

THE OU WOMEN'S INITIATIVE IS PROUD TO PRESENT:


— TISHREI ESSAY COLLECTION —

IDEAS
& *inspiration*

5786

Ripples of Relationships





In loving memory of our beloved parents, Dr. Manfred Raphael and Sara Anne Lehmann,
and Jacob and Rose Siegel, and in memory of all who have perished in defense of Am Yisrael.

With our fervent *tefillot* for HaKadosh Baruch Hu's bestowing merciful *shalom* and
refuah sheleimah of all Am Yisrael.

Sponsored by Yitzchok and Barbie Lehmann Siegel

In honor of Danny and Audrey's first anniversary.

In honor of Jenny and Aari's 17th anniversary.

In honor of Jonathan and Larah's 22nd anniversary.

Sponsored by Anne and Mitchell Kirschner

In loving memory of our fathers,

Tzvi Elimelech Klein a"h

Chaim Aryeh Mermelstein a"h

Sponsored by Moshe and Doreen Mermelstein

In honor of the women in our family who impart love and wisdom to their children, grandchildren,
great-grandchildren, and great-great-grandchildren:

Savta Clare Muschel

Bubby Chana Kornwasser

Savta Suzanne Weilgus



A message from
REBBETZIN DR. ADINA SHMIDMAN
Director, OU Women's Initiative

בס"ד

Tishrei is a month filled with sacred sounds and symbols—the cry of the shofar, the white of Yom Kippur, the shade of the *sukkah*, the joy of the *lulav*, the dance of Simchat Torah. But beneath each experience lies something deeper: a call to create relationships.

This season beckons us not only to return to Hashem but to reconnect with one another, with ourselves, and even with the spaces we inhabit. At the heart of this journey is a single question: How do we relate—truly and deeply—to the world around us?

The Hebrew word for connection, קשר, offers a nuanced reflection on what it means to stay connected. Its letters—ק, ר, and ש—are not sequential, not in “order,” and yet they sit side by side in the *alef-bet*. The word itself models what connection can look like: not perfect alignment, not identical direction, but a closeness and the decision to remain near. In a world that often feels fragmented, קשר reminds us that being beside one another with openness and intention is holy work.

This year's booklet explores the theme of relationships. Each essay focuses on a key Torah concept from this time period and draws it into the realm of relationships—with Hashem, others, self, and even possessions. Our hope is that these reflections open new pathways of ideas and inspiration as you enter this sacred time. May the messages within these pages inspire deeper connections and help us all strengthen the ties that matter most.

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May the sounds and symbols of Tishrei echo through our year—drawing us closer to Hashem, to one another, and to the people we are meant to become.

Kesiva V'Chasima Tova,

Rebbetzin Dr. Adina Shmidman
Director, OU Women's Initiative



Transliterations in this publication are based on Sephardic or Ashkenazic pronunciation according to authors' preferences.

This essay collection contains divrei Torah, and should therefore be disposed of respectfully by either double-wrapping prior to disposal, or placing in a recycling bin.



Ripples of Relationships

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מלכויות

Relating to Hashem and His Royalty

By Mrs. Tali Pfeiffer

It's the word we say over and over again throughout Rosh Hashanah davening: *Melech*. King. We say it, we sing it, we declare it. But do we understand what we're saying? Kings wear velvet robes, sit on golden thrones, issue decrees with the wave of a scepter, and command armies from afar. The Gemara tells us that "the earthly kingdom resembles the Heavenly Kingdom" (*Berachos* 58a). In previous generations, we were able to use the image of a human king as a point of reference. Nowadays, it has become much harder for us to grasp what it means to crown Hashem as "King."

Chazal tell us: "The king among the wild animals is the lion. The king among the domesticated animals is the ox" (*Chagigah* 13b). It's easy for us to understand why the lion is the king of the wild animals. He is big and strong, and his loud roar chases all the other animals away. But why is the ox the king of the domesticated animals? Does the ox "reign" over them?


Rav Shimshon Dovid Pincus in *Moadei Hashanah* explains that everything in the world possesses a unique defining quality. "*Malchus*" is the point at which this characteristic reaches its fullest expression. The ox is the king of the domesticated animals precisely because it embodies domestication and is devoid of all wild qualities. For humans, our defining characteristic is life itself. When we declare Hashem as our King, we affirm that true life, life in its highest form, is only possible when Hashem is the focal point of our lives.

This is indeed the goal of the creation of mankind. Rashi explains that the day that man was created is the day that Creation was completed. There was finally a creature able to declare the greatness of his Creator. This is why the *Levi'im* sang "Hashem has reigned; He has dressed in pride" in the Beis Hamikdash on the sixth day of the week, the day man was created. Since Rosh Hashanah is the day that man was created, we have the opportunity to remind ourselves of this goal each year.

Rav Sa'adia Gaon, in his *siddur*, gives ten reasons why we blow the *shofar* on Rosh Hashanah. The first reason relates to Rosh Hashanah as a day where we commemorate Creation. The same way that kings have trumpets and horns blown to announce the beginning of their reign, we sound the *shofar* to crown Hashem as King.

But why is it that blowing the *shofar* signifies the coronation of a king and of Hashem? Rav Avraham Tzvi Kluger, in *Otchah Avakesh*, explains that Hashem gave life to man by blowing into his nostrils. Every breath man takes is a direct continuation of that initial breath that Hashem blew into Adam. When we blow horns and trumpets at the coronation of a king, we demonstrate that we use the breath in our life for his honor. When we blow the *shofar*, we show our dedication to Hashem. On Rosh Hashanah, when we blow the *shofar*, we effectively proclaim that the life Hashem gave us is dedicated to His service. We don't simply pray for life; we ask for a life that is *lema'anacha Elokim Chayim*—a life devoted to You, Hashem, the true Source of all life.

When we take a step back, the task of crowning Hashem as King over the entire world feels like a daunting task for one individual. Can "little me" really crown Hashem as King over the WHOLE world? Does my "*hamlachs Hashem*" really make an impact?



Rav Meizlish, in his sefer *Sichos B'Avodas Hashem*, quotes an idea from the Sfas Emes and then offers a *mashal* to reinforce the point. The Sfas Emes explains that when we accept Hashem as King, our main goal is to focus on our own selves. Each person is a world unto himself, and therefore, the success of the *klal* is dependent on the success of each individual. Accepting Hashem as King in our lives impacts Hashem's Kingdom in the world at large!

Rav Meizlish explains this concept with a *mashal*. There was once a father who needed to go through a big pile of mail. One of his young children came in and started to ask questions about each letter. The father realized that there was no way he could do his work like this. He had an idea. He took a piece of paper from the table that had a map of the world on it. He ripped the paper into pieces and turned to his son with a challenge.

"Go and put together all the pieces of the map, like a puzzle! I can't wait to see what it looks like when you finish!"

He figured this would keep his son busy for a few hours so he could get his work done without being interrupted. After all, his son had to figure out where to place each country on a very detailed map of the world. Finally, some peace and quiet.

Five minutes later, his son barged back into the office with the finished puzzle. Every country was in the right place; it was done perfectly. The father couldn't believe his eyes.

"How did you manage to do this?" he asked.

His son looked at him with a big smile on his face and explained. "On the other side of the paper was a picture of a person. I know what a person looks like, so I put the pieces together—eyes, mouth, arms, legs—putting everything in the right place to make it look like a person, and then, when I flipped it over, the map of the world was also done!"

Our job is to work on ourselves, to accept Hashem as King in our own lives, and in doing so, Hashem will also reign as King over the whole world.

