

The Covenant at Sinai and Covenants Today

Covenants. Connections. Identity.



L'ilui nishmat Tzipporah Devorah Kronitz
bat Yosef Halevi and Chana (Yoshpa) z"l



Foreword by Rabbi David Stav

When a man and a woman love each other, they enter into a covenant that obligates them to stand by each other, to care for one another, and to be there for each other.

Similarly, when families or groups feel that what unites them is greater than what divides them, they too can forge a covenant. This is often the way that nations and countries are formed. Some even carry the concept of “covenant” in their name, like the United States.

The Jewish people as a whole also made a covenant with God at Mount Sinai on Shavuot thousands of years ago. What was the meaning and significance of this covenant? Did it simply create a shared destiny, or did it also carry a mission that the Jewish people then – and today – are obligated to pursue?

I think that today, with the rise of antisemitism around the world and the ongoing war in Israel, there is no subject more worthy of contemplation than this covenant. We hope this guide leads you and those around you to new insights – and that you enjoy the process.

Chag Sameach!

Rabbi David Stav, Chairperson, Tzohar



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The design of the booklet's cover uses details adapted from photographs by Zoltan Kluger and Ephraim Moshe Lilien.

With prayers for the protection and release of all hostages, the success of the soldiers, and complete healing for all those who have been wounded in body and spirit.



Introduction

Now therefore, if you will hearken unto my voice and keep my covenant, then you shall be a treasure to me above all peoples... (Exodus 19:5)

אם שמוע תשמעו בקלי ושמרתם את בריתי - והייתם לי סגלה מכל העמים... (שמות י"ט, ה)

At Mount Sinai, the people of Israel made a covenant with God, a covenant that transformed them into a unique and chosen people. Unlike earlier covenants in the Torah – such as the covenants God made with Noah and the Patriarchs – this was a covenant made with the entire Jewish nation rather than with individuals. That is why the revelation at Sinai is such a central event in Jewish history.

This booklet presents six “voices,” personal essays, in which individuals explain what a covenant means today against the backdrop of modern Israeli society: the forming of covenants and friendships today.

These essays are personal reflections about new points of connection that were born from the reality in Israel today, openness, and a sense of shared destiny. A renewed alliance between people with different opinions, sectors of society, new immigrants and longtime residents, Diaspora Jews and Jews in Israel, connection with families of the hostages, and a personal connection of people with the Jewish part of their identity.

These covenants may reveal themselves in countless ways, far beyond what we can capture here.

We hope that the small selection in this booklet offers a spark of hope — and invites reflection, and perhaps even action.

Each essay is accompanied by a Jewish source — Midrashic, halachic, or contemporary—inviting you to explore further. You are invited to read, reflect, and ask: How does this source relate to the essay? What does it add to your understanding of the essay or covenant described in it?

The ongoing war is changing Israeli society, but amidst all the complexity and pain, it is also creating new, meaningful connections. These renewed connections and covenants act as guiding lights. They do not simply illuminate the path, they help create the path.

Wishing us all a meaningful learning experience that connects our hearts and our minds.

Here's to a good Chag and good tidings in the year to come.

Yochi Nedvetzki, Editor





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Michal Herzog

Wife of President Isaac Herzog

A few days before Passover, I met with a group of mothers whose young daughters were widowed on October 7th and during the Swords of Iron War. The meeting at the President's Residence was initiated after Tzipi, the group's founder, approached me during an event commemorating fallen soldiers.

At that gathering, I looked around: Here were 18 families, 18 fallen sons and daughters, from diverse backgrounds and ages, from all over the country. I wondered if, before the war, dialogue between them would even have been possible. But now, they – and we – were like one family. So, when Tzipi turned to me and said, “Maybe we could come visit you, a group of mothers of widows?” I was ready.

We started a program that has become known as “Let's Talk: Presidential Initiatives for a Shared Israeli Tomorrow.” Even amidst the days of mourning, the long months and year of healing — perhaps because of them — this program has grown to offer support to thousands of Israelis. It has become a meeting place for countless communities across the country, each working in its own way to rebuild, together, our shared home.

In that first gathering, we met at the President's Residence in Jerusalem. Around 30 women came then, and it has now grown to hundreds. They are each so different from one another: religious to secular, young women to grandmothers, older women with wisdom earned over the course of years, kibbutz members, ‘hip’ urbanites, new immigrants, women with and without head coverings, dressed in jeans and long dresses. A truly remarkable collection of unique personalities, who, were it not for the covenant of blood that had been forged between them, would likely never have met, and certainly not become close friends.

