

Wooing a Star: Israel and Danny Kaye

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Abstract

The American comedian Danny Kaye was an international star on stage and screen for more than three decades, beginning in World War II. During his career, Kaye visited the state of Israel more often than any other Hollywood celebrity. This article tracks Kaye's trajectory from a reluctant Jew to a champion of Zionism. It looks at the Israeli government's early efforts to incorporate popular figures like Kaye into its public diplomacy infrastructure designed to boost the country's international image. It emphasizes the role that Kaye's highly choreographed visits to Israel played in winning him over to Zionism and in making him such a valuable pro-Israel advocate. The article argues that Danny Kaye was a trailblazer for today's generation of celebrity activists and points to the importance of the Hollywood-Israel relationship to the wider alliance between Israel and the United States.

Introduction

With world-famous celebrities and mega-expensive movies competing for prizes, Oscar season has never been a quiet time of the year in Hollywood. Adding to the usual hullabaloo in 2016 was a row over – believe it or not – the content of the goodie-bags being given to Leonardo DiCaprio, Jennifer Lawrence and other nominees in the major categories. For some people, the loo roll worth \$275 and the Vampire Breast Lift revealed themselves as the ultimate metaphor for Hollywood's surreal lifestyle. But it was the Israeli Tourism Ministry's offer of a free VIP trip to the Holy Land, worth \$55,000, that sparked most controversy. The Israeli tourism minister, Yariv Levin, claimed the initiative was intended to allow the stars to "experience the country firsthand and not through the media". Pro-Palestinian activists challenged the Israeli

government's "luring" of celebrity visitors, which they claimed was part of a propaganda campaign masquerading as educational fun. Supporters of Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions sardonically invited the Oscar nominees to an alternative ten-day tour of Palestine, in which they could "Enjoy a tear-gas filled weekend in an East Jerusalem ghetto" and "Watch a baby being born in the back of a taxi as checkpoint guards look on." The whole episode seemed to win Israel few friends, not least because the country stood accused of politicizing the Oscars.¹

Attracting visitors to one's country has long been an important component of public diplomacy: the process by which international actors seek to accomplish their foreign policy goals by engaging with foreign publics. In a perfect world, those visitors will embrace what they see and hear, developing or strengthening their affinity with the country in the process, and thereby support closer international ties when they return home. The exchange of visitors between two countries can take this a step further, producing mutual cultural and political benefits. Such thinking lies behind the US government's Fulbright Scholarships, established in 1946, for instance, and Japan's emphasis on exchange as an organizing concept for its public diplomacy, an attitude dating from the Meiji period of nineteenth-century modernization. Things can go wrong sometimes of course. Perhaps one of the most notorious examples is that of Sayed Qtub, the Egyptian writer who spent 1948 in Colorado as an exchange visitor studying the US education system. Qtub, critical of the Western world before travelling to the US, was appalled by American materialism and lasciviousness, became a leading ideologist of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt, and later an inspiration for violent Islamist groups like al-Qaeda.²

Since their state's birth in the same year that Sayed Qtub visited the United States, Israeli diplomats have gone to great lengths to encourage high-profile visitors. As the 2016 Oscars row illustrated, Hollywood celebrities have always ranked highly in importance. This article looks at some of the Israeli government's earliest efforts to persuade Hollywood stars to visit the Jewish state and to turn these individuals into pro-Zionist advocates. Its focus is on Danny Kaye, one of the most famous comedians of the twentieth century. It will be shown that Kaye was one of Israeli public diplomacy's greatest success stories during the first decades of Israel's life. Initially reluctant to advertise his Jewishness, and disparaged by some Israeli officials, the star gradually turned into an ardent Zionist thanks in large part to his visits to Israel. These were often

highly choreographed, and designed to appeal to the Israeli public, to the international media, and to Kaye's ego. By the time of the 1967 and 1973 Arab-Israeli wars, Danny Kaye's numerous visits to Israel had helped convert him into one of the country's prized public diplomacy assets. The story of the Israeli government's patient wooing of Kaye adds to the emerging literature on Israeli public diplomacy (in Hebrew *hasbara*, literally 'explaining') and casts light on the history of celebrity activism.³ It also points to the importance of the relationship between Israel and Hollywood and to its recent decline.

Nobody's Jew

Danny Kaye was born as David Daniel Kaminsky in Brooklyn in 1913, to Jewish parents who had immigrated only three years earlier from the Ukraine. The family spoke Yiddish at home and his upbringing was quite orthodox. The young Kaminsky was not a good pupil and left school early on, his long career in entertainment launched during summers as a teenage tummler at a resort hotel at the Catskills in upstate New York. In 1940 Kaye married Sylvia Fine, a Jewish pianist and aspiring songwriter. Thereafter, Sylvia provided the artistic management and most of the material, while Danny supplied the faces, gestures, accents, mimicry and ability to pour out nonsense at a breakneck speed.

Kaye shot to fame in 1941 with a supporting role in the Kurt Weill-Ira Gershwin musical *Lady in the Dark*, thanks chiefly to a comic song in which he recited the tongue-twisting names of forty-seven Russian composers in thirty-eight seconds. This success on Broadway soon led to an invitation to Hollywood, where producer Samuel Goldwyn, a Jew himself, chose not to hire Kaye because he looked "too Jewish." Kaye refused a nose-job but was signed by MGM after agreeing to bleach his red hair blond. In 1944, Kaye made his Hollywood debut in *Up in Arms*, a remake of a hit by the outspokenly Jewish comedian Eddie Cantor. By the late 1940s Kaye was an international film star thanks to a string of romantic comedies with Virginia Mayo, his carefully-fashioned, non-ethnic, childlike persona attuned to the likings of suburban, family-minded postwar America. Kaye's comic genius and radiating warmth really connected with audiences live on stage. In February 1948, Kaye enjoyed a sensational season at the Palladium in London. The newly-wed Princess Elizabeth, having seen the show with the Duke of Edinburgh and then drunk champagne with the star backstage, returned with her

parents, making it the first time since their accession that the King and Queen of England had seen an ordinary variety show.⁴

