In 1945, B’nai B’rith International President Henry Monsky led an expansive Jewish coalition at the historic San Francisco conference that created the United Nations. As an official public advisor to the conference’s U.S. delegation, he crafted a strategy to ensure the rights of the Jewish people in their homeland. In the Holocaust’s immediate aftermath, he also advocated for making membership in the nascent world body contingent upon a country’s fulfillment of minimum human rights standards.

The emergence of the United Nations was a development that, from the beginning, clearly carried risks and flaws, but it truly was a monumental achievement. Particularly after two World Wars which killed untold tens of millions of people, the resolve to chart a new course was greater than ever. And so, the creation of not just a parliament of nations but an organization of “nations united”—the United Nations—brought with it once-unimaginable hope.
The founding Charter of the United Nations certainly aimed high: “to save succeeding generations from the scourge of war,” “to reaffirm faith in fundamental human rights, in the dignity and worth of the human person, in the equal rights of men and women and of nations large and small,” and “to unite our strength to maintain international peace and security.” The subsequently adopted Universal Declaration of Human Rights became the first global expression of essential entitlements for every human being. Eleanor Roosevelt, the driving force behind the declaration, envisioned it as an “international Magna Carta” for all people, everywhere.

In 1948, Israel was established, following U.N. adoption the year prior of the Partition Plan to create neighboring Jewish and Arab states in the former British Mandate for Palestine. The plan was accepted by the Jewish community, but rejected by the Arab world. Nearly two millennia after exile from the land, Jews saw fulfillment of Theodor Herzl’s stunning prediction, a half-century earlier, that the Jewish state would be a reality within 50 years.

Israel was thus founded with an uncommon relationship to the United Nations, its existence having been uniquely endorsed by the world body. Israel was admitted to the body in 1949 and cooperation within the United Nations was a cornerstone of Israel’s early foreign policy, and an aspiration, at least, in the decades since. Israel’s Declaration of Independence positively references the United Nations not once but seven times.

Years later, however, David Ben-Gurion, Israel’s founding prime minister, came to famously confirm a negative change in the attitude of Israelis toward the United Nations. But the Israelis hadn’t chosen to distance themselves from the United Nations. It was the United Nations that changed.

With the Cold War prompting fiercely competitive blocs at the United Nations, and the long-awaited process of decolonization multiplying the number of non-democratic member states, the Arab and aligned nations (particularly the Organization of the Islamic Conference, which alone encompasses nearly 60 of over 190 current U.N. countries) began exploiting the world body for the systemic censure and isolation of Israel. Until this day, more than 65 years after the founding of the United Nations, Israel alone is excluded from full membership in a U.N. regional group (and thus from many key positions and deliberations); she is condemned annually in dozens of biased resolutions and reports by countless agencies and assemblies, demonized and delegitimized by units in the U.N. bureaucracy assigned to this purpose, and threatened with international sanctions and prosecution for attempting to protect the lives of its citizens.

Without fail, however, B’nai B’rith has been there to respond.

Beginning in 1947, B’nai B’rith has been officially accredited to multiple U.N. bodies: the Economic and Social Council, the Department of Public Information (DPI), and the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization. At the United Nations, B’nai B’rith continues to operate the Coordinating Board of Jewish Organizations as a communal voice. And since 1960, B’nai B’rith has been the only major Jewish organization with a full-time Office of United Nations Affairs—supported by a lay-led Council on U.N. Affairs—and an active, professional
B’nai B’rith has assumed key roles in important U.N. committees such as the DPI/Non-Governmental Organizations Section Executive Committee, the NGO Committee on Human Rights, the NGO Committee on Freedom of Religion or Belief, the Committee of Religious NGOs, the NGO Committee on Youth, the informal Caucus of Jewish NGOs and the Conference of NGOs in Consultative Relationship with the United Nations.

Over the recent period, B’nai B’rith has summoned attention when the General Assembly president said that Palestinians suffer conditions worse than the victims of Nazism, when a Syrian representative claimed that Israeli children sing of eating the flesh and drinking the blood of enemies, when a Palestinian Authority official accused Israel of apartheid policies, and as U.N. bodies proliferate prejudiced investigations following episodes such as radical Turkish activists’ efforts to penetrate an Israeli blockade on weaponry destined for terrorists.

B’nai B’rith led a successful 16-year campaign to rescind the notorious 1975 General Assembly resolution equating Zionism with racism. Three years earlier, when Kurt Waldheim was U.N. chief in 1972, B’nai B’rith directly demanded that the organization take action following the Palestinian massacre of Israeli athletes at the Munich Olympics. B’nai B’rith has helped encourage Israeli inclusion in the Western European and Others Group (WEOG), a U.N. association of various key democracies, and also pressed actively for Israel’s admission to other international organizations, such as the Red Cross and Red Crescent movement, which finally admitted the Magen David Adom society in 2006.

B’nai B’rith mobilized the largest Jewish presence at the 2001 World Conference against Racism in South Africa. B’nai B’rith again brought the single largest Jewish delegation to the Durban Review Conference in 2009, preventing expansion upon the shocking anti-Zionist and anti-Semitic rhetoric of eight years earlier. B’nai B’rith sent proof of Hamas’ gross violations of international law in its launching of terror attacks upon, and from among, civilians, to the now largely discredited Goldstone Fact-Finding Mission on Gaza. B’nai B’rith also forced the so-called “investigators” to listen to a young Israeli victim of the Palestinian rockets. B’nai B’rith is vigilant in confronting any unfair, unequal or hostile treatment of the world’s lone Jewish democracy. It does so by routinely delivering formal interventions at the Human Rights Council and deploring its ritualistic abuse of Israel at the expense of foremost humanitarian crises worldwide. B’nai B’rith has also demanded a response on incitement in education from the commissioner-general of the U.N. Relief and Works Agency, which focuses on Palestinian refugees.

Every year, B’nai B’rith meets with U.N. officials, confers with countless diplomats accredited to the world body, and orchestrates the organized Jewish community’s marathon consultations with world leaders in September. Thanks to the persistent action of B’nai B’rith and its allies, the United Nations
Iran’s then-president, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, as he denied past genocide against Jews while threatening a new one against the Jewish state.

For well over 50 years, B’nai B’rith’s Office of United Nations Affairs has spearheaded the promotion of the organization’s objectives and the values of the Jewish community and its diverse friends. In 1960, B’nai B’rith initiated an early campaign at the United Nations to secure freedom of movement for repressed Jews in the Soviet Union. In 1988, concerted advocacy by B’nai B’rith’s late founding director of U.N. affairs, William Korey, led to U.S. ratification of the U.N. Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide. Today, B’nai B’rith highlights concerns ranging from atrocities in the Darfur region of Sudan to efforts to proscribe discussion of violent extremism as “defamation of religion” to Iran’s ongoing pursuit of illicit nuclear capabilities.

U.N. Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon himself has recognized as “influential” and “very powerful” the role B’nai B’rith plays at the United Nations. His predecessor, Kofi Annan, said that the organization “brings long international experience and a global presence” to its work, with a “continuing role” in promoting Middle East peace. B’nai B’rith uses its unmatched record and all its global resources to fulfill the enduring mandate in its charter, written by German Jewish immigrants to New York in 1843, for service “on the broadest principles of humanity.”

The United Nations is, without a doubt, an imperfect institution, but it is no less a vital one. B’nai B’rith’s Office of United Nations Affairs will continue to work tirelessly to urge the United Nations to realize its founding vision and values.