The conversation, flowing with painful honesty and an intimacy usually reserved for soul friendships, showed me how a new covenant was being woven right there, in front of me.

I see this new Israeli covenant – the covenant I saw arising in my own home – being formed and created in more and more communities across Israel. I see it binding souls together.

I see it sowing closeness and commitment where, just moments ago, hostility and alienation reigned. This covenant is an expression of the great transformation that has begun, and that continues to unfold within us, since the sky fell upon us on October 7th, and we began, together, to rise from the ruins.

I am far from naïve. In every such community, in every covenant that forms, in every step toward ‘the other’ — whether social, political, or ideological — I also sense the fear and suspicion that fill the heart. Do I dare to trust? Are my views, my principles, my identity in danger? Will the outstretched hand — even one offered in pain — truly find a sister hand reaching back?

In these fragile moments, when fear fills the room, I remember the words of Ehud

Manor in his song 'Brit Olam' ('Eternal Covenant'), lingering on the trembling of the soul just before the covenant is sealed: "You are my witness / that I am afraid / and so my whole-body trembles tonight."

This fear demands that we learn a new language, one that replaces the poison and polarization, through which we have become accustomed, to speaking about our differences with a language of trust, partnership, and responsibility. This fear demands that we take a 'leap of faith' toward one another - steady, daily work, a continuous effort - like a covenant forged in the present tense: "Day / day and night / all the time / along a single / unmarked path."

On this path, which we constantly forge with our shared steps, we must continue walking, together and alone, creating a shared trail anew with every word, every gesture, every decision, every argument, and every agreement. And, above all, with a deep hope, for an ancient but ever-new covenant.



Another Point of View:

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All the Roman commanders who saw the internal conflict that was raging among their enemies, the Jews, viewed it as a gift from heaven, and were eager to attack Jerusalem.

They urged Vespasian, on whose command everything depended, to seize the opportunity.

They said, "God has come to our aid by sowing discord among our enemies. But the wheel of fortune turns — the Jews may yet recover, either out of exhaustion or out of regret for their civil war."

Vespasian replied that they were making a grave mistake. "If we attack the city immediately, it will cause the enemies to unite and turn their full strength against us. But if we wait, we will find our enemies fewer in number, after they have worn themselves out through their internal struggle. Therefore, while their rivals are being destroyed by their own hands and are suffering the worst of calamities - civil war - it is better for us to sit back and watch their dangers from afar rather than to fight against people who are recklessly risking their lives and raging against one another. The Jews are endangering themselves through civil war and conflict. Therefore, if we desire security, it is better to leave the Jews to themselves as they destroy one another."

The War of the Jews (~73 CE) by Josephus Flavius, Commander of the Galilee Front at the beginning of the Jewish revolt against Rome.

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“Where Deep Calls to Deep” (Psalms 42:8)

Rabbi Dr. Reuven Tabull and Meirav Leshem Gonen

In broken hearts, cracks of light open. Meirav Leshem Gonen, mother of former hostage Romi Gonen, and Rabbi Dr. Reuven Tabull, a Torah scholar and educator, share two sides of the same encounter. A small and unexpected encounter that tells a big story about the future for Israeli society.

Rabbi Dr. Reuven Tabull

Creator, educator, and lecturer, Chairman of the Israeli Volunteer Association, instructor for Tzohar's training programs

The first time I met Meirav Leshem Gonen was when she and her partner Asaf came to my kibbutz in Gush Etzion. Two days later, Meirav and I met again. This time was in Tel Aviv, when I spoke at a Tzohar Kabbalat Shabbat dedicated to the safe return of Meirav's daughter, Romi.

We kept meeting over the course of the last year, and slowly, at least that is how I felt, they started taking on their own path and meaning. A path of renewal and wonder, as well as simplicity and depth. That is what home looks like, and that is what we can and should look like.

Since October 7th, in addition to the pain and fear, there has been movement within me that does not stop. Perhaps it is more accurate to say that Torah is being written inside of me. It began on the day itself: Simchat Torah, when the holiday and Shabbat fell out on the same day. Even as it turned - in an instant - into mourning and tears, the essence of the day remained, reaching out from the abyss to awaken the heart. It is the day we finish reading the Torah and open it up again from the beginning, physically as well as symbolically. Going back to Bereshit is the time to tune in, to truly listen, as if for the first time.