May we be *zocheh* to experience the ultimate *ge'ulah b'mheira* so we can experience Hashem's ultimate Kingship.

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זכרונות

Memory, Relationships, and Renewal

By Mrs. CB Neugroschl

Rosh Hashanah is called many things—*Yom Hadin*, *Yom Teruah*, *Hayom Harat Olam*—but perhaps the most tender of all is *Yom Hazikaron*, the Day of Remembrance. It is a day that invites us to pause and reflect, not just on what we have done, but on who we are and who we hope to become. And at the heart of that process is memory.

Memory is so deeply woven into who we are. When we are young, remembering is about facts and information—what we need for school, for tests, for doing things right. As we grow older, memory becomes something else entirely. It becomes the way we hold onto people, the way we make sense of our past, and the way we find the courage to change. Some memories lift us up; others weigh us down. And some we need to choose—again and again—to see with new eyes.


Rosh Hashanah gently invites us into that space. The *machzor* speaks repeatedly of Hashem as '*Zocher Habrit*'—the One who remembers the covenant. But Hashem's memory is not like ours. It is not about looking back solely in order to judge. It is also about holding the past as something alive, something binding and sacred. The covenant with Avraham is not a story frozen in history—it is a relationship that continues, that binds us even now. Just as Avraham represented us, Rav Soloveitchik writes in *Emergence of Ethical Man*, we represent Avraham.

Throughout our Rosh Hashanah davening, when we ask Hashem to remember Noach, Avraham, Sarah, and the *Akeidah*, we are not just telling stories. We are asking Hashem to remember with compassion—to see not only what was done, but why it was done, what was struggled with, what was overcome. And we are hoping that Hashem will do the same for us. That in all our stumbling and striving, in all the good we tried to do and the mistakes we regret, we will be remembered with understanding and with love.

We know how fragile memory can be in our own lives. Two people can share the same moment and walk away with completely different recollections. Sometimes what stays with us is not the full picture—it is the part that hurts the most. And even when we know someone has changed, when we ourselves have changed, it can be hard to let go of the old stories we carry. But just as we ask Hashem to see us with fresh eyes, we are called to do the same for others—and for ourselves.

In *Al HaTeshuvah*, Rav Soloveitchik teaches that *teshuvah* begins with *hakarot hacheit*—not just confessing our wrongs, but recognizing the gap between who we are and who we are meant to be. It is not about guilt; it is about growth. And memory plays a central role in that growth. It helps us recognize what needs repair, but also what is worth reclaiming. It reminds us not only of our flaws, but of our values, our hopes, and our capacity to begin again.

One of the most beautiful gifts of this season is the idea of selective memory—not as denial, but as intention. Choosing which parts of our past we carry forward, and which we leave behind. Choosing to remember the moments that reflect our best selves, our deepest connections, our resilience, and grace. And choosing to let go of the stories that keep us stuck.



In the *Zichronot* section of the *machzor*, we read about Noach. He was not perfect. He faltered after the flood, retreating into silence. But when Hashem remembers Noach, it is with compassion—for his faith, for his loneliness, for his kindness, and for his courage to act in a world that had lost its way. That is the kind of memory we long for—the genre of memory that sees the full picture and still leans toward love.

Rosh Hashanah reminds us that we are not meant to be defined by our worst moments. The past matters—not as a verdict, but as a foundation. When we gather in shul, surrounded by familiar melodies and the sound of the *shofar*, or at home, with the tastes and smells of the holiday, we are not just recalling ancient rituals. We are stepping into a living relationship—with Hashem, with our people, with ourselves.

This season, I invite you to remember differently. As part of fully embracing the power of *teshuvah*, let us reflect honestly about regrets, misdeeds, and missed opportunities and also choose to speak about what we cherish, to recall what inspires us, and to let those memories shape our choices. Let us choose to allow love and hope to take up more space than disappointment and regret. To repair what can be repaired, and to walk gently with what cannot.

May this Rosh Hashanah be a time of blessing, growth, and healing memory. May Hashem remember us with kindness, compassion, and with faith in our future. And, may we do the same for ourselves and others in our lives. May we remember our story as one that is still being written—with courage, with honesty, and with heart.

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שופרות

The Role of Listening in Relationships

By Mrs. Michal Horowitz

Rosh Hashanah.
The beginning of the year brings:

Celebration—we were blessed with life the past year, and for this we celebrate and give thanks;

Hope—we hope and trust that Hashem will accept our *tefillos*, and the new year will be one of blessing and redemption for our nation and land;

Awe—we feel trepidation and reverence as we stand before the King on Coronation Day, and we recognize that our lives depend upon Him;

Repentance—we cherish the opportunity to repent and return in purity and wholeness to Hashem, Who awaits our *teshuvah* and takes us back with love;

Strength—we feel strengthened as we stand on the cusp of a new year, looking ahead with resolve and determination, accepting the challenge to make the coming year one of productivity and success in *avodas Hashem*;

Silence—we bow our heads, standing silently, as the blast of the *shofar* pierces our minds, hearts, and *neshamos*, its powerful call stirring feelings deep within us, as we yearn for closeness with our Father in heaven.

The theme of the *Shofaros* section of Mussaf is the powerful call of the *shofar* and its eternal message.

The *shofar* is so important to the essence of Rosh Hashanah that the *pasuk* tells us:

And in the seventh month, on the first of the month, a calling of holiness it shall be for you, all work of labor you shall not do—יום תרועה יהיה לכם—a day of the *teruah* blast it shall be for you (Bamidbar 29:1).

Interestingly, the *berachah* that is recited prior to the *shofar* blasts is “*lishmo’ah kol shofar*,” to *hear* the sound of the shofar.

Thus, it behooves us to ask: What does *lishmo’ah* mean? It must mean more than just “to hear”—as in the biological process of hearing—if it is so important to our *avodah* of crowning Hashem as *Melech* on this day.

In regard to the mitzvah of *shofar*, the Rambam states:

אף על פי שתקיעת שופר בראש השנה גזרת הכתוב, רמז יש בו, כלומר: עורו ישנים משנתכם ונרדמים הקיצו מתרדמתכם וחפשו במעשיכם וחרו בתשובה וזכרו בוראכם—Even though the blowing of the *shofar* on Rosh Hashanah is a decree of the Torah, nevertheless, there is an allusion in it. It is as if the *shofar* is saying: Wake up you sleepers from your sleep! Arise you slumberers from your slumber! Examine your ways and return in repentance and remember your Creator (*Hilchos Teshuvah* 3:4).

¹ Soloveitchik, Rabbi Joseph B., *Machzor Mesoras Harav Rosh Hashanah*, ed. Dr. Arnold Lustiger and Rabbi Michael Taubes (K’hal Publishing, 2008), 447.

² Sacks, Rabbi Jonathan, *Covenant & Conversation, Deuteronomy* (Maggid Books, 2019), 69.

Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik expounded upon the Rambam's words and explained:

These words constitute not only a moral message, but they bear halachic implications as well. By introducing the above “allusion,” the Rambam suggests a new understanding of the *shofar* obligation. While *mitzvos* such as eating *matzah* on Pesach do not contain any subjective component and demand no reaction to the significance of the physical act, the Rambam emphasizes here that aside from the auditory experience of hearing the *shofar*, there is also a *kiyum she'ba'lev*, an aspect of the mitzvah whose fulfillment requires a subjective emotional response... Even though there is an aspect of the mitzvah that is external and objective, “there is an allusion in it,” i.e., an inner, emotional fulfillment, without which one has not truly and completely addressed the obligation inherent in the mitzvah.

