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Making Sense of Suffering: Seventy Years After Kol Dodi Dofek

Rabbi Doron Perez

Seventy years ago, in 1956, Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik delivered one of the defining addresses of modern Jewish thought before the Mizrahi Convention in the United States. That address would later be published under the title *Kol Dodi Dofek* – “The Voice of My Beloved Beckons” – borrowing its evocative name from *Shir HaShirim*. It was far more than a philosophical essay. It was a theological response to the greatest catastrophe in Jewish history and the greatest renewal of Jewish national life in nearly two thousand years: the Holocaust and the establishment of the State of Israel.

Seven decades later, as Israel enters its seventy-ninth year and the Jewish people continue to grapple with the trauma of October 7th and its aftermath, Rabbi Soloveitchik’s message remains as urgent as ever.

The question behind the question

At the heart of *Kol Dodi Dofek* lies one of the Rav’s most profound insights: a distinction between two ways of reading one simple Hebrew word. The word *lama* means “why?” Yet with a slight change in vocalization, the very same letters can be read *lema* – “for what purpose?” This subtle linguistic shift contains an entire philosophy of Jewish faith. The question of *lama* seeks explanation. The question of *lema* seeks responsibility. One asks: why

did this happen? The other asks: what can we do now that it has?

The “why” question – why do the innocent suffer and the wicked prosper – is perhaps the greatest theological question to haunt humanity, and especially those who believe in a just and merciful G-d. How does G-d allow the most heinous acts of cruelty to take place? People commit these terrible acts and bear primary accountability, yet G-d created human beings with the freedom to choose such evil and often does not intervene. Is there any acceptable answer as to how one and a half million children could be so brutally murdered in the *Shoah*? These questions echo throughout *Tanach*, from Avraham to Moshe, from Yirmiyahu to the entire book of *Iyov*, which is devoted to precisely this question.

The question of “why” remains unanswered, and the question is stronger than any answer. G-d tells *Iyov* that this question surpasses the capacity of the human mind. As *Yishayahu* the prophet declared regarding G-d’s ways: “For My thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways My ways” (*Yishayahu* 55:8). There exists an unbridgeable gap between finite human understanding and infinite Divine wisdom. Rabbi Soloveitchik insisted that no philosophical system can adequately explain evil, and that any attempt to do so ultimately diminishes either the reality of suffering or the transcendence of G-d. This is especially true of the Holocaust. There

is no theology capable of fully explaining Auschwitz. No rational calculation of Divine justice can make sense of Treblinka. The Rav maintains that the “why” eludes us, and he therefore rejects all facile explanations that pretend to resolve history’s deepest mystery.

The transformative “for what?”

Yet Rabbi Soloveitchik refuses to leave us only with silence and inaction. If the heavens remain silent regarding *lama*, they thunder regarding *lema*. Not “Why did this happen?” but “What can we do now that it has? What can we do to shape our future in light of what has occurred?”

This shift changes everything. Although we cannot fully understand what caused a tragic event, we can always take full agency in deciding how it will shape us going forward. Instead of seeing ourselves as helpless victims of history, we become partners in shaping it. Instead of remaining trapped by tragedy, we are called to transcend it – not by explaining it, but by responding to it. This is one of Judaism’s most powerful ideas: to accept a painful, unanswered “why” while embracing with vigor the “for what,” infusing life with additional meaning and purpose. We possess little control over many of the events that happen to us. We possess enormous control over what we do with our lives as a result.



The Holocaust and the State of Israel

Nowhere is this distinction more important than in understanding the relationship between the Holocaust and the establishment of the State of Israel. One sometimes hears the simplistic assertion that the Holocaust happened so that Israel could be established. Such a claim is both historically questionable and theologically problematic.

Historically, the Zionist movement was already well underway for over forty years, with hundreds of thousands of Jews having returned to the land before the Second World War began. While sympathy for the Jewish people's suffering during the *Shoah* may have hastened the establishment of the State, there is nothing to suggest it would not have occurred without it. More troublingly, the claim implies that the murder of six million Jews was somehow necessary for Jewish redemption. Did the Almighty truly have to permit such unimaginable suffering for Israel to come about? No explanation can neatly account for such unparalleled human tragedy. The Rav would never permit such certainty. It is better to live with a painful unanswered question than with a superficial or inadequate answer.

We do not know why the Holocaust occurred. The "why" haunts and escapes us. But somehow, the "for what" took shape in the miraculous establishment of the State of Israel just three years later. That establishment was not an explanation for Auschwitz, but it is one of history's most remarkable consequences. The Jewish people picked themselves up after the unspeakable horror of the crematoria and built, for the first time in nearly two thousand years, an independent state. They rebuilt Jewish communities around the world and slowly restored the *yeshivot* and *Chassidic* courts that had been destroyed in Europe.

Covenant of fate, covenant of destiny

Rabbi Soloveitchik famously distinguished between the covenant of fate (*brit goral*) and the covenant of destiny (*brit ye'ud*). Fate is what happens to us. Destiny is what we choose to do with what happens. The Jewish people did not choose persecution or suffering. These belong to the realm of fate, what the Rav calls the covenant of Egypt, where the Jewish people first collectively endured servitude and persecution. But they arrived at Sinai and chose to receive the Torah, infusing their lives with spiritual meaning and reshaping their destiny. From the covenant of Egypt to the covenant of Sinai: converting fate into destiny.

The fate of unparalleled suffering during the *Shoah* was somehow channeled into destiny in Israel. Rebuilding Jewish life, returning to Zion, revitalizing the land, reviving Hebrew, re-establishing Jewish sovereignty, ingathering the exiles from every corner of the earth, and rebuilding Jewish communities and learning centers in the Holy Land and around the world.

Religious Zionism sees in these events something even greater: a Divine invitation, a spiritual beckoning. In the Rav's famous analogy drawn from *Shir HaShirim*, it is a knock at the door, *Kol Dodi Dofek* itself, the voice of the Beloved knocking and calling. G-d, through the historic opportunity of Israel, was not merely causing political upheaval but extending a great Divine invitation: to convert fate into destiny, to shape a Jewish state in His image, and to move Jewish and human history forward.

October 7th and the next chapter

After October 7th, Jews around the world once again found themselves asking "Why?" Why such hatred, brutality, and suffering? How was our military caught so off guard? How can this be prevented in the future? We will grapple with these

questions, receiving answers to some but not all. Yet Rav Soloveitchik's thesis urges us not only to grapple with "why" but to focus on "for what." For what purpose shall we use this painful experience? How can it awaken us spiritually, individually and together? How can we deepen our solidarity and unity despite our differences and diversity?

Seventy years after *Kol Dodi Dofek*, Rabbi Soloveitchik continues to teach us that faith is not measured by possessing answers to every mystery, but by how we respond with faith to the circumstances we find ourselves in: transforming Egyptian exile into Sinaitic redemption, turning painful fate into purposeful destiny.

As Israel approaches its eightieth year, that responsibility has never been greater. We cannot fully explain the tragedies that have befallen our people, nor penetrate the mysteries of Divine providence. But we can determine how we will build, defend, and elevate the sovereign Jewish state entrusted to our generation. We can strengthen the bonds of our one great Jewish family. We can ensure that Jewish sovereignty protects Jewish life and serves as a beacon of moral and spiritual purpose. The "why" belongs to Heaven. The "for what" belongs to us.

In that sacred partnership between Divine mystery and human responsibility lies both the challenge and the opportunity of Jewish history.



Rabbi Doron Perez
is the Executive Chairman
of World Mizrahi.



Guidelines for Those Unable to Fast on Yom Kippur

Rabbi Yosef Zvi Rimon

There are people for whom fasting is very difficult, and in some cases they are unable to fast for medical reasons. In any case of doubt about whether one can fast, it is appropriate to consult a rabbi. If that is not possible and there is genuine doubt, one should refrain from fasting and not endanger himself – even if the danger is not immediate but only remote. A sick person is forbidden to endanger himself and fast against a doctor's instructions. Of such a person it is said, "But your blood, of your souls, I will demand" (*Mishnah Berurah*, 618:5).

The *Shu"t Chatam Sofer* (vol. 6, ch. 23) writes that it is preferable not to go to synagogue if doing so might prevent one from being able to fast. It is better to forgo prayer in *shul* if attending would make fasting impossible – even if the only consequence of staying home is avoiding a single drink of measured amounts, known as drinking "*shiurin*" (*Shmirat Shabbat Kehilchatah*, ch. 39, note 94). Therefore, someone who fears that going to *shul* will prevent them from fasting should rest throughout Yom Kippur, praying according to his ability – even in bed – so as not to break the fast.

Even when drinking *shiurin* – the measured amounts mentioned above – becomes necessary, it is preferable that each drink contain less than a *melo lugmav* (a cheekful), taken no more than once every nine minutes (*Mishnah Berurah* 618:20). Although any drinking on Yom Kippur is Biblically prohibited, consuming a full *shiur* increases the severity of the transgression, incurring *karet* if done deliberately – so drinking less than the minimum measure is always preferable where possible. The interval between drinks may be shortened as needed: if necessary, one may drink every six minutes (*Aruch HaShulchan* 618:14), every four minutes (*Shiurei Torah*, 203–204), and in pressing circumstances every two minutes (the most lenient opinion cited in *Shu"t Chatam Sofer*, vol. 6, ch. 23).

How does one measure *melo lugmav*? This is half a mouthful and therefore varies from person to person. It can easily be measured: fill your mouth with water and spit it into a disposable cup. Divide this water equally between two disposable cups. The amount in one cup is the measure of *melo lugmav*. Before Yom Kippur one can mark a line on the cup at the water level, and drink that amount each time.

Once the need for measured drinking has passed, one must stop drinking, because each act of drinking is a separate prohibition. Drinking once does not constitute a "breaking of the fast" that permits continued measured drinking freely.

Should one limit himself to water, or may one drink sweetened juice? According to the *Nefesh Chayah* (Rabbi Margolies, 618:17), one may drink only water. However, most *poskim* allow a flavorful beverage as well (*Nishmat Avraham*, 612:1). There may even be a preference for this – Yom Kippur is a *Yom Tov*, and if one is already drinking, it is better to derive some enjoyment from it. Additionally, drinking a sweetened beverage may help one avoid eating and drinking later on.

Where possible, even someone who needs to eat or drink on Yom Kippur should limit himself to drinking alone. When eating is unavoidable, the same principle of *shiurin* applies: eat less than a *kotevet hagasah* (the bulk of a large date, approximately 30 cc – roughly the volume of a standard matchbox) every nine minutes. Even food that only becomes smaller than a matchbox after chewing falls within this allowance (*Kuntres Mevakshei Torah* 15–16).

When eating and drinking *shiurin*, no waiting period is required between them (*Mishnah Berurah* 618:21). However, foods whose status is ambiguous – neither clearly food nor clearly drink, such as pureed fruit, porridge, or cream (*Minchat Shlomo* 21:1; vol. 2, 58:27) – must be separated from both eating and drinking by a full nine minutes.

When eating or drinking in measured amounts, a single *beracha rishonah* before the first portion suffices, unless there is a lengthy interruption and a complete lapse of attention between portions. One does not recite a *beracha achronah* for measured eating.

If a shower is needed for recuperation, one may shower – and this is preferable to eating or drinking. Showering is permitted even for a non-critically ill person (*Rema*, 613:9; *Aruch HaShulchan*, *ibid.*, 9).

A non-critically ill person who takes medication that must be continued on Yom Kippur may take it without water. If water is needed to swallow the medication, he should take a small amount of water and render it unpalatable (by adding something bitter or a little salt, so that people would not normally drink it) and then swallow the medication with it (*Shmirat Shabbat Kehilchatah*, ch. 39, 9). If the pill is pleasant-tasting, it should be wrapped in thin paper and swallowed while wrapped.

May G-d "accept the fast of His people" – and may we and all the house of Israel be sealed for a good life and for peace.



Rabbi Yosef Zvi Rimon

is the Nasi of World Mizrahi.

He is the Founder and Chairman of Sula-mot and La'Ofek, and serves as the Chief Rabbi of Gush Etzion, and Rosh Yeshiva of the Jerusalem College of Technology.



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A Historic Chag HaSemicha

In the heart of Yerushalayim, dozens of new Religious Zionist rabbis were ordained, ready to take on leadership roles around the Jewish world.

Shortly after celebrating *Chag Matan Torah*, hundreds gathered overlooking *Har HaBayit* to celebrate the first Chag HaSemicha ceremony of the incredible Musmachim program.

Musmachim is a three-year program to train a new generation of Religious Zionist rabbis for the English-speaking world. Participants study a varied curriculum of *halacha*, pastoral training, the intersection of Jewish law and modern technology, public speaking, and many other aspects to prepare them to be rabbis in the 21st century. It is headed by Rabbi Binyamin Zimmerman, and overseen by a Rabbinic Va'ad led by Rabbi Yosef Zvi Rimon.

It was a truly special evening honoring the hard work, dedication, and growth of the 38 rabbis throughout their learning journey. Some of the *rabbanim* already completed the program in previous years, and are already serving in rabbinic roles in the UK, USA, Canada, Israel and beyond.

The Musmachim were honored to be addressed by Rabbi Yosef Zvi Rimon, Nasi of World Mizrahi, Rabbi Doron Perez, President of the World Zionist Organization and Executive Chairman of World Mizrahi, and Rabbi Udi Schwartz, head of the IDF's *halacha* unit. Michael Lax delivered opening remarks on behalf of the program's supporters. Special presentations were made to the Lax family, and to Mrs. Nechama Werdiger as a token of appreciation to all our Australian supporters.

A particularly moving moment was the tribute to those serving in *milu'im*. Together, our Musmachim participants, graduates and staff have completed over 10,000 days of reserve duty, a powerful reflection of their dedication to "*safra u'sayfa*" – to Torah, Am Yisrael, and the State of Israel.

Musmachim is a program of the Religious Zionist Shlichut Center, which was founded by World Mizrahi.

(PHOTOS: YONA BRODER)





"Wherever I travel to Jewish communities, I am now privileged to meet you, our Musmachim, changing lives and impacting kehillot. I just returned from a trip to London, Seattle, Chicago and Washington, and in each of those places there was a Musmachim couple – in shuls, on university campuses, in schools. I spoke to parents who told me how literally our Musmachim have changed the lives of their children at university. We are today celebrating all you are doing around the world, and moments like this make all the effort worth it."

Rabbi Doron Perez



"I see you, our Musmachim, when you learn here in the program, and then I see you in various places around the world. You have the gift of knowing, loving and teaching Torah, but also being able to bring the unique atmosphere of Eretz Yisrael to wherever you go in the world. Our beracha is that you should have siyata dishmaya in your shlichut to Am Yisrael around the world."

Rabbi Yosef Zvi Rimon



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A Modern Religious Blueprint

Three years after October 7th, the Jewish people stand before big questions. Will Israel find safety as its multi-front war ebbs and flows? Will all of Israeli society help shoulder the sustained military burden? Can Jewish communities continue to thrive in Western societies where connection to Zionism is increasingly presented as evil itself?

As we settle into *shul* for Rosh Hashanah, our tradition asks of us another set of big questions; more personal and existential. What is my role in life, and what have I achieved in the past year? What mistakes have I made, and how do I fix shortcomings? What do I pray for in this coming year?

Few Jewish texts speak to these national and personal questions as profoundly as *Kol Dodi Dofek*. A discourse by Rabbi Yosef Dov Soloveitchik, one of the great Jewish thinkers of the 20th century grapples with Jewish themes in a way that is timely and timeless, national and individual, lofty and practical. Delivered at a Yom HaAtzmaut celebration in 1956, and constructed around a central column of the religious significance of the State of Israel, it is in fact a full edifice of Jewish thought. *Kol Dodi Dofek* engages with perennial religious questions; the capacity of man in a divine world, the meaning of suffering

in Jewish thought, the role of the individual in the Jewish community. It is from these materials, hewn from Biblical stories and Jewish philosophy, that Rabbi Soloveitchik constructs his approach to the reborn Jewish state. The reader looking for inspiration in both public and private spheres will be able to find it in this essay.

70 years on, this edition of *HaMizrachi* reflects on the current meaning of Rabbi Soloveitchik's ideas. Rabbi Soloveitchik spoke in the era of Nasser and Nehru, but his words are no less relevant in the era of Mojtaba and Mamdani. May we be able to heed the call of the Divine in our time, and may we be blessed for a good and sweet new year.



Rabbi Aron White

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

The Six Knocks

At the heart of Rabbi Soloveitchik's drasha is the biblical image of Kol Dodi Dofek – the voice of the Beloved, knocking on the door of His beloved. This metaphor is interpreted to mean the knocking of G-d on the door of the Jewish people. Rabbi Soloveitchik expounds how in the modern era, G-d has knocked on the door of the Jewish people, calling them to the reborn State of Israel.



(PHOTO: YESHIVA UNIVERSITY)

Eight years ago, in the midst of a night of the terrors of Majdanek, Treblinka, and Buchenwald; in a night of gas chambers and crematoria; in a night of total divine self-concealment; in a night ruled by the devil of doubt and destruction who sought to sweep the Lover from her own tent into the Catholic Church; in a night of continuous searching for the Beloved – on that very night the Beloved appeared. The Almighty, who was hiding in His splendid sanctum, suddenly appeared and began to beckon at the tent of the Lover, who tossed and turned on her bed beset by convulsions and the agonies of hell. Because of the beating and knocking at the door of the mournful Lover, the State of Israel was born.

