

# JENNIFER LASZLO MIZRAHI

by DENISE COUTURE



The résumé of Jennifer Laszlo Mizrahi is so dense with experience and accomplishments, it seems surprising that it belongs to someone in her early forties. A media and political consultant, Laszlo Mizrahi has advised presidents, prime ministers and political candidates; managed the winning campaign of a U.S. congressman; made a gutsy, though unsuccessful, bid for Congress herself; published hundreds of articles as a weekly newspaper columnist; and held leadership posts in a variety of Jewish and civic organizations.

And that was all *before* 2002, when she cofounded The Israel Project (TIP), a Washington, D.C.-based nonprofit organization whose mission is nothing short of making the world a safer place for Jews.

Drawing on the expertise of a five-star board of directors and a six-million-dollar budget, TIP uses the weapons of strategic

communications – polls, focus groups, targeted advertising – to educate the press and public about Israel, fight anti-Semitism, and promote peace and security in the Jewish state. A large part of TIP’s focus is on educating journalists. The organization has found that most people today form opinions about Israel – and therefore Jews – based on what they read in the newspaper and see on television, according to Laszlo Mizrahi.

It was television that compelled Laszlo Mizrahi to take action.

“I started the Israel Project when I was watching a lot of CNN after the birth of our first child, Max [in 2001],” recalls Laszlo Mizrahi, who lives in Annapolis, Maryland, with her second husband, Victor Mizrahi, a scientist-businessman, and their two children. “I would see Israel in the news and I was disgusted, frankly, with the horrible image that they were portraying. And having been to Israel many times, I knew that what I was seeing on television was dramatically different from the real Israel.” This was all the more troubling to Laszlo Mizrahi because she had come to believe that if Israel was at risk, so too were Jews throughout the world.

She and her husband decided they would donate money to an organization that was doing smart, proactive, strategic work to strengthen Israel’s image. But after conducting a diligent search, she came up empty.

“There was nobody who was bringing cutting-edge communications skills [to the task]. There was no polling or focus groups being done. There was nothing modern or strategic about how the research was being done,” she says. During her search, many people suggested she take on the challenge herself. “Since I worked in communications, everyone I talked to saying, ‘I want to donate money,’ would turn around and say, ‘Well, what we need is your time and your brain power and not your money. Somebody needs to do this.’”

So, at a conference of the Jewish Funders Network in Houston, like-minded philanthropists informally pledged financial support if Laszlo Mizrahi could get such an organization off the ground. She put her strategic communications and public policy firm, Laszlo

& Associates Inc., on hold, contributed fifty thousand dollars of family money, and donated her time.

“I recruited my friend Margo Volftsun, who’s a terrific philanthropist and leader. And she recruited Sheryl Schwartz, who’s a young attorney and a friend of hers. And the three of us founded The Israel Project together in March of 2002,” Laszlo Mizrahi says.

With Laszlo Mizrahi as president, Volftsun as secretary and Schwartz as the group’s treasurer, TIP was launched.

Since then, TIP has run major media campaigns to influence attitudes on thorny topics such as Israel’s security fence, gathered reams of opinion research data through polling and focus groups, informed thousands of Jewish professionals on how to better advocate for Israel, and worked with hundreds of journalists to educate them about Israel in general and about important policy issues in particular.

Today TIP has fifty thousand journalists worldwide on its e-mail list, from those at major U.S. news organizations to reporters in India and Scotland. Laszlo Mizrahi estimates that two thousand journalists a week use TIP’s services. “Sometimes that just means opening an e-mail from us, sometimes coming to a briefing with an Israeli official, sometimes they come to us for research,” she explains.

Another goal of the organization is to put a human face on Israel, giving the world images of the nation that are more multi-dimensional than the aggressor it is often portrayed as in the news. One campaign orchestrated by TIP brought a delegation of bereaved Israeli Jewish families to the International Court in The Hague in 2004 to share stories of suffering and loss caused by suicide bombings and other attacks. The campaign was part of an effort by various pro-Israel groups to support the building of a security fence. Ron Kehrmann was one of the bereaved. His seventeen-year-old daughter, Tal, was among the seventeen people killed in a bus bombing in Haifa in 2003.

“The Israel Project does a lot to make our voices heard,” Kehrmann writes in an e-mail. “TIP shows the other side of Israel. It enables people not familiar with all the small details of the Middle

East conflict to learn and understand our side of the story. TIP teaches people that the Israelis would like to live an ordinary life, without killing and being killed.”

Sheryl Schwartz, TIP cofounder and now its vice president, says the campaign has had a lasting impact. “Pictures of the terror victims and their stories went around the world,” she says. “It was very exciting to see that the world was listening. Before that, it wasn’t.” Since then, the media has given more attention to the plight of Israelis, says Schwartz, so that now at least “you hear there *are* terror victims in Israel.”

Or, as Laszlo Mizrahi puts it, “tens of millions of Americans changed their mind on Israel’s security fence.” According to TIP polls, prior to the campaign, only forty-three percent of Americans thought Israel had a right to erect the fence. Afterward, the figure jumped to sixty percent.

