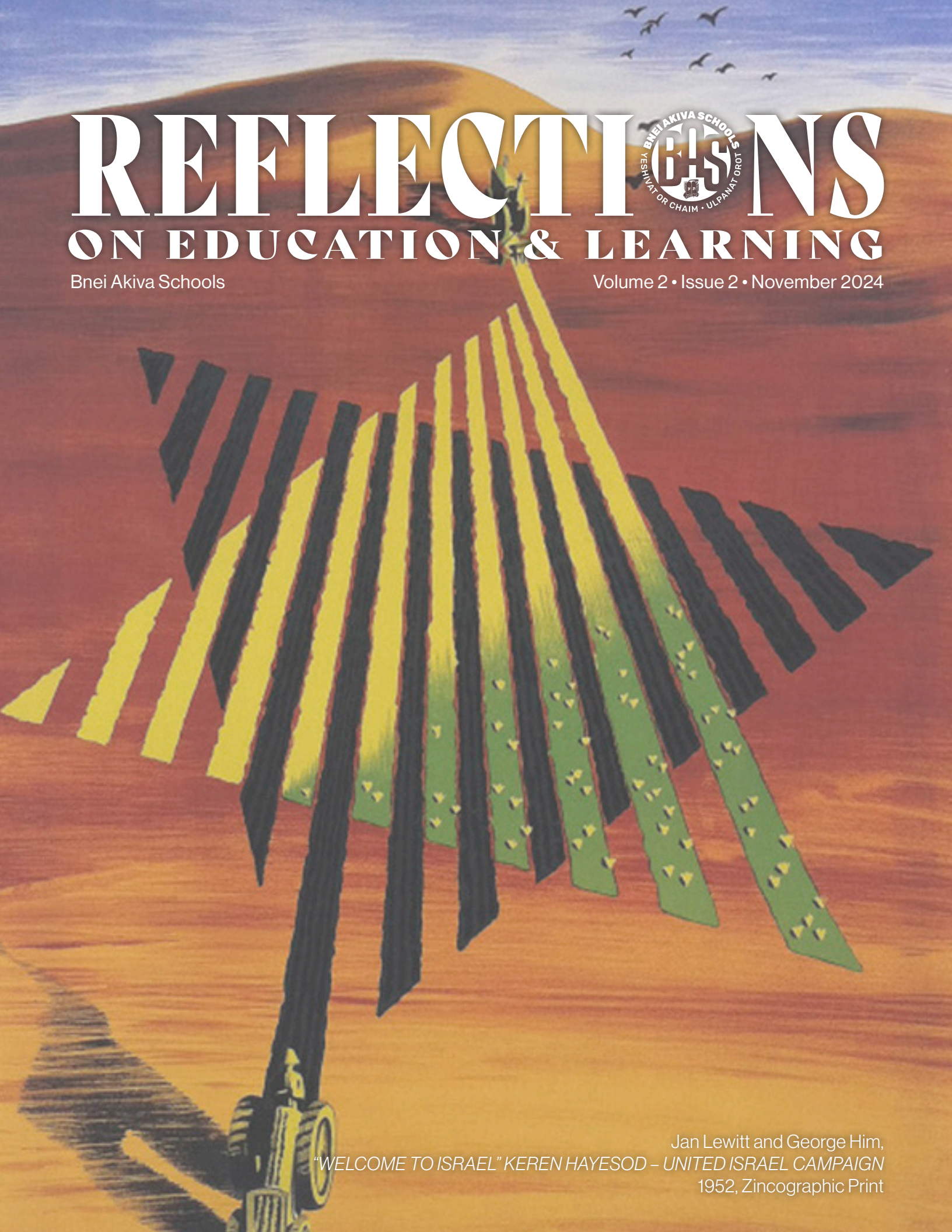


REFLECTIONS

ON EDUCATION & LEARNING

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Jan Lewitt and George Him,
"WELCOME TO ISRAEL" KEREN HAYESOD – UNITED ISRAEL CAMPAIGN
1952, Zincographic Print

ISRAEL POST-OCT 7TH HELP AND SUPPORT 2.0

HOW WE AS DIASPORA JEWS NEED TO RE-THINK AND
RE-IMAGINE OUR ASSISTANCE AND AID



Rabbi Seth Grauer
Rosh Yeshiva and Head of School

A RECENT FACEBOOK POST FROM Israel showed a photo of a couple with a young man: “He [the young man] lives in Haifa. He posted on Facebook that he’s looking to buy a used car. A couple in Ashkelon came across the post and understood from the comments that the young man was a lone soldier. They contacted him and told him they had a great car for sale at a really good price. The soldier traveled three hours from Haifa to Ashkelon. When he arrived, the couple showed him the car and told him that out of appreciation for his service the car is now his...FOR FREE! This country is filled with such special people...”