Beyond fulfilling this mitzvah with our ears, we must also listen deeply to the *shofar* with our hearts. Hence, the inner fulfillment means that we must not only auditorily hear, but we must also emotionally “hear” the *shofar* as well. It must pierce our essence and become part of who we are.

Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks writes:

In Judaism faith is a form of listening—to the song creation sings to its Creator, and to the message history delivers to those who strive to understand it. That is what Moses says time and again in Deuteronomy. Stop looking; listen. Stop speaking; listen. Create a silence in the soul. Still the clamour of instinct, desire, fear, anger. Strive to listen to the still, small voice beneath the noise. Then you will know that the universe is the work of the One beyond the furthest star yet closer to you than you are to yourself—and then you will love the Lord your G-d with all your heart, all your soul, and all your might. In G-d's unity you will find unity, within yourself and between yourself and the world, and you will no longer fear the unknown.

The blast of the *shofar* cries out to the deepest recesses of our souls, and calls on us to hear the voice of Hashem in our lives, to recognize His handiwork in all of creation, to crown Him as King over ourselves every day of the year.

The *shofar* reminds us to refocus on what is important in life and to live mindfully, where we pay attention to Hashem, our Father and our King, daily.

The *shofar* blast teaches us that to accept the unity of Hashem, we must first be prepared *to listen to Him*.

Only when we appreciate His *Malchus* by integrating Torah and *mitzvos* into our daily lives, only when we are really listening, can we build a relationship with Hashem, for it is then that we are truly listening.

For the voice of G-d is not heard in the great, strong wind that splits mountains and shatters rocks, nor in an earthquake that shakes the earth, or in a blazing fire. Rather, the voice of G-d resonates in the still, small sound, בְּקוֹל דְּמָמָה דָּקָה.

And when we learn to still the noise of the world around us, and we learn to hear the voice of Hashem, we can truly build a stronger, deeper, lasting, and powerful relationship with Him. And it is this relationship that will sustain us through all times and become our beacon and guide as we enter yet another year of life, in order to serve Him.

זְכֵרְנוּ לַחַיִּים מֶלֶךְ חַיָּץ בְּחַיִּים וְכַתְּבֵנוּ בְּסֵפֶר הַחַיִּים לְמַעַן אֲלֵקִים חַיִּים—Remember us for life, O King, who desires life, and write us in the book of life for Your sake, O living G-d.

Mrs. Michal Horowitz is a teacher, lecturer, and author whose shiurim reach audiences around the world.



וכפר בעדו

Mending Relationship with Self

By Mrs. Mindy Hilewitz

יום הכּפּוּרִים דּוֹבֵר טוֹב לְמַאֲד... אֵין לָנוּ דּוֹבֵר טוֹב מִמֶּנּוּ... כִּי יוֹם הַכּפּוּרִים מְכַפֵּר עִם הַתְּשׁוּבָה—“There were no better days for Yisrael . . . than Yom Hakippurim”¹ (*Mishnah Ta'anit* 4:8). This declaration ostensibly does not align with our experience of Yom Kippur—a solemn day spent immersed in prayer. We would more readily expect such a statement about the more festive day of Purim or the more joyous celebration of Sukkot.

A similar sentiment is echoed by Rabbi Yisrael Salanter: “Yom Kippur is a very good thing. . . we have nothing greater than it. . . because Yom Kippur atones with repentance.”²

Rabbi Salanter enlightens us that the “goodness” of Yom Kippur derives from the *kapparah* that it yields. Perhaps, then, an exploration of the word *kapparah* can elucidate the joyous nature of this seemingly solemn day.

Rashi in his commentary to Bereishit 32:21 comments: “Any forms of the word *kapparah* used in association with ‘sin’ or ‘transgression’ . . . all mean ‘wiping away’ or ‘removal.’”³ Elsewhere, Rashi notes that *kapparah* is achieved through *viduy*.⁴ The word *viduy*, a derivative of “*le'yadot*,” means “to cast away.”⁵ Just as *kapparah* means to wipe away or remove, *viduy* means to cast off. Both powerfully proclaim: “Sin is removable! It can be cast off!”

All too often, we mistakenly define ourselves by our sins, labeling ourselves based on our negative behaviors. “I am so lazy.” “I am so irresponsible.” “I am so selfish.” The compelling message of the *viduy* experience is that our *chata'im* do not define us! They comprise an outer shell that we can shed, allowing our inherently pristine nature to resurface.

Imagine a glass cup bearing a candle, with its outer walls colored by black marker. Surely the reflected light will be dimmed by the blackened walls. Nevertheless, the candle is untouched by the sullied walls and continues to illuminate pure, unadulterated light. *Viduy* affords us the opportunity to cast off our sins and remind ourselves that, indeed, our sins merely comprise an outer layer of grime but do not taint our essence.

Teshuvah, rooted in the word “*lashuv*,” connotes returning to a certain place. Rabbi Yerucham Levovitz posits that our point of return is to *our true selves*.⁶ Through our sinful behavior we have lost touch with our true selves, conflating our sinful actions with our identity. *Teshuvah* reconnects us with our intrinsically pure self. Most significantly, we discover that *teshuvah* does not demand that we *change* ourselves; we just have to uncover who we *already are*!

This concept sheds new light on the famous dictum of Chazal: “Great is *teshuvah* as it reaches the Throne of Glory” (Yoma 86a). Rav Yerucham explains that this does not mean that the repentant gets “promoted” to the Throne of Glory.⁷ Rather, through *teshuvah*, the repentant returns to his true self, a self so intrinsically lofty that its natural station is near the *Kisei Hakavod*.⁸

¹ ט"ו באב משנה תענית ד: ח

² אור ישראל, איגרת ז'

³ בראשית לב: כא. Translation based on the Artscroll Chumash, Saperstein Edition

⁴ רש"י, יומא לב ע"ב

Perhaps this can explain why Yom Kippur is the only time a year that entry is permitted into the *Kodesh Hakdashim*, the Holy of Holies. The *avodah* in the *Kodesh Hakdashim* is not limited to the *Kohen Gadol* alone; each of us is encouraged to enter *our* personal *Kodesh Hakdashim* and rediscover that buried inside every Jew is a *neshamah* of inestimable value, tantamount to his own “Holy of Holies.”

These ideas are crystallized through the somewhat perplexing ceremony of the *sa'ir la'azazel*, the “scapegoat” upon which Klal Yisrael's sins are transferred. What is the meaning of this enigmatic ceremony?

