



# ISRAEL MATTERS!

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## Scarlett Johansson Quits Oxfam International Over Israel-based SodaStream Criticism; To Visit Israel

### Israel's Peres Sets Guinness Record in "Presidential class"

Israel recently set a Guinness record for the largest online civics class, with President Shimon Peres simultaneously teaching a lesson to more than 9,500 students.

In an unexpected twist, Peres himself was also presented with a personal award - that of being the oldest serving head of state in the world, presidential spokesman Yair Zivan said.

Peres gave the "Presidential Class" at the local headquarters of US networking giant Cisco in the northern Israel coastal city of Netanya. It was watched live by students in at least 215 classrooms across the country. "There needed to be more than 5,000 (to beat the existing record) and we've counted over 9,500," Zivan said.



The award was presented by Marco Frigatti, senior vice president of

Guinness World Records who flew in to verify the event. As he handed a framed certificate to Peres [photo], Frigatti said the 90-year-old president had also set another record. "I have an interesting surprise because you're holding two records; not only have you taught a wonderful civics lesson but you're also the oldest head of state in the world," he told Peres.

[Yahoo]



American actress Scarlett Johansson has released a statement about the controversy surrounding her role as the first-ever brand ambassador of the Israeli company SodaStream, describing the firm as "building a bridge to peace between Israel and Palestine," and making clear that she would not be stepping away from it.

Her public comments were made after she came under fire for the endorsement deal - which included a TV ad screened during the Super Bowl [photo] - from the pro-Palestinian Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions (BDS) movement.

"While I never intended on being the face of any social or political movement, distinction, separation or stance as part of my affiliation with SodaStream, given the amount of noise surrounding that decision, I'd like to clear the air," Johansson's statement, published by The Huffington Post, read.

Since SodaStream named Johansson the first-ever brand ambassador of its seltzer makers, the BDS movement has demanded that the star step down from the post, plastering social media with blood-soaked ads bestowing upon Scarlett an "A for Apartheid."

Johansson's statement addressed her critics' concerns: "I remain a supporter of economic cooperation and social interaction between a democratic Israel and Palestine. SodaStream is a company that is not only committed to the environment but to building a bridge to peace between Israel and Palestine, supporting neighbors working alongside each other, receiving equal pay, equal benefits and equal rights. That is what is happening in their Ma'ale Adumim factory every working day."

SodaStream plans to bring Johansson to Israel this year, the company said on the same day that the Hollywood star resigned from her prominent eight-year role as Oxfam's representative due to the controversy. "She has never been to Israel before. We look forward to hosting her later in the year," said SodaStream president Yonah Lloyd.

Since taking up her new post with SodaStream in December, grassroots pro-Palestinian groups, primarily the Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions movement, have attacked Johansson and called on Oxfam to drop her as its global ambassador. Alternatively, they asked her to stop rep-

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resenting SodaStream.

Johansson has defended SodaStream as a company where Israelis and Palestinians work together, and refused to cave to the public pressure to drop her new role. Johansson's spokesman wrote that "she and Oxfam have a fundamental difference of opinion in regards to the Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions movement."

Oxfam, on its site, said that it accepted Johansson's resignation. "While Oxfam respects the independence of our ambassadors, Ms. Johansson's role promoting the company SodaStream is incompatible with her role as an Oxfam Global Ambassador," it said. "Oxfam believes that businesses, such as SodaStream, that operate in settlements further the ongoing poverty and denial of rights of the Palestinian communities that we work to support. Oxfam is opposed to all trade from Israeli settlements, which are illegal under international law."

But Lloyd, a New Jersey native who moved to Israel in 2003, said that the West Bank factory allowed Palestinians to make a living wage to support their families in an atmosphere of coexistence. He had not, he said, paid attention to some of the more vitriolic attacks against Johansson on social media, that included a photograph of her sipping soda against a background of caged Palestinians. If these Palestinian activists were to come to the factory, he said, they would change their minds - and after that, they would ask him for a job.

Lloyd explained how, in the factory's one-floor white stucco sprawling building, some 1,300 employees produce as many as 20,000 boxed kits a day. The factory is one of 25 such facilities worldwide, and one of six such sites in Israel, he said. "But this is the one that everyone is interested in," said Lloyd, as it is the only one of their factories located over the pre-1967 lines. "We recognize that it is in an area that is a flash point of tension, with activists on both sides of the story," he said. The current owners of SodaStream, who took over the company in 2007, could have shut down the factory, Lloyd said, but they saw it as an opportunity to improve people's lives.

In the 1970s, the building was a munitions factory that produced bullets and other weapons for the Israeli government, said Lloyd. The former owner of the SodaStream brand purchased it in the 1990s for a food and beverage factory. "He literally turned it from bullets to bubbles," said Lloyd. As a physical illustration of that philosophy, the former owner placed a statue outside the factory doors with a quote from the prophet Isaiah: "And into plowshares beat your swords, men shall study war no more." Lloyd said it was an important metaphor for the business under its current ownership. "You are talking about a place that makes food. When people break bread together, they can make peace together. They can get to know each other," he said. [JPost]

## Israel's Sephardim Consider Expanded Spanish Citizenship Offer

The expansion of Spain's offer of citizenship to descendants of Jews it expelled en masse in 1492 has sparked interest in Israel, where the so-called Sephardim make up around a quarter of the population. While no one predicts an Israeli exodus to economically bruised Spain, a passport granting access to the wider European Union appeals to many in Israel - especially its disproportionately large Sephardic underclass.

Amending a decades-old law, Spain said it would allow foreign Sephardim - old Hebrew for Spaniards - who become nationals to keep their original citizenship. Though the amendment awaits parliamentary ratification, the Spanish embassy in Israel said it had received "many" inquiries from potential applicants. Israeli media republished Madrid's list of typical Sephardic names, meant to help locate eligible kin, and celebrity candidates debated the opportunity.

Around 300,000 Jews lived in Spain before Inquisition-era monarchs Isabella and Ferdinand ordered them and the country's Muslims to convert to Catholicism or leave.

Abraham Haim, head of the Council of Sephardic Community in Jerusalem, played down Madrid's new law. He said its outreach to Sephardim dated back to 1924 and through World War II, when Spain was neutral and some of its diplomats saved Jews from the Holocaust by giving them citizenship. "This (amendment) will not bring thousands of new immigrants to Spain," said Haim, who framed the move as part of a rapprochement between Spain and Israel, which formally established ties only in 1986. [Yahoo]

## Israel, Turkey "Close" to Deal After 2010 Flotilla Raid

Negotiators are close to striking a long-awaited deal on compensation for Turkish victims of a deadly Israeli raid on a Gaza aid flotilla four years ago, a Turkish official said Monday. The May 2010 Israeli assault on the Turkish ship the Mavi Marmara while it was in international waters on its way to Gaza sent relations between Israel and Turkey to an all-time low.

Talks on compensation for the nine Turks killed in the raid eventually began in March 2013 after Israel extended a formal apology to Turkey in a breakthrough brokered by US President Barack Obama. "We are close to an agreement" to settle the compensation issue, said a Turkish official. Turkish foreign ministry undersecretary Feridun Sinirlioglu was in Israel in February to discuss the terms of an agreement, which will help normalize relations between the Jewish state and its once closest Muslim ally. [Yahoo]