

A Fund for the Future

When three successful Russian entrepreneurs made aliyah in 2003, they decided to put their time, energy and money into strengthening Israel-Diaspora relations. Instead of buying a soccer team, Leonid Nevzlin, Vladimir Dubov and Michael Brudno joined their Hebrew initials - Nun, Daled and Vav - to create the NADAV Fund, which literally means 'donation' / Daniel Savery

Leonid Nevzlin, the initiator and founder of NADAV, made his fortune during Russia's privatization in the 1990s but now concentrates on his philanthropic activities. Sitting in his ultra-modern offices in central Tel Aviv, Nevzlin remains philosophical about philanthropy. "It is very personal," he says, speaking English with a gentle Russian accent. "Some people want to do business all their lives, some want to be scientists, some want to be teachers and some want to be students. For me, making money was only a stage. It was always an aim of my life to work on social projects. I believe that non-government organizations and charities can be so effective that they could help us to develop a more civil, democratic society."

Since its founding in 2003 and through the end of 2007, the NADAV Fund generated \$15 million in grants. The fund is also a partner of the Jewish People Planning Institute and gives grants to the Inter-Disciplinary Center in Herzilya, Tel Aviv University, Taglit-

Birthright Israel and MASA. The Leonid Nevzlin Research Center for Russian and Eastern European Jewry and other charitable organizations. But at the center of all this philanthropic activity is Beth Hatefutsoth (Museum of the Jewish Diaspora). "If you are Jewish, this museum is your roots," says Nevzlin, passionately. "It shows that you not only have 60 years of history but thousands of years in your nation before."

An important institution

Since making aliyah, Nevzlin has been appointed a member of the Board of Trustees of the Hebrew University, Keren Hayesod, the Jewish Agency for Israel and Chairman of the International Board of Governors of Beth Hatefutsoth. In fact, he has been instrumental in rescuing Beth Hatefutsoth from a financial crisis that threatened the museum's existence. The museum, located on the Tel Aviv University campus, faced closure until Ariel

Sharon declared it a national asset and vowed that it would not close in September 2003. Nevzlin was approached by Sharon and by Natan Sharansky and took it upon himself to save Beit Hatefutsoth from this sad fate.

Nevzlin remembers reading stories about the museum's financial situation in the newspapers at the time. "There was a choice either to stay and help the museum or go," he says. "So I decided to stay because symbolically the idea of closing such an important institution as Beth Hatefutsoth was absolutely unthinkable." Today, developing Beth Hatefutsoth, which celebrates its 30th anniversary in 2008, is the main project funded by NADAV. Over the next four years, the fund will donate \$4 million, which will be spent on educational projects and reconstruction, new exhibitions, new technology, improved dining facilities, shopping and entertainment.

"In five years you will see a 100% change," says Nevzlin. "Conceptually, the museum must now work in the same fabric as a business that can import and export exhibitions with other museums around the world."

However, Nevzlin understands that the heart of the museum must still remain the same. "Some things, such as the models of synagogues, are so beautiful that they should be preserved. These models show how different cultures can influence each other. For example, some of the old Spanish synagogues were influenced by Moorish architecture and many Russian synagogues were influenced by the Slavic Orthodox church," he says.

In 2005, the Knesset officially recognized Beth Hatefutsoth as the 'national center for the Jewish community in Israel and abroad' but at present NADAV's vision for the museum has only been half realized. Recent successes include restoring a once unused building that was constructed on the site 15 years ago and is now being used for exhibitions. The permanent exhibition is being upgraded, a new integrated database will soon be launched, the lobby and exhibition halls are being expanded and a new website will be launched later this year. Furthermore, a new exhibition of photographs depicting important events in



A Taglit-Birthright group visits Beth Hatefutsoth

PR Taglit



Leonid Nevzlin

the Jewish world from the 1930s through the 1980s will open, thanks to photographs donated by the Zonenfeld family.

Perestroika

Having grown up under the Soviet regime, Nevzlin understands the true value of freedom of speech and pluralism. Up until 1989, religious communities in Moscow were viewed as anti-social, uneducated and dissidents. "I will tell you openly that in a country like the Soviet Union, there was no possibility to receive objective information in the same way as an educated Western person, so it was a big switch when the world became much more open," he says, pausing to take a sip from his cappuccino. "I didn't know much about other models of social and political life, so I think *perestroika* (economic restructuring) made a big impact on my life. After 1989, when the market became free, I was able to meet partners abroad and visit other Jewish communities."

Born in Moscow in 1959, Nevzlin worked for the Ministry of Geology before he became involved with developing the private sector in Russia. He served in a number of high-ranking positions in both the private and public sectors, eventually becoming Deputy Chairman of the Committee for Foreign Affairs and President of the Russian Jewish Congress in 2001.

Then, two years later, Nevzlin decided to make aliyah with fellow NADAV founders Dubnov and Brudno. "We decided to establish ourselves not just as good citizens of Israel and good Jews, but also as philanthropists," he says. "So we took \$1 million each and created

the NADAV Fund." He says that one of the reasons for immigrating was the fact that his increased philanthropic activities were causing problems with the Putin regime.

Today his parents and both his daughters live in Israel and he recently celebrated the birth of a new grandchild. "Here I have two feelings. I still feel part of the Russian Jewish Diaspora community, but I am also a citizen of Israel and a strong relative of other communities," the social entrepreneur says. "So my main task is to help Jewish people feel part of here, part of Israel and part of one nation."

The concept of peoplehood

Being a Jew in the Diaspora and now in Israel has given Nevzlin a real insight into the complicated issue of peoplehood. He describes the term 'peoplehood' as "a new way of describing what it is to be part of the Jewish nation." He explains that the term relates to all Jews whether they live in Israel, America, Russia or anywhere else.

"We are not a very big nation; let's say modestly there are only 13 million, half here, half in the Diaspora," he adds. "But there should be a lot of bonds and connections with people in the Diaspora because it makes us stronger, not just financially but intellectually. One of the main objectives of NADAV is not only to ensure Israel's continuity but to make the country stronger."

Much of the work funded by NADAV is educational and in 2005 it founded the International School for Jewish Peoplehood Studies (SFJPS), which is located at Beth Hatefuthsoth. SFJPS is the only institu-

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tion in the world solely dedicated to Jewish Peoplehood Studies and last year it welcomed more than 25,000 people.

The school does not just educate university students, but also develops curricula, trains teachers and offers a range of programs for Israeli soldiers as well as for groups from Taglit-birthright, MASA and Israel Experience programs. SFJPS's curriculum includes innovative courses on 'Mapping the Jewish People', 'Jews in their Non-Jewish Environment' and 'Jewish Thought'.

Dr. Shlomi Ravid, Director of SFJPS, says NADAV is an "open-minded partner that understands the importance of the subject and the bigger picture." A life-long kibbutznik, Ravid has been involved in Israel-Diaspora relations for the last 20 years. In the past he has worked for the Kibbutz Movement in New York and a number of Jewish Agency departments, as well as founding the Center for Israel-Diaspora Cultural Relations.

"The language of Jewish nationality has developed," explains Dr. Ravid. "In the past, we spoke in terms of Israel and the Diaspora being a dichotomy. Now we are trying to develop a new language as a whole Jewish people. We are trying to deal with our identity in terms of a collective prism of the Jewish people. It's not an automatic shift. One of the big challenges we face is the term 'peoplehood'. Most Israelis don't know what it means, so we are in the process of trying to figure out what this whole notion of belonging to a people as well as different nationalities means in the 21st century." ■

For further information on various projects relating to Jewish Peoplehood, visit www.nadavfund.org.il.