

Productive Exchange

Baltimore County's sheriff learned homeland security tips and techniques from his Israeli counterparts.

Laura Laing
special to the Jewish Times

One morning in early February, Baltimore County Sheriff Jay Fisher had breakfast at the Tel Aviv Sheraton Hotel. But when he and his companions got up to leave, they were stopped at the front door.

A suspicious bag was found near the entrance, and the bomb squad was assessing the situation. Law enforcement officers hot the shopping bag with a water cannon. Nothing happened, signaling that the tote was just that — a misplaced remainder of

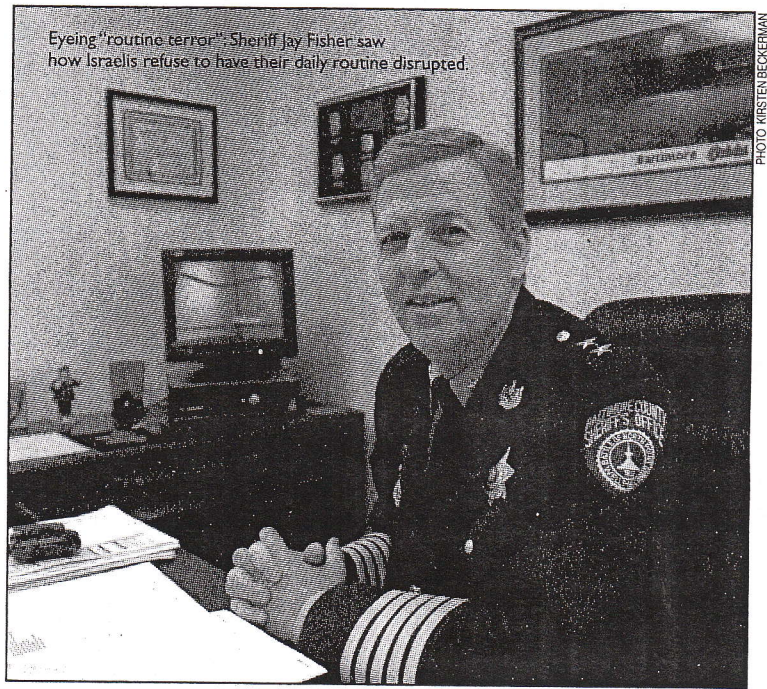
a shopping trip.

"Within 15 to 20 minutes, it was cleaned up and we were on our way," Sheriff Fisher said. "If that had happened here in the U.S., we would have been tied up for half the day. There — and I hate to say this — it's just another day."

In those 20 minutes, Sheriff Fisher experienced an impromptu demonstration of why he was in Israel. A part of a coalition of American law enforcement officers, he was taking part in a program sponsored by the American Israel Education Foundation, a supporting organization of the

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American Israel Public Affairs Committee and the National Sheriffs' Association.

In the first trip of its kind, the program is part of AIPAC's new homeland security initiative, which focuses on facilitating mutual relations between the American and Israeli homeland security communities.

"Israel has been preparing for and responding to terror attacks for 50 years," said AIPAC board member Harriet Zimmerman. "Our goal is to ensure that U.S. law enforcement and first-responders have the opportunity to learn from Israel's vast experience in this critical area. This trip is an important part of AIPAC's new homeland security initiative."

On Feb. 4, 13 law enforcement officials from across the country embarked on a six-day trip to Tel Aviv and Jerusalem to learn how Israeli police officers manage security threats. The group met with Israel's senior command police officials and private sector security experts.

The journey had a huge impact on Sheriff Fisher. "It was an honor to be selected," he said. "I really consider this a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity."

Participants were senior members and leaders of the National Sheriffs' Association. Allegheny County Sheriff David Goad also took part.

Before retiring from the Baltimore City police force, Sheriff Fisher served as the operations commander of the Warrant Apprehension Task Force. In charge of seven districts, he oversaw the delivery of warrants and searches for wanted criminals throughout the state. He was elected Baltimore County sheriff in 2002. In his current role, he oversees security initiatives at the county's courthouse.

"A courthouse is a safe haven," he said. "It could be disrupted very, very badly by a bomb. What this prepares you for is the future. I think it's important to be pro-active."

Right away, Sheriff Fisher noticed some major differences between American and Israeli approaches to security. First and foremost was the national police force. About 27,000 officers patrol Israel and its borders. At 18 years old, each citizen is required to serve; men serve for at least three years, and women serve for at least two.

"We're not used to that here," he said. "I think you have more control when you have one organization. You have better control and more accountability."

Israel's small geographic size is a factor, he noted. "They do very, very well with

that one police force," he said. "It's just another model. It makes you think outside the box."

On one night of his stay, Sheriff Fisher rode along with two Civil Guard volunteers — a businessman and an attorney.

"They support the police and take calls for the police department," he said. "Every night they are assigned a particular area, and they patrol the streets." The volunteers are permitted to carry guns and make arrests, responding to family disturbances and car accidents.

"It just shows you how the people there, they love their country" he said. "We have that here [in Baltimore], but they do it on a wider scale."

That seemed to be a theme. Sheriff Fisher said he was also surprised by the size of the country's surveillance system. About 350 motion-sensitive cameras scanned the old section of Jerusalem, he said.

The Baltimore County courthouse recently upgraded its surveillance system, "but we need even more," he said.

Sheriff Fisher said he got additional ideas from Israel's bomb squad. Between 2001-2005, Jerusalem alone fielded 3,500 bomb squad calls, he said. That led the force to begin profiling potential suicide bombers.

"They have a huge amount of intelligence information on suicide bombers," he said. Characteristics include low self-esteem, social isolation, childish behavior and an ability to blend in with a crowd.

The group also visited border patrol checkpoints. About one-third of the police force serves on the borders, as well as a large number of volunteers, Sheriff Fisher said.

"They do a very thorough job," he said. "I think that we need to look at the way we interview people on the street. 'Is that person who she says she is?'"

Such diligence can be a long process, so the border patrol uses benchmarks. "At any of these benchmarks, if there are questions, you will be detained," Sheriff Fisher said.

But people were very patient. "If a person is detained, they understand this," he said. "They don't have a problem."

That's very different in the United States. "We do what we call a balancing act between security and getting people through."

Fifty years of terrorism makes for a more thorough process, Sheriff Fisher said. "They do things that are a little more in-depth than we do" he said. "They're just more aware of their surroundings." □