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HAMIZRACHI

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***“For 491 days
in captivity, I
never stopped
saying Shema
Yisrael”***

An interview with Eli Sharabi
pages 12-14



PHOTO: BLAKE EZRA

Dedicated in honor of World Mizrahi's Co-President, Rabbi Yechiel Wasserman, on receiving the title of Honorary Resident of the city of Givatayim, where he previously served as Deputy Mayor.



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Based in Jerusalem and with branches across the globe, Mizrachi – an acronym for *merkaz ruchani* (spiritual center) – was founded in 1902 by Rabbi Yitzchak Yaakov Reines, and is led today by Rabbi Doron Perez. Mizrachi's role was then and remains with vigor today, to be a proactive partner and to take personal responsibility in contributing to the collective destiny of *Klal Yisrael* through a commitment to Torah, the Land of Israel and the People of Israel.

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Mizrachi's Stunning Election Results

After the most hotly contested global World Zionist Congress election campaign in recent memory, and after elections in almost every country globally for the first time in decades, World Mizrachi is thrilled to announce our exceptional election results.

Represented in 17 national Zionist Federations around the world, the Mizrachi movement is the second largest global Zionist movement and indeed the largest in the world outside the United States. In the US, our Mizrachi-driven alliance – The Orthodox Israel Coalition-Mizrachi – achieved a top-five result out of a record 23 participating lists. 27,000 people voted for us – an increase of 25% from the last election with a result of 18 seats.

In the recently completed election results throughout the rest of the world, Mizrachi ended with the stunning result of being the largest movement represented with an additional 26 seats, including being the single largest movement in Australia, Canada and South Africa. Mizrachi is represented in the local national Zionist Federations in Argentina, Australia, Brazil, Canada, Chile, France, Hungary, Italy, Mexico, Serbia, South Africa, Sweden, Switzerland, United Kingdom, Ukraine and Uruguay.

The 44 seats globally of Mizrachi is actually 51 as it includes an additional alliance with three small affiliated parties – Beyachad, Herut and OTR. This makes World Mizrachi a formidable global force of Religious Zionism at the forefront of the global Zionist movement.

We once again thank our partners – in the United States: RZA-Mizrachi, AMIT, OU, and YU, together with BANA, NCYI, RCA, Touro and Shvilim – as well as all our local Mizrachi branches and affiliates including all professional staff, ambassadors and volunteers who ensured that the flame of Torah Judaism together with Israel-centred Judaism – Religious Zionism – burns bright for the future of Jewish destiny.

The results in general bode well for the future of the Zionist movement, where record numbers voted in these elections with 300,000 adults from around the Jewish world who paid and participated in these WZC elections.

Now we are engaged in the next step of coalition building to form a broad-based Zionist movement for the upcoming 39th Congress in order to begin the real work of the Religious Zionist global movement in the National Institutions. To be a proactive and leading force of engaging Israel-centric Torah Judaism as a dynamic force of Jewish education; courage in facing today's incarnation of antisemitism, anti-Zionism; and being a driver of bridge-building and internal unity in a fractured Jewish world in need of internal cohesion and healing.

Together We Will Prevail – יחד ננצח.



HOSTAGE DEAL

Eli Sharabi and Human Freedom

Rabbi Doron Perez

After his 491-day ordeal in Gaza captivity, in the pages of this *HaMizrachi* edition, Eli Sharabi shares that no matter what happens to us, we always have freedom of choice – to personally decide how to face any and every situation we come across. Eli says:

“Nothing simply happens to us – we manage whatever situation we find ourselves in. Even after my freedom was taken away, there remained a sphere of choice during captivity: how to respond to situations, how to engage with my captors, how to work together with fellow hostages...”

Eli teaches us one of the most profound insights in all of human experience – there is one element of free choice that no one can ever take away from us and that is our ability to choose our thoughts.

As much as we have free choice, others can take away almost every freedom from us. We can be forced into situations where there is nothing we can do. We can be gagged and bound, Heaven forbid, be rendered unable to speak or act. But no human being can ever force us to think something we don't want to think. We have an absolute free choice to choose our attitude in every given situation.

Viktor Frankl and the final human freedom

This is one of the great insights into the human condition that emerges from Viktor Frankl's masterpiece, *Man's Search for Meaning*. Frankl writes that no one can tell him, as a survivor of the concentration camps, that a human being does not have free choice. He says that he witnessed people in their last moments stealing another person's piece of bread to survive.

Yet, incredibly, he witnessed others who literally give away their last piece of bread. This, he maintains, provides unequivocal evidence of a human being's capacity to choose a course of action even in impossible circumstances. He says that whether we become angels or animals, saints or sinners, it is entirely up to us.¹ Indeed, our sages have famously said that “everything is in the hands of Heaven except for the fear of Heaven.”² This has been interpreted by many of our great ethicists to mean that everything that happens to us can be beyond our choice and control except our “fear of Heaven” – how we choose to react to what happens to us.

So many circumstances, as we know all too well, happen without us having any choice or control – they are forced upon us. But one thing can never be taken away and that is our fear of Heaven. We can always choose our attitude. When we face challenges in life that shake our world, we have to dig very deeply into our reservoirs of faith and perspective. Vulnerability and excruciating pain need not necessarily beget paralysis or anger, blame or harsh criticism – there is nothing automatic about these responses.

As Stephen Covey has said in his book *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People*, between stimulus and response, there is a gap, and we live in that gap. The things that happen to us – stimuli – need not elicit any automatic, uncontrolled response. We have free choice to dig deep within ourselves and to choose our perspective on what happens to us and then to choose our attitude, response, and course of action. To try, despite the pain, to choose a path of hope and healing, light and life. Faith and beliefs impact perception, which in turn impacts our actions and performance. We

indeed see the world not the way it is, but the way we are.

My mental gamble and 'hostage deal' with myself

Having gone through the horrific 163 days of our son being a hostage and thought to be alive, we were full of fear and angst, amongst the most harrowing situations in life. This tested us in a way that nothing previously had. Then, the knowledge that Daniel had been murdered, with his lifeless body held somewhere in Gaza. Just to find the strength to live each day by putting one foot in front of the other required all our inner reserves of strength and resilience to somehow face the valley of death with faith, hope, and positivity. There is a need every day to choose how to confront this challenging reality.

I felt this so acutely, particularly during those 163 painful days. How is one to cope with the knowledge that one's son is being held by Hamas and heaven only knows what they are undergoing? Are they, G-d forbid, being tortured? Is he injured or even alive? When and will we see him again? How is one to handle such impossible thoughts about the fate of one's beloved child? I realized very quickly that if I am unable to be intentional and proactive about my thoughts, they will get the better of me, paralyze and destroy me. I needed to up my game and do everything I could to think correctly and create the mental paradigm that I wanted to try to live in. I, thankfully, with the grace of G-d, was able to develop the following mind game that I played with myself every day. I said to myself as follows: There is a chance that Daniel did not survive the first day of the tank battle, and that would mean, G-d



forbid, that he is no longer alive. If that is the case, that means I have nothing to worry about – he is not being tortured. They cannot harm him. If it is true that, G-d forbid, he is deceased, then I have a lifetime of loss and mourning to contend with. But I need not worry about that at all now, because hopefully he is alive. If, on the other hand, he is alive, then please G-d, we have so much hope and we will, *b'ezrat Hashem* [with G-d's help], see him again.

The choice to view reality as the glass half-full is our choice, and our choice alone. It is possible to see the emptiness and pain of both sides of the equation, that he is, G-d forbid, either dead or being tortured. But one can choose to do one's best to think differently – that if he is alive, we will, please G-d, see him again. And if, G-d forbid, he has died, then he is not in harm's way and has died *al kiddush Hashem* [lit. for the sanctification of G-d, as a holy martyr].

This is a choice, an almost impossible one. Hashem gives us seemingly impossible tests to face. Yet, somehow, at the same time, He gives us impossible strength to deal with them.

Simcha as a state of being

Happiness is never truly dependent on external circumstances, however debilitating, but more on the inner precincts of personal thought and choice. It is indeed a mindset, a perception and an attitude, and in essence a state of being.

It is this very state of being, says Rav Shimon Raphael Hirsch, that we ultimately hope to be blessed with on Sukkot. After all, only this holiday is defined in our prayers as *אִתּוֹ שְׂמֵחָה*, the time of our happiness. Additionally, it is the only holiday where

we find the unusual expression of *simcha*: “רְחִיב אֶת לִבְךָ, You should be only happy,” implying a type of complete or ultimate happiness. What is the meaning of this phrase? Rav Hirsch explains that it refers to a state of being, a mindset that we hope to achieve, having been celebrating in G-d's presence in the Temple precinct for the entire seven days.

The Malbim states³ that this is the very meaning of the word *simcha*, happiness in Hebrew. There are the two primary words to describe joy and happiness in Tanach: *יוֹשֵׁף* and *הִקְפֵּשׁ*.

יוֹשֵׁף is an expression of external, celebratory joy, whereas *הִקְפֵּשׁ* is a more internal and ongoing sense of joy – a state of being.

Happiness can be transformed into a character trait, a permanent quality, and a *joie de vivre* that accompanies us throughout our lives. It is this state of being that we hope to take with us into the long, rainy winter months. Indeed, it can only be this mindset that will successfully see us through the ‘winter periods’ of life, the difficult and dark times.

In Whose world do we live?

Simchat Torah two years ago came with so much horror that we are still reeling from it today. This Simchat Torah will commemorate once again 1,300 *yahrzeits* of death, destruction, and hostage-taking, including the death and hostage-taking of our beloved son Daniel. It will be accompanied by much pain and challenge.

We do, though, live in Hashem's world, not ours. “Even when I walk in the valley of death, I will not fear evil, because You are with me” (*Tehillim* 23:4). King David, who faced danger and challenge more than

most, was convinced that G-d was with him and he would somehow prevail.

When we live in His world, there is hope in the face of despair; light in the face of darkness. That somehow, even if we don't understand, everything is for the best. When we are broken, we are whole, and when we are fractured, we are complete. Even when things are so not okay, they are okay. The flimsy *sukkah* is called in the Zohar “the shadow of faith.” It is but a whisper and a shadow, but with faith in Hashem and Jewish destiny, with conviction in the justness of our cause, we can weather any storm and not only survive but thrive.

On Sukkot, Shemini Atzeret, and Simchat Torah, we celebrate that, notwithstanding all our pain and challenges, we can always choose to live with hope and happiness.

We have to choose Whose world we live in.

1. *Man's Search for Meaning*, Viktor Frankl, pp. 65–66.
2. *Berachot* 33b, *Megillah* 25a, *Niddah* 16b.
3. Rabbi Meir Leibush. He mentions this distinction in a number of places, for example, see *Yishayahu* 35:1, in his section on the meaning of words.



Rabbi Doron Perez
is the Executive Chairman
of World Mizrahi.

Beyond the Bamboo: The Halachot of Schach

Rabbi Yosef Zvi Rimon

Jews traditionally begin building their *sukkah* immediately after Yom Kippur ends, following the principle of moving “from one *mitzvah* to another.” While there are many aspects to constructing a kosher *sukkah*, this guide focuses specifically on the laws governing *schach* – the roof covering that is perhaps the most complex and crucial element of *sukkah* construction.

The Torah instructs us regarding Sukkot: “You shall observe Sukkot for seven days, when you have gathered in the yield from your threshing floor and your vat” (*Devarim* 16:13). From the phrase “when you have gathered in the yield from your threshing floor and your vat,” *Chazal* derive that *schach* must be made from materials similar to agricultural waste – the leftover stalks, branches, and plant matter found around threshing floors and wine vats.

This teaches us that valid *schach* must meet three essential criteria: it must be plant-based (grown from the earth), it must be detached from its source, and it must not be susceptible to ritual impurity (*Shulchan Aruch* 629:1). Consequently, materials like metal, plastic, or glass cannot be used for *schach*, but any detached plant material works, provided it doesn't become impure according to Torah or rabbinic law – such as wooden vessels with receptacles (*Keilim* 2:1).

Ma'amid and ma'amid d'ma'amid

A *ma'amid* (support) refers to any structure that holds up the *schach* – without which the covering would collapse. Ideally, *schach* should not rest directly on anything that can become ritually impure, or on materials that would themselves be invalid for *schach* (such as non-plant materials). However, when no alternative exists, this requirement can be relaxed, and the *sukkah* remains kosher after the fact (*Mishnah Berurah* 629:22).

The *Shulchan Aruch* (629:8) permits using nails – which are invalid for *schach* – to secure the beams that support the *schach*.

Most authorities, including the *Magen Avraham*, agree that even those who are stringent about *ma'amid* (direct supports) can be lenient here, since this involves only “*ma'amid d'ma'amid*, support of the support” – the nails support the beams, which in turn support the *schach*.

The *Chazon Ish* dissented, arguing that anyone stringent about direct supports should also be stringent about indirect supports, since the beams become part of the *schach* system, making the nails effective supporters of the *schach* itself.

The accepted practice follows the lenient view, endorsed by the *Mishnah Berurah*, Rabbi Shlomo Zalman Auerbach, Rabbi Yosef Shalom Elyashiv, and many other authorities. Therefore, while *schach* itself shouldn't be nailed down, the supporting beams may be secured with nails.

Mats and permanent schach

Mats present a complex issue: those manufactured primarily for sleeping become susceptible to ritual impurity and cannot be used for *schach*. However, mats made specifically for *schach* purposes don't become ritually impure and are perfectly acceptable. Today's permanent *schach* mats fall into this latter category, being designed exclusively for *sukkah* roofing rather than bedding.

Modern authorities debate whether permanent *schach* made from thin wooden slats joined together is acceptable. Rabbi Elyashiv considers a *sukkah* with this form of *schach* invalid, reasoning that connected, adjacent boards function as a single large board. Conversely, Rabbi Shlomo Zalman Auerbach, the *Shevet HaLevi*, and others permit such *schach*, noting that these thin, flexible slats bear no resemblance to solid ceiling construction.

Recently, permanent *schach* made from reeds rather than wooden slats has become popular. Even Rabbi Elyashiv would approve this type, since reed ceilings are not typical building materials.

Using a pergola

When pergola beams are tightly spaced and nailed in place, they cannot serve as *schach* (*Mishnah Berurah*, *Sha'ar HaTziyon* 633:6). However, if the beams cover less area than they leave exposed – meaning the gaps between beams exceed each beam's width – you can add proper *schach* on top, ensuring the added covering creates more shade than the pergola structure allows sunlight through.

Dense but un-nailed pergola beams avoid the problem of excessive permanence (*keva*), but you must still address the support (*ma'amid*) issue. The solution is constructing the pergola so beams slide through *mefulashim* grooves – channels open on both ends. Since these aren't enclosed receptacles, they don't create a *ma'amid* problem (*Magen Avraham* 629:8). Anyone building a pergola for Sukkot use should employ this groove-based, nail-free construction method.

If your pergola is already kosher for *sukkah* use and remains standing year-round, you should “renew something” in the *schach* annually before the festival (*Shulchan Aruch* 636:1, *Mishnah Berurah* 4). This can be accomplished by adding at least one square *tefach* (8cm x 8cm) of new *schach*, or by placing a long stick – even a thin one – across the entire *sukkah* length.



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He is the Founder and Chairman of Sulamot and La'Ofek, and serves as the Chief Rabbi of Gush Etzion, and Rosh Yeshivah of the Jerusalem College of Technology.

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LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

In the Tisha B'Av edition of HaMizrachi (Vol. 8, No. 3), Rabbi Ari Kahn examined a Talmudic story in his article "The Carpenter, His Apprentice and His Wife." The following letter to the editor from Professor Rochel Alpert references that article. Here is a brief recap of Rabbi Kahn's essay:

Rabbi Kahn examined a Talmudic story (*Gittin* 58a) about the destruction of the Second *Beit HaMikdash*. In this account, a carpenter's apprentice lusted after his master's wife. When the master needed money, the apprentice offered to lend to the wife directly. After spending three days with her, the apprentice falsely claimed she had been violated by others on her return journey. He then advised the master to divorce her, offering to lend money for the divorce settlement. The apprentice subsequently married the divorced woman and, when the debt came due, forced his former master to work as their servant, pouring wine while they dined. The *Gemara* states that when the master's tears fell into their cups, the fate of the Jewish people was sealed.

