

From: Rabbi Baron <rabbi_baron@baranovich.org>
Sent: Sunday, September 24, 2023 9:01 AM
To: Ingrida.Simonyte@Irs.lt; Victoria Čmilytė Nielsen
<viktorija.cmilyte@Irs.lt>
Subject: OPEN LETTER OF ADMIRATION AND CRY FOR ACTION ON
LITHUANIAN JEWISH HERITAGE TO THE VERY BRAVE LITHUANIAN
LEADERSHIP IN LIGHT OF DANI DAYAN'S HISTORIC SPEECH
Importance: HIGH

Honourable Ingrida Šimonytė, Prime Minister of Lithuania and Honourable
Viktorija Čmilytė-Nielsen, Speaker of the Lithuanian Seimas,

Warmest greetings for the Jewish New Year to you, your esteemed
government, and the people of Lithuania!

As Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement, approaches, and hundreds of
thousands of Jews worldwide have today finished reciting Selichot Lita:
“Supplications According to the Lithuanian Rite,” including at Lithuanian
Yeshiva Academies in Israel and the US with tens of thousands of students,
I find myself reflecting on the enduring ties between the Jewish and
Lithuanian communities. This year marks the 80th anniversary of a somber
chapter in our shared history, a milestone that will be commemorated
worldwide tomorrow when the millions are remembered in the Yizkor
prayer. Yet, it also serves as a reminder of our common heritage, which
continues to flourish.

I was deeply moved by the speech in the Lithuanian Seimas by Yad
Vashem Chairman Dani Dayan. Your presence and applause signaled a
new era of understanding and cooperation between our communities. I am
inspired by your incredibly courageous initiative to invite Mr Dayan to the
Seimas in order to hear and applaud his difficult message of improvement.
I am sure that your strong and brave leadership will advance Lithuania to
new heights in many areas.

For years, I have championed the preservation of Jewish heritage in
Lithuania, a cause that enriches both our communities. Despite challenges,
I remain steadfast in this mission. Mr. Dayan's speech, accessible here
<https://youtu.be/3OskH9a6FgY?si=ENaH03FrmVpNaY9E>, underscores the

urgency of this endeavor, as well as the need to inculcate the message to all members of Lithuanian civic society.

I am encouraged by your alignment with the principles Mr. Dayan laid out. Therefore, I would like to highlight ten critical areas requiring immediate action. From our part we will please G-d continue to make ourselves and our resources readily available to all levels of Lithuanian government, to assist with these and any other Jewish Heritage issues and projects.

Kovno (Kaunas): Seventh Fort – the site of the first major massacre of Jews in Europe (by Lithuanians, without German assistance), privatised in 2009 without informing the buyers of the presence of mass graves, including one of the most famous Rabbis murdered in the Holocaust – Rabbi Elchonon Wasserman ob”m, who I am named for. It is an important pilgrimage place for tens of thousands of Jews, but remains in a disgraceful state. Although I presented a detailed plan for the respectful restoration of this holy site, including a willingness to bring outside resources, we have so far been unsuccessful in engaging the government. Matzevos (gravestones) placed to honour the famous victims were removed and not replaced.

Kovno (Kaunas): The “Jewish Club” of Kaunas, the only fully functioning Jewish community in Lithuania, efficiently run by Rabbi Moshe Sheinfeld in small rented premises, serving Kovno’s local Jews as well as the five hundred Israeli students who study for years in Kovno’s prestigious medical schools. At the Club they receive a warm home atmosphere, place to study Medicine as well as our Holy Torah, subsidized Kosher meals and more. The community receives no support and is not recognised by the government. They own an unusable building but do not have the resources to renovate.

Kovno (Kaunas): Slobodka (Wiliampole) Yeshiva and other Holy Sites. The last building of the Slobodka Yeshiva used to be available to visit. To my knowledge it is the only building in the world in the shape of an open Torah Scroll! It was recently converted to an office building and is no longer open to visitors. The sign was removed for renovation years ago and not returned. In general, all signs in Kovno regarding Jewish Heritage were removed in preparation for the Kaunas 2022 urban renewal – but none were returned, including the sign on the Laisves Aleij Café that once housed the Dutch Phillips office of Jan Zwartendyk, who issued a visa that

saved my father's life (after free Lithuania graciously allowed my father refugee residence). Additionally, almost the only road in Kovno not repaired leading up to 2022, is the gravel road to the Ninth Fort killing fields, with all its massive potholes. It hasn't been repaired in 30 years!

Vilna: Vilna Gaon gravesite – top Jewish Holy Site in Europe. There are no signs anywhere in Lithuania, including in the cemetery, to direct and facilitate visitors and pilgrims. There is no website, and available information online is misleading and confusing. The cemetery lacks basic plumbing to allow for Jewish ritual washing after visiting graves. Our offer to repair the leaky roof of the mausoleum was rebuffed, and only after raising a hue and cry is it now being repaired.