In interviews at TIP’s offices on K Street – the hub of Washington lobbyists – Laszlo Mizrahi exudes supreme confidence and a kind of suffer-no-fools competence. She favors classic jacket-and-skirt suits, wears little make-up and keeps her dark blond hair in a low-maintenance shoulder-length cut sometimes pulled back in a no-nonsense ponytail. She’s tall and slim. Her look is professional but not Wall Street, feminine but not frou-frou (this is not a woman with time to accessorize).

Numbers, percentages and poll results roll off Laszlo Mizrahi’s tongue as easily as if she were reciting what she had for breakfast that morning. She is *uber* media-savvy, speaks in complete sentences and seems always at the ready with a well-formulated, lengthy argument or a succinct sound bite – all in support of Israel.

When asked what she believes are TIP’s greatest accomplishments thus far, she mentions several successful media campaigns, such as the one waged at the time of Israel’s decision to withdraw from Gaza. “We saw that there was going to be an immense amount of goodwill given to Israel because of this policy, and we worked very, very hard to make sure that reporters covered this,” she says. Among other things, TIP set up a media center in Gaza to

work with reporters. “We were very proud of our [Gaza withdrawal] campaign. There were thirty thousand press mentions, 760 page-one stories in the United States. By a ten-to-one margin, Americans feel better about Israel as a result of that.”

Just how much of that media coverage and goodwill was the direct result of efforts by TIP is, of course, difficult to measure. But Laszlo Mizrahi – with her staff of about twenty, not including the scores of interns and others who come on board to help out in a crisis – knows how to mobilize quickly and take action when the need arises.

Reared in Durham, North Carolina, by a cancer specialist father and community activist mother, Laszlo Mizrahi displayed an early affinity for challenging work. When just thirteen and continuing through college, she began spending occasional summers in France, working at her great aunt’s skin care products company, Ella Bache Inc. Unlike many teens who put in time at the family business, Laszlo Mizrahi skipped stocking shelves and other menial tasks and went right to marketing and communications, something she immediately liked.

Bache was an important role model for Laszlo Mizrahi, who named her second child, a daughter, Ella. Her great aunt represented what a woman with intelligence, determination and courage could achieve despite enormous odds, such as those faced by Jews in pre- and post-World War II Europe.

Laszlo Mizrahi made her first trip to Israel around the age of ten, then spent her junior year of college at the Hebrew University. After college, she found herself in Israel again, contemplating becoming a rabbi or Middle East expert. But her interests in communications and politics won out and she returned home to work as a legislative assistant for the U.S. Congress. She spent two years in a leadership role at the District of Columbia Jewish Community Center and then landed a job as a political trainer for *Campaigns & Elections* magazine. All the while, she kept her hand in volunteer

work for Jewish and non-Jewish community groups, earning recognition as one of President George H.W. Bush's "1,000 Points of Light."

Soon, Laszlo Mizrahi was leading campaign training seminars around the world, working with Vaclav Havel in Prague, Boris Yeltsin in Moscow, and other emerging heads of state. She struck out on her own in 1993 and founded Laszlo & Associates, building an impressive client roster that included the White House, sixty U.S. senators, more than one hundred U.S. representatives and various Fortune 500 companies and notable nonprofits.

She also decided to practice what she preached, so to speak, and made a bid, at age twenty-nine, for U.S. Congress when the seat became vacant in her home state, North Carolina, where, she says, a Jew had never run for federal office before. When asked what compelled her to make the bid at such a young age, Laszlo Mizrahi says, "I had been working at my [great aunt's] business in a role where there were a lot of high expectations. I had had my own company and I had worked for Congress, so I didn't think of myself as being particularly young when I was twenty-nine. I had a lot of experience."

Nevertheless, she lost in the 1994 Democratic primary – and admits to no regrets. "I saw a chance to try and make a difference and so I made an attempt. And I got shellacked. But I will never be an old person sitting in a rocking chair, looking back on my life and saying I didn't try." For the next six years, as a "hobby," she wrote a weekly column for the *Daily Record*, a small newspaper in Dunn, North Carolina. "It was an outlet for creativity and for a lot of opinions that I had," she says. "I published literally hundreds of columns, mostly on foreign policy or on American politics or issues of need."

Laszlo Mizrahi's critics have at times construed her doggedness in getting the message out and willingness to put herself in the public eye as arrogant and self-aggrandizing. When questioned about this, she sighs as if she has heard it before but knows she has to address it. "Look, I'm just trying to do something positive to make a difference," she says. "If somebody wants to spend their time criticizing or if they want to spend their time differently, they can certainly

do that. That is not going to get me down or upset me. I mean, we're doing things that are dramatically different here, and change is not always easy for people."

She truly enjoys working collaboratively with various groups, Jewish and non-Jewish, that share her dreams for Israel, that are willing to exchange good ideas, "so that everybody can do a better job. And for me that's what it's all about."

