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# PANIM • פנים

Connecting with Israel

September 2022 • Tishrei 5783





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The journal of the Center for Community Education (CCE)  
Bi-Cultural Hebrew Academy of Connecticut

Bi-Cultural Hebrew Academy of Connecticut  
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The Center for Community Education (CCE) is an initiative of the Bi-Cultural Hebrew Academy of Connecticut that aims to inspire thoughtful conversation related to the spectrum of Jewish issues.

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## Dedicated to Walter Shuchatowitz (Mr. S), Z”L



This year’s issue of Panim Journal (“Connecting with Israel”) is dedicated to the Founding Principal and guiding soul of Bi-Cultural Hebrew Academy, Walter Shuchatowitz, z”l.

Mr. S was a visionary who created a Jewish Day School in Stamford to teach, inspire and build a generation of Jewish leaders for the future. He taught us to look beyond the issues that may divide us, and see the dignity, the sanctity, and the guiding light of Torah in every Jewish soul. He believed with all his heart in a community day school guided by the principles of Modern Orthodoxy. A school and community that respected the path each family found to Hashem, embracing every Jewish child and family with joy, and nurturing in everyone he met a deep and abiding love of Torah, Mitzvot, and Israel. His love and connection to Israel led him to create a month-long eighth grade trip to Israel, the first of its kind in the country. He also led countless trips for families who were often introduced to Israel for the first time, through his boundless love for the land and the people.

Mr. S was far more than our school’s builder or founding principal, he was our father, grandfather, mentor and guiding soul. He was the voice who told us we could do better; he was the *neshama* who helped us dream of everything our school and community could be.

He was a true *gadol*, whose life and legacy will continue to inspire generations.

— Cindy and David Pitkoff

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**Elana (Trombka) Friedman** holds a BA in Jewish Education from Stern College's Legacy Heritage Foundation program and an MA in Bible from the Bernard Revel Graduate School of Judaic Studies at Yeshiva University. Elana taught middle school Judaic Studies at the Bi-Cultural Hebrew Academy for the past seven years, during which time she has also been involved leading in various school programs. Additionally, she has completed different professional development courses such as Ayeka, Standards and Benchmarks and YOULead. Elana currently lives in Baltimore, MD with her family.

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***Rivy Poupko Kletenik***, a 2002 Exceptional Jewish Educator Covenant Award winner, just completed sixteen years as Head of School at the Seattle Hebrew Academy and is now consulting with schools and writing. Over the years, Rivy, a dynamic and engaging speaker has enjoyed serving as a scholar-in-residence, as Limmud presenter and teacher at CAJE, NewCAJE and in the Mussar Institute's Kallahs. Rivy is also an enthusiastic writer and devotee of poetry and literature. Her column "What's Your JQ" appeared for years in the JT News and then "Jewish in Seattle Magazine." Her work garnered the Simon Rockower American Jewish Press Association Excellence in Commentary award

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**Zachary Truboff** is the author of the new book: *Torah Goes Forth From Zion: Essays on the Thought of Rav Kook and Rav Shagar*. He is the Director of Rabbinic Education for the International Beit Din and previously headed the English-speaking program of Zerufim, a project of Yeshivat Siach Yitzchak. Before making aliyah, he served for nearly a decade as the rabbi of Cedar Sinai Synagogue in Cleveland, Ohio, where he led the merger of three synagogues into one thriving community. While there, he also worked as Director of Jewish Life and Culture at the Mandel JCC, founded the Cleveland Jewish Arts and Culture Lab, and in 2015, was chosen by the Cleveland Jewish News as one of its 18 Difference Makers, a select group honored for their contributions to Jewish communal life in Northeast Ohio. He lives in Jerusalem with his wife, Jen, and their four children.

## A Message From The Head of School

Last year, the Bi-Cultural Hebrew Academy of Connecticut's Center for Community Education published its inaugural volume of the *Panim* journal. It contained ten scholarly articles that were presented in a highly readable fashion, and from the comments received after distribution, it was roundly enjoyed and appreciated. Its success was a testament to the knowledge base of its contributors, the expertise of its editorial staff, led by Dr. Joseph Angel, and the largesse of Cindy and David Pitkoff, who sponsored the journal in honor of all of the educators who guided them in their "path of learning and growth."

With the publication of this second volume of the *Panim* journal, we at Bi-Cultural stand as adherents to the venerable maxim, "If it ain't broke, don't fix it." Once again, we have obtained a collection of articles written by scholars of great renown and reassembled our editorial staff under the able leadership of Professor Angel. Once again, Cindy and David Pitkoff have sponsored this volume, in loving memory of our iconic founding Head of School, Walter Shuchatowitz, z"l.

The present volume has a general theme to which all submissions relate... our connection to Israel. BCHA has always been a leader in building our educational ties to Israel. As mentioned by David Pitkoff in his dedication, many years ago Mr. S made an extended Israel trip a fixture in our school's 8th grade curriculum. Since that time, hundreds of our graduates have credited that experience as having a formative influence on their lifelong support for Israel and, in many instances, their ultimate decision to commit to a gap year of study in Israel, to serve as lone soldiers in the IDF, and/or to make *Aliya*. In partial recognition of this pioneering annual Israel experience, Bi-Cultural was awarded the prestigious Jerusalem Prize, which was presented to Mr. S by then-President Ezer Weitzman, z"l, and Chief Rabbi Yisrael Meir Lau, z"l. [See photo.]



Therefore, it is with great pride that we add to our emphasis on Israel education by bringing to light articles of scholarship on our connection and commitment to Eretz Yisrael with this second volume of the *Panim* Journal. Great thanks and *Kol Hakavod* to everyone who contributed and edited these articles, to the Pitkoffs for their continued generosity which makes the publication of the *Panim* journal possible, and to Michael Feldstein, Co-chair of the Center for Community Education, Bi-Cultural Hebrew Academy of Connecticut, who gives a great deal of time, talent, and thought to ensure the success of its mission.

— Tzvi Bernstein, *Head of School*

## A Note from the Editors

In the wake of the tragic loss and demographic catastrophe of the Bar Kochba Revolt (132-135 CE), the Sages declared that “living in *Eretz Yisrael* is equal to all the *mitzvot* in the Torah” (*Tosefta, Avoda Zara* 5:3). Until only recently, however, the majority of world Jewry has remained on the outside looking in. Jewish life in the Diaspora has always been defined by the negotiation of a complex web of relationships and attitudes to the Holy Land. We are proud to present the fine contributions in this year’s issue of *Panim*, which continue to explore and provide insight into our profound, eternal connection to Israel.

— Michael Feldstein and Joseph Angel

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## Submission of Articles

If you wish to submit an article to *Panim*, please send an email to Michael Feldstein at [michaelfeldstein@gmail.com](mailto:michaelfeldstein@gmail.com), along with a short description of the essay you plan to write.

All articles should be written in a conversational style, and do not necessarily require footnotes. The editors reserve the right to make changes to the final version of any article that is published.

All articles reflect the views of their authors, and do not necessarily represent the official positions of the Center for Community Education (CCE).

We welcome letters to the editor and/or full-length articles in response to any article or essay that is published.

# A Nuanced Approach to Israel Education

## *Sarah Gordon*

For your average Modern Orthodox day school, Israel education is a key priority. We want our students to develop a strong emotional connection to the State of Israel and a deep sense of investment in its future. We are concerned about the questions our students will face when entering university, where the political discourse surrounding Israel is often hostile. How can we best meet our goals for Israel education while still teaching about Israel in a way that encourages nuance and critical thinking? Can we foster committed Zionists with a deep love for Israel, while leaning into the difficult questions and complexities surrounding the State of Israel?

While many Modern Orthodox day schools may agree on the importance of teaching about Israel, some are beginning to shift their approach on how it is done, rethinking the traditional model of Israel *advocacy* in favor of a more holistic approach to Israel *education*. Traditionally, Israel advocacy has focused on training young people to defend Israel in any challenging situation. This was seen as required to counter the anti-Israel tropes found in the media and to prepare students for the anti-Zionist climate they would face in college. By contrast, Israel education is a more integrated approach. According to Dr. Bethamie Horowitz, its goal is “to build a relationship between the learner and Israel, and to create a sensibility that Israel in its varied aspects figures centrally in the experience of being a Jew.”<sup>1</sup>

Today, Israel educators must decide if, when, and how to introduce complexity about Israel into the classroom. Will highlighting Israel’s successes guarantee a love for and connection to the State of Israel? Or will a “commitment and critique” approach better achieve these goals, fostering a mature love of Israel that comes from learning everything about the country, “warts-and-all”?<sup>2</sup> As described by my colleague Dr. Noam Weissman, “Celebrating both the sublime and romantic aspects of Israeli history, as well as exploring some of the unsavory and challenging aspects of Israeli history, is what can provide a young person with a long-lasting and realistic relationship with Israel. Not only can our young people handle such a paradox in their identity development, but they seek it as well.”<sup>3</sup>

The importance of using a nuanced approach in Israel education can be seen from the results of a report issued by Rosov Consulting in 2018 called “Devoted, Disillusioned and Disengaged: The Forces that Shape a Relationship with Israel.”<sup>4</sup> In this study, Rosov Consulting interviewed 40 alumni of Jewish day schools, first when they were juniors in various high schools, and then again seven years later.

The study found that many of the alumni felt deeply frustrated with their day school Israel education, finding it overly simplistic and failing to engage with the challenges they encountered in the outside world. They acknowledged the well-meaning intentions of their schools but did not find their education to reflect the complex reality existing in Israel today. Both the alumni who were classified as “Devoted” and committed to the State of Israel and those identified as “Disillusioned” expressed these criticisms.

Most interestingly, the study found that being aware of Israel’s flaws and criticisms had no impact on the commitment of the Devoted alumni to the State of Israel and the deep significance it plays in their lives. Consequently, the study concluded that day schools should not be nervous about asking hard questions about Israel or encouraging students to ask these questions themselves. Day schools may be the safest possible context in which to explore these questions, more so than encountering such questions for the first time on a college campus.

Reflecting on my own education, I could relate to this version of “you never told us,” which we often hear from graduates of the day school community. While the day schools, *midrashot*, and Jewish summer camps I attended inspired a strong sense of personal commitment to Zionism and unwavering love for Israel, they avoided major questions surrounding the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. I was never exposed to different narratives that leaned into the hard questions about Israel or asked to fully engage with the complexity of certain topics. This study felt to me like a wake-up call that our approach to Israel education needs to shift and that doing so would solve the adaptive issues with our current educational model while ensuring stronger, thoughtful, and more committed Zionist students.

But what does this approach look like practically in a day school, and what difficulties arise when implementing it? Why are some educators and schools resistant to embracing this model of complexity? I will share some practical perspectives from the field, including suggested best practices educators can employ when bringing these methods into the classroom.

## UNDERSTANDING THE HESITANCY OF EDUCATORS

Often the resistance of educators to implementing this model can come from a few different fears. First, there is the concern that despite the research shared above, opening up complex discussions about Israel in the classroom would lead to students turning against Israel and Zionism. Second, using a nuanced approach is asking educators to open their teaching to a new level of vulnerability, where they may not know what to do when a student shares an opinion questioning Israel’s

actions or legitimacy. Third, teachers may be nervous about possible repercussions from parents and administrators should their class get a reputation as being too critical of Israel, especially in a school with a strong Zionist mission statement.

In addressing the first concern, it can be helpful for educators to hear from alumni how this type of class would have helped prepare them for encountering the “real” Israel. I once had a conversation with a former student who shared how she was often asked in high school to engage with challenging Torah texts, ranging from excerpts of Talmud that referred to women’s Torah learning as “*tiflut*” (a waste of time), to larger topics within *Masekhet Kiddushin*, which contradicted modern notions of women’s roles within society. At no point was there a concern that including such selections in the Judaic Studies curriculum would cause her to “go off the *der-ekh*.” Rather, she was trusted as a student to be able to engage with complexity and that this would ultimately enhance her connection with Torah. Why should Israel education be any different?

In response to the second point, educators must be given time and space to share their concerns and feel reassured that this model is not being forced on them. Transformational leadership is required to create teacher buy-in and investment. Additionally, not every teacher is comfortable leading nuanced class discussions, and many would benefit from training, good mentorship, and access to a larger community of Israel educators grappling with the same issues. Many organizations today provide the support and scaffolding needed for educators to gain confidence in navigating these difficult Israel conversations.<sup>5</sup>

Finally, teachers need to know that their jobs are not in jeopardy and that the administration will support them if any pushback arises from parents. Educators can ask administrators to sit in on more controversial class conversations to provide further protection should a parent call with a concern. Schools should be as transparent as possible with parents, explaining that the complexity approach does not in any way negate the school’s steadfast commitment to Zionism, with research showing it to be the best pedagogical approach to ensuring a lasting connection to Israel.

## REFLECTION, REFLECTION, AND MORE REFLECTION

Students may also struggle with this approach and feel uncomfortable with some of the questions that discussions and sources will elicit surrounding Israel. What does it mean for their identity as Zionists if suddenly they find themselves disagreeing with Israeli policy? Here, significant time must be allocated for student reflection, which can happen through class discussions, writing prompts, or one-

on-one meetings. Educators can start the year by inviting students into the process, with an introductory unit debating the different approaches to Israel education along with their advantages and disadvantages, and students sharing their comfort levels with each one.

This opening unit can serve as an anchor to the year with classes returning to this discussion after completing complicated topics, such as refugees or the Nakba, to take the temperature of the class. Do students feel that a fair balance exists between engaging in complexity and focusing positively on Israel, or is the course veering too far toward one side or the other? Sometimes the answers received may require a pivot to restore the equilibrium of the course. A heated discussion about IDF raids into Palestinian refugee camps may require a Zoom session with an IDF soldier as a follow-up to clarify certain IDF policies and make sure due respect is given to the soldiers putting their lives on the line.

It can also be helpful to show students how this approach is already used in their U.S. History and Government classes, where they often engage in debate over aspects of the United States without it being assumed that this would risk their patriotism or love of the country. Students can also view video clips from Knesset deliberations and see the vast range of opinions that exist within Israeli democracy – even within the Zionist camp.

Finally, it is important to give students the one-on-one time they may need to further discuss and process certain questions. For some students, we are asking them to go out of their comfort zone when it comes to Israel, and these students will need space to process this new approach.

## TEACHING EMPATHY

It is important to clarify that the goal of a “commitment and critique” approach is not to change anyone’s politics but to help students develop empathy. This gives students the agency to think through all sides of an issue and formulate their own informed beliefs. One way to foster empathy is to expose students to the experiences of real Israelis on all sides of the conflict and political spectrum, including IDF soldiers, settlers (an out-of-the-box example is Tekoa, a *yishuv* founded by Rabbi Menachem Froman, known for his open approach to interfaith work), and relatives of students who currently live in Israel. When conflicts heat up between Israel and Gaza, students can hear perspectives from families living under rocket fire in Sderot as well as from Palestinian civilians about what life is like in a warzone, even with the safety measures taken by the IDF. Hearing first-person narratives complexifies the conflict beyond a black and white binary, allowing students to formulate their



own view while acknowledging and empathizing with different perspectives.

Educators can also connect challenging questions to the personal experiences of students and of the Jewish people. When discussing how descendants of Palestinian refugees refuse to give up on returning to their family homes from 1948, one can ask students to compare this to their experiences as grandchildren of Jewish refugees from Europe or the Middle East. Or, students can compare Palestinian poetry about the experience of exile to the poetry of Jewish philosophers dreaming of returning to Zion. While these parallels are not exact, they invite students to debate the similarities and differences between these two experiences and step into the shoes of those on different sides of the story.

## FINDING THE RIGHT TEACHERS

One major challenge of the nuance and complexity approach is finding the right educators. In essence, we are looking for the quintessential unicorn. We need an educator with expert pedagogical skills, content knowledge on Israel's history and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, who is comfortable having open class discussions on controversial topics, and able to navigate them with empathy and understanding. This teacher must also have the time available to meet with students who need more time to process the approach of the class with a trusted mentor. Finding and retaining these educators is difficult enough for a school with the best resources and will be even more challenging for schools in areas where there is a dearth of talented teachers.

