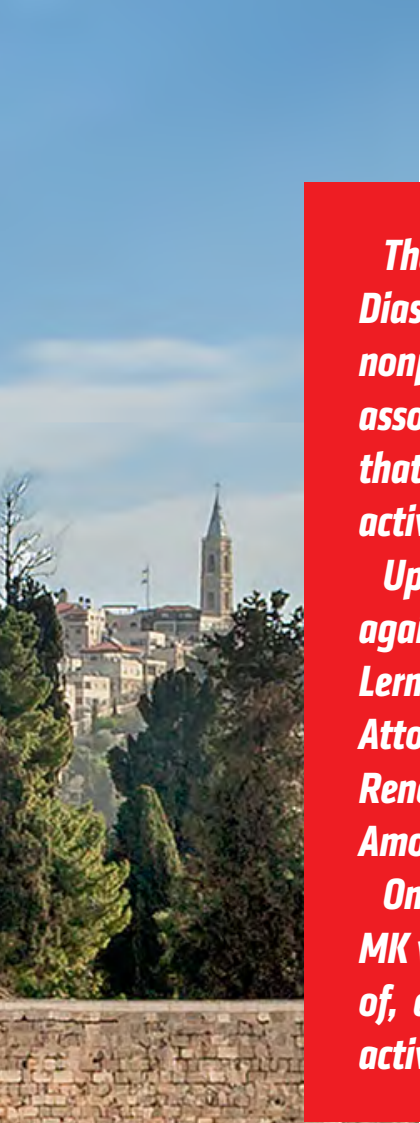


by *Yossi Golds*

FREEZE THE BUDGET, OPEN AN INQUIRY



The behavior of the head of the “Jewish Renewal” arm of the Diaspora Ministry, MK Gilad Kariv, toward Reform-supporting nonprofit Panim, an organization with which he had been associated, was eyebrow-raising. The special investigative report that followed brought shocking allegations regarding Panim’s activities to light.

Upon learning of this, RABBI PESACH LERNER, a valiant crusader against anti-Orthodox entities, raised a hue and a cry. Rabbi Lerner, as well as MK Yitzhak Pindrus, sent urgent requests to the Attorney General demanding that government funding to “Jewish Renewal” be suspended and a criminal investigation be opened. Among the allegations are breach of trust and conflict of interest.

One can just imagine what would have happened if a chareidi MK were to transfer money to an organization that he is a member of, especially outside the standard procedure required for such activities.



RABBI PESACH LERNER, Chairman of Eretz Hakodesh, sent an urgent letter on Friday to the Attorney General, Gali Baharav Meara, and to the Knesset’s legal advisor, Sagit Afik, with a demand that they open an immediate inquiry and suspend the budget allocations for the “Jewish Renewal” administration in the Diaspora Ministry. The letter came following serious allegations of conflict of interest and breach of trust by Reform MK Gilad Kariv, and the exposure of the connection between Kariv and the Panim organization that was chosen to operate the initiative.



Rabbi Lerner has been a valiant crusader against entities that promote Reform Judaism. The letters came following an investigative report released on Friday by journalist Kalman Liebskind in *Maariv*, in which he shared the machinations of this incident. From the report, it is evident how the “Jewish Renewal” administration, which has been allocated a budget of NIS 60 million, was established for activities associated with Reform groups in Israel. All this was done while concealing personal ties between the administration and Kariv, in addition to the fact that the organization is a small one, with minimal financial turnover and without any proof of its activities. Most importantly, there was no clear explanation as to why such activities are under the purview of the Diaspora Ministry and Minister Nachman Shai from the Labor Party.



Yonatan Sindel/Flash90
Nachman Shai, Israel's
Minister of Diaspora
Affairs, attends
the Jewish People's
Lobby, at the Knesset,
November 15, 2021.

Liebskind describes how on August 2, 2021, when the State budget for 2022 was approved by the government, it included an allocation for a Jewish renewal administration. At that time, the Panim organization began to celebrate this allocation.

The executive director of the organization, Yotam Brom, himself a Labor party member, described then how “I met with MK Gilad Kariv. I made a number of suggestions for guidelines and projects, and he rejected them all and urged me to focus on one thing: establishing a department for Jewish renewal. From that point on, we worked day and night on the figures, on the wording of the position papers, and on meetings with many partners to approve the establishment of the new department and to justify the funding for the activities of the Israeli Jewish organizations.”

But while this information was openly publicized, what was kept under wraps was that Gilad Kariv was not just an external supporter of the cause. He is actually a member of the administrative board of the Panim organization. He remained a board member even after being elected to the Knesset, and invited the executive director of the organization to speak as the host at the establishment of the lobby that he leads in the Knesset and which is involved in “religious freedom” and “Jewish renewal,” names that have very specific connotations.

