



Karmiel mayor looks to strengthen Sister City ties

By CHRIS LEPPEK

JTA

Adi Eldar, the mayor of Karmiel, Israel, now has an additional reason to visit Denver, over and above the fact that the two municipalities are sister cities.

For the past two years, Eldar, who has served as mayor of the Galilee city since 1989 (with five reelections since, winning with an amazing average 80% of the vote) has had familial motivation to visit the Mile High City, as he is doing during the current High Holidays.

His son, Eran, daughter-in-law Ravit and their children are living in the metro area where Eran, a software executive, works for the huge Israeli concern Amdocs and Ravit works as a teacher for Denver Jewish Day School.

During an interview with the **INTERMOUNTAIN JEWISH NEWS** — ably translated by son Eran — Adi Eldar stressed that he also loves Col-



Karmiel Mayor Adi Eldar, left, recently presented a key to the city to Shimon Peres, then president of Israel, who passed away last month.

“and I challenged Mayor Hancock, telling him that for every piece of

nities in the Negev Desert, which formed a partnership with the Allied

hopes to work with JEWISHcolorado so that both communities can maintain strong ties with Denver and its Jewish community.

Eldar envisions a relationship built on several components.

“The best investment is in our youth,” he says. “How can that work? We could have joint summer camps of youth delegates from both communities. We could create relationships between schools. We have three high schools in Karmiel and everybody knows and learns English, so language is not a problem. We think it could be a great relationship between our cities.”

Karmiel’s Dance Festival — described by Eldar as “the biggest dance festival in the world” — is another obvious bonding agent.

The three-day annual festival, focusing on choreography and folk dance, is nearly 30 years old and often draws a quarter of a million visitors to Karmiel.

“We can invite professional dancers from Denver who can come and perform during the festival,” Eldar says. “We have our own dance groups that can come here for shows for the city and for the Jewish community.”

A further opportunity for partnership, the mayor says, might be exchanges between Denver’s and Karmiel’s mental health professionals, particularly social welfare workers and counselors.

“We can talk about what works here, what works there, what are the challenges. It could open a lot of new horizons.”

When asked to provide a few vital statistics on Karmiel, circa 2016, Eldar is happy to oblige.

The city is known not only for its cleanliness, he says, but its modernity. It was founded in 1964, as part of a concerted government effort to draw Jews to the largely Arab Galilee in Israel’s North.

“It’s one of the newest cities in Israel,” Eldar says, “but there are ancient Roman settlements in the area that are now being excavated.”

Eldar, who came to Israel from Iraq with his family at the age of seven in 1944, has lived in Karmiel since 1973, shortly before it began its partnership with Denver.

The population of the city has

grown considerably since then.

Karmiel today is home to some 53,000 souls, most of them Jewish, many of them relatively recent immigrants to Israel.

“Karmiel is one of the leading cities in accepting immigrants,” Eldar says. “In the city and the state we have Jews from all over the world.”

(An aside: A number of former Denverites are among them, including Gavi and Robin Hanssen and their family, who moved to the outskirts of the city in 2012.)

“Forty percent of Karmiel’s population speaks Russian. We also have an Ethiopian community of about 1,000 people. We dedicate a lot of resources towards accepting and embracing the immigrants and with great success.”

The Arab population in Karmiel proper is small, the mayor says, but in the area surrounding the city Arabs outnumber Jews by five-to-one. Most of them manage olive groves or manufacture olive oil, a regional tradition so ancient that the Bible itself refers to the area’s reputation for quality olives.

“We live with them in harmony,” says Eldar about the neighboring Arab communities. He leads a group of mayors from the Karmiel area, including five Arabs, “and there a lot of joint activities,” he says.

The same is true of the city’s immigrant Jews, he says, for whom Eldar has appointed special representatives to maintain relations and facilitate discussion between the city and ethnic neighborhoods.

“Everybody works together to create more of a social neighborhood,” says the mayor, adding that finding employment is a key component of a municipal immigrant policy that is considered something of a national model in Israel.

There are “a lot of economic opportunities” in Karmiel, says Eldar, who adds that encouraging US investment in the city is a major motivator behind its sister cities relationships.

“Our unemployment percentage is lower than the national average.

“We have converted Karmiel into a centralized city in the Galilee region. Seventeen years ago we had about 4,000 square meters of commercial space. Today we have about 350,000 square meters of com-

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Karmiel, like Denver, says the mayor, is a city of tomorrow

orado strictly on its own merits, calling it “one of the prettiest areas in the US.

“The quality of the air here is excellent and the nature that surrounds the city is magical,” he says generously.

When asked what he would like to change about Colorado, he reluctantly admitted that he finds Denver’s highway congestion a bit hard to take.

