

# UNITY, NOT UNIFORM

In just six years, NADAV has saved one of Israel's most important museums and has been instrumental in promoting the idea of Jewish Peoplehood worldwide. To find out more, we spoke to the people behind this visionary fund / Dan Savery Raz



Irina Nevzlin Kogan

Usually, when people make aliyah there is a period of adjustment to life in Israel. But Russian-born philanthropist and businessman Leonid Nevzlin hit the ground running. Since arriving from Moscow in 2003, he has been appointed a member of the Board of Governors of the Hebrew University, Tel Aviv University and the Jewish Agency for Israel. Nevzlin also founded the NADAV Fund, which saved Beit Hatfutsot (formerly known as The Museum of the Jewish Diaspora) from closing and he recently donated a further \$6 million dollars to the new Museum of the Jewish People at Beit Hatfutsot.

Now it seems that his daughter, Irina Nevzlin Kogan, is following in his philanthropic footsteps. Since making aliyah in 2006, she has founded the Nevzlin Family Foundation, which directly assists children with cancer and blood diseases, and then launched the Israeli Center for Better Childhood. Today Irina has a young family of her own and is also the President of NADAV, an organization that she feels passionate about. But it wasn't always going to be this way.

Growing up in Russia, Irina didn't un-

derstand her father's concern for the Jewish community. "The age gap between us is very small (19 years), but the generational gap is huge," says Irina. "He was born when it was very hard to have any connection to Judaism, whereas I studied at a Jewish school."

While her father was President of the Russian Jewish Congress, Irina was embarking on a business career. She studied economics in Moscow before working in government relations and developing international strategies for major companies. She lived and worked in London for three years and then decided to move to Israel, although she says it wasn't only for Zionist reasons. "All my family had gradually moved to Israel," she explains. "My father suggested that I go into the charity world. I started by doing one day a week, then I got more and more involved until it became my full-time job."

## Exploring the Jewish world

Instead of the business world, Irina Nevzlin Kogan now puts most of her time and energy into supporting the Jewish people. "I'm happy to use my professional skills and experience



The NADAV Fund team

in something that is very ideologically natural for me," she says. But what exactly is the Jewish people? "I think it is the feeling of family, the feeling of someone who will take care of you," Irina answers. "Of course, I'm talking as someone who made aliyah."

She adds that there tends to be a big difference between Jews in the Diaspora and Jews in Israel. "If you look at the American Jewish community, many people feel proud to be both Jewish and American and this doesn't cause a conflict of interest for most. But in Israel, the Jewish agenda is not always popular."



Leonid Nevzlin (right) with the late Senator Tom Lantos



Apart from supporting the regeneration of Beit Hatfutsot, the NADAV Fund also organizes conferences and initiatives that encourage discussions on Jewish Peoplehood, and one theme that often arises is Jewish leadership. “We don’t run leadership programs but we are moving in that direction,” says Irina. She explains that NADAV helps to bring influential speakers to Israel, such as Professor William Duggan from Columbia University. Duggan is the author of many books, including ‘Strategic Intuition: The Creative Spark in Human Achievement,’ which focuses on how the mind can make giant leaps by combining existing ideas with new ways to solve a problem. “We invited him to Israel together with the Wexner Foundation, and the Rabin Center organized his lecture for an audience of young Israeli leaders and MBA students,” she says. “We try and support conferences that inspire leadership.”

Working in partnership with the Jewish Agency for Israel and the Jewish Federation of New York, NADAV forms part of the Jewish Peoplehood Hub. Louisa Valitsky, NADAV’s Project Manager, explains: “The Hub is a triple initiative of a think-tank, program incubator and a creative center that deals with the issue of Jewish Peoplehood. On the one hand we are researching what is Jewish Peoplehood and on the other hand we are initiating projects to make Peoplehood happen.”

Last February, NADAV initiated a panel at the Herzliya Conference that dealt with the issue and provided a platform for the Jewish

Peoplehood Index. The Index was an innovative new survey that examined the connection between Jews in Israel and in America. This survey (of 18+ adults) had some groundbreaking results, showing that both societies felt that the other was the spiritual center of the Jewish people, that Israelis were more open to inter-marriage and that religiosity was more muted in Israel.

NADAV also supports the Jewish People Policy Planning Institute, and this year

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We’re not a religion that has a state; we’re a people that has a state, and we’re a people that also has a religion, culture and language

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Leonid Nevzlin was appointed the Associate Chairman of JPPPI’s Board of Directors and Professional Guiding Council. But the biggest project is still Beit Hatfutsot.

### A new museum

The museum, located on the Tel Aviv University campus, has existed for over 30 years and tells the story of the Jewish Diaspora

up until the State of Israel was declared in 1948. Now it is expanding to tell the ongoing story of the Jewish People through the ages.

“At first, we supported Beit Hatfutsot when it was at the point of economic collapse,” says Valitsky, “but then we started working closely with developing the museum and now we are in the middle of building a completely new museum. This process is supported by the Government of Israel.”