And so it was. This year, the descriptions of 'tohu u'vohu' - the abyss and darkness - felt so real, so present. What I already knew suddenly became so much more tangible, so 'there.' The source of creation is chaos, the source of speech is the still, small voice, it is not removed or abstract. It is a life experience that is all too real and demanding. How hard it is to remain silent in that chaos. How difficult it is to move away from the orderly ideologies, the familiar religious language, the 'I told you so's' and all the claims we make so easily, so thoughtlessly in public. When we enter the great silence, we set up a deep dwelling place for ourselves in the inner sanctum of the broken heart. There - only there - among the broken shards of the heart, the broken shards of the tablets - can one hear the spirit of God hovering, of the awesome Torah of kindness and strength, and, above all, of even more voices. Where deep calls to deep, sharing and connecting. Broken hearts reach out, discovering the possibility of hearing and healing one another.

On the eve of this holiday, Shavuot, the day of the Giving of the Torah, I will also be listening, as if for the first time, to what happened at Mount Sinai. On Seder night this year, I told my children that just before Maggid (the section of the seder where we tell the Passover story) just before we open our mouths to tell our story, there is

Yachatz - the breaking of the matza. The symbol of our redemption has to be broken before we can retell the story and give thanks anew.

Meirav Leshem Gonen talks about how, after months of fighting in Hostage Square in Tel Aviv, she began to feel the need to follow another path, a path that would take her to towns and communities around the country. She recognized the importance of investing in places that are unfamiliar and distant, far from our personal and political worlds. The importance of meeting - meeting and listening - from the place of a broken heart, from empathy and love. To listen with the willingness to hear disagreement and still, with inspiring courage, to refuse to give up on the potential for unity, for brotherhood.

Thank God, since then, Meirav's Romi has come home alive! But Meirav and Asaf have chosen to continue seeking this unity, this togetherness, for all of Israel, for all Jews. So there we meet—at the foot of our own Mount Sinai—choosing a covenant of love, and together gazing in wonder at the voices around us.

Meirav Leshem Gonen

There are rare moments in life when we encounter truth. Something real. Something with substance - even godliness.

These are loaded moments: the highest of high. They give us strength and inner fortitude, and mark a new path for us - a path of inner light and beauty. I believe this is the kind of moment Moses encountered when he climbed Mount Sinai to receive the Torah from God. But what I have discovered is that each of us can experience such moments if we keep our heart open and our soul engaged.

I had such a moment in Rosh Tzurim, a religious kibbutz in Gush Etzion, five months before my Romi was returned from Hamas. It was a fulfilling yet complex evening aimed at bridging hearts through dialogue and genuine discussion. Initially, I did not want to be part of the conversation. It was late August, I was tired and drained, and all I wanted was for Romi to come back. The conversation was difficult; the questions were painful and touched on dilemmas that have no answers. Yet, at the end of the evening, something wondrous happened: a close encounter with meaning and truth. Despite the challenges and different perspectives, despite the pain expressed in various ways by different people, a large crowd gathered around me, asking for more - to understand more, to ask more, to tell more. Most encouraging of all, they said: "You strengthened us. You showed us that dialogue like this is possible."

In the crowd that night was Reuven Tabull, a gentle, humble man who spoke softly with respect. His quietness, the pleasant way in which he spoke, and his respectful and delicate manner left a deep impression on me.

As fate would have it, two days later, we met again at a Kabbalat Shabbat dedicated to Romi's return. It was held at Tel Aviv University, and as soon as I entered, there was Reuven.

Both of us were excited to have this unexpected second chance to be together, just days after we had first met. Somehow, we understood that there was a path here that needed to be followed, and we needed to walk it together.

Not just Reuven and me, but all of Israel, with all its diversity, needed to take this path, together.

This road is filled with so many challenges, so much pain that needs to be expressed – just like it was for those who wandered the desert after leaving slavery in Egypt. This is the time for us to leave our ‘slavery’ – the ways of thinking we are accustomed to. To grieve together, and to discover how we can unite to face our true enemies—those who seek to break us from within, to divide us, and to erase us.

Just as I chose to go to Rosh Tzurim to speak with people distant from my everyday world, Reuven chose the same, coming to speak in Tel Aviv to a public with a worldview far from his own. Both of us were seeking points of contact, sources of unity, from which to face the most difficult challenges and to share the highest moments.

And maybe that’s what we are being asked to do: to walk the path, to meet eye to eye, to listen, and speak in a way that can be truly heard. To understand that this covenant is, in fact, between us and ourselves, and that the Torah—the inner wisdom—comes when the heart is open to receive.