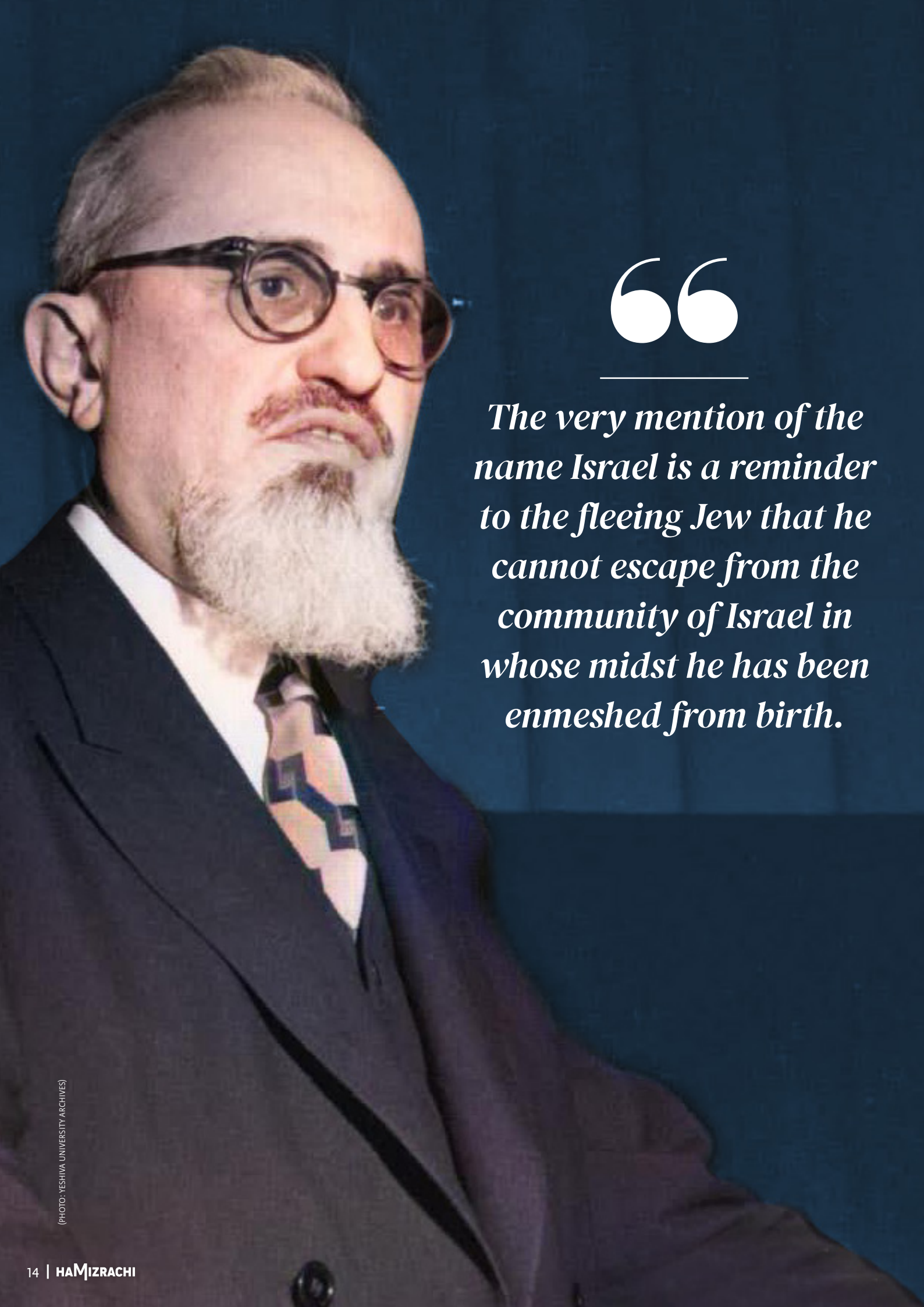
How many times did the Beloved knock on the door of the Lover? It appears to me that we can count at least six knocks.

First, the knock of the Beloved was heard in the political arena. From the point of view of international relations, no one will deny that the rebirth of the State of Israel, in a political sense, was an almost supernatural occurrence. Both Russia and the Western nations supported the establishment of the State of Israel. This was perhaps the one resolution on which East and West concurred [during the Cold War era]. I am inclined to believe that the United Nations was especially created for this end – for the sake of fulfilling the mission that Divine Providence had placed upon it. It appears to me that one cannot point to any other concrete accomplishment on the part of the United Nations. Our Rabbis of blessed memory already expressed this view: At times rain falls on account of one individual and for one blade of grass (*Bereishit Rabbah* 66:2). I do not know who the representatives of the press, with their human eyes, saw to be the chairman in that fateful session of the General Assembly in which the creation

of the State of Israel was decided, but he who looked carefully with his spiritual eye saw the true Chairman who conducted the proceedings – the Beloved. He knocked with His gavel on the lectern. Do we not interpret the passage “On that night the king could not sleep” (*Esther* 6:1) as meaning that the King of the Universe could not sleep? If Ahasuerus alone had been sleepless, the matter would not have been at all important and salvation would not have arisen on that night. If, however, the King, the Master of the Universe, could not sleep, as it were, redemption would be born. If just anyone were to have opened the session of the United Nations, the State of Israel would not have been born. But it was the Beloved who rapped on the Chairman’s lectern, and the miracle materialized. Listen! My Beloved Knocks!

Second, the knock of the Beloved was heard on the battlefield. The tiny defense forces of [the State of] Israel defeated the mighty Arab armies. The miracle of “the many delivered into the hands of the few” materialized before our eyes, and an even greater miracle happened! G-d hardened the heart of Ishmael and commanded him to go into battle against the State of Israel. Had the Arabs not declared war on Israel and instead supported the Partition Plan, the State of Israel would have remained without Jerusalem, without a major portion of the Galilee, and without





“

The very mention of the name Israel is a reminder to the fleeing Jew that he cannot escape from the community of Israel in whose midst he has been enmeshed from birth.

some areas of the Negev. If thousands of years ago Pharaoh had allowed the Children of Israel to leave immediately, as Moses had originally requested, Moses would have been bound by his word to return in three days. Pharaoh, however, hardened his heart and did not listen to Moses. “The Holy One then took Israel out with a mighty hand and by an outstretched arm” (*Devarim* 4:34). Consequently, the force of the promise [that the Children of Israel would return to Egypt] was vitiated. No contract that is based upon mutuality of promise binds one side if the other party refuses to fulfill its obligations. Listen! My Beloved Knocks!

Third, the Beloved also began to knock on the door of the tent of theology, and possibly this is the strongest beckoning. I have, on several occasions, emphasized in my remarks concerning the Land of Israel that the theological arguments of Christian theologians to the effect that the Holy One has taken away from the Community of Israel its rights to the Land of Israel, and that all of the biblical promises relating to Zion and Jerusalem now refer in an allegorical sense to Christianity and the Christian Church, were all publicly shown to be false, baseless contentions by the establishment of the State of Israel. One must have a broad familiarity with theological literature from the time of Justin Martyr down to the theologians of our own day to comprehend the full extent of this marvel by which the central axiom of Christian theology was shattered. We should pay careful attention to the learned explanation of our Secretary of State, Mr. Dulles (who served as the deacon of an Episcopalian Church), to a Committee of the United States Senate that the Arabs hate the Jews because they killed the founder of their religion. This “explanation” possesses hidden and deep symbolic significance. I am not a psychiatrist and surely not a psychoanalyst, but I know how to study Talmud, and I remember well what our Rabbis of blessed memory said about Balaam: “from his blessings... you may learn what was in his heart” (*Sanhedrin* 105b). Sometimes, when a person speaks too much, something of the truth slips out. When one of the Senators asked the Secretary of State, “Why do the Arabs hate the Jews?” he really wanted to answer, “Personally, I too, as a Christian, have no great love for them, because they killed our messiah and consequently forfeited their portion of Abraham’s heritage.” An angel sat in the throat of the Secretary, or a hook was put into it (as in the exegesis of the Rabbis of blessed memory on the phrase “and G-d put a word in Balaam’s mouth” [*Bamidbar* 23:5, *Sotah* 10a], “[i.e.] he put a hook in his mouth”), and instead of saying, “Our Lord” and “for myself,” he let other words slip out, the “Arabs” and “Mohammed.” In his subconscious he was terrified of the “awful” fact that the Community of Israel rules over Zion and Jerusalem. I find satisfaction in reading about the State of Israel in the Catholic and Protestant newspapers. Despite themselves they must mention the name of Israel when they report the news of Zion and Jerusalem, which we possess. I always have a special sense of satisfaction when I read in the paper that Israel’s reaction is not as yet known because today is Saturday and government offices are closed or when I read, on the eve of Passover, an item from the United Press that “Jews will sit down tonight to the *Seder* table in the hope that the miracles of Egypt will return and recur today.” Listen! My Beloved Knocks!

Fourth, the Beloved knocks in the heart of the youth which is assimilated and perplexed. The period of *hester panim* in the 1940s brought confusion among the Jewish masses and especially Jewish youth. Assimilation increased, and the urge to flee from Judaism and the Jewish people reached its apex. Fear, despair, and ignorance caused many to forsake the Jewish community and “climb aboard the ship,” to flee to Tarshish from the presence of the L-rd (*Yonah* 1:3), just as Jonah sought to flee G-d’s presence. A seemingly unstoppable tidal wave stood over us and threatened

to destroy us. Suddenly, the Beloved began to beckon to the hearts of the perplexed, and His beckoning, the establishment of the State of Israel, at least slowed the process of flight. Many who were once alienated are now bound to the Jewish State with ties of pride in its mighty accomplishments. Many American Jews who were partially assimilated find themselves beset by hidden fear and concern for any crisis that the State of Israel is at the time passing through, and they pray for its well-being and welfare even though they are far from being totally committed to it. Even Jews who are hostile to the State of Israel must defend themselves from the strange charge of dual-loyalty and proclaim daily and declare that they have no stake in the Holy Land. It is good for a Jew when he cannot ignore his Jewishness and is obliged to perpetually answer the questions “Who are you?” and “What is your occupation?” (*Yonah* 1:8), even when extraordinary fear grips him and he does not have the strength or fortitude to answer with true pride, “I am a Jew, and I fear the L-rd, the G-d of heaven” (*Yonah* 1:9). The unrelenting question of, “Who are you?” ties him to the Jewish people.

The very mention of the name Israel is a reminder to the fleeing Jew that he cannot escape from the community of Israel in whose midst he has been enmeshed from birth. Everywhere we turn we hear the name “Israel.” When we listen to a radio station, when we open a paper, when we participate in a debate on current events, we encounter the question of Israel; it is always a topic of public concern.

This phenomenon is extremely important for Jews who are afflicted with self-hatred and want to turn away from Judaism and run for their lives. They hide, like Jonah in his day, in the recesses of the ship (*Yonah* 1:5) and seek to “slumber” (*Yonah* 1:5). The Captain, however, does not permit them to ignore their fate. The shadow of Israel continuously chases after them. Random thoughts and paradoxical reflections arise from the subconscious of even the most confirmed assimilationist. And when a Jew begins to think, to reflect, when he is unable to sleep, it is impossible to know where his thoughts will take him and how his doubts will be expressed. Listen! My Beloved Knocks!

The fifth knock of the Beloved is perhaps the most important. For the first time in the annals of our exile, Divine Providence has amazed our enemies with the astounding discovery that Jewish blood is not cheap! If the antisemites describe this phenomenon as being “an eye for an eye,” we will agree with them. If we want to courageously defend our continued national and historical existence, we must, from time to time, interpret the verse of an “eye for an eye” literally. So many “eyes” were lost in the course of our bitter exile because we did not repay hurt for hurt. The time has come for us to fulfill the simple meaning of “an eye for an eye” (*Shemot* 21:24). Of course, I am sure everyone recognizes that I am an adherent of the Oral Law, and from my perspective there is no doubt that the verse refers to monetary restitution, as defined by *halakhah*. However, with respect to the Mufti and Nasser I would demand that we interpret the verse in accordance with its literal meaning – the taking of an actual eye! Pay no attention to the saccharine suggestions of known assimilationists and of some Jewish socialists who stand pat in their rebelliousness and think they are still living in Bialystok, Brest-Litovsk, and Minsk of the year 1905, and openly declare that revenge is forbidden to the Jewish people in any place, at any time, and under all circumstances. “Vanity of vanities!” (*Kohelet* 1:2). Revenge is forbidden when it is pointless, but if one is aroused thereby to self-defense, it is the most elementary right of man to take his revenge.

The Torah has always taught that a man is permitted, indeed, has a sacred obligation, to defend himself. With the verse, "If a burglar is caught in the act of breaking in" (*Shemot* 22:1), the Torah establishes the *halakhah* that one may defend not only one's life but his property as well. If the thief who comes to take the property of the householder is capable of killing the householder (should the householder not comply with his demands), the householder may rise up against the criminal and kill him. For good reason the Torah relates that two of its great heroes, Abraham and Moses, took sword in hand to defend their brethren: "And when Abraham heard that his kinsman was taken captive, he led forth his retainers" (*Bereishit* 14:14). "And when Moses saw the Egyptian smite a Jew... he struck down the Egyptian" (*Shemot* 2:11-12). This behavior does not contradict the principle of loving-kindness and compassion. On the contrary, a passive position, without self-defense, may sometimes lead to the most awesome brutality. "And I will gain honor from Pharaoh, and all his hosts, his chariots, and his horsemen. And the Egyptians will know that I am the L-rd" (*Shemot* 14:17-18). G-d did not seek honor and recognition. He wanted Pharaoh, Moses' contemporary, to know that he must pay a high price for his edict that "Every male child born shall be cast into the river" (*Shemot* 1:22). His present desire is that the blood of Jewish children who were slain as they recited the eighteen benedictions of the daily [*Amidah*] prayer shall also be avenged. When G-d smote the Egyptians, He sought to demonstrate that there will always be accountability for the spilling of Jewish blood. At present, it is necessary not only to convince the dictator of Egypt [Nasser], but the self-righteous Nehru, the Foreign Office in London, and the sanctimonious members of the United Nations, that Jewish blood is not cheap. Therefore, how laughable it is when they try to persuade us to rely on the declaration of the three Great Powers guaranteeing the status quo. We all know from experience what value can be attached to the pronouncements of the British Foreign Office and the so-called friendship of certain officials in our State Department. In general, how absurd is the request that an entire people be dependent on the kindnesses of others and remain without the ability to defend itself. Public and private honor is dependent upon the possibility of defending one's life and one's honor. A people that cannot defend its freedom and tranquillity is neither

free nor independent. The third of the phrases of Divine redemption is "And I shall redeem you with an outstretched hand and with great judgments" (*Shemot* 6:6). Thank G-d we have lived to see the day when, with the help of G-d, Jews have it within their power to defend themselves.

Let us not forget that the poison of Hitlerite antisemitism (which made Jews fair game to all) still permeates this generation, which looked with equanimity upon the horrible scene of the suffocation of millions in gas chambers as a normal event that need not be challenged. The antidote for this venom that poisoned minds and dulled hearts is the readiness of the State of Israel to defend the lives of its citizens. Listen! My Beloved Knocks!

The sixth beckoning, of which we should also not lose sight, was heard at the time of the opening of the gates of the Land of Israel. A Jew escaping from an enemy's land now knows that he can find refuge in the land of his forefathers. This is a new phenomenon in the annals of our history. Up to now, when a Jewish population was uprooted, it wandered in the wilderness of the nations without finding shelter and habitation. The shutting of the gates in the face of the exiled caused total destruction for much of the Jewish people. Now the situation has changed. When any nation expels its Jewish minority, the exiled now direct their steps to Zion, and she, as a compassionate mother, absorbs them. We are all witnesses to the settlement of Oriental Jewry in Israel over the last several years. Who knows what would have been in store for these brothers of ours in the lands of their origin if not for the State of Israel, which brought them to her in planes and ships? Had Israel been born before the Hitlerian Holocaust, hundreds of thousands of Jews could have been saved from the gas chambers and the crematoria. The miracle of the State tarried somewhat, and in the wake of its delay, thousands and tens of thousands of Jews were taken to the slaughter. Now that the hour of *hester panim* has passed, however, the possibility exists for Jews who are pried from their homes to take root in the Holy Land. This should not be taken lightly. Listen! My Beloved Knocks!

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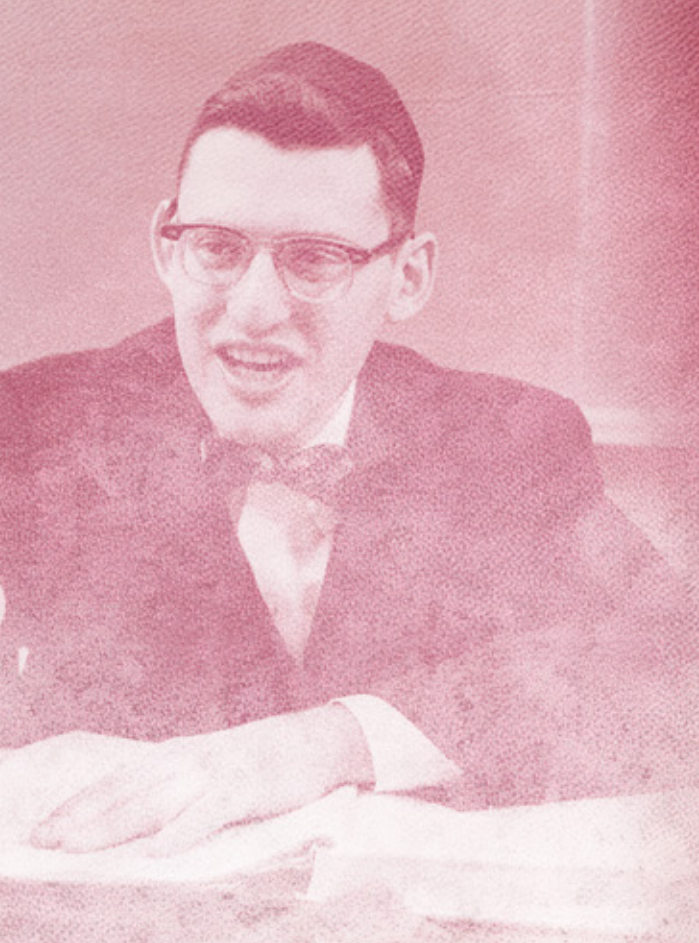
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In the Room Where it Happened:

An Interview with Rabbi Aaron Rakeffet-Rothkoff

(PHOTO: YESHIVA UNIVERSITY)

In 1956, Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik delivered a public lecture at Yeshiva University on the occasion of Israel's 8th Independence Day. That lecture became Kol Dodi Dofek – one of the most influential works of Religious Zionist philosophy ever written.

For most Jews today, it is a text to be studied. But there were people in the room that night for whom it was something else entirely. One of them was a young Aaron Rothkoff, then a teenager active in Bnei Akiva, who would go on to become Rabbi Aaron Rakeffet-Rothkoff – teacher, historian, and one of the foremost transmitters of the Rav's legacy to generations of students in the United States, Israel, post-Soviet Russia, and beyond. Rabbi Aron White spoke with him about what it meant to hear the Rav speak, and how those teachings shaped a generation of American Jews.

Take us back to 1956. What brought you to Lamport Auditorium at Yeshiva University that night?

I grew up in the Bronx, where there were hundreds of thousands of Jews, many of whom were very assimilated. I was involved in Bnei Akiva as a *chanich* and then a *madrish*, and Bnei Akiva played a significant role in helping Jews stay religious – in fact, I also met my wife there. Before Yom HaAtzmaut in 1956, it was announced that Rabbi Soloveitchik would be speaking at Yeshiva University, and many of us from Bnei Akiva decided to attend.

It wasn't just a *drasha*. It was an event. It was standing room only, and there was an energy in the room that enthused us all. That *drasha* of *Kol Dodi Dofek* changed my life and the lives of many people in that room. It was the greatest description of Religious Zionism, I believe, to this day. As teenagers, did we really understand the philosophical depth, every level of meaning, every reference in *Chazal* that the Rav was drawing on? We didn't. But hearing the description of the six knocks – the way that G-d is calling to us – was something unique.

I was privileged to hear Rabbi Soloveitchik many times, but this *drasha* was something special. There is a story about the Alter of Novhardok, who said: "I heard Rabbi Yisrael Salanter speak thirteen times. The first twelve I went over to him and said 'yasher

koach,' but the thirteenth changed my life." That is how it goes with the great *darshanim*.

You describe it as transformative – not only for you, but for many others in the room. Can you paint a picture of what Jewish life looked like in America at that time?

If one reads certain books of popular Jewish history, the story told is that American Jewry had nothing before the 1940s, and that the refugees from Europe were the ones who built American Jewry, especially American Orthodoxy. This is not entirely true, but American Orthodoxy was indeed transformed by the wave of European Jews who came in the years before, during, and after the Holocaust.