Administrators must also decide how to classify this course. Is this course being taught by history teachers, or outsourced to younger community *shlichim*, Israeli teachers brought into day schools specifically to increase awareness and connection to the State of Israel? The course will look different and focus on separate goals depending on which hire the school decides to make.

Here too, the importance of teacher training for Israel education cannot be underestimated. Part of professional development and in-service training can focus on how to do nuanced Israel education successfully, with both schools and communities investing in the organizations already doing this important work.

## MOVING FROM A SILOED TO HOLISTIC MODEL

Often, even when a school decides to adopt a “commitment and critique” approach to teaching about Israel, this message can get drowned out by the multitude of other messages about Israel happening simultaneously in the school. Diverse models can be wonderful and show the need for multiple voices in a school, but it is

rarely done clearly. Instead, students get contradictory messages from their history class, the Israel Advocacy club, their *Ivrit* classes taught by *shlichim*, and school-wide Israel speakers and *Yamim* (Yom Ha'zikaron and Yom Ha'atzmaut) commemorations run by the student life department.

Schools can minimize confusion by naming the different approaches of each division and the separate goals of the Israel course versus the advocacy club, or how the role of student life speakers, *Yamim* events, and *Ivrit* classes are to focus more on positive Israeli culture.

Alternatively, there is an advantage to a holistic model rather than one that is siloed into different departments. Complexity and nuance can be introduced across the different disciplines and co-curricular clubs in a school to varying degrees. Perhaps not every advocacy club speaker is appropriate to bring in and an administrator can work with the different co-curricular clubs on which speakers will achieve their goals while staying true to the school's commitment to nuance. *Ivrit* and Israel course teachers can meet together to discuss how their curriculums can work in tandem. Finally, Yom Ha'zikaron and Yom Ha'atzmaut are the perfect days to model serious Zionist commemorations and celebrations with thoughtful programming on the complexities surrounding the State of Israel.<sup>6</sup>

### DEFINING A “MIKRAOT GEDOLOT” APPROACH

My colleague, Dr. Noam Weissman, made the argument for a “Mikraot Gedolot” approach to Israel education. Just as a volume of “Mikraot Gedolot” contains a wide range of different biblical commentators with diverse opinions, a similar model should be applied to Israel education:

“...imagine a Mikraot Gedolot of Israel education that included the perspectives of diverse thinkers like Benny Morris, Anita Shapira, Martin Gilbert, Daniel Gordis, Yossi Klein Halevi, Micah Goodman, and Francine Klagsbrun.... Let's showcase the exciting wide contours of dispute that exist within Zionism, Israeli history, and current events in Israel, so our students can appreciate each topic's complexity and engage with diverse viewpoints.”<sup>7</sup>

I find this idea powerful, especially in how it applies the discourse of Tanakh and Talmud classes to Israel courses. But schools must decide which Israel commentators they want to include in their “Mikraot Gedolot” approach and if there are authors, texts, or questions they are uncomfortable with even as part of a nu-

anced curriculum. Schools must also clarify what they mean by Zionist in their mission statements, as multiple forms exist. Do they view settlements as a complicated political issue with valid arguments on each side, or as a solely positive endeavor strengthening *Yehuda v'Shomron* (Judea-Samaria)? Without clarification of languages and boundaries, schools can unintentionally send mixed messages to students on when they are embracing complexity and when they have a clear position on an issue.

This can be seen specifically in how religious Zionist schools celebrate Yom Yerushalayim, a day that contains both powerful religious implications as well as complicated political messages. Often, even schools that embrace complexity avoid asking and engaging students in the hard questions of the day. However, schools can celebrate the victory of how the State of Israel escaped destruction during the Six Day War, while still using the day as a springboard for nuanced conversations about the present.<sup>8</sup> There does not have to be a contradiction between singing Hallel and having students discuss Israel's presence in the West Bank, or celebrating the reunification of Jerusalem while discussing what this meant for the *Maqdasayin* (Palestinian residents of Jerusalem). We can trust our students to sit in tension with both aspects of the day and do them a disservice when we choose the easy way out.

## INVITING PARENTS AND THE COMMUNITY INTO THE DISCUSSION

Introducing nuance and complexity into discussions about Israel can extend outside of the classroom to parents and the greater community. Schools should encourage students to share the questions that arise in class at their Shabbat tables. This is a great opportunity for students to put into practice what has been modeled over the year, listening with empathy to different views and adopting an approach of curiosity when asking questions.

Schools can also run events for parents and the greater community by screening different films that balance strong Zionist messages with difficult questions, or inviting thought leaders in the field of Israel education to present to the greater school community. Bringing the parents and community into these important conversations is crucial for the discourse we want to see take place, especially on a topic as central as Israel.

## CONCLUSION

Introducing nuance and complexity into an Israel curriculum is no easy task. It comes fraught with difficulties, ranging from finding willing and competent teachers and a supportive administration, to a wide range of adaptive and technical

challenges when looking at the school as a whole system. It is a work in progress in day schools, which is why discussions about best practices are so important for schools to have. Despite the challenges, the best advocates for this approach are alumni of schools that have adopted it, who share how leaning into the hard questions did not push them away from Zionism but helped strengthen their love for Israel, preparing them for the challenging discourse surrounding Israel in the adult world. Simply put, “good Israel education is good education”<sup>9</sup> and we have our work cut out for us.

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<sup>1</sup> Bethamie Horowitz, *Defining Israel Education* (San Francisco: Jim Joseph Foundation, 2012), [https://jimjosephfoundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/03/march\\_2012\\_BethamieReport.pdf](https://jimjosephfoundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/03/march_2012_BethamieReport.pdf).

<sup>2</sup> David Bryfman, “Good Israel Education is Good Education,” *Times of Israel*, November 1, 2018, <https://blogs.timesofisrael.com/good-israel-education-is-good-education/>.

<sup>3</sup> Noam Weissman, “Celebration and Exploration: Why Good Israel Education Needs Both,” *The Lehrhaus*, April 14, 2021, <https://thelehrhaus.com/commentary/celebration-and-exploration-why-good-israel-education-needs-both/>.

<sup>4</sup> *Devoted, Disengaged, Disillusioned: The Forces that Shape a Relationship with Israel* (Jerusalem: Rosov Consulting and the Avi Chai Foundation, 2018),

<https://www.rosovconsulting.com/wp-content/uploads/2018/11/7-Years-Later-Final-Report-FINAL-20181101.pdf>.

<sup>5</sup> One example is the school collaborative program run by the organization Unpacked for Educators, which can be found here: <https://unpacked.education/>.

<sup>6</sup> Programs could address aspects of the Israeli-Palestinian Context (<https://unpacked.education/program/the-israeli-palestinian-context/>) or the challenges faced by Mizrahi Jews when integrating into Israel (<https://unpacked.education/video/mizrahi-jews-the-jews-of-the-middle-east-and-north-africa/>).

<sup>7</sup> Weissman, “Celebration and Exploration.”

<sup>8</sup> For example, see Unpacked for Educator’s program, “The Deeper Meaning of Jerusalem Day,” accessible here: <https://unpacked.education/article/celebrate-jerusalem-respectfully/>.

<sup>9</sup> Bryfman, “Good Israel Education is Good Education.”

# Modern Orthodox Young Adults, Their Relationship to Israel Today, and Enhancing and Deepening It for Tomorrow

*Nathaniel Helfgot*

## INTRODUCTION

The following essay on Modern Orthodox Israel education is not a classic academic paper based entirely on rigorous surveys, polling data, or extensive interviews. The reason for this is the dearth of peer reviewed studies on this topic and the limitations of this author. To my knowledge, only one major study, *Hearts and Minds: Israel in North American Day School Education*, conducted by the Avi Chai foundation in 2014 has been undertaken and no other formal research has been produced on a national level in over a decade.<sup>1</sup>

This short paper has made use of some of that research and the paradigms outlined there. In addition, a number of faculty at SAR High School explored some of these issues five years ago under the umbrella of its in-house think tank, Machon Siach. They produced thoughtful papers of reflection on educational ideology and prescription that have informed this short essay as well. In addition, it is informed by conversations with alumni, college students, and young adults as well as my surveying of the sociological landscape around me through reading, personal interactions, and discussions with other educators both here and in Israel. *Betokh ami ani yoshev*—I am sitting amongst my people, and I hope that my thoughts resonate with those who share an interest in these topics.

## OVERVIEW AND THE “ELITE”

The Avi Chai study mentioned above divides student populations in day schools across denominations into three categories in relation to their attachments to Israel:

1. Hyper-Engaged
2. Engaged
3. Detached

There exists a wonderful subset of students in our community, across the diverse yeshiva high schools throughout the country, who can easily be categorized as hyper-engaged. According to the data from the Avi Chai study, about 25-30% of the

12<sup>th</sup> grade cohort in modern and centrist Orthodox schools in 2013 were grouped that way.<sup>2</sup> These are students who are deeply committed to Israel and its welfare, are knowledgeable about Zionism, and some have a rich understanding of the contemporary Israeli scene. These are the students who participate in the Israel clubs in our yeshiva high schools, attend AIPAC and NORPAC conferences with their parents or school delegations, and lobby their elected officials or write letters to their congressional representatives. Many of them are up to date on Israeli politics and social realities and consume news from and about Israel on a daily basis. They can not only explain to you the different nuances of policy between Bennet, Bibi, and Lapid, but get into minute detail regarding what the *Chok Hanorvegi* or the latest iteration of the conversion controversy is. They have read many books on contemporary Israeli politics by writers such as Yossi Klein Halevi, Michael Oren, Daniel Gordis, or Natan Sharansky. Moreover, they can show you sophisticated models of the different permutations of building Israeli coalitions after each new election cycle on their iPhones and get daily alerts about things going on in the Knesset and Israeli society. The political views of these students all fall well within the Zionist consensus, though some lean slightly more to the right or slightly more to the left on various issues in contention surrounding religion and state, the Israel-Palestinian conflict, and relations with the Gulf states.<sup>3</sup>

Within this group many are student leaders and have a deep attachment to Judaism and Jewish peoplehood in general. One challenge for *some* in this group is that much of their Zionist education is univocal and veers into what some might call Israel advocacy, without as much nuance and exposure to a range of perspectives that would give them a richer and multi-layered understanding of contemporary Israel and its challenges. A second challenge for some of these highly engaged students is that their focus is almost exclusively on the political dimension or issues that Israel confronts, primarily the Israel-Palestinian conflict. As such, their knowledge, understanding, and exposure to the other aspects of contemporary Israel is not as developed or rich.

It is important to note that there is a small sub-group within the hyper-engaged (maybe 10% of the larger group) who one might term “hyper-engaged on steroids” in their desire to connect to all aspects of Israeli society. These kids are well plugged into central elements of popular Israeli culture and have a strong handle on the Israeli pop artists and their hits, including Omer Adam, Narkis, Noa Kirrel, Hanan Ben Ari, Static and Benel and many others who most adults in our community have never heard of. Many of these kids are already thinking in high school about potentially studying at an Israeli college and living in Israel (after their gap

year), and some already decide to join the IDF in some form or enroll in *Sherut Leumi* upon graduation in high school. Without doing a careful statistical analysis, it seems clear that in the last two decades more of our high school alumni are joining the IDF or remaining to study in universities and college programs in Israel, such as Bar Ilan and IDC, than was common one generation ago. Indeed, it is a fascinating data point that the Orthodox Union has opened JLIC programs with Modern Orthodox couples living near those campuses to support the growing number of young Modern Orthodox American students who are choosing to study in those institutions in Israel.

These kids have fully imbibed the religious-Zionist ethos and spirit that we educate towards in our schools, camps, and shuls. They have traveled to Israel on summer programs, vacations and family *semahot* (celebrations), have cousins in Israel who they deeply connect to and have fully bought into the message that the destiny of the Jewish people is in the east, even as they are currently rooted in the west. Some in this group work hard to improve their Hebrew skills during high school and have a passable conversational Hebrew which improves exponentially when they go to study in Israel after high school graduation.

These students represent, in many ways, the unmitigated success of our educational philosophy and efforts as a Modern Orthodox community deeply attached to Israel on a practical and religiously motivated level. These young people have grown up in this unique age of easy communication and access to Israel that they have fully taken advantage of. While no more than twenty to thirty years ago, one's knowledge of news from Israel was limited to occasional stories in the *New York Times* or the once-a-week delivery of the Jerusalem Post International Edition, today the scene is radically different. One can listen to Kol Yisrael radio in real time, read the most up to date news on *Times of Israel*, *Haaretz*, *Arutz Sheva* and so many other venues, listen to the most popular Israeli radio station, *Galgatz*, and watch Israeli television (*Shtisel*, *Eretz Nehederet*, among others), on a weekly basis. All of these realities have allowed these kids to be plugged in and hyper-connected to Israel in many ways and have reinforced their connection and desire to be part of this vibrant Jewish-Israeli culture. These conduits for connection were non-existent for our high school populations two decades ago and their impact on this subset has been enormous.

## MAJORITY OF OUR STUDENTS

There are, however, two other subsets of Modern Orthodox high school students and graduates in gap years and in college who make up the majority of the

students in our broad community. The middle group is primarily made up of students who are Zionist and viscerally connected to Israel. Many of them have traveled to Israel on numerous occasions and enjoy many aspects of Israeli life that are especially geared for tourists or focus on the religious and historical dimensions of the land of Israel. Their connection to Israel is religious and symbolic, and the main parts of their connection to contemporary Israel are through the lens of a visitor or tourist. Thus, they can navigate the trails leading to restaurants and bakeries in and around Mahane Yehudah, Emek Refaim, and the Malha Mall, have been to the Kotel tunnels and the tours at the City of David in Silwan, have hiked Masada and other famous sites, have enjoyed the special experience of a Shabbat in Jerusalem or Tzfat and may have spent a number of Pesach vacations in various hotels at the Dead Sea, in Tel-Aviv, or near the Kinneret. These kids have wonderful, positive memories and experiences that connect them emotionally and religiously to Israel. However, their grasp and identification with contemporary Israeli life is much less in place. This reality is well described in the Avi Chai study:

While Israel is an integral component of students' Jewish identity, what Israel actually means to them is more ambiguous: For example, while students express a strong connection to Israel, the students' expression of Jewish identity does not include much room for contemporary Israel. This does not come as a surprise given both the mythologized image of Israel we found in schools and the limited importance that teachers attributed to the goal of connecting their students with contemporary Israel. As we indicated above, we found numerous examples of teachers cultivating a mythic image of Israel. Thus, when students were asked to respond to a set of different images of Israel, positive images of contemporary Israel (for example, a home away from home, a place with close friends and/or family, or a place to be safe from anti-Semitism) possessed only moderate positive resonance for the students. Instead, four of the five images to which they responded most positively have an almost timeless quality: Israel as the Jewish homeland, a place with a Jewish atmosphere, a place to explore their Jewish identity and a place for the exploration of spirituality. None of these images has much to do with the specific circumstances of life in contemporary Israel. These items, in fact, could have been selected even before the establishment of Israel as a Jewish state. It is as if the past 65 years of history in that land had never transpired.



Further probing of the students' responses sheds more light on their perceptions of Israel. Factor analysis reveals that first and foremost students conceive of Israel as a center for spirituality, a place to explore Jewish identity and a place with a Jewish atmosphere. Secondarily, it is a place with resonance as the homeland of the Jewish people, the birthplace of the Jewish people and as a home away from home... These findings are in line with student responses to questions about how self-confident they felt discussing certain types of issues. Among the items students felt diffident talking about were current Israeli events, daily life in Israel and the status of the various religious movements in Israel. Of all the possible items, the one they felt most diffident discussing is contemporary Israeli culture (such as films, music and books) and daily life in Israel, although they are more confident discussing the Arab-Israel conflict.<sup>4</sup>

As the report notes, the mainstream student, part of the “engaged” cohort often does not have an understanding of many of the social, political, religious and economic issues that face the State of Israel and its inhabitants. They don't necessarily have a deep understanding of Zionist and Israeli history nor a good handle on the current day to day Israeli reality. They support Israel and want to study there after high school to grow religiously, or because their friends are going, but their hold on the nuances of Israeli life, culture, politics, and thought is far from ideal.

