

In 1924, a woman named Renana Gutman was born in Lvov, Poland. Things were never great for the Jews there, so at an early age, she and her family moved to Vilna. At the time, prior to the Second World War, Vilna was known as the “Jerusalem of Lithuania,” because it was essentially a spiritual, cultural and intellectual hub for Eastern European Jewry. It was home to some of the greatest yeshivot and rabbinic minds, like the Vilna Gaon who made his mark on Jewish history dating back to the 18th century. Renana, or Rena, would talk about how it was the best place to live, until suddenly, it wasn’t. It didn’t take long after the Nazi occupation in 1941 for life to change drastically. Where there was once an abundance of bakeries and freely exchanged Jewish thought, things became very cramped. They couldn’t move around in the same way as they could before. It was hard to get food. She managed to escape what we now know as the Vilna Ghetto before its liquidation.

Where did she go? She made it to the Land of Israel, which at that time was called the British Mandate of Palestine. She worked as an “advocate” or what we might call a lawyer, and rose through the ranks to become the first female Director General of the State Comptroller’s Office in Israel, appointed in 1972. Golda Meir was Prime Minister at the time.

Rena met and married a physician named Aaron Gutman. Aaron was my grandmother's first cousin, and he had his own story of how he arrived in the Land of our ancestors.

Aaron was born in Minsk in 1918, which was also a terrible place for the Jews, especially at the time of his birth. Before the Russian Revolution began in 1917, Minsk was in a region known as the Pale of Settlement, the place where Jews were legally confined under Tsarist law and faced all kinds of discrimination and restrictions on life, work, and more. The chaos of the Russian Revolution and Civil War, which lasted until 1921, brought waves of pogroms against the Jews of Minsk.

When the war ended and the Soviets took over, the pogroms were suppressed, but Jewish life under communist rule was reshaped with the forced closures of Zionist schools, Hebrew academies, and overall repression of Jewish expression, religion, and culture.

This didn't work for Aaron, so he escaped from there. He took train after train clandestinely until reaching Russia's main warm-water port where he boarded a ship crossing from the Black Sea into the Mediterranean where he made it to the Land of Israel, – which again, was still under British control. Most of the rest of his family didn't make it out alive.

But my cousin did, and there he met Rena, where they had two children whose family still resides there. Both Aaron and Rena have since passed, but you could find their children and children's children today in Hertzilya.

Now you may be thinking, "thanks for the history, rabbi, but what's the point here?"

I share this story with you not only because it's part of my family's history, but because it represents one small chapter in all of our shared history together as a People. The stories of their escape to the Land of Israel are incredible, and they're also not unique. Israeli society consists of people who made the same tough decisions and voyages as did they, and today's society consists of their descendants, along with countless others.

All of that is to say that Israel is not just some ephemeral idea subject to the attitudes and opinions of whomever turns on their television or reads a newspaper. Israel is a real place, a place in which our own families and friends live and thrive, and a refuge for Jews all over the globe.

This is – and *has* – been true since even *before* the founding of the Modern State.

And ever since Ben Gurion proclaimed its establishment on May 14, 1948, forces seeking to destroy, delegitimize, and drive us out of the Land have never abated.

It's no secret that, today, Israel has been under some of the most intense international pressure and scrutiny since responding to Hamas' attack on October 7, 2023, which was the biggest massacre of Jews since the Holocaust. So an important and timely question for us as American Jews is, "how do we relate to Israel at this moment?" The answer, I suggest, is the same way that we always have: with empathy, love, and most crucially, support.

The inevitable response to that assertion, by some, often sounds something like, "how could one hold such a position in light of the war in Gaza?"

I know that for many of us, this is hard. We feel grief for Israelis, and also pain when we see human suffering in Gaza. Some of us carry confusion and frustration, or even a deep fear for Israel's future. Holding these emotions doesn't weaken our bond with Israel — it shows that our love is real, because real love makes room for complexity.

And so we remind ourselves that multiple things can be true at the same time. The hostages in Gaza must be returned. At the same time, humanitarian aid must be accessible to the Gazans who have no affiliation with terrorist groups or activity.

Also, Hamas must be vanquished and never again be given an opportunity to launch attacks on Israel. Meanwhile, the war must end; it's deepening the divide in Israeli civil society, its reservists are exhausted, and the civilian death toll continues to mount.

Each of these points are true, and whether and *how* they can all be achieved remains an open question. Just as Rena and Aaron lived through times when truth about Jewish life was distorted and our people maligned, so too today we face distortions meant to weaken our bond with Israel. Their story reminds us that our connection to the land is not theoretical, but rooted in experience and survival. And yet, the narratives around Israel today often obscure that truth.

Nonetheless, we cannot allow Israel's enemies and detractors to weaponize these factors against us. The anti-Israel propaganda machine has been running at full throttle to turn the international community against Israel and to sow division within our own Jewish communities.

Just a few days ago, a cell of 18 terrorists emerged from a tunnel and descended upon an IDF security encampment in Gaza with the goal of kidnapping Israeli soldiers. The attack was routed and 8 escaped back into the tunnel. Clearly, their tactics have not changed, and the tactics of their supporters have not changed, either.

Over the past two decades, the Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions movement on college campuses attempted to delegitimize Israel on the world stage and undermine its security in the diplomatic realm. This evolved in the “téntifada” movement that gripped schools around the country last year, where open and unabashed anti-Semitism was given free reign to harass Jewish students and faculty on campus. Again, their goal was to isolate and undermine Israel by demanding colleges divest from Israeli holdings and ties – but this time, episodes of violence were a feature, not a bug.

Just this week, the AIPAC newsletter highlighted two reports. One, from The Free Press, exposed viral photos of Gazans supposedly starving — but the subjects were actually suffering from other medical conditions like cystic fibrosis and rickets. Another report alleged misconduct by UN agencies in Gaza from a whistleblower, including mishandling humanitarian funds and obstructing aid distribution. Both show how misinformation and political mismanagement fuel false narratives against Israel, with real consequences for its legitimacy and security.

These are strategies by Israel’s adversaries to win the war of the minds, and part of our responsibility as American Jews, and as Zionists, is not to fall prey to them.

Instead, our people's connection to the land compels us to stand united and strong in support of our spiritual homeland. Because for us as Jews, it's more than that. Israel is neither a headline nor a political football—it is our story, our people, our home. For us, it's personal, just as it was for Rena, Aaron, and all Jews alike. And that is how we relate to Israel today.

May we never lose sight of this bond. May we stand firm against falsehoods, offering our love and support in ways that strengthen our people everywhere. And may we see the day when Israel and her neighbors know peace, security, and wholeness – speedily and in our days. As together we say: amen.