Jewish organizations sought early on to connect Kaye's popularity to their philanthropic drives, but this proved hard to realize. While in London, Kaye had professed to the *Jewish Chronicle* that he was "truly and really Jewish, deeply conscious of it, nurtured and reared in it, and very, very proud of it." Nothing would give him greater pleasure than supporting Jewish charities in Britain, he said, but unfortunately time and professional commitments did not permit it.⁵ During the 1940s, Kaye's name rarely appeared in the public relations associated with Jewish or Zionist philanthropic efforts.⁶ In the wake of the Holocaust, Zionist passions consumed Jewish communities in the US and found powerful expression in Hollywood. Yet Kaye's name was absent from advocacy events and newspaper ads in which many of the greatest Jewish and non-Jewish film stars of the era – including Humphrey Bogart, Lauren Bacall, Betty Davis, Paul Muni, John Garfield, Gene Kelly, Groucho Marx, Vincent Price, Frank Sinatra and Orson Welles – supported Zionist aspirations in Palestine.⁷ Despite this, Kaye was one of the earliest targets of the Arab boycott of Hollywood's pro-Zionist film stars. In June 1948, just a month after Israel was born, the American press reported that the Egyptian authorities had banned the films of Danny Kaye and (the non-Jewish) Mickey Rooney because they had given money to the Zionists.⁸

Kaye's absence from pro-Zionist activity continued in the early years of the Jewish state. Media stories circulated in 1950 that he would be going to Israel to celebrate the twenty-fifth anniversary of the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, an important symbol of Zionism, but the star failed to show up.⁹ There was another effort to bring Kaye over to Israel on the state's third anniversary in 1951, but that was quickly quashed by the star's agent claiming it did not fit in with his work schedule.¹⁰ Israeli impresarios had no greater success in luring Kaye over for commercial performances.¹¹ Israeli press rumors in 1953 that the star would be coming to give shows proved to be false, seriously disappointing his many Israeli fans. In 1955, no less a person than Vera Weizmann, widow of Israel's revered first president Haim, tried to arrange a Kaye visit on behalf of a 1948 war disabled veterans organization, but this also came to nothing.¹²

Kaye's apparent lack of interest in Israel, or at least sufficient interest to prompt him to visit the country, was far from unusual in the American Jewish community during this period. American Jews had shown support for Israel's birth and during the

War of Independence, but this had subsided considerably in the early 1950s. American Jews of this era, as Dov Waxman argues, were primarily interested in cementing their economic advancement and political and social status in American society. Between 1948 and 1955, United Jewish Appeal (UJA) donations to Israel in the US dropped from \$150 million to just \$60,000.¹³

Generating American interest in Israel, especially American Jewish interest, underpinned the Israeli government's own efforts to facilitate a Kaye visit during this period. Showcasing Jewish endeavors in Palestine to Jewish and non-Jewish visitors had been a key feature of pre-state Zionist propaganda and the Israeli government vigorously promoted visits to the newly-established country by all sorts of opinion-formers, including political leaders, media people and creative artists. Responsible for handling the visitors was the Prime Minister's Office "information services" department whose head, and the leading light of Israeli public diplomacy in its early years, was London-born Moshe Pearlman. American visitors, and Hollywood celebrities among them, were naturally top of the list considering the importance to Israel of the United States and its large and wealthy Jewish community. In 1950, Pearlman and his staff successfully orchestrated the visits of two of Hollywood's then most visible Zionists, Edward G. Robinson and Eddie Cantor. Robinson, a political progressive and screen tough-guy, was taken on a whirlwind tour, met with senior politicians and military chiefs, and returned to the US speaking of Israel as a land of opportunity and of his pride in being a Jew. Cantor's highly-publicized visit, which was turned into a film by the United Jewish Appeal, saw the comedian mixing with newly-arrived orphans and soldiers wounded in the War of Independence.¹⁴

Behind the scenes, Israel's consuls in Los Angeles – effectively Israel's point-men in Hollywood – had some serious doubts about a Danny Kaye visit. One of them, Avraham Biran, felt it would be more worthwhile recruiting the more experienced entertainer Bob Hope because of his "contacts with people in high places" and that "such a Goy's visit would positively influence distant Jews."¹⁵ Another consul, Reuven Dafni, told Moshe Pearlman that Kaye was a nice man but a "big babbler who promises much and does little." Kaye had regularly announced donations of \$10,000 to the United Israel Appeal (UIA) but, according to Dafni, the star had yet to pay a cent. Dafni believed the reason for this was Kaye's fear of turning into an "official Jew": meaning one associated in the public mind with Jewish causes and identity. The star had once told him that "he did not belong to one religion or nation but rather to the whole world,"

adding that the fact he had been received by the Queen of England was, in his opinion, as important "to Jewry and the Jews" as any appearance before a Jewish organization.¹⁶

As if to emphasize his point that philanthropy should be based on universal values rather than ethnicity, Kaye had in the early 1950s become an "ambassador-at-large" for the United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund. This was tied to and built upon Kaye's role in the 1952 smash-hit movie about the famous Danish story-teller, *Hans Christian Andersen*.¹⁷ In April 1956, Kaye finally set foot in Israel as part of a UNICEF fundraising tour of Europe and parts of the Middle East.¹⁸ The star's five-day visit to Israel would include, as in other countries, a special showing of his documentary *Assignment Children* in the presence of diplomats and government officials. The idea was that Kaye's visit, allied to media coverage, would provide a "unique opportunity to turn the flashlight" on the work of UNICEF and the National Committee for UNICEF in Israel.¹⁹ In the event, Danny Kaye's arrival was a unique opportunity for Israeli public diplomacy.

