

PERSPECTIVES

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The magazine of
**jewish
futures**



EYLON LEVY

A Clear Voice in the
Media War

OCTOBER 7TH

Special Compilation:
One Year On

HIGH HOLY DAYS

Reflection, Insight,
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DEAR READERS,

Welcome to the 21st edition of *Perspectives Magazine*. As I write into a completely unknown future at a time of great uncertainty and unease—ranging from chaos in the streets of England to escalating tensions with Iran and its proxy armies in the Middle East—I'm acutely aware that we have no control over what the future holds. We live in a fast-paced world, bombarded by a 24-hour news cycle, 30-second reels and endless scrolling, all consumed by our ever-shrinking attention spans.

How fitting, then, that we take this moment to reflect on the past year—especially as we prepare to welcome the New Year and its cycle of High Holy Days, a time inherently meant for introspection, personal accountability and reconnecting with our core values.

Our special section, *A Year On: The Multi-Front War*, seeks to honour the countless facets of this conflict through the telling of a few stories. We spotlight those who put themselves on the line, those who hold down the fort at home, those who have been without a home since this all began and those around the world who are just as much a part of this war. Evacuees, soldiers' wives, university students on campuses and artists fighting with their talents—this is about all of us.

This war has seven physical fronts and an eighth that is global—the media war. In an exclusive interview with Eylon Levy at his new Tel Aviv headquarters, he graciously shared his insights and vision for shaping Israel's narrative and fighting the information war. Another unmissable piece is an interview with Shabbos Kestenbaum,

an unyielding voice in the fight for Jewish students on campus and against the fierce rise of antisemitism in the US and beyond.

Don't miss the stunning and meaningful photo essay by Atara Whitman, bridging words and images to relate our national yearning. Our Food and Culture sections are brimming with rich stories and flavours from around the world that connect us through time and across borders, while the Wellness section offers practical and sustainable solutions to challenges most of us or our families encounter at some point.

Personally, every holiday and piece of liturgy read this year has carried an additional layer of meaning and intentionality, as we, no matter where we are in the world, find ourselves in this existential war. As I consider the High Holy Days ahead, I feel a profound sense of awe in preparing for them. The Introspection section offers articles that provide deep reflection as we prepare ourselves internally to navigate the cycle of these holidays, offering beautiful insights to carry us from Rosh Hashanah all the way through Simchat Torah—when we will dance again.

Wishing all of us a truly sweet new year with all of our loved ones home safely in lasting peace. *Shana Tova*.

Sasha Silber

Sasha Silber has a passion for creativity, demonstrated throughout her career as a professional concert pianist, vocal coach for opera singers and performance coach for Oscar-nominated actors in movies such as *Star Wars* — among other artistic endeavours. A native of New York, she has worked on three continents, speaks several languages and lives in Jerusalem with her husband Daniel and their adorable children.

This is Sasha's fifth edition of *Perspectives* as executive editor.

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Eylon Levy, photo by Menachem Geisinsky

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Image courtesy of Shabbos Kestenbaum



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RABBI

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Eli studied in Talmudic College in Israel, gained rabbinic ordination from the Jerusalem Kollel and earned a BSC in Criminology and Social Psychology. After working at the Jewish Learning Exchange and Hasmonean High School, he joined Aish UK as Director of Young Professionals. Eli now leads community development at Stanmore and Canons Park.



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Darren Cohen, born and raised in Manchester, made Aliyah to Israel in 2014 and served as a combat soldier in the IDF's Nahal Brigade. He currently works as the regional director of intelligence of the Middle East and North Africa division at a private security firm. Darren holds an MA in Conflict Resolution from Tel Aviv University, having completed his BA at King's College London.



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Kayla Haber-Goldstein is a Rebbetzin and interior designer. Early in life, Kayla embarked on a journey discovering the depth of Judaism, and wrote a book called *Questioning the Answers*, now also an organisation that provides a space to find answers about Judaism. Kayla teaches brides and a co-founder of the Vaad L'Inyanei Igum — an organisation that helps *Agunut*.

📧 @questioningtheanswers



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Forest Rain, an American-born branding expert and storyteller, immigrated to Israel at thirteen. After IDF service, she co-directed a project aiding terrorism victims, gaining deep insight into trauma. She shares Israel's profound stories to inspire global support, counter antisemitism and highlight Israel's values and role models.

🌐 inspirationfromzion.com

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Dan has been a member of the Jewish Futures family for 9 years, running the graphics department and leading on creative projects, events and campaigns. Originally an Aish participant back in 2006, Dan has been on quite a journey with the organisation, and he currently serves as Art Director of Jewish Futures and Development Manager of Ta'amim, which he runs alongside his wife, Rivkie.

🌐 wearetaamim.com



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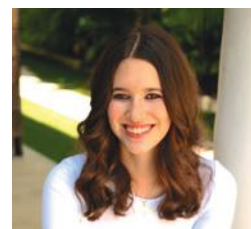
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RABBI

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Alice Reich, a creative writing major and journalism minor at the University of Miami, avidly writes for *The Miami Hurricane*. Her notable article on rising antisemitism on campuses since October 7th highlights her passion. Alice aims to inspire Jewish youth through her articles and future novels.



RABBI

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Rabbi Ari Kayser is the Director of Media for Jewish Futures and Editor-in-Chief of Perspectives magazine. Ari leads a talented team of creatives, producing impactful video content and was instrumental in creating *Maven*, the online courses of Aish UK. Ari relishes the challenge of conveying authentic Jewish teachings in the language of the 21st century, particularly through immersive experiences and travel.



ELLA KENAN

Ella Kenan, a seasoned digital marketer with eight years of experience, previously served as a captain in Israeli intelligence and holds a law and governance degree. She founded BrightMind, now with tens of thousands of members worldwide, dedicated to promoting the Israeli narrative and countering antisemitic content on social media with quick daily efforts.

🌐 did.li/EllaLinks



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RABBI

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Rabbi Naftali Schiff is the founder and CEO of Jewish Futures, a family of educational organisations including JRoots, Gift, Aish, Chazak, Chazon and Shelanu. He read International Relations at the London School of Economics, gained rabbinic ordination from the Jerusalem Rabbinat, a Diploma of Education from the Israeli Ministry of Education and saw active service with the IDF Givati infantry unit.



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Nomi is a double board-certified nutritionist and health and wellness coach who holds an MS in Nutrition and Functional Medicine. Nomi speaks to groups of all ages and stages on topics ranging from holistic health to Jewish identity and connection. She has lived in Jerusalem for the past 19 years with her husband.

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SAHAR TARTAK

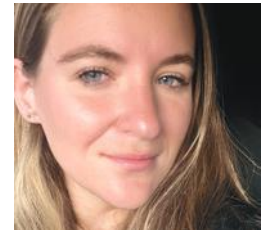
Sahar Tartak is a junior at Yale studying history, origin. Outside of her academic work, she is involved with Jewish life and journalism, serving on the student board of Chabad at Yale and writing for various outlets on campus antisemitism, including *The Wall Street Journal*, *The Free Press* and *Tablet*.

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YISSCA WEISZ

Since studying English Literature at UCL, Yissca has contributed to different publications, including the *Observer* in New York, Jewish history magazine *Segula* in Israel and *Valour Lifestyle* in London. With a keen eye for detail and sensitivity to the pulse around her, Yissca conveys on the page what is experienced within.



ATARA WHITMAN

Born and raised in Jerusalem to American parents, Atara Whitman observes both American and Israeli cultures from a unique perspective. She is a professional photographer, specializing in photographing families visiting Jerusalem and capturing urban Israeli scenes.

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FEATURES

Powerful *Perspectives*

A double-feature of exclusive interviews with Eylon Levy, a key voice in shaping Israel's narrative – and Shabbos Kestenbaum, a fierce opponent of antisemitism. Discover a miraculous Auschwitz survival story, delve into Catherine Perez-Shakdam's exposé on Iran and read about Israel's diplomatic challenges in a sharp geopolitical analysis.

אלה גרסנו
אסתר וייסבדום
דנינה ספירשטיין
רוזה רובינשטיין
חברות השתתפות היהודית באושוויץ
שהועלו לגורדם בכ"א שבט תש"ו



Eylon Levy at the Israeli Citizen Spokespersons' Office at Mindspace Laguardia, Tel Aviv. photo by Menachem Geisinsky

EYLON LEVY:

In His Own Words

Sasha Silber

Eylon Levy filled the room of his new office in Tel Aviv with gracious, friendly and commanding energy in his iconic steel blue tie and deep slate suit. Formerly the most recognizable face of the official spokespeople for Israel from October 7th, 2023, Levy now leads The Israel Citizen Spokespersons' Office, innovating Israel advocacy with clarity and conviction.

It's rare we feature a face on the cover of Perspectives—with some of the exceptions being Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks and Queen Elizabeth II. Having heard that they happen to be some of your favourite people, how have their legacies influenced your tireless efforts in crafting a cohesive and fact-based narrative for Israel on the global stage?

Wow. Rabbi Sacks was – I feel pain in my heart, just saying the word “was” – a profound inspiration. He had an incredible ability to lend intellectual profundity to the Jewish tradition in a way that linked it to the modern world, and engaged with the issues of the real world in modern Britain, the problems facing Israel – and I always loved reading his interpretations of the *parsha* (the weekly Torah portion). The Jewish world is immeasurably richer for him having been in it, and immeasurably poorer that he's no longer in it. If there's one figure out who gets the title of *Gadol Hador*,¹ then it's the late Rabbi Sacks.

And the Queen... You know, I grew up in Britain, and British people will have several recurring dreams. One of them is that I'm Harry Potter. The other was that I'm having tea with the Queen. Growing up, she was one of the rare historical figures who just seemed to transcend history and personify a

country. I never met the Queen, but I always appreciated how fortunate we were to have a figurehead with such grace and dignity and sense of profound duty. That sometimes life throws crises and unpleasant things your way, but you need to chin up, stiff upper lip and plough ahead, because this is what the moment requires. Having our Queen for over 70 years as she was on the throne made a profound mark on the British character – and everyone misses her.

What was your relationship with Israel growing up in London?

My roots in Britain go back to the mid-18th century. I think my great-great-great-great-grandparents were among the first Ashkenazim in Britain. But Jewish history is one of constantly moving across the globe. I was born to Israeli parents, who were originally planning to return to Israel by the time I started school, and life took us in a different direction. We spoke Hebrew at home. My dad had a subscription to *Yediot*, and every weekend, the weekly Hebrew newspaper would arrive on a special flight from El Al. For the most part, I did not go to Jewish schools – I was very much British, always living with one-leg-in, one-leg-out, straddling both worlds and understanding that both places were in a very profound sense, home.

So how did you decide to move to Israel and serve in the IDF?

I wanted to serve in the army when I finished my master's degree, a thought that had been in the back of my mind for a long time. When I graduated from Cambridge, it was now or never, and the decision was pushed ahead by two very important moments in my life.

The first was participating in the March of the Living, Yom HaShoah 2014. I remember standing near the stage, just metres away from the rubble of the gas chambers, wrapped in an

Israeli flag, breaking down during the singing of *Hatikvah*. I realised the decision had been made for me.

The second was the War of 2014. Soon after I got back from Poland, we were dealing with a hostage crisis (then three, rather than 255, including the four that have been held hostage since 2014), rockets from Gaza and an astonishing burst of antisemitism around the world. I tried to fight against it. I set up a Tumblr feed called *The Everyday Antisemitism Project*, where I collected various examples of antisemitism just to keep them in one place. I wrote a column for *The Guardian* about how the obsessive coverage of Israel was fanning the flames of antisemitism – and had my first TV appearance.

Having been abroad during a war, not really disconnected, being intensely part of it, I understood that this was a burden that I have to share, and a fight that I have to be part of. My *Aliyah* (immigration) flight took off when the war was still raging, and landed 20 minutes after the ceasefire went into effect. I went to the enlistment centre the following morning to join the army.

I was the aide-de-camp – the correct military term which sounds better than ‘assistant’ – to a colonel in the COGAT unit. We were basically the point of intersection between the Palestinian Authority, the Israeli government and international organisations. So there were days that would start with a meeting in Ramallah in plain clothes with the Palestinian Authority about Gazan reconstruction. Then we'd go to Jerusalem for meetings with the foreign ministry, back to Tel Aviv for meetings with the Red Cross and then finish the evening with drinks at the Dutch ambassador's house. That was my military service; it was extremely unusual, but as a former politics and Middle East Studies student, it was fascinating to see things behind-the-scenes and the dynamics that are not normally reflected in the media coverage. That was the beginning of the 10-year journey that has brought me to this point.

¹ Great rabbinical leader of a generation

“

International public opinion really matters because it affects the decisions that leaders are able to make, and the military moral and financial power with which we can fight this war

You became one of the most recognizable and influential faces from Israel's team of spokespeople during the first six months of this war. What key insights did you gain about Israel's challenges in the information war, and how did these experiences motivate you to start the Israeli Citizen Spokespersons' Office?

My nearly-six-months at the prime minister's office, working alongside a dedicated team of spokespeople, led me to the conclusion that Israel is losing the information war because it has never truly tried to win it. Ambassador Mark Regev, a direct link to the prime minister,

along with other tireless colleagues like Tal Heinrich and Avi Hyman, led the charge in our communications efforts. Despite our collective efforts, Israelis have, by and large, told themselves, that it doesn't matter what we do, or what we say, because people will always hate us, and the media will always spin things against us. The reason that the interview with Kay Burley on Sky News went viral was that it touched a nerve with Israelis, that sometimes it literally doesn't matter what we do, people will make us out to be the bad guys.

I have learned that, if you make noise, if you try to be everywhere, all the time, all at once – if you make your case loudly, clearly and unapologetically – you can make a difference. There are people who want to support us, they need the words, they need the reassurance and they need to know that there is a case worth fighting for. Israelis have largely convinced themselves that it doesn't matter, but it does. We've been dragged into this war, and I want

to fight it knowing that we have the full support of our allies, and that our enemies are under pressure – not that our leaders are under threat of arrest warrants and sanctions and embargoes while our allies are financing our enemies. It's hard enough to fight this war without this lopsided dynamic. International public opinion really matters because it affects the decisions that leaders are able to make, and the military moral and financial power with which we can fight this war, to bring down Hamas, bring back the hostages, push Hezbollah away and contain Iran.

So when I was forced to leave the prime minister's office, I understood that this was a fight that had to continue from civil society as well. If the government wasn't going to explain Israel well enough to the international media, then we the people would have to do it. The Israeli Citizen Spokespersons' Office is an attempt to build a whole new concept of citizen spokespeople – a team of people who





can put on a suit and tie and essentially hold a press conference to brief the diaspora and answer questions. People want to help Israel, but they feel they don't have the words, the information or know where to look. We want to be the daily address for what you need to know, what's being said about Israel, and here's how to go on the offensive. Here's what slipped under the radar in the news. We want to give our supporters the tools, sound bites and strategic information and messages that they need in order to continue the fight for Israel.

There's a reason that we've chosen the visual language of a suit and tie, standing in front of a flag and a logo, which is that we want to be an authoritative source of information for people who want to know what the Israeli position is. We can take statements from the army, the prime minister's office and other sources, then repackaging it to give people the authoritative information and talking points to go, fight and adapt as they need in their own communities.

The point of the Citizen Spokespersons' Office is to empower our supporters who need help finding the words. People came up to me after briefings and said, I used to watch your interviews with a little notebook and a pen, and took notes on what you were saying – that was how I knew what to say. So we say perfect. You already want to speak. Let me give you the words and let me put them on the tip of your tongue so you can repeat them. I want you to use the phrase "Hezbollah must back off, or Israel will have to push it away." I want you to speak about " Hamas terror dungeons." I want you to talk about "captivity survivors" and not just "released hostages." I want you to talk about Israel fighting for its life against the Iranian regime and its proxy armies on seven fronts, and to be able to give people the frame with which to make this argument in their own communities.

You have a famous bookshelf. What is good literature you would recommend for people to educate themselves?

There are three books I would highly recommend, but currently they're only in Hebrew. Two of them I've translated into English and are awaiting publication. Asaf Asulin's *History of the Jews* focuses on the continuous connection to the Land of Israel, rather than the diaspora story – the Land of Israel, the God of Israel, the language of Israel. There is Dr. Asaf Malach from the Shalem Center, whose fascinating book *From the Hebrew Bible to the Jewish State: The History of Jewish Nationalism* shows how the core belief in Jewish statehood and sovereignty has been a persistent thread in Jewish history, far from being a modern imitation of European nationalisms. Amotz Asa-El's book *The Jewish March of Folly* takes a political analyst's lens to the stories of Kings, Judges and Josephus, and asks: what were the political dynamics between the lines, and why did the Jews keep walking into disaster after disaster? Yes, it's true, we were the victims of predations by more powerful empires. But every time things started going well for the Jews, they ruined it for themselves.

So how do we get out of the cycle?

First of all, by understanding that there is a cycle. Asa-El writes in his book that every American student learns about the American Civil War, but neither in Jewish day schools around the world nor in Israel do students learn about the Jewish civil wars. Jewish history is not a story of unified kingdoms interrupted only by external invasions; even during periods of sovereignty, infighting and tribalism were common.

That's the default mode of Jewish history – the one we need to transcend now. The biggest challenge after this war will be the dynamics from before – when Israeli society seemed to be fraying, really in a downward death spiral. There is no silver lining, full stop, to this horrific war and tragedy. I hope, at least, that it does shake people out of a sense of complacency and understand how fragile sovereignty is and how important national unity is and responsibility, and that we just don't have the luxury of slipping into the default mode of infighting. The enemies are at the gates and they're knocking them down.

How is that relevant to those that are not actually living in Israel?

First of all, they have to understand the extent of the threat to us and that they have a role to play. Global war has been declared on the Jewish people. The State of Israel is under attack on eight fronts– Gaza, Judea and Samaria, Lebanon, Yemen, Syria, Iraq, Iran itself and the diaspora. We do not have the luxury of not picking a side or saying, "We're both pro-Israel and pro-Palestinian. We're somewhere in the middle. We don't have a horse in this race."

You *have* a horse in this race. You *are* the horse. You are a party to this war that has been declared on you. And the question is, are you going to try to cower and find comfort in not answering them, or are you going to fight for your people's survival?

Then the question comes up, to what extent should you criticise the Israeli government? Should you present a united front? When people ask, "do we need to show Israel some tough love?" First of all, show it love. Only criticise when it's from a place of *us* – don't just snipe from the sidelines while you're protected from having to make the impossible choices that people in this country are forced to make.

That's actually really good relationship advice! So how do we stay calm, keep our morale up and maintain a clear perspective in the face of all of the hostility?

The most painful thing about the moment that we are experiencing now is not specifically the hatred. It's the nefarious campaign to make people doubt themselves, their morality, their humanity and their sanity, and to gaslight people out of speaking up for Israel because they are convinced that they're crazy. *Look, the whole world is against you. Is it possible that everyone is wrong if only you are right?*

First of all, no, the whole world is not against us, and we are not alone. The Jewish concept of justice has always been about standing up to the mob and saying, "you're wrong", and to know that sometimes even if the majority has fallen for whatever the cult or fad of the day is, you have to stand tall and firm for the truth and hold your ground.

They will get under your skin and make you doubt yourself, but if you know your facts and you know why you are right, it will make it easier not to let them get you out of your comfort zone because you won't feel ruffled. You'll know what you're supposed to say, instead of letting them convince you that you're crazy.

So I could say, do breathing exercises – but it really comes down to knowing your stuff.



Reporting from Gaza.
Autumn, 2023. Photo by
Noam Galai/Getty Images.
Courtesy of Eylon Levy

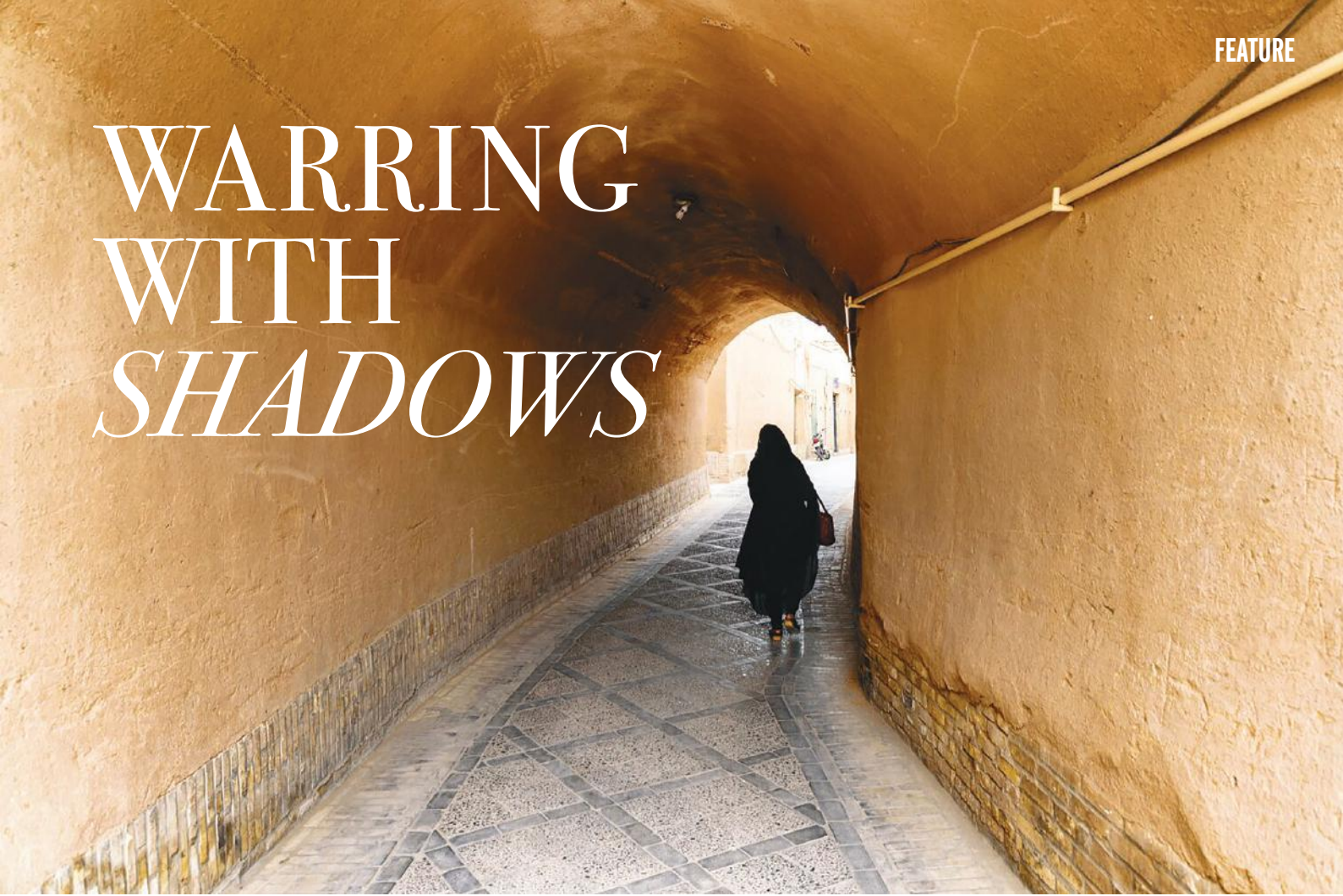
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The Jewish concept of justice has always been about standing up to the mob and saying, "you're wrong", and to know that sometimes even if the majority has fallen for whatever the cult or fad of the day is, you have to stand tall and firm for the truth and hold your ground

Giving a speech entitled "Fight for the Living Buried Alive" at the 100-Day Israel Rally on 14 January 2024 in Trafalgar Square, London. Photo by Omri Dagan. Courtesy of Eylon Levy



WARRING WITH SHADOWS



An infiltrator's exposé of Iran's spiritual and ideological war on Jews

Catherine Perez-Shakdam

DISCLAIMER:

The views expressed in this article are that of the author and do not necessarily express the views of Jewish Futures. This article was written on 5 July 2024 and is therefore reflective of events up to this date.

In the labyrinthine world of geopolitics, where ideologies clash and power struggles manifest in the most gruesome of spectacles, there exists a profound spiritual dimension that often goes unexamined. The Islamic Republic of Iran's relationship with the State of Israel and the Jewish diaspora is one such dynamic, steeped in a spiritual and ideological zeal that demands scrutiny.

During a rare and unsettling meeting with Iran's Supreme Leader, Ali Khamenei, back in 2017, I was struck by the chilling clarity of his intentions. His words—"we seek to destroy the sons and daughters of Jacob"—revealed a sinister aim not just to destroy Jews physically, but to sever the divine covenant

between God and Israel. My journey into the heart of Iran's regime began with a complex infiltration that exposed me to the regime's core ideologies and strategies. Detailed in my account "The Mossad Agent Who Never Was: Inside Iran's Regime", I navigated the corridors of power under the guise of an academic and researcher, unravelling the depths of Iran's state-sponsored antisemitism and its broader geopolitical ambitions.

Whilst there, I gained unprecedented access to its inner circles, offering a rare glimpse into the radical ideologies driving the regime's policies. These revelations weren't mere abstractions; they emerged from firsthand encounters, underscoring the perilous trajectory Iran's leadership is charting, especially against Israel and the Jewish people. My role was not for personal gain but a dire warning to others. In Tehran's shadowy political landscape, my survival depended on a flawless concealment of identity, with exposure meaning far more than just expulsion—it was a matter of life and death.

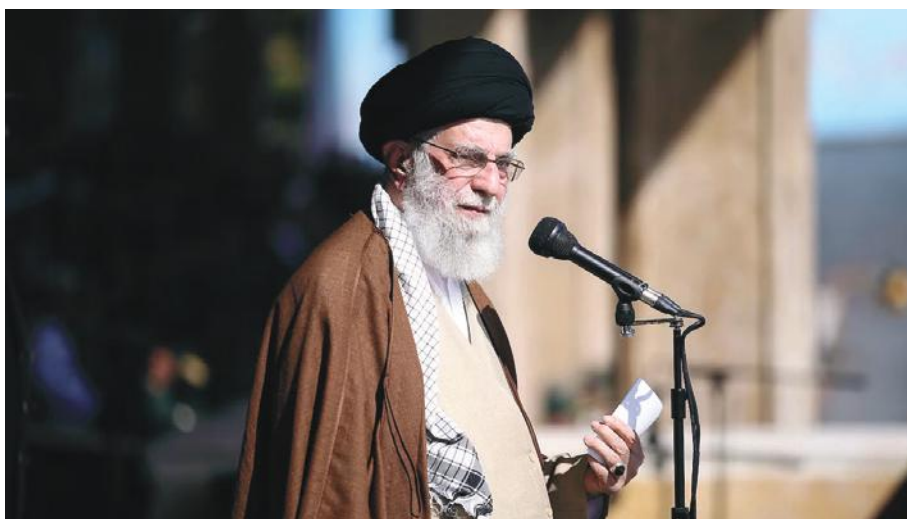
This essay offers my reflections based on my experiences at the heart of the Islamic Republic, unmasking the regime's destructive ambitions and urging Jews worldwide to recognise and respond to the existential threat they face.

Iran's genocidal agenda against Jews extends beyond the borders of Israel, casting a long

shadow over Jewish communities worldwide. The regime's fervour is rooted in a deep-seated hatred for what Jews represent: a covenantal relationship with the Divine, a beacon of moral law and a symbol of resilience against tyranny. This spiritual animosity is not new; it echoes the ancient enmities that have periodically erupted throughout history. However, the Islamic Republic of Iran has managed to harness this age-old hatred and weaponise it in unprecedented ways.

Central to the regime's strategy is its manipulation of the Palestinian cause. By championing the plight of Palestinians, Tehran has positioned itself as a defender of Muslim rights against what it portrays as "Zionist oppression". This clever ruse serves multiple purposes: it garners support from the Muslim world, diverts attention from Iran's own repressive practices and amplifies antisemitism under the guise of anti-Zionism. The regime's ideologues have adeptly leveraged the Palestinian struggle, transforming it into a vehicle for their broader geopolitical and theological ambitions.

This manipulation extends to a quasi-hypnotic influence over the Middle East, and now, alarmingly, the West. Through a relentless propaganda campaign, Iran has co-opted various communities into believing a pernicious lie—that liberation and freedom require the destruction of the Jewish people.



This narrative of liberation through annihilation is not merely a political strategy but a profound inversion of values, a grotesque parody of justice.

Iran's fiery rhetoric and actions are not confined to inflammatory speeches and militant support; they manifest in systematic attempts to delegitimise and dehumanise Jews globally. By fostering an environment where antisemitism can flourish, Iran seeks to create a world in which the Jewish state is isolated and Jewish communities are vulnerable. This is evident in their backing of militant proxies like Hezbollah and Hamas, groups that openly call for the destruction of Israel and have a history of perpetrating violence against Jews.

The other side

The ideological framework of the Islamic Republic is antithetical to the principles of Judaism. While Judaism celebrates life, sanctity and the moral imperatives of justice and mercy, Iran's theocratic regime glorifies martyrdom, death and an apocalyptic vision of divine justice that is fundamentally despondent. This cult of death, masquerading as the ultimate expression of piety, is in truth a negation of the divine light that Judaism seeks to illuminate in the world.

The spiritual war that the Islamic Republic of Iran wages against Jews is not merely a battle

for territory or political dominance; it is a cosmic struggle between life-affirming values and a worldview that venerates destruction. The regime's agenda is nothing short of genocidal, aiming to eradicate not only a people but also the very covenantal relationship that defines their existence. This war transcends the tangible; it is a battle for the soul of humanity.

October 7 was a macabre display of this genocidal agenda. Hamas' systematic targeting of women and girls, the atrocious ferocity of their attacks, was not a simple exercise in revenge but an expression of a deep-seated desire to defile Jewish women as they guarantee the continuation of the Jewish line—the vessel within which light is forever renewed and expressed. We cannot speak of October 7 without attesting to this dimension of the conflict. If we fail to see the dark design of the regime, we may be forced to endure such painful ordeals again—Hamas leaders have already expressed their desire to make it so.

Kabbalistic teachings describe evil in several profound ways, referring to it as the "*Sitra Achra*" (the Other Side) and "*klipot*" (husks or shells), representing forces of impurity and negativity that obscure the divine light. The Islamic Republic's actions, cloaked in the language of divine mission, are the epitome of

these Kabbalistic concepts. They represent an inversion of the values that Judaism upholds.

Until we acknowledge the spiritual dimension of this fight, we are condemned to prolong it. Unless we learn to name the evil we wrestle against, we won't be able to bring it down. Jewish tradition teaches us that understanding the nature of our adversary is crucial to overcoming it. As my grandfather, a Holocaust Survivor, so often used to say, "in order to fight one's enemy one needs to give it its proper name."

The Holocaust sought the physical destruction of the Jewish people; the Ayatollahs' ambition is to disconnect our ties with the Divine. This war against Israel is actually a war against God—a rebellion akin to that of Pharaoh, who saw himself as divine.

As we navigate the treacherous waters of modern geopolitics, let us not lose sight of the deeper, spiritual battle that underpins it. To confront the Islamic Republic of Iran, we must muster not only our political and military resources but also our moral and spiritual fortitude. Only by doing so can we hope to preserve the covenant and ensure the survival of the values that make us truly human.

The spiritual dimension of antisemitism

The battle waged by the Islamic Republic against Israel and the Jewish diaspora is fundamentally spiritual. Antisemitism, that ancient and insidious poison, thrives on this perceived threat, seeking to dismantle the very values and beliefs that form the bedrock of Jewish identity.

Khamenei's chilling admission underscores the spiritual warfare in which Iran is engaged. By aiming to destroy the "sons and daughters of Jacob," the regime targets the very foundation of Jewish faith and continuity. Iran's regime seeks to erase not only the biological line of the Jewish people but also to annihilate the source of its spiritual traditions, its ethos and its collective memory. By targeting the cultural and spiritual foundations of these communities, Iran's leadership aims to sever the connections that bind past, present and future generations. This is an assault on the very concept of identity, intending to create a world devoid of the values that have underpinned human dignity and societal progress.

The resurgence of the blood libel, that mediaeval calumny, exemplifies the depths of this spiritual and ideological conflict. This grotesque myth, which accuses Jews of using the blood of innocents for ritual purposes, has been revived and repurposed by the Islamic Republic to vilify Israel and the Jewish people. This pernicious accusation, adapted to the modern political landscape, is used to paint Jews

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This war transcends the tangible; it is a battle for the soul of humanity

as inherently evil and corrupt.

Recent claims by Iranian propagandists suggest that Israel's efforts to secure the return of hostages are an injustice to Palestinians. This twisted narrative defines acts of self-defence and humanitarian concern as evidence of Jewish malevolence. By framing Israel's legitimate security measures and humanitarian efforts as proof of corruption, the Iranian regime employs a classic tactic of projection. They accuse their enemies of the very atrocities they themselves are willing to commit, thereby ensnaring the unwary and the gullible in a web of deceit.

This projection is not merely rhetorical; it serves a strategic purpose. By casting Jews as bloodthirsty aggressors, the Islamic Republic seeks to dehumanise them, making it easier to justify acts of violence and oppression against them. This dehumanisation process is crucial for maintaining internal cohesion and external aggression within the regime's ideological framework, as it creates a scapegoat for the regime's failures and a rallying point for its supporters.

Moreover, the weaponisation of victimhood is a grotesque and macabre fascist play that the Iranian regime has mastered. By positioning themselves as the ultimate victims of Western and Zionist conspiracies, they deflect criticism and garner sympathy from those who view anti-imperialism and anti-colonialism as paramount values. This strategy has ensnared many in the West, who, for fear of being labelled racist or Islamophobic, become architects of their own oppression. They silence themselves and others, reinforcing the very structures of control and

repression that the Iranian regime relies upon.

The Islamic Republic's focus on the Palestinian cause has been a central tenet of its foreign policy, not out of genuine concern for Palestinian rights, but as a means to amplify antisemitism and galvanise support for its broader geopolitical ambitions. The plight of the Palestinians has been co-opted as a tool to foster hatred against Jews, portraying their liberation as inherently tied to the destruction of the Jewish state. This narrative has a quasi-hypnotic hold over many in the Middle East and increasingly in the West, where communities have been duped into believing that true liberation and freedom necessitate the complete erasure of the Jewish people.

The challenge for the global Jewish community and its allies is to recognise and counter this existential threat, understanding that the battle is as much about preserving a way of life and a spiritual legacy as it is about physical survival.

Iran's ideological framework glorifies martyrdom and death, contrasting sharply with the Jewish emphasis on life and its sanctity. This inversion of values manifests in the regime's support for terrorist organisations like Hamas and Hezbollah, which use violence and terror as tools of resistance and power. The veneration of suicide bombers and the celebration of death as a path to divine favour are stark reminders of this perverse ideology.

In contrast, Judaism's reverence for life is reflected in its laws, traditions and ethical teachings. The Talmudic principle of *pikuach nefesh*—the obligation to save a life—illustrates the paramount importance of life in Jewish thought. This fundamental divergence in values highlights the spiritual chasm between the Islamic Republic's ideology and the principles upheld by Judaism, its injunctions are our best weapons in this great war.

The broader implications of this struggle

are clear: the values that have shaped western civilisation are rooted in Jewish teachings. The Islamic Republic's war against Jews, therefore, is a war against these fundamental values.

The urgent need for awareness and action

In the current struggle against the darkness represented by the Islamic Republic of Iran, we must muster a resolve and moral clarity that is unwavering. Jewish texts and traditions offer profound insights into confronting evil. The Torah and the Talmud are replete with exhortations to stand firm against wickedness. In the Book of Deuteronomy, we are reminded that when facing an enemy, we should not be afraid because God is with us.¹ This passage underscores the necessity of courage and the divine support that bolsters us in the face of formidable foes.

We learn from our Sages in a Talmudic discussion that mercy and compassion are virtues to be extended towards those who seek peace and righteousness, not towards those who embody and perpetuate evil. Extending mercy to the wicked is seen as a distortion of divine justice and an abrogation of our moral duty. As Rabbi Eliezer ben Hyrcanus states, “Anyone who becomes merciful upon the cruel one will end by being cruel to the merciful.”²

In another tractate of the Talmud, we find the principle of *Din Rodef*, (the Law of the Pursuer) which permits preemptive action against someone who is pursuing you with the intent to kill.³ This concept underlines the imperative of self-defence and the protection of innocent lives. It is a stark reminder that in the face of existential threats, decisive action is not only justified but required.

Judaism emphasises the importance of confronting evil. The texts assert that one must actively pursue justice and eradicate wickedness from the world. This pursuit of justice is not passive; it requires active engagement and, at times, the use of force to ensure that righteousness prevails.

In this struggle, we must reclaim the narrative. The weaponisation of victimhood by the Iranian regime and its proxies is a grotesque inversion of justice. By portraying themselves as defenders of the oppressed, they mask their own oppressive actions and manipulate global perceptions. We must expose this deceit and affirm the true nature of their agenda.

The battle we face transcends the physical realm. It is a spiritual war, a confrontation between light and darkness. Our resolve must be unbreakable, our moral clarity undimmed. When we stand firm against the forces of evil, we honour the covenant that binds us to the divine and ensure the preservation of a just and righteous world.



Read Catherine's account "*The Mossad Agent Who Never Was: Inside Iran's Regime*"

Image courtesy of Catherine Perez-Shakdam

¹ Deuteronomy 20:1-4 ² Midrash Tanchuma, Metzora 1 ³ Sanhedrin 73a



*Image courtesy of
Shabbos Kestenbaum*

Standing Up and Speaking Out: SHABBOS KESTENBAUM

Rabbi Dr. Effie Kleinberg

I had the distinct privilege of sitting down with Shabbos Kestenbaum for an exclusive conversation about his passionate activism on behalf of Jewish students on campus since October 7th and his lawsuit against Harvard University. Shabbos recently graduated from Harvard Divinity School, studying religion and public policy. He has been a vocal advocate against antisemitism, particularly highlighting the systemic issues at Harvard. His lawsuit alleges gross violations of Title VI of the Civil Rights Act and a breach of contract, citing the university's failure to address pervasive antisemitism on campus.