In addition, there is another smaller cohort who are considered detached from an intense identification with Israel. Often, but not always, some of the detachment is related to a general detachment from religion and/or communal norms which invest Israel with such a central place in its value structure. It is interesting to note that the Avi Chai study suggests that it is this cohort and those who are “under-engaged” who might benefit most from active programming in school about contemporary Israeli life, in addition to the impact that family and community can have:

It is a well-established fact that schools alone do not shape the outlook of students. Other variables tend to be as important, if not even more important. And none is more determinative than the family. The denominational identification of the family is determinative of levels of Jewish engagement in general, and specifically of Israel engagement.

- Whether parents model engagement with Jewish communal life,

even when not necessarily with support for Israel, students are more likely to feel strongly engaged too.

- Community is also an important determinant. If students live in a community with a dense Jewish population, they are more likely to feel at the center of Jewish life.
- Schools can and do have an impact. This is especially the case when they model concern for Israel by running special programs to mark important moments in contemporary Israeli life.
- *The students most likely to be influenced by schools are those who come from less engaged families. Schools can do a good deal to heighten the emotional connections such students feel toward Israel and to reinforce the engagement of students from more engaged Jewish homes (italics mine).*<sup>5</sup>

## MODELS OF ENGAGEMENT WITH CONTEMPORARY ISRAEL IN THE YESHIVA HIGH SCHOOL SETTING

Given this research and lived experience of teaching in yeshiva high schools, in recent years some schools have undertaken deep dives into analyzing how they teach Israeli history and contemporary Israel. For instance, in SAR High School, which has been my home for the last 13 years, cohorts of teachers meet on a regular basis to discuss these issues, study previous research such as the Avi Chai study, speak to students and faculty, and write papers exploring these issues under the aegis of Machon Siach, the in-house educational think tank of SAR.

As all other Modern Orthodox high schools, SAR has always viewed fostering a love for Israel and the Jewish people as a central part of its mission, and strongly values developing an affinity with the struggles and triumphs of Israel in a deeply emotional and affective manner. This is often achieved through the ritualized celebrations and commemorations relating to Yom Ha-Zikaron, Yom Ha-Atzmaut, and Yom Yerushalayim. It has also been fostered through inspirational speakers and programming that impart the community's visceral connection to the State of Israel and Am Yisrael. These are elements that are essential and crucial to the ethos of any Modern Orthodox yeshiva high school and continue to be a critical component of life at SAR.

At the same time, it became clear that a richer, more nuanced discussion of Israeli history is also necessary in our day and age to truly educate and inspire young people. Here is an extended excerpt from one of the papers, "Israel Education at SAR: Teaching Israeli History at a Modern Orthodox High School," written by Ms.

Adina Shoulson, co-chair of the history department, and Dr. Laura Shaw Frank, then a member of the history faculty:

The study of Israel's history in day school and other Jewish educational settings has historically been an endeavor rich in non-academic, affective programming, and lacking in the rigor that we expect from a general history curriculum. It is critical to change this paradigm, particularly at a school like SAR, which prides itself on a nuanced and complex curriculum that pushes students "beyond their comfortable limits." We model for our students the joy of deep critical engagement with the subject of study; any education about Israel must be as rigorous as the rest of our history curriculum. In a postmodern world in which multiple viewpoints are expected and simple answers non-existent, the uncomplicated "rah rah" Israel education of the past would cause the opposite of its intended result of inculcating love of Israel in our students. Indeed, it would serve as a red flag for our students that we are hiding something or that Israel cannot withstand critical examination. Further, as SAR endeavors to prepare our students to be integral members of the adult Jewish community, whether in America or Israel, we fail by not giving our students the tools to engage with the complex and nuanced realities of the State....

*Hearts and Minds: Israel in North American Jewish Day Schools*, the seminal 2014 Avi Chai study of Israel education, found that rooting study of Israel in a larger narrative of Jewish peoplehood was central to the success of Israel education. At SAR, where we teach about Jewish life in the diaspora prior to 1948, the study of Zionism and the creation of the state is rooted in a larger narrative of the Jewish people. This narrative helps students understand the desire and need for a Jewish state and the political, religious, and cultural philosophies that gave rise to Zionism.

Researchers in Jewish history and Israel education support the rigorous and critical study of Jewish and Israeli history with a reliance on primary source material and the inclusion of the more troubling elements of the Jewish past. Curriculum should include everything from Jewish slaveholders in the American antebellum South, to Jewish involvement in white slavery and organized crime, to Israel's involvement in the Sabra and Shatilla massacre. While it might seem counter-

productive to the stated goals to allow students to see the underbelly of the subject at hand, all of the literature that we surveyed, whether about teaching history, Jewish history, or the more recent literature on teaching about Israel, recognize that teaching a one-sided, un-nuanced history can backfire when it comes to building long-term loyalty to the Jewish people and Israel.

With respect to Israel education, in the past few years, numerous accounts have been published in the Jewish press by students who found themselves alienated from the State of Israel because they felt their day schools “lied” to them about the “true” nature of Israeli history and society. By whitewashing some of the more complicated and unpleasant aspects of Israeli history and society, whether it be the relationship with the Palestinians or the role that religion plays in state policies, day schools have caused their graduates to call into question much of their Israel education. While it did not specifically focus on these disaffected students, the Avi Chai study noted that “in schools that offer different, more critical perspectives on the history and development of modern Israel, especially on the upper school level, students scored no lower in their sense of connection to Israel. Students can be aware of the challenges facing the Jewish State and still be committed to Israel’s well-being and importance in their own lives.”

...In constructing our high school Israel curriculum we embraced the idea that we were trying to offer the students something different from what they had been given in the lower grades and in summer camp. The Avi Chai study states that “Israel education in day schools, we have found, is to a large degree a practice of working on the heart.” The stated goal of Israel education in day schools is to instill love in and identification with the land and its people and it is done primarily through affective connections, symbols and positive images and experiences. When it comes to high school students, who developmentally are at a stage of questioning and skepticism, we believe that “working on the heart” must engage the critical mind as well. This is particularly true in our “post-everything era, in which Jewish young adults, even those in the Modern Orthodox community, have very complicated and diverse identities....When Jewish identity is up for grabs, a properly crafted Jewish history course has the potential to ground students in their Jewish identity. Therefore, our curriculum must simultaneously

promote identity while making room for criticism. Ultimately, based on the research we have explored, we believe that teaching this tension is actually the way to help students develop an enduring and more resilient connection to Israel.<sup>6</sup>

Out of these deliberations over five years ago emerged some productive recommendations and results such as moving the basic Israeli history curriculum up to 10<sup>th</sup> grade from its traditional 12<sup>th</sup> grade perch and making it a more rigorous, nuanced, and historically rigorous course. Moreover, the 12th grade Modern Israel curriculum (a kind of Israeli History 2.0 after the learning in 10<sup>th</sup> grade) was revised to focus on the entire range of Modern Israeli life, culture, and creativity, as well as the short- and long-term challenges that the rich mosaic of Israeli society confronts. In this course, students read documents, watch episodes of Israeli TV shows, listen to speakers, and engage with primary documents. They grapple with central issues at the heart of Israeli life, including the meaning of a Jewish state, the place of the Arab-Israeli minority in Israeli society, the growing confluence of Jewishly inspired spiritual themes in modern Israeli culture, and the place of immigrant communities in the Israeli narrative, such as the Ethiopian or Russian immigration to Israel in the last quarter century. In addition, students examine conflicting narratives about central events in Zionist and Israeli history, which includes hearing Palestinian perspectives and evaluating conflicting narratives.

In her paper, “A (Post)Modern Israel Education,” Dr. Rivka Press Schwartz nicely summarized the rationales and goals of this Modern Israel course that is now taken by every 12<sup>th</sup> grader at SAR:

What we seek to do in this Israel education, then, is to craft a different community that students can imagine themselves as members of. In this community, our students are not the diasporic outsiders, proving their sustained commitment and lack of alienation with doctrinaire views and nationalist fervor, but are insiders into a community that can comfortably encompass some of the wider range of opinions that are part of the political debate in Israel. But the identity that we are seeking to create is not, ultimately, an Israeli identity. We do not seek to have our students imagine themselves as part of an Israeli community, for they are not Israeli and most of them will not be. We will seek to have our students engage more meaningfully with the fullness of life in modern Israel, not only with the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, but that is not the

sole goal of this study. More than that, we seek to craft a new imagined community—one of American Modern Orthodox Jews, of Diaspora Zionists, who combine their intimate understanding of the Israeli scene and their immersive exposure to a broader world to provide them with unique intellectual frameworks and perspectives with which to think about Israel. What would educating towards that identity, and towards that mode of thinking about and engaging with Israel, look like?

- Helping our students understand themselves as members of a different Israel-supporting, Zionist community than the one they may have been acculturated to in elementary school and summer camp, one that admits more of the complexity and contention that is part of the national discourse in Israel itself.
- Introducing students to ideas and approaches to understanding national narratives, histories, and claims that they might encounter in college, and doing so with a real desire to understand those approaches, what light they can shed, and what their limitations are (not just equipping students with talking points to parry the claims).
- *Helping students see that ability to hear others' truths does not negate our commitment to our own, and understand that accepting that there can be multiple truths does not mean that there is no truth* (italics mine).
- Helping our students understand that the contemporary Israeli experience is not solely defined by the Israeli/Palestinian conflict, and educating them more broadly about Israeli society, politics, and culture.
- Teaching our students to recognize and call out genuine anti-Semitism (“all Jews everywhere are responsible for the actions of the Israeli government”; “Jews cannot be part of campus government because they are all Zionist”) and delegitimization of Israel as a Jewish state; to appreciate that there is room for legitimate criticism of Israel from within and without the Jewish community; and to talk about the hard cases that exist on the boundary.<sup>7</sup>

Follow-up research evaluating graduates’ experience of the course and the impact it had and has on them is in its preliminary stages. Anecdotal feedback and exit surveys filled out by many of the students confirm that this is a worthwhile

endeavor that has enhanced the attachment of graduates to Israel. It has deepened their understanding of both the miracle of Israel and its vibrant multi-layered society and culture, as well as its ongoing socio-economic, cultural, internal political and geo-political challenges as the only Jewish democratic state in the world.

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<sup>1</sup> Alex Pomson, Jack Wertheimer, and Hagit Hacothen-Wolf, *Hearts and Minds: Israel in North American Jewish Day Schools* (New York, Jerusalem: The Avi Chai Foundation, 2014), 1-68, [https://avichai.org/knowledge\\_base/hearts-and-minds-israel-in-north-american-jewish-day-schools/](https://avichai.org/knowledge_base/hearts-and-minds-israel-in-north-american-jewish-day-schools/).

<sup>2</sup> *Hearts and Minds*, 2.

<sup>3</sup> There is a small number of young Modern-Orthodox high school and college alumni who have more ambivalent attitudes towards Israel due to their sharp critique of Israel's treatment of the Palestinian population in the "disputed/occupied" territories of "Judea-Samaria/West Bank." An even smaller subset and negligible number of this cohort has crossed the Rubicon and have adopted anti-Zionist views.

<sup>4</sup> *Hearts and Minds*, 35-36.

<sup>5</sup> *Hearts and Minds*, 49.

<sup>6</sup> Adina Shoulson and Laura Shaw Frank, "Israel Education at SAR: An Evaluation of the Teaching of Israeli History at a Modern Orthodox Day School," *Machon Siach* (2017): 4-7, <https://www.machonsiach.org/israeleducation>.

<sup>7</sup> Rivka Press Schwartz, "A (Post)Modern Israel Education," *Machon Siach* (2017): 5-6, <https://www.machonsiach.org/israeleducation>.

# The Impact of Israel Trips in Day Schools

## *Elana (Trombka) Friedman*

Throughout my seven years at Bi-Cultural Hebrew Academy (BCHA), one of the most rewarding parts of my job has been planning (and often chaperoning) the 8th grade Israel trip. While leading such a trip requires hours of arranging technical and minute details, I do it because I find sending children to Israel personally meaningful. Since Israel has always been close to my heart, I want to pass that love on to my students, and there is no better way to fall in love with Israel than by being there.

In reflecting upon how Israel became so important to me, the answer is simple. In addition to my parents being proud Zionists and taking us to Israel as children, I credit my strong Zionist beliefs to my day school education at Berman Hebrew Academy, which I attended from kindergarten through 12th grade. From my graduating class of 47 students, 12 currently live in Israel. I was privileged to travel to Israel with the entire Berman high school in 9th grade, and throughout all my years at Berman I saw the importance of Israel being stressed time and time again.

Between my experience as a student at Berman and my time as an educator and Israel trip leader at BCHA, I offer here some reflections on Zionism in day schools and the significance of Israel trips. I will discuss the impact of visiting Israel as well as what have stood out as effective ways to bring a love of Israel to the school while not in Israel.

### SECURITY AND VISITING ISRAEL

At BCHA, before taking a group of students to Israel one particular year, I helped lead a grade-wide bonding exercise with the students. The activity included students anonymously writing down their fears about the trip. Upon looking at the responses, security and safety was overwhelmingly the single biggest fear the students had (and this was during a relatively quiet year in Israel).

I remember experiencing something similar as a child. In 2000, my father went to Israel for a family *simcha*. I was eight years old at the time and had never been to Israel before. My parents were excited to tell me that I, as the oldest child, was allowed to accompany my father on the trip. Without thinking twice, I declined the offer. While I didn't express the reason at the time, I remember exactly why I declined the trip. Every morning at school, at the end of *tefilla*, my class recited *Tehillim* as the Second Intifada was in full swing. Doing so caused me to form a perception of Israel in which Israel was an exclusively dangerous country. I spent my father's entire trip to Israel worrying that something would happen to him because



pizza shop and bus bombings were all my young mind associated with Israel.

Unfortunately, during my time at BCHA, there has been no shortage of reasons to mention Israel in our prayers. Of course, it is important for schools to teach students about current events in an age-appropriate manner and to teach them to pray for Israel in times of need. However, it is also important to realize that doing so leaves a strong, sometimes frightening, impression. This is one of the reasons I believe students need to visit Israel. Once on the ground, things feel normal and safe to children, just as we often feel here in America despite the acts of violence committed.

I remember spending a night with BCHA students on a Kibbutz fairly close to the Gaza border. The border was quiet at the time and there was no reason to expect any escalations. Nonetheless, before going to sleep, we reviewed the protocol with the students about what to do should a missile siren sound while we were in our rooms. These drills were practiced by the students with calmness, very much resembling the occasional fire drill. Despite the seriousness of the drill, they were not scared. I am confident that had we reviewed these missile drills from America it would have instilled a greater sense of fear in the students. Once on the ground, however, these fears tend to fade and despite the security and safety concerns, students feel safe in Israel.

## THE KOTEL

Israel trips both with Berman and BCHA have shown me the impact that the Kotel has on children. One of the first things preschoolers learn to recognize in Israel is the Kotel. I would imagine that in every Modern Orthodox preschool across America there is a wall that turns into “the Kotel” at some point each year.

When taking BCHA students to the Kotel, I have seen students become overwhelmed with emotion upon touching it for the first time. Students who struggled to connect to *tefilla* back home (and often anywhere else in Israel), are suddenly engrossed in prayer and tears. My first time chaperoning a trip to the Kotel was surprisingly one of the calmest moments of the trip. Unlike any other waking moment of the trip, the students were able to stand still and quiet for more than sixty seconds.

Along similar lines, experiencing Friday night at the Kotel both as a Berman student and as a BCHA chaperone is entirely different than visiting during a quiet moment. There is something about seeing Jews from all over the world in all different dress and from all walks of life, alongside IDF soldiers in uniform, holding hands and singing together. Whether the words be *Kabbalat Shabbat* or *Am Yisrael Chai* the energy pours over onto the students, who within minutes are holding hands and

singing with people they do not know. This left an impression on me when I went with Berman and similarly leaves an impact on the BCHA students each time.

