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Israel belongs to the Jews



THE US DELEGATION takes part in the opening ceremony of the 20th Maccabiah Games in Jerusalem in 2017. (Yonatan Sindel/Flash90)

• By ODED REVIVI

Once we look beyond the severe public health threat posed by COVID, the impact the pandemic has had upon the foundations of communities and even countries is astounding.

The very fabric that binds societies together – communal unity, neighborly generosity – is fraying from the stress. But in Israel, the threat is even more pronounced as we are currently in danger of permanently damaging the relationship between Israelis and our brothers and sisters in the Diaspora.

COVID is frightening. It is a cause for serious concern. But if we continue to act as if Israel belongs only to Israelis, unilaterally closing the country to the rest of the Jewish nation, it is unclear if we will ever recover from the consequences.

The connection between Israel and Diaspora Jewry has always been a strategic asset. The Jews of Britain pushed for the Balfour Declaration on behalf of the Jews in Palestine. Influential Jews throughout the world utilized their unique influence with governments throughout the globe to influence the United Nations vote.

Over the years, issues of Jewish law have threatened to undermine this connection – access to the Western Wall, conversion and other disagreements have jeopardized Israel's relationship with Jews around the world. But a non-halachic issue now stands to ruin this relationship. We must work to understand and address the harm of locking out our Jewish brethren.

The Zionist Congress, which operated from the time of Herzl, through the Balfour Declaration, until even

after Israel's Declaration of Independence, stated that the State of Israel is the Jewish national home. And now, while the virus continues to rage, and with a growing fear of the unknown, we must remind ourselves of Israel's unique status as a place for all Jews.

We cannot simply shut the door on those who wish to visit their home, those who wish to visit their family, and those who are considering aliyah. They are not like everyone else. They are not tourists, they are *mishpacha*.

In 1929, Yosef Yekutieli, founder of the Maccabiah, said, "Hundreds and thousands of young Hebrews will come to Israel to take part in the Maccabiah, they will breathe in the air of their beloved homeland, hear lively and vibrant Hebrew, and they will return full of courage and vigor to continue their work in the Diaspora. And not only will 'athletics' be part of this gathering, 'spirituality' must also play a significant role."

His words deserve to be heeded even today. Taglit trips, which aim to strengthen Jewish identity, prevent assimilation and introduce young people to an Israel that they can be proud of so that they can serve as ambassadors on campuses, were put on hold, even though they constituted a first-rate national need.

What right do we have to give up on this relationship, or to put in on hold? How will we be able to give back to these young people what we have withheld from them, the right to travel to their homeland, to learn and to connect with their people? Each of them has only a short window of time in which they are emotionally, physically and professionally available. The decision to deny their entry removes a plank

from the bridge binding Israel and Diaspora Jewry. This cannot be tolerated.

The town of Efrat contains a high percentage of immigrants from a variety of countries. Our residents speak English, French, Portuguese and more. It has become a place that truly embodies the clause in the Declaration of Independence that says, "the State of Israel will be open to Jewish immigration and the ingathering of exiles and will work for the

development of the country for the benefit of all its residents."

I have recently met with people whose spirits are filled with longing for their parents who cannot come to visit. I have witnessed the pain of families whose relatives cannot come for celebrations. I have visited the shiva home of siblings who were forced to mourn far away from each other when they desperately needed to be together, to support each other in their grief.

Jews throughout the world have relatives in the Jewish state, and they are a significant part of the bridge that connects Diaspora Jewry with Israel. We cannot place barriers in their way.

Government ministers must understand the great challenge before them: we may be called the State of Israel, but we are a homeland for all Jews. We have a mission, we have goals, and we have brothers overseas. In this difficult time, it is the duty

and responsibility of our leaders to find the safest way to allow every Jew from anywhere in the world to come and visit their home in the Land of Israel.

If we fail to open the gates for them we jeopardize this crucial connection between Diaspora Jewry and Israel. This relationship is being tested.

We cannot fail. We must remember that Israel has always belonged to all of the Jews.

The writer is mayor of Efrat.