During our conversation, Shabbos shared how he and his classmates initially tried to collaborate with Harvard to create safe spaces for Jewish students. However, they found that the university was either unwilling or unable to take their concerns seriously, prompting the need for legal action. This lawsuit, filed in January, underscores the severe and hostile environment Jewish students have faced, particularly since the outbreak of this war.

At the Forum for Jewish Leadership, we build immersive educational experiences focused on cultivating future leaders of Jewish communities around the globe. Participants of our 2024 programs are returning to their respective campuses with renewed Jewish pride and the tools to stand up to the challenges they have been facing. This mission aligns closely with the values that Shabbos embodies in his activism, providing a crucial support network for students navigating these difficult times.

This interview was conducted 26th June, 2024.

Was there anything in your upbringing or family background that helped shape and motivate your passion for activism?

I grew up in an Orthodox household and community; I'm actually a first generation American. My dad started the first auction house in America that specialised in rare Judaica. Every single wall of my house was covered in 17th and 18th century holy and rare books. I grew up with an appreciation and awareness of Jewish history, and in particular for the Holocaust, which I always found, even at a young age, to be a total rupture of Jewish history. I always wanted to go to Poland. My parents said, "Wait till you're 18." At 18 I went, and I've been back twenty-five times. I'm actually going tomorrow night. I had a deep appreciation again, not just for Jewish history, but also an awareness of the shadow of the Holocaust. I think, subconsciously, that probably motivated my personal desire after October 7th to just speak out about what I saw was a critical moment in Jewish American history, whereby, yes – there's always been anti-semitism, there have always been high profile incidents – but never on such a national level, never as pervasive and systemic as it is now, and it felt obvious that I would speak out. To my surprise, people listened.

I received a bit of a platform, which I was not anticipating. That was sort of an added bonus. I spoke out because, for me, I didn't see any other option. I will add that when Russia invaded Ukraine in February of 2022, within a month, I bought a one-way ticket to Poland, and I was shuttling Ukrainian refugees across the border. When I first found out about the Uyghurs, (an ethnic Muslim minority in China who were being detained and sent to education centres), I started rallies of Jewish solidarity with Uyghurs outside of the United Nations to call attention to their plight. That's not me saying how heroic and brave I am, it's more of just me realising that,

"in a place where there are no leaders, try to be a leader" (Pirkei Avot 2:5).

Has being visibly Orthodox made you think twice about your activism? Has it intimidated you or hindered you in terms of what you could say?

No, because being Orthodox is a core part of my identity. Why would I conceal something that is so essential to who I am? It never once crossed my mind that I would take off my *kippah*, in the same way that it never once crossed my mind to take off my trousers! In fact, I actually bought a bigger *kippah* after October 7th! In no way did I ever consider hiding, concealing or making excuses for my identity. That's one of the very few things I brag about after October 7th.

Are you a known entity on Harvard's campus?

I would say, everyone knows who I am. In fact, there was actually a fake magazine called the *Genocide Times* that Harvard students published, and they called Zionists "dogs" and "cry-babies". I'm pretty notorious among Harvard students. They're not big fans of mine. But I think I'm paraphrasing and butchering Winston Churchill's line: If these people are my enemies, I'm clearly doing the right thing –you know? I like the fact that the people who call for the genocide of Jewish people don't like me very much – that's okay in my book.

As an observant Jew who is politically progressive, how do you reconcile your political views with your pro-Israel stance?



Shabbos Kestenbaum speaking during the third day of the 2024 Republican National Convention in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, on 17 July 2024. Photo by Chip Somodevilla/Getty Images

In terms of being a progressive, that has become increasingly complicated. I have two answers: I don't base my Judaism on my politics. I base my politics on my Judaism, and for whatever reason, my interpretation of the written and oral tradition is one that is progressive, that believes in universal health care, progressive taxation and environmental sustainability. If we're being honest, I'm actually unclear as to why more people don't have that interpretation.

In terms of the Israel part, the answer is not to abandon the Ivy Leagues. My classmates yell, "Zionists off our campus!" There is a dangerous element within the Democratic Party that doesn't want people like me there. Why would I acquiesce and give them what they want? I plan on going to the Democratic Convention this summer; I plan on having my American flag and my Israeli flag, and I'm going to force them to contend with the fact that there are people like me who exist in their party, and we are not going anywhere.

Can you walk me through your thought process of staying at Harvard versus making a statement and leaving?

I could definitely talk about why I chose to

stay. After October 7th, I bought a one-way ticket to Israel; I have family there, and I felt like I wanted to help. I also felt like I couldn't spend one more day at Harvard. I spent a week in Israel digging graves for fallen soldiers, playing guitar at hospitals – just doing whatever I could. I didn't want to go back at all. But I didn't feel like there were enough people at Harvard speaking out for the Jewish community, so again, "in a place where there are no leaders, try to be a leader." I figured that I had an obligation to myself, and certainly to the history of the Jewish people to not allow our story to be defined by our aggressors, and I decided that I had to go back. I didn't see it as a choice, and I'm glad that I did stay at Harvard. It was obviously very difficult. We couldn't let them write this narrative and claim an important American institution as their own.

What would you say to students who are on campus now facing those environments? Should they leave or should they fight back?

If someone's safety is in question, then that is the priority. If they feel that they're physically, or even emotionally or religiously unsafe,

I'm not going to tell them to leave, but they should put their safety first, and if that entails dropping or transferring out or taking a leave of absence, then that's what they should do. But once you pass step one, and you've acknowledged that you're going to stay, then, yes. We need fighters! We need people who are going to take on our ideological opponents. We need people to be visibly and proudly Jewish. The best thing you can do if you're in a classroom, raise your hand and tell the professor, or the classmates why what they just said is either factually untrue, dangerously antisemitic or why it's religiously bigoted. You have to speak out. It's easier said than done; I get that. But if we are simply passive at this pivotal moment in Jewish history, then history will not look too kindly on what we did.

What are you hoping is actually going to happen in the lawsuit you filed against Harvard?

We filed the lawsuit because we believe we have legal merits. We believe that Harvard has grossly violated Title VI of the Civil Rights Act. They have grossly violated their contractual obligations to their Jewish students, and we are confident in the legal

process to work this out. In addition, we are aware of the historical nature that this lawsuit represents for Harvard, as an American institution, which once had official quotas on the amount of Jews admitted in the country. We are cognizant that this gives the voice for many who have historically been on the receiving end of hatred, bigotry and discrimination.

What are you expecting to see on campuses in the upcoming academic term, and how can students prepare themselves accordingly?

The anti-Israel caucus at Harvard has made it explicitly clear that they've only just begun, coupled with peckless leadership at the top that has refused to enforce policy, enact disciplinary responses and has refused to showcase that they respect and cherish their Jewish students. I fully expect tensions to escalate, and for there to be active physical violence. I actually remember when people would ask me at the end of autumn term of

last year, "Oh, you know, how will the spring term look? It'll get better, right?" Obviously the spring term only got worse. What students can do is be armed with the facts. Be an educated, informed, knowledgeable student, and also be armed with the solace or the comfort knowing that there is a much broader community, both Jewish and gentile that support you, and want to be a resource for you.

Can you share a message to Jewish students who are struggling to maintain their Jewish identity without fear or embarrassment?

There has never been a better time to be visibly and proudly Jewish. You have nothing to apologise for, and no one to apologise to. It's like the Charles Dickens line, "It was the best of times, and it was the worst of times". It's certainly the worst of times, but out of this pain and out of this tragedy will come goodness and hope, and I personally have been strengthened by seeing other Jews who have reconnected to their Jewish identity since October 7th. I would encourage all

Jewish students to tap into that spiritual energy because they will be gratified. I can certainly assure them of that.

Should aspiring Ivy League applicants decide now to apply elsewhere?

If you are willing to stand up, be counted, be a part of the Jewish community and fight back, then absolutely, you should go to that school. Our lawsuit alleges that we've had diminished educational opportunities. We need strong leaders. We need people to amplify their voices. We need the Jewish community to be visible, and if you can contribute to that, great!

Now that you've graduated, what can you tell us about your next steps?

I am aiming for a career in politics. I want to be an advocate for the Jewish community and use the political process to do that. I definitely have been fortunate to be given a platform, and I want to continue to use it for good. As the Spider-Man line goes, "With great power comes great responsibility!"



Shabbos Kestenbaum (left) speaks on Fox Business about his lawsuit against Harvard over antisemitism, (right) stands with an American flag on the Harvard steps, and (bottom) addresses a rally defending Jewish student rights. Images courtesy of Shabbos Kestenbaum.



*Rabbi Naftali Schiff (left)
interviews Herschel Herskovic (right)*

Never Again, Always Again

The unbroken circle of Jewish resilience

Rabbi Nafali Schiff

“The end is nigh” – a hackneyed aphorism that sadly has resonated closer to home this year for many; certainly more so than ever before in recent times. It all began on October 7th when another ominous phrase seemed to be tragically laid bare for its empty promise – that of “Never Again.” No more...

Yet, precisely from that day, October 7th, Simchat Torah, I would like to share a couple of testimonies and sentiments from both our recent and not-so-distant history, that ironically provide us with exactly the opposite; a sense of continuity, faith and hope in our collective future.

Simchat Torah is indeed the end, but it has also simultaneously always been the beginning. The completion of the yearly cycle of Torah readings is marked by joyous dancing in synagogues, the world over, from time immemorial. As soon as we end, we immediately begin the annual series of Torah study once again with a fresh and newly invigorated start. The swirling circles intertwining dance and melody in ever deeper spiritual ecstasy are the hallmark of Simchat Torah as Jews young and old express their deep connection with the gift of Torah.

Embedded in our national psyche is the concept that we never reach the end. Every Jewish end marks a fresh beginning. We dance in circles. A circle has no beginning; no end. We are constantly starting anew. For the Jewish People there is no ‘never’, there is always ‘again’. We always believe we can dance, we can sing, we shall plant, we shall grow, we shall flourish again.

Along my travels interviewing hundreds of Holocaust survivors over the past 20 years, I have met many remarkable people and became a vicarious witness to numerous incredible

events and resounding acts of both Jewish heroism and of indomitable faith and resilience. Among the most memorable were the survivors who shared with me their firsthand accounts of the Simchat Torah of 1944, recounting events they lived through eighty years ago.

I remember my first interview with renowned survivor, Yosef Friedenson, in New York. He recounted how, on Simchat Torah, the Nazi forman in the forced labour factory returned to the shop floor to find himself and his teenage friends, in the midst of the drudgery, having the strength and courage to sing songs of joy appropriate to the particular festive day. He demanded to know what the Hebrew words meant. Yosef related how one of the boys told him that it was a song sung on Simchat Torah in honour of our Eternal Nation and God. The German turned to the first boy and asked him, “*Glaubst du?*” Do you believe this? You still believe that your God is around? “*Ja, ich glaube!*” “Yes, I believe!” Then he turned to the next boy, “*Glaubst du?*” “*Ja, ich glaube!*” He went round each boy one by one asking them if, after having seen such despair, destruction and degradation of the Jewish People, any of them still believed the liturgy they were singing. Every single boy answered- “*Ja, ich glaube!*” I believe. The Nazi was astounded and simply said, “*Das ist ein unglaubliches Volk*” - this is an incredible people! He understood that there is something deep in the psyche of the Jew that creates a resilience and a sense of hope that can carry even teenagers incarcerated in a hell on earth, through the darkest of times.

Toby (Toivi) Blatt, a survivor from Ishbitz, was one of only a handful of teenage survivors of the heroic escape from Sobibor in October, 1943, and one of the producers of a film bearing that same name. We were privileged to avail him the opportunity to lead a number

of JRoots trips to Poland and speaker tours to England. I vividly recall the consternation he still harboured around a group of observant Jews who stood praying as the famed escape from the concentration camp began. Sixty years later, he joined us for a Shabbat meal at our home with a group of students. After I recited the *Kiddush* (sanctification recited over wine) he told me that this was the first time since before the Holocaust that he experienced a Jewish Friday night. On the very last occasion, Toby was able to journey with us to Poland; he stood with our group on the site of the parade ground and reminisced about those Jews who stood and prayed. He emotionally shared with us that perhaps it had taken him seventy years to appreciate those prayers of hope, faith and belief in a purpose. In Toby's memoir *Sobibor*, he recalls that the covert plans for the great escape were hatched on October 7th, 1943!

Fast forward a few decades. There was one day in the year when even the most distant of Jews brainwashed against religion by the Communist system, would bravely turn up at the Great Choral Synagogue on Archopova Street, Moscow, during the dark years of persecution and oppression imprisoned as they were, behind the Iron Curtain. Yes, that day was Simchat Torah, the day of dancing with the Torah. A day of hope. A day of rejoicing in the end, which is also the beginning.

I recently visited Yad Vashem. The stark red granite sculpture by Yosef Salomon commemorating the uprising of the four condemned Sonderkommando heroines who smuggled dynamite to blow up Crematoria 3 in Auschwitz Birkenau caught my eye. That unimaginable act of heroism took place on October 7th, 1944!

Last month I interviewed Avigdor Neumann, a nonagenarian Auschwitz survivor at his



Chaim Schwimmer



Avigdor Neumann



Herschel Herskovic



Yaakov Yosef Weiss

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If I hadn't met these people personally, listened to their eyewitness accounts, recorded them for future generations and felt the power of belief regained, life reborn, families and communities rebuilt, I don't know if I would have believed such accounts myself

home in Netanya. He related how he was amongst the few hundred Hungarian teenage boys selected to be taken to the gas chambers the day after that October 7th event. The day they were led to their intended slaughter was Simchat Torah, 1944. As his group approached the gas chambers they passed another group of fifty boys coming in the other direction. Their guards told Avigdor's group to turn around. They survived that day and some persevered through the subsequent Death Marches and torture to relate their story.

I have been privileged to interview five of those fifty boys who were miraculously plucked out of the gas chambers in Birkenau on Simchat Torah 1944. Their story is amongst the most incredible I have heard. I heard it in detail and firsthand from those who were there 80 years

ago and lived to pass it on to us:

It was Simchat Torah 1944. They had been selected by the infamous Dr. Josef Mengele on the previous day. Overnight they were incarcerated in the barracks of those condemned to the next day's consignment for the gas chambers. Each palpably related to me the scene of three hundred boys weeping, praying, swaying between despair and hope in the heat of the barracks of those who knew that their end was nigh.

Yaakov Yosef Weiss, Yisrael Taub, Chaim Shwimmer, Wolf Grunwald and Hershel Herskovic were amongst about three hundred teenage boys taken to the gas chambers, ordered to strip naked and enter the chamber of death. Yaakov Yosef Weiss told me that as a teenage boy, he personally remembered a passage from

the Talmud discussing the murder of Jews by the Romans 2000 years ago that advises a Jew not to witness the death of another Jew. As a result, he therefore chose to step into the gas chamber at the head of the line of malnourished, naked, despairing Jewish boys. Hershel Herskovic related how he told his cousin Chaim not to give up hope citing another Talmudic dictum, "even if the sword of death is upon your neck, do not desist from hoping for mercy." As far as historians know, this was the only such instance throughout the working history of the gas chambers at Auschwitz when, at the last moment, a group of Nazis conducted a further selection, grabbing fifty of those boys out of certain death by the Zyklon B gas.

I interviewed them across three continents over a period of 15 years, in addition to other

eyewitnesses to the event who were there at the same time. David Leitner, Yosef Kleinamn and Avigdor Neumann each corroborated this miraculous event.

I asked Yaakov Yosef Weiss what happened next. He said he heard the Nazi officer explicitly giving the order to remove the fifty, and that the rest would go straight to ovens. The group of fifty boys destined to live were ordered to get dressed again and led back to the barracks. I asked him what he did then. He answered, "It was Simchat Torah— *hakafot!*" (referring to the custom of dancing in a circle with the Torah) – Can you imagine?

Yaakov Yosef told me that like many survivors after liberation in May 1945, he was left bereft. He naturally abandoned religious practices, and along with a couple of other teenage survivors for the next few months as displaced persons in every sense, they roamed the streets of European cities, nowhere to go, nowhere to belong, no purpose in being. One Saturday morning they were meandering along a street, three bedraggled and miserable

paupers, a forlorn sight to behold, when a Jewish man recognising their appearance beckons to them to come into the synagogue in order to complete the quorum needed to make up a minyan for festive services. Yaakov Yosef rebuffed the approach, explaining that they were Jewish boys and had survived the Holocaust however they had no interest in any ritual or observance after all they had endured. The man tells them that he too is a survivor and understands their feelings, however, today is Shabbat and Simchat Torah and he'd really appreciate it if they'd pop in for a few minutes in order to fulfill their need for a *minyan* (quorum of ten needed for prayer). Yaakov Yosef relates to me that he remembered the previous Simchat Torah and that he thought to himself he may as well join them just in order to recite a blessing of thanks for his miraculous salvation from the gas chambers one year ago to the day.

Shortly after, he found himself called up to the Torah. He remembered, he knew what to do and holding on tightly to the two staves of the Torah Scroll, Yaakov Yosef falteringly began to

recite the customary blessing... "*asher Bacher banu mikol ha'amim...who chose us from all the peoples and gave us the Torah...*" He can't explain it, but in an instant, Simchat Torah 1945 – all the thoughts, the feelings, the experiences he'd been through came rushing back – he couldn't make sense of it, and as I heard from numerous survivors, there was a simple, almost elemental feeling of coming home. *This is a Torah scroll. I may have left it for a while as I exited my ordeal of hell, but it was always there. I suddenly realised – this is me! This is my parents, my grandparents, the essence of my identity. This is what the Nazis wanted to obliterate. I won't give them that victory.* And that's how Yaakov Yosef returned to his roots, by grabbing hold of a Torah scroll in some nondescript synagogue somewhere in Europe. Simchat Torah 1944 had nearly been his end. Simchat Torah 1945 awakened a new beginning.

Between those five boys who were plucked from the hands of death at the very last moment and the other three who shared their testimony of Simchat Torah 1944 in Auschwitz-Birkenau, there are many hundreds of descendants living throughout Jewish communities today. We lost millions; no human being can ever judge the actions or beliefs of others, especially those in whose shoes we shall never stand. If I hadn't met these people personally, listened to their eye witness accounts, recorded them for future generations and felt the power of belief regained, life reborn, families and communities rebuilt, I don't know if I would have believed such accounts myself.

The beginning of the *Mishnah*, the Oral Tradition, is about the planting of seeds. All planting is referred to in the Talmud as an act of faith. An act of one who believes in everlasting life and hence sows for the future. When one plants, one casts a seed into the earth where it disintegrates and rots, with the belief that from the tiny kernel of life that remains, a sapling shall be born.

The resilience that uncannily inspires the Jewish People to perpetually rise up from the dust and from ashes, is a quintessentially-Jewish response. "...In every generation they try to destroy us, and God saves us from their hands,"¹ is not a jingle or cliché. It is rather an imperative, a dictum of Jewish survival. Simchat Torahs of 1944, 1945, 1965 and even 2023 can hold within them messages of hope for every memory, and indeed for every future perception of October 7ths to come. Our end is not nigh. Teetering on the precipice can also spark fresh hope: the promise of new beginnings, the rediscovery of faith and a renewed belief in ourselves, in each other and in our collective journey. As a people chosen to build a better, more connected world, we can reach out together and, united, we shall always overcome.



Above: A sculpture in memory of four Jewish women who took part at the Zonderkommando rebellion at Auschwitz on 7 October 1944. The sculpture is in Yad Vashem, Jerusalem. Made by Joseph Salomon. Granite, 1989.

¹ From the Passover Haggadah

Israel's Diplomatic ISOLATION

Strategic crisis or tactical blip?

Darren Cohen

DISCLAIMER

The views expressed in this article are that of the author and do not necessarily express the views of Jewish Futures. This article was written on 15 July 2024 and is therefore reflective of events up to this date.

In the immediate aftermath of the atrocities of October 7, most Western governments expressed solidarity with Israel. Global leaders demonstrated their support by visiting the country during its hour of need. US President Biden steadfastly declared his belief in Israel's right and duty to defend itself. His support was epitomised by his "DON'T" speech and deployment of military hardware to the region, whereby he sought to deter Jerusalem's foes. In the UK, too, there was consensus among mainstream parties that Israel's cause to return its hostages and eliminate Hamas was both necessary and morally justified.

Drastic shift in the discourse

Fast forward almost a year, and the discourse has shifted drastically. While Jewish communities in Israel and the Diaspora focus on the events of October 7 and the plight of the hostages, the common narrative and information stream globally focuses on Palestinian casualties and the humanitarian crisis in the Gaza Strip.

Israel, for some, is increasingly becoming a pariah state. Exacerbated by manipulated social media algorithms and disinformation campaigns, Israel's actions in Gaza have seen it ostracised and demonised in all walks of life. University students have staged violent sit-ins, academic institutions have halted partnerships with their Israeli counterparts, Israeli physicians have been excluded from conferences abroad, and influential figures have called to ban

Israel from the Eurovision Song Contest and sports events. Meanwhile, large-scale protests condemn Israel as an illegitimate actor and establishments declare themselves "Zionist-free" spaces. Certain countries have severed or downgraded ties with Israel, as others have imposed trade restrictions. Employees of corporate giants, like Google, violently called to halt collaborative projects with Israel. Elections in the UK and France, which typically focus primarily on domestic issues, resulted in the empowerment of five independent MPs and the far-left, respectively, who ran on a staunch anti-Israel agenda. The list goes on.

Strategic crisis or tactical blip?

A true examination of Israel's international standing requires a more sober assessment of the facts, rather than an emotional reaction. Yes, gut-wrenching images of protesters in New York waving Hamas and Hezbollah flags while proudly raising a photo of Hamas leader Yahya Sinwar make the blood boil. However, to what extent is this reflective of mainstream views? Are we paying too much attention and lending too much credibility to a handful of radical activists, or are we indeed bearing witness to an irreversible shift in attitudes to Israel's legitimacy and right to exist?

Irreversible strategic shift? The crossing of red lines

The crossing of unprecedented red lines on the international stage supports the argument that Israel's isolation is potentially a long-lasting generational transformation. This is evidenced by the use of language previously applied exclusively to pariah regimes from history's dark epochs. While Israel's military actions during its 76 years of existence

have always elicited charged discussion and unrest, Jerusalem has rarely been accused or suspected of genocide by formal international institutions. The normalising of a case against Israel at the International Court of Justice (ICJ) under the Genocide Convention, and the very use of a term that evokes the greatest crimes against humanity, most saliently against the Jewish people, is a damning indictment of Israel's current global position.

This was exacerbated further in May 2024 when the International Criminal Court (ICC) Prosecutor announced that he sought warrants against Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and Defense Minister Yoav Gallant in the context of the humanitarian situation in Gaza. This includes "reasonable grounds to believe that [the pair] bear criminal responsibility for war crimes and crimes against humanity".¹ If the warrant is issued, it would mandate 124 member states, including some of Israel's allies, to arrest both officials upon entry to the former's territory — potentially creating a major diplomatic crisis.

These two cases, alongside previously unthinkable delays in US arms shipments and arms embargoes by other Western nations, sanctions on Israeli individuals and organisations by Jerusalem's allies, the unilateral recognition of a Palestinian state by several European countries, UN Security Council resolutions opposed by Israel and a prevailing attitude among even more centrist elements in mainstream political parties in the West that Israel has employed excessive force in Gaza have increased the perception that a more strategic, long-term phenomenon is taking place vis-a-vis Israel's global standing.

Before considering the alternate view, we ought to explore the reasons for Israel's diplomatic decline. There are undoubtedly

¹ Excerpt from the full statement on Netanyahu and Hamas arrest warrants by ICC Prosecutor Karim A.A. Khan KC, 20 May 2024

elements among the political extremes that seize any opportunity to demonise Israel. These activists' antipathy to Israel is ideological and existential, rooted in either deep-seated antisemitism or a worldview that divides global actors into oppressors and the oppressed, with Israel deemed to be on the wrong side of history. These elements characterise Israel as an illegitimate project and Zionism as a colonialist and inherently racist ideology. Their myopia and rejectionism facilitate their acceptance of Hamas' actions in the name of resistance.

However, there is another societal group that is engaged in this conflict and has adopted a view that is critical of Jerusalem as a direct result of their view of specific Israeli actions. Whether or not they are misinformed or misled, their condemnation is neither ideological nor rooted in antisemitism. It is predicated on unease with the perceived consequences of Israel's military operation: mass civilian casualties and extensive displacement, humanitarian suffering, widespread destruction of civilian infrastructure and the arguable intentional deprivation of essential goods and services. Some, including many of Israel's friends, argue that Israel's war goals are just but its method of operation has been unjust.

While there is no doubt that Israel is demonised and double standards are applied to the Jewish state, it is clear that many of the international politicians, decision-makers and influencers who expressed sympathy with Israel in the immediate aftermath of October 7 have gradually lost patience and grown critical of Israel's actions. This shift in public opinion has facilitated a host of rhetorical and material acts against the Jewish state and runs the risk of permanently damaging its standing. However, to what extent will these trends permanently damage Israel's status?

A temporary setback? The bigger picture

We must challenge the previous view. First and foremost, many of the setbacks experienced

by Israel and Israelis are symbolic, rather than substantive. The recognition of a Palestinian state prior to its existence or a resolution of the conflict by three European left-wing governments clashes with Israeli policy, but it has no meaningful impact on Israel or its security. The ICC and ICJ cases are significant, no doubt, but were vocally opposed by several of Israel's most prominent Western allies. Moreover, many of the diplomatic initiatives against Israel in the past year have amounted to either calls for action that have not systematically materialised or have remained on the fringes of society and organisations. Despite a lot of noise, international action against Israel has been incomparable with the diplomatic, cultural and economic sanctions campaign targeting Russia and its supporters.

Most importantly, when push comes to shove, many of Israel's allies remain in its corner. The unprecedented April 13 Iranian drone and missile assault on the Jewish state, which triggered an impressive military alliance of Western and Arab nations coming to Israel's defence, indicated that even critics of Israel's conduct in Gaza remain willing to publicly protect the Jewish state against the regime in Tehran. Furthermore, while the short-lived delays to US weapons shipments to Israel may have temporarily harmed its deterrence, they proved to be tactical blows rather than signs of a strategic decline.

In addition, although support for Israel in the US may be at an all-time low among the far left of the Democratic Party, a poll of Americans conducted by the Pew Research Center in February (when much of world opinion was already against Israel) found that 58 percent believed Israel had valid reasons for fighting Hamas. This figure, corroborated by similar polling of Americans carried out since the war began, shows that the majority of the US population remains broadly in line with Israel. Even in the Muslim world, where anger towards Israel has grown, the leader of Arab nations, Saudi Arabia, remains open to a

normalisation deal with Israel and no Abraham Accord nation has severed ties with Jerusalem, underscoring the continued perception of the Jewish state as a strategic partner.

Outlook: Opportunities & challenges

On balance, Israel has much to be concerned about — although the future need not be bleak. There is no doubt that the current global campaign against Israel is greater in scope, scale and intensity than any previous escalation in the region. It will not subside to the pre-October 7 levels when the war concludes. However, much depends on how Israel chooses to approach the day after. The longer the war continues, the more Israel's isolation will become entrenched as governments perceive cooperation with Jerusalem to be a political liability, while the Jewish state may become a symbol of aggression in the hearts and minds of sections of society. This runs the risk of permanently changing the perception of Israel globally, especially among younger generations who live on social media.

That said, owing to both the proven continued support extended to Israel and the short memories of most of the population fueled by a lightning-quick news cycle, Israel also has an opportunity. It can work with its allies in both the West and the Arab world to shape a framework to gradually end the conflict and create better conditions in the Gaza Strip, thus both providing security for the citizens of Israel and opening up new diplomatic avenues for Israel. It can build meaningful alliances and strengthen ties with like-minded nations in the West while continuing to emphasise its right to self-defence and duty to protect its citizens.

Israel cannot afford to isolate itself from the world — international integration is essential for its key military and economic interests. It is therefore at a crossroads, with an opportunity to either build long-term strategic alliances that serve its national security interests or, alternatively, to slowly descend into the abyss of diplomatic isolation.



Big Ben displays the phrase 'From the River to the Sea,' a slogan that calls for Israel's destruction and used by terrorist group sympathisers. Photo from social media



Hamas flag spotted at anti-Israel rally near DNC. 20 August, 2024. Photo from Fox News

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ONE YEAR ON

A photograph of a soldier in a tan uniform and beret, seen from the back, looking towards the Israeli flag which is flying on a tall pole in a field under a blue sky with some clouds.

All of *Us*

As the soldiers continue to risk everything on the frontlines, the homefront endures profound challenges and Jews worldwide battle fierce antisemitism. This compilation presents challenging realities that are empowering and inspire action. A year on, this war has forged a deeper resolve and unity across the Jewish world.

ONE YEAR ON



The MULTI-FRONT *War*

Sasha Silber

Jerusalem Day at the Kotel.
Photo, The Western Wall Heritage Foundation



Hamas militants and their sympathisers invaded Israel early in the morning of October 7th, cruelly decimating entire families and communities, desecrating and defiling innocent men, women and children of all ages – simply for being Jewish. Since that catastrophic day, Israel has been fighting an existential war to restore security to its people and to rescue the innocent captives brutally taken from their homes. Though the battlefield is concentrated on the ground in Gaza and on Israel's northern borders, it is a war that is being fought on multiple 'fronts', so to speak.

The soldiers are putting their lives on the line day in, day out on the ground, sea and air in extremely complex military operations

aimed at destroying Hamas and rescuing hostages. In the north, a prolonged dangerous war of attrition is being waged by Hezbollah resulting in military and civilian casualties, destruction of homes and infrastructure and forcing mass civilian evacuations to the centre of the country. Hundreds of thousands of reserve soldiers have dropped everything, tirelessly serving to protect the Nation of Israel while putting their lives and businesses on hold for months at a time, reporting for duty repeatedly with ever-changing schedules keeping them far from their loved ones who wait for them at home. The battlefield is fierce; soldiers have been filling hospitals and rehabilitation centres, recovering from injuries of all sorts – of body and mind. There are so many who did not survive, falling in defence of the Jewish People and their ancestral Homeland *al Kiddush Hashem* (in sanctification of God's name). Each one is a whole world, and the scope of the loss to the Jewish people since the 7th is sometimes just too massive to comprehend.

The homefront is a different kind of battlefield. Mothers and wives are burying their loved ones. Families are doing whatever they can think of, imploring local politicians as much as international non-governmental organisations to put pressure on Hamas to release their loved ones from cruel captivity, hoping they are alive to be nursed back to physical and mental health. Wives of reservist soldiers have been running their homes as single-parent providers to support their husbands from whom they often don't hear for days or weeks at a time when deployed in enemy territory. Evacuees from the Gaza envelope and from the northern border – at the time of writing, upwards of 86,000 people – have been lodged in hotels and apartments of distant cities and towns across Israel, sometimes with no clear notion of when it will finally be safe to come home – if there even is a home to return to. First responders are on constant high alert across the country; volunteers for civil squad units organise and endanger themselves to help ensure communities are self-sufficient in emergencies. There is an agricultural crisis with a lack of manpower available to work the land, often bordering enemy territory. The volunteer efforts on the ground continue full force from day one, from meal trains and challah bakes, to professionals offering specialised services free of charge to anyone affected by this war.

This war has a third front: the Jewish people, no matter where they are in the world, are now facing unabashed antisemitism with violent protests in front of their places of worship, on the streets of

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Whenever we as a people forget that we are all one nation, those who seek our destruction remind us

their cities, on campus quads and on social media. A people who make up 0.2% of the world's population are being villainized globally, facing absurd hate, social isolation and physical threats. The media, often under the guise of objectivity or pretence of human rights, perpetuates double standards against the only Jewish state, scrutinising Israel's right to defend itself while frequently downplaying, excusing or flat-out ignoring the barbaric actions of Hamas and Hezbollah. This biased coverage not only fuels further antisemitism but also emboldens those who wish to see the destruction of the Jewish people. Therefore we as the Jewish people, no matter where we find ourselves in the world, no matter whether in uniform, on the public stage, or in our close social networks and classrooms, each have a role to play in this war. There is no room for impartiality or sitting this round out. After all – when *chayalim* in the field dance in concentric circles, they sing to motivate themselves “*Am Yisrael Chai!*” (The Nation of Israel Lives!) – not “*Medinat Yisrael Chai!*” (The State of Israel Lives!).

October 6th and the months that came before it were dark with internal schisms within Israeli society. The judgement and the terrible things said between people with baseless hatred should be left in the past, and the unity that came after the 7th should be cultivated and increased. Whenever we as a people forget that we are all one nation, those who seek our destruction remind us. It is this unity, in learning about who we are, speaking out and fighting back with dignity and intelligence—whether it's on campus, in the courtroom, in front of governmental bodies or on social media—that will see us through these trying times. Our determined collective resistance and resilience, fueled by confidence in understanding our history, knowing the facts and owning who we are and the values we stand for, will ensure that *Am Yisrael Chai*—the Nation of Israel lives—now and forever.

The following articles and spreads will tell individual stories that represent but a fraction of the reality on the ground.

Letters from *Fallen* Soldiers

IDF soldiers write letters to their families before going into battle, only to be read in case God-forbid something should happen to them. These letters, filled with love, hope and unwavering dedication, reflect their courage and commitment to defending their people and ancestral homeland



Master Sgt. (res)
Elkana Vizel

If you are reading these words, something probably happened to me. First of all, if I am taken prisoner by Hamas I demand that you do not make any deal to free me from any terrorist. Our crushing victory is more important than anything else, so please, just keep on working with all your might so our victory will be as crushing as possible...

Maybe I will have fallen in battle. When a soldier falls in battle it's sad. But I ask of you, be happy. Don't be sad when you part from me. Sing a lot, hold each other's hands and support each other. We have so much to be happy about and proud of. We are the generation of redemption! We are writing the most significant moments in the history of our nation and the entire world. So please be optimistic. Continue choosing life constantly. Lives of love, hope, purity and optimism. Look at those dear to you in the white of their eyes and remind them that everything they go through in life is worth it and they have a lot to live for.

Live! Don't stop the power of life for a moment! During Operation Protective Edge I was injured. I had the option to stay behind, but I don't regret for a moment that I returned to combat. On the contrary, that was the best decision I ever made.

Master Sgt. (res) Elkana Vizel, 35, a resident of Bnei Dekalim in southern Israel. Vizel, married to Galit and a father of four, worked as a teacher at the Naom School in Bnei Dekalim, where his wife also works. Vizel wrote this letter before he left to battle in Gaza. The letter was found after he fell in the building collapse tragedy in the Gaza Strip.

I am writing this message to you on my way to the base. If you are reading this, something has probably happened to me. As you know me, there's probably no one happier than me right now. I was just about to fulfil my dream. I am grateful for the privilege to defend our beautiful land and the people of Israel.

Even if something happens to me, I don't allow you to sink into sadness. I had the privilege to fulfil my dream and my destiny, and you can be sure that I am looking down on you with a big smile. Perhaps I'll sit next to Grandfather and bridge some gaps. Each one will share their experiences and what has changed between wars, and we'll talk a bit about politics, and I'll ask him for his opinion.

If, God forbid, you are sitting shiva (in mourning), turn it into a week of friends, family and joy. Have food, definitely meat, beer, sweet drinks, seeds, tea and of course, Mom's cookies. Laugh, listen to stories, meet all my friends you haven't seen yet. Seriously, I envy you. I would like to be there to see everyone.

Another very, very important point. If, God forbid, I fall captive, alive or dead, I am not willing for a soldier or civilian to be harmed because of any deal for my release. I do not allow you not to conduct a campaign or protest or anything like that. I am not willing for terrorists to be released in exchange for me. In no way, shape or form. Please do not twist my words.

I'll say it again; I left home without even being called up to reserve duty. I am filled with pride and a sense of duty, and I always said that if I have to die, I hope it will be in defence of others and the country. (From the song Guards of the Walls) 'Jerusalem, I have placed the guards' (Yishayahu 62:6), that the day will come when I will be one of them.

First Class Sgt. Major (res) Ben Zussman, 22, of the Combat Engineering Corps' 601st Battalion, was killed fighting in Gaza on December 3. Zussman, a native of Jerusalem, is survived by his parents, Sarit and Tzvi, and two younger siblings, Mika and Boaz.



First Class Sgt. Major
(res) Ben Zussman

May their memories be a source of blessing.

INJURED, *NOT* BROKEN

Sasha Silber

Since October 7th, receiving a name of an injured soldier to pray for over WhatsApp has been an almost-daily occurrence. I often find myself holding my breath when looking down the list, fearful it might be one of the names I recite daily for protection — husbands, brothers or sons of family or friends.¹ Sometimes through these experiences we realise how closely we are all connected.

I'm looking forward to meeting Ari Spitz one day as we share many friends in common. On February 27th, those friends were sharing messages, pleading for everyone reading the messages to stop and pray, take on good deeds and beg to God for his complete recovery.

Now, five months later, I had the privilege of speaking over Zoom with his mother, Leah. I had heard Leah speak on the radio only a couple of days after Ari was injured in Gaza, thanking people for their continued prayers and asking people to donate blood, something that saved him and injured soldiers rely heavily upon. I was so moved and strengthened by her words of unwavering determination and faith, and have felt connected to his healing ever since.

What an incredible new photo of Ari, standing on two prosthetic legs, wearing trainers and a big smile on his face — what a miracle! Can we rewind to when you first heard that Ari had been injured in Gaza?

