

A BUSINESS WIN-WIN

A delegation of businesspeople from Cincinnati came to the Israel Business Convention as part of the Jewish Agency's B2B forum. B2B associates businesspeople in Jewish communities with their Israeli counterparts. Shepard Englander, CEO of the Jewish Federation in Cincinnati tells about significant collaboration which is already underway

Akin Ajay, Haaretz CSR Supplement, January 2010

A bi-lateral venture between the USA and Israel at a time of economic crisis seems irrational, but Shepard Englander, CEO of the Jewish Federation in Cincinnati, the USA, is very optimistic. "There are extraordinary opportunities for establishing profitable business partnerships between the two countries," he says, "but the main difficulty is challenging ingrained paradigms and transform the philanthropic thinking into one that centers of gains for both parties..."

Englander spoke with us during a recent visit to Israel with a delegation of businesspeople from Cincinnati which came to the Israel Business Conference in Tel Aviv as part of the Jewish Agency's B2B venture. B2B is part of the largest Partnership 2000 Program of the Jewish Agency, which connects pairs of Jewish communities around the world on the basis of common interests such as business, healthcare, education, sports and more.

"With this venture, we can use the existing relation network of the members of the Jewish federations as a springboard and switch from relations which are founded on charity to ones which are founded on values shared by people who care about Israel and the Diaspora," explains Englander. The opportunity for expanding the narrow opening through which Israel is traditionally viewed is equally important for both parties. As guests of the Jewish Agency, the delegates from Cincinnati did not feel only like Jews but also as businesspeople that see Israel from a different perspective for the first time.

Another significant contact which was already created through B2B is between the Cincinnati Children Hospital Medical Center (CCHMC) in Ohio and the Schneider Pediatric Medical Center in Petach Tikva. Officially scheduled to start in 2010, the collaboration will involve exchange of know-how and expertise between the two hospitals in research, training and clinical operations. In addition, Israeli children with intricate medical conditions will benefit from access to the medical care at CCHMS, which is consistently rated as one of the best pediatric centers on the USA.

The relationship between the two hospitals started in a series of talks during a visit to Israel organized by B2B in 2008. The meeting between the CEO and chairman of CCHMC and their peers from Schneider was so good that the parties immediately undertook to create an even closer alliance. Dr. Mark Levitt, associate director of the pediatric colorectal center at CCHMC says the Jewish angle offered by B2B helped shaping a partnership which seem rational in view of CCHMC's aspiration to solidify its positioning as a global leader in pediatrics. "The partnership is a natural evolution for both institutions," says Levitt.

Levitt, the driving force behind the partnership, has a soft spot for Israel. "During high school, I spent a semester in the Hebrew University as part of a student exchange program. In fact, I met my wife there," he says. Today, Levitt visits frequently in Israel. He has close professional relations with peers in the Schneider Hospital, which he visits annually for clinical collaboration and surgeries. With such a close acquaintance, Levitt believes the benefits to a small medical center like Schneider are clear with know-how flowing in all directions. "We are looking forward for an opportunity to work together is research and science, two areas in which Israel has reputation and expertise" he says. Other potential areas include the development of medical and IT technologies.

Professor Yossef Press, the director of the Schneider Pediatric Hospital is equally optimistic about the partnership promoted by B2B. He reports that a young specialist from Schneider won a research grant from CCHMC and is working there since July, winning very positive feedback. As regards the broader upsides for Schneider, Press says, "Bi-lateral clinical and basic research is very important for us. CCHMC has a good research center which serves as excellent platform for collaboration." He adds that as far as medical-technological research is concerned, the larger pool of patients in the USA is very valuable for Israel researchers. "CCHMC is much larger than Schneider. As a result, conducting medical research there us much more efficient and faster."

Press values very much the contact which B2B helped establish. However, he points out that for the partnership to succeed, it takes more commitment on the domestic level. "It all starts and ends with money, but I hope this situation will change if B2B penetrates the pubic consciousness."

Shepard Englander is confident this will happen. "A few years ago, we invested efforts in building authentic bi-lateral business relations, but it did not work out. This time, however, both parties are strongly interested. Israel managed the economic crisis much better than other economies. It's time we used initiatives like B2B to gain from it."