To Live Like Human Beings

A Talk with Adina Bar-Shalom

Biographical Note

Rabbanit Adina Bar-Shalom is the founder of the Haredi College in Jerusalem and a recipient of the 2013/2014 Israel Prize for special contributions to society and state. She is the eldest daughter of Rabbi Ovadia and Margalit Yosef. From age three to six she lived in Egypt, where her father served as deputy Chief Rabbi of Cairo. She attended the Haredi Beis Yakov education system in Jerusalem. After graduating primary school, she was referred, with other graduates of Sephardic origin, to a Beis Yakov vocational school, where she studied sewing. At age eighteen, she married Rabbi Ezra Bar-Shalom. She taught sewing and opened a salon for brides that she ran for years. In 1975, after her husband and her father opposed her wish to pursue a university degree in psychology, she began to study fashion design at Shenkar College. In 2000, she established the Haredi College in Jerusalem, with her father’s permission.

Bar-Shalom is a member of the executive committees of Bar-Ilan University and various public forums. She established a forum for dialogue between religious and non-religious Jews and in 2011 was a member of the Spivak-Yona team that was established in response to that year’s social protest.

Isaiah 1**[[1]](#footnote-1)**

1 The prophecies of Isaiah son of Amoz, who prophesied concerning Judah and Jerusalem in the reigns of Uzziah, Jotham, Ahaz, and Hezekiah, kings of Judah.

2 Hear, O heavens, and give ear, O earth, for the Lord has spoken: I reared children and brought them up—and they have rebelled against Me!

3 An ox knows its owner, an ass its master’s crib: Israel does not know, My people takes no thought.”

4 Ah, sinful nation! People laden with iniquity! Brood of evildoers! Depraved children! They have forsaken the Lord, spurned the Holy One of Israel, turned their backs [on Him].

5 Why do you seek further beatings, that you continue to offend? Every head is ailing, and every heart is sick.

6 From head to foot no spot is sound: all bruises, and welts, and festering sores—not pressed out, not bound up, not softened with oil.

7 Your land is a waste, your cities burnt down; before your eyes, the yield of your soil is consumed by strangers—a wasteland as overthrown by strangers!

8 Fair Zion is left like a booth in a vineyard, like a hut in a cucumber field, like a city beleaguered.

9 Had not the Lord of Hosts left us some survivors, we should be like Sodom, another Gomorrah.

10 Hear the word of the Lord, You chieftains of Sodom; give ear to our God’s instruction. You folk of Gomorrah!

11 What need have I of all your sacrifices?” Says the Lord. I am sated with burnt offerings of rams, and suet of fatlings, and blood of bulls; and I have no delight in lambs and he-goats.

12 That you come to appear before Me—who asked that of you? Trample My courts no more; bringing oblations is futile. Incense is offensive to Me. New moon and sabbath, proclaiming of solemnities, assemblies with iniquity, I cannot abide.

14 Your new moons and fixed seasons fill Me with loathing; they are become a burden to Me, I cannot endure them.

15 And when you lift up your hands, I will turn My eyes away from you; though you pray at length, I will not listen. Your hands are stained with crime—

16 Wash yourselves clean; put your evil doings away from My sight. Cease to do evil;

17 Learn to do good. Devote yourselves to justice; aid the wronged. Uphold the rights of the orphan; defend the cause of the widow.

18 Come, let us reach an understanding—says the Lord. Be your sins like crimson, they can turn snow-white; be they red as dyed wool, they can become like fleece.

19 If, then, you agree and give heed, you will eat the good things of the earth;

20 But if you refuse and disobey, you will be devoured [by] the sword.—for it was the Lord who spoke.

21 Alas, she has become a harlot, the faithful city that was filled with justice, where righteousness dwelt—but now murderers.

22 Your silver has turned to dross; your wine is cut with water.

23 Your rulers are rogues and cronies of thieves, every one avid for presents and greedy for gifts; they do not judge the case of the orphan, and the widow’s cause never reaches them.

24 Assuredly, this is the declaration of the Sovereign, the Lord of Hosts, the Mighty One of Israel: Ah, I will get satisfaction from My foes; I will wreak vengeance on My enemies!

