

Israeli Dance Duo Open Cultural Channels Across Africa

By Deborah Danan

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The year 2018 was a banner year for Israel-Africa relations. Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu spoke of a “great change” heralding blossoming ties between the Jewish state and African nations. But while the political elites were enmeshed in a diplomatic drive, another — no less important — effort was being made to forge connections on a cultural level.

At the same time as Chadian leader Idriss Déby made his historic visit to Jerusalem in November, an

Israeli dance duo were in Dakar, Senegal, performing at schools, orphanages, an ambassadorial gala and even for the National Ballet.

Dakar marked the last city on Jill and Amnon Damti’s tour of Africa, organized by Israel’s foreign ministry and including stops in Ghana, Kenya and Uganda as well as Senegal. The husband-wife duo said that as much as they were able to impact the lives of the people they encountered, they too were transformed in a profound way.

“You see things in Africa and your life changes,” Jill told Breitbart. “There’s so much poverty and disease and so much suffering.”

Yet, she added, there was also plenty of laughter and love and the eternal hope that dreams can come true.

Her husband Amnon can attest to that. Born deaf, Amnon has quite literally made overcoming adversity into an art form. While he was still a child, Amnon saw Russia’s Bolshoi Ballet perform on TV and immediately knew he had found his calling.





The fact that he couldn't hear the music didn't deter him, and by the time he was 15 Amnon became a soloist in an Israeli dance company. His choreography is synced with the vibrations of the music felt through the stage floor.

The Damtis' storied career has seen them gain adulation from all corners of the globe, not least of all the White House, where they performed for late president George H.W. Bush in the mid-1990s.

But the glam and the glitter aren't a patch on giving hope to children who have suffered unimaginable afflictions. In Africa, of course, there is no shortage of suffering children

"It was everything I imagined as a child when [my] parents said 'eat your food, there are starving kids in Africa' — only worse," Jill said.

They met children who were severely malnourished, others who were suffering from devastating drug addictions, and still others who had been trafficked and abused.

Jill spoke of the dissonance of starting the day by performing in sprawling slums "that stank so much you literally couldn't breathe" and the very same evening playing for ambassadors and other distinguished guests at an extravagant ball.

They also performed in scores of schools, centers and orphanages for children suffering from physical disabilities — not least of all, deafness.





“The deaf kids in Africa were thirsty for culture and meeting Amnon was inspirational,” Jill said.

In Kampala, Uganda, they performed for 300 deaf children. “They were enchanted by the fact that a deaf-born dancer was in front of them and that he was dancing and married to a hearing woman, facts that they could not grasp,” Jill recalls.

Amnon interjects. “Seeing [us] gave them some sort of power because they are second class

citizens there,” he said, using sign language. “But even though life is hard, we laughed a lot.”

“There was a lot of laughing. A lot of hugs,” Amnon said, his eyes shining behind his spectacles.

The duo also met plenty of people who were from more privileged sectors of African society. Yet even among the intellectual elites, ignorance and misinformation about Israel was rife.

“People with master’s degrees were shocked to learn that there are Muslims in Israel,” Jill said, noting the unofficial public relations roles she and her husband donned while on the tour, explaining to people that Israel’s Muslim and other minority populations are afforded the same rights as Jews.

And for so many Africans, Amnon and Jill’s origins were enough to turn them into legends.

“Everyone was asking us to bless them just because we’re from the Holy Land,” Jill said, laughing.