

Dialogues of Love and Fear

A Rabbi's Daughter, a Kes's Son, and Hope for the Future



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MAGGID



Sharon Zewde Shalom

DIALOGUES OF

LOVE AND FEAR

A RABBI'S DAUGHTER, A KES'S SON,
AND HOPE FOR THE FUTURE

Yeshiva University Press
Maggid Books

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Where there is need, we were taught to respond with swift and concrete action – even if we have not yet figured out all of the details.

Responding in this way is born out of a deep set of values, rooted in a tradition of *tzedaka* passed down through generations of our family. It is also informed by a powerful and creative vision for the future – one in which those who are able respond generously and quickly to support those around them, with the hope that such support will move the needle, even if just a little, to make the world a better, kinder, holier place.

This is exactly what happened when our parents, Brenda and Samuel Gewurz, met our friend Rabbi Sharon Shalom. They saw in Rabbi Shalom something right and good. Through the rabbi's thinking and teaching – and wonderful warmth – they saw that this man has a gift that would allow him to make a broad and positive impact on Israeli society and the Jewish people.

We are delighted to have the blessed opportunity to dedicate this beautiful and important work in honor of our father's eightieth birthday and also our parents' fiftieth wedding anniversary, *b"n*. Yehuda ben Tema says in *Pirkei Avot* (5:21), "Eighty is for *gevura* (strength)." May our father continue to be strong, find more opportunities to effect positive change – something that brings him true joy – and may he continue to inspire the rest of us to do the same. King David taught us in *Tehillim* (2:11), *Gilu birada* (Rejoice with trembling). May our parents continue to live and to love together in joy and commitment. And may Rabbi Dr. Shalom's messages of love and fear continue to resonate for generations.

Risa & Zev
Ariana, Danya,
Judah & Raanan

Julie & Ilan
Maia, Lyla
& Dov

Ora & Michael
Jonas, Emmett,
Leo & Caleb

This book is dedicated in loving memory of my mother

Seiley Tzila Mengesha Tefery zt"l

I was constantly amazed by my mother's strength. She was hardworking, wise, and full of humor. She believed that her life had meaning, and she was both proud and modest. My mother managed to transform her life completely, despite complex technology, a language gap, and cultural differences. She moved beyond the constraints of the times and became the mistress of her domain. Help from others is not what sustained her; rather, it was the self-worth that radiated from within her and shone out to those around her.

She overcame hardships via hard work. She married off nearly all of her children, bought a house without needing to take out a mortgage, and never went into overdraft at the bank. And she did all this without knowing how to read a word of Hebrew. She was always on the go, tireless until her very last days. Always moving onward and upward, never backward, until death overpowered her. For who can stand in the face of death? Our mother taught us to never let go of hope. Go, go, keep going and never stop.

May her memory be a blessing.

Sharon Zewde Shalom



THE PRESIDENT

Jerusalem, August 23, 2020

Dear Rabbi Dr. Sharon Shalom,

I have happily received your book, *Dialogues of Love and Fear: A Rabbi's Daughter and a Kes's Son*.

Now, only a few weeks after the recent impassioned demonstrations by Israelis of Ethiopian descent, your book is more timely than ever. The form of the volume teaches us about the progress that we as a society must still make - progress that can only begin and end with dialogue.

The Zionist dream has brought upon us the worthy challenge of recognizing the beauty of differing customs and traditions, and of building a shared life together in this country. I hope that we can continue to cultivate a sense of love amongst ourselves and root out and destroy our fear of the other. This is indeed the way we must approach our relationships with all the myriad different groups that make up the mosaic that is Israeli society.

Yours, with best wishes and esteem,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'R. Rivlin'.

Reuven (Ruvi) Rivlin



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Letter from Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks

Four thousand years ago, one man heard a call. “Leave your land, your birthplace, and your father’s house and go to the land I will show you” – those were the first syllables of recorded Jewish time and in a way I find mysterious, even miraculous, Jews throughout history have heard those words calling to them as they called to Abraham and Sarah to leave their land, birthplace, and father’s house and journey to the Land of Israel.

Few chapters in that story are more dramatic than that of the Jews of Ethiopia – Beta Israel. Separated from Jews elsewhere for some two thousand years, in the fourth century, they fled from attempts to convert them to Christianity and settled in the hills of Gondar. They lived a tribal lifestyle, many of them couldn’t read or write, yet they clung to their identity with awesome faith. When violence broke out in Ethiopia in the 1980s, they began their journey back to Israel through the Sudan. It was dangerous and many died on the way.

There is an ancient tradition that each year migrating storks fly over Ethiopia. The Hebrew for a stork is “*hasida*” and in Amharic it’s called “*shimaleh*.” Seeing the birds flying overhead, the Jewish children would sing them a song, “Stork! Stork! How is Jerusalem,” and they dreamt that they too would one day fly to the Holy City. The same call that once summoned Abraham and Sarah, in our time was heard by

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Jewish children in Africa, to leave their land, their birthplace, and their father's house to make the Jewish journey to the Jewish land.

Rabbi Dr. Sharon Shalom was one of the children who followed that call and made that dangerous journey, miraculously reaching Israel in January 1982. Today, Rabbi Dr. Shalom is a shining light of not only Ethiopian Jewry but of the Jewish people as a whole.

Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks
London 2020

Foreword

The Mekhilta of Rabbi Ishmael, a third-century Tannaitic midrash, reflects on the moment when the people of Israel accepted the Torah and its commandments at Mount Sinai. The midrash amplifies Exodus 19:5, “And now, if you hearken to My voice and keep My covenant, you shall be My own possession among all peoples.” God expresses understanding at the shock of the Israelite former slaves on hearing this offer. God urges them to accept. The midrash builds upon the immediacy of the biblical “now,” and the conditional nature of the Divine offer: “Take it upon yourselves *now*; all beginnings are difficult.” Indeed, all transformations, all new “beginnings,” are difficult, and require a leap of faith. The exodus of the Beta Israel, literally “the House of Israel,” from Africa and their aliya is the most recent of these new Jewish beginnings, an act of “Love and Fear” of the first order.

