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The Body of Israel

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The word Israel refers to two things:

1. The Nation of Israel, known today as Jews. Yaakov received this name from Hashem's messenger (Bereishit 32:29), and his descendants adopted this name for their nation.

2. The Land of Israel, whose borders very roughly correspond to those of the modern State of Israel.

Jewish History – The Nation and the Land

The history of the Jewish people is the evolving relationship between these two meanings of Israel. Already from the Humash, it is clear how the arc of the Torah's history bends in one direction: the People of Israel reaching, inheriting, and living in the Land of Israel.

- Hashem's first recorded words to our first forefather were: "Go… to the land that I will show you" (Bereishit 12:1).
- Hashem repeatedly promised Avraham, Yitzhak, and Yaakov a nation as numerous as the stars and sands, and that that nation would inherit the land of Canaan (Bereishit 22:17, 26:4, 28:14; Shemot 32:13). Sometimes He emphasized the Land more than the Nation, as in the *berit bein ha-betarim* (Bereishit 15).
- Yaakov's offspring multiplied in Egypt to become a nation of slaves, and were transformed to God's nation by the Exodus.

Why did they leave Egypt? To go to Israel (Devarim 6:23).[1]

- Many *mitzvot* involve life in Israel: agriculture, society, government, and the rituals of the *Beit Ha-Mikdash*. All the rest were meant to be experienced in Israel; we do them in exile to practice for our return.[2]

The root of all our nation's troubles—two exiles, the Inquisition, the Holocaust, pogroms, and our current tragedy—is our distance from the Land and its spiritual values. Another large chunk of the Torah is devoted to telling that story: When Moshe's failed spies stoked fear of the Canaanites, Israel the Nation spent the night of the ninth of Av crying to return to Egypt. Hashem's immediate response was to keep them in the desert for 40 years until a new generation was born, and the long-term repercussions were millennia of painful exile and torment (see Tehillim 106:24-27).[3] On that day, many years later, both *Batei Mikdash* were destroyed (*Sanhedrin* 104b; *Bamidbar Rabbah* 16:20).

These observations have nothing to do with religious Jews' various opinions about modern political Zionism. You can believe the State of Israel is the harbinger of *Mashiah*, the worst desecration of Hashem's name in history, or anything in between, but the fact remains: *there is no story of Israel the People disconnected from Israel the Land.*

Why a Land?

We might be so used to identifying the Nation with the Land that we never stop to wonder why they always go together. What would Judaism lack if we received the Torah on just any mountain - say, in the Sinai desert - and then returned to civilization (anywhere!) to live as good Jews? Indeed, we have been scattered everywhere for more than half of the 3,331 years since we received the Torah and we continue to survive. Why couldn't that always have been the plan? Why should spiritual beliefs be confined to borders of dirt and water? Doesn't Hashem transcend those confines?

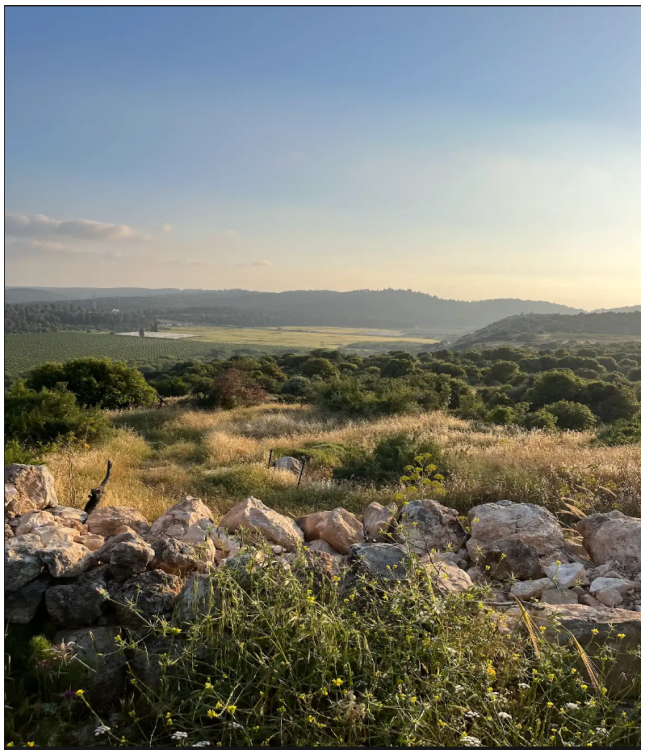
In this essay, I will present a simple yet profound answer to this question, based on the *Kuzari* and

[1] See also Ramban to Shemot 3:12, s.v. "va-yomer."

[2] See Rashi to Devarim 11:18, s.v. "ve-samtem et devarai"; Ramban to Vayikra 18:25, s.v. "va-titma ha-aretz."

[3] See Maharal, *Netzah Yisrael* ch. 8 s.v. "ve-ka'amar be-tet be-av."

the works of the Vilna Ga'on.



The view of the Elah Valley from Khirbet Qeiyafa, an ancient town dating back to the era of David and Golyat.

One Jewish Person

The Jewish nation is not a collective of many individuals who share a common history, philosophy, or set of morals. We are not even a nation in the regular sense of the term.

Hashem instructed Moshe to tell Pharaoh in His first message to the Egyptian king: "My firstborn son is Israel" (Shemot 4:22). The Jewish nation is as a single living human form—a "son"—that reaches farther and higher than any individual person can ever hope to reach with the individual's own limited mind and abilities. We—all of us together—know and emulate Hashem by learning and living His Torah. "Israel camped there, next to the mountain [of Sinai]—as one person, with one heart."[4]

Soul and Body

How exactly is Israel a single human life? It is easy to see how a unified nation possesses a common **soul**: nations and souls are metaphysical concepts that exist beyond the material world. To glimpse the oneness of Israel the Nation, just observe the love and support pouring out from Jews everywhere since the war that began on October 7, 2023.

But where is the **body** of Israel? It is great to have a common soul somewhere up in heaven, and to occasionally see its effects down here. But we are human people living inside physical bodies. Everything we do, for better or worse, happens in the material world.

For the Torah to guide Israel the Nation as one life, we must have a common body that we can see, touch, feel, and care for together.

That Body is the Land of Israel.

Israel the Nation breathes life into Israel the Land through living there by Hashem's will, as expressed in its special Torah laws. We give form

[4] Rashi to Shemot 19:2, s.v. "va-yihan sham Yisra'el."

and purpose to this little corner of the material world.

Israel the Nation also needs this material home where its spiritual ideals are grounded – literally! – in physical earth. The Land gives the Nation its body, an island of unity in a world of separation and conflict.

Death and Life

With many bumps, fits, and starts, this was the state of affairs for some 1,300 years, until the destruction of the Second *Beit Ha-Mikdash* sent everything crashing down in heaps of stones and buckets of tears that get higher and fuller every day.

