

**Kol Yisrael Arevim Zeh Va'zeh**  
**(We Are Responsible, One For The Other)**

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Marriage is hard. It takes work, a lot of work. It also requires patience. A lot of patience. Marriage requires us to have faith in the other person, to believe that *our* hopes, fears and well-being are as important to *them* as they are to *us*.

For a marriage to survive, it needs honest and open communication. It requires *both* parties to be willing and able to share their concerns with the other in a way that is truthful, constructive, and said with love.

Before anyone gets worried, this is *not* a sermon about me and Glenn. No, this is about a different relationship that I've been in *for years* before I ever met my husband. In fact, my husband has shared my love and what some might even call my obsession.

What I'm talking about is the State of Israel.

Because that is how I view the relationship between Diaspora Jewry and Israel, it's a marriage. A marriage that is sometimes filled with joy and happiness, sometimes it's a bit rocky, and there's bickering. A marriage that has seen good times and not so good times. And, sadly, it is a relationship that I think is in urgent need of repair and attention.

I grew up in a deeply zionistic home. There was the ever present blue and white JNF tzedakah box, commemorative certificates for trees bought in someone's honor or memory, there were Israel bonds for every child in the house. Almost every Chanukah menorah we had was made from that weird green metal that indicated it had been brought back on a relative's trip to Israel.

And then there was the beautiful framed certificate that hung in my grandfather's closet commemorating the many *dunums* of land he had purchased for the JNF back in the 1930s, during the height of the Depression, when he had hardly any money to spare. I didn't know what a *dunum* was, but I loved looking at the certificate because it reminded me of the illustrations in a storybook of a magical place, far, far away.

And while much of my childhood memories about Israel felt like that certificate, something out of a storybook or a movie, charming and sweet or heroic and uncomplicated, I still remember with vivid clarity the first time I understood that Israel was not a mythical land, but someplace very, very, real.

I was five years old, and I was sitting on the floor at my father's feet, trying to be invisible so the grown-ups wouldn't notice me. My cousin Anvar had just returned from Israel where he had gotten married to a young woman named Janet. And Janet was telling our family her story. While the two had met in Israel, she had been born in Iraq. And Iraq in the 1960s was a

dangerous place for Jews. Anti-Semitism was virulent and sanctioned by the government. Jews were hung in the public square and lived in fear. Janet and her brother had managed to escape, and traveled by foot to Israel where they found safety and a new life.

As I sat there, mesmerized and scared by her story, I found myself falling in love with Israel for saving my new cousin, and for being a safe haven for our people in what sounded like a terrifying world.

Over the years my love for Israel deepened as I hopped on an emotional roller coaster of profound ups and downs. I remember celebrating the Camp David Peace Accords and then being fearful about the war in Lebanon. I was thrilled when we saw the the Jews from the former Soviet Union find freedom in Israel, as well as witnessing the miraculous rescues of Ethiopian Jews. I remember my first visit to Israel being just a few weeks into the first Intifada, and then visiting Israel just a few days before rockets landed in suburban Tel Aviv during the first Gulf War.

And I will never forget standing in downtown Jerusalem watching on a giant screen, the historic handshake between Yitzchak Rabin and Yasser Arafat on the White House lawn, and watching grown men crying with joy at the possibility that their children would live in peace. And my heart still aches and can remember exactly where I was when I heard of Yitzchak Rabin's assassination at the hands of another Jew.

In fact, I fell so head over heels in love with Israel that I seriously contemplated making Aliyah, but decided against it because I couldn't imagine raising a family so far away from my brothers and sister.

But like any relationship, there are different stages to being in love. And I have realized that my relationship with Israel, is similar to the relationship that many Diaspora Jews have experienced.

It is a relationship that has changed and evolved over the years. A relationship that has sometimes been passionate, and at other times, I have had the nagging feeling that she's just not that into us.

During the first stage of most relationships, we think that the other person can do no wrong, they are the idealized answer to our dreams. Everything about them is interesting and exciting.

And then, in the second stage, as things become more serious, a sense of mutual responsibility begins to develop, a desire to take care of each other, and a sense of comfort and familiarity begins to form.

And then, over time, stage three creeps in with disillusionment. This is a critical stage of any relationship because we have choices to make in terms of how we respond to our feelings of disappointment as the one we love falls off their pedestal, and their flaws and frailties become painfully obvious to us, and the quirks we once found charming are now irritating.

If a couple stays together long enough, inevitably their love will be tested. No relationship goes without its challenges, both from within the relationship and from the world around us.

At that point, some important questions need to be answered. Do we end the relationship? Settle for this feeling of malaise or disappointment? Or do we persevere and try to struggle through it? Are we willing to do the work that is needed to heal the hurt from the disagreements or arguing? Are we able to listen to each other's fears and needs? Are we willing to be open to each other and trust each other once again?