The Midrash (*Bereishit Rabbah*) draws a fascinating parallel between the *sa'ir la'azazel* and Esav, who is similarly referred to as “*sa'ir*,” the hairy one: הֵן עָשָׂו אָחִי אִישׁ שָׁעָר וְאֶנֶכִּי אִישׁ חָלָק —“Alas my brother, Esav is a hairy man and I am a smooth-skinned man” (*Bereishit* 27:11).⁹ The Midrash illuminates the difference between Esav and Yaakov through the following parable: a hairy man and a bald man enter the threshing-floor and both emerge entirely covered in chaff. While the bald man simply brushes off the chaff, the hairy man can only extract it with great difficulty, as it has become entangled in his long hair. For Yaakov, sin is an external appendage that can be easily shaken off, whereas for Esav, it becomes enmeshed in his personality.¹⁰

The powerfully vivid scapegoat ritual reminds us that, like Yaakov, we are not *sa'ir*, namely, our sins do not become entangled in our essence. They can be transferred to the *sa'ir la'azazel*, underscoring the message that *our sins can be removed*. The Maharal adds that, in fact, we are returning our sins to their rightful source—the Satan (represented by *azazel*)—who enticed us to sin in the first place! We thereby remind ourselves that sin derives from a source *external* to man; it does not emanate from his essence.¹¹

We can now better appreciate the concept of the “*chamesh inuyim*,” the five pleasurable activities from which we refrain on Yom Kippur. The classic explanation for this practice is that we are trying to mimic the *malachim*, in order to elevate ourselves on this most holy day. Yet in reality, we are not *acting* angelic. Rather, by subduing our bodily veneer, we allow our *naturally* angelic qualities to emerge.¹²

And, so, indeed, יוֹם הַכִּפּוּרִים דָּבָר טוֹב לְמַאֲדָּה... אֵין לָנוּ דָּבָר טוֹב מִמֶּנּוּ... כִּי יוֹם הַכִּפּוּרִים מְכַפֵּר עִם הַתְּשׁוּבָה, “Yom Kippur is a very good thing... because Yom Kippur atones with repentance.”¹³ The process of *kapparah*, wherein we discover that sin is *removable*, bequeaths us the priceless gift of reminding us who we really are—a pure, holy *neshamah*, tantamount to the angels, carved from beneath the *Kisei Hakavod*. Our sinful behavior has covered us in “chaff,” but it can easily be “shaken off,” allowing our true, radiant nature to shine forth in all its glory.

⁵ See for example זכריה ב: ד - “לִידוֹת אֶת הַקִּרְנוֹת” רש”י, אבן עזרא, מצודת דוד

⁶ Cited in האדם ביקר, עמ' לה

⁷ יומא דף פו ע”א

⁸ דעת תורה על דברים, עמ' קסא-ב

⁹ בראשית כז: יא

¹⁰ מדרש רבה, בראשית פרשה סה, פסקה טו

¹¹ דרשות המהר”ל, דרוש לשבת תשובה

¹² Ibid

¹³ Ibid, אור ישראל, איגרת ז

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ובעד ביתו

Mending Relationships with Family

By Dr. Michelle Waldman Sarna

The Torah readings on Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur are steeped in emotional depth and moral complexity. They trace stories of longing and fulfillment, hope and disappointment, jealousy and contentment, conflict and reconciliation. The narratives of Yitzchak's birth, Chanah's prayer, and the *Akeidah* all unfold within family life—revealing both its challenges and its power to foster personal and spiritual growth. These stories, full of nuance and emotional intensity, offer enduring wisdom on how we can cultivate healthy and meaningful family relationships.

On the first day of Rosh Hashanah, we read about the long-awaited birth of Yitzchak, a moment of miraculous joy for Sarah and Avraham (Bereishit 21). The text highlights three themes that can guide us in enriching and repairing our own relationships: laughter, listening, and love.

LAUGH

When Sarah is told that she will bear a child at the age of 90, she laughs—*וַתצַחֵק*. And when her desperate struggle with infertility is miraculously absolved by the birth of a son, Avraham aptly selects the name “*יִצְחָק*.” He identifies the joyful transcendence of G-d's act of *pakad*, of remembrance and redemption from despair. Sarah anticipates that the community will also share in her joy: *כֹּל הַשָּׁמֹעַ יִצְחָק לִי*—“Everyone who hears will rejoice with me” (See Rashi on Bereishit 21:6).

Yet, in the very next verse, we find a stark contrast: Yishmael is described as *מִצְחָק*. Rashi reads this laughter as derision, even moral corruption. The same root word—*צחק*—takes on an ominous tone, symbolizing a threat to Yitzchak's moral and spiritual development, and to his legacy.

Why would the same word, repeated in different forms, contain paradoxical implications—delight and danger—in this critical text?

Psychologist Paul Bloom notes that human emotions seek balance. Profound joy is often tinged with vulnerability; meaningful lives necessarily embrace both suffering and joy. Susan Cain writes in her book *Bittersweet* that it is this awareness of fragility that gives life its depth and beauty. Sarah's laughter is born not only of joy, but also of pain, fear, and fierce protectiveness.

This dynamic helps us understand why Israel, despite war and heartbreak, continues to rank among the world's happiest countries. In 2025, even after the devastation of October 7th, Israel was ranked 8th globally in the World Happiness Report. As happiness researcher Professor Sonja Lyubomirsky explains, happiness isn't about the absence of suffering—it's about strong relationships, a sense of purpose, and deep-rooted identity. Miriam Zami describes Rabbi Akiva's laughter upon seeing the ruins of the Beit Hamikdash as an “act of healing,” infusing despair with meaning and hope.

Embracing the emotional contradictions inherent in living a life of meaning offers us perspective and strength as we reflect on our disappointments and dreams in the context of our own family relationships.

LISTEN

Sarah's joy turns quickly to concern when she sees Yishmael's potential negative influence on Yitzchak. She is concerned that Yitzchak will be morally corrupted by Yishmael's behavior and that his status as the spiritual progenitor of Am Yisrael will be threatened. Her protective instincts lead her to demand that Hagar and Yishmael be sent away. וַיִּרַע הַדָּבָר מְאֹד בְּעֵינֵי אַבְרָהָם—Avraham perceives this decision as רָע, a morally troubling act. According to the Ramban, Avraham is deeply distressed—מְאֹד לֹו הָרָה and according to some commentators, he likely believes that he can still guide Yishmael to follow the Torah's path. Avraham's paternal instinct fears the physical, spiritual, and emotional consequences of expelling them from his home.

Avraham and Sarah are not arguing over good versus evil—they are upholding competing, deeply held values: inclusion and protection, love and legacy. How is this impasse resolved? Only through Divine intervention, a command to truly **listen**: כָּל אֲשֶׁר תֹּאמַר אֵלַיךְ שָׁרָה שְׁמַע בְּקוֹלָהּ—“Whatever Sarah tells you, heed her voice.” The Netziv (Ha'emek Davar on Bereishit 21:12) teaches that Hashem isn't demanding blind obedience. Rather, שִׁידְקֶדָּךְ וַיִּתְּבוֹנוּ בְּדַבְרֶיהָ, Avraham is commanded to listen closely and to reflect on her words. Perhaps this Divine act of grace is modeled when a few verses later, Hashem listens with equal empathy to Yishmael's cry—וַיִּשְׁמַע אֱלֹקִים אֶת־קוֹל הַנֶּעֱר—responding to him שָׁם הָיָה, as he is in that moment, a vulnerable young person in pain.

In *The Righteous Mind*, Jonathan Haidt explores how different groups often perceive the “other” as amoral, when actually group differences reflect a hierarchy of values. While most human cultures and societies identify six core values, they calibrate differently. For example, liberals emphasize care, fairness, and liberty, whereas conservatives evenly prioritize loyalty, authority, and sanctity. When we consider the values of the other, we are open to genuinely understanding their perspective and perhaps even changing ourselves.

So too in our families. When we experience conflict, it often emerges from value tension—not from lack of compassion or concern. Psychologist John Gottman identifies four relational patterns that lead to rupture: criticism, contempt, defensiveness, and stonewalling. The antidote? Active listening. To listen effectively, we must regulate our emotions, tap into our love and respect for the other, and seek understanding over being right.

Listening transforms relationships. It is a sacred act—one that Hashem models and commands.

