

Reflections on the Israel-Diaspora Relationship in our Current Situation

I write these words from Jerusalem amid a raging war, filling the moments between live TV broadcasts, visits to shiva homes, and talks at army bases. This article isn't a philosophical discourse on Israel-Diaspora relations, but rather stories that shed light on this current chapter of our nation:

Since the war began, my speeches start with, "Describe our situation in one word." Answers vary: hope, despair, unity. A New Jersey woman said "clarity," aptly capturing this era of moral discernment. My response is "opportunity." HaKadosh Baruch Hu has given us an opportunity. He gave us an elevator. We can stay where we are by not pushing any buttons, by not changing. We can, *chalilah*, descend to the basement. Or we can ascend to higher floors, to new heights of spiritual growth.

The air here is filled with Torah, heroism, sanctity, and light. Many Jews are reconnecting with their heritage, yearning to learn and do more.

In this pivotal moment, new heroes are emerging, embodying Torah values. "*Ki MiTziyon teitzei Torah*" — from Zion shall Torah go forth — and we must listen and heed its call. Amid the extremist voices from the progressive left and radical right, Israel's authentic Jewish voice resounds.

Many attended the Washington, D.C. rally, which showcased unprecedented support for Israel. Remarkably, similar rallies in London and France drew 100,000 each. A friend who attended the D.C. rally commented: "The rally's impact extends beyond the day. Participants returned transformed, infused with Jewish strength and pride." A father noted, "We attended to support Israel, but it also strengthened us."

My husband's friend shared a story of unity: He spotted a distant cousin at the rally, someone disconnected from Jewish life, unaffiliated with any synagogue or Jewish organization, who has never been to Israel. "He traveled all the way from Boston to stand with



**Mrs. Sivan
Rahav-Meir**

*Journalist, Speaker, Writer &
Educator
Former Faculty Member at Stern
College for Women*

Israel for the first time ever. On October 7, part of us died, but another part of us came to life."

During the last few weeks, I have met with delegations from New Jersey, London, New York and Chicago. One of the organizers asked about the "*matzav*." I pointed out, "You are the *matzav*! Who else flies 12 hours to a war zone if not for home or family? The fact that thousands of people are coming speaks to where your heart is and who you truly are. Thank you!"

At the shiva home of Binyamin Airley Hy"d in Beit Shemesh, I met Mrs.

Elisheva Kaminetzky, principal of SKA, who brought dozens of letters from her students describing the mitzvot they accepted upon themselves *l'ilui nishmato*. Right after that, a group of students from YU arrived to pay a shiva call, also on a mission to provide strength to the people of Israel.

There have been countless such visits, a testament to our global family. You can support Israel from afar. You can send money (and thanks to those who have done so), you can connect on Zoom. But you can also come in person.

Elie Wiesel eloquently stated that homecoming knows no bounds of age or distance. An 80-year-old Jew arriving in Israel for the first time feels an innate sense of returning home. We thank all of those who came home during this time.

Even in challenging times, the spirit of Jewish unity and support for Israel is thriving. Rabbi Shalom Stember and his wife, Dini, Chabad emissaries in Poland, faced a dilemma about hosting their annual Shabbaton amid wartime uncertainties. As an invited speaker, I shared their concerns. Despite the challenges of war and escalating anti-Semitism, they bravely proceeded with the event. Expecting modest attendance, they were astounded when 300 people, many typically absent from community gatherings including Yom Kippur, joined in solidarity and support for Israel, setting a new attendance record for them.

There is no rational explanation for this. Their *neshamot* had an awakening. Our job is to make sure that the spark remains ignited even after the war ends.

Rabbi Stember shared another remarkable story with me. Two notable community figures, previously estranged due to a past disagreement,

approached him together, declaring, "We have made up and are friends again. Please tell us what we can do together for the Jewish people."

