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## African-American rep touts ties between communities



Atlanta Congressman John Lewis makes a point about black-Jewish cooperation as his host, Englewood Mayor Michael Wildes, looks on.

Photo by Robert Wiener

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In a pitch for closer relations between America’s black and Jewish communities, Georgia Congressman John Lewis told a multiracial audience in Englewood June 29 that members of the two groups “have a legacy and a history of working in struggle together.”

Lewis, a veteran of the civil rights movement of the 1960s, addressed a meeting of NORPAC, a political action committee that supports candidates deemed friendly to Israel.

A member of the House since 1987, he is being challenged by two younger Democrats in a primary fight — partly because he had originally backed Hillary Clinton, and not Barack Obama — in his predominantly African-American district in Atlanta.

Speaking at the home of Englewood Mayor Michael Wildes, the congressman said many of his young African-American constituents come to Capitol Hill “to speak for Israel. These people can become ambassadors to the larger world.

“I’ve been to Israel five times,” he told the 25 people gathered in Wildes’ living room and kitchen. “Each time I go I learn something. The determination of the people, the persistent desire of the people of that region to work for peace. Israel is our strongest ally in that part of the world, and we must continue to support Israel.”

In response to a question about Middle East peace prospects — in which the questioner characterized the adversaries as “one side, Israel, says, ‘I want peace,’ and the other says, ‘You have no right to exist, you have no right to breathe, I want to drive you into the sea’” — Lewis said the antagonists could learn a lesson from the civil rights movement.

“They could come and see what happened in Selma, what happened in Mississippi.... The fear is gone. There is still the need for people to see how other people are living. We’ve got to stop teaching hate. It destroys us all. The young people — whether in Egypt or Iran or wherever — have got to be taught there is a better way. We’ve got to peacefully coexist.”

Lewis referred frequently to the close collaboration between black activists and the disproportionate number of Jewish young people who joined them in the civil rights struggles of the 1960s. “When we see racism when we see anti-Semitism,” he said, “we have an obligation, a mission, and a mandate to speak up, to speak out, and to find a way to get in the way.

“Another generation of blacks and Jews got in the way and made our country a better place.”

**‘Very optimistic’**

Asked how Obama should be “advancing himself in the Jewish community” to allay some of its members’ expressed concerns, Lewis said he has talked with the presidential candidate.

“One thing he understands, probably better than most people, is that if it had not been for the civil rights movement, he wouldn’t be where he is. He always talks about the young people who went south — the young blacks, the young whites — and many of the whites were Jewish. People gave their blood. Some gave their very lives in Mississippi, in Selma, Alabama, and along the way. He understands that.”

In an interview with *NJ Jewish News* prior to his speech, Lewis said Obama “has got to get to know the Jewish community, and the Jewish community has got to get to know him. I think members of the Jewish community should spend time with him, help to educate him, help to sensitize him.

“I think he is a strong supporter of Israel. The leadership of the African-American community and the leadership of the Democratic Party and rank-and-file citizens would not allow him to deviate from strong support and commitment to the State of Israel.”

NORPAC president Ben Chouake pressed Lewis about Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad’s threat to destroy Israel. Chouake identified himself as a child of Holocaust survivors who “understands the nature of hatred and terrible racism.”

“Iran and similar nations must not be allowed to develop weapons that can harm the rest of humankind,” the congressman responded. “We must keep Iran from developing nuclear weapons, and it is my hope and my belief that as a people it doesn’t matter that we are Democrats or Republicans, liberals or conservatives. We must do everything in our power to prevent that from happening.”

Lewis said he and his wife often discuss the Holocaust. Born in 1940, Lewis said, “I still don’t understand how people could be so mean and sick. The madness of the Holocaust, of genocide, it disturbs the very essence of me as a human being. And something like what happened to your family and many other families must never ever happen again. That is why I have been happy to see the Jewish people, more than any other group, take on the issue of Darfur.”

Earlier, he told *NJJN* he was “very optimistic about the future” of close relations between African-Americans and Jews.

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