LOVE

The Torah readings on Rosh Hashanah center around the foundational family of Avraham and Sarah. We witness their love, their disagreements, their parenting choices, and their moments of grace. These stories canvas Divine-human encounters as well as interhuman encounters between spouses, parents and children, and individuals and communities.

These relationships involve missteps and mending, sorrow and sweetness. And perhaps it is no coincidence that we read these stories on the holiest days of the year. They are an invitation to laugh, listen, and love with courage; to reflect, repair, and deepen our relationships. May our homes be places of healing, growth, and sacred connection.

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ובעד כל קהל ישראל

Mending Relationship with Community

By Mrs. Shira Jackson



Why do zebras have stripes? A group of zebras is called a “dazzle,” as their clustered stripes create a dazzling effect, designed as a defense mechanism. Grouped together, their stripes blend, making it hard to see where one zebra ends and another begins. This confusion deters predators by making the herd appear as one large, unapproachable target.

The Kerias HaTorah on Yom Kippur describes the purpose of the *avodah* performed by the Kohen Gadol: וְכָפַר בְּעֵדוֹ וּבְעַד בֵּיתוֹ וּבְעַד כָּל־קֹהֵל יִשְׂרָאֵל—“And he (the Kohen Gadol) shall make atonement for himself, and for his household, and for the *entire* community of Israel” (Vayikra 16:17).

It is one thing for a person to atone for his own sins, perhaps even those of his family. But the entire Jewish people? How can one person wipe the slate clean for the millions of mistakes made by millions of Jews throughout the year?

The answer is the zebra method: blending into a single, unified nation—one indistinguishable whole called *Kehal Yisrael*—where individual faults dissolve into the collective, and personal mistakes are absorbed and lost within the greater crowd.

Concurrently, we *can* still maintain our individuality. While every zebra shares key traits—four legs and black-and-white stripes—each remains unique. Likewise, though we each have individual ways of connecting to Hashem, our *neshamos* share the same mission, and each is an invaluable and integral part of the nation.

Occasionally, one meets people who think they “don’t count” towards the collective because they are “not religious.” I went away for a weekend, just after the Iran war, and I davened in a hotel *minyan* on Friday night. Halfway through Kabbalas Shabbos, a woman walked in looking a little uncomfortable. I gestured toward the seat next to me, whispered “Shabbat Shalom,” and offered her a *siddur*. She replied, “Shabbat Shalom,” then immediately said, “I am not religious, I am just here to support my partner because he is saying Kaddish and it’s something very meaningful to him. Are they nearly finished?” she asked hopefully. I could tell from her accent that she was Israeli, and I asked after her family. She said, “Thank G-d they are all okay. It is a complete miracle...we should probably pray. Can you show me what they are up to?” She stood next to me, following in her *siddur*, and joined in the parts she knew. Afterward, we chatted some more, and she told me she had hosted 11 strangers in her home the previous week, who were stranded when there were no flights! As we said our goodbyes, I told her, “*You* might not think you are religious, but *I* think you are.” “You are right,” she said, “I am a good person.”

To understand how national atonement works, let us consider the term Yom Kippur. What is *kapparah*, atonement, and how does it work?

וְכִי־יִזְכּוּ הַיּוֹם הַזֶּה יִכָּפֵּר עֲלֵיכֶם לְטָהָר אֶתְכֶם מִכָּל חַטֹּאתֵיכֶם לִפְנֵי ה' תִּטְהָרוּ—“For on this day, it will atone for you to cleanse you of all your sins; you shall be clean before the Lord” (Vayikra 16:30).

Does this mean that Yom Kippur itself atones and purifies us? And what exactly is *tahara*, purification?

According to the Mishnah (Yoma 8:9), Yom Kippur only atones for sins between man and G-d, but not for sins between man and his fellow.

In this same mishnah, Rabbi Akiva concludes: אֲשֶׁרֵיכֶם יִשְׂרָאֵל, לִפְנֵי מִי אַתֶּם מְטַהְרִין, וּמִי מְטַהֵר אֶתְכֶם, אֲבִיכֶם שְׁבַשְׁמַיִם—“How fortunate are you, Israel; before Whom are you purified, and Who purifies you? It is your Father in Heaven.”

How does Hashem purify us? Rabbi Akiva quotes, מְקוֹה יִשְׂרָאֵל ה'—“Hashem is the *mikvah* of the Jewish people” (Yirmiyahu 17:13) and explains, “Just as a *mikvah* purifies the impure, so too, HaKadosh Baruch Hu, purifies the Jewish people.”

To achieve atonement, we must be purified, and on Yom Kippur, Hashem purifies us by functioning as our *mikvah*...if we have mended our interpersonal relationships. What does this mean?

We usually associate *taharah* with someone who has become *tamei* (ritually impure) and needs to immerse in a *mikvah*. Impurity can result from birth, death, menstruation, or *tzara'as*—all of which involve contact with the finite. Birth reminds us that life has a beginning; death, that it has an end. And anything with a beginning or end is, by definition, not infinite. These encounters temporarily distance us from the Infinite. Exposure to the finite, though often unavoidable, temporarily severs our connection to the Infinite. The *taharah* process restores that connection.

A similar *taharah* process is required on Yom Kippur. Hashem is our life source, and He is Infinite; when we sin, we disconnect from Him, becoming more finite and weakening our connection to our Infinite source. He is our *mikvah*—the space we immerse in to purify and reconnect through *teshuvah*. Each *neshamah* was once part of the original *neshimah*, the Divine breath Hashem blew into Adam. Our souls long for *taharah*, the process that draws us back to our Source and to one another.

That is why the Kohen Gadol can atone for the entire community, though not for sins against individuals. National atonement only works when we are united. If we have become fractured ourselves, distant from one another, we have broken that unity. To truly reconnect with Hashem, we must first repair our relationships and restore our national wholeness. We can only fully reconnect with Hashem once we have repaired our interpersonal relationships, and we form a unified *kehal*. Infinity cannot be divided.

On the 29th of June, Sergeant Natan Rosenfeld Hy”d fell in battle. His mother, Sam, eulogized: “Natan, we hope you are the last sacrifice anyone should have to pay for the price of our land and our freedom. There is no religious, secular, or Hareidi person in the army; we are all one people, with one heart. We need to come together and put aside our differences. You shall not die in vain.” His father, Avi, looked heavenward and cried out, “The people of Israel are good people. Hashem save us, because it’s only You.”

This year has made it clear: our enemies’ missiles and bullets don’t distinguish between Jews, and neither do our hearts. Every Jewish tragedy has pained us to our core; every victory has filled us with pride. Our souls are deeply connected to one another, and one Jew’s actions can impact others across the world.

United, we are strong and can share our light with the world. We will share our integrity, our love of life, and each other; the essence of belonging to the Jewish nation. United, we share an infinite connection. May Hashem continue to make us the most miraculous and inspirational nation the world has ever seen. May our *tefillot* for the entire community, all of *Kahal Yisrael* be answered *l’tova*.

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בסוכות תשבו

Relating to Space

By Dr. Ariella Agatstein

Three years ago, I visited my childhood home for the very last time. I flew in to help my parents pack for their long-awaited aliyah, and stepping back into that house felt like visiting an old and dear friend. My parents had lived there for forty years, and almost every meaningful memory took place within those walls. As I sat among the boxes and packing paper, sorting through old photo albums and knickknacks, I thought: If only these walls could talk. If only they could join me in remembering—laughing and even crying, about the beautiful symphony of life that took place here.