Rabbi Kahn initially presented this as a story of calculated cruelty driven by *sinat chinam*, noting that the destruction of the Second *Beit HaMikdash* stemmed from such hatred rather than sexual immorality. However, toward the article's end, he offered a psychological reinterpretation. He suggested the master "appears to be an abusive personality who craves control," and that the apprentice and wife were actually "two victims of an abuser conspiring not just to escape, but to destroy their tormentor." In this reading, they felt justified in their actions, believing they were teaching their "terrible, abusive tormentor" a lesson.



I READ Rabbi Ari Kahn's "The Carpenter, His Apprentice and His Wife" with much interest. It seems to me that the concrete incidents cited by the *Gemara* as the proximate causes of the destruction are often overlooked, in favor of a more cerebral / "middot" approach towards the blight of *sinat chinam*. Rabbi Kahn retells the terrible incident reported by the *Gemara*, one which, one must add with terrible dismay, rings true today.

Unfortunately, Rabbi Kahn then takes what was a sober and detailed recounting of the incident, and, in one hurried paragraph, turns to a "psychological" re-evaluation of the story, with almost no textual basis. The carpenter - whom we have seen presented as the meekest of men, asking his own apprentice for advice - we are now told, "appears to be an abusive personality who craves control over his victims." Indeed, the reason that the apprentice and his now-wife feel no remorse is not, Rabbi Kahn assures

us, because they are sinners and overtaken by base desires, but because they truly believe that they are now getting back at their "terrible, abusive" tormentor... They did not think they sinned."

Rabbi Kahn's only support for this rather dubious psychological reading, beyond his suggesting that a (*less* controlling?) person would normally launch an inquest and set out to find his wife, seems to be the very fact that the carpenter's wife and his apprentice betrayed him in such a striking manner. This would seem to be a case of "blame the victim" in the highest order. The gates of interpretation, it is true, remain perennially open - but surely they shudder at explanations that seek to cast aspersions where none can be found.

Perhaps even more troubling, however, is the fact that an incident which the *Gemara* presents as a primary case-study of what it is that effected the destruction - has yet again been robbed of its power. Today, as then, people and their *yitzrei hara* have never needed excuses. It will not do to give speeches where "*sinat chinam*" has moved to some elusive, theoretical realm of working on one's *middot* - no, the *Gemara* comes out loud and clear, and, with a sledgehammer, as it were, makes it clear to those who might not realize, that the destruction came as a result of that *sinat chinam in action* and the terrible deeds that were committed. But it equally and entirely misses the point to write exegeses that seek to somehow "humanize" or somewhat "explicate" the heinous acts committed.

There is no need to name names, but the Orthodox world today has, unfortunately, its fair share of people who share more than a passing resemblance to those portrayed in this and other narratives recounted in *Perek Hanizakin*. It is, of course, an extremely admirable characteristic that even very fine and upright people seek to improve themselves - hence, the "*dakus shebedakus*," *middot* approach of *sinat chinam*. Likewise, it speaks only positively that some of us cannot even imagine how such crimes could be committed, were it not for some mitigating factor. Yet this is not the way of the world - not at the times of the destruction, and, sadly, not today either. As we shall read in the coming week, *uviarta hara mikirbecha*: Evil must be called out, including within our ranks, be it in Bnei Brak or Baltimore, Israel or America.

Rochel Alpert

Judaic Studies professor, Lander College, Touro University

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SURVIVING THE DARKNESS

**An Interview
with Eli Sharabi**



On February 8, 2025, Eli Sharabi emerged from 491 days of Hamas captivity as one of three hostages released that day. Taken at gunpoint from his home in Kibbutz Be'eri on October 7, he returned to Israel only to learn the devastating news that his wife Lianne and two daughters, Noya and Yahel, had been murdered during the attack. His brother Yossi, who was also kidnapped that day, was murdered in captivity, and his body remains in Gaza.

In the weeks following his release, Sharabi's remarkable strength and determination to rebuild his life captivated the Israeli public. His account of captivity, published months later, became one of the fastest-selling books in Israeli history. Ahead of the book's English publication, Rabbi Aron White sat down with Sharabi to discuss his extraordinary journey of survival, faith, and hope.

Reading your book, one thing that stands out is how you remained mentally in control throughout your ordeal. You focus extensively on managing situations, making whatever choices were available to you, and maintaining some measure of control even in captivity. Was there anything in your background or upbringing that prepared you for dealing with such an extreme situation?

From the moment the terrorists took me from my home – away from my family – I promised them I would return. I knew immediately that I was entering a completely new reality with one singular goal: survival. Throughout captivity, you're constantly managing scenarios, sometimes literally matters of life and death.

My approach was that even in this extreme situation, captivity was still a situation that required management. Nothing simply happens to us – we manage whatever situation we find ourselves in. Even after my freedom was taken away, there remained a sphere of choice during captivity: how to respond to situations, how to engage with my captors, how to work together with fellow hostages. These are all situations that demand management.

I grew up in South Tel Aviv in a neighborhood that wasn't easy. At sixteen, I decided to leave the city for agricultural life on a *kibbutz*. That's how I arrived at Be'eri, where I began what became a lifelong career in management. I found an incredible community there, and after my military service, while my friends were traveling, I was working to advance through the ranks of *kibbutz* management.

Much of management involves dealing with unclear situations, and I believe this gave me certain mental tools for handling captivity.

You describe the torture, starvation, and terror you endured in vivid detail. How did you maintain hope during those dark moments?

During captivity, there are moments when you break down, and that's okay. But I would tell the others, "You can break down

for a few minutes, but then we need to pull ourselves together." There were months when we received only one small meal per day. We were so hungry we would search for crumbs on the floor – we could have eaten the walls themselves.

But we could not lose hope. We didn't have the right to lose hope. Our loved ones in Israel were fighting for us, and we had to stay strong. One day we would return home. It might take a month, two months, a year, two years – but we believed we would go home. It was our job to do everything possible to survive until that moment arrived.

Over the past few months, I've traveled around the world sharing my story with thousands of people. They seem to view me as having superpowers, calling me a superman or a *gibor Yisrael* [hero of Israel], which I don't believe I am at all. Anyone who was captured would think about their family – their spouse, parents, siblings, children. I simply didn't have the option not to survive this. There are moments when you break down, but ultimately, you don't lose hope.

You beautifully describe making kiddush each week and starting each day with Birchot HaShachar [the morning blessings]. What did those religious moments mean to you then, and what do they mean to you now?

This moved me deeply. I grew up in Tel Aviv in a traditional home, attending *shul* on Shabbat and holidays. But for thirty-five years in Be'eri, I lived a more secular lifestyle. I would still have Shabbat meals and *kiddush* with the family, but more as a family tradition than a religious observance.

From the moment my captors pushed me into their car, I instinctively began reciting *Shema Yisrael*, and for 491 days I never stopped saying it. There were four of us in captivity together, and we would recite *Birchot HaShachar* every morning as part of our daily routine. It helped keep us sane and maintained our connection



President Trump meets with a group of released hostages, including Eli Sharabi. (PHOTO: THE WHITE HOUSE, PUBLIC DOMAIN / WIKIMEDIA COMMONS)

to Israel and Judaism. Even fifty meters underground, you want to feel connected.

We all looked forward to Friday nights. I would recite *Eishet Chayil*, which I know by heart – saying it for my mother, my sisters, my wife – and I would become emotional. We would make *kiddush* over water because what else could we do? We saved a quarter of a pita to say *hamotzi*, then we would sing *havdalah* songs at the end of Shabbat.

These moments connected us to our memories, filled us with spiritual strength, and gave us tremendous hope. Sometimes that spiritual strength was worth more than a meal. I felt I had *Hashgacha Pratit*, Divine providence.

At one point, our captors offered us additional food if we would recite verses from the Quran. They were offering more pita and pieces of fruit, but we refused. This was a victory of the spirit, a small triumph over our captors. Surviving captivity isn't one single victory, but many daily small victories that accumulate until you reach the moment you're going home.

When you were released, you learned that your wife and daughters had been killed on October 7th. What memories of them would you like to share so people can know who they were?

Wow. All we wanted was to live a quiet life, to raise our family in the open fields of Be'eri, living on a *kibbutz* with friends. The girls were so happy there. Lianne chose to leave England and move to Be'eri. We had such a wonderful family life there.

Each one was a world unto herself. Lianne loved music and reading. Noya was passionate about volunteering with people with disabilities, far beyond what school required of her. Yahel was always pushing boundaries and exploring extremes. Her smile and ability to make everything fun

meant she was constantly surrounded by friends.

You're speaking to us now from Australia, and you've visited Jewish communities worldwide in recent months. What message do you want to share with Jews around the world?

I've met with Jewish communities in the United States, London, Mexico, Australia, and I encounter communities that never cease showing incredible solidarity with Israel. This is what *Am Yisrael* needs – in Israel, we need to feel we're not alone.

When you're fifty meters underground, you believe your friends and family are fighting for you, but you don't realize that Israeli society and Jews worldwide are standing on street corners holding your pictures, lighting Shabbat candles for you. It's deeply meaningful. I want to personally thank everyone – you also played a part in bringing us home.

In your travels, have you encountered the anti-Israel movement? As someone who experienced Hamas captivity firsthand, what do you say to those people?

I spoke at the UN Security Council, which is definitely not a friendly place for Israel and the Jewish people. Tomorrow I'm meeting with Australia's Deputy Prime Minister and Foreign Minister.

First, I believe much of the anti-Israel movement stems from ignorance. Second, I tell them that even if you disagree with Israeli policy, you cannot justify legitimizing antisemitism or violence against Israelis. They should be ashamed that this has been given legitimacy. When I met with the British Foreign Minister, I told him that even if you don't like Israel, my daughters and wife held British passports when they were murdered.

I also explain that they don't understand Islamism and jihad. My captors told me,



Eli Sharabi with Eylon Levy, who translated his book from Hebrew to English. (PHOTO: EYLON LEVY)

“When we finish with you in Israel, we will go to France, to England, to the USA. The whole world will be Islamic.”

You are truly a symbol of hope – someone who went through hell and emerged from it. What would you say to people facing struggles in their own lives, even if they're not as extreme as yours?

Within any darkness – whether it's captivity, divorce, or many other situations involving pain and suffering – you must find sparks of light and optimism. You must believe you can emerge from these situations and remember that there are people in your life who care about you.

I feel lucky. Lucky to be alive. Lucky to be free. It's priceless – there's no other word for it. The ability to open a refrigerator and choose what to eat and drink. To walk without chains on my legs. I'm lucky I spent twenty-nine years with my wife and had our wonderful daughters. I'm lucky to have a wonderful family who stopped their lives on October 7th to fight for me. I'm lucky to have friends around me.

We must look forward with optimism. Life contains so much light – we have to choose to focus on it.

Thank you so much for sharing your story.



Rabbi Aron White is the Managing Editor of HaMizrachi magazine. He lives in Carmay HaNadiv, Kiryat Malachi, and serves as the Rabbi of Beit Knesset Tzameret Arnona in Yerushalayim.

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Guided with empathy and strength by Shlomit Peretz (widow of Maj. Eliraz *hy"d*) and Shlomit Kalmanson (widow of Capt. Elchanan *hy"d*), Kuma draws on both personal experience and professional expertise to ensure that no widow is ever left alone.

To make this mission a reality, Sulamot partners with the World Mizrahi movement and additional global partners, uniting communities worldwide to stand behind Israel's heroines.

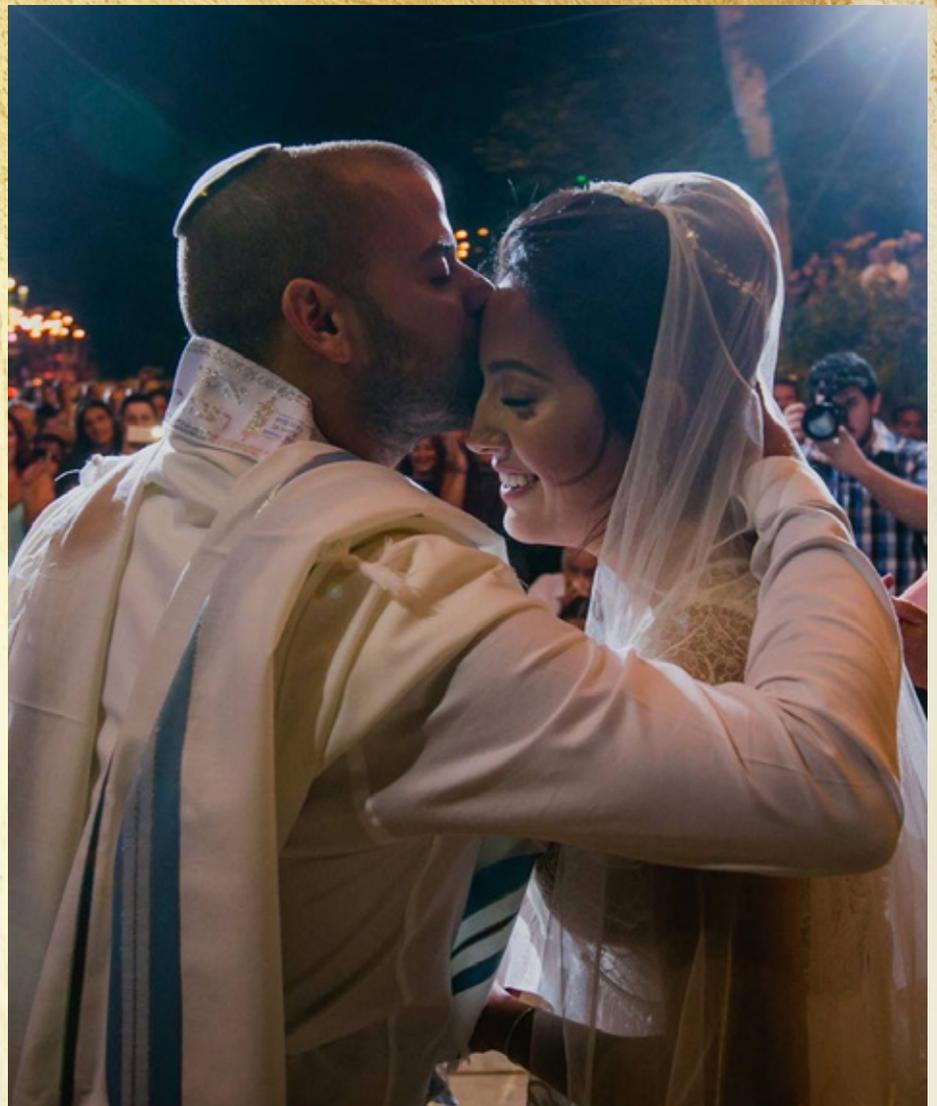
Challenges don't wait – and neither do we.

"Gal was my best friend"

When Lior Becher speaks of her husband, Gal, she does so with warmth and longing. More than a commander, more than a career officer who dedicated his life to protecting the Jewish people from terror, she wants her children – and the world – to remember that he was first and foremost a person.

"Gal was my best friend," she says. "A wonderful man. A loving father. A true partner. Before anything else, that's who he was."

Gal Becher had a rare gift for people. He brought those around him together – friends, neighbors, fellow soldiers. "If I had to define him in one sentence, he was



a people's person," Lior recalls. "He knew how to connect people in any situation."

Life with Gal was rich and joyful. "I would ask myself often, *what did I do to deserve this special life?* We had a beautiful marriage, a warm extended family, and we always

found joy. Every Shabbat we went on outings with the kids. Every weekend was filled with friends, laughter, and moments just for us."