While every itinerary will include at least one Kotel visit, it is worth trying to get both these experiences in, as they yield very different outcomes. Visiting during a quiet moment allows students to connect with prayer in a way they are unable to anywhere else in the world. On the flip side, it is likely that when visiting the Kotel on a Friday night, no prayer will occur, but students will feel a unity of the Jewish people unlike anything they have ever experienced.

## NORMAL LIFE IN ISRAEL

From multiple trips to Israel with BCHA, I have seen how easy it is to view Israel as a tourist attraction or vacation destination, but not necessarily as a place in which students can potentially live a normal life. While almost every itinerary will include ruins from 2,000 years ago and a Yom Kippur War memorial, it is important that students see the daily lives of Israelis as well. One way we accomplished this on a BCHA trip was by taking the students to the home of our *bat sheirut*, who came to our school from Israel as part of her national service to work with us. Her family lived in an average sized apartment in Jerusalem, and we were a group of over 30 students and chaperones. Nonetheless, we crammed into the apartment to essentially observe her parents, siblings, furniture, bedroom, and so on. By doing so, we were teaching the students that their *bat sheirut* – who they only knew within her role as “an Israeli girl” – actually comes from a family living a normal life in Israel.

Additionally, both Berman and BCHA host “alumni dinners” during their trips. Joining these dinners are often former teachers who have made *aliya*, students who made *aliya* with their families before graduating, and actual alumni who are living in Israel. These alumni might be serving in the army, doing national service, attending university or already in the workforce and living in Israel with their families. During these events, the guests share what they are doing in Israel, further driving home the message that living in Israel can be a normal thing.

The goal in visiting the house of the *bat sheirut* or investing in an alumni dinner is for the students to grasp that moving from one tourist attraction to the next is not the only way to be in Israel. Rather, there are regular people, just like them, who are leading normal lives in Israel. Whether or not these students will choose to do the same is something they will have their whole lives to figure out. However, the knowledge that inheriting a share of their heritage in a permanent way is something students can understand right away, so that if or when the opportunity to move arises, they are not inhibited by the idea of *aliya*.

## ISRAEL EDUCATION OUTSIDE OF ISRAEL

While there is much Israel education that can only take place in Israel, I strongly believe that in addition to a trip there is much that should occur within the school's walls on a day-to-day basis in order to supplement the trip and mission.

Much of this can be accomplished through the "little things." Whether it is decorating bulletin boards with flags and Hebrew or incorporating Hatikvah into the daily routine or assemblies, it sends the message to students that Israel is a core value of the school. Playing popular Israeli music on the loudspeaker between classes or on Rosh Hodesh gives students exposure to Israeli culture. Many schools also have young women fulfilling their *sheirut leumi*, who run Israel programming throughout the school year. Additionally, a formal Israel education curriculum should be in place so that students gain a broad understanding of Israel and can be prepared to speak about its history and current state.

While everything mentioned above can happen bit by bit over the course of students' day school experience, Yom Ha'atzmaut is time to go "all out." As a student at Berman, everyone's favorite day of the year was Yom Ha'atzmaut. We began with a student-led night celebration transitioning from Yom Ha'zikaron to Yom Ha'atzmaut. This program filled a large auditorium with community members, students and their parents. The night featured student presentations, *daglanut* (flag dance), a *ruach*-filled *tefilla hagigit* (celebratory prayers), dancing, and so much more. The day of Yom Ha'atzmaut continued the energy from the night before, with a day's worth of activities. Some highlights included army training, painting Yom Ha'atzmaut-themed mugs, making pita, among other exciting activities. I have seen similar programs take place at BCHA, and I am sure that associating Yom Ha'atzmaut with one of the most fun days of the year will yield a positive feeling towards Israel among the students.

Growing up, I loved Berman's nighttime celebration so much so that while in my gap year program, I, along with the one other girl who came to my program from Berman, felt homesick on Yom Ha'atzmaut, even though we were in Israel. Upon returning to the States, I tried my best to attend the Berman ceremony when I could.

During the spring of 2020, when schools were closed, Berman's Yom Ha'atzmaut ceremony was virtual. While watching the program from New York, I felt how many of us felt during that time – that nothing virtual could ever replace the real thing. However, the final minutes of the ceremony left an impact on me. They showed a video taken during the final days of school two months prior, when everyone suspected closure was only a matter of time. Students ages 2 to 18 were out

on the field, wearing blue and white. Many were holding flags and dancing, all to celebrate the important day that they would likely be unable to celebrate in person. Although I was not there when they made this video, and did not even know about it until Yom Ha'atzmaut night, I can only imagine the impact this time had on the students, as one of the final fun experiences they had before a disappointing closure was celebrating Israel.

As educators in Zionist schools, we are so blessed to be living at a time in which what we teach can be brought to life. Some of my great-grandparents were raised as Zionists back in Europe before the Holocaust. Surely, they did not get to dance at the Kotel on Friday night, reconnect with those who made *aliya*, or celebrate Israel's independence year after year. We are living in a time in which Israel is more accessible than ever, and between taking our students there and bringing as much of Israel to the school when they are in America, we are able to achieve our mission of graduating Zionists into the world year after year.

# Feeling “Off” on Yom Ha’atzmaut<sup>1</sup>

*Ariel Rackovsky*

The atmosphere in the room was somewhat tense. Present that morning were nine of us local rabbis and five members of Knesset, representing a wide array of political affiliations and viewpoints. The MKs were on a whirlwind tour of North American Jewish communities, and we were the only group of rabbis they would meet with during their entire trip. Each of my colleagues spoke, respectfully but forcefully, about the challenges they faced as American rabbis and what they wanted to see in a relationship between the American rabbis and Israel. It was no surprise that denominational acceptance and pluralism were special areas of concern, though some ventured into much more controversial political territory. I was the only rabbi of an Orthodox synagogue in attendance, and I had not yet spoken my turn.

The moderator took great care that an Orthodox voice should be heard, and when I was called upon, I could feel all eyes on me. What did a religious Zionist Orthodox Rabbi who doesn’t live in Israel have to say about the Diaspora/Israel relationship? What did I think about the concerns of my colleagues? The following is what I told Michal Rozin of Meretz, Deputy speaker of the Knesset, Dr. Nachman Shai of the Labor Party, Majority Leader of the Knesset, Tzachi Hanegbi of the Likud, Meir Cohen of Yesh Atid and Revital Swid of the Zionist Union about what I think are the real challenges in the relationship between American and Israeli Jewish communities. The following are my thoughts on why I disagree with my colleagues and why this time of year (close to Yom Ha’atzmaut) makes me feel somewhat uneasy.

The Torah records the prohibition against consuming *hadash*, grain that took root after the sixteenth of Nissan of one year and is harvested before the same date of the following year:

Until that very day, until you have brought the offering of your God, you shall eat no bread or parched grain or fresh ears; it is a law for all time throughout the ages in all your settlements (Leviticus 23:14).

It is this last clause that leads to a widespread discussion among halakhic authorities in the Diaspora. Most Rishonim rule that *hadash* is prohibited everywhere, both within and outside the Land of Israel, on a biblical level, though several medieval halakhists maintain that outside of Israel, this prohibition is only rabbinic in nature. Several early modern Ashkenazic commentators note that the climate and

agricultural cycle of Poland, their country of residence, made it exceedingly difficult to properly observe the laws of *hadash*. They therefore combine several leniencies into a permit to consume “new” grain products throughout the year. Interestingly, though, there is no analogous discussion in the Jewish communities of the Middle East and North Africa, which were traditionally meticulous about *hadash*.

The laws of *hadash* demonstrate, as do so many other laws, that the Torah’s optimal observance is in the Land of Israel. Although we remain obligated in all commandments outside the land, our performance of them—especially of those that are seasonal—is, by definition, “off.” Starting with the second day of Pesah, there is a several-month reprieve during which all Jews everywhere may eat any kosher grain product. Soon this period will end, and we will be reminded once again that we are misaligned—“off”—from the land of Israel.

I think it that this is a critical lesson to consider around the time of Yom Ha’atzmaut. Attitudes toward the State of Israel divide different Jewish communities even on the liturgical level: Does a particular synagogue recite the prayer for the government of Israel or not? With or without reference to “the first flowering of our redemption”? Does it at least recite the prayer for the welfare of IDF soldiers? These year-round questions are made more acute at the beginning of the Hebrew month of Iyar: Do we recite *Hallel* on Yom Ha’atzmaut, do we recite *Tahanun* (petitionary prayers), or (like Ben-Gurion, according to a legendary quip) neither? If *Hallel*, full or half? With or without a *berakha*? On the fifth of Iyar, or on the day determined by the Israeli government?

These liturgical issues, which may affect no more than five minutes annually, are often definitive of how one chooses to affiliate and even identify, even for people who rarely or never attend the synagogue during the week. Thus, these finer points of observance have become ideological litmus tests (or “*tzitzis*-checks”), but they obfuscate a more serious, foundational issue: the ways in which we Diaspora Jews are “off” from our Israeli counterparts.

Thus, I told the visiting MKs that beyond the political and religious issues (and in Israel, those are often interchangeable) that my colleagues were so passionate about, the more serious reality is that American Jews (even Orthodox Jews) are misaligned from Israel in several important ways.

The first major way in which we are unaligned is that American Orthodox Jews are often unaware of the cultural and religious lives of our Israeli brethren. We inhabit a different cultural space with disparate influences; we read different books, listen to different music, and have different public intellectuals, authors, and poets. Moreover, and more importantly, American Jews are often unaware of the impres-

sive variety and creativity of Israel's religious leaders and thinkers. We tend to hear about the religio-political controversies—the Temple Mount, women's services and mixed services at the Kotel, questions of “Who is a Jew?” and other areas of intersection and overlap between religion and politics.

But some of the most exciting developments in Jewish thought, law, and scholarship are taking place in Israel, and we have no idea what they are and who is driving them. Rabbi Yoel Bin-Nun is the father of an exciting stream of text-based Tanakh study, whose popularity is widespread in Israel, but is not particularly well known outside of Israel; Professors Yair Zakovitch and Avigdor Shinan, the leading “secular” Tanakh commentators, are even more obscure outside of Israel.

Rabbi Shimon Gershon Rosenberg (Rav Shagar) is virtually unknown in America outside the readership of *Lehrhaus*, Professor Alan Brill's blog, and another rarefied corner or two. Rabbi Dr. Yehuda Brandes is a pioneering figure in the realm of Talmud study and teaching: his work is premised on the idea that the division of the Talmud into legal and nonlegal elements is an artificial one, he integrates academic methods into his close talmudic readings, and his highly-developed pedagogical method is now being used to train a generation of Talmud teachers at the Herzog College, where he serves as the academic head. And yet, most Diaspora Jews have never heard of him or read any of his writings.

Rabbi Chaim Navon and Dr. Tomer Persico draw thousands of readers to their thoughtful, learned Facebook posts (where they often respond to one another) on religion, economics, politics, and everything in between, but they are inaccessible to those who are not fluent in Hebrew. Sivan Rahav-Meir, a Haredi woman and media personality, draws huge crowds from across Israel's political and religious spectrum for her lecture on the weekly Torah portion. Former MK Dr. Ruth Calderon's inaugural Knesset speech went viral, but it was a flash in the pan, and her readings of talmudic narratives remain under-explored.

In the realm of Jewish law and religious scholarship, only recently have Rabbi Eliezer Melamed, the Rosh Yeshiva of the Yeshiva in Har Bracha, who is revolutionizing the religious Zionist halakhic world with his eminently reasonable and balanced halakhic approach, and the brilliantly creative Rabbi Osher Weiss, gained currency outside Israel.

In the academy, one need only peruse the table of contents of the recently-published *Ha-gedolim* to get a sense of some of the new directions in Jewish scholarship. Each chapter profiles a different rabbi who influenced the formation of Israel's *haredi* community, but the chapters themselves are distillations of master's and doctoral theses on these seminal figures. The fascinating thing is not only that

the scholarship is being produced, but also that it is being read by laypersons and sold in popular bookstores. It is not uncommon to see someone reading Professor Benny Brown's monumental work on Rabbi Avraham Yeshaya Karelitz (*Hazon Ish*) or Dr. Maoz Kahana's dazzling study of the way Rabbi Yehezkel Landau (*Noda Bi-Yehuda*) and Rabbi Moshe Sofer (*Hatam Sofer*) each responded to the currents of their times.

While American Orthodox Jews debate the roles, function, and titles of women in communal leadership, Rabbaniyot Michal Tikochinsky, Esti Rosenberg, Tova Ganzel, and Malka Puterkovsky, to name some of the most prominent, have created institutes for advanced Torah study for women, integrating their graduates into communal frameworks with minimal comment and controversy. Professor Vered Noam, in addition to being a talmudist and *talmidat hakhamim* of the first rank, has penned several searing articles on women and Orthodoxy in mainstream, widely-read publications. Yet many of us have never heard of any of these women. The late Chana Safrai, in addition to being a pioneer of Jewish women's study, began a project with her father and brother to produce a commentary on the entire Mishnah that would bring history, botany, archaeology, and other academic disciplines to bear on the text. The result is over a dozen full-color volumes of the Safrai Mishnah have been published, but rare is the American Jew who has heard of them.

The truth is that even if we did know who Israel's most exciting thought leaders are, their writings would be all but inaccessible to too many American Jews, as only a small fraction of this output has been translated into English. The Mishnah in Pirkei Avot tells us, "Be as scrupulous about a light *mitzvah* as about a severe one" (2:1). What is a "light *mitzvah*"? Rambam explains that this refers to *mitzvot* like making a festival pilgrimage to Jerusalem or teaching Hebrew. Rambam listed this as a prime example of a *mitzvah* that really ought to be taken far more seriously than it is.

The great American intellectual Leon Wieseltier recently published a magisterial working paper titled "Language, Identity, and the Scandal of American Jewry," in which he bemoaned this lack of Hebrew proficiency of American Jewry:

The American Jewish community is the first great community in the history of our people that believes that it can receive, develop, and perpetuate the Jewish tradition not in a Jewish language. By an overwhelming majority, American Jews cannot read or speak or write Hebrew, or Yiddish. This is genuinely shocking. American Jewry is quite literally unlettered.<sup>2</sup>



The assumption of American Jewry that it can do without a Jewish language is an arrogance without precedent in Jewish history. And this illiteracy, I suggest, will leave American Judaism and American Jewishness forever crippled and scandalously thin.

What this means is that American Jews—even those who have benefitted from extensive Jewish educations—are often at a loss when encountering foundational Jewish texts, such that, as Wieseltier put it, “We are a community whose books and whose treasures—our books are our treasures—are accessible almost entirely in translation.” And we know that something is lost in every translation (if you don’t believe me, try reading Harry Potter in Hebrew). Regardless of one’s political affiliations, Americans who are limited in their Hebrew knowledge aren’t exposed to the nuanced political writing that appears in Israeli papers, only to the juiciest (and often mistranslated) bits that filter into the English media. As a result, we are woefully ignorant of what Israelis are really thinking, saying, and doing.

This is what I told the MKs, and this remains our challenge. When we celebrate Yom Ha’atzmaut, we should feel a degree of cognitive dissonance that attends the celebration of the independence of a country we don’t live in. This dissonance can be productive. It can inspire eventual *aliyah*, though that is not for everyone, and certainly not *right now*. It can also spur some introspection and evaluation, even amidst a joyous celebration. To what degree do we, in our lives, truly manifest a connection and an alignment with Israel in any deep way? If we keep asking ourselves this question, perhaps we will conclude that the lip service of a few prayers and perhaps a check to an Israeli charity or political action group is not sufficient. Perhaps then we will begin to explore and attempt to understand Israel’s incredibly rich musical, intellectual, spiritual, material, artistic, religious, and, last but not least, deeply and authentically *Jewish* culture.

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<sup>1</sup> This article originally appeared in *The Lehrhaus* in 2017, accessible here: <https://thelehrhaus.com/commentary/feeling-off-on-yom-haatzmaut/>.

