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'There's a Jewish story everywhere'

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PEACE MAKERS—Agricultural specialist Oren Blonder of the Peres Center for Peace examines a bird-of-paradise at the Mission Bay Hilton during a joint interview with Dr. Bonnie Stewart, executive director of the Hansen Institute for World Peace of San Diego State University Research Foundation. Blonder came to the interview directly from Sea World, which he had been touring with his wife, Gal.



The Jewish Citizen

by Donald H. Harrison

Planting peace through agriculture

SAN DIEGO—Oren Blonder, an agricultural specialist at the Peres Center for Peace in Israel, was asked yesterday why the countries of the Middle East want to cooperate in the development of agricultural products, even when politics so often put them at odds.

As he answered, I thought I was listening to Israel's President Shimon Peres, the namesake for the center and a man who loves nothing better than a pithy example. "An olive fly doesn't need a visa," Blonder responded. The pest can fly among the groves of the Palestinian Authority, Israel, Jordan, or Egypt without having its passport checked. It also can be utterly apolitical in its choice of crops to destroy.

As there is an imperative for these neighboring countries to eradicate common pests, so too is there a need for them to work together to increase yields and demands for their crops in the global market, Blonder said.

Joint marketing was what brought Blonder to San Diego for a meeting with Dr. Bonnie Stewart, executive director of the Fred J. Hansen Institute for World Peace, which is a unit of the San Diego State University Research Foundation.

For decades, the Hansen Institute quietly brought together Israeli and Arab agronomists and scientists to discuss common problems even when there were no formal relations between their countries. Since the establishment of diplomatic relations among these neighbors, the Peres Center for Peace has taken the lead role with the Hansen Institute happily becoming a supporting cast member.

Delegates representing the four Mideast countries will be joined by others from the United States, Italy and Macedonia for a conference in Tiberias Dec. 4-6 to discuss how to better market such Mediterranean crops as olives, tomatoes, potatoes, almonds, table grapes, melons and pomegranates.

The Hansen Institute will send to the conference Sandy Ehrlich, who heads SDSU's Qualcomm Entrepreneurial Management Center, and Marvin Spira, a food industry specialist who has owned restaurants and

has helped bring to market such restaurant specialty items as onion rings.

International teams will be formed to analyze the potential for each agricultural product, with members drawn from all the participating countries, Blonder said. Having the participants actually work together, thereby developing collegial relations with each other, is one of the hallmarks of such international conferences.

The teams will learn how to study the product, will visit markets to assess how they are displayed, and will devise strategies to increase sales. Together team members will ponder various kinds of marketing questions such as: What are the features about this fruit or vegetable that consumers like? What features discourage consumers? Can this or that feature be changed through the breeding of hybrids? When should the products be shipped to market? Is there an ideal way for them to be displayed? What about the pricing? Are prices low enough to attract consumers, but high enough to provide profits both for the growers and the distribution chain?

The dividend for such research not only is product development, but the forging of friendships as agriculturalists work together to solve problems. Some, such as Blonder, will have other specialties in their background which can lead to other collaborations.

Still completing his master's degree at Hebrew University, Blonder was part of a team that developed a computer-operated portable unit that by using nano-technology can convert six cubic meters of effluent per hour into agricultural water.

Still in development, the device which is hauled in a 20-foot container to agricultural sites has been proven capable of screening out viruses during the conversion process, Blonder said.

Nano-technology, which uses microscopic size holes in the screens through which the water of the effluent passes (leaving behind the solid waste), was an area that Shimon Peres had urged Israeli scientists and engineers to develop.

Blonder's opportunity to join the Peres Center came when an agricultural economist at the Center went on maternity leave. Although originally

hired to fill in just until she returned, the Center decided to create a new position for him when she came back.

Besides talking with Stewart about the mechanics of the conference, Blonder had private meetings with philanthropists and community activists to better acquaint them with the work of the Peres Center. Along with his wife, Gal, he also had a chance to visit Sea World as a tourist.