Another Point of View:

One Shabbat, I stayed with my Rebbe, Rabbi Dov Berish of Biala. All night I could not sleep. When morning came, I went into my Rebbe’s room. He called me over and I found him reading the verse from the Psalms, “Deep calls to deep at the roar of your waterfalls; all your waves and breakers have swept over me.” (Psalms 42:8)

Then my Rebbe explained the verse to me and said, “‘Deep calls to deep’ — it is I who am calling to you and saying — I, too, am ‘deep.’ I, too, have passed through your troubles and your hardships — ‘all Your breakers and waves have swept over me.’”

Afterward, Rabbi Dov Berish said to me, “We must remember that eventually night will turn to day, and that from all the darkness and suffering, light will emerge and song will rise. This is what is written in the next verse of the chapter, ‘By day, the Lord will command his love kindness, and at night, his song will be with me.’” (Psalms 42:9)

After finishing his story, Rabbi Yerachmiel Yisrael Yitzchak said to Meir: “And now look: I, too, stand within that same verse from Psalms: ‘Deep calls to deep at the roar of your waterfalls; all your waves and billows have swept over me.’”

Adapted from: M’Kover, Yehuda Leibish. Tiferet Raboteinu MiAlexander. Bnei Brak, 1966, pp. 143–144.



Between Tel Aviv and Nir Am

Rabbi Joe Wolfson and Chen Farhi-Cohen

Early on October 7, 2023, over 100 terrorists mounted a surprise attack on Nir Am, a kibbutz two kilometers from the Gaza border. Their goal was clear: to massacre and kidnap as many residents as possible.

It was terrifying — and miraculous. For hour after long hour, there were fierce battles around the kibbutz, until finally the terrorists were neutralized or repelled, thanks to the determination of the kibbutz's local defense squad, aided by Golani soldiers and the Border Police. Immediately after, the kibbutz's residents were evacuated to Tel Aviv's Herods Hotel — a temporary solution that lasted 10 months.

It was during this period that the kibbutz came to know JLIC TLV, a community of Jewish religious Olim who ran activities for the kibbutz children and families in the hotel. But it was actually after the evacuees returned to their homes on the kibbutz that the relationship depended and took on its unique quality. This relationship has been a source of light in the darkness.

Rabbi Joe Wolfson

Lives in Tel Aviv, married and father of three, born in London, alumnus of Har Etzion Yeshiva and Cambridge University, Rabbi of the JLIC TLV Community — a community of Israelis and Olim from around the world (through the Orthodox Union)

"You are our guests. The only thing we ask is that when this is over, you invite us to your home." That is what we kept telling the evacuees at every meeting. We felt privileged to offer these families support during their time of need, and wanted them to feel honored and respected — not as evacuees, but as guests.

Thank God, Nir Am took us up on our offer. When they returned home, it became clear that the bond between us was not just one of mutual assistance, but of true friendship. Despite the differences, an extraordinary closeness developed between us: our two communities became like sisters.

We celebrated Sukkot and Tu B'Shvat together at the kibbutz, painted murals together on the bomb shelters, held barbecues, watched our children play together, and planted trees on the kibbutz. Members of the kibbutz came to Tel Aviv to attend our Chanukah party — this time not as evacuees fleeing danger, but as friends coming to celebrate.

The kibbutz children look forward to the carnivals we organize for them, and soldiers from our community who are stationed near the Gaza border know they can always stop by the kibbutz to sleep, do laundry, and, of course, to get a home-cooked meal. The kibbutz lets us take advantage of the 'member discount' they receive at their kitchenware store. We send them Purim gift packages. This past Passover, we helped kasher the communal kitchen.

But most important are the bonds that have formed. Friendships blossomed between people that would never have met if not for the war — secular and religious, long-time kibbutzniks and new immigrants, residents of the Gaza envelope and city dwellers. In the midst of the pain, we discovered how close it is possible to be — how resilient we are as human beings.

Chen Farhi-Cohen

Kibbutz Nir Am Partnership Coordinator, married and mother of four, loves her community and believes that Nir Am will grow and flourish after the trauma.

In August 2024, ten months after our evacuation, we returned to the kibbutz – and reeled in shock at what we found.

The thriving community we left had become a war zone. The fighting could still be heard just a few kilometers away from the kibbutz, and the homes we had left were being used as military bases. We were sad and exhausted, fighting the feeling that we had been abandoned and forgotten.