<sup>2</sup> Leon Wieseltier, “Language, Identity, and the Scandal of American Jewry,” *Journal of Jewish Communal Service* 86, nos. 1/2 (2011): 14-22; 16.

## **The Power of the Gap**

*Anat Chavkin*

“And there is hope for the future, declares the Lord. Your children shall return to their country.” (Jeremiah 31:17)

Anyone with even the smallest connection to the Jewish day school system in the United States would agree that the most magical time of the school year is the weeks following Pesach. During this small window of time between the return from Pesach break and the final day of school in the middle of June, Judaic Studies departments are blessed with the opportunity to build an entire curriculum that promotes Jewish identity, while commemorating and celebrating multiple events on the Jewish calendar. It is in these weeks that our students have the opportunity to take the lessons from Passover and truly experience not only our freedom from slavery and the value of the Torah given to us on Shavuot, but to understand how important the State of Israel is to us today as Jews living outside of Israel in the post-Holocaust era.

The land of Israel is the eternal gift Hashem promised us thousands of years ago on condition that we follow in his ways. There have been many times over the course of history where we failed to hold up our end of the bargain, leading Hashem to temporarily hide his face from us, until we were able as a nation to renew our faith in him.

Just one week following the conclusion of Pesach, when we celebrate our freedom from slavery, students gather for community events and schoolwide assemblies in commemoration of Yom Ha’shoah, remembering those who perished during the Holocaust. Each year it becomes more challenging to educate children on the meaning of the Holocaust, as there are fewer living survivors to share their stories.

Without question, the climax of this period comes only a few weeks later when our emotions switch gears and we celebrate Yom Ha’atzmaut, Israel’s Independence Day. In a school setting, students spend the majority of the day participating in fun activities that often include an “Israeli lunch” and other Israeli themed activities. However, the essence of the day, and the message for our children, depends on how well our schools are able to inspire students with love and appreciation for Israel. Diaspora Jews must ensure our connection to the land. Yom Ha’atzmaut serves as an opportunity to encourage a bond between Israel and Jews living outside of the Holy Land.

On Yom Ha’atzmaut in 1956, Rabbi Joseph D. Soloveitchik, affectionately known by his students and followers as “the Rav,” gave a famous speech entitled

*Kol Dodi Dofek* (now published as a book) at Yeshiva University in which he spoke passionately about his views on Zionism. In his address, Rav Soloveitchik connected the relationship between Jews and Israel to Shir Hashirim, the Song of Songs. He warned his audience that while the establishment of the state of Israel in 1948 is a modern-day miracle and the beginning of the groundwork for the arrival of the messianic redemption, Israel will only exist if we as Jews do our part and invest in Israel spiritually. In Shir Hashirim, we learn about the romantic relationship between a husband and wife who love one another, but in some cases fail to properly show their feelings. Lack of feeling can jeopardize a marriage in the same way that lack of spiritual connection to Israel puts Israel's survival at risk. At the end of his speech, the Rav concluded with Hashem's desire for us to connect to Israel: "It has been eight years since he has continued to beckon, hopefully we will not miss the opportunity."

Hashem's words in Jeremiah 31:17, "Your children shall return to their country," inform Rav Soloveitchik's message regarding the need for our spiritual investment in the Holy Land. Born and raised in Israel, I have wonderful memories of serving as an officer in the Israeli Air Force. Serving in the IDF deepened my personal connection to the land and served as the basis for my work in the United States at Friends of the IDF (FIDF). Many of my cousins are products of Israel's Hesder Yeshiva program. Hesder Yeshiva combines army service with formal Yeshiva learning fostering connection to the land and understanding of the need to defend the land. The land that Abraham purchased in Hebron for Sarah's burial has been defended for thousands of years.

For Jews living outside of Israel, there is a significant need to create experiences through which our children will develop a connection to Israel. A post high school gap year in Israel affords such an opportunity. While programs in Israel have long been popular with graduates of Jewish schools, there is more to be done for students in secular schools. *The Wall Street Journal* noted that for the 2020-2021 school year, Masa Israel, the organization overseeing non-religious gap year programming, saw a forty percent increase in students.<sup>1</sup> Covid closings at American universities might have contributed to the uptick. While these statistics are promising, we need to improve! We must focus our efforts on our secular high school graduates. We need to instill an awareness of how to merge our Jewish identity with our deep relationship to Israel.

One gains maturity and independence through a gap year in Israel. It is easier to fill gaps in knowledge than to fill gaps in experience and growth. Time in Israel offers far more than a resume building opportunity. My experiences at FIDF and my

efforts within the Jewish community lead to the conclusion that Yeshiva study, army service, and communal volunteer work in Israel all go a long way towards building Jewish identity and creating the next generation of Jewish leaders. Let us heed the warning of Rabbi Soloveitchik and take to heart Jeremiah's words of thousands of years ago. Let us encourage our youth to return to our eternal home.

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<sup>1</sup> Felicia Schwartz, "Israel Emerges as Top Destination for American Teens Amid Pandemic," *The Wall Street Journal*, September 28, 2020, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/israel-emerges-as-top-destination-for-american-teens-amid-pandemic-11601292665>.

# Religious Zionism: Beyond Left and Right<sup>1</sup>

## Zach Truboff

According to Yossi Klein HaLevi, Zionists are divided between “Pesach Jews” on the Left and “Purim Jews” on the Right.<sup>2</sup> For Pesach Jews, the story of the Exodus is primary and its central lesson is that God will not stand idly by the suffering of the innocent. The story must be retold every year to serve as a reminder that freedom is the birthright of not just the Jewish people but all people. Its existence is never guaranteed and must constantly be fought for. The suffering of the Jews in Egypt makes clear that when they finally arrive in the Promised Land, they have an absolute moral obligation to others not like them. For Pesach Jews, Zionism can be distilled to one verse: “Love the stranger for you were strangers in the land of Egypt” (Deuteronomy 10:19).

Purim Jews, however, grasp on to a different narrative. In the book of Esther, the Jewish people are viciously targeted for genocide despite having done nothing wrong. Their salvation comes not through revealed miracles but through the affirmation of Jewish power. With it, the Jews can defend themselves, and without it, they are nothing more than sheep to the slaughter. In a world where God’s face remains hidden, the Jewish people have no choice but to look after themselves. After lacking a land for so long, Israel provides the existential security the Jewish people so desperately need. For Purim Jews, Zionism is animated by the need to be ever vigilant: “Remember what Amalek did to you as you left Egypt” (Deuteronomy 25:17).

The conflicting verses of the Left and Right present a challenge for Zionism, but not an insurmountable one; when two verses contradict, a third verse can resolve the dispute. A newly published collection of Rav Shagar’s writings, titled *My Covenant of Peace*, represents this quest for a third verse that will enable Zionism to move beyond Left and Right.<sup>3</sup> At over five hundred pages, the book collects essays from a twenty-five-year period beginning with the Invasion of Lebanon, continuing with the First Intifada and the Oslo peace process, and concluding with the Second Intifada and the disengagement from Gaza. Each one reflects Rav Shagar’s attempt to grapple with challenging political questions through the lens of Torah. While many rabbis invoke the word of God only to justify their political positions, Rav Shagar’s approach turns to the multiplicity of views contained within the Torah in order to engage the complexity of the issues before him.

## NEITHER LEFT NOR RIGHT

Rav Shagar refuses to see himself as part of any ideological camp. He explains, “I do not define myself as Right or Left; rather I approach each issue on its own (*inyani*). Our challenge is to find the correct path between the Right and Left in accordance with a changing reality” (68). His refusal to embrace one of Zionism’s competing ideologies perhaps traces back to his biography. Though raised as a Religious Zionist to believe that the state of Israel heralded a new redemptive age, this belief met its limits on the battlefield of Nafach during the Yom Kippur War. Sent to the Golan Heights in the early days of the war alongside two other young soldiers, his tank was hit as soon as it reached the front. It burst into flames, yet somehow Rav Shagar managed to fling himself from the wreckage. Nevertheless, he did not escape unscathed. His friends were killed, and his body grievously wounded.

The national catastrophe of the war, combined with his personal tragedy, challenged many of the truths he had long taken for granted. It raised questions for which he had no answers, and though the costs of war have long been justified by appeals to political or religious ideologies, Rav Shagar found himself unable to do so:

Of course, it is easy to create slogans, to speak with pathos. There is nothing easier than trading in war and blood. But reality is stronger than words. The fear one speaks about in a religious sermon is different from fear one feels when traveling in a tank towards war, and it is even more different from the fear one feels inside a tank covered in flames. The faith is different as well (38).

Trauma leaves scars, and while scars are a sign of healing, they never fully disappear. For Rav Shagar, the scars he bore on his mind and body were a constant reminder that life’s most difficult questions elude simple answers. This realization granted him a unique perspective on the dramatic political events faced by Israel. Rather than fall into the trap of one political camp and view all political questions through this narrow lens, he saw a bigger picture that enabled him to criticize both sides without denying the legitimacy of either.

A clear example of this approach appears in the essay “*Min Ha-Meitzar*” (“From the Straits”), written in 1987 as a response to the first Intifada. In it, he notes both the dangers of right-wing extremism and the challenges of relinquishing the occupied territories. The miraculous victory of the Six Day War, he argues, brought about a certain arrogance within Religious Zionism. In place of the generation which had won the War for Independence arose a new generation, the *kippot serugot*.

However, they differed from the previous generation. Unlike Israel's founders, they were "not seeking self-improvement, driven by deep pain, or haunted by longing. Rather they carried God's promise in their pocket" (51). Their self-confidence bordered on arrogance, which found its way into Gush Emunim and the settlement enterprise as a whole. Fueled by the belief that the settlement efforts were a fulfillment of the divine plan, many founded settlements illegally. In a pattern reminiscent of recent years, Rav Shagar highlights the attempt of Gush Emunim to establish an illegal settlement outside the Palestinian village of Sebastia in the Shomron only for the Israeli government to forcibly evacuate them. The lawlessness inherent to founding illegal settlements, Rav Shagar argues, is not without its consequences:

There is a straight line from Sebastia to the Jewish underground. It is impossible to ignore this. If people are willing to take the law into their own hands and transgress the laws of the state in the case of settling Sebastia, why wouldn't they permit themselves to act similarly regarding violence towards innocents, like the Jewish underground did? (51)

Once Gush Emunim permitted itself to break Israel's laws for the sake of a higher purpose, what was to prevent others from going even further? This is exactly what happened, he explains, in the years following Sebastia when the Jewish Underground perpetrated a number of terror attacks against Palestinians in the West Bank. When they were finally brought to justice, it was discovered that several high-ranking members of Gush Emunim had been involved. Yet despite his sharp critique, Rav Shagar also sympathizes with Gush Emunim. He notes that "if we are going to criticize the breaking of the law by Gush Emunim, we also need to recognize the other side of the coin: If Gush Emunim had asked permission from the government to establish a settlement, the whole project would never have happened at all" (51).

Throughout the essay, Rav Shagar alternately agrees with arguments of both the Left and Right. In doing so, he identifies a central dilemma Israel still struggles with today. Returning the territories may not bring Israel peace, but maintaining the occupation is immoral. He writes, "Is there a solution to the question of returning the territories? Indeed, Menachem Begin is correct. If we return the territories, the Katyushas will fall in Tel Aviv and in Jerusalem. But those promoting peace are also correct. It is impossible for one nation to subjugate another" (51).

While it is common for the Left to argue that the occupation corrupts Israel's soul, Rav Shagar justifies his critique by citing Maharal (*Netzah Yisrael* 1), who wrote

that the Jewish people's exile in Egypt was destined to come to an end because each nation has its natural place in the world, and therefore no nation can rule another permanently. The same would apply to Israel's occupation of the Palestinians. Just as the Jewish people were destined to go free from Egypt, so too, Rav Shagar implies, the Palestinians are as well. Those who think the status quo can be maintained indefinitely are profoundly misguided because "it is impossible for one nation to subjugate another without its moral and spiritual character becoming corrupted" (52).

## FOLLOWING IN THE FOOTSTEPS OF RAV KOOK

In many ways, Rav Shagar's critique of the Left and Right is deeply reminiscent of Religious Zionism's spiritual forbearer, Rav Kook. Because of Religious Zionism's sharp turn to the political Right in recent decades, many fail to realize that Rav Kook never saw himself as tied to any political party; in fact, he repeatedly lamented the factional nature of Jewish politics. In an important essay (*Orot Ha-Tehiyah* 18), he wrote that the ideologies of the Jewish people divide into three camps. The Liberal camp, most associated today with what we would consider to be Israel's Left, emphasizes the Jewish people's moral obligation to humanity and the importance of bettering society for all. The Nationalist camp, associated today with Israel's Right, puts the needs and national interests of the Jewish people at the center even at the expense of others. Lastly, the Orthodox camp, similar to today's ultra-Orthodox, stood firm in their unyielding commitment to the Jewish tradition. Each camp grasped a central element of God's vision for the Jewish people: the universal, the national, and the holy. But in failing to recognize that each camp had a place within the divine plan, all three viewed the others as obstacles or enemies. This perspective was dangerous, for the harmonious synthesis of all three camps was the ideal vision of the Torah.

Rav Kook's greatest hope was to unite all three camps under the vision of Religious Zionism, and he believed that the unfolding process of redemption taking place in the Land of Israel would make this possible. Though the core principles of the three camps may appear to conflict with each other, eventually, these contradictions would be resolved and unify within a higher divine truth.

Rav Shagar's earlier writings in *My Covenant of Peace* bear the distinct influence of Rav Kook. He too notes that both the Left and Right embody divine truths, and though politics may divide them, one must still aspire to a unity that resolves their contradictions. "Beyond all the oppositions—and there are oppositions on every issue and every approach—there is one root. In every position there are sparks of holiness. The question is whether we have the ability to arrive at the root in which



the oppositions are unified” (22).

Several of Rav Shagar’s earlier essays express the optimism that some sort of political synthesis is possible. However, Rav Shagar’s later writings betray an attitude that is more skeptical about such possibilities, drawing on Rebbe Nachman of Breslov to emphasize the necessity of contradiction rather than the optimism of harmony. Left and Right each have their place but the challenge is to live them as a productive tension rather than to search for a final resolution. “The path we must take is not the effort to unify opposites, to build a coherent awareness, rather to build the possibility of multiple consciousnesses—a schizophrenic consciousness—without becoming cynical” (154).

## THE DISENGAGEMENT FROM GAZA AND ITS DISCONTENTMENTS

Few if any political events were as significant for Rav Shagar as the disengagement from Gaza in 2005. His several essays on the subject, written before, during, and afterwards, depict his struggle to make sense of an event Religious Zionism considered a profound catastrophe. The Jewish state, in which it had imbued its hopes and dreams, appeared to be turning away from Rav Kook’s messianic vision. If redemption was just beyond the horizon and settling the territories would make it a reality, how could the state of Israel actively work against this? Many Religious Zionists believed that the disengagement simply would not occur. Surely God would provide a miracle demonstrating that the divine plan must go forward. Others argued for vigorous action to stop the disengagement, encouraging religious soldiers to refuse orders to take part in the expulsion of Jews from Gush Katif, and planning mass acts of civil disobedience.

Like he had done in the past, Rav Shagar took a more nuanced approach. He expressed his opposition to the disengagement, but also noted that “the expulsion of Jews is not invalid from a pure halakhic perspective” and that “it is forbidden to associate it with Nazi expulsions, because the decision does derive from political and security concerns” (160). Furthermore, he did not believe that religious soldiers should refuse to follow orders, if only “to preserve some level of societal unity and solidarity” (149).

What most concerned Rav Shagar was not necessarily the disengagement itself but what would come after. Because a governmental coalition imposed the disengagement rather than a public referendum, he worried that it lacked the popular will that would grant it legitimacy in the eyes of the Right. Instead, it was experienced not only as a betrayal by the state to which they had dedicated so much, but as an act of outright violence. Thus, he identifies it as a turning point in Israel’s history:

For everyone, the battle is so intense today not only because of the singular issue of Gaza. In reality, this is the opening shot of a struggle for the entire Land of Israel, and the Right and Left recognize this... It is not just a political struggle. Rather, it is a cultural struggle for the character of the state and Israeli society (128-129).