We were on our way down south to volunteer for the day with two of our children, my 7-year-old and my 12-year-old, in the car. Suddenly, we got a phone call from a number we didn't recognise. Ari never called from his own phone; he always used random phones or an officer's phone. So, every unknown number brought a mix of hope and fear. This time, it was the call we dreaded.

When a soldier is severely injured, they call you while they're waiting outside to take you to the hospital. They knew he was in

surgery, but that's all they told us. They don't give more information because they want you to find out from the doctors. We were only 40 minutes from Soroka Hospital, so we decided to drive ourselves. During the drive, we kept saying prayers and gave a large donation, sending out Ari's name for prayer. I was giving out instructions, calling our daughters at home to tell them they were going to be picked up by the army, and I called my parents and siblings to meet us at the hospital.

When we arrived around noon, an officer met us and escorted us to the operating room area. It took for a few more hours until we found out the extent of his injuries. Ari had lost both his legs and his right hand. He lost his right leg above the knee and his left leg below the knee. It was incredibly hard to hear, but from the first moment, I believed he was saved by miracles. We started spreading his name like wildfire. My 19-year-old daughter picked the picture, which we all thought was very powerful. We shared a message along with the photograph, asking people to pray for his recovery, for his condition to stabilise.

Ari's officer, who was seriously injured about two months earlier, met us at the hospital. Despite being on a day off from rehab, he came to the entrance of the operating room to meet us because he heard something had happened to his unit. I recognised him because we had

prayed for him. It was comforting to have someone who understood the situation explain what had happened from an army perspective.

I also reached out to someone who knew Elisha Medan, a reservist who had lost both his legs a few months prior, hoping to speak with him. Five minutes later, Elisha called back and gave us invaluable advice. He told us to speak only positively in the room because patients remember what is said when they are sedated. We enforced that strictly—no negative speech or crying in the room. Elisha also emphasised the importance of keeping a diary to track everything,



Ari Spitz, standing on two prosthetic legs, wearing trainers and a big smile on his face, five months after his critical injuries in Gaza. Courtesy of the Spitz family



Ari Spitz, courtesy of Spitz family

¹ We are all family, and I truly believe we feel this pain just as much for strangers—or rather, for family and friends we have not yet met.

which we did diligently. At that point, we did not know that Ari would be sedated for the next six weeks. We were very careful, took pictures of everyone who came to visit and kept detailed records.

How did your children react when they realised the extent of Ari's injuries?

At first, all my children knew he was severely injured, but they didn't necessarily know what it was. I consulted a therapist— from whom I had previously taken parenting classes — for advice on how to tell our other children about Ari's injuries. Her guidance was priceless in terms of how to go about it with each child in an age-appropriate way.

As I told them about the injuries, I said, 'It's okay to cry. It's okay to be sad. It's okay to be scared. But we're still going to laugh, and we're still going to do, to have fun, to travel. This is not the end of our lives.'

How did you get through those initial weeks, until after he came out of sedation?

We needed the support and prayers of others, so we called out to people to connect with different *mitzvot* — whether it was donating blood, praying or performing acts of kindness. Ari loved hiking, so we asked people to walk in his merit.

We were by his side 24/7, which we called "hero-sitting." Our siblings took turns on the night shifts so we could rest. Ari had eight surgeries and received over 35 pints of blood during his time in the hospital. The first day alone accounted for 20 of those pints. Despite the ups and downs, we felt incredibly blessed.

Nothing prepares you for a challenge like this. Since October 7th, every parent with a child in the army has had bad thoughts. Anyone who says otherwise is lying. But since Ari's injury, I never doubted he would come through. My thoughts were always focused on his happiness and future.

I also think that our positive energy was a magnet for the doctors and nurses. People liked

being around us because we had positive energy. Doctors would hang out in the room with us because it was pleasant. I believe the care he received was better because of that. We also used his picture extensively. We wouldn't let anybody treat him without explaining who he was and showing them his picture. We wanted them to know he wasn't just a random patient; this is who he is.

Can you tell us about the process of coming out of sedation?

At first, they tried to take him off of sedation and they had to re-sedate him. My husband and I had to leave the room because we were too upset, both of us were crying. My 16-year-old turned to us and said, "It's a step back before the sprint." It is one of my favourite moments from this whole period, showing us that she had internalised our positive messaging.

Coming out of such a long sedation is a gradual process over several days. When they finally succeeded and Ari was able to speak, his first words were "I love you." We noticed quickly that he spoke differently to different people, which showed us that he understood who he was talking to. When he asked about his injuries, the doctors used a mirror to show him all of them. When we finished, he looked up and asked, "...and that's it?" We were all astounded - that's not enough?! The doctors were certain that he did not understand the extent of his injuries. An hour later, he looked up at us and asked about the cost of prosthetics. He understood.

Looking back, he explained that what he was really worried about was a brain injury. He said, "if my brain is OK, then I will be OK."

You, Ari and your whole family are so positive and strong. What is your secret?

We are people who always look at the glass as half full. We avoid drama and focus on positive relationships. At the hospital, as Ari and all of us were showered with gifts (ruining my 22 years of educating my kids!), we emphasised the importance of *hakarat hatov* – gratitude. It's a principle we have stressed to our children whenever they speak with us or anyone since early childhood.

What's next?

Our children have been resilient. Our 19-year-old daughter is doing national service at Beit Elizabeth, a home for children removed from their homes, and plans to continue for another year. We expect our other children will also serve, either in the army or national service.

Ari will be in rehab for a long time, probably close to a year. He might go back to Yeshiva for a few weeks, but it's not practical for an extended period due to daily rehab sessions.

Despite the challenges, he remains connected to his Yeshiva through online classes.

What can we be doing for Ari and other injured soldiers?

Gratitude, prayer and *ahavat chinam* (baseless love). Those are definitely my top three things. For Ari, for the soldiers, for *Am Yisrael*. They are sacrificing their lives so all of us can live in peace and quiet, and we need to have *hakarat hatov* for them. That's for sure.

Since Ari is so severely injured, he receives a lot of gifts, and the generosity of *Am Yisrael* has been incredible, but many people whose injuries aren't as severe don't get the same level of attention and support, even though they are also suffering. We need to appreciate and support those who are injured more lightly as well.

There are groups that come around the hospital regularly to give small gifts like shakes, sandwiches, salads and cut fruit. These acts of kindness are uplifting.

It's also important to sense boundaries. Sometimes visitors ask inappropriate questions, and Ari doesn't always feel like sharing his story repeatedly. If you're visiting soldiers, take cues on when it's fitting to engage. For instance, I was on a call yesterday, and two visitors stood next to us. They had good intentions, but they should have walked away when they saw we were on a conference call. Remember, you are coming for the soldiers, not for yourselves.

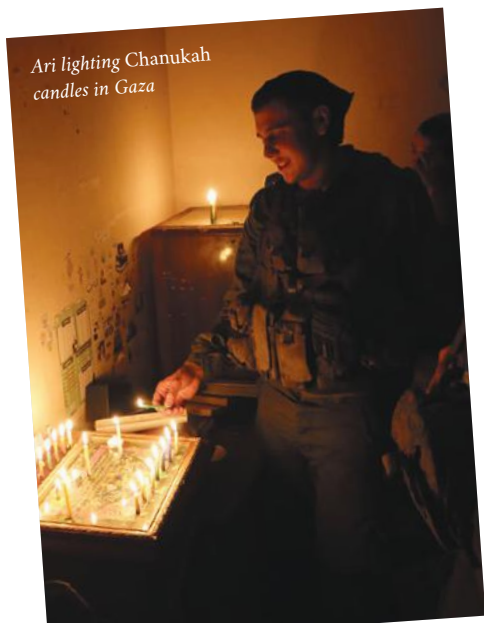
It is important to be sensitive to people who suffer from trauma. Thank God, Ari doesn't have PTSD, but others do. Always ask if it's okay to speak and be respectful if the answer is no.

If you want to offer help, be specific. Ask, "Would it be helpful if I brought you soup for dinner?" It's okay if people say no. We took food for a while because we needed it, but now my kids only want my cooking. So, bringing food isn't helpful anymore because it just goes to waste.

Connecting to one or two stories is very important. Pick a name of an injured soldier, *daven* (pray) for them, have *kavanah* (focused intention) for them, think about them and include them in your daily prayers. The power of positive energy and thoughts is immense. We've had times when Ari was doing terribly, and we sent out messages to a WhatsApp group of two thousand people, asking for prayers. You could feel the energy coming. I'm not the most spiritual person, but the power of *Am Yisrael* pushing us forward was priceless. Knowing that Ari was in people's thoughts and that we weren't alone is beyond anything words can describe.

Ari's name for prayers is Moshe Aharon ben Leah Beila.

Ari lighting Chanukah candles in Gaza



A NATION OF *Superheroes*

Sasha Silber

Since October 7th, in addition to soldiers serving in active duty, hundreds of thousands of reservists were called up – in fact, more than 100% responded to their *Tzav Shmoneh* (emergency call-ups) as many who were no longer of age to serve or had exemptions for various personal reasons decided to show up and volunteer anyway. It is as inspiring and moving as it is difficult for the families that stayed home waiting for their husbands, fathers and sons to return from the battlefield. There is no real way to generalise their experience, and there is no real way to tell hundreds of thousands of stories, each unique and powerful.

“Step into the inspiring narratives of everyday Jewish heroes on *Giborim*, a podcast that delves into the stories of individuals who, after October 7th, responded to darkness with unwavering light.” These words introduce Josh Bar-On’s new podcast, capturing the essence of heroism that permeates Israeli society. It’s reminiscent of Omri Glikman (of *Hatikva 6*)’s song “*Giborei Al*” (A Nation of Superheroes), a humbling tribute to those who drop everything to defend their people and homeland. Here in Israel, we walk among giants.

The inspiration behind *Giborim* stems from a deeply personal place. Josh, a 40-year-old tank commander in the IDF reserves, has

experienced the trials and triumphs of military service firsthand. His podcast aims to share the stories of those who exemplify exceptional courage and resilience. From soldiers on the battlefield to volunteers and activists, Josh seeks to illuminate the leaders who have played pivotal roles in the People of Israel’s continuous struggle and ultimate victories.

In our conversation, Josh’s insights into heroism and courage reveal a profound understanding of what it means to be a modern-day hero. His reflections are not just about extraordinary acts but also about the everyday decisions and sacrifices that define true leadership and courage.



Josh Bar-on (top left)
with fellow reservists



Photo from the Gaza envelope,
courtesy of Josh Bar-on

As a teenager, Josh came to Israel for the first time for summer camp. “I was shocked by the soldiers. They really stood out to me. I was enamoured by the idea of Jews protecting themselves, protecting a state that is ours in our ancestral homeland.” After completing his studies in university, he made *Aliyah* (immigrated to Israel), driven by a deep-seated desire to serve in the IDF.

“When I decided to make *Aliyah*, it was during my gap year programme in Israel. It wasn't a religious decision, but an identity decision. I wanted to be part of the Jewish state and people. I drafted into the IDF in November 2007, joining *Shiryon* – tanks. I didn't have to go to the army; I just had to serve six months of mandatory service. However, I signed on for two years because I wanted to be in combat. Six months wouldn't be enough. After basic and advanced training, I became a tank commander. During my regular service, I spent time up north training and participated in Operation Cast Lead in Gaza. After Gaza, we were stationed on the border for another 4-5 months. When I left the army, life in Israel began. It was an interesting and beautiful shift from serving in the army to living in Israel. I've been in the reserves ever since.”

Josh has continued to participate in reserve duty, like so many of his comrades, regularly leaving his family for days, sometimes weeks at a time in order to train and serve. Ten years ago, he had already been on reserve duty when Operation Protective Edge started in response to the shocking kidnapping of three teenage Israeli boys. He spent the war protecting the Jewish communities of the western Shomron during that war.

Josh began his professional life working in business development, got married and began to grow his family, spending seven years in Efrat with his wife Annael and four young children.

He had grown up in a religious home in the US but felt disconnected from it for many years. “I was always immersed in it, and I enjoyed the rituals, but I wasn't myself keeping Shabbat. I wasn't fully keeping kosher – I kept some of it, but I wasn't into it. During that semester abroad, it was totally lacking. I remember it was a Friday night, and we all happened to be having dinner together, so I asked, ‘who's making *kiddush* (blessing over wine to sanctify Shabbat)?’ My friends were surprised, ‘Whoa! I didn't know Josh was religious!’ That was the first comment I heard. It was so weird because I wouldn't

“*The reality of war is harsh. One moment you're grateful for narrowly escaping harm, and the next, you're mourning the loss of a brother-in-arms*”

have self-described that way, but it turned out I was the most religious person at that party, so I made *kiddush*. Being fully immersed in it, I realised that I had to choose it. So, I started putting on *tefillin* (phylacteries). When I made *Aliyah*, I knew I was going to be drafted to the army right away, so I decided to study at a *machon*, which is like a yeshiva, but a little less intense. As far as I was concerned, I would learn Hebrew and fully integrate. I kept Shabbat for my first Shabbat there, and I've been trying my best to keep Shabbat since then. My thought going into it was, *I don't*



We have more miracles to celebrate than we know, but we are also experiencing tremendous loss. It's a mixture of both

know if I'm religious or not because I've always been told to do this and that. I'm just responding and doing the opposite of what I've been told. So, I'm going to check it out, see if there's something there that speaks to me. If it's real, I'll accept it. If not, I'll move on. It was real, so I took on more, with Shabbat being the first thing. I was suddenly a religious person, self-described. When I went to the army, I was always known as the religious guy, the 'dati' from day one."

The summer of 2023 brought big changes, including the first of many surgeries on his son, Eitan, who suffers from a rare disease called pseudoachondroplasia, a rare form of dwarfism—and a big house move to Pardes Chana, an idyllic community in the Haifa district of Israel. Only weeks later on October 7th, 130 kilometres from the Gaza Strip, Josh and his family, like so many others in Israel observing Shabbat and Simchat Torah, began to hear the murmurings of the catastrophe unfolding in the south despite being disconnected from their phones.

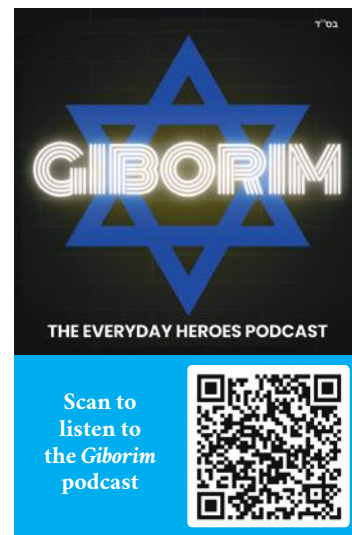
It wasn't until later that day, when neighbours shared the gravity of the situation, that Josh began to grasp the seriousness of the events. Josh and his wife Annael decided to wait until their kids were asleep before delving into the national news.

When he turned on his phone, he expected perhaps a routine reservist update. Instead, he received a call from his officer, urgently notifying him of an impending call-up. "Josh, we've been looking for you for hours," the officer said. "We already had a meeting at noon. We haven't been officially called up, but get ready because we probably will be." The escalating death toll, already in the hundreds, signalled the scale of the emergency. Josh rushed to gather his gear.

The following morning, Josh and his unit were officially mobilised, tasked with heading towards Gaza. The transition from civilian life to the demands of wartime readiness was abrupt and stark. "We walked a few kilometres with just a little water and a giant duffel bag on our backs towards our tanks," Josh recounts. Once at the base, the level of alertness was palpable. They were soon ready to move out, experiencing moments of high tension as false



Josh Bar-on, all geared up



Scan to
listen to
the Gaborim
podcast



alarms of infiltrations kept them on edge.

As they moved towards the border, the reality of the conflict hit hard. Over the next few days, they covered a staggering 120 kilometres in their old, maintenance-needy tanks. "These tanks hadn't been treated in 20 years, so it was all coming up," Josh explains. The situation was chaotic; he and his comrades experienced his first close call, a mortar shell striking a spot they had vacated moments earlier.

"Our job was to secure the border. There weren't supposed to be any terrorists within our border, but the defence system of the fences had a cyber attack on October 7th, and it took time to get them back up securely," Josh explains. This responsibility fell heavily on the soldiers' shoulders, knowing that any lapse could be fatal.

The first weeks were a blur of high-stakes tension. Josh recalls, "We eliminated many threats from multiple directions during two different incidents. We were constantly on edge." The soldiers were on high alert, regularly responding to threats and ensuring the safety of their nation, and sometimes tasked with the extremely important mission of recovering bodies.

"Suddenly, we were full-time soldiers with no clear end to the conflict or clear next steps," Josh says. Initially, there was an assumption that they might not be called into Gaza due to the age and condition of their tanks. However, this period allowed them to focus on maintenance and readiness. "In the next two months, we dedicated ourselves to getting the tanks in top condition," Josh notes. Despite the tanks' frequent breakdowns, the crews worked tirelessly, often in gruelling 18-hour shifts, to ensure they were combat-ready.

As they settled into a routine, the focus shifted slightly. "The cameras came back on the border, and our job became secondary. We had additional systems, and we were there to take care of any terrorists that came through," Josh recalls. This period involved multiple missions in and out of Gaza, aiming to create a one-kilometre buffer zone between Israel and Gaza. Josh describes the missions: "We were in northern Gaza for one mission and in southern Gaza for another. We were there for weeks at a time, trying to create that buffer in a suburban area, working with an infantry unit."

These operations were not without significant losses. Josh recounts the devastating impact of an RPG attack that killed his close

friends Sergeant Major (res.) Yair Katz and Master Sergeant (res.) Zechariah Pesach Haber, and severely injured their deputy company commander and gunner. "It was a terrible, terrible day," he reflects.

I asked Josh whether he felt scared. "The psychological warfare, like all the videos Hamas put out, induced a lot of fear – you can't imagine how brutal and disgusting the enemy is. It's not just an enemy out to kill you; it's an enemy out to disgrace you and your people, to inflict as much suffering and pain as possible. There was a lot of fear initially because they made sure the horror got everywhere. I was afraid too, but I recognised it and started saying Psalm 37 repeatedly. After saying it for a couple of days, I wasn't afraid anymore, except for brief moments."

He went on to explain how he felt after his comrades fell. "When Yair and Zaharia were killed, there was a lot of sadness. I didn't see much fear, just real emotions. The IDF gets a lot of flack, but one thing they do well is processing trauma. The morning after Yair and Zaharia were killed, we were sitting in a house in Gaza with a military psychologist, breaking down the event, talking it over and crying. We were with the only people we wanted to be with, those who experienced it with us. The army's way of processing trauma is based on dealing with facts, getting as many facts as possible from different angles, going through step-by-step of what happened, so the psyche and brain can process the experience. Post-trauma is the inability to process the experience, reliving it over and over because the memory can't be stored. This method has helped us a lot."

It was a technique they would use repeatedly in the field. "We had more injuries from another RPG attack. Our company commander was injured, and we lost our deputy commander. We had significant injuries. Some people's inner ears exploded because of the blast. Our company's numbers were decimated, but we continued the mission."

The last day of Josh's first tour in Gaza tured into one of the most harrowing days. Josh's unit advanced in their tank cautiously when it was hit by an RPG. The explosion rocked the tank, but everyone emerged unscathed, thanks to the specific angle at which it hit. "We couldn't believe our luck," Josh reflects. This brief moment of relief quickly turned to horror when, just five minutes later, a second RPG struck the tank of his commander, Major (res.) Netzer Simchi, in the adjacent tank. The impact was devastating and resulted in his death. "The reality of war is harsh," Josh says. "One moment you're grateful for narrowly escaping harm, and the next, you're mourning the loss of a brother-in-arms. Netzer was

not just our leader; he was our anchor," he shares. "His leadership, calm under pressure and unwavering determination kept us going." Despite the overwhelming loss, Josh and his unit pressed on. "We didn't have time to grieve properly," he notes. "The mission had to go on. We had to push forward, not just for ourselves, but for the memory of those we lost."

Josh and his unit went straight from Gaza to Netzer's *shiva* before settling back into civilian life. "There's a drop in fulfilment when shifting from a nationally-important task to family life. I needed to stay connected to a national effort." He started his podcast, *Giborim* — Heroes — to share inspiring stories of heroism from the field and highlight positive aspects of Jewish identity. Josh emphasises the importance of recognising Jewish pride beyond just reacting to antisemitism. "Being a Jew is more than, 'people shouldn't do this to us.' There's a lot to be proud of and identify with positively." He aims to share stories of bravery and selflessness, whether from soldiers, first responders or volunteers.

There have been many miracle stories that have circulated since the first day of the war — even from the horrid day of the massacre. I asked Josh how he perceives these stories having experienced both miracles and loss, sometimes within a span of minutes.

Josh reflected on the complexity of those experiences and made an analogy. "There is an incredible verse in the book of Ezra, from the time of the building of the Second Temple. When it was rebuilt, there was a mixture of celebration from the younger generation and tears of sadness from the older generation who remembered the previous Temple. Those two cries became one voice. We have more miracles to celebrate than we know, but we are also experiencing tremendous loss. It's a mixture of both."

Coming back to the topic of heroism, I asked Josh again about fear. Afterall, he had mentioned reciting a Psalm to try to overcome fear while on the battlefield. He explained, "My kids and I talk about stories that involve heroism, maybe a bedtime story or something they're dealing with. I always ask them, 'what do you need right now? Do you need strength or courage?' The definitions are pretty simple. Strength is when your body needs more, to do what needs to be done. The first stage of courage is acknowledging that you're feeling something called fear. When you give it its place and space, you can ask, how do I take the next step? Heroism is exactly that."

At the time of printing, Josh is about to gear back up and get back to the battle field. We wish him, along with all of the other (estimated 300,000) soldiers both in regular and reserve service, tremendous blessings and success.

Giborei Al — A Nation of Superheroes

A Song by Omri
Glikman of
Hatikva 6

(translated from the original Hebrew)



So the teacher of *Tanach* in Givati
The language teacher Modi'in
The neighbour upstairs is a construction contractor
but has already been in the reserves for a month
The lawyer is *Kambatzit* (operations manager) doing shifts in the division
Her brother is a senior hi-tech man, now he is a sniper on rooftops in Gaza
The tough branch manager of the bank is a sergeant in Judea and Samaria
Doron is the owner of a toy store, now he is an MP in the armoury
And our stand is an atonement for mostly singing in Caesarea
An engineering soldier bravely recovers after being wounded in the heart of Gaza

It's true that everyone here looks normal, but
We are a nation of superheroes
There is always a soldier hiding in everyone
Ready to save the world

Dan's bus driver
The one who is always on time
He is now the commander of an artillery battery in the south near Nir Am
And there is a student at the Technion
In the middle of a bachelor's degree
He is a captain in Mil in the Galil formation for a month at the northern border
There is a paramedic model here
There is an electrician here who is a magician
There is Yoni, a gifted saxophone player who is first and foremost a metal player
Everyone has a hidden closet or a large equipped box
He has a set of uniforms and a spare cloak always ready for a challenge
It's true that everyone here looks normal, but
We are a nation of superheroes
There is always a soldier hiding in everyone
Ready to save the world

And it doesn't matter if in the middle of life or in the middle of a football game
Everyone will drop everything in a second if the flag calls them
This is not a parallel universe or a Marvel reality
This is our story — the people of Israel

ONE YEAR ON



LIONESS

Sasha Silber

A lioness is not only a symbol of strength, resilience and nurturing but also of unwavering dedication and fierce protection — qualities that Jewish women, especially the wives of soldiers, embody. While there isn't an exact statistic for how many regular and reservist soldiers are married or have children, estimates suggest there are nearly a quarter of a million wives of soldiers. Each of these wives has experienced significant changes since October 7th, suddenly shifting into the role of sole caregivers to their children, with some even giving birth while their husbands are on the

battlefield. Everyday domestic and work challenges still exist, but these have been reprioritised, reshuffled into a “new normal” where survival and adaptation are key. This ongoing situation affects women, children and marriages not only while husbands are away serving but also profoundly impacts those marriages when soldiers return home, whether for a break or once their service is complete.

Before the war, everyone faced their normal challenges—some more than others. The Bar-on family, for instance, was already navigating life with their son Eitan, who has a rare disease requiring extensive medical care, compounded

by the complexities of a cross-country move, settling into a new community and starting new jobs. This was August, 2023.

On October 7th, as rumours of war began to spread, the Bar-on family was uncertain about what lay ahead once they started to read the news that night. “Josh didn't think he'd be called up because his unit's tanks are really old, but that night, everything changed. At 11:30, he got a message from his commander asking him to report to base the next morning.

I caught up with Josh's wife, Annael, a registered dietician and certified health coach.¹ She recounted the abrupt departure vividly. “He left at 6 in the morning. I made sure he had whatever he needed—coffee, sandwich and all that. At the door, as he was getting into the car, we didn't know how long he would be away. Who knew? Maybe this is for a week, maybe it's two weeks, maybe a month...” What Josh said next blew Annael away. “I pray and bless you to have patience with the kids.” She continued, “He told me, ‘I pray that you will be able to forgive

Top left: Josh & Annael, Middle: Together with Orelle (8.5), Mia (7), Eitan (5), Leviah (2.5), Bottom: Josh with Eitan. Right: Josh and Annael at home.

¹ @annael_brown_nutrition / annaebrownnutrition.com

yourself when you lose patience.' That was really powerful." That was it. "When he left the driveway, my kids and I were saying goodbye, trying to be positive. The second he left, I started crying in the street," she shares.

Having just moved to Pardes Chana from Efrat weeks prior, the Bar-ons did not yet have a tight group of friends in their new community. "WhatsApp is a powerful tool. I quickly found the right groups for myself." One of them was dedicated to volunteers organising community members to make and deliver food for Shabbat for reservist families. "It was the first Friday. That was when I realised I was under some category I wasn't yet aware of. Someone showed up at my door with a beautiful package addressed 'to a *leviyah*' – a lioness. Inside, there was a poem, cake, snacks for Shabbat and challah. I started to understand my situation. I remember crying out of happiness, feeling very grateful."

This wasn't a one-time thing. A few days later, two more people showed up to help take down the Bar-on's Sukkah, which had still been standing after Josh had left suddenly the morning after the holiday. "It started to open my eyes to the situation I was in. When they came to do it, I could see in their eyes a sense of... not pity, but... compassion. Josh's mother, my mother-in-law, also moved with us. I wasn't completely alone, and I had it better than others in that sense."

Among the four Bar-on children, their four year old son, Eitan, was born with pseudochondroplasia, a rare disease affecting about one in 50,000 births. "It's a form of dwarfism," she explains, "but different from the common type called achondroplasia," a condition that primarily impacts the joints, leading to chronic pain and short stature. Annael recounts surgery on her then three-year-old, describing how they had to cut bones above and below the knee to straighten his legs. Eitan had just resumed walking following his surgeries mere weeks before October 7th.

Her community did not let them down. "Part of the volunteering was women offering their kids to come play with younger kids at home. These teens would come over to play with our girls. It was a little frustrating, though, because my son, who had just had surgery, needed a male figure," Annael shared. "So I requested a male, and it was like magic for my son."

In the first two weeks, Annael begged her mother to come from the US, telling her, "If I ever need you, this is when you come. I need you." She came, and it was like a breath of fresh air. The first night she was here, I slept deeply for the first time since the 7th and realised just how sleep-deprived I had been."

At first, before the ground incursion into Gaza, Annael heard from Josh quite often.

"In the beginning, he messaged me daily, which calmed me. When he went into Gaza, I had to remind myself, 'I will survive with my husband in Gaza. He will survive.'" At that point, the communication decreased drastically, often hearing nothing for a couple weeks at a time.

"I was also part of a WhatsApp group for his unit that would update us. This group was scary because it was all of us wives and mothers of the men. I was almost afraid to open it, meaning as long as it stayed quiet, I was happy. Sometimes I would hear a wife piping up and saying, 'Can we have some sort of an update? How are they?' The head commander would respond, 'They're good. They're doing this. They're fine. They're great.'"

Annael's voice dropped. "And then there was a black day." She opened WhatsApp to see a flurry of activity and the name of a soldier who had fallen. "It felt like Russian roulette." Annael describes the feeling of shock of reality hitting her, while trying to keep herself together with her children around. "I knew I couldn't fully be in both places. It was a moment when I understood the magnitude of what could be. I didn't freak out because I wanted to be strong for my husband who had just lost somebody, but in the moment, I remember also not freaking out because I had to continue being what I needed to be for myself and my kids."

I asked Annael how she managed to cope and juggle everything. "I loved nighttime for the quiet and catching up, but seeing the hate and antisemitic slurs on social media just days after this started triggered me. I eventually stopped looking completely; I couldn't handle the details of all of the brutality while Josh was gone. I needed to stay sane for my kids, so I stopped staying up late. There have been moments of anxious panic during this war... You had to breathe through it."

Annael continued, "Something happens to the wives of soldiers — they put on a superwoman cape. You didn't even know you had it. Suddenly, everyone's in bed by 7, with teeth brushed and breakfast ready for the next day. You take energy from reserves you didn't know you had because you know that no one is coming and there is no room to slack off, so everything is super tightly-routined and organised. Single mothers live this way all the time—they never get a break."

This went on for months, with occasional days – few and far between – to come home and visit for a few hours or rarely, a whole Shabbat. Finally, in February, his first tour during this war was complete. His next reserve duty would begin in November. Over the summer, the date got pushed up, and Josh will have gone back into active reserve duty at the end of August.² She sighed, "there's a denial

factor, maybe for survival. You try to live normally because you don't know when things will change. I've spent the past few months enjoying life as normal as possible, knowing it's not permanent. He is going back."

Then, Annael blew me away. The place from which she finds her internal strength comes from one of the biggest challenges she had faced. "When I discovered Eitan's condition, I was so broken, like in *shiva* (mourning). I learned that I'm losing something I never really had, the dream, the thought of what I had envisioned for my child. I started to understand that I needed to part ways with that. I imagined a conversation with God, telling me he has a special soul that will come into this world and need help, and asking if I can be trusted with this mission. It changed my perspective. I can't imagine my life without Eitan. He has the sweetest face."

She continued, "A rabbi told me that God always responds positively when you pray for *emunah* (faith). You can ask for *emunah*, and that will always be granted. It's like a muscle you have to exercise. If you don't pray for it, you won't have it. *Emunah* is funny. You pray for what you want while also praying to accept what is. How can those two things coexist? But I let myself pray for both."

This is only one story out of many, each unique in its challenges and experiences. These women have adapted to a new normal where survival and adaptation are key, finding strength in faith and community. Like lionesses, they continue to protect their children and support their spouses with incredible resilience. We must stand by these women and support them as they navigate these trying times.



² Reflective of the reality as of August 6, 2024.

Right: Annael emotional after receiving a care package labeled "Dear Heroine, Thank You," in Hebrew.

Bottom: Annael with the kids while Josh serves in reserves. All photos courtesy of Annael and Josh Bar-on/Brown

Sketches of *Resilience*

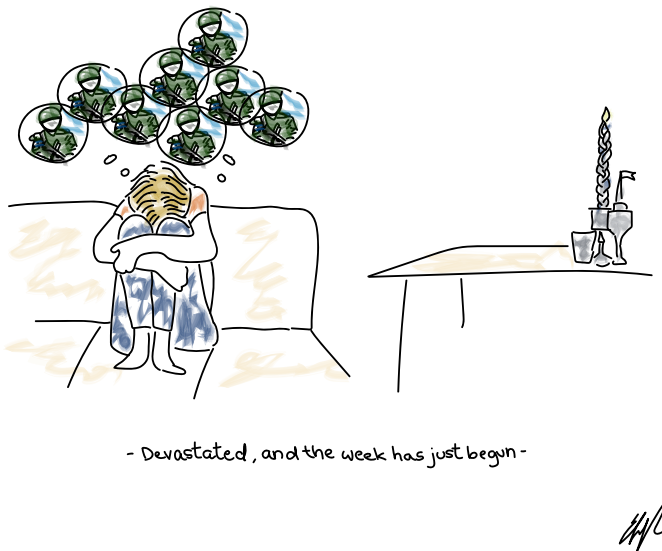
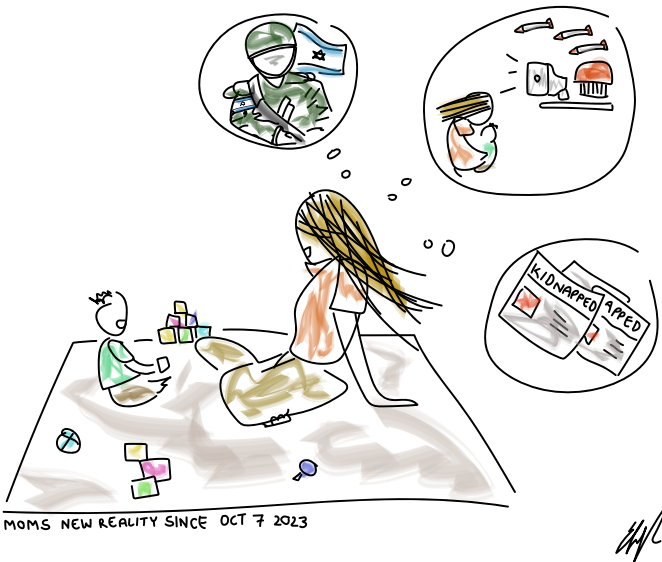
Sasha Silber

Efrat Silberhaft (née Barzilai) is a Viennese mother of two, a full-time product designer for a well-known Israeli cybersecurity firm, married to a reservist. Her father, Shmuel Barzilai, is the chief cantor of the Jewish community in Vienna, and her mother, Dvora Barzilai, is an artist there who also draws war-related art. Efrat was in Vienna for the High Holy Days when the war broke out, and they decided to take the first available flight a few days later home to Israel to send her husband off to

serve as a reserve soldier. As she stayed at their home in Ra'anana with the children, she found herself in a bit of a surreal situation—on the floor with her children, playing with Legos while internally wondering when the next siren would have them rushing into their protected space, devastated by the news coming out of Gaza about casualties, hostages and fallen soldiers, all while keeping a smile on her face in an effort to keep her children calm. “I found solace in sketching my feelings and emotions when my husband was called up to the army. This creative outlet helped me cope

with the challenging situation.” The first sketch of what would become a series on Instagram quickly resonated with others. The growing interest led to Efrat compiling 39 sketches in a book called *Sketches of Resilience* at her own cost, choosing to donate 100% of the profits to the IDF Widows and Orphans Organization. **Instagram:** @theefixdesign

Buy the book





Tzvika Mor, holding an image of his son Eitan while speaks to the public

FAMILY OF HOSTAGES

Forest Rain Marcia

CONTENT WARNING AND DISCLAIMER:

The content in this article may be distressing and includes descriptions of violence and loss. Reader discretion is advised. The views expressed in this article are that of the author and do not necessarily express the views of Jewish Futures. This article was written on 9 July 2024 and is therefore reflective of events up to this date. As of the print date of this edition, 107 hostages remain in captivity in Gaza. We hope that by the time this edition is read, they are all home of sound body and mind. We pray for all of them — those still in captivity and those who have returned — for their safety and healing.

Do you believe your home is your sanctuary? Going to sleep safely in your own bed is a comfort most people take for granted. That basic feeling of security was ripped from every single Israeli on October 7th.

Hostages were taken from the *kibbutzim*, army bases and the Nova music festival. This made it impossible to dismiss the horror as belonging only to a certain segment of society, it personally touched Israelis from all walks of life and all areas of the country.

And this brought home the realisation that any of us could have been in the place of the hostages or their immediate families.

My friend's daughter was murdered at the Nova site. Friends of mine were murdered in Be'eri. Friends from other *kibbutzim* survived to live with the trauma. Friends and neighbours were killed in action. On top of that, we worry about our sons' safety while they do their IDF reserve duty.

Not having direct friends or family taken hostage does not reduce my feeling of helplessness, frustration or anguish for the hostages or their families.

But what could I do to help? Not much. So, I did (and do) what I can; to stand with the families in their activities, provide whatever kind of assistance I can, listen and give them the feeling that they are not alone. If I can help with professional advice, help amplify their voices, or do something as simple as bringing water or handing a tissue to someone crying, that is better than not doing anything.

On numerous occasions, I have spoken with family members of different hostages. Some I

have gotten to know well. All evoke the deepest empathy – if you really listen to them.

Most of all, the different families have taught me lessons in humility and strength.

In Israel, there is an idea – a norm – that bereaved families are not to be judged. Those who lost their beloved because they were Jews, those who died defending us or who could have just as easily been us, have a different, almost holy status. They are allowed to do or say anything they feel and society needs to embrace them. In Hebrew, the concept is to “contain their emotions”, like a jar that holds contents without judgement. By extension, it is a societal consensus that the families of hostages are understood to belong to this category.

Never has this idea been tested to the extent that it is with the hostages.

Every Israeli wants the hostages returned home. Those who are still alive and those who were murdered need to be returned to their families for the simple reason that they are ours. They are family and family needs to be home.

The problem is that there are vehement disagreements about how to return the



Tzvika Mor holding an open discussion with Israeli pre-army age teens in Hostages Square, Tel Aviv

hostages. The method chosen has ramifications for the individuals and the Nation of Israel as a whole – Israelis and Jews worldwide. Compounding the issue is the fact that this is being tainted by politics, creating division and blindness where none should exist. This is an issue of survival and something we should all be unified around. If the enemies of Jews learn that they can take hostages with impunity this will become a methodology and no Jew on earth will be safe.

So how do you “contain the emotions” of people whose actions you vehemently disagree with?

Had I only seen these families on the TV screen, I am not sure I would have succeeded in embracing in my heart those who behave in ways that seem destructive to me. Listening to them and seeing more than what the media chooses to present gave me valuable insight. Most of all, it gave me the ability to breathe, step back and respond with humility – although, like everyone in the country, I too am distraught and concerned about what this all means for our future.