But the JLIC TLV community we had come to love in Tel Aviv had not forgotten us. The WhatsApp channel we had opened with them while we were at the hotel continued to operate, and they kept asking, “What do you need? What do you want? We are with you. Let us help.” They felt like family, and we realized that we could not, and did not want, to part ways.

We decided that just like there are sister cities, we would become sister communities. We began to explore among ourselves what that could look like, and formed a formal partnership based on mutual responsibility and support. We launched it with an opening event in the kibbutz, inviting our JLIC TLV friends to get to know us again in our own home base. From the first moment, everything just flowed. There was joy, connection, mutual curiosity, and from there we moved forward, together.

They came to us again and again, helping us rebuild. Volunteers from JLIC taught English to anyone interested through one-on-one Zoom sessions, and that alone has created some meaningful relationships. Our kibbutz members deeply appreciated the fact that so many of the JLIC friends - who themselves were experiencing the same war, with sirens and parents called up for reserve duty - came to dig, plant trees, and help in whatever way they could.

We told them, “This is your second home.” To us, they are full members of our kibbutz. We host them in our homes and have open conversations with them: they have become part of the scenery. Some of them have no family in Israel, but found adoptive families here in Nir Am. We teach them Hebrew, invite them to events, and involve them in our daily lives.

In short, we are choosing to grow from the trauma by healing ourselves as a community that continues to give to others. One member of the JLIC TLV community told me, “I am a new immigrant. Helping a community that has experienced trauma makes me feel like I matter in this country.” And it is true for us, too. Many communities in the Gaza envelope rely on us and depend on our support – and friendship and partnership are helping us heal.

Our partnership with JLIC has ripple effects. People from other places have reached out to me, saying, “We heard you have a twin community – tell us about it, we want one too...” or “Why did only you get a twin community?”

And I explain: “We did not get one, we built it together... They helped us in Tel Aviv and they did not move on. This is not the story of one person who came to volunteer – it is the story of two communities that decided to become unlikely partners. Two communities so different that they became true friends. And true friendship has no expiration date.”



Another Point of View:

The Laws of Hospitality

To properly fulfil the commandment of *hachnasat orchim* (hospitality) one must love their guests, desire their well-being and honor, greet them with joy, and strive to meet their needs. If they are saddened, one should comfort them with kind words...

Today, there are very few people who are truly hungry for bread, but many people are in need of support and encouragement. The mitzvah remains, but its emphasis has shifted... Material abundance has only made the anguish of the soul more visible. Many more people today experience loneliness and alienation, and there is no mitzvah quite like hospitality to ease the suffering of the soul.

In our times, the most severe form of poverty is emotional and spiritual. Therefore, the mitzvah of hospitality has taken on a more spiritual form: the offering of emotional support and spiritual care. Many people have lost their way in life, and despair as they look at themselves and at their future. Warm, supportive, friendly hospitality can rekindle their faith that their lives have meaning, and that others value them, are happy to be in their company, and genuinely wish to help. From such hospitality, they can draw new strength for the journey ahead.

It should also be noted that today, with the establishment of the State of Israel and the ingathering of the exiles, the mitzvah of hospitality has become a national imperative.

One cannot overstate the sense of anxiety felt by new immigrants arriving in the land, uncertain of what the future holds. Suddenly, they find themselves living in a place they do not know, speaking a language they do not understand, and navigating new working relationships. It is a mitzvah for veteran residents to host the newcomers and support them, both materially and spiritually.

In addition, many Jews in the Diaspora who considering making Aliyah visit Israel to “test the waters.” If we welcome them warmly, they will come. If, heaven forbid, we fail to do so, they might choose to remain in exile, risking the loss of their Jewish identity through assimilation.

Thus, the Jews living in the Land of Israel must gather all their strength and all the love they have for the Jewish people to fulfill the mitzvah of hospitality toward visiting Jews at the possible highest level.

Melamed, Eliezer. Peninei Halakha. 2014. Chapter 7, Summary of Sections 5–7.



My God—I am a Jew

Omer Barak

Lives in Tel Aviv, father of two, author, screenwriter, has been giving lectures, leading workshops, and writing since October 7th to try and heal the rifts in Israel and bring people closer together

I did not want to write this essay. That's the truth. I kept putting it off—one day after another—hoping that time would roll back to October 6, 2023, and that all the horrors that followed would simply be erased, and that I would not find myself talking, once again, about my Judaism.

