



# Mutual Responsibility and the Jew's Search for Meaning

**W**e all know the story: the people of Israel camped at the foot of Mount Sinai, united in an extraordinary way—“*k'ish echad, b'lev echad*”—like one person, with one heart. It's almost a cliché, the idea we revisit every Shavuot, but perhaps it's time we truly *think* about it anew. Like so many things learned in kindergarten, the deeper meaning deserves another look. How do we recapture that? How can we possibly generate that same *arevut hadadit*, that mutual responsibility and solidarity, that defined Mount Sinai but often feels so absent today? As a journalist covering the Jewish world for years, blessed with the opportunity to lecture and meet communities across the globe, here are two practical recommendations:

## 1. **Unity Forged Around Torah:**

Why were we united at Sinai? Because we heard the Ten Commandments. Because we encountered G-d Himself. *That* is the experience that fuses us into a single soul. No other source truly binds us together in the same way. Shavuot is our annual reminder: the Jewish people's unity stems from our shared Torah values. For millennia, this was simply understood. We must return to

these foundational truths.

- 2. Positive Unity:** Shavuot offers a model for unity born of positive connection, not just shared threats. Think about most of our other holidays. Typically, there's a villain—a Haman, a Pharaoh, an Antiochus—pursuing us, and our joy comes from salvation, from being rescued. Chanukah, Purim, Pesach (even the solemn day of Tisha B'Av, though vastly different in tone), revolve around our enemies. Shavuot is different. There's no enemy in the story. We're elevating ourselves, ascending. We approach Har Sinai willingly, joyfully, declaring “*na'aseh v'nishma*”—we will do, and then we will understand. If only we could learn to embrace and declare our Jewishness driven by this internal love and identity, not merely in reaction to Sinwar or Nasrallah (who, *Baruch Hashem*, are observing the holiday elsewhere...). Simply put: our unity isn't rooted in who hates us, but in what we, together, love.

Now, let's turn to some remarkable stories of this *arevut hadadit*—this mutual responsibility—centered on Torah. I believe that sometimes, we in



## Sivan Rahav Meir

*Sivan Rahav Meir is an Israeli journalist and lecturer. She lives in Jerusalem with her husband, Yedidya, and their 5 children. She was chosen by “Globes” magazine as Israel's favorite journalist and by The Jerusalem Post as one of the most influential Jews in the world.*

the observant world miss the mark. We hesitate to speak plainly about Torah as our unifying force, perhaps fearing we'll sound fanatical or coercive. But the ground is shifting beneath our feet. A younger generation is actively seeking its Jewish heritage, returning to Torah, and writing an entirely new chapter. Every one of us is invited to join this incredible change.

“*Man's Search for Meaning*”—Viktor Frankl's profound work showed how the Tzelem Elokim, the divine spark within, the soul's quest for meaning, empowers us to overcome unimaginable challenges. Today, it feels like a new

book is being written: “The Jew’s Search for Meaning.”

In this past year, modern-day Viktor Frankls have returned from the tunnels of Gaza. They aren’t authoring books, perhaps, but they are sharing their experiences through posts and stories. Forget academic studies; sometimes, just seeing the radiant light in their eyes, their illuminated faces, tells you everything.

I have begun collecting these contemporary accounts—stories that once might have become legends passed down through generations, but now flicker briefly on TikTok before vanishing.

- Consider Eliya Cohen: when told he was being released, he offered his spot to a fellow hostage who was physically and mentally weaker. “Let him go, I’ll stay,” he proposed. The terrorists refused (as his father, Momi, recounted). Or think of Omer Shem Tov, meticulously observing Shabbat in captivity. “He had only a flashlight,” his mother, Shelly, shared, “and he refused to turn it on during Shabbat, as a symbol, to honor the day.” And then there’s Agam Berger, whose story resonated

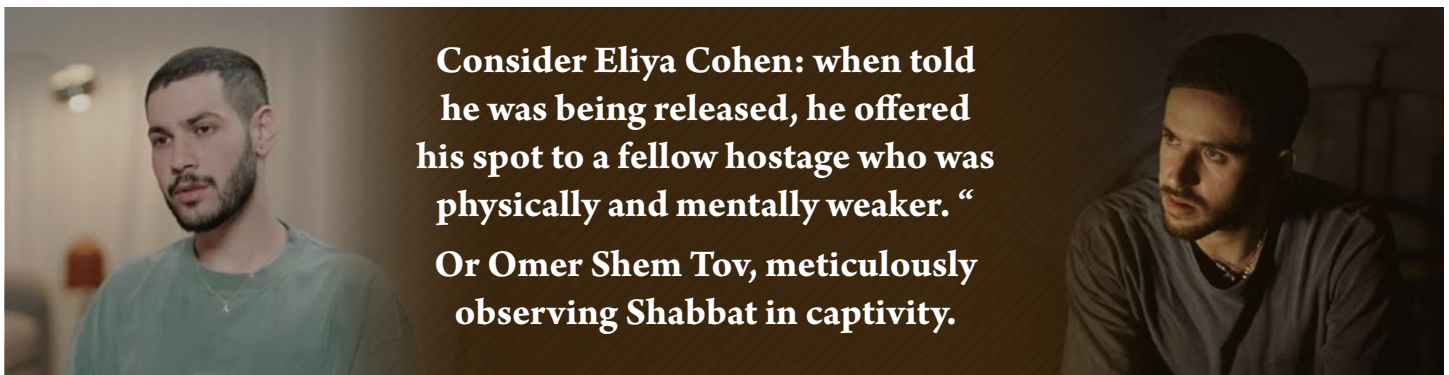
globally—*The Wall Street Journal* even featured an article by Rabbi Meir Soloveichik explaining the profound significance of her Shabbat observance in Gaza to an American audience.