If a relationship is able to survive past stage three, then you enter stage four, real love. In stage four you *know* that your partner isn't perfect, and neither are you, and yet you find that you are willing to forgive each other for past hurts. You discover that you love each other not in spite of your differences, but rather you appreciate that your life is better because of what the other brings to the relationship, and you begin to function as a team, a real partnership.

And at that point, you're able to make it to stage five, where you realize that together you are more than the sum of your parts. That together not only are you able to become better versions of yourself, but you can do good for others as well, for your family, your friends, and your extended community.<sup>1</sup>

These last few years I have found myself oftentimes stuck in stage three of my relationship with Israel. Frustrated by our differences. Confused by their choices. Hurt by their rejection.

This last spring as my oldest son was spending a semester in Israel we went out to visit him. As part of our visit we joined the parents' tour that ran parallel with the program.

We went to many of the places I've been to before. Heard the same stories that I've heard before. But this time they rankled me. It felt uncomfortable. What we were being shown was a very simplified and airbrushed view of Israel, an Israel that did not seem to be related to the Israel that I read about in the *Israeli* press, or the Israel that I hear about from my Israeli friends and relatives, or the Israel that I lived in during college and rabbinical school.

The tour reminded me of my early images of an Israel out of a child's storybook. Except, I am no longer a child willing to hear simple stories and explanations.

So after a few frustrating days, we left the Parents' trip and took off on our own. We went to Tel Aviv, and we were shown around Holon by Rabbi Galit from our sister congregation Kodesh v'Chol, and we visited with my old boss who works for the IMPJ, the Israeli Reform Movement.

What we saw then was much more complex and nuanced. We saw an Israel that is struggling with the idea of religious pluralism, and we saw Israelis who are fighting to make religious pluralism the norm.

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<sup>1</sup> The description of five stages of a relationship is based on the following articles:  
<http://menalive.com/stages-of-love/>  
<https://www.betterhelp.com/advice/love/how-to-last-through-the-5-stages-of-love/>

We saw an Israel that is feeling overburdened and overwhelmed by the high cost of living and being in a constant state of war, and we met Israelis who want to do something about it, and are speaking out and working for social justice and against economic inequality.

We saw an Israel that disagrees passionately with itself on every political issue, and we engaged with Israelis who aren't afraid to wrestle with *all* of it.

What we saw was an Israel that was flawed and complicated and most of all real.

And it was then that I realized that this, this is the Israel that I love. Not the imaginary Israel that is always perfect and in the right, but an Israel that is struggling the best it knows how.

In the 1920s the famous Israeli poet, Chayim Nachman Bialik purportedly said about the future state of Israel: "We will be a normal state when we have the first Hebrew prostitute, the first Hebrew thief and the first Hebrew policeman." His image of Israel was very different than the image that we yearned for in America. We wanted an Israel that was perfect and always noble, an Israel that never makes the wrong choice.

But Israel does not live in an idyllic world. It lives in the same flawed world that we do. It has to make difficult choices, just like our government does, just like our voters do. And much to our shock and surprise, Israel has become a nation like all other nations, just as Bialik hoped it would.

At some point in every relationship we need to come to grips with the fact that the person we love isn't perfect. They don't think identically to us, and they won't always respond the way we want them to, and they may not believe in all of the same things that we do. And why would they? The hurts they've suffered, the victories they've enjoyed are not the same as ours.

Our recent history is not identical, the events and circumstances that have shaped the collective American Jewish psyche are not the same things that have shaped the Israeli reality.

So the question for us now is how do we move from stage three to stage four in the relationship between Israelis and Diaspora Jewry? How do we work through our differences and disagreements? How do we fall back in love with each other and begin to once again work together for a greater good? How do we start acting like a loving and close family once again?

I believe that we must first get past the idea that Israel is perfect and can do no wrong, or conversely we must stop assuming that Israel is always wrong. We do not live in a world that is black and white. Reality is to be found in the gray area.

And we need to show Israel through our actions that we have more to offer than merely financial support. And for our relationship to survive, we both have to understand that there are real and existential challenges facing both of our communities, and we should not dismiss or underestimate how under siege each community feels.

Because if we don't see each other in the fullness of the social complexities in which we live, the flawed systems under which we operate, we cannot appreciate the victories we have each

achieved or the daily obstacles that we each navigate, let alone the real dangers that we both face.

I know that there are some Jews who want to wash their hands of Israel, and they feel like they're done. But I am not. I cannot, and do not want to, imagine a world without Israel. I cannot make sense of a Judaism where Israel is not a central part of it. I will not accept a Judaism where all Jews do not see themselves responsible, one for the other.

No matter what we as individuals might believe, the anti-Semites in the world have made it clear that the words "Zionist," "Israeli" and "Jew" are interchangeable.