Dialogues of Love and Fear: A Rabbi’s Daughter and a Kes’s Son, and Hope for the Future is a reflection written in Hebrew, translated into English, penned by a person who has reached the very center of Israeli Religious Orthodox culture. Sharon Shalom is an Orthodox rabbi, trained at the elite Yeshivat Har Etzion, sometimes called the “Harvard of the Yeshivot.” He holds a doctorate in Talmud from Bar-Ilan University, enjoyed a prestigious post-doc at Brandeis University, is a congregational rabbi to

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Holocaust survivors in Kiryat Gat, and holds an important academic position in Israel (no small feat). He is married to an Ashkenazi social worker and is a father of five. Look him up on the site of Ono Academic College and his “International Center for the Study of Ethiopian Jewry” and you will find him – Rabbi Dr. Sharon Shalom.

Dig a bit deeper, perhaps, searching online “Rabbi Dr. Sharon Shalom,” and you will learn more – that Sharon Shalom was not born either Sharon nor Shalom, but Zewde from Tesfay in the Gudulo Province of Ethiopia. His grandfather, Abba (Gideon) Dejen Mengesha z”l, was a leader of his community, and his mother, as he writes, was a *tza-deket* – a woman of towering strength. She must have been – to send her oldest son off in a truck and a boat to a new land, no matter how much he or she believed that in Jerusalem “everything was made of gold.” Zewde came to Israel as a refugee child – and for a time, as an orphan.

Having survived the refugee camp in the Sudanese desert, and averting a “plague” that afflicted not just the first born, Zewde from Ethiopia reached Israel. At Ben Gurion airport he acquired his very Israeli Hebrew name. In Israel, young Sharon dived into the culture of the State apparatus for new olim, including the Emunah Afula Children’s Home. He thrived, especially after the arrival of his parents, brothers, and sisters – years later. This personal “resurrection of the dead,” as he calls it, set the “son of the Kes” on eagle’s wings on his ascent into Israeli elite society. As the midrash intimates, though, it wasn’t easy.

The adult Sharon Shalom reflects: “I was pleased to have this name [Sharon], because people explained to me that this was a new name from Jerusalem. Wonderful, I thought, but that led me to ask: Who am I, an Israeli or an Ethiopian? What does it mean to change your name to an Israeli one? Or on the contrary, to keep your Ethiopian name? Was society a factor that pulled me down and kept me back, or was it a motivating factor that pushed me forward? I also asked, why am I different? Is difference a blessing or a handicap? Is this society racist or not? I had to reformulate my identity – how should I go about it? I was confused.”¹ Over time, Rabbi Dr. Sharon Shalom worked to integrate his many identities – as a member of the Beta Israel (the “House of

1. <https://www.brandeis.edu/israel-center/about/visitors/dr-shalom-story.html>.

Israel”), who became a western-oriented religious Zionist of its liberal wing, and a fluent speaker of English. He altered his name, this time integrating his Ethiopian self publicly into his Israeli Jewish self. He is Rabbi Dr. Sharon Zewde Shalom.

Dialogues of Love and Fear: A Rabbi’s Daughter and a Kes’s Son, and Hope for the Future is a fictionalized reflection upon our author’s life and transformations, a window into the process of one Ethiopian *oleh* and of his community as he and they have joined the chaotic and deeply multicultural constellation that is Israeli society. It is structured as a conversation between a the daughter of a rabbi, and the son of a *kes*. Both characters have complex family structures which reflect the reality of modern Israel, and each are beholden to their own values and traditions. This exchange is incisive as it is often quite personal. The “Rabbi’s Daughter” is the “everyman” of her community, a sympathetic, supportive, and curious ear and foil through which Shalom presents the complexities of his personal story and religious synthesis to the larger Religious Zionist community.

Simultaneously, it introduces other Israeli communities – including Ethiopians – to the thought world of the “typical” educated religious Zionist. Ethiopian readers may find themselves glancing left and right, as they listen in on the personal synthesis of Ethiopian-ness and Israeli-ness described by “the Kes’s Son.”

Shalom’s synthesis is tolerant as it is gentle. In it he finds a place for Ethiopian tradition among the varieties of Jews and Judaism that make up the contemporary Jewish tapestry. He is a trailblazer, creating dialogue across Israeli culture. Blending his many commitments and broad, humane education, Shalom in the chapter “The Truth: Heavenly vs. Earthly,” writes that “A halakhic argument is considered legitimate and is called ‘the words of the living God’ when it’s based in the halakhic system. That’s why the Ethiopian halakhic tradition is legitimate, too; the Ethiopian sages stood at Mount Sinai along with the rest of the children of Israel, and wanted to worship God in the traditional way. They, too, are part of this great story.”

The Creator of the Universe, through the voice of the *Mekhilta*, reminds and challenges us that “All beginnings are difficult.” The great *aliya* of the Beta Israel is no exception. In fact, the complexities

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of identity became evident once this amazing community arrived and began to settle into the real and distinctly non-utopian “land of Zion and Jerusalem.” “Rabbi Dr. Sharon Zewde Shalom,” our friend Sharon, is a prime mover in that process, a man with legs humbly set in Ethiopia and the Sudanese Desert and in Ono and Gush and Bar-Ilan, and always in Jerusalem of Gold. He sits beside his marvelous wife, and his Ashkenazi-Ethiopian thoroughly Israeli children fidgeting on his own knees. What better metaphor can we imagine for our very human yet miraculous *kibbutz galuyot*, the modern “ingathering of the exiles,” that is the State of Israel?

We at the Yeshiva University Center for Israel Studies, our feet set in both New York and Jerusalem, are proud to take a small part in Rabbi Dr. Shalom’s project. We look forward to the day when we will join our Ethiopian brothers and sisters in the “land flowing with milk and honey,” when “all synagogues and study houses... will be set eternally in Eretz Yisrael” (Megilla 29a).