25 I will turn My hand against you, and smelt out your dross as with lye, and remove all your slag:

26 I will restore your magistrates as of old, and your counselors as of yore. After that you shall be called City of Righteousness, Faithful City.”

27 Zion shall be saved in the judgment; her repentant ones, in the retribution.

28 But rebels and sinners shall all be crushed, and those who forsake the Lord shall perish.

29 Truly, you shall be shamed because of the terebinths you desired, and you shall be confounded because of the gardens you coveted.

30 For you shall be like a terebinth wilted of leaf, and like a garden that has no water,

31 Stored wealth shall become as tow, and he who amassed it a spark; and the two shall burn together, with none to quench.

**Havruta**

**Adina:** Dealing with the destruction of the Temple in a *havruta* (literally: friend or partner) format seems symbolic to me. The two temples were destroyed precisely because there was no *havruta,* no togetherness. The chapter we have chosen to study is meaningful and difficult, but at least it ends in a way that gives us hope.

Let us start from the beginning:

Isaiah’s life overlapped the reigns of four kings and during this period, the People of Israel went through some dire experiences. The prophet adopts Moses’s language from the Torah but inverts the order. The prophet says: “Hear, O heavens, and give ear, O earth,” and Moses says: “Give ear, O heavens, let me speak; Let the earth hear the words I utter!” (Deuteronomy 32:1). Why this inversion? It is because Moses was in heaven; therefore, the heavens certainly “heard.” What was needed from the heavens was attentive listening. When the prophet Isaiah speaks, however, he does so in this world, and here the heavens have to listen.

“Even an ass knows its master’s crib” but we do not. We are not living here, we do not appreciate what we have, and we do not acknowledge that the Holy One, who has chosen us, has given us so much happiness, so much goodness. We reject it all.

“Who asked that of you? Trample My courts no more”—we are the worst ingrates in the world. Instead of doing good by defending the cause of the widow, we trample her a little more and disregard her hardships until she cries out to heaven and expresses her anguish. We treat the orphan and the sojourner similarly. Where has solidarity gone? Benevolence is lost; where has it gone?

“I reared children and brought them up—and they have rebelled against Me!”—This is the most terrible thing of all. Every child knows who their father is. When we are born, our love of father and mother, the wish to give our lives for them in return for everything they did for us, is embedded in our DNA. Is there a mother who would not give her life for her children? We do not treat God like a father. It is a horrible thing. We do not feel that He is our father. We neither respect nor obey Him.

The bottom line: Isaiah speaks mainly about the interpersonal mitzvot, those that structure how we behave towards one another.

**Gil:** The verses in the first part of this chapter may be read as strengthening the traditional religious connection and obligation of the individual or the public to their God. As the chapter continues, however, the prophet calls for social reform. Your interpretation wishes to link the two and to present social responsibility, the social connection among individuals, as the main message of the relationship between human beings and God.

**Adina**: “*Derekh eretz* [social decency] preceded the Torah.”[[2]](#footnote-2) Isaiah in our chapter does not speak about forbidden foods and the like but only about how we relate to each other, to our fellow human beings. We are siblings, are we not? Not only do we ignore this principle, but before Yom Kippur we confess: we have sinned, we have transgressed, we have done iniquity; we pound our chest—and the next day we revert straight away to our misconduct. Often one can see people in synagogue fighting over a seat and shouting at each other as though the end of the world has come—on Yom Kippur! How do you change things like that? In my eyes, the way to contend with such phenomena is by education to value human dignity. The moment people care for each other, the world will change.

**Gil:** This chapter, which does not purport to offer any formula apart from accepting responsibility, calls for that. The religious aspect, in its accepted sense of painstaking observance of the commandments, is absent here. In fact, the prophet speaks critically of people who offer sacrifices while continuing to commit injustice.

**Adina:** As human beings, we ought to transcend beasts. Animals do not behave like predators for pleasure; they do so when they are hungry. People, to our great misfortune, do prey on others for pleasure. Perhaps if we manage to find a formula that will speak to people’s hearts and remind them that we were created in the image of God, we may move ahead. God gave us life, which is an enormous gift. “Do not murder” is a fundamental principle of our Ten Commandments. It is our DNA. Today, the Ten Commandments have been accepted in all decent societies. Some call them morals; some call them norms of life. Call them however you understand them, but the Ten Commandments are the foundations of the world. Without them, we would be worse than animals. We saw this in the Holocaust.