Every item I picked up had a memory attached to it. As I lifted each one, I smiled, laughed, and even held tight—because only in that home, with its unmistakable clean and homey smell, did those memories come alive again. The place itself held onto parts of my story that I had not remembered in years. Every room, every crack in the wall, every closet and hallway had a story to tell—of joy, of longing, of laughter, and sometimes even of loss.

I remembered bringing my babies home from the hospital and seeing my mother waiting for me on the curb, waving. I remembered the faces of loved ones long gone, and of dear friends, who made our lives all the more meaningful. I recalled the house before the construction and after. I remembered being a little girl celebrating my sister's engagement, and then standing in that very same room, years later, at my own engagement party. I was reminded of the joyous occasions, new babies, first steps, first dates, Chanukah candles, Pesach seders, Shabbos meals, and Purim costumes. I also tried to remember the everyday things—the Post-it notes of grocery lists, the prepared lunches for family trips, the way the house looked on a snowy day, and the respite it provided in the heat of summer. On the very last evening of my visit, in an all-too-familiar scene, I found my father outside grilling some hot dogs while my mother tossed together a salad and corn. I distinctly remember a tear rolling down my cheek. I did not say anything out loud. This would be the last time we would barbecue in this home.

The next morning, before heading to the airport, as I walked and videoed and narrated my last time in each room, I was filled with one thought: What a *zechut*, what a merit, to be a part of my parents transforming their home into a place of *kedushah*, a place of holiness. It felt like the home had been a loyal messenger of Hashem, and in turn, we had helped it reach its maximum potential, raising its inanimate, mundane form into a place of holiness.

In Judaism, the animate and the inanimate can hold *kedushah*, holiness. The Chatam Sofer (*Torat Moshe, Shavuot*) writes that the three types of holiness correspond to the three main holidays: Pesach connects to the holiness of the soul and body, Shavuot correlates to the sacredness of time, and Sukkot teaches us about the sacredness of place—*kedushat hamakom*.

The Torah tells us:

“You shall dwell in *sukkot* for seven days...so that your generations may know that I made the children of Israel dwell in huts (“*sukkot*”) when I took them out of Egypt” (Vayikra 23:42–43).

The Gemara (*Sukkah* 11b) offers two understandings of what these “huts” were. According to Rabbi Eliezer, we build *sukkot* to remember the *ananei hakavod*, the clouds of glory, that Hashem used to protect Am Yisrael in the desert. Rabbi Yona Ibn Janach points out that the word “*sukkah*” itself means protection—a covering that shields us from outside forces.

Rabbi Akiva, however, offers a second interpretation and suggests that the *sukkot* we build are replicas of the actual *sukkot* that our forefathers built in the desert. This begs the question: Why are we asked to remember these *sukkot*? If it were merely about historical reenactment, surely there are more dramatic or inspiring moments G-d could have chosen for us to relive.

The answer is that the *sukkot* built by our ancestors were unique. For forty years, Am Yisrael built and deconstructed these huts in the desert, trusting that wherever Hashem led them, He would provide and protect them. That is why G-d says to Yirmiyahu: “I remember the kindness of your youth...how you followed Me into the wilderness, into a land not sown” (Yirmiyahu 2:2). In fact, Chazal call the *sukkah* a “*tzila d’mehemanuta*”—a “shadow of faith.” According to this interpretation, when we build our *sukkah* each year, we are stepping into the footsteps of our ancestors, into *their* deep trust and faith in Hashem, raising our simple and mundane *sukkot* into places of faith.

The Sefat Emet brings the two views together. He says the *sukkah* is both a symbol of G-d’s protection and our response to it—our faith. He suggests that Sukkot, which is also named *Zeman Simchateinu*, the “Time of Our Joy,” is joyous because of our trust in Hashem. He explains that the Jewish people are happy to dwell in the shade of G-d’s protection, and in turn, Hashem protects those who take refuge in Him. Perhaps, the two opinions cited by the Gemara can then be viewed as reciprocal and interdependent: The *sukkah* is a manifestation of our willingness to follow G-d in every aspect of our lives, and in that merit, G-d protects us even more.

Like the *sukkah*, our homes are meant to mimic these two aspects of *kedushat hamakom*. Every day, Hashem envelops us in our homes with protection, and we, like our forefathers, are meant to joyously turn our homes into vessels of *emunah* and *kedushah*. We are called upon to create experiences and memories that transform these places into vessels of holiness, and in doing so merit an even greater degree of Divine Presence and protection.

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ארבעת המינים

Relating to Possessions

By Mrs. Hyndi Mendelowitz

Many Jewish households harbor a mysterious closet. It is filled with silver menorahs, ornamental goblets, and multi-tiered *seder* plates that bring a touch of splendor to our journey through the year. What is the deeper meaning behind the elegance of these ritual objects?


“*Hiddur mitzvah*” is a precious concept in Judaism: we do not merely perform the commandments. We beautify them to express our love. This principle applies universally to every mitzvah. However, with the mitzvah of *arbah minim*, the concept of *hiddur mitzvah* is taken to a whole new dimension. Generally, a mitzvah performed precisely according to halachah, but without *hiddur*, is still kosher. However, if one of the *arbah minim* on Sukkot lacks *hiddur* in a significant way, the mitzvah has not been fulfilled. Tosafot (*Sukkah* 29b, s.v. “*Lulav*”) explain this based on the fact that the Torah itself refers to the *etrog* as a “*pri eitz hadar*,” indicating that *hiddur* is an intrinsic component of the mitzvah of *etrog*, and by extension, of the other three species as well.

The prominence of *hiddur* in the mitzvah of *arbah minim* is a beautiful (pun intended) starting point for an exploration of our relationship with the “stuff” we accumulate during our earthly journey. What does the mitzvah of *arbah minim*—swaying together with our *lulav* and *etrog*—teach us about a Jew’s capacity to transform physical possessions into objects of holiness?

Rabbi Immanuel Bernstein, in *Sukkos: A Symphony of Joy*, points out that *hiddur* re-aligns our priorities. We humans invest our attention and effort into what we consider important. The *hiddur* of the *arbah minim* re-directs our investment towards *mitzvot*. Viewed this way, the *sukkah* and *arbah minim* work in tandem. The *sukkah* as a temporary dwelling de-emphasizes physical priorities and possessions that may have taken over—no more couch or designer kitchen to make me feel secure. With those distractions diminished, the *arbah minim* restore *mitzvot* to the center of our focus and attention—I will invest in, beautify, and elevate that which is most important: my service of G-d.

Rabbi Bernstein further explores the concept: *hiddur mitzvah* is derived from קָלִי וְאֶנְהוּ—“This is my Lord and I will glorify Him,” which the Gemara explains as הִתְנַחֵה בְּמִצְוֹת—“Beautify yourself before Him with *mitzvot*” (*Shabbat* 133b). The Gemara’s statement begs the question: What is the connection between my personal appearance—the reflexive commandment to “beautify yourself”—and my performance of *mitzvot*?

Every human has something she takes pride in. In fact, we often define ourselves by these things. When I proudly parade around in my car, and mention it too many times, you know I define myself by my wheels. What does that tell you about me? When I invest tremendous resources in my physical appearance, you know I hope you notice my looks. When I glow at my children’s accomplishments and invest myself in their growth, clearly my motherhood is primary. When I pour attention and care into my *lulav* and *etrog*, I am defined as a person who takes pride in my service of G-d. This bestows great honor on the mitzvah. But it is not only the mitzvah that is elevated. This pride gives *me* value. There is no more beautiful person than one who defines herself by the pride she takes in her mitzvah observance.