Both Gal and Lior built their lives in uniform. They met in the army when she was



teaching Hebrew to new immigrants and he was in commanders' training. "Instead of sitting in class, he'd wander into our office," she remembers with a smile. "Three years later we reconnected, began dating, and from there everything was history. We grew up together - from young officers to more senior roles - always encouraging each other, always pushing each other forward."

The knock at the door

On December 10, 2023, Gal Becher fell in an operational car accident on his way from Gaza to the division headquarters.

That night is seared into Lior's memory. "The kids were asleep. At 10:15 p.m. there was a hard, heavy knock at the door," she recalls. "At first I didn't understand - just two hours earlier Gal and I had been texting. For a split second I even thought it might be a package. But when I opened the door and saw the uniforms, and recognized exactly which unit they were from, I understood immediately. That was the moment I knew. It felt like the end of the world."

For most, this would have been the first encounter with the IDF's casualty officers.

For Lior, it was painfully surreal. As a career officer herself, she had long been part of the system that supports bereaved families. "I had walked into the homes of widows. I thought I understood what it meant. But suddenly I was on the other side of the door. I never imagined it would be me."

Even in that moment, her instincts as both a mother and a soldier took over. "I couldn't cry then. The children were upstairs. I had to hold myself together. Within minutes, commanders and friends who had been notified earlier filled the house, so I wouldn't be alone. It was surreal - suddenly the house was already full, like a *shiva* house, before I'd even begun to process what had happened."

And then came a turning point. "I remember that moment when I realized I can't die with him," Lior says softly. "Life couldn't stop here. I had two children, and I had to be there for them."

Silence and bureaucracy

The days that followed were filled with both unbearable silence and endless bureaucracy. "Suddenly I was making every decision alone - about the house, the bank, the children,



even about organ donation. Things Gal and I had always shared.”

There were more decisions than anyone should ever face in those hours: where to bury him, what to write on the gravestone, even how to spell his name. “It was surreal, and it was all on me.”

But the deepest pain came not from the paperwork but from the small, everyday routines that vanished. “Every morning, whoever dropped the kids off at daycare would immediately call the other one on the way out. I remember that first day: I put the kids in school, sat in the car, and there was only silence. No one to call. That was when it hit me hardest – not the big milestones, but the little rhythms of daily life.”

Her children, she says, became both her greatest responsibility and her greatest source of strength. “They give me strength – they are a great light in the darkness. But they also demand strength, because I know I have to be there for them.”

At first, Lior tried to carry everything herself. “I wanted to show my kids that I could manage, that I was strong. But slowly I realized that without help, I would collapse. Asking for help was never easy for me. I was always independent, even within marriage. But I had to learn that you can’t do this alone.”

Then came the deeper realization: “I understood that I can’t pour all my energy into everything. I have to save my strength for the most important thing – my children. For them, I need to stay whole.”

That is where Kuma entered her life.

Walking together: the heart of Kuma

“When Shlomit Peretz called me, it was with such empathy,” Lior recalls. Shlomit, the widow of Eliraz Peretz, has herself been a widow for 15 years. Eliraz, like Gal, was a career soldier, and he was killed in action, leaving Shlomit to raise four young children between the ages of six and just three months. “There isn’t one person in this country who doesn’t know her story. And because of that, she knew exactly how I felt and the best way to approach me. She didn’t just offer help – she walked with me. She said, ‘Let’s think together. What are things you used to manage alone, but today you need help with?’ That ‘together’ changed everything.”

Thanks to Kuma, Lior even has a cleaner who comes regularly. “It may sound small, but for me it’s a world of a difference – one less burden on my shoulders, one more chance to focus on my children.”



Through Kuma, Lior was also introduced to Lirit, Kuma’s in-house financial advisor. “It started as help with budgeting and managing family finances, but it became much more. She’s someone I can share my life with, someone who remembers, who shows up even in difficult moments. Once, during the war with Iran, she came to my home with cookies – just to give me a hug. That is Kuma: practical help, but also deep, human support.”

Keeping Gal’s memory alive

Today, Lior is raising her children with Gal’s memory alive in their hearts. “I want them to remember that before he was a commander or an officer, he was simply Gal. A wonderful man. A loving father and friend. That is what matters most.”

Her eldest, Omer, remembers and shares stories. Her younger son, Noam, creates memories through photos and the stories she tells. “I’m grateful. What I had in ten years of marriage – some people don’t have in a lifetime.”

For herself, she feels Gal’s presence in her new identity as a widow. “People tell me, ‘You’ve become so similar to Gal.’ And it’s true. He’s part of who I am now.”

And what would he say to her if he could? Lior pauses. “I hope he would tell me he’s proud of me. That he knows I can do this. That it will be okay – that it will be better, or at least less terrible.”

Why Kuma matters

For Lior and hundreds of other widows, Kuma has become a lifeline. It provides

financial stability when bills must still be paid, expertise when bureaucracy feels impossible, and human connection when the silence feels unbearable. The Kuma team also looks ahead, planning for the future even when widows like Lior are focused simply on surviving today.

“I was shocked by how much bureaucracy there was after Gal’s death,” Lior admits. “Nothing prepares you for the endless details you suddenly face. Kuma reduced the bureaucracy and the headaches for me – but even more than that, they listened. They reminded me that I don’t have to carry this alone.”

Support our sisters

Kuma is only possible because Sulamot, with the partnership of World Mizrahi and generous supporters worldwide, has stepped in to make it a reality.

They made the ultimate sacrifice for *Am Yisrael*. We must ensure they are not left alone. Donate to Kuma today.



Inbar Gabay Zada
is Director of Development at Sulamot.



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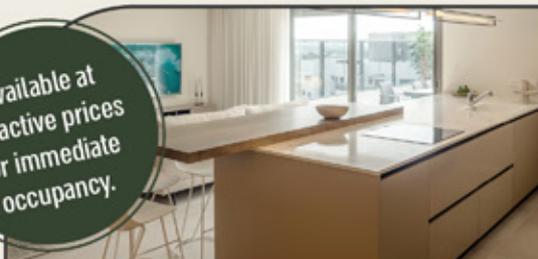
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Multiple Stones, One Foundation: An Interview with Chief Rabbi Kalman Ber

Rabbi Kalman Ber recently became the 8th Ashkenazi Chief Rabbi of the State of Israel. A former shaliach of Mizrachi in Belgium, and most recently the Chief Rabbi of Netanya, Rabbi Ber brings decades of rabbinic leadership and his personal warmth to this significant role.. Rabbi Aron White sat down with Rabbi Ber to hear about his vision for the role.

Thank you for speaking with us. Could you tell our readers a little bit about your background and those who influenced you in your upbringing?

My background was very multifaceted, with multiple levels. My father's family was *Chassidic* – I am actually named after an *Admor* named Rav Kalman Kalonymus. My mother's family was also descended from *Chassidim*, but she grew up in a Mizrachi home, and I grew up going to *Yeshivat Bnei Akiva* in Netanya. Today it is rare for people to have what is termed a *rav muvhak* – a primary Torah teacher – so instead we learn from various *rabbanim*, *sefarim*, and approaches. I was very close with the former Chief Rabbi and *Rosh Yeshiva* of Merkaz HaRav, Rav Avraham Shapira, Rav Goldvicht in KBY, and Rav Yehuda Segal in Kiryat Shalom.

The synthesis of these different influences allows me to speak to different segments of our people in their own language and style. The truth is not found exclusively in one group, but each group has aspects of truth. Rav Kook comments on the verse

requiring the *mizbe'ach* to be built from multiple stones rather than a single stone. He explains that just as the altar needs many stones, our religious world is built from multiple perspectives, not one absolute truth – therefore we shouldn't delegitimize different approaches. The *Netziv* connects this idea to the *Gemara's* teaching that the *Beit HaMikdash* was destroyed because of *sinat chinam* – baseless hatred that arose from rejecting other legitimate approaches.

Rav Kook also writes that in the *Mishnah* in *Bikkurim*, when it describes the bringing of the first fruits, it says that the people of Jerusalem would come out and say "Our brothers from x, welcome to the people from y." Why? Because when the Jewish people gather as one in Jerusalem, it is important to remember that you have your own identity. Our brothers from Johannesburg, our brothers from London, our brothers from Herzliya, our brothers from New York – it is important that within the Jewish people, each group keeps its tune, its uniqueness.

As far as I am aware, you are the first Chief Rabbi of Israel who served as a combat soldier in the IDF. Could you tell us about your experience there?

Yes, I learned in Yeshivat Kerem B'Yavneh and was part of the *Hesder* program in which *talmidei yeshiva* then go to serve in the army. I was in the Nachal Brigade and did my training in *Machane Shamirim* near Pardes Chana. I continued to serve in *milu'im* for many years after my *sadir* (regular) service, though eventually my *milu'im* shifted to be in educational roles in the army. I continued to serve in *milu'im* when I got married and had six children, and only finished serving in reserve duty when we went on *shlichut*.

You served as a Rav Shaliach to the Mizrachi community in Antwerp, Belgium. How did that experience shape you?

It was a very formative experience that had a great impact both on myself and my family. The Mizrachi community there, which is named after Rav Amiel, was very strong, with people who did amazing things for Israel. Many of those families have since moved to Israel. The community was often led by *rabbanim* who came as *shlichim* from Israel. It's a wonderful community that built its institutions with great *mesirut nefesh*. That is one of the ironies of successful Religious Zionist communities in the Diaspora – that over time they are weakened by their success as families move to Israel!

I very much encourage young *avreichim* and families to go on *shlichut*; it's very important to share the unique atmosphere and Torah of *Eretz Yisrael*, without trying to change communities to all become like them. I have seen *shlichim* come from Israel to *chutz la'aretz* who don't have this sensitivity, and it harms their effectiveness as *shlichim*.

I also think that everybody has to see themselves as having a *shlichut* in this world. When *David HaMelech* flees from Shaul, it is described as "Go, because Hashem has sent you there." Even when things seemingly don't go to plan, a Jew needs to see himself as being put in a particular place by Hashem for a reason.

After serving as Chief Rabbi of Netanya for many years, you have now begun to serve as the Chief Rabbi of Israel. What are some aspects of that role that people might be less aware of?

I think that during this war, there has been a thirst to hear about *netzach* – things that are eternal and rise above the challenges of the here and now. In Elul, I will be visiting countless communities to speak. There is a real thirst for Torah.

I inherited a system of religious services that has been built over many years, but we are always looking to improve and advance it. For example, in *kashrut* standards, the Rabbanut standards are very high, but we are continually looking to improve them. Each city in Israel has its rabbi, who is in charge of its *kashrut*, but the Chief Rabbinate sets the rules that guide the city's system, as well as national matters. I am in the middle of reforming the system, whereby the Rabbanut will oversee the work of many of the private *hashgachot*, which will bring the cost of *kashrut* down significantly. Another reform we are doing is by incorporating more technology, such as in ways that allow us to avoid issues of *bishul akum* in various factories. Everyone uses technology to improve what is important to them, and for us this is *kashrut*!

What is your message to Jews around the world this Rosh Hashanah?

Jews outside of Israel need to do whatever they can to help their brothers in Israel. In the famous lines of *Acheinu*, we say "*Acheinu kol beit Yisrael hanetunim batzara uvashivya*, Our brothers, all the house of Israel, who are in distress and captivity." Historically, there has never been a time where the entire Jewish people has been in captivity, so what does this line mean? It means that when some of our people are in captivity, we all have to feel that a piece of us is captive. If 50 of our brothers and sisters are held, that has to affect all of us, every Jew around the world. It doesn't matter if I'm in Israel, or Manhattan, or Paris. *Am Yisrael* is at war, the longest war we have had in Israel. There are so many hostages, injured soldiers and people who are suffering. Whether it's visiting families or soldiers, the things we do to help our brothers and sisters make a big difference.

Rav Kook writes about the *Mishnah* which says "*Vekulam niskarim biskira achat*, They are all judged in one judgment." This teaches us that on Rosh Hashanah, beyond the individual judgment we each face, we are also judged collectively based on how much we contribute to the Jewish people as a whole. We all need to do what we can for the *klal* – the Jewish collective.

We pray that this year we will merit a year of peace, a year when the hostages return and our soldiers come home safely, and that we should see the return of G-d's *Shechina* to Jerusalem. ■



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World Mizrachi joined with Nefesh B'Nefesh in inviting *Bnot Sherut Bodedot* to the celebratory opening of their new *Beit Midrash*, located at the Mizrachi Tzemach David Women's Learning Hub. The evening of learning, music, and great food, included words of encouragement and *beracha* from Rabbi Yehoshua Fass, Co-Founder and Executive Director of Nefesh B'Nefesh, Rabbi Yosef Zvi Rimon, Nasi of World Mizrachi, and Rabbi David Katz, Nefesh B'Nefesh Residence Torani Coordinator. Rosh Beit Midrash, Rabbanit Shani Taragin, delivered the opening *shiur*, which was followed by Elul *niggunim* with Ricka Razel!

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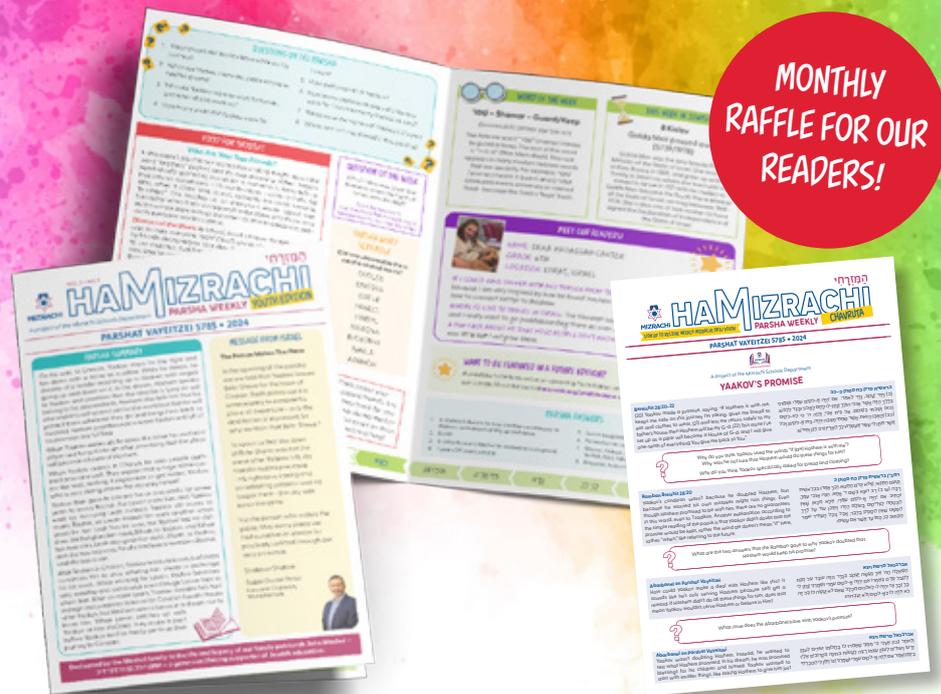


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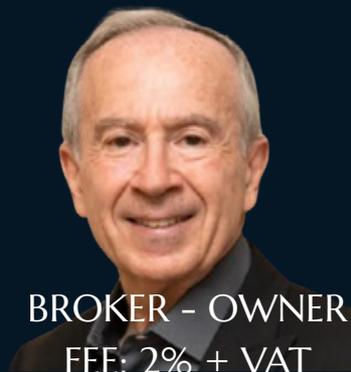
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The Three Stages of Creation

Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks ל"צ

“And G-d said, let there be... And there was... and G-d saw that it was good.” Thus unfolds the most revolutionary as well as the most influential account of creation in the history of the human spirit.

In Rashi's commentary, he quotes Rabbi Yitzchak who questioned why the Torah should start with the story of creation at all (Rashi, 1:1). Given that it is a book of law – the commandments that bind the children of Israel as a nation – it should have started with the first law given to the Israelites, which does not appear until the twelfth chapter of *Shemot*.