Danny Kaye's UNICEF visit to Israel

No sooner had news that Danny Kaye was coming reached the Israeli government, a small committee comprised of senior officials and the local UNICEF representative was set up to organize the visit. It was headed by Moshe Pearlman and Meir de Shalit, deputy manager at the Prime Minister's Office, then run by the indefatigable Teddy Kollek who was personally involved in the *schmoozing* of important visitors. There would be no coordination difficulties or conflicts with UNICEF, whose local representative, Zena Harman, happened to be married to Abe Harman, a senior Israeli Foreign Ministry official involved with public diplomacy (and future Israeli Ambassador) in the US.²⁰ Within days a detailed plan for the packed five-day visit was put together and approved by UNICEF and Danny Kaye himself. This entailed ferrying the Hollywood star from one UNICEF-funded establishment to another and to a variety of Israeli cities and border settlements. Israel was the only country on his tour in which Kaye was prepared – besides his appearances in connection with the screening of *Assignment Children* – to give special stage performances, with the proceeds going to UNICEF and to local disabled children. Four such shows were arranged for Jerusalem, Haifa, Tel Aviv and Kibbutz Ein Gev on the eastern shore of the Sea of Galilee, with the government carefully allocating free or discounted tickets to local dignitaries,

diplomats and the press.²¹ Kaye was particularly enthusiastic about a planned performance with the Israeli Philharmonic Orchestra, which would allow him to reprise his renowned act of mimicking the world's great conductors.²²

The value of Danny Kaye's visit in April 1956 for Israeli public diplomacy was made even greater by the filming of his UNICEF tour for CBS Television's flagship newsmagazine program *See It Now*, fronted by the acclaimed journalist Ed Murrow. This would be Kaye's first appearance on the small screen. Israel would only be part of the hour-long program but a warm relationship had recently been established between Murrow, Teddy Kollek and Moshe Pearlman when Murrow had filmed a *See It Now* special in Israel in early 1956, highlighting the border tensions with Egypt. Israeli officials and Zionist fundraisers were delighted with the special when it was broadcast in the US in March 1956.²³ Murrow and his fellow producer Fred Friendly told Kaye that Pearlman was "the Tom Paine" of Israel and that the star should put himself wholly in his capable hands.²⁴ Thanks to UNICEF's PR machine, Kaye's tour was assured further American media coverage, which Israeli officials did their best to augment through their own efforts.²⁵

A complicating political factor was that Kaye's UNICEF tour would also take him to Egypt. Kaye was worried about this, having been warned by prominent American Jewish friends that such a visit might not be well received by American Jews or in Israel. He was greatly relieved after consulting a senior Israeli diplomat in Washington, who told him it would cause no problems at all.²⁶ At the same time, probably for a combination of diplomatic and commercial reasons, Kaye did not want his Israel tour to offend the Egyptian authorities any more than it need do. This resulted in a rocky start for the tour among some sections of the Israeli media. At a press conference in Geneva shortly before leaving for Israel, Kaye said his mission was simple and clear: "to do my best to help children everywhere with no difference of race, nationality, color or faith." Drawn reluctantly into political issues by an Israeli journalist, Kaye was quoted as saying that he wanted to be treated simply as an American on a UN role; Israel did not intrigue him more than any Arab country, he went on, and "a hungry Arab child in a refugee camp" was close to his heart "no less than any Jewish child."²⁷ Reports of Kaye's statement resulted in acerbic criticism of the "clown" by prominent right-wing Israeli press columnists and the boycotting of a reception for him by the right-wing Betar youth movement.²⁸

None of this really mattered to the Hollywood-mad Israeli film fans, many of whom had camped the night and formed long queues in front of box offices selling tickets to Kaye's shows. Hundreds came to greet the star at Lydda Airport, and once he had stepped out the door of the El Al plane Kaye seemingly never stopped pulling faces, performing tricks, and making them laugh. Also there to meet him were Meir de Shalit and Zena Harman. The recent news that Egypt had in fact decided to bar the star from visiting probably removed any qualms Kaye might have had about being publicly disposed too much towards Israel. Urged to do so by host officials, Kaye immediately and repeatedly denied to the local press that he had said anything dismissive about Israel, claiming that were it not for his other commitments he would happily stay for months rather than days.²⁹

The Israeli government and UNICEF officials milked Kaye's visit for all it was worth over the next five days in what amounted to a grueling tour of receptions, sight-seeing and performances, all followed by an eight-man CBS crew, newsreel cameras and other journalists and photographers. In Jerusalem, the star was received by president Yitzhak Ben Zvi, foreign minister Moshe Sharett and prime minister David Ben Gurion, with whom he made a public appearance for the cameras, surrounded by dozens of children.³⁰ Traveling in a Limousine preceded by two packed police Jeeps and followed by ten cars full of cameramen and reporters, Kaye toured the demilitarized zone in the center of the divided city. Putting on a round *tambel* hat – the ultimate symbol of the kibbutznik and pioneering Israeli – Kaye made assembled children roar with laughter while paying solemn respects at the grave of the founder of Zionism, Theodore Herzl, after which he played the lead role in a long filming session at a Hadassah Maternity Welfare Center for poor immigrants. Here for the sake of the cameras Kaye changed his white shirt to a blue-colored working-man's outfit. At his next stop, at a children's tuberculosis hospital, filming was totally disrupted by a rowdy crowd that tested the tired and hungry star's patience to the full.³¹

