

I Thought I Knew Israel

By Russell Robinson
CEO, Jewish National Fund

Each time I land at Ben Gurion airport, it feels like I have come home again, just as so many of our People have since Israel was miraculously reborn 74 years ago, and just as they have for the past 4,000 years. It's never lost on me that for the first time in 2,000 years, we have returned to our ancestral soil. A home where Jews can be Jews. Where no one looks at you differently for wearing a yarmulke, yet you can be as secular or observant as you choose. However, what's clear this Yom Ha'atzmaut is that just when you think you know Israel, you discover something new and incredible that our Jewish home has achieved, almost always against the odds.

I knew that Israel cares for people with disabilities, yet when I see the faces and hear the stories of those graduating from our Special in Uniform program, an initiative that empowers people with disabilities to serve in the Israel Defense Forces, my admiration for how our homeland cares for these young people is taken to a whole new level. Because of Jewish National Fund-USA's philanthropic investments, Israel is the only country in the world that enables people with cognitive and physical disabilities to proudly serve their country in uniform.

I knew that Israel had made great strides in helping our environment. However,



Russell Robinson, CEO of Jewish National Fund-USA. Photo: JNF-USA.

never in my wildest dreams did I ever think that our tiny nation, with so many other challenges, could lead the world in water recycling. Yet that's exactly what we did. Through bold leadership and strategic planning, Jewish National Fund-USA invested in hundreds of water reservoirs, recycling centers, and other water related infrastructure, enabling Israel to become the first civilization in history to face-off against a water catastrophe and win.

I also knew that Israel made pretty good falafel. However, I didn't know the depth, breadth, and uniqueness of Israel's culinary scene until Jewish National Fund-USA, together with renowned spice master and chef, Lior Lev Sercarz, embarked on the creation of the Galilee Culinary Institute by

JNF (GCI), located within the Greater Kiryat Shmona Region. Israel is home to over 80 different ethnicities, and students and tourists will visit GCI and experience a culinary revolution like nowhere else in the world. The campus will include a brewery, facilities for chocolate making, baking, and wine/spirit tasting, as well as an outdoor organic farm, orchard, and amphitheater. Future world-renowned chefs will be immersed in a culinary journey from Morocco to Poland, Mexico, Tunisia, and beyond, which are all reflect in the melting pot that is Israel at 74.

I knew that students who attended our Alexander Muss High School in Israel (Muss) come away from the semester abroad experience with a new lifelong

connection to their ancestral soil and people. However, what I have now come to realize is the "multiplier effect." Each of our graduates has their own network of peers, friends, and family, and when they leave Muss, they take with them this extraordinary enthusiasm for Israel, the land, and its people. It's infectious, and they spread their excitement and passion for our homeland throughout their networks. We estimate that each graduate of Muss High School shares their positive experience with at least 150 of their friends. With over 30,000 alumni, that means we have touched over 4.5 million people through Muss.

They say you learn something new every day. And I have to tell you it true! Just when I thought I knew Israel, our homeland finds another way to excite, inspire, or engage me. And as Israel turns 74 years young, the one thing I do know is that it's not just me. Hundreds of thousands of our supporters are discovering the incredible things that they can achieve for the land and people of Israel through our philanthropic investments in the Negev and Galilee - and it's growing every year. Happy birthday Israel, and stay tuned for what's planned for your 75th year - it will be a celebration like you've never seen before.

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