, Knesset Member, Is a Man On The Move



Meir Shitrit, Mayor of Yavne and Member of the Knesset, looks with pride over the town he helped bring back to life. (UJA Press Service Photo by David Harris.)

By Judy Krausz
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YAVNE, ISRAEL — Member of Knesset Meir Shitrit, 34, is a man in a hurry. He thinks fast, speaks fast and moves fast, and this quality, combined with an engaging smile and a generous endowment of charisma, has a curious effect on people around him: they too begin to move fast.

Take his town of Yavne, here, some 15 miles south of Tel Aviv. It had a colorful history, but by 1969, when Shitrit was 19, it had become an obscure, neglected repository for unskilled immigrants from Arab lands. The town was run down, its young people were leaving and those who remained were sunk in apathy.

Shitrit asked the town council to build a community center. The council refused. So he organized a mass protest by virtually all the town's 5,000 residents, contacted members of the Knesset, Israel's national legislature, and attracted newspaper reporters to Yavne. He got his center.

But just as his political career began, he was called to army duty. Five years later, when he was a captain, he was granted a 30-day leave to campaign for mayor. At 24, he became the youngest mayor elected in Israel's history. He was released from the army to take office as mayor.

"If the town council didn't turn us down, I never would have gotten into politics," he said with a grin that quickly jumped into a chuckle, then a laugh.

Of course he would have gotten into politics anyway, or else been a leader in another area of Israeli society. Shitrit is one of a new generation of Israeli leaders, born after the Holocaust and the establishment of the State of Israel, men and women who bring the same pioneering spirit of earlier Israel to solving today's problems.

Shitrit is one of those in politics, but others with sharp intelligence and similar dynamic verve are teaching in the universities, operating in medical centers, developing businesses and honing the cutting edge of high technology in cities and on farms -- all sharing the vision of a strong, healthy Israel at peace.

"My platform had been to develop the town, and suddenly I was scared," Shitrit said, recalling that there is a great difference between getting elected and succeeding in office. "So many hopes were pinned on me, and what did I know? But I was determined to succeed. I began by making big changes, bringing young people into municipal offices. I did things I wouldn't dare do today, and I got away with it."

In the past ten years, Shitrit has turned Yavne into a boom town. He has attracted non-polluting industry to strengthen the tax base, obtained generous land grants and mortgages for construction of attractive, single-story houses, convinced educational leaders to try some new approaches in Yavne's schools and generally helped the townspeople to think more highly of themselves, their town, and their potential.

He has also become a spokesman for many people in need, as by his support for Project Renewal, a comprehensive effort of diaspora Jews and Israelis to help Israelis in distressed neighborhoods. American Jews contribute to Project Renewal by additional contributions to the United Jewish Appeal/community campaigns.

Shitrit's personal biography was something of a success story even before he became Israel's youngest mayor. He was born in Ksarassouk, Morocco and his family's passage to Israel when he was eight was a harrowing six-month journey which he remembers vividly.

The family began with forged visas, from Jewish Agency emissaries working clandestinely to help Jews desperately trying to escape from Morocco. There was a secret, nighttime departure to Fez, and a border crossing into Spanish Morocco, followed by a stifling voyage to Spain in a ship's hold. The family was cared for at immigrant camps in Malaga, Gibraltar and Marseilles operated by the Jewish Agency, the principal beneficiary of UJA/community fundraising campaigns. A sea voyage followed and the family set foot on a dock at Haifa. In Israel, the Shitrit family lived in Neviot, an immigrant town in the barren Negev, in a tin shack, with

neither electricity nor indoor bathrooms.

"My father had been a shopkeeper in Morocco and he could only find rugged farm work," Shitrit said, "but I never once heard him complain. He used to say, 'Even Moses didn't succeed in entering the Promised Land, but we have'."

A year later, the family moved to Yavne, again into a tin shack, but later graduating to a wooden bungalow and finally a "real" three-room row house constructed largely of plasterboard.