Accompanied by Pearlman and the media entourage, Kaye then spent two days touring and performing in the north of Israel. Showing the well-being and loyalty of Arab minorities in the young Jewish state was a staple of Israeli public diplomacy. Accordingly, Kaye's first stop was at a UNICEF-aided health center at the Arab village of Tira. Travelling further north through the Jezreel Valley and lower Galilee, Kaye seemed most interested in battles fought in the recent war. In the Arab town of Nazareth,

which was still under Israeli military rule, he was received by army officers, local notables and boy scouts, and given a brief tour of a girls' school and the town's holy sites. On the following day Kaye and his entourage visited an important Druze holy site near Tiberias, where a large crowd of men danced traditional Arab folk dances in his honor under an Israeli flag. At the nearby Druze village of Mghar, he donned an Arab *kufiah*, got a taste of Arab coffee, and received two white doves as a symbol of peace. Later that long day, with Pearlman at his side, Kaye met a mixed group of Arab and Jewish children at a western Galilee resort.³²

One of the highlights of Kaye's tour of Israel was an evening at Kibbutz Ein Gev, located right under Syrian guns on the Golan heights. The well-known kibbutz counted both Teddy Kollek and Reuven Dafni among its founders and its members were well versed in hosting visiting dignitaries and media. Waiting at the gates, his hosts suggested Kaye switch from the Cadillac in which he had been traveling all day to a Jeep for his entrance to the kibbutz, and the pre-positioned CBS cameramen loved it. The star was filmed at the communal children's house, another well-known feature of kibbutz life, and later participated in communal folk dancing around a bonfire.³³ This was a scene that American Jews already knew from numerous Zionist propaganda films and which had been recreated by Kirk Douglas in Hollywood's first film made in and about Israel, *The Juggler*, a few years earlier, in 1953.³⁴

What made Kaye's April 1956 visit such a wonderful publicity opportunity for the Israeli authorities was the Israeli public's love affair with Hollywood. The young country had one of the highest per-capita cinema attendance rates in the world and American movies dominated the market.³⁵ Israelis' fascination with Hollywood created a buzz around Kaye's tour and led to mass scenes that could not have been staged. Fans lined the streets everywhere Kaye appeared and in Haifa thousands of youth stampeded his show, causing its abrupt cancelation. The Americanizing force of Hollywood had long reached even the Israeli Labor movement's birthplace and rural pioneering heartland in the Jordan Valley. Four thousand spectators crammed the amphitheater at Ein Gev for Kaye's performance and on the following morning, at another open-air theatre, the children of the kibbutzim surprised Kaye with a show, adapted from *Hans Christian Anderson*, that would become the filmed pinnacle of his Israel visit.³⁶

Israel's religious diversity and political divisions meant that Danny Kaye's visit was not loved by all. Many fans were disappointed by performances shortened or cancelled by the tiring schedule. The orthodox complained that his visit to a Tel Aviv synagogue on Friday afternoon resulted in the desecration of the Sabbath by the police and mobbing fans. Some nationalist commentators could not forgive Kaye's earlier alleged comments and decried the corruption both of modern education and of the nation's character manifest in the riotous behavior of the star's young fans. Elitist left-wing critics also found the mass enthusiasm and pandering to Kaye of the state's leaders and artists distasteful, and particularly took offence at the Israeli Philharmonic Orchestra's participation in his last show in Tel Aviv.³⁷

These criticisms had little to no impact on Kaye himself. Like Kirk Douglas during *The Juggler's* production in autumn 1952, Kaye was deeply moved by witnessing the Jewish state at first hand. In his case, however, it appears to have had a near transformative effect, helping him see Israel and his Jewishness in a new light. "You can seemingly be a Jew in every country in the world", the star told his Tel Aviv audience on his last night, "I was one too. But I know now that I was not Jewish until I came to Israel."³⁸ A delighted Pearlman described the visit as a "tremendous success," with Kaye leaving the country "a fervent friend and admirer." Having referred to himself as an "American citizen" on the day he had arrived, Pearlman believed that "with each hour that passed" Kaye became "closer and closer to us." By the end, Kaye was repeatedly talking of his desire to return with his family, not as an American entertainer or a UNICEF representative, but rather "as a plain, simple, ordinary Jew."³⁹

In financial terms, Israel profited from Kaye's tour to the tune of 30,000 Israeli liras, a handsome sum that was used to set up a local Danny Kaye-UNICEF fund and which did some good deeds for disadvantaged children until it ran out of money after a few years.⁴⁰ The visit's public diplomacy rewards for Israel would last much longer. Shortly afterwards, the UNICEF official in charge of the tour, Willy Meyer, reported that Kaye had "not been the same" since his visit to Israel. So keen was he to get back there and to make good on his promise to Ben Gurion to visit the much-talked about Israeli southern frontier in the Negev desert, UNICEF had to cut short the rest of his tour. In the end, Kaye's return in late May was foiled by an Italian airline strike.⁴¹

CBS's The Secret Life of Danny Kaye

For all his new-found enthusiasm for Israel, Jewish and Israeli organizations continued to have difficulties exploiting Kaye's celebrity status for fundraising and publicity in the United States. While in Israel, Kaye had made no secret of his aversion to being continuously badgered by American Jewish organizations, all wanting him to make appearances and speeches. The star told Israeli officials that he was more prepared to take a lead from them when he got home, but on his return to the US all the efforts of Israel's diplomats to utilize what they saw as their new prized asset failed. Having met Kaye in New York and once again heard numerous excuses about his packed schedule, Reuven Dafni – still highly skeptical of any genuine, lasting change-of-heart by Kaye – found no evidence that the Israel experience had cured Kaye's "diaspora complex" and fear of becoming an "official Jew." Reluctant to act as a fundraiser for Israel, Dafni hoped the star might still be of use in "the propaganda field" if he continued to speak about Israel so enthusiastically "as he does with us" in his "many, wide important circles." Ambassador Abba Eban hoped Kaye could be persuaded to make at least one important appearance for Israel Bonds – he did not – or alternatively be tasked "with blowing a spirit of devotion among Hollywood people." The potential rewards of harnessing the soft power of American popular culture for Israel's benefit made recruiting Kaye too important to give up. In the Prime Minister's Office back in Israel, Meir de Shalit emphasized how "Danny talks to millions of people we don't reach" and who "don't even read newspaper headlines." It was necessary "to try and try" until they could find him "a field of action that he could make his own."⁴²