**Gil:** You see this chapter from a totally universalistic point of view. In your remarks, you do not refer exclusively to Jews. You describe a pan-human principle and emphasize “people.”

**Adina:** Absolutely so. Sadly, as a “special people,” we are not setting the best example as people. The fact that other peoples breached limits and excelled in wrongdoing is immaterial. After all, they did not receive from God what we received. Throughout human history, during the Inquisition, during periods of riots and pogroms, and ultimately in the Holocaust, we observed human beings, normal and intelligent people, sitting and thinking about how to kill the most people with the greatest celerity. It defies credulity. In Syria and Africa today, people, thousands and hundreds of thousands of people are being killed and the world says nothing. Instead, it turns on us, of all people. “If you’re a special people, how can you kill in Gaza that way?” they ask us. We have to fight for our existence, of course, but how? How do you do that correctly? These are grand questions for which I do not have correct answers. I have no answers.

**Gil:** Nevertheless, it is interesting that you call the prophet Isaiah’s reproach of the People of Israel, perhaps meant for all time, a universal reproach.

**Adina:** I do so because the Ten Commandments were given to the whole world. The prophets’ moral norms were meant for all of humankind.

**Gil:** How did the process that the prophet describes here unfold? How did a “faithful city … filled with justice, where righteousness dwelt” become “a place of murderers” where “silver has turned to dross [and] wine is cut with water?”

**Adina:** “So Jeshurun grew fat and kicked” [Deuteronomy 32:15] due to the profusion of material success, as in “A lover of money never has his fill of money” [Ecclesiastes 5:9] and all those other sayings and remarks on empty materialism. Sometimes a person who pursues materialism and fails to fill his life with content becomes a pursuer of endless and never-ending pleasures, literally like a beast. We saw this in the Roman Empire. The Romans’ hedonism drove them to the very lowest of levels, to doing unspeakable things.

**Gil:** The close juxtaposition of large quantities of sacrifices that the Holy One despises and neglect of widows, justice, and law is very interesting.

**Adina:** The prophet loathes it because he senses the disingenuousness. Someone commits an injustice, strikes a fellow man, offers the sacrifice, and says that is that, I have atoned, now I am cleansed, I deserve to continue receiving benefits, give me more. What disingenuousness and falsehood! “Would you murder and take possession?” [I Kings 21:19]. It is an offering offered in vain, a pointless gift because God said, “I do not need this sacrifice; behave like human beings!”

**Gil:** How does one make the transition from “Your hands are stained with crime” to “Learn to do good”? How do you learn to better your ways? The prophet does not explain how this watershed is crossed.

**Adina:** Indeed, if everything is so bad, how does the Holy One ultimately tell us: “Wash yourselves clean”?

I learned from this that there is always hope. “Even if a sharp sword is laid on one’s neck, one should not despair of mercy” (Talmud Bavli Berakhot 10a). For the sake of our children and posterity, we must not give up hope. We need to teach the meaning of respecting and loving each other with even greater intensity. “Love your fellow as yourself” [Leviticus 19:18] is not only for your fellow but also for one who has wronged you. Life among people is composed of good moments and bad ones. If we forgive and love the other with all of their advantages and drawbacks, if we manage to teach this little matter that Hillel called the entire Torah on one leg—“Love your fellow as yourself”—perhaps we can begin from there.

**“A Faithful City”—Israeli Society**

**Gil:** Israeli society today is waging a fraught struggle about the shaping of its identity, a struggle bundled with past agonies, political disputes, conservative stances versus liberal ones, and so on. Many describe Israeli identity as one so torn that it cannot be healed. The argument is that every promise to link our arms and take the royal road within the confusion of the Israeli identity is groundless. Where do you stand on this?

