



September 27, 2017

ז' תשרי תשע"ח

Dear

Eric Goldstein

Executive Vice President & Chief Executive Officer

UJA-Federation of New York

We have just returned to Israel from our fascinating visit to the United States. I'd like to thank you and everyone at the Jewish Federation of New York for welcoming us not only into your community, but also into your hearts. This was one of the most informative, impressive, and meaningful visits to the United States I've ever been privileged to experience. I had a chance to get to know wonderful Jewish communities – strong, serious, and committed to each other. I also had a chance to see how Israel serves as an ideal in the lives of American Jewry, and to appreciate the true meaning of the bond with Israel. I also would like to thank you for the amazing opportunity to engage in direct, frank, and open dialog during our various meetings. This helped me to learn more about the Federation's impressive and wide-ranging activities and to get to know the wonderful and dedicated people responsible for advancing this work. I am sure that from here on I will always feel a special connection to the Jewish community of New York as one of the strongest and most committed communities I have met.

This encounter strengthened my own personal commitment to the unbreakable bond between American Jews and the State of Israel. Just as importantly, it offered a chance to understand in depth the joint challenges we face. For seventy years, the American Jewish community has asked with exceptional consistency and devotion what it can do to help Israel survive and prosper. In times of crisis and of calm, American Jewry has always been there. But now the relationship needs to become more mutual. Israel must become more involved in the efforts of the American Jewish community to cope with the tremendous challenges it faces, particularly the need to maintain Jewish identity and a strong connection with Israel in the coming generations. This is vital for Israel itself, too.

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Since the State of Israel was founded, it has always seen itself as a home for **all** Jews. Now, however, there are some in Israel who are trying to force the state to narrow this definition and to apply it only to Jews **of a particular type**. This immediately raises the question of the extent to which my country considers itself a partner – and, to an extent, a bearer of responsibility – when it comes to the future of the majority of North American Jewry that is not Orthodox. It's true that the Law of Return recognizes all Jews, but who would be crazy enough to move to a home where you have to change who you are in order to be accepted? People cannot be expected to feel a bond to a place that offers no room for their own identity; they cannot feel part of a family where they are made to feel like a stepchild; and they cannot continue to believe in Israel as an ideal when Israel rejects and denies their own Jewish essence. Only now, after my visit, I do really understand how great the threat is, how deep the crisis, and how painful the insult.

There is no reason why Judaism should be discriminatory, rigid, or fossilized. The claim that there is only one right way to be Jewish is completely contrary to Jewish morality, to the Israeli ethos, and to the Zionist vision. It is absurd to suggest that someone can be "Jewish enough" to lobby for Israel in Washington, donate money to help underprivileged children in the Negev, or even serve in the IDF, yet will never be considered "Jewish enough" to belong fully to a place that plays a key role in his identity. This attitude combines hypocrisy with ingratitude and must be changed. As political leaders here in Israel, we should be clearly dedicated to this task. **I can promise you and everyone at the Jewish Federation of New York that I will make my voice heard even more clearly on this subject than in the past, and strengthen my efforts in this field.** There are many people in Israel who long for equality and justice and still have faith that the state will come through. In my public activities, I always try to be there for them: to serve as the voice of the voiceless whose voice has not been heard by decision makers, struggle for them, and secure whatever achievements are possible. As much as I see it- our struggle is no different.

Even in a parliamentary system that imposes constraints and compromises, political leaders must be true to their basic beliefs and principles. Both in moral terms and in terms of Israel's national interests, it is wrong for Israel to continue to hide behind the mantra of the "status quo." We cannot engage in Tikkun Olam when institutionalized discrimination is still rampant. We cannot

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implement social justice when the government remains silent in the face of offensive and extremist statements, such as the recent remarks by Rabbi Amar (a civil servant whose signature appears alongside the official emblems of Jerusalem and the State of Israel). We cannot heal the divides when our prime minister refuses to meet with some of your key leaders during his visit to the United States in order to avoid possible conflict. While he may win himself a few more weeks in power, there is a real risk that his actions could lead to a disastrous rift in the Jewish people.

I know that a clear majority of Israelis support a pluralistic, tolerant, and liberal Israel. There is widespread support for our position, but Israelis sometimes see this as a theoretical debate about the Halacha, and do not always recognize its relevance for our own lives. This is also the key to the solution. We must raise awareness in Israel that the bond between us is at stake – not by way of a threat, but as an honest description of a future reality. We don't have to agree with each other, but we must respect each other and forge a relationship between all the Jewish streams under the auspices of the state of Israel. This relationship will be rooted in our collective historical memory, but no less importantly in our sense of a shared destiny and future. This is our road map, and from tomorrow morning I will do everything in my power to make sure we get there.

I would be grateful if you can forward this letter to the representatives from UJA Federation of NY who attended our meetings.

With respect, love, and admiration

Sincerely yours,

MK Itzik Shmuli

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