

Ambassador's remarks at a Sukkot reception in honor of Special Olympics Israel
September 29, 2015

Welcome and chag sameach to all.

It is a distinct honor for Julie and me to be hosting the athletes of the Israeli Special Olympics team, along with your families and coaches today in our Sukkah. I met many of you at the Embassy before your departure to the United States, and it is wonderful to see you again today.

You are an inspiration to us all and have already achieved the pinnacle of athletic excellence. Less than two months ago in Los Angeles, you won 61 medals- 25 gold, 18 silver and 18 bronze. Kol hakavod! Congratulations!

I cannot think of a more appropriate occasion for this evening's event than this holiday of Sukkot, dedicated to togetherness, using our bodies to physically build the sukkah, and with the tradition of welcoming the most important and inspirational guests, the ushpizin, to our table. The four species of Sukkot—the lulav, etrog, hadassim, and the aravot, which are bound together—are an essential part of this holiday, just as you all here today are essential to ensure a vibrant, healthy, democratic society which embraces all its members.

I would also like to welcome members of the Special Olympics Committee, the Israel Olympics Committee, and all the many wonderful organizations who are providing outstanding support while also advocating for employment opportunities and disability services for all people with disabilities; and welcome to all our friends in the business community who are committed to a more respectful and inclusive society.

I'd also like to offer a special thank you to Tali Kornhauser, Lin Kornhauser's mother, who was instrumental in ensuring that all the athletes and their families could be here tonight.

In fact, it was Tali's inspirational meeting with my wife, Julie, last spring that gave us the idea of hosting this event. When I asked Julie who we should invite to her sukkah, she said, the Special Olympics athletes!

I am also delighted to welcome tonight Israeli Olympic athletes and senior government officials. Your presence here is a tribute to these athletes and underscores our shared commitment to their continued success.

Let me also take a moment to extend a warm thank you and congratulations to Leslie Smith, who will be retiring from the U.S. Embassy this Thursday after 33 years of dedicated service. For many years, Leslie has managed all the Embassy programs related to disability rights, and his excellent and longstanding relationship with the Israeli Special Olympics made tonight's event possible. Leslie, thank you so much for your service and best wishes.

And I also want to welcome the newest member of our Public Diplomacy team, our new Cultural Attache Sarah Gonzales! In a very short time, she has shown us just how innovative and hard-working she is. Welcome, Sarah!

Finally, to our media friends here tonight – I hope you will continue to cover events like the Special Olympics, not as human interest stories, but as events that any sports’ enthusiast would appreciate.

We are fortunate to have with us today dancers from the Los Angeles Contemporary Dance Company - BODY TRAFFIC, who are visiting Israel as part of the State Department’s DanceMotion USA program, which facilitates cultural exchange while showcasing the best in contemporary American dance abroad. Soon they will be performing for us.

The Special Olympics is not just a once a year event. It is a way of life that creates a universal culture of high expectations and sports excellence and honors individual achievement. Each athlete here this afternoon has individual gifts to share, and we are all here to recognize and celebrate each of these gifts.

I may be the only one bearing the official title of Ambassador today. But each and every one of you is truly an Ambassador, representing the best of the human spirit and shattering the myths that people with disabilities are less capable than others of leading fulfilling lives and contributing greatly to society.

I’m sure no one is surprised, because our two nations share common values—and promoting inclusion for people who are different is an on-going challenge we pursue together, both at home and across the world.

I am very proud that over the past few years, the Embassy has worked closely with many of you here tonight – businesses, NGOs, and government representatives – to ensure that all Israeli citizens can work together and participate equally to promote a strong society.

Inclusion of everybody is what makes societies strong. Inclusion is the main idea behind the Americans with Disabilities Act, which was passed 25 years ago. And while government can lead the way, now it is private companies, including those represented here today, leading the way by demonstrating a major commitment to including people with disabilities in meaningful, productive roles. Thank you for setting an example of businesses that understand the contributions that people with disabilities can make.

To keep our progress going, President Obama signed an executive order to establish a coordinated government-wide initiative to promote diversity and inclusion in the federal workforce. He said: “We are at our best when we draw on the talents of all parts of society, and our greatest accomplishments are achieved when diverse perspectives are brought to bear to overcome our greatest challenges.”

In the spirit of President Obama’s words and in recognition of the tremendous strides our two societies have made in this on-going mission, let me again tell you what an honor it is to gather you here tonight under this shelter of peace.

Chag sameach, toda, and shukran to all of you here today, and please lift your glasses for a toast to these amazing athletes – yashar koach to all of you. I am looking forward to my table tennis match!