This story of unity really resonated with me. Chaim and Hinda Hackelman's catering business was set to cater a Diaspora couple's wedding. War shifted the wedding to Europe. However, the couple surprised them with a different idea: They still wanted the Hackelmans to host a grand reception, not for wedding guests, but for women from Southern Israel. And so, in Binyanei HaUmah, an extraordinary event unfolded for 550 women — single mothers, evacuees, residents from Sderot to Netivot. There was special entertainment, elegantly set tables, lots of food and lots of love. All of it free — a gift from this couple who wants to remain anonymous.

This is just one example of the many acts of kindness, and the deep spirit of Jewish unity, that characterizes our times. This young couple's home is built on the foundation of exceptional chesed, and this story is a testament to the fact that we can be united even from a distance. When this young couple got married in Europe, they sang "*Im eshkech Yerushalayim*" under the chuppah. This couple did not forget.

Sometimes, children are the wisest in the room. When three Israeli teenagers were kidnapped in 2014, an American father shared that for the first time, his son had pictures of Jewish heroes hanging from his walls, instead of celebrities. This striking observation underscores the importance of nurturing Jewish values and a sense of connection to klal Yisrael in our homes, through meaningful, experiential Jewish education.

I shared a Facebook photo of Englewood, NJ kids selling "slime" to support IDF soldiers, raising thousands of dollars. In talks about the war, I highlight this image to show that support isn't just in grand rallies or massive funds. A 6-year-old's act of selling slime to help the Jewish people makes a lifelong impact that they will never forget.

Stephanie Sokol of the Five Towns teaches women to read Tehillim in Hebrew, slowly, word by word. They are saying Tehillim for us like a small child learns to read for the first time. This is one of the most touching tributes that I have heard.

We must celebrate these contributions, big or small, recognizing their collective significance.

After addressing over ten missions, I have begun to suggest that efforts should extend beyond places like Sderot to include Yale or Miami. These missions are crucial in the U.S. too, to reconnect with the Jewish community there. I urged them to invite people to synagogue, to educate about the moral battle we face, and to share the richness of Shabbat, the chagim, Torah, and God, and the existential battle between good and evil. These missions are essential, not just abroad but also closer to home.

Rabbi Efreim Goldberg of Boca Raton, FL led a mission to Israel precisely at a time of heightened anti-Semitism on college campuses and in the UN. It was the week when three university presidents appeared at a congressional hearing and couldn't say that calls for the destruction of the Jewish people violate their code of conduct, and that it depends on "context." Rabbi Goldberg observed, "Some say we should be worried about Israel, but I don't. It

has moral clarity and can distinguish between good and evil. I worry about Europe and America, which may be stronger and more secure, but lack moral clarity.”

This year, I’ve met many “gap year” students, filled with pride for choosing to stay, and some even contemplating a second year. They’ve faced challenges in conveying the significance of this experience to their families and communities. At Yeshivat Hakotel, I met students who see their Torah learning as a vital contribution to the nation, akin to the “iron dome.” They wonder if their mothers will allow them to push off college for another year.

I met a group of young people from London volunteering on a farm. One week picking oranges and pomelos

may be one of the most significant educational experiences of their lives.

A young volunteer showed me a letter from Rabbi David Teller of the Fuchs Mizrahi school in Cleveland. In it, Rabbi Teller, an Ivy League alumnus, expressed his embarrassment at being associated with this institution. He writes:

“I will take this opportunity, to shout from the rooftops if I need to, that our children need and deserve to be in a place, in a college or university, where first and foremost they can live proud, authentic, meaningful, and *safe* Jewish and Torah lives. That should always be the *ikar* and every college and university option should be seen first and foremost through that prism. Enough is enough. Let us regain our perspective and our pride.”

In summary, while I’m impressed by the growing interest in Aliyah among the small community of religious Jews, it’s important to extend this energy to the broader Jewish community, most of whom feel distant and disconnected and would never consider Aliyah. Those reading *Torah To-Go* are protected by a strong Jewish-American identity, but what of the countless others? We must act now to prevent a massive loss of Jews to assimilation, echoing the tragic losses in Europe in the last century. It is our challenge and our responsibility to reach these Jews before we lose them forever.

On October 7, when the gates of *gehinnom* opened, so, too, did the gates of identity, heroism, Torah and values. Let us not squander this opportunity.

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