The Jewish people today are scattered all over the world. We are also separate from each other in body, mind, and spirit, and unfathomably distant from oneness with God and His Torah. We cannot agree on how to serve the God of Israel, or even whether such a God exists for us to serve.

Without our unified body and soul, Israel's Nation and Land have lost their human form. One might almost say that Israel has died, which is the natural outcome of any soul leaving its body.

But we are not quite dead. Instead, as the *Kuzari* (2:34) explains, we are a terminally ill patient: the doctors have given up hope, yet we still hang on, trusting in a miracle. Like the dried bones of Yehezkel's vision (37:3) that returned to life, we too will return to our original human form.

Throughout all the exiles, we remain tethered to the Land: Jews all over the world live, pray, and die for it, and study its special laws. And in the past century, millions of Jews have returned to Israel, many for the purpose of finding Hashem there. While the fragmented pieces of Israel's soul search for their body, the body eagerly waits for its children's united revival and return.

The Anatomy of Israel

This perspective on the Land of Israel might sound strange. Israel is a land of earth and water: what is human about it? To understand Israel as a living, breathing body, we must expand our conception of body. Not every human body looks exactly like yours and mine, but they all share some common characteristics.

Anatomy textbooks teach that all human life processes happen in three vertically arranged cavities. Everything else protects and transports these three containers of life:

- The **cranial cavity** primarily holds the brain – life's management center that interprets stimuli from the environment, decides how to respond, and commands the relevant organs to act.

- The **thoracic cavity** holds the lungs and heart – the flow of life itself, constantly entering, exiting, and circulating. Here we experience the emotions and personality traits that originate from our brain's perceptions and reactions.

- The **abdominopelvic cavity** holds the digestive

and reproductive systems that sustain life and seek to live forever through offspring. There is no mind or heart here. This is the body of the body, so to speak: raw, visceral, sensual, instinctual, desirous.

Notice the differences between the cavities' location, colors, and texture:

· The **cranial cavity** contains one white organ that is as pure and mysterious as the consciousness it holds. It rises above the rest of the body, separated by the thin avenue we call the neck.

· Moving downwards, we first reach the **thoracic cavity**. The heart is a more complicated character: a single, life-holding organ - but red and bloody. Instead of one single king ruling from its cranial-cavity throne, here three musicians play together the symphony of life.

· Finally, we cross over the diaphragm, enter the **abdominopelvic cavity**, and cleanliness and simplicity disappear altogether. The many organs here grind and absorb food, churn out putrid waste, filter the blood, and send all the extras downward and outward.

The cranial and abdominopelvic cavities teach that human life is both simple and complicated, clean and messy, white and red, wisdom and desires. But life is not only a superficial dichotomy of disconnected, contradictory parts, because the independent thoracic cavity holds everything together in harmony.

The heart of life – literally! – mediates between the white pureness of wisdom and the blind darkness of instincts. Through the breath, heartbeat, and emotions, the brain and mind reach out and guide life's most remote reaches, directing our desires with balance and purpose. The body's anatomy thus reflects the anatomy of the soul.

Israel's Three Regions

According to the Vilna Ga'on,[5] the Land of Israel contains these three parts of human life in the three regions delineated by the Mishnah regarding different areas of Jewish law (*Shevi'it* 6:1, 9:2; *Bava Batra* 3:2).

· The land's **cranial cavity** holds Jerusalem: from there the divine presence – as expressed by the Temple service, Davidic kings, and the Sanhedrin - guided the entire country's Jewish life. The region surrounding Jerusalem is called Judah after the tribe that lived in most of Israel's southern half.

· The land's **thoracic cavity** is the windswept hills of the Galilee that breathe air and life into the land. The many Mishnaic and Talmudic Sages who

[5] *Aderet Eliyahu* to *Eikhah* 1:2, s.v. "kol rei'eha bagedu vah."

lived there, and later the brilliant Kabbalists of Safed, taught most of the Torah's Oral Tradition – the beating pulse of Jewish life on earth.

· *Ever Ha-Yarden*, the Transjordan, is Israel's stretched **diaphragm**, cleanly separating the brain and heart from Israel's **abdominopelvic cavity**. This region stretches across most of modern Jordan and large swaths of Iraq and Syria, ending at the Euphrates River.

Although most of *Ever Ha-Yarden* is not within the modern State of Israel, it is part of the biblical Land of Israel. Two-and-a-half of Israel's twelve tribes called it home (Bamidbar 32).[6] Yet it has always been regarded as secondary to the rest of the country, just as the **abdominopelvic cavity holds the lowest aspects of our lives**. For example, Moshe was forbidden to enter Israel proper - but conquered (and is buried in) *Ever Ha-Yarden*.

Altogether, Israel's body contains all three facets of human life, neatly arranged as in every human body. The message is clear: your Jewish identity is right here on earth, and reaches every area of your life: mind, feelings, and instincts. Do not run to heaven to find Hashem, for He is right here in Israel the Land.

Hashem chose an earthly people to be His nation, not angels in heaven. Just as the Nation of Israel will live forever, so too the precious Land of Israel will forever be the center of our story, the body of our soul.

A Halakhic Guide to Dealing with Mental Illness

Meir Ekstein is a rabbi, community activist, and the director of Tiferet Orot, a nonprofit organization dedicated to educational ventures in Israel.

A review of Yonatan Rosensweig and Shmuel Harris, *Nafshi BiShe'elati - The Halakhot of Mental Health* (Maggid books, 2025).[1]

Rabbi Yoni Rosensweig and Dr. Samuel Harris's Halakhic book, *Nafshi BiShe'elati - The Halakhot of Mental Health* has recently been translated into English from the Hebrew edition by Maggid press.

The book presents a comprehensive Halakhic treatment of mental illness, offering the first systematic approach to applying Jewish law to mental health issues. While a few articles have addressed some of these halakhic questions, this work stands out for its thoroughness and scope. The book's strengths and multidisciplinarity are reflected in the diverse and laudatory approbations (*haskamot*) it has received.

Rav Eliyahu Abargel praises its scholarship,

[6] To learn more about the three regions of biblical Israel and their boundaries, including the halakhic and spiritual status of *Ever Ha-Yarden*, see my book, *Land of Health: Israel's War for Wellness* (Menucha Publishers, 2024), ch. 4 and Appendix.

[1] Parenthetical citations refer to this volume.

summaries, and novel interpretations of rabbinic literature. Rav Baruch Gigi and Rav Eliezer Melamed emphasize its practical utility for issuing halakhic rulings for mentally ill individuals, noting R. Rosensweig's extensive consultations with contemporary poskim. Rav Re'em Hacohen and Rav Yuval Cherlow view the work as essentially developing a new area of Halakha, attributing the previous lack of such a treatise to recent advancements in psychiatric diagnoses and our more sophisticated understanding of psychology, genetics, and mental health treatment. In the English translation, there are additional approbations from Roshei Yeshiva at RIETS: Rabbi Michoel Rosensweig (the author's uncle), Rabbi Hershel Schachter, and Rabbi Mordechai Willig.