Steven Fine
Director, Yeshiva University Center for Israel Studies

Acknowledgments

I will never forget my first days in the IDF. I didn't know a soul. Feelings of shock and awkwardness filled me. Mostly I had a sense of alienation. Later I realized that I was in good company, since almost everyone felt the same way. It was precisely in that state of chaos and darkness that good friends were discovered, as Dr. Martin Luther King said, "Only when it is dark enough can you see the stars." Ilan Gewurz, an English-speaking lone soldier from Canada, was one of them. A lone soldier from Canada and a new immigrant from Ethiopia meet in the Israel Defense Forces. For no apparent reason, friends at first sight. A circle closed.

Over time, a deep friendship began to form between us. I understood him and he understood me. However, inexplicably, immediately after we were released from the IDF, our paths split, the memory of our connection severed and forgotten.

Twenty years later, as I came off the plane at the Montreal airport, I suddenly noticed a man smiling broadly at me and introducing himself. "We were together in the Givati Brigade!" he said. "I came to take you to your host family, which are my parents, Sam and Brenda Gewurz. Do you remember me?" How could I not remember! We jumped and hugged and the circle closed.

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For a long time I walked around with a dream to establish an international center to research Ethiopian Jewry. This was part of my thinking about changing the consciousness in the community of scholars regarding the place of the study of Ethiopian Jewry in academia. One day I received a phone call from Ono Academic College. To my surprise, they were offering me a position to teach as a full-time lecturer in the Jewish Studies Department. When I arrived at Ono I told them about my dream. When they answered me, I understood that they had also been dreaming the same dream. Another circle closed.

The obstacle we faced was funding. I decided to call Ilan's father, Sam Gewurz. I briefly told him about the dream and the opportunity in my academic career. Sammy asked clever, deep, and sensitive questions to understand the story of my research center dream. After listening to me attentively, he thought for a few moments and then asked, "Do you know what *mazal* (luck) is? I'll tell you: It's an acronym for place (*makom*), time (*zeman*), and language (*lashon*). A person who knows what is the right place, the right time, and says the right thing, makes himself lucky, and you are very lucky." Three months later, Ilan and I, this time without military vests or weapons, with only good people around us, cut the red ribbon to open the first International Center for the Study of Ethiopian Jewry at Ono Academic College. I would like to thank Prof. Tova Hartman, who believes in the value of every person and in the value of every culture. I would also like to thank Ranan Hartman, Dr. Sam Schwartz, and Dr. David Biton for making this dream come true. From this dream another circle is closed.

My book, *Dialogues of Love and Fear: A Rabbi's Daughter, a Kes's Son, and Hope for the Future*, was translated from Hebrew to English thanks to the generous contribution of Sam and Brenda Gewurz's three children and their spouses, Risa and Zev, Julie and Ilan, Ora and Michael, in honor of their father Sam upon his reaching the age of eighty, the age of might. Sam is a dreamer with his feet on the ground. A ladder is placed on the ground and its head reaches the sky. Sammy is a man with a tremendous amount of life experience. He is sensitive, smart, and funny. Endowed with out-of-the-box thinking, he continues to bring dreams and people together. But mostly he is attuned to other people's worlds. On one occasion I heard him interpreting the mishna in *Avot*, "Who is rich? He who is happy with his share." He said that the true rich man

Acknowledgments

is a man who is happy for others. The term *behelko*, “with his share,” doesn’t mean he is happy with his own share. It means, said Sam, that he is happy for the other person’s share. On another occasion I heard him interpret the verse in Psalms, “I was a boy and I became old and never saw a righteous person abandoned” (37:25), this way: “I never stood by and let it happen, but rather I got involved and did something about it.”

Sammy always says that labeling and lack of inclusion are the enemies of human dignity. In order to preserve human dignity in society, each individual must commit himself to dialogue, on the basis of getting to know and listening to others. The book *Dialogues of Love and Fear*, now including new chapters, seeks to implement this. Who is a hero? The one who enables love to defeat fear. Dear Sam, as you reach this age of might, I want to say thank you and good luck, with the hope that you and your beloved wife Brenda continue to enjoy health, success, and *naḥas* from all your children, grandchildren, and great-grandchildren. Blessed are You, Lord our God, King of the Universe, who has granted us life, sustained us, and enabled us to reach this occasion. Another circle is closed and a new circle is opened.

* * *

Here I have the opportunity to thank, from the bottom of my heart, the wonderful, kindhearted, knowledgeable, proactive individuals who have given me tremendous support over the course of many years, since my immigration to Israel without my immediate family, and until today. The Beta Israel community and its spiritual leaders, the *kesim* and *shmaglotch* (elders), have given me a wonderful gift: the gift of love. This love vanquished my fears of wild animals and of the wilderness during my journey from Ethiopia to the Land of Israel, and subsequently, it vanquished my fears during my journeys here in Israeli society. This is my chance to thank the spiritual leaders of the community, who toil day and night, amid joy and sorrow, at every memorial and every celebration. I bless them all with long life; the community needs their presence and will need it for many years to come.

I am grateful to all the teachers and rabbis in the various communities in Israel and around the world where I have spent time; to my colleagues at all the institutions where I have learned and at all

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the institutions where I have taught and still teach; and to my community, Kedoshei Yisrael, in Kiryat Gat. All of these were significant junctures in my life, and this is my opportunity to express my appreciation for my close friends from all over the world from whom I get support and loving kindness. I want to tell you all how much I love, appreciate, and think of you all the time. You are the ones who shaped my experiences. I would also like to sincerely thank Professor Tsvia Walden, Rabbi Professor Yehuda Brandes, and Rabbi Reuven Tal Yasu, who readily agreed to patiently and carefully read over this work and write some words of recommendation for it. I would like to thank Prof. Steven Fine, who thoroughly read the book and agreed to write the preface. I would also like to thank Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks *zt"l* who also agreed to write a preface. After his passing, I realized that he wrote his words while battling his sickness. May his memory be a blessing.

