

MedReview's Joseph Stamm and Sadat Congressional Gold Medal Commission Meet Egypt's President Sisi

By Marion Cohn

NYCHSRO/Medreview's President and CEO Joseph Stamm joined a Jewish-American delegation to Egypt in mid-February as the Anwar Sadat Congressional Gold Medal Commission took the penultimate step to realizing its vision of honoring the man who, forty years ago, made peace with Israel and then paid for this act with his life.

Led by Ezra Friedlander of The Friedlander Group, the delegation, which last year won Congressional approval for the Sadat Gold Medal, made the trip to Cairo to ask Egyptian President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi to attend the award ceremony this fall in Washington, DC. From his place at the head of a great roundtable in the conference hall of Heliopolis Palace, President Sisi not only welcomed the group and agreed to come to DC if his schedule allows; he also took extraordinary steps to further repair Jewish-Egyptian relations in response to the Sadat Commission's efforts and their personal invitation to him.

"It was historic," Stamm said. "Who would have ever imagined that close to thirty Orthodox Jews would be meeting with the president of a major Arab country—one hundred million people! Ezra Friedlander deserves congratulations not only for his successful effort to secure the Sadat Congressional Gold Medal but also for organizing this unprecedented event."

Stamm also noted how impressed he was with President Sisi himself.

"He was exceptionally gracious and gave us two and a half hours of his time followed by a photo op. He listened and responded to every comment and took his own notes. After I mentioned my involvement in healthcare," Stamm added, "he brought over an interpreter to hear what I had to say about promoting healthcare in Egypt."

Stamm also made a brief speech before the roundtable about the Commission's efforts. Recounting recent and historical ties between the US and Egypt, he noted that Sisi himself had celebrated Sadat's hundredth birthday on December 25, 2018, with the words, "he will remain immortal, not only in our hearts as Egyptians but also in the hearts of the peoples of the whole world." Adding his own "respect and honor" for Sadat, Stamm noted the pride of each Commission member in helping to achieve this vision.

Later, the delegation spoke to Sisi about their desire to provide funds to clean up and rehabilitate ancient Egyptian Jewish cemeteries desecrated during the Arab-Israeli conflict.

"The second oldest cemetery in the world is in Egypt, and it is in such a disarray," Stamm explained. "It's used as a dumping ground, it's overrun by dogs, and the walls are cracking. El-Sisi turned around and



Top L-R: Joseph Stamm with President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi Stamm and members of Congressional Gold Medal Commission at the Heliopolis Palace Grand conference table meeting the President.

said, 'I don't want your money. I will make sure it will be taken care of. I must tell you, within just two hours of our meeting, we saw film of Egyptians already in the process of removing piles of garbage from a historic burial ground.'

The delegation also addressed Sisi about the need to maintain Egypt's synagogues and the group's desire to retrieve old religious documents.

"He agreed to the synagogues," Stamm said, "but the one thing he was not willing to do was allow the delegation to take back some of the nation's 70 to 100 remaining sefiri torah for a large Egyptian Jewish community in Brooklyn. 'This is Egypt's history and they belong to the Egyptian people,' Sisi said. He took a very firm stand on that."

Stamm also remarked on the widely repeated headline concerning Sisi's "pitch welcoming Jews to live again in Egypt," where only 30 or 40 still reside. Sisi's invitation included a promise to build a new synagogue and other types

of buildings necessary to maintain Jewish life and culture.

"Let's face it," Stamm said, "a return to Egypt is not happening. But the bottom line is that I felt Sisi was very, very sincere. The reception by the Egyptian people was extremely warm. We had a police escort with sirens wherever we went, including a boat trip down the Nile. Everywhere, Egyptians said to us, 'Come back! Come back!' We were all wearing yamulkas, and Ezra stands out very clearly with his Hasidic garb. But we did not feel any type of danger."

However, he noted sadly, "The day we arrived in Egypt there was a terrorist attack two blocks away. The terrorist and another person were killed."

Now back in the relative safety of New York, Stamm focused his commentary on the historic nature of their venture.

"The Sadat Gold Medal Commission brought something to the table that no other group had yet accomplished on behalf of a powerful Arab nation and critical US ally," he said. "They achieved honor and recognition by Congress for a beloved Egyptian leader who was assassinated for his peacemaking efforts."

"Shimon Perez, Martin Luther King, Nelson Mandela, Rabbi Schneerson, Tony Blair—these are some of the very few world dignitaries to have received this honor, which requires a two-thirds vote by Congress within a two-year period," Stamm noted. "Sadat was the first Arab leader to visit Israel, and in 1979, he was assassinated for making peace. Ezra Friedlander worked very hard on this historic effort, and I have been privileged to assist him."

Although he and other Commission members were able to visit the Pyramids of Giza and the Sphinx during their brief two days in Egypt, Stamm was also greatly awed by two other sites.

"We received a rare private tour, arranged by el-Sisi himself, of the 500-room presidential palace of Abdeen, which had been Sadat's official residence. And we visited a few of the remaining synagogues and Jewish centers in the area. We were not able to pray, but at the Ben Ezra synagogue we broke out in song about *Yerushalayim* and *Zion*."

In fact, before heading home, members of the committee spent several days in Jerusalem for various meetings; with newly elected Mayor Moshe Leon, US Ambassador to Israel David M. Friedman, Defense Minister Eli Ben-Dahan, and Israeli President Reuven Rivlin.

Some of the group made a special trip to Bnei Brak where Stamm and others received personal blessings from the great Orthodox authority on *Halacha* Rabbi Chaim Kanievsky.

He later summed up his entire Mid-East trip in a single sentence, "We left *Mitzrayim* for a second time, and returned to *Eretz Yisrael*."



L-R: US Ambassador to Israel David Friedman. Stamm pays respect at the Tomb of Sadat. Bottom: HaGaon Chaim Kanievsky giving blessing to Stamm. Meeting with Ambassador Friedman. Stamm and Bortz at the Hotel on the Nile.



Stamm at the Abdeen Palace