Nafshi Be-She'eilati is structured in three sections, with only the first two translated into English. The first part is a legal handbook, written in the style of guides like *Shemirat Shabbat Ke-hilkhatah*, which first lays out concepts such as *Shoteh* (mental incompetence) and addresses what the Halakhic obligations are for people suffering from mental illness. It addresses Halakhic attitudes to treatment and practical questions such as laws of prayer, rules for holidays, *kashrut*, family laws including *niddah*, obligations to parents, and gossip laws. Some examples of questions the book deals with are whether someone with OCD must pray, whether an anorexic patient must fast on fast days, and whether a depressed person can listen to music on Shabbat. The second section provides extensive annotations citing a wide range of Halakhic sources for each legal question and decision. The untranslated third section contains lengthy Halakhic discussions of critical sources along with R. Rosensweig's interpretations and innovations. There is also a survey of accounts of mental illness in rabbinic literature, and a comprehensive table and discussion that translates DSM-5 categories and risk factors for each mental illness into Halakhic categories.

The authors state that they wrote the book to help patients suffering from mental illness. R. Rosensweig hopes the book will further legitimize the suffering of mental health patients and their need for support, and Dr. Harris writes about helping rabbis provide Halakhic guidance and hopes that the book validates the suffering and destigmatizes the symptoms of mental illness. However, despite the book's virtues, one might wonder about its true contribution, given that many of its conclusions, for example that the principle of *Pikuach Nefesh* (preservation of life) overrides other commandments in mental health situations, seem intuitively obvious.

In his *Iggerot* (1:31), Hazon Ish points out that Halakhic decision-making involves two components: Halakhic principles and *metziut* (reality). He suggests that Halakhic principles, such as *Pikuach Nefesh*, are usually clear, with most questions arising in their application: what situations are defined as *Pikuach Nefesh*? R. Rosensweig's book clarifies the reality (*metziut*) of mental illness. What situations arise, and what are their implications? Mental illness presents a unique challenge: the Halakhic applications are underdeveloped, and the psychiatric realities are complex and vary by situation. This results in

ignorance of the dangers and realities of mental illness, compounded by the perplexing and uncertain prognosis in many cases. The book is therefore peppered with terminology from DSM-5, reflecting the latest diagnostic categories, and is accompanied by recent research on risk factors for various mental illnesses. In addition, the book cites extensively from the entire range of relevant rabbinic sources: the Talmud, sometimes-obscure Rishonim and Acharonim, the world of *She'eilot* and *Teshuvot*. Due to the relative scarcity of existing sources, R. Rosensweig includes consultations with present-day Halakhic experts as an additional source. The bi-focal view of *Halakha* and psychiatry is the successful outcome of a book written jointly by a rabbi and a psychiatrist.

R. Rosensweig's approach involves borrowing Halakhic principles from other areas and applying them to mental health realities. He maps the concepts of *Holeh she-ein bo sakana* (non-life-threatening illness), *Holeh she-yesh bo sakana* (life-threatening illness), and *Pikuach Nefesh* (preservation of life) to mental health contexts. By codifying how to deal with mental illness using Halakhic medical models, R. Rosensweig effectively treats mental health issues in a medical framework.

This shift moves away from a past inclination in general society to blame patients for their symptoms, which was reflected in the approach of some earlier *poskim* and Orthodox therapists. Past studies of Orthodox use of mental health services have described clients' fear of stigmatization and of feelings that they should overcome the problems themselves because the symptoms indicate moral weakness. Dr. Abraham Amsel, an early Orthodox therapist, in a representative passage, described mental illness as resulting from sin in the following manner: "A sin is associated with a spirit of madness because irrational choosing momentary pleasure instead of permanent good makes for the beginnings, the kernels of madness. Since the sinner had free choice at the start between good and evil, he is, of course, punishable."[2] R. Rosensweig (66) in his book writes that some early *poskim* saw psychotherapy as emphasizing "the anthropocentrism of treatment, at the expense of Judaism's Theocentrism and submission to God's will," also implying that psychotherapy can be a way of avoiding one's obligations.

The book is innovative in further developing Halakhic concepts related to preventative care and probabilistic risk assessment in mental health. For example, if a patient isn't suicidal at the moment but there is a chance they will be in the future, can one violate Shabbat to help prevent the patient from becoming suicidal soon? The book's overall orientation adamantly upholds the principles of *Pikuach Nefesh* (preservation of life) and sustaining well-being. However, it carefully balances this approach with the weight of

[2] Abraham Amsel, *Judaism and Psychology*, (Feldheim Press, 1969), 93.

Halakhic obligations, emphasizing that each case requires individual evaluation through professional and/or rabbinic consultation. This dual consultation helps determine whether a situation constitutes *Pikuach Nefesh* and whether relaxing religious obligations will aid treatment.

Regarding treatment, the book argues that, despite reservations of *poskim* in the past, patients should seek psychotherapy due to new developments and professionalism, adding that some p*oskim* even regard it as a Mitzvah. They offer broad guidelines including permitting behaviors normally discouraged, such as expressing anger, if they are therapeutic, while simultaneously upholding Torah obligations and values when it isn't therapeutically helpful, and in some cases limiting who an observant therapist should treat. They support a range of therapies leaving the details up to the decision of the professionals and the patient.

The written style of the book is also noteworthy. The guidebook format makes the Halakha accessible and user-friendly. However, this technical approach is less likely to engender empathy. A narrative approach presenting complex dilemmas, similar to those described on R. Rosensweig's Facebook page, might have enhanced its emotional impact. Perhaps a future edition of the book can add more rich real-life stories and their Halakhic resolution to illustrate some of its principles. However, and perhaps ironically, the familiar and straightforward procedural guidebook style helps normalize mental health challenges as illness and anchor them in a clear Halakhic language and framework.

Even though some of the conclusions are intuitively obvious, the significance of this work extends beyond serious Halakhic scholarship. Many rabbis have limited exposure to mental illness, and this book helps destigmatize and frame mental health issues within a medical model. It emphasizes the potential risks in mental health situations and therefore provides the basis for appropriate leniencies. It may also alleviate the concerns of Orthodox Jews who feel self-conscious, constrained, or guilty regarding their condition. Perhaps most importantly, as reflected in the approbations, the book's value lies as much in fostering a more empathic and understanding approach to mental illness among rabbis and Orthodox Jews as in its Halakhic innovations. The book excels in three areas: translating the reality of mental illness into Halakhic principles, clarifying the Halakhic obligations of patients with mental illness, and explicating the broad Halakhic areas where leniency may be appropriate.

