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One on One: 'It's all about shaping a story'

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'One of my first teachers in PR was Avi Weiss," Ronn Torossian says, referring to the activist American rabbi who had an impact on his early years. It was Weiss who taught the young follower - and subsequent national president - of Ze'ev Jabotinsky's Revisionist Betar movement the importance of being "as close as you can to the cameras to further your message."

It was thus that the 34-year-old founding president and CEO of the New York City-based 5W Public Relations "was on the cover of every daily paper in Israel, two days after moving here in 1997," at the age of 23, shortly after graduating from college.

Ironically, the occasion for this instant publicity more than a decade ago was the activity surrounding the eastern Jerusalem neighborhood of Ras el-Amud. Torossian accompanied the first group of residents moving into a building purchased by none other than Miami-based philanthropist Irving Moskowitz. (This illustrates what Torossian goes on to say generally about controversies surrounding this country: "If one opens the paper today to read about the conflict, it's the same story it was 10 years ago. I remember when Anthony Zinni said that he wasn't going to leave until it was resolved. And now 'George Mitchell is returning to the Middle East.' Isn't that another tired rerun?")

THE PHOTO-OP was only the beginning. During what would turn out to be a two-year stint in this country, Torossian was one of three founders - together with fellow Betar alumni and peers, today Likud MK Danny Danon and Kadima MK Yoel Hasson - of Yerushalayim Shelanu (Jerusalem Is Ours), a secular organization promoting the right of Jews to live anywhere they choose in the city of Jerusalem.

"I aspired, and still do aspire, to help the Jewish community in any way I can, whether spiritual or material," he says.

And today, while his having become "more spiritual in recent years" could contribute to the former, his financial success gives him the means to achieve the latter.

But money - which the Bronx boy-turned-Manhattanite admits to considering important - isn't the

only thing he's after. Indeed, he insists, he's got strict red lines when it comes to clientele. The notorious Ponzi schemer Bernard Madoff, for example, whom he likens to a "mass murderer," is someone he claims he never would have represented. Ditto for terrorists or others out to harm Israel.

On the other hand, he does admire the PR prowess of some of the above, citing Al Jazeera TV as one example, and US President Barack Obama - whom he calls "a disaster" - as another.

But little of Torossian's work involves politics, he stresses, pointing to the fact that his clients are primarily corporate, tech and consumer brands - though he does boast a tight working relationship with the Christian Right, as well as many members of the Israeli political echelon, including the Tourism and Foreign ministries, members of Knesset and Jerusalem Mayor Nir Barkat. (In an amusing twist of fate, Torossian's office hosted Barkat in New York on July 23, during his first official visit there, where he held a press conference at 5WPR - while Torossian himself was in Israel.) Among his past and present clients in the Israeli business world, Torossian has worked with Nice Systems, gaming mogul Noam Lanir, Moshe Gaon, "oligarchs" whose names he is unwilling to disclose publicly, Ahava and a number of hi-tech firms.

"I feel very at home with Israel and Israelis," says Torossian, who not only has a sense of himself as a proud Jew, but who speaks Hebrew fluently. This undoubtedly is a plus when he consults with his non-English-speaking rabbi, the renowned Yishayahu Yosef Pinto - grandson of the famous Sephardi rabbi known as the "Baba Sali" - whose New York synagogue, Shuva Israel, attracts prominent businesspeople and celebrities from all walks of life.

Torossian, who describes himself as having emerged "from quite modest beginnings," comes by his attachments honestly. His mother, who was born in a DP camp in Poland after World War II, met his Jerusalemite father in the Holy Land. It was she who "forced" him to join Betar in his early teens. It was a move, he says, that "changed everything."

It is not clear whether Betar affected Torossian's behavior (he is described in a *New York Times* profile as "brash and aggressively outspoken"), or if his temperament made him a natural member of a youth movement that used to have the reputation of being full of "tough guys."

But Torossian, a divorced father of a four-year-old daughter, does not come off as a barracuda. In fact, during our interview at the Tel Aviv Hilton, he waxes poetic about his little girl, whom he has brought with him on this trip, and who is eagerly waiting for him to finish talking, so that he can take her to the Ramat Gan Safari.