The political battle around the disengagement was so fierce because it was a fight for Israel's soul. If the Left was to "win" and the disengagement comes to pass, Zionism's contradictions will not be resolved. Rather, Rav Shagar fears, it will only further inflame a culture war between the Left and Right. He fears that the violent and coercive nature of the disengagement will only lead to further political polarization, and it is here where he is most prescient if not prophetic:

Violent conflict invites the next conflict. There is a well-known "*vort*: "The Egyptians acted harshly [*va-yarei'u*] towards us" " (Deuteronomy 26:6) – they made us evil [*ra'im*]. The matter is also correct regarding the disengagement. The threat of expulsion turns us evil, and this is because of the simple reason that hate fuels hate (129).

By imposing its will on the Right through the disengagement, the Left abandoned the mode of persuasion so central to democratic politics. This move, he claims, will only serve to radicalize the Right for years to come by convincing it to take up non-democratic means as a way of advancing its political agenda. While one can debate the extent to which Rav Shagar has been proven correct in recent years, there is no question that the traumatic memory of the disengagement still looms large for many on the Right. Political polarization on the Right remains one of Israel's greatest challenges and the legacy of the disengagement plays no small part in it.

## WHAT COMES NEXT FOR RELIGIOUS ZIONISM?

Just as Rav Shagar was forced to question some of his most deeply held beliefs in the aftermath of the Yom Kippur War, so too Religious Zionism was forced to do the same in the wake of the disengagement. Could one continue to confidently declare that Israel is *reishit tzemihat ge'ulateinu*, the beginning of the flowering of redemption? For many the answer remained the same as it had always been, a resounding yes. Others experienced a crisis of faith, with some even embracing more nihilistic religious philosophies that saw the state as an opponent of redemption.

Rav Shagar, however, recognized that while catastrophic, the disengagement was an opportunity for much needed introspection on the part of Religious Zionism.

For Religious Zionists unwilling to question their core beliefs, the disengagement merely proved that they must do a better job conveying their message to Israeli society. Rav Shagar, however, vehemently disagreed:

If rabbis from the Religious Zionist community cannot find a solution for broad sections of their own community, and especially the youth, how do they have the arrogance to bring their Torah to the community and youth who are much more distant? It appears they feel as if they are already living in the generation of Rav Kook, and they therefore try to engage with and resolve the questions of our generation with copies of Rav Kook's answers for his generation (131).

He argued that the religious and political crisis presented by the disengagement should be an opportunity for *teshuvah* (repentance) on behalf of Religious Zionism. As Rambam explains, those who fail to see crisis as a necessary opportunity for *teshuvah* follow “the path of cruelty and it causes them to remain stuck to their evil ways” (*Hilkhoh Ta'aniyot* 1:3) For Rav Shagar, the disengagement must lead to a renewal of Religious Zionism, one in which even core beliefs may need rethinking. He makes this clear in a striking essay written just months before it was scheduled to take place:

The change must take place in Torah itself, and I am aware of the bad impression felt by those listening when the words change and Torah are joined together. We believe in the eternity of the Torah, but even with this, the Oral Torah is compared to the moon which teaches the renewal and development of Torah, terms that Rav Kook himself used. (131)

## RETHINKING REDEMPTION

Few tenets are more central to Religious Zionism than the belief that Israel's founding inaugurates the beginning of the redemption. This belief, as argued from the teachings of Rav Kook, has influenced nearly all Religious Zionist thought. It serves as a cornerstone of the settlement enterprise, and it is at this belief which Rav Shagar takes aim. His concern is that messianic enthusiasm too often demands to be transformed into a political platform, and in doing so, it runs the risk of becoming a “radical evil” (133) that seeks to impose its will on others out of the belief that

the promised future is already at hand. This kind of messianism, he warns, can give license to the worst moral atrocities.

Thus, religious Zionism must rethink its understanding of redemption to separate it from politics. In a sense, he notes, it would be easy to embrace the approach of the Haredim, who limit the dream of redemption to the *siddur*, or that of Yeshayahu Leibowitz, messianic Religious Zionism's harshest critic, who wrote that "any messiah who comes is a false messiah." Nevertheless, Rav Shagar was unwilling to give up the belief that redemption must be a concrete reality, not something left only to our prayers. For him, the Zionist project is fueled by a utopian spirit that is inextricably bound up with the Jewish people's yearning for redemption. Excising it would deny Zionism's very legitimacy. He emphatically states, "Without messianism there can be no Religious Zionism, just as there cannot be Zionism; a utopian pathos is an essential part of it—'to fix the world' (*le-taken olam*)" (134).

For Rav Shagar, it is essential that Religious Zionism hold on to its dream of the state of Israel as *reishit tzemihat ge'ulateinu*, but the question remains: how can such a belief be a vital force in religious life without succumbing to its potential dangers? To address this dilemma, Rav Shagar turns to two German Jewish thinkers from the early twentieth century, Walter Benjamin and Franz Rosenzweig, neither of whom would have ever been confused as a Zionist. Both came of age in *fin de siècle* Germany, at a time of great optimism. However, Germany's failures during World War I forced Jews and Germans alike to rethink many of their core ideals. Benjamin and Rosenzweig focused much of their efforts on rethinking modern notions of philosophy, truth, and historical progress, and though raised secular, both affirmed a Jewish theological notion of redemption as the necessary corrective to modernity's limitations. Benjamin ultimately became a Marxist and Rosenzweig a religious Jew, but both articulated a belief in an immanent messianism that seeks to cultivate a space for rupture and transformation rather than impose its will on reality.

Whereas liberal conceptions of history tended to see modern life as a process in which the new replaced the old for the better, Benjamin's dream of a better world meant not incremental improvement but a radical transformation of reality. This transformation could only be properly sustained by drawing on the Jewish belief in the messianic redemption, a claim he makes in his "Theses on the Philosophy of History." Modern capitalism, which created the illusion of progress while perpetuating profound inequality and oppression, could only be changed through a rupture, one that would make a true break with the present rather than merely serve as its continuation:

As the thinker Walter Benjamin put it well, messianism that is like a miracle can be understood as a revolution, as opposed to the Enlightenment's conception of progress. The reason for this is that which merely comes last is not truly capable of birthing something new, rather it can only recycle the old and repeat itself. Messianism as a utopian echo that acts upon us and inspires us, must continue to provide spirit for those who interpret faith. Messianism is indeed a revolution—a refusal, the place in which the desire of the subject bumps into historical laws (133-134).

The kind of messianic faith offered by Benjamin refuses to accept the status quo. It compels believers to recognize that redemption is not achieved through any particular political battle, and it cultivates a resistance to the present that causes one to look at it differently. What at the moment looks like ironclad, unbreakable rules will ultimately be nothing more than illusions.

Rosenzweig articulates a similar notion, although with a different emphasis. While Benjamin is a Marxist who sees history in materialist terms and therefore grants no special status to the Jewish people, in *The Star of Redemption* Rosenzweig perceives the Jewish people as existing outside of history. For the Jews, redemption is not some far off possibility but something that is always possible *ha-yom*, “today.” Thus, the Jews do not participate in history like other peoples. Their attention is always attuned to God's law and the present moment rather than oriented around an attempt to build something for the future. Even so, while the possibility of a complete and total redemption is always “today,” Rosenzweig was careful to point out that this moment remains perpetually *adayin lo*, “not yet.”

The tension between redemption as potentially “today” and still “not yet” captivated Rav Shagar, because it expressed the lived experience of Religious Zionists in Israel. To be in the Land of Israel dwelling among the Jewish people is to experience God's closeness and the possibility of transformation while still knowing that it has not yet arrived, for the world continues as it always has. He expands upon this point by connecting Rosenzweig's thought to the narrative of Song of Songs. The biblical book depicts two lovers in the Land of Israel who yearn to be together. Their passion is palpable, and it infuses all that they see and do. Yet, despite being so close to consummating their love, each finds the other constantly out of reach. Even the attempt to open the door when one hears one's lover knocking, reveals only their absence, not their presence. In this way, Rav Shagar explains, messianism preserves the gap between redemption and reality. It consists of a

faith in the messiah as one who will come, one who even comes and

goes; one who comes and goes and is still “not yet” to come... “My beloved is like a gazelle or like a young stag. There he stands behind our wall, gazing through the window, peering through the lattice” (Song of Songs 2:9). Like in Song of Songs, opening the door causes the beloved to slip away (134).

The belief that redemption can be “today” but still “not yet” may sound paradoxical, but Rav Shagar sees it as creating a new kind of political consciousness. Not one that cannot provide a political platform, but one that can possibly allow for a different kind of politics. In Rav Shagar’s words: “This is the true utopian spirit... Messianism is not a political argument but it can be the spirit which animates politics, the vision that stands at its foundation. It is not a present but a future that we yearn for and strive for” (134-135).

To better understand this idea, it is helpful to think about those who have the custom of keeping a bag packed under their bed in anticipation of the messiah’s arrival. On the one hand, they know that redemption is not yet here, but they nevertheless remain ready for it at any moment. Such an approach embodies a profound truth. To live one’s life with the faith that the messiah can come today, while still aware that he has not yet come, is to experience life differently from others. On the outside one’s actions may look mostly the same, but on the inside reality feels different because one lives with the awareness that the current state of the world is only temporary.

It is often to our detriment that we invest so much in the structures and modes of thinking that dominate our lives, for it is often our attachment to them which serves as the greatest obstacle to achieving the change that we truly yearn to see in the world. For Rav Shagar, this impediment includes the ideologies of Zionism’s Left and Right. Though each may represent a verse in the Torah, and therefore appear immutable, it is upon us to recognize that each represents but one verse. There are always more verses, more redeeming possibilities waiting to be discovered if only we are open to seeing them as a reality.

## THE FUTURE OF RELIGIOUS ZIONISM

In the fifteen years since Rav Shagar wrote the essays in *My Covenant of Peace*, much has happened to Israel. The Left has completely fallen out of power, and the Right has gained ascendancy. During this same period of time, Religious Zionism has become much more fractured and no longer remains the unified political force it once was. Many now vote for right-wing parties with a more secular bent and the only

official Religious Zionist party is distinguished by its extremist beliefs. A yearning for redemption has been combined with bigoted statements against Palestinians and LGBTs,<sup>4</sup> advocating for the expulsion of Arab citizens of Israel,<sup>5</sup> and a glorification of Meir Kahane<sup>6</sup> has moved from the fringes to become the norm.

It's hard to believe Rav Shagar would have felt anything other than shame that the only party in the Knesset to literally bear the name Religious Zionism (*Tzionut Datit*) currently embodies the two tendencies he perceived as most dangerous: a messianic fervor that seeks to impose its chauvinistic vision on Israeli society combined with the belief that the use of power and even violence can solve Israel's most difficult problems. He would no doubt argue that Religious Zionism must confront its demons by offering new thinking that addresses the questions of the present moment.

Does Zionism have a future beyond Left and Right, and does Religious Zionism have a role to play in making that possible? The answer remains unclear, but we must not forget what Rav Shagar took to be a foundational principle of Religious Zionism, one also affirmed by the teachings of Rav Kook. The Torah always contains the potential for renewal. As Rav Shagar described it, "We believe in the eternity of the Torah...that the Torah is a Torah of truth because it is a living Torah, and life is constant change, a spring that gushes forth anew" (131). Even after his passing, Rav Shagar's writings in *My Covenant of Peace* can offer us exactly that.

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<sup>1</sup> This article originally appeared in *The Lehrhaus* in 2021, accessible here: [thelehrhaus.com/culture/religious-zionism-beyond-left-and-right/](https://thelehrhaus.com/culture/religious-zionism-beyond-left-and-right/).

<sup>2</sup> Yossi Klein Halevi, "Pesach Jews vs Purim Jews: The Agony of our Dilemma," February 10, 2019, <https://www.hartman.org.il/pesach-jews-v-purim-jews-the-agony-of-our-dilemma/>.

<sup>3</sup> Ha-Rav Shimon Gershon Rosenberg (Shagar), *Briti Shalom: Yamin u-Smol, Milhamah ve-Shalom* [My Covenant of Peace: Right and Left, War and Peace] (Yediot Aharonot, 2020) [Hebrew]. All unidentified page numbers refer to this volume. All translations are by the author unless otherwise noted.

<sup>4</sup> Jacob Magid, "Smotrich says he opposes 'LGBT culture,' appears to liken gay marriage to incest," *Times of Israel*, March 18, 2021, <https://www.timesofisrael.com/smotrich-says-he-opposes-lgbt-culture-appears-to-liken-gay-marriage-to-incest/>.

<sup>5</sup> "Far-right party leader: Arabs are citizens of Israel 'for now at least,'" *Times of Israel*, April 26, 2021, <https://www.timesofisrael.com/far-right-party-leader-arabs-are-citizens-of-israel-for-now-at-least/>.

<sup>6</sup> Raoul Wootliff, "Otzma Yehudit head says Kahane was 'holy'; backs expulsion of 'disloyal' Arabs," *Times of Israel*, March 5, 2021, <https://www.timesofisrael.com/otzma-yehudit-head-says-kahane-was-holy-backs-expulsion-of-disloyal-arabs/>.

# Judaism in an Anti-Zionist Environment

## *Elchanan Poupko*

American Jewry is seeing the preponderance of non-Zionist and even anti-Zionist Judaism in its cultural attitude. Students on large campuses or other environments that might be hostile to Israel are often preferring to express a Judaism focused on culture or ritual to avoid being identified as “Zionists” and avoid the potential backlash that might come with that. This struggle of identity is not new. A century ago, the motto of the General Jewish Labour Bund in Russia was in Yiddish “*Darten Vu Mir Leben, Dart is Unzer Land*”—“there where we live, there is our land.” Many have stopped yearning for the land of Israel, or at least weakened the central position of Israel to the Jewish people as a nation. This has been on the minds of young Jews for a long time as they struggle to form their own identities and reconcile those with the time and place in which they live, and the values they hold to be sacred.

In what follows, we will examine how Jewish texts and law treat the land of Israel and our connection to it, and where this value should be placed in the Jewish hierarchy of priorities.

### THE KUZARI AND ITS MISINTERPRETATION

The great Rabbi Sa’adia Gaon (882- 942) famously wrote that “our nation, the people of Israel, are only a nation by our Torah” (*Emunot Ve’deot* III, 132). This line has often been misinterpreted by some to say that the only thing that makes Jews Jewish is the observance of the Torah and that, therefore, anyone not observing the Torah is not part of our nation. Others misinterpreted him to say that the only thing that makes the Jewish people a people is our Torah, to the exclusion of a shared homeland. We cannot accept either interpretation: just as we would reject the idea that if someone does not observe the Torah, they are no longer members of *Am Yisrael*, so too, we cannot accept the interpretation of the statement to exclude the land of Israel as a shared homeland of the Jewish people.

Rather, Rabbi Sa’adia Gaon’s statement means that unlike other nations such as the French or Germans who are members by virtue of a shared land or citizenship, the Jewish people are united by the law of the Torah, which applies to every Jew. In that law, there are many details which include our shared peoplehood and the ability of others to convert to our faith if they meet certain requirements, and that same Torah also tells us of our shared homeland, the land of Israel.

This is the explanation offered by Rabbi Yehuda Amital, founder and Rosh



Yeshiva of Yeshivat Har Etzion.<sup>1</sup> Rabbi Amital juxtaposed Rabbi Sa'adia's concept with a passage of the Rambam's *Guide to the Perplexed*:

The prophet then adds that the seed and name of Israel will be as permanent as their faith and as the rejoicing in it, which God promised to create and to spread over the whole earth: for faith in God and rejoicing in it are two possessions which, once obtained, are never lost or changed.

This is expressed in the words: "For as the new heavens and the new earth, which I will make, remain before me, saith the Lord, so shall your seed and your name remain" (Isa. 66:22). But of other nations, in some instances, the seed remains, whilst the name has perished; so, e.g., many people are of the seed of the Persians or Greeks, without being known by that special name; they bear the names of other nations, of which they form part. According to my opinion, we have here a prophecy that our religion, which gives us our special name, will remain permanently (*Guide to the Perplexed* II:29; trans. Friedlander, 1903).

