

Israeli mock elections today

By Vered Blonstein

Today, students at Brandeis and other universities across the country join Israeli voters in voting for Israeli political parties. While the votes from American students are only tallied online and do not count toward the official Israeli vote, Brandeis students educated themselves about current Israeli party politics at a mock debate last Thursday, preparing for the web-based vote.

Students portraying Israeli politicians debated in the Shapiro Campus Center Atrium. The pro-Israel education group Zionists for Historical Veracity (ZaHaV) sponsored "Educational Series on Israeli Democracy." Brandeis Hillel and the Student Union are co-sponsoring Brandeis participation in the national program.

Student Union President Ben Brandzel '03 submitted a resolution at the Jan. 19 Union Senate meeting, introducing the idea of co-sponsoring the event as a means of "promoting a healthy dialogue and real sense of engagement in global politics."

"I was happy to propose Union involvement in this exercise. Education and participation in the democratic process is a key part of the Brandeis experience, and Israel holds a special place not only in the hearts of many Brandeisians, but in world affairs as a whole," Brandzel said.

"With all the controversies surrounding Israel and all the questions of its military actions," said former ZaHaV board member Yoni Goodman '05, "it's very important for the world to understand that at the root of it all is a rigid democratic process similar to that of the United States."

UpStart Activists is leading this effort, which includes a mock Israeli election held today on 75 campuses throughout America and Great Britain. Although www.IsraelVotes.com, the Web site that sponsors the series, has a voting system, Brandeis students will be using the Student Union's voting system. Students can vote today from noon to 6 p.m. in the Usdan Student Center. National and regional results will be posted on the sponsoring Web site.

Jewish advocates weren't alone in their goal -- Labor party representative Ayham Bahnassi '05 participated, despite his difference in faith.

"Israel is a country that receives a lot of aid from America each year. We, as American citizens, need to make sure that our tax dollars are being put to good use, for purposes that will aspire peace -- not for offensive and destructive purposes," Bahnassi said.

In addition to the mock Israeli debate and election, a panel of professors will hold a discussion session about the results and

effects of the election Feb. 4 at 8 p.m. in the Shapiro Campus Center.

But, according to debate mediator and Educational Series on Israeli Democracy Coordinator Ari Stein '04, the most significant aspect of the program was the debate -- it afforded the audience a chance to learn something about Israel other than "the 30 second clip they see on CNN."

"People believe what they see on the news, but Israel is an open and free society unlike any of the Arab countries in their area. People need to realize that things in Israel aren't equivalent to the rest of the Middle East," Shinui party representative Marc Narotsky '06 said.

Narotsky and five other students were given the chance to reveal the uniqueness of Israel's political system in the Middle East to the Brandeis community by playing the roles of politicians representing different political parties. After presenting a three-minute speech, each student was asked to respond to two questions. The first concerned the cessation of hostilities.

"The situation in Israel has deteriorated over the past two and a half years, and the violence appears to be continuing with no end in sight. What plans do each of your parties propose for improving the security situation and seeking an end to the violence?" Stein asked.

Terrorism wasn't the only issue seizing the forefront. "The war is very central, but there are issues like the economy, budget, arts and water. Israel is a thriving cultural and political center in the Middle East, but in the media all that gets lost behind the war," Stein said.

Stein also said it is important to recognize that Israel is the only democratic country in the Middle East.

"It's important to learn about different democracies around the world -- it's multifaceted and it's not a monolithic system that we think of," Yisrael Ba'aliyah party representative Marc Herman '05 said.

"Israel's much more than a country that's been under war for the past 50 years -- it's really a beautiful country with a pluralistic society that can reach out to lots of different people," Herman added.

The second question, inquiring what each political party proposed to "revive the flailing Israeli economy," produced a variety of responses.

Jonathan Lubin '05, representing the Shas party, voiced a plethora of concerns.

"We want to protect large poor families, protect people in the inner cities and protect citizens from Israel's current economic downfall. We also want to protect yeshiva education -- a lot of parties now want to take money away from yeshiva education," Lubin said.

"Israel's economy is in shambles because of the lack of tourism and problems in the technology sector," Herman added.

After the competitive atmosphere of the speeches subsided, observers were given the opportunity to question the debaters regarding various related topics.

To close the debate, each representative was given 30 seconds to rally support for his party.

"I just hope people get the message," ZaHaV president and Likud representative Mitchel Balsam '05 said.

Perhaps the debate was not enough for some.

"It was a very impressive event," Mark McGrath '06 said. "But, I think I'll read more about all of their platforms before I actually vote."

Other students found the debate to be very informative. "I know nothing about Israeli politics -- or, I should say, I knew nothing about Israeli politics (before the event)," Sarah Slone '06 said.
