

# From Chicago to Israel, with love

Michael Kotzin, a gifted storyteller and eloquent advocate for Israel, touches on everything from Zionism to anti-Semitism, branding Israel to countering delegitimization, aliya and the Diaspora, and of course Jewish communal activity and media coverage

• STEVE LINDE

**M**ichael C. Kotzin was executive vice president of the Jewish Federation of Metropolitan Chicago when he accompanied then-senator Barack Obama on a visit to Israel in January 2006. He recounts a revealing exchange after Obama had been helicoptered above northern Israel and received a military briefing.

“Another Chicagoan asked him if he had seen or learned anything unexpected during that overflight. ‘I know what you expect me to tell you,’ the senator answered. And then, validating insights of the Brand Israel Group’s research, he went on to say: ‘But I was not surprised by Israel’s overall smallness and the narrowness of its width; those are the details that I was already familiar with. What did surprise me was to see how green Israel is.’”

The story is classic Kotzin: simply told with a sharp message. A former English literature professor who catapulted to a top leadership position in American-Jewish organizational life, Kotzin is an acute observer, gifted storyteller and eloquent advocate for Israel, whose love of the country shines through in this vast collection of his writings.

*On the Front Lines in a Changing Jewish World: Collected Writings 1988-2013* touches on everything from Zionism to anti-Semitism, branding Israel to countering delegitimization, aliya and the Diaspora, and of course, Jewish communal activity and media coverage.

In his own words, the many short pieces in this 450-page volume “provide a record of certain aspects of some of the central conditions faced in the Jewish world during 25 years of change,” by “someone who found himself on the front lines of communal activity and who is grateful for having had the opportunity to serve the Jewish community of Chicago and the Jewish people during this dramatic time.”

As Yossi Klein Halevi writes so succinctly in his preface, the essays were written with “a deep love” for the Jewish people and Israel. “Michael’s writings are dispatches from the front in the war for Jewish legitimacy,” he asserts.

The Chicago-born Kotzin studied English at the University of Chicago and the University of Minnesota, and after receiving his doctorate moved to Israel with his wife in 1968 to take a post as a lecturer at Tel Aviv University’s English

Department. “Our plan was to stay in Israel two or three years, but we ended up remaining for 11, with all three of our children born there,” he writes.

Living in Israel “greatly enriched my understanding of the reality of that country, intensely strengthened my own ties to it, and profoundly deepened my belief in the importance of ensuring the safety of the state and its people.”

When he returned with his family to the US in 1979, he decided that if he wasn’t in Israel, it was important for him to serve the Jewish people – and he went to work first for the Anti-Defamation League, then for the Chicago Federation. For more than a quarter of a century, he says, the Federation provided him with “many extraordinary experiences,” including accompanying top personalities such as Obama, former mayor Richard M. Daley and late Chicago archbishop Joseph Bernardin to Israel.

And what lessons did he learn over the decades? Well, you have to read the book to get the full answer, but as he details, “A most basic lesson, to be sure, is that living this world of change, we who serve in the Jewish community need to stay on our toes, ready to adjust.”

“What the Zionist thinkers and the Zionist project have taught us is that, for our survival and well-being, we must regard ourselves as having our destiny in our own hands and act accordingly,” he advises. “And we must attempt to realize that potential with wisdom and strength, acting with purpose and keeping our eyes on our goals.”

Several of Kotzin’s short pieces originally appeared as columns in *The Jerusalem Post*. My favorite is one titled “Remembering Jamil Abu Toameh, A True Teacher,” published on October 30, 2009. “When Jamil Abu Toameh died suddenly last week, Israel and the Middle East lost a man of a type all too rare in today’s world,” writes Kotzin. “And I lost someone who, as I was growing up in Chicago years ago, it would not have occurred to me to be likely to have as a future friend.”

Kotzin taught Abu Toameh at Tel Aviv University after his move to Israel in 1968 and, in his own words, “Over time, the relationship of teacher and student evolved into one of friends.” Abu Toameh, who came from a highly respected family in Baka al-Gharbiya (his brother, Jalal, served as its mayor), later became an educator in Jerusalem, serving as principal of a girls high school and later as director of educa-



tion for the Jerusalem Municipality.

“He told me how he was working on an Arabic translation of George Orwell’s *Animal Farm*, a book which he believed offered a parable of current Palestinian life,” Kotzin recalls. “He rued the absence of a Palestinian leadership ready to sincerely and effectively work toward resolution of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, and was embittered by the corruption and mendacity he saw in Yasser Arafat and many around him.”

Abu Toameh was “neither an Uncle Tom nor naïve,” Kotzin remembers, but “sustained a vision of Jews and Arabs living together in friendship in the State of Israel, and of Israel and its Palestinian neighbors living together in peace, and he taught by example how that could come about.”

Kotzin omits that his son, Khaled Abu Toameh, is the acclaimed Palestinian affairs reporter for the *Post*. “If only there could be more people like my friend Jamil Abu Toameh, especially at a time like this,” he concludes.

The same, I believe, can be said of Michael Kotzin. Elie Wiesel once quipped that God created people because he likes a good story. Kotzin’s book is full of really good stories.

It is highly recommended for anyone interested in Israel and American Jewry, told from the perspective of an intellectual insider who truly cares. ■

**AFTER RETURNING** to the US from Israel in 1979, Michael Kotzin worked for the Anti-Defamation League and then for the Chicago Federation. (Courtesy)

**ON THE FRONT LINES  
IN A CHANGING  
JEWISH WORLD**

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