**Adina:** We must not give up. We need to look for ways to live together. Even if one way fails, another may succeed because there is no assurance that two or three ways will suffice. We may need to invest more effort in it or we might succeed on the very first try. We need to fill our minds with ideas about how to pave the path in which we believe, how to fulfill our mission, and become a “faithful city.” Each of us has a mission. No one comes into this world without a mission.

My late father told me about this idea of everyone having a mission when I was ten years old. My three-month-old little sister had just died. I could not comprehend it. I screamed and cried and said: “Why should the Holy One punish her and take her? She had not wronged anyone; what could she have managed to do at the age of three months?” Father answered: “She had a mission. She completed her mission in the world.” What mission? I thought. She could not have accomplished anything! We do not know, Father said. We do not know what correction, what *tikkun,* this was. I am a person like you, he said. I am as anguished as you are. I was a ten-year-old girl and he cried as he spoke with me.

My grandfather, his mother, came into the room and said: “You are crying over a three-month-old baby? Look, she is a *nefel*” [akin to a stillborn]. [הוספתי] In my grandmother’s generation, that was the only way to cope with infant death.

Father did not answer her. He honored her, kissed her, and said: “Mom, it is hard for me, it is hard for the children, so be merciful.”

That is all he said. To this day I cannot grasp it. I was a ten-year-old girl then and I am a seventy-year-old woman today. I tell the story and feel as though it happened yesterday. It was then that I first heard about the mission that every person has in the world.

**Gil:** You mentioned the answer that your father, the rabbi, gave. I would be happy if you would elaborate in this context about the appeal to the judges in our chapter: “Uphold the rights of the orphan; defend the cause of the widow.”

**Adina:** It’s written in our chapter: “Zion shall be saved in the judgment; her repentant ones, in the retribution.” My late father spoke a great deal about matters of justice and law. There was one God-fearing judge on the court; occasionally he based his rulings on the Talmud. The other members of the court reacted to this condescendingly, saying that we have enough sources to rely on without adding others from Torah. I think that until this attitude was publicized, Father did not inveigh against the judges so vehemently; all he said was that this is the reality and we as Jews must only adjudicate according to Torah law. This is because everything exists in the Torah: guidance in all areas of life, including how to treat murderers and thieves. Why is British Mandate law or Turkish law better than our law? Had we not given the entire world the codes by which cultured people behave?

Father wanted to expand the Torah and bring it to a point where the world would say: What a delightful teaching the Jewish people has. What a reservoir of knowledge, what nuances it offers. The Israeli judges’ contempt for the Talmud pained him more than anything. There was plenty of contempt there. He would forgive anything but that contempt.

**Gil:** “Zion shall be saved in the judgment; her repentant ones, in the retribution.” What is the difference between the two?

**Adina**: Judgment has to be done justly. If a person sues a widow and a pauper, the trial has to take place by the letter of the law. One cannot deny a person something that he is owed by law. When you adjudicate a case at hand and the question of someone’s debt, you must not consider her economic situation. Only after the verdict is handed down is the judge approached and asked to be merciful—to give *tzedaka*.

Acts of kindness are one of three things on which the world stands. Father always spoke in these two languages: justice, and compassion. One does not apply compassion in law; compassion arrives after the trial.

**“Learn to Do Good”—the Haredi College as a Response to Social Distress**

**Gil:** To what extent did your father divulge the value considerations that guided him in the talks that the two of you conducted about the social missions in which you were involved over the years? For example, you identified the need for a Haredi college and labored to establish one. Did your father support you in this mission?

**Adina:** Two years before I established the college, my father supported my daughter’s nursing studies and her wish to be a nurse because he felt it was very apt for her. My daughter was twenty-one when she turned to academia and went for a degree in nursing at Tel Aviv University. On that occasion, we spoke about the topic of academia for the Haredi public. He said: “The Haredi world has a ban on sending girls to academic studies.” I told him that I had learned from Professor Menachem Friedman’s writings that the Ashkenazim had boycotted general academic studies because they caused assimilation. The world has changed since then, I argued. Today’s girls are not like the girls back then who acquired higher education and were then unwilling to marry men who studied Torah because they had no common language. Today’s girls have a deeply embedded love of Torah. They are willing to devote themselves to enabling their husbands to learn Torah. These are not the same girls who enrolled in Gentile schools and did not learn about the importance and values of Torah because Torah study among girls was not accepted. Sara Schenirer was the one who established the Beis Yakov system for girls who, until then, were expected to know only how to diaper a baby and run a household. Father, I said, look at the processes that our people have undergone. The Gentiles did not send their own girls to study. Girls who did study were those of the aristocracy; the majority had no formal education whatsoever and could not read and write. It was the Jews, of all people, who enrolled their daughters in the Gentiles’ schools so they would not be illiterate. As a result, the girl was disengaged from her family and its values. She emphasized her status as a learned, enlightened girl, such that her Gentile classmate was well suited to be her mate in life. That is not where we are today. Today we have very deep foundations and values in the world of Torah, the world of the commandments. What happened then will not happen to us. Heaven forbid it.