Rabbi Yitzchak's own answer was that the Torah opens with the birth of the universe to justify the gift of the Land of Israel to the people of Israel. The Creator of the world is ipso facto owner and ruler of the world. His gift confers title. The claim of the Jewish people to the land is unlike that of any other nation. It does not flow from arbitrary facts of settlement, historical association, conquest or international agreement (though in the case of the present State of Israel, all four apply). It follows from something more profound: the word of G-d Himself – the G-d acknowledged, as it happens, by all three monotheisms: Judaism, Christianity and Islam. This is a political reading of the chapter. Let me suggest another (not incompatible, but additional) interpretation.

One of the most striking propositions of the Torah is that we are called on, as G-d's image, to imitate G-d. “Be holy, for I, the L-rd your G-d, am holy” (*Vayikra* 19:2):

The Sages taught: “Just as G-d is called gracious, so you be gracious. Just as He is called merciful, so you be merciful. Just as He is called holy, so you be holy.” So too the prophets described the Almighty by all the various attributes: long-suffering, abounding in kindness, righteous, upright, perfect, mighty and powerful and so on – to teach us that these qualities are good and right and that a human being should cultivate them, and thus imitate G-d as far as we can (*Rambam, Mishneh Torah, De'ot* 1:6).

Implicit in the first chapter of *Bereishit* is thus a momentous challenge: Just as G-d is creative, so you must be creative. In making man, G-d endowed one creature – the only one thus far known to science – with the capacity not merely to adapt to his

environment, but to adapt his environment to him; to shape the world; to be active, not merely passive, in relation to the influences and circumstances that surround him:

“The brute's existence is an undignified one because it is a helpless existence. Human existence is a dignified one because it is a glorious, majestic, powerful existence... Man of old who could not fight disease and succumbed in multitudes to yellow fever or any other plague with degrading helplessness could not lay claim to dignity. Only the man who builds hospitals, discovers therapeutic techniques, and saves lives is blessed with dignity... Civilized man has gained limited control of nature and has become, in certain respects, her master, and with his mastery he has attained dignity as well. His mastery has made it possible for him to act in accordance with his responsibility” (Joseph B. Soloveitchik, *The Lonely Man of Faith*, New York: Doubleday, 1992, 16–17).

The first chapter of *Bereishit* therefore contains a teaching. It tells us how to be creative – namely in three stages. The first is the stage of saying “Let there be.” The second is the stage of “and there was.” The third is the stage of seeing “that it is good.”

Even a cursory look at this model of creativity teaches us something profound and counter-intuitive: What is truly creative is not science or technology per se, but the word. That is what forms all beings.

Indeed, what singles out *Homo sapiens* among other animals is the ability to speak. *Targum Onkelos* translates the last phrase of *Bereishit* 2:7, “G-d formed man out of dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and man became a living creature,” as “and man became *ruach memallelah*, a speaking spirit.” Because we can speak, we can think, and therefore imagine a world different from the one that currently exists.

Creation begins with the creative word, the idea, the vision, the dream. Language – and with it the ability to remember a distant past and conceptualize a distant future – lies at the heart of our uniqueness as the image of G-d. Just as G-d makes the natural world by words (“And G-d said...and there was”) so we make the human world by words, which is why Judaism takes words so seriously: “Life and death are in the power of the tongue,” says

the book of *Mishlei* (18:21). Already at the opening of the Torah, at the very beginning of creation, is foreshadowed the Jewish doctrine of revelation: that G-d reveals Himself to humanity not in the sun, the stars, the wind or the storm but in and through words – sacred words that make us co-partners with G-d in the work of redemption.

“And G-d said, let there be... and there was” – the second stage of creation, is for us the most difficult. It is one thing to conceive an idea, another to execute it. “Between the imagination and the act falls the shadow” (T.S. Eliot, “The Hollow Men”, in *Collected Poems 1909-1962*). Between the intention and the fact, the dream and the reality, lies struggle, opposition, and the fallibility of the human will. It is all too easy, having tried and failed, to conclude that nothing ultimately can be achieved, that the world is as it is, and that all human endeavor is destined to end in failure.

This, however, is a Greek idea, not a Jewish one: that hubris ends in nemesis, that fate is inexorable and we must resign ourselves to it. Judaism holds the opposite, that though creation is difficult, laborious and fraught with setbacks, we are summoned to it as our essential human vocation: “It is not for you to complete the work,” said Rabbi Tarfon, “but neither are you free to desist from it” (*Mishnah, Avot 2:16*).

There is a lovely rabbinic phrase: *machshava tova HaKadosh baruch Hu meztarfah lema'aseh* (*Tosefta, Pe'ah 1:4*). This is usually translated as “G-d considers a good intention as if it were the deed.” I translate it differently: “When a human being has a good intention, G-d joins in helping it become a deed,” meaning – He gives us the strength, if not now, then eventually, to turn it into achievement.

If the first stage in creation is imagination, the second is will. The sanctity of the human will is one of the most distinctive features of the Torah. There have been many philosophies – the generic name for them is determinisms – that maintain that the human will is an illusion. We are determined by other factors – genetically encoded instinct, economic or social forces, conditioned reflexes – and the idea that we are what we choose to be is a myth. Judaism is a protest in the name of human freedom and responsibility against determinism. We are not pre-programmed machines; we are persons, endowed with will. Just as G-d is free, so we are free, and the entire Torah is a call to humanity to exercise responsible freedom in creating a social world which honors the freedom of others. Will is the bridge from “Let there be” to “and there was.”

What, though, of the third stage: “And G-d saw that it was good”? This is the hardest of the three stages to understand. What does it mean to say that “G-d saw that it was good”? Surely, this is redundant. What does G-d make that is not good? Judaism is not Gnosticism, nor is it an Eastern mysticism. We do not believe that this created world of the senses is evil. To the contrary, we believe that it is the arena of blessing and good.

Perhaps this is what the phrase comes to teach us: that the religious life is not to be sought in retreat from the world and its conflicts into mystic rapture or nirvana. G-d wants us to be part of the world, fighting its battles, tasting its joy, celebrating its splendor. But there is more.

In the course of my work, I have visited prisons and centers for young offenders. Many of the people I met there were potentially good. They, like you and me, had dreams, hopes, ambitions, aspirations. They did not want to become criminals. Their tragedy was that often they came from dysfunctional families in difficult conditions. No one took the time to care for them, support them, teach them how to negotiate the world, how to achieve what they wanted through hard work and persuasion rather than violence and lawbreaking. They lacked a basic self-respect, a sense of their own worth. No one ever told them that they were good.

To see that someone is good and to say so is a creative act – one of the great creative acts. There may be a few individuals who are inescapably evil, but they are few. Within almost all of us is something positive and unique, but which is all too easily injured, and which only grows when exposed to the sunlight of someone else's recognition and praise. To see the good in others and let them see themselves in the mirror of our regard is to help someone grow to become the best they can be. “Greater,” says the Talmud, “is one who causes others to do good than one who does good himself” (*Bava Batra 9a*). To help others become what they can be is to give birth to creativity in someone else's soul. This is done not by criticism or negativity but by searching out the good in others, and helping them see it, recognize it, own it, and live it.

“And G-d saw that it was good” – this too is part of the work of creation, the subtlest and most beautiful of all. When we recognize the goodness in someone, we do more than create it, we help it to become creative. This is what G-d does for us, and what He calls us to do for others.



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The Sukkah as Hashem's Protection: Reflecting Two Years Later

Rabbi Reuven Taragin

October 7 and Sukkot

Two years ago, our perception of Simchat Torah changed forever. The Hamas invasion on Simchat Torah undermined our *simcha* then and will continue to challenge our celebration in years to come. Just as Yom Kippur reminds us of the Yom Kippur War, so too we now associate Simchat Torah with the Hamas attack.

But the day of the attack was not only Simchat Torah – it was also the morning after Sukkot. That is significant, because the *sukkah* symbolizes Hashem's protection. It commemorates the *ananei haKavod* that safeguarded the Jewish people during their forty-year journey through the desert. Each year, we sit in the *sukkah* to recall Hashem's protection then, and His continued protection today.¹

Two years ago, however, that protection felt absent. Less than twelve hours after sitting in the *sukkah*, we were attacked gruesomely. The assault was not confined to military bases; it extended to the home front. Families were murdered in their private homes, and many were taken hostage.

How can we still identify with the message of the *sukkah* – the sense of Hashem's protection – after October 7?

The last two years

Although this question was painful on October 7, 2023, it is easier to answer two years later. Over the past two years, we have witnessed tremendous miracles – not only on the battlefield but also on the home front.

Our enemies have fired more than twenty-five thousand rockets, missiles, drones, and other projectiles at the State of Israel, sometimes hundreds or even more than a thousand at once. Yet the vast majority failed to take human life.

Though the loss of even one soldier or civilian is a tragedy, we must recognize the miraculous way Hashem has protected the

Jewish people. Our enemies believed October 7 would spark an ongoing massacre of Jews. While Hashem allowed that terrible day to unfold, He has since turned the tide against them. He has enabled us to strike our enemies on all sides while protecting our communities from devastation.

We still have brothers and sisters held hostage, and the fighting continues, but the tables have been turned. Hashem has helped us dismantle each part of Iran's "ring of fire" – and even to strike Iran itself.

The events of these two years also revealed another dimension of Hashem's protection: only once our enemies' full intentions were exposed did we realize the extent of the danger. Their plan included not only Hamas's invasion, but also a simultaneous assault by Hezbollah in the north and terror forces from Judea, Samaria, and other parts of Israel. This was meant to be coordinated with missile barrages from Syria, Iraq, Iran, and Yemen. Together, these attacks were designed to overwhelm Israeli defenses and, *chas v'shalom*, threaten the very existence of the state.

Hashem, however, disrupted their coordination. Hamas struck prematurely, before the others were ready. Instead of facing a united front, Hashem allowed us to confront and defeat each enemy one at a time.

The lessons of the last two years remind us that although our enemies in every generation devise elaborate plans to destroy us, Hashem ensures that we endure. For reasons known only to Him, He sometimes allows us to be attacked, but at the same time He spreads His protective clouds around us to limit the devastation.

Our prayers for the future

Recognizing Hashem's great care and protection should inspire us to deepen our prayers for His continued shelter. In recent years, we have seen the profound significance of His protection – both in

times when it was revealed and in times when it was concealed.

When His protection is revealed, we glimpse how Hashem, our Father in heaven, longs to relate to us at all times. Our task is to return to Him in a way that allows Him to draw close. We must remember that Hashem uses our enemies to remind us of our need to strengthen our relationship with Him – and that lasting peace with them depends on true peace with Him.

Let us turn and return to Him so that we may merit the restoration of the ultimate *sukkah* – the fallen *sukkah of David* – and His spreading of the *sukkah* of peace upon us, upon Yerushalayim, and upon the entire world.

HaRachaman Hu yakim lanu et sukkat David ha-nofelet, u'feros aleinu sukkat sh'lomecha. May the Merciful One restore for us the fallen *sukkah* of David, and spread over us His *sukkah* of peace.

1. See *Mechilta, Hakdamah to Beshalach*, about the end of days, and *Derech Hashem 4:8* about each year.



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The Power of Prayer: Rain, Redemption, and Responsibility

Rabbanit Shani Taragin

At the opening of *Masechet Ta'anit*, the *Mishnah* records a dispute between Rabbi Eliezer and Rabbi Yehoshua regarding *hazkarat gevurot geshamim* – the mention in our daily prayers of Hashem's might in sending rain. Rabbi Eliezer maintains that we begin mentioning Hashem's power to bring rain from the first day of Sukkot, while Rabbi Yehoshua contends that it should begin only on the last day of the *chag*.

The *Shem MiShmuel* reveals a much deeper philosophical divide: the nature of *tefillah* itself, and the interplay between *middat hadin* (Divine justice) and *middat harachamim* (Divine mercy).

According to Rabbi Eliezer, prayer operates within the framework of *din*. We cannot presume that requests automatically guarantee results. Our prayers must be matched by genuine effort and moral worthiness. Rain will not fall merely because we ask for it; it is granted when we prove ourselves deserving.

Rabbi Yehoshua views *tefillah* through the prism of *rachamim*. The very act of praising Hashem's greatness carries transformative spiritual energy that can tilt the heavenly scales. Hence Rabbi Yehoshua delays until Shemini Atzeret. If our words of praise truly invite rain, we dare not utter them prematurely, lest rain descend during Sukkot and disrupt our dwelling in the *sukkah*.

The *Shem MiShmuel* adds a striking symbolic dimension: the disputants' very names reflect their spiritual orientations. Eliezer begins with the Divine Name *Elokim*, the Name associated with *din*. As a disciple of Beit Shammai, Rabbi Eliezer emphasizes human responsibility and the need to earn blessing through merit. By contrast, Yehoshua contains the Tetragrammaton, associated with *rachamim*. As a supporter of Hillel's predominant views, Rabbi Yehoshua channels that attribute in his belief that simply uttering Hashem's praise can unlock blessing.

The *halacha* follows Rabbi Yehoshua, underscoring prayer's awe-inspiring power. Yet we must not lose sight of Rabbi Eliezer's contribution. Words alone are not a substitute for responsibility. True religious life demands both elements: the pleading voice of prayer and the steady hand of action.

Rain itself is the perfect metaphor. Farmers pray for rain, but they must also plow, sow, and tend their fields. Without effort, prayer becomes escapism; without prayer, effort becomes arrogance. Only together do they yield blessing.

This is the dialectic of *tefillah*. Rabbi Eliezer reminds us that heaven's gates are not opened automatically; prayer requires action. Rabbi Yehoshua testifies to the immeasurable strength of words alone – how even a whisper of heartfelt *shevach* can change nature's course.

It is no accident that this debate arises in the context of Sukkot, when we are judged for water. Emerging from the Days of Awe, we step into *sukkot* that symbolize both fragility and faith. We acknowledge our dependence upon rain not as entitlement, but as a gift. Sukkot embodies this duality: human vulnerability (*din*) and Divine embrace (*rachamim*).

When, on Shemini Atzeret, we first utter "*Mashiv haruach umorid hageshem*," we affirm both truths simultaneously. We have invested effort through repentance, through building and dwelling in *sukkot*, through taking the *arba'a minim* – yet we still recognize that everything ultimately rests in Hashem's merciful hands.

This message resonates urgently as we mark the second anniversary of Shemini Atzeret 5784 / October 7. That day seared into our collective memory the fragility of life, the limits of human control, and the desperate need for Divine compassion. Jews worldwide turned to prayer – reciting *Tehillim*, crying *Shema Yisrael*, pouring out tears and *tefillot* for hostages, soldiers, and bereaved families.

Prayer alone is not enough. Israel's security requires vigilance, courage,

and action. We dare not expect miracles without doing our part. Yet every word of prayer has power. Every *Tehillim*, every *Avinu Malkeinu*, every whispered *Shema* from a child in a bomb shelter to a *Mi Sheberach* in Melbourne carries cosmic weight.

The *Shem MiShmuel's* insight charges us with a twofold mission as we approach Sukkot: to pray with renewed intensity and to act with unwavering resolve. Just as rain requires both clouds from above and plowing from below, redemption emerges when human striving meets Divine compassion.

As we enter this Sukkot season, let us reclaim the vitality of our *tefillot* and recognize in every syllable the possibility of rain, blessing, and redemption. And let us couple our prayers with action – building homes, communities, and lives rooted in faith and responsibility. Let us honor both Rabbi Eliezer and Rabbi Yehoshua, harnessing *din* and *rachamim*, effort and prayer, as we turn to Hashem: *Mashiv haruach umorid hageshem*.

May our voices this Sukkot not only summon the rains of blessing but also hasten the rains and winds of *geulah*, nourishing and reviving *Am Yisrael*.



