

Yaron Mayer joined the Ministry of Foreign Affairs(MFA) of Israel in 1993. He has served in various capacities at Israeli Embassies in Hungary and India and was a deputy director at Southeast Asia Department, Asia and the Pacific Division of the MFA prior to being appointed at the Israeli Ambassador to Myanmar. Ambassador Mayer spoke with Asian Jewish Life in March 2010. The full text of this interview can be found on our website at [www.asianjewishlife.org](http://www.asianjewishlife.org).

## Q Why does Israel have an embassy in Myanmar as opposed to non-resident ambassador as elsewhere in the region?

Israel and Myanmar's relationship goes back to the early fifties when both countries were newly born and under unique circumstances. They benefited from the special relationship with each other. Last year we marked 55 years of the establishment of embassies in both countries. Israel remembers very well the friendship and support of Burma those days towards Israel. Prime Minister U Nu paid the first ever official visit of a Prime Minister to Israel in 1955 and Israel's first Prime Minister, David Ben Gurion, paid a long visit to Burma in 1961 in addition to many other Israeli dignitaries who came to Burma like Moshe Sharet, Golda Meir, Moshe Dayan, Shimon Peres and President Yitshak Ben Zvi. These visits were background to extensive relations in various fields such as economics, agriculture and industry.

Both Israel and Myanmar kept their embassies open throughout the years. The friendship and good feelings between the two people also contributes hugely to people-to-people contacts in the forms of tourism, training, exposures and humanitarian projects. Israel believes that there is potential for further economic and trade relations with Myanmar and also recognizes the strategic importance of Myanmar.

## Q Is Myanmar part of the Israeli back-packers circuit?



Ambassador Yaron Mayer

Myanmar is a popular destination for Israeli tourists. Among them there are also many backpackers who come to explore the wonders of Myanmar and its people. However, I wouldn't consider it part of the back-packers circuit unlike Thailand or India. Many of the Israeli visitors do make repeated visits and leave the country with deep feelings of satisfactions and appreciation towards the people. Once Myanmar becomes more open, I am certain that many more Israelis will come.

## Q Is Israel involved with the restoration or preservation of the synagogue or the Jewish cemetery?

The embassy of Israel in Yangon is in close contact with the local Jewish community as well as with Jews of Myanmar origin who visit the country. Naturally we are involved in various aspects of these matters. However, it should be mentioned that generally the

Jewish community or Jewish people have no problems in this country.

## Q What aid did Israel provide to Myanmar during Cyclone Nargis in 2008?

Israel aid and assistance from the government and various Israeli NGOs as well as private citizens came to Myanmar right after Cyclone Nargis. Israel provided medicine & medical equipment, training to local volunteers, consultations with the local government and civil society organizations. Soon after the cyclone, Israeli disaster management experts immediately arrived to assist in relief efforts. Taking into account the friendly relations, many Israelis felt the need of the crisis and spontaneously responded to the tragic situation. Beside the support of governmental agencies like MASHAV, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Ministry of Health, I can mention the immediate response of organizations such as IsraAid, Israel Flying Aid, FIRST,

LATET, MDA Kibbutz Movement, the JDC, Benei Brit and others.

Cyclone Nargis hit right at a time when Israel Embassy in Yangon was preparing its 60th Independence Day event. The then ambassador, Mrs. Ruth Schatz, promptly decided to cancel the event and diverted its budget towards the relief efforts.

## **Q Is the Israeli aid for cyclone struck areas continuing? What is being done?**

As in any disaster of this magnitude, cyclone affected areas are still in need of recovery and reconstruction support. Israel, in cooperation with local partners, is actively involved in reconstruction of few villages in the delta region building schools, providing livelihood support and trainings to promote psycho-social support for trauma recovery. So far, 3 primary schools are being rebuilt along with other amenities such as bridges, latrines, etc in all respective villages. These activities are undertaken in collaboration with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, MASHAV (the Israeli agency for International cooperation) and various civil society organizations.

## **Q In what other humanitarian aid projects is Israel involved?**

Israel is active in various humanitarian and health projects. One major project that was initiated last year was the 'Eye from Zion' project, which brought a delegation of eye surgeons from Israel's best hospitals and provided two weeks of free eye treatment and training in three locations in Myanmar. The Embassy of Israel in Yangon facilitated this project in cooperation

with the Ministry of Health, Union of Myanmar. We hope that this project will continue.