- Shai Graucher became a household name during the war, tirelessly delivering gifts and aid to bereaved families, the wounded, and hostages. He’s noticed something striking lately: he offers a tablet, they ask for tefillin. He brings a smartphone, they ask for Shabbat candlesticks. Just this week, it happened with released hostage Ohad Ben Ami. Ohad requested tefillin, and then, on a Monday, asked to perform Havdalah. But Havdalah marks the end of Shabbat? Ohad explained his faith deepened in Gaza. In a viral video, he speaks with incredible force about belief, about G-d, about the Havdalah ceremonies fellow hostages held that gave him strength. He then simply asks someone to teach him the ritual right there, on a Monday, concluding with a powerful rendition of “Am Yisrael Chai.”
- And another true tale that sounds like a legend: Keith Siegel, a

kibbutznik, described trying to say a blessing over the meager food he received in captivity. Not knowing the specific brachot, he simply recited “*Borei Minei Mezonot*” (the blessing for grain products) over everything. When he finally came home, his family asked what special meal he wanted for their first Shabbat together. Keith replied, “Forget the food. First, I want a kippah and Kiddush.” His wife, Aviva, freed in an earlier exchange, shared tearfully in another widely seen video: “My captors demanded I pray with them. I told myself: I will not pray to Allah. I moved my lips, pretending, but I didn’t pray. I am so incredibly proud of myself for that.”

This list is far from complete, but the pattern is undeniable: Something profound is happening.

It extends beyond the hostages. Bereaved families are sharing incredibly moving stories of resilience and Jewish revival. “Those souls, they are working hard up there,” Israel Fenigstein, who lost his grandson Ma’oz in Gaza, told me recently. Ma’oz, from Susya, fell in the northern Strip last December. Then, out of the blue, Israel received a deeply touching



greeting from the past.

Years ago, when Ma'oz was a boy, his parents were on shlichut (community emissary work) in Montreal. Ma'oz attended the Hebrew Academy, where his classmates included Benjamin (Benji) Friedman and Eliana Rohr. They didn't stay in touch after those school years.

Upon hearing the devastating news of Ma'oz's death, a shocked Eliana posted in their alumni WhatsApp group, proposing a way to honor his memory. She started fundraising to print copies of *Mesilat Yesarim* (Path of the Just) by Rabbi Moshe Chaim Luzzatto (the Ramchal)—Ma'oz's favorite book—filled with timeless Jewish wisdom and ethics. The plan was to donate the books to their alma mater and other institutions, ensuring Ma'oz's legacy would live on through learning. She followed through, and the books were printed.

Benji saw the message and contacted Eliana privately. "I'm heading to Israel soon on a volunteer mission," he wrote. "Give me a copy, and I'll deliver it personally to Ma'oz's family, so they see how he's being remembered."

The rest of the story unfolded, quite literally, under the chuppah (wedding canopy) at Benji and Eliana's recent wedding in Canada. Rabbi Zelly Kleiman, officiating, shared this: "On his way to the airport, Benji stopped by Eliana's house to pick up the book.

Little did he know, that was their first date! That was the moment their souls connected. Ma'oz's soul brought you two together. He was the shadchan (matchmaker)! You were classmates for 12 years, never having a single deep conversation. And now, you've connected through this hero, bonded by your shared love for Torah learning. This isn't just Benji and Eliana's story; we are all part of something much larger."

The rabbi concluded the ceremony with prayers for the hostages, the soldiers, and all of Am Yisrael. When I called Benji days later, he confirmed every detail, eager for the story to be shared in Israel. "People need to understand," he said, "the ripple effects of what's happening here are immense." Benji and Eliana, both 26, are planning to make Aliyah after she finishes medical school soon.

And, as I write these words, news broke that Odaya, Ma'oz's widow, is now engaged. Truly, we have no idea what work these holy souls are accomplishing in the heavens...

Finally, let's look at Diaspora Jewry. Just observe your surroundings. See how the current wave of antisemitism and global hypocrisy, painful as it is, is paradoxically sparking a Jewish reawakening and strengthening. I have been privileged to visit numerous communities, not just to speak, but more importantly, to listen. On a recent lecture trip to Toronto, I heard

variations of these statements from individuals who admitted they weren't always synagogue regulars:

- "Since October 7th, we make *Kiddush* every single Shabbat."
- "After Simchat Torah, I made my first trip to Israel—ever. I'm 30. I went to volunteer near Gaza. I'm already booked to come back this summer, and I'm bringing friends."
- "Post-October 7th, I started learning Hebrew online. I also now attend a weekly Torah class at the synagogue."
- "For the first time, I'm wearing my Star of David necklace openly on campus, even with the hostile comments. I've never felt so strongly about anything."

At first glance, the connection seems puzzling. Hamas commits atrocities in southern Israel... and someone in Toronto starts learning Hebrew and making Kiddush? The answer is a resounding yes. This global shift has a name: the "October 8th Jews." Those who woke up on the day after October 7th. Whose hearts cracked open. Who suddenly grasped they were part of an epic story, a battle for identity, consciousness, and faith.

We are approaching Shavuot this year as a changed people. The Jewish nation is stirring, awakening. Each of us has a role to play in this unfolding process: invite someone for Shabbat, look around your community to see who needs help—materially or spiritually—and share the incredible spiritual treasures and resources of our tradition with those who lack them. May we merit to experience once again that profound, authentic unity of Mount Sinai—"k'ish echad, b'lev echad," one people with one heart, united around our Torah.



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