Adorning a mitzvah with physical beauty is a statement of the importance of spirituality in my life. The flipside likewise defines me: imbuing the physical with the beauty of *mitzvot* also demonstrates the centrality of spirituality.

Rav Chaim Shmuelevitz, in *Sichot Mussar* on *Parashat Noach* develops a fascinating idea about the power of investing our life force into inanimate objects. Chazal (*Yalkut Shimoni*, section 139) point out that Chanah made her young son, Shmuel, a coat when she brought him to the Mishkan at age two. He wore that same coat as he reached adulthood, was buried in that coat, and in that coat rose to the Heavenly court when he died. What is the nature of this miraculous coat? Rav Chaim quotes the Radak: young children did not generally wear such coats, but Chanah made this one from her deep love. Chanah did not merely sew a coat. She invested in that little coat all the tears and pain of her barren years, the fierce hopes she'd had for a child, the overwhelming gratitude at that baby's birth, and her prayers that this long-awaited child would serve G-d to his full capacity. Through this, the coat itself became a source of love and *chesed*. When wrapped in it, Shmuel imbibed an infinitely deep *ahavat Yisrael* and *ahavat Hashem*, implanted by his mother. In this coat, Shmuel grew in his service of Hashem, circulated throughout the cities of Israel to draw Jews closer to Hashem and direct them towards His service—powered by the *ahavat Yisrael* within him. With this *middah*, he drew the *Shechina* towards him—and never separated from this power-source-coat. Ever.

The takeaway is enormous. Our spiritual force can be so potent, it can actually animate the objects we invest ourselves in. Many of us have found ourselves gasping as we clutch Grandma's sweater or Dad's Gemara, feeling their very essence in the objects they left behind. Our emotions or spiritual input can animate mundane objects, transforming them into vessels for connection or growth. If we apply this principle to all our possessions, the tools, vehicles, and clothing we accumulate can become vessels that pulsate with spirituality—when we consider them tools for serving G-d.

Our relationship with our physical possessions reflects our inner spiritual identity and helps tell the story of our souls, values, and aspirations. We adorn our *mitzvot* with physical beauty—and that speaks of the ambition of our souls to ascend. At the same time, we also engage in a parallel process by infusing our physical objects with our own spiritual yearnings—and reveal our souls yet again.

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ושמחת בחגך

The Happiness of Relationships

By Mrs. Bracha Poliakoff

Moving is frequently cited as one of life's most stressful experiences. I experienced this firsthand when our family returned to our much larger community after spending three years in the smaller, more close-knit community of Richmond, VA.

During that stressful transition, I realized that much of my overwhelm came from losing a sense of community. It was as if someone had pulled the rug out from under me, and I was trying to find my bearings. Although I had many friends and family in my current city, the unique dynamics of big-city life made it harder to feel a true sense of community.

In Richmond, like in many small cities, shul was a social experience for the entire family. If you missed a week, people noticed. Simchos were attended by all. When there was an event or shiur, everyone did their best to participate. Friends became like family and often spent time together, whether at a Shabbos meal, the park, or a community event. When my son was born, community members made the entire *shalom zachar* so I would not have to worry about anything.

In contrast, re-establishing social connections in a larger community felt incredibly challenging. There were fewer "built-in" social opportunities, which made it hard to connect with friends who were understandably busy with their own family responsibilities. Shul also felt different, with so many options, none felt like the perfect fit for our entire family. In addition, the sheer number of people made it hard to identify "regulars," leading to fewer greetings from other shul-goers.

Speaking to other women about my struggles, I quickly learned that I wasn't alone in this experience. I realized that many other women were dealing with similar feelings of isolation and lack of community. This shared challenge inspired me to think more deeply about how to create community—for myself, my friends, and everyone else who felt disconnected.

Ve'samachta be'chagecha, the commandment to rejoice on our holidays, really speaks to this challenge—it is essentially about creating community.

We are told, "You shall rejoice in your festival, with your son and daughter, your male and female slave, the [family of the] Levite, the stranger, the fatherless, and the widow in your communities" (Devarim 16:14).¹

The commandment to rejoice on the holiday of Sukkos, as well as on our other holidays, is not just about our personal happiness. Our joy is supposed to radiate outward in a way that includes the entire broader community.

This may be because true joy is only possible when our good fortune is shared with others. As the Rambam writes:

When a person sacrifices festive and celebratory peace-offerings, he should not eat while secluded, together with his children and his wife, and think he is performing a perfect mitzvah. Instead, he is obligated to bring joy to the poor and unfortunate. Thus, Devarim 16:14 mentions: 'the Levite, the stranger, the orphan, and the widow.' One should grant them food and drink according to his wealth (*Mishneh Torah, Hilchos Chagigah* 2:14).²

The Rambam says even more explicitly in another context: “For there is no greater and more splendid happiness than to gladden the hearts of the poor, the fatherless, the widows, and the converts” (*Mishneh Torah, Hilchos Megillah Ve’Chanukah* 2:17).³

The ripple of this shared joy is reflected in the verses. Following the commandment to “Rejoice in your festival”, the Torah describes the blessing that will come: “Hashem will bless all your produce and all the work of your hands”. Perhaps this suggests that joy and blessing begins with us (“you shall rejoice”), extends to our children (“you, your son, and your daughter”), reaches our household (“your male and female servant”), includes the teachers and spiritual leaders who rely on our support (“the Levi”), and embraces the most vulnerable in our midst (“the stranger, the orphan, and the widow”).

When we share in this way, our joy becomes magnified. We see this reflected in the closing of the following *pasuk* when it says, “*V’hayisa ach sameach*”—“And you will have nothing but joy.” Expanding our circles is both a source and purpose of joy.

At times, we have all felt this to be true in our own lives. Happiness must be shared to be truly enjoyed. It is not just when we go through challenges—like the loss of a loved one—that we turn to our community for support and encouragement. When we experience a *simchah*, we turn to our community to help us rejoice and magnify the joy we are feeling.

This is why *hachnasas kallah*, bringing a bride to her wedding, is included under the category of *chesed*. Even though the majority of the *mitzvot* of *chesed* involve helping someone during a very vulnerable time—such as visiting the sick, helping the poor, and visiting the bereaved—showing up for someone in a time of joy, and magnifying that joy, is just as meaningful and important.⁴

Ve’samachta be’chagecha highlights for us the importance of creating a sense of community for ourselves and those around us. This Yom Tov season, let us challenge ourselves to think about how we can better do this in our own spheres of influence. Some ideas include warmly greeting someone in shul or at a community event, making an effort to show up for people during their times of need as well as joy, and thinking about those in our community who find themselves in a vulnerable place. This is how we create community and connection—one person at a time.