There are posts like that almost every day, showing the fine and noble side of humanity. We have seen so many wonderful local volunteer projects, chesed initiatives and movements for

unity, demonstrations of great resilience, and a powerful feeling of the Jewish spirit.

There are plenty of reasons for hope and comfort. Israel is certainly experiencing a period of healing, rebuilding, and strengthening. We hear powerful and inspirational messages from bereaved parents like Rabbi Doron Perez (World Mizrahi, 2024), Iris Chaim (Jewish Founders Network, 2024), Rachel Polin Goldberg (PBS News Hour, 2024), and others. But for every hero like that, who somehow finds inner strength, there are still hundreds of families that we don’t see, coping—or not—with their loss and trauma.

With the *Yamim Noraim* and Sukkot celebrations over, we begin the start of a long winter. For many, getting back into their mundane daily routines often reopens the great chasm in their

lives, if it ever closed. So, with great sadness and a heavy heart, I want to highlight this other side of the Israeli reality, far away from the headlines and media spotlight, however, with a lofty, principled and purposeful goal.

I just recently returned from Israel, where I visited bereaved families, shiva houses, injured soldiers, many alumni, and others. Despite physically having been in Israel on October 7, 2023, and witnessing the tragedy first-hand, this was a trip very different from any other I have ever experienced—so much so that I now feel renewed motivation and responsibility to see what we, Diaspora Jews, can perhaps do to help. Even if the people I encountered are a tiny representative sample, it still means we have sisters and brothers out there who need our help.

Let me explain.

Over a year after Oct 7, 2023, the dry statistics are shocking: 1228 soldiers and 891 civilians killed, 2300 wounded, 927 orphans, 234 widows, 121 parents left without any children at all, thousands of evacuated families still living in hotels (Israel Defence Forces, 2024), and a 900% increase in people seeking psychological help for mental and emotional war/trauma-related issues (Goldshtein, 2024).

I saw a country that was exhausted from over a year of war and devastated over

mounting losses of young soldiers. A country filled with widows and orphans whose numbers keep growing.

I visited shiva homes where some mourners were no longer as faithful and idealistic in their sacrifices and pain. Rather, harbouring frustrations and anger in ways I had not seen or heard before.

I visited injured soldiers both connected and unrelated to our communities in Toronto. Again, not all of them viewed their injuries and

suffering with the same courage and bravado we have heard so often this past year. Far too many expressed anger, frustrations, sadness, and, at times, a sense of futility and, dare I say, even fear.

I visited many of our graduates who have either been discharged from the IDF, are currently serving, or are getting ready to draft. Some of them are deeply affected. Clear

mental health challenges were apparent; there were some who spoke openly about their struggles, while some were even questioning their decision to make aliyah and enlist. While I didn't ask specifically, my sense was that the realities of war (and of course the lack of time to process) has had a far greater impact than they could have anticipated.

Inside people's homes, I witnessed some feelings of despair, as wives expressed their frustration with their husbands' absences; mothers no longer wanting their sons to volunteer for *miluim*; families fighting amongst

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themselves about the way in which the army is treating the older soldiers; and reservists considering not going back next time. Sadly, there exists increasingly bitter animosity between those who are prepared to sacrifice their lives and those who are not.

I was brought to tears more than once on this trip; often when I came face to face with individuals, but also when reflecting on my own complex feelings of confusion and helplessness over the realities of this seemingly insoluble conflict.

In short, among the many examples of defiance, resilience, light, faith, and hope, I saw a country overwhelmed by the weight of this war. Over 100 hostages are still being held in Gaza, political turmoil has taken over the country, and all this says nothing of the fears associated with how the country will pay for this war and the possible impact on daily life when it is all over. There is one thing I know for sure: Israel needs help.

