"I got sick of high-tech"

Since Jeff Skoll, a 44-year-old Jewish billionaire, sold eBay seven years ago, he has invested millions in resolving conflicts and in the environment through the Urgent Threats Fund he founded. "If the Middle East conflict and the issue of water desalination are not resolved in the next ten years the world will be down on its knees," he says.

Revital Hovel, Calcalist [business daily published by Yedioth], August 30

As the cliché says, sometimes one act can change your life. That is what happened to Jeff Skoll, 44, a Canadian-born Jew, when he established eBay and was appointed as its first president in 1996. The brilliant innovation that brought eBay to the United States and then to the rest of the world made Skoll a billionaire.

If you ask him, a lot of water has flowed under the bridge since eBay burst onto the world market. But that is all behind him. Today, with his pockets full, Skoll prefers to concentrate on big things like world peace and he devotes most of his energy to philanthropy.

Besides producing films by the Participant Media production company he owns, that promotes a green agenda, this year Skoll announced he founded a new fund for "urgent threats." The fund is managed by Larry Brilliant, who managed Google's philanthropic arm, and one of its goals is to fight the consequences of global warming in the world and the Middle East conflict.

Skoll came to Israel with a mission of the Elders, a group of 12 former world leaders trying to promote world peace. The large entourage, including former US President Jimmy Carter, Nobel Peace Prize laureate Bishop Desmond Tutu and others, visited Wadi Fukin near Tzur Hadassah, to see close up a project that recently received $750,000 from the Skoll foundation.

The project by Friends of the Earth Middle East is trying to promote good neighborly relations between the residents of Wadi Fukin and Tzur Hadassah, while fighting together against the route of the separation fence that is going to separate the two communities.

"My foundation invests in social initiatives and one of the key areas is the environment. One of the ways we do it is by donating millions of dollars to different charities in the world. We started a new foundation in the Middle East, which I hope will be able to create change in many communities systematically. As part of the new foundation we are dealing with key issues such as nuclear weapons, epidemics, water desalination and Middle East peace. For Larry Brilliant and for me the Middle East is a new subject and I have a few ideas for new projects."

Solar energy for remote villages

Do you plan to invest in that kind of company in Israel?

"In the past I worked with IVN (Israel Venture Network), which deals with different kinds of alternative energy and electric cars. I definitely invest in that kind of company in the US but I have not started to deal with that in Israel yet. One of the reasons I came here is to look for opportunities here. Last night I dined with several leading Israeli businessmen. It's a pretty long list but you can imagine I'm talking about major and
important investors (Idan and Batya Ofer, Efrat Peled, Ami Harel, Yaakov Peri, Ofra Strauss, Aharon Fogel, Hemi Peres and Nir Bronstein).

"I find it very moving to see projects like Better Place developed here in Israel. We are trying to deal with essential problems in the world such as climate change and depletion of energy resources and I think they can be handled in several ways. For example, you can invest in solar energy companies or start a philanthropic fund of private entrepreneurs trying to produce solar energy in remote villages, or alternatively do it by producing a movie. I try to find a balance between all those things."

Did you find a business area in Israel that interests you as a future investment?
"What I found is a desire by Israeli businesspeople to be involved in social projects. Companies like Cisco or Intel outsource and employ Palestinian workers. Such cooperation is good for both sides. It is the kind of thing that can be economically feasible and of course also has a social aspect. I believe that social development can bring peace to the region."

We are coming out of the crisis

Is there anything else you would like to focus on in the environment?
"Last time I visited Israel was four years ago and it's great to come back here. Visiting here helps me understand the situation. I think Israel is one of the only countries that knows how to use its water resources well and has excellent technologies to do so. This field is constantly improving and I learned a lot about water desalination. I also learned that there are a lot of alternative energy solutions whose source is Israel. There is one thing I can say about the Israeli business community: the business people I met here are smart, devoted workers and very successful. They all agreed that peace and stability will help their business a lot. They go hand-in-hand.

"I think a business investment can solve big problems throughout the world. Climate change, Middle East peace and water desalination are subjects that if they are not resolved within five to ten years will bring the world down on its knees. I think these subjects have to be dealt with and we can invest wisely in different areas so it will be good for everybody."

Is the economic crisis behind us?
"That is a hard question. All of the findings indicate we are getting out of the crisis. Personally I think it is going to be a longer process than we imagine. There is also the issue of the swine flu, which may not cause more deaths than regular flu but a lot of people are going to get sick and that is going to have an economic impact."

What do you think of the way Israel is handling the crisis? Do you know the Israeli economy?
"Not too well. I don't think that's the main subject of this conversation, it might have been the other way around half a year ago."

What about your going back to high-tech?
"I got sick of high-tech. I left eBay seven years ago and since then I have concentrated on foundations and other projects."

Is there any chance you will move to Israel?
"I love Israel and I am a Jew but most of my businesses are in South California so for the meantime I think not. Unless I find an Israeli bride."