The 1950s were a time when it was still not easy to maintain a basic Orthodox lifestyle. Rabbi Hershel Schachter describes how there were early Shabbat morning *minyanim* at 6:30am, because people would come to *davening* and then go directly to their jobs – they were working six-and-a-half day work weeks, otherwise they wouldn't be able to put food on the table. As I said, Bnei Akiva had a profound role in preserving Torah observance

for many Jews. I was a third-generation American, but most of my friends were either survivors or children of survivors of the Holocaust. Even though my family had been spared, I definitely grew up in the shadow of the Holocaust.

It was also a time when different Jewish organizations and outlooks were developing. Rabbi Soloveitchik had initially been aligned with Agudat Yisrael. His grandfather Rav Chaim was stridently anti-Zionist. His father Rav Moshe was already a little more open, including teaching in the Tachkemoni schools of Mizrahi in Warsaw. Rabbi Yosef Dov Soloveitchik was even one of the candidates for Chief Rabbi of Tel Aviv in 1935 – as the candidate of Agudat Yisrael. However, he gradually moved toward identifying with Mizrahi. One critical moment in this shift was the Rabbis' March to Washington in 1943, when hundreds of rabbis, including Agudah leader Rabbi Eliezer Silver, requested to meet with President Roosevelt to plead for greater action in saving Jews from the Holocaust. President Roosevelt effectively slammed the door in their face, and Rabbi Soloveitchik recognized that certain approaches from the "Old World" required a fundamentally new response. That activist orientation went hand in hand with his shift toward Mizrahi.

Can you speak about the impact his teachings had, not only on you personally, but on your generation more broadly?

There are so many people from that time, a whole generation of young American Jews who would ultimately come to Israel and be involved in building up the land and Torah here. One such person was my *madricha* at Bnei Akiva, Miriam, who would later become known by her married name, Miriam Levinger. She was an inspiring personality: "Everyone has a social security number, but it's a choice whether we use our lives to do something meaningful. This is the choice that Hashem gives us." She made *Aliyah* with her husband Moshe Levinger, and they were among the first Jews to move back to Chevron after the Six Day War. Her dedication, and her husband's, to the cause of *yishuv haAretz* was

legendary, and had a profound impact on us personally. My wife said to me: "Miriam is sleeping on the floor in Chevron. What are we doing here in our nice house in New Jersey?" It was a catalyst for our own *Aliyah* a few years later.

Another contemporary of mine was Rabbi Avraham Silvert, who established an important religious high school in Be'er Sheva to serve the many traditional immigrants arriving in Israel at that time. People like Rabbi Dovid Miller, who would go on to become the *Rosh Kollel* at Yeshiva University's Gruss Kollel, had their first teaching positions at Rabbi Silvert's school. I could go on with so many examples. And perhaps the most celebrated is Rav Aharon Lichtenstein, who came on *Aliyah* inspired by his father-in-law's teachings.

Today, Rabbi Soloveitchik's teachings are studied in Israeli schools, yeshivot, academic settings, and public forums. That wasn't always the case. How have you seen that change over the course of your years in Israel?

When I came on *Aliyah*, I was something of a strange bird as a student of Rabbi Soloveitchik. I remember giving some *shiurim* and noticing that none other than Justice Menachem Elon was attending. I went over and asked him: "Justice Elon, you are an accomplished *talmid chacham*. What brings you to my *shiurim*?" He said: "You are a student of Rabbi Soloveitchik. We have heard a great deal about him, but don't get to hear from him directly, so hearing from his students is very meaningful." Thankfully, after many decades, his teachings have become far more accessible and widely known. The whole concept of Yeshiva University, of Torah applied to the full range of society, is ever more relevant in Israel, as we seek to build a Jewish state in every dimension of that phrase. I am gratified that today the Torah of Rav Soloveitchik is far better known across Israeli society. ■



Kol Dodi Dofek: Seventy Years Later... Are We Still Sleeping?

Rabbanit Shani Taragin

אני ישנה ולבי ער. קולו דודי דופק.

I am asleep, but my heart is awake. Hark! My beloved is knocking. (Shir HaShirim 5:2)

The *ra'aya*, representing *Knesset Yisrael*, lies in bed. She hears the *Dod*, *Hakadosh Baruch Hu*, knocking at her door, His head drenched with dew. He pleads: "Open for Me, My sister, My beloved." But she hesitates: "I have taken off my robe; how shall I put it on? I washed my feet; how shall I defile them?" (5:3). By the time she rises, He is gone. The watchmen strike her, wound her (5:7). The Daughters of Jerusalem, representing the nations, taunt her as she searches for her lover.

This is the scene Rav Soloveitchik seized upon seventy years ago. The Rav identified six divine knocks, i.e. six ways Hashem was "banging" on the door of the Jewish people after two thousand years of waiting. Would we open the door in 1956, eight years after the State's founding? Seventy years later, each knock resounds louder. Do we hear them? Will we finally rise, or miss another opportunity to answer the loving knocks of Hashem?

The six knocks, requalified

The political knock: In 1956, both the western powers and the Soviet Union somehow agreed to vote for the partition plan – a Cold War miracle. Today, the Abraham Accords providing for the Gulf states aligning with Israel, have amplified that knock. And yet, the miracles are reported as geopolitics, stripped of providential character. The Rav heard the Divine hammer in the UN gavel. We hear only headlines.

The military knock: In 1948, Israel miraculously defeated six Arab armies. Today,

Israel's achievements against Hamas, Hezbollah, and Iran – its intelligence reach, its precision, its resilience – have amplified that knock beyond imagination. And yet, we marvel at the technology, credit the soldiers, and forget to ask Who made them possible. The *ra'aya* hears the sound but ignores the *Dod's* hand on the door.

The theological knock: In 1956, Christians could no longer point to Jewish exile as proof of G-d's rejection. Today, Jewish sovereignty and the ingathering of exiles refute every denial of Jewish rootedness. And yet, we have grown accustomed to *shivat Tzion*. Sovereignty is a headline instead of what the Rav saw: Hashem proving that His covenant endures.

The psychological knock: In 1956, the State injected pride into the Jewish psyche. Today, since October 7th, tens of thousands have made *Aliyah*, not fleeing but running toward home. And yet, the surge of solidarity fades. The *ra'aya's* heart stirs, but her body remains in bed. The excitement of October 8th gives way to the routine of August.

The ethical knock: In 1956, the Rav declared that Jewish blood was no longer free. Today, the knock resounds in every soldier who risks his life to minimize civilian casualties, in a military code no other army matches. And yet, the ICJ entertains genocide charges against the people who were nearly annihilated. The knock demands that we not internalize their verdict.

The practical knock: In 1956, every Jew had a place to flee. Today, when war broke out, Israel opened its gates wider – not

refugees but fighters came home. And yet, the door is open and we remain in the corridor. The *ra'aya* hears the *Dod* say, "Get up," and answers, "I have washed my feet."

The knocks of "brit goral" and "brit ye'ud": what we must become

The Rav's framework rested on two covenants: *brit goral*, the covenant of fate – involuntary, shared, inescapable – and *brit ye'ud*, the covenant of destiny accepted at Sinai – the voluntary commitment to a sacred mission. The six knocks were phenomena of *goral*. But *goral* is what happens to us; *ye'ud* is what we choose to become. Fate can catalyze energy but cannot provide direction.

Translating the Rav's categories into our moment, we hear additional knocks meant to transform us from *goral* to *ye'ud* – from *machane* to *edah*, from a people united by threat to a people united by mission. These are knocks not of Providence acting upon us, but of Hashem demanding what we choose to make of ourselves.

The knock of achdut: October 7th briefly created a united camp (*machane*) – *Charedi* and secular, left and right, Diaspora and Israeli. But a *machane* dissolves when the threat recedes, and the fractures have returned. The knock calls us to become an *edah*, i.e. a congregation united not by shared danger but by shared covenant. How do we fail to hear it? We let the unity of October 8th curdle back into the partisan camps of October 6th.

The knock of moral clarity: The Rav believed Judaism's unique contribution was the connection between religious

experience and ethical action – *tzedek u-mishpat*, not moral relativism. After October 7th, the world inverted its compass: Israel accused of genocide while defending itself against genocidal enemies. The knock demands that we not internalize their verdict – self-defense with ethical restraint, yes, but without moral apology for protecting Jewish life. How do we fail to hear it? We become defensive rather than declarative.

The knock of kevod ha-adam: The Rav insisted that denying human dignity calls into question the *raison d'être* of the human race. The hostages. The bereaved. The wounded. The displaced. Each demands that the Jewish people become a society refusing to let suffering become abstract or partisan. “Jewish blood is no longer *hefker*” must extend beyond the battlefield to the living: the healing of hostages, the widows and orphans, the soldiers learning to walk again. How do we fail to hear it? The hostages become a political football. The bereaved become a ceremony. We move on, but the knock asks whether we can sustain the seriousness of *kevod ha-adam*.

The knock of kedusha: The State of Israel has achieved remarkable successes in the realm of *goral* – military dominance, technological prowess, diplomatic breakthroughs. But the knock implores: what kind of society are we building? One of power alone, or one of Torah, humility, *chesed*, and holiness? The Rav’s *Adam I* – majestic, creative – has been realized. But the knock demands *Adam II* – the covenantal man of humility and inwardness. The State cannot remain merely a refuge, an army, an economy measured by GDP and military victories; it must strive for *kedusha* manifest in kindness, justice and Torah values.

The laziness the Rav feared

The Rav feared the laziness of his own community. He confessed that during the Holocaust, American Jewry failed to feel their brethren’s suffering with sufficient intensity. “We all sinned in our silence.” Orthodox Jews, he charged, suffered from miserliness not only of wealth but of spirit – experts at criticism, amateurs at construction. Seventy years later, the Negev he warned was dangerously underpopulated remains a frontier. Have we opened the door, or merely changed into cleaner pajamas?

Opening the door means *Aliyah* when possible, serious Israel education when not, material support for soldiers, evacuees, and bereaved families, investment in the Negev and Galil, and a Diaspora Jewish life organized around responsibility rather than sentiment – hearing the *goral* knocks as calls to national destiny (*ye’ud*).

The knock that answers the oaths

The Three Oaths (*Ketubot* 111a), derived from *Shir HaShirim* (chapters 2, 3, 8), adjured *Am Yisrael* not to “ascend as a wall” to reclaim the Land and not to rebel against the nations, while adjuring the nations not to oppress Israel excessively. For centuries, these oaths deterred return. Rav Zvi Hirsch Kalischer and other nineteenth-century proto-Zionist *rabbanim* concluded that the oaths prohibited only forcing the End, not the gradual, faithful return that Hashem’s providence had made possible.

Rav Soloveitchik’s *Kol Dodi Dofek*, also based on *Shir HaShirim*, reminds us that even for those who felt the oaths of the *ra’aya* as constraining Jewish initiative toward the Land, the *Dod* is not constrained. He comes to her. He knocks on her door. When Hashem knocks through history – through the birth of a state, through military miracles, through the ingathering of exiles, through the very suffering that tests our resolve, refusing to open is not caution. It is spiritual negligence.

The *ra’aya*’s tragedy: she delayed, and He departed. The watchmen found her. The Daughters mocked her. She then searched for Him, wounded and alone. October 7th was the watchmen’s blow. Global antisemitism is the Daughters’ taunt. How much suffering might have been averted had we opened the door when He first knocked?

Tishrei: the time to rise

And so we arrive at Tishrei – a month of individual and national introspection. The *shofar* blasts are echoes of the *Dod*’s knocks: *Kol dodi dofek!* The *shofar* is the sound of a hand reaching through the hole in the door (5:4), stirring our innards, calling us to rise as stated in *Devarim*: “And you shall return to Hashem... and He will return your captivity and gather you from all the nations” (30:2–5). Return to Hashem leads to return to the Land. Individual *teshuva* becomes national return. But only after we get out of bed.

The Rav implored Diaspora Jewry not to remain in slumber. Seventy years later, the knocks are louder – the knocks of *goral* and *ye’ud*, the knocks of what happened to us and what we must become. The *Dod* stands at the door, His head drenched with the dew of mornings in *Eretz Yisrael*. He is knocking. He has been knocking. Will we rise from passivity, remove our pajamas of complacency, and open the door before He turns and leaves, and we are left to search for Him through the dangerous streets of a world never kind to a wandering *ra’aya*?

פְתַחֵי לִי אַחֹתִי רַעֲיָתִי – *Open for me, my sister, my beloved, cries Hashem now more than ever. The door is yours to open.*



Rabbanit Shani Taragin

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Brit Goral and October 7th

Rabbi Dr. Jeffrey R. Woolf

Rav Soloveitchik's essay *Kol Dodi Dofek* has long been known for two things. First, and perhaps foremost, it is regarded as the Rav's definitive statement on Religious Zionism and on the religious significance of the establishment of the State of Israel.¹ Second, the opening sections of the essay provide the reader with a rare, and therefore all the more precious and challenging, discussion of the *Shoah*, divine justice, the problem of evil, and the proper response to these realities.

Since 2023, somewhat unexpectedly, *Kol Dodi Dofek* has

occupied a central place in Israeli social and political discourse. In January of that year, the government introduced a far-reaching and highly controversial series of measures to reform the Israeli judiciary. The initiative was met with intense opposition, which quickly escalated into mass demonstrations and, at times, violence. These reactions and counterreactions stemmed from multiple causes, chief among them profound disagreements over the purpose of the State of Israel, its values, and its very identity. Israelis, especially those at the ideological extremes, were deeply alarmed by the prospect of either a religious or a progressive takeover of the country – one that, they feared, would undermine everything they held dear and ultimately force them to leave Israel. Some, primarily on the Left, and most ominously, among Air Force reservists, declared that if the reforms were enacted, they would refuse to serve in the IDF, arguing that such an Israel would no longer deserve their service or sacrifice. Most Israelis feared that the fissures in our society had become unbridgeable and that we were hurtling headlong toward the abyss.

Enter *Kol Dodi Dofek*.

In response to the growing polarization of Israeli society, literally hundreds of organizations and initiatives emerged to lower the flames and restore Jewish unity through dialogue and compromise. The largest of these is *HaRiv'on HaRevi'i*, whose thousands of participants reflect the full spectrum of Israeli society.

Its founder, Dr. Yoav Heller, who is not Orthodox, introduced the Rav's distinction between *brit goral* and *brit ye'ud* – “a covenant of fate” and “a covenant of destiny” – as a compelling way to express the fundamental reality that, in the end, all Jews are bound by a shared historical fate and by a relentless history of persecution and hostility at the hands of successive manifestations of Amalek. This, Heller emphasized, is true regardless of the different ways Jews define or express their Jewish identity. As he quoted the Rav:



“We are all in the realm of a shared fate that binds together the different strata of the nation and does not distinguish between classes and individuals. Fate does not distinguish between nobility and common folk, between rich and poor, between a prince dressed in royal purple velvet and a poor man who goes begging from door to door, between a pious Jew and an assimilationist.”²

Heller's invocation of *brit goral* reinforced and inspired many Israelis to distance themselves emotionally from the extremes of the judicial reform debate. It was adopted and widely cited, with explicit reference to the Rav and to *Kol Dodi Dofek*, by concerned Israelis ranging from President Herzog downward. Not everyone, of course, was persuaded.

Then came the horrors of October 7th and their aftermath, confirming the reality of *brit goral* even for many of those who had previously remained unconvinced – and underscoring the Rav's remarkable prescience.

Today, Israelis overwhelmingly recognize and appreciate the reality of *brit goral*, despite the celebrated fractiousness of our political culture. There remains, as there always has been, an instinctive and unselfconscious sense of mutual belonging that binds us together, especially in times of crisis.

Nor has *brit ye'ud* been orphaned. The past three years have witnessed the emergence of a renewed *brit ye'ud*, as large numbers of Israelis, especially soldiers and reservists, who previously had little or no connection to Torah and *mitzvot* have increasingly sought out G-d and His Torah. This is not a mass movement of *chazarah bi-teshuvah*. Nevertheless, there can be little doubt that Israelis today are more deeply connected to their Jewish identity than they were before October 7th, and that the *Ribbono Shel Olam* occupies a more prominent place both in their personal lives and in Israel's public discourse.³

As the Rav taught, the covenant forged in Egypt inevitably leads to the foot of Mount Sinai.

1. Today, the full measure of the Rav's Religious Zionist thought can only be taken if combined with *Chamesh Derashot*, Tel Aviv 2012; *Al Ahavat ha-Torah u'Geu'lat Nefesh ha-Dor*, in *Be-Sod HaYahid ve-haYahad*, Jerusalem 1976, 401–432; *Community, Covenant and Commitment*, ed. N. Helfgott, New York 2021, 163–246; and *The Return to Zion – Addresses on Religious Zionism and American Orthodoxy*, trans. S. Seidler-Feller. New York 2023. See, also, G. Blidstein, “A Religious Zionist Thinker,” *Society and Self: On the Writings of Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik*, New York 2012, 19–36 and the reflections of R. Mayer Lichtenstein, “The Rav's Philosophy on the Land and State of Israel” at <https://www.yutorah.org/lectures/lecture.cfm/724719>.
2. R. Joseph B. Soloveitchik, *Kol Dodi Dofek: Listen-My Beloved Knocks*, trans. David Z. Gordon and ed. Jeffrey R. Woolf, New York 2006, 55.
3. I discussed this development in an interview available here: <https://daniel-gordis.substack.com/p/when-the-collapse-of-old-dreams-leads>.



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Refilling the Well:

Reflections on the World Mizrahi Rebbetzin Yarchei Kallah Retreat

Rabbanit Tali Wohlgelernter

When the flyer for the World Mizrahi Rebbetzin Yarchei Kallah Retreat first appeared in my inbox, I wasn't immediately sold.

Should I really spend time away from home? Would it be worth the travel and the logistics? More than anything, I wondered what it would actually be like. Aside from a handful of familiar faces, the participants were essentially strangers. What if it felt awkward? What if everyone else already knew each other? What if the sessions didn't resonate with me? I seriously considered staying home.

I'm so grateful I didn't.

Some experiences are difficult to describe because they feel almost too beautiful to be real. This retreat was one of them. For a few days, time seemed to slow down. We learned Torah, sang together, enjoyed meals prepared especially for us, shared pieces of our lives, and discovered how quickly strangers can become friends when they are brought together by a shared sense of purpose.

What surprised me most wasn't how restorative those few days felt. It was how deeply they stayed with me after they were over.

As *rabbaniot*, we spend much of our lives creating space for others. We teach, mentor, listen, host, comfort, celebrate, and help carry our communities through both joyful milestones and painful moments. It is deeply meaningful work, but it often leaves little room to nurture our own spiritual and emotional well-being.

The brilliance of the World Mizrahi Rebbetzin Yarchei Kallah Retreat was that it recognized this reality. Rather than focusing primarily on training us to become better leaders, it invested in us as people. Of course, we spoke about our communities. We exchanged ideas, compared experiences, and learned from one another's successes and challenges, but we did so without frantic schedules or endless professional development sessions.

Instead, the retreat created something far more valuable: space. Space to learn Torah for ourselves rather than preparing to teach it. Space to *daven* without rushing to the next responsibility. Space to laugh, rest, reflect, and connect with women who instinctively understand both the weight and the privilege of serving their communities. Those conversations happened naturally because the retreat fostered a feeling of safety and trust among the participants. There was no need to impress one another or pretend to

have all the answers. Instead, there was openness, vulnerability, and an overwhelming sense that everyone belonged.