Rabbanit Shani Taragin

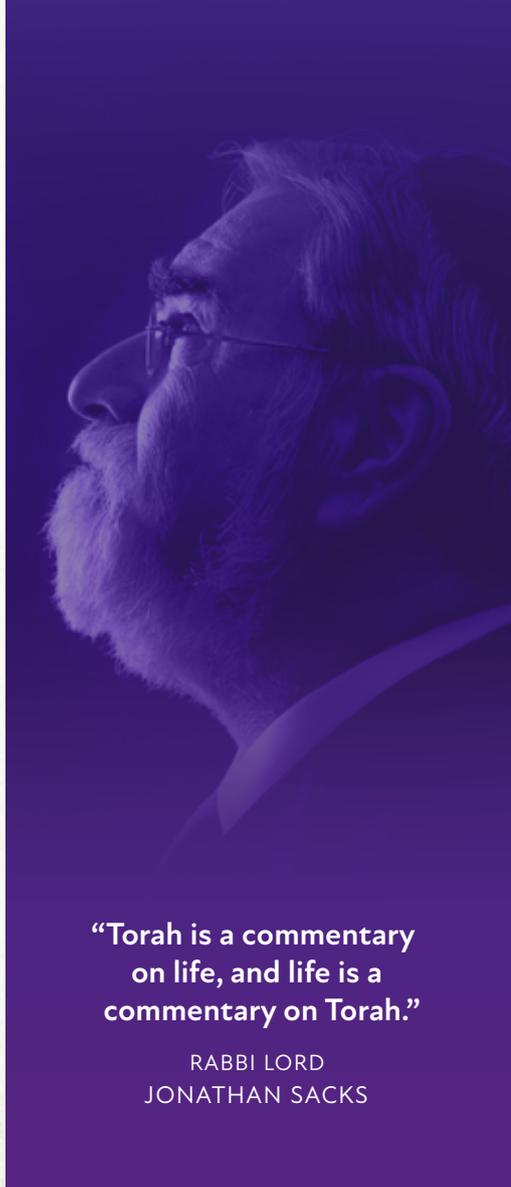
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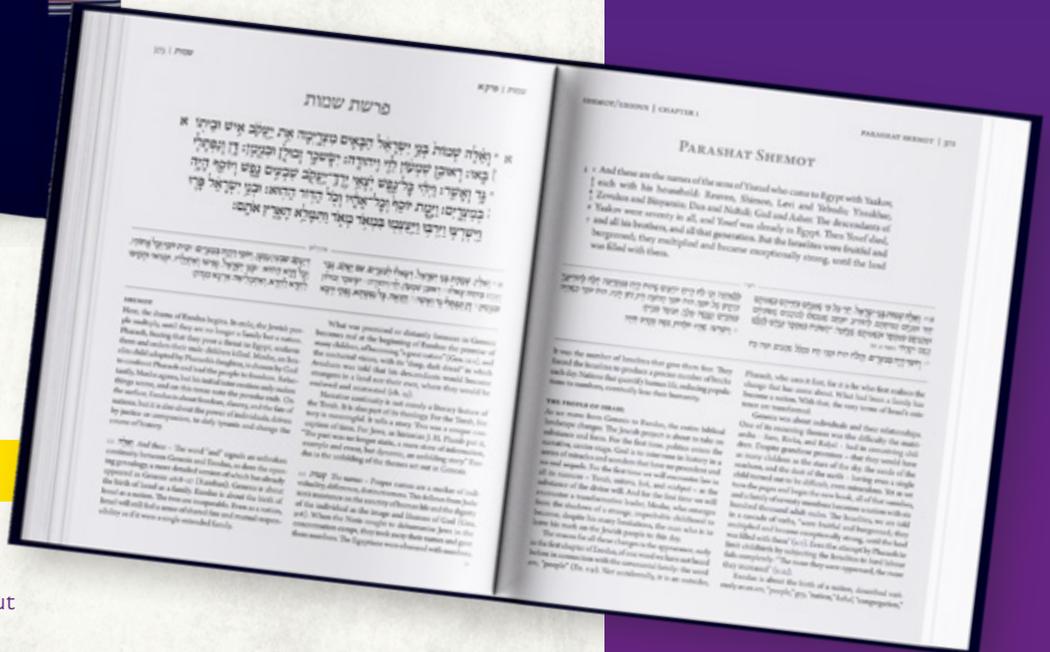


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They Choose Comfort. We Choose Children.

Rabbi Elie Mischel

Western society is falling apart – and few statistics reflect that cultural collapse more than fertility rates. In America, the current fertility rate per couple is 1.84, well below the replacement level of 2.1. Incredibly, this is better than most developed nations, where birthrates are even lower. As Wilfred Reilly writes, young people in the West “increasingly resemble captive panda bears, who have to be pushed into one another and bribed with delicacies to be persuaded to mate” (Wilfred Reilly, *What’s Really Driving the Birth-Rate Crisis*, *National Review*).

Low birthrates are the clearest sign of a society in decline. An aging population means fewer working people, slower economic growth, and unsustainable social programs. But the deeper issue is spiritual: it reflects a culture that no longer believes in itself, a society with no mission and no will to endure.

The Torah describes a strange conversation between Lemech, a descendant of Kayin, and his two wives: “Now Lemech said to his wives, ‘Adah and Tzilah, hearken to my voice; wives of Lemech, incline your ears to my words. For I have slain a man by wounding him and a child by bruising him. If Kayin shall be avenged sevenfold, then for Lemech it shall be seventy-seven fold.’ And Adam knew his wife again, and she bore a son, and she named him Sheit, for ‘G-d has given me other seed instead of Hevel, for Kayin slew him’” (*Bereishit* 4:23–25).

At this early stage in human history, there is a crisis. Lemech’s wives won’t listen to him. He seems to have killed both a man and a child. What is going on?

Chazal provide a fascinating backstory. Lemech, who was blind, went hunting with his son Tuval-Kayin. Tuval-Kayin spotted their ancestor Kayin, who was hunched over and appeared to be an animal. He told his father to shoot – and Lemech killed Kayin. When he realized what had happened, Lemech clapped his

hands together in anguish, accidentally crushing his son’s head between them and killing him.

After this double tragedy, Lemech’s wives separated from him. Lemech tried to appease them, but they refused. So Lemech came to Adam and complained that his wives had abandoned him. Adam told them: “Return to your husband and fulfill your obligation to be fruitful and multiply.” But Adah and Tzilah responded: “Correct yourself first. Haven’t you separated from your wife for 130 years since death was decreed because of you?” And immediately, Adam reunited with Chavah, and Sheit was born (*Rashi, Bereishit* 4:23,25).

It’s a strange story – but one that speaks directly to our generation.

Rav Yehuda Leon Ashkenazi explains that after Kayin murdered Hevel, human society spiraled into darkness. They built cities and invented tools and music, but lacked all moral purpose. Like Kayin, they related to G-d in a transactional way: bring a sacrifice, get a reward. Society was marked by violence, egotism, and nihilism. In such a world, human life becomes worthless. Lemech’s senseless killing of Kayin and Tuval-Kayin was the inevitable end result of a hollow, godless society.

Adah and Tzilah saw it clearly. Why bring children into a world like this? If life is about nothing more than self-indulgence and empty pleasure, why continue the human story? Why invest in another generation when there’s nothing worth passing on? (Rabbi Yehuda Leon Ashkenazi, *Sod Halvri*, 1:176)

We are witnessing the same phenomenon in Western culture today. As religion fades, children are increasingly seen as a burden – expensive, exhausting, and disruptive to personal fulfillment. Without G-d, Torah, and a higher purpose, there is no compelling reason to raise children at all.

What can be done? The answer lies in the next verse: “And Adam knew his wife again, and she bore a son, and she named

him Sheit, for ‘G-d has given me other seed instead of Hevel, for Kayin slew him’” (*Bereishit* 4:25).

Adam understood the fundamental problem: the descendants of Kayin were spiritually lost. So he returned to Chavah, and they brought a new soul into the world – Sheit. Sheit was a new kind of man. He was the ancestor of Avraham, Yitzchak, Ya’akov and *Am Yisrael*. The mission of Sheit and his descendants was to bring humanity back from the brink, to teach the children of Kayin that G-d is real and life has meaning. Sheit is called “a new seed” because he planted the seed of redemption.

This, in the end, is the purpose of *Am Yisrael*. We are the descendants of Sheit – the counterforce to the spiritual collapse of civilization. Our role is to show the world what a life of meaning looks like. And perhaps more importantly: what a *society* of meaning looks like.

Even under the threat of war and terror, Israel is growing stronger, not weaker. Our birthrate is the highest in the Western world, our people are returning to G-d, and thousands make *Aliyah* each year. Step by step, we are fulfilling Sheit’s mission, and becoming the light unto the nations that it is our purpose to be.

They chose comfort. We chose children – and through them, we’ll show the world what it really means to choose life.



Rabbi Elie Mischel

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The Sukkah:

Fragility, Grandeur, and the Capstone of the Yamim Nora'im

Rabbi Yehuda Susman

The festival of Sukkot greets us at the conclusion of the intense High Holiday season. Having stood before G-d in awe and trembling on Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, we emerge into a holiday whose central *mitzvah* seems deceptively simple: sit, eat, and dwell in a temporary hut. Yet from the earliest rabbinic sources through contemporary thought, the *sukkah* has carried layers of meaning. It recalls the *ananei haKavod*, the Clouds of Glory that shielded Israel in the desert, and it recalls the actual huts in which the Israelites lived during their wanderings. On a more agricultural level, it echoes the farmer's hut in the field during harvest, a reminder that Sukkot is at its root a festival of ingathering and thanksgiving.

But beyond these classical associations, there is a strikingly different interpretation that speaks directly to the spiritual journey of the *Yamim Nora'im*. In 1926, Rabbi Yitzchak Herzog – then serving as Chief Rabbi of Ireland, and later destined to become Chief Rabbi of Israel – published an essay in the *Jewish Chronicle*, later republished in his work *Judaism: Law and Ethics*. Drawing inspiration from Rabbi Yitzchak Arama, the 15th-century author of the *Akeidat Yitzchak*, Rabbi Herzog focused on the *sukkah* as a metaphor for human existence itself.

At first glance, the *sukkah* embodies fragility. It is, by design, a frail and temporary structure. Its walls need not be strong; its roof – the *schach* – must be porous enough to let in rain, to let us glimpse the stars above. So too is the human condition: fleeting, vulnerable, impermanent. Rabbi Herzog and Rabbi Arama note the parallel between the seven days we spend in the *sukkah* and the traditional “seven decades” of a human life. In the sunshine of youth, of health, of success, life feels sturdy and

stable. Yet, like the *sukkah*, it can collapse with little warning. One strong wind can shift the balance; one misfortune can transform security into transience.

But to stop here would be incomplete. For the *sukkah* is not only about fragility. It is also about greatness. Jewish law requires that the *schach* – the roof covering that defines the *sukkah* – be made of material that “grows from the ground” (*davar gidulo min ha'aretz*) and that is not susceptible to ritual impurity (*davar she-eino mekabel tum'ah*). The message is twofold. On the one hand, we are mortal, earthbound, subject to the laws of nature and the finality of death. On the other hand, we are capable of transcending that mortality. The very same materials that speak of our earthy origin are also elevated by *halacha* into something untouchable and immune from impurity. The *sukkah* reminds us that though our bodies are frail, our souls are imbued with infinite worth.

This paradox continues when we lift our eyes upward inside the *sukkah*. What do we see? The *kippat ha-shamayim*, the dome of heaven. Through the interlacing branches we glimpse the stars. We see our smallness against the vastness of creation, but also our potential: the call to rise beyond ourselves, to aim at the heavens. Yet the *halacha* again insists on balance: a *sukkah* cannot be too high, nor can it be oppressively low. It is a space of proportion, reminding us that true spiritual life does not lie in extremes but in harmonizing humility with aspiration.

Thus the *sukkah* becomes the capstone of the *Yamim Nora'im*. On Rosh Hashanah we experienced the majesty and dread of divine judgment. On Yom Kippur we trembled in awe, yet at its climax we felt the closeness of G-d's forgiveness and sang of redemption in *Ne'ilah*. Now, on Sukkot,

all these tensions are given physical form. We sit in a structure that is both fragile and dignified, both temporary and holy. It holds together the contradictions of the season: fear and joy, judgment and mercy, smallness and greatness.

Rabbi Herzog's insight is that the *sukkah* does not merely commemorate past miracles or agricultural practices. It is an existential symbol. To step into the *sukkah* is to step into a mirror of our own lives: lives bounded by time, yet capable of eternity; lives filled with vulnerability, yet suffused with divine grandeur.

In this way, the *sukkah* is not only a conclusion to the High Holiday season, but its fulfillment. Having faced our mortality and frailty in judgment, we now embrace them with joy. We accept life as it is – temporary, unpredictable – and sanctify it. We crown the awe of the *Yamim Nora'im* with the joy of Sukkot, and in the fragile walls of the *sukkah*, we discover a vision of human life at once humbling and exalting.



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Candy Apples and Tears: Finding Joy in the Shadow of October 7

Rabbanit Yael Leibowitz

Human beings are constantly evolving, and as we do so, the words we use evolve with us. A single word can conjure distinct, concrete images for years, only to take on an entirely new meaning after a single experience. The word *parent* can mean one thing to someone for decades, until he or she experiences loss, at which point the familiar word becomes coated in layers of new, unfamiliar emotions. Similarly, words like *birth* and *true love* acquire unimagined depth and intensity when lived firsthand. The same holds true for the most mundane of words such as *book*, *airplane*, or *red* – their import is determined by our individual and collective experiences.

For centuries, the words *Simchat Torah* called to mind dancing, singing, religious rapture, and smiling, sticky children clutching candy apples. But October 7th changed that. Now we choke on the words, suppressing the images of the children they stir up. The gulf between what the words once invoked and what they do now feels irreconcilable, and

many of us are left wondering if, or how, we will ever truly experience the joy of the holiday again. The book of Ezra-Nehemiah suggests we can and we will – but that our joy will simply take a different form.

Ezra-Nehemiah traces the activities of Jews who lost everything, went into exile, and then, upon return from Babylon attempted to reconstitute what had been lost. It describes the restoration of the *Beit HaMikdash*, the city of Jerusalem, and the community itself. The process was fraught with challenges, and for that very reason, it continues to serve as a helpful paradigm for all Jewish restorations.

In *Ezra 3*, we encounter the foundation-laying for the new *Beit HaMikdash* on the very spot where the first Temple had stood. Yet instead of the unbridled jubilation we might expect, we read that “many of the *Kohanim, Levi'im...* the old men who had seen the first house, wept loudly at the sight of the founding of the house.” The memory of the first *Beit HaMikdash* and the devastation of its destruction remained too raw. They simply could not celebrate without sorrow overwhelming them.

But the verse continues: “Many others shouted joyously at the top of their voices.” Those galvanized by the moment rejoiced without restraint. Both reactions, Ezra-Nehemiah demonstrates, were equally authentic and equally valid. Most powerfully, the text reveals that “the people could not distinguish the shouts of joy from the people’s weeping, for the people raised a great shout.” Two seemingly incompatible cries merged into one, echoing through the hills of Jerusalem.

Celebrating after loss does not require that we forget our pain, nor does it require that we temper our joy when joy is called for. Rather, it asks us, as a community, to make space for both sentiments simultaneously – the searing recognition that we will never be able to go back to what was before, alongside the triumph of

knowing that, despite that truth, we possess the strength as a people to mend and persevere.

Of course, our ability to pick up the pieces of our shattered past is only worth celebrating if we know what we are striving to reconstruct. As such, the book’s climax comes in *Nehemiah 8* when men, women, and children gather as Ezra acquaints them with the Torah they had long forgotten. There, in the streets of Jerusalem, Ezra patiently reminds the people what is expected of them, and why their future is worth fighting for. He recalls their covenant with G-d which demands that they build a fair and ethical society, and he reminds them that they were chosen to be different and to lead the world by example.