“Are you sure you will know how to stop?” Father asked. “It is hard to stop because one who loves knowledge thirsts for more knowledge and more and more and more. Where do you stop?” he always asked. Ultimately, however, he allowed me to establish the college.

Then I introduced him to the man who would become Professor Yitzhak Shaveh [Shweka]. He was born in Cairo to a renowned rabbinical family and learned with Father there. Then he went on to academia to study physics, and his studies drove him to apostasy. One day, he came to learn with Father and told him that he had lost his faith. Science had convinced him that the world was a product of nature, molecules, and evolution. He no longer believed in God. Father sat and cried as one might cry over a child who has died. I saw the embrace that he gave him as he escorted him to the door and told him: “Keep coming here; we will talk about other matters. You will tell me what you learned and how you are developing in your studies, but do not disengage from us.” That was Father’s policy: do not turn away anyone who left the path. There were parents whose children had gone astray and told Father about their *ben sorer* [an irredeemably wayward son] [הוספתי] who would ruin their other children! Father told them: “So keep an eye on them, but you have no authority to expel him from your home.” Several years later, Shaveh repented. And when he returned to Father, Father danced and sang. I remember their conversations; he remained a friend of the family over the years. When I looked for people to serve as members of the college’s nonprofit association, Father told me to nominate him. “He knows how to be watchful and make sure that we do not lose our compass, our connection with God, our connection with the Torah, to love of the Torah.”

“Turn it over and turn it over, for all is therein” [Pirqe Avot 5:22], I told Father. You always say this and you know what you are talking about. “Very well,” he answered, “but we do not always have the wisdom and the intelligence to search within the Torah for the right things that will calm us. Do you know what a genius that man is? He worked in nuclear research at Nahal Sorek, but today he could have been the Chief Rabbi of Israel, and this we have lost.”

Yes, I said, but perhaps science gained.

“I do not know which is better,” Father replied. “I needed him at my side.”

Father needed him at his side, like another son.

This is what we are trying to accomplish at the college that I established: to bring in God-fearing people from academia to strengthen the girls. Things are much easier with the boys. Academia does not harm them. I have no idea why; perhaps they study just for their grades, as many at the university do. Or maybe their Talmudic studies prepared them to cope. The girls are inquisitive; they want to know and investigate matters in depth, and I am truly fearful for them. Therefore, the rabbis at the college watch over the girls and try to probe for girls who may have questions, and if they do, to encourage them to ask. Those who do not know how to ask are us, the past generation of Haredi women, because that capacity was not accepted and available to us. Our mothers did not teach us to ask questions, so we asked no questions. Therefore, the rabbis at the college emphasize this point so that the girls would ask: Do you see that they are asking? When you know what is bothering them, you know how to guide them.

**Gil:** The chapter of Isaiah before us is read on the Shabbat before the Ninth of Av, an occasion also known as Shabbat Hazon after the first word in the chapter. In another famous chapter in Isaiah, which we read as the haftarah for Yom Kippur, the prophet speaks more explicitly about helping the poor: “It is to share your bread with the hungry, and to take the wretched poor into your home; when you see the naked, to clothe him, and not to ignore your own kin” [Isaiah 58:7].

Today we distinguish among several types of social entrepreneurs. One kind wishes to offer a response to a distinct and concrete deficiency in the public systems. Another seeks to shed light on a new need that society does not yet acknowledge and to promote its fulfillment.

