



Jews from Small Communities in the US at Global Hanukkah Candle Lighting Event:

“We long for direct contact with Israelis to get to know Israeli culture”

Rehovot, Israel, December 15, 2020 — The Ruderman Family Foundation, together with the Jewish Federations of North America (JFNA) and the Ministry of the Diaspora, held a global candle lighting event tonight to celebrate the 6th night of Hanukkah. The event allowed Jews around the world, particularly from small communities in the US, the opportunity to celebrate Hanukkah with Israelis and the entire Jewish people.

The event was a sign of appreciation of small communities in North America for their support of Israel and insistence on keeping their Jewish identity and celebrating the Jewish Holidays, despite the challenges posed by distance and size of community. Jews living in places like Alaska, rural Texas, South Carolina, and Virginia joined the candle lighting. As part of the event, these individuals shared personal Hanukkah stories and discussed the challenges of being a Jew in remote locations, asking the Minister directly to send Israeli *shlichim* (emissaries) to these areas.

Debbie Grashin, who was born and raised in Alaska, thousands of miles from Kosher food or Jewish life, said: “In my heart, I would love to see more education, not only about Judaism but about Israel as a country. Not only to Jews, but to everyone. I would like to hear from groundbreaking scientists and Start-Up companies which showcase Israel.

“Our small community would benefit from a *shaliach* from Israel to connect with our community. I am worried for our impressionable Jewish students that will be entering university, where without a strong background in Judaism and Jewish history, the influences they will face have the potential to turn them off from our heritage. By reaching and teaching them sooner, it will be better for us all.”

Michael Gillette, who lives in Lynchburg, VA, also spoke about the need for his community to engage with Israelis: “We would love the opportunity to meet informally with average Israelis so that we might learn from them what life in Israel really is like day-to-day, to gain their perspective on important issues, and to feel more connected to Israeli culture.”

To this end, Gillette suggested organizing periodic video calls in order to create interpersonal connections between Israelis and isolated Jews living in small communities in the US. Gillette, who argued that Israel should do more to make Jews from around the world feel more valued and respected, cited the example of Israel’s decision to freeze the Western Wall compromise as a move that hurt Diaspora Jewry.

Jay Ruderman, President of the Ruderman Family Foundation, congratulated the participants for their Jewish resiliency: "Given the ongoing struggle with COVID-19 in the United States and around the world, Hanukkah is an opportunity for us to salute and show solidarity with the small Jewish communities scattered across America and find creative ways to preserve Jewish identity, even in remote places, which are usually not spoken about enough. It is inspiring to see how community members maintain their Jewish pride even in difficult conditions and maintain mutual responsibility towards each other even when the pandemic forces people to stay at home. Therefore, now more than ever, we must develop new channels of dialogue with American Jewry and continue to strengthen their connection with Israel."

Minister of the Diaspora **Omer Yankelevich**: "Since entering office, one of my primary missions has been reaching out to the smaller Jewish communities across the world and finding new ways to connect with them. Each community is important and adds its own unique beauty to create the mosaic of the Jewish people."

"Throughout history we proved, time and time again, that when the Jewish people are united and driven by a shared purpose, we prevail. This year has been difficult for everyone and we have sometimes felt like we are in the dark, but if we come together, each person and community with their own unique light and support for one another in true solidarity, we will overcome... Thank you for this unique opportunity to celebrate Hanukkah."

About the Ruderman Family Foundation

The Ruderman Family Foundation is a private philanthropic foundation established in 2002 managed by the Ruderman family. The Foundation operates in the United States and Israel. In the field of Israel-American Jewish relations, the foundation focuses on fostering a sense of mutual commitment between the State of Israel and the Jewish community in the United States. The Foundation aims to raise awareness, generate and disseminate knowledge, and promote positive attitudes among the Israeli public towards the American Jewish community. We believe that the partnership between Israel and the American Jewish community is a strategic asset to the strength and prosperity of Israel and the entire Jewish people.