It has been an excruciating two years for our people, and we bear the wounds of our past. But we also have our Torah, and the conviction that the words contained within its sacred scrolls can guide us toward the promises of our future. So, with our eyes brimming with tears of prayer for our hostages, our soldiers, our injured, and our bereaved, let us hand out candy apples to our children, and let us choose to dance.



Rabbanit Yael Leibowitz

is an Israeli educator. She currently teaches at Matan Women’s Institute for Torah Learning and Midreshet Lindenbaum. Yael’s new book on Ezra-Nehemiah is now available through Koren Press.



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Rejoicing on Simchat Torah 5786

Rabbi Heshie and Rebbetzin Rookie Billet

The Torah in *Devarim* 16:13–15 commands us multiple times to rejoice on Sukkot. The text speaks of rejoicing for seven days, which does not include Shemini Atzeret. The rabbis in *Sukkot* 47b–48a state that Shemini Atzeret is indeed a holiday “by itself” with its own *mitzvah* to rejoice.

The tragedy that befell the Jewish people on Shemini Atzeret 5784 highlights the challenge of rejoicing on this day in the same manner we rejoice on other festivals. It was almost prophetic of the Torah and *Gemara* to distinguish Shemini Atzeret as standing alone.

Several aspects of the commandment to rejoice on the holiday are worthy of note. In his *Laws of Resting on Yom Tov* 6:17–18, Maimonides firmly states that joy means sharing what you have with others, especially the lonely and tragically stricken among the Jewish people. Failure to do so negates the true joy of *Yom Tov*, transforming what we think is joy into mere “joy of our bellies.”

The State of Israel, its citizens, and Jews worldwide have made herculean efforts to reach out, adopt, support, and make the ultimate sacrifice to help our brothers and sisters in the Gaza Envelope. As Shemini Atzeret 5786 approaches and the celebration of Simchat Torah is upon us, we must redouble our efforts of love to bring the inclusive joy of the holidays to our stricken brethren.

Other elements are subsumed within the framework of *simcha*. One idea that has always resonated with us is that the Hebrew letters spelling *simcha* are the same as the Hebrew term *sheh'machah*, meaning “he who erased.” What does this imply? The idea is that when one is self-conscious about rejoicing, when one worries about how he or she will appear while dancing with abandon before the Torah, that cannot be true *simcha*. When we can “erase” our egos and not worry about appearances – just rejoice as King David did when he danced with abandon alongside the common people while bringing the holy Ark to Jerusalem – that is the genuine happiness the Torah asks of us.

Tehillim 100, *mizmor le'todah*, invites the reader to “Serve Hashem with happiness, come before Him with jubilation.” This implies that gladness isn't limited to holidays; rather, a Jew should cultivate elation and bliss in everyday life, bringing feelings of *gilah*, *rinah*, *ditzah*, and *chedvah* to one's *avodat Hashem* as a constant theme running through life.

This brings us to the question: Can we celebrate this year with a *lev shalem*, a whole heart, on Simchat Torah, knowing what our nation as a whole and so many individual families experienced on Simchat Torah 5784? Perhaps one answer is that we must! This is the story of the Jew throughout the ages. Chanukah candles were lit in concentration camps; weddings were celebrated while

family members of the bride and groom were held captive in Hamas tunnels; Pesach *Sedarim* were clandestinely held in labor camps without a morsel of *matzah* or the text of the *Haggadah*. Jews have lived with contradictions in every epoch. *Yizkor*, the prayer of remembrance for the deceased, is recited on Simchat Torah, though only moments before, we are charged to dance with jubilation to celebrate completing the reading of the Torah and restarting the cycle.

In a certain sense, this demand to rejoice even as we remember atrocities is akin to the question posed this past Tisha B'Av: How can we say that Jerusalem is a city that is mournful, ruined, scorned, and desolate when we live in a city so beautiful, so full of light and people of all stripes, teeming with children and baby carriages, parks and new construction? But remember we must, even as we celebrate the beauty and life surrounding us in this great capital of the State of Israel. Indeed, happiness on Simchat Torah and other holy days is a dialectic characterized by legitimate contradictions and the pursuit of balance. The Jew lives with contradictions and somehow reconciles them.

In sum, the joy of this holiday reminds us that inclusiveness is a tremendous Jewish value. It requires us to negate our egos and simply surrender to the national feelings of elation that are an essential part of Jewish holidays. It calls to mind the contradictions of Jewish life and history – that we celebrate our holidays despite exile, incarceration, and being besieged by relentless enemies. *Simcha* is a theme of Jewish life and *avodat Hashem*, this year and every year, even as we remember with longing and full hearts those who are no longer with us to celebrate. May their sacrifices and memories inspire us, and may we have the *zechut* of true healing and of welcoming home all our missing loved ones.



Rabbi Heshie and Rebbetzin Rookie Billet

made Aliyah after long and distinguished careers in Jewish community work in the United States. Rabbi Billet is Rabbi Emeritus of the Young Israel of Woodmere and a member of the US President's Commission for the Preservation of America's Heritage Abroad. Rookie Billet recently retired after a long career as a Jewish educator, principal, shul Rebbetzin, and yoetzet halachah, and hopes to contribute to life in Israel.

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Dancing the Two-Step this Simchat Torah

Rabbi Dr. Katriel (Kenneth) Brander

As we approach Simchat Torah – a day on which we customarily dance – the shadow of October 7's horrors still lingers. Last year, dancing was difficult. Those who could manage it did so courageously, but in darkness and muted celebration. What about this year? Have things changed? In some ways our lives have remained the same, while in others our outlook has evolved.

As time passes, we are learning resilience in the face of tragedy. Songs about the current reality populate our playlists. Young children coping with their new realities make up short rhymes about Houthis and Iranian missiles. Last year, our children needed to know where the safe rooms were; this year, they want to know if the rooms have wi-fi. We talk more openly about trauma than perhaps at any time in the history of this country.

Construction around the country is, *baruch Hashem*, booming, and parking at malls has again become treacherous. We are out shopping for school supplies and the *chagim*. Fertility rates have reversed course – rather than continuing their decline, they have rebounded and even slightly exceeded previous levels.

And yet, we are never far away from the realities of war. The ongoing pressures have led to struggles with mental health and suicides in the IDF. Parents, children, spouses, students and colleagues are still spending too much time away from family, their studies and their businesses. We still live with the horrific reality of hostages yet to come home, and we face anxiety and uncertainty about what will happen in Gaza or with Iran.

But we must once again dance on Simchat Torah even if it's still hard and confusing. Perhaps we need to do the 'two-step': dancing forward in one direction while pivoting to acknowledge that we are still living amid a war. We are living in two concurrent realities and must dance in the

presence of both. For our light is woven with the darkness of war.

We dance in celebration of our *mesorah*, inspired by the immense sacrifice of our fellow Jews, including the hostages in Gaza, who maintained their devotion to tradition under unimaginably difficult circumstances. Agam Berger, taken hostage from her base, observed fast days and refused non-kosher meat despite hunger and scarce food. She refused to light fires on Shabbat to cook for her captors, putting her life in even greater peril. We dance in celebration of a Torah so beloved that former hostage Ohad Ben Ami, confined to a six-square-meter cell, recited *kiddush* and *havdalah* each week – even without wine.

We dance because of the resilience of our people – those like Yonatan Veinstock, whose burnt *Gemara* was found in his bombed out tank. During breaks in the fighting, he had been reviewing the *sugyot* learned at Yeshivat Hesder Beren-Machanaim before suffering injuries that required a double lung replacement. *Baruch Hashem*, thanks to his and his family's tenacity as well as the indefatigable perseverance of his medical team, Yonatan is now living a beautiful life with his wife. I look forward to dancing for – and with – him.

As the war continues, we are also witnessing a growing number of Israelis who do not identify as religious seeking deeper connection to Judaism, and the beauty of different parts of society coming together. I have seen soldiers returning from Gaza or Lebanon asking for help with the words of *Birkat haGomel*, covering one another's heads with their hands. I have also observed more women lighting candles on Friday nights and participating in *challah* baking events.

Rav Soloveitchik once noted that throughout the *Hoshanot*, the Sukkot *hakafot* service, we express our relationship with G-d by encircling the *bimah* where someone holds the Torah scroll – what *halacha* calls

a *kinyan hiluch*, concretizing our bond with the Torah by walking around the *bimah*. On Simchat Torah, however, we take the Torah scrolls and carry them as we dance, leaving the *bima* empty save for the *Shechina*. In the Boston synagogue where the Rav prayed, the *bima* on Simchat Torah was roped off to emphasize that it held only the presence of G-d. For the Torah itself is a means to an end – helping us forge our relationship with the Divine.

This year, as we encircle the “empty” *bima*, I will imagine it not empty at all, but filled with the hundreds of holy souls taken from us since October 7. They too are dancing on the *bima*, with and around G-d. We are dancing with duality – living in the darkness of war and uncertainty, yet simultaneously drawing strength from perseverance and faith. Together with the *Shechina*, with the souls on the *bima*, and those of us in the circle, we will all sing as one, celebrating the eternal nature of our bond. *Am Yisrael Chai!*



Rabbi Dr. Katriel (Kenneth) Brander is President and Rosh HaYeshiva of Ohr Torah Stone, an international network of 30 Religious Zionist institutions committed to illuminating the beauty and relevance of authentic Torah Judaism in the modern world. Prior to making Aliyah, Rabbi Brander was Vice President at Yeshiva University and the senior rabbi of the Boca Raton Synagogue, overseeing its explosive growth from 60 to more than 600 families.



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Fallen Yet Standing: The Sukkah of David

Rabbi James Kennard

When reciting *birkat hamazon* during Sukkot, we add a line asking Hashem to restore “*sukkat David ha-nofelet*” – the “fallen *sukkah*” of David, using the description found in *Amos* 9:11. This verse, and this addition to our prayer, is enigmatic. Why is the dynasty of *David Hamelech* referred to as a “*sukkah*” and not a “house,” as most royal lineages are characterized (e.g., “the House of Windsor”) and indeed as David’s line is often described in the *Tanach*?

The commentary of Rav Eliezer of Beauvency (twelfth century, France) connects the *sukkah* imagery to David’s early years as a shepherd. In that role he would build a tent in which to sit while he watched his flock, and in his later years, a symbolic “*sukkah*” would be his base from which to rule the people.

The Maharal of Prague (*Netzach Yisrael*, chapter 35) has a more profound understanding of the “*sukkah*” and its “fallen” state. He says that David and his successors are not considered like other kings. David was appointed by Hashem and therefore his line has a divine component, just as the *sukkah*, being the object of a divine command, is also of a G-dly nature.

The divine element also leads to such items having a non-permanent quality in this physical world since Hashem’s permanent domain can only be in the spiritual realm. A house is fixed and immutable, and the term “house” is therefore applied to a non-heavenly dynasty or to a building which is permanent. Conversely, both the kingdom of David and the *mitzvah*

of *sukkah* have a temporary quality and hence are called “*sukkah*” – the epitome of non-permanence.

But there is a more specific reason why David’s dynasty shares a characteristic with a *sukkah* precisely when it is “fallen.”

If a house were to collapse, an observer would describe what remains as rubble or ruin. It would not be called a “house.” Yet when we take down our *sukkot*, and store the walls and beams (and even the *s’chach* for those who like the reusable kind), the dismantled construction would still be considered a “*sukkah*.” We speak of the “*sukkah*” as we put away the pieces until next year, and it is the “*sukkah*” that comes out of storage again as Tishrei approaches, even though it has yet to be reconstructed and is currently in pieces.

It might appear to us that the kingship of David is “in ruins.” Since the destruction of the First *Beit HaMikdash* some two and a half millennia ago, we have had no king from his progeny. Yet, somewhere among us dwell his descendants and one day, one of them will emerge as *Mashiach* and king. Just as the walls are still called a “*sukkah*” even when disassembled and not fulfilling their function, so too “*David melech Yisrael chai v’kayam*” – “David, King of Israel, lives and endures” during this long interregnum.

Furthermore, if a fallen house were to be rebuilt, it would be considered as a new construction rather than the continuation of the previous one. Even if the original bricks and other materials from the first house were used, we would speak of the

“new house.” Yet in the case of a *sukkah*, when we put the pieces together each year, we consider ourselves as sitting in precisely the same *sukkah* as we have dwelt in previously.

In the same way, when the day comes that a descendant of David is appointed as king, we will regard this as David’s line continuing, albeit after a break, and not as the foundation of a brand new dynasty.

The Maharal adds another perspective to his explanation by pointing out that even after the destruction of the First *Beit HaMikdash*, the Exilarchs, who served as the leaders and governors of the semi-autonomous Jewish populations of Babylon until the eleventh century, could trace their ancestry back to David. Even though the kingship was lost, a vestige remained, just as when a *sukkah* lies in its dismantled state, it still is some kind of “*sukkah*” albeit not a fully functioning one.

The dynasty of David and his descendants is not destroyed. It has not ceased to exist. It is a “fallen *sukkah*” – not a ruin. And in its fallen state, it remains a *sukkah*.

May we enjoy the days we spend in our fully built *sukkot*, and may we see the complete re-establishment of the fallen *sukkah* of David speedily in our days.



Rabbi James Kennard

has served as a school principal in the UK and for many years in Melbourne, Australia. He now lives in Ramat Beit Shemesh in Israel.



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Sharing the Burden of the Community

Rabbi Chaim Drukman, *zt”l*

Sharing communal pain

The last chapter of *Mishnah Avot* (6:6) presents a list of things required from a person who wishes to ‘acquire’ the Torah. One of them is “he bears a burden with his fellow.”

Maharal explains in his commentary on this *Mishnah* that bearing a burden with one’s fellow is not limited to sharing the burden of just one friend but also includes bearing a burden **with the entire community**. When a person bears the burden of the entire community, he demonstrates that he is not separate from the community, but part of it. For this reason, this person is worthy of the Torah, for the Torah was not given to individuals – but to the people of Israel as a whole.

The Torah comes to instill in us a total perspective, to grasp that everything is part of a great whole, that there is no individual disconnected from the whole. For this reason, bearing a burden with one’s fellow is essential for the acquisition of Torah.

A *Midrash* (*Pesikta Zutreta*, *Shemot* 2:11) brings *Moshe Rabbeinu* as an example of bearing the burden of one’s fellow in the collective sense. The Torah (*Shemot* 2:11) recounts how *Moshe Rabbeinu*, when he still lived in Pharaoh’s palace in Egypt, went out to his brothers to see their suffering. Moshe could have remained in Pharaoh’s palace, but he chose to go

out and see how Israel was being tormented; he did not estrange himself from them.

In connection with this story, the *Midrash* mentions Hillel’s adage, “Do not set yourself apart from the community” (*Avot* 2:4), and adds: “One should not see the community suffering and say, ‘I will go home to eat and drink, as all is well with me.’ Rather, he should share the burden with his fellow.”

“And he was chained in fetters”

In Chapter 39 of the Book of Yirmiyahu, it is told that Nebuzaradan, the “chief executioner” of King Nebuchadnezzar, received an instruction from his king to “do no harm” (30:12) to Yirmiyahu during the destruction of the Kingdom of Yehudah and the exile of many of its people to Babylon. And indeed, the text states that Yirmiyahu was released “from the prison compound” (30:14) where he had been confined, and he went and dwelled among the people.

Yet at the beginning of the next chapter, we read that Yirmiyahu was “chained in fetters among those from Jerusalem and Yehudah who were being exiled to Babylon” (40:1), until Nebuzaradan came and freed him. Nebuzaradan even offered to bring him to Babylon and look after him there, but Yirmiyahu refused, preferring to remain with the few Judahites who remained in *Eretz Yisrael* when the rest were exiled.

And one must wonder: if Yirmiyahu was released earlier in the episode, why was he “chained in fetters” with the rest of the people?

A *Midrash* (*Eicha Rabbah*, Introduction §34) recounts that after his initial release, Yirmiyahu saw a gang of young men chained by the neck, and he voluntarily went and placed his head with them! When Nebuzaradan saw this, he removed him from them. Then Yirmiyahu saw a group of elders in shackles and

placed his neck with them. Once again, Nebuzaradan came and removed him from them. Ultimately, Nebuzaradan presented Yirmiyahu with the option of remaining with the remnant in Yehudah or coming with him to Babylon, and Yirmiyahu chose to remain in *Eretz Yisrael*, in accordance with Hashem's command.