Kariv told the Knesset members who were present at the meeting of the lobby on October 25, 2021, that he was leaving Panim upon his election to the Knesset. But according to the report, he was misleading the participants. In response to a query by Liebskind, Kariv admitted that he had remained a board member until the end of 2021, more than two months after that meeting in the Knesset. Likewise, the records of the Israel Corporations Authority indicate that Kariv continued to serve as a board member for nearly nine months after joining the

Knesset. But Kariv claimed in response that although he had remained a formal member, he did not participate in board meetings after his election.

However, after the budget passed, Kariv boasted that “among the countless budget items that were approved yesterday in the government, there is one line concealed there that is the beginning of a revolution: government funding for the establishment and operation of a department for Jewish renewal in the Diaspora Ministry. The establishment of this department was included in the coalition agreements of the Labor party.”

An Obscure Legal Solution

The report further exposed that although the approval at the time was only in principle, and it still needed to be offered in an official bidding tender, Panim was already deep into the activities and continued to promote themselves. The executive director himself publicized how “we met with the professional teams in the Diaspora Ministry in order to put into action the dream that has become a reality.”

Officially, Panim was selected to lead this project only a few months later, and only then was the agreement between the Diaspora Ministry and Panim officially approved. The ministry and the organization, it was agreed, would work together for “Jewish renewal” initiatives. The ministry would fund the activities to the tune of NIS 30 million, concurrent to the identical sum that the organization would need to raise itself.

Another issue raised in the report is that the initiative takes place under the auspices of the Diaspora Ministry, even though this ministry is meant to address issues of the Diaspora, not matters in Israel. The Labor party took advantage of the appointment of Nachman Shai as a minister on its behalf in the Ministry in order to use him to promote this initiative. In order to overcome the legal difficulties of doing this, the tender committee of the Ministry found an obscure solu-

tion from a government decision from 13 years ago. At the time it was decided to transfer to the Information and Diaspora Ministry, as it was then called, various domains of activity, including “social initiatives and the Diaspora.” Because no one had altered this definition since then, there was no problem for the Diaspora Ministry to promote “social” initiatives, even if they are in Israel. Needless to say, this is a distorted definition, because the word “social” can include most of the work of the Welfare, Religious Affairs and Education Ministries, among others.

Moreover, Liebskind then delves into the identity and profile of Panim, which had landed such a windfall. Liebskind shows that it’s a very small organization. It employs all of two people and a few volunteers. Its financial turnover from activities in 2021 was NIS 696,000, of which NIS 317,000 were for payroll and general expenses. A year earlier, those numbers were NIS 632,000, of which NIS 312,000 were for payroll and general expenses. In a normal situation, an organization like this has no chance of getting tens of millions of shekels from the state without proving financial viability. All this was done, as noted, without a tender.

‘Serious Concern of Lack of Integrity’

Following the report, MK Rabbi Yitzchak Pindrus sent an urgent letter to the attorney general and the Knesset’s legal advisor, writing, “In light of the serious finding, the question arises if it is conceivable that in a democratic system, which operates according to proper management regulations, there is a way to have such a severe conflict of interest involving sums of tens of millions of shekels! This is all without Kariv making the effort to even declare — for the optics — that there is a conflict of interest at play. Are these the standards of allocating public funds for coalition purposes, without any oversight?”

Rabbi Pindrus further wrote that “the severity of these matters is even more pronounced when you examine them in light of the involvement and declarations of MK Kariv about the allocation of money for a cause that is so important to him. Is it conceivable that the proper administrative rules and conflict of interest regulations have been trampled on in order to allow MK Kariv to transfer coalition funds in a process that exempts it from a tender, and determining that tens of millions of shekels should be allocated to an organization in which he served until a short time ago — and the chairman of the orga-

Olivier Fitoussi/Flash90

MK Yitzhak Pindrus attends a discussion at the Knesset on June 15.



nization is a Labor party member? In light of the severity of these matters, I appeal to you with this urgent request to instruct that the funding should be frozen until further investigation, both because of the involvement of MK Kariv in preparing the budget, and because of the work of the tender committee, which chose to approve the agreement with Panim in such a baffling way.”

In a letter sent at the same time by Rabbi Lerner to the Attorney General, he notes that “the connection with Panim to the tune of NIS 60 million is tainted with severe conflict of interest and lack of integrity, which raise serious concerns of ethical violations. As such, we appeal to you to instruct that the connection between the two should be frozen, and that you order a criminal inquiry involving Panim and MK Kariv. Likewise, we ask that you transmit for our perusal every decision, protocol or other ruling that you or your proxy makes regarding these coalition funds or with regard to the connection with Panim.”