That is, while not every Jew might live up to this, the Jewish people maintain our uniqueness not only by being the biological heirs to our great forefathers but by proudly carrying their faith. Thus, to say that our nation is a nation only through our Torah is not excluding any element of Judaism or any person from Judaism; it is to say that our continued faith is what keeps us unique as a nation.

## A COMMUNITY OF FATE

When addressing our connection to Israel and how much we choose to make of that connection, it is essential we acknowledge two very different aspects of contemporary Israel. On the one hand, the state of Israel is a political entity—a state—which resides within the borders of the ancient land of Israel, and carries with that historical and religious significance and means different things to different people. On the other hand, the land of Israel is home to more than 6.7 million Jews, almost half of our current nation in total. This means that all of the obligations, commitments, and care we have for one another as a nation applies to each and every one of our fellow Jews living in this country.

The shared commitment of the Jewish people is emphasized by Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik in his essay *Kol Dodi Dofek*. Rabbi Soloveitchik famously distinguishes between a community of faith and of fate:

What is the Covenant of Fate? Fate signifies, in the life of the nation, as it does in the life of the individual, an existence of compulsion. A strange force merges all individuals into one unit. The individual is subject and subjugated against his will to the national fate/existence, and it is impossible for him to avoid it and be absorbed into a different reality. The environment expels the Jew who flees from the presence of God so that he is awakened from his slumber, like Jonah the prophet, who awoke to the voice of the ship's captain demanding to know his personal national-religious identity.<sup>2</sup>

The shared commitment we have to one another as members of a covenant of fate, the obligation of *ve'ahavta le'reakha kamokha* (love your fellow as yourself; Lev. 19:18), *lo ta'amod al dam reakha* (do not stand upon the blood of your fellow, Lev. 19:16), and so many others bind us in a covenant of responsibility to those Jews living in modern-day Israel—just as they bind those Jews living in Israel to American and world Jewry as well.

This bond of fate is not only a matter of Jewish thought, but is also codified as law by Rambam in his *Mishneh Torah*:

A person who separates himself from the community [may be placed in this category of people who have no share in Olam Haba] even though he has not transgressed any sins. A person who separates himself from the congregation of Israel and does not fulfill mitzvot together with them does not take part in their hardships or join in their [communal] fasts but rather goes on his own individual path as if he is from another nation and not [Israel], does not have a portion in the world to come (*Laws of Repentance*, 3:11).

This powerfully demonstrates how fundamental our communal responsibility is to one another, and highlights the need for this responsibility on both a local and national level. The idea that someone may not be affiliated with any specific community yet can still separate themselves from the congregation of Israel highlights the importance of a shared sense of responsibility we have for one another.

Thus, if there is a collective assault on the people living in Israel, regardless of one's view of Israeli politics, outlook on Zionism, or religious views on the legitimacy of Jews establishing a state of our own, it is incumbent upon the Jewish community around the world to stand up for our brethren in Israel. This does not

necessarily mean defending any specific action of any particular Israeli government, though it does mean defending the right of every single Jew in Israel to live in safety and security, free of threats and any kind of attacks. Furthermore, with the concerning rise in antisemitism around the world, in which we see conflicts between Israel and the Palestinians used as a pretext to attack Jewish communities, it is vital that we recognize that the right to pronounce Israel's name proudly and fearlessly anywhere is tied to the security and wellbeing of Jews around the world.

## JEWISH ATTITUDES TOWARDS THE STATE OF ISRAEL

Jewish, religious, and political approaches to the state of Israel are more numerous than the number of Jews in any synagogue. Whether the state of Israel is a form of messianic redemption, the onset of a redemption—*hatchalta de-geula*—or a forbidden entity until the messianic era, as per the Satmar approach, there are still fundamental ideas about Israel that all Jews agree on.

First, the center of Jewish national life exists in Israel, regardless of any political or religious beliefs about the modern state. It is clear that the national and religious life of the Jewish people can only exist in its most ideal form while living in the land of Israel. A bold example of this is the mitzvah of *horayot*, atoning for erroneous ruling of the court. The Torah says that if a majority of the congregation of Israel sins inadvertently, we must bring a communal offering (Num. 15:24). The question then arises, how does one define a majority of the Jewish people? In the *Mishneh Torah*, Rambam writes that this is defined by the number of Jews living inside the land of Israel:

If the majority of the inhabitants of the land of Israel acted according to the erroneous ruling even if the transgressors were only from one tribe.... the court is liable for this sacrifice and the transgressors are exempt... We are not concerned with the inhabitants of the Diaspora, for the term *kahal* ("congregation") applies only to the inhabitants of *Eretz Yisrael* (*Laws of Offerings for Unintentional Transgressions*, 13:2).

This is not the only occasion. Speaking of the Beit Din Hagadol (highest Jewish court), the sanctification of the Jewish calendar, and other fundamental aspects of our life as a nation, Rambam codifies Jewish law demanding that the center of our national life be in the land of Israel.

While this is certainly a halakhic concept, it is also a historical reality. From the days of Ezra and Nehemiah, the writing of the Mishnah, and the Bar Kokhba re-

bellion, to modern-day Israel, what happens in the land of Israel has always been at the forefront of Jewish history. Ask Jewish children today about the communities of Worms, Speyer, and Maintz—all centers of Jewish life for more than one thousand years—and few will be able to recognize them. Ask young Jews about the glorious Jewish communities of Alexandria, Marrakech, Tripoli, and Shiraz—and not many will recognize those. Yet, as if no time has gone by, ask every Jewish child about Jerusalem, Hebron, Be'er Sheva, Ashkelon, Shilo, and Bnei Brak, and they will have much to share about those. Not every child will know everything there is to know about each of the cities, but they will all know something about some of them. This is the reality across all levels of religious observance.

Secondly, the center stage of religious life also exists in Israel. While there is extensive discussion regarding the nature of the mitzvah of Yishuv Eretz Yisrael—inhabiting the land of Israel—there is no question that it is in fact a mitzvah. While there are disagreements over the ways in which one fulfills this mitzvah, and some may say it is not incumbent upon each and every Jew, there is no debate whatsoever that this is a mitzvah. While we may have not chosen to fulfill this mitzvah in our lifetime, the least we can do is stand with those who have—or at least not oppose them. Living in the land of Israel is an undeniable sacred religious ideal. Furthermore, many mitzvot in the Torah, perhaps hundreds, can only be fulfilled by living in the land of Israel, from the mitzvah of *terumah* (offering) to giving *challah de-orayta* (according to biblical law) and more. Those who theorize about “Diasporic Judaism” are welcome to do so as an acknowledgment of the reality of some Jews, but not as a Jewish ideal, because there is no such ideal anywhere in Judaism.

The increasing attacks and attempts to delegitimize Israel on campus and other spaces leave many day-school graduates vulnerable and even intimidated. It also leaves many wondering about our connection to Israel and how essential it is to our Jewish identity. We must not underestimate, ignore, or dismiss difficult questions on these issues. There is room for discussion, questioning, and diverse opinions. Yet we must also acknowledge that there are common denominators and red lines which we all share. The idealization of diasporic Jewish life, abandonment of our commitment to all Jews—millions of whom are living in Israel—or siding with pro-Palestinian groups who endanger the wellbeing and safety of Jews in Israel and abroad are lines that cannot be crossed.

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<sup>1</sup> Yehuda Amital, “A Torah Perspective on the Status of Secular Jews Today,” *Tradition: A Journal of Orthodox Jewish Thought* 23, no. 4 (1988): 1–13.

<sup>2</sup> Joseph B. Soloveitchik, *Kol Dodi Dofek: Listen, My Beloved Knocks*, trans. David Z. Gordon (New York: Ktav, 2006), accessible at [www.sefaria.org/Kol\\_Dodi\\_Dofek%2C\\_The\\_Covenants\\_of\\_Sinai\\_and\\_Egypt](http://www.sefaria.org/Kol_Dodi_Dofek%2C_The_Covenants_of_Sinai_and_Egypt).

# Catching up to Israel: A Yom Ha'atzmaut Reflection on the Post-Pesah Parasha Gap<sup>1</sup>

*Shmuel Hain*

Here is the dilemma: a family in my synagogue suddenly decides to move to Israel, realizing a lifelong dream on the heels of a fantastic job opportunity.<sup>2</sup> Their children are being pulled out of school mid-year, making a difficult transition especially challenging. On top of that, shortly before their lift departs, the parents realize that their son's bar mitzvah, long reserved on our *shul* calendar for June 1, 2019/*Parashat Behukotai*, is now going to be celebrated in Israel, where *Parashat Bamidbar* will be read on June 1. There is not enough time or emotional bandwidth for an *oleh hadash* (new immigrant to Israel) to learn a new parasha in a few short months. Returning to America to celebrate the milestone is also not an option. Hence, the halakhic query: may a pre-bar mitzvah boy *lain Behukotai* in Israel on Shabbat, May 25, the Shabbat right before his thirteenth birthday?

Though I have had many congregants from our *shul* move to Israel over the years,<sup>3</sup> this particular scenario pushed me to reflect more deeply on my identity as a Religious Zionist in America. During the process of researching the narrow question about the propriety of a minor reading the Torah on behalf of the community, I began wondering why this was even a question in the first place. The facts of the accepted practice are straightforward:<sup>4</sup> during a leap year, when the eighth day of Pesah in the Diaspora falls out on Shabbat, the Torah reading in Israel is *Parashat Aharei Mot*. Here in the Diaspora we don't read *Aharei Mot* until the following Shabbat, while in Israel they read *Kedoshim*. This parasha gap continues until August, when the diaspora combines *Matot* and *Masei*, finally catching up to Israel.

But why should this pattern persist? Why don't we in the Diaspora simply combine *Aharei Mot* and *Kedoshim* on the Shabbat right after Pesah, and synchronize with Israel as soon as possible? If we did that, by the time we reached June 1 we would all be reading *Parashat Bamidbar*, and this boy would never have learned the "wrong" *parasha* in the first place.

Remarkably, 5779 (2019) was the second consecutive year when the Diaspora fell a week behind Israel for an extended period of time after Pesah.<sup>5</sup> 5778 was a non-leap year when the eighth day of Pesah also fell out on Shabbat. In a non-leap year, there is an equally simple solution. All that is needed to synchronize the two communities is for Israel to separate *Tazria/Metzora* or *Aharei Mot/Kedoshim*. Instead, those *parashiyot* are combined, and Israel and the Diaspora do not realign until *Parashat Bamidbar*, after Israelis read *Behar* and *Behukotai* on separate weeks. In the

non-leap year scenario, the question is equally obvious: why doesn't Israel separate one of those earlier double *parashiyot* so as to synchronize with the Diaspora as soon after Pesah as possible?

Of course, it's not just bar and bat mitzvah Torah readings that are impacted by the Diaspora/Israel divide. Those who travel midweek to Israel from the Diaspora after Pesah miss a whole Torah portion, unless they conduct a reading of their own. And those going in the opposite direction, who dutifully attend shul, will hear the same *parasha* in the Diaspora as they heard the week before in Israel. More broadly, in our hyper-connected global world, it seems inconvenient and strange at best, and needlessly divisive at worst, to have two different Torah readings the same week. Why not do everything we can, calendrically and otherwise, to unite the Jews of Israel and the Diaspora?<sup>6</sup>

But the more I considered this *parasha* paradox, the less absurd it seemed. Truth be told, the misalignment may even capture a certain feeling I have at times as a Religious Zionist living in the Diaspora. It's not just the time difference, though being seven hours behind certainly makes staying meaningfully connected with family and friends in Israel more challenging. It's deeper than that. There is a disconnect that I experience, even and especially when I visit Israel and spend time in the communities and around the people with whom I should feel most aligned.

It is the slight disconnect I experienced when I was in Israel for the night of Yom Ha'atzmaut several years ago, and was overwhelmed by the many liturgical elements added to a meaningful and joyous service in my siblings' shul in Raanana. They pulled out all the stops: *shofar*, full *hallel* with a *berakha* (at night!), *yom tov nusah* (prayer arrangement for holidays), and additional recitations on top of what was printed in the Koren Siddur. Not only did I have a hard time following, I felt as if I did not fully belong at this over-the-top religious celebration of statehood.<sup>7</sup>

I experienced a different, albeit related, disconnect when I participated in an exchange between a group of North American Modern Orthodox rabbis and prominent Religious Zionist rabbis from Israel. Many of the Israeli participants were scholars and leaders whom I admire greatly. The goal of the exchange was to discuss remedies for the seemingly ever-widening rift between parts of American Jewry and Israel. Somewhat astonishingly, two of our colleagues from Israel spent a good deal of our time together sharing, with a great deal of pride, how they had never stepped foot outside of Israel. When I noted that this kind of talk was not furthering our stated goal of narrowing the chasm between Israeli and Diaspora Jewry, the chastened rabbis responded that they did not mean it personally; they were just sharing their halakhic view that no Jew is ever allowed to leave *Eretz Yisrael*.

Maybe these moments reflect my own feelings of inadequacy over not having made *aliyah*, but I don't think that insecurity as an American Religious Zionist fully explains what transpired on these occasions. These vignettes highlight a disconnect when it comes to assessing the relative importance of the Israeli and Diaspora Jewish communities more generally, and the alienation experienced by Diaspora Religious Zionists in the face of a "*shelilat ha-golah*/negation of the exile" ideology espoused by our Israeli counterparts.

And so, not being in lockstep with Israel and their Torah readings no longer feels so ill-conceived. The *parasha* gap has begun to resonate with me, a minor misalignment providing metaphoric space for the independent significance and stature of both the Israeli and Diaspora Jewish communities as part of the Jewish nation. Furthermore, this perspective is borne out by the two sixteenth century halakhic sources that justify the post-Pesah *parasha* gap in its two iterations (leap year and non-leap year).

First, some background: the Talmud Bavli in *Megillah* (31b) states that there are two poles for determining placement of *parashiyot* in the Jewish calendar:

It is taught: Rabbi Shimon ben Elazar said: Ezra enacted for the Jewish people that they should read the curses in Leviticus before *Atzeret* (Shavuot) and the curses in Deuteronomy before Rosh Hashanah. What is the reason for this? Abaye said, and some say Reish Lakish: In order that the year may conclude its curses (and the new year begin without the ominous reading of the curses). Granted, with regard to the curses in Deuteronomy, this makes sense: in order that the year may conclude together with its curses (for Rosh Hashanah is the beginning of a new year). However, with regard to the curses in Leviticus, is *Atzeret* (Shavuot) a new year? Yes, indeed, *Atzeret* is also a new year, as we learned (*Rosh Hashanah* 16a): And on *Atzeret*, divine judgment is made concerning the fruit of the trees (indicating that Shavuot also has the status of a new year).

Tosafot (ad loc. s.v. *kelalot*) add that the ideal fulfillment of the requirement to read the portions containing the admonition prior to the "new years" of Shavuot and Rosh Hashanah actually entails reading one additional portion before these holidays, so as to establish a buffer between the curses and the blessed new year. Thus, Tosafot explain, our practice is to read *Bamidbar* prior to Shavuot and *Nitzavim* (or *Nitzavim/Vayelekh*) prior to Rosh Hashanah.

R. Joseph Trani (Maharit, 16th century, Greece) utilizes Tosafot's ruling to answer our question about a leap year scenario such as the one in 2019 (*Shu"t Mahari"t* II, *Orah Hayyim*, 4).<sup>8</sup> Maharit explains that Tosafot's requirement for a one-week *Bamidbar* buffer following the curses is precise; the buffer must be one week and no more:

Just as we do not delay the reading (of *Bamidbar* until after Shavuot), so too we do not advance it and read it two Shabbatot before Shavuot, because then it would not be clear that we are completing the reading of the curses in advance of the "New Year." That is only clear when we read the curses close to the end of the year (and have just one portion in between)... In Israel during a leap year when they read *Aharei Mot* on the seventh day of the Omer, there is no choice but to have two weeks of interposition (*Bamidbar* and *Naso*) between the curses and Shavuot. But outside of Israel, it is appropriate to maintain the usual practice of "*manu ve-atzru*" (the aphoristic shorthand that the portion of the census "*manu*"—*Bamidbar*—be immediately followed by *Atzeret*—Shavuot).