I do not want to talk about my Judaism.

In fact, for years I made a point of not talking about it as a point of pride, even conviction. When I lectured abroad, I insisted on being introduced as an Israeli artist, not a Jewish artist. If someone in the audience asked me about my Judaism, my standard response was, “I was born to a Jewish mother, I had a bris—and that's where my connection to Judaism began and ended.”

And the worst part of this was that I actually believed it.

My encounters with Judaism as a youth were, to put it mildly, unpleasant. Always forced. Always angry. Always focused on such useless details – the prayer book, the rituals. Judaism may be many things, but the Judaism we were pushed into, the mainstream Judaism taught in Israel, is not pleasant, not inviting. Every encounter I had with an official religious figure—from the synagogue rabbi at my Bar Mitzvah to the rabbinate when I registered for a marriage certificate—made me cringe, to just wait for it to be over, and to declare, to myself and whoever else would listen: I am not one of these people.

What do I have in common with them anyway? I am not like them. I am not a Diaspora Jew in my own country. I am Israeli. A sabra. A free thinker. A non-believer. A radical. I am not that child with the cap in that famous Holocaust photo. I am an Israeli.

Then came October 7th.

And with it the video that shattered every bone and belief in my body. A disgusting terrorist was there, shouting with excitement into the phone to his father: “I killed ten Jews!”

His eyes—oh, his eyes—told the whole story, shattering my worldview – the assumptions and attitudes built over a lifetime – in a moment. This was not something I could just brush away, and it changed everything.

I can claim all day long that I am not Jewish, that I am a citizen of the world—and still, some bloodthirsty lunatic will lump me into the same category with fanatics from Mea She'arim.

And maybe, I thought to myself, that is because there really is not a difference.

My God—I am a Jew.

And now comes the question of questions: So, what does that mean? What do you do with this reality? Do I have to start lighting Shabbat candles? Keeping Shabbat?

Eating kosher? Praying?

Well, the answer to all those questions, for me, is no. I have been through deep shock and brokenness, but not a personality transplant.

And I am here to say that that is okay.

I am here to claim my place in the chain of Jewish destiny, and to say: I am a Jew. I am a Jew too.

If the terrorist's knife does not distinguish between me and the Chassid, neither can we. We cannot afford to. After so many years of infuriating, hair-splitting contemplation about the question of who is a Jew and who decides, we have come face to face with the undeniable truth: the knife decides. In the end, it is the knife alone that decides who is a Jew. And if I'm going to die as a Jew, then my decision has to be that I should live as one too.

How does that get expressed? In my worldview. In my thinking. In my understanding of the world and the realization that although for years I saw myself as a citizen of the world, I belong here—to the small ghetto. This is where my brothers are. This is my country. This is my religion.

I am a Jew.

These are words I thought I would never say - and yet here they are, an inseparable part of my identity. I am not afraid of my religion anymore, and I do not hate it. For me, that is saying a lot.

And for right now, that is enough.



Another Point of View:

Another Point of View: Rabbi Jonathan Sacks

Why, then, am I a Jew? Not because I believe that Judaism contains all there is of the

human story Nor am I a Jew because of antisemitism or to avoid giving Hitler a posthumous victory. What happens to me does not define who I am: ours is a people

of faith, not fate. Nor is it because I think that Jews are better than others, more intelligent, virtuous, law-abiding, creative, generous or successful. The difference lies not in

Jews but Judaism, not in what we are but in what we are called on to be.

Sacks, Jonathan. *Radical Then, Radical Now*. Shalem Press, 2007, p. 167.



The Word We Have Not Said in Years – Us!

Ruti Russo

Chef, television personality, entrepreneur, and social activist. Since October 7th, she has led the operations of World Central Kitchen in Israel, providing food across the country for evacuees, residents of the conflict zones, Nova survivors, the families of hostages, and returned hostages.

In his book *Guns, Germs, and Steel*, researcher Jared Diamond attempts to explain the differences between cultures. For example, why one culture becomes a powerhouse while another stays poor and helpless. One of his key explanations relates to agricultural innovation: what made some communities adopt technology and grow, while others remained hunter-gatherers? One of the key factors, he said, is war. War brings destruction, pain, and violence. But it also creates opportunities for change - even in seemingly unrelated arenas, like food production, or, in our case, human connection.

So why am I mentioning this?

