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12 Tevet 5783
January 5, 2023

Mark Wilf
Chair, Board of Governors
The Jewish Agency for Israel
633 Third Avenue, 21st Floor
New York, NY 10017

Dear Mr. Wilf,

We are writing to express our concern and disappointment regarding the recent letter sent to Prime Minister Netanyahu by you and leadership of the Jewish Agency, the World Zionist Organization, Keren HaYesod and the Jewish Federations of North America. All of these bodies were chartered and are intended to represent all mainstream Jewish groups. Indeed, they are among the few Jewish organizations to welcome full diversity of opinion, providing space for internal debate and discussion.

Thus our disappointment that the views of so many constituents—including both the vast majority of America's rabbis, and the apparent majority of voters in the last World Zionist Congress election—were not reflected in the letter, and there was no effort to solicit input from diverse voices within the Jewish community.

Most of all, we are confounded by what seems to be a clear distortion of Israeli history found in your letter. You express a desire to preserve the "status quo" on conversion and the Law of Return, yet refer not to where things stand at this moment, a colloquial status quo, but to "the long-standing status quo on religious affairs" in Israel.

To anyone familiar with Israel's history, that choice of language is an unmistakable reference to the Status Quo Agreement, a crucial written understanding between David Ben-Gurion and Agudath Israel and other religious parties prior to Israel's formation. That Agreement stipulated that the coming state would protect Jewish Law regarding public Sabbath observance and Kashrus, provide a "Law of Return" for those with a Jewish mother or those who underwent Jewish conversion, and place Jewish marriage and divorce under the authority of the religious courts.

This precious Agreement, enabling co-existence and unity between Israel's disparate Jewish constituencies, was badly undermined over time by secular parties and with pressure from American groups. Directly contrary to the implications of your letter, the new Netanyahu government appears to have proposed only changes that will restore respect for that Status Quo.

The Status Quo Agreement was violated when Israel's secular bodies decided to redefine "Jewish conversion" away from how it was obviously understood by Ben-Gurion and the religious parties in their agreement—the definition found in Maimonides, the Code of Jewish Law, and every legal code since

Talmudic times. It was fully trampled when the Law of Return was extended to those with a single Jewish grandparent, such that the vast majority of immigrants from countries of the former Soviet Union today are not Jewish by any definition.

Indeed, the immediately-previous government further dispensed with the Status Quo Agreement by turning kosher certification from a genuine standard set by Israel's Chief Rabbinate into a leaderless, standard-free bureaucracy—such that no serious Kosher consumer can so much as pick up a falafel at a street vendor under local Israeli government certification without tedious investigation of the rabbi and supervision in that location. That government attempted to start public transportation on the Sabbath, in open violation of the Agreement. And, despite Ben-Gurion's promise not to interfere with the religious principles or conscience of any Jewish sub-group, the previous government even acted to deprive individual consumers of access to "kosher phones" as directed by their rabbinic advisors.

The reaction of the Jewish Agency, WZO, JFNA et al. to all of the foregoing was: silence, silence, and more silence. So how can you now claim to be so interested in Israel's "long-standing status quo on religious affairs?"

Indeed, the Jewish Agency and the JFNA have openly disparaged the status quo in recent years, calling for the Western Wall plaza, developed and structured after 1967 to respond to public demand for a place for traditional prayer at the site, to be altered to satisfy the political concerns of North American liberal groups. Today, constituent bodies demand that a space be provided that is only and uniquely for atraditional prayer, undisturbed, while simultaneously demanding that no such space be provided for traditional, observant women, no matter how obvious the hypocrisy and misogyny of these two contradictory positions.

Though it is not central to our letter, we wish to also correct the record on another key point. You state that Jewish unity "explains the miracle of our survival as a people and as a nation." This is fundamentally erroneous. The Jewish nation survived many periods of tragic disunity. Jews can claim no special unity superior to those of the Persian, Roman, Viking, and other cultures now relegated to the history books. What we have, that no other society has, is the Torah.


Indeed, the recent celebration of Chanukah commemorates a time when one, Hellenized segment of the Jewish population attempted to force all Jews to unify under its banner, and the oppressed, faithful Jews, who wished to follow traditional Judaism and the Torah, rebelled into civil war. The Jewish nation owes its very survival, today, to their rejection of unity without Torah.

We strongly encourage you to consider if you truly have the backing of those Jews most focused upon Israel, such as the WZO voters and America's rabbinic leaders, in future letters.

Yours sincerely,



Rabbi Yoel Schonfeld
President



Rabbi Yaakov Menken
Managing Director

cc: all signatories