Cultural understandings of mental illness have changed over time and have contributed to different assumptions and interpretations of its reality. We have seen a shift from a moralistic model of mental illness where the patient is at fault and all they require to improve is better willpower, to a medical model where the illness is externalized and the patient needs outside help such as medication, support, and therapy to overcome their sickness. We have also seen, in the past few decades in the Orthodox community, a

greater willingness to treat mental illness, reduced stigmatization of symptoms, and a greater awareness of the risks. This book reflects and catalyzes these trends by providing a Halakhic language for mental health challenges.

In conclusion, although the book's Halakhic decisions may seem intuitive to some, *Nafshi Be-she'eilati* contributes by systematically addressing the place of mental health challenges within a normative Halakhic framework. This allows for accessible practical guidance, but perhaps more significantly, plays a crucial role in shaping a more compassionate and informed approach to mental health in Orthodox Jewish communities. Despite the procedural language the book adopts, it reflects a Halakha that isn't limited to delineating what is permitted and prohibited; the book encourages and fosters values such as compassion, *hesed*, and caring for people's well-being and lives. In the same vein, R. Rosensweig, in addition to authoring this book, has become an address for psak Halakhah on mental health issues and founded an organization to train, educate, and sensitize rabbis to challenges of mental health and Halakha. Placing mental health patients at the forefront of this Halakhic caring is innovative, and is an important and necessary reminder of Halakha's underlying values.

Hearing the Shepherd from Tekoa

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Review of Yitzchak Etshalom, *Amos: The Genius of Prophetic Rhetoric*, Maggid Studies in Tanakh (Jerusalem: Maggid, 2025).

If you were looking for a single figure to encapsulate the biblical prophets, you could do worse than Amos of Tekoa, who inveighed against the northern kingdom of Israel in the eighth century BCE. Not for nothing is his book among the Bible's most quotable. Jews know well his withering clarification that Israel's chosenness is precisely why God "will hold [them] to account for all of [their] iniquities" (Amos 3:2).[1] On Sukkot, we effortlessly recite his assurance that God "will raise up David's fallen *sukkah*" (Amos 9:11) during *birkat ha-mazon*. For American Jews in particular, his demand (in God's voice) that "justice roll down like water, righteousness like a mighty stream" (Amos 5:24) reverberates in Martin Luther King Jr's legendary 1963 "I Have a Dream" speech. Indeed, King's friend Abraham Joshua Heschel deployed Amos as a paradigm at the beginning of his magnum opus, *The Prophets*: "The things that horrified the prophets are even now daily

[1] Translations of Amos are my own until midway through the review, at which point I begin using the translations offered in the volume under discussion.

occurrences all over the world. There is no society to which Amos' words would not apply."[2]

Yet if Amos comes down to us as a central, iconic figure, what is remarkable is how assiduously he himself renounces any such importance. In fact, he famously denies being a prophet (*navi*) at all. In the only third-person narrative scene in the book, he responds to threats from Amaziah, priest of Bethel, by declaring, "I am no *navi*, nor am I a *ben navi* [literally 'son of a *navi*'—probably a disciple of a prophetic guild]. Rather, I herd cattle; I pick figs. But Hashem took me from the flock and said to me, 'Prophesy [*hinnavei*] to my people Israel'" (Amos 7:14–15). Indeed, the very opening line of the book identifies him as "one of the shepherds [*nokedim*] of Tekoa" (Amos 1:1). Many of the prophets who boldly challenged the powers that be were themselves members of powerful groups—the court (e.g., Isaiah), clerical circles (e.g., Jeremiah and Ezekiel), etc. Amos was a farmer. Somehow, that farmer has come to embody biblical prophecy itself.

What should we make of this figure who is central yet marginal, this prophet who is not a prophet? This question drives the newest entry in the Maggid Studies in Tanakh series, *Amos: The Genius of Prophetic Rhetoric*, by Yitzchak Etshalom, a rabbi and educator based in Los Angeles. Etshalom argues that the key to reading the book of Amos is to recognize that *reading* is the wrong category. The name "Amos" refers most fundamentally not to a text but to a person, and that person's defining feature is that he *spoke*—in God's own voice, no less. This is signaled right from the opening: "He said [*va-yyomar*], "Hashem roars [*sha'ag*] from Zion, sounds His voice [*yittein kolo*] from Jerusalem" (Amos 1:2). Although Etshalom unconvincingly strains the syntax of *va-yyomar* to argue that Amos would say this regularly, his characterization of the line as an "anthem" (1–6)[3] accurately captures how it establishes not only the medium of the book but also a central part of its message: prophecy is speech. For this reason, Etshalom urges, the goal is not to *read* Amos. One does not read a roar. The goal is to *hear* Amos.

How does one hear what is now preserved only as writing? According to Etshalom, we must strive to read in such a way that transports us into the position of Amos's contemporaries. "In order to capture the impact of the prophet's words and to understand his lexical choice," he writes in the preface, "we have to put ourselves in the place of the 'primary audience,' that group of citizens, royalty, or aristocracy who were privy to the 'live' version of the speech" (x). As such, the task will be to leverage the full range of the Jewish tradition in order to achieve a kind of time travel: "Welcome to a stimulating journey to eighth-century BCE Samaria," Etshalom announces at the beginning of the book, "traveling the roads of the text-study

[2] Abraham Joshua Heschel, *The Prophets* (1955; repr., New York: HarperCollins, 2001), 3.

[3] All page numbers cited parenthetically refer to Etshalom's volume.

approaches developed by the rabbis of the classic period, with frequent visits to the academies of France, Spain, and Provence, and occasional pit-stops in the halls of modern academia" (ix).

Etshalom's reference to "occasional pit-stops in the halls of modern academia" undersells things significantly. True, he cites contemporary, historical-critical scholarship less frequently than classical midrash or medieval *peshat*. Nevertheless, the very terms of his inquiry are deeply indebted to modern biblical studies and, indeed, would be unthinkable without it. While premodern commentators (especially the medievals) were somewhat attentive to speech and voice, the idea of recovering the spoken environment is a legacy of nineteenth-century European Romanticism. This movement prioritized the recovery of pristine origins and celebrated spontaneous creative genius—sentiments that profoundly influenced early biblical studies, which took shape later that same century. Hermann Gunkel (1862–1932), the German Protestant scholar whose name is synonymous with the study of orality in ancient Israel, wrote,

> The prophets were not originally writers but speakers. Anyone who thinks of ink and paper while reading their writings is in error from the outset. "Hear!" is the way they begin their works, not "Read!" Above all, however, if contemporary readers wish to understand the prophets, they must entirely forget that the writings were collected in a sacred book centuries after the prophets' work. The contemporary reader must not read their words as portions of the Bible but must attempt to place them in the context of the life of the people of Israel in which they were first spoken.[4]

The affinities with Etshalom's orientation are obvious. Regardless of whether he himself is aware of this intellectual trajectory, he is playing by rules set only a century ago by scholars such as Gunkel. In fact, he seems to allow this when he (rightly) notes that, in some ways, "the twenty-first century student may be in a better position to fully appreciate the import of the biblical text than his or her forebears" (ix–x). Despite Etshalom's rootedness in the tradition, his project is characteristically modern.