Another significant project is in the area HIV/AIDS prevention and treatment. Collaboration between the Myanmar Business Coalition on AIDS (MBCA) and the Jerusalem AIDS Project (JAIP) provides opportunities for training and exposure visits to successful programs and projects in Israel whereby Myanmar participants gain hands-on learning of best-practice methodologies and approaches from Israel's experienced organizations. Israel's HIV/AIDS experts also come to Myanmar to share insights and experiences with local HIV organizations and agencies. Recently we held such workshop with cooperation between Mashav and Burnet Institute.

A new field of cooperation is in Hydrotherapy. Two Myanmar physiotherapists from "EDEN", a private institute for children with disabilities, have been sent to Israel to receive training and diplomas in the field of hydrotherapy. This marks the first hydrotherapy facility in Myanmar.

## **Q Is Israel providing any assistance to Myanmar on water issues and agriculture?**

Agriculture and water management is the main field of cooperation between our two countries. Israel receives annually more than 100 trainees from Myanmar and also provides on the spot tailor made training in Myanmar through MASHAV. The director general of Myanmar's ministry of Irrigation participated last year in WATEC exhibition in Israel and following up to this visit, more collaboration is now under consideration.

Israeli private companies in the field of water and agriculture are also active in Myanmar.

## **Q In what commercial areas is collaboration taking place between Israel and Myanmar? Are there cultural or educational exchanges?**

The potential for commercial collaboration between Israel and Myanmar is big, similar to commercial ties with other Asian countries. However, the volume of these contacts is still relatively small and we hope that economic reforms in Myanmar will enable business people from both sides to enhance their business ventures. I see three main fields that we should promote. Firstly, is the field of agriculture and water technology, which is already being explored but the potential is much higher. Secondly, is in field of telecommunication and information technology which many Israeli companies have world-known standards that can be adapted to different environments. Thirdly, there is much scope in the field of medical equipment and pharmaceutical industries.

Currently Israel imports from Myanmar traditional items like rice, textile, teak wood, gems and exports to Myanmar telecommunication equipment as well as other high-tech technologies.

Several cultural and educational events in the field of music, cinematography, bible teaching and art exhibitions have been organized by the embassy in the last few years. We believe that culture is useful to create better mutual understandings and to provide a platform for people-to-people dialogue. We also encourage Myanmar art and cultural activities in Israel.

This year, the first Holocaust Memorial Ceremony was held in Myanmar, which was jointly organized by UNIC, the German Embassy and the Embassy of Israel. The event was hugely significant and drew much interest from various circles. The emphasis on the universal lessons from that chapter of history which sadly, is largely unknown here especially amongst the younger generation, made the event even more important and we wish that it will be a beginning of an annual tradition, and will lead to further awareness.

## **Q Are there any Israeli investments of any real significance in Myanmar?**

Like in the trade sector, there is also potential for Israeli investments in Myanmar. However, so far the amount of real significant investment is low.

## **Q What was Myanmar's position on the Goldstone Report given the controversy around their record for human rights abuses?**

The Israeli position towards the Goldstone Report, like other political issues, was submitted to Myanmar authorities through diplomatic channels. However, Myanmar is reluctant to take public positions on foreign issues and usually prefers to keep silent on such matters. In general, I feel that the Myanmar Government understands the Israeli challenges and supports a peaceful resolution of the Israeli Palestinian conflict.

## **Q Does Myanmar sit on any UN council?**

Myanmar is a full member of the UN and takes part in its various bodies.



Eye from Zion, Israeli humanitarian aid in Myanmar

## **Q Have you or any Israeli representative met with Daw Aung San Suu Kyi?**

Not since she is been kept under house arrest. However, like other members of the diplomatic corps in Yangon, I had the opportunity to attend few hearings of her recent trial in 2009.

## **Q Is there any cooperation between Myanmar and Israel's law enforcement to help combat the growing drug trade?**

Both Myanmar and Israel give high importance to this issue and are ready to cooperate if needed.

## **Q What is the importance of the relationship between Myanmar and Israel?**

As the twentieth Ambassador of Israel to Myanmar, I feel that we are continuing a tradition that has been developed over the years through the contribution of many people of various backgrounds from both countries. The friendship of the Myanmar people is well known, but as an Israeli Ambassador, I feel a much larger dimension of it, specifically towards Israel. This friendship towards Israel together with the long-standing and extensive relations between our two countries and the potential therein is valuable to us. One can appreciate the recent changes taking place in Myanmar, and personally I believe that Myanmar with its significant history, rich human and natural resources and unique cultural tradition has a role to play in the future development of this region, and thus Israel too can play its role and be relevant to this development. ✡