Thank you to my teacher, Rabbi Professor Daniel Sperber, and to Rabbi Aryeh and Ahuva Shalom, who are a source of inspiration, support, and advice, and who have been with me for many of my stops along the way. Thank you to the staff of lecturers from the Ono Academic College who have enabled me to march forward on a path of professional and academic development. I have so much gratitude toward them. Thank you to the dear staff of the School for Basic Jewish Studies at Bar-Ilan University.

I am exceedingly grateful to Dr. Haim Perry from whom I learned the secret of expanding the boundaries of the self, and the holistic view of the connection between past and future. I would like to thank my friend Joey Low, who is always available to help at important crossroads. Thank you to Rabbi Johnny Solomon who I could count on for advice on the book.

I thank Matthew Miller and the staff of Maggid Books, Rabbi Reuven Ziegler, Shira Finson, Caryn Meltz, Orit Sinclair, Rabbi Avidan Freedman, Debbie Ismailoff, and Dvora Rhein. It has been a pleasure to work with all of them.

I thank my mother, Seiley (Tzila), may her memory be blessed. She was taken from us just a few years ago. Anyone who met my mother sensed the strength of her character. She radiated confidence and

responsibility, and served as a source of inspiration and pride for me and my siblings. We venerated her. She taught me the value of taking responsibility, and instilled confidence in each of us, along with respect for every human being.

During my first year in yeshiva, my father asked me, “What are you learning?” I replied, “I’m learning Torah.” In my second year, he asked me again, “What are you learning this year?” Once again, I answered, “Torah.” “Well, all right,” he said. Then, in my third year, he finally asked, “What about math? When will you learn that?” He may not have understood exactly how things worked here in Israel, but he always made an effort and showed interest in whatever I was doing, and I am so appreciative of that.

I want to thank my aunt and uncle, Asresu and Betewly, who took me under their wing and together we came to Israel. Likewise, my deepest thanks go to my in-laws, Dr. Aaron and Tzameret Gablinger. They embrace us with unceasing support, concern, kindness, and respect, and this has given me and our family a tremendous sense of security. They have my appreciation and love, as well as my blessing for success in all that they do. I pray that just as they give to us, so we will be able to give to our children.

Finally, I wish to thank my wife, Avital, who has accompanied me during my work on this project from start to finish, with advice, wisdom, and unending support. Avital never stopped helping and encouraging me until I was blessed to see the finished product. There are no words to express my gratitude for all her help, which often came at the expense of home and family time. I pray that God will grant us and our children, Roi Gideon, Nadav Mordechai, Ziv Yehuda, Gil Haya, and Tohar Menachem a wonderful life, with good health, and may He be with us wherever we go. May we merit to increase love, tolerance, and Torah in the world, and may we serve God wholeheartedly. We give thanks to Him for the kindness that He always shows us.

I thank God that through all the hardships of the journey from Ethiopia to the Land of Israel, He was my protector and savior. He delivered me from the snare and from the harmful pestilence. He sheltered me with His wings, and I took refuge there. Plagues, destruction, and thousands of enemies were at my right hand, but they did not come near me; instead, I looked straight into their eyes (see Ps. 91:3–8). Moses was

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not permitted to enter the Land of Israel. Additionally, many generations of Jews dreamed of Jerusalem yet did not merit to witness God bringing His people back to Zion. Thank God, I merited to enter the Land of Israel. I will never know why I deserved this, but I certainly know what responsibilities I have as a result.

It is my hope that this work will pave the way for dialogue, will serve as a window between worlds, will create a meeting place, and will help to make the Beta Israel community an integral part of the mosaic of the Jewish world.

As a child in the Beta Israel community in Ethiopia, I thought that in Jerusalem everything was made of gold. I imagined a land flowing with milk and honey where everyone was Jewish, a utopia where there was no hatred or rivalry, but only love and serenity. I learned this utopian dream, and the longing for Jerusalem, from my grandfather, my parents, and the Israel-centric environment in which I grew up.

In 1981, I set out with my family in a convoy heading for Sudan. The journey to Sudan took more than two months, during which we were exposed to many dangers. I was certain that in just a short time, I would see Jerusalem. However, in reality, all those families remained in a refugee camp in Sudan for a period of about six years. Some of the parents decided to send their children ahead to Israel because they were afraid for their lives, as the mortality rate among children was high in the camp. My parents decided to send me to Israel with relatives in order to save me from a plague. It was 1982, and I was eight years old. Together with others, we set out toward the Red Sea in trucks belonging to the Mossad. There, we boarded a ship, the INS Bat Galim 2, which transported us to the shores of Israel as part of a special operation. The authorities gave me the name Sharon when I arrived in Israel.

Sometime after I arrived at the Emunah Afula Children's Home, I received some terrible news: my parents were likely no longer alive. For two years, I lived with the knowledge that I was an orphan. The children's home became my home in all respects. Then one day, the director of the home, Barukh Vazan, informed me that my parents were alive and that they were in Israel. When I saw my parents and siblings again, I truly felt that I was witnessing the resurrection of the dead and the realization of a two-thousand-year-old dream: the return to the Land of Israel.

Introduction

A fine line separates between an individual and the “other,” and between “God is the only One” and “I am the only one.” In fact, in Hebrew, the difference between these terms (*eḥad* and *aḥer*; *ein od milvado* and *ein od milvadi*) is literally a fine line, a tiny section of a letter, which, when removed, transforms it into a different one. Yet this tiny stroke contains an immense amount of meaning. I chose to write this book in the form of a dialogue between the daughter of a rabbi and the son of a *kes* (*kohen*) for several fundamental reasons. First, in the development of personal autonomy, democratization is a crucial step; the individual must expand the boundaries of the self and arrive at an understanding of others. In other words, the right to autonomy is the right to responsibility, namely, responsibility toward others. This kind of democracy is crucial, and one way to express it is through dialogue. I believe that every unjust act is the result of failed dialogue, and that this leads straight to destruction, including the destruction of the Holy Temple.