That may be World Mizrahi's greatest contribution to female spiritual leadership. Its investment extends far beyond a single retreat. By bringing together *rabbaniot* from communities throughout Israel, it is cultivating a network of women who continue to support, encourage, and inspire one another long after the suitcases are unpacked. Those relationships become a source of strength that inevitably finds its way back into our classrooms, our Shabbat tables, our conversations, and our communities.

As I reflect on the retreat and its impact, I think back to the hesitation I felt when I first saw that flyer. I could never have imagined that saying 'yes' to one invitation would leave me feeling so renewed, so connected, and so grateful.

The retreat may have lasted only a few days, but its impact will be measured in the countless moments that follow: in the Torah we teach, the Shabbat tables we open, the women and families we support, and the communities we are privileged to help build. By investing in *rabbaniot*, World Mizrahi is investing in Jewish communities across Israel. Sometimes the most powerful way to strengthen a community is to first strengthen the people who quietly devote themselves to strengthening everyone else.

● The World Mizrahi Rebbetzin Yarchei Kallah Retreat was led by Rabbanit Shani Taragin and hosted by World Mizrahi in partnership with the Mizrahi-Young Israel Shuls Network, the Rabbinical Council of America (RCA), and the OU Women's Initiative. Held at Beit Binyamin in Tzfat, it reflected a shared commitment to supporting and strengthening Rebbetzins in their vital communal roles.



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Rising to the Moment: The New Levels of Israeli Healing

As Israel passes 1,000 days of war, the costs and scars of the conflict continue to grow. Few have been affected as deeply as those who have lost immediate family members – from the massacre at the Nova festival to battlefronts across the country. Rabbi Aron White joined a therapeutic trip run by OneFamily to learn about the challenges the bereaved face, and the remarkable new approaches being developed to heal emotional wounds.

“**L**ehitraot, See you soon” – said Aviv Baranes, as he hung up the phone with his brother Nir. It was the ninth of July, 2024, and Nir and his wife Noa had called Aviv from their car near Kibbutz Ortal in the Golan. Half an hour later, reports began coming in of a direct Hezbollah missile strike on a vehicle. “The photo of the burned car was circulating within five minutes, and I immediately recognized it as my brother’s,” said Aviv. “My mother saw it on the evening news.” Nir and Noa were murdered as they drove together near their home. Their three children became orphans in an instant.

The murder of a husband and wife in their car together shook Israel deeply, with the President and numerous Members of Knesset coming to pay their respects during *shiva*. “When the *shiva* was over, the social workers came to me and my sister: ‘Who is going to take care of the kids?’” says Aviv. “I have three children, my sister has three children, and now there are three teenage orphans. We decided they would live with my sister in Netanya, and I would be their legal *apotropos*, their guardian. And so a new chapter in our lives began.”

Aviv describes with quiet intensity just how demanding this new reality has been. “Overnight, you have to learn the educational and medical history and needs of three children who aren’t yours. They were changing school and home, dealing with grief and loss, and life still had to go on. The oldest was approaching his army service, and there are legal rights and entitlements one needs to understand. I was working full time, caring for my own children, and trying to process my own grief – all while taking on responsibility for them. After more than a year, I realized it was too much. Six months ago I left my job to focus on what the family needed, and on myself. This trip is the culmination of that six-month process, after which I’ll start looking for work again.”

I asked whether he had ever considered stepping back and letting someone else take the children. “Never,” he said without hesitation. “We knew this was what we had to do – for my brother, and for the kids.” He looked upward and added: “I trust in Hashem, and believe He will help me, and that it will be okay.”





I am speaking to Aviv as we hike in the Rila Mountains in Bulgaria, as part of OneFamily's "Stronger Together" therapeutic trip. Twenty men, aged twenty-five to fifty, are taking part – all of them have lost a sibling since October 7th. The trip runs for a week; throughout June, OneFamily is running a separate therapeutic trip each week for a different group of bereaved individuals: one for widows, one for parents, and so on. The sheer scale of Israel's losses has made this kind of stratified treatment necessary.

The trip is led by Moshiko and Moriah, with content provided by six therapists on staff. While some elements of the schedule – group conversations, shared meals – might seem familiar, what unfolds is far more sophisticated than a standard support retreat. This is real group therapy, planned meticulously, with an impressive range of modalities and a clear therapeutic arc.

I arrive on the afternoon of the second day and join the group for their third session of the day, taking place entirely in the forest a few minutes from their base in Bansko, a quiet resort town in the mountains. "Forests have proven therapeutic benefits," says Dotan, an avowed believer in both group and nature-based therapy. "Trees emit phytoncides; spending a day in a forest literally lowers stress, reduces blood pressure, and calms the body. It creates an excellent context for conversation and therapy."

The group has already completed a partner exercise and breathwork session. Now Dotan opens their third session with a short presentation in the quiet of the forest on the BASIC PH resilience model developed by Professor Muli Lahad, which identifies six types of tools we draw on to cope with trauma (see box below). "Which of these methods comes naturally to you?" he asks. "Which did you lean on? Which do you want to lean on?"

The group spends the next hour-and-a-half working through exercises that explore these approaches. At this point I am asked to step back, to protect the closed therapeutic nature of the session. Just as a journalist wouldn't enter a therapy clinic, this group therapy is no different. As the session continues, a thought takes shape: while those who have lost a sibling have experienced the most direct trauma, all Israelis have experienced some degree of loss, shock, and upheaval since October 7th. Models of resilience are relevant and important for all of us.

BASIC PH: A Model of Resilience

Developed by Professor Muli Lahad, BASIC PH is an acronym that identifies six channels through which people cope with trauma:

B – Beliefs: Spirituality, values, personal meaning, political or ideological convictions

A – Affective (Emotional): Expressing emotions verbally or through art, writing, crying, laughter

S – Social: Seeking support from family, groups, social roles, or organized structures

I – Imagination: Using creativity, distraction, fantasy, guided imagery, humor, or daydreaming

C – Cognitive: Problem-solving, information gathering, planning, critical thinking

Ph – Physiological: Physical activity, relaxation, sleep, nutrition, somatic awareness, or medication

On October 7th, Ravit Asayag was serving as a border police-woman in the Gaza envelope. At 7am, her unit was called to the town of Yachini, between Sderot and Netivot. She fought for two hours, and under fire helped treat an injured soldier, saving his life. She was killed by a terrorist as she entered a building.

Ravit was nineteen years old, and the middle child of nine siblings. One of her brothers, Matan, is on the trip. “We have done so much to commemorate her, in our hometown of Ashdod and across the country,” he says. Many participants describe similar experiences: channeling grief into projects and commemorations that keep their loved one’s memory alive. This trip offers them something different, a space to focus on themselves.

“The trip aims to take participants on a journey and help them explore different aspects of their new reality,” says Moshiko, the dynamic trip leader, himself a veteran of *Sayeret Matkal*. “So much of their life has changed. The family is not the same family, their parents are not the same parents, the Shabbat table is not the same Shabbat table. People in this age group often naturally assume the role of caregiver, looking after younger siblings and supporting older parents while still needing to move forward with their own careers, families, and *milu'im*.”

“Siblings are also sometimes sidelined in public discourse around grief,” adds Moriah. “The losses that are most visibly acknowledged are parents losing a child, a wife losing her husband, or children losing a parent. Siblings have experienced profound, first-degree loss, but they don’t always receive the support they need.”

Another theme that surfaces quickly among the group is the weight of societal expectations around male grief. While Israeli society has become more open to emotional expression, the image of men as strong, stoic, and able to soldier on remains powerful. “Three months after my brother was killed, I suddenly felt overwhelmed during a staff meeting and had to excuse myself,” says Gal from Modi’in. “That was in 2024, when the war was still so raw and front of mind for everyone. I’m not sure I could do that today.” Gal’s brother Ran was a reservist, thirty-nine years old when he fell in Gaza. A month after his death, his wife Tamar gave birth to their fourth child.





“October 7th unleashed a tidal wave of trauma across Israeli society and in its wake came a wave of new approaches to treating that trauma,” says Dotan. “After

October 7th, tens of thousands of people were evacuated from their *kibbutzim* overnight, as their communities became the sites of atrocities and active war. Within days, therapists began arriving at the evacuation hotels, but traditional routes of therapy had limited reach, for several reasons. There simply weren’t enough professionals to provide individual sessions to everyone who had experienced the attacks firsthand. The financial cost of funding individual therapy on that scale was also prohibitive.

“But perhaps most importantly, people had experienced the trauma together, and they wanted to process it together. A *kibbutz* is a close-knit community, and when a *kibbutz* was overrun, with dozens killed or taken hostage, the entire community bore that wound collectively. Group therapy, processing not in a one-on-one clinical setting but together as a group, became a critical response to this new reality.”

The trip weaves these innovative therapeutic approaches together with lighter activities. After a beautiful hike through the mountains, we reach an icy lake where one of the therapists, Aharon, presents on the therapeutic benefits of cold-water immersion for trauma. Participants who wish to take an ice bath in the open water do so under professional guidance, before the group continues back through the mountains.

Why Bulgaria, I ask, rather than somewhere in Israel? The answer comes with a characteristically Israeli blend of wry humor. “I was running a retreat for paratroopers after a hundred days on the front line, and we went to Mitzpe Ramon, the classic Israeli escape into the desert,” says Ariel, one of the therapeutic professionals. “As we were talking, planes and helicopters from the nearby Hatzerim airbase kept flying overhead. A colleague of mine bought a farm near Zichron Ya’akov to build a retreat center for soldiers. It was hit by a missile in the most recent Iran war.” There are limits to how much one can process the wounds of a war while still living inside it.

Between sessions and activities, the participants form bonds quickly, creating bonds that outlast the trip itself. Speaking with Ziv afterward, he described how grief often brings profound loneliness, and how much it means to spend time with others who truly understand. Ziv’s sister Livnat was killed together with her husband and three children in their home in Kfar Aza on October 7th.

I leave after forty-eight hours with the group, my mind full. The sophistication of the therapeutic approaches on display was genuinely impressive. As Israel’s news cycle continues to report on the effects of PTSD among soldiers and civilians, there is a palpable sense of purpose around providing meaningful support to those most directly affected.

But there is also something else, a feeling that this work is, in the deepest sense, holy. October 7th unleashed death, destruction, pain, and loss on a scale the Jewish people had not experienced in many years. Its effects have spread far and wide, but those bearing the heaviest burden are the families of the fallen. Finding light in that darkness, finding a path toward healing after trauma, is the holy work of *tikkun*, enabling people to flourish in spite of devastating loss. ■



Sefer Yonah and the Belief in Teshuva

Rabbi Reuven Taragin

The Levush explains that we read *Sefer Yonah* during Mincha on Yom Kippur because it vividly demonstrates the transformative potential of *teshuvah* (*Orach Chaim* 522). But why read it at Mincha? Why not after Shacharit, as we do with other *Megillot*?

A deeper understanding of *Sefer Yonah*'s message regarding *teshuvah* can provide insight into our practice.

Sefer Yonah opens with G-d's directive to Yonah to travel to Nineveh and warn its inhabitants of imminent destruction. Instead, Yonah boards a ship heading in the opposite direction. Later, he explains why: he anticipated that G-d would forgive Nineveh upon their repentance. But if prophets typically welcomed the opportunity to inspire *teshuvah* and facilitate divine forgiveness, why would such knowledge cause Yonah to flee?

Yonah addresses this in his prayer after the whale rescues him. He reaffirms his commitment to offer thanks in the *Beit HaMikdash*, and contrasts his sincerity with that of most penitents. Yonah observes that many individuals, even while repenting, persist in their attachment to false beliefs and erroneous practices, suggesting that their good intentions are unlikely to endure.

Yonah's perspective was shaped by his experience with the sailors. During the storm and after casting him into the sea, they repented, made vows, and offered sacrifices to Hashem. Yet Yonah believed their *teshuvah* would last only as long as the immediate danger. Repentance under duress, in his view, was insincere and motivated by a desire to escape punishment rather than by genuine change. Significantly, Yonah himself refrained from praying during the storm, despite knowing he was responsible for the calamity, for precisely this reason.

For this reason, after Nineveh repented and was forgiven, Yonah built a *sukkah* to the east of the city to observe what "would be in the city" (*Yonah* 4:5). The Radak explains that Yonah expected Nineveh to revert to its evil ways. In his view, *teshuvah*

lacked authenticity, and G-d's forgiveness was therefore unfounded. Accordingly, he omitted "truth" from his listing of G-d's thirteen attributes of mercy, a term G-d had included when conveying them to Moshe (*Shemot* 34:6). Fittingly, *Sefer Yonah* introduces Yonah as the son of Amitai, a name rooted in *emet*, truth, a value that defines his perspective throughout the narrative.

Hashem responds to Yonah's perspective at the end of the *sefer*. After creating and then destroying a shady tree for Yonah to sit under, G-d responds by comparing Yonah's care for the tree to His own care for His creations: "You care for the gourd, for which you did not toil nor did you make it grow, which one night came into being and the next night perished. And I should not take pity on Nineveh, the great city, in which there are many more than one hundred twenty thousand people who do not know their right hand from their left, and many beasts as well?" (*Yonah* 4:10-11). Hashem acknowledges that the resolve to improve may not always endure, yet G-d accepts *teshuvah* out of concern for His creations. As Yechezkel explains, G-d does not desire the death of even the wicked (*Yechezkel* 18:23). As our Creator, He extends mercy and prefers repentance, offering additional opportunities for spiritual growth.

G-d's mention of animals alongside human beings is significant. Animals are G-d's creations too, and He cares for them despite their having no merits or good deeds. Man is meant to live on a higher plane, but even when we fall short, we, like animals, receive G-d's mercy.

Chazal explain that this was the point the people of Nineveh made by including animals in their fast and dressing them in sackcloth (*Shemot Rabbah* 45:1). Recognizing their lack of merit, they asked G-d to show them the mercy He shows His creatures. This is why we blow the horn of an animal on a fast day, mimicking the cry of animals to awaken G-d's mercy for all His creations (*Yerushalmi, Ta'anit* 7b). In the words of the *Bavli*, we act like people

who "though cunning in thoughts, turn to You like animals" (*Chullin* 5b).

G-d's care for His creations does not mean He allows sinners to go unpunished. *Teshuvah* is a condition for forgiveness, and it must meet minimum standards of sincerity. This is why verses from *Micha* are appended to the reading of *Yonah*. The third verse specifically invokes "truth," emphasizing its essential role. While the preceding verses highlight G-d's mercy and willingness to cast sins "to the depths of the seas," genuine *teshuvah* must contain an element of truth, accountability, and introspection.

This is why we read *Yonah* at Mincha. As Yom Kippur draws to a close, our desire for forgiveness becomes especially urgent. *Sefer Yonah* assures us that *teshuvah* remains attainable even now, because G-d actively seeks to forgive. *Ne'ilah* reinforces this with verses from *Yechezkel* affirming G-d's preference for repentance and life over punishment and death. Yet Yonah's perspective and the verses from *Micha* provide a necessary balance: G-d's eagerness to forgive does not exempt us from approaching Him with genuine sincerity. Perfect *teshuvah* is not required, but it must contain an element of truth.



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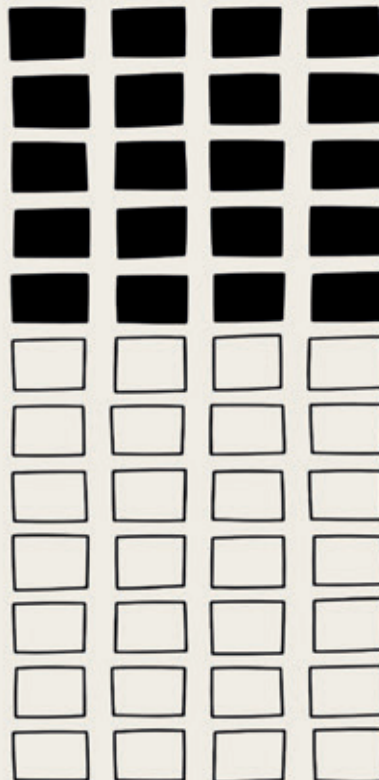
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On Rosh Hashanah, A Breath of Life

Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks זצ"ל

This message for Rosh Hashanah was originally published in The Forward on September 22, 2014.

In the year that we are now parting with, 5774, it became dangerous once again to be a Jew. Israel, subject to sustained missile attack, discovered how hard it is to fight an asymmetric war against a terrorist group ruthless enough to place rocket launchers beside schools, hospitals and mosques. It found itself condemned by large sections of the world for performing the first duty of any state, namely to protect its citizens from danger and death.

Antisemitism returned to the streets of Europe. One hundred and twenty years after the Dreyfus trial, the cry “Death to the Jews” was heard again in Paris. Seventy years after the Holocaust, the call of “Jews to the gas” was heard in the streets of Germany. There were times when it felt as if the ghost of a past we thought long dead had risen to haunt us. More times than was comfortable I heard Jews say, “For the first time in my life I feel afraid.”

Let us stay with those fears and confront them directly. We are not back in the 1930s. To the contrary, for the first time in the almost four thousand years of Jewish history, we have simultaneously independence and sovereignty in the land and state of Israel, and freedom and equality in the Diaspora. Israel is strong, extraordinarily so. The success of the Iron Dome missile defense was the latest in an astonishing line of technological advances – not just military but also agricultural, medical and commercial – designed to protect, save and enhance life.

Israel has lived with the disdain of the world for a very long time. Even the most lukewarm among us knows that it is infinitely preferable to have a State of Israel and the condemnation of the world than no Israel, no Jewish home, and have the sympathy of the world.

The unity Israel showed during the Gaza conflict was deeply moving. It reminded us that in a profound existential sense we remain one people. Whether or not we share a covenant of faith, we share a covenant of fate. That is a good state to be in as we face the *Yamim Nora'im*, when we stand before G-d not just as individuals but as a people.

As for antisemitism, rarely has it been more self-evident that the hate that starts with Jews never ends with Jews. The most significant enemies of the Jews today are the enemies of freedom everywhere. Worldwide we may feel uncomfortable, anxious. But there are parts of the world where Christians are being

butchered, beheaded, driven from their homes and living in terror.

As for Muslims, one prominent academic recently estimated that of the hundreds dying daily, at least 90 per cent were doing so at the hands of their fellow Muslims. Bahai are at risk. So are the Yazidis. So in other parts of the world are Buddhists, Hindus, Sikhs, and for that matter atheists. No historian looking back on our time will be tempted to call it the age of tolerance.

Which brings us back to the *Yamim Nora'im*. There is a note of universality to the prayers on Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur that we do not find on other festivals. On other festivals the key section of the *Amidah* begins, “*Atah vechartanu mikol ha-amim*, You chose us from among all the nations.” The emphasis is on Jewish singularity. On the *Yamim Nora'im* the parallel prayer begins, “And so place the fear of Hashem our G-d, over *all* that You have made... so that *all* of creation will worship You.” The emphasis is on human solidarity. And human solidarity is what the world needs right now.

One message resonates through these days: life. “Remember us for life, King Who delights in life, and write us in the book of life for Your sake, G-d of life.” We sometimes forget how radical this was when Judaism first entered the world. Egypt of the Pharaohs was obsessed with death. Life is full of suffering and pain. Death is where we join the G-ds. The great pyramids and temples were homages to death.