I watched Esther Buchshtab (mother of hostage Yagev Buchshtab¹) listening to an argument between Ayala Metzger (daughter-in-law of hostage Yoram Metzger) and Vered Ansbacher whose brother Yehuda was killed in action in Gaza. Vered was advocating for military pressure on Hamas to protect the future of Israel and as the best way to incentivise the release of hostages. Ayala, who believes that negotiating a deal is the only way to secure the release of the hostages, accused Vered: “You are putting the dead [her brother] before the living!” Vered, trying to bridge the

gap between them, responded: “I’m not doing anything for my brother. He’s dead. I’m worried about the safety of everyone who is alive, for the rest of my family, for our future.”

I could see that Esther Buchshtab was visibly shaking with the emotions she was trying to contain. She turned to me with her eyes wide like saucers but her voice flat and said: “I don’t want any military activity [no matter what is right]. Sinwar is holding my son close to him and any attempt to eliminate Sinwar will mean my son’s death.”

For a moment I felt like I couldn’t breathe. For a moment I felt what she feels EVERY moment.

Ayala Metzger has been one of the more prominent hostage family members in the demonstrations against the government. I’ve seen her block roads, scream at members of Knesset and disrupt other hostage family members who were expressing ideas contrary to hers. I’ve also sat on the floor with her and asked her how she feels, quietly, when no one else was around. She told me about waking up, shaking in terror from nightmares about being hostage in Gaza. About her mother-in-law who was released from Hamas captivity and her father-in-law whose body is still there. About the terrible frustration of not seeing the government act in a way she believes will create a solution. She asked me: “Is it reasonable that I, a private person, had to become a public person, so much that I even hired a media spokesman to help me deal with all of this?! Why do I have to do this?”

I’ve also heard her shout in response to Tzvika Mor (whose son Eitan is a hostage in Gaza): “You say that the State must go to battle and overpower the enemy to get back the

hostages. I am willing to go with you on that, but the State is not fighting full force or making a deal and the hostages are still there!”

Are provocative actions and harsh words helpful in getting the hostages back? They are helpful when your goal is to retain media attention. Ayala believes that pressure on the Israeli government via the media and demonstrations in the streets will bring us closer to a solution. I believe that pressure needs to be put on the enemy, on Hamas and their enablers. I believe that pressure in the wrong places weakens us and takes us further from the solution we all want – but I understand Ayala.

I don’t have to agree with her to feel her pain and frustration. Or to realise that we all want the same thing – for the hostages to be released and to be safe.

Tzvika Mor taught me a different lesson in humility; were I in his shoes, would I be able to comport myself with the level of dignity and concern for national interest that he has?

Tzvika’s son Eitan was working as a security guard at the Nova Festival. Instead of thinking about his own safety, Eitan stayed on site, helping others escape the attackers. For some two hours, he did this, while people were being slaughtered all around them. He and some other guards went looking for more survivors. They found a few dozen and helped them hide in bushes in a valley. Eitan and another security guard came out of hiding to see what was going on. They chased off Gazans who came with knives and axes. That’s when they found the corpse of a young woman who had been brutally violated. They could not bear the thought that on top of the horror she had experienced before death, the attackers would

¹ On July 22nd we learned that Yagev Buchshtab was killed in Hamas captivity in Gaza; his body, along with those of five other hostages, was rescued from a Hamas terror tunnel in Khan Yunis on 20 August 2024



Division is being sown but that comes from the media, not the families. The truth is that we are unified, even if we are not identical

further abuse her body, taking it to Gaza so they hid her body and returned to the group. That's when the terrorists shot an RPG at them. The group scattered in all directions. The other security guard survived, making it possible to tell the Mor family what Eitan had done and bring the young woman to burial.

Tzvika tells me: "We know that Eitan was taken across the border to Gaza alive. One of the released hostages in the deal that took place a month into the war reported seeing Eitan and speaking with him. There has been no sign of life since. What we do know is that he is strong both physically and mentally. If anyone is capable of surviving this, it's Eitan - and for him, the most natural thing to do would be to do everything in his power to bolster the wellbeing of other hostages."

About how his family is coping, Tzvika explains: "I draw my strength from my public mission, reaching out to the Israeli public and to our politicians with the message that we must be strong, confident and proud. The only way to release the hostages and protect our future security is through strength. The enemy will make a deal when they understand they have no other choice, not before. We cannot make a partial deal that leaves my son and others behind. We must vanquish them so totally that they and all our other enemies who are watching understand they can never do this again. That is how I will get back my son."

"My wife went back to work almost full-time. This helps maintain stability. She's a kindergarten teacher. The children need her and it helps her as well. All our children

returned to their regular schedules and we try to maintain normality as much as possible. We made a conscious decision to have a happy home. Hamas stole my son, should I let them steal our happiness as well?"

When I asked Tzvika what he would like to say to the readers of this article he paused and said: "Who will read this? Jews? From the UK? Europe? My gut says to tell them: Make *Aliyah*. Come home. Your lives will become unbearable there."

I know Tzvika so I didn't find his answer surprising, but I still find it extraordinary. How does a father, whose son is a hostage in Gaza, not knowing if he is dead or alive tell other Jews - I am worried about you. Come be where I am?

Wow. Just wow.

When I asked Rabbi Shimon Or what message he would like to convey to the readers of this article he had a different request.

Rabbi Or is the uncle of Avinatan Or. The world was introduced to Avinatan in the heart-wrenching Hamas video of them taking Noa Argamani on a motorcycle into Gaza as she reaches out in terror to her boyfriend, Avinatan. We all celebrated the heroic rescue of Noa but sadly she is unable to shine any light on Avinatan's fate. Since the moment they were separated there has been no sign of life from Avinatan.

Rabbi Shimon Or has been advocating for the Or family, speaking in the Knesset and other public forums, trying to shoulder that burden for Avinatan's parents. Avinatan's father Yaron, Shimon's twin brother, has more difficulty speaking in public. Worry over the fate of his

son has made him physically ill. The stress has taken a physical toll on Shimon as well but they brush off their damaged health because Avinatan and the future of Israel matter more. Avinatan's mother Ditzka focuses on spiritual strengthening and prayers, taking care of herself and empowering others.

Rabbi Or, says: "I want to explain two important points. The first is that we all want the same thing. Sometimes the media makes it seem as if there is an argument between different families of hostages but even between those of us who disagree on how to bring them home, there is camaraderie. Most of the families disagree with the idea of setting the streets on fire to get our loved ones back. Political division is being sown but that comes from the media, not the families. PR activities of those promoting a political agenda make it seem as if more people agree with them than actually do. The truth is that we are unified even if we are not identical."

"As a religious man who has studied Islamic culture, I am striving to open people's eyes to a critical cultural misconception here that we need to bridge to solve this problem. There is the western idea that the individual is more important than the nation. But that is not the way it works in the Middle East. Moreover, Islamic culture, the Hamas version, does not accept honest negotiations with non-Muslims. They accept a truce for the purpose of regrouping and renewing their attack - and this only in situations when they find themselves extremely weakened or on the verge of being destroyed. Hamas itself was founded on the idea that previous Arab losses were a result of not being religious enough. For these reasons, Hamas will never agree to return the hostages. That means that only we can make it happen, and to do so, we need to stop courting Hamas, stop trying to create a deal they will never uphold and make sure that the people of Gaza understand that Hamas is not staying in power. When that happens, Gazans will no longer benefit from holding the hostages and they will find ways to return them to us. We need our brothers and sisters to understand these principles so that we can be certain and strong in their support for Israel continuing this war - because that is how we bring the hostages home and ensure safety for us all."

Israelis and Jews abroad may not always feel like one family. Sometimes it takes those who hate us to remind us that this is a fact. At the moment we are a family of hostages. We don't have to agree on how to address this terrible situation. What we do need is to retain unity in mutual respect and compassion, to bring our family home and make sure that our enemies and everyone watching understand that we meant it when we said NEVER AGAIN.



Rabbi Shimon Or (center), advocating in a Knesset committee for his nephew Avinatan Or

CIVIL SQUADS OF ISRAEL

Sasha Silber



After hearing about the critical role of *Kitot Konenut* (civil security squad units) in Israel, I met with Daniel (Danny) Buchen, acting Executive Director and one of the earliest members of Civil Squads of Israel. Danny moved to Israel over 15 years ago to study counterterrorism at IDC, intending to return to Australia to protect his community. However, the 2010 Mavi Marmara incident was a turning point. He described the incident, in which Israel's most elite troops boarded with non-lethal paintball guns as "the most black-and-white example of the world hating on Jews," leading him to stay in Israel.

In Australia, Danny worked in community and corporate security. After completing his degree and Argov Fellowship at the IDC in Herzliya, he joined the army and served as a lone soldier in the infantry. Following his military service, he transitioned to a high-tech career, where he has been working for the last eight years.

The conversation then shifted to the post-October 7th reality. "At around quarter to 7 in the morning on October 7th, the first rockets started coming. I was in Japan for a business trip. I received a message from my brother about an alarm in Tel Aviv as I arrived at the

Hiroshima train station. Hours later, I was in the atomic bomb museum, watching the news from Israel on my phone. It was surreal. I came back to Israel as quickly as I could."

His efforts to assist from abroad quickly turned into a significant movement. From Japan, Danny started raising funds and connected with the crew that had just started Civil Squads of Israel right after October 7th — among them, Nir Alon from Kibbutz Sufa on the Egyptian border. On October 7th, Nir was in his mum's bomb shelter with his wife, her family, his family, their small kids and their dog, hearing Kalashnikovs and Arabic outside the door.

First responders battling wildfires in the north of Israel without PPE. Photo, Efi Sharir, Ynet

“

Are they expected to be unprotected from burns, smoke inhalation or worse while defending their communities?”

that morning. He suffered a head wound and his father attempted to save him by dragging him from the field, but Ido ultimately died in his father's arms. Nir decided he would do everything to avoid being in a powerless situation again and wanted to make sure no one else would be either. He contacted friends and started Civil Squads of Israel to ensure communities are self-sufficient in emergencies, whether it's terrorism, earthquakes, fires, flooding or a pandemic. "The authorities can't be everywhere at once. They simply can't."

Danny emphasised the importance of preparedness and self-sufficiency. "All communities rely on their local emergency response teams. And, they should all have the capacity and support to handle all forms of disasters and emergencies. The civil security squads specifically deal with security, however security underlies everything. For example, someone with expertise in flood disasters may not respond to wildfires, but civil security squads get activated and deployed for all forms of disaster." Today, for example, we see this reality playing out as the civil security squads of evacuated communities are deployed to suppress wildfires ignited by Hezbollah rockets.

Each community has a council overseeing

finances, approvals and other needs, operating similarly to a small-scale municipality.

Rather than a large municipal body, there is a management team that includes a dedicated disaster response manager.

Many communities lack the funds or resources to support comprehensive plans for many eventualities. Each community is unique, and many are without the necessary infrastructure to respond effectively to disasters. To address these needs, various organisations in Israel step in to try and assist, including funding, conferences to introduce new technologies and disaster preparedness solutions, showcasing efforts to improve community resilience. However, emergency preparedness for communities is not the core purpose of these organisations. This is where Civil Squads of Israel steps in as civil society's response to this challenge.

Danny and his team have high-tech and fundraising expertise rooted in military and security backgrounds. They partner with specialists to provide targeted training, identifying needs and gaps and finding the right experts to address them. Civil Squads of Israel operates like a business-to-customer organisation, with their primary "customers" being the emergency response teams on the ground. They collaborate and coordinate with all relevant stakeholders to ensure the most impactful actions are taken, focusing on practical solutions to enhance community safety and resilience.

The focus of Civil Squads of Israel has been on assisting communities in the most impacted areas, specifically those within 0 to 7 kilometres from the Gaza border and 0 to 4 kilometres from the Lebanon and Syria borders. However, their vision also encompasses the rest of Israel and just recently they distributed two hundred

The civil security squads typically consist of several to a dozen people per community, depending on the number of firearms available on a kibbutz. In Sufa, they had only four rifles that day, but still managed to stop and eliminate twenty Hamas terrorists. As a result, another 100 terrorists waiting in Sufa's orchards never received the command to advance, and were neutralised by IDF helicopters, mitigating a much larger disaster for the small Kibbutz.

Ido Hubara, one of Nir's childhood friends, was fighting terrorists two houses down, as one of the four civil squad members there



Above: Civil Squads of Israel with Operation Fire Support at Druze village Peki'in conducting safety awareness and community wildfire prevention workshops. Photo, Lior Grundman

bulletproof vests in the Lev HaSharon area near the Green Line in response to escalating tensions by Tulkarem and Qalqilya.

Their efforts have been 100% voluntary for the past 10 months, without a marketing team or online presence until late February – 5 months into the war. Danny is grateful. “Thanks to our community of generous Jewish and Christian Zionist donors, we focused on action and impact, distributing over 1,200 protective vests, hundreds of helmets and protective fire-rated equipment. Despite raising over half a million dollars and distributing significant resources, our branding hasn’t reflected the real impact. We had the unwavering support of Pastor Victor Styrsky, a staunch Zionist and supporter of Israel, who spent sleepless nights in the first 6 months ensuring we had the necessary resources from our US allies.” Now, the Civil Squads of Israel are formalising their organisation to improve visibility and increase impact. In July, they became an official non-profit charity to achieve this.

A critical project currently underway is addressing the wildfire hazards in Israel, particularly in areas near the northern and southern borders. Civil Squads of Israel has partnered with Australian wildfire expert Timothy Wainwright from Operation Fire Support to tackle this pressing issue. Timothy, with thirty years of firefighting experience and a family history in the field, has a unique blend of expertise in education and fire safety. Despite not

being Jewish, his love for Israel has driven him to assist the country during its times of need.

Timothy first visited Israel in 2009 after witnessing Hamas terrorists send incendiary balloons to burn down Israeli farmland and communities. Shocked by the inadequate equipment and protective gear used by Israeli security squads—who often fought fires in T-shirts and flip-flops—he decided to intervene. He raised funds, took a month off work and travelled to the Gaza envelope to train local squads in wildfire prevention, fire behaviour, suppression and mitigation strategies.

Timothy returned in 2022, once again volunteering his time and expertise, but found that the situation had not improved. Protective equipment was still lacking, and the same outdated methods were in use. Undeterred, he came back in 2024, this time partnering with Civil Squads of Israel amid the ongoing war.

Recognising the urgency, Civil Squads of Israel began planning in February for Timothy’s latest visit. The country had experienced an unusually wet winter, resulting in significant overgrowth in forests and communities. Coupled with the hottest April on record in eighty-five years and widespread evacuations, the conditions created a tinderbox situation where even a small ember could devastate entire communities.

Timothy conducted around one hundred hours of workshops, raising awareness about wildfire prevention and suppression. His expertise is vital, especially since many

civil security squads are first responders on the border, often operating without proper training or protective equipment.

Recently, the government released funds to address the fire crisis, allocating 50 million shekels to purchase two hundred firefighting vehicles for northern communities. However, the provisions in this budget for Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) was not nearly enough. Danny explained, “In each community there can be scores of emergency responders battling the wildfires. Are they expected to be unprotected from burns, smoke inhalation or worse while defending their communities?”

Civil Squads of Israel is now working diligently to bring Operation Fire Support back to Israel for a humanitarian mission aimed at improving fire safety across the nation. This initiative underscores their commitment to enhancing the capabilities and safety of local communities, ensuring they are better equipped to handle emergencies.

By streamlining support and ensuring civil squads are well-equipped and trained, this initiative aims to be civil society’s response and augment the traditional authorities. This grassroots effort would enhance local security and preparedness, reducing pressure on the current system and ultimately contributing to protecting Israel’s citizens and land.

Please visit civilsquadisrael.com and operationfiresupport.org to learn more and get involved.



Above: Timothy Wainwright from Operation Fire Support training the Druze community Peki'in emergency responders. Photo, Lior Grundman

First responders at the site where a rocket fired from Gaza hit a building in Rishon Lezion, October 25, 2023, Yossi Aloni



THE DISPLACED

Sasha Silber

Imagine being told you have a few minutes, maybe an hour, to gather a few necessities for yourself and your loved ones to take with you to cram into a room far away for an indefinite period of time, not knowing if you will ever see your home or possessions intact again.

Imagine deciding between sentimental items and valuables and basics. Imagine your loved ones that you are trying to bring with you are elderly. Imagine worrying about their medications and comforts – or necessities.

Imagine scrambling around the house while the children are scared, and while unable to make contact with your husband who is fighting to protect the border.

We can imagine this based on stories we heard from our grandparents of their parents and grandparents needing to quickly pack and leave — or be ripped away from their childhood homes. We can envision the anguished faces because we have seen films about wars and pogroms our ancestors endured, complete with a soundtrack and mood lighting.

For over 250,000 Israelis living in the Gaza Envelope border towns and the towns bordering Lebanon and Syria in the north, this has been a reality since October 7th. Once the IDF arrived in the south on that horrific day, those not engaged in combat against the terrorists began to rescue survivors of the massacre, gathering anyone they could find with whatever they had on their bodies. Sometimes this meant they were in the same



Daniel, Elroy (5), Osher (13), Benaya (2), Tahel (10), Tohar (6), Shani, Rafael (1), Eliyah (15) on the day of Osher's Bar Mitzvah in Jerusalem

pyjamas they had spent the day hiding in safe rooms, sometimes it meant they didn't have their shoes or glasses. Many were rescued from burning homes, leaving without credit cards or any form of identification, lucky to be alive, even luckier if they were not the only surviving members of their families. Buses of evacuees were arriving all over the country — to Eilat, the Dead Sea, Jerusalem and Tel Aviv. Local communities began to rally together to collect anything and everything the evacuees needed, and quickly. It was still warm outside, but Jerusalem and other areas of the country get cold at night. Optical stores decided to donate glasses to evacuees who needed them. Families parted ways with extra buggies, travel strollers and baby carriers. Local families quickly sorted through their closets for clothing, books and toys their children had outgrown or would part with to donate. Shopping carts in grocery stores were packed with diapers and wipes of all sizes to bring over to hotels where the evacuees were staying. Therapists and social workers from all over Israel took 12-hour volunteer shifts to be present in these hotel lobbies, should anyone need to speak. Government offices tried to quickly supplement temporary identification for survivors who had lost everything. No one had any idea of how long they would be away from home.

It was the end of July when I sat down with Shani Romi in Jerusalem in a little cafe across the street from the hotel that has been her home since October 16, 2023. Shani grew up in Shlomi, a small town just across the border from Lebanon in north-west Israel. Before the war, Shani was getting ready to go back to her job at Noga, a biomedical product manufacturing company, from maternity

leave after having her seventh child, a little baby boy. Her husband Daniel was working at Chanita, an eco-friendly metal manufacturing company. On the evening of October 7th, news of the atrocities from earlier that day in the Gaza Envelope reached the Romi family. The following day, Hezbollah began to fire rockets at civilians in Israel in solidarity with Hamas, putting lives, homes and vital infrastructure in danger. Like much of the country, the following week was spent running in and out of bomb shelters and protected spaces. School was cancelled.

Hezbollah is known to have a much larger stock of even more powerful rockets than Hamas; the other fear was the risk of the border being breached by Hezbollah militants and for residents of the north to experience the cruelty that the residents of the southern kibbutzim had undergone. A decision was made on 16 October for the northern border towns to immediately be evacuated.

Within the hour of the evacuation notice, Daniel was called up for reserve duty to protect his hometown as the head of security. While he quickly prepared his gear, Shani, with the help of her older children, scrambled to grab whatever she felt she needed for a few days for herself and seven children.

When they got to their allocated hotel in Jerusalem, it was the seven of them, ages 4 months through 14 years old with their mum, split into a few rooms. "We arrived in Jerusalem, thinking it would be for a short period. But now it's been more than nine months. Despite the extended stay, we had to adapt quickly to our new circumstances. The hotel, while a refuge, was not equipped for long-term family life," Shani explained, "With my husband rarely able to visit due to his duties in Shlomi, I had to manage everything on my own. He replaced the head of security of our community and was

away for a week at a time. It was suddenly like being a single parent with seven kids, two of which were babies, doing everything, facing all the challenges alone indefinitely."

Shani began to explain how they got through those first few weeks. "The people here accepted us in an amazing way. The mayor did a reception for us, and they brought us a lot of donations at first. Activities were organised for the children, and local residents helped with daily needs. There was a woman from the neighbourhood who took everyone's laundry and distributed it among her friends to help with the washing." She went on to tell me about how her children have been dealing with this situation — they must miss home. "Shlomi is a small town. They would walk around alone, everyone knows each other. Jerusalem is a big city. At first, they were nervous, but eventually, they found confidence. They started riding buses on their own. It felt like we were living abroad. We have been eating all of our meals provided by the hotel — and of course, we are grateful — but my children are small, and they definitely miss my cooking from home."

I can only imagine how challenging it is for Shani to keep up morale for the kids who miss their father when he is up north serving. "I try very hard to make this time something positive, to give my children good memories. There are days when it's really hard when I miss home, but I hold myself together for them. Every day in Jerusalem is a gift. We even celebrated my son's bar mitzvah at the *Kotel*, something I never imagined we would do! Looking back, I see the strength and resilience we've gained. We've learned to adapt, to find joy in the small things and to support each other. This experience has made us stronger."

Shani and her family make up a fraction of a percentage of the families who are still displaced today. Though there have been many who have decided to return to their homes in the south and the north — those who had homes to return to — many others legitimately do not feel safe enough to return. At the time of writing, during tense days following the murder of 12 Druze children playing football in a northern village with much uncertainty, the number of officially displaced Israelis stands at 123,961. There are others, beyond this statistic that are not receiving any compensation from the government, and families choose to come back despite the risks. Half still live in hotels, while others have moved into apartments.

Their future remains uncertain, forced to rely on faith, community support and inner resilience to continue to get through this period until full security is restored on Israel's borders.



DIGITAL WARRIORS

Ella Kenan

Ever since October 7th, my team and I at the BrightMind Community, have been engaged in a fight against the surge of misinformation targeting Israel on social media. Before that day, we were seven individuals each absorbed in our own projects. I was a digital marketing professional and content creator, Livne Dgani was involved with an NGO addressing the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and Dani Bueller was an online educator, among others. Our worlds collided as we witnessed not just physical attacks on Israel, but a coordinated onslaught of digital propaganda.

The " Hamas is ISIS " campaign was our first major initiative, and it proved to be highly effective, creating a Digital-to-Physical impact. By linking Hamas with ISIS, we struck an emotional chord. Everyone remembers ISIS, and by associating Hamas with them, we grabbed people's attention on an emotional level rather than a logical one. It's about being on the offensive, not defensive. This approach got us billions of views and even caught the attention of President Biden. Furthermore, the association with ISIS has led Hamas to refrain from executing Israeli hostages to avoid reinforcing the narrative that they are akin to ISIS.

Our strategy is centred on engaging and

mentoring the community, not just big influencers but also micro-influencers. These are our boots on the ground, our digital army. We need to connect with people in a way they understand and care about. We make it as easy as possible for people to get involved. Five minutes of their time, and we provide everything: the content, the instructions and the support. This is how we build an army of digital warriors ready to combat misinformation.

We saw the need for a coordinated response on social media, especially after witnessing the orchestrated attacks on Israel from both Hamas and Hezbollah, coupled with a highly organised social media campaign against Israel. It was evident that the other side had a well-planned strategy, targeting specific audiences with precise messaging, while the Israeli side had nothing comparable in place. This gap needed to be filled urgently.

Organic growth is a core principle for us. We don't use bots. Liars need bots; truth-tellers need human driven soldiers. Authentic engagement leads to meaningful impact and learning. When people get involved themselves, they learn and understand more deeply. It's a powerful, organic movement. We emphasise the importance of human engagement because it creates a more dynamic and knowledgeable community. People

become doers and understand the cause better, making the movement stronger.

Our mission is to transform global perceptions of Israel through storytelling, robust digital engagement and the strengthening of Jewish identity. By countering disinformation and promoting positive narratives, we aim to secure Israel's legitimacy and support worldwide. We're working on creating a united front of people from different faiths and backgrounds, all working together against radical jihadist terrorism. This isn't just about Israel; it's a global issue that requires a global response. We collaborate with influencers and communities worldwide, from Hindus and Muslims to Yazidis and ex-Iranians, to form a broad coalition against common threats.

Looking to the future, we aim to rebrand Israel, telling our unique story in a way that resonates globally. We have a rich history and diverse culture, and we need to highlight that. It's not just about facts; it's about connecting emotionally with people. We need to tell our story in a way that makes people care. Israel is a unique nation with a diverse population and a history that dates back thousands of years. We are more than just a conflict; we are a vibrant, dynamic society with much to offer the world.



From the horse's mouth: a tweet about the importance of the social media war by Iran's Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei



"Let My People Note" Campaign that resulted in expansion of X's fact-checking tool to Israel

Successfully urged Elon Musk to make X's Community Notes available in Israel, thanks to the collective efforts of the community



Left: Hamas' account on X (Twitter) was taken down following a campaign by the entire community to report it simultaneously. In just 24 hours and with thousands of reports, a clear impact was achieved.

Right: A picture of Bart Simpson writing the message "Hamas is ISIS" over and over again

The *four* pillars of BrightMind

1. CONTENT AND PR

Our content strategy is akin to a PR campaign for a major brand like Coca-Cola or Google. Each piece of content is tailored to resonate with different audiences while maintaining the core message. We focus on creating high-quality, emotionally engaging content that can be easily shared and understood, aiming to set the agenda and narrative. This means being proactive, not reactive. *Hasbara* literally means explaining; what we are doing is putting the other side on the defensive. This involves not only creating compelling visuals and narratives but also understanding the nuances of each target audience. For example, content that works in the United States might not be as effective in Europe or Asia. We continuously adapt our messaging to ensure it remains relevant and impactful across diverse demographics.

2. COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

Community engagement is about more than just sharing content; it's about building a movement called "The 3 B's": Be together. Be informed. Be active. We run our engagement like an educational platform, providing people with clear instructions and the necessary tools to participate. This can be one of a number of calls-for-action, from email campaigns to protect people or hold others accountable, to taking down Hamas or other harmful social accounts, to boosting pro-Israel and pro-West content, to tackle antisemitic content and more. We make it easy: "I only need five minutes of your time – let's go get it!" We give people the training, the 'ammo' and the support they need to be effective advocates. This grassroots approach turns everyday people into digital warriors who can spread our message organically and authentically. As of July, 2024 our Hebrew Channel boasts 15,000 members, and our English Channel, though smaller, is growing steadily. We're also members of various international groups, expanding our in-person reach, globally, to over 30,000 people.

3. EDUCATION AND MENTORING

Education and mentoring are foundational to our efforts. We believe that for people to be effective advocates, they must understand who they are, what they stand for and the historical context of their cause. We are integrated into Israel's educational system through the Geffen programme, allowing us to speak in schools and engage with students directly. Dani and I travel to schools across Israel, teaching about identity and advocacy. We help students understand their history and how to use that knowledge

to build a better future. By connecting the dots between past and present, we empower the next generation to be knowledgeable and passionate defenders of their heritage.

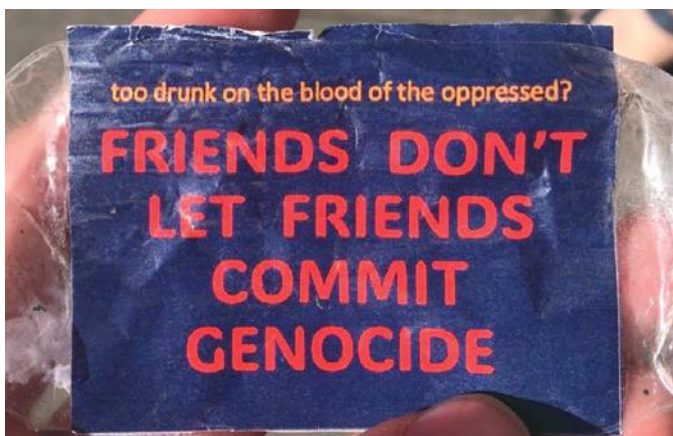
4. RESEARCH AND ADAPTATION

Our research involves constant A/B testing and analysis to understand what works and what doesn't. We study our target audiences to identify their pain points and tailor our content accordingly. This is not a one-size-fits-all approach; what resonates in America might not work in Canada, and vice versa. We also keep a close watch on our opponents' tactics to learn and adapt. The "Let my people note" campaign, for instance, resulted in Elon Musk enabling community notes in Israel. This tool helps combat misinformation effectively. When I met with Musk, he acknowledged our campaign, which was a significant milestone for us. Community notes help reduce the exposure of false posts and demonetise those spreading misinformation, making it a vital tool in our digital arsenal. Our fight is part of a larger struggle against radical jihadist terrorism worldwide, as well as the 'Axis of Evil' — Iran, Russia and China. We need a united front, whether it's Jews, Christians, Hindus or any other group facing similar threats. Together, we can make a significant impact. This is not just about Israel; it's about a global fight against forces that threaten freedom and democracy everywhere. By understanding and addressing the broader context, we can build stronger alliances and make a more significant impact. We need to keep pushing, keep engaging and keep educating. It's about grit and persistence, like water cutting through stone. This is a long-term fight, and we are committed to it 24/7, ready to adapt and evolve as needed to meet the challenges ahead.

Brightmind encompasses tens of thousands of Israelis and supporters worldwide who dedicate 5-10 minutes daily to social media efforts. Their mission is to promote the Israeli narrative, counter antisemitic and false content about Israel and diminish the influence of opinion leaders who spread biased or antisemitic views.

Join the new English-speaking online call-for-action community channel on Telegram





A Blessing in *Disguise*

How antisemitism on campus strengthened my Jewish roots

Sahar Tartak

CONTENT WARNING: *This article contains descriptions of violence.*

I escaped Yale University this summer to Israel, a war-ridden country that ironically felt safer than my college campus. As a loud voice for the Jewish people at Yale, I'm certain many of my peers want me dead. It's eerie to wonder which ones were calling for an "Arab Palestine from the river to the sea," or to "celebrate the resistance's success" after October 7th, or for Jews to stop "drinking the blood of the oppressed." The sense of fear and hostility on Yale's campus is shared by my Jewish

college-aged friends throughout America, and our conversations have brought to light the universality of my experience at Yale. They had all seen the same posters, protests and pain of a newly-Nazified generation of college students, which loves antisemitic brutality and hates Jewish self-defence.

Yet my friends and I didn't just share a sense of struggle. We shared a sense of resilience, a refusal to give falsehood a free pass. So we found avenues of empowerment and redress, channels of advocacy that we didn't know existed. We also deepened our connections to our Jewish roots, learning what it means to be

a Jew. It was this learning, both in Israel and on campus, that gave me the strength to stand up for basic human truths.

The bulk of my time in school this year was spent defending the Jewish people to the best of my ability. From writing articles to running challah bakes, I hoped that my efforts would make young Jews feel less alone. It was the least I could do in return for what other Jews had done for me. My mum came up to campus to cook a Persian Shabbat dinner for over a hundred students. The Chabad house at Yale opened their doors to me for meals when the dining halls felt too hostile. My OU JLIC

rebbeztin learned Jewish law with me once a week. My professors, Jewish and non-Jewish alike, invited me to their Passover Seder and cried with me after October 7th.

Campus only worsened, and the situation grew so drastically that I was invited to testify to Congress about the terror enclave nestled in the Ivy League. At the advice of my Hasidic friend, I began my testimony by dropping a few coins into a charity box to demonstrate the Jewish concept of giving, which brings light into times of darkness.

One night, I went to an antisemitic rally at Yale to document the hate. Upon arrival, I was followed and blockaded by a mob. They waved flashlights in my face and refused to leave me alone. They blasted Arabic rap music about Hamas tunnels and women's corpses. A protestor jabbed my eye with his Palestinian flag. The mob protected him, and an ambulance brought me to the hospital.

For some reason, I was bothered that my classmates disparaged me after the assault, saying that I cried wolf. My friend reminded me that week, "Sahar. God didn't put the Jews on earth so that people would *like* us." Moments of Jewish inspiration on campus kept me going.

Of course, my friend was not only inspiring but also right. Jews reject the victimhood complex and embrace challenges. We are given only what we can overcome. If needed, we are given the strength to overcome it. When we do, we're better than we were before, and the world is, too.

As the school year came to a close, I solidified a plan to gain the strength to overcome. I had already been strengthened by Jewish kindness and learning on campus, so I decided to continue the inspiration in

the best place possible: Israel. I would spend my summer learning full-time at a seminary in Jerusalem. The experience would give me the strength to return to campus with proud Jewish values, standing up for and taking care of my fellow Jews.

When I first arrived in Israel this summer, I dropped my phone in a river. I fished it out and tried to turn it on. No luck.

Because I was in Jerusalem, I wasn't the only one without a smartphone. If anything, I was living like a local. My time in Israel, in part because of these locals and their spirituality, strengthened my Jewish identity and convictions before returning to America. Time and again, they inspired me to refine my character — moments of inspiration I especially tuned into because I had no phone to distract myself with.

One evening, for instance, waiting at a bus stop in Har Nof, a dozen Haredi women and girls stood around and watched the setting sun. There was nothing else to do. I joined them. I hope to bring that mindfulness home with me.

Another night, the buses didn't work. I split a taxi home with another stranded woman. I only had a credit card, and the driver wanted cash. She paid for us both, no questions asked. With some luck, I'll learn from her to be as kind in my home country as she is in hers.

I've been overwhelmed with Shabbat dinner invitations while here, and have double-booked myself on multiple occasions. Families of twelve (or more) have added seats to their tables for me and my friends enthusiastically, irrespective of their economic status. I dream of the day when I can open up my own home and family to fellow Jews in the States, regardless of where they come from.

All these experiences make it easy to feel

how much people care about you here in Jerusalem. You never feel alone. There's no doubt that you can take home the kindness that you learn from the locals if you're intentional about it.

I can't say that I learn the same lessons back home as I do in Israel — which is exactly why this trip was necessary.

At seminary, the aforementioned kindness I witnessed on the streets of Jerusalem came to life in our texts. In the Book of Samuel, for instance, King Saul prepared David to fight Goliath. Saul was a towering figure, and David a mere shepherd. Yet David miraculously fit into Saul's oversized armour, a sign that he would soon take over Saul's throne. Not wanting to upset Saul, David refused to don his armour — a major disadvantage in his upcoming battle against Goliath. Yet a combination of compassion for Saul and faith in God strengthened David's moral convictions, and he willingly took the "risk."

When we parse stories like this in seminary, I am reminded that we stand on the shoulders of giants. It's no wonder I've seen so much courage lately in the Jewish people to do the right thing, from broken IDF soldiers returning to duty, to northern evacuees managing to live with dignity out of Tel Aviv hotel rooms. Their courage is in our spiritual DNA. I was reminded of this over the summer, both inside the classroom and out. And I intend to take these lessons home with me.

You and I, we can't predict the future — hence my jitters to leave Israel and return to campus. But being in this place clarifies things. Just because we don't know what's next, doesn't mean we can't handle it. As a matter of fact, I'm sure we can. It's what we've always done.

Climbing Mount Arbel in the Lower Galilee, Israel



Sahar Tartak with US House Representative Burgess Owens after her speech at US Congress



Focused RESISTANCE

Artists Against Antisemitism

Sasha Silber

In today's digital age, stories and reels flash by in 15-second intervals, rarely giving us a moment to reflect on what we are seeing. This war has made one thing undeniably clear: it is a war against all Jews, no matter where in the world.

Zusha Goldin, a successful celebrity photographer in Los Angeles, has experienced this firsthand and is using his platform to document and combat antisemitism. Known for capturing stunning portraits of Hollywood's A-listers including Sir Patrick Stewart, Ben Stiller, Elle Fanning and many others, he has turned his lens towards a more urgent and personal subject.

Last autumn, he was in Jerusalem for Sukkot, sharing his unique street photography on Instagram. When he turned on his phone after October 7th, when news spread of travesties in Israel, the response to his photography was immediate and horrifying. "Comments flooded in like 'Kill yourself!' and 'Warm the ovens,'" Zusha recalls. These vicious attacks, however, were not new to him. "I received these types of comments as a Jew living in America. So you can't tell me it's just against Israelis. No, I was receiving these comments all the time as a Jew. What was shocking was how quickly after the 7th it got worse."