Nevertheless, it is hard to imagine that one could achieve Torossian's status - among the youngest and most successful CEOs in his field - by being soft or modest. Indeed, Torossian and his company are often accused of exaggerated self-promotion.

At this, Torossian shrugs. "Jealousy will always exist," he says. "But we work hard, and thank God succeed."

At a lightening pace, he might have added. In 2003, Torossian set up shop in a shed on the roof of Tzell Travel in midtown Manhattan. Tzell owner Barry Liben - another former Betar leader - let

him make use of the space. What he did with it was create 5WPR (named after the "five Ws" of journalism: who, what, where, when and why). In a mere six years, Torossian has not only moved out of the shed, but has made it onto the prestigious "Inc. 500" list of the fastest-growing companies for two years running, and is now one of 25 of the largest PR firms in the US. Having so many high-profile clients - from corporate and consumer brands, like Evian water and Anheuser Busch, to hip-hoppers and techies - will do that. How, though, did Torossian do it?

"I don't get very much sleep," he says.

Had the state of Israel been your client during the war in Gaza, what would you have done differently in terms of PR? Would you have allowed the press into the Strip?

No, I think it was very smart not to permit the press to enter Gaza. This isn't a war between two equals; it's a war between a civilized democratic nation and a group of murderers and terrorists. And the media have difficulty grasping that - though whether this is due to actual difficulty grasping it or whether it is purposeful is open to interpretation. In any case, it is clear that they're not balanced when it comes to the conflict. Therefore, we know what kind of images would have emerged had the press been inside. And images shape conflict. What Israel did successfully was limit the ability of the international media to shape the conflict.

But overall, Israel does a poor job of PR.

Is the problem that Israel does a poor PR job, or that whatever Israel does or does not do, the world tends to be against it?

It's both. One can't deny that much of the world is against Israel. I mean, look at what happens when private investors build a few houses in eastern Jerusalem - a Jew can build and live anywhere in the world, but not in eastern Jerusalem?... And, surely, everybody would be happy to claim that this is why Iran wants to blow up the West.

But still, there is a lot that can be done to fight and influence the media on these issues. It's a question of shaping concepts, of speaking in terms the world understands. For example, I don't think the world understands the difference between east Jerusalem and west Jerusalem. But it does understand distances, such as the "length of three football fields" or that Israel is the size of the state of New Jersey - simple things like that.

Meanwhile, unlike many other governments, Israel's doesn't use PR companies, because it doesn't spend the money. And it's not only that it doesn't spend the necessary moneys; it won't even pay many of the cellphone bills of Israeli staffers working for the government in consulates throughout the world. What's needed, then, is a private initiative, where people on their own come up with the funds necessary to fight the propaganda war.

Israel needs private investors to establish a station that is for the Jews and the West what Al Jazeera is for the Arabs. That's my political - and PR - take on it.

Speaking of which, you say that you learned your PR skills from your days as a

political activist. But how do such skills serve you in noncontroversial cases, such as in the realm of product promotion?

A very small percentage of our business is political or controversial. The bulk is consumer brands, technology companies, corporate problem-solving and the like. We understand how to shape and position a story - how to create news and shape opinion.

Is using the media for the above different from using it for political causes?

Not really, because it's all about shaping a story, crafting a message and delivering what the media are looking for. It's also about timeliness. You need to understand that when there's a story, there's going to be a reaction to that story, so you have to get your experts positioned and ready. For example, we represent some of the leading health-care companies in the US, some of which are opposed to President Obama's current health-care reform initiative, and some of which are supportive. So there's a lot of room for debate and interpretation on that program.

Where consumer brands are concerned, it's about tapping into things like Valentine's Day, Mother's Day, graduation day, and tying into relevant angles. Again, much of it is about shaping and creating messages and images.

We are one of the 25 biggest PR firms in the US today - the fifth largest independent firm in New York. This is because we understand how to shape messages and images that benefit both our clients and the media.

We also how utilize social media like Facebook and Twitter, which are very important today.

Are sites like these indeed more important today than other forms of media?

You know, there's all this talk about the death of traditional media. I don't buy that any more than I buy the death of advertising. Do I believe that traditional media have changed? Absolutely. Do I believe that I can reach a consumer in a manner different from three years ago? Absolutely. The campaign of the president of the United States is a prime example of that. One of the reasons he is the president is that he realized the value of social media. Barack Obama is a PR genius.