Anthropologists and social psychologists still argue today that the reason religion exists is because of people's fear of death. Which makes it all the more remarkable that – despite our total and profound belief in *olam haba* and *tehiyat ha-metim*, life after death and the resurrection of the dead – there is almost nothing of this in most of the books of the Torah. It is an astonishing phenomenon. All of Kohelet's cynicism and Iyov's railing against injustice could have been answered in one sentence: “There is life after death.” Yet neither book explicitly says so.

To the contrary, King David said in a *Tehillim* we say daily: “What gain would there be if I died and went down to the grave? Can dust thank You? Can it declare your truth?”

Almost at the end of his life Moshe turned to the next generation and said to them: “Choose life, so that you and your children may

live.” We take this for granted, forgetting how relatively rare in the history of religion this is.

Why so? Why, if we believe the soul is immortal, that there is life after death and that this world is not all there is, do we not say so more often and more loudly? Because since civilization began, heaven has too often been used as an excuse for injustice and violence down here on earth. What evil can you not commit if you believe you will be rewarded for it in the world to come? That is the logic of the terrorist and the suicide bomber. It is the logic of those who burned “heretics” at the stake in order, so they said, to save their immortal souls.

Against this horrific mindset the whole of Judaism is a protest. Justice and compassion have to be fought for in this life not the next. Judaism is not directed to fear of death. It is directed to a far more dangerous fear: fear of life with all its pain and disappointment and unpredictability. It is fear of life, not fear of death, that have led people to create totalitarian states and fundamentalist religions. Fear of life is ultimately fear of freedom. That is why fear of life takes the form of an assault against freedom.

Against that fear we say from the beginning of Elul to Sukkot that monumental *Tehillim* of David: “The L-rd is my light and my salvation. Whom then shall I fear? The L-rd is the stronghold of my life. Of whom then shall I be afraid?” On Rosh Hashanah we blow the *shofar*, the one *mitzvah* we fulfill by the breath of life itself without needing any words. On the first day of Rosh Hashanah, the “anniversary of creation,” we read in the Torah and *haftarah* not about the birth of the universe but about the birth of Yitzchak to Sarah and Shmuel to Chana as if to say, one life is like a universe. One child is enough to show how vulnerable life is – a miracle to be protected and cherished. On Yom Kippur we wear the *kittel*, a shroud, as if to show that we are not afraid of death.

Never before have I felt so strongly that the world needs us to live this message, the message of the Torah that life is holy, that death defiles, and that terror in the name of G-d is a desecration of the name of G-d.

The State of Israel is the collective affirmation of the Jewish people, a mere three years after emerging from the valley of the shadow of death, that “*lo amut ki echyeh*, I will not die but live.” Israel chose life. Its enemies chose the way of death. They even boasted, as did Osama bin Laden, that the love of death made them strong. It did not make them strong. It made them violent. Aggression is not strength; it is a profound self-consciousness of weakness. And the main victims of Islamist violence are Muslims. Hate destroys the hater.

Today it is not just Israel or Jews whose freedom is at risk. It is the whole of the Middle East, large parts of Africa and Asia, and much of Europe. Therefore let us approach the New Year with a real sense of human solidarity. Let us show, by the way we celebrate our faith, that G-d is to be found in life. The love of G-d is love of life. Let us take to heart King David’s insistence that faith is stronger than fear. No empire ever defeated the Jewish people, and no force ever will. May G-d write us, our families, the people and State of Israel and Jews throughout the world, in the Book of Life. And may the day come when the righteous of all nations work together for the sake of freedom, peace and life.



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We Can Rise Above

Rabbi Hershel Schachter

We know from both *Mishnayot* and from the *piyutim* that we recite on Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur that this period of the year is when Hashem judges the world. After the Ramban succeeded in a debate with a Jewish *meshumad* – a Jew who had converted to another religion – he realized that his life was in danger and he had better leave Spain. He fled to *Eretz Yisrael* and delivered a very long *drasha* that Rosh Hashanah, covering all of the topics of the *Yom Tov*. A major issue he raises in that *drasha* is that the idea of *Aseret Yemei Teshuva* being the days of judgment never appears anywhere in *Tanach*. How, then, did Chazal know that these are days of *teshuva*?

The Rambam quotes *Midrashim* which say that *Adam HaRishon* was created on the sixth day of *Bereishit*, instructed not to eat from the *eitz hada'at*, violated the instruction, was judged and punished, and was expelled from *Gan Eden* – all on the same day. At that time, Hashem told *Adam HaRishon* that just as He judged him on that day, so too in all future generations, all of his descendants would be judged on that day: Rosh Hashanah. The Ramban therefore suggests that *Aseret Yemei Teshuva* being the days of judgment was not a tradition that *Moshe Rabbeinu* received at *Har Sinai*, but rather a tradition going back to *Adam HaRishon* himself.

The Torah tells us that Adam was created *b'tzelem Elokim*, in the image of G-d. The *Meshech Chochmah* explains that having a *tzelem Elokim* implies that each of us possesses *bechirah chofshit* – free will. Many psychologists do not believe in free will, but it is considered one of the most important principles of the Torah.

Every morning we say to Hashem in our *tefillot* that the *neshamah* You implanted in my body was given to me in a pure state. We do not believe that because of the

“original sin,” all human beings’ souls are tainted. We are born with a pure soul, and if and when we sin, we taint it. The commentators ask what the significance was of recording the story of the *eitz hada'at* in the Torah if it is not directly relevant to us. They explain that the Torah recorded this incident to teach us how a typical human being might fall into the trap of sin.

In his commentary on the first *perek* in *Chullin*, the Ramban quotes a fascinating *Midrash*. The prohibition against eating from the *eitz hada'at* was only a *hora'at sha'ah* – a temporary ruling. *Adam HaRishon* was told that Friday morning that if he waited until *leil Shabbat* he would be permitted to eat those fruits; it was only for the few hours of *erev Shabbat* that it was prohibited. The *Midrash* comments that we ought to dig up *Adam HaRishon* from his grave, remove the sand from his eyes, and show him how the Jewish people always exercise self-control. If a married woman has not gone to the *mikvah*, her husband knows he must wait a week or two. When we slaughter an animal, we do not eat the meat right away – we wait until we check the lungs to see if it is *treif*. When we plant a tree, we know that for the first three years we may not eat any of the fruit, because of the *mitzvah* of *orlah* [the prohibition on the fruit of newly planted trees]. The Jewish people have learned the lesson of self-control.

The Torah describes the *aseret hadibrot* as being *charut* – engraved – on the *luchot*. The *Mishnah* in *Pirkei Avot* comments that the verse implies that real *cheirut* (freedom) can only be found by those who learn Torah and live a life of Torah. Many people have caused themselves to lose part of their *bechirah chofshit* – they are enslaved by their *yeitzer hara* and have not trained themselves in self-control. By giving the Torah to the Jewish people, Hashem gave us the ability to free ourselves from this enslavement and become true *bnei chorin* – free people – who exercise their *bechirah*

chofshit. The verse in *Kohelet* praises the country whose king is a *ben chorin* and declares woe unto the country whose king is a slave. The *Zohar* explains that the verse is praising *Eretz Yisrael*, whose official King is Hashem, Who grants freedom to human beings – enabling them to train themselves in self-control, resist enslavement to their *yeitzer hara*, and thereby exercise their *bechirah chofshit* more fully.

During this season, Hashem makes Himself more readily accessible than at any other time of year. The prophet Yishayahu encourages us to seek out Hashem specifically during the *Aseret Yemei Teshuva*. May we all seize that opportunity before the *Yom HaKodesh* to draw closer to Hashem, who created the entire universe *yesh me'ayin* – something from nothing – and by drawing closer to Him, strengthen our *bechirah chofshit* to make reasonable and balanced decisions in life through the exercise of self-control.

May we all have a *g'mar chatimah tovah*.



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Chana: The Power of Intimacy in Prayer

Shayna Goldberg

There are certain defining elements of Rosh Hashanah *tefillah* that are uniquely experienced when we pray as part of a *tzibbur*, a congregation: the rabbi calling out the first *tekiah*, followed by the piercing cry of the *shofar*; the singing of *Avinu Malkeinu*; the rustle of *machzor* pages turning in crowded *shuls*; the murmur of generations standing together in judgment before Hashem. And yet, the *haftarah* read on the first day of Rosh Hashanah is centered on the deeply personal prayer of a single individual.

The *haftarah* tells the story of Chana, a woman whose lips move in prayer while no sound emerges from her mouth. *Chazal* teach that on Rosh Hashanah, Sarah, Rachel, and Chana were “remembered” by Hashem after years of infertility. The themes of remembrance, prayer, longing, and hope resonate deeply. But what is it about Chana’s prayer that makes it so powerful?

Chana arrives at the *Mishkan* carrying unbearable pain. For years she has been childless, turning to G-d in prayer. On this particular visit to Shiloh, her husband Elkana attempts to comfort her by saying, “I am better to you than ten sons” (*Shmuel I* 1:8). Rav Soloveitchik once explained that even though Elkana has the best of intentions, his words leave Chana broken. She suddenly feels completely alone as even her loving, well-meaning

husband does not fully understand her. As a result, her prayer that year becomes something entirely different. From within her loneliness, she turns to Hashem in a way she never has before. As Rabbi Shalom Carmy writes: “We can only pray properly when we know the difference between our communion with G-d and our discourse with human beings, even with those who are close to us.”

From Chana’s pain emerges one of the most transformative prayers in Jewish history. She is vulnerable, and her words are raw. The *Gemara* in *Berachot* reads her prayer as brazen. She does not hold back in challenging G-d and making demands. She prayed upon Hashem forcefully and bluntly, not hesitating to accuse. She asks how it can be that G-d has legions of angels and of people, yet she does not fit into either category: unlike angels she needs to eat and drink, but unlike people she is unable to have children. And yet, at the same time that Chana fights for what she believes she deserves and asks difficult questions, she also has total faith in G-d and demonstrates her complete dependence on Him. She knows that G-d controls the world, and that only He can help her conceive.

On Rosh Hashanah we speak about kingship, judgment, and destiny – of all humanity passing before the *Ribbono Shel Olam*. The liturgy is sweeping and grand, with prayers relating to the nations of the world and Hashem’s dominion over all creation. The story of Chana reminds us, however, that beneath the majesty of Rosh Hashanah lies the personal experience of a lonely human being standing before G-d with a trembling heart.

Perhaps this is why so many *halachot* of *tefillah* are learned specifically from Chana. Judaism’s model of authentic *tefillah* is built around honesty, vulnerability, and the courage to stand before Hashem exactly as we are. On a day when the entire community comes to synagogue and so

many of our prayers are chanted together, we learn from Chana that Hashem listens especially closely when we turn to Him personally and intimately.

On Rosh Hashanah we should not be afraid to share our most intimate feelings, thoughts, hopes, and aspirations with our Creator. Whether we pray for health, a life partner, children, peace in a difficult marriage, a sense of purpose, or the strength to face each day, we should know that Hashem is waiting to hear our *tefillot*. Chana presumably prayed for many years and was not answered immediately. For years she navigated the tension between faith and disappointment, but she never stopped coming to the *Mishkan*. She never stopped praying. She refused to despair.

When we show up on Rosh Hashanah even as we struggle; when we turn to Hashem even when we question; when we put our faith in Him even when we are frustrated – we demonstrate deep humility and recognition of He who runs the world. Our authentic prayer has enormous power.

The *shofar* blasts shake and open the Heavens. But I like to imagine that silent tears rise up and are collected by G-d Himself.



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THE SEASON OF RETURN: A ROAD MAP FROM ELUL TO YOM KIPPUR

RABBI JESSE HORN

As we approach Rosh Hashanah, the *Aseret Yemei Teshuva*, Yom Kippur, and the whole month of Elul, we may wonder what distinguishes each of these four periods from the others. They are clearly linked – each transitioning immediately into the next – and yet each is clearly different. On Yom Kippur we recite *viduy* (confession of sins) and observe *inuy* (affliction – fasting, refraining from washing, anointing, wearing leather shoes, and marital intimacy), none of which apply to the other days. Rosh Hashanah is distinct as well, marked by *shofar* blowing and the unique *berachot* of *Malchuyot*, *Zichronot*, and *Shofarot*. What is the unique nature of each period and what is the logic behind this process?

For an illuminating insight, we can turn to a fascinating conclusion Rabbi David Fohrman draws from the Rambam (*Teshuva* 2:3), who compares insincere *viduy* – where one has not truly abandoned the sin – to immersing in a *mikvah* while holding a *sheretz* (an impure animal) in one's hand. Remarkably, the Rambam compares *viduy*, not the abandonment of sin, to the *mikvah* itself – implying that *viduy* is the pinnacle of religious purification, while abandoning sin is merely a prerequisite, comparable to setting down the *sheretz* before immersing. This reading is further supported by the Rambam in both *Hilchot Teshuva* (1:1) and *Sefer HaMitzvot* (73). In *Hilchot Teshuva* he writes that “when one does *teshuva*, one is obligated to do *viduy*” – implying that *teshuva* is not itself the obligation but only a prerequisite to it. In *Sefer HaMitzvot* he states that the *mitzvah* is *viduy* accompanied by *teshuva*.

At first glance this sounds counterintuitive. *Teshuva* – genuine inner character evaluation and spiritual improvement – would seem to be the zenith of the entire process. Does abandoning one's sins and becoming a better person not represent the greater religious achievement? Should *viduy* not serve as a vehicle to assist *teshuva*, rather than the reverse? There are indeed those who read it that way: Rav Soloveitchik (*Al HaTeshuva*, 37–41) understands

viduy as an external act designed to facilitate the real *mitzvah* of *teshuva*.

However, the plain reading of the Rambam suggests otherwise. *Viduy* is the spiritual climax, yet because of the very real danger of hollow *viduy*, mere lip-service devoid of inner meaning, *teshuva* is performed first. *Teshuva* is a preparation designed to ensure that when *viduy* is recited, it will be wholehearted and authentic.

Yom Kippur carries a seriousness unlike any other day. We disengage from worldly pleasure through *inuy* and aspire toward an almost angelic state – reciting “*Baruch shem k'vod*” aloud, as the angels do – as we strive for spiritual purification and a cleansing of sin. No day is more befitting of intense *viduy*, capturing our deep hunger to stand pure before Hashem. And Yom Kippur falls last in the sequence precisely because it is the culmination and high point of the entire process. The *Aseret Yemei Teshuva* precede it for exactly this reason: ten days dedicated to genuine introspection, abandoning sin, and internalizing a new spiritual direction – so that the *viduy* recited on Yom Kippur will be real.

Working backwards: if Yom Kippur is a day of *viduy* and cleansing, and the *Aseret Yemei Teshuva* are its preparation, how does Rosh Hashanah fit in? Why does it precede the *Aseret Yemei Teshuva*?

Rosh Hashanah is the day Hashem created the world and thereby became its King. We celebrate by reaffirming that Hashem is in fact our King – and in doing so, we come to recognize how grave our sins truly are. Rav Saadia Gaon explains that one reason we blow the *shofar* on Rosh Hashanah is because trumpets and horns accompany a king's coronation (Avudraham, *Rosh Hashanah*, 300). The *Gemara* (*Rosh Hashanah* 16a) records Hashem's own explanation of the three unique *berachot*: “*Malchuyot* – so that you accept My sovereignty upon yourselves; *Zichronot* – so that your remembrance rises before Me favorably; and with what? With a *shofar*.”

In light of this, it becomes clear why Rosh Hashanah triggers the *Aseret Yemei Teshuva*. *Teshuva* is the natural and correct response to recognizing that Hashem is King and that we have disobeyed Him. Upon internalizing His kingship, we devote the following ten days to acting on that recognition.

Which leaves Elul. What is its unique character?

Elul, as implied by its acronym “*Ani l'dodi v'dodi li*, I am to my beloved and my beloved is to Me”, is a time for cultivating love for Hashem and recognizing His love for us. Only from within a deep, mutual love can one willingly make the sacrifices that crowning Hashem demands. Only when we truly trust and love Hashem – and feel that love returned – can we crown Him King wholeheartedly, with full acceptance of everything that commitment entails.

Elul is the foundation. We deepen our awareness that Hashem loves us, and that we love Him. That love makes crowning Him King on Rosh Hashanah possible – which ignites genuine *teshuva* during the *Aseret Yemei Teshuva* – which enables a sincere and wholehearted *viduy* on Yom Kippur.

Four periods. One process.



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A Season of Contrasting Themes

Rebbetzin Rookie and Rabbi Heshie Billet

G-d is so multifaceted that we use different names, nouns, and adjectives to describe Him. He is *Havaya*, eternal and compassionate, and sometimes *Elokim*, the Almighty who sits in strict judgment of all of us. In our daily *kedusha*, He is immanent – *melo kol ha'aretz kevodo*, His glory fills the earth – and yet transcendent, *mimkomo*, in His place in heaven. In *Bereishit*, He is called *Borei*, Creator ex nihilo, and *Yotzer*, He who fashions the world out of existing matter. These contrasts are not contradictions; they reflect the inexhaustible richness of our relationship with the Divine. In this essay, we explore four pairs of contrasting themes that we hope will deepen and enrich this season for all of us.

We begin with two Yom Kippur memories from our own lives, one from the best of times, the other from the worst.

Rookie: I spent a year in Israel as a student a few years after the miracles of the Six Day War. The country was still intoxicated with the euphoria of its miraculous victory: the unification of Jerusalem, the liberation of Yehudah and Shomron, *Me'arat HaMachpelah*, the Golan Heights, the Sinai. David had triumphed over Goliath, and Israel was the world's hero. I was young, care-free, and full of enthusiasm about learning and growing in Israel.

On *Kol Nidrei* night, my friends and I made our way through the streets of Jerusalem, from Machon Gold in Geulah toward Yeshivat Merkaz HaRav in Kiryat Moshe. I can still feel the stillness of

those streets: traffic lights blinking, no buses, almost no vehicles. Everyone was dressed in white, garments that carried their own clarity, simplicity, and innocence. The children's voices were hushed, the adults and students solemn. The scrubbed faces of those hurrying from the *mikvaot*, the bearded scholars and young men emptying the *Aron Kodesh* of its *Sifrei Torah*, holding them, clutching them, embracing them: the love was palpable.

The *kahal* was at one with G-d and with each other. We chanted the words of *BiYeshiva shel Ma'alah*, asking permission to pray even in the presence of the sinners among us. Then we recited *Shema* and *Baruch shem* aloud, with power, unity, and faith. Our voices swelled as we sang one of the most beloved passages in the *machzor*, which describes the many ways *Am Yisrael* relates to its G-d: nation and G-d, children and Parent, servant and Master, congregation and Leader, homeland and Destiny, flock and Shepherd, vineyard and Caretaker, creation and Creator, beloved and Lover.

There was a concentrated effort, in silence, grace, and dignity, to bridge the gap between finite man and infinite G-d, to truly communicate, supplicate, and articulate our innermost selves before our Creator. And then came the sweet peace of walking home under the Israeli moonlight, in small groups, reminiscing, thinking, planning the future, secure, as only teenagers can be, in a world at peace.



Rookie and Heshie: By contrast, consider an experience we shared during the worst of times, in Leningrad, in the USSR, when the awakening Jews of the Soviet Union lived in despair.

