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HONORS FOR DAVID FRIEDMAN

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FOR YESHIVOS p. 42

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PHOTO: AFP/IMAGEBANK



Anti-Russian fever hasn't been running this high since the days of the Cold War and the media is feeding the fever

Russian Influence Blown out of Proportion

"RED SCARE" ONLY FEEDS
RUSSIA'S NATIONAL DELUSIONS

A few months before the US presidential election, the Rand Corporation, a think tank that offers research and analysis to the US armed forces, issued a stark warning.

A newly emboldened Russian army could slice through NATO's three weakest members — the Baltic states of Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia — in just 60 hours, handing NATO a rapid defeat and leaving them with a limited number of options — all bad.

With President Trump still issuing mixed signals on NATO, there is no way to tell how the US would react to such a Russian blitz.

But judging from some of the zanier headlines in the nation's newspapers and the way Trump's alleged Russian loyalties are being spun, Russia doesn't need to flex its military muscles against US interests. After all, Putin's already got Donald Trump and a few of his top cabinet officials bought off.

There's much more smoke than fire. Attorney General Jeff Sessions made an unsound decision not to tell a senate confirmation hearing the



Vladimir Putin's approval rating among Russians at the end of 2016. Some 72% of Americans view Putin unfavorably, according to the latest Gallup Poll
 —Russian Center for Public Opinion Research

56.5%



"I can only imagine the Russians are very happy with the things written about them because it portrays them as being much stronger and having more influence than they really do"

—Dr. Yuri Teper

whole truth about meetings he held with Russia's US ambassador, but some of the stories that purportedly show Trump and the Russians in cahoots aren't just unsound — they're absurd. Like the report that Trump sold the oceanfront Palm Beach mansion he bought for \$40 million to a Russian "fertilizer king" for \$100 million — as if a \$100 million, private real estate deal is huge business between citizens of two countries that do \$20–\$30 billion in annual trade.

If laws have indeed been broken, then prosecutors should investigate and bring the perpetrators to justice. But in the meantime, the neo-Cold War hysteria that's gripped Washington and the news media only plays into one person's hands — Vladimir Putin's.

"I can only imagine the Russians are very happy with the things written about them because it portrays them as being much stronger and having more influence than they really do," says Dr. Yuri Teper, a postdoctoral fellow who specializes in Russian politics at Hebrew University in Jerusalem. "The e-mail hacking attack during the campaign took place. That's a fact," Dr. Teper says. "But to say this is something that decided the outcome of the American election is ridiculous. Russians are stigmatized, as is anyone in close contact with them,

so if anything, Russian interference in American politics damaged Trump."

The inability to separate fact from fiction will prejudice any legitimate probes into Trump's Russian connections and could damage already sensitive relations between the world's two biggest nuclear powers.

Russia's military interventions in Ukraine and in Syria have put a real scare into the international community, especially coming at a time when the US, under President Obama, was moving to disengage from foreign entanglements.

But investing Russia, and President Putin, with an aura of infallibility regarding its foreign adventures exaggerates Moscow's power and unwittingly feeds a dangerous, internal Russian narrative, says Anna Geifman, a senior research fellow in the political studies department at Bar-Ilan University. Dr. Geifman explains that narrative by way of a famous, four-part Russian proverb. Roughly translated, it reads: You cannot understand Russia through your intellect, nor can you measure Russia by the same yardstick as other nations. Its essence is special. All you can do is believe in its supremacy.

"It's amazing how much this stands at the center of their belief system," Dr. Geifman says. "While for Jews, being the Chosen People is part of our rational tradition, with Putin, it's the opposite. He's irrational — because his belief in this special purpose of Russia is based on random assumptions. What other country thinks about themselves this way? Yet he totally believes it."

Dr. Geifman contends this brand of irrational thinking provides fertile ground in which conspiracy theories can breed, and many of them are generated in Russia, not the US.

"I don't know many rational people who believe Trump is bought by Putin, but there are plenty of Russian journalists who think this way," Dr. Geifman says. "Russians are very much into conspiracy theories. They don't accept the normal standard answers. They don't accept what's visible, but only what's hidden."

—Binyamin Rose



Netanyahu and Putin have reached understandings, but there are limits to what they can agree on

When Bibi Meets Putin

Israel's prime minister, Binyamin Netanyahu, is far from a conspiracy theorist, so when he told his cabinet Sunday morning that Iran is working to establish a permanent military presence in and around the Golan Heights, his goal was to form a basis for his talks on Thursday with President Putin.

Netanyahu and Putin have been cooperating ever since September 2015, when Russia began to commit its military forces to influencing the outcome of Syria's civil war. Russia and Israel established a joint communications command that, so far, has kept both sides far from any misunderstandings that could lead to a military clash.

But Netanyahu will have his work cut out for him in expressing what he called "Israel's sharp and vigorous opposition to this possibility" of Iran using the Golan as a base from which to attack Israel. Russia and Iran may not be allies, and their relations are marked with mutual distrust and hostility, but they do share the common interest of keeping Bashar Assad in power in Syria.

"Putin wouldn't be happy about Iran becoming stronger in the region, but if it doesn't endanger Russia's influence, or its ports on the Mediterranean, I can hardly imagine a situation where Putin would invest any resources to prevent it," says Dr. Teper.

Up until now, Putin has played both sides against the middle. He has ignored Iran smuggling advanced weapons systems to Hezbollah, yet turns the other cheek when Israel attacks one of those convoys.

"At least until now, Putin has been respectful of Israel's interests. It doesn't mean he will do whatever we ask, but he has made sure to coordinate his moves with the IDF," Dr. Teper says. "So while I think Netanyahu could try to speak to him about trying to prevent Iran from getting closer to Israel's borders, in this case I can hardly see it bearing fruit."