Rabbi Yitzchak ben Shlomo of Toledo, in his commentary on *Avot*, sees Yirmiyahu's participation in Israel's imprisonment as an expression of the virtue of "bearing the burden with one's friend" and sharing in his distress.

He adds that one who bears the yoke of the kingdom together with the community will ultimately witness the comfort of the community, and he will retain what he has learned. The source for his comments is the *Gemara* (*Ta'anit* 11a), which states that anyone who starves himself during years of famine, even if he personally lacks nothing, will be spared an unusual death - a reward for having tormented himself to share the community's pain and identifying with the community in its distress.

The *Gemara* adds when Israel is in distress, and one of them sets himself apart, the two ministering angels assigned to accompany that person come, place their hands on his head, and say: "So-and-so, who set himself apart from the community, will not witness the comfort of the community!" The *Gemara* also states there that at a time when the community is in distress, a person should not say to himself: "I will go home to eat and drink, as all is well with me." Rather, he should cause himself distress to suffer along with the community.

The *Gemara* brings an example of this from *Moshe Rabbeinu*. When Israel was battling Amalek, Moshe stood on top of a hill and raised his hands to strengthen the people. The Torah takes care to describe how Moshe sat down: "Moshe's hands grew heavy, so they took a stone and put it beneath him, and he sat on it" (*Shemot* 17:2). Why did Moshe specifically sit on a stone? Did he not have a cushion or pillow to sit on? Rather, Moshe said: "Since Israel is in distress, I will suffer along with them!"



This excerpt is from Rabbi Chaim Drukman zt"l's *B'chayil U'veruach*, adapted and translated into English as *With Might and Spirit*. To see an extract of the book and to purchase the full online version please scan the QR code or go to mizrachi.org/mightandspirit.



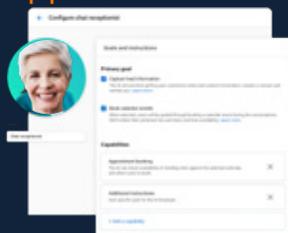

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A Season of Shelter, Simcha, and Soulmates

Aleeza Ben Shalom

As the seasons begin to change, we step into one of the most spiritually rich and emotionally resonant times of the Jewish year: Sukkot and Simchat Torah. These holidays are full of beauty, joy, and vulnerability – and they offer us deep insight into love, dating, and marriage.

Sukkot invites us to leave the comfort of our solid homes and dwell in a temporary, fragile structure. For a full week, we eat, sing, and even sleep in the *sukkah* – a space with walls that sway and a roof that lets the stars shine through. Why do we do this? Because it's in that very impermanence that we find stability. It's when we step away from what we think keeps us safe that we remember who actually protects us. The *sukkah* teaches us about trust – real trust. The kind you need in a marriage. The kind you build when dating with intention. The kind you lean on when the world around you feels uncertain.

After the heartbreak of October 7th – a date etched into our collective soul – it can feel hard to trust. Hard to feel joy. Hard to open ourselves to love or even celebration. But our people are resilient. And this season reminds us that even when we feel most exposed, we are not abandoned. Every action we take – from lighting a candle to setting up two friends – can be a prayer. A prayer for clarity, for peace, for the hostages who are still waiting to come home. Our joy is not naive. It is a form of resistance. It is a choice.

When we dance with the Torah on Simchat Torah, we dance not because life is easy, but because life is holy. We dance because the Torah is still in our arms. We dance for those who cannot. We dance to say, “We

are still here.” The circle we make on the dance floor is the same circle that shows up in weddings – people surrounding the bride and groom with song and love. The same circle we build emotionally in our relationships when we commit to showing up, day after day, with faith, humor, and compassion.

For singles, this is not just a time of celebration – it's a time of opportunity. The holidays stir up a longing to connect, to share a *sukkah* table with someone who truly sees you, to dance beside someone whose joy adds to your own. Let that longing move you forward. Use this season to take a step – send that message, say yes to that date, or tell your friends you're open to meeting someone. There is no better time to search for your soulmate than when your heart is tender and open.

And for those who are already married, or even if you're single... be the matchmaker. You don't have to be a professional to set two people up. You just have to care enough to make an introduction. The act of matchmaking is a *mitzvah* – and this season, it's also a message. A message that we still believe in *Am Yisrael*. That we still believe in the Jewish future.

The *sukkah* is temporary, but the values we build inside it – trust, connection, faith – those last. The dancing ends, but the joy we carry from it? That can ripple into our relationships, our communities, our nation. And when we dance this year, let's dance with intention. Let every step be a whisper of hope. Let every circle include a silent prayer: May those who were stolen be returned. May those who are waiting find their soulmate.

We live in a time that demands depth and joy, prayer and action, vulnerability and strength. This season gives us all of it – if we're willing to step outside, to feel the breeze, to sit beneath the stars, and to remember that even when things are uncertain, we can bring light to the darkness.

May this season shelter your soul, awaken your heart, and move you toward connection – with yourself, with others, and with Hashem.

Blessings,

Aleeza



Aleeza Ben Shalom

is a soulmate clarity coach, she was on Netflix's "Jewish Matchmaking" and is an in-demand speaker, expert, and author of numerous books. She leads the Jewish Matchmaking Movement, in partnership with World Mizrahi.



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SHAGRIRIM BALEV

Friends Setting Up Friends



Our Couples: Introducing Tehila and Yaakov Zimmerman!

What did you learn from the dating process that you'd like to share? Do you have any tips?

Every experience in dating – good or bad – is a tool in your toolbox. When you're treated with respect and walk away feeling good, that's Hashem showing you what dating should look like, even if it doesn't work out. When the experience is disappointing, don't let it discourage you. Learn from it. Every person who enters your life is placed there for a reason. Your dating journey helps you redefine your values, goals, and what truly matters in building a relationship. Even when it feels like you're "starting from scratch," remember: your toolbox is full of wisdom and experience. You're not starting over – you're starting smarter. (Tehila is a longtime Shagrira as well!)

A funny story from one of your dates:

It was the day before Rosh Hashanah. Yaakov was stationed on an army base nearby, and I was staying with my brother, just a short drive away. He picked me up and we headed to Katzrin. We started at a cozy brewery, where we sipped beer and shared easy conversation. When Yaakov offered to order food, I hesitated – restaurant food is not always my thing. "I prefer home-cooked meals," I said with a smile. His face lit up. "I haven't had a home-cooked meal in ages." Moments later, we were at the supermarket, filling a basket with peppers, onions, and steak. I texted my sister-in-law to ask if we could use their grill. "Sure," she replied, "just wait until the kids are asleep."

Well... that didn't quite happen. Just as Yaakov fired up the grill, a siren sounded. We rushed into the mamad (shelter), and that's where he met the whole family. My young nieces, never ones to hold back, immediately asked, "Are you getting married?" The next day, as Rosh Hashanah approached, Yaakov messaged to say he had a great time. As we texted, I asked if he'd found a ride back to Jerusalem. Hours passed – no ride. On a whim, I invited him to join us for the holiday. He politely declined. I asked again. Still no. Finally, the third time, he said yes. Yaakov spent Rosh Hashanah with my family. In shul, curious friends whispered questions: "How long have you been dating?" "Where did you meet?" We hesitated to admit: we met yesterday. Yaakov, smooth under pressure, responded vaguely, "Quite some time." People winked, gave thumbs up and didn't make it awkward at all.

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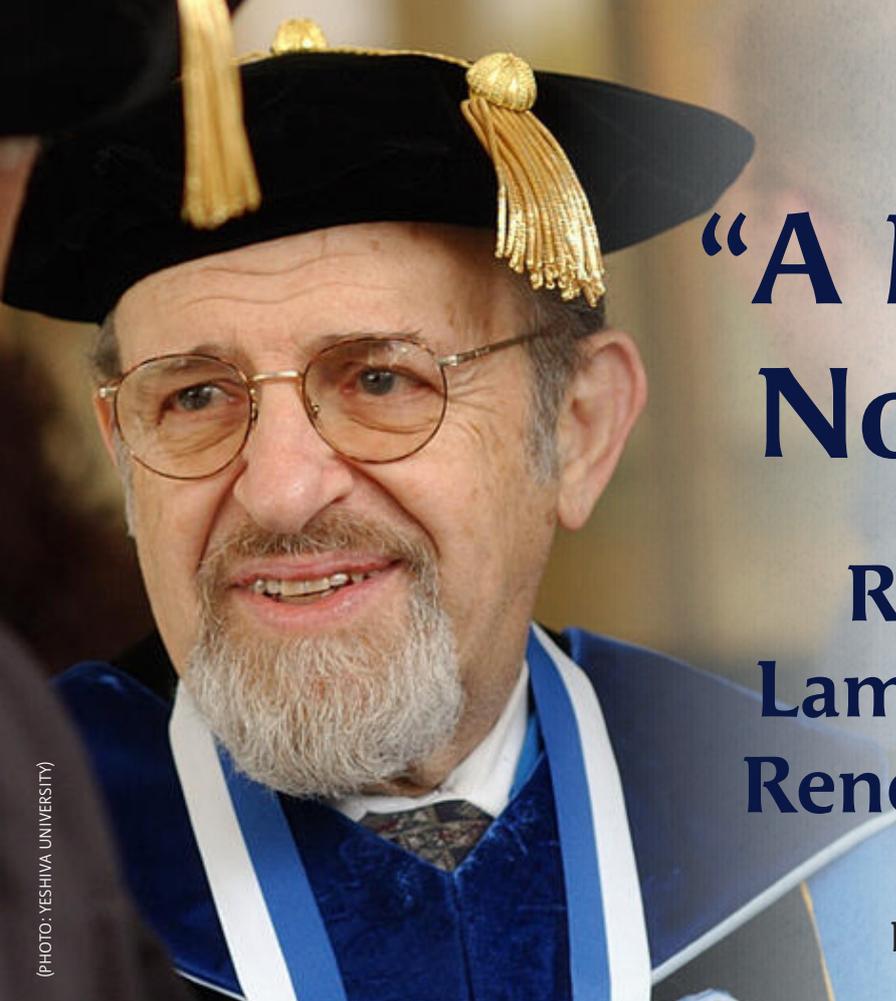


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(PHOTO: YESHIVA UNIVERSITY)

“A Movement, Not a Party”

Rabbi Norman Lamm’s Call for the Renewal of Mizrachi

Rabbi Dr. Tzvi Sinensky

This essay, exploring Rabbi Norman Lamm’s deep relationship with the Mizrachi movement, is occasioned by the launch of the new Rabbi Lamm Digital Archive at lammlegacy.org – an online library of more than 5,500 curated documents that shed new light on his leadership, thought, and enduring impact.

The launch of the Rabbi Norman Lamm Legacy Digital Library opens a new chapter in the preservation of Modern Orthodoxy’s intellectual and institutional history. Among the thousands of newly accessible documents is a sustained, candid, and impassioned record of Rabbi Lamm’s lifelong engagement with Mizrachi. That relationship speaks not only to a storied past but to the complex moment we confront today.

Rabbi Lamm’s commitment to Mizrachi was no abstraction. In the early years of his career, he and his wife Mindy ז”ל were active in multiple Manhattan chapters of the movement while he served at The Jewish Center for eighteen years beginning in 1958. In a 1973 letter to a Mizrachi leader in South Africa, Rabbi Lamm expressed his “loyalty to the Mizrachi ideal,” noting that he had “spoken on behalf of Mizrachi on many occasions” and reaffirming his readiness to speak on their behalf during his coming monthlong visit to the country. It was a telling affirmation of his longstanding conviction that Religious Zionism, rightly understood, was the natural ideological home of a Torah Jew in the modern world.

Yet Rabbi Lamm was equally convinced that this home required constant upkeep. As he put it in his 1982 address to the World Mizrachi Conference – convened in Jerusalem in the fraught months following Israel’s invasion of Lebanon and amid declining fortunes for the National Religious Party – “Some of us have begun to feel like vestiges of the past instead of harbingers of the future.”

By the early 1980s, the warning signs were impossible to ignore. In Israel, Mizrachi had become increasingly identified with the *Mafdal*, whose political strength had peaked in the years after the Six-Day War. That influence eroded in the late 1970s and early 1980s, as factionalism weakened unity, the Likud’s 1977 rise shifted the political map, and new Religious Zionist currents – particularly *Gush Emunim* – captured the public imagination with settlement activism and uncompromising rhetoric.

In the United States, the once-vibrant chapters that had mobilized for Israel’s independence in 1948 and rallied during the Six-Day War in 1967 were shrinking. The unifying glow of those years had been replaced by the reckonings of the Yom Kippur War – which pierced Israel’s aura of invincibility – and the First Lebanon War, which stirred moral and strategic debates across the Jewish world. In an era drawn to ideological purity, Mizrachi’s tradition of nuance and synthesis could seem less like a strength and more like a liability.

Rabbi Lamm did not shrink from this reality. In a pivotal December 1982 address, he called for a *chanukat ha-Mizrachi* – a rededication of the movement. Drawing from Jewish historical memory, he observed that we commemorate not the original building of the *Mishkan* or the First *Beit HaMikdash*, but the rededication of the Second *Beit HaMikdash* on Chanukah. Rebuilding, he argued, is harder, less glamorous, but ultimately more worthy of celebration.

His prescription for renewal was threefold: organizational distinction, fraternal healing, and educational investment.

First, Mizrachi had to reassert its identity as a movement, not merely the political arm of a party. “The Movement embodies an idea,” he reminded his listeners. “A Party is only a means to achieve and enhance it.” In the early 1980s, when *Mafdal* was increasingly absorbed in coalition bargaining and short-term maneuvering, blurring that line meant the party risked becoming spiritually unmoored and the movement ideologically hollow.

Second, the movement needed to heal itself. “There has been too little *shalom bayit* in our ranks,” he lamented. Strains between Israeli and Diaspora leadership – with Israelis focused on political influence and Diaspora leaders on education – had weakened trust. In Israel, tensions between *Mafdal*’s pragmatic old guard and younger *Gush Emunim* activists over settlements and political compromise deepened divisions, while disagreements over the Camp David Accords and the Lebanon War sharpened mistrust. For a movement claiming to represent Religious Zionism’s highest ideals, such rifts were untenable.

Finally – and most importantly – was the call for spiritual renewal. Mizrachi’s educational mission, he insisted, had to be restored to the center. “Torah must be the soul of the State,” he declared. “Without it, the body may survive, but it will be a body without direction, without conscience.” Without a deep intellectual and moral core, Religious Zionism risked becoming a slogan rather than a source of inspiration.

At Yeshiva University, Rabbi Lamm modeled what he preached. He proudly noted that over ten percent of YU alumni had made *Aliyah* – not because of recruitment campaigns, but because they had been steeped in a worldview where love of Torah and love of Zion reinforced each other. Hundreds more studied in *hesder yeshivot*, women’s seminaries, and other institutions infused with the Mizrachi ethos. “We have already proven,” he said, “that a Jew can fight to defend himself. What we must now prove is that we can live for something higher.”

What Mizrachi could offer, he argued, was exactly what the moment demanded: a Judaism that was intellectually serious, spiritually anchored, and neither escapist nor triumphalist – one that could affirm the State of Israel without reducing religion to politics, and embrace science and culture without surrendering *halachic* integrity.

It was a call for what he termed “radical moderation” – not bland centrism, but a principled synthesis grounded in clarity, humility, and courage. The relevance of that vision has only grown. In an age when some voices within Religious Zionism have drifted toward stridency, Rabbi Lamm’s insistence on resisting the pull

of extremism and serving as a bridge between Torah and the wider society offers a vital corrective.

