# Out of Sync With Israel, But Never Out of Love

The time difference between Israel and the United States has gotten longer since October 7. The news arrives here hours later. Overnight events do not reach us until the morning. Shabbat cuts us off from Israel altogether. We are always slightly out of sync.

In the past weeks, we in America have entered Shabbat knowing all that we will not know and left only with anxiety: Will the hostages who are slated to be released reunite with their families? Will there be major military incursions? Will Israel begin to mourn another spate of fallen soldiers? Shabbat ends, and we rush to turn on our phones to find out what we missed. This rush tries to make up for the painful truth that we're always lagging behind Israel—in both space and time.

This is not only measured by the distance or the clock but also by the temperature. Diaspora Jewry's role in this war is sometimes welcomed with warmth: Thank you for coming, for supporting, for caring.

At other times it is dismissed with a cold shrug: You who do not live here, did not serve in our army, whose children are not on the frontlines cannot possibly know what we are going through.

Our relationship is also measured in boundaries. The map is drawn through the contours of love and hope, guilt and regret—but our countries do not touch. There is no contiguous border.

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I thought about this as I was recently walking with a young Israeli woman in a densely populated Jewish neighborhood in the New York area. She took out her phone and started snapping photos of Israeli flags perched on front lawns.

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“This is amazing,” she said in Hebrew. “Look. Look.” She pointed out hostage posters in windows in utter disbelief.

She had no idea. On those front lawns, it was as if she suddenly discovered a bevy of long-lost relatives.

Her delighted surprise at this unexpected connection filled me with sadness. We have been here all along, I tried to explain. We have never stopped praying and crying and caring. We are not on your physical frontlines, that’s true. But you are always on the emotional frontlines of our consciousness. As individuals and organizations, we are protesting, traveling back and forth, giving charity, providing supplies, checking the news, wearing dog tags, listening to soldiers and survivors, writing editorials, and calling friends and relatives.

Diaspora Jews stand up and speak out for Israel and speak up to those who tolerate and foment antisemitism everywhere. We, too, are sickened by the terror and unable to sleep. We, too, weep with relief when a hostage is released. We, too, watch the videos of family reunions on a repeat loop. We are family, and we will not be silenced. There was too much silence in our past.

We feel so close, as if one heart, I declared to this young woman. She looked at me slightly puzzled. “Thank you,” she awkwardly replied.

Her reaction showed me that my deep feelings of longing and love, ones shared by so many American Jews, are not necessarily reciprocated. This young woman has no space to carry the burdens of antisemitism on the American college campus or the desecration of diaspora synagogues. She is unlikely to sympathize with the large swath of confused American Jews, who feel betrayed, whose Judaism once synonymous with progressive values now feels hollow. Complex questions of Jewish identity take up little room in her mind when so many Israeli lives are in mortal peril. And I don't think they should.

I get it. Israeli Jews are carrying enough. Waking up in Israel is itself an act of heroism. Israelis don't need to give anyone in the Diaspora a medal for caring, or even an acknowledgment, for that matter. I've described it as a shiva visitor who wails louder than the mourner. That mourner owes the visitor nothing. She has every right to say, "This is not about you—this is about me."

But this approach is ultimately not helpful if we truly see ourselves as one people.

I've noticed a sometimes chilly wind from recent immigrants to Israel towards the culture and communities they're from. Some openly express disdain for those not in Israel, possibly as a negative way of affirming their own choices. All of this eats away at that elusive desideratum: Jewish unity. Relationships can suffer when there's an emotional imbalance. To dismiss the pain of Diaspora Jewry in this moment is itself an expression of *shlilit ha-golah*—the negation of the diaspora, a pillar of hardline Zionism.

***[Purchase Erica Brown's book,* Morning Has Broken: Faith After October 7th*, here]***

Right now, we need not compete, negate, or diminish one another. In any competition, the Diaspora will always lose because we cannot know the trauma as intimately as Israelis. But to disregard our pain altogether is to widen the gap between us when so many Diaspora Jews are trying hard to close it.

I experienced this myself.

I spent a year composing my thoughts on the war in a very personal account. I've discussed it with many Israelis who saw themselves in it. But I was also told in a recent conversation in Jerusalem, "No one really cares what an American Jew thinks about the war." This was not said to offend. But it offended.

Do only those directly living through a war lay claim to it? As I described in that book, a friend helped me manage my own guilt at the distance. He reminded me that during wartime, whatever we do, we feel guilty for all we are not doing. His son, a reservist who was sent to the North, feels guilty that he was not in the South. His son who is in the South feels guilty that someone he knows has been injured, yet he returned home whole. Even the wounded feel guilty about still being alive while others lie dead.

One day the history books will tell the story of this time on both sides of the ocean. Right now, it's not possible to assess the dissonance the way we can calculate a time difference. Some days, it can feel like rejection, like the vulnerability of an earnest teenager who musters the courage to say, I love you, yet hears nothing in return.

We Diaspora Jews are the ones who wait—we wait for news, for a good word, and for the wick of a havdala candle to be drenched in wine to find out what happened in Israel while we were "gone."

Roland Barthes describes the tension in *A Lover's Discourse: Fragments*. "Am I in love?—yes, since I am waiting," he writes. "The other one never waits. Sometimes I want to play the part of the one who doesn't wait; I try to busy myself elsewhere, to arrive late; but I always lose at this game. Whatever I do, I find myself there, with nothing to do, punctual, even ahead of time. The lover's fatal identity is precisely this: I am the one who waits."

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I find it more instructive to turn to the spiritual signposting offered by our ancient Sages without judgment. "One who was standing in prayer in the Diaspora should focus his heart toward the Land of Yisrael," states a passage in the Talmud. One who stands in the Land of Israel, it continues, focuses his heart toward Jerusalem. One in Jerusalem turns in the direction of the Temple. One in the Temple turns towards the Holy of Holies. One in the Holy of Holies turns to the ark, where God's glory is manifest. One behind the ark imagines being in front of the ark.

From every direction, the Talmud reminds us, and from every level of proximity, there is someone closer still. But we are all mandated, the Talmud concludes, to focus our hearts in the same direction, towards one place.

So was it then. So is it now.

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