—Binyamin Rose

Attorney General Jeff Sessions left some unanswered questions on Russia



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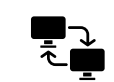
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A Lesson Well Learned

By Eytan Kobre

For years, Maury Litwack, director of state political affairs for the Orthodox Union, struggled to recruit people to travel to Albany for lobbying missions to make their voices heard.

He gained new determination on a recent visit to Albany, accompanied by only a small contingent, and seeing another group of hundreds of animal rights activists with T-shirts publicizing their cause.

“Someone said to me, ‘Why can’t we bring hundreds of people here with T-shirts saying they care about yeshivah education?’”

In more formal dress, Litwack succeeded last week in bringing more than 600 parents, students, educators, and administrators from 16 New York-area yeshivos to Albany to lobby for increased funding for the state’s nonpublic schools under the aegis of the Orthodox Union’s Teach NYS initiative, which advocates for the interests of New York’s yeshivos.

In addition to demonstrating the passion of the Orthodox community on this issue, the Teach NYS delegation pressed lawmakers on three specific legislative objectives: a continuation of current levels of state funding to reimburse schools for expenditures under the Comprehensive Attendance Policy and other mandated services; a request to nearly quadruple state funding for

school security; and to build a case that the time has come for New York State to begin funding the secular educational programs in nonpublic schools, especially in the STEM (science, technology, education, engineering, and mathematics) disciplines.

“It’s only fair for the state to invest in our kids the same way it invests heavily in public school kids,” Litwack says. “The state already reimburses us for Regents exams and helps fund pre-K education, so why not for the salaries of math teachers?”

When asked why advocating for passage of a tuition tax credit wasn’t on last week’s agenda, as it had been in prior lobbying trips to Albany, Litwack said, “Although we’re very proud of our efforts to pass tuition tax credits in places like Florida and Pennsylvania, which brought tens of millions of dollars to yeshivos, there is, unfortunately, zero chance of that happening in Albany this year.”

Ultimately, Litwack took heart that the delegation he assembled was the largest Orthodox Jewish contingent to lobby in New York’s capital, and that Governor Andrew Cuomo and members of both the State Senate and Assembly took the time to meet with them. Cuomo told the delegation how much religious education means to him personally.

“The governor addressed us and responded so positively to our message because he knows we’re going to be here next year again, that we’re involved in the political process, and that we’re going to make our voices heard in a consistent fashion,” Litwack said.



PHOTO: ORTHODOX UNION / HANS FERNINK

“It’s only fair for the state to invest in our kids the same way it invests heavily in public school kids”

—Maury Litwack

THE LAST WORD

Giving Backing to David Friedman



By Omri Nahmias,
Atlantic Beach, NY

When the Yeshiva of South Shore held its 60th annual banquet Sunday night at The Sands in Atlantic Beach, the event was festive on more than one level.

On one hand, it was a celebration of the *chinuch* the yeshiva provides for some 700 students and a validation of the solid growth of the institution established by Rabbi Binyamin Kamenetzky in 1956, which today is in Hewlett, NY — one of the “Five Towns.”

Waiters clad in vests served an array of fine food, yeshiva boys performed in a choral group, and videos of day-to-day yeshiva life were screened.

On another level, the banquet was a show of appreciation for David Friedman, expected to win senate confirmation this week as US ambassador to Israel. David and his brother Mark accepted the yeshiva’s “Ohev Yisrael” award in memory of their father, Morris. The decision on the award had been made before the presidential election. With his nomination still pending, Friedman found himself in a delicate situation, trying to satisfy his listeners’



“Jerusalem is one Jerusalem, and I firmly believe the ambassador feels the same way, and we are all on the same page”

— Irving Kaminetsky

curiosity, while avoiding politics. All the evening’s speakers emphasized that they would honor the yeshiva’s request not to talk politics.

But judging by the public figures who lined up to shake his hand, it was apparent that at least some arrived to make small talk with the future ambassador to Tel Aviv, or perhaps Jerusalem.

Friedman himself declined to answer any questions. “*Savlanut* (Patience)” he tells me in Hebrew, and his formal address was dedicated exclusively to his father’s memory.

While the podium was politics-free, some dinner guests were happy to talk shop and throw their support to Friedman.

“People in this community agree with him that we should not give up territory in Israel, or the settlements, because they are a buffer. They are part of Israel, part of Israel’s security,” said Bruce Blackman, a councilman on the Town Board of Hempstead. “This land was promised to us by higher Authority, and we are glad that President Trump and our new ambassador embraced that.”

And Irving Kaminetsky, a commissioner in Sanitary District No. 1 in Lawrence, who said he is old enough to have attended Friedman’s bar mitzvah, seconded the motion. “I don’t believe in giving anything away. Judea and Samaria are part of Israel, Jerusalem is one Jerusalem, and I firmly believe the ambassador feels the same way, and we are all on the same page.”

The one element of the evening that might have politicized the occasion never materialized. Reports had spread that US senator Chuck Schumer, a New York Democrat, and a friend of the yeshiva, would attend as a personal nod to Friedman, despite their prickly political relations. Friedman has contributed to several of Schumer’s previous political campaigns, although he sharply criticized the senator for his support of President Obama’s Iran deal. As of press time, Schumer had not announced if he would vote yes to the Friedman nomination, which is bitterly opposed by most Democrats.

But Schumer was a no-show. “In past years, he did come,” one participant said. “Ask him why he didn’t come today.” As of press time, Schumer’s office did not reply to confirm if he received an invitation, and if so, why he did not attend.