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# Time for new paradigm in Israel-Diaspora ties

• By NACHMAN SHAI

This week in Basel, we celebrated the 125th anniversary since the first Zionist Congress, led by Theodor Herzl.

Herzl's vision came true beyond all expectations. Zionism achieved one of the greatest successes of the Jewish people, if not the greatest. The Jewish people were finally granted independence. However, even with the establishment of Israel, a majority of Jewish people live across all corners of the world, many with no intention of making aliyah. Almost eight million people - half of the entire Jewish population - choose to live, flourish, strive and build vibrant communities outside of Israel.

This leads us to crucial questions. Where does Israel, as the nation-state of the Jewish people, actually stand vis-a-vis the Jewish people? Do we care for them and they for us? And is the Zionist dream only about aliyah? Or perhaps there is a wider, bigger definition of what Zionism is all about?

On this historic occasion of celebrating this quasiquicentennial of the First Zionist Congress, I would like to propose a novel and different thesis about how this intertwined relationship between us should look going forward.

In Israel's Declaration of Independence, there is a paragraph turning to world Jewry asking them to participate in this extraordinary part of history: "We appeal to the Jewish people throughout the Diaspora to rally around the Jews of the Land of Israel, in the tasks of immigration and up-building, and to stand by them in the great struggle for the realization of the age-old dream: the redemption of Israel".

Prime Minister Ben-Gurion and Jacob Blaustein, president of the American Jewish Committee, signed an agreement that defined the relationship between Israel and American Jewry. This document cleverly captured the state of relations at the time. It emphasized "the delicate balance between involvement and non-interference."

While we must indeed cherish this balanced principle, today, I would argue the exact opposite.

I believe it is time to formulate a new "Blaustein - Ben-Gurion" agreement. Rather than non-interference, we need to encourage a relationship of engagement. Instead of staying sidelined, we need a relationship of involvement. It is time to challenge the present relationship between Israel and the Jewish diaspora, and to take

it to a new strategic level.

We have to adopt a new paradigm, one which I shall call: The Jewish peoplehood paradigm - Israel and Diaspora as partners.

In 1999, the government of Israel decided to establish a government ministry focused only on these relations, after realizing the importance of keeping a connection between us. This new ministry became the chief coordinator between Israel and the Jewish world, and it gradually built and promoted new initiatives and connections with Jewish communities around the world.

NINE YEARS later, in 2018, there was a significant development. The Knesset voted in favor of a new Nation-State law, which manifests a major legal change. Paragraph 6 of the law, a law of constitutional status, articulates Israel's new legal responsibility to the Jewish people: "The state will strive to ensure the safety of the members of the Jewish people and of its citizens in trouble or in captivity due to the fact of their Jewishness or their citizenship."

This was a breakthrough.

This law anchors Israel's obligation to world Jewry, which is not tied to considerations of Zionism and Aliyah, but from the perception of Diaspora Jewry as a partner of Israel. And Israel, now a strong and blossoming state, takes on its duty to secure the resilience of the Jewish people in Israel and around the world.

To paraphrase the words of John F. Kennedy, Israel now tells the Diaspora: "Ask not what the Diaspora can do for Israel, ask what Israel can do for the Diaspora."

The Diaspora Affairs Ministry is responsible for implementing this law and duty. We promote formal and informal Jewish education in the Diaspora, encouraging affinity towards Israel, and with an emphasis on the younger generation. We assist Jewish communities in crisis, like Ukraine and Russia, defending the rights of Jews to live a full Jewish life wherever they are in the world. Additionally, we are at the forefront of combating antisemitism and steer activities aimed at strengthening community resilience.

But, there is still much more to be done.

Throughout my time as the minister of Diaspora affairs, I have come to learn that there is a lack of understanding within Israel of the essence of the strategic relationship between Israel and the Diaspora. At the moment, we do not even have a way



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THIS WEEK, the writer addresses the 125 Years of Zionism conference, in Basel. (Kelly Odes)

to hear the yearns and concerns of Jewish communities around the world when it comes to decision making in Israel. It is of utmost importance that we find ways to integrate the voices of the diaspora into the decision making processes of Israel.

In that way, the Israeli public will be exposed to another side of the equation, perhaps even develop an understanding and sensitivity towards the needs of Diaspora Jewry. A clear example of where such

a mechanism could have made a difference is when it comes to the issue of the Kotel. An issue that is a bleeding wound, that we as a society need to mend. Had we had a clear consultation process with diaspora Jewry from the start, the Western Wall crisis would not have played out as it did.

I know that in 125 years from today, we will gather in Basel once again to celebrate the 250th commemoration of the first Zionist Congress. But by then, I've no

doubt that Israel and our world will look different. There are some things, however, that will not change. Israel will continue to exist and blossom in our land, and world Jewry will carry on residing across all corners of the world. We'll face new challenges that are hard and impossible to imagine.

Perhaps we would need a new vision, a new Herzl for then?

*The writer is minister of Diaspora affairs.*