

The Jewish Week

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The GA Without A Buzz

Nuts-and-bolts fund raising highlight UJC gathering.

Gary Rosenblatt - Editor And Publisher

Cleveland — Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon did not attend the General Assembly, the annual convention of the United Jewish Communities here this week, as originally planned. In his stead he sent his foreign minister, Silvan Shalom, a respected but low-key politician whose speech to the delegates at a plenary Sunday night drew applause for his portrayal of the strong bonds between Israel and American Jewry but tugged at few heartstrings.



Sharon was not alone in staying home. The official registration for the four-day event, long considered the most important meeting on the communal Jewish calendar, was reported to be 2,800, markedly down from upwards of 4,000 in recent years.

The presence of more than 350 college students sponsored by Hillel enlivened the gathering, where it appeared that none of the plenaries drew more than about 1,200 people.

The numbers are significant because UJC officials have been trying to reshape and fine-tune the content and style of the GA, long the showcase for the federation movement. Officials are well aware that attendance has been down at the event, with the exception of last year's inspiring gathering in Jerusalem, and that the perception among professionals and lay leaders at federations across the country is that the national body is struggling to define and articulate its goals.

This year's event, though, was most notable for its lack of drama. Past GAs often have been dominated by a crisis — Israel under siege, the rescues of Russian and Ethiopian Jewry, and debate over Jewish identity — or an emerging communal theme.

The conclave in Cleveland, though, may best be remembered as the GA without a buzz. The highlight for many participants was a dessert reception Monday night at the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame and Museum, where delegates roamed the halls of the exhibits, from Motown to Madonna, watched films of rock's most famous acts, and danced to a live band. One sensed the energy of the crowd that night.

To be sure, there are issues of serious concern for the Jewish community — including the ongoing Mideast violence, the spread of anti-Semitism around the world, and deep budget cuts that will hurt the social services provided by the UJC's 200 member federations — and they were addressed at the conference. But no one issue was prevalent, and almost half of the carefully planned program was given over to hands-on techniques and advice related to fund raising, including sessions on "New Models of Donor Engagement," "Top Ten

Tips on Strategic Planning," and "Fiscal Management for Non-Fiscal People."

Gone are the days when the GA was seen as an arena for big ideas in the community, a kind of parliament for the Jewish people. In its place is a more parochial, nuts-and-bolts affair, a kind of trade show for the federation movement.

Most of Tuesday's schedule featured sessions on practical skills, but if only the planners had taken to heart the message of one lunchtime offering. Entitled "Top Ten Tips on Making Meetings More Exciting and More Effective," its program blurb noted that "when meetings are innovative, inspirational, groundbreaking and necessary, participants will be begging you for the next one rather than you begging them to come!"

Deborah Grayson Riegel, the dynamic facilitator (and former improvisational comedienne), stressed that successful meetings are ones where the purpose is clear and the objectives specific, attainable and measurable.

This year's GA may renew discussion about whether the event should be held every two years, or whether its emphasis should alternate between practical and more expansive goals.

Howard Rieger, the new president and CEO of United Jewish Communities, was frank in his critique of UJC in its first five years. He told the delegates that UJC must improve its efforts in helping local federations do things they cannot on their own by improving the organization's structure and communication skills, and narrowing its agenda.

Rieger listed three areas that need improvement: a project to help Ethiopians in Israel overcome economic, educational and social obstacles; finding a response to the problems posed by assimilation among American Jews; and providing a social safety net for Israelis suffering from financial hardship.

But Rieger's message, which he offered at a popular session on helping federations advance "from good to great" (led by author Jim Collins, author of "Good To Great"), was that UJC had turned the corner and was ready to "unleash the power from within" in transforming itself.

Among the highlights of the more than 80 GA plenaries, workshops, meetings and sessions that started early each morning:

- A lively debate between Ami Ayalon, the former head of Israel's Shin Bet, and Moshe Arens, former minister of defense, on the Sharon government's disengagement plan from Gaza and part of the West Bank. Arens, who is to the right of the prime minister and opposes the plan, maintained that unless and until the Palestinians dismantle the terrorist elements among them, negotiations are worthless. He said that "uprooting" 8,000 Jews in Gaza is a mistake.

Ayalon, who recently announced that he was considering a run for prime minister, is the co-author of a peace plan that would make wide-scale concessions. He insisted that as long as the Palestinians see settlement growth continuing, there is no motivation for them to stop the violence.

- A session on the "new" anti-Semitism found Aryeh Mekel, the consul general of Israel in New York, and Yehudit Barsky, a terror expert at

the American Jewish Committee, agreeing that Islamic fundamentalism poses a real threat to Jews around the world, while Antony Lerman, chief executive of Hanadiv Charitable Foundation in London, rejected the "conspiracy theory" of coordinated, global anti-Semitism and urged Jews to be careful about confusing anti-Israel sentiment with anti-Semitism.

- A colorful plenary on the impact of the U.S. presidential elections. William Kristol, editor of the conservative Weekly Standard, said President Bush needs to be "more adept" in achieving bipartisan support for a variety of policies and predicted Washington will be more engaged in the Mideast peace process now that Palestinian leader Yasir Arafat has died. James Carville, the maverick Democratic consultant, said Republicans are saying they will "protect us from terrorists in Iraq and gays at home, but that doesn't mean Democrats should sound more like Republicans."

In her assessment of the elections, Shoshana Cardin, a former chair of numerous national and international Jewish organizations, sounded a partisan note, expressing concern about Bush's statement that he will reach out to all who share his goals.

"That doesn't speak to me," she said.

Cardin encouraged American Jews, three-quarters of whom voted Democratic, to "be as vocal and passionate as they [the Republicans] are, with dignity."

- A session on efforts to advance women in federation leadership roles drew about 85 people, including five men; advocacy for Israel on campus was the subject of several programs, though few college students were included on GA panels; and a large audience turned out to hear a moderate Muslim author call for Muslims to protest against terror, violence and hate taught in their schools.
- Surely the most electrifying presentation came from Alina Gerlovin Spaulding, 31, of Greensboro, N.C., who told of coming to the U.S. as a baby from the former Soviet Union with her parents, and how the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee and other Jewish agencies helped the family, from resettlement to urgent medical attention for her father. A riveting speaker with a powerful story, Spaulding expressed her gratitude to the Jewish community for her life, underscoring the many and varied good works of the social service agencies that make up the federation system.

The challenge for Rieger and his lay and professional leaders at UJC is to somehow find the platform to present the everyday drama of stories like that to those observing Jewish life from the sidelines. n

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- [Abbas At The Abyss](#)
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- [American-Russian Summit](#)
Boston's conservative Russian Jews reach truce with AJCommittee's liberal leaders, but tensions linger.
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*Episcopalians reject sanctions against Israel in favor of
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