For Gunkel and others like him, the goal of studying biblical orality was to separate the oldest kernels of speech from later redactional supplementation. This involved a value-laden (and frequently antisemitic) characterization of the former as authentic and inspired, the latter as inauthentic and derivative. It should be obvious that, as an Orthodox rabbi writing for an Orthodox readership, Etshalom does not share this goal or

[4] Hermann Gunkel, "The Prophets as Writers and Poets," in *Prophecy in Israel*, ed. David L. Petersen (Philadelphia and London: Fortress and SPCK, 1987), 24.

its underlying premises. While he acknowledges that Amos's oracles might not have been recorded in precise chronological order (e.g., 127), he assumes that there really was a shepherd from Tekoa who said all of these things at God's command in eighth-century Israel. The book of Amos as a whole, not just individual passages deemed "authentic," is a faithful record of this prophet's words.

As it turns out, Etshalom is less remote from contemporary critical scholarship here than one might imagine. True, basically no Bible scholars, including me, seriously think that the historical Amos of Tekoa (if he existed) said everything attributed to him. However, we also typically reject the approach represented by Gunkel, whose methodological premises are unsustainable in view of new historical evidence. While I, for my part, understand the book of Amos to be a compilation of oracles with long, complex histories, I do not separate them into "authentic" versus "inauthentic." Rather, I see their integration as a creative scribal process that produced an emergent portrait of the prophet named Amos—one that is remarkably consistent even as the book still shows signs of authorial disunity. In the end, this is not *so* different from Etshalom. Both of us are interested in hearing Amos. When he says "Amos," he means a historical individual who spoke in the world; when I say "Amos," I mean a literary character who speaks in the text. But we might well hear the same things nonetheless.

Like many entries in Maggid Studies in Tanakh, Etshalom's *Amos* follows the order of the biblical text rather than proceeding thematically or synthetically. What is somewhat unusual against the backdrop of the series is the level of detail here. While the book of Amos itself is a mere 146 verses, Etshalom's study is over 400 pages. This works out to about three pages per verse. (Incredibly, in the acknowledgments, Etshalom states that an earlier draft was twice as long [xiii].) Contrast this with, for example, Tova Ganzel's (outstanding) recent Maggid volume on Ezekiel, which is one hundred pages shorter for nearly ten times as many verses—about a quarter of a page per verse.[5] As a result, Etshalom's book functions more as a commentary than a monograph. Unlike some other volumes in the series, this one is probably best read while sitting in the beit midrash with a Tanakh open in front of you, not while kicking back on the couch during a long Shabbat afternoon.

To get a sense of Etshalom's detailed exegesis, we can consider a few brief case studies. For each, I will provide Etshalom's own translation. The first is one of Amos's most stirring condemnations of Israel's socioeconomic injustice:

For their selling a *tzaddik* [i.e.,

[5] Tova Ganzel, *Ezekiel: From Destruction to Restoration*, trans. Kaeren Fish, Maggid Studies in Tanakh (Jerusalem: Maggid, 2020).

> innocent person] for silver, and the needy for (a pair of) shoes [*na'alayim*] (Amos 2:6b).

While the basic thrust here is clear enough, its precise meaning is not. Etshalom rightly dwells on it, devoting nearly five pages (65–70) to what is actually just half a verse. Drawing on a 2012 article by Avi Shveka in one of the leading journals of historical-critical biblical studies, Etshalom explains the unintuitive parallelism of silver and shoes with reference to ancient Near Eastern laws regarding the extradition of runaway slaves to their masters.[6] Amos, he argues, rejects this practice as unjust (cf. Deut 23:16–17).

Etshalom gives little attention to the main alternative interpretation proposed in the scholarly literature: that the oracle refers to judicial corruption. This involves reading the word *na'alayim* not as "shoes" but as a misvocalization of a term for bribery derived from "hide," "avert" (*alam*). This notion is perhaps supported by Samuel's insistence that he never took bribes (I Sam 12:3). Personally, I think it deserves more of a hearing. Yet even if we grant that Etshalom is correct to follow Shveka, I was surprised that he says nothing about what strikes me as the latter's most interesting conclusion: that Amos's engagement with the ancient extradition laws serves to condemn the whole society for enabling the institution of debt slavery in the first place.[7] This would be about as close as a biblical prophet comes to what we would today call a "systemic" critique. Given Etshalom's interest in rhetoric, this omission is a missed opportunity. If Shveka is right, his reading has obvious and important ramifications for just how subversive this oracle would have *sounded* to Amos's audience, implicating all of them.

Such quibbles notwithstanding, Etshalom's discussion of this passage is a good model of what constructive Orthodox engagement with historical-critical biblical studies might look like. He has meaningfully learned from an interesting, important study and "translated" it effectively for Maggid readers. He states without apology or fanfare that "the solution [to the exegetical problems] may lie in ancient Near Eastern texts" (67) and then cites these texts directly. Moreover, he does so (mostly) without falling into the common trap of focusing only on the Bible's differences from—and alleged superiority over—the cognate texts.

For a second case study, let us turn to what is perhaps the single most famous oracle in Amos: his condemnation of worship in the absence of social justice, featuring the line that King so powerfully quoted. God screams,

> I hate, I despise your feasts [*saneiti ma'asti hageikhem*], and I take no

[6] Avi Shveka, "'For a Pair of Shoes': A New Light on an Obscure Verse in Amos' Prophecy," *Vetus Testamentum* 62 (2012): 95–114.

[7] Shveka, "Pair of Shoes," 109.

> delight in your solemn assemblies [*ve-lo ariah be-atzroteikhem*]. Even though you offer Me [*li*] your burnt offerings and cereal offerings [*u-minhoteikhem*], I will not accept them [*lo ertzeh*], and the peace offerings of your fatted beasts [*meri'eikhem*] I will not look upon [*lo abit*]. Take away from Me [*mei-alai*] the noise of your songs [*shirekha*]; to the melody of your harps [*nevalekha*] I will not listen [*lo eshma*]. But let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream. Did you bring to Me [*li*] sacrifices and offerings the forty years in the wilderness, O house of Israel? You shall take up Sikkut your king [*malkekhem*], and Kiyun your star-gods [*eloheikhem*], your images [*tzalmeikhem*], which you made for yourselves [*asitem la-khem*]; therefore I will take you into exile [*ve-higleiti*] beyond Damascus, says the Lord, whose name is the God of Hosts (Amos 5:21–27).