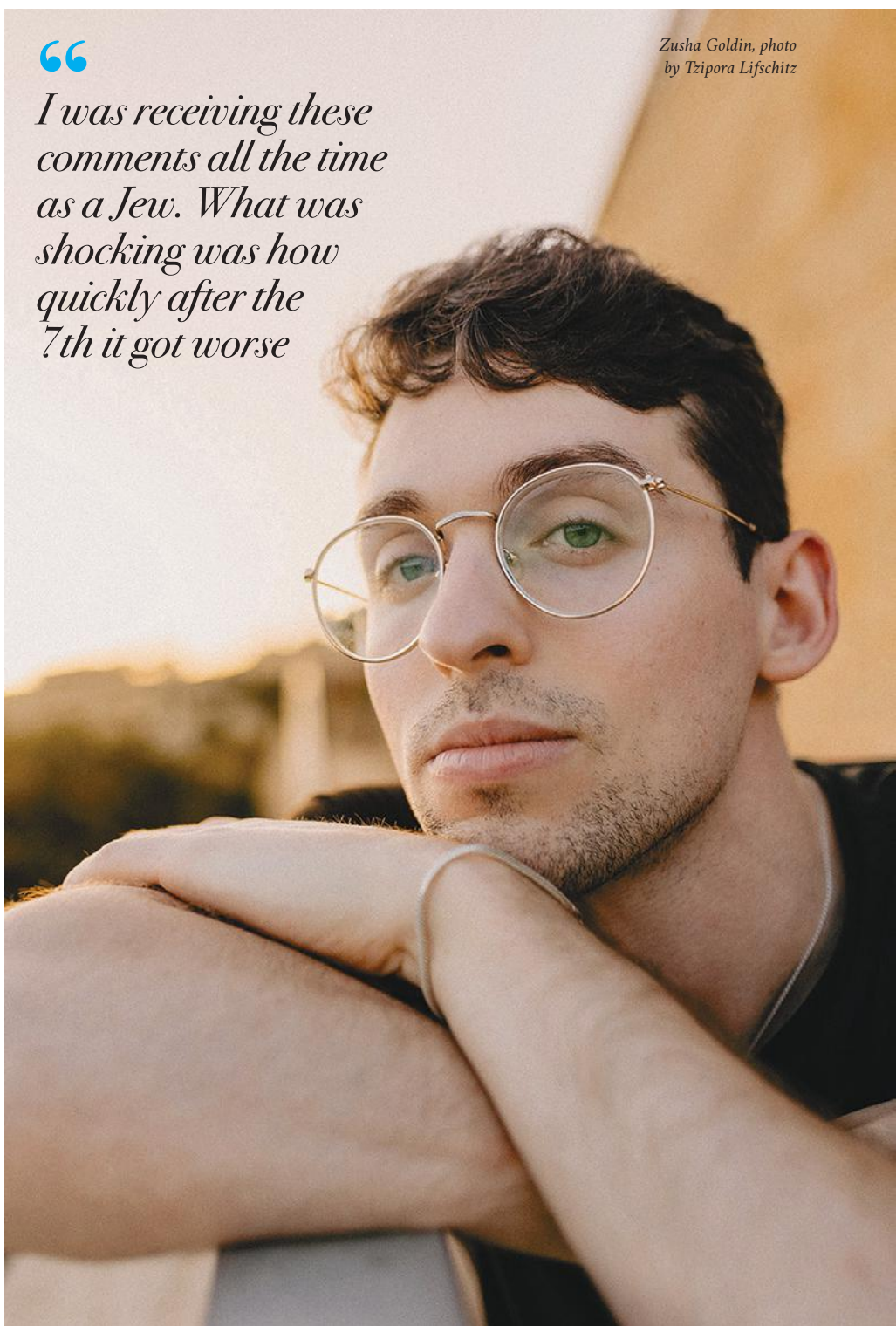
The outpouring of hate wasn't limited to social media. Zusha's visible Jewish identity, marked by his *kippah* and Star of David, made him a target in public spaces. He recounts numerous encounters where he faced antisemitic threats and insults. "In 2021, when Hamas was firing rockets into Israel, I was very careful with my words on social media. I didn't want to have an Israeli flag anywhere. I would omit the word Israel," he explains, highlighting the precarious balance he tried to maintain to avoid backlash.

However, the events of October 7th marked a turning point. "Now, I'm very

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I was receiving these comments all the time as a Jew. What was shocking was how quickly after the 7th it got worse

Zusha Goldin, photo
by Tzipora Lifschitz



Ginnifer Goodwin



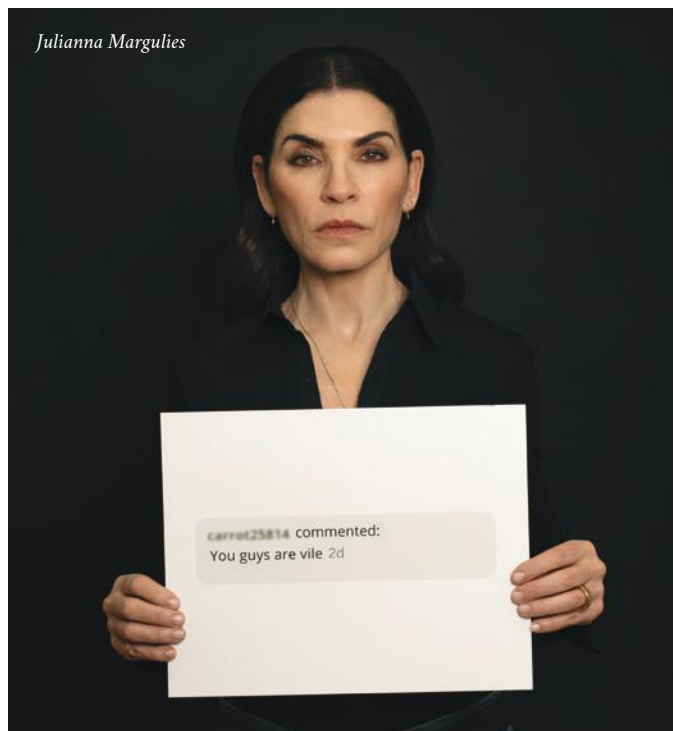
Hen Mazzig



Jonah Platt



Julianna Margulies



outspoken. I see how people are distancing themselves from me. People who liked me and were friends with me, they just don't want to get involved," he says. The isolation is difficult, but Zusha refuses to be silent. He decided to channel his frustration and energy into his photography, creating a powerful statement against antisemitism.

Zusha put out a call to Jewish students in Southern California. "Any Jewish student who feels alone and unsafe on their campus, DM me. I will come to your school and photograph you wearing your Judaism with pride—your Star of David, kippah, clothes with Hebrew lettering...." The response was

overwhelming. "Then I thought, let's take it a step further. Let's put it on display and invite the public. That's how I launched an exhibit." The exhibit was the catalyst in beginning Artists Against Antisemitism.

Next, Zusha began working on a new exhibit, featuring portraits of celebrities and influencers holding placards displaying viciously antisemitic comments that Zusha and his friends have received—shocking, hateful and threatening messages that highlight the pervasive nature of this bigotry. Though some celebrities posed for the photos, including Tony-winning Broadway performer Jonah Platt, singer-dancer-influencer Montana

Tucker, Emmy-winning actress Julianna Margulies, the popular actor Adam Rose; many others refused to endanger their careers.

Still, a packed crowd showed up for a star-studded event in Los Angeles for the exhibition, and plans for more projects and exhibitions are in the works.

Zusha's fearless initiative with Artists Against Antisemitism underscores the idea that everyone can fight this war using their individual talents and skills. One doesn't have to be in Israel or holding a weapon to fight back. By being confident, vocal and exposing the truth, people can combat hatred and feel empowered in their efforts.

בס"ד



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JEWISH FUTURES



Cultivating *Connection*

From Mt. Kilimanjaro to Southern Israel, explore updates from Jewish Futures' charities like Aish UK, JRoots, FJL and GIFT, including a special report on their recent fashion show, Beyond the Label. Don't miss a spotlight interview with Rabbi Daniel Rowe, reflecting on 25 years with Aish UK.

STRONGER *Together*

Jessica Finger

Did you know?
Jewish Futures organisations have facilitated 23 solidarity/volunteering trips to Israel since October 7th!

Amid unprecedented challenges, the Jewish Futures family of organisations united to support, connect and strengthen community ties. Through impactful trips and volunteer programs, they brought together students and professionals worldwide, fostering connections, inspiring leadership and providing crucial assistance during these difficult times

ISRAEL SOLIDARITY TRIPS

This year, the Jewish Futures family of organisations achieved a significant milestone by organising 23 trips to Israel during a crucial time. Aish UK led six immersive trips for students and young professionals, including three cohorts of campus students on two-week journeys filled with volunteering, cultural activities and impactful encounters with survivors of October 7th, displaced Israelis and Holocaust survivors. GIFT organised five dedicated volunteer missions, providing community groups with action—packed itineraries to support Israel. JRoots facilitated eight trips that combined Jewish heritage journeys with volunteering. Additionally, FJL brought four groups of young Jews to Israel for a unique program that blended volunteering and internships, offering participants a glimpse into living and working in Israel while aiding local communities.

GIVEFEST attendees cheer together after completing the 'Beit Guvrin Caves' inflatable challenge



A GIVEFEST volunteer carefully arranges artwork created by children at the 'Kotel Kindness Pledges' stall

ISRAEL AT HOME

GIFT hosted its 4th annual GIVEFEST over the summer, drawing an impressive 850 attendees of all ages, supported by 80 dedicated volunteers. The Israel-themed family fun-day featured various interactive stalls such as the Kotel Kindness Pledge, Bring Them Home Badges, Candles for *Chayaleinu* and the Give/Take Game. The carnival zone was a major attraction with rides and inflatables inspired by famous Israeli landmarks, including the Inflatable Mount Sinai, Mediterranean Sea Bouncy Castle and Masada Base Jump. The event also included the “People Who Help Us” zone, where essential community services like Hatzolah offered demonstrations and interactions. Additional activities included Shrink Art for Shalva, Fill a Plane with Kindness by El Al, Shawarma Seasoning with Ta’amim and creating a giant mural for Kibbutz Alumim with Gift BM. Children collected stamps at each stall, earning spectacular balloon creations, ensuring a fun and educational day for all.

REACHING NEW HEIGHTS

19 dedicated participants climbed Africa's highest peak, Mount Kilimanjaro, to support GIFT's vital community work. This remarkable group was led by Rabbi Sandor Milun, GIFT's Managing Director, a passionate advocate for developing opportunities and engaging young people within our community. It not only tested their physical limits, but also raised substantial funds to support GIFT's work.

Starting their 7-day adventure via the scenic Lemosho Route, the team traversed diverse terrains, culminating in the arctic conditions near the summit. A particularly memorable moment for the group was celebrating Shabbat above the clouds. This was a true highlight of their ascent, bringing spiritual enrichment to their physical challenge. The ultimate test came as they ascended the steepest part of the mountain by torchlight, peaking at the triumphant summit at 5,895 metres.

The descent, though arduous, was a time for reflection and celebration. The participants concluded their trek with a celebratory dinner and a heart-warming 'gifting' of clothes, stationary and toys collected by the participants and given to the local community.



Even on an exhilarating hike, on the peak of Mt. Kilimanjaro, we do not forget the hostages

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This journey was not just about reaching the summit but about pushing ourselves beyond our limits to support GIFT, an organisation that is close to every one of us on this trek. Each step we took was a step towards a better future for those we inspire and support

Rabbi Sandor Milun



Snapshots from the trek up to the peak



GIFT participants pause during their ascent of Mount Kilimanjaro



RESPITE AND RENEWAL

Shelanu, an organisation dedicated to building a vibrant community for Israelis living abroad, recently organised an impactful ski retreat that has left a lasting impression on all who participated. This retreat, set against the backdrop of the French Alps in Chamonix Mont-Blanc, was more than just a ski trip; it was a week-long journey of healing, connection and empowerment.

Since the traumatic events of October 7th, life for many Israelis has been marred by grief and stress. The participants on this trip included 33 individuals, most from the community Shelanu has built in the UK, but also some survivors of the horrific Nova massacre and soldiers who have recently fought in Gaza. For them, this retreat offered a much-needed opportunity to step away from their struggles and reconnect with themselves and with others. The trip included healing yoga sessions for physical and emotional relief, dynamic ski lessons, comfortable accommodations and delicious food that nourished both body and soul.



Shelanu trip in the French Alps



FJL students at Bloomberg, NYC



Getting ready for Shabbat candlelighting with Elisheva Newman

BACK TO THE USA

Nearly 30 students from the UK's top universities joined FJL for a Jewish leadership programme in New York and Washington DC. These participants, representing diverse industries such as law, finance, property, start-ups and nonprofits, engaged in exclusive meetings and experiences to inspire the next generation of young Jewish leaders.

Highlights included a professional development session at CitiBank, meeting an owner of one of the largest US shopping malls, and hearing from Shabbos Kestenbaum, who is suing Harvard University for its inaction against antisemitism. They also met Malcolm Hoenlein, Executive Vice Chairman of the Conference of Presidents of Major American Jewish Organizations and Rabbi Aryeh Lightstone, former senior adviser to the US ambassador to Israel. A visit to the White House included a meeting with Anne Neuberger, National Security Advisor to President Biden.

Led by Rabbi Jonny and Elisheva Newman, Rabbi Daniel Rowe, Ben Thwaites, Rabbi Jack Cohen and Emma Katz, the students joined local communities for Shabbat, volunteered at the Israel Centre and a homeless shelter and explored Jewish values and the challenges facing the Jewish people and Israel.

JEWISH JOURNEYS

In July, JRoots led Year 9 students from JFS and Yavneh schools on an inaugural trip to Alsace and Basel. Nearly 200 students, teachers and guides spent a week delving into the rich Jewish history of Eastern France, meeting prominent figures of Alsatian Judaism and exploring the region's highlights. The packed itinerary combined learning, cultural experiences and the natural beauty of the Vosges.

Students reflected on the global movements of Jewish communities and their enduring aspiration to return to Israel. The journey culminated in Basel, at the site of the first Zionist Congress led by Theodor Herzl in 1897, providing a poignant conclusion.



Year 9 students from JFS and Yavneh proudly display their artwork during a JRoots trip to Basel, Switzerland

MAKING A DIFFERENCE

This year, Aish UK coordinated a series of immersive trips to Israel for singles and students. This summer has seen three campus students' cohorts experiencing two-week journeys filled with volunteering, cultural activities and powerful encounters with October 7th Survivors and soldiers as well as Holocaust survivors. Although the itineraries for each trip vary, they all include a mix of experiences unique to Israel as well as volunteering opportunities making a tangible difference to the people of Israel.

The first trip kicked off with a tour of Jerusalem, followed by a session with Holocaust survivor Yosef Lefkowitz. The group continued on to cook and deliver meals for displaced families. One of the most moving moments of the trip was a barbecue they hosted for reserve soldiers, bringing their week of giving and connecting full circle.

The Aish UK trips have proven to be more than just a summer adventure; they are a journey of personal growth, social and cultural connection and community service. These trips are a testament to the power of volunteering, the importance of connecting with one's heritage and the impact of stepping out of one's comfort zone to make a difference in the world.

BUDAPEST SHABBATON

Aish UK recently hosted an incredible Shabbaton in Budapest, bringing together 180 secondary school students from a diverse array of schools including Immanuel, Yavneh, JFS, JCOSS, Haberdashers' Boys and Girls, City of London and North London Collegiate, among others. The students, who spent their summer interrailing across Europe after finishing their A-levels, joined Aish UK for an unforgettable Friday night dinner in the heart of Budapest.

The event began with the students gathering in the courtyard outside the shul for drinks, followed by a meaningful Kabbalat Shabbat service held at the historic Kazinczy Synagogue, built in 1913. The presence of over 180 attendees marked the largest gathering in the synagogue since before the Holocaust. Following the service, the group moved to the Hanna Garden Restaurant, which is part of the synagogue complex, where Friday night dinner took place, with tables covering the expanse of the courtyards. The atmosphere was electric, filled with good food, songs, socialising and a profound sense of unity and community. Ben, a Yavneh student, shared, "The Friday night dinner was a big highlight of the trip. It was really special to all be together to celebrate Shabbat in a different country."

The evening extended beyond the meals, with students staying to socialise, play board games with fellow students and the Aish staff. The Aish UK team, led by Rabbi Rafi Stemmer and Rabbi Ari Kayser, curated an incredible weekend, creating a Jewish haven for the students and bringing them all together in one place for a special weekend in between a summer of travelling across Europe. "It was beautiful to see students from a variety of backgrounds, affiliations and communities, uniting to spend their Friday night together," Rabbi Stemmer reflected. "In a city where 80 years ago Jewish life was obliterated, we demonstrated that the Jewish people are vibrant, alive and committed to continue spreading our eternal message of light, peace and hope to the world."

“

The last time this synagogue has seen such joy, with this many children, was in the pre-Holocaust era

Gabor Keszler, President of the Hungarian Jewish Community



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180 students in the Kazinczy Street Synagogue in Budapest, Hungary, ready to welcome Shabbat



Just a taste of the atmosphere

Photos from GIFT's fashion show, Beyond the Label, by Jeremy Coleman



Leah Levenson walks her cousin Hannah Levy down the runway to deliver a moving speech in sign language

CELEBRATING BEAUTY BEYOND THE LABEL

Yissca Weisz

For the third year running, this July GIFT hosted an inclusive fashion show, 'Beyond the Label,' that showcases body positivity, female empowerment and inner beauty in the most upbeat way. Over 300 women and girls gathered at Kinloss Synagogue to applaud and celebrate 30 'models,' as they took to a runway of dreams.

Co-created by two Hasmonean students Adina Rosenstein and Shira Gubbay as part of the GIFT Charity Incubator Course, for the past two years Adina has been instrumental in organising the show, approaching local fashion brands, taking care of styling needs and clothes fittings for the models. Nine clothing brands plus several accessories retailers and wig designers contributed their products to the evening, and on the day, twenty-one local hair and makeup artists donated their time and skills, ensuring that every model felt like a queen.

GIFT's energetic Programme Director Shira Joseph spearheaded the evening, providing fun facts and inspiring information about each model before they appeared on the runway. This allowed the audience to connect with each model, enabling true moments of acceptance, support and admiration as girls, teens and ladies of all walks of life walked the catwalk.

A highlight of the evening was when Hannah Levy, a 34-year old woman with Down Syndrome, abandoned her wheelchair to walk the runway on her own two feet, supported by her cousin, Leah Levenson. Hannah delivered her speech through sign language and the audience listened to her cousin translate, spreading a message of kindness and happiness. It was evident how excited she was to be wearing a special dress and to be making people smile.

Feel-good music was provided by the spirited Jayli Music, each song carefully chosen to reflect the model's story, message or vibe.

In true GIFT style, this evening was one of giving, providing a safe space for women to shine and feel embraced, to stand up and cheer and be cheered for, as personal and rousing stories were shared, of combating communal hunger through local distributions to thirty-two food banks since Covid-19, battling a *gett* refusal for eight years and struggles with body image and hair loss. There was not a dry eye in the audience as vulnerability and bravery became intertwined.

PIVOTING

Facing unprecedented challenges and a drop in demand to visit Israel, FJL innovated to bring people to Israel this summer and strengthen the FJL community. Beyond the established internship program, FJL developed volunteer programs for alumni worldwide.

Young professionals from the UK, USA, Canada, Australia, Germany, Bulgaria, Spain, France, Italy and Mexico participated in an intense one- to two-week volunteer program. They supported local farmers, prepared food for soldiers and organised events for evacuees. University students from Canada, Australia, the USA and the UK spent six weeks in Israel, balancing top-level internships in Tel Aviv with deep community engagement and addressing broader Jewish issues.

Led by FJL educators Rabbi Dr. Effie Kleinberg, Ben Thwaites and Jen Van Amerongen, the groups immersed themselves in Israeli society, participating in eight Shabbatons across various communities. They met survivors of the October 7th massacre and soldiers involved in the war effort. Highlight speakers included Colonel Richard Kemp, Michael Eisenberg, Rabbi Doron Perez, Fleur Hassan-Nahoum, Rabbi Keleman, David Mencer, Golan Vach, Paula Weiss and Miriam Fuld.



FJL participants pause during their volunteer work in Israel



Charlotte Korchak of StandWithUs addresses FJL students in Jerusalem

Engaging the Next Generation

Rabbi Daniel Rowe's Perspective on Jewish Education

Rabbi Ari Kayser

As Rabbi Daniel Rowe prepares to move from the UK to Israel, Rabbi Ari Kayser interviews him to reflect on his 25 years with Aish UK, exploring his insights on Jewish education and the challenges facing British Jewry.

It's been 25 years! Let's go back to the beginning. When did you first get involved with Aish UK?

I first got involved as a *madrich* (counselor) on summer programmes in the mid-1990s. The research was starting to come out about the global rates of intermarriage and the global assimilation rates. There was a Jerusalem Report article at the time titled, "Anglo Jewry, An Endangered Species?" There'd been some research by a Harvard professor suggesting that the Jewish people were essentially going to cease to function as a recognisable entity between 2020 and 2090. Rabbi Sacks had written a book, *Will We Have Jewish Grandchildren?* There was this major question of what sort of future will there be for the Jewish people. Outside of the Orthodox community, the Jewish world was considered very likely to disappear pretty quickly.

When I heard about Aish programmes, where people can come and learn in a non-judgmental environment that was having a positive impact on continuity, I thought I'd love to be involved in that. I saw the incredible impact of those Summer Fellowships programmes and when I came back from university, I got myself involved. I used to go around different campuses giving talks and creating events and *Shabbatonim*. At a certain point I realised we can make a difference.

So many young Jews had a certain apathy



Rabbi Daniel Rowe engages a group of young professionals for an evening of learning. Photo by Leivi Saltman Photography

or went through negative experiences and Judaism just didn't speak to them. To me, it was just because they hadn't really tasted the beauty and the power and the depth of what Judaism has to offer. I thought, we owe it to 3,000 years of Jewish heritage and all that we've been through together to at least help young Jews understand.

Growing up in Manchester, did any aspects of your childhood, family or upbringing influence you to consider these profound questions at such a young age? You were only 18 at the time!

My parents were very involved in the Joint Israel Appeal. As a child, I remember Russian

Jewry and the fundraising that was being done to support them. When Chief Rabbi Jakobovits and Chief Rabbi Sacks came to Manchester, they used to stay in my parents' house, so I got to hear a lot of their conversations and they were very much oriented to this question.

I'd been a very philosophically-sceptical child. I was asking questions in a way that I was not getting what I felt was a satisfactory answer and it made me just doubt the whole thing. So I did a lot of my own exploring and thinking and discovering that on the one hand, there was this very rich, deep, profound and compelling Jewish philosophy and wisdom, and on the other hand, I could still relate to the idea that in the free market of ideas, it was very easy for a young Jew, even from a strong background, to grow up and think Judaism doesn't really have much to say. I realised we have got to change the priority of what we teach.



Looking back, can you share a memorable moment from all of these years with Aish UK?

I think it was probably the final banquet of the very first trip when people got up and spoke about what they gained from it. It was staggering to hear so many people from different backgrounds talk very openly about the struggles they'd had all the way. They had written off Judaism in their life and in just a few weeks they opened doors for themselves.

It's very hard to explain the emotion I was going through. It was like somebody got up and literally used the words in the title of a book, *My Friends, We Were Robbed*. Why did no one tell us all this? Why did no one show us all this? It felt as if, those of us who have been blessed with a real exposure to what Judaism really is, have got an obligation to reach out, because no matter their background, there was a unanimous feeling of, "if only we knew".

What would you say is the biggest challenge facing British Jewry today?

There are several challenges I see facing British Jewry, though the first is not uniquely a challenge for British Jewry. All Jews are facing the fact that we live in a thought climate that is negative toward religion, hostile to Israel and where belief in God and belief in the justness of the State of Israel are mocked and attacked online. For a long time the bedrock of Jewish

identity was Israel. Today, for most young people, it's a drag on Jewish identity. Once upon a time, the more connected you were with Israel, the more likely you were to engage with Judaism. Today it's the other way around. The more Jewishly you engage, the more likely you are to be willing to defend Israel.

The next challenge is that our homes are often not as strong as they could be. Either marriages themselves are weak or the Jewish commitment or knowledge in the home is not that of what our grandparents were. So the ability to pass on that Jewish identity to the next generation is more difficult.

The final challenge is that we live in a digital world. That universe is inhabited and dominated by people with extremely hostile views towards religion and towards Israel. Forget explicit antisemitism, which is enormous on platforms like TikTok which young Jews are on, but even the more cynical and negative attitudes that pervade social media pose a threat. We are fighting against an extremely powerful global thought climate, one that is often contradictory to the values and ideals that are needed for Jewish continuity.

What role do you envision technology playing in the future of Jewish outreach and education?

For thousands of years, Judaism was excluded from the global conversation. Now, thanks to technology, not only are we invited to the table, but we also have a voice that will be

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We are fighting against an extremely powerful global thought climate, one that is often contradictory to the values and ideals that are needed for Jewish continuity

heard worldwide, whether we like it or not.

As technology gets stronger and stronger, our ability to give people access to that which would have been inaccessible is now a reality. One day, this technology will change the way we study Talmud, for example, and ensure language is no barrier. In the interim, Jewish educational foundations and organisations have to consider how to use technology to the maximum potential.

At the same time, we have to also realise that a lot of what Judaism offers is not technologically-available. The natural warmth, the soul, the love, the power of the Jewish family, the Jewish community, the power of being part of the story of 3,000 years of Jewish history, the depth of touching the godliness of every soul and teaching people how to do that themselves—that cannot yet be done online. We need to enhance technology with the human depth found in Jewish community experiences, like the Shabbat table or communal singing, to offer young Jews the best opportunities to discover their place in the great Jewish story.

You are known for addressing difficult questions in various formats, from debating atheists to Q&A sessions with students and speaking out in short online videos. What are the most common questions you receive from students?

Right now, there are a lot of questions about Israel. In general, it will depend on the person, but typically they involve contradictions in the way society thinks about something and the way the Torah either appears to think about or actually does think about it.

Sometimes that can be scientific or a question about archeology or Bible criticism, and it's an intellectual contradiction between the way parts of academia think about issues

and the foundations of Jewish belief. Other times it's sociological, like LGBTQ+ questions, or the role of women in society. In all cases, I try to be honest about the Torah opinion and about the premises that society is built on, and to really understand where the primary point of divergence is. How do we look at the same data and reach different conclusions?

We may be carrying a lot of assumptions that Judaism doesn't carry. We may have misconceptions about what Judaism actually believes even though we were brought up "Jewishly". In every generation, Torah forms an alternative voice to whatever the dominant narrative of a society is, whatever its assumptions are. For example, in the West, the individual is the centre of reality. Now, Judaism was often more individualistic than a lot of the societies around it, because it placed a lot of weight on the value of the individual, but it placed enormous weight on the value of family, community, tradition and society in a way that the modern world doesn't. Often you've got to work out where we actually diverge on any given issue? What does Judaism really say? Often, our view of it is incorrect. Additionally, we don't have to assume that society's got all the right answers.

If a new question emerges that I haven't looked into, I try to look into it. What are the assumptions that underlie it? What does the raw data say? What are the moral issues? Where do they come from? What are the premises that underpin all that? And when you've done all of that, then you can usually get into the guts of where a Jewish perspective would differ, where either our understanding of Judaism is incorrect, or where there really is a clash of values. By exploring the root, we can really see that different premises and different assumptions will lead to different conclusions. My aim is not to try to make up people's minds for them, but I want to share ideas they may not have known.

Underpinning many of these intellectual questions are often deeper questions that are much more existential, like, "why am I here?", or "what is the meaning of my life?" So the question may be phrased as an intellectual question, but really they are asking if Judaism is where I'm going to find my place in the world? So whilst we may want to give certain intellectual insights and tackle questions on that level, we also want to share how Judaism is the voice of the soul.

That is why somebody could say consciously, "I feel like I don't believe in anything. I feel part of this Jewish family, and it's more than just being part of any old family. There is something on the intangible level that I always want to be a part of." I often see that the intellectual process is often just giving permission to a process that is a natural awakening, a space that lies in every single Jew.

You have taught a lot about the fundamentals of Judaism, misconceptions, archaeology and the existence of God. What is the next big area that you would like to study and explore?

I am interested in exploring the question of the relationship between different faiths. All of humanity is part of a big story and the Jewish people are a critical part of that story. Historically, we have struggled a lot with other religions because of the nature of the State of Israel, where it is geographically located and the narratives that have been built around it. The conflicts we are in now are religious, or at least have religious components to them, and at the moment, everyone's looking to solve these problems, ignoring the religious dimension. The place of the Jewish people amongst the nations of the world, specifically Islam, I think this is a very big burning issue.

I am also interested in exploring technology. Not just how we avoid the dangers of technology, but how do we envision a new future for humanity? Technology is going to offer us possibilities that we could not dream of. Things that the prophets or the rabbis of the Talmud have told us and we just thought were metaphors, might become literally true. When they said in the future pork will become kosher, it may well happen. Or 'the wolf will lie down with the lamb', these things could become literally true at some point, as well as metaphorically true. The real point is that technology is going to offer us an ability to change what a human is. We are future-oriented people who have always had a vision of a radically different humanity. Every week we enter Shabbat, where we travel into a state of what the world will look like when you don't

need to work anymore. At the moment, people are talking about how to rein in technology, but they are not asking where technology could take us? What could humanity look like? How can it bring us more into a state of oneness? We have to get ahead of the conversation and not behind it.

What inspired your decision to move to Israel?

I have always dreamed of being in Israel. It is something that our ancestors would have given anything for. I have been in England for the Jewish community and so long as I felt I could have a bigger impact here than anywhere else, I was here. This year I became convinced that there is an opportunity to project Torah out of Jerusalem. And I couldn't say no. If I believe there's a chance to make a greater impact, I am excited to pursue that opportunity.

God tells Abraham, "lech lecha", be on a journey, and go to a land which I will show you, which you can't even see now. I think that means that you have to always hear the voice that says, be on the journey. You don't stay somewhere just because you were there yesterday. Not physically and not in terms of our own spiritual growth. I'm always asking myself, "where does God want me next on the journey?" I believe when you are open to that question, the opportunities come. Thankfully, a tremendous opportunity came. More important than the messenger, although that's also very important, is the message itself. Ultimately we would like every Jew to be a messenger. The digital world offers that possibility for everyone to find their unique voice.

To stay connected with Rabbi Daniel Rowe and explore his insightful articles, videos and latest updates, visit his official website at rabbidanielrowe.com



Both images: Rabbi Daniel Rowe engages a group of young professionals for an evening of learning.
Photos by Leivi Saltman Photography



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INTROSPECTION



Food for *Thought*

As we approach a particularly poignant High Holy Day cycle after a year of national tragedy, insight and reflection seem fitting. Discover an emotive poetic piece on pain and hope, an analysis of the High Holy Day cycle and a practical guide, as well as thought-provoking articles on debate and justice.

Chasing the *Horizon*

Reflections on October 7th

Rabbi Eli Birnbaum

October the 7th, 2023. Simchat Torah, 5784. A day now branded into the consciousness of our nation for eternity.

When I was approached to put pen to paper and write this piece, my heart sank. The notion that I, sitting in my pampered and comfortable diaspora bubble, could ever be considered worthy, let alone capable of capturing the feelings and emotions looming on the anniversary's first horizon of the greatest tragedy suffered by our people since the Holocaust, strikes an empty and desperate irony.

I found myself dwelling on a saying taught by my infinitely more illustrious namesake, the Tannaic sage Rabbi Eliezer:

"If all the oceans were ink, and all the reeds therein quills, and the heavens and earth parchment, and all of humanity scribes, [still] we would not manage to write it down."

Midrash Shir Hashirim Rabbah, 1:3

What can possibly be written? What can possibly be said that won't ring hollow, words turned to ash as they are spoken, evaporating in a sigh of despairing inadequacy?

To commemorate the catastrophe that befell and continues to haunt our brothers and sisters on that dark day is to acknowledge its realness. And it cannot be real. It belongs to a realm beyond our comprehension, beyond our emotional range. It cannot belong here on

Earth. We are too frail, too fragile, too finite to carry its pain.

If all the oceans were tears, and all the reeds therein quills, and the heavens and earth parchment, and all of us as one unified people the composers of a eulogy, [still], we would not manage to write it down, to do justice to the precious souls who were lost, to the families torn apart.

To write about it is to make it real. Better then perhaps to emulate Jonah, and flee into the storms of a lie, to sleep in solitude in the bowels of the sinking ship of denial.

But October 7th was and is real. It casts us overboard, swallows us whole and forces us to face the truth, no matter how painful it is.

Thousands of years ago, our ancestors confronted a similar crisis. Jerusalem ransacked, the Temple in ruins, they dragged their chained feet step by step as they headed north-east, the long road out of Zion, the long road to Babylon and exile.

And as they walked, they glanced back at that once glorious city, the 'joy of all the land', now a dot shrinking on the horizon, and they asked a question that has reverberated throughout our history. It was the question the prophet Jeremiah chose to open his heartrending prophecy of the exile. It was the question we found ourselves asking on the morning of October 7th.

How?

And as they reached the banks of the Tigris, exhausted, starving and broken, the exiles to Babylon did something quite un-Jewish.

They started to give up.

"By the rivers of Babylon, there we sat, and we wept, as we remembered Zion. There, on the trees, we hung our instruments, never to play them again. How can we sing God's song on foreign soil?"

Psalms 137

Their question, mirroring Jeremiah's unheeded warnings, found its echo on Simchat Torah, two and a half thousand years later, as we stood in *Shul* wondering: 'How can we dance? How can we sing? How can we celebrate,



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Our tradition is coloured not so much by giants of faith who saw reason to be positive when all around them collapsed, but by people who gazed defeat in the face and didn't blink

knowing that whatever snippets of news we've heard are but the tip of a hellish iceberg? How can we be happy if our smiles are little more than a feeble façade masking our pain?

Just as they stood at the banks of the Tigris, we stood across the world as different time zones awoke to a nightmare and – united in shock and grief – for a moment we, like them, gave up.

For years, decades in fact, I'd assumed that those exiles in Babylon had done precisely that: hung up their instruments to be retired and never used again. What words of comfort could possibly be offered? What lyric, stanza or chorus could ever bring Zion back to life?

But then I saw the response to October 7th.

I saw a nation rally together. I saw mind-blowing *chessed* (acts of kindness) and volunteering projects, fundraisers shifting millions overnight, flights filled with thousands of reservists who had dropped everything to testify to the world that Jonah taught us well:

When times are tough, we don't disappear to the bowels of a ship. We seize the helm, force it hard to port and sail back, back into the maelstrom of agony, eyes blinded by the salty mixture of rain and tears, to confront the storm head-on. And if we are thrown overboard or capsized, what of it? We will

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*Jewish happiness is hope.
Hope that even the darkest
storm will pass, and the sun
will shine again*



swim there instead. And if our strength fails us and muscles and hearts aching, we begin to drown, what of it? Others will take our arms and carry us onward.

So I read Psalm 137 again. It takes familiar twist:

“How can we sing God’s song on foreign soil?

If I forget you, Jerusalem, may my right hand forget its strength.”

Here, the medieval sage Rabbi Avraham ibn Ezra, whose travels across the Diaspora are the stuff of legend, makes a brief but fascinating observation:

Our pledge to constantly remember Jerusalem is equally a pledge for us to constantly feel the pain we felt as we “sat and wept as we remembered Zion”.

This is remarkable. Even though it hurts like hell to recall that which we lost, we will never stop recalling it. The easy way is to respond like all other nations when confronted with a crossroads in history and give up, melting into the blissfully indifferent slumber of national and spiritual anonymity.

Consider this:

Is it not logical to forget the past, to move on and put it firmly into life’s rear-view mirror and resist the urge to glance back? Can any amount of remembrance change what happened? Can vigils and memorials bring back that which was lost?

No. It can’t. But that misses the point of what it means to be Jewish. You see, forgetting may allow us to descend to the bowels of the ship and fall into the deepest of sleeps, a night not haunted by the nightmares that stalked us there in the first place. But forgetting is kryptonite, Samson without hair. It strips us of the strength and resolve needed to confront and overcome the struggles ahead, to change the very thing that made the pain possible. The Psalmist knows this well:

“If I forget you, Jerusalem, may my right hand forget its strength.”

And so, the Jewish response to pain, quite incredibly, is to run headlong back into it. Doing what must be done, using our last ounce of strength to soothe the pain and heal the wounds of those around us.

From Abraham walking defiantly into a fiery furnace, to Rachel sacrificing her marriage to spare Leah’s honour, to Moses marching into Pharaoh’s palace for a confrontation that defied logic, to Ruth abandoning a life of luxury to care for an ageing, destitute widow, our tradition is coloured not so much by giants of faith who saw reason to be positive when

all around them collapsed, but by people who gazed defeat in the face and didn’t blink. There they stood, and here we stand. A people staring down eras, empires and entire civilisations without flinching; undimmed, undaunted against the shattering of the world.

What defines us and marks us unique is not our ability to find happiness where there appears to be none. It is our profound understanding that happiness is predicated on something far, far deeper. Something that requires us to chase the horizon, to sing, to dance, to rejoice and to do all of this despite the pain and the tears. Because to give up the chase, to abandon the dancefloor, to forget the chorus, to forget Jerusalem, is to forget the true foundation of happiness: Hope.

Herein lies what I consider to be a life-changing idea. We tend to think of happiness in extremely western terms, intensely focused on the here-and-now: If there is reason to be cheerful right now, we are happy. If there is none, we are sad. In the consumer-obsessed culture of the West, where everything we encounter is there to be purchased or taken, there to be reacted to, it is as if we must seek permission to allow ourselves to feel happiness. Did I buy the shoes I wanted? Did I get the promotion I coveted? Did I achieve the grade I was hoping for? If you answered ‘yes’ to any or all of the above, you have permission to smile.

Our happiness is therefore dangerously reactive and self-centred; hugely dependent on the circumstances around us aligning in a perfectly tailor-made way with our subjective needs. Perhaps this is why we struggle so much to share happiness with others; because Western happiness, driven by algorithms and filters, is intensely personal. To go a step further: Perhaps this goes some way to explaining the mental health crisis ravaging our society and especially our youth. Our happiness is reactive.

This is the entire thrust of the book we are soon to read in *Shul* on Sukkot. Indeed, it was the book we read on that fateful morning of October 7th.

Kohelet.

In it, the wise and powerful King Solomon utterly eviscerates the western model of happiness. He has everything money could buy, denying himself no pleasure and sparing not an ounce of indulgence. He rules over a prosperous kingdom in an era of peace and security.

And still, he isn’t happy.

Because the Jewish model of happiness is not reactive. It does not focus on the immediate present.

Jewish happiness belongs in the future; to a horizon not yet chased, a circle not yet danced, a poem not yet sung. We acknowledge this every

time we recite Grace After Meals on Shabbat or festivals, introduced with Psalm 126:

“Then, in the future, our mouths will be filled with laughter, and our tongues with joy.”