Of course, Danny Kaye already had his own field of action, UNICEF, and it was that which took him back to Israel in the summer of 1956, yielding further public diplomacy returns for the Jewish state. In CBS's *See It Now*'s office in New York, Ed Murrow had been busily going through the Danny Kaye footage from Israel. Some of it was "really sensational," Murrow told a delighted Moshe Pearlman, adding that he believed "we will use more footage out of Israel than any other country he visited." However, in order to make the documentary really sparkle Murrow needed Kaye to return to Israel to film some close-ups of heart-warming scenes shot in April in which the star and a small kibbutz boy had mimicked the "ugly duckling" scene from *Hans Christian Andersen*.⁴³

Pearlman jumped into action, making the necessary hospitality and production arrangements but springing a surprise on Israelis by informing the press of Kaye's return visit only when his plane landed at Lydda in mid-July. Though the visit was described as private it was highly publicized from the very outset. The star alighted from his plane wearing a blue *tembel* hat and, accompanied by two CBS cameramen, broke into a rendition of the recent Israeli hit-song "Land of Milk and Honey," which was based on a famous biblical sentence in Hebrew. Kaye told the press that he had come to complete his UNICEF film and to keep his promise to Ben Gurion when they'd met in April to see the Negev desert.⁴⁴ On the following day, he was with Pearlman at an open-air theatre at Zemach, on the southern tip of the sea of Galilee, re-filming the *Hans Christian Andersen* scenes.⁴⁵ Having concluded the CBS business, Kaye was taken on another sight-seeing trip, this time touring the Negev and tense southern border with the Gaza Strip as a guest of the Israeli Defense Forces (IDF). He was then flown to the developing southern port-city of Eilat, which Israel was busily turning into a sunny tourist resort. Kaye was made the first honorary citizen of Eilat and awarded a plot of land on which to build a residence. Returning to Jerusalem after the two-day trip, he met Ben Gurion for the second time; Teddy Kollek's secretary said it was the first time she had heard the old prime minister laugh out loud.⁴⁶ The visit ended on a sour note, however, when Kaye developed a severe stomach condition that got so bad it was reported in the American media. This hitch was offset by reports of the star being made a freeman of Eilat and, in the American Jewish press, photos of Kaye with happy Israeli children who "reflect the beauty of the Land of the Bible"⁴⁷

Israel's image was given a more powerful boost a few months later in December 1956 when *The Secret Life of Danny Kaye* opened the new season of CBS's *See It Now*. The special ninety-minute episode reaped huge ratings and critical acclaim. Narrated by Murrow, it showed Kaye's encounters with children in fourteen countries across the globe, the most memorable being a long scene of his meeting and dancing with leprosy-afflicted children in Nigeria.⁴⁸ Widely covered in the press, and broadcast in numerous other countries, *The Secret Life of Danny Kaye* was a resounding publicity success for UNICEF and for Israel. Interspersed among scenes from other countries and conversations with world leaders, the film returned to Israel four times: Kaye conducting the Israeli Philharmonic Orchestra to the roaring laughter of the crowd; chatting with Ben Gurion about "better understanding for the adults of the world;" and

being entertained at a party by the Israeli actor Shai Ophir who was parodying Gary Cooper in the Western *High Noon*, with Kaye himself then mimicking Ophir in what Murrow called "an American imitation of an Israeli impression of an American cowboy." The finale of the film focused on the "ugly duckling" scene, sung in Hebrew and in English, with the kibbutz children.⁴⁹ Pictures of Kaye's jocular scenes with the children – Hollywood star and kids all sporting *tembel* hats – took pride of place in American press reports of the show, providing another publicity boost for Israel.⁵⁰

Egypt's refusal to allow the star to visit in 1956 meant that *The Secret Life of Danny Kaye*, contrary to early plans, contained no troubling images of Palestinian children in the Gaza Strip's refugee camps. Following his first visit to Israel in April, the Egyptian weekly *Aher Sea* had carried a picture of Kaye with Israeli children captioned "Danny Kaye is no ambassador." The weekly reported that Kaye's trip to Egypt had been cancelled after a senior Egyptian official accused him of being an "enemy of the Egyptian republic and an activist in soliciting funds for Zionism." When the local UNICEF representative protested that there seemed to be no freedom of thought in Egypt, the Egyptian official responded sharply by saying that the American government had done exactly the same thing with Charlie Chaplin, who had been banished from the US for his political views in 1952.⁵¹ Following his second trip to Israel in July, Kaye's movies were banned in Syria and government officials there said that an inter-Arab ban on his films was under consideration. In October 1956, Jordan also officially banned Kaye's movies, accusing the Hollywood star of being "an enthusiastic Zionist propagandist." In the US, Kaye said he "couldn't care less" about the ban but – perhaps still trying to preserve his global image – added that "it so happens I am not a Zionist."⁵²

Completing Kaye's conversion

Zionist or no Zionist, Danny Kaye's devotion to Israel was by now undeniable. During the Suez War in November 1956, the star was depressed by Soviet support – "those dirty bastards" – for the Arabs and told Pearlman he was praying for "the safety and the well-being of my friends and their country and beliefs." Kaye did not think the Arabs themselves offered "a serious threat to the existence of Israel" but decided to put on hold plans for a house in Eilat for fear of Jordanian attack.⁵³ Kaye's attachment to Israel

grew stronger and stronger with each and every visit. In November 1957, Kaye arrived for a short four-day break from filming in France. In theory this was for a private visit but within hours he was entertaining the audience at an IDF orchestra concert to which officials had taken him. The star visited Ben Gurion, who was in hospital, and participated in a test flight of El Al's new *Britannia* plane over Eilat, helping advertise the Israeli air carrier by recording the experience for American TV.⁵⁴ Further plans that Kaye would publicize El Al by joining a *Britannia* test flight to Rome, and later to Los Angeles, fell through for technical reasons and Kaye's busy schedule.⁵⁵ Kaye himself suggested making a recording in English of "Land of Milk and Honey," and later other Hebrew hit-songs, but these did not materialize despite Pearlman having enthusiastically secured the rights at Kaye's request.⁵⁶ There were no public fundraisers, though Kaye and his wife Sylvia spent some \$4,000 on buying special Israeli commemorative stamps.⁵⁷