What entrepreneurial urge motivates you in the social missions that you have been leading?

**Adina:** I wanted to establish an institution that would enable Haredi girls to participate in higher education and resolve the conflict between academia and the Haredi way of life. An international body called Ashoka[[3]](#footnote-3) chose to give me its Entrepreneurship Prize for this initiative. No one before me, I think, had attempted to deal with conflicts between academia and our way of life, our faith. It was clear to me that the Council for Higher Education would not allow us to touch the content. They think of our Torah as something that has become obsolete. There was no chance of their letting us criticize Freud’s writings, for example, in the name of the Torah. But would they agree to defer the course that deals with social perversions from Year 1 to Year 3, in which, after they have learned something, the girls can digest the material? Would they agree to set aside the inflexible dictate that if a course exists in Year 1 they have to teach it in Year 1, or would they refuse to deviate from their custom and the academic professional tradition in the slightest? How do you solve this problem? After all, Haredi society is raising a generation in total innocence. They send a young woman out to work so that she can support a Torah scholar; in her workplace, there is a computer that she has not got at home. If she surfs the web on this computer she may discover things that she had never encountered before and her world will be challenged. Such things happen quite a bit when Haredi women go out to work. At the college, however—thank God—only one of the 2,000 graduates has left the Torah fold, and she would have left even without these studies.

This phenomenon teaches us something about ourselves. We look for information all the time. As products of the modern world, we are curious about other people’s ways of life. What is more, human beings are social creatures. People are responsible for each other and involved with each other. When atrocities take place in Syria, the whole world cries out in protest. No one on earth is oblivious to them. A hundred years ago, things were different. Those who lived in the Land of Israel knew only what was happening in the Land of Israel. I first traveled abroad when I was twenty-four or twenty-five, and I had no telephone with which I could speak with my parents. Look how far we have come: People today walk around with a phone in their pocket and use it to see each other. Today’s world today is changing continually.

**Gil:** The need to copewith the challenges of modernity has prompted many halakhicists to take a disapproving and restrictive stance, diagnosing any new phenomenon as a problem in need of a solution. The approach that you promote creates a broader point of view. It integrates sober sociological analysis of social currents; it takes economic needs and political constraints into account; it insists on including value dimensions, and so on. It is a very special approach that certainly makes it much harder to take a stand when this is necessary at various crossroads.

**Adina:** I spoke about these matters with Father. If we prohibit academic studies for Haredi adolescents, for example, they will find an unsupervised way to acquire general education. Here we can offer both criticism and a way of coping with these contents from the inside so that they will be steadfast and resist the phenomena. You need soldiers, I told Father. You need people who will know how to cope with progress, to accept it and not reject it because we cannot reject it. We cannot live as we did a hundred years ago, even if we want to. He definitely accepted this position. Another issue we spoke about concerns earning a livelihood. How can you limit yeshiva men to jobs that do not require higher education? My father-in-law was a blacksmith. My husband wanted to help his father but failed, no matter how badly he wanted to, because he was a man of Torah. He worked with his mind instead of with his hands. It is our duty to give these men additional tools. Only the very few can make a living from the Torah; the others must be given a broader toolbox. I thought about high-tech, I thought about medicine, I thought about physics, I thought about science. I thought the day would come when a Haredi would win the Nobel Prize. I envision Haredim in these places; I do not envision them only as social workers, even though those are also needed. I want to see them leading our society, studying sociology, and changing the society that we inhabit. A non-religious sociologist cannot change our society; only a Haredi can, because change is possible only from within a society—from the inside. You cannot force a society to accept behavioral norms that it does not recognize. Regrettably, general society does not acknowledge this. Many want this process of higher education for Haredim to move faster and for the Haredi public to be integrated into the existing universities. Without the Torah reinforcement that I offer here, without protecting the habits of modesty and guarded speech that are accepted among us, it will not happen.

**Gil:** Recognition as an academic institution by its nature, demands acceptance of the authority of the establishment’s rules and regulations. The Haredi community, whom you have taken upon yourself to educate, demands a totally different frame of reference. How do you strike a balance between them?