Secondly, the model of the dialogue contains a paradox. Dialogue does not typically cut corners; rather, it magnifies points of contention. It does not overlook differences, but in many cases exposes them. It is not my intention in this book to cut corners or to ignore disparities. My

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goal is to lay all the cards on the table, without regard for political correctness. Understanding that we are different is necessary in order to reach the point where we feel equal yet different. Exposing divergence is not pleasant, but it is good. It does not invalidate either party, but guides them both toward the right path:

It is a covenant between two parties who are essentially different from one another, and this difference is the most fundamental in all of nature. Yet, it is through their difference that the two of them see and reveal within themselves the eternal, the sublime, the infinite: the *Shekhina* [Divine Presence] itself.¹

During my doctoral studies at Bar-Ilan University I became acquainted with Judah Abrabanel's book, *Dialogues of Love*. That book is composed of dialogues between two characters, Philo and Sophia (whose names, when combined, form the word "philosophy"). The dialogues are written in a grand, philosophical style, and they deal with various topics, including the differences between love and desire, between needs and values, and between fate and free will. The structure of Abrabanel's work has certainly had a great influence on this book.

The Rabbi's Daughter and the Kes's Son are not interested in blurring differences, but in revealing them. Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik writes:

When Adam addressed himself to Eve, employing the word as the means of communication, he certainly told her not only what united them but also what separated them. Eve was both enlightened and perplexed, assured and troubled by his word. For, in all personal unions such as marriage, friendship, or comradeship, however strong the bonds uniting two individuals, the *modi existentiae* remain totally unique and hence, incongruous.... In fact, the closer two individuals get to know each other, the more aware they become of the metaphysical distance separating them....

1. Rabbi Shimon Gershon Rosenberg and Rabbi Yair Dreifuss, *Re'im Ahuvim* (Tel Aviv, 5771), 9.

The greatness of man manifests itself in his dialectical approach to his confronter, in ambivalent acting toward his fellow man, in giving friendship and in hurling defiance, in relating himself to and, at the same time, retreating from him. In the dichotomy of *ezer*, “helper,” and *kenegdo*, “against him” (Gen. 2:18), we find our triumph as well as our defeat.²

The encounter that is the focal point of this book occurs between two people who are equal yet different. They exemplify two totally dissimilar identities that exist in every society and in every group. The Rabbi’s Daughter and the Kes’s Son both undertake a journey by means of a dialogue between the “self” and the “other.” Both of them have decided to be free; they do not wish to remain enslaved to reality, to accepted ways of thinking, or to commonly accepted views. They therefore represent an archetype for all dialogue.

I once saw a bumper sticker that contained a clever anagram in Hebrew: “Make your feelings (*regesh*) into a bridge (*gesher*), so that your message will move others (*yeragesh*) and not push them away (*yegaresh*).” Likewise, in a dialogue, there are moments when the emotions of one side evoke emotion in the other, and there are also moments when the emotions of one side drive the other away. This is the paradox of living in a heterogeneous society.

Modern life presents a challenge to the institution of marriage. One of the reasons for this relates to the tension between a couple’s desire to live *for* their partnership, and their desire to live *in* their partnership. There is tension between life outside the home, where one is often compelled to adopt certain set behaviors, and life within the home, where there is communication based on dialogue and a lasting human connection. It is important to find a balance between living *for* and living *with* ourselves, and accordingly, to be able to offer someone else a life based on this balance. A love that can conquer fear is, among other things, one that is able to cope with this tension.

2. Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik, *Confrontation and Other Essays* (Jerusalem: Maggid, 2015), 97–99.

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As was mentioned above, the exchanges between the Rabbi's Daughter and the Kes's Son represent an archetype for all forms of dialogue. The Rabbi's Daughter is an idealist, while the Kes's Son is an existentialist.³ These two approaches both grapple with the reasons for existence: Who are we? What is the secret of love? How should the universe be explained? What is real? Does life have meaning? Thought and reason play a central role in the worldview of the idealist, as according to this view, thought and the universe sustain, or create, one another. The idealist places primary importance on reason, because through it one can explain humanity and the universe; ideas precede reality. The idealist believes that every individual has a purpose that must be brought to light. By contrast, the existentialist maintains, in the words of Professor Ephraim Meir, that

one method cannot incorporate all of reality, and one way of thinking cannot provide a definitive explanation of the universe and all human existence. ... Existentialism objects to the idealistic approach, where ideas precede reality, as this approach makes the unique subject vanish into abstract thought. ... The existentialist opposes the entire philosophy of idealism, maintaining that there are gaps in every systematic theoretical approach. ... [The existentialist] denies any philosophy that seeks to explain humankind. ... [The existentialist] rejects any way of thinking where a person is considered the necessary consequence of a combination of arbitrary, indiscriminate factors. ... [Therefore, the existentialist] considers truth to be synonymous with authenticity. Truth is individual; it relates to the subject. ... The existentialist philosopher has little interest in philosophy itself, with its impersonal history, despite his participation in it. He is more interested in his own life, which he seeks to comprehend.⁴

The essence of a person is determined not by the color of their skin, their clothing, whether they have a beard, coat, and hat, or the stigmas that

3. Idealism and existentialism are two fundamental philosophical schools of thought.

4. Ephraim Meir, *Jewish Existential Philosophers in Dialogue* (Jerusalem, 2004), 5 [Hebrew].

society holds about them. On the contrary, the existentialist decides to create and shape his or her own essence via personal autonomy, tremendous effort, and belief in his or her own capabilities, while letting go of any feelings of inferiority or blame. A weighty question lies between the lines of the dialogue between the Rabbi's Daughter and the Kes's Son: Is a person's character predetermined, or is it as Professor Meir writes, that "existence precedes any a priori determination with regard to the individual, and one can always change"?⁵ The persona of the Rabbi's Daughter is inclined toward the former notion, while the Kes's Son is inclined toward the latter.