We were a young couple experiencing the frenetic pace of *erev Yom Tov*, eating a makeshift meal of rice and soup cube dissolved in hot water before leaving our hotel well before sunset. We had checked our bus connections to the synagogue in advance, knowing that for the trip home we would have no bus, no map, and no choice but to rely on new friends to escort us back so we would not become lost halfway across the city.

The crowd in the street was shabbily dressed, in everyday clothing, carrying book bags and grocery bags, with no *siddurim* or *machzorim* in sight. There was tension in the air, a deep contrast to the previous Shabbat in Odessa, where barely ten men, not one under seventy, had made the *minyan*. Now there were scores, perhaps hundreds, of people, young and old, their eyes filled with fear, studying faces and trying to identify spies, the “bad people,” as they called them.

Heshie wore his *tallit* on the outside, purposely and bravely, to attract attention. People stood in small groups, speaking cautiously, greeting old friends warily, noting the absence of some and the presence of others who had not dared appear publicly at the synagogue for years. KGB agents took notes, instilling fear and circumspection.

The *tefillot* could barely be heard. There were no prayer books, little knowledge of Hebrew, no decorum, and more Jews outside than inside. People asked us to lead them in *Hatikvah* and *Yerushalayim Shel Zahav*, the only Hebrew songs whose melodies they knew. We made the conscious decision that on this Yom Kippur, after a few brief *tefillot*, our place was in the courtyard with our people, singing *Hatikvah* rather than the liturgy of the *machzor*.

These two Yom Kippur experiences embody the first two themes we explore: Reaching in, to deepen our relationship with Hashem, and reaching out, to connect with our brothers and sisters.

Reaching in and reaching out: Deepening our relationships with Hashem and with people

Reaching in means learning to feel G-d at our side, over our shoulder, and within our hearts and minds, recognizing ourselves as recipients of His gifts. Whatever intellect, sense of humor, or artistic ability we possess is a gift from G-d, not merely the result of chance. Our accomplishments are certainly the result of our own efforts, but without His blessing and favor, those efforts might never have borne fruit.

Reaching out means learning to see the world from another person's perspective, to walk in someone else's shoes and understand their experiences. We must empathize with the disadvantaged, the newcomer, the physically challenged, the widow, the single parent, families raising children with special needs, the elderly, the anxious, the infirm, and the poor. Our mission is to lighten another person's burden, whether through a kind word, a thoughtful gesture, a phone call, a flower, a thank-you note, or a Shabbat invitation.

Humility and confidence: Recognizing our place before Hashem

A second contrast in the *machzor* is humility versus confidence. We approach Hashem with profound humility in the *piyut* recited on *leil Kol Nidrei*. In *Ka-chomer b'Yad haYotzer*, the *paytan* compares humanity to clay in the hand of the potter, stone in the hand of the mason, the axe in the hand of the blacksmith, a wheel in the hand of the ship's captain, silver in the hand of the silversmith, glass in the hand of the glassblower, and material in the hands of the embroiderer. G-d sustains us and determines whether our efforts will bear fruit. He molds and transforms us, strengthens and weakens us, guides us along the proper path or allows us to stray, directs our destiny, purifies us, or leaves us to our own choices.

The *paytan* also describes G-d as the Preserver of lovingkindness; the One who gives life and takes it away; the One who supports the poor and vulnerable; the Source of goodness and forgiveness;



the One who forgives our wrongdoings, whether intentional or unintentional; the One who desires our complete devotion; and the One who brings justice to wrongdoing.

“*Motar ha-adam min ha-behemah ayin*, man has no superiority over the beast,” says Kohelet: in one sense we are only the highest rung of the animal world. Yet the Psalmist declares “*Va-techasreihu me’at me-Elokim*, You have made him only slightly less than the angels,” teaching that we stand just below the divine in spirit and potential. Human beings can think, write, create, remember, and emulate G-d Himself. The very fact that we can address Hashem directly, standing before Him as *shlichim*, emissaries, for our families and communities, reflects the confidence we have in our relationship with our Creator.

Preparation and spontaneity: Balancing tradition and personal growth

A third contrast of this season is preparation versus spontaneity. Shai Agnon, Israel’s Nobel laureate, writes in *Yamim Nora’im*, quoting a nineteenth-century rabbi: “I am profoundly displeased with many persons who spend large sums on gorgeous garments while they do not care to buy themselves attractive *machzorim* for the *Yamim Nora’im*. An attractive prayer book is extremely effective in increasing our devotion.”

Just as we begin studying the laws of *chametz* and *matzah* thirty days before Pesach, we begin preparing for the High Holy Days thirty days before Rosh Hashanah. We blow the *shofar* daily in the synagogue beginning on the first of Elul to awaken us to *teshuvah* and introspection. We add *L'David Hashem ori*, reminding us that our deepest desire is *achat sha’alti me’et Hashem*, to dwell in the house of Hashem, surrounded by His love, all the days of our lives. We study the *tefillot* so they will have greater meaning when we recite them. We study the *viduy* so we can examine our actions and recognize where we need to grow. We add our own reflections when the traditional list does not fully capture our personal failures of omission or commission. We send greetings to friends, family, and neighbors. We prepare festive meals and symbolic foods like carrots, honey, pomegranates, and fish heads to connect us to our prayers and hopes. We prepare a *kittel* or white garment as a reminder of the purity and holiness toward which we strive.

And yet spontaneity is equally important. A sudden decision to write to an old friend with whom we have lost touch; a last-minute resolution to end a conflict with a relative against whom we have held a grudge; an unplanned commitment to take on a new *mitzvah*, repair a *middah*, or practice *shemirat ha-lashon*; these moments can transform us.

Sometimes we need to reach out to those we love most, because we can be careless with the people whose unconditional love we rely upon. A spontaneous request for forgiveness from those whose love we take for granted is always appropriate. At times, we may also need to step away briefly from the exact words of the *machzor* and offer our own personal prayers for children, for those who are childless, for companionship, for those who are lonely, for patience with the challenging people in our lives, or for protection for IDF soldiers and for Israeli and world Jewry. The composers of the *machzor* provide the words we need, but there is always room for the words that emerge from our own hearts.

Viduy and shira: Repentance and gratitude

A fourth contrast of these demanding days is the relationship between *viduy* and *shira*. Studying the *Hilchot Teshuvah* of the

Rambam is a powerful way to prepare for *teshuvah*, which consists of several essential steps: *hakarot hachet*, recognizing our wrongdoings; *viduy*, admitting them aloud to ourselves and to G-d; genuine regret for the ways we have hurt others, distanced ourselves from G-d, or failed to appreciate our blessings; and *kabbalah la-atid*, resolving with complete conviction not to repeat these failures. *Viduy* is an essential part of the process of *teshuvah* and of *cheshbon hanefesh*, an honest accounting of the soul.

Rav Soloveitchik teaches that *cheshbon hanefesh* requires more than *viduy*. We must acknowledge our mistakes, regret them, and commit to a more noble and ethical future. But there is a second, equally important component: *shira*. We must also sing a song of praise and thanksgiving to G-d during this season, recognizing the happiness and satisfaction that come from the worthy things we have done, even if they are not yet sufficient. We must feel gratitude for the gifts that make our lives richer and more filled with truth and purpose, and focus less on what we lack and more on what we have received.

This attitude of gratitude, which has become so central to positive psychology today, is a vital part of *teshuvah* and of creating a true balance sheet of our lives. The Talmud teaches that had *Chizkiyahu HaMelech* sung *shira*, he would have become *Melech HaMashiach*, and the suffering of the Jewish people throughout history would have ended at that moment. *Shira* must therefore be at least as much a part of our preparation for the *Yamim Nora’im* as *viduy*.

Conclusion: Embracing the contrasts of the season

We close with a summary of our four contrasting themes.

We can reach inward to deepen our relationship with Hashem, with the intensity and spiritual connection we felt in Jerusalem, and reach outward to strengthen our bonds with others, as we learned from the experience in Leningrad.

We can balance humility in approaching G-d with confidence that our sincere prayers and heartfelt *teshuvah* will be received favorably.

We can prepare with diligence and dedication while remaining open to moments of spontaneity and personal transformation.

We can reflect penitently on our wrongdoings while singing the praises of Hashem for our accomplishments and for the gifts He has so generously bestowed upon us.

May these contrasting themes help us experience the *Yamim Nora’im* with greater depth, meaning, sincerity, and connection.



Rebbetzin Rookie and Rabbi Heshie Billet

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

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Friends Setting Up Friends



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Our first date was at Cafe Gan Sipur in Gan Sacher in Yerushalayim.

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A funny story from one of your dates:

Our dating was a little different since my husband only speaks Hebrew and I only speak English. On our 4th date, my husband realized that he forgot the key to his house so he called his sister to tell her not to lock the door. I didn't understand at first what he meant because I thought he was talking about buying a watermelon (מפתח) and מבטיח sounded similar to me when he was talking fast) and didn't think it needed to be done that night but I just went with it. Once I realized what he was talking about, it made more sense and I started laughing.

Tell us about the marriage proposal:

It happened at my husband's brother's wedding during the photos before the chuppah. My husband got a bouquet of flowers and got down on one knee and proposed in front of his family.

Is there anything else you want to share?

We met because of miscommunication, and we both didn't really have expectations on the first date – maximum it would be a couple of hours of awkwardness – and now the rest is history. So believe in hidden miracles and have faith because everything works out in the end.

Who are the ambassadors who set you up and what would you like to tell them?

Etty Lax and Rachel Paul. We want to tell them thank you and that we always say that the best present we can ever receive (especially for Shabbos and Chagim) is a dictionary to make sure we understand each other correctly.



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New Year, New Mazel: The Reset We've Been Waiting For

Aleeza Ben Shalom

There's something about Rosh Hashanah that feels like a reset button for the soul. We dress a little differently. We speak a little more gently. We sit around tables filled with sweetness – apples and honey, round *challahs*, blessings layered with hope. But beneath all the symbolism is a quiet question that hums in the background: What do I want this year to become?

For so many singles, that question carries extra weight. Another year has passed. Some dates led somewhere. Some didn't. Some hopes grew. Some hopes wore out. And yet, Rosh Hashanah arrives and says: begin again anyway. New year. New *mazel*. New blessings waiting to arrive.

As a matchmaker, I see this moment not just as personal, but communal. Finding love isn't only an individual journey – it's a shared responsibility. We don't build a future as a people by accident. We build it intentionally, through connection. That's the heartbeat of the Jewish Matchmaking

Movement. Our vision is simple but powerful: just as every community has a rabbi, every community should have a trained matchmaker. Someone who holds the stories, who knows the people, who pays attention, who cares enough to say, "I think you should meet." Because singles shouldn't feel invisible in the places meant to feel like home. They should feel seen, supported, and thought about.

So as we step into this new year, I want to speak directly to community members – the friends, the neighbors, the leaders, the quiet observers. Who is going to step up this year? Supporting singles doesn't require perfection. It requires presence. It looks like inviting singles into your home not as an afterthought, but with intention – not the "extra seat," but a thoughtfully curated table where connections can actually form. It looks like making introductions even when you're unsure, speaking about dating with dignity, and asking someone, "Are you open to meeting someone right now?" – and actually listening to the answer. And for some of you, it might mean stepping into a bigger role: training as a matchmaker, becoming that point person in your community who says, "I've got this. I'm here for this." Because we need you. Behind every single person is a story still being written.

And then comes Yom Kippur. A day that strips everything back – no distractions, no noise, just you, your soul, and the quiet honesty of where you've been and where you want to go. For singles, this day can feel particularly raw. So I want to gently ask: What are you holding onto that you need to release? The belief that it's never going to happen? The story that you always choose wrong? The weight of past heartbreak you haven't fully let go of? Yom Kippur invites you to clear out the old – not because it didn't matter, but because it doesn't get to define what comes next. You are allowed to start afresh. You are allowed to date again with a softer heart and stronger clarity. You are allowed to believe that this year can unfold differently.

And to the community, Yom Kippur asks something too: release judgment, release assumptions, release the quiet ways we sometimes overlook those who are still waiting. When we clear space collectively, we make room for something new to enter. Rosh Hashanah opens the door. Yom Kippur clears the path. And somewhere in that sacred space between hope and honesty, new beginnings take root.

So this year, let's not just wish for connection – let's create it. Let's be more intentional, more aware, more willing. Let's notice who's still searching and remind them that they're not doing it alone. Because "new year, new *mazel*" isn't just a phrase – it's a possibility we help bring to life. May this year bring clarity where there was confusion, courage where there was fear, and connection where there was distance. May those who are searching be guided gently toward their person. And may we all have the merit to play a small but meaningful role in building homes, hearts, and futures filled with love, purpose, and blessing.



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What Kind of King are We Crowning?

Rabbi Leo Dee

Every Rosh Hashanah, Jewish communities across the world rise together to proclaim “*Avinu Malkeinu*, Our Father, Our King.” We crown Hashem as King, plead with Him as children before a loving Father, and stand in awe before the Judge of all humanity.

For centuries these images have carried the Jewish people through exile, repentance and hope. Yet many modern Jews quietly wonder as they stand in *shul* on Rosh Hashanah: To whom are we actually speaking?

Rabbi David Aaron warns against what he calls the “Zeus Model” of G-d – the image of a powerful Being somewhere “up there,” seated on a Heavenly throne, watching, judging, rewarding and punishing. The Rambam states unequivocally that G-d has no body or physical form. Yet many of us still imagine our prayers rising toward a great invisible Person beyond the clouds.

That picture can be comforting, but it raises difficult questions. If Hashem is a loving Father, why is there suffering? If He is an all-powerful King, why does He allow evil? If He already knows what we need, why must we ask? If He knows the future, where is our free will?

Perhaps the issue is not Hashem, but the picture in our minds. *Chazal* explain that the Torah speaks in human language because every generation needs images that help us approach the Infinite. Perhaps our generation needs another metaphor alongside *Avinu Malkeinu*.

Imagine a vast simulated world sustained by an Intelligence beyond it. The beings inside experience time, choice, fear, love and growth. Their decisions genuinely matter, yet the Simulator is not another character within their universe. He exists beyond it while sustaining every moment of its existence.

This is only a metaphor. Hashem is not a programmer, nor is our world a computer

game. But the analogy illuminates something we have always known: Hashem is both beyond the world and intimately present within it.

More than that, it reminds us that we are not standing outside Hashem looking toward Him. We exist within Him. He is not merely the Creator of our world; our world exists within His infinite reality.

A striking *Midrash* teaches that Hashem created other worlds before creating ours (*Bereishit Rabbah* 3:19). As a metaphor for the modern mind, we might picture those “worlds” as countless possible histories. Imagine the Simulator exploring every possible path from Creation to Redemption. Out of those innumerable possibilities, one history reaches its intended destination.

The Simulator then “renders” that history. Think of it as a complete playback of the one timeline that reaches its intended destination. Every decision along the way was genuinely ours; human free will was real and uncoerced. And yet the Simulator already knows every outcome, because He has already seen the story in its entirety. We experience history one choice at a time, moving forward in suspense; G-d knows it whole, the way we might watch a replay of a game whose result we already know. This offers one way of reconciling authentic human free will with Divine foreknowledge: our choices are real, but to G-d, this world is not unfolding – it is already complete.

This metaphor could also transform the way we think about our Rosh Hashanah *davening*.

Prayer is not flattery offered to a King who needs praise, nor information given to a Father who lacks knowledge. *Tefillah* is alignment. As we proclaim “*HaMelech*,” we reorient ourselves to the deepest reality. Praise reminds us what is true. Our

requests clarify what we aspire to. Gratitude reshapes how we see the world.

When we whisper the *Amidah*, we are not projecting our voices across the universe toward a distant Heaven. We are turning inward to the One within Whom we already dwell, Who continually sustains our existence.

Avinu Malkeinu remains one of our most beautiful prayers. Sometimes we need a Father’s embrace. Sometimes we need a King’s authority. Those images will always speak to the heart. But Rosh Hashanah also invites us to deepen our understanding. Perhaps *HaMelech* is not a ruler seated upon a throne, but the Infinite Source of all reality, beyond everything, within everything, and in Whom we ourselves live.

Perhaps the deepest meaning of crowning Hashem as King is not placing Him above us, but awakening to the reality that we have always lived within Him. Perhaps that is what Rosh Hashanah has been asking of us all along.



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The Shofar Controversy in Jerusalem:

Rav Akiva Yosef Schlesinger and a Bold Bid to Restore an Ancient Practice

Rabbi Shimshon HaKohen Nadel

In the late nineteenth century, as the Jewish return to *Eretz Yisrael* began transforming the landscape of Jerusalem, a dramatic controversy erupted around a question that had lain dormant for centuries. Could the *shofar* once again be sounded when Rosh Hashanah coincides with Shabbat?

At the center of the debate stood one of the most colorful and controversial rabbinic personalities of the Old *Yishuv*: Rav Akiva Yosef Schlesinger.

When Rosh Hashanah coincides with Shabbat, the *shofar* is not blown, out of concern that one might carry it in the public domain. According to the *Mishnah*, however, this prohibition does not apply in the *Mikdash* or where there is a *beit din*: “When the *Yom Tov* of Rosh Hashanah fell on Shabbat, they would blow [the *shofar*] in the *Mikdash*, but not in the provinces. After the destruction of the *Beit HaMikdash*, Rabban Yochanan ben Zakai decreed that they should blow [the *shofar* on Shabbat] wherever there is a *beit din*. Rabbi Elazar said: Rabban Yochanan ben Zakai instituted this only in Yavneh. They said to him: Both Yavneh and any place where there is a *beit din*.”

The *Mishnah* raises two fundamental questions: how far does the sanctity of the *Mikdash* extend, and what type of *beit din* qualifies?

Rashi limits *Mikdash* to the *Beit HaMikdash* itself. The Rambam, however, in his *Peirush HaMishnah*, explains that *Mikdash* includes the city of Jerusalem as well.

There is a major *machloket Rishonim* regarding the nature of the *beit din* required. Rashi, Rosh, and the Tur require a *Sanhedrin Ketana* of twenty-three judges. The Rambam requires judges possessing authentic *semicha*, like those who could

sanctify the new month. According to the Rif, however, any established and recognized *beit din* of three is sufficient.

The Rosh and the Ran relate that the Rif himself blew the *shofar* on Shabbat in his *beit din* in Fez, Morocco, though his students did not continue the practice. The *Ba'al HaMa'or* and *Ritva* write that they are unaware of any community that blows the *shofar* on Shabbat, while *Rabbeinu Mano'ach* records that it was done in Damascus. *Sefer HaChinuch* cites the conflicting opinions without ruling on the matter, concluding instead: “And you my son, should you merit it, choose what is good in your eyes.” The *Shulchan Aruch* rules that today the practice is not to blow the *shofar* on Shabbat.

For centuries, the accepted consensus was that absent a *Sanhedrin* or a *beit din* possessing authentic *semicha*, the *shofar* would remain silent on Shabbat. That changed when Rav Akiva Yosef Schlesinger sought to restore the ancient practice, stirring a controversy that shook Jerusalem.

A fascinating figure, Rav Akiva Yosef studied in Pressburg under the Ketav Sofer and Maharam Schick before immigrating to *Eretz Yisrael* in 1870. Once in Jerusalem, he became a passionate advocate for religious and national renewal. He championed agricultural settlement, encouraged the revival of the Hebrew language, promoted reforms to the *kollel* system, advocated for the restoration of the *korban Pesach*, supported the rediscovery of *techelet*, and argued for renewing the sounding of the *shofar* on Shabbat.