According to Maharit, the residents of Israel are forced to compromise on the ideal *parasha*/calendar cycle during a leap year when Pesah coincides with Shabbat. They have no choice but to read *Naso* before Shavuot. This off-kilter adjustment is not necessary outside of Israel, nor should it be adopted, in Maharit's view.<sup>9</sup> Therefore, we in the Diaspora delay combining the weekly Torah portions and synchronizing with Israel until after Shavuot.<sup>10</sup>

Turning our attention to the non-leap year scenario, Tikkun Yisaschar (R. Yisaschar ben Mordekhai ibn Shoshan, 16th Century, Safed), a work devoted to issues related to the Jewish calendar, addresses the extended gap and the question of why residents of Israel do not separate *parashiyot* right after Pesah. After initially justifying the combining of *Tazria* and *Metzora* to avoid doubling the number of Shabbatot where the Torah reading deals with the distasteful topic of *negaim* (impurities), the author acknowledges that this does not explain why Israel does not split *Aharei Mot* and *Kedoshim* in order to harmonize with the Diaspora sooner. Tikkun Yisaschar therefore explains that a larger value is at stake. The *parasha* gap, in his view, cuts to the very core question of hierarchy between the Jewish communities of Israel and the Diaspora:



If residents of Israel were to split these earlier *parashiyot* to harmonize with residents of the Diaspora it would make the “primary ones” (those living in Israel who observe one day of Yom Tov) dragged along to follow the halakhic practice of the “*benei ha-minhag*” (non-Israeli residents who observe the custom of *yom tov sheni*). It is incorrect to relegate the primary ones to secondary status, and, if we were to separate those earlier *parashiyot*, it would elevate those outside of Israel by making the residents of Israel follow them (*Sefer Ibbur Shanah*, p. 32b).

Because the Jewish community in Israel should never be perceived as an afterthought, Tikkun Yisaschar concludes that the proper practice is for residents of Israel to wait until just before Shavuot (splitting *Behar* and *Behukotai*) to close the gap. In this way, the residents of Israel properly sequence the curses, *Bamidbar*, and Shavuot, without prematurely broadcasting that Israel is getting in line with the Diaspora order of *parashiyot*.

These positions on the weekly Torah readings have broad implications regarding peoplehood, *Medinat Yisrael*, and the relationship between the Jewish communities of the Diaspora and Israel. Maharit’s explanation for Diaspora Jewry to maintain the *parasha* gap in a leap year expresses one critical message about living outside of Israel with religious integrity. As Religious Zionists in the Diaspora, ideal Jewish practices and values should always be promoted, even if that occasionally creates space between, and even tension with, our brothers and sisters in Israel. In a word, the *parasha* gap underscores and fosters the significance of a strong Diaspora Jewish community.

At the same time, Tikkun Yisaschar’s argument for Israel to maintain the gap in a non-leap year must also loom large for Religious Zionists living in the Diaspora. The people and practices of those residing in Israel represent an ideal. We must retain the perspective of Israel’s centrality as the corporate headquarters of the Jewish people, even if at times that creates a disconnect with those of us in the Diaspora. We should not expect or encourage Israel to just follow our lead, even when it comes to the annual cycle of Torah readings.

This *parasha* gap has also brought to the fore my own self-contradictory feelings as a Religious Zionist in America, contradictions that I have come to believe are religiously valid and rooted in halakhic sources. I should feel discomfort—but I should also feel proud.

On the one hand, the disconnect of the post-Pesah *parasha* gap speaks to the anxiety I feel about the life which I have completely slipped into in the Diaspora. I

speak the language of Religious Zionism every time I *daven*, yet I am about to embark on a major expansion project of my shul, a building campaign that concretizes and promotes the permanence of my roots outside of Israel. On the other hand, I should take pride in the accomplishments of our community, and not just because so many of our members and their adult children have made *aliyah* and support worthy causes in Israel. In deepening religious practice and values, unifying a diverse membership and neighborhood, and creating a spiritual and intellectual home for so many people, our *shul* has played a transformational role.

However, beyond the impact of any single *shul*, the perspective that American Jews bring to Jewish identity in the twenty-first century is critical and distinct. Living, and thriving, as a minority in this always great country has taught us to be mindful of the diverse and interconnected world in which we live. This mindfulness is not just about political correctness; it is a religious value. The challenging, multi-faceted nature of the society in which I live, work, and worship ultimately brings me closer to God. These are values that Diaspora Jewry must transmit to the totality of the Jewish people, alongside the spirit of nationalism and singular responsibilities embedded in the enterprise of building the Jewish state, values which Israelis uniquely contribute to Jewish peoplehood.<sup>11</sup>

On Israel's Independence Day that year, I thought about the pre-bar mitzvah boy and his family celebrating their first Yom Ha'atzmaut in Israel as citizens. Less than three weeks from that day, they would celebrate his bar mitzvah on *Parashat Behukotai*. Much to my congregants' relief, numerous authorities rule that a minor may read the Torah for the community in extenuating circumstances such as these. The young man would read *Parashat Behukotai*, a week earlier than anticipated, and across the ocean from the original plan. Although I missed the celebration, I looked forward to catching up with them and the rest of Israel: first, the following week, when we in the Diaspora would read *Parashat Behukotai*; and several months later, when we finally reconnect and harmonize our Torah readings, affirming the interdependence of the Jewish communities of the Diaspora and Israel. This calendrical quirk generates a powerfully symbolic space, one I aspire to fully inhabit on Yom Ha'atzmaut: We may be different, but we do not stand alone.

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<sup>1</sup> This article originally appeared in *The Lehrhaus* in 2019, accessible here: <https://thelehrhaus.com/timely-thoughts/catching-up-to-israel-a-yom-haatzmaut-reflection-on-the-post-pesah-parasha-gap/>. The present article features minor changes.

<sup>2</sup> I want to express thanks to my friend and colleague Simon Fleischer for his many helpful suggestions on an earlier draft, and for his determination to help me personalize this piece. I also want to thank Eitan Cooper, who sparked my initial interest in this subject when he gave a shiur on the topic at Young Israel Ohab Zedek of North Riverdale/Yonkers over Shavuot last year. Eitan directed my attention to an article by Chaim Simons, "The Differences between Torah Reading in Israel and the Diaspora" (Hebrew), accessible at <http://chaimsimons.net/divreichamishah02>. For an in-depth look at the division of the parashiyot more generally, see Sheldon Epstein, Bernard Dickman, and Yonah Wilamowsky, "Parsha Management –

Doubling, Halving, Accuracy,” *Hakirah* 2 (2005): 65-108.

<sup>3</sup> I think I may have written more “*Aliyah Letters*” in the past five years (some 60 plus at last count!) attesting to the Jewishness of congregants than any other rabbi in North America, a distinction which gives me a great deal of pride but is also bittersweet, as Israel’s gain has been our community’s loss.

<sup>4</sup> There were a number of other practices during the medieval period, as attested by the author of the *Kaftor va-Ferah*, and Meiri in his work *Kiryat Sefer*. For exact citations and sources, see here:

<https://docs.google.com/document/d/14O3gbBbfyI2Ac21BVyfaNLWekZ7n115uEBUPnyU3FE8/>.

<sup>5</sup> The following year gave us the third consecutive year with a gap, this time when day two of Shavuot coincided with Shabbat. The Diaspora caught up a few weeks later when they combined *Hukat* and *Balak*. See the Simons article above for further details on this scenario.

<sup>6</sup> Indeed, see Rav Amnon Bazak’s Facebook post (April 28, 2019) on this matter, which proposed that the Chief Rabbinate in Israel and/or religious leaders outside of Israel should unify Torah readings as soon as possible.

<sup>7</sup> For an overview of sources in support of reciting Hallel with a blessing on the night of Yom Ha’atzmaut, see Rav Uri Sharki, “*Ve-emunatekha ba-lelot*: Inquiries regarding saying Hallel on the night of Yom Ha’atzmaut” (Hebrew), accessible at [http://ravsherki.org/index.php?option=com\\_content&view=article&id=521:521521-521&catid=253:253&Itemid=100513](http://ravsherki.org/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=521:521521-521&catid=253:253&Itemid=100513).

<sup>8</sup> Here is the text of the question:

“What is the reason in a leap year, such as this year, when the eighth day of Pesah coincides with Shabbat and those in Israel read *Aharei Mot* on that day and those outside of Israel read it the following week, and what emerges is that we are separated from those in Israel for every Shabbat until *Matot/Masei*? Why don’t we just combine *Aharei Mot* and *Kedoshim*, the Shabbat right after Pesah, like we combine them in all non-leap years?”

<sup>9</sup> Maharit’s explanation highlights a potentially significant historical point. During the Talmudic and Geonic periods when the weekly Torah readings were being determined, the Jews of Babylonia read according to an annual cycle, even while many in Israel continued to follow the triennial cycle. Thus, when the annual Torah reading cycle was originally canonized and practiced according to a fixed calendar in the Diaspora, reading *Naso* before Shavuot was not a possibility. As a result, Maharit maintains that it is ideal for those outside of Israel to retain the original system and tradition of Torah readings, as designed by and for Diaspora Jewry.

The origins and history of the triennial cycle in Israel has been the subject of much scholarly discussion. See, especially, Ezra Fleischer, “Remarks Concerning the Triennial Cycle of the Torah Reading in Eretz Israel,” *Tarbiz* 73:1 (2004): 83-124 (Hebrew); idem., “Annual and Triennial Reading of the Bible in the Old Synagogue,” *Tarbiz* 61:1 (1992): 25-43 (Hebrew); idem., *Eretz-Israel Prayer and Prayer Rituals as Portrayed in the Geniza Documents* (Jerusalem: Magnes, 1988); 293-326 (Hebrew).

<sup>10</sup> See further in Maharit’s responsum for an explanation of why we don’t combine *Hukat* and *Balak*. See also the Simons article for sources attesting to alternative practices to avoid reading *Naso* before Shavuot, including splitting *Ki Tisa* into two *parashiyot*.

<sup>11</sup> For further analysis of the two centers of Jewry, and citations to much of the literature on this subject, see Rabbi Tully Harsztark’s analysis, “Israel, Diaspora, and Religious Zionist Education in America” (2016), published by Machon Siach, SAR High School’s think tank, available at <https://www.machonsiach.org/israeleducation>.

<sup>12</sup> For a brief summary of the issues, see Rabbi Aryeh Leibowitz’s audio shiur, “Ten Minute Halacha – Oops, I Learned the Wrong Bar Mitzvah Parsha” (delivered at Yeshivat Lev Shlomo, April 12, 2016), accessible at <https://www.yutorah.org/lectures/lecture.cfm/774370/rabbi-aryeh-lebowitz/ten-minute-halacha-oops-i-learned-the-wrong-bar-mitzvah-parsha/>. I also want to express my thanks to Rav Yoni Rosensweig who wrote up a comprehensive response to my specific question in the classical form of a responsum, available at <https://docs.google.com/document/d/1kEKlhCY3kPUyuCduoJWhRnKlXS-ACF-19F9I44g43-nc/>.

## Say “Yes” to the Trip

*Rivy Poupko Kletenik*

*Dear Rivy:*

*Though we have been members of a congregation for many years and have led an involved Jewish life, neither my husband nor I have ever been to Israel. Now our daughter wants to go to Israel next year on a high school program. On one hand I am thrilled that she is so connected to Judaism yet on the other I am afraid and conflicted. We have never been there – why should she go? Is it safe? How will it change her? What do you think; is it a good idea?*

*—Concerned Parent*

While I have traveled over twenty times to Israel, spent extended periods of time there and have had children study in Israel in the past, I appreciate your question. It is not a casual deed to send a child to Israel. Given the political landscape, the distance and the simple foreignness of any country abroad, your concerns are compelling. Despite these challenges you probably already suspect that I would strongly advocate travel to Israel, especially for youngsters. I genuinely recognize any parents’ reservations. Here are some of my experiences, beliefs and deeply felt emotions about Israel; perhaps they will help you make peace with your daughter’s plans.

There I was, ten years old; the year was 1968 and we were taking off from Lod Airport headed back to Pittsburgh after a summer family trip to Israel. *Jerusalem of Gold* was playing over the airplane’s intercom and to my youthful consternation, tears were trickling down my cheeks. I was overwhelmed by feelings I could neither identify nor understand. Now I know; I was in love. In love with everything that was Israel; the sand, the soldiers, the holiness, the heat, the astonishing landscapes, the language, falafel and pita, the rush of the people, the proximity to Torah and history, the unbelievable palatable feeling of being home. That was 1968. Some of that has never left me and even though so much has changed dramatically, the romance lingers still.

Subsequent trips, growing up, and deeper knowledge has seasoned and complicated my initial impressions. But this I know: no one travels to Israel and returns the same as when they left. Perhaps this phenomenon reflects the deep primal

connection that we as a people have to the land. From Abraham's ancient journey to the Israelites entry into the land, through the medieval mystical pilgrimages up until the modern *aliyah* movement, our people have sacrificed to make the connection.

Travel for teens is essential to their growth. Being away from home and learning how to cope with the vicissitudes of life without Mom or Dad is a step towards maturity. Laundry, tummy aches, and homesickness are the stuff of growing up and small challenges that are good for the soul. Navigating and negotiating peer relationships is critical and sometimes poses difficult tests. But these can happen anywhere and should be a part of growing into adulthood—so why Israel? Here are my three most compelling reasons why I think study and travel for teens in Israel is meaningful and worthy of your consideration.

Israel is the authentic hands-on classroom. Education for students in Israel is like no where else. You open the Bible and head out to the locales of the action; scenes of Joshua, Deborah, David and Goliath come alive with the reality of standing where they once stood. The land becomes the text as you traipse through the excavated cities from the time of the Mishnah. The Second Commonwealth comes alive as you walk through the Old City of Jerusalem and see Herod's Palace and the Burnt House. Compelling as any of our lessons and classrooms are in America – nothing replaces the realness of being in Israel in the very spots of the action.

Hebrew is the language that connects all Jews. It is the idiom of the Torah, the cadence our prayers, the nuances of our heritage and the vessel of our collective memory. Any Jewish study that one will hope to embark on is profoundly enhanced with knowledge of Hebrew. To truly master the language, one must be given the opportunity to speak it natively – hear it spoken in the everyday sense and thrill in its vibrancy. A teen trip will launch your daughter on a lifelong relationship with the language and equip her with future potential.

Though Israel is a modern, high-tech startup nation—an up-to-date, Burger King, Ikea, Home Depot kind of place—it exudes a spirituality that cannot be missed. The holiness of sacred sites together with cadres of devout penitents creates an ambience of otherworldliness. Once experienced in the Holy Land itself, it cannot be replicated elsewhere. Standing at the Holy Wall in Jerusalem on Friday night is a sight to behold and a feeling to experience. A miscellany of languages sprinkles the air as peoples from the entire world stream through the gates of Jerusalem headed towards prophetic fulfillment of the words of Isaiah – people *are* streaming to the mountain of the Lord!

I am not sure that I have any definitive answer regarding safety, and I am not sure that anyone can provide that sort of comfort. Israel programs take security

more seriously than ever. They plan carefully and spare no costs, but there are no guarantees. I can tell you that our children and thousands of children have studied there – not to mention the hundreds of thousands of Israeli children who live there! Teen programs have an impeccable track record in terms of security and steer away from potentially volatile areas. It is one of those leaps that we as parents inevitably must take as our children leave the shelter of home.

And lastly, this thought. Experiences throughout our lives build upon each other. They become a multilayered rich texture with shades and hues that change over time. Each lesson informs the next. That first trip to Israel becomes the first installment, and hopefully many others will follow. For me, nothing will ever replace that emotional plane ride home in 1968 and the emotions that overwhelmed me then, but others sure have come close.



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