**Adina:** Ben-Gurion University was the only university that was willing to certify our program; the other universities would not. The lecturers from Ben-Gurion University meet with the rabbi of the college three or four times per year to see how we are teaching the material. Every new lecturer who reaches the college meets with the rabbi and learns from him what he may say and what the accepted rules of conduct are. How exceptional this is, what cultural sensitivity. Where did they get it from? They got it from working with the Bedouin sector. The way we teach here and the way they study in academia are two totally different worlds, even though the contents of the same.

**“And Our Counselors as of Yore”—A Leadership is Born**

**Gil:** Within this great demarche—combining academic studies with Torah studies for women in the Haredi community—another question arises. You have not mentioned it; we are well aware that the attitude toward it is not self-evident among the Haredi and even the religious public: the approach to Torah studies and, in particular, Talmudic studies, for women.

**Adina:** Today there is an awakening among women who also thirst for Torah studies. When I brought up this necessity with Father, he praised it. I asked: but it is the Talmud, we do not know Talmud, we never learned it. He replied: “It took my mother half an hour to light a Primus [a primitive cooking device]. She had to bake her own bread, raise her children alone, and do so much more. Who had the presence of mind to sit down and study Talmud?” I asked: So is it permitted? The answer: “Unless you want to make it into a tool of contention—it is permitted.” My brothers opposed it. They said: “Father, drop it; it will cause damage and ruination. They will become Reform [Jews]. Father said: “Don’t listen to them.” He was very fond of the idea that women should learn Torah.

As for my leadership, when did he see it? It happened when Rabbi Melchior, who was a minister in the Prime Minister’s Office for Social Affairs, established the Yahad Council, in which religious, secular, and Haredi members would search for bridges to connect us. Rabbis from all over the country joined secular and religious intellectuals on the Council in a quest for solutions to all the issues that plague our society in matters of religion and state such as organ donation, Sunday as a day of rest, and so on. I turned to Father and said: Father, I will be able to cope with Shabbat matters because you taught me everything, but I know nothing about organ donation and I cannot advise them about it. Father approached my brother’s uncle; “He will help you,” he told me. Father sent him there as an advisor on the topic because he is a towering rabbinical scholar and an important halakhicist. It was then that Father also discerned my abilities to understand and connect the different poles in Israel.

**Gil:** You spoke about a process; you spoke about many conversations you held with your father that you found very meaningful. Was there ever a moment where you realized that you wanted to be among those figures who bear responsibility for social changes—one of those “magistrates” and “counselors” of whom Isaiah speaks in our chapter?

**Adina:** I have avoided publicity all my life. When I moved to Ramat Aviv [a secular neighborhood in north Tel Aviv], [הוספתי] my neighbors did not know whose daughter I was; no one in the street recognized me; no one knew. I maintained this modesty diligently—until my younger daughter got married the week Rabin was assassinated. My world turned totally upside down. It was an enormous shock to everyone. People came to comfort the Rabin family, who lived in the neighborhood. The days of the *shiva* [mourning] overlapped those of my *sheva berakhot* [seven days of celebration after a wedding]. [הוספתי את שניהם] We canceled the music and limited the event to a small family affair because everyone who came to comfort the mourners drove past my house. How could I throw a party?

At the end of the *sheva berakhot,* my daughter went to the United States and I stayed here in my empty home. This was my youngest daughter; my two sons live in Jerusalem. She moved to the United States, to Los Angeles, and for six weeks I was beside myself. On the one hand, I missed her and her absence led to soul-searching. On the other hand, there was a powerful general shock, an accusing finger pointed at anyone who observed the Torah and the commandments, crude allegations against Judaism, against a Torah that produced people who were capable of killing a prime minister to undermine a peacemaking program. After all, I believe in peace and my father believed in peace. I also felt a little guilty because I had done nothing. Do you understand? Guilt belongs not only to the perpetrator of a vile act but also to those who did not protest. Obviously, I had not known that somebody would murder Rabin but I had done nothing to improve the public atmosphere. I am less naïve today. At the time, however, I thought I might have been able to do something, to bring people’s hearts together, to make people better acquainted with one another, and to seek ways to convince each other without violence. Imagine a fifty-year-old woman so naïve as to think she could generate change.