MK Rabbi Pindrus said, “Again, the hypocrisy of those who deny *Toras Moshe* has come to light. They are always talking about proper administration and preserving the legal system, but they really

mean that all in order to fight against the Torah and those who maintain it; they are not obligated by any of this. I can just imagine to myself what would have happened if a *chareidi* MK had transferred money to an organization that he is a member of, which has no significant activity aside for money transferred to it. I imagine he’d already be detained until the end of proceedings against him.”

‘The Most Suitable Entity’

In response to the report in *Maariv*, MK Kariv, who was quoted in the report, stated, “When I was chosen to Knesset, I ended my active work on the board of the Panim organization. Formally, my term concluded at the end of 2021. The joint initiative of the Diaspora Ministry and the Panim organization came to fruition during 2022. The selection of Panim and the connection with it was carried out by the professional echelons of the Diaspora Ministry without any involvement from me in the work processes. I’m very proud of my contribution to the government decision to make a significant budget allocation to encourage pluralistic Jewish renewal in Israel, and of my deep connections with various renewal organizations. For many decades,



the Israeli government discriminated against secular and liberal Jewry when allocating resources and issuing tenders and joint initiatives. All the government entities involved in Jewish culture work had a clear Orthodox orientation, and I [consider it a] blessing that for the first time, there has been a government response to other expressions as well.”

Yet, all this does not answer the hard questions. The Diaspora Ministry responded to the report as follows: “In accordance with the coalition agreement of June 2021, the Diaspora Ministry was tasked with establishing a department for Jewish renewal. After extensive staff work, which took a number of months, and a close examination of a number of options, the Ministry decided to establish a Jewish renewal administration jointly with the Panim organization, the umbrella organization for Jewish renewal in Israel. Panim was chosen because it was the most suitable organization and met the criteria that were set for partnership in the initiative. These include deep familiarity with the area of involvement and the ability to provide supplementary funding to match the government contribution. The connection with Panim was approved by all the elements in the Diaspora and Finance Ministries. The initiative was publicized for public responses, and no reservations were filed. The process of establishing the administration was conducted according to the relevant laws and procedures, and the protocols of the committees were publicized online by the government Acquisitions Administration.”

Said Rabbi Lerner in response, “The facts do not seem to agree with the Ministry of Diaspora’s response. As clearly delineated in our complaint, the entire process deviated from legal protocol, was hidden from public view and was tainted from the start. We expect the Ministry of Justice, the office of the state examiner and the ethics committee of the Knesset to fully examine this ‘deal.’ We have asked that the funds be frozen and that MK Gilad Kariv be investigated.” ■

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LIKE A CAT

Rav Gedalya Eiseman, zt”l, the Mashgiach of Kol Torah in Yerushalayim, was once walking home from Shacharis along with a talmid. As they passed a large garbage dumpster, they heard a cat purring. No unusual sight for the streets of Yerushalayim.

But, Rav Gedalya stopped and turned to his talmid. “Do you know,” he said, “that this cat is talking to us? Do you understand what the cats tell us?”

The talmid was quiet. He had no idea what the Mashgiach was getting at.

“The cats look up toward us men and say, ‘Why do you consider yourself greater than us? We are wealthy compared to you! Our situation is much better. You see, when a human being is hungry, he must go through much hassle to prepare his food. First, he must go to the store and hope that he will find the products he is looking for on the shelves. He must carry the bags home and begin the cooking process. Then he must set the table with a plate, fork, and knife. And, sometimes, a guest will walk in just then and he will have to share his food.’

“But we, cats, don’t have to go through any of that! We simply run up to the garbage dumpster and find whatever

we like. We can eat to our hearts’ content without investing any effort! You must agree that we are better off than you, mortal men!”

Rav Gedalya turned to his talmid and explained, “Truthfully, aren’t the cats right? They don’t lack anything and they have no boundaries. They can eat whatever, whenever, wherever. But, at the end of the day, their sustenance comes from the dumps. They feed on dirt and trash that smells so bad that we people would run across the street...”

Finally, Rav Gedalya explained what he was getting at. “Those who don’t carry the full yoke of Torah and mitzvos look toward us the same way. They mock us and proudly feel that they are better off than us – living a life without any limitations or restrictions. They claim to be happier because they have nothing holding them back.

“Yet, an ehrliche Yid will look upon such permissiveness and realize that such an attitude is much like the cats’. True, they have whatever they want – but it all comes from the dumps, and smells like the dumps. In contrast, a yarei Shamayim sticks to the boundaries and regulations set by the Torah and our gedolim, and in this way, ensures that everything he takes in is pure and on a higher plane.

“Tell me,” Rav Gedalya concluded, “Who is experiencing the real pleasure?!”

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