Our fates, the fate of the Jewish people, are intertwined, one with the other, it always has been, and it always will be.

That doesn't mean that there aren't some real differences that need to be addressed between Israelis and the American Jewish community. Of course there are. But remaining silent, or turning our backs on each other doesn't solve the problems, it just increases the mutual sense of isolation.

More engagement with each other is needed, not less. More communication, clearly and lovingly shared is needed, not less.

No matter where we were born, we are all the *B'nai Yisrael*, the children of Israel. The house of our ancestors, the house that our brothers and sisters currently dwell in, is *Eretz Yisrael*, the land of Israel. To turn away from them, to turn away from the house our people were raised and nurtured in, the house that we built, and rebuilt, is to turn our back on our family, on our history, and ultimately, it is turning away from part of ourselves.

In August of 1897, the modern state of Israel became a possibility when approximately 200 Jews from around the world gathered in Basle, Switzerland for the first Zionist Congress. At that meeting they agreed on working together to re-establish a home for the Jewish people in *Eretz Yisrael* – our ancestral homeland.

In addition to creating a modern Jewish State, their goals included organizing and uniting the whole of world Jewry, as well as strengthening and fostering Jewish national sentiment and a national consciousness.<sup>2</sup>

These are goals that will always be a work in progress. Even though the State of Israel has been established, uniting world Jewry and strengthening and fostering a national consciousness will be something that will always need our attention.

After that convention in 1897, the World Zionist Congress met annually for a few years, then every other year, and after WWII, approximately every four to five years.

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<sup>2</sup> <https://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/first-zionist-congress-and-basel-program-1897>

The World Zionist Congress continues to strive to be a representative body for world Jewry, and is sometimes referred to as the Parliament of the Jewish people. The next gathering will be in 2020 with 500 delegates from around the world.

Through this gathering, Diaspora Jewry will be able to have its concerns, values and priorities heard, and to have a degree of influence on Israeli society. Because of the last two elections, we have had profound influence on the allocation of financial and other resources that reinforces and supports our values of egalitarianism, religious pluralism, and strengthening Israel-Diaspora relationships.

So who chooses the delegates? Those of us who take the time to vote.

In fact it is because in the last two elections the Reform Movement did such an excellent job in getting out the vote that the Reform Movement in Israel was able to receive increased funding and recognition. In the last WZO election, the Reform Movement received 39% of the votes coming from the United States. Working together with other liberal branches of Judaism, we were able to make a positive impact on Israeli society.

For instance, the program that connected our congregation with Rabbi Galit Cohen-Kedem and Congregation Kodesh veChol in Holon was created and funded because of the results from the last World Zionist Congress Election.

A strong turnout can translate directly into increased funding for the Reform movement in Israel, as well as for emerging Reform Jewish communities throughout the world. It also allows for Diaspora Jews to have a say in who sits in leadership positions for the Jewish Agency for Israel, the World Zionist Organization and the Jewish National Fund.

We don't have to be a silent partner with Israel. When we vote we are able to articulate what our values and our expectations are.

A good marriage doesn't mean that we should sublimate our needs, but rather, we should communicate them with clarity and in a loving way that allows the relationship to grow and move forward.

Voting doesn't start until January, and will last through the beginning of March. In the months to come we will share more details about how you can make sure that your voice is heard.

In addition to making sure we get out the vote for the World Zionist Organization election, our Israel committee is planning a trip to Israel in the coming year. It will be a trip where we'll meet with Israelis, learn about current issues that are hot buttons for us and for Israel, visit with members of Congregation Kodesh veChol, and have a chance to really see and experience Israel. Not necessarily the Israel we see in postcards or in history books, but the *real* Israel that deals with many of the same societal problems that we deal with here.

I don't have all the answers. In fact, I'm not sure I have *any* of the answers. But what I do have is a deep desire and an unending commitment to keep working on this relationship. For me, divorce just isn't an option.

As Jews around the world gather together to welcome in the New Year, we ask for blessings, on each of us, on all of our families, on all of the *B'nai Yisrael*, on all who dwell with us, and on all the world.

*Mi sheberach Avotainu, Avraham, Yitzchak, v'Ya'a'kov, v'Imotainu, Sarah, Rivka, Rachel v'Leah* – May the one who blessed our ancestors, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, Sarah, Rebecca, Rachel and Leah, bless their descendants, in *all* of the lands in which we dwell.

May the Holy One grant us the vision to see, and the wisdom to understand the blessings that every community celebrates, and the challenges that each community struggles with.

May the Holy One give us the strength to continue to love even when we don't feel loved, and to offer understanding, even if we don't feel understood.

May the Holy One help us to be ever mindful through our words and our deeds that *kol Yisrael arevim zeh v'zeh* – that all of the Jewish people are responsible one for the other.

*Ken yehi ratzon* – May this be God's will.