Indeed, great changes are underfoot, largely thanks to the backing of NADAV and Leonid Nevzlin. To underline this bold new direction, earlier this year the museum was renamed ‘Beit Hatfutsot - the Museum of the Jewish People.’ Nevzlin’s recent \$6 million donation kick-started a fundraising campaign for building the new museum, which is estimated to cost \$24 million. Speaking at an event at Beit Hatfutsot to celebrate his 50th birthday in September this year, Leonid Nevzlin said, “The new museum will be one of the principal tools available to us for ensuring the future of the Jewish People and its prosperity. I believe that visitors at the museum will not only be moved emotionally, but it will also teach them about their Jewish roots, and succeed in connecting them with the collective story of the Jewish people.”

NADAV’s biggest mission is to ensure that Beit Hatfutsot re-opens its permanent exhibitions in 2012. Spread out over three floors, when completed it will be the largest experimental museum in Israel and the first museum of the Jewish people. However, →



Computer model of the new Museum of the Jewish People at Beit Hatfutsot

← interestingly, Louisa Valitsky says that saving Beit Hatfutsot is not NADAV's crowning achievement. "Our biggest achievement is generally promoting the idea of Jewish Peoplehood," she states. "NADAV was one of the first organizations that started discussing it and now this idea is being talked about in all corners of the Jewish world."

### A diverse people

The notion of Jewish Peoplehood is a complicated one and means different things to different people. "One of the biggest problems is the question of how Jews differentiate themselves in different ways," says Avraham Infeld, NADAV's Senior Consultant on Jewish Peoplehood. "There are places where Judaism is defined as a religion and in purely religious terms. If you go to the United States and ask the average person 'What is a Jew?', he will say it's like being a Catholic, Protestant or Muslim; it's defined in completely religious terms. But ask a Zionist here in Israel and they'll define Jews as a nation. So we have a problem, we want to define ourselves for future generations."

When asked what unites Jews worldwide, Infeld says, "It is a people or family, with a very particular culture and way of viewing the world." Yet, within this unity there is great diversity and pluralism, which Infeld recognizes: "Look, we're not all going to be uniform or the same. We're not all going to become Chabadniks or make aliyah or become Reform Jews. The question is, can we still be unified as well as keep our different ways?"

So where do converts fit into this idea of Peoplehood? "The term 'conversion' causes many questions because you can convert to a religion but you cannot convert to a people," he says. "So the use of the term 'conversion'

is confusing and undermines the sense of Peoplehood. But if we look at the Hebrew term 'giur', it doesn't mean conversion; it comes from a root that means someone who ties his lot to a people. It's a totally different concept."

"Very often people try to find the lowest common denominator that unites Jews," he adds, "but NADAV shows that there are a variety of ways in which one can be Jewish."

One organization that has been instrumental in bridging the gap between Jews in the Diaspora and Israel is Taglit-Birthright Israel, also supported by NADAV. "Birthright shows

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Leonid Nevzlin: "The new Beit Hatfutsot museum will be one of the principal tools available to us for ensuring the future of the Jewish People and its prosperity"

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young American Jews another way of being Jewish from what they know," says Infeld. "Coming to Israel can change a kid's perception and make them ask, 'Maybe I should not reject what I was rejecting?'"

### A sense of belonging

Another major issue that is often associated with Peoplehood is the State of Israel and its relationship to Jews around the world. "When I was President of Hillel," says Infeld. "I met

many students who couldn't understand why Judaism had a state. They would ask, 'If Jews are a religion, why do we have a state? What religion in the world has a state?' And they were quite right, because we're not a religion that has a state, we're a people that has a state. And we're a people that also has a religion, culture and language. It's a people with values, a people that has made a commitment to making a better world."

Although he agrees that Israel is an integral part of the life of the Jewish people, Infeld believes that the heart of Judaism lies in the concept of Tikun Olam (fixing the world). "The concept of Tikun Olam is central to Jewish daily life," he says. "It's a religion that says, 'I'm not only a religion' and 'I'm not only a nation.'" He defines NADAV's mission as working towards creating a "knowledge-based sense of belonging to the Jewish people." This sense of belonging doesn't refer to some far-off notion, but is based on Jewish heritage, Jewish future and the way that Jews would like to see the world.

In many ways, the work of NADAV is much more than rebuilding a museum. It is a fund that encourages a new Jewish dialogue of pluralism and acceptance. "I'd like for us to develop a sense of respect for each other," says Infeld. "I believe that the Jewish people can create a model of something that is deeply lacking in the world today. And that is the possibility of creating unity without being uniform."

Irina Nevzlin Kogan, NADAV's President, is hopeful about the future of the Jewish people. "Personally I believe in a future in which Jews, wherever they live, feel connected and committed to one another, to our shared history and to our common destiny," she says. "It's not only a vision, but also a difficult challenge, especially considering all the turbulent changes the world is experiencing and the dynamic reality of the Jewish people."

The strengthening of Jewish Peoplehood is a historic mission, and I am proud and excited to contribute my share to this effort. I am so lucky to be surrounded by a wonderful team of experts. The personal and professional connections among us, and the young energy and enthusiasm of the people at the NADAV Fund, as well as their vast experience in the Jewish world, give me a great deal of hope and optimism for the future." In conclusion, says Irina, "I hope that, together with many others, we will succeed in assuring the future and the prosperity of the Jewish people." ■

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For further information on the NADAV Fund and projects related to Jewish Peoplehood, please visit [www.nadavfund.org.il](http://www.nadavfund.org.il).