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After helping Obama win White House, James Hoffa Jr. visits Israel

By [TOVAH LAZAROFF](#)

On Election Night last week, one of Barack Obama's major supporters was not in Chicago savoring the hard-won moment.



Hoffa on the campaign trail for Obama
Photo: Teamsters.org

Instead, James Hoffa was home in Troy, Michigan packing his bags for his first trip to Israel. Back in Chicago, balloons floated into the air and champagne bottles were uncorked without him.

It was a case of bad timing, said Hoffa, who explained that this visit on behalf of the Yitzhak Rabin Center, which began last Friday, had been planned before he even knew he would become an Obama fan.

Now, just the name makes him grin, even though he is thousands of miles away.

"I am an extremely big supporter [of Obama]," said Hoffa with a smile, as he sat in the lobby of the David Citadel Hotel in Jerusalem on Sunday morning, the day after he addressed a memorial rally for Rabin in Tel Aviv.

But this was not initially the case, said Hoffa.

As the head of the International Brotherhood of Teamsters, a union with 1.4 million members in 50 states, the question of which candidate his union supports can be critical.

So when the Teamsters had to decide whom to endorse, the Democratic candidates - including early favorites in the race, such as John Edwards and Hilary Clinton - came to meet its governing council.

But it was the unknown senator from Illinois, Barack Obama, who excited them, even back then. They liked his ideas on workers' rights, trade and economic stimulation.

By February, the Teamsters had come out for Obama.

"It was the first major union to do so," said Hoffa proudly.

This endorsement translated into some 37,000 volunteers across the country who worked to get out the vote. Bent on putting Obama in office, they made 1.6 million phone calls and knocked on 4.5 million doors.

Hoffa said he was scouring for votes until mid-day Tuesday, when he flew back home from Ohio to Michigan.

"I campaigned in many, many states on his behalf," said Hoffa. "We focused on the battleground states we thought were key to the election - Michigan, Florida, Pennsylvania, Ohio and Indiana," he said.

He and his union worked hard, even though Hoffa said he was confident of the outcome.

"I knew he would win," said Hoffa.

US President George W. Bush, a Republican, set the stage for the defeat of his party, said Hoffa. And Republican contender John McCain, he added, was a "terrible candidate. He never moved to the middle. He moved further to the right and became more shrill with his attacks."

With the elections behind him, Hoffa said, he and his union are involved in Obama's transition team, working on issues relating to transportation, energy, labor and the Treasury.

"We are his partners for a new America," said Hoffa.

This week, though, Hoffa is busy getting his first taste of Israel. Although he is not Jewish, his family has been involved with the state since before its founding.

His father, James R. Hoffa, who was also head of the Teamsters Union and a legend in the American labor movement, helped smuggle guns into Israel for the War of Independence and raised cash for the fledgling state.

His father, said Hoffa, had close ties to American Jews because of the significant role they played in American unions, and their story inspired his feelings for Israel, said Hoffa.

He saw the Jewish fight for a state of their own as "similar to the struggle of the American worker," said Hoffa.

In the United States, the elder Hoffa was a controversial figure; he had ties to organized crime and a deep enmity with the Kennedy family. He disappeared in 1975 and his fate is unknown.

But in Israel, he is remembered for his contributions to the country. In honor of that relationship, earlier this year, the younger Hoffa raised \$2.5 million for the Yitzhak Rabin Center. During his visit, a room at the center will be dedicated to the Teamsters.

Hoffa said he had been looking for a way to strengthen his ties to Israel, and began to work for the Rabin Center on the advice of friends.

During his time here, he plans to visit the Histadrut-run Alumim Youth Village in Kfar Saba, whose original Jerusalem facility was built by a \$300,000 donation from his father.

Although Hoffa has been in Israel only a few days, he can not get over how "modern and progressive it is," said Hoffa. He added that he "considers this the only democracy in the Middle East."

On Sunday afternoon he meet briefly with President Shimon Peres, who had known his father. Peres told Hoffa that his father had been an "extremely charismatic man."

Hoffa added he had a photograph taken of himself with Peres that he plans to put in his office when he returns home next week.