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PRIME MINISTER Naftali Bennett addresses a memorial ceremony marking 107 years since the death of Theodor Herzl, held on Mount Herzl in Jerusalem in June. (Olivier Fitoussi/Flash90)

At least let my people in

• By MARTIN OLINER

Zionist visionary Theodor Herzl wrote in *The Jewish State* in 1896 that his plan for a state for the Jewish people was “conditioned on the motivation of the distress of the Jews” around the world.

Unfortunately, 125 years later, Jews around the world are once again in distress, this time, because the state that Herzl helped create is closed off to them.

I normally visit Israel three or four times a year, and I haven’t come since February 2020, immediately before the COVID-19 pandemic intensified and changed the world.

But there are countless stories that are much sadder than mine: Mothers who missed their daughter’s wedding, children who missed their parent’s funeral, and grandparents who have not met their grandchildren.

As heart-wrenching as all these stories are, perhaps they would be understandable if Israel had decided to isolate itself completely and end all entrances into the country by air, land and sea.

That is not the case. Israel decided to allow only those who have an Israeli passport into the country.

In making that decision, Israel decided to differentiate between Moshe who lives in Modi’in and his cousin Moshe who lives in Manhattan.

Why? Is one Moshe more committed to the Jewish state than the other? Why is Moshe’s residence and citizenship the only criteria?

The rationale for Israel’s existence is to be a haven for the Jewish people. The laws should be the

same for Jews who live in Israel and abroad.

Israel’s current policy sets a bad precedent. What would happen if there was another international tragedy, like a nuclear strike? Would Israel decide to be a haven for some Jews and not others?

The government of Israel is also pushing away Diaspora Jews, who have every right to be offended. We support Israel, we fight for Israel where we live, and we teach our children to love Israel. It is harder to teach that commitment when the Jewish state is shunning us.

This is the worst possible time for Diaspora Jewry to be cut off from Israel. The plagues of intermarriage and antisemitism need to be tackled with the positive messages of Jewish pride and peoplehood that a trip to Israel provides better than any other remedy.

Young people especially need to learn the importance of Israel. But the Birthright Israel program has been handicapped for two years. A top travel company that had 43 buses of Birthright participants in December two years ago had only three this year.

Visits to Israel are desperately needed for Diaspora Jews of all streams, no matter what their level of affiliation.

AT A MEETING of the Knesset Foreign Affairs and Defense Committee on Monday, United Torah Judaism MK Israel Eichler asked Foreign Minister Yair Lapid why Diaspora Jews were not allowed into the country. Lapid’s response was disingenuous.

Lapid told Eichler that the reason Israelis are allowed to come in is because it is possible to track

them by phone and to know where they live. Lapid said this was not true of Jews who live abroad.

Excuse me? Is Israel no longer the Start-Up Nation? Why can they not take our telephone number or give us some kind of device that can be tracked?

An idea raised by Religious Zionist Party MK Simcha Rothman makes a lot more sense. He said Israel should let in *zaka’ei shvut* – people eligible to make aliyah under the Law of Return.

Implementing this idea would justify continuing to temporarily turn away non-Jews who want to visit the country while permitting in Jews, for whom Israel remains a haven.

It would not be discriminatory, just as the Law of Return is not discriminatory. It is merely a recognition of the role that Israel has played since its founding. And it would correct the mistake that Israel is currently making.

It is wrong for Israel to decide to be a state of all its citizens, as the Joint List party wants it to be. Even Ra’am (United Arab List) MK Mansour Abbas has recognized that “The State of Israel was born as a Jewish state, and it will remain one.”

Being a Jewish state is a responsibility. Israel is currently shirking that responsibility and not living up to Herzl’s vision.

The writer is copresident of the Religious Zionists of America, chairman of the Center for Righteousness and Integrity, and a committee member of the Jewish Agency. He was appointed by former US president Donald Trump as a member of the United States Holocaust Memorial Council. The views expressed are his own. Martinoliner@gmail.com.