Happiness that focuses on the future is not a reactive slave to the present. It sacrifices today’s comfort to crown us the masters of tomorrow. It is proactive, imagining the world not as it is, but as it could be. The world as it could be is one that we build together. It has no price, because its value is infinite. It appears in no algorithm, because it does not yet exist. It must be shared with everyone around us, because we cannot build it alone.

Jewish happiness is hope. Hope that even the darkest storm will pass, and the sun will shine again.

Our ancestors realised this truth. They realised it as they sat weeping by the Rivers of Babylon. And they made a choice. True, they hung up their instruments, but only because it was inappropriate for them to “sing God’s song on a foreign land”. Not because they had chosen to forget entirely, abandoning hope for a model of happiness that is a slave to circumstance.

They chose to root their happiness in the future; proactive, infinite, shared. And they made an oath: We will never forget Jerusalem, no matter how painful the memory. Not Jerusalem in ruin, a fractured shadow of what it once was. Jerusalem of golden parapets, of shining glory, of the elderly and the young cavorting along its sun-kissed pure white marble-clad streets, rejoicing in the fact that the pain that threatens to drag us into the past and see us rot there, is the very pain that gives us the strength we need to build a new future.

And so, they never forgot. One day, they said, we will return by this road, we will take our instruments from the trees of the Tigris, and we will sing again.

My dear reader. There is very little I could possibly say to provide words of comfort. Less still to offer a message of encouragement. But know this, and know it with certainty:

We, too, will sing again.

Because ours is not just a song of happiness. It is a song of hope.

“For a brief moment I abandoned you, but with overwhelming mercy I will gather you in. In a moment of anger, I hid my face from you, but with a kindness that will change the world I will take you back in love – so has spoken the Almighty, your redeemer.”
Isaiah 54:7-8

We will sing again.

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Return & Renew: The High Holy Day Guide



INTROSPECTION

ELUL

The month of introspection, preparing ourselves for judgement, analysing our deeds and where we are going. We blow the *shofar* (ram's horn) each morning to awaken our souls from their slumber.

SELICHOT

The poetic communal prayers asking for forgiveness, making use of the Thirteen Attributes of Mercy which God revealed to Moses as a key to repentance.

TESHUVAH

The process of return to one's true elevated self, through repentance. The three parts are:

1. Regret for what we have done
2. Confession and articulation of our mistakes
3. Resolution and commitment not to repeat in the future

HATARAT NEDARIM

The annulment of vows performed in front of three people the day before Rosh Hashana. The idea is that we relinquish ourselves from any promises we have made throughout the year before the Day of Judgement.

ROSH HASHANAH

The Day of Judgement when all of humankind is judged for the year to come based on their thoughts, feelings and actions of the past year; the day when the Books of Life and Death are open. It's a day of celebration of God as King and the day we blow the *shofar* and eat apples and honey.

SHOFAR

The ram's horn is blown 100 times over the day of Rosh Hashanah. There are three types of sounds: *Tekiyah* (one long unbroken sound), *Shevarim* (three medium-length sounds), and *Teruah* (many short quick sounds). The sound of the *shofar* represents the deep voice of our soul crying out to be the person we want to be.

SIMANIM

Typically known as "signs" or "omens", the *simanim* are a series of foods eaten before the Rosh Hashanah evening meal. We take the name of the foods and, through a play on words, make a positive statement that will be a good sign for things to come. It encourages a mindful start to the year where we contemplate what goes into our body, mind and soul.

TASHLICH

A ritual of "throwing away our sins", performed by going to a natural body of water and reciting passages about our desire to repent and be forgiven for our misdoings. It is performed on the afternoon of Rosh Hashanah

but can be done any time until Yom Kippur.

THE FAST OF GEDALIA

One of the minor fasts, from dawn till dusk on the 3rd of the month of Tishrei (the day after Rosh Hashanah). After the destruction of the first Temple, the Babylonians appointed Gedalia as the governor of the Jews who remained in Israel. He was treacherously murdered by Yishmael ben Netaniah, a fellow Jew who disagreed with the tactical alliance made with the Babylonians. This led to much bloodshed and effectively ended the prospect of Jews permanently resettling in the land.

TEN DAYS OF REPENTANCE

The days between Rosh Hashanah (the Day of Judgement) and Yom Kippur (the Day of Atonement), where our judgement is hanging in the balance. It is a time where we try to take something on that we may not usually do, be it an extra mitzvah, going to a class or resolving to be nicer to our families.

KAPAROT

The custom to take money (or a chicken!) and wave it over our heads three times. We recite a statement whereby we transfer our bad deeds onto the money and then give it to charity to elevate our transgressions for a good purpose.

YOM KIPPUR

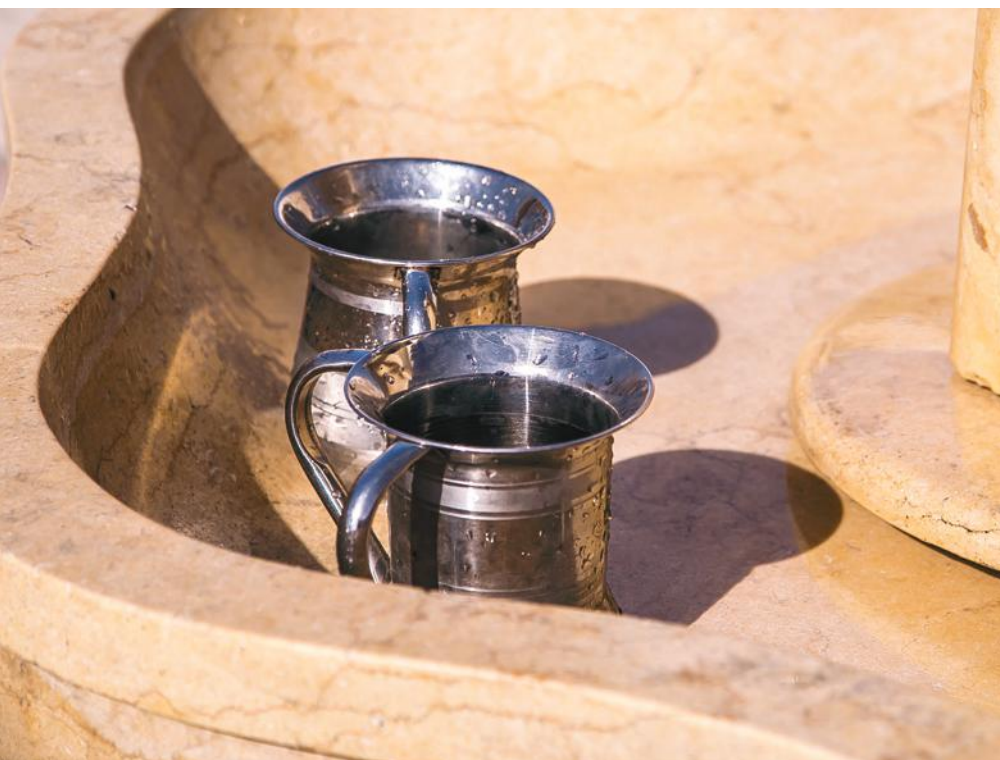
The Day of Atonement, often referred to as the holiest day of the year, where we ask forgiveness for anything we have done wrong. The day is spent in deep prayer at synagogue with five restrictions: no eating or drinking, no washing, no applying oils or creams to the skin, no marital relations and no wearing of leather shoes.

KOL NIDREI

The haunting and moving melodious introduction to the Yom Kippur evening service. We annul our vows and endeavour to pay close attention to the words we use and promises we make. We cannot begin to talk to God about repentance, atonement or forgiveness before establishing that our word is one that can be trusted.

NEILA

The closing moments of Yom Kippur when the gates of Heaven are closing. After a day of meditating in prayer and fasting, we throw all the energy we have left into hoping for forgiveness, and for a year filled with life.



CHOL HAMOED

The intermittent days between the beginning and end of Sukkot. They are quasi-festival days whereby we try as best we can to embrace the festiveness of the time by eating (and, weather permitting, sleeping) in a *sukkah*.

HOSHANA RABBAH

The seventh day of Sukkot, where an unfavourable sentence from Yom Kippur can still be torn up through sincere repentance. On this day, communities circle the synagogue seven times with Torah scrolls reciting the *Hoshanot* (salvation prayers). We beat the *Aravah* (willow) to the ground, representing a mastery over our bad inclinations. There is a custom to learn Torah all night.

SHEMINI ATZERET

The day after Sukkot, considered a festival in its own right. It is a day representing the spiritual connection between God and the Jewish people. There are no overt commands or practices on this day, and the idea is that it is the opportunity for the Jewish people to simply be at one with their Creator.

SIMCHAT TORAH

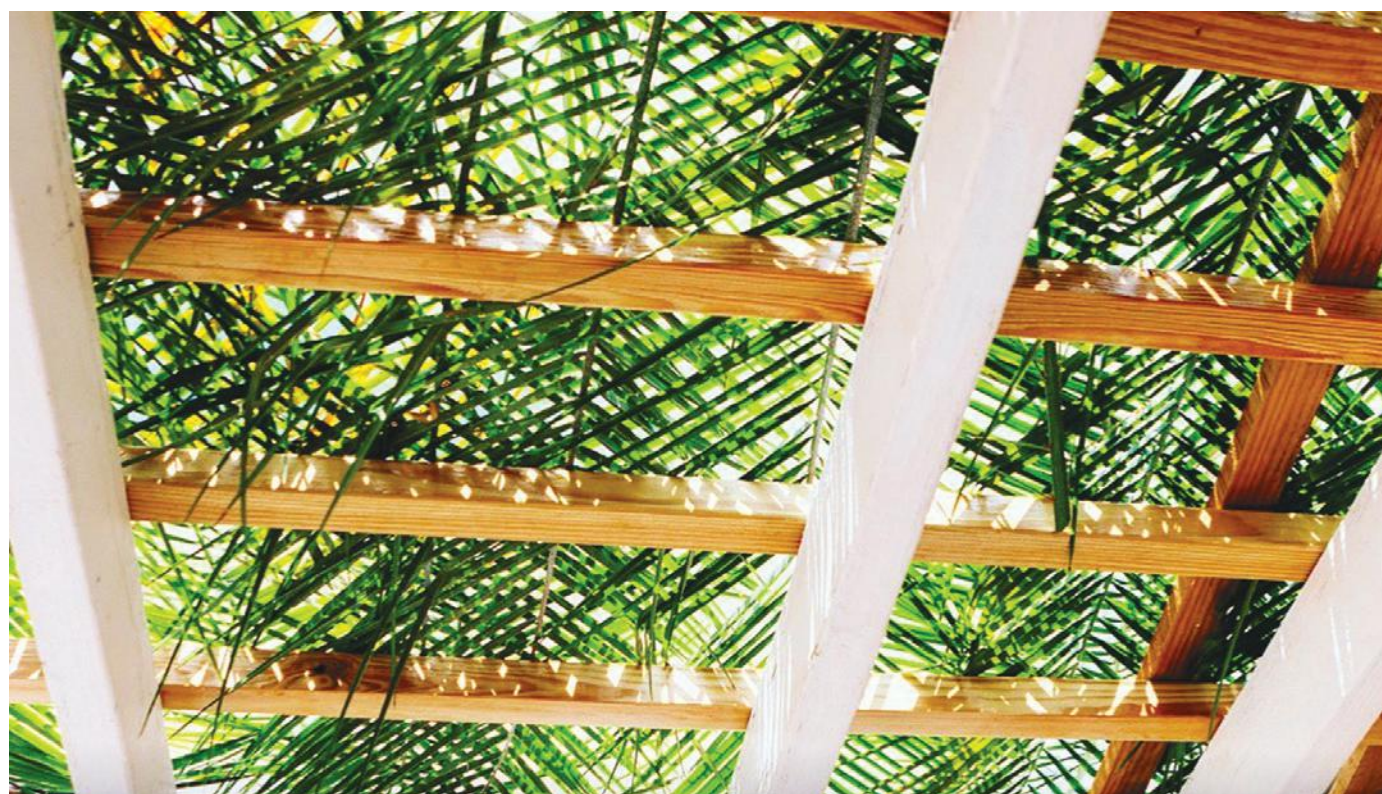
Celebrates the conclusion of the annual cycle of Torah readings. There is a custom to dance with the Torah scrolls and express our deep happiness to have the Torah, the source of all Jewish wisdom.

SUKKOT

The Festival of Booths, celebrating the temporary shelters the Israelites used during their time in the desert after the Exodus from Egypt. The *sukkah* represents the fleeting nature of this world and the flimsiness of its protection. We sit under an organic roof looking up at the starlit sky to remind us that our trust is not in our security and possessions but in our faith in God.

FOUR SPECIES

The *Lulav* (palm branch) symbolises the spine which holds us up; the *Etrog* (citron fruit) represents the heart and seat of our emotions; the *Hadas* (myrtle) leaves are shaped like eyes, representing the way we look at the world; the *Aravah* (willow) leaves are shaped like lips, representing our speech. We bind these together to symbolise that our actions, emotions, perception and speech should be aligned with positive intent.



RETURNING TO COMPLETE OUR
**UNFINISHED
BUSINESS**

Rabbi Jonny Roodyn





We are part of a far bigger picture, each individual an integral part of humanity whose actions can impact the entire world

The fact that the horrific events of the 7th October took place at the end of the Jewish Festivals, means that in a certain sense we never really got closure on last year's festive season, as we concluded it with an open wound that is yet to heal.

For many of us, the past year has passed by in a blur of pain, uncertainty and deep concern. From the initial sense of bewilderment and confusion, to the flurry of activity, the outpouring of prayer, support and unity to ongoing acts of solidarity, we have struggled to ground ourselves and fully adapt to this ongoing situation. We therefore return to the High Holy Days with a sense of trepidation, it is almost as if we have 'unfinished business' to take care of from last year.

A certain sense of security comes from returning to a familiar place after being away for so long, a feeling akin to coming home. As we prepare our festive foods, perform the seasonal *mitzvot* and join in with the familiar melodies, perhaps we can use this special time of year as an opportunity to return to that place and in doing so, feel a sense of healing and connection with God and the Jewish People — both in Israel and worldwide. At the same time, the High Holy Days provide us with a unique opportunity to reflect and introspect, an essential part of the *Teshuva* (repentance) process.

Elul: Begin Again

Our journey therefore starts on *Rosh Chodesh* Elul, the first day of the month. There is an almost universal custom to blow the *shofar* for the entire month after the morning services in synagogue. This serves as a reminder that on this day Moshe ascended Mount Sinai for the final time to receive the second set of tablets. The *shofar* blasts serve as a wake-up call for the "Day of Judgement" that is to take place in a month's time on Rosh Hashanah.

From this day, we include special prayers in our services, most notably, Psalm 27 which is a song of security and closeness to God. This chapter is an anthem of sorts, as it is recited twice daily, morning and evening until the end of the festive season. This year its words ring so true and take on a whole new meaning. 'If a camp encamps against me, my heart shall not fear; if a war should rise up against me, in this I trust...' 'Do not deliver me to the desires of my

adversaries, for false witnesses and speakers of evil have risen against me.' The Psalm concludes with the ever-reassuring verse, 'Hope for God, be strong and He will give your heart courage, and hope for God!'

Elul is a time to stop, think, consider and prepare for Rosh Hashanah. We appraise our lives, evaluate our actions and most importantly, think about where we have been and where we are going. This is why these days are lovingly referred to by the Sages as *yemei haratzon*, days of desire. They give us licence to dream about how great we can become, what we can achieve and how we can make those aspirations a reality. This, in turn, is the perfect introduction to Rosh Hashanah when we do the same thing, but this time not for ourselves— rather for the Jewish People and all of humanity.

Most Sephardic communities have the custom of reciting *Selichot* throughout the month, either at midnight or early in the morning. Ashkenazi communities only start doing this in the final week of Elul, creating more of a sense of intensity as Rosh Hashanah approaches. One major difference between the two communities is that Sefardim say the same liturgy daily, something that creates a greater sense of familiarity and affinity. Ashkenazi *Selichot* differ from day to day and are more poetic in nature, making them much harder to understand. Either way, they both revolve around reciting the Almighty's Thirteen Attributes of Mercy as a means to invoke Divine salvation, something that many of us feel the need for now more than any other time in our lives. These prayers are amongst our most powerful spiritual weapons, according to the Talmud were revealed to Moses by none other than God Himself and will accompany us all the way to the conclusion of Yom Kippur.

Rosh Hashanah: Judgement Days

Rosh Hashanah, the Days of Judgement, are serious yet happy days. They are an expression of the verse in Psalms (2:11) *rejoice with quaking*. Whilst these two emotions may initially seem contradictory, they can be harmonised with the understanding that we are celebrating the fact that our lives are significant, that in the divine scheme

of things, we are worthy of being judged.

The *shofar* blasts are a wake-up call, the raw sounds of the *Tekiya* are broken into the cries of the *Shevarim* and *Teruah* symbolising an individual, or even a world that has lost its way. Since there is nothing as whole as a broken heart, these broken notes are always followed by a full *Tekiya*, putting these broken pieces back together again in what can best be described as a spiritual healing process.

Our actions matter and create consequences far beyond that which we can perceive. We are part of a far bigger picture, each individual an integral part of humanity whose actions can impact the entire world. As such, we set our visions on the biggest dream possible, we yearn and pray for a world perfected and redeemed, and pledge to play an active role in bringing that dream to fruition. Through presenting ourselves as partners with God, with a vision aligned with His Will, we hope to merit a favourable judgement, blessed with the resources we need to fulfil our tasks in this world.

For many, the most stirring moment of the High Holy Days is the *chazan's* rendition of a prayer called *Unetaneh Tokef*. With a voice filled with emotion he describes the fear and trepidation in the Heavenly Court as each person, each country and the world at large has their destiny decided today. 'Who will live and who will die; who will die at his predestined time and who before his time; who by water and who by fire, who by sword, who by beast, who by famine, who by thirst, who by storm, who by plague, who by strangulation and who by stoning. Who will rest and who will wander, who will live in harmony and who will be harried, who will enjoy tranquillity and who will suffer, who will be impoverished and who will be enriched, who will be degraded and who will be exalted.' These words will take on a new resonance this year as we contemplate the events of the past year and the power of the Divine decrees that take place on these days. At the same time, we are reassured by the community's response to these frightening words, 'But repentance, prayer and charity remove the evil of the decree!' We realise and recognise that ultimately it is all in our hands and we have the power to alter the trajectory of world destiny through our choices and actions and heartfelt prayers. This empowering thought ought to inspire us to make the most of the precious hours of Rosh Hashana, whether we are in *Shul* or at home.

The 10 Days: Don't Look Back in Anger

The Ten Days of *Teshuva* leading up to Yom Kippur differ from the days of Elul in that we subject our actions and personalities to scrutiny in granular detail. Unlike some other

religions, confession is not something that takes place in front of a clergyman, rather we stand with honesty and vulnerability in front of God, owning our actions and facing up to our shortcomings. In truth, *teshuva* is not something that should be limited or restricted to this time of year, it is a process that we should engage with daily; after all, God is described in our daily prayers as One who is *rotzeh biteshuva*— who desires *teshuva*. We stand in front of a loving God who gives us every chance to repair and rectify any mistakes we have made.

Yom Kippur: Unlock the Gates

At the end of the forty-day period of preparation which started on Rosh Chodesh Elul, we are now ready to spend a day in front of God (Leviticus 16:30). On the holiest day of the year, when God's presence so to speak comes down to earth, we do all we can to dial down our physical needs, appearing purely as a soul before its creator. We spend a day getting in touch with our essential selves—who we really are—and reset our relationship with our creator. Jewish tradition teaches that the spiritual gateways are open all day long, enabling our prayers to get 'straight through'. As long as these gates are open, we have a solemn responsibility to beg the Almighty for peace and security in Israel and for the Jewish People worldwide.

Contrary to popular perception, Yom Kippur is not a sad day, we don't spend the day reliving our sins or experiencing existential angst for our mistakes. Rather it is considered one of the happiest days of the year as we revel in the joy of reconciliation, repairing our broken relationships with man and God. We don't fast as a punishment, but rather as a means of rising above our bodies in order to get in touch with our souls. Although we don't

normally fast on Shabbat, when Yom Kippur falls on Shabbat, as it does this year, we do so. This is because the Torah specifically refers to Yom Kippur as "*Shabbat Shabbaton*", a Sabbath of Sabbaths. Whilst on a normal Shabbat, we enjoy good food to keep body and soul together, Yom Kippur is a higher level, a day of the soul divested of its body.

The *Neilah* service corresponds to the locking of the gates, not only to the gates of Heaven but also to the one lock to which God Himself does not have the key, the lock in our hearts. We cannot remain open and vulnerable forever; the time comes for us to re-enter our bodies and to re-engage with our physical needs. The 'seal' of *Neilah* is a seal on our open hearts, where we pledge and commit to be better and do better in the coming year.

Sukkot: Time for Action

These dreams and aspirations are liable to dissipate if we do not translate them into the world of actions (in kabbalistic thought, referred to as "*olam ha'asiya*"). The days between Yom Kippur and Sukkot are therefore full of activity preparing for a seven-day celebration at the culmination of both the agricultural and spiritual cycles. In ancient times Sukkot would have been the harvest festival; corresponding to this, we reap the benefits of and celebrate the achievements of the last month and a half since the start of Elul.

On Sukkot we eat, drink, socialise and even sleep in the *sukkah*. We take physical actions and bring them into sharp focus by performing them in the *sukkah* with great joy and excitement. We take four diverse species and wave them in six directions and in doing so, recognise that all of our material abundance ultimately comes from God. On Sukkot, we take the good intentions and resolutions of Rosh Hashanah and Yom

Kippur and put them into practice under the leafy coverage of the *schach* (*sukkah* roof), which is referred to by the Zohar as the 'shade of *emunah* (faithfulness)'. These seven days culminate in Hoshana Rabbah which is the final judgement, one that determines whether we have successfully managed to translate our good intentions into practice.

Shemini Atzeret and Simchat Torah: Close the Circle

This brings us to the climax of this period, Shemini Atzeret and Simchat Torah. These are celebrated on one day in Israel and on two days in the Diaspora. The word *atzeret* actually means to stop, and for many of us the world as we knew it ground to a halt last Shemini Atzeret. Since the events of the 7th of October, these days have taken on a new meaning. The seriousness of Shemini Atzeret and its heartfelt requests for rain, material abundance and security merge with heartfelt mourning, particularly as the *Yizkor* memorial prayer is recited.

The joy and celebration of completing the reading of the Torah and starting it anew become an opportunity to think of new beginnings and national rebirth. The pain of the previous year is so raw and there will be no uniform way to mark these emotions and so each individual and community will invariably do this in their own way, not only to give closure to the past year but also to immortalise the victims and the countless acts of selfless heroism that took place.

The journey from Rosh Chodesh Elul through Simchat Torah is one that is full of incredible opportunities to connect to ourselves, our families, our community, our nation and our God. As we have seen, each stage of the journey has a unique role to play in enabling us to hit the reset button,

to gain closure on the events of the past year and move forward with renewed vigour, passion and an inspired sense of destiny.

As 5784 draws to a close, we can but echo the words of the age-old Jewish saying, 'May the previous year with its curses come to an end, and may the new year with its blessings begin'.



Individuals pray at the Western Wall - the Kotel - in Jerusalem, Israel

The TRUTH *of the* MATTER

The Power of Debate

Kayla Haber-Goldstein



I bet none of us ever thought that we would spend so much of our time wondering where the truth has gone, yet here we are in 2024, doing just that. On social media we constantly see people stating their opinion, and others “stitching and reacting” with their response. We see people attending college campuses asking to be debated on their political views. Recently we witnessed journalist Douglass Murray and UK-based international law expert Natasha Hausdorff face off against broadcaster and columnist Mehdi Hasan and Israeli journalist Gideon Levy for the Munk Debate in Canada on the topic of Anti-Zionism; while in America, two presidential nominees appeared on a live televised parley. While it all seems pretty rage-filled, some are civil and positive. Taking away the tension, I wonder if debate benefits our society or if it's something we should stop engaging in.

Rabbi Shneur Zalman of Liadi, known as the Alter Rebbe, the founding Rebbe of Chabad, once arrived in a city full of Torah scholars who did not necessarily agree with his method of observing the Torah. He invited the community to gather in the main synagogue where everyone had a chance to ask questions and voice their arguments against him. He assured them that he would answer every question, and that he wouldn't leave until everyone was satisfied.

When it was time for the debate to begin, the Alter Rebbe ascended the platform and gazed at each person in the crowd. Instead of speaking, he began to sing a tune from the depths of his soul, a song that was not limited to words, and soon the entire crowd was singing along with him, each one experiencing the Alter Rebbe's spirit.

After several long minutes of singing, everyone opened their eyes. The Rebbe asked for those who have questions to begin. However, no questions arose, everything was clarified. Their arguments seemed resolved. He was free to go.

Soon after, all of their questions returned

as they came down from their enraptured state. They ran after the Alter Rebbe and cried, “What have you done to us? We still have our questions.”

The Alter Rebbe answered, “I only wanted to show you that there is a higher level than the intellect that can be reached through song. By singing the tune, you were able to feel the soul that has no boundaries. When you feel the soul, your faith is revealed and there are no questions and there are no doubts, now that you experienced that feeling we can answer your questions.”

The beauty of this story shows us the possibilities of what can happen in a debate. Yes, in this situation the debate was solved temporarily with a spiritual high, but in essence, the idea was to sit down and have a debate. There were well-respected Torah scholars who did not agree with the Alter Rebbe, and his response was to offer a conversation. The idea is not to run from people we disagree with, rather to sit down and talk to them, speak it out. Debate.

Why is this so? Why were both sides so willing to sit and discuss their different opinions on how the Jews should keep the Torah? You would think if one party disagrees with another there would be a petition to convince one side, to bring people over to their way of thinking. Yet here the goal was to accept each other. Is that what a debate is?

“Every dispute that is done for the sake of Heaven will endure in the end; but one that is not for the sake of Heaven, will not endure. Which dispute is considered for the sake of Heaven? The disputes of Hillel and Shammai. And which disputes are not considered for the sake of Heaven? The disputes of Korach and his congregation.” (Ethics of the Fathers 5:17)

Let's examine these two debates so we can find the difference between them and better understand the purpose of debate in Judaism, and how crucial it is to do it right.

Korach lived during the time in the desert, as the Jews were living there for 40 years,

internalising the Torah they had just received. This is the story of a man who disputed the leadership of Moses (Numbers 16:1 - 18:32). He wanted Moses to share the leadership role and allow more people to have such close contact with God and all that is holy. This sounds like a good thing; he wanted a closer relationship with God and an opportunity to share Torah and lead the Jewish people. Therefore, he approached Moses and explained that he should not take all the glory for himself. Moses, in turn, suggested they ask God. He proposed that they each bring a sacrifice and see which one God accepts. God accepted the sacrifice of Moses, making it clear that he was the rightful leader. However, Korach did not give up. While a person who is motivated by the desire to do God's will would have stopped when God told him to — Korach was working for his ego. He wanted to be right and he wanted to be the leader. And so, he led a revolt against Moses, and he and all of his followers were swallowed up by the earth. This was a debate that did not end well.

The story of Hillel and Shammai on the other hand, is of a totally different nature. When the Jews returned from exile, the leadership was given to pairs, and not to one single person. This was to ensure that we stay on the right path, that our tradition does not change, and the pair kept each other in check. One of these most famous pairs were Hillel and Shammai. They disagreed on most things. However, they prospered and the Jewish nation prospered along with them. How is this possible? How can it be that the leadership of the Jewish people seemed to be fractured yet the Jewish people thrived under it? Our sages explained it above. Their disputes had one goal, to spread the light of God and his Torah, to keep the Torah as accurately as possible. There was no ego involved, no drive to be proven right, they simply wanted to know what the Torah was teaching us. At the end of each day they walked home with only love and respect for one another in their hearts. This yearning



Carl Schleicher, 'A Discussion of the Talmud'



The Punishment of Korah (detail from the fresco 'Punishment of the Rebels' by Sandro Botticelli (1480–1482)

and push for the truth, with no motivation by their respective egos, was what kept the Jewish nation thriving — as the push and pull centred them. This was a debate that ended so well, we continue to learn from them to this day.

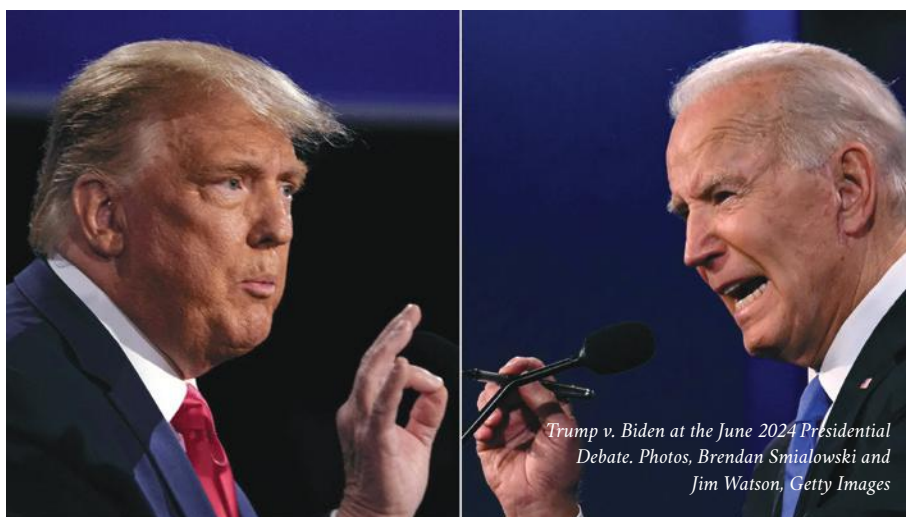
These two examples illustrate that debate arises when two individuals hold differing opinions and aim to determine which is correct. They engage in the discussion to uncover the truth, using it to guide them forward on the right path.

What happens when a debate doesn't conclude amicably? When it results in the defeat or silencing of one side, or when no truth is reached? What occurs when the debate turns hostile? Why are some debates beneficial for society while others are harmful? We can see from these examples what the defining factor is between a debate that is good for the world, and one that will destroy society. We see that at the end of the day, what really matters is the *goal* of the debate. Are we here to inflate egos, to prove that we are right and to destroy the other? Or are we here to find the truth, to understand the world better, to move the world forward? Korach was not willing to hear that Moses was right. He went into the debate searching for a way to accomplish his goal of becoming a leader. When method A didn't work, he went to method B. If he genuinely wanted to know the truth, he would have stopped when the truth was revealed, when God did not accept his sacrifice.

Understanding the crucial element of a debate can help us understand why debates are so important to have. When we are living in a world that is constantly inflating our egos, an echo chamber on social media and a politically-correct environment that never wants to correct us, we end up in a world built from lies created to protect our egos. What happens to a society that believes only that which makes them feel good? They become blind to the truth, to the reality of the world around them, and eventually they get destroyed — just like Korach did. Their foundation is so flimsy that it will eventually fail. However, if we remove ourselves from the echo chamber and we become okay with our egos being deflated from time to time, we open ourselves up to the possibility of being wrong about something. We stand up to debate someone who has a different opinion than us with the open-mindedness that we might be wrong. We are here to find the truth, not to prove our intelligence. When a society is constantly pushing for truth, for reality, for clarity — then they will thrive like the Jews under Hillel and Shammai. However, if a society is constantly looking to make themselves feel good, they will eventually crash and burn because they are turning a

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Are we here to inflate egos, to prove that we are right and to destroy the other? Or are we here to find the truth, to understand the world better, to move the world forward?



Trump v. Biden at the June 2024 Presidential Debate. Photos, Brendan Smialowski and Jim Watson, Getty Images



Left to right: Natasha Hausdorff, Douglas Murray, Rudyard Griffiths, Mehdi Hasan, Gideon Levy. June 17, 2024 Munk Debate

blind eye to truth, until truth consumes them.

The US presidential debate this summer highlighted the difference between constructive and unproductive debates. When asked about improving childcare, the candidates diverted to a petty argument about their golf skills, showcasing egos rather than seeking truth. In contrast, debates in the Talmud and among Torah scholars exemplify the beauty of seeking truth through discussion.

Today's political climate, fuelled by quick information and social media soundbites, has

lost the art of true debate. Mass protests and one-liners overshadow meaningful dialogue.

The beauty of debate lies in embracing the discomfort of hearing opposing views, rather than seeking affirmation. True conversation can save our world. Instead of arguing to win, let's engage in real dialogue aimed at finding the truth, ensuring our society's survival.

Let's avoid seeking ego validation and remain open to debate and discussion, constantly pursuing the truth to make the world a calmer, smarter place.

Who Wants to Be a *Jew*?

Gareth Kobrin



I don't think I've ever kept Shabbat properly, but I try. I stay away from my phone and electricity, but at a recent *kiddush*, someone spilled oily cholent on my new blue suit. As I reached for water to clean it, I was almost rugby tackled by fellow congregants, lest I transgress the Biblical prohibition of laundering.

I have a lot to learn, but I once saw a Rabbi walking his dog on a sunny Saturday afternoon – so when it comes to exercising my pooch on the Sabbath, I follow his example.

Which is why, after shul, you'll often spot me testing the boundaries of the *eruv* (enclosure permitting certain activities on Shabbat) with my furry friend, Buddy. I wash down herring with a few too many *l'chaims*, head home to remove my suit (even when cholent-free), and slip into comfy gear for paw patrol: trackies, trainers and a T-shirt – with sunglasses and a beanie to complete the disguise.

Last week, I was strolling through a busy Hampstead Heath, contemplating the Rabbi's words, when I noticed what looked like a Hasidic Jew wearing a long white beard and black silk frock – floating across the green grass. I was startled when he called cheerfully from across the park – clearly addressing me – “Good Shabbos!”

My kids tell me I look like a homeless person in my dog-walk attire, so I self-consciously responded with a sheepish, “Shabbat *shalom*” and kept walking.

It bothered me how – amongst all the gentile-men – he knew to greet *me*. There are only two logical explanations: either he randomly assumes some men are *yids*, or he recognised me. I am certain we had never met, and apart from my nose, nothing about me screamed *Wandering Jew*.

There is, of course, a third option.

Part of the tribe

Buddy is a Border Collie – a graceful breed of British sheepdog, known for their intelligence and an instinct to work. As those who walk dogs will know, they like to stop and play with other hounds. Because Buddy thinks he's always herding, he's not a particularly friendly pup (which suits this introspective shepherd just fine). However, if he spots another Border

Collie across the park, he will go out of his way to bark hello.

Yes, they look and smell the same, but I'm convinced he somehow *knows* they are connected.

Is it possible that my new shabbat mate *knew* I was a Jew?

What makes a Jew?

In the wake of the barbaric October 7th invasion, and the viral outbreak of antisemitism since, many Jews are questioning their identity, some for the first time.

Jews are Jews by way of being born to a Jewish mother or by converting, but a Jew who does not observe the commandments or traditions is still considered Jewish. The Talmud (Sanhedrin 44a) says, “A Jew, although he has transgressed, is still a Jew.”

The Nazis weren't as concerned with *halachic* details – according to the Nuremberg Laws of 1935 – a single Jewish grandparent was sufficient to earn your ticket to the gas chamber. I'm sure you've seen the modern meme version:

A Jewish Zionist and a Jewish anti-Zionist walk into a bar.

And the bartender says, “We don't serve Jews.”

I grew up in South Africa, where my Judaism was challah on Friday nights, matzah on Pesach and a deep connection to the Holy Land of milk and honey. (Milk and meat, on the other hand, wasn't such a big issue).

My family went through varying stages of observance, but my parents were religious enough to endow me with Orthodox Jewish Guilt. I respected those who obeyed the laws and revered the Rabbis who taught them, but the voice in my head was stark: you are not a *good Jew*.

A better Jew

I am very lucky to be in business with a very good Jew. He is a *Talmid Chacham* (learned person) and Reluctant Rabbi to his brutish partner, often having to field inane “*halachic*” questions over morning coffee.

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In the wake of the barbaric October 7th invasion, and the viral outbreak of antisemitism since, many Jews are questioning their identity, some for the first time

"I've started saying the *Shema* [prayer] twice a day. I do the first one in the morning with my *tallit* (prayer shawl) and *tefillin* (phylacteries), so I'm confident that one's kosher. But the nighttime one might be more problematic..." I say, like an 8-year-old to his dad.

"Why?" Ben asks patiently, like a father to his infant son.

"I go to bed and – regardless of the time – just before I fall asleep, I cover my eyes while lying down and say *Shema* by heart. I'm obviously not wearing a kippah at the time. Does that count?"

He's not one to sugar coat – it's never healthy – but he searches for a kind way to say it, then answers matter-of-factly. "You are probably not fulfilling the *mitzvah*."

I don't let him off so easy. "So it's better for me *not* to say it?"

His answer blew my mind.

"It would be better if you said it properly. But I don't think you are *losing* the *Shema*." (*This is not a direct quote; I'm paraphrasing a longer answer that I'm still trying to fully understand*).

I can't do justice to the idea – which he attributed to the *Maharal*¹ – but I must try. Our role in the world is to manifest who we are. The *mitzvot* are not simply commandments – they are what we were created to do. We say the *Shema* to reveal its essence within each of us: perhaps Unity, maybe Love. Crudely put, *mitzvot* act as a

kind of cognitive behavioural therapy for the human species.

Make the circle bigger

The lesson, I think, is that by fulfilling a *mitzvah*, you activate that spark of the divine within yourself. You become a Person of *Shema*. I could be wrong, but I think it's possible to be a "good Jew" even if you are lacking in *mitzvot* – they hold the secret key to unlocking our Superpowers.

It is depicted most elegantly by the Kabbalistic image of the Jewish people being a perfect circle, with God in its Centre.