Etshalom begins by distinguishing between "hate" (*san'ei*) and "despise" (*ma'as*) in the first verse: the former is relative, the latter absolute (235). This is philologically questionable and, in any case, misses the point. The repetition poetically conveys how God is overcome with fury, as if searching (in vain) for a word that might fully capture the extent. "The opening pair of words seems repetitive," as Etshalom puts it, because it *is* repetitive. That is its function. Again, in a study that centers rhetoric, it is strange that Etshalom obscures such an important rhetorical effect.

Although Etshalom gets off to a rocky start, he emphatically sticks the landing. Considering the passage as a whole, he notes how it juxtaposes (a) first-person singular verbs with God as the subject; and (b) second-person plural possessive suffixes, referring to Israel, on words relating to various aspects of worship (sacrifices, songs, etc.). He explains,

> This interplay between "Me" and "you" (or "you all") may hold the key to understanding the oracle's structural wisdom and underlying historical message. … God's rejection of the people's offerings means that they *have* been worshipping Him; He cannot reject an offering that was not offered up to Him. Even so, these offerings are considered *your* offerings; God wants nothing to do with them because they are meaningless. … God is rejecting Samaria's *legitimate* worship because their society is corrupted with moral depravity that poisons the core of true "devotion" (249).

Few interpreters would dispute the theological point that Etshalom capably summarizes in the last line. His real contribution, however, is in observing how this point is *rhetorically* conveyed.

The juxtaposition of first-person singular and second-person plural endows the oracle with a discernible rhythm, alternating between the sounds associated with these forms (especially *ti* for the former and *khem* for the latter). The result is that, on the very level of style, apart from the direct substance, it conveys the distance between Israel's worship and the God to which that worship is ostensibly devoted. This truly is "the genius of prophetic rhetoric" in action, and it is one of Etshalom's most astute readings in the book.

As a final case study, we may look at the passage that I mentioned by way of introduction: Amos's account of his prophetic status (or lack thereof) in his confrontation with Amaziah. As I noted, this is the book's only third-person narrative. It reads,

> Then Amaziah the priest of Beit El sent to Jeroboam king of Israel, saying: Amos has conspired against you in the midst of the house of Israel; the land is unable to bear all his words. For thus Amos has said [*koh amar Amos*]: Jeroboam shall die by the sword, and Israel shall surely be led away captive out of his land. Then Amaziah said to Amos: Go, you seer, flee to the land of Judah, and there eat bread, and prophesy there; but never again prophesy at Beit El, for it is the king's sanctuary, and it is a royal house. Then Amos answered, and said to Amaziah: I am not a prophet, neither am I a prophet's son; but I was a herdsman, and a dresser of sycamore trees; and the Lord took me from following the flock, and the Lord said to me: Go, prophesy to My people Israel. Now therefore hear the word of the Lord: You say: Do not prophesy against Israel, and do not preach against the house of Isaac. Therefore, *ko*[*h*] *amar Hashem*: Your wife will be a harlot in the city, and your sons and your daughters will fall by the sword, and your land will be divided by the survey line. And you yourself will die in an unclean land, and Israel will surely be led away captive out of his land (Amos 7:10–17).

Etshalom correctly and lucidly draws the important connection between Amos's counterintuitive denial to be a prophet and his insistence that he has a far more mundane occupation:

> He is not part of a professional guild of prophets, nor is he a prophet by vocation. … He is not part of the scholastic or ascetic class, but rather a "regular person." … Amos's words are not his own—they are God's words, a divine message, ignored at one's own peril. … Amos was *sent*; he did not go of his own volition. When Amaziah tells him to "go," this

> assumes that Amos chose to come and may now choose to go. This is not the case (327–28).

Amos's humble origins are not in tension with his emergence as the quintessential prophet. They are the key to the whole thing: it is precisely because Amos is, sociologically speaking, such an unexpected vessel of the divine word that he may deliver it so effectively. How could we understand such brilliant and devastating oratory from a "regular person" if not as an authentic expression of the divine roar? This is why prophecy is so subversive: God's voice is not constrained by social class.

Etshalom nicely calls attention to Amaziah's characterization of the prophet's speech as "thus has Amos said" (*koh amar Amos*). Given the stereotypical use of this phrase to introduce divine speech—a formula inherited from ancient Near Eastern epistolary convention—he is surely right that this is a subtle but significant charge of inauthenticity: "Amos said this, not God." Etshalom's observation would have been even stronger had he connected it with the prophet's subsequent use of the *expected* formula, "thus has Hashem said" (*koh amar Hashem*). Etshalom rightly notes its superfluousness midway through the oracle (332) but does not mention that it directly inverts the priest's implicit accusation. This inversion carries rhetorical force, asserting authenticity by reclaiming the oratorical convention that has been deployed against him.

Something that limits Etshalom's analysis here is his inattention to ancient Near Eastern evidence regarding the complex political dynamics between prophecy and other authority structures. He starts off promisingly, intuiting that there might be some distance between priest and king: "Perhaps Amaziah's message to the king is tinged with hysteria and exaggerated in order to spur the king to action against Amos" (323). Amaziah does not simply represent authority; he is also himself beholden to it. But Etshalom drops this theme, with consequences for his discussion of the rhetoric: he misses that Amaziah is also deploying rhetorical strategy, emphasizing how a challenge to the cult at Bethel is, more fundamentally, a challenge to the king himself (Amos 7:13). To be clear, Amos *is* targeting both. "Church" and "state" were not sharply distinct in his world—but neither were they identical, and Amaziah's blurring of the differences is a power play that is central to what this passage is about. The ancient Near Eastern evidence helps to clarify these dynamics.[8]

These three case studies are, I trust, sufficient to give a sense of Etshalom's approach. While I disagree with this or that claim, his interpretation is careful, insightful, deeply grounded in tradition, and admirably open to contemporary scholarship. That said, I do have questions about whether this

[8] See, e.g., J. Blake Couey, "Amos vii 10–17 and Royal Attitudes toward Prophecy in the Ancient Near East," *Vetus Testamentum* 58 (2008): 300–14.

ultimately accomplishes his stated goal of, as cited above, "fully appreciat[ing] the import of the biblical text." At times, his impressively detailed exegesis actually seems to be at cross-purposes with that goal. While I would not go so far as to say that Etshalom has missed the forest for the trees, his line-by-line analysis does not zoom out as often or as clearly as would have been necessary to keep the prophet's overall message in view. As a result, I reached the end of his book feeling like I had certainly *read* Amos but unsure of whether I had *heard* him.

One way that Etshalom might have avoided this problem would have been to write a more substantive introduction (his is less than ten pages) or to include an integrative essay at the end of each chapter. If length was an obstacle—as, per Etshalom's acknowledgments, it apparently was—then I believe that it would have been worth it to trim some of the exegetical detail in exchange for the space necessary to offer more of a bird's eye view. The book would have greater potential impact if it more evenly integrated the commentary and monograph genres rather than leaning so heavily toward the former.