No Hollywood supporter of Israel kept going back to Israel as frequently as Danny Kaye. His visits were usually encouraged by the senior Israeli officials who had befriended him and used for Israeli public diplomacy or to promote Israeli tourism. In January 1959, after repeated urging by Teddy Kollek, Kaye went to the Tel Aviv premier of the film *Me and the Colonel*, his first serious role as a Jew, escaping Nazi-occupied France.⁵⁸ The screening was delayed for more than an hour by thousands of Kaye enthusiasts who held up traffic in the city center. An excited Kaye told the audience in his pre-curtain speech that he was planning to come to Israel more often and might even settle permanently.⁵⁹ The profits of the gala opening were dedicated to polio-stricken children, but Kaye's visit was not limited to philanthropy but also to what Kollek called explaining "the case of Israel abroad."⁶⁰ Kaye flew in an IDF helicopter with Kollek and Pearlman to the northern Hula Valley, where he entertained excited children in Kibbutz Hulata, recently bombarded by Syrian positions on the Golan Heights. The star visited bomb-shelters, damaged buildings, the children's house, and was photographed holding shrapnel that one child had given him as a memento. The party then went to Tiberias on the Sea of Galilee, where Kaye participated in a government film promoting winter-tourism to Israel. He crossed by boat to Ein Gev on the eastern shore, planning a night's fishing expedition with the kibbutz's fishermen, who were often harassed from nearby Syrian positions. There was also the customary meeting with Prime Minister Ben Gurion, and a reception at the Weizmann Institute

which included the IDF's Chief of Staff, the young Director General of the Ministry of Defense, Shimon Peres, American, British and French diplomats, and numerous senior officials.⁶¹ A harbinger of future relations, Kaye delighted Menachem Begin's right-wing opposition Herut movement by paying a visit to its museum and asking questions about the Irgun's armed operations against the British authorities in Palestine.⁶²

Kaye's reluctance to be involved with Zionist fundraising slowly seemed to give way, too. There were still no major fundraising public appearances in the US for the UJA or Bonds for Israel but in October 1959, at the request of Kollek, the star appeared at a fundraiser for the Jewish National Fund (JNF) at the London Palladium, attended by the Duke of Edinburgh. The sponsoring committee wanted to establish a recreation venue for mentally-disabled children in Israel, which they suggested naming after Kaye.⁶³ Back home in the US, Kaye also made a fundraising appearance for the JNF in Chicago and in the early 1960s was involved with promoting the America-Israel cultural foundation in Hollywood.⁶⁴ Kaye was back in Israel in January 1961 with his wife Sylvia. The couple toured the country accompanied by Kollek and de Shalit, not missing Kibbutz Tel Katzir near the Sea of Galilee, another recent flashpoint close to the Syrian border.⁶⁵ Shortly afterwards, Fine wrote a "tongue-in-cheek" article about Israel for the fashion magazine *Vogue* "to stimulate interest in Israel in new circles" and "intrigue people who don't ordinarily read travel pieces."⁶⁶ A pro-Israel enthusiast in her own right, Fine had for some years been trying to promote Israeli music in the US in cooperation with the Israeli government. In February 1961, Fine told the pro-Zionist boss of the Music Corporation of America, Lew Wasserman, of her plans for a Broadway musical using Israel's birth as a backdrop. Nothing came of the idea, probably because, as Fine herself acknowledged, Otto Preminger's recent film *Exodus* based on Leon Uris's best-selling novel – a cultural phenomenon among American Jews which had inspired a wave of tourism to Israel at the turn of the 1960s – had stolen much of her story's thunder.⁶⁷

In pro-Israel advocacy, as in all matters, it was Danny's face, and not Sylvia's, that was repeatedly in the limelight. In 1963, Kaye made his own small contribution to Israeli public diplomacy in an unexpected location, joining the Israeli embassy table at the international film festival in Moscow.⁶⁸ There was another low-key visit to Israel in 1964 and again in 1966, this time with his daughter Dena and received by his friends

de Shalit, who had become general manager of the Ministry of Tourism, and Teddy Kollek, now the Mayor of Jerusalem.⁶⁹ In early 1967, Kaye delighted de Shalit by agreeing to appear – with fellow stars Frank Sinatra, David Niven, Peter Sellers and Marlene Dietrich – in a successful advertising campaign in Britain to promote tourism to Israel.⁷⁰

Israel's beloved public diplomat

For all his visits to and growing affection for Israel over a decade or so, Danny Kaye in the mid-1960s was still best known off-screen as "ambassador-at-large" for UNICEF. The official boycotting of his films by the Arab League seemed to have little effect on his global status as "Mr. UNICEF" and the kindly friend and protector of the world's children. Kaye's public identification with the UN agency reached a peak in December 1965, when he was invited by the Norwegian government to attend the ceremony in which UNICEF was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize.⁷¹

Soon after this, Kaye's public association with UNICEF blended with his known and increasingly active support for Israel. The star seemed to have shifted his priorities due to pressing political and diplomatic circumstances. It was the 1967 crisis and swift June war – events which galvanized the identification with Israel of Jewish communities around the world – that more than anything else brought Danny Kaye's allegiance to Israel to the wider world. Just after the war had ended, and reflecting the immediate outpouring of support among American Jews, Kaye along with many other film stars took part in a mammoth Rally for Israel at the Hollywood Bowl.⁷² A few days later, at a glitzy cocktail party at the house of Hollywood studio boss Jack Warner, where \$2,500,000 was raised for Israel, Kaye was one of the biggest donors among the stars present, publicly pledging \$25,000.⁷³ This financial assistance was quickly followed by more active support for Israel.