At the heart of the dialogue lies the debate concerning religious truth, which is embodied in the respective opinions of Judah HaLevi and Maimonides.⁶ Judah HaLevi views religious truth as being spontaneous: The believer does not prepare to arrive at the truth, and he or she does not arrive at it by means of study and acquiring knowledge. Rather, Judaism is "a law whose origin is divine; it arises suddenly. It is told to come into being and it comes into being, just like at Creation."⁷ Maimonides takes the opposite view: Continuous, strenuous preparation, by studying the branches of wisdom, is the only path that can lead a person to religious truth. Maimonides harshly criticized those who believed that a person could receive prophecy without preparing and working steadily to acquire more wisdom: "But it is impossible that an ignorant simpleton will prophesy. It is just as likely that a donkey or a frog will prophesy."⁸ I do not intend to resolve this issue; after all, the answer is individual. But the debate surrounding religious truth is certainly fundamental to the dialogue in this book; the Rabbi's Daughter reflects Judah HaLevi's approach, and the Kes's Son reflects that of Maimonides.

THE KES'S SON

The Kes's Son made aliya (immigrated to Israel) from Ethiopia with his family. When they left their village in Ethiopia they numbered ten people, but when they arrived in Israel only six remained; three of the

5. Ibid.

6. Dov Schwartz, "Murkavut HaKiyum," *Shabbaton* 645, *Vayetzeh* (5774).

7. *Kuzari*, I:81.

8. *Guide of the Perplexed*, II:32.

children and their mother had died on the journey. This was, of course, absolutely catastrophic for the family. Later, the kes remarried in Sudan and had three more children, one of whom was born after their arrival in Israel. Once in Israel, when the family learned that they had to undergo ritual immersion in order to remove any doubt as to their Jewish status, they understood that they were not even considered Jewish. This was the straw that broke the camel's back. Government policy in those days was to send most young immigrants to learn in religious institutions, mainly schools for immigrant youth. This was in order to avoid repeating the mistakes of the 1950s, when the traditional and religious immigrant populations were sent to secular institutions. The Kes's Son developed a great appreciation for the wonderful staff members at his school, who were available around the clock for the students who needed them. And they were doing it not just for the paycheck; they saw it as an act of Zionism and a holy task of the highest importance.

After completing their studies, the siblings went their separate ways. One brother became *haredi*, which caused friction between him and the rest of the family. In his opinion, any custom or law that is in conflict with the *Shulḥan Arukh* or the rulings of Rabbi Ovadia Yosef constitutes heresy. His father, who continues to follow his own traditions, does not meet his halakhic standards. The traditions that were kept by his ancestors – and which essentially kept them – for thousands of years in Ethiopian exile, and were the cause of his own move to the Land of Israel, are no longer good enough in his eyes. Another brother was killed in a fight between Ethiopian youths in a nightclub. One sister moved abroad to pursue higher education. There, she met and married a successful non-Jewish lawyer. Another sister lives in Israel. She is an academic with a master's degree in education and sociology. She, too, is secular; she feels revulsion and total distrust toward the religious establishment. In her view, all those who represent it are thieves, cheats, and hypocrites. The remaining siblings are all still in school.

After high school, the Kes's Son started volunteering at the absorption center in Hulda, and went to learn at a national-religious Hesder yeshiva, where he fit in wonderfully. At the yeshiva, he expanded his knowledge of halakha (Jewish law) and numerous other fields of study. As noted earlier, the Kes's Son represents the existentialist approach, which proposes that

existence precedes essence. He does not deny the existence of essence, but he argues that it undergoes a transformation by the human being. People are different from one another, and each individual is affected in accordance with his or her personal decisions. The Kes's Son is inclined to believe that recognizing God and really accepting the yoke of heaven does not occur as the result of any external cause; rather, it is a choice that a person makes in his or her heart. Two people with similar backgrounds, even if they are siblings, could have the exact same experiences and education, and even endure the same tragedies, yet each one will emerge with a different conviction about his or her connection to God. Faith derives from within, from the individual's choice. The family of the Kes's Son is proof of this.

THE RABBI'S DAUGHTER

The Rabbi's Daughter is the grandchild of Holocaust survivors. Her grandmother and grandfather came from Poland. They met in a displaced persons camp after the Holocaust, immigrated to Israel, got married, and began a family, in spite of the horrors that they had endured. They had four children, each of whom went a different way. The oldest (our protagonist's father) became the rabbi of a West Bank settlement. The next son decided to cut all ties with religion; he lives in central Israel and his political views are left leaning. The third child, a daughter, is a prominent chemistry professor, and the youngest, also a daughter, lives abroad and is involved in the art world. The Rabbi's Daughter is one of six siblings. Recently, she learned that one of her sisters, who has a degree in mathematics and computer science, is a lesbian. Another brother, a medical student, is no longer religious, and all her other brothers and sisters are still learning in religious schools. The Rabbi's Daughter did a year of national service at the absorption center in Hulda, after which she decided to travel to Ethiopia. She then worked in a boarding school for immigrant youth. In the wake of great pressure from her parents, she began studying medicine.