Thankfully, we've been successful in this area, as well. The media have changed. And today, PR is about more than just media: It's consulting, it's social networking on the Web and much more. One of the reasons we succeed is that there's not another PR firm in the US owned by anyone under the age of 45.

What do you tell a new staff members about what is most important on the job?

That to succeed in PR, you have to work hard. There is no such thing as 9-to-5. Like in the news business.

I always say: "Look after clients as though they're your mother, your father, your husband, your wife, your brother, your sister. If you treat them like family and you do great work, they're going to come back to you."

This ties into the fact that there's very little separation in the PR business between your personal life and your business life.

Another thing is that I look to hire people who have come out of politics or sports, who understand the necessity of winning. I play in a 5:30 a.m. basketball league with a bunch of Wall Street people - who else would be up that early? - among them highly successful investment bankers. Does it make any sense in the real world for a bunch of guys like that to be diving face-first for a ball at the crack of dawn? No, it doesn't. But that's the killer attitude, the winning attitude. And that's the kind of thing I look for. People who want to win.

It's about taking chances. I tell my people not to be afraid to make mistakes. If you're not making any mistakes, you're probably not taking enough chances.

What constitutes winning?

Winning in PR is picking up the newspaper and seeing our story on the front page. Winning in PR is turning on the TV and seeing our client quoted. Conversely, we have clients who pay us a lot of money to keep them *out* of the media. Our client list ranges the gamut. We represent two of the 400 richest people in the world. We represent a number of Fortune 500 companies. We represent technology companies and consumer brands of all sizes: big and small and in between. So, victory for every client is a different thing, but yes, we like to work for clients who win, and who want to win. We work for clients who want to see their stock prices go up, their sales go up, their investments go up. And in this economic environment, this is certainly not an easy thing.

Speaking of the economy, is it true that businesspeople are all claiming these days that they've never been better off?

It's true that many people in the business world today make public statements that bear little resemblance to reality. The way I see it is that there are two kinds of businesses in the world right now: those that are down and those that are lying. But I will say that the depression going on in the US isn't as apparent in Israel.

You say that many public statements don't reflect reality. But isn't that what your whole business is all about? You oppose Obama, yet describe him as a PR genius. Are you saying that the portrayal of reality counts more than the reality itself?

If a tree falls in the forest, and nobody hears it, did it really fall?

Perception and reality are two different things. The job of a good PR person is to create his own reality. It's true that I don't think Obama is good for America and business. As a Jew, I certainly don't think he's good for Israel. Does that mean that I don't think he's brilliant at PR? No. By the same token, I am a Jew and a Zionist at my very core. Israel is a part of my soul and my identity. I love the State of Israel. But does this mean that I think it has good PR? Absolutely not.

It also doesn't mean that you wish to settle here, does it?

I did live here for two years, in 1997-1998. I often wonder if I made the right decision leaving, and

often regret it, because I feel so at home here. That said, it's often easier to love Israel from afar - not because of bombs, but because of bureaucracy. But in my dreams, I do live in Israel, and perhaps will again one day.

And though technology has made a big improvement, and Israel is very much a Western country, it is still firmly planted in the Middle East. And while part of Israel's beauty is its human warmth, that's also occasionally a downside. The rules of interaction are different here.

But I come here very regularly - which I can do, thanks to my BlackBerry and laptop. Being here allows me to be more grounded, and helps me realize the value of what I do and who I am. It also helps me realize that there's something much more holy than success - which is sometimes easy to forget.

Don't get me wrong, money is very important. It's much nicer to take a taxi than to take a bus. It's much nicer to take an air-conditioned limo than a regular taxi. But, there is something higher than that. Today, when I travel in Israel, for example, I pray at the graves of some great rabbis, and regularly meet with living ones, which is something I never would have imagined myself doing years ago. That said, I don't miss a Friday morning in [Tel Aviv's] Nahalat Binyamin or Sheinkin when I'm here, and frequent its great nightclubs and restaurants, while spending time with businesspeople and friends.

The point is that I am shaped by Zion and Torah, and every day I try to grow as a result, in all aspects of life. I have three clients: the people who hire me, the media and God - not necessarily in that order.

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