In mid-June, characteristically Kaye announced via the Israeli consul general's office in Los Angeles that he would be going to Israel as soon as possible to raise morale.⁷⁴ The star was able to wriggle out of commitments he had in Las Vegas thanks to fellow Jewish comic Jimmy Durante, who volunteered to step in as a replacement. However, Kaye's cancellation of a much-anticipated lead role at the Chichester Festival

in Britain that summer, which put the whole production at risk, angered colleagues and disappointed friends like Sir Laurence Olivier, who had suggested the part to him.⁷⁵ Rumors circulated that a nervous Kaye had used Israel as an excuse to evade his first serious stage role, but the star told the American press he had no regrets about having to abandon commercial engagements, nor the resulting "adverse criticism." He wished he could have gone to Israel as soon as the war had broken out, feeling "a special emotional pull" both as a Jew and, in addition, "as a human being to salute a nation" that had successfully "stood up to injustice and hostility" against "apparently overwhelming odds."⁷⁶

Kaye landed in Israel in early July and stayed, remarkably, for more than three weeks. After exchanging hugs with the victorious defense minister Moshe Dayan, the star went straight to the conquered Old City of Jerusalem, where pictures of him at the Western Wall appeared in dozens of American newspapers. Kaye told the *Associated Press* he had promised himself that praying at the Wall would be the first thing he did in Israel and that after that he was "at the disposal of the Israeli government."⁷⁷ The remainder of his stay was spent going around Israel and the occupied territories, entertaining Israeli troops, wounded soldiers, children, and members of border kibbutzim. His presence in the country and support for its brave "spirit" and the government's postwar plans were covered in the American media like none of his earlier visits to Israel.⁷⁸

The most important act of public diplomacy Danny Kaye performed in the wake of Israel's historic June victory on the battlefield was a highly successful international tour with the orchestra of the Israeli army paramilitary youth, the GADNA, in the autumn of 1967. Organized by the Keren Hayesod-United Israel Appeal (UIA) and promoted by Israeli embassies in many countries, Kaye and the orchestra appeared no less than twenty-one times in thirty-nine days before ecstatic, predominantly Jewish audiences in seventeen major cities in Western Europe, Canada and Central and South America. Kaye was slightly disappointed there was no show in Los Angeles and was anxious for a concluding engagement in New York. However, the American UIA were not enamored with Kaye, who had done little for them in the past, and no one else took up the task of organizing a New York show.⁷⁹ Despite this, the UIA were delighted with the elated response in numerous Jewish communities and the enormous amount of publicity – almost wholly positive – that the tour received in the Jewish and non-Jewish

media. There was some talk that Kaye had "stolen the show" from the Israeli youth he conducted. However, the tour's chief organizer was adamant that without Kaye – "a great artist, a warm-hearted Jew, and a sworn supporter of Israel" – the orchestra would have never attracted the same audiences and that Kaye had done more than necessary in his show and speeches to praise Israel, the UIA and the young musicians. The commander of the GADNA also praised Kaye for encouraging a positive attitude of Jews and non-Jews to Israel and to a united Jerusalem under Israeli rule, not least by inspiring mass-singing everywhere of the patriotic postwar hit "Jerusalem The Golden."⁸⁰ The Israeli foreign minister, Abba Eban, wrote personally to congratulate Kaye on the "knockout" success of the tour and to thank him for giving his "varied talents" "so generously" to help Israel when it was really needed.⁸¹

During the late 1960s and 1970s, Danny Kaye's dedication to Israel's international image was constantly reaffirmed. Recruited by Kollek and de Shalit in the cause of Israeli tourism and Jerusalem, on one occasion he made a 48-hour flying visit from London with Israeli actor and friend Haim Topol, apparently just "to eat Humus."⁸² On annual trips to Israel, the star would visit and entertain wounded soldiers and Israeli troops on the tense cease-fire borders.⁸³ During the October 1973 war, while in the midst of a UNICEF tour in Turkey, he was back in Israel for a fortnight, his presence widely covered in the American press. Pictures of Kaye with wounded soldiers, and a trademark appearance as conductor of the Israeli Philharmonic Orchestra, in front of badly-wounded Israeli soldiers and their loving girlfriends, provided a sentimental and humane image of Israeli heroism and sacrifice.⁸⁴

At the twilight of his career as an entertainer, honors for Kaye poured in from the Israeli government and American Zionist movement. At a Bonds dinner in Montreal, Canada, in May 1968, he received from the Zionist leader Samuel Bronfman the Israel Prime Minister's Award for "humanity, support of the world's underprivileged and support of the State of Israel."⁸⁵ An Israel Bonds dinner in his honor at Palm Beach, Florida, in March 1973, raised a record-breaking sum of 4.2 million dollars.⁸⁶ During Israeli Prime Minister's Yitzhak Rabin's visit to the US in early 1976, Kaye was invited to a special White House party and a few days he later sat at Rabin's table at a glittering Hollywood gala in honor of the Israeli premier.⁸⁷ Kaye was equally revered by Israel's right-wing Likud Party which rose to power in 1977. Prime Minister Menachem Begin

bestowed on him – and other Hollywood producers and celebrities such Otto Preminger and Columbia boss Leo Yaffe – the Jabotinsky Centennial Medal at a ceremony at the Waldorf Astoria in New York.⁸⁸ There was a much-publicized Hollywood fundraising gala for Ben Gurion University in Kaye’s honor in 1982, where the star was joined by actress Jane Fonda, comedian George Burns, and singer Ella Fitzgerald.⁸⁹ And there was a medallion conferred by Teddy Kollek in 1985 for his UNICEF work at Jerusalem's first (and last) International Conference on Volunteerism.⁹⁰ This was Kaye's first visit to Israel since having major open-heart surgery two years earlier, and he died two years later at the age of 76.