The Rabbi's Daughter represents the idealistic approach, according to which essence precedes existence. In the Torah context, she believes that only the rabbis can reveal this essence, and that they do this by means of the halakha. She has difficulty understanding the existentialist. The Rabbi's Daughter believes that the entire Jewish nation stood at Mount Sinai and received the Torah, but because it is difficult

for everyone to comprehend the divine truth that was given there, God commanded us to follow the words of the rabbis of each generation. Nevertheless, each individual is still considered as having received the Torah in accordance with their particular spiritual nature. The Rabbi's Daughter believes that recognition of God and true acceptance of the yoke of heaven are the result of a personal choice to accept the words of the rabbis, which contain the truth. Because reality is so heterogeneous, it would be difficult to impart the truth to everyone. Consequently, limits and guidelines must be provided concerning divine truth, and this is done through the words of the rabbis.⁹

ENCOUNTER

The Rabbi's Daughter and the Kes's Son met at the absorption center. Every so often, she would ask him to come and run an activity or to help her communicate with the new immigrants. The Kes's Son saw this as holy work and would happily agree to come, even when it meant missing out on Torah study and uplifting Shabbatonim at his yeshiva. Naturally, they would speak before and after the activities. Occasionally, these discussions would turn to other topics: identity, politics, religion, culture, and sometimes even love.

The Rabbi's Daughter decided to do a second year of national service at a boarding school for new immigrants, and the Kes's Son entered the army through the Hesder yeshiva program. It seemed that the time had come for them to go their separate ways, yet at that point, when it became harder to meet, their desire to see one another became stronger. However, there was another obstacle: Her parents opposed her having contact with the Kes's Son. The two young people felt that they had no other choice, and sadly decided to end their connection.

After her trip to Ethiopia and her work with Ethiopian immigrants, the Rabbi's Daughter began studying medicine. She left her relationship with the Kes's Son in the past. The Kes's Son completed his military service and returned to yeshiva. After his time there, he decided to study law at university. Unlike the Rabbi's Daughter, he never forgot about

9. For more on this, see David Hartman, *A Living Covenant: The Innovative Spirit in Traditional Judaism* (New York: Free Press, 1985).

their connection. He believed that he may have lost the love of his life. Then, ten years later, at an academic conference, fate intervened and they met again. They caught up during a break and discovered that they were both still single. Their relationship began anew.

The conversations in this book take place after their reunion. The two embark on a journey of self-discovery, delving deep into the nature of love. They talk about things that happened during their time in national service and yeshiva. Where will the discussions between these two beautiful souls lead to? A deep connection begins to develop, resulting in true friendship. Amid moments of failure, doubt, and angst, a love arises that can conquer fear. Who or what will stand in their way this time? Could their talks bring about a love that cannot be stopped?



Love vs. Infatuation

RABBI'S DAUGHTER: I can't believe it's you! What an amazing surprise to see you here, after all this time. Has it really been ten years since we were at the absorption center? God truly works in mysterious ways. So much has happened since then, but my national service at the absorption center was, without a doubt, the most meaningful time of my life. Oh, I was in total shock when I first met the immigrants. And they looked at me like I was some kind of white UFO! Remember? I could barely communicate with them at the beginning, because of the language and cultural differences. But I was so determined to understand them, and thanks to your help, it became my most meaningful experience. This is ten years late, but I really want to thank you. It's truly wonderful to see you again.

KES'S SON: I'm very excited to see you again, too. You're not married yet! I think I might be dreaming. So, tell me everything. What have you been up to since I last saw you?

RD: Well, right after I completed my national service, I traveled to Ethiopia. It was important to me to see the places where the immigrants, who had become such a huge part of my life, had lived. After the trip, I worked as a *madrikha* (counselor) in a

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boarding school for immigrant youth. I got my driver's license, and I began studying medicine at university. Let's just say that my parents had gently suggested that I study medicine. Now I'm training to become a pediatrician. In the past, I wanted to study teaching and to work with children, and in the end I will be working with children, but as a doctor. What about you? I'm dying to hear what you've been doing. I see that you aren't wearing a ring either; are you still single?

KS: Listen, I don't want to tiptoe around this. It's kind of embarrassing but I'm just going to cut to the chase. There's something I want to tell you, and I didn't have the courage to say it ten years ago: I was always excited to be around you. I used to talk about you constantly, until I had worn myself and everyone else out. I thought about you all the time. Actually, if I'm being honest, I have never stopped thinking about you. I really don't want to lose you again. I'm speaking from the heart right now, and I hope your heart hears it and responds in kind.

RD: Oh! I don't know what to say. Now I'm embarrassed, too. You seem very sure of your love, but I'm concerned and confused. Perhaps you are *in* love with me, but don't really love me. On the other hand, maybe the fact that God brought us together today is a sign of true love. After all, there is no such thing as happenstance; everything is from Above. You know, in my own search for love, I also sometimes get a little crazy and think about the other person incessantly. It seems that you have been searching for me. Well, I am searching for love.

KS: To search for you *is* to search for love! But there is something you said that I don't quite understand: What's the difference between loving someone and being *in* love with them?

RD: I'll tell you a hasidic story to explain what I mean:

Rabbi Moshe Leib of Sassov, a hasidic rebbe, once said, "What is love? I learned the answer to this from a drunken gentile. I once

came to an inn and saw a group of peasants who were getting drunk. One of the peasants turned to his neighbor and, slurring his words, asked, ‘Do you love me?’

“The other replied, ‘I love you from the bottom of my soul!’

“The first peasant then burst into tears, wailing, ‘How can you say that you love me, when you don’t even know what pains me?’”¹

I think that it’s important to differentiate between love and infatuation. Infatuation can be defined as

a disease that everyone hopes to catch at least once in their life. It is a raging and seemingly irrational insanity, an emotional state that is always accompanied by a multitude of physical symptoms that at any other time would make us slightly concerned, such as increased heart rate, dry mouth, insomnia, stomachaches, loss of appetite, and an uncontrollable urge to exhaust those around us with incessant talk about the individual who is the cause of all this affliction.²

The feelings that you described are similar to this. Think about the difference between the phrases “to love” and “to fall in love.” When a person is infatuated, it’s as though he or she is really “falling.” On the other hand, when a person loves, there is no state of falling; instead, there is stability.³

KS: I understand the distinction between the two types of love. Infatuation is a more physical, egoistic love, which is unlike the love that the Rebbe of Sassov spoke of. But how can one tell the difference?