Something else that could have helped Etshalom would be engagement with Heschel's aforementioned discussion of Amos in *The Prophets*. In a mere fifteen pages, Heschel offers what is, in my opinion, the only scholarly analysis that comes close to channeling Amos's voice.[9] He does so in part because he takes the opposite approach to Etshalom, eschewing fine-tuned, sequential exegesis in favor of sweeping, thematic synthesis. While I am certainly not saying that Etshalom should have rewritten Heschel's book, I do think that he would benefitted from engaging it. As it stands, however, he does not cite it even once (as far as I can tell). One might defend this by noting that Heschel is outside the Orthodox fold. Yet this is unconvincing, as we are currently witnessing a remarkable Modern Orthodox "discovery" of Heschel.[10] Indeed, his magisterial *Torah Min Ha-Shamayim* was recently reissued by none other than Maggid.[11] A twenty-first-century Jewish study of Amos simply *must* draw on Heschel's *The Prophets*. It is the modern foundation for the entire conversation.

Despite my criticisms, Yitzchak Etshalom's *Amos: The Genius of Prophetic Rhetoric* is, in the final analysis, a learned study and a strong new entry in the Maggid Studies in Tanakh series. I recommend it to readers who hope to pursue deeper learning in Amos (or the Trei Asar in general) and are seeking a companion volume that incorporates a broad range of interpretive tools within an Orthodox framework. I think they will find that even if Etshalom does not ultimately recreate the divine roar itself, his analysis may still attune their ears to the whisper of what he aptly calls "the

[9] Heschel, *Prophets*, 32–46.

[10] See especially Dr. Dror Bondi's work.

[11] Abraham Joshua Heschel, *Heavenly Torah as Refracted Through the Generations*, 2 vols., Heb. (1973; repr., Jerusalem: Maggid, 2021).

eternal messages of this time-bound yet timeless prophetic text" (xxiii).

Teaching Israel and Jewish History Post-October 7: A Values Proposition

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My friend Hillel Rapp's recent reflections on the shifting landscape of Israel education in Modern Orthodox schools raise important, urgent, and necessary questions about how we teach the history of Israel, and in a larger sense Jewish history, in the wake of October 7. His analysis forces us to confront a fundamental tension: how do we maintain academic and historical honesty while also fortifying Jewish identity in a time of increasing external hostility? As someone deeply engaged in the Modern Orthodox Yeshiva day school world, I take seriously, as we all should, the challenge he presents. As Rapp notes, the past decades have seen a move toward nuance and critical engagement in Israel education, but given today's realities, we need to ask whether the emphasis on complexity has come at the cost of clarity, and whether the framework of dual narratives has truly served our students in the long term.

While my reflections here are rooted in the Yeshiva day school educational context, the issues at stake extend far beyond it. Jewish education has always been a values proposition, and the events of October 7 only underscore the necessity of reaffirming this reality. What we teach, how we teach, why we teach, and how we structure our curricula must be shaped by the values we seek to instill. Our task as educators is not merely to present narrative or history but to ensure that history serves as a foundation for identity, resilience, and communal responsibility. Where Rapp leaves the question of next steps largely unanswered, I offer my own reflections and path forward grounded in a simple proposition - that an inward-facing, values-driven approach must now be at the center of Jewish history and Israel education. In the wake of October 7, Jewish educators writ large face a stark reality: our teaching is not, nor has it ever been, neutral. The way we teach Israel and Jewish history is inherently a values proposition—a reflection of what we hold dear, what we want our students to internalize, and how we see their place in the Jewish world. This moment demands that we ensure our curriculum is rooted in the values that will guide our students as they navigate an increasingly complex and often hostile world.

Jewish history education has always been about more than just the past. It is about identity formation, the transmission of values, and the cultivation of a moral and communal consciousness. Jewish history is not merely a collection of facts or a detached academic discipline; it is a living narrative, one that informs our sense of self and shapes our collective future. The stories we tell, the figures we emphasize, and the lessons we extract from history are not arbitrary choices but deliberate reflections of

what we believe matters most. Whether we choose to focus on resilience, ethical responsibility, communal solidarity, engagement with the other, or matters and development of faith, we are making a statement about the kind of Jewish identity we hope to instill in our students.

For decades, many Jewish schools and educators sought to balance the teaching of history as both an academic discipline and a tool for identity formation.[1] The prevailing assumption was that Jewish history - the history of Israel included - could be taught with the same academic rigor as other subjects while also serving as a means of reinforcing communal and religious identity. This balance has always been delicate, but the events of October 7 have thrown it into sharp relief. If there was once an impulse to embrace dual narratives or to frame Israel education through the lens of competing historical perspectives, that impulse now feels increasingly misaligned with our core educational mission. The current reality in public discourse is not one of academic or historical debate, but of ideological warfare in which Jews and Israel are cast as a settler-colonial state with no right to exist. Many students now experience their public and private identities as Jews and Zionists not as an intellectual position or religious belief but as a moral litmus test, where they must either declare allegiance or attempt to remain unseen. At a time when our students are being bombarded with external narratives that seek to undermine their sense of self, our responsibility is to fortify them with deep and meaningful convictions that foster identity formation and growth.

This imperative forces us to confront a fundamental tension between academic history and a values-driven curriculum. Academic history, by its nature, demands objectivity and critical analysis.[2] It calls for a rigorous examination of sources, a skeptical stance towards dominant narratives, and a commitment to uncovering historical truths, even when they complicate communal memory. By contrast, a values-driven approach to Jewish history is not merely about scholarly inquiry; it is about shaping a worldview, instilling moral clarity, and providing students with the tools to understand their place within the Jewish story. It is an education that seeks not just to inform but to inspire, not just to analyze but to

[1] Hillel David Rapp, “Considering The Changing Landscape in Modern Orthodox Israel Education,” The Lehrhaus, February 4, 2025, https://thelehrhaus.com/commentary/considering-the-changing-landscape-in-modern-orthodox-israel-education/.

[2] Contrast this with Gaddis: "For if you think of the past as a landscape, then history is the way we represent it, and it’s that act of representation that lifts us above the familiar to let us experience vicariously what we can’t experience directly: a wider view." John Lewis Gaddis, *The Landscape of History: How Historians Map the Past*, Oxford University Press, 2004. See also the perspective offered by GR Elton: "The task of history is to understand the past, and if the past is to be understood it must be given full respect in its own right. And unless it is properly understood, any use of it in the present must be suspect and can be dangerous." John Tosh, *Historians on History* (Routledge, 2017).

affirm.

