

## **Playing politics**

*Schechter seniors get a crash course in activism*

*by Ron Kaplan*

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If the senior class at Solomon Schechter Day School of Essex and Union has its way, the winner of the Israeli elections, scheduled for March 28, will be Ariel Sharon's Kadima Party.

The mock election was part of the West Orange school's second annual Caravan for Democracy, High School Edition, event, coordinated by the Jewish National Fund, Media Watch International, and American Friends of Likud. The program brings speakers from Israel to the United States to discuss with college students a spectrum of political and philosophical thought and the challenges the Jewish state faces as the only democracy in the Middle East.

Schechter was the only high school to participate in the program this year.

About 50 students learned about the current political situation in the Middle East through lectures, break-out sessions, and other exercises during the program's morning portion. The afternoon was spent studying the Israeli democratic system, key political issues, and various political parties through IsraelVotes.com, a Web site developed by Upstart Activist, a Jerusalem-based education and advocacy organization.

The students were divided into groups representing Israel's five main parties: Kadima, Likud, Labor, Meretz, and the National Union Party. They ran mini-campaigns consisting of short speeches, skits, or commercials to explain their platforms, followed by the election.

In an e-mail to *NJ Jewish News* prior to the event, Michael Eglash, cofounder of the four-year-old Upstart Activist, explained the importance of these programs.

"Israel advocacy *does* matter, as what we say in our private lives affects public opinion and public opinion affects public policy. Engaging others to look at Israel beyond the headlines and away from some of the distortions and negative images...in the media is crucial. What happens on campus and in [the students'] lives does make a difference and has an influence on people who could be...future leaders.

"So the message is to stand up to anti-Semitism and anti-Israel propaganda by being proactive, having good goals and strong principles, but most importantly, being creative and having a little chutzpa in order to educate and inspire others."

At the same time, Eglash — a native of Milwaukee who made aliya 10 years ago — said, "We know that Diaspora Jewry has played largely a positive and crucial role in strengthening U.S.-Israel relations. I think it is healthy for Diaspora Jews to discuss Israeli politics and debate what is the right path for Israel's future. But it must also be understood that the Jews in the Diaspora do not face the consequences of the advice they give."

The day-long seminar was the highlight of the senior class' "mini-mester," a two-week session on Israel advocacy and Jewish leadership.

Lilach Bluevise, Israel educator and Hebrew Department chair at Schechter, said the students needed to learn as much as they can about Israel, the Israeli elections, and the elections' impact on the Palestinian Authority before heading off to college.

"They leave the day school, a Jewish environment that supports Israel, and may face, for the first time in their lives, anti-Semitism and anti-Israel actions and emotions geared toward them," she said in an e-mail.

Forty-one Schechter seniors will spend three months in Eastern Europe and Israel beginning Feb. 26 as part of the school's Neshama program, which provides them the opportunity to develop their Jewish identity and consolidate their knowledge of Hebrew, Bible, Jewish culture, and history.

"We know that after they are back from the Neshama program, Israel becomes an important component of their Jewish identity and Jewish life, in college and in their adult life," Bluevise said.

The program was first held in 2003 for more than 50 American college campuses. About 20,000 people — Jewish and non-Jewish — cast mock ballots on-line. According to Sarit Schonbrun, a JNF spokesperson, "The results...were, overall, very close to the actual election results in Israel."

While his fellow students were casting their votes, Mica Cohen of Essex Fells, one of the student facilitators, told *NJJN*, "I think it was very important to do it. A lot of people at our school don't know much about Israeli politics, and it was worth the effort. The structure of Israeli politics is much different than it is here."

Student facilitator Yosefa Ehrlich of Highland Park told *NJJN*, "You have to consider that Israel is a politically charged country. American teenagers are so apathetic, they don't know as much about politics as the average Israeli teenager. So I think it's very important that we learn this now so we don't sound idiotic."