



September 1, 2019

Dear Friends of Hillcrest Jewish Center,

I am writing this message from Israel and I believe it is only fitting to share some insights from this trip, a combination of study time, family visits, and vacation time. Israel is a lovely place, and even though it is a very small country, there are always new things to see and new adventures to experience.

On most of my previous trips to Israel, I divided my time between Jerusalem, where I study; the north, where my parents live; and Ashkelon in the south, where Silvia's parents and brother live. This trip wasn't an exception, although I got to visit a few places off my beaten path, including the Soreq Stalactite cave near Beit Shemesh, Ein Kerem, and Beit Hatfutsot in northern Tel Aviv, which I haven't visited since my first trip to Israel almost 40 years ago.

Beit Hatfutsot was under partial renovation, but just by entering the museum, I could tell that the renovations were not just aesthetic ones. To begin with, the museum kept its Hebrew name but changed its English translation. The old name, "*The Nahum Goldmann Museum of the Jewish Diaspora*" is now "*The Museum of the Jewish People*."

Those who visited the museum in the past may remember that it described the historical journey of the Jewish people, from the destruction of Jerusalem by the Romans in the year 70 C.E., culminating with the Holocaust, three years prior to the establishment of the State of Israel. This new version of the museum, so far, focuses on synagogue history and life, including a very funny yet accurate explanation on the differences between the Sefardic and Ashkenazi synagogue experiences. The museum also features a special exhibit on Jewish humor, both in and out of Israel, which include spotlights on *Seinfeld*, *The Marx Brothers*, and *HaGashash HaHiver*.

I'd like to suggest that this new rendering of "*The Nahum Goldmann Museum of the Jewish Diaspora*," with its new name – "*The Museum of the Jewish People*" – is presenting not only a new version of the museum itself, but a new version of how many Israeli Jews and non-Israeli Jews see the relationship between the State of Israel and the Jewish people.

The new trend materialized in this new museum, is also shared by many Israeli thinkers, among them my teachers at the Shalom Hartman Institute, and stresses the fact that without Jewish people, there is no State of Israel, and it reflects the fact that Israel is experiencing a new appreciation of Jewish tradition, Jewish culture, and Jewish life outside of Israel.

While the message of the founders of the State of Israel was: "Only in Israel is there a future for the Jewish people," many of the Israeli leaders recognize the vibrancy and viability of Jewish life, not only in America but around the world.

I'd like to suggest that there are two main reasons for this change. First, due to advanced technology and communication, the Diaspora and Israel are not as far apart as they used to be as little as 25 years ago. Netflix, for example, brings America to Israel every day and also brings Israel to the rest of the Jewish and even non-Jewish world, with extremely popular series such as *Shtisel*, *When Heroes Fly*, and others. Second, it used to be that everybody outside of Israel had a cousin in Israel. While this is still true (I, for example, have two parents, two in-laws, a brother and sister-in-law, nephews, nieces, and many cousins), most Israelis nowadays, including many sitting in the Knesset, have close relatives living in America, in Europe, in Canada, and virtually, all over the world.

Will this acceptance of the "Diaspora reality" negate or diminish the importance of the State of Israel?

I don't think so. Those visiting Israel can attest that the streets of Jerusalem and Tel Aviv are full of tourists, most of them Jews, who keep falling in love with all the wonderful experiences Israel has to offer, the same way many of us fell in love with Israel, 30, 40, or 50 years ago.

To sum up, this new trip to Israel has reaffirmed, once again, my inveterate hopefulness, both regarding the State of Israel itself and regarding its relationship with the Jewish people.

Yes, there is a lot yet to be done, but looking at the blue Mediterranean Sea while drinking a *Hafuch* (an amazing Israeli version of a latte), I feel more optimistic than ever.

Rabbi Manes Kogan

Ashkelon, August 5, 2019