

# Finding Commonality Through Difference - Building Moderate Leadership for Israel's Future

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Dear \_\_\_\_\_,

Since September of last year, the fifteen members of the first cohort of Shaharit and Ne'emanai Torah va'Avodah's leadership initiative in the Religious Zionist community, all of whom are key leaders in one of the most influential communities in Israeli society and politics today, have been meeting with different Israeli communities on a monthly basis - from Russian-Israeli activists to Muslim religious leaders, from activists in Yeruham to academics in Jerusalem. Through these meetings, they are both seeing sides of Israeli society that many of them had never been exposed to before and better understanding their community's relationship with them. Earlier this month, their year culminated in a week-long journey to the heart of the New Jersey and New York communities, as they explored the relationship between their community and American Jewry. Read on for more about what they saw there:



Nearly three weeks have passed since our delegation of leaders from the Religious Zionist community returned from their trip to New Jersey and New York. During this time, the participants, all of whom are key, respected leaders within this community, have begun to digest what they saw and experienced. Notably, three articles by participants have been published in influential media outlets that represent the mainstream of the right-religious community: the [Makor Rishon](#) and [Basheva](#) newspapers, and the blogging platform “[Settlers Online](#).” **One of the participants met with a forum of Rabbis from Tzohar to discuss his impressions and conclusions from the trip. Another met with Rabbi Druckman (perhaps the most influential Rabbi in the Religious Zionist community today) to discuss the failed Western Wall agreement. Two others are going to meet with MK and Union of Right Wing Parties leader Bezalel Smotrich on the same subject.** An additional participant, a senior editor in the leading book publishing press in Israel, began to work on a series of translations of leading American-Jewish thinkers into Hebrew. All is this to say, that a lot of things are happening and moving as a result of this meaningful, complicated trip to the US.



**So, what exactly happened on this trip?**

This was the first time that the majority of the participants really met and got to know American Jewry. The first time that we were exposed to the deep investment of the community in its continuity and its Jewish identity, and to the diversity and richness of Jewish life in the US. The first time that we thought about questions of Jewish education and community life in a setting of separation between religion and state. The first time we experienced the deep, astounding success of the American Jewish community, along with its deep, numerous challenges that such success engenders.

This was the first time that they heard, **directly and without any intermediary**, about all of the pain. The pain of those Israel doesn't recognize as Jewish. The pain of those who feel a deep connection to Israel deep in their soul despite everything, but whose children don't feel this connection. The pain of those who

care about Israel, but who aren't sure if Israel cares about them. You can argue until tomorrow about perspectives and beliefs, but it's impossible to argue with pain.





Our trip was built around a number of different themes that we saw as essential in order for participants to understand Jewish life in the US: Jews as a minority; Jewish minorities; separation between religion and state- the autonomy of religion; what's a federation and what's a community; the history of American Jewry, using Brooklyn as a case study; and what it means to be a Zionist in America.

We met with the heads of religious organizations such as the JTS, the OU, and Yeshivat Hadar. We visited different synagogues - the LGBT synagogue (CBST), B'nai Jeshurun, and the spiritual center of Chabad, along with Orthodox ones. We saw Jewish educational institutions for mainstream and special-needs education. We visited two federations and the massive JCC on the Upper West Side. We met lobby organizations such as AIPAC, J Street, and the AJC. We met with the IAC, who works to connect American Jewry and Israeli-Americans. We met with Hillel to talk about connecting young American Jews to the Jewish community, and we met the Israeli Counsel to New York to learn about his work with the American Jewish community and the Israeli government. These were just a few of the meetings we had as part of a busy and important week, a **week that created a richer and deeper picture for us of the life of American Jews**. The fact that our group all came from the Religious Zionist community allowed us to create a safe space in which we could digest what we saw, and could talk in reference to our community. This also allowed people to focus on learning the reality to which they were exposed, and not on dealing with different inter-group dynamics. The fact that the trip was part of a year-long initiative that dealt with the "five tribes of the Jewish and Israeli community" helped us to connect what we saw to the different issues within Israeli society. **It allowed us to understand and to feel that the issues of the American Jewish community are part and parcel of the divisions and challenges within Israeli society**, and it helped us to see the unity of the Jewish people.

The purpose for this delegation was always very clear: we want to build solidarity among the participants with the whole Jewish people, a solidarity that supersedes disagreements and discord. It's still too early to definitively say, but the first fruits of the trip seem to suggest that the message was delivered. **The "we" of the participants has expanded, and their eyes were opened to the one half of the Jewish people that doesn't live in Israel**. We are convinced that anyone who

dreams of a real change in the relationship between American Jews and Israeli society must deal with the more traditional, religious parts of the Israeli Jewish community, as we fear that they are one of the key factors in the increasing disconnect between these communities. We believe that if we can send additional groups on this journey, we can cause a change in the community conversation among the Religious Zionist (Orthodox) community in Israel, which will lead the community to become more of a partner to the American Jewish community, and strengthen the Jewish people as a whole.

--Tehila Friedman, Religious Zionist Program Director



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