

Jewish Identity in our Times

An Interview with

Rabbi Reuven Taragin

Rabbi Reuven Taragin is the Educational Director of World Mizrahi and the RZA (Religious Zionists of America), and the Dean of Overseas Students at Yeshivat Hakotel. In those roles, he interacts with and brings together Jews from different backgrounds in Eretz Yisrael and the Diaspora. We asked Rabbi Taragin about Jewish identity in Eretz Yisrael and the Diaspora.



For a religious person, are Jewish identity and religious identity synonymous?

A Jew should see himself as an *eved* Hashem, and his observance of mitzvot should define his identity. With that, a pasuk in Yeshaya (44:5) says:

זֶה יֹאמֵר לֵה' אֲנִי וְזֶה יִקְרָא בְּשֵׁם יַעֲקֹב וְזֶה יִכְתֹּב יָדוֹ לֵה' וּבְשֵׁם יִשְׂרָאֵל יִכְנֶה.

One shall say, "I am G-d's," Another shall use the name of "Jacob," Another shall mark his arm "of [G-d]" and adopt the name of "Israel."

Rav Tzadok HaKohen, *Tzidkat HaTzadik* no. 54, writes that this pasuk teaches us that the foundation of everything is Jewish identity. Even before we talk about religious observance, this identity itself is valuable.

When Yonah was asked (multiple questions about) who he was, he responded simply, "*Ivri anochi.*" He saw that as independently significant.

Rav Kook, who had to deal with a Jewish society that identified strongly as Jews but was mostly non-

observant, also discusses this topic. He distinguishes between *segulah*, the innate connection to Judaism, and *bechirah*, the connection we forge through our actions and choices. Rav Kook writes:

ובדורנו נתרבו נשמות רבות שאע"פ שהן שפלות מאד בענין הבחירה, וע"כ הם נגועים במעשים רעים רבים ובדעות רעות מאד ד' ישמרנו, מ"מ אור הסגולה מאיר בהם, וע"כ הם מחבבים מאד את כללות ישראל וחושקים בא", ובכמה דברים טובים ויקרים מהמדות שהם באים מסגולת ישראל בטבע נפשם הם מצוינים בהם.

In our generation, there has been an increase in the number of souls that are very lowly in the matter of bechira, and therefore they are afflicted by many evil deeds and bad value systems, may God protect us. Nevertheless, the light of segulah shines in them; hence, they love



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the concept of Israel and greatly desire the Land of Israel. They naturally excel in several good and precious things based on the special qualities of Israel. (Igrot HaRa'ayah no. 555)

What are the key differences between Jewish identity in Eretz Yisrael and Jewish identity in the Diaspora?

In Rav Kook's time (his aforementioned letter was dated 1913), many Israelis were less observant and saw their Jewish identity as disconnected from religion. In fact, in their attempts to create a "new Jew" with a new Jewish identity many secular Zionist/Israeli intentionally worked to distance people from their traditional Jewish values and Judaism's traditions.

In the Diaspora, the situation was the opposite. The connection of the less observant was through whatever traditions they maintained (Pesach seder, attendance in synagogue on the High Holidays, etc.).

Nowadays, things are much different. In the Diaspora, many of the children and grandchildren of those who were "traditional" have assimilated. The Jewish identity that remains is a (weak) sense of "belonging" to the Jewish people.

In Israel, there has been a shift in the

opposite direction. With the weakening of the secular Zionist ideology (and nationalism worldwide), Israelis are turning to Judaism to try to connect spiritually. Even before the war, studies showed that very high percentages of Israelis were fasting on Yom Kippur and joining Pesach Seders. This direction has intensified since Oct. 7. (The term "October 8th Jews" is used to refer to Jews who returned to Judaism after Oct. 7.) There is still a long way to go, but we are moving in the right direction.

There are two additional notable differences between the Diaspora and Israeli communities: the connection to Eretz Yisrael and the connection with Am Yisrael.

The connection to Eretz Yisrael is more obvious, yet worth discussing. There are indeed Jews in the Diaspora who are deeply connected to Eretz Yisrael. However, when someone lives in Eretz Yisrael, it becomes part of their daily experience and in a holistic way. Even menial tasks have great significance. Construction workers in Israel fulfill prophecies when they build Highway 16, while their peers in America merely pave the road to the Garden State Plaza Mall.

Very little in Eretz Yisrael is purely *chol*. It's all *kadosh*. Just being here transforms everything you do. To flip the famous comparison of the Gra,

living in Eretz Yisrael is like sitting in a Sukkah.

We have mitzvot that relate specifically to being in Eretz Yisrael. You can even feel it in the weather patterns, as the Jewish calendar is heavily connected to Eretz Yisrael's agricultural cycle.

