

## TEXT STUDY

# KOL YISRAEL AREVIM ZEH BAZEH

## WHAT IS OUR ROLE IN ENSURING JEWISH CONTINUITY?

### TORAH BLESSING

#### DISCUSSING THE SERMON:

*Rabbi Buchdahl ends her sermon as follows:*

Abraham worries about Jewish continuity but he doesn't just fret, he does something. In this portion, he buys a burial plot for Sarah, thereby establishing a claim to the land. And he sends his most trusted servant to find a nice Jewish girl for his son Isaac, to help ensure that there will be future generations in his family.

We know that Jewish continuity takes work and effort, but I continue to be inspired by the way Jews have fought to keep Judaism alive all over the world for centuries. *Kol Yisrael Arevim Zeh Ba Zeh*—All Jews are responsible for another. Together, we will help fulfill the covenantal promise of our people that began with Abraham and Sarah.

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#### DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

- (a) Does the idea that “all Jews are responsible for one another” resonate for you? When do you feel most connected to the larger Jewish community? When have you experienced obstacles to this kind of connection?
- (b) Abraham acts to ensure the Jewish future by establishing a right to the land and finding “a nice Jewish girl” for Isaac. What actions are necessary in our time to ensure a vibrant Jewish future?
- (c) Abraham was propelled to act based on God’s promise that he would be the father of a great nation. What propels you to act to ensure Jewish continuity? What promise are you trying to see fulfilled?

## VOICES FROM OUR TRADITION

*The World Union for Progressive Judaism (the international body of the Reform Movement) offers this commentary on the phrase “Kol Yisrael Arevim Zeh BaZeh”:*

[In the Talmud, this quote is written in two different ways. One is “Kol Yisrael Arevim Zeh Ba-Zeh.” The other is “Kol Yisrael Arevim Zeh La-Zeh.]

Rabbi Shimon, in the version of “*zeh la zeh*” [“this one to that one”], holds that each individual is a separate unit, who is responsible for other members of the *klal*, the whole, like the guarantor of a loan. But Rabbi Yehudah, holds that it is “*zeh ba zeh*” [“this one in that one”], implying that all Jews are mixed together to form a single entity known as Klal Yisrael, and thus share a common destiny.

As modern Jews the first interpretation is problematic. As Rabbi Mark Washofsky writes in his book *Jewish Living* in the section concerning “Reform Judaism and the Jewish Community”: “The suggestion that it is the business of every Jew to insure that other Jews perform the *mitzvot* offends our most deeply held beliefs in the right to privacy and the autonomy of the individual,” (page 282). This is *kefiah datit*, the imposition of religion, which is such a burden on those living in Israel, and which our Movement struggles against.

For us as Progressive Jews, Rabbi Washofsky says, the appropriate stress is on all Jews sharing a common religious destiny and recognizing that we need each other. We live today in a time of intense individualism. Not only do we bowl alone, but we listen to our own playlist of music and read our own individualized sms newsfeeds. This intense individualism can lead us to forget that we are part of a larger community. Yet the weight of Jewish tradition points towards seeing ourselves as part of a larger whole . . . .

Our tradition expresses this in a simple story. We read (*Tanna De Bei Eliyahu Rabbah* Chapter 11): “*The people of Israel are similar to a ship. If there is a hole in the lower hold, one does not say, ‘Only the lower hold has a hole in it.’ Rather they must immediately recognize that the ship is liable to sink and that they must repair the hole down below.*”

The structure of the World Union for Progressive Judaism is a response to our recognition that as Jews, we share a common destiny and should be conscious of our responsibility to care for one another. If one of us is in trouble, we must all join together to repair the hole.

- Rabbi Melanie Aron, *Torah From Around the World #272* (available on wupj.org).

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**DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:**

- (a) What are your reactions to the two different interpretations of what it means to be “responsible” for other Jews?
- (b) The authors imply that the increased fragmentation and focus on the individual in our society has decreased our sense of shared destiny or peoplehood. Does this strike you as true? Is it something that can be changed?
- (c) If the concerns that Rabbi Buchdahl mentions in her sermon are evidence that there is a hole in our ship, what actions could or should we take to repair it? How do we balance our obligation to rectify these problems with our obligations to address problems in our own communities?