I raise this issue not to heaven forfend dwell on negativity and certainly not to see the glass as being half empty. I do not believe on any level in a sense of helplessness or hopelessness. I am very optimistic, and I know that Israel will emerge from this crisis stronger than ever, and the Jewish people will triumph. Rather, I want to highlight the other side and a significant impact of this war to draw attention to it. All too often we fail to discuss and focus our attention on the pain and sorrow because it is too difficult otherwise. We prefer to wear our rose-coloured glasses and only share stories of inspiration and strength. However, if we want to be helpful and truly supportive, we cannot remain tone deaf to some of the realities of what is happening in Israel.

Please also understand that I remain filled with *bitachon* and *emunah*. During these

times, we rely on *yeshuot Hashem keheref ayin*: Hashem can save us in the blink of an eye. We know He is in charge of the bigger picture. We believe we will emerge victorious and all will be well with our beloved country and land. We know we are living in *atchalta deGeula*, the beginning of redemption. This war and its attendant troubles are all part of *chevlei mashiach*, the pains of redemption.

That said, we cannot rely on miracles and we, the Diaspora community, must act. I am convinced that we must rethink how we can support our sisters and brothers in Israel and consider what kind of help will have the greatest impact.

Like so many communities around the world after October 7th, the Toronto Jewish community responded with alacrity, passion, and purpose. We sent dozens of duffle bags of supplies, wrote hundreds of letters, learned thousands of *mishnayot*, and prayed tens of thousands of chapters of Tehillim. Coupled with over 100 million dollars of aid, our outpouring of support was deeply felt throughout Israel. This does not even include the number of missions and individuals who personally traveled to Israel to offer face-to-face empathy, support, and love.

The needs are different now.

Of course, we can't all make aliyah and we can't all join the IDF to fight, but still, we must find a way to do our part. Of course, many of us have been praying and saying Tehillim since the war began, and certainly this is something we must continue. However, I am suggesting we reconsider what the needs truly are and to what extent we can come up with creative ways to address these needs. We should be listening and asking questions on both a micro and macro level and determine how we can help in the most meaningful, effective, and

We need to be these “others” who are providing help, strength, and support.

long-term ways.

One example of the kind of initiative we could consider is a support program for Israeli children in institutions with a high risk of post-trauma, for students and staff alike. As we have entered into the second year of war, Israeli citizens of all ages are subject to the likes of complex trauma, secondary trauma, and collective trauma which have cascading impacts that exceed the primary trauma at the outbreak of war. The circles of impact are so numerous that unfortunately, Israel does not have the capacity to provide individualized responses to all victims. Consequently, the Ministry of Education has approached a leading psychological institute to spearhead a project to prevent and reduce the trauma responses among residents of Israel. This includes: psychological guidance and support for leaders, parents, emergency teams, and others, trauma processing groups, and psychologists accompanying school principals throughout the year.

Another creative project already being spearheaded in Israel involves retired citizens moving to the Gaza Envelope area for one year, where they will use their skills and experiences to help rehabilitate the residents and strengthen the communities (Beit Midrash Elul, 2024). The project, *Shnat Sherut 50 Plus*, mirrors the *shnat sherut* (year of service) that some 18-year-old Israelis serve in the Diaspora, bringing a taste of Israeli culture to Jewish

communities around the world. Toronto is blessed to have benefitted from the presence of *shinshinim* (as these teenagers are called) for many years; now, we have the opportunity to reciprocate.

And this is just a drop in the ocean. There is so much that can be done. Rabbi Sacks (2021) writes:

Morality, at its core, is about strengthening the bonds between us, helping others, engaging in reciprocal altruism, and understanding the demands of group loyalty, which are the price of group belonging. A sense of morality safeguards something deeply engraved within us, a legacy from the distant life's past, when we lived together in small groups. Then, as now, the ability to rely on the help of others when facing life's challenges is a powerful source of resilience. (p. 36)

Every day, as educators, we have the opportunity to instill in our students important skills and values that we hope they will use for the rest of their lives. This, perhaps, is the most important message that we need to impart: we need to be these “others” who are providing help, strength, and support to our sisters and brothers in Israel and we need to figure out ways that we can do more to help. We can do it – we have the will and the way. We now just need to blend and merge those together. ■

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