In advance of Rosh Hashanah 5642 (1881), he published a pamphlet arguing that the *shofar* could be blown on Shabbat

in Jerusalem before an established *beit din*. Seeking to implement his ruling, he attempted to assemble twenty-three rabbis and constitute a *beit din chashuv*. As Rosh Hashanah approached, however, most participants withdrew in the face of fierce rabbinic opposition.

The controversy resurfaced when Rosh Hashanah fell on Shabbat in both 5665 and 5666 (1904–1905). The debate filled the pages of the Hungarian Torah journal, *Tel Talpiot*. By then, Rav Akiva Yosef had gained the quiet support of prominent Jerusalem rabbis, including Rav Shmuel Salant and Rav Eliyahu David Rabinowitz-Teomim, the Aderet. Sensing he might not live to see another Rosh Hashanah, the Aderet reportedly remarked: “If only Rav Akiva Yosef would blow [the *shofar*] on Shabbat, I would stand behind the wall to hear the sound of the *shofar*.”

Some accounts suggest that, faced with overwhelming opposition, Rav Akiva Yosef rose before dawn, shuttered the windows of his Jerusalem home, and blew the *shofar* in private.

The initiative ultimately failed. The overwhelming majority of authorities insisted that only a fully constituted *Sanhedrin* or a *beit din* possessing authentic *semicha* could revive the ancient practice. Yet Rav Akiva Yosef's attempt was never merely about *halacha*. He heard the reverberations of redemption in the streets of a rebuilt Jerusalem and asked whether a national restoration demanded renewed religious expression as well. A century later, that question remains unanswered.



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Changing Our Names in Repentance and Illness

Rabbi Dr. Shlomo Brody

Few things feel more fixed than a person's name. Yet Jewish tradition treats a name as more than an identifier. It can reflect destiny, character, reputation, and the possibility of becoming someone new.

The Talmud records the following declaration from Rav Yitzchak: "A person's sentence is torn up on account of four types of action: giving charity, crying out in prayer, changing one's name, and changing one's deeds for the better" (*Rosh Hashanah* 16a). Three of these – charity, prayer, and repentance – are familiar pillars of *teshuva*, immortalized in *U'netaneh Tokef*. Changing one's name, *shinui ha-shem*, is more puzzling. What could a new name have to do with tearing up a divine decree? Divine judgment is not like crossing a border with a forged passport.

Strikingly, Chazal cite Sarah's change of name from Sarai as proof. Parallel *Midrashim* note that she bore a child only after the change (*Pesikta Rabbati*, *Hosafa Aleph Piska Daled*). On this basis, Rabbi Yaakov Etlinger argues that changing a name may alter one's *mazal*, or fortune, but it has nothing to do with atonement. Sarah's barrenness, after all, was not the result of sin.

This may explain why *shinui ha-shem* does not appear in *U'netaneh Tokef*. Rabbi Shmuel Yaffe Ashkenazi observes that it is also absent from the parallel *Yerushalmi*. He therefore suggests that *shinui ha-shem* applies only to those whose suffering is not rooted in wrongdoing. For the rest of us, a new name cannot substitute for a changed life.

An alternative interpretation asserts that a name change is not an end in itself, but a means of inspiring repentance. The Rambam presents the new name as a declaration of transformed identity. "I am another person, and not the same person who committed those deeds" (*Teshuva* 2:4). The Maharsha emphasizes a related but subtly different psychological process. Just as exile from one's home humbles the heart, a disruption in one's familiar identity can break through complacency and awaken a person to change (*Chidushei Agaddot*, *Rosh Hashanah* 16b).

For the Rambam, a new name affirms a decision already made. For the Maharsha, the shift in identity humbles the person and prompts that decision. Yet both reject the notion that a new name magically erases a divine decree. Its power lies in forcing a person to confront the distance between who he has been and who he must now become.

Occasionally, people change their names as part of becoming religiously observant. Some adopt their Hebrew birth name in place of a legal English name, while many converts do something similar. Yet Rabbi Moshe ben Yekutiel of fifteenth century Rome

noted that changing one's name every Yom Kippur would be plainly impractical (*Sefer HaTadir*, 254). Imagine the chaos for contracts, *gittin*, and other legal documents. He therefore suggests that the true meaning of *shinui ha-shem* is not a literal change of name at all, but a change of reputation, transforming the way one is known and perceived in the community. That kind of change cannot be declared; it must be earned through honest self-examination and a genuine change in conduct.

There is, however, one setting in which the custom developed in the hope of changing a person's fate. That setting is grave illness. This follows the logic of the tradition surrounding Sarah, in which a new name may alter a person's *mazal*. The idea is that a divine decree was attached to the person under a particular name. By receiving a new name, the person symbolically prays for a different identity to which the former decree may no longer apply.

The earliest detailed description of the custom appears in Rabbeinu Yerucham, who attributes it to an enactment of the *Geonim*. Ten men gather around a gravely ill patient, one of them holding a Torah scroll, and formally confer upon him a new name. They then pray that he be regarded as an entirely different person, a new creation, like a newborn child, so that any heavenly decree attached to his former identity might no longer apply. The custom appears in mystical Ashkenazic sources as well, and spread, to varying degrees, throughout the Jewish world (*Sefer Chassidim* 245).

Different practices emerged for choosing the new name. Mahari Bruna cautions against selecting it randomly by opening a Torah, since the first name encountered might be unsuitable (*Shu"t Mahari Bruna* §101). Many preferred names evoking life and healing, such as Chaim.

If the patient recovered, the new name could become permanent, with implications for the writing of *gittin* and other legal documents (*Shulchan Aruch*, *Even HaEzer* 129:18). Some authorities added that when the patient had not known of the change, he or she could later reject the new name. If the patient died within thirty days of the change, or never recovered, many decisors ruled that the new name should not appear on the gravestone.

Authorities even permitted the ritual to be performed on Shabbat for a dangerously ill patient. Although supplications are ordinarily restricted on Shabbat, saving a life overrides those limitations (*Shulchan Aruch*, *Orach Chaim* 288:10). Many *poskim* nevertheless cautioned against changing a person's name once recovery was no longer realistically possible. At that point, the

ritual could resemble a *tefilat shav*, a prayer in vain that Chazal prohibited because it would depend upon a miracle. A changed name, like prayer itself, is not an act of magic, and it should never be treated as though it mechanically compels a different outcome.

The earlier custom was to replace the original name entirely. Over time, however, the more common practice became to add a new first name while retaining the old one (*Shu"t Maharam Brisk 2:7*). A new name might change a person's *mazal*, but abandoning the old name could also sever the patient from the merits attached to the original identity. Adding a name sought to preserve those merits while drawing additional blessing from the new one.

Some authorities therefore questioned the practice altogether. Many cite the Chassidic master Rabbi Chaim Tyrer of Czernowitz, who argued that a person's name is not merely a label, but the spiritual channel through which the soul receives its vitality (*Be'er Mayim Chaim, Bereishit 2:17*). Changing the name of a sick person might remove the very source of strength sustaining the patient, unless the decision is made by someone possessing near *ruach ha-kodesh*, or extraordinary spiritual insight. The Chida, Rabbi Chaim David Azulai, likewise entrusted such changes only to exceptional religious figures (*Sansan LeYair*, section 7).

Rabbi Yosef Chaim Sonnenfeld reportedly avoided the practice and warned that a misguided name change could itself endanger the patient. This is especially notable because the name Yosef was apparently added to his own name by his teacher, the



A name can reflect destiny, character, reputation, and the possibility of becoming someone new.

Maharil Diskin, after he became seriously ill in his thirties (*Torat Chaim, Bikur Cholim*, 171). Given these sentiments, many assert that a name should be changed only after careful consultation with a leading *halachic* authority (*Be-Mareh Ha-Bazak 4:16*).

Whatever one's perspective on this fascinating *minhag*, the deeper teaching of *shinui ha-shem* as *teshuva* should not be lost. Through *teshuva*, a person can change the name by which he or she is known. We are all creating a name through the habits we repeat, the relationships we shape, and the deeds for which others know us. *Teshuva* is the power to refuse the name our past has given us and to begin earning another.



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Rabbi Yehuda Bibas: The Man Who Lit the Fuse

Rabbi Elie Mischel

In the autumn of 1839, two Scottish missionaries arrived in Bucharest on a mission to convert Jews. Andrew Bonar and Robert McCheyne were ministers of the Church of Scotland, sent

across Eastern Europe and the Middle East to assess the spiritual condition of Jewish communities. In Brăila, a port city on the Danube, they heard about a rabbi from Corfu who had passed through recently – and the Jews there were still talking about him. A young Jewish man in Brăila spoke of him with obvious excitement, “especially of this one sentiment, that the Jews must be instructed in science and in arms, that they may wrest the land of Palestine from

the Turks as the Greeks wrested their country.”¹

The two ministers tracked him down. They found Rabbi Yehuda Aryeh Leon Bibas on the second day of Rosh Hashanah, 5600.

What followed was not the conversation they planned. Bonar later recorded that the moment they sat down, Rabbi Bibas “immediately began to speak of the situation of the Promised Land, asking us to say, Why G-d chose Israel for his peculiar people, and that portion of the earth as their land.” Every time the missionaries tried to redirect the conversation toward their own agenda, Bibas cut them off, “holding us to the point, if we had any pretensions to the character of logical reasoners.”² He had no interest in their mission. He had his own.

When they rose to leave, Bonar recorded Bibas’s parting words: “He said that he was travelling for the sake of his degraded brethren, to see what might be done for them.”³

The two Scots went home to Edinburgh and published their account the following year. They had no idea they were documenting one of the most important Jewish thinkers of the nineteenth century – a man who would help set in motion the chain of events that produced the State of Israel.

Not your average rabbi

Yehuda Aryeh Leon Bibas was born in 1789 in Gibraltar to a Sephardic family whose roots traced back to the Jews expelled from Spain in 1492. His ancestors wandered to Morocco and eventually settled in Gibraltar, then under British rule, making Bibas a proud British subject – a fact he mentioned to Bonar with evident satisfaction. His father, a *kabbalist* and Torah scholar, died while Bibas was still young, and he was sent to live with his grandfather in Livorno, Italy. There he acquired extraordinary range: deep mastery of *halacha* and *kabbalah*, fluency in English, Italian, and French, and a doctorate – he signed his name with the title *L.D., Laureato*



Dottore – from an Italian university. He maintained a large personal library filled with manuscripts, and from it, his contemporaries report, many scholars benefited.⁴

In 1831 he was invited to serve as rabbi of the Italian Jewish community on the island of Corfu, a community of four thousand souls sitting between Italy and Greece. He accepted, and Corfu is where his vision took shape. He watched the Greek revolt against the Ottoman Empire, which ended in Greek independence in 1830, with intense interest. If the Greeks could organize, arm themselves, and take back their ancient land from the Turks, why not the Jews?

He was a demanding rabbi. He prohibited his community from carrying an umbrella on Shabbat. When the *kashrut* of Corfu's *etrogs* came under challenge from Ashkenazic merchants, he produced a formal *halachic* ruling defending them, backed by Rabbi Chaim Palagi of Izmir.⁵ He was no dreamer divorced from practical Jewish life. But alongside the strict observance, he harbored a vision that most of his contemporaries considered dangerous fantasy.

A new reading of teshuva

At the heart of Rabbi Bibas's thinking was a radical reinterpretation of a familiar concept.

The Torah promises: "And it shall come to pass, when all these things come upon you, the blessing and the curse... and you return (*veshavta*) to Hashem your G-d and obey His voice... then Hashem your G-d will return your captivity (*veshav Hashem Elohecha et shevutcha*) and have compassion upon you, and He will gather you again from all the peoples where Hashem your G-d has scattered you" (*Devarim* 30:1-3).

Every Jew knew this passage. The standard *reading* was clear: repent, pray, fast, do *teshuvah* in the religious sense, and G-d will redeem you. Rabbi Bibas read it differently. The *teshuvah* the Torah demands, he argued, hides its meaning in the word itself – *shuvah*: return to the land.

Wandering itself was not a punishment to be endured with patience and prayer; it was a sin requiring repair. "What are we doing, O Israel? In all the lands of the world we wander from city to city to seek our sustenance, and we do not go to the Land of Israel, 'the land that the L-rd your G-d seeks out always' (*Devarim* 11:12)".⁶ And once Jews moved – organized, armed themselves, went up – the Divine response would follow. Not before.

This was the principle the *kabbalists* called "*itaruta d'letata*, the arousal from below" that awakens the Divine response from above. G-d will not act until the people move first. And moving meant preparation: stop collecting the *chaluka*, the charity money sent to support Jews in Jerusalem, and teach them to work. Train Jewish youth in the sciences. Teach them to use weapons. Conquer the Land from the Ottomans the way the Greeks conquered theirs.⁷

The Jewish world was not ready for any of this. When he traveled through Belgrade, Brăila, Bucharest, Vienna, Frankfurt, and London, he was received with honor as a great Torah scholar. His ideas were something else.

Belgrade, 1839

In the summer of 1839, while traveling through Serbia, Rabbi Bibas sat down for a private meeting with a younger rabbi named Yehuda Alkalai, who served in the nearby town of Zemlin. Rabbi Alkalai was already known as a thinker with proto-Zionist inclinations, but nothing he encountered prepared him for what he would hear that day. He recorded the experience in his own words: the ideas Bibas shared were "most awesome, which caused my heart and knees to tremble."⁸

Rabbi Alkalai spent the rest of his life building a complete theological architecture on the foundation Rabbi Bibas laid in that conversation – arguing systematically that human initiative, mass immigration, the revival of Hebrew, the establishment of Jewish national institutions, was not merely permitted but required as the precondition for Divine redemption. The *teshuvah* of *Devarim* 30 was his central proof text, and he learned to read it the way Rabbi Bibas read it. Rabbi Alkalai became Bibas's most important legacy, carrying his ideas forward to the next generation.

For the next several decades, Alkalai served as rabbi in Zemlin. The *shamash* of his synagogue was a man named Shimon Leib Yehuda, Theodor Herzl's grandfather. He sat in that synagogue and heard Alkalai preach. Scholars have traced the line from there: Bibas to Alkalai, Alkalai to the Herzl family, and from that home to the man who convened the First Zionist Congress in Basel in 1897. What Herzl thought he created from scratch had perhaps been spoken of with longing at his grandparents' table long before he understood what any of it meant.

In January 1852, Bibas left Corfu for the last time. He was past sixty and recently

widowed. He packed his library of manuscripts, took two young students with him, and sailed for the Land of Israel. He settled in Hebron, intending to found a *yeshiva*. Two months after his arrival, he collapsed and died in the middle of a *drasha* – standing before his congregation, in the city of the Patriarchs, exactly where he always said the Jewish people belonged.

After the 1929 massacre, when the Jewish community was expelled from Hebron and the old cemetery desecrated, no one could say any longer which stone was his. Nearly a century later, a 93-year-old man who remembered visiting the grave as a child pointed to the right stone. In 2023, a distant relative who bears his name came to Hebron and placed a nameplate on the stone. It was 173 years overdue.⁹

Rabbi Bibas dedicated his life to planting a vision the world was not yet ready to receive. The world finally caught up.

1. Andrew Alexander Bonar and Robert Murray McCheyne, *A Narrative of a Mission of Inquiry to the Jews from the Church of Scotland in 1839* (Edinburgh: W. Oliphant, 1842), 380.
2. *Ibid.*
3. *Ibid.*
4. Yael Weiler-Israel, "Rabbi Dr. Yehuda Aryeh Leon Bibas, Herald of Zionism," in Ofer Tubol (ed.), *Kol HaTor: Tzionut Mesoratit Sefaradit* (Jerusalem, 2021).
5. *Ibid.*
6. Quoted in Weiler-Israel, *Kol HaTor*.
7. Bonar and McCheyne, *Narrative*, 380.
8. Rabbi Yehuda Alkalai, *Darkei Noam*, introduction, 19 Menachem Av 5599.
9. "Mystery Solved: Grave of Yehuda Bibas Identified in Hebron," Hebron Jewish Community, <https://hebron.org.il/en/mystery-solved-grave-of-yehuda-bibas-identified-in-hebron/>



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Two Broken Hearts. One New Beginning.

Inbar Gabay Zada

“You aren’t starting from scratch. You are building a beautiful house on ruins, which is even more complex. Suddenly you step on nails, suddenly you step on broken glass from the previous house.”

These words, spoken by Yael, lay bare the emotional reality of an unfolding Israeli story. In the spring of 2025, a new family was established under a *chuppah*, founded on a deep, revitalizing love. Together, Yael and Amit married and brought seven young children into a single household, attempting to anchor two distinct timelines of profound grief into a hopeful shared future.

Their paths to that *chuppah* were defined by two extreme tragedies. Yael’s first husband fell in combat in November 2023, during the brutal opening weeks of the Swords of Iron War, thrusting her and their three children into sudden bereavement. Amit’s loss was no less profound: when his first wife passed away from terminal cancer, he found himself raising their four young children alone while working around the clock just to keep the family afloat.

Beneath the emotional haze of their new union lay a sharp financial and psychological paradox. In her first marriage, Yael and her late husband were tight-budget university students driving a rundown car she constantly feared would break down on the road. Then, in the wake of tragedy, she had to navigate a complex web of state support, where certain resources are strictly reserved for the distant future. In the here and now, some needs are met by the Ministry, while other everyday needs go unmet.

Yet to the outside world, none of this complexity is visible. The widespread assumption is that remarriage resolves the struggles of bereavement – that a new partner closes the financial and emotional gaps overnight. In reality, the cognitive and administrative burden on someone navigating trauma is enormous, and rarely something they can shoulder alone.

“Grief leaks directly into the checking account, turning basic budgeting into an emotional battleground,” explains Yael. Even more urgent is the need to catch up on many months of no or low income and newly emerged expenses related to the trauma. “Without structure, spending patterns quickly become bound to the trauma of survival. Money cannot organize itself. A defensive mechanism takes over when spending. There is also the instinct to live entirely in the moment

because tomorrow feels abstract.” Amit nods in agreement, noting that while the desire to secure the family’s future is there, the psychological toll actively stalls forward momentum. “We knew we wanted to balance our needs and build long-term financial security,” he shares, “but the weight of trauma paralyzes the capacity to initiate complex processes.”

Compounding this interior struggle is the rigid nature of the state’s safety net. While it provides crucial, structured frameworks for the future, the system operates on a sterile, automated track that inadvertently expects people to stay frozen in their grief.

Yael gives voice to the subtle confinement this landscape creates: “In the Ministry of Defense, you feel like you’re in a ‘sea of widows.’ It fixes you in place. Your status is permanently designated as ‘widow,’ leaving you to tread water while well-meaning but misguided voices in the community isolate you further with warnings like, ‘If you remarry you will lose your rights.’”

When Yael and Amit chose to marry, a common public assumption followed them: the flawed belief that the moment a widow stands under the *chuppah* for a second time, the problem solves itself. The public logic is simple – she is married now, there is a husband to step in, and a partner expected to improve family finances.