Because Diamond's five principles keep coming back to me as I try to answer a question that has confounded researchers over the ages: What causes people to change? To question their precious worldview, and to recognize the potential for such a scary process to lead to a developmental leap? This involuntary departure from the known can be a catalyst for unexpected change - breakthroughs in the mind and soul that could never have been anticipated.

As part of my work with World Central Kitchen since the war, I have found myself running humanitarian operations through numerous restaurant kitchens, from Dan to Eilat. We have worked with Chabad in Tzfat, Bedouins in Rahat, Haredim in Beitar Illit, and kibbutzniks in the Arava, working together to distribute two million meals. Along the way, we created unlikely partnerships. I discovered that what I once considered to be "the other Israel" – the Israel I do not relate to - has now become one – we are all in this together, part of the same story.

I have been thinking about this non-stop. In my work as a chef, journalist, and lecturer, whenever I was asked, "What is Israeli food?" I used to answer so arrogantly and blindly, talking only about my local Tel Aviv culinary world. But Israeli food - like Israeli society - is incredibly rich, bold, colorful, and diverse. It comes from Beitar Illit and Modi'in, from Kiryat Gat, Yotvata, Manot, and Rahat, just as much as from Tel Aviv.

The daily contact I have had with such different types of people, through this expansive and meaningful war effort, has been like reserve (miluim) duty. "Wait," I'd think as I worked with a woman

packing food, “isn’t she one of those ‘crazy messianic types?’” The answer might actually be “yes” – and yet here we are, working together and having a deep, open conversation about the situation’s impact on our children. And the “crazy lady” is thinking to herself, “Isn’t she one of those the Tel Aviv leftists I hated so much and was so scared of? What was that all about?”

This war might have brought us into the depths of violence and evil, of conflict and venom, but it also lifted us into a year of soaring spirit, unconditional solidarity and acts of extreme sacrifice and devotion. It has unified us, all the disparate segments of our society. People have literally given their lives, or put their lives on hold, to help and save others.

For me, this has also been a time of discovery about what it means to be an Israeli, and especially what Religious Zionists are. So many volunteers from that community entered my life that I became motivated to learn – and I actually started studying Torah with Rabbi Shai Piron. I do not feel more religious as a result, but I do feel that I have opened up a secret treasure chest: an entire community that I had always kept my distance from. A community that, like me, believes in family, in being Israeli, in goodness, kindness, and compassion. A community that values education, the Hebrew language, morality, kindness, and responsibility. A community that shows up when needed, that has principles, that understands the power of teamwork and that does not regard culture and books as dirty words.

I hope that, like me – and like the many who have stepped up to the frontline – there are many more who are experiencing the real connections that bind Israeli society – who understand that while there are always those who seek to divide, to profit from hatred, in times like October 7th, when the state faltered, the human spirit rose to the task, bearing arms, distributing ceramic vests and hot meals, and offering listening ears and open hearts.

I know that the real war we are all fighting – the hardest of all to win – is internal. Not just between the different segments of society, but truly internal – within ourselves. To try to listen. To try not to hate, even when we know that they hate us. No ceramic vests and no American aid will help us here. Only deep reflection and true internal repair.

In his song “Us,” musician Guy Mazig asks, “Who will be here the day after? The dream’s end and its dull shattering, what was and will be no more. So, what will remain after the war?”

Who will be here, and what will remain? The answer depends on us. And with true inner healing, we will be able to call ourselves “us.” We are in this together, and togetherness is where true power is built.



Another Point of View:

“If you see the donkey of someone who hates you collapsed under its burden, and would refrain from helping him, you must nevertheless help him lift it.” (Exodus 23:5)

Rabbi Alexandri said: Two donkey drivers were traveling along the road, and they hated one another. One of the donkeys collapsed under its load. The other passed by and saw it lying there under its burden. He recalled the Torah’s verse, “Doesn’t the Torah say, ‘When you see the donkey of someone who hates you you must help him’?”

What did he do? He turned back, helped him reload the donkey, and accompanied him. As they worked together, lifting a little here, pulling a little there, they began speaking to each other. As a result, peace was made between them.

The other said: “I always thought he was my enemy. But look how he had compassion when he saw me and my donkey in distress.”

They went to an inn, ate and drank together, and came to love one another.

Thus it is written: “You have established equity, justice, and righteousness.”

Midrash Tanchuma, Mishpatim 21



The Jewish Connection

Yael Mayevsky

Clinical psychologist, married to Ari, mother of four children ages 5 to 17, living in Beit Shemesh since last summer

The 7th of October found us in our synagogue in Fair Lawn, New Jersey. It is hard to describe the feeling—shock, worry, helplessness. Even though we were so far away, it felt close, tangible. No one was able to celebrate normally or dance with the Torah scrolls. People stood in groups—talking, worrying, crying.