**Gil:** At the age of fifty, you did make a surprising pivot.

**Adina:** Until then, it had not occurred to me to do something for the public. In those six weeks, however, I changed. I stopped spending leisure time with my friends; I stopped going to work. I withdrew into myself and sank into my thoughts. Father, who interpreted this as depression, came to visit me and asked: “Do you miss her?” I said, very much. Then he said: “Here’s some money; buy a ticket and go visit her.” That is not enough, I told him. And he answered: “It is definitely not enough. When you come back—we will talk.”

He knew what I was going through; he knew I lacked content in my life, that I lacked my mission, and that I needed to fulfill it because he had been speaking with me. Ever since I was ten, we spoke about my innermost thoughts. When he established the Shas Party, I opposed it vehemently. A day after the elections, I revealed to him that I had not voted. I could not put the slip in the envelope. I thought a Mizrahi party must not be established; the correction should be made from within by confidently confronting the Ashkenazi establishment, fighting it, and creating a more united society. I believe in this today, too, but I believe that what he did was the right thing at the time. First, he had to give the Sephardim a sense of place and respect and only then to fight for equal status. I failed to understand this at the time; I thought we were equal. That was also a certain naivety.

**Gil:** You continued to live in Ramat Aviv for another twenty-five years. Not only did you leave behind the status and the privileges you enjoyed as Rabbi Ovadyah’s daughter because no one in Ramat Aviv knew you, but you also chose to live in a place that is identified in Israel as the abode of affluent population groups that enjoy class privileges, and you lived there as a Mizrahi Haredi.

**Adina:** No, no. Until I was fifty, I was one of the crowd. I had religious and non-religious friends. I maintained my Haredi appearance, but apart from that and observing the commandments I was a person like everyone else. I visited the university to attend lectures. I was like everyone. There was nothing unique about me. I found my uniqueness only after I passed my fiftieth birthday.

When I returned from visiting my daughter abroad, Father called me and said: “Come, tell me what is bothering you. I know you are very upset.” I replied that it was the behavior of the Jewish people that was upsetting me.

We endured a year of suffering—it is hard for me to say this, but one of the reasons for Mother’s premature death, as I see it, was the demonstrations that the opponents of the Oslo process held. Members of the national-religious camp demonstrated against Father because he supported the accords. The Shas Party abstained in the voting, but the accords were approved because Shas had not voted against them. I thought then, and I still think, that there is an appropriate way to protest and an inappropriate way. We explained to the protesters that there was a sick woman here. They saw the ambulance coming and going all the time as my mother was hospitalized over and over, and they stood there for three or four months doing inhuman things: entering the building, pouring red water onto the floor, and calling it the blood of the Jewish people that is being spilled because of you. When Father came out of the building, they surrounded him with black candles and yelled at him that everyone was mourning on his account. The demonstrators crossed the limits of good taste with their protest. Day after day they stationed themselves under Father’s and Mother’s window in the afternoon, knowing that Father and Mother were resting, and shouted.

The neighbors called the police but the police said the demonstrators had the right to demonstrate. I told the police, no, they do not have that right. To demonstrate at my workplace, at the court, in a public space, very well, but how dare they drag my mother into it? Should we be like Sodom?

My mother never recovered after that; she died eight months later. Then Rabin was murdered and everything inside me awakened again. I asked myself how one learns to build a bridge, how to create a better society, how to smelt out the dross, and how to attain redemption. This cause occupies me to this day.

Alongside this, however, I feel that some auspicious social phenomena are starting to appear. Organizations and people are emerging who talk about the goodness that one can extract from people. Today we have an abundance of wonderful stories about amazing people in this country who want us to live together here like human beings.

**Gil:** So have you not lost hope even today?

**Adina:** No, I have not. One must not lose hope.

1. Translated, with adjustments from the Hebrew in accordance with *Tanakh: The Holy Scriptures, The New JPS Translation according to the Traditional Hebrew Text* (Philadelphia and Jerusalem: The Jewish Publication Society, 1985). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Cf. Midrash Rabba, Lev. 9:3. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. An international association that brings together leading social entrepreneurs worldwide, active since 1981. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)