



'The Impact of Identity'

In her new book, Irina Nevzlin offers a road map for bringing together Israeli and Diaspora Jews

By Maayan Hoffman

Irina Nevzlin is a woman on a mission to repair the growing alienation between Israel and Jewish communities around the world.

In her new book, "The Impact of Identity: The Power of Knowing Who You Are," Nevzlin highlights what she believes are three reasons for this rift.

The first: "After thousands of years of imagining our promised land that would unite us all, we finally made it," she explains. "For 70 years now, we have had a State of our own, but we haven't yet figured out how to handle it."

While the utopia was a united Jewish people, she admitted this is not the reality.

The second, is that after a lifetime of being minorities, more than half of the Jewish people are not the majority in their own state.

"Being the majority is a different state of mind," she explained. "Therefore, Israeli Jews as the majority can be less accepting."

Finally, as she explains in her book, the Jewish people face the challenge of "we do not really know ourselves and we also do not really know each other."

"It is like when you meet distant relatives at a family event, and yes, you are acquainted, but it doesn't mean you know anything about their lives," she continued. "This is a very deep problem."

However, Nevzlin, in her passionate optimism, does not believe that it must be a problem. She said that although the Jewish people look different today than in the past, they are no less Jewish and no less a people.

“We were a people for 5,000 years,” she said. “We were minorities scattered around the world, but what connected us was a set of ideas and values.”

Nevzlin recounted a significant experience in her own life that illustrates the importance of maintaining one's roots and having a connection to one's own group.

“I moved to London on a Thursday and began work on the following Monday,” she writes in her book. “On Friday afternoon, I was approached by a colleague, who said to me, with a twinkle in his eye, ‘Please come to our family for dinner tonight.’”

Nevzlin's colleague had realized that she was Jewish, and had invited her for dinner, simply because she was Jewish.

“He invited me because he felt a responsibility, because I was a young Jewish professional alone in the city.”

Nevzlin said that the idea that she had an extended Jewish family wherever she might go, just because of her Jewish ethnic identity, was a transformative moment in her life.

“I know that I belong to something,” she said. “On a deeper level, I am not alone, but part of something, part of a network.”

She said tackling the tension between Jews in Israel and the Diaspora is an issue that “requires immediate intervention and has to be done from the roots.”

First, she said, “let us get to know ourselves. Second, let us accept that there will always be differences. Third, let us talk to get to know each other better.”

But she said that talking is not enough. Fifty years before the State of Israel was founded, Theodore Herzl laid out a vision for the country, a vision that involved not only the grandiose idea that a Jewish people would live in a Jewish land, but one that included concrete ideas and a roadmap for how to successfully make it happen.

“It is now time to create ‘Herzl Volume 2,’” she noted. “‘Herzl Volume 2’ is a new vision for Israel and the Jewish people that includes both universal values as well as practical solutions... Let us each one of us take responsibility for our future, strengthen the feeling of belonging and connect to our mutual roots.

“This is not a crisis,” Nevzlin continued. “We just need to figure it out.”

Nevzlin has done this before – in fact, she has been a visionary and entrepreneur since she was a little girl growing up in Moscow, where she was born to parents who worked as engineers in 1978.

She received a bachelor’s degree in 1999 and a master’s degree in 2001 in economics at Moscow State University. While studying, she worked from 1997 to 2000 at Sibintek, a hi-tech company where she specialized in managing projects in the field of digitalization. The aim of the program was to build a new Russia.

In 2005, she moved to London to work as an independent communications consultant for commercial entities and nonprofit organizations. She said her decision to relocate was based not only on professional considerations but an understanding that her homeland, under Vladimir Putin, was deteriorating.

She said that she saw the country “trampling upon liberal values and freedoms that she held dear” and that these developments formed the basis of the worldview she has held ever since: one that champions human rights, freedom of speech and the rule of law.

In 2006, at the age of 28, Nevzlin immigrated to Israel and founded and managed the Israel Center for Better Childhood, which is dedicated to improving the welfare of children and youth in Israel in need of medical attention and educational support.

She also helps lead the Nadav Foundation, founded by her father, Leonid Nevzlin, which works to promote projects that build a sense of Jewish peoplehood.

In 2017, Nevzlin was named one of the most influential Jews in Israel by *The Jerusalem Post*.

But her greatest passion today is her work as chair of the board of the Museum of the Jewish People. In her role, she has helped transform the museum, encouraging it to place greater emphasis on developing a sense of belonging among the Jewish

people, on forging a stronger Jewish identity, on strengthening diverse ties connecting Jews throughout the world and on unifying Jews while recognizing and celebrating the different narratives that reflect Jewish diversity – similar messages to those conveyed in her new book.

Identities have become much more difficult to define, Nevzlin explained. Yet, she said it is defining and understanding one's ethnic identity that can provide a needed base and stability in a world that is changing quickly. She said her book is meant to help people have the important conversation about who they are and where they belong – a conversation she believes should start with their parents from a young age.

“Any other identity in your life can be changed,” she explained. “You can change the country in which you live, your religion, your language – even your gender,” Nevzlin said. “But the one thing that you can't change is your ethnic identity. If you are born Italian, you will die Italian. It is the one place that is forever yours. Even if you decide to change it, you cannot.

“If you want to be stronger, more grounded and better balanced, you'd better connect to that part which is unchangeable,” she stressed.

In her book, Nevzlin helps readers to see the importance of developing and preserving both self-identity and collective identity, and how developing these two identities are essential skills required to live a life of meaning. Understanding one's identity, Nevzlin said, is a process, not an end result.

“It involves a complex, ongoing and dynamic strategy of asking, thinking, making choices and taking responsibility for the results,” she wrote in her book. “One's personal identity defines who we are and how we define ourselves as individuals. Knowing who we truly are is the ultimate freedom.”

“The Impact of Identity: The Power of Knowing Who You Are” is available on Amazon.

<https://ejewishphilanthropy.com/the-impact-of-identity/>