THE JEWISH AGENCY FOR ISRAEL

Board of Governors

**Unity of the Jewish People Committee**

Committee Chair and Chairman of the Executive: Doron Almog

Deputy Chairman of the Executive: Martine Fleishman

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**Summary of Meeting**

**Opening Remarks**

Martine Fleishman, the facilitator, opened the floor for questions. Some participants were physically present, others participated via Zoom.

Pesach Lerner said he found the presentation enlightening and asked that it be distributed. Martine agreed that could be done.

**Need for emphasis on unity**. Rabbi Rick Jacobs said he finds it impressive that the presentation was shown to the Israeli government, given that this was their only discussion of the issue of Diaspora-Israel relations. He bemoaned the current between the Diaspora and Israel, and within Israel. He said there is an urgent need to update Israelis’ image of Diaspora Jewry. He expressed concern that under the incoming Israeli government, there will be challenges in keeping the unity of the Jewish people at the forefront and that there is likely to be demonization and divisive policies enacted. Martine agreed and said that the meeting might need to continue in a few weeks.

**Questions about Israeli involvement in Diaspora Jewish education**. Martine called on Diane Asher, who asked for clarification of the recommendation for Israel to be involved in strengthening Jewish education and history of the Diaspora. She questioned whether that meant contributing money or content (implying Diaspora Jews don’t know their own history). An Israeli man (Jonathan?) responded that one third of the Jews live in North America, and many families there cannot afford Jewish education for their children. He said Israel has a responsibility to support Jewish education, but without being involved in the content. Diane Asher thanked him for his clarification.

A woman from Chicago noted that research for the presentation was done three years ago, and there has been significant change since then. She asked if any of the recommendations had changed. Jonathan (?) answered that the dialogue takes place every year, and that he stands 100% behind the recommendations made. He mentioned an online course that had been organized in which Israeli professors lecture on Israeli issues of identity, which is shown in all Israeli universities. He suggested the same should be done on issues of Peoplehood.

**Comments about Peoplehood.**

Martine called on Andy Groveman, who said the committee has been good at identifying problems but hasn’t discussed what unites them. He suggested taking a positive, proactive approach by identifying the principles they support as a group.

Rabbi Leah addressed two recommendations from the presentation: Jewish holidays and people who are not recognized as Jews in Israeli society. She advocated pluralistic celebration of holidays. She noted that the incoming Israeli government intends to return recognizing only Orthodox conversions, which can be abusive, especially to women. She advocated the Jewish Agency working with the Israeli Ministry of Interior to urge the new government not to undue progress that has been made in recognizing non-Orthodox conversions for the Law of Return.

**Comment about education**. Adam asked why the focus is on universities. He said his Jewish education in America encouraged a love of Israel from a young age and that university studies tend to be academic and not to build an emotional connection. A man (unnamed) addressed this: he said Israeli school principals and schoolteachers are undergoing training in education about Peoplehood/Diaspora Jewry including a trip to New York and a program in grades 1-7, then will start in high schools. Then Jonathan (?) said the Israeli Ministry of Education controls what happens in schools, while universities have more freedom. That makes it easier to focus on universities. He said that JPPI signed a contract with the current (outgoing) Ministry of Education to prepare a civics studies course for high school students. Their course is professional, objectives, shows many views.

Rabbi Eliezer said he felt angst about the previous government. He notes that in Australia 85% of Jewish children attend Jewish day schools, which leads to significantly different rates of intermarriage, Jewish involvement, etc. Therefore it is essential to strengthen Jewish Diaspora education and celebration of holidays. Communities that invest in Jewish education have stronger connections to the Jewish people, Judaism, and Israel.

A woman (Leah?) spoke about building trust among Diaspora communities and within Israel. Jonathan suggested making the Declaration of Independence of the State of Israel a centerpiece for Jewish education, emphasizing equality.

Rav Howard (?) said that for almost 75 years the State of Israel has been the anchor of Jewish identity and that for Israel to take a more active role is a valuable development. He referred to previous comments on trust between Haredi and non-Haredi communities and that not everyone views the State of Israel and its Declaration of Independence as holy. For some the Torah is the holy central document, and that education centered on the Torah is a basic need. He said they must understand each other’s moments of angst, not to just highlight their own. He noted that ministers in the previous Israeli government insulted the Haredi population. The Diaspora should not mimic the Israeli government but should make Israel a rallying point for unity.

Steve Ornich, from a Conservative synagogue in Toronto, pointed out that the Israeli government has isolated certain communities and this raises existential angst for left-of-center communities. He emphasized the importance of meetings (mifgashim), people from different communities sitting together, speaking, as a transformative experience among the Jewish people in Israel and the Diaspora.

Doron Peretz reinforced the need for supporting education and the importance of people with different views coming together as in the current forum.

Martine closed the meeting with a reminder of the next day’s activities and a presentation on classroom education. She summarized the emphasis on tolerance, peoplehood, solidarity, shared resources, unity, understanding, trust, learning, meeting, respect, education, Torah as elements that unite the Jewish people. She thanked Yedidya and Shmuel for their presentation.