“I would like to see the traffic jams improve,” he says. “In Karmiel, if there’s a line of 10 cars there’s a riot.”

Eldar likes to slip such subtle touches of wry humor into his conversation.

For example, he says that he has known and admired former Denver mayors Federico Peña and Wellington Webb and has already grown chummy with current mayor Michael Hancock, with whom he met this month.

In 2013, Hancock visited Karmiel while on a JEWISHcolorado mission to Israel.

“He was very happy to see our Denver Park in Karmiel,” Eldar says,

paper he might find in the street I would give him a dollar. At the end of his trip, he didn’t get a single cent from me.”

An unabashed booster of his home city — as is virtually every mayor one is ever likely to meet — Eldar is clearly proud of his hometown.

“The city is always clean,” he says. “It’s a green city. It’s exceptional.”

While the streets of Karmiel might be neat as a pin, however, the relationship between Denver and Karmiel has become a bit overgrown and neglected in recent years, Eldar admits.

The two cities initially forged their relationship in 1977 as part of the Sister Cities International program. During the first decade or two the sister cities bonded nicely, sharing many cultural and youth programs. Many Denverites visited Karmiel and vice-versa.

But eventually, like lovers grown weary, Denver and Karmiel became distant.

Denver Jews grew enamored of Ramat Hanegev, a region of commu-

Jewish Federation (now JEWISHcolorado) in 1999.

“During the inception of the relationship it was very strong because the Jewish community in Denver was very strongly engaged in the relationship,” says Eldar, explaining that the Denver side of the partnership depended on community volunteers — specifically the Denver-Karmiel Sister City Committee — to maintain ties.

Over time, as the committee’s initial supporters aged or passed away, those ties loosened.

The same thing gradually happened in Karmiel, where the city itself maintains sister city contacts. In more recent years, Karmiel added Pittsburgh to its sister city relationships, and that developed into a mutually beneficial partnership, but Eldar is adamant that it’s time for Karmiel and Denver to get back together.

“In recent years hardly anything has been happening,” Eldar says, “and that’s a shame. There are great people in Denver and we would like to rekindle that relationship. We need to see how we can broaden and strengthen it again.”

It needn’t be an either-or choice between Karmiel and Ramat Hanegev, the mayor emphasizes. He

United Jewish Communities brunch in Colorado Springs

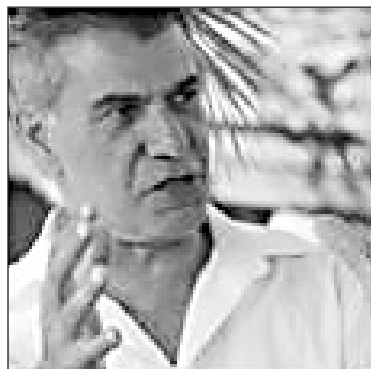
United Jewish Communities of Colorado Springs (UJC-CS) annual campaign brunch will be Sunday, Nov. 6, 11:30 a.m., at Cheyenne Mountain Resort.

Dr. Perry Bach, past chair of the UJC-CS committee, will be honored at the event for his service to UJC-CS.

Avi Melamed, Middle East strategic intelligence analyst, will speak on “GPS — Navigating the Middle East in the 21st Century.”

Melamed is an expert on current affairs in the Arab and Muslim worlds and their impact on Israel and the Middle East.

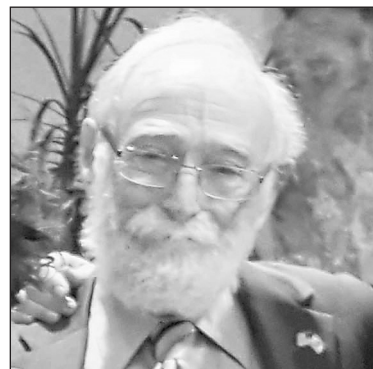
He is a former Israeli intelligence official and senior official on Arab Affairs. In his decades of public service, Melamed has held senior advisory, intelligence and counter-terrorist intelligence positions in Arab cities and communities throughout the region on behalf of Israeli government agencies.



Avi Melamed

Melamed spearheads the “Inside the Middle East — Intelligence Perspectives” program for college students, designed to ensure that the next generation will be knowledgeable about Israel and the Middle East and will apply methods of critical thinking regarding Middle East affairs.

He is also the founder and creator



Perry Bach

of Feenjan — Israel Speaks Arabic, a non-profit initiative which presents contemporary Israeli society and culture to the Arab world in Arabic, and serves as an online platform for Israelis and Arabs to discuss issues of common interest.

The event is open to the community. Information: Gary Altman, pakman80906@yahoo.com.

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