Rav Nachman MiBreslov, based on Bamidbar 13:32, described this as the Land of Israel "digesting" its inhabitants. Eretz Yisrael "swallows" its Jewish inhabitants and digests and links us to her.

The connection to Am Yisrael is also different. The *Gemara, Horayot 3a*, based on a pasuk in Melachim, asserts that only Eretz Yisrael communities constitute authentic communities (*kahal*). While this is more of a halachic/ontological observation, it is also true on a practical level.

When I lived in America, I connected only to other religious Jews in my local community. I did not have much to do with Jews in other communities or with the non-religious Jews locally. There isn't much that connects the Jews of the Diaspora to one another.

When you live in Eretz Yisrael, you feel strongly connected with Am Yisrael. There is an inherent connection to the people and to those of all stripes. There is more interaction and connection between groups, not just in times of

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war, but even in times of peace. Any national event allows for a shared experience. In the Diaspora, there are fewer shared experiences (the recent Washington rally was a rare exception, generated by the current situation).

Israel sees itself as responsible for all Jews around the world. We felt responsible for capturing and punishing Eichmann and freeing the Entebbe hostages. The Israeli government has an entire ministry devoted to Diaspora Jews and the challenges of anti-Semitism. The State of Israel sees itself as responsible for Jews everywhere and acts upon it.

For many, the deep connection to Eretz Yisrael and Am Yisrael enhances the Jewish identity of those who live in Eretz Yisrael. However, for some, there is a downside. As Jewish identity in the Diaspora is defined mainly by religious practice, some Olim have difficulty transitioning to life in Israel, where our national identity is more pronounced. Instead of the national identity supplementing religious identity, it often replaces it. They can experience a form of Jewish identity without observance, and this sadly leads to a weakening in observance of Torah and mitzvot.

What has Changed Since October 7?

The attacks on Oct. 7 and the subsequent pervasive open anti-Semitism have caused a surge in Jewish identity. Being attacked because we are Jewish reminds Jews of our unique identity. In fact, the Navi Yechezkel (perek 20) says that Hashem uses anti-Semitism to drive Jews back to him when we have become too assimilated.

Additionally, people from the Diaspora have strengthened their connection to Eretz Yisrael. Mizrachi has organized over 100 missions to Israel, and there have been other opportunities to connect for those who can't come on a mission. Mizrachi has held mass tefillah events bringing communities in the Diaspora together, programs to say Kaddish for victims, and opportunities to send supplies and letters to soldiers. People in the Diaspora, even those who do not consider themselves Zionists, are closely following the news in Eretz Yisrael and are deeply concerned about the welfare of the hostages, our soldiers, and the people of Eretz Yisrael.

Additionally, in times of crisis, people turn to religion. We see that now as well. Almost everyone, even in the Diaspora, has a friend or family member serving in the IDF, and there is a sense of people wanting to do their part spiritually to help protect our soldiers.

In a recent *Hamizrachi* (Purim 5784), Rabbi Elie Mischel highlighted the impact of Oct. 7 on some high profile people. New York radio talk show host Sid Rosenberg visited Israel for the first time and said that “[Hamas] brought the Jew out in me.” He started going back to shul and started learning Torah with a rabbi. Matisyahu the musician, who moved away from Judaism in recent years said that Oct. 7 awakened his “pintele Yid” (Jewish spark). In a Chabad survey conducted recently, 86% of respondents found that members were experiencing a “deeper connection to their own Jewish identity.”

Obviously, the other change is newfound *achdut* in Israel and around the world. We all remember how deeply divided Israeli society (and the Jewish people in general) were before Oct. 7.

The divisions reached a point where it seemed like there was no way to bring the two sides back together. Oct. 7 changed everything. People started to volunteer for many different chesed projects and there is a real sense of caring for one another, regardless of political views. A sense of solidarity formed.

In addition, anti-Semitism around the world (in every country) has connected Jews to one another and to those in Israel. We very much feel like one people in “the same boat.”

How Do We Ensure Lasting Change?

“B”H we are more unified now, but the unity is rooted in the common enemy we face. The common threat posed by a genocidal enemy and the hypocritical anti-Semitism we are experiencing unify us and direct our attention to the existential threat we face. If it runs no deeper than the common enemy or threat, it will dissipate when that enemy is defeated.

True *achdut* is achieved when we emphasize what we have in common and downplay what divides us. We must respond to the common threat by focusing on our shared values and mission. We must focus more on what we agree upon, including our connection to Eretz Yisrael and Am Yisrael.

We also want to sustain the spiritual awakening that has taken place. After the Six-Day War, there was also a spiritual awakening, but not enough was done to maintain it. Nowadays, many organizations are positioned to help nurture spiritual growth, and we hope that they will be successful in doing so.