The circle is mathematically unique, and in some ways, infinite. Every point along a circle is the same distance from its centre – creating perfect balance. Circles are special because you can split them into two equal parts in an infinite number of ways, always through the centre.

This perfect symmetry expresses a simple truth: there are countless ways to be a good Jew, and every point along the circle is as important as the next – because it's incomplete without it. I might not observe as many *mitzvot* as you, but you might not be as kind as me. We can be 180 degrees apart, and still the same distance from God.

The goal is to work your way onto circles closer to the centre. I know I'll never get onto the same level as most people I know, let alone the likes of Abraham or Moses. But at

least I am part of the circle.

Who would want to be part of such a circle?

We can't eat some of the best foods, or clean cholent off our suits on Saturdays. We've been hated by the world for millennia, and perhaps hardest of all, have to be away from our phones for 25 hours a week. It's difficult to do one good thing a day – who wants to take on 613!?

I do.

It may be hard, but it's a gift. To reject it is unjustifiable.

Perfection is not the goal; we simply need to be both proactive and accountable for our actions. Be mindful of the Secret Sauce: every time we commit a sin of *omission* (by failing to act), or one of *commission* (by taking wrongful action) – we move a little bit further away from the place we are supposed to be.

The goal is to keep trying to get closer.

There is a big difference between *what* we do in life, and *who* we are. Yom Kippur is the time to think about what we have (and haven't) *done*. But before that, on Rosh Hashanah – the day Humans were created – is the time to focus on what we have *become*.

We are disparate parts of the same whole, but every Jew is different and unique. Stop comparing yourself to others – try, instead, to be the better you.

Oscar Wilde said it best:

Be yourself; everyone else is already taken.



FINDING UNITY

in King Solomon's Wisdom

Theo Landau



During the year—whether during the High Holy Days or on fast days—we reflect on our identity as a people and the communal struggles we have faced throughout history. This reflection prompts us to seek out the wisdom that might guide us toward unity. Let us journey back to a time in Jewish history when all of Israel lived peacefully together, under the wise and just reign of King Solomon, and discover the secret to this harmony through his famous judgement involving two women.

The judgement of King Solomon, where he famously suggested splitting a baby in two to reveal the true mother, is a story rich with symbolism and profound wisdom. Why does the Torah share this particular tale among all the clever judgments Solomon must have made? This story's placement right before the description of Solomon building the Temple suggests it holds essential insights into achieving lasting peace.

To fully grasp the depth of this story, we must first explore the historical context of the two identities within the Kingdom of Israel: Judea and Israel. These identities trace back to our matriarchs, Rachel and Leah, and their sons. Leah's son Judah became the ancestor of the southern Kingdom of Judea, while Rachel's son Joseph represents the northern Kingdom of Israel.

Joseph's archetype is marked by his charismatic, physical presence and leadership in providing for his family during the famine. The Torah describes Joseph as someone who cared about his appearance and played a significant role in managing the resources of Egypt, earning him the title of the 'provider of the land.' His descendants, such as Samson, also reflect this focus on physical strength and leadership.

In contrast, Judah's identity is deeply spiritual. Judah himself took a leading role in ensuring the moral and spiritual integrity of his family, exemplified by his willingness to take responsibility for Benjamin's safety when they returned to Egypt. The tribe of Judah, therefore, embodies a commitment to spiritual leadership and moral guidance.

These two archetypes – the physical, practical leadership of Joseph and the spiritual, ethical leadership of Judah – coexisted within the united Kingdom of Israel during Solomon's reign. The peaceful coexistence described in the verse 'Judah and Israel were sitting together, each man under his vine and fig tree,' highlights the balance and harmony between these two aspects.

The story of Solomon's judgement tells of two women, each claiming the baby as their own, much like the tribes of Israel and Judah might claim the kingdom. Solomon's suggestion to divide the baby revealed the true mother,

who was willing to give up her claim to save the child's life. This act of selflessness and prioritising the well-being of the child over personal gain is the wisdom Solomon imparted.

In today's Israel, there are many diverse perspectives on the country's future, with some emphasising economic and military strength and others prioritising spiritual and moral leadership. However, the lesson from Solomon's judgement is clear: for the kingdom to thrive, all sides must be willing to compromise and prioritise the greater good over individual dominance.

As we reflect on the wisdom of King Solomon, let us learn that true leadership and peace come from a balance of strengths. Israel has always had to find a balance between physical and spiritual; cultivating the land as well as fulfilling thousand-year-old spiritual aspirations. Both are essential for the well-being of the kingdom. By embracing this balance, we can hope to overcome the divisions that threaten our unity and build a future where all of Israel sits together in peace, under their vine and fig tree.

This profound lesson, emerging from the depths of our history, offers a guiding light for the challenges we face today. By prioritising the collective well-being over individual claims, we honour the wisdom of King Solomon and move closer to a harmonious and united Israel.

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WELLNESS

Finding *Balance*

In today's fast-paced world, self-care is crucial. A clinical psychologist and a double board-certified nutritionist offer valuable insights—from practical tips to combat burnout (especially for mums), to strategies for fostering a healthy, sustainable relationship with food. Both articles emphasise empowerment over guilt for achieving lasting balance.



Frend Photography, courtesy
of Nomi Spain-Levy

Long-Term *Relationship*

Sustainable food habits & healthy self-image

Nomi Spain-Levy

One of our longest and most enduring relationships starts in the womb. Within minutes of being born, we eat and continue to do so until 120. This relationship is nurtured multiple times a day. The feelings that we feel around food are initiated with breakfast, lunch, dinner and snacks. If we are excited, empowered and looking forward to enjoying our food, this is one dynamic. If we feel guilty, rushed, stressed or are ruminating over our meal choices, this relationship can feel burdensome and unpleasant.

The conscious and subconscious thoughts taking place throughout our days and nights initiate certain hormonal and neuropeptide cascades that affect our body. There is a physiology to belief. It is difficult to quantify subconscious beliefs, but psychology has given us tools for digging them up, bringing them to the surface and then using those insights to move forward into new and better habits and patterns that support our health and head.

Your habits are a vote for your future self. I didn't coin this phrase but I work with this idea daily. Habits are more than simply the actions that we do on a daily basis. They are also the thoughts we think, and they become the energy that we put out into the world. If I could have one desire for people, it would be that they can enter into their world each day with an abundance of positive energy towards their goals. I would also hope that the goals we have don't centre around a number on the scale or a specific body aesthetic, but instead focus on function and what we are able to do.

There is one thing that I see taking people – often, but not exclusively, females – away from a positive and energetic state of being; that is the hyperfocus on diet and wellness culture that is perpetually reminding us that we can lose more weight, look younger and biohack our way to longevity. I have had clients, ranging in age from 12 to 80 tell me they are unhappy with their bodies or that they want to be on a diet. I have had an intelligent and successful young lady tell me that the pressure from her community to look a certain way made her cry herself to sleep. I have had healthy weight girls tell me that they want to look underweight. I have actually had a client tell me that they want to look a little too thin.

On the other side, I have individuals of all ages and genders struggling with stress, anxiety and indecision due to a plethora of non-contextual information from the wellness culture. Which supplement to take, should they be fasting for longevity, are vaccines causing cancer and what about all of the chemicals in their food? I'd like to offer a perspective and some tips from evidence-based research and behavioural science.



The diet culture tells us to fear getting fat while the wellness culture makes us fear disease. I don't believe in making any decisions out of fear. In fact, if I see myself taking an action or making a decision out of fear I will pause and wait. There is a fine line between actions made out of fear and living in denial. It takes practice and presence to feel one's way through life with a balance of clarity, intelligence and faith. After years of observation and clinical work, I think there is a way to improve our relationship with food and promote healthy behaviours without promoting stress and guilt.

Before I became a nutritionist, I worked as a mentor for girls in gap year programmes, particularly those from unconventional backgrounds, and my own diverse experiences made me uniquely suited for this role. Being half-Korean, losing a parent, spending two years in foster care, getting adopted, being raised Catholic, working as a television and print model and eventually converting to Judaism—all contributed to my colourful background. These experiences taught me that anyone can transform life's challenges into extraordinary outcomes, turning lemons not just into lemonade, but into lemon meringue pie, lemon zest, limoncello and more.

While modelling, I had received daily overt and clear criticism about my body. Whether it was the wrong angle to look at the camera because it wasn't flattering to one part of me or another, or my not-thin-enough legs after years of being a competitive sprinter, I knew exactly what others thought was wrong with my body.



Frend Photography, courtesy of Nomi Spain-Levy



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One thing that years of nutrition study and research, supervision and clinical work has taught me is how to look at food in terms of how it benefits my body

I remember when one of my good friends came to visit my agency. At six-feet tall and a spitting image of Uma Thurman, she was told that if she lost 20 pounds she could be a model. My friend was not impressed with this vaguely-disguised insult, and I wasn't at all surprised at the comment. My weight, with a perfectly normal BMI and build, was a constant point of discussion with my agency. Whenever a billboard or commercial would come out, the first thing I would ask my booking agent was, "did I look fat?" "Yes," I would be told. "Thick" was a word I remember being tossed my way, my arms were "too big" in one billboard, I "should lose five pounds"; the comments were never flattering. I was put

on pills with herbs of unknown origin and given free memberships to posh gyms and spas to work out and get lymphatic drainage. I was eating a diet of canned beets, diet Dr. Pepper and oranges.

After two years, I was done. I didn't need, nor agree with, the criticism constantly being sent my way and, besides, my spiritual side was calling. After a short, superficial stint with Buddhism and lots of yoga, I discovered Shabbat – and that is a story for another time.

I left the modelling world behind as it had been a moment in the middle of university and never my dream. I emerged a few years later in Jerusalem. Now married with a few kids, I started working with teenage girls as a mentor.

As I continued along my career path and into graduate school for nutrition, I was surprised to see the diet mentality that I had witnessed in Hong Kong was lurking in the background within our Jewish world. This time it wasn't confined to a studio or commercial set, it was haunting young and ambitious women and girls, from across the religious spectrum. Many didn't want to be healthy, they wanted to be thinner and thinner. Some had mothers and siblings with eating disorders, or food habits that could fall under 'disordered eating'. Some feared that if they weren't a certain size by the time they returned from their gap year in Israel they would be at the bottom pile of the marriage market.

One thing that years of nutrition study and research, supervision and clinical work has taught me is how to look at food in terms of how it benefits my body. I always say that if one wants to know God, study biochemistry. When I sit down to a salad, I hear research about fibre, antioxidants and phytochemicals singing through my head. I see the blueberries I eat as a wonderful source of anthocyanin, not a source of pesticides. I see the chicken I eat as a great source of leucine and protein. When working with clients I am teaching them to make consistent choices based on their personalised nutrition and health needs and to make those choices from a place of positivity and empowerment – not guilt, anxiety or dread.

For some, their needs are incredibly specific in order to manage a chronic illness. For others, they have to focus less on the details and focus on just showing up to basic health habits daily. Wherever one is on the health spectrum, there are a few things I believe in with my entire heart and soul: the body is primed for healing and does it well when supported. A body that one loves will respond better than one that is criticised and berated daily. Guilt is heavy and more unhealthy than a few extra pounds on the scale. It is a lot more enjoyable to show up to do our purpose (*tafkid*) when we aren't distracted by the dictates of an industry whose primary goal is to profit from our insecurities.

I would hope that our unique values would offer a protective measure from body image issues for our young adults. From my observations, we can upgrade some of our habits and mindsets in order to protect our adolescent and young adult population. I'd like to offer some tools to help us guide our families to a great relationship with food. In an upcoming article I'll be sharing some of my tried and true tips for promoting a healthy relationship with food. With some simple mindset shifts, we can make our home environment one that is nourishing, physically and mentally.

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With some simple mindset shifts, we can make our home environment one that is nourishing, physically and mentally



*Frend Photography, courtesy
of Nomi Spain-Levy*

Mum *BURNOUT*

"Burnout. I know it in myself as a feeling of being totally, utterly, intolerably drained. Not just tired, but wrung out. It's been years since I've been that burned out, but even as I write I can feel its echo..."

Dr. Ilyssa Bass

Defining burnout

What is burnout? The term was coined by Herbert Freudenberger in 1975. Burnout was defined by three components:

1. **Emotional exhaustion** — the fatigue that comes from caring too much for too long.
2. **Depersonalisation** — the depletion of empathy, caring and compassion / cynicism.
3. **Decreased sense of accomplishment** — an unconquerable sense of futility: feeling that nothing you do makes any difference.

Burnout is not depression, but they have a similar feel. How can you differentiate? I like to use this test: If you were on a tropical island without your stressors (mums: pretend you are on a magical tropical island where three weeks for you is 30 minutes for your kids — to avoid the mum guilt), would the exhaustion fade over time or would it hover consistently like a dark cloud over the island? The former is burnout; the latter is more likely depression (you should consult a mental health practitioner).

How does burnout happen?

According to Christina Maslach, the inventor of the Maslach Burnout Inventory (MBI), burnout (she was focused on the workplace) is caused by a mismatch between the individual and:

WORKLOAD
CONTROL
REWARD/ RECOGNITION
COMMUNITY
FAIRNESS
VALUES

She argued that a person will burn out if the stress of the mismatch is high enough and persistent enough. For example: if someone works in a place where the workload is too high or too low and he cannot change that, he will eventually burn out.

It sounds obvious, but it was an important assertion — that there are environmental factors that, if not changed, will make people

burn out — not because they are weak or need a mindset shift, but because they are *human*.

This was a wakeup call to the workplace: burnout costs businesses money. If you burn out your employees, you need to recruit new ones, interview them, train them and integrate them into your organisation; that takes time and resources. There is a whole industry now around employee retention and it is populated by consultants, speakers and HR teams who are dedicated to making sure that employees want to stay.

When burnout meets Mum

What if your occupation (or one of your occupations) is "mum"? Let's go through the burnout mismatch categories:

Workload: Definitely more to do than can ever be done

Control: Over myself — on a good day; everyone else — I can influence, definitely not control

Reward/Recognition: I have never received a

bonus check for good parenting

Community: We're all getting more isolated, no?

Fairness: I'm not sure I can even apply that to motherhood

Values: I value spending quality time with my kids, but somehow I always find myself in the kitchen or at dentists appointments...

Is burnout just part of motherhood then? Shall we all just resign ourselves to feeling utterly drained until the baby turns 18?

No.

There must be more to burnout than environmental factors (otherwise, we're doomed...)

The psychology of Mummy Burnout:

An allegory: Picture a bucket full of water. The bucket is you, your personality, likes and dislikes, strengths and weaknesses, your wants and needs— it is unique. The water is your life force/ energy/ vibrance. The leaks, big or small, are the constant, often unconscious, drains or drips that leak your energy.

We fill our buckets and pour from our buckets all day long. Most of us have things that dip into our buckets, our conscious stressors — finances, difficult family dynamics, our hectic schedules etc. They take water out of our bucket and we try our best to do some

act of self-care to fill up again.

Then there are leaks. Leaks are things like:

- Our **self-critic** that tells us how messy the house is when we think of sitting down to fill the bucket a little
- Our niggling **guilt** when we finally decide to do something that we enjoy
- Our over-the-top **worry** that we are not good enough parents

You can know yourself and you can fill yourself and if one of these insidious leaks is in the picture, you will still feel drained.

If you are drained here are some important questions to explore:

1. **Do I know my bucket?** (Do I know who I am and what I need and want in my life?)
2. **Do I fill my bucket?** (Do I have meaningful physical, emotional, cognitive and spiritual self-care practices and do I do them regularly enough for my unique bucket?)
3. **Do I know my leaks?** (Do I know the voices inside me that can drain my energy when I'm not even looking? Do I know how to soothe or converse with those voices inside me?)
4. **Are there choices about the technical setup of my life that I need to make?** (so I

am not so drained by the mismatch between what is asked of me every day and what I can give.)

5. **Is there anything in my life that is really toxic (i.e. abuse, neglect, lack of support) that needs to be addressed?** (so I have access to the water in my bucket.)

A practical, doable, potentially life-changing challenge:

Ask yourself every day "Was I more filled or drained today?"

If you have a visceral resistance or a voice in your head screaming "that's not practical! I can't

fill myself more than I drain myself *every* day!" — notice that.

You can validate that it's right; you are not going to be able to fill yourself more than you drain yourself every day, life is more complex than that. Then see if you can give yourself permission to ask the question, to build the awareness muscle about where your water level is, how *your* bucket is doing. Through awareness comes change.

Burnout culture

Society at large has gotten very fast-paced. There is a culture of "go, go, go" up a career ladder, from carpool to after-school activity to doctor's appointment to clean house to home-cooked dinner and healthy snacks. It is hard for any of us to have realistic expectations for what can get done in a day or how much we can drain ourselves without the time to refill. Our magazines are filled with images of children in matching clothing in homes with white couches enjoying meals with garnishes. If you feel like everyone else has it together and you're the only one serving hot dogs tonight, you are not alone.

So, what now?

I write about burnout here, because it is a topic near and dear to me. My early motherhood was characterised by intense burnout. I know it in myself as a feeling of being totally, utterly, intolerably drained. Not just tired, but wrung-out. It's been years since I've been that burned out, but even as I write, I can feel its echo.

I was working, supporting my husband in learning, getting my doctorate, writing my dissertation, cooking, cleaning and nursing a baby who *never* slept. I had always defined myself as a giver and, on paper, I loved everything I was doing and found deep meaning in it. On paper, there was even time for it all. I had simply never met my limit before and by the time I realised I had been overdoing it, I'd contracted Glandular fever.

It took me years to get there and years to get out. I learned about myself, my "bucket," where my limits are, what my needs are; I learned what fills me and what drains me in a much more nuanced way (most of the things I was doing were filling me and also draining me). And I did some deep personal work on my leaks. It is a journey I'm glad I went through and never would have asked for.

Today, my message is this: Burnout is not "just how motherhood is."

If you feel drained, do the "Was I more drained or filled today?" exercise. Ask that question every day for a month and see what happens when you let yourself sit with the answer. I hope for you that it is a trail head to a journey you are glad you went through.



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FOOD



Meaningful *Meals*

Food is one of our vessels for storytelling and tradition – certainly a great connector. Explore the global journey of Jewish cuisine, from the diverse flavours of the diaspora to Ta'amim's special Simchat Torah spread that reimagines the nostalgic tastes of Israel, honouring its native fruit.



The Jewish Holiday Table

Our story spread across the world

Yissca Weisz

Frequent festivities and weekly Shabbat meals pepper the Jewish calendar, for which food is often meticulously and elaborately prepared, cooked and consumed. We eat to live, but we also live to connect with the world around us, and quite often it seems, we do so through food. Even more so, because of the many rituals and traditions centring on food, Jewish eating is naturally a social occasion; it brings people together.

Yes, there are the typical foods you'll find Jews eating at certain points in the year: chopped liver and chicken soup with *kneidlach* (matzah balls) on Shabbat, matzah and bitter herbs on Pesach and pomegranate arils on Rosh Hashanah. Preparing, eating and sharing the same or similar foods as our ancestors connects us to a rich past, creating a sense of continuity and shared experience.

Over the centuries eating customs have even developed to showcase the more



figurative ideas related to the festivals, be it the *hamantaschen*, triangular pocket-filled pastries on Purim, or the oil-drenched *latkes*, potato fritters on Chanukah. But what's unique about the fact that we are a dispersed nation across the four corners of the earth, Jews of the Diaspora, is that the types of flavours, tastes and ingredients that are available in one locality, or even preferred, are likely to be different to what's around in another continent across the globe.

This is what Naama Shefi maps out in her innovative cookbook *The Jewish Holiday Table*, as she explores international family recipes, with the focus on the origin country, culture and personal story, rather than the dish itself. Through her non-profit organisation, The Jewish Food Society (JFS), Naama has amalgamated hundreds of recipes from different people with even more diverse backgrounds. In her new cookbook she tells

the story of the Diaspora through food, using personal accounts and gorgeous spreads, offering a feast for the soul, eyes and stomach. Linger over the memories and passed down tales of previous generations, the past comes alive through cooking these recipes.

The menus in the cookbook are categorised into four seasons, and then subdivided into the corresponding Jewish festivals, but with emphasis placed on the hands and faces behind the food. It's not a quick grab-and-cook type of recipe book, to be flicked through in-between rotas and work shifts. *The Jewish Holiday Table* embodies what it means to spend time with family and community, savouring precious moments in celebration of love and life.

Included in the cookbook is renowned Israeli food writer Hila Alpert's retelling of simple kibbutz life as a child, being forced to eat whatever was on her plate as she was told "we eat to get stronger, to build the country." Her loving Moroccan grandmother, however, who lived nearby the kibbutz, urged her not to eat what she didn't like, insisting "you're not a garbage can." Celebrating Shavuot for her was inextricably linked to the harvest and agriculture, around which much of the kibbutz life revolved, everyone working hard to sustain it. Hila's Kibbutz, Ma'ale HaHamisha, was one of the first in Israel to grow sweet cherries, and her vivid descriptions reveal how she can still recall the sensation of gorging cherries in secret behind the trees. This childish feeling of guilty pleasure is immortalised in her "Lali Salad" (p. 288), which has become a culinary icon in Israel.

Who knew that chicken soup with matzah balls could appear in so many variations? Flick through *The Jewish Holiday Table*, and you'll experience Sasha Shor's mouth-watering chanterelle-stuffed matzah balls, a grateful nod to her personal freedom in Nashville and then in New York City, far from her family's persecuted past in Soviet Russia (p.210). Mitchell Davis opts for matzah balls of a light and puffy consistency, but nostalgically and affectionately remembers his mother's preferred "sinkers" (pp. 46-8). Fany's chicken broth offers a unique hybrid of tastes and traditions, by intensifying classic matzah balls with a Mexican kick of lime, chiles, cilantro and sprigs of epazote (a member of the mint family) (pp. 229-31). Inspired by her Persian heritage, Rotem Lieberman's *Ash e Anar*, a hearty and tangy pomegranate soup with meatballs, offers an entirely different alternative to the Western/Ashkenazi bog-standard chicken soup. What's clear is that diverse as we may be in our individual tastes, as Jews we cling tenaciously to our traditions.

In the Chanukah section of this book, we discover Jewish cooks around the world

interpreting the tradition of frying oil in different ways. Lorenza Pintar's Italian family's tendency to top their crispy latkes with a creamy cow's-milk cheese called *stracchino* (p. 136), would look very different to Nir's Egyptian grandmother Rubi's *zalabia* (p. 152), crispy globes drenched in orange blossom syrup.

War survivor Elizaveta Vigonskaia, who narrowly escaped the massacre of nearly thirty-four thousand Jews at Babyn Yar in 1941, recounts how her mother would resourcefully grind up a single potato and fry latkes in fish oil – the smell of which makes her stomach turn to this day. As life improved, her mother would fry latkes every holiday – not just for Chanukah – in regular oil, then top them with roasted meat, transforming a meagre dish into an "absolutely delicious" in-house special (pp. 158-61). Now Elizaveta continues this tradition, serving latkes with braised short ribs as a reminder of challenging times but also as a sign of appreciation for how enriched her life is in her newfound home in Brooklyn.

Providing a tangible and sensory link to the past, these personal stories offer crucial insight into what life was like in certain communities that no longer exist, sometimes due to persecution and danger. Max Nye relates how his family's recipes became ever more precious as generations went on, because of their traverse across continents, from Baghdad to Calcutta in 1847, then to Great Britain in 1964. The number of Calcuttan Jews across the globe has dwindled severely, with less than thirty Jewish citizens in Calcutta itself today.¹

Max fondly recounts his youth growing up in North London as exuding a unique and diverse mixture of "Indian flavours, Iraqi recipes and Jewish customs..." Through eating the food of his heritage, then later in life learning how to cook it, Max affirms "it's brought me closer to my own identity."

His menu is classified under the Rosh Hashanah category, in which the warming spice garam masala plays a leading role in shaping the sweet taste of multiple dishes. Ornate family dishes are beautifully presented, with fresh herbs and aromatic spices sprinkled over tantalising dishes that almost leap off the vibrant fuchsia tablecloth. Preserving the cuisine of a culture under threat, Max's Rosh Hashanah menu offers a refreshing take on the standard salted and roasted chicken and boiled green beans. Slow-cooked onions, deeply caramelised together with garlic, ginger and spices create a fragrant compote upon which the chicken roasts and its skin crisps (p. 66). Max's *Lubia Meetha*, green beans with garlic and spices, takes its name from the Hindi word "*meetha*,"

¹ Priyadarshini Sen, "As Kolkata's Jewish Community Dwindles, One Woman Dreams of the Legacy They Should Leave Behind," *Scroll.in*, January 25, 2023

meaning “sweet.” Tomato paste offers a fruity touch, joined by the multi-faceted sweet-spicy garam masala blend (p. 65). Another exciting sweet addition to this year’s Rosh Hashanah menu is Max’s cousin Sharon’s moist Spiced Walnut and Apricot Semolina Cake, which incorporates natural sweeteners from raisins and dried apricots, as well as an indulgent powdered sugar glaze on top.

What’s so special and enticing about

this book is that it enables us to engage and unite with one another by exploring different family cuisines, offering our own tastes and influences. Cooking these recipes, we participate in a mesmerising dance of connection through time and space, ‘*L’dor vador*’ – generation to generation – maintaining family legacies that span centuries and great distances.

The Jewish Holiday Table elucidates our

shared diaspora experience, building upon our ancient traditions, harnessing our local resources and infusing them with love, spirituality and a celebration of Jewish life. With family customs, cultures and geographic regions that couldn’t be farther apart, what we bring to the table shows our similarities; we share a strong sense of community, enjoying our time together and bonding over delicious food.

ASH E ANAR

Pomegranate Soup with Meatballs

Generous amounts of fresh herbs and scallions lighten up this hearty soup with a tangy undercurrent of pomegranate—a classic Persian flavour combination. The meatballs can be made ahead of time and kept in the fridge for a day or in the freezer for up to a month.

Makes 8 servings

INGREDIENTS

For the Soup

3 tbsp extra-virgin olive oil
3 cups (450 g) finely chopped yellow onions
8 garlic cloves, thinly sliced
½ cup (100 g) basmati rice, rinsed and drained
½ cup (90 g) yellow lentils
½ tsp ground turmeric
2 tbsp kosher salt
¼ tsp freshly ground black pepper
3 litres water
1 cup (30 g) finely chopped fresh coriander
1 cup (30 g) finely chopped fresh flat-leaf parsley
1 cup (30 g) finely chopped fresh mint, plus more for garnish
2 to 3 bunches spring onions (about 20), white and light green parts, finely chopped
1 cup (240 ml) pomegranate concentrate
¼ to ½ cup (50 to 100 g) sugar (optional)
Pomegranate seeds for garnish

For the Meatballs

1½ pounds (625 g) beef mince
¾ cup (115 g) finely chopped yellow onion
1 garlic clove, finely minced or crushed
1 cup (30 g) finely chopped fresh coriander
1 tsp kosher salt
1 tsp freshly ground black pepper

METHOD

Make the Soup

- 1 Heat the olive oil in a large pot over medium heat.
- 2 Add the onions and cook, stirring occasionally, until soft and golden, 15 to 20 minutes.

Meanwhile, make the Meatballs

- 1 Put the beef, onion, garlic, coriander, salt and pepper in a large bowl.
- 2 Mix well (your hands are the best tool for this) until combined.
- 3 Scoop up a heaping teaspoon of the mixture and roll it between your palms into a ball the size of a cherry tomato, then transfer it to a baking sheet or tray. Continue shaping the remaining meatball mixture, then set the meatballs aside.
- 4 When the onions are ready, add the garlic and cook until golden, 3 to 5 minutes.

- 5 Add the rice, lentils, turmeric, salt and pepper and stir to mix well.
- 6 Stir in the water, increase the heat to high and bring to a boil.
- 7 Add the meatballs, cover the pot, adjust the heat to a simmer and cook for 30 minutes, stirring occasionally.
- 8 Uncover the pot and stir in the coriander, parsley, mint and spring onions.
- 9 Increase the heat to high to bring the mixture back to a boil, then cover the pot again, reduce the heat to a simmer and cook the soup for another 30 minutes, stirring occasionally.
- 10 Stir in the pomegranate concentrate and cook, covered, for another 10 minutes.
- 11 Taste the soup and adjust the seasoning with more salt and pepper if needed; add sugar to taste if the soup seems too tart.
- 12 Ladle the soup into individual bowls, garnish with pomegranate seeds and serve hot.





LATKES WITH BRAISED SHORT RIBS

If you make the short ribs the day before serving, it will simplify the workflow of this recipe and the time in the fridge will allow the fat to float to the top and solidify, making it easy to skim off.

Makes 6 to 8 servings (about 24 latkes)

INGREDIENTS

For the Stew

900 g bone-in short ribs, cut across the bone into 2½-inch (6 cm) pieces
 1½ tbsp kosher salt
 ½ tsp freshly ground black pepper
 2 tbsp vegetable or grapeseed oil
 1 large onion (about 280 g), finely chopped
 2 garlic cloves, finely chopped
 5 whole allspice berries
 Water for braising

For the Latkes

1 medium onion (about 170 g)
 4 large russet or maris piper potatoes (about 1.3 kg), peeled
 1 tablespoon all-purpose flour
 1 large egg
 1 large egg yolk
 1½ tablespoons kosher salt
 ½ teaspoon freshly ground black pepper
 Vegetable oil for deep-frying
 A few dill or parsley sprigs for garnish

METHOD

Make the Short Ribs

- 1 Season the short ribs with salt and pepper.
- 2 Heat the oil in a large heavy-bottomed pot, such as a Dutch oven, over medium-high heat. Once the oil is hot, carefully add the short ribs and cook, turning occasionally, until nicely browned on all sides, about 5 minutes per side. Transfer the meat to a plate and reduce the heat to medium.
- 3 Add the onion and garlic to the pot and sauté until soft and light gold but not browned, about 15 minutes.

- 4 Return the short ribs to the pot and add the allspice and enough water to come about three-quarters of the way up the sides of the pot. Bring to a boil, cover the pot and reduce the heat to medium-low, adjusting it if necessary so the liquid simmers gently. Cook the short ribs for about 1½ hours and then, using a pair of tongs, carefully turn the short ribs. Continue cooking the short ribs, partially covered, for another 1 to 1½ hours, until the meat is very tender and the liquid has reduced and thickened slightly. Remove from the heat.
- 5 Let the short ribs partially cool in their liquid and then spoon off the fat that rises to the surface. Once the short ribs are cool enough to handle, take them out, shred the meat and discard the bones; set aside.
- 6 If the cooking liquid seems watery, return it to the stove and simmer for a few minutes to thicken and concentrate the flavours.
- 7 Taste and season with more salt and pepper if needed. (You can cook and shred the short ribs ahead of time, then refrigerate the meat and the cooking liquid separately. Just before serving, remove any remaining fat that's hardened on the cooking liquid, and gently reheat the meat in a bit of the liquid.)

CHANTERELLE-STUFFED MATZAH BALLS IN BROTH

Makes 6 to 8 servings; 12 to 16 matzah balls

INGREDIENTS

For the Filling

2 tbsp non-dairy butter or extra-virgin olive oil
 2 tbsp finely chopped shallot
 4 oz. (115 g) chanterelle mushrooms (or other wild mushrooms or white or cremini mushrooms), trimmed and cut into ¼-inch (6 mm) slices
 Kosher salt
 1½ tsp finely chopped fresh flat-leaf parsley
 1½ tsp non-dairy cream cheese
 Freshly ground black pepper

For the Matzah Balls

4 large eggs, beaten
 ¼ cup (60 ml) seltzer or water
 ¼ cup (60 ml) melted schmaltz or duck fat
 1 cup (115 g) matzah meal
 1½ tsp kosher salt
 Freshly ground black pepper

3 litres homemade or canned chicken broth (not low-sodium), heated
 450 g fresh spinach or Swiss chard, stemmed and steamed just until wilted
 Good-quality truffle oil for serving (optional)
 Fresh dill for serving

METHOD

Make the filling

- 1 Heat 1 tablespoon of the non-dairy butter in a large skillet over medium-high heat until it simmers. Add the shallot and sauté, stirring often, until translucent and starting to caramelize, 2 to 3 minutes. Transfer the shallot to a small bowl to cool.
- 2 Wipe out the pan with a paper towel, add the remaining 1 tablespoon non-dairy butter and heat over medium heat. Add the mushrooms and ¼ teaspoon salt and sauté, flipping and stirring the mushrooms so they cook evenly, until they are tender and starting to brown at the edges, 4 to 5 minutes. Transfer the mushrooms to a bowl and set aside to cool.
- 3 When the mushrooms are cool, chop into a very fine dice. Drain off any liquid.
- 4 Add the mushrooms to the bowl with the

shallot, then add the parsley and non-dairy cream cheese and stir until well blended. Season generously with salt and pepper. Set aside.

Make the Matzah Ball mixture

- 1 In a large bowl, combine the eggs, seltzer and schmaltz.
- 2 In a small bowl, stir together the matzah meal with the salt and several twists of black pepper.
- 3 Add the matzah meal to the egg mixture and stir until well combined. Refrigerate, uncovered, for 30 to 45 minutes.

Shape and fill the Matzah Balls

- 1 Line a baking sheet with parchment paper.
- 2 Remove the matzah ball mixture from the fridge.
- 3 Moisten your hands with water, scoop out some of the matzah ball mixture and shape

- it into a 1½- to 2-inch (3.75 to 5 cm) ball. Cradle the ball in one hand and poke a hole into the centre with your other thumb. Fill the hole with a teaspoon of mushroom filling, and then seal the hole by easing the mixture around the filling and reshaping it into a ball. Gently roll the ball between your palms to smooth it. Aim for 2 matzah balls per person; so if you're serving 8, make the matzah balls on the smaller side.
- 4 Put the chicken broth in a large pot and bring to an active simmer/low boil over medium-high heat.
 - 5 Very gently add the matzah balls to the hot broth, cover and simmer until cooked through, about 1 hour.
- To serve, put 2 hot matzah balls in each soup bowl, ladle in the hot chicken broth and add a spoonful of the wilted greens. Garnish each bowl with a few drops of truffle oil, if using, and torn fresh dill.



The *Flavour* of ISRAEL

A Simchat Torah menu flowing with milk and honey

Dan Matalon, Ta'amim

Unlike most other Jewish holidays, Simchat Torah has no specific *mitzvot*, and is not mentioned in the Torah. We are instructed to mark Shemini Atzeret, a celebration on the eighth day from the start of Sukkot, but the festival we now know as Simchat Torah wasn't born until about a millennium after our exile. Historically, in Israel, the Torah was read over three and a half years, but in ancient Babylon, the custom shifted to reading a portion weekly, completing

the cycle after Shemini Atzeret.

Interestingly, while Shavuot commemorates receiving the Torah at Sinai, and we customarily study and eat dairy in recognition of the laws we accepted upon ourselves, it does not focus on celebrating the Torah itself. This is due to the sin of the golden calf which caused us to temporarily lose our special connection with God. Simchat Torah, at the end of the High Holy Days and Sukkot, celebrates our renewed connection with God and the joy of Torah.

Last year's events, however, changed Simchat Torah forever, leaving us to face this year's celebration marred by tragedy. We will dance with tears in our eyes for the joy of Torah, for the grief of those whom we lost on and following October 7th, 2023, and with hope and prayer for those who (at the time of writing) have yet to return home safely.

Ta'amim has created a special dairy menu honouring both the people and the fruits of the land flowing with milk and honey.



Turn the page for 4 amazing dairy recipes to try!



Pizza Boureka Twists with *Sabra* Sauce

There is something quintessentially Israeli about the taste of olives. One of the Seven Species of Israel mentioned in Torah, olive branches also adorn the emblem of the modern State of Israel, a symbol of peace, holiness and beauty. From gourmet marinated olives piled high in the Shuk, to sliced olives in tins, these delectable, salty little fruits are such a staple of the Israeli diet that they are even considered a default Israeli topping for pizzas.

Pastries sold on Middle Eastern street corners for centuries have been made with spinach, cheese, potatoes and more, but the relatively modern Israeli creation of the Pizza Boureka contains the obvious cheese and tomato in all pizza pockets, flavoured with little bits of sliced green olives.

Our starter for this special menu, Pizza Boureka Twists, takes inspiration from this classic. We plate these alongside a little extra sauce with an added chilli kick. Delicate and sweet with tomato, but a little prickly on the surface, we have named this sauce 'Sabra' for the cactus fruit from which Israelis derive their nickname.

Makes approximately 30 twists

INGREDIENTS

1 roll pre-made, frozen puff pastry (approx. 1kg)
 1 small jar of sliced green olives, drained
 1 cup (240 g) tomato sauce (*passata*)
 2 tbsp tomato paste
 1 tsp garlic powder
 1 tsp onion powder
 1 tsp dried basil
 1 tub pre-grated parmesan (optional)
 1 egg, whisked
 Salt and black pepper to taste
 ½ tsp chilli flakes or 1 chilli pepper (optional)

METHOD

- 1 Heat tomato sauce and paste together in a pan, stirring to combine.
- 2 Add garlic powder, onion powder, dried basil, salt and pepper and cook on a low heat, continuing to stir.
- 3 Add olives. Stir to combine and set to one side.

Meanwhile

- 4 Preheat your oven to 200°C / 180°C fan

(Gas Mark 6 / 400°F)

- 5 Line a baking tray with foil and baking parchment, then set aside.
- 6 Unfold defrosted pastry onto a floured surface as it can get quite sticky.
- 7 Cut off a sheet of pastry approx 30-40cm long, and with a floured rolling pin, gently roll out the pastry further.
- 8 Cover one half of the pastry sheet in a light layer of sauce and sprinkle with a generous coating of parmesan (don't be shy). Then fold the remaining layer over the top, sandwiching the filling inside.
- 9 Slice into 2cm strips, carefully twist each strip and lay on the lined baking tray.
- 10 Glaze the pastry twists with egg and bake in the oven for approx 20 mins or until golden.
- 11 Repeat steps 5-10 until all pastry is used.