It is striking that for all Danny Kaye's involvement with Israel over three decades, and his ongoing personal contacts with Israeli officials and actors, the star never projected his interest on the big screen. He was examining film scripts by Israeli writers as early as 1956, and in 1962 was reported to be heading a group of Israel supporters in Hollywood who planned to turn into film a novel by Yael Dayan, daughter of the former IDF Chief of Staff, about the experiences of a young Israeli woman soldier.⁹¹ In July 1971, the Israeli press reported that Kaye was soon going to fulfil his dream of making a feature film in Israel. This followed a 24-hour visit by the Jewish American producer Elliot Kastner, who had recently produced the World War II hit-adventure *Where Eagles Dare* (1968). Nothing came of this project, nor of another film project in 1979 about an Israeli piano tuner.⁹² That Kaye participated in no film about Israel, as an actor or producer, stands in marked contrast to Kirk Douglas, another great Hollywood supporter of Israel throughout this period. Douglas not only participated conspicuously in Zionist fundraising from the early 1950s onwards but also starred in two Hollywood films about Israel by the mid-1960s – *The Juggler* and *Cast a Giant Shadow* – and four in all throughout his long career.⁹³

Conclusion

In the early twenty-first century, it might seem that celebrities are almost expected to be political activists of one sort or another, whether it be favoring a presidential candidate, calling for equal rights, or campaigning against, say, the use of land mines. This helps account for the increasing interest in the power of celebrity in society and

for the burgeoning scholarship on the significance of celebrity diplomacy.⁹⁴ Danny Kaye can in some ways be classed as some sort of trailblazer for many of today's celebrity activists-cum-diplomats. Before the social media age, the comedian travelled the globe advocating for UNICEF and for the state of Israel. It is always possible to speculate about the commercial benefits celebrities get from their advocacy. In Kaye's case, campaigning for children certainly boosted his avuncular image and did him no harm at the box office. Campaigning for Israel, however, carried certain political and commercial risks, especially for an international star in the 1950s, not least because of the Arab boycott. Like others perhaps, Kaye gained from being associated with Israel following its dramatic victory over the Arabs in the 1967 war, but by this point his passion for the state was well established.

Like all public diplomacy, it is difficult to quantify the exact value of Kaye's activities for Israel, but it is easy to work out why the Israeli government treasured him so much. Kaye was first and foremost an American Jew, member of a constituency deemed vital to Israeli interests. He was, moreover, a household name across the world, someone who represented clean, wholesome family entertainment. His work for UNICEF might have helped reinforce Israel's image as a young, vibrant yet vulnerable country that needed help and protection. It may also have helped associate the Jewish state with the UN's spirit of peace and understanding.

As strong as Kaye's support for Israel was, it is worth emphasizing the role that Israeli public diplomacy played in nurturing it. Hitherto, scholars have largely focused on the news media dimensions of Israeli public diplomacy, on the lobbying of politicians and journalists to sell Israel overseas. Danny Kaye points to the hosting of celebrity visitors as a tool of public diplomacy. By encouraging the star to visit Israel, ministers and officials helped pave the way for him to become a champion of its cause. Time after time, these visits were scrupulously organized, pulling the star into a closer relationship with the people of Israel. Israelis simply loved the funny man, and Kaye loved returning again and again to a country where he was adulated and where he could openly express pride in his Jewish roots: something which seems to have been harder in the US. Israeli wooing was necessary because Kaye initially had no wish to be an "official Jew" and believed, unlike Eddie Cantor and Edward G. Robinson, that being a Hollywood star gave him global responsibilities that went beyond ethnic ties. For Israeli officials, some of whom at first felt dubious about Kaye's apparent conversion

to Zionism, this arguably made his advocacy for Israel both sweeter and more valuable. Many more Hollywood people would visit and befriend Israel after the great entertainer – Barbra Streisand, Steven Spielberg, Kirk Douglas, Sylvester Stallone, to name but a few – but for Kaye the country was almost a second home.

For political and cultural reasons, the relationship between Israel and Hollywood has been important for decades, helping underpin the alliance between the Jewish state and the United States. Looking back, it seems clear that the Israel-Hollywood relationship was at its peak between the 1960s and 1980s, epitomized by the frequency of Danny Kaye's visits. With Israel's international standing in the United States and among American Jews at its height, during this period a long list of Hollywood celebrities responded to Israel's public diplomacy needs and visited Israel, most notably during the controversial Lebanon war in the summer of 1982.⁹⁵ In more recent times the relationship has remained tight but has also come under stress and scrutiny. Some of the older generation of Hollywood's A-class stars, like Arnold Schwarzenegger and Robert De Niro, have continued to visit Israel and to participate in high-profile events, due partly to the influence of pro-Israeli power brokers in Hollywood such as Arnon Milchan and Haim Saban.⁹⁶ But the controversy surrounding Israel's security policies, and the emergence of the Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions movement, have taken its toll. The fallout surrounding Israel's 2016 Oscars goodie-bags offer of a free trip to the Holy Land demonstrates this perfectly. Though only one, the British actor Mark Rylance, a vocal critic of Israel, publicly rejected it, none of the Oscar contenders took up the offer. Israel couldn't claim any new celebrity advocates on this occasion.⁹⁷

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- ¹⁶ Reuven Dafni to Moshe Pearlman, 19 July 1956, G/3144/16, ISA.
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