¹Devarim 16:14

וְשִׂמְחַתְּ בְּחֶגְךָ אֶתְּהָ וּבְכֶדְךָ וּבְעֶבְדְּךָ וְהַלְוִי וְהַגֵּר וְהָאֲלֻמָּנָה אֲשֶׁר בְּשַׁעְרֶיךָ:

² משנה תורה, הלכות חגיגה ב' י"ד

כְּשִׁיזְבַח אָדָם שְׁלָמִי חֲגִיגָה וְשְׁלָמִי שְׂמִיחָה לֹא יִהְיֶה אוֹכֵל הוּא וּבְנָיו וְאִשְׁתּוֹ בְּלֶבֶד וּדְמָה שִׂיעֶשָׂה מִצֹּה גְמוּרָה. אֲלֹא חֵיב לְשִׂמְחָה הַעֲנִיִּים וְהָאֲלֻמָּלִים שֶׁנֶּאֱמַר (דברים טז יד) “וְהַלְוִי וְהַגֵּר וְהָאֲלֻמָּנָה” מֵאֲכִיל הַכֹּל וּמִשְׁקוֹ כִּפִּי עֲשֶׂרוֹ

³ משנה תורה, הלכות מגילה וחנוכה ב' י'

מוֹטֵב לָאָדָם לְהַרְבוֹת בְּמַתָּנוֹת אֲבִיוָנִים מִלְּהַרְבוֹת בְּסַעֲדָתוֹ וּבְשִׁלּוֹחַ מְנוֹת לְרֵעֵיו. שֶׁאִין שָׁם שְׂמִיחָה גְדוֹלָה וּמִפְאָרָה אֲלֹא לְשִׂמְחָה לֵב עֲנִיִּים וְיִתּוּמִים וְאֲלֻמָּנוֹת וְגֵרִים. שֶׁהַשְׂמִיחַ לֵב הָאֲלֻמָּלִים הָאֵלּוּ דוּמָה לְשִׁכִּינָה שֶׁנֶּאֱמַר (ישעיה נז טו) “לְהַחְיֹת רוּחַ שְׂפָלִים וְלַהֲחַיֹּת לֵב נִדְרָאִים”

⁴ I was first introduced to this idea in Rabbi Daniel Feldman’s wonderful and comprehensive book, *Divine Footsteps*.

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The Ripple Effect: Rooted in Relationships, Reaching the World

How the OU Women's Initiative Connects, Inspires, and Elevates Jewish Women Across the Globe

When Chumie Jacobson of Boca Raton, Florida, attended the Orthodox Union's Women's Initiative biennial Leadership Summit 2025 for the first time, she experienced what she calls a "tremendous high." This year's summit brought together 160 emerging and seasoned female leaders for workshops, networking, brainstorming sessions, and keynote presentations led by internationally renowned experts. Surrounded by women from across the United States, Canada, and Israel, she was immediately struck by the vibrant energy, shared purpose, and strong camaraderie that defined the event.

"Everyone came wanting to learn from one another, to support and inspire each other—and we did," says Chumie, executive director of Keren Hashviis, which currently supports Israeli farmers whose land was devastated on October 7. "I'm inspired by all I learned, I'm excited about the connections I made, and I'm in awe of the women who made this happen."

The connections Chumie and the other women formed have lasted beyond the summit—supporting one another in their work and collaborating on new initiatives to address community needs.


Chumie's experience reflects the transformative impact of the OU Women's Initiative, founded by the Orthodox Union in 2017 under the direction of Rebbetzin Dr. Adina Shmidman. Guided by three pillars—Learning, Leadership, and Community—the department creates and promotes programming that nurtures Torah study, communal leadership, and the spiritual, personal, and professional growth of women of all ages.

Beyond the Leadership Summit, the Women's Initiative offers a rich tapestry of programs that bring its three pillars to life—from daily learning and holiday programming to collaborative brainstorming labs and communal grants, connecting over 25,000 women worldwide in 2025 alone.

Among these offerings are specialized initiatives designed to equip communal leaders with practical tools, training, and most importantly, connection.

The department hosts a Mikvah Directors Symposium bringing together administrators and presidents to learn, share, and connect, supporting one another in creating welcoming, supportive, well-run, and spiritually uplifting mikvah environments.

The Community Mental Health Support Fellowship program provides advanced guidance to rebbetzins, kallah teachers, and kiruv and chinuch professionals, who often serve as "first responders" to personal, marital, and familial challenges in their communities.



As a participant reflected, “I realized again the power of sisterhood. Meeting such extraordinary women—so humble, deep, kind, and yearning for real connection—reassured me that we are a nation of greatness. We laughed and cried together, shared intimate challenges and moments of growth, and built a support system that will stay with us long after the conference. The connections and inspiration reawakened the part of my *neshama* that knows with certainty that even when things feel so bleak, Hashem has His plan. I return uplifted, grateful, and ready to carry this strength forward.”

At the heart of the Women’s Initiative’s educational mission is its flagship Torat Imecha Nach Yomi program. Launched by Rebbetzin Dr. Shmidman in 2020 with women educators and learners at its center, the program created a vibrant global community that is now accessed by more than 20,000 women across 28 countries and 38 U.S. states.

“It gives me tremendous personal joy to see learners’ diverse educational backgrounds, geographic locations, ages, and *hashkafos*,” Rebbetzin Shmidman reflects. “There’s something exceptional about the fact that everyone can sit and learn together.”

For many participants, Nach Yomi brings not only knowledge but also a sense of belonging, shared purpose, and spiritual connection.

“I am studying now with the eyes and ears of a Pre-K student, but with the heart and mind of an adult whose enthusiasm and motivation knows no bounds,” notes participant Ingrid Danilewitz of Merion Station, Pennsylvania. “I simply love learning and cannot wait to begin my day on a Torah note.”

Just as Nach Yomi nurtures personal growth and connection through daily study, the Women’s Initiative also strengthens communal bonds through creative opportunities. Launched in 2024, the Transforming Tehillim Together grant funded the creation of communal experiential Tehillim programs. Rebbetzin Dr. Shmidman explained: “Tehillim is the heartbeat of our people. It’s where we turn in joy, crisis, and gratitude. As we approached this *sefer* in the Torat Imecha Nach Yomi cycle, we saw an opportunity not just to learn the words of David HaMelech, but to bring them to life, to encourage women to take those timeless words and make them resonate in today’s world.”

This year, awardees from New York, Portland, Cleveland, and Chicago united the women in their communities through uplifting programs providing an opportunity to connect to Tehillim’s timeless messages.

“At the OU Women’s Initiative, we believe in building communities from within—giving women the tools, encouragement, and platform to design Torah-centered experiences that inspire others,” Rebbetzin Shmidman reflects.

Ahead of Shavuot, women worldwide participated in K'Isha Achat, a global day of learning dedicated to studying the entire Torah in one hour.

“It was electrifying,” recalls Jen Airley, a Women’s Initiative educator and program participant from Ramat Beit Shemesh. “The whole shul was filled with women who were learning and investing in the Torah. It was magical. It was empowering. When we feel this way, everyone around us feels this way — our children, our husbands, our friends. This is how we feel connected to the Torah. By learning together, we feel the energy and excitement of Limmud Torah, and we feel connected with Hashem, and with one another.”

Through Torah learning, leadership development, and meaningful community engagement, the OU Women’s Initiative empowers women to grow, connect, and contribute. From daily Nach study to leadership summits and innovative programs, participants strengthen Jewish life across North America and beyond, weaving a network of relationships and inspiration that spans communities.

“Program after program, the OU Women’s Initiative has grown into a global community of learning, leadership, and connection, uniting women across the world,” notes Rebbetzin Shmidman. “Its impact continues to expand, and the greatest privilege is welcoming more women into this transformative space. Join the Women’s Initiative community, deepen your relationships and inspire others along the way.”

To learn more and support the OU Women’s Initiative,

visit ouwomen.org,

follow us on Instagram @ouwomen,

or email ouwomen@ou.org.





Save the Date

Be part of the third Torat Imecha

NACH YOMI SIYUM CELEBRATION



Sunday,
February 15, 2026
Woodmere, NY

Wednesday,
February 18, 2026
Jerusalem, Israel

Other siyum locations and more details
to follow in the coming months!