But stepping into a second marriage brings its own profound disorientation. Social and bureaucratic labels become blurred, leaving a person caught in an identity crisis. “There is something complex about marrying again,” Yael says. “You don’t know where to put yourself. Are you a widow? Are you not a widow? It is confusing.”

Far from the neat conclusion people expect, remarriage is exactly where the deepest complexities begin. The illusion that a new partner magically absorbs previous trauma is shattered by the day-to-day reality of building a blended household, both financially and emotionally.

A unique and deeply sensitive set of structural imbalances also enters the home in a case like Yael and Amit’s. In Israel, IDF orphans are held in a warm embrace of national gratitude, receiving specialized institutional support, communal recognition, and dedicated retreats. In a blended home, this can inadvertently create a two-tiered emotional ecosystem

under one roof. One group of children carries a highly visible, publicly honored legacy of sacrifice, while their step-siblings navigate a quiet, private loss. Left unaddressed, this stark difference in institutional recognition can foster deep undercurrents of confusion and marital friction.

Amit reflects on the immense dedication required to stabilize this reality: “Couples who marry for a second time really work at it. Their jobs are secondary compared to what they are doing inside the home. It’s a daily, constant job. It’s not simple when each family unit is dealing with its own trauma, and even harder when it also entails fusing different upbringings, behaviors, and histories.”

Enter Kuma: the structural anchor

Protecting the fragile hope of a newly blended family takes more than raw courage; it requires a tender, steady hand to hold them up. This is exactly where Kuma, a specialized program by Sulamot, steps in, scaling its embrace to mentor and support Swords of Iron IDF widows who remarry. This process is led jointly by Kuma’s senior advisor, Shlomit Kalmanzon, herself an October 7th widow who recently remarried, and Lirit Lopez, a Kuma financial advisor and rights specialist.

Kuma operates on a proactive philosophy, recognizing that people who experience trauma often lack the executive function to initiate long-term planning. Kuma’s team does not wait for an application; they reach out directly. But timing is a delicate art. Had she met with Kuma in the immediate aftermath of her husband’s death, Yael shares that she would have fled. The team waited, persistently and gently reaching out until she was ready to choose a goal.

“I got a lot of offers of help and felt overwhelmed because I didn’t know where to turn,” Yael recalls. Though her family wanted to help, sharing bank statements with those closest to her felt too emotionally overwhelming. “Even from my first meeting with Lirit, I could tell that Kuma has both the professionalism and warmth I need. She listened, and I opened up to her because there was no obligated closeness. She wasn’t a friend, family, or a psychologist, so I felt more comfortable.”

Having an objective third party became key for Yael. Lirit was an anchor, backed by an entire strategic staff. Beyond macro-budgeting, Kuma became a practical

lifeline for the minutiae of daily administration. When Yael faced the overwhelming task of filling out a complex corporate Form 101, a tax document made infinitely more complicated by her shifting marital status and state stipends, she snapped a photo of the form and sent it via WhatsApp to Lirit. Within minutes, Lirit messaged back with clear, granular directions on exactly which boxes to check.

"This is Kuma's operational reality," explains Shlomit Peretz, Kuma's program manager and a veteran IDF widow. "We break down the grand concept of 'rehabilitation' into tiny, accessible everyday victories."

When the wedding music stopped for Yael and Amit, Kuma did not step away. Instead, they remained alongside them, providing the same steady support for this new and precarious phase of life. In the immediate aftermath of tragedy, Kuma is known for providing essential, short-term practical relief, stabilizing the home by bridging the immediate operational gaps that state systems miss, whether that means securing temporary household help to let a grieving mother breathe or helping cover the sudden costs of relocating from a site of trauma.

"When an IDF widow's family shifts into a blended household, Kuma's guidance evolves from emergency relief into long-term strategic architectural support," emphasizes Shlomit Kalmanzon. The internal economics of a blended family require immense strategic navigation. To address this, Kuma brings both partners into intensive financial mapping sessions to meticulously untangle their assets and design a healthy boundary between past legacy and future unity.

The first step Kuma recommends is for the couple to implement a legal prenuptial agreement (*heskem mamon*). Through this mechanism, Kuma helps new couples protect the fallen father's estate and state funds, securing them strictly for his biological children's

long-term futures. With the inheritance safely set aside, Lirit then guides the couple toward a healthy balance in merging their monthly household economy, creating a single, unified front for daily expenses, groceries, and family life. By drawing a clear line between the past estate and the present budget, Kuma works to eliminate the primary source of financial suspicion that tears many second marriages apart.

Kuma also ensures that couples do not navigate the psychological strain of this transition alone. The organization's financial coaches work alongside clinical social workers who understand the psychological trauma driving spending habits and avoidance behavior. Financial stability and relationship health are entirely interwoven; one cannot succeed without the other.

For Yael, the presence of these mentors transformed her outlook entirely. "There are people you meet and you feel they are messengers sent by Hashem," Yael shares, invoking Naomi Shemer's timeless imagery of "good people along the way."

Kuma's approach reflects the very meaning of its parent organization's name, Sulamot, "ladders." Yael identifies this vertical movement as the core of the organization's impact: "Kuma helps you rise. They help you choose a goal, and it's like you're climbing the ladder to get out of where you were." It is a ladder lowered into a dark pit, offering a way out of survival mode and into a life of calm, deliberate planning, restoring to these women the agency to shape their own futures.

For the founder of Sulamot, Rav Yosef Zvi Rimon, the strategic mission of Kuma is nothing less than a spiritual and historical imperative for the Jewish people. His vision elevates the grueling daily work of budgeting, legal contracts, and step-parenting into an act of supreme national significance. "When a widow successfully remarries, this is a national success that extends beyond the new couple's personal home," says Rav Rimon.

In a society where grief can easily trap a person in place, Rav Rimon reframes the decision of these families to love again, to choose life, and to build a home as the ultimate triumph over destruction. "It is by their merit, and the merit of all the soldiers' wives and their families, that the State of Israel was saved. The rebuilding of their homes after unimaginable loss is *binyan ha-uma*, an integral part of rebuilding the nation. It is the next stage of our ultimate victory in this war."

By pairing the raw human courage of families like Yael and Amit's with the practical financial architecture of Kuma and the peer mentorship of figures like Shlomit Kalmanzon and Shlomit Peretz, Israeli society is being handed the tools to step over the broken glass of tragedy, pick up the hammer, and build the next floor of national resilience.

Yael and Amit's names have been changed to protect the family's privacy.



Inbar Gabay Zada
is Director of Development
at Sulamot-Kuma.



Heroes Fell. Heroines Rise.
Learn more about Kuma:
kuma.sulamot.org/en/eng/



We asked three new Olim:
What has been the most meaningful
moment in your first year of Aliyah?



Melyssa Mandelbaum

There was no way to truly prepare myself emotionally for watching my children belt out the *Mi Sheberach* for *chayalim* alongside 25 other Israeli children, all singing with the same incredible passion. At first, I couldn't understand why my eyes became tearful during an end-of-year ceremony. After all, I've been to countless school performances over the years. Then it immediately hit me: this was nothing like the ceremonies they'd had in the past.

This ceremony was a testament to our move across the world – to this new culture, this new language, and the reason we chose to make Israel our home. It was a reminder that while this transition has had different challenges for every member of our family, I couldn't have been prouder of all of us for our resilience, perseverance, and willingness to make it work. I am so appreciative of Hashem's support and guidance that we feel throughout our journey.

It was also a reminder of why we made this seemingly crazy move to the Middle East: because this is the country where the Jewish people – our people – come together and put their nation first. This is where, from the youngest age, children are raised with a deep sense of *achdut* and *achrayut* for their fellow Jews and for their nation. Looking back, it's almost funny that I wondered why I was tearing up, because in that moment, I realized this was exactly why we're here – and how we know this is where we're meant to be.

Melyssa Mandelbaum, PsyD, made Aliyah to Ramat Beit Shemesh in 2025 with her husband and 3 children. She is a Clinical Psychologist practicing in both Israel and the US.



Rabbi Josh Broide

My most meaningful moment during my first year of *Aliyah* came on the morning of February 28.

Like every Shabbat, I made a cup of coffee, picked up my *tallit*, and began walking to KSYM, our neighborhood *shul* in Modi'in. But something felt different. There was a quiet tension in the air.

When I reached the end of the block, I saw neighbors turning around. Someone called out that Rav Sobol had closed the *shul*. Israel had entered a new phase in the war with Iran.

Moments later, our normally quiet street filled with cars. Every vehicle carried Israelis answering the call to report for duty. Then one car caught my attention. A father was driving his daughter, who looked barely out of high school. In an instant, she had left behind her family, her plans, and her Shabbat to answer her country's call. There was no hesitation, no complaint, just a quiet sense of purpose and responsibility.

In that moment, *Aliyah* took on an entirely new meaning. For years, I had stood with Israel from across the ocean. That morning, I realized I was no longer standing with Israel. I was standing among Israelis, sharing not only their celebrations, but also their responsibilities and sacrifices. That was the moment Israel truly became home.

Rabbi Josh Broide made Aliyah from Boca Raton to Modi'in in 2025. He is the Vice President of the Silver Foundation and Director of Partners in Jewish Life. He has spent his career bringing Jewish communities together through relationship-building, education, and leadership, and was honored with the Jerusalem Unity Prize for his work in strengthening Jewish unity.



Scott & Devorah Friedman

When people ask what the highlight of our first year in Israel was, we keep coming back to one late afternoon in June, sitting in the bleachers, watching our youngest daughter Dena perform with her class at her *mesibat siyum*.

Dena moved to Israel going into sixth grade, which is not an easy age to start over. New language, new school, new friends, all at once. There were plenty of hard days that first year, days when she came home frustrated because she couldn't find the right word, or felt like she was a step behind everyone else in class.

Then came the *siyum*. She got up and spoke in Hebrew, with a native accent, right alongside kids who had grown up here their whole lives, and you honestly could not tell the difference. Same confidence, same ease, same sense that she belonged exactly where she was standing.

We looked at each other and didn't really need to say anything. All the packing boxes, the paperwork, the nights she cried about missing her friends back home, it all led to this. Watching her become, in one year, simply Israeli.

That is *Aliyah* in a nutshell for us. Not one big dramatic moment, but a quiet one in a school auditorium that told us we had done the right thing.

Scott and Devorah Friedman made Aliyah last August from Philadelphia. Their two oldest children had recently made Aliyah and entered into the army and Sherut Leumi respectively. They came with their other two children, one who attended Yeshivat Sha'alvim this year, and Dena, who just finished 6th grade.

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COMPILED BY: JACQUI AUSTEN
DESIGNED BY: LEAH RUBIN

KIDS CORNER

UNLOCK THE SHOFAR CHEST!

OH NO! THE COMMUNITY SHOFAR HAS ACCIDENTALLY BEEN LOCKED INSIDE A SPECIAL CHEST JUST BEFORE ROSH HASHANAH. THE ONLY WAY TO REVEAL THE SHOFAR IS TO SOLVE FOUR ANCIENT LOCKS. EACH LOCK GIVES YOU THE KEY FOR THE NEXT ONE. WARNING! DON'T SKIP AHEAD AS YOU'LL NEED EVERY ANSWER TO REACH THE END!



1 DECODE THE MESSAGE ON THE SECRET SCROLL

THESE SECRET MESSAGES ALL NEED TO BE UNSCRAMBLED BUT ONLY ONE MESSAGE WILL GUIDE YOU TO THE NEXT STEP!

MYO RPPIUK SI A HOYL DYA

PHYAP EWN YARE OT LAL

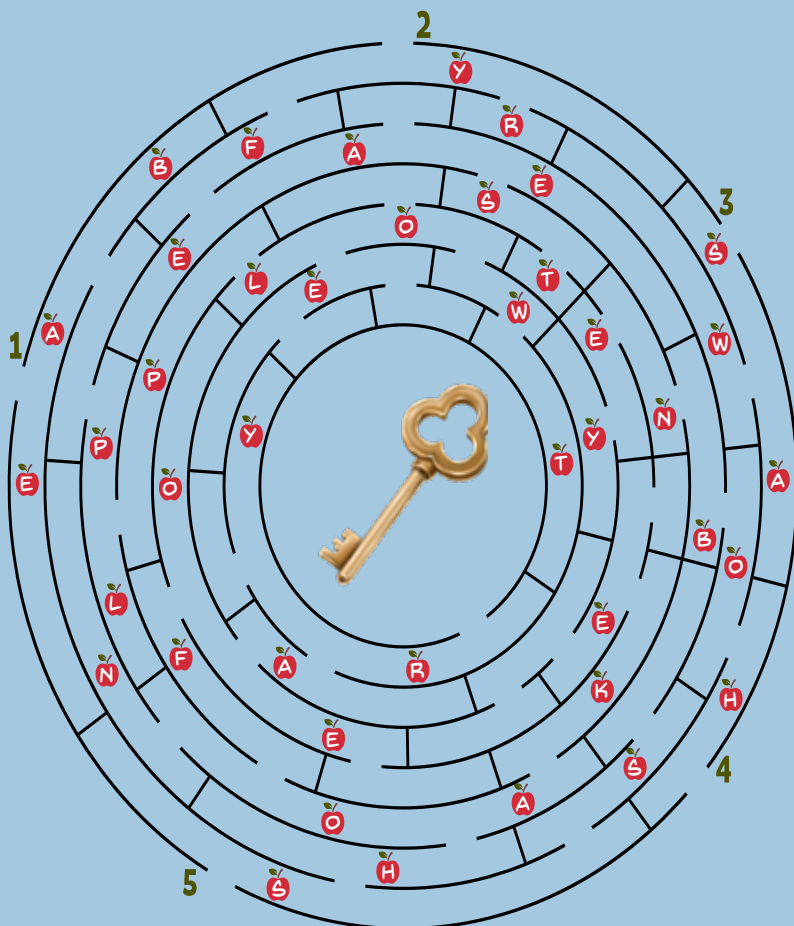
CUOTN HTE TRANEPOEMSGA

PLSEAP DAN YENHO EAR YYUMM



2 SEARCH THE MAZE

START AT THE CORRECT ENTRANCE AND COLLECT HOWEVER MANY APPLES YOU FIND ALONG THAT ROUTE. EACH ROUTE WILL SPELL SOMETHING DIFFERENT SO BE SURE TO START AT THE CORRECT ONE!



3 ADD IT ALL UP!

TAKE THE LETTERS OF THE WORD YOU JUST FOUND AND ADD UP THE CORRESPONDING NUMBERS THAT GO WITH THAT LETTER!

FOR EXAMPLE: A=1, B=2, C=3 ETC.



4 TRIVIA TALES

USING THE ANSWER TO THE LAST LOCK, ANSWER THE CORRECT QUESTION AND FIND THE FINAL ANSWER NEEDED TO UNLOCK THE CHEST!

- What new country was established in 1948?
- Which Jewish holiday did the 1973 war begin on?
- What is the last name of the Rabbi who blew the shofar when the Kotel was liberated during the Six Day war in 1967?
- What was the First Lebanon War in 1982 also called?



HAVE YOU COLLECTED ALL THE KEYS?

GO TO THE NEXT PAGE!





MEET ZELDA



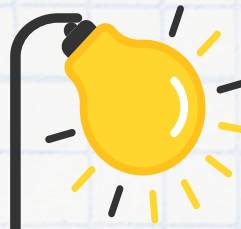
June 19, 1914 - April 30, 1984 (25 Sivan 5674 – 28 Nissan 5744)

The Poet from a Chassidic Dynasty

Zelda was a brilliant poet who hid away her talent for many years. She lived in Me'ah She'arim in Jerusalem where no one had ever published a book of poetry before. Born in Russia, to the grandson of the founder of Chabad Chassidic movement, at eleven years old Zelda moved to Israel. When she grew up she studied in the Mizrahi Seminar for teachers. After a few years she became a teacher, but still feared publishing any of her poems. Finally at 53 she published her first book of poems and became very famous. People from all over came to see her and speak with her. By the time she passed away, she had published five more books and was taken care of by her younger friends whom she had met after publishing. When she passed away, the radio played a song whose lyrics she had written: *Each of us has a name given by G-d and given by our parents... Each of us has a name given by the sea and given by our death.*



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



DID YOU KNOW?

- Bees seal the honeycomb with wax to keep air and moisture out!
- Pomegranate literally means "Seeded Apple"!
- Many people eat round challahs on Rosh Hashanah to symbolize the continuous cycle of life.



Test Your Knowledge

In what Jewish month do Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur happen?

What animal is connected to the shofar?

What is the final thing that happens before Yom Kippur is officially over?



Look for the answers in the Parshat Haazinu Youth Edition – see below for more details!

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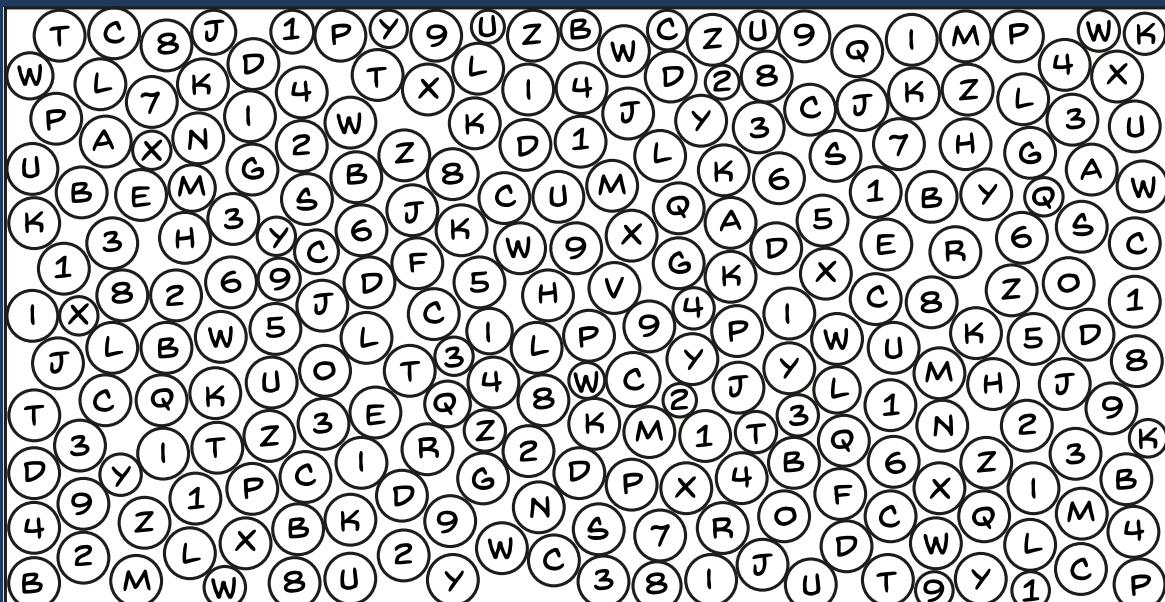
Scan the QR code or visit mizrachi.org/youth to learn more.



YOU'VE COLLECTED EVERY KEY! NOW IT'S TIME TO UNLOCK THE CHEST!

FILL IN EVERY BUBBLE THAT MATCHES ONE OF THE LETTERS OR NUMBERS YOU'VE COLLECTED DURING YOUR MISSION.

IF YOU'VE SOLVED EVERY LOCK CORRECTLY, A HIDDEN PICTURE WILL BE REVEALED...



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