



**MARKETPLACE:** Shlomo Maital

## Light Bulb Unto the Nations

**A** RECENT BBC WORLD SERVICE poll completed in February reveals a painful fact – Israel is regarded by much of the world as illegitimate, a pariah, a social reject,

The survey covered 29,000 people, interviewed either by phone, or face-to-face, in 28 countries. The question was: For each of 17 countries, do you regard the influence of Country X in the world as mostly positive or mostly negative? Half the respondents rated Israel's influence as negative. Only 19 percent rated it as positive. The rest were either neutral or replied 'don't know.'

Incredibly, the results for North Korea are slightly better than for Israel; Iran rates only slightly worse. In only two of 28 countries does Israel have a perceived net positive balance: America and Kenya. And in America, only 40 percent gave Israel a "positive" rating, down from 47 percent a year ago. There is not a shred of evidence that Israel's leaders lose sleep over these terrible numbers, let alone take action.

Against this tsunami of anti-Israel sentiment rises "Start-up Nation," the best-selling book about Israeli innovativeness by Dan Senor and Saul Singer, reviewed in The Jerusalem Report "When Chutzpa Wins" (December 7). Friends abroad, mainly in the US but in other lands as well, tell me that the book has aroused enormous curiosity about the source of Israel's boundless creativity. Thousands are reading the book to learn how this little country invented the cell phone, Copaxone (a drug for treating multiple sclerosis), Azilect (a drug for the treatment of Parkinson's disease), a kind of heart pump, drip irrigation, the Given Imaging pill that 'broadcasts' your intestines' condition, the Pentium chip, and a thousand other life-changing inventions, while fending off enemies, and with its citizens squabbling endlessly with one another. "What is driving it," Senor recently told the cable network CNBC, "is a national ethos, resilience, the fight for survival."

Why not build on "Start-up Nation's" buzz? Why not rebrand Israel as the nation



where creativity lives – come see it for yourself? A first step in this direction was taken recently by Prof. Shimon Shocken, who founded the Efi Arazi School of Computer Science at Herzliya's Interdisciplinary Center. Shocken and a team of dynamic young people led by Maya Elhalal and Liat Aaronson organized a TEDx gathering on April 26, at a highly unusual venue near Jaffa Port called Na Laga'at (more about the venue later).

TED stands for Technology, Entertainment, Design. It is an American group dedicated to "ideas worth spreading"

that has built a popular, fascinating website where brief 18-minute talks by creative people are uploaded, many of them given at TED conferences in the US ([www.ted.com](http://www.ted.com)).

The 'x' in TEDx stands for 'ex' or 'held outside the US.' TEDx Tel Aviv was the first TED conference in Israel. A second, TEDx Holyland, will be held in Jerusalem on October 28 and will feature Jewish-Arab partnership.

The TEDx Tel Aviv conference was limited to only 340 participants, each of whom had to write an essay saying why he or she deserved a seat. (For the crowds who did not



gain admission, a simulcast was broadcast to 18 sites throughout Israel.) The theme was “thriving on turmoil.”

In his opening remarks, Prof. Shocken used the phrase “mighty rivers of creativity” to describe Israel. And then, one by one, we saw those rivers burst forth, as Israeli after Israeli spoke inspiringly, 15 of them in all. In just 18 minutes, each described a brilliant idea, and then explained how they made it happen.

What we learned from this amazing day was that Israeli innovativeness is not confined to high-tech. It is pervasive and ubiquitous, in social action, education, therapy, music, and dance. (And in politics? Alas – no creative politicians could be located.)

Participants ranged in age from 14-year-old Ori Sagy, who is a “scientist of the future” at Tel Aviv University, to myself (age 67).

They also included Raphael Mehoudar, who invented drip irrigation for Netafim and Anita Shkadi, who introduced horse-back therapy to Israel many years ago.

Here follows a sample of five of those mightily creative people who spoke and the ideas they implemented.

**Shimon Shocken** chose to talk not about computers or software, but about juvenile offenders. A fanatical mountain bike rider, he rode past a juvenile jail one day, talked his way in, and pitched an idea to the warden, who at first found it highly amusing. (Creative people are never deterred when their idea arouses gales of laughter). Result: Every Tuesday, Shimon leads a group of juvenile inmates on a challenging mountain bike ride, to build their self-confidence and tolerance for frustration.

**Anita Tal**, who directs plays, was asked in 2001 to come to Jaffa to work with a dozen blind, deaf and dumb actors suffering from Usher’s Syndrome, a progressive genetic disease, and until then living in darkness and silence. How in the world does one do that, she wondered? Result: The curtain rose in the Na Laga’at (“please touch,” in Hebrew) Center on “Light Is Heard in Zig Zag.” In 2004 the unusual company toured Canada and the U.S. and won rave reviews. Today the Na Laga’at Center, where the TEDx conference was held, features the Blackout Restaurant, where dinner is served by blind waiters in complete darkness – a startling experience I strongly recommend. Tal was given the Chesed (Grace) Award at the Knesset in 2008.

**Karen Tal** (no relation), principal of the Bialik Rogovin School in South Tel Aviv, told how she upgraded a rundown elementary school of 800 children, many of them refugees or children of foreign workers hailing from 48 countries, two-thirds of them from families with a single parent. Within five years, she and her team raised the proportion matriculating from high school from 28 percent to more than 70 percent. She serves her kids hot lunches and runs a Hebrew ulpan for 45 parents. In the afternoons, the children study art and play sports. The school choir sang for us; the polyglot blend of ethnic groups singing in perfect Hebrew brought tears to our eyes.

**Shimon Steinberg**, a scientist, talked about why “bugs are good for your health,” and related how at Kibbutz Sde Eliyahu biological pest control creates good bugs that destroy bad bugs. The global biocontrol industry today amounts to \$250 m. worldwide, and aspires to replace an environmentally harmful pesticide industry that is 100 times larger. Israel is among the leaders.

**Isaac Berzin** spoke about “fill it up with seaweed.” At the Massachusetts Institute of Technology he is making biofuel out of algae, after being told it could not be done. Berzin thinks it is smarter to make biofuel out of algae than out of corn, which takes food out of hungry people’s mouths. “Tell Israelis it was never done before, it can’t be done, and you get their attention!” he said. “We Israelis invented ‘Yes, we can’ (US President Obama’s slogan) first.”

**Ehud Shapiro**, a Weizman Institute scientist, told us about the human cell lineage tree. Shapiro had a stellar career in computer science in the US, then came home to the Weizman Institute and shifted into biology. By tracing how our 100 trillion cells divide from an original fertilized ovum, he believes we can crack cancer’s origins, by learning how and why cancer cells divide uncontrollably.

It is an utter travesty for Israel to be perceived by the world as a pariah, rather than what it truly is, a light bulb unto the nations.

At a time when countries in the West are struggling to recover from the global crisis and are seeking new innovations to lead the way, they can learn much from Israel. Let every Israeli official abroad convey that message with conviction, at every opportunity. ●

The writer is senior research associate at the **S. Neaman Institute Technion**.