Vilna: Shnipishok (Snipiskes) Jewish cemetery in Vilna. We succeeded in showing the Lithuanian government that Chief Lithuanian Rabbinic Justice Sariel Rosenberg in conjunction with Chief Rabbi David Lau of Israel are authorized by 99.99% of International Jewry (excepting the group financed by the Lithuanian government) to represent them, and meaningful negotiations began. When Rabbi Rosenberg asked for an engineering assessment of the Sports Palace building to be executed by the venerable German firm WSP, to be paid for by us, so that the Jews and Lithuanians alike should know the true state of the building, and after multiple government meetings, the engineers were refused access, using the excuse that the Lithuanian government only recognises Andrew Baker, Faina Kukliansky and the CPJCE to represent Jewry. In other words the government reverted to the position that only Jews who are paid by the Lithuanian government are allowed to represent international Jewry. Furthermore, the Prime Minister's top advisor stated that "The people of Vilnius will not accept a cemetery in their midst." If the people of Vilna do not know that the city was once 57% Jewish, and we lived and died there, shouldn't they be educated? Now direct discussion with the true representatives of International Jewry has been replaced by a commission that excludes almost all Jewish stakeholders, and has a mandate to potentially desecrate the cemetery by utilising the Sports Palace building.

Vilna: Zaretche (Uzipis) Jewish cemetery. 70,000 recorded burials from 1831-1944. Declared "abandoned" in Soviet times, the beautiful gravestones were "harvested" for use in public buildings, particularly stairs. A funeral parlor was built on a small part, a few homes at the edges, and the center path was turned into a road, but over 90% of the cemetery is still intact. Reuven Dessler (of the USA, and board member of the Good Will Foundation) requested to prepare a plan for the erection of a protective

fence, which was done, complete with local architects and city approval. “Chairwoman” of the “Lithuanian Jewish Community,” (fully sponsored by the Lithuanian government), refuses to certify the erection of a fence, leaving the entire cemetery at continued risk.

Vilna: Shulhoyf – Synagogue Courtyard, unparalleled in the Jewish world with its 14 synagogues and kloizen (including the 3000 seat Great Synagogue) plus Jewish community buildings (including Europe’s largest Jewish library, the legendary Strashun Library), all destroyed in Soviet times. Recently returned by the city to Andrew Baker and Faina Kukliansky (whose Good Will Foundation is fully financed by the government). In the agreement it states that Vilna Jews do not need synagogues, paving the way for development of the site with the complete destruction of one of Lithuania’s richest heritage sites and the second holiest Jewish site in Lithuania. This site must be restored, in cooperation with international partners and Jewish foundations, thereby placing Lithuania in the front row of countries with rich Jewish Heritage Sites to visit - the foremost in Europe.

Vilna: Lack of a Lithuanian Rabbi to minister to Lithuania’s Jewish community. The last two Rabbis were expelled by the “Chairwoman” of the “Lithuanian Jewish Community,” one notably being Rabbi Chaim Burstein, who was sacked in 2015 after his courageous and ethical stance against the immoral desecration of the Shnipishok cemetery. The millions of Euros the Lithuanian government grants yearly to two prominent Jews, is consistently used to solidify their power and undermine the Jewish religion, values and heritage.

Vilkija: Holocaust mass gravesite – a fresh example of Holocaust distortion. A sign was recently erected under the auspices of the “Genocide Center” with a fairly accurate account of the murders. One word was added: The “White Bander” murderous militia were a “FORCED battalion.” One untrue additional word that covers up and changes the entire picture of tragic events.

Lithuanian regional municipalities: Milda Jakulyte of the “Lost Shtetl” Museum in Sedova and of the Maceva organization promoting cemetery and gravestone preservation (a private initiative not supported by the government) informed me that only 12 of the 48 regional municipalities are sympathetic to the preservation of Jewish Heritage Sites in their districts, even though they are required by law to do so. For example, although Kelme is a hallowed name in Jewish Heritage (there is a well-known

expression that the fish in the Kelme lakes trembled during the Days of Awe), the Jewish cemetery there, a National Landmark, is in decaying condition. Even though the adjacent park is beautifully landscaped, there is no sign or path to the entrance of the cemetery, the cemetery is overgrown making it next to impossible to visit some areas, rodents have taken over the earth, the fence has fallen on two sides with local builders using the cemetery as a dumping ground, and the forest is slowly overtaking the cemetery. One of the three mausoleums of holy rabbis has disappeared into the forest. Several weeks ago when questioned about the situation, the vice-Mayor responded: "By law we are only required to cut the grass once a year."

I have included 10 prime examples which are an indication of the situation on the ground vis-à-vis Lithuanian Jewish heritage. I have a sincere hope that with your continued courageous leadership, real change is around the corner!

Respectfully yours,

Rabbi Elchonon Baron

Rabbinical Emissary to Lithuania, representing:

Bnei Berak Rabbinical Court (senior Lithuanian Rabbinical Court), and the Council of Torah Sages of the USA and Canada

Israeli Office: +972-2-586-7766

Israeli Cell: +972-54-818-3600

US Office: +1-718-578-4150

US Cell: +1-347-786-4747

Canada: +1-514-738-0559