Moreover, Laszlo Mizrahi says she is deeply grateful to many people who have guided or mentored her throughout her life. She ticks off a list of rabbis, former professors at Emory University, where she earned degrees in international relations and Judaic studies, and people she works with at TIP, among others. "I have been really blessed with really good, intellectually outstanding Jewish role models," she says.

High on the list is her mother, Nancy Laszlo. Originally Baptist, she converted to Judaism before marrying Laszlo Mizrahi's father. "She embraced Judaism fully and is a very terrific Jewish leader in her own right, and that's very important," says Laszlo Mizrahi. "She frequently, in my community in Durham, North Carolina, represented the Jewish community on interfaith church councils and interfaith organizations, where she really helped bridge the gap between northern Jews, who had moved to Durham to be doctors at Duke, and southern Christians, who had a very big culture gap with the Jews."

Her mother was also active in local nonprofits. She started and ran a hospice for the terminally ill, as well as a center to house out-of-town cancer patients at Duke University and a community Meals on Wheels program. As a child, Laszlo Mizrahi and her two siblings, a brother and a sister, sometimes helped their mother make sandwiches and deliver meals to homebound seniors. "She would see a need in the community and she couldn't stand idly by and watch the need not be filled," says Laszlo Mizrahi.

Although her parents divorced when Laszlo Mizrahi was in college, she remains "incredibly close" to each of them, she says. Her father, John Laszlo, who had a prominent career at Duke University's

medical school, was indirectly a factor in Laszlo Mizrahi's fascination with communications and her founding of TIP.

As a new mother, she found herself thinking, "I don't want my son to have happen to him what happened to my father," she recalls. "My father, who lived in Vienna, had two very successful parents who came from very successful families and they went from having everything to having most of their family murdered. My father was there during the Anschluss, and when he was five, which is the age that my son is now, he literally wanted to join the Brown Shirts, which is the Nazi youth. They had made it so socially acceptable and so cool and so hip that a five-year-old Jewish kid in Vienna, Austria, wanted to be a Brown Shirt, and these were the people who pushed him out of Europe and ultimately murdered most of his family."

"And it didn't happen overnight. It came through sophisticated, strategic communications. They had messaging, they had delivery systems, they had Nazi radio. They had rallies, they had uniforms, they had posters, they had banners, they had newspapers. They sold their message to the public. And what most people don't realize is that in Austria where my father lived, Hitler was democratically elected. People say it couldn't happen again, well those people don't see the handwriting on the walls. What we see today in terms of propaganda in the Arab world about Jews is worse in many cases than what the Nazis had. And if you don't stop it before it's deadly, then it's too late."

Laszlo Mizrahi is adamantly opposed to any suggestion that American Jews should stay behind the scenes to avoid fueling negative stereotypes about Jewish influence over the media and policymakers. She says she rejects the informal consensus reached some years ago among many Jewish leaders to keep quiet on sensitive issues affecting Israel. "It was the wrong strategy!" she exclaims. "Americans have the right to speak freely, and Americans who are not Jewish feel that people who are Jewish or who just know a lot about Israel have as much right to educate reporters about Israel as they have to educate reporters about the Boy Scouts or their opinions about abortion or taxes or guns or whatever."

TIP accepts neither funding nor direction from the Israeli government (or that of any other country), says Laszlo Mizrahi. “We are a completely independent, nonprofit organization, completely controlled by our board of directors, who are all American citizens.” But it does work closely with Israel’s political elite. “We visit very regularly with Ehud Olmert, with Shimon Peres, with [then] Ambassador [Daniel] Ayalon, with [then] Ambassador [Dan] Gillerman,” says Laszlo Mizrahi. “We work very closely with Silvan Shalom and Bibi Netanyahu. So, across the political spectrum, we’re sharing data and sharing ideas. Just like in the United States we work with a whole host of pro-Israel groups and the same in Europe.”

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Although as a youth she was very active in the Reform synagogue her parents founded in North Carolina, where Eric Yoffie was her rabbi, these days Laszlo Mizrahi finds there is little time in her schedule for religious observance. “I don’t go to synagogue very often anymore. I used to go a lot,” she says. “For me, Shabbat is about just being with my kids and my husband.”

Even so, juggling her family’s needs with those of Israel is a constant balancing act. She’s frequently at her home computer into the wee hours responding to TIP e-mails or quietly text messaging on her Treo while sailing with her family. “Israel, a democracy defending itself from terror while working for peace, is so important to me. But both our children need special attention and love, and being a good parent is the hardest and most important thing I do,” she writes in an e-mail.

And despite her commitment to Israel, she misses the work she did while running Laszlo & Associates – the variety of political campaigns and projects – and dreams of one day re-opening the firm. When asked when she envisions that day will come, she pauses for a moment. “You know, when there’s world peace and Israel is secure,” she says. “But right now is a time of crisis for Israel so I can’t make any changes now, because the threat of Iran is so severe and the other threats that Israel faces are so significant.”

And off she goes, delineating the various threats – with focus group and poll results flowing from mind to tongue with matter-of-factness and ease.