Shitrit raced through high school, graduating at 15. He attained a coveted matriculation certificate at the Kfar Batya agricultural boarding school at 16 while working in the school's citrus grove to pay for his tuition and meals. Kfar Batya is one of a network of Youth Aliyah schools which have been supported through the Jewish Agency by UJA/community campaigns.

Shitrit supported himself as a librarian and later as a high school science teacher as he earned his degree in microbiology and biochemistry at Bar-Ilan University by age 19.

One more thing about Meir Shitrit: he's a born optimist. "Look," he said. "If we can create a fine quality of life in Yavne, we can do it all over the country. That's why I decided to get into national politics, and that's why I plan to become a minister in the government as well."

Barbra Streisand Dedicates Building In Father's Name At Hebrew University

JERUSALEM — Praising her late father as a "teacher, scholar and religious man who devoted himself to education," an emotional Barbra Streisand dedicated last week the Emanuel Streisand Building for Jewish Studies on the Mount Scopus campus of the Hebrew University of Jerusalem. Emanuel Streisand died when his daughter Barbra was just 15 months old.

The famed actress, singer and film director spoke to an audience of hundreds at the dedication, including members of the University Board of Governors attending their annual meeting, representatives of the West Coast Friends of the Hebrew University, and friends and associates who had come especially to Jerusalem for the event.

Ms. Streisand described her gratitude to the Hebrew University for providing her with the opportunity to dedicate this center of learning, a center which she said would contribute to the spread of knowledge and understanding, and therefore world peace. The building, located in the Faculty of Humanities on the Mount Scopus campus, is a gift from Ms. Streisand and the West Coast Friends of the University.

In a reference to her new film "Yentl," in which she plays a woman who enters a yeshiva in the guise of a man in order to study the Talmud, Ms. Streisand said she was pleased that women now

"can pursue Jewish studies without having to disguise themselves as men."

Other speakers at the dedication included Vidal Sassoon, president of the West Coast Friends, and Harvey Silbert, chairman of the board of directors of the American Friends of the Hebrew University.

The symbolic key to the Streisand building was presented to Ms. Streisand by University President Don Patinkin. Later, Ms. Streisand and her brother Sheldon unveiled the plaques at the Streisand building bearing her father's name.

Two days earlier, Ms. Streisand appeared in the gala Israeli premiere of "Yentl" in Tel Aviv, which was followed by a dinner. Both events were sponsored by the Israel Friends of the Hebrew University as a benefit for the University.

U. S. Ambassador Samuel Lewis was a guest at both the building dedication and Tel Aviv events. Lewis referred to Ms. Streisand as "a caring daughter of the Jewish people."

Other friends and associates of Ms. Streisand who made the trip to Israel as part of the West Coast delegation of Friends of the Hebrew University were actress Florence Henderson and her husband, Ira Bernstein; Alan and Marilyn Bergman, who wrote the lyrics for "Yentl"; and Cis Corman, casting director for "Yentl," and her husband, Harvey.

Pravda Publishes Article Equating Zionism With Fascism

LONDON (WNS) — The equation of Zionism with fascism, a frequent theme in the official Soviet media, "acquired an authoritativeness it did not hitherto possess" when it became the thesis of an article in the Communist Party daily Pravda, written by Vladimir Bolshakov, according to an analysis published here by the Institute of Jewish Affairs (IJA) in association with the World Jewish Congress. The analysts found

Bolshakov's implication of a "Zionist 'fifth column' in the countries of the world -- first and foremost, presumably, in the USSR and the Socialist countries." That was suggested by the writer's allegation that Zionists view Jews throughout the world, no matter in which country they live, as obliged to support the State of Israel in every possible way and to remain loyal to it.

"This concept," Boshakov claims, "is

reminiscent of the Nazi practice of recruiting 'volksdeutsche' to support the Fatherland," the IJA report noted. Other claims of a Zionist-fascist kinship cited by the author are alleged collaboration between Zionists and Nazis during World War II; common ideas of "racial purity;" the practice of "genocide" by Israel in Lebanon; and the role of Zionism, like fascism, as "lackey of big capital and imperialism."