For such a vision to take root, he urged, Mizrachi needed leaders who were spiritually ambitious and morally uncompromising. “We must shun mediocrity,” he wrote. Its future would depend less on political machinery than on educators, scholars, and lay leaders whose character and commitments embodied the ideals they preached.

Thanks in no small measure to the leadership of Rabbi Doron Perez, Mizrachi has in recent years experienced a renaissance – expanding globally, deepening its educational mission, and inspiring a new generation with the ideals of Torah and Zionism. Rabbi Lamm would have been proud, but he would also have reminded us that pride is no substitute for purpose. To endure, Mizrachi must remain a movement of substance, not just activity; of ideas, not just institutions – rooted in *Torat Yisrael* and engaged with the world.

As Rabbi Lamm concluded in his 1982 keynote: “Maybe our potential is far greater than our sorry present reality would indicate. Let us make the present worthy of our magnificent potential.” The release of the archive invites us to take that challenge seriously – and to continue the sacred work of renewal.



Rabbi Dr. Tzvi Sinensky

serves as Director of Judaic Studies at Main Line Classical Academy in suburban Philadelphia. He earned his undergraduate and graduate degrees at Yeshiva University, and received rabbinic ordination from its affiliated Rabbi Isaac Elchanan Theological Seminary (RIETS). A highly regarded speaker, author, and editor, he has completed three book-length series published by Yeshivat Har Etzion’s Virtual Beit Midrash, is the editor of a posthumous edition of Rabbi Norman Lamm’s halachic writings, and is currently writing a book on overarching themes in Rabbi Lamm’s oeuvre. Rabbi Sinensky lives in Lower Merion, PA, with his wife – Rabbi Lamm’s eldest granddaughter – and their three children.

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Beyond Particularism: The Universal Heart of Religious Zionism

Ari Tatarka

It was a cold Wednesday morning when I found myself tucked into a corner of a trendy café, meeting with a professor of mine from university. I had recently graduated and wished to discuss my plans before my impending move to Israel. Israel – more specifically, our political differences regarding it – served to provide underlying tension in our discussion.

Yet, unafraid of political disagreement, we dove into conversation on Israeli politics almost immediately. Explaining the constituencies active in the Israeli political

landscape, I mentioned the community with which I identify: the knitted-*kip-pah*-wearing Religious Zionists, known in Israel as the *Dati Leumi*.

Nationalism being his area of research, the professor inquired further. I defined the community as a revolutionary one – one that saw religious significance in the modern State of Israel. A movement that resisted the insular instincts of the Ultra-Orthodox in favor of a religious and national renaissance through the restoration of sovereignty in Israel.

With pride, I boasted of how the community is overrepresented on the front lines of protecting the state; how, when secular society moved from the *kibbutzim* to the cities, trading their Labor Zionism for Western liberalism, Religious Zionism picked up the torch of pioneering spirit; how they instill Israel with forward momentum, a movement toward destiny so rare in an increasingly lethargic West.

His reaction to this description was visibly uncomfortable – and I can imagine why. His associations with religious nationalism were with the Baath movement in Iraq and Syria, Christian nationalists in the US, and Turkish nationalists under Recep Tayyip Erdoğan – regimes known for brutality and intolerance. Religious nationalism has an unsavory reputation, and for good reason. The combination of religious zealotry with ideological fervor is a recipe for abominable outcomes. It runs contrary to the sacred divide that characterizes the West: the separation of church and state.

In vain, I searched for a characteristic that distinguished my community from other religious nationalists – to no avail.

Religious nationalism is often characterized by a desire for territorial growth, reliant on historical claims. While I believe, in the case of Israel, the claims to the areas of Judea and Samaria are legitimate, this is not characteristically different from other movements. It would be cold comfort for someone like my professor, who supports the Palestinian cause, that Religious Zionists do not aspire to world domination, but only to the historic lands of the Jews – in which Palestinians currently reside. In sections of the Religious Zionist community, there have also been examples of violence against minorities within Israel.

Ultimately, our conversation concluded amicably, and we parted ways.

Yet the question remained with me.

To borrow a phrase from the Passover meal: What makes this religious nationalism different from all other religious nationalisms?

The answer is a single word: Universalism.

The Religious Zionist perspective is one that hinges on the gift of the few to the many. There is no better example of this principle than the messianic beliefs core to Religious Zionism.

Messianism is far from uncommon in religious nationalist movements. Yet for all other movements, utopia is particularist – a goal of national ascendancy. For Turkey, the messianic vision is a return to Ottoman borders; for Russia, an empire stretching into Eastern Europe, claiming hegemony over all Slavic peoples. Religious Zionism, by contrast, has a universalist vision – one in which the return of Jews to their land leads to a world in which, in the words of Isaiah: “They will beat their swords into plowshares and their spears into pruning hooks. Nation will not take up sword against nation, nor will they train for war anymore.”

This is a radically different idea of redemption. According to the prophet Zechariah, the ultimate reconciliation of mankind in all its diversity will occur at Jerusalem where we shall celebrate Sukkot as one: “And it will come to pass that everyone left of the nations who came up against Jerusalem will go up from year to year to prostrate himself to the King, the Lord of Hosts, and to celebrate the festival of Sukkot” (Zechariah 14:16).

To reach this idyllic future, no Jewish armies must march, no surrounding nations must be subjugated, and no existing peoples cleansed. Instead, peace emerges through restraint and ethics. As it says in *Devarim*: “Do not harass the Moabites or provoke them to war, for I will not give you any of their land as a possession” (*Devarim* 2:9). This vision suggests that the messianic era will arrive not through domination, but through good deeds and moral integrity.

I am far from the first to point out this distinction. Rav Avraham Yitzchak HaKohen Kook, the foremost ideological figure of the Religious Zionist movement – akin to Theodor Herzl or Martin Luther King Jr. in stature – drew this line clearly.

In one of his early forays in the rabbinic journal *Ha-Peles*, Rav Kook published an essay titled “*Te’udat Yisrael U-Leumiyyuto*” (Israel’s Mission and Nationhood). In it, he claimed that Religious Zionism is not a movement driven by the passions of nationalist fervor, but by the intellect. It acknowledges the universal ethical mission with which its nationalism is tasked. Without that ethical core, he warned, Zionism would descend into what he called *nationalismus* – a hollow pretext for xenophobia and violence.

So, what are the implications of this ethical messianism?

Simply because the Religious Zionist community is founded on altruistic ideals does not erase the risks and excesses of religious nationalism. As with all movements, not all members of the community embody the universalism of its luminaries.

And yet, this universalist idea lying at the movement’s core keeps the center from drifting toward the extremes. There will always be radicals, but no Religious Zionist can stand and publicly deny belief in peace, in the sanctity of life, or in the vision that Israel should be, in Isaiah’s words, “a light unto the nations.”

Why? Because of the text.

Religious Zionism is a textual movement, grounded in a literary canon that emphasizes ethics. Its battles are fought not by hooligans in the streets, but by communal leaders on the pulpit and intellectuals in the journals and newspapers.

Rav Kook transcribed a doctrine of universal love – not only love for secular Zionists and their contributions toward the ingathering of Israel, but love for the beauty in all people, including the non-religious

and even the anti-religious. Even in the writings of his more zealous son, Rav Zvi Yehuda – known for his messianic fervor and occasional tensions with Israel’s secular authorities – there is reflected a deep and foundational love of humanity.

This ethical messianism, codified in the writings of these figures, acts as an edifice upon which leaders rise to push back against extremism and preserve the moral center.

It was on such a foundation that Rav Aharon Lichtenstein and Rav Yehuda Amital, headmasters of one of Religious Zionism’s most prestigious institutions, stood to challenge their community during the moral crises of the Lebanon War and the First Intifada. It is the same foundation upon which future leaders will stand to confront the extremists of the next generation.

Religious Zionism is faced with the challenges of all ideologies: the lure of extremism, tribalism, and hatred of the other. And yet, it stands firm – fortified by solid foundations and timeless ideals.

I am proud of my community.

I am proud of the sacrifices we make to protect our country. I am proud of the energy and purpose we bring to the nation. I am proud that the torch of pioneering Zionism – that bold movement to reinvent the Jew for modernity – is still held aloft in Religious Zionism’s hand.

But most of all, I am proud of our mission: to bring the world into a greater awareness of the other – by example.



Ari Tatarka

received his Bachelors of Politics Philosophy and Economics at Monash University in Melbourne. He previously spent 2 years studying at Yeshivat Orayta in Jerusalem and has been a lifelong student of the humanities.

JEWES with VIEWS

We asked five participants in Mizrahi leadership programs: Which person inspired you to pursue a career in Jewish leadership?



Eliav Saban

It was not one person who inspired me to pursue a career in Jewish leadership, but rather my *chanichim*. Throughout my experiences as a *madrish*, *Rosh Eidah*, and *mefaked*, they have consistently challenged me, motivated me, and given me purpose. Their questions, curiosity, and passion for growth push me to keep striving as a leader and as a Jew.

I often see my own struggles from youth reflected in their actions and decisions, and this recognition inspires me to walk alongside them in their journeys. Their perseverance reminds me daily why Jewish leadership is vital – not as a title or position, but as a responsibility to support the next generation of *Am Yisrael*.

This generation, navigating advanced technology, complex social structures, and an ever-present search for connection with *HaKadosh Baruch Hu*, inspires me with their honesty and determination. The way they bring sincerity and depth to their learning and relationships shows me what *avodah* can truly look like. Their growth and yearning for meaning give me the strength to get up each morning.

My *chanichim* continue to inspire me, and they are the reason I have chosen a life dedicated to Jewish leadership.

Eliav Saban is originally from Toronto, Canada. He made Aliyah after his first year at Yeshivat Hakotel and served as a tank commander in the IDF. Eliav returned to yeshiva to finish his Hesder service and is currently in kollel continuing his Torah studies, and a participant in the Mechanchim program of the Religious Zionist Shlichut Center founded by Mizrahi. He serves as Chapter Director of the Jerusalem Chapter of NCSY Israel.



Rivka Mazal Tauber

The person who inspires me in Jewish leadership is the Lubavitcher Rebbe. He shows me that leadership doesn't happen in the big moments, but when I fully show up to another person. Making a difference is about the small moments of connection – looking out for another Jew and helping them express their essential connection with Hashem.

The Rebbe teaches me that when I know *alef*, it becomes my job to share it with someone who doesn't yet. To me, that means my qualifications are not something outside of me, but whatever I know in this moment, wherever G-d placed me, with whatever tools I have available to share light onward.

The Rebbe shows me that Jewish leadership is our ability to look at the world with hope for what we all can become, and how to live every single day a little more in that world through our actions, love of another, and belief in our shared destiny.

Rivka Mazal Tauber is a Chassidut and Tanach teacher in Jerusalem. She is currently a participant in the Mizrahi Lapidot program.



Ari Levisohn

In his commentary on *Parashat Matot*, Rav Samson Raphael Hirsch highlights a surprising *halacha*: a child is empowered to create a binding vow even a year before they reach *bar* or *bat mitzvah*. He explains that these childhood vows are “resolutions uttered secretly, known only to G-d, but they are often decisive for a lifetime. The rich contents of the life of a noble man or noble woman are often only the ripened fruit of a resolution vowed to G-d in the dawn of youth.”

Much has been written about Rav Hirsch’s lifetime of accomplishments preserving and advancing Torah Judaism during the peak of the Enlightenment, but it is less well known that he was merely a teenager when he resolved to dedicate his life to this mission. He hadn’t yet worked out the “how,” but he was already clear on the “what”: to reveal the light and heart of Torah that had been neglected – or perhaps never fully uncovered. In many ways, the next six decades of his life were simply a relentless effort to fulfill that youthful vision.

I think about this often as I pursue a career in Jewish leadership. I hope I can live up to my own youthful visions to shine a light on the Torah, yet I know that I am also continuing, in my own small way, those same dreams first kindled by the young Rav Hirsch.

Ari Levisohn is studying for semicha at Yeshivat Siach Yitzchak and through the Musmachim program of the Religious Zionist Shlichut Center founded by Mizrachi. He also hosts “Tehillim Unveiled,” a podcast uncovering the depth of Sefer Tehillim.



Sara Greenfield

There are two people who inspired me to pursue a career in Jewish leadership, both never officially having any special title. One I know very well, and one I never had the *zechut* to meet.

The first is my father, who lives his life based on his ideals. He is not a rabbi nor has he ever been on any synagogue board, but he has left a lasting impact on my hometown community simply by his essence. (I could list endless examples but that would take up the word count!)

The second is Sarah Schenirer. She, too, was a woman not interested in fancy titles. She simply wanted women to learn Torah. Her ability to live on her ideals, while simultaneously maintaining her humility, is so inspiring to me.

Sara (Schatz) Greenfield is the director of JLIC Sherut, a new initiative of JLIC Israel that helps Anglos doing national and army service find support and community during those years. She is also a proud member of the Shalhevet program of the Religious Zionist Shlichut Center founded by Mizrachi. She lives in Jerusalem with her husband, Kobi.



Lavi Peles

We are both in Torah leadership positions today thanks to our families. My wife’s family went on *shlichut* in Connecticut and my family went on *shlichut* to Manchester twice, then established a community for new immigrant students in Givat Shmuel.

Through active education, personal example, and quiet action, our parents instilled in us a love for the Torah, people, and Land of Israel. Two recent stories illustrate this well:

A few weeks ago, someone knocked on Chana’s parents’ door in Jerusalem. When they opened it, they shouted excitedly: “Reuven!” It was their student from their *shlichut* in Connecticut over twenty years ago. Without phone numbers or confirmation they still lived there, he had remembered their address and decided to visit during his trip to Israel. Even after two decades, he saw them as cherished friends rather than just religious leaders.

As children, we were raised to build the largest *sukkah* possible during Sukkot, hosting as many family, neighbors, friends, and guests as we could. One year the *sukkah* was bigger than our house! Even after the holiday, there was no rush to dismantle it; it continued as a center for hosting and connecting.

This education is deeply ingrained in me. Last year, while serving with tanks in a Lebanese border forest, I pushed for building a *sukkah* there, bringing religious and secular soldiers together. Though camouflaged and small, it was adorned with children’s drawings. Between operations, sitting inside, we felt that “all Israel is worthy to sit in one *sukkah*.”

Lavi Peles and his wife Chana live in Jerusalem at Midreshet Nishmat, where Chana studies at the Midrasha and is the student coordinator. Lavi studies at the Manhigut Toranit program, in partnership with World Mizrachi, when not serving in reserves (over 300 days with the 205th Armored Brigade).

הַמִּזְרָחִי

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KIDS CORNER

SUKKOT

"SUKOKU"

TAKE 2!

RULES:
Each row, column and rectangle (6 spaces each) needs to be filled out with the 6 words, without repeating any words within the row, column or rectangle.

WORDS IN THE PUZZLE:

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- CHAG
- TORAH
- KOHELET
- SHEMINI ATZERET

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As we commemorate two years since the tragedy of Simchat Torah 5784, we would like to take a moment to remember our fallen, acknowledge the courage and strength of our people and army and pray for the quick return of the rest of our hostages. Also, to remember that our people are strong, but we are stronger together.



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Adapted from *Iconic Jewish Women* by Dr. Aliza Lavie. Scan the QR code to purchase on Amazon.



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SUKKOT RIDDLES

I wear silver crowns but I'm not a king,
I'm kissed and embraced while the people sing.
I'm heavy with wisdom, though silent I stay,
Yet I guide you each week in what to obey.

What am I?

I'm four yet one, Together we sway.
Without me, your mitzvah
Can't be done that day.

What am I?

I'm taken once a year,
But not for food or drink.
I must be whole and flawless,
More precious than you think.

What am I?

(1) A Sefer Torah (2) The Arba Minim (3) Etrog



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Here are some suggested items to help build your sukkah!

- Pretzel sticks/twizzlers/sour sticks
- Graham crackers, Petit Beurre cookies, or make sugar cookies in the shape of walls for the Sukkah!
- Frosting/peanut butter/cream cheese/something sticky to help those walls stick together!





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