Whilst baking

- 12 Add chilli to the remaining sauce and warm over a low heat for at least 10 minutes, stirring frequently, until infused. This is optional, and the chilli level is down to personal taste.

Serving suggestion: serve two twists together to represent the 'Atzei Chayim', the two wooden poles around which we wind the Torah scroll.

Pistachio, Zaatar and Pomegranate Crusted Salmon *with Seven Species Salad*

The Seven Species of Israel, or *Shivat HaMinim*, form the heart of our meal. These are the seven special species of the Holy Land specifically named in Torah, whose first fruits could be brought to the Temple in Jerusalem as offerings. They are: wheat, barley, grape, fig, pomegranate, olive (oil) and date (silan – date honey).

We have created a Seven Species salad, bursting with flavour and rich in meaning, accompanied by a pistachio, za'atar and pomegranate pesto-topped fillet of salmon, a light and nutritious dish elevated with the tastes of the Mediterranean.

Makes 4+ servings

INGREDIENTS

For the fish

Either 4 fillets of salmon or a side of salmon (*double the rest of ingredients for side of salmon*)

For the pesto crust

150g shelled pistachios
Two handfuls parsley
1.5 tbsp pomegranate molasses
1 tsp of za'atar
3 tbsp olive oil
1-2 garlic cloves, crushed
Salt and pepper to taste

For the salad

(serves 4 – increase quantities if required)

1 cup (200 g) pearl barley
1 cup (180 g) bulgur wheat
2 dried Medjool dates, pitted and checked*
2-3 soft dried figs
2-3 tbsp fresh pomegranate seeds
Bunch fresh parsley (washed, checked and finely chopped)
½ handful fresh mint leaves (washed, checked and finely chopped)
½ punnet red grapes
Juice of half a lemon
Generous drizzle extra-virgin olive oil
Salt & Pepper to taste

METHOD

For the salad

- 1 Cook pearl barley according to the packet and to desired consistency. Rinse with cold water once cooked, then drain.
- 2 Cook bulgur wheat according to the packet.
- 3 Roast grapes for 20-30 minutes until soft and beginning to brown.
- 4 Dice up figs and dates¹
- 5 Once cooled, add wheat, barley and chopped herbs to a bowl. In a separate jug or bowl, mix together oil and lemon juice, then pour over and combine well.

- 6 Add dates and figs, fold in and top with roasted red grapes.

For the fish

- 7 Preheat your oven to 200°C / 180°C fan (Gas Mark 6 / 400°F)
- 8 Blitz together all crust ingredients.
- 9 Smear the pesto onto the skinless side of the salmon and place skin side down in a roasting dish. Bake for 10-15 minutes, (approx. 4 mins per 1 cm of thickness), until salmon is just opaque and easily flaked with a fork, but before the pesto crust catches.
Serving suggestion: serve salmon with seven species salad and roasted butternut squash.



² Be sure to thoroughly wash and check the figs and dates, and all produce, properly for bugs



Limonana Cheesecake

Lemon and mint drinks are refreshing, delicious and have been consumed across the Middle East for centuries. However, you might be surprised to know that the *Limonana* we know and love today, often referred to as the national drink of Israel and served everywhere from street corners to supermarkets, only gained real popularity in the country during the 1990s, and was originally part of an advertising prank!

In a bid to promote bus advertising to sceptical clients, a clever group of marketers created a celebrity-endorsed campaign around a fictional lemon and mint soft drink. A play on *limonada* and *nana*, the Hebrew words for lemonade and mint, respectively, the bus campaign triggered a frenzy with shoppers on the hunt for the drink we now know as Limonana. Having proven that the bus ads really worked, the marketers came clean about their deception. When it was revealed that it was all a ruse, restaurants and coffee shops started creating their own versions blended with ice, and the rest, as they say, is history.

We have infused the flavours of *Limonana* into a delicious cheesecake, an opportunity to spark discussion around the links between Shavuot, Shemini Atzeret and Simchat Torah as mentioned earlier.

Makes 1 9-inch cake

INGREDIENTS

For the base

170g (6oz / $\frac{3}{4}$ cup) butter, plus extra for greasing tin
280g (10oz / 3 cups) digestive biscuits, made into fine crumbs
 $1\frac{1}{2}$ tbsp golden caster sugar

For the cheesecake filling

1kg (2.2lb / 4 cups) full-fat soft cheese (can use cream cheese)
250g (9oz / 1 cup) golden caster sugar
3 tbsp plain flour
Finely grated zest of 4 lemons (about 3 tbsp)
1 bunch of mint, finely chopped
 $1\frac{1}{2}$ tsp lemon juice
3 large eggs, plus 1 yolk
200ml (0.85 cups) carton sour cream

METHOD

- 1 Preheat your oven to 180°C (160°C Fan / 350°F / Gas Mark 4)
- 2 Line the base of a springform tin: either one 23cm or eight x 10cm springform tins (available in packs of four – you can bake four at a time).

For the base

- 3 Crush 280g (10oz / 3 cups) biscuits
- 4 Melt 170g (6oz / $\frac{3}{4}$ cup) of butter in a medium-sized pan and stir in the biscuits. Stir in 1 tbsp of golden caster sugar until it is combined and well coated.
- 5 Carefully press the mixture into the bottom

of your cake tin(s). Bake in the oven for 10 minutes. Remove and leave to cool (inside the tins) on a wire rack.

- 6 Up the temperature of the oven to 200°C (180°C Fan / 390°F / Gas Mark 6).
- 7 In a mixer (you can use a large bowl with an electric whisk) beat 1kg (2.2lb / 4 cups) of full-fat, soft cheese on a low speed until creamy. This should only take a couple of minutes.
- 8 Slowly beat in 250g (9oz / 1 cup) of caster sugar (keeping the mixer on low). Then add in 3 tbsp of plain flour, and a pinch of salt. Scrape the sides off to combine the mixture and whisk until fully combined.
- 9 Add in lemon zest and 1.5tsp lemon juice.
- 10 Whisk in, one at a time, 3 large eggs and 1 egg yolk. Scrape the sides of the bowl intermittently. Whisk until well combined.
- 11 Stir in 200 ml of sour cream. Whisk to blend, but don't overdo it. It should be light and fluffy at the end.
- 12 Grease the sides of the springform. Pour the batter into your tin.
- 13 Bake on 180°C (160°C Fan / 350°F / Gas Mark 4) for 30 minutes and check. The batter should jiggle subtly, but not be sloshing around. If required, cook for a further 10 minutes and repeat the jiggle test.
- 14 Remove the cheesecake and allow it to cool for 1 hour in the tin, then use a palette knife to separate the edges from the springform. Refrigerate for 4-5 hours or overnight to set, then remove the sides of the tin.

Will keep refrigerated for 1 week in an airtight container, or can be frozen and thawed before serving.



The Limonana we know and love today is often referred to as the national drink of Israel and served everywhere from street corners to supermarkets

Tahini Martini

A widely held custom of Simchat Torah is to imbibe alcoholic beverages, not to the excesses of Purim, but enough to bring extra joviality and *Simcha* to this day of celebration. Our menu is completed with a final tribute to Israeli food culture by way of a cocktail.

Tahini paste, or *techina*, is a bedrock of Israeli cuisine. The average Israeli consumes almost 5 kg of sesame every year, much of it in the form of tahini. To quote celebrity chef Michael Solomonov, "Israelis love tahini like Americans love Doritos and wrestling –

unconditionally and a little bit irrationally. The country doesn't run without it." Infinitely versatile, the sesame-based condiment is at once savoury, bitter, sweet, nutty and creamy, and therefore comprises an almost perfectly balanced flavour profile without any help. A little lemon for sourness, and a little water to dilute the intensity, and you have a beautifully well-rounded dip or drizzle. Add it to chickpeas to add creaminess and bitter notes to hummus. The sweeter notes lend themselves to delicious desserts and snacks, such as halva.

It therefore seems only fitting that our Israeli Simchat Torah menu should be rounded off with a delicious, bittersweet Tahini Martini. We drink a *L'Chaim*, to life, as we dance through the tears.

Makes 1 Martini

INGREDIENTS

1 tbsp tahini paste
1 tbsp silan (date honey)
2 shots oat milk
1-2 shots vodka
Ice

For the Garnish (as pictured on previous page)

Sesame seeds (optional)
Extra silan (optional)

N.B. You will also need a cocktail shaker, and, ideally, a martini or coupe glass.

METHOD

- 1 Start, if desired, by chilling the glass in the fridge for 30-60 minutes, and then, optionally, garnishing the rim of the glass with sesame and silan. Pour a little silan onto a plate, and a generous sprinkling of sesame seeds onto another. Upturn your glass into the silan, to coat the rim. Twist it through the date honey to ensure even coating. Then dip the coated rim into sesame seeds which will stick to the silan, twisting the glass again to ensure even coverage. Set aside.
- 2 Into a cocktail shaker add the tahini paste, 1 tbsp silan, 2 shots oat milk and 1-2 shots vodka (to taste/desired booziness). Top with ice.
- 3 Ensure the lid is tightly on the shaker, and shake very vigorously for 30 seconds. (The outside of the shaker should get very cold and damp with condensation, so you may wish to use a tea towel to hold it.)
- 4 Strain the cocktail into your chilled (and rimmed) glass, serve and enjoy.

Photo by Sophy Weiss Photography 2024

CULTURE



About *Time*

Uncover the history of the Jews of Kaifeng, China, then lose yourself in a photo essay capturing our deep collective yearning for a rebuilt Jerusalem. Check out the Fashion Edit by *Valour*, inspired by vintage looks. “We will dance again” takes on special meaning in the final piece.

Longing

A photo essay

Atara Whitman



PART ONE: 8 October 2023

As a family photographer in Israel, I found myself watching the most graphic, horrific scenes on the news as I sifted through thousands of photos I had taken throughout Sukkot of families, smiling and giggling all in their finest clothes, celebrating the *chag* (holiday) in Jerusalem.

The photos felt entirely irrelevant, insignificant and vain.

And yet, at the same time, they became all the more meaningful and powerful.

The contrast between both scenes was jarring.

From a historical perspective, I was unsure which of them made more sense.

PART TWO: 1 November 2023

6:00 AM. The IDF Spokesperson announces the loss of 11 soldiers in an explosion in Gaza.

I'm in my car on the way to photograph a family from New York, celebrating their son's *Hanachat Tefillin* (first experience laying phylacteries for Bar Mitzvah) at the Kotel.

11 soldiers,

11 mothers,

11 families,

Dreams, worlds and lives all shattered.

It is impossible to begin to grasp the depths of the destruction.

The distance of the shrapnel.

I'm standing in front of *Shaar Yafo-Jaffa*

Gate, framing the Bar Mitzvah boy and his family within the very same gate the soldiers came through when reclaiming Jerusalem 57 years ago.

I think about the *Bikkurim* (offerings) that the Jewish People would bring to the *Beit Hamikdash* (the Temple),

*"...but each with his own gift, according to the blessing that your God has bestowed upon you."*¹

The tremendous honour of protecting our land, fighting for it and for its people, has not been distributed equally among our nation, but it is the responsibility of us all, to cherish, to live and celebrate our land, each according to what has been given to us.



¹ Deuteronomy (16:14-15)

PART THREE: 7 October 2023

Simchat Torah, my very favourite holiday, is the most challenging day for me not to be photographing.

Instead, I close my eyes tight and try to imprint the scene I see.

I have a few of these photos stored in my mind; they are my very best work.

I'm standing on the second story of our synagogue, through the white lace curtain, watching my daughter—then four, in her pink dress, on the shoulders of my father. Dancing in front of the Torah, as though there is no world outside this setting.

Dancing to the same words children on their grandfathers' shoulders have been

dancing to for thousands of years.

The choice to disconnect ourselves from the outside world entirely during the holiday, refraining from the use of technology, kept us innocently singing and dancing while our land was burning, our brothers and sisters were being tortured, slaughtered and were becoming ashes, so close to where we were.

Simchat Torah will never be what it was.

The pink little dress does not fit, and the innocence of that dance is gone. Forever.

I don't know what Simchat Torah will become, but I know that we will be dancing that dance again.

We never danced in spite of the horrors, we dance and celebrate because of them.

We choose to celebrate our Torah, our people, our land and home. No matter what.

And just as in our happiest moments we remind ourselves of the sorrow and sadness of Jerusalem's destruction, in our darkest times, we remember that we must rebuild.

"I will build you firmly again, O' maiden Israel, yet again you shall be adorned with your tambourines, and go forth to dance with joy."²

Dancing in Jerusalem is not yet the final redemption, but it is a reminder, for our souls and bodies, of what we pray and yearn for, every single day.

"...and the streets of the city shall be filled, with boys and girls playing in its streets,"³

This year. Amen. Chag Sameach.





Kibbutz Nir Yitzchak in the Gaza Envelope, Israel. 2018



More from Atara Whitman

Website: israelphotographybyatara.com

Instagram: @atarawhitman

The *Fashion* Edit

By Chaya Baumgarten, founder of Valour magazine

In collaboration with **VALOUR**
LIFESTYLE



Fashion has always been a powerful form of self-expression, reflecting the cultural and social values of each era. Throughout history, styles have evolved, with new trends emerging in tandem with the times.

There's an intriguing balance between staying at the pinnacle of innovation and

remaining true to eternal Jewish values through tradition and perennial laws. Within this framework, our wardrobe choices serve as an opportunity for individuality, allowing plenty of room for creativity and personal expression.

As trends continue to evolve, these pages highlight how we can effortlessly blend

the charm of vintage styles with modern sensibilities. By layering classic pieces with contemporary elements and simple wardrobe staples, we create a look that is both nostalgic and new, showing how what goes around truly comes around in fashion, allowing each generation to redefine timeless elegance.

1920s

Fashion reflected the newfound sense of freedom of the era. Women's fashion featured dropped waistlines, shorter hemlines and boyish silhouettes, with flapper dresses and cloche hats becoming iconic symbols of the era.



Chorus Stellarum bandana £220, Hermès



Multi-strand pearl necklace £29.99, Zara

Perfect layering pieces



Cropped broderie-anglaise trimmed wool blazer £552, The Outnet



Viscose blouse £19.99, Reserved



Black sequin fringe midi dress £189.99, Mint Velvet

Top tip:
Add interest with sequins



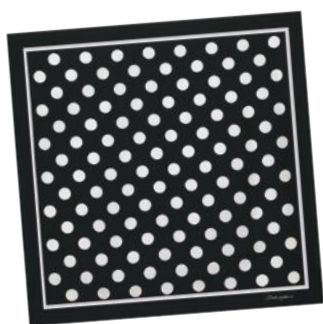
New Bonnie veil beret £495, Harrods



Linen embroidered shirt £45, M&S



Sequin mini bag £45.99, Reserved



Silk twill scarf £365, Dolce & Gabbana



Lyocell blend maxi dress £79.99, Reserved



Fringe-embellished woven midi skirt £169, Selfridges



Fitted top with rhinestone bow £35.99, Zara



Colour block shirt £95, Karen Millen



White linen court shoes £65, Lyst

1950s

This time period was characterised by a return to glamour and femininity. Women's clothing featured hourglass silhouettes, full skirts and pastel colours. Popular styles included dresses with nipped-in waists, tailored suits with pencil skirts and accessories like gloves, pearls and kitten heels. The overall look was classic, elegant and refined: reflecting a return to traditional notions of beauty.

Try with a cropped jacket or bolero

Vintage style pearl studs
£18, Lovett & Co



Gucci canvas bucket hat
£415, Harrods



Eloise blouse
£65, Y.A.S

Midi pleated skirt
£97, Arket



Plain knit top with gold button
£29.99, Zara

Plissé halterneck maxi dress
£225, COS



Jackie O straw pillbox hat
£124.95, Village Hats



Ganni twill blazer
£160, The Outnet



Top tip:
Opt for pastel pinks, yellows and greens



Crystal midi dress
£75, Y.A.S

Suede cotton day gloves
£195, Cornelia James



Lyla dress in green
£115, Jovonna London



Satin cropped jacket
£99, Karen Millen



Linen blend cropped blazer,
£79.99, John Lewis



Maxi flower high heel sandals
£49.99, Zara

1980s

The 1980s were a decade of excess and extravagance, yet more casual and relaxed with fashion, reflecting the bold and vibrant culture of the time. Women's fashion featured power suits with padded shoulders, satiny materials, bold colours, bizarre patterns and oversized accessories, embodying a strong and confident style.



Cherry earrings
£15.99
Zara



Saddle
sleeve cardigan
£80, Boden

Floral-
embroidery
shirt £97,
& Other
Stories



Petunia red
gingham
knit vest £130,
Olivia Rubin

Perfect
pair ↗

New Balance
530 trainers
£100, Schuh



Embroidered
t-shirt cardigan
£125, Boden



Cascade glass-
bead earrings
£27, & Other
Stories



Pleat detail
midi dress
£135,
Boden



Jacquard pattern crew
jumper £54.99, Superdry



Ballet flats with double
strap £45.99, Zara



Liv pleat detail midi dress
£135, Boden



Ganni wool-blend
twill blazer £198,
The Outnet



Smock
maxi dress
£87,
Arket

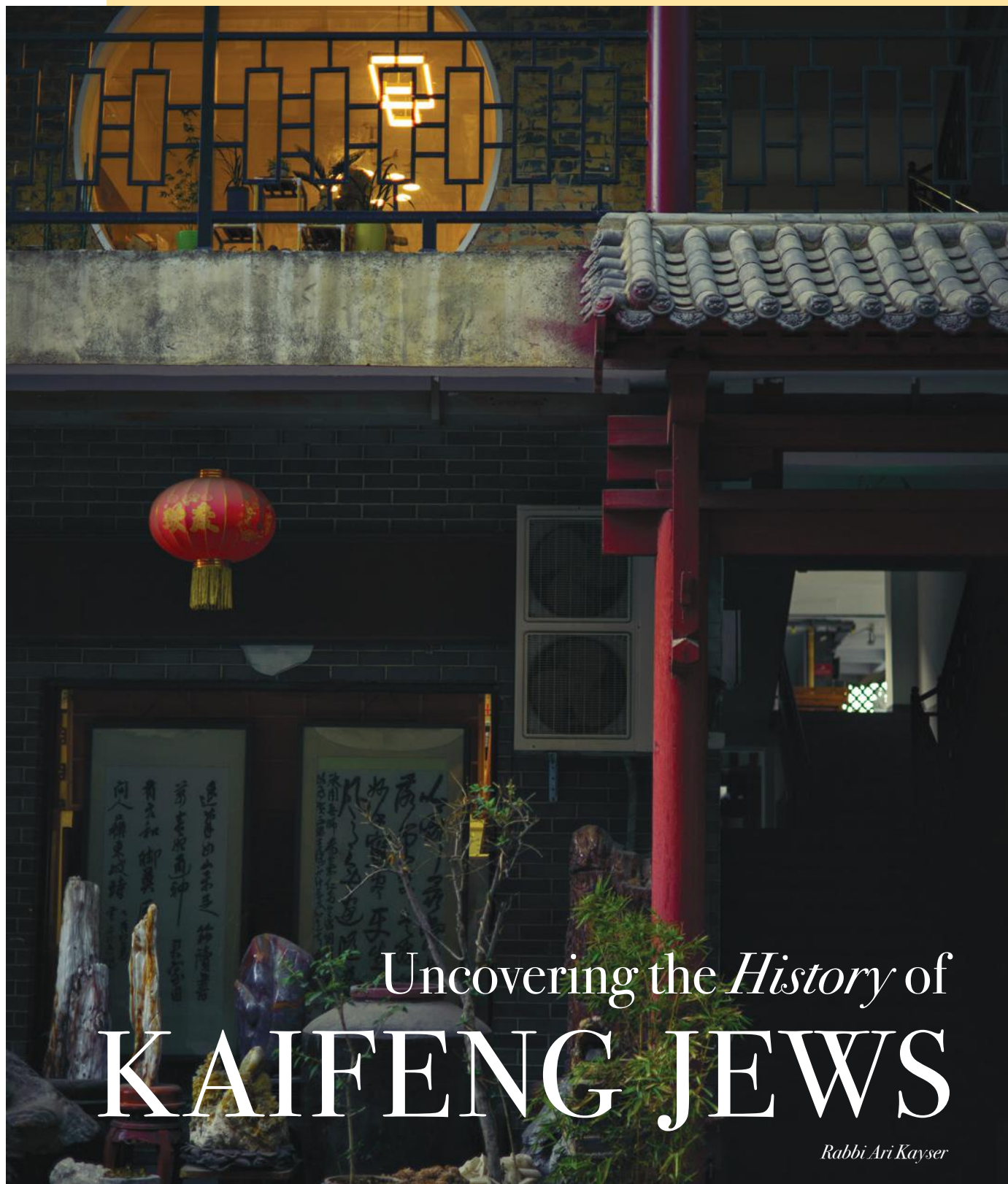
Top tip:
Try bold prints
and roomier
shapes



Tailored blazer
£165, & Other
Stories



Floral printed
scarf £12.99,
Mango



Uncovering the *History* of KAIFENG JEWS

Rabbi Ari Kayser

Along the banks of the Yellow River in China's Henan Province lies the ancient city of Kaifeng, one of China's Seven Ancient Capitals. The exact date Jews first arrived in China is unknown. However, the records of Chinese Jews indicate their ancestors may have settled there as early as the Zhou dynasty, between 1056 BCE and 256 BCE.¹ There seems little doubt that Jews had been migrating to China in several groups over many centuries, and there is consensus

among historians that Jews have been living continuously in China since the 9th century CE. Remarkably, even at its peak during the Ming Dynasty (1368–1644), the Jewish population in China never exceeded 4,000 people. This makes their ability to maintain a distinct identity, avoiding the widespread assimilation typical of that era, all the more extraordinary.

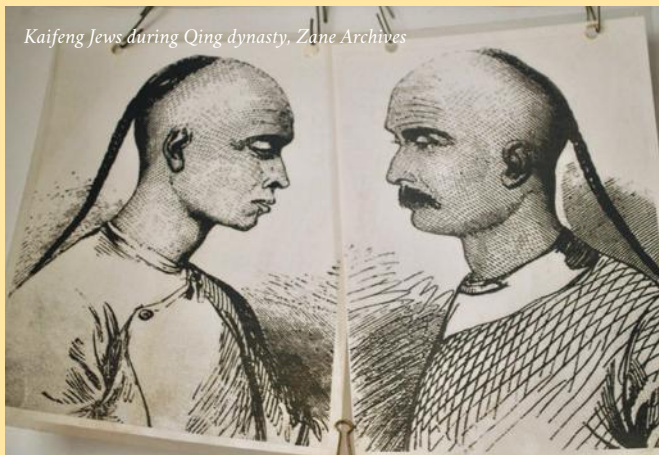
Historical accounts and local legends suggest that Jewish merchants, likely from India or Persia, travelled along the Silk Road and

settled in Kaifeng, a burgeoning commercial hub. These Jewish traders were experts in the production of cotton fabrics, an industry well-developed in India but just emerging in China to address an acute silk shortage.

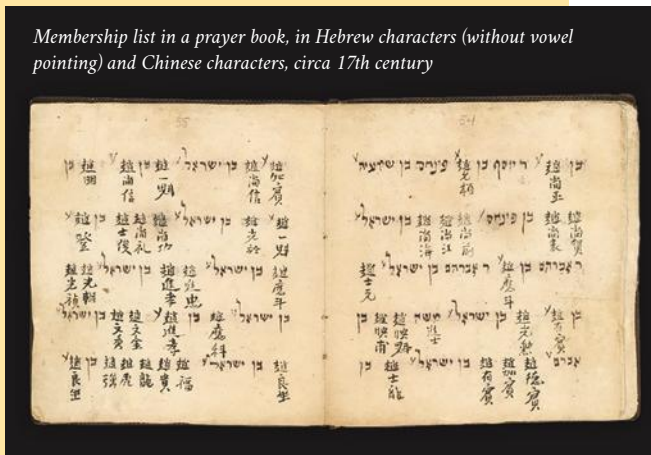
Prior to this, Jewish merchants were likely active in China, as evidenced by the Persian geographer Ibn Khordadbeh, who in his 870 CE work, *Book of Roads and Kingdoms*,² describes Jewish Radhanite merchants operating across a vast arc from Western

¹ Ken Blady, *Jewish Communities in Exotic Places, The Blue-Turbaned Muslims*, p. 257 ² *Kitāb al-Masālik wa-l-Mamālik*

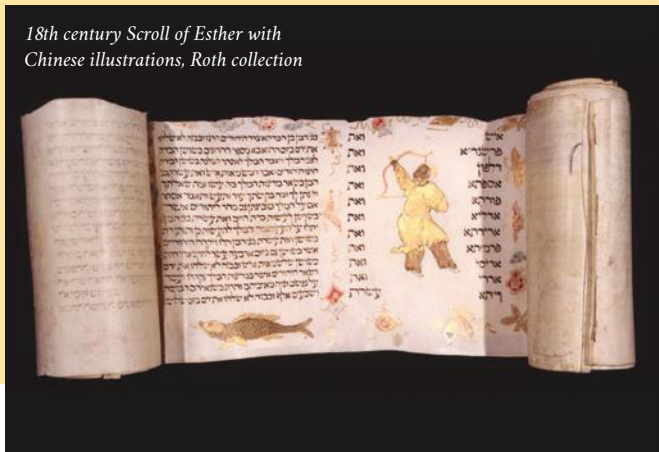
Kaifeng Jews during Qing dynasty, Zane Archives



Membership list in a prayer book, in Hebrew characters (without vowel pointing) and Chinese characters, circa 17th century



18th century Scroll of Esther with Chinese illustrations, Roth collection



Kaifeng Jews pictured in 1899



Europe to China. Although Jewish written sources do not detail how they arrived in Kaifeng, a popular legend suggests they travelled by land on the Silk Road, bringing with them their sacred texts, rituals and a deep sense of community.

One of the most striking aspects of the Kaifeng Jews was their adaptation to Chinese culture. They adopted Chinese surnames, such as Zhao, Zhang and Ai, often bestowed by the Emperor as a sign of respect and integration. Inscriptions from 1672 and 1489 mention 73 and 14 clans, respectively, indicating a robust community structure. Despite these adaptations, they retained a distinct Jewish identity, passing down their traditions and religious knowledge through generations.

Their religious life was vibrant, with a strong emphasis on communal worship and education. The synagogue served not only as a place of prayer but also as a centre for learning. The Torah and other Jewish texts were studied, and religious education was provided to the younger generations, ensuring the continuity of Jewish knowledge and practices.

The Kaifeng synagogue, built in the traditional Chinese style, featured a large courtyard, prayer halls and a *mikvah* (ritual bath). The synagogue complex also housed a library filled with sacred texts, some written in a unique blend of Hebrew and Chinese characters. The architecture of the

synagogue reflected the integration of Jewish and Chinese aesthetics, with traditional Chinese roofs, intricate wooden carvings and symbolic decorations.

Unfortunately, the synagogue faced multiple destructions due to natural disasters. The original building erected in 1163 was destroyed by a flood in 1461. Subsequent reconstructions faced similar fates: a fire in 1600, another flood in 1642 and finally, another devastating flood in the 1860s. Despite these setbacks, the community made considerable efforts to preserve their scriptures and religious artefacts. For instance, Gao Xuan, a member of the Gao clan, heroically dove into the flooded synagogue to rescue sacred scrolls, with the help of the seven clans who restored and rewrote the 13 scrolls.

These artefacts included Torah scrolls, prayer books and religious commentaries, many of which were carefully copied and restored after each disaster. The community's resilience in the face of repeated calamities underscored their commitment to preserving their religious and cultural identity.

The Jews of Kaifeng made significant contributions to Chinese society. Several community members became officials or military officers, their achievements documented in provincial Chinese gazetteers. A notable figure, Chao Ying-ch'en, played a significant role in restoring the Kaifeng

synagogue after the flood. His leadership and dedication to the community were instrumental in preserving their religious practices and ensuring the continuity of their cultural heritage.

The community left behind significant historical artefacts, including four Chinese stone inscriptions from 1489, 1512, 1663 and 1679. These inscriptions provide invaluable insights into the community's history, religious practices and interactions with their Chinese neighbours. The earliest stele from 1489 commemorates the construction of the 1163 synagogue and mentions that the Jews brought Western cloth as tribute for an emperor, who welcomed them with the words: "You have come to Our China... preserve the customs of your ancestors, and hand them down at Kaifeng."

During the prayer service, congregants would face west toward Jerusalem, although the wearing of the tallit was not found among the Kaifeng Jews. The *ba'al koreh* (one who reads from the Torah) would stand barefoot and cover his face with a transparent veil just as Moses did when he descended Mount Sinai to present the Torah to the Jewish people. In a similar vein to how many Western countries have a prayer for the head of state, the synagogue in Kaifeng had a tablet with gold Chinese letters with the words, "Long Live the Emperor." However, in



Despite the forces that sought to destroy this community physically and spiritually, it is inspiring to see that their sense of identity has persevered

order that the Jews not forget that God was the true King, the Kaifeng community added the Hebrew letters of their seminal prayer, the *Shema*, above it so that no one else could understand. (see Blady, p268.)

The 20th century brought significant challenges to the Jews of Kaifeng. The fall of the Qing Dynasty, the establishment of the Republic of China and later the Communist Revolution, brought about political and social upheaval that impacted the Jewish community. Many of the remaining Jews began to assimilate further into Chinese society, losing touch with their Jewish heritage.

The Cultural Revolution (1966-1976) posed a particularly harsh period, during which religious practices were suppressed. The few Jewish families in Kaifeng had to hide their religious artefacts and refrain from public worship to avoid persecution. This period significantly eroded the visible presence of Jewish life in Kaifeng, leading to a further decline in community cohesion. By the mid-19th century, the community barely retained any of its Jewish knowledge. Despite these challenges, some traditions and memories of Jewish customs were passed down through generations, keeping the embers of their heritage alive. These stories

and traditions became crucial in the later efforts to revive and preserve the Jewish heritage of Kaifeng.

Between 500-1,000 people living in Kaifeng today claim to be Jews. While most do not speak Hebrew, celebrate Jewish holidays or practise traditional religious beliefs, these Chinese citizens still call themselves Jewish. Some members of the community remember celebrating Passover and Yom Kippur as children or having Stars of David in their childhood homes.

Today's younger generation of Chinese Jews has a strong desire to learn more about their heritage. The main street where the Jews of Kaifeng once lived is still called the Lane of the Teaching Scriptures. In 2016, the communist Chinese government, which opposes all religion, shut down the few existing Jewish organisations in Kaifeng and forced the small Jewish community to celebrate, learn and pray in private. Additionally, the authorities removed all public signs of Jewish history in Kaifeng and members of the local Jewish community have reportedly been monitored by the authorities.

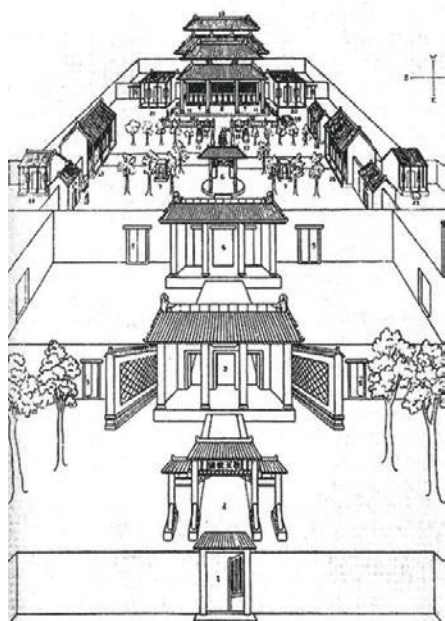
Some remnants of Jewish traditions are still observed by Chinese Jews, such as eating matzah during Passover. Often, the traditions

are somewhat distorted, such as one person who was observed to remove the sinew (a command in the Torah) but this was done on pork (which is forbidden in the Torah).

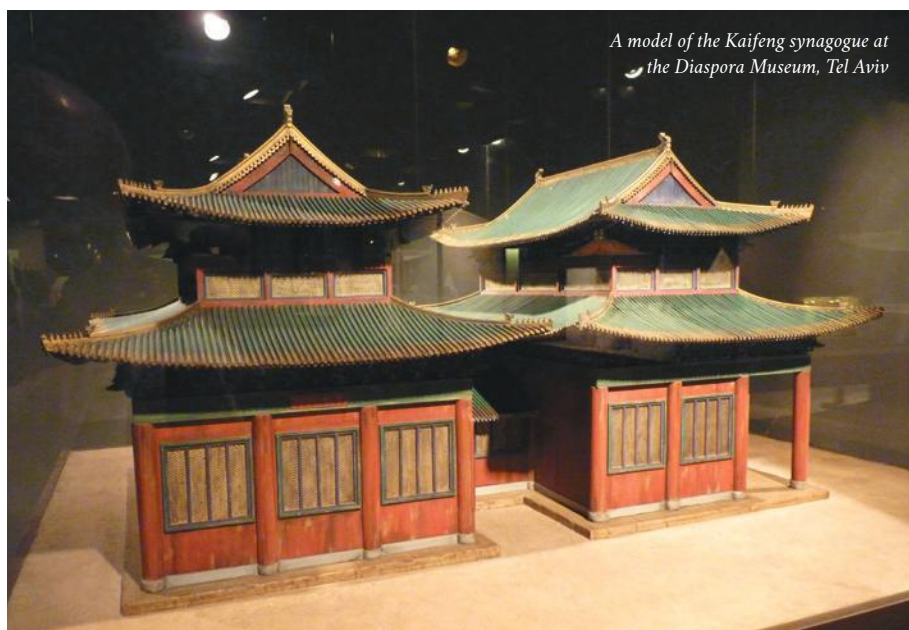
In Israel and other parts of the world, descendants of Kaifeng Jews continue to honour their heritage. They celebrate their unique customs, culinary traditions and religious practices, ensuring that the memory of Kaifeng Jewry remains alive.

Among the remarkable artefacts associated with the Kaifeng Jews is a unique Scroll of Esther, adorned with Chinese illuminations by three different artists. This scroll, part of the Roth collection, is a testament to the cultural fusion and artistic contributions of the Kaifeng Jewish community.

The history of the Kaifeng Jews serves as a powerful reminder of the global reach and adaptability of Jewish communities. Despite the forces that sought to destroy this community physically and spiritually, it is inspiring to see that their sense of identity has persevered, even though it has diminished over time. This underscores the importance of preserving cultural heritage and fostering connections between past and present, raising the question of what truly sustains us through the generations.



Above: Sketch of the Kaifeng Synagogue 1722, Wikimedia Commons



A model of the Kaifeng synagogue at the Diaspora Museum, Tel Aviv



Photo, Chabad Info

Hakafot Shniyot: WE WILL DANCE AGAIN

Alice Reich

Following the horrors of October 7th, Israelis felt helpless and terrified. Solidarity bolstered overnight, as the war-ravaged nation unified in support of their hostages and soldiers. Unlikely heroes were musicians— from small garage bands to famous singers— all of whom had one goal: to inspire and bring joy to active soldiers.

One night at a small performance on a remote base, Avi Wiesenberg, the frontman of an unnamed band faced his crowd of serious yet somehow optimistic group of soldiers. As the music began to lighten the mood a soldier approached Avi, inquiring about the band's name. Avi hesitated before professing that they didn't have one. This soldier went on to tell a

story that would become the heart of the band:

"I dashed out of the synagogue on Simchat Torah morning, straight into my uniform, and headed south. I missed doing *hakafot* (dancing in circles) with the Torah. Tonight, dancing here feels like *hakafot shniyot* (second rounds)!" Inspired by the heartfelt exchange, the band took on the name of *Hakafot Shniyot*. The name tells another story of connection and unity:

It was 1934 when Rabbi Frankel, a young Rabbi in Rypin, Poland, faced the rise of antisemitism. He recognised the forthcoming danger and led his family to the safety of pre-state Israel. They settled in Florentin, a diverse neighbourhood in Tel Aviv, with immigrants from Bukhara, Salonika, Morocco, Yemen, Poland, Hungary, Bulgaria and Romania. Rabbi Frankel dedicated himself to aiding new immigrants and unifying the community, eventually becoming the chief rabbi of Tel Aviv-Jaffa. This ultimately became the backdrop of Rabbi Frankel's most enduring legacy.

It was October of 1942. The war in Europe was looking worse than ever for the Jewish people. On Shemini Atzeret and Simchat Torah, Rabbi Frankel turned to his congregation at Ahavat Chesed Synagogue and made a riveting, emotive plea. Rabbi Yisroel Meir Lau, his son-in-law, narrates how he urged his congregants to complete another round of *hakafot*. Their brethren in Europe were suffering, unable to celebrate, so they were implored to do so in their place. It was this fervent appeal from which the tradition of *hakafot shniyot* was conceived in Israel.

This tradition continues til this day, motivating us through difficult times. The band *Hakafot Shniyot* is dedicated to epitomising this spirit, bringing happiness and consolation to soldiers through their music. Furthermore, they have a strong pull, and the band members are driven by an incredible purpose:

"We're *Olim*, who wanted to do something meaningful with the onset of the war. We didn't get to pick up *klei neshek* — weapons — instruments of war — so we picked up *klei negina* — musical instruments - weapons of the soul — to support, uplift, inspire and rejuvenate!"

As we approach the beginning of a new year and High Holy Day cycle, culminating with the first Simchat Torah since that horrific day last year, how fitting then is it to reflect on how everything interplays. The band, made up of those who can't serve in the army, plays for the soldiers allowing them to celebrate the holiday missed to fight for us. The beauty of the Jewish nation is how we are there for one another throughout the roadblocks. We will always come back around the bend, each time stronger than the last.

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