After the holiday, we spread out a map of Israel and tried to make sense of it all—connecting the names we had heard on the news with the places on the map, trying to grasp the magnitude of the event and understand who was where and what was really happening.

And in that one single night, even our neighborhood started to feel different. People we thought were our neighbors suddenly felt like enemies. Protests against Israel erupted, and we heard chants we never expected. The atmosphere changed. Some of the Israelis we knew took down their mezuzahs. My kids' Hebrew teacher could not bear it—she moved to another neighborhood. The reality around us had changed, and we felt it very deeply, though we did not yet know what that would mean for us.

Then on Thursday morning, a week later, I laced up my running shoes, unsure whether I should even go out. The streets looked the same, but my personal sense of security had shifted. I always run the same route. For over a year, I had been passing by the same man. I do not know his name, have no idea who he is—but I knew he was Israeli. Usually, we would exchange a small nod, like runners who recognize each other in the same place, at the same time, and then move on.

But this time, the moment we recognized each other—we stopped. Everything around us continued as normal—people jogging, walking dogs, the usual park routine—but in the space between us, time seemed to freeze.

Two people who did not even know each other's names, and yet, a small moment was created—a private bubble of mutual understanding. I asked about his family, and he shared his worries. I told him simply, "I am with you, with your family. It is going to be okay."

Just a moment before, we were two joggers in a park, like any other Americans. Now, we were two Jews in a park. And it felt different. Because on the one hand, I did not know him - but on the other, I was there for him, like family.

And in general, whenever a visitor, emissary, a representative from Israel, or even a relative arrived in our community or school during that time—it was like a magnet. Everyone came out of their homes, eager to hear, to feel, to connect. It was not just a routine gathering - it was a living, tangible bridge that connected us and made us feel a sense of belonging, more than any phone call or news update ever could.

As a community, we reached out to all the Israelis in the neighborhood, especially those who had stayed distant from the community, Israelis who just wanted to live like 'regular Americans,' without connecting to their Jewish identity. The invisible threads between us became real.

The Israelis were touched by our outreach, and bonds were formed. The community sent support and Shabbat treats. In the end, some of them began coming, a little hesitantly: “Can we come to synagogue? In jeans? Will you accept us?” For us, it was never even a question. The phrase “All of Israel are responsible for one another” had never felt so concrete, so critical.

We wanted to do more. I heard about Tzohar’s initiative to donate meals to the families of IDF reservists (MEALuim). If I had been in Israel and had a neighbor doing reserve duty, I would definitely bring over a pot of soup. So, this was my way to be a neighbor, even from afar. We started by donating money, and then I thought—I can make this personal. I asked to be connected directly to a family, and that is how I met Michal (a pseudonym).

Despite everything on her plate—four small kids, a Bar Mitzvah on the horizon, and a husband in the reserves—she found time to speak with me. My husband, an experienced Torah reader, offered to help her son prepare for his Bar Mitzvah over Zoom. It was not easy, but we made the effort. Through that connection, without even realizing it, Michal helped me feel more connected to Israel—like I was part of the country.

Then this past summer, we made Aliyah. We now live in Beit Shemesh.

In the midst of the darkness, we realized how much we need each other (other Jews). The world keeps reminding us that we are one people. It is just a shame it only becomes clear when antisemitism comes knocking at the door.



Another Point of View:

“And it has stood in good stead for our ancestors and for us, for not just one enemy has risen against us to destroy us. In every generation, they rise up against us to destroy us. But the Holy One, Blessed be He, saves us from their hands.” (From the Passover Haggadah)

“And it” — the promise, the Covenant Between the Pieces — is what has stood for our ancestors and for us.

We are accustomed to understanding the covenant and the promise as something that supported us in our times of trouble: not only one has risen against us to destroy us, but thanks to the covenant and the promise, the Holy One, Blessed be He, saves us from their hand.

However, it is possible to read the Haggadah differently: To see the promise and the covenant not only as that which brought about our salvation in the end, but as the very force that drives the entire process. It is because of the covenant and the promise that others rise against us to destroy us — and it is also thanks to them that the Holy One, Blessed be He, ultimately saves us from their hand.

Steinsaltz, Adin Even-Israel. Passover Haggadah with Commentary. 1983.



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+22,000,000

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