1. Yoel Rappel, *Fear and Love: Hasidic Stories and Sayings* (Tel Aviv, 1996), 15 [Hebrew].
2. Hamutal Degani, “A Disease Called Love at First Sight,” *Ynet*, September 29, 2003, Health section, <http://www.ynet.co.il/articles/1,7340,L 2771855,00.html> [Hebrew]; see also Eva Ilouz, *Why Love Hurts: A Sociological Explanation* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2012).
3. For more on this, see Naftali Rothenberg, *Where Love Leads: Love and Partnership in Jewish Sources* (Jerusalem, 5760) [Hebrew].

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We might react to a new relationship in an extreme and irrational way. And yes, when we meet a new person and feel those wonderful feelings, it may not be real love but an illusion that will end in disappointment. However, there are also amazing, irrational feelings that later, once there is recognition of life's complexities, become rational, transforming infatuation into love. So how do we know? Teach me the secret of love. I've told you of my love for you, but how do I know whether I love you or whether I'm *in* love with you?

RD: I don't know what the root of your love is, as it's hard to know in advance whether a particular love stems from egoism or altruism. I'll try to explain the difference between the two. One of the features of interpersonal relationships is the shift between the requirement to love and the desire to be loved. A person might be of the opinion that love means that the other person must love them, and not that they must love the other person. Such an individual will be occupied with trying to win the heart of their partner. However, there are also those who long not only to be loved, but also to be able to shower love upon their partner. Rabbi Eliyahu Dessler describes this complexity:

It seems to be commonly accepted that love is the feeling of gratification that a person has in the company of their loved one. While there is some truth to this, the opposite is even more accurate. Most of our love develops as the result of giving. The more one gives to and invests in one's partner, the stronger one's love grows.⁴

With this in mind, can you honestly tell me that you love me?

KS: Yet frequently, giving fails to unlock the other person's heart. I know of many relationships where one person wants to give, but the other doesn't want to take. The love portrayed in the Song of Songs is a

4. Rabbi Eliyahu Dessler, *Mikhtav MeEliyahu* vol. 1, *Kuntres HaNetina*.

good example: “I was asleep, but my heart was wakeful. Hark, my beloved knocks! ‘Let me in, my own, my darling, my faultless dove! For my head is drenched with dew, my locks with the damp of night’” (Song. 5:2). The man arrives in the middle of the night and calls out to his beloved to open the door, but she responds: “I had taken off my robe – was I to don it again? I had bathed my feet – was I to soil them again?” (Song. 5:3). She remains in her bed and doesn’t answer the calls of her lover. Then, through the keyhole, she sees his hand departing, and longing is awakened within her: “My beloved took his hand off the latch, and my heart was stirred for him” (5:4). Her heart is now open, and she rises to open the door: “I rose to let in my beloved; my hands dripped myrrh – my fingers, flowing myrrh – upon the handles of the bolt” (5:5). However, it is too late: “I opened the door for my beloved, but my beloved had turned and gone. I was faint because of what he said. I sought, but found him not; I called, but he did not answer” (5:6). The truth is that I have no desire to pull away from you, but I fear that you may pull away from me and then we will miss our chance for love.⁵

RD: I’m afraid of losing you, too. And I’m afraid that my own foolishness will be the cause. I have this fear that the moment I open up my heart to you a little, you won’t be there. I’m not myself right now; I’m scared that you’ll suddenly disappear, and I’ll start looking for you again, which I haven’t done for the last ten years. But I know I’ll keep looking, even when I can’t find you. I’ll call out, and if you don’t answer, I’ll shout. If someone is not loved, it’s a sign that he or she doesn’t love; and one who doesn’t love cannot be loved. I ask you to prove that you love me, yet immediately afterward, I’ll need to prove that I love you, just like in the Song of Songs, where the lover becomes the beloved. Yet all this just confuses me and prevents me from taking the next step toward love. Help me to find proof that you love me and that I love you.

5. For more on this, see Eliyahu Assis, *Ahavat Olam Ahavtikh* (Tel Aviv, 2009).

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KS: Love contains a secret, even a paradox. The Sages tell us that Abraham would travel from place to place searching for God. Once, he saw a palace that was on fire. He said, "Perhaps the palace has no owner." The owner looked out and said, "I am the owner of the palace." Likewise, when Abraham said, "Perhaps the world has no ruler," the Holy One, blessed be He, looked down and told him, "I am the ruler, the Master of the universe."⁶ In other words, Abraham's great religious epiphany began when he saw the world in its ruined state. Abraham expressed doubt as to whether there was a ruler of the world, and then God revealed Himself to him.

As a lawyer, I have represented clients in divorce proceedings. Once, I asked a couple why they were getting divorced. The husband answered that their love had ended. He said that for thirty years, there had been no love between him and his wife: "In the beginning, when there was still love between us, there was also contempt. But once the contempt was over, the love was over. Caring, which simultaneously contains both love and contempt, was replaced by indifference." It's possible for great love to be born out of rejection and anger.

RD: Now I'm even more confused. How do you know that this is love and not just infatuation? How do you know that this love will last?

KS: I know that right now I love you, and that I'm *in* love with you. I don't want us to allow fear to triumph over love. Please, let's allow love to triumph over fear instead.

RD: So let's leave these questions aside for now. I know it's not quite fair, since you've come to me and said that you love me, whereas I cannot confirm or deny that I love you. But perhaps I'll be more certain if we let go of this question and instead embark on a journey together in the hope that we will find that our love is real.

6. Genesis Rabba 39:1.

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KS: I would be happy to do this with you. Let's learn about love together on this journey that is life. Life contains within it all manner of difficulties, failures, disappointments, and pain, but we will allow love to defeat fear. We will learn how to live within a paradox and a reality of concealment and contradictions, of rejection and acceptance.

RD: Thank you very much for agreeing to this. I'm already beginning to love you!