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Mr. Jerry Silverman
President and Chief Executive Officer
The Jewish Federations of North America
25 Broadway, 17th Floor
New York, NY 10004

Dear Mr. Silverman,

We are delighted to see that the General Assembly of the Jewish Federations of North America is returning to Israel once again, and that you are anxious to confront the differences that separate Israeli Jews from their non-Orthodox brethren in North America. This is of special concern to us, because many of these same issues divide the Orthodox and non-Orthodox communities here in America itself. Thus the Federations have the opportunity to increase understanding on both sides of the Atlantic.

Your website and program begin by describing several of these differences, as outlined by recent Pew Research Center and AJC surveys: while fully 50% of Jews in North America describe themselves as "liberal," only 8% of Israelis say likewise. Only a minority of Israelis think that non-Orthodox rabbis should officiate at Jewish ceremonies, or that Israel can coexist with an independent Palestinian state — positions adopted by a clear majority of North American non-Orthodox Jewry.

Yet although you entitle the program "Israel and the Diaspora: We Need to Talk," we were surprised to see a program that seems to place far less emphasis upon understanding Israelis' different positions than how best to communicate American views. Especially when one considers that Israel is the topic — its security, its religious practice, and its future — this program strikes a discordant note.

There is a session on "Peace-Process Realities," but none addressing the majority belief among Israelis that any such process proved itself a failure long ago. The General Assembly in Israel would be an opportune time to hear this from Israelis, most of whom regard "talk" as of little value while the greater Arab populace is being educated to admire terrorists, hate Jews and wage war. To most Israelis, "Peace-Process Alternatives" would be a more appropriate topic.

Israel's blossoming traditional community is acknowledged in your program only as one that needs to be "integrated," not as an outstanding model and resource for Jewish life. Surveys report that the Haredim are the happiest and least-stressed population segment in Israel, despite having a significantly lower average income. Recent articles by traditional and even secular Israelis have recognized that the Haredim greatly contribute to Israel's distinctly Jewish character. Is none of this worthy of Federation interest?

Perhaps most stunning to us, the General Assembly looks forward to discussing “the Business of Religious Pluralism” — in a session entitled “Market Forces.” One could easily read that as outlining a business plan to impose changes to Israel’s religious practices through economic coercion. Consider that cynics have long asserted that “religious” agitation by American liberal leaders is merely a “business” endeavor, creating an artificial cause around which to rally support from their rapidly-assimilating members. Is it truly your intent to strengthen this claim?

What makes all of the odd choices of topics particularly painful is the one omitted, the topic that the upcoming GA seems to avoid entirely: the future of North American Jewry, which one would imagine to be the single most important concern of the Jewish Federations of North America. Why are the Federations not looking to Israel for successful models for Jewish growth?

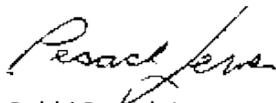
As things stand today, “secular” Israelis participate far more frequently in Jewish practices than their brethren affiliated with Reform and Conservative synagogues in America. Of even greater significance is that this gulf is widening: Israelis are adopting more traditional practices into their lives, while younger American Jews make observances a lower priority than did previous generations.

What could American Jews learn from Israel’s communal practices and educational programming that might reverse the collapse of non-Orthodox Judaism in America? Israel has a surfeit of Rabbinic scholars, creative thinkers and master teachers able to articulate successful models for strengthening Jewish communities. Would not Federation leaders benefit from even one workshop offering their guidance?

North American Federation leaders will have a special opportunity to engage in a dialogue with their Israeli counterparts. But perhaps instead of merely saying “We Need to Talk,” should not the Federations recognize that *they still more urgently need to listen?*

We would welcome any opportunity to further discuss these concerns, and even more, to assist in translating any of them into practical changes to benefit attendees to the upcoming General Assembly.

Yours Sincerely,



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cc: Judy Altenberg, Mission Co-Chair
Bruce Plotkin, Mission Co-Chair
General Assembly in Israel 2018