How do we reconcile these two approaches, especially when their objectives seem to diverge or even conflict? Ostensibly, by recognizing that history education, in any form, is never truly neutral. Every historian operates with a set of assumptions and priorities, every curriculum is shaped by the perspectives of those who design it, and every classroom discussion is influenced by the implicit values of the teacher. Rather than pretending that we can teach Jewish history with detached objectivity, we must embrace the reality that our teaching is always framed by the varying and at times disparate commitments we hold. That does not mean abandoning rigor or critical thinking. On the contrary, it means ensuring that our students engage with history in a way that is intellectually honest while also being rooted in a deep sense of identity and purpose.[3]

This question of balance becomes even more urgent when we turn to Israel education. In recent decades, Jewish schools, as noted by Rapp, particularly modern orthodox schools, sought to teach Israel through a framework that emphasized complexity and competing narratives.[4] This approach, often rooted in the belief that exposure to multiple perspectives would foster critical thinking, was seen as a way to prepare students for engagement with broader intellectual and political discourse, particularly on college campuses. By exposing them to various accounts of historical events and encouraging open-mindedness, educators aimed to foster empathy, develop critical thinking skills, and cultivate a readiness for respectful dialogue.

But October 7 shattered the illusion that balanced narratives were a sufficient foundation for Israel education.[5] The focus on duality, however well-intentioned, has come at a cost. In striving to engage other viewpoints with intellectual honesty, the formal classroom curriculum often relegated to the periphery the vital task of cultivating a deep, self-assured sense of Jewish identity. The meaning and significance of Zionism (widely conceived but often religious Zionism for modern orthodox schools) were in many cases not explored with the same level of intensity and introspection as the opposing narratives. As a result, students learned to see Israel through multiple lenses but did not always gain the firm grounding necessary to withstand both external challenges and personal doubts. The events of October 7 exposed the fragility of this approach, highlighting a pressing need to ensure that our students not only understand other perspectives but also possess a robust grasp of their own heritage, moral imperatives, and responsibilities

[3] Yehuda Kurtzer. *Shuva: The Future of the Jewish Past*. UPNE, 2012.

[4] Sivan Zakai and Matt Reingold, *Teaching Israel: Studies of Pedagogy from the Field* (Brandeis University Press, 2024).

[5] Ammiel Hirsch, "It Is Still October 7," accessed February 28, 2025, https://sapirjournal.org/friends-and-foes/2024/03/it-is-still-october-7/

to the Jewish people.

If Jewish history education is about instilling values from our past for our present, then Israel education must be about fostering commitment.[6] The purpose of teaching about Israel is not to leave students questioning its legitimacy but to ensure that they emerge from our classrooms with a deep, unwavering sense of connection. This does not mean ignoring difficult questions, shielding students from complexity or burying the past. But it does mean that we must be intentional about our priorities. Before our students can engage with alternative narratives, they must first have a firm grasp and understanding of their own. Before they can debate Israel's challenges, they must internalize the meaning and reality that its existence is a miracle, its survival a triumph, and its defense a sacred responsibility.

October 7 reinforced what many have long suspected: the world does not see Jewish history as we do, and it is our responsibility to teach it from within, not from the outside looking in. More than ever, we must be deliberate about the values we choose to emphasize, the narratives we prioritize, and the sense of identity we cultivate in our students. This is not a rejection of academic rigor. It is an assertion that Jewish education is, first and foremost, about strengthening Jewish identity, commitment, and resilience. It is about ensuring that when our students learn about Jewish history and Israel, they do so with the clarity of conviction, the strength of purpose, and the deep awareness that they are part of something greater than themselves.

But when we get down to it, what are these values we look to instill, to serve at the heart of our Israel and Jewish history education?

At the heart of this values-driven approach is a deep and unshakable commitment to Jewish peoplehood. For generations, Jews have understood themselves not simply as individuals practicing a private faith, but as members of a collective—a nation, a family, a people bound together by shared memory, shared destiny, and shared responsibility. Today, as our students witness a surge in antisemitism and a coordinated assault on Israel's legitimacy, this value must be reasserted with even greater force. They must understand that their connection to the Jewish people is not conditional, not situational, but an inheritance that comes with both privileges and obligations.

Integral to this identity is the relationship between Jews and the Land of Israel. The connection between the Jewish people and *Eretz Yisrael* is not merely political, but historical, religious, and existential. It is a relationship that predates modern Zionism by millennia, embedded in Jewish texts, practice, and consciousness. The rebirth of Jewish sovereignty in the land is not just an accident of history; it is the fulfillment of a

[6] Barry Chazan, *A Philosophy of Israel Education: A Relational Approach* (Springer, 2016).

national longing that has sustained Jewish life in exile for generations. Students must be taught to understand that Israel is not simply a place Jews happen to live, but a central pillar of Jewish identity itself.

Jewish history also teaches a lesson that is particularly urgent today: resilience, *Netzach Yisrael*. The story of Jewish history is not simply one of persecution, but of extraordinary achievement in the face of adversity. When our students learn about the Jewish past, they must see themselves as part of a chain that has withstood and transcended the challenges of every era. Their role is not just to remember, but to carry that story forward.

But resilience alone is not enough. Jewish history education and Israel education must also cultivate moral clarity—the ability to differentiate between right and wrong, between legitimate criticism and ideological attack, between self-defense and aggression. The events of October 7 have shown just how dangerous moral equivocation can be, particularly in an age of social media. Jewish students must be equipped with a framework that allows them to see through false narratives and stand firm in their convictions. This does not mean rejecting critical inquiry; rather, it means recognizing that certain ideas—justice, self-preservation, and the right of the Jewish people to their homeland—are non-negotiable.

At the same time, a values-driven education must be intellectually rigorous. Students must be taught to engage critically with history—not as passive recipients of a predetermined narrative, but as thinkers capable of grappling with complexity while remaining anchored in their identity. This means learning to differentiate between historical facts and ideological distortions, between genuine moral dilemmas and manipulative rhetoric. It means ensuring that students are not just emotionally connected to Israel and Jewish history, but also intellectually prepared to defend them.

Finally, perhaps the most important value we must cultivate today is a sense of responsibility. Jewish history is not something that happens to other people; it is something that each generation has the responsibility to carry forward.[7] Our students are not just inheritors of the Jewish story—they are its next authors.

These values must form the foundation of Jewish history and Israel education today. In an era where Jewish identity is under attack, our schools cannot simply provide knowledge; they must provide conviction. The world is trying to tell our students who they should be. It is our job, as educators, to ensure that they have the strength, the

[7] Kurtzer, *Shuva: The Future of the Jewish Past*; Amos Funkenstein, *Perceptions of Jewish History* (University of California Press, 2023); Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi, *Zakhor: Jewish History and Jewish Memory* (University of Washington Press, 2011).

confidence, and the clarity to reject those pressures and stand firmly as Jews, rooted in their history and ready to shape the future. Now is the time to double down on identity formation, to teach with conviction grounded in values, and to shape a generation that knows who they are and stands proudly in that knowledge. If Jewish history and Israel education are values propositions, then we must embrace that reality with confidence, ensuring that our students emerge not just informed but inspired, not just knowledgeable but committed. The events of October 7 have made this responsibility clearer than ever. The question is whether we will rise to meet it.