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## INTRODUCTION

**I** MOVED TO ISRAEL two decades ago as a young mother, with my own youthful understanding of why Israel was important. In the years that followed, my appreciation of the Holy Land shifted and grew into something entirely different. The fact that I had changed became apparent to me over time, especially when I met with old friends from abroad, friends who had also planned to come to Israel, but had never made the move. During our time together, I became aware that their vision of the country hadn't changed much since those early years. And how could it possibly have shifted as mine had, when Israel wasn't a part of their everyday lives?

I so wished that I could express my experiences and explain the way they had changed my perspective, but our short hours of conversation together left me tongue tied. So, I decided to write this book, a personal memoir about the land, Religious Zionism, and the importance of Israel to the Jewish people.

I want to acknowledge that this is simply my perspective, the perspective of a Southerner turned Settler, a Religious

Zionist in Israel. There are many different types of Jews in Israel and outside of it, all with their uniquely wonderful sets of loves and ideals about our country. Their passions about Israel are important, their stories and dreams valid. The story of my experience does not negate their visions for the land.

This is a book about what Israel might mean to the Jewish people today. I believe that, together, we are writing the next chapter in the once ancient history book of our land and our people.

How will that story unfold?



# I.

## REFLECTIONS

*March 24, 2020, during the first days of COVID-19.*

**W**E COULDN'T WAIT. It didn't matter anymore that the official wedding date was only days away. The florist had cancelled, along with the hall and the band. Tomorrow morning, we would make a wedding for our daughter Elie, the earlier the better. Although Elie and her husband-to-be, Moshe, were both youngsters still completing their years of national service, they had been eagerly anticipating their marriage for months. Yet somehow it was also all happening before anyone was ready for it.

We made phone calls, planning, worrying. Moshe's parents called and suggested: Maybe we should have the wedding tonight? We reassured them. The new COVID restrictions weren't set to go into effect until tomorrow morning at the earliest. We could wait until then. But no longer. Most of our plans had already been scrapped because of this new virus that was sweeping the world. The expected arrival of family from America to celebrate with us would not happen. The

original venue, an elegant Bedouin tent overlooking the beautiful Judean Hills, was impossible now. Friends could not attend. This last plan, a party of twenty—immediate family, the rabbi, the musician, one set of grandparents, and two friends to serve as witnesses—on our friends' remote hilltop farm, was going to happen. *Tomorrow*.

Pushing all of my feelings aside, I transitioned into power mode. What we had left were my daughter and her fiancé, isolated in their own homes, eagerly looking forward to beginning their new life together. We had a rabbi to officiate, a beautiful, simple wedding dress. What more did we really need? I threw myself into giving my daughter the best wedding day possible. After a few phone calls and messages, we managed to find flowers, one of my daughter's only requests. Because of the new travel restrictions, all of the local flower exporters were stuck with lots of beautiful blossoms with no place to go. We bought bushels from several different sellers—every wedding should have lots of flowers—and picked out the prettiest blooms to weave into a happy bouquet. We picked up a giant tallit from a neighbor. It would serve as an extra-large *chuppah* (marriage canopy), so that everyone could stand underneath, leaving space between the two families to comply with COVID regulations. The rabbi and witnesses would stand two meters away. At the local hardware store, we bought four wooden broomsticks to hold it up.

And so, it continued. All day, we pulled it together: the food, party items, the rest of our wardrobe. My friends pitched in, driving all over the place to find a random assortment of items: a garden bench belonging to a neighbor's sister became

the bridal chair. A giant satin sheet from down the block became its adornment. My daughter, throughout it all, remained happy and totally go with the flow. How many modern Jewish brides are content to let a sixteen-year-old neighbor do their hair for their wedding day? Our bride sat in the living room that afternoon with a teenage neighbor, both of them masked, trying out hairstyles in front of the mirror.

Late that night, Elie, my husband Avi, and I sat in the living room after the younger kids had gone to bed, pulling together the finishing touches: candles for the ceremony; tablecloths for the small meal we would hold at home in our backyard afterwards. And then it was time to create the actual chuppah. We had a giant tallit and four broomsticks, but how were we going to make the thing actually hold together? Our destination wedding would take place in a wide-open area, the mountain cliffside of our friends' farm—this chuppah had to be completely windproof. Running through possibilities in my head, I came up with a potential solution. My kids' curtain poles had knobs on the end; if we could somehow secure those knobs to the broomsticks with screws, then tie string tightly around the tallit to hold it all together...we would have a chuppah!

I crept into the room shared by my two youngest sons, Gabi and Benzi, to retrieve the knobs. Climbing on to four-year-old Benzi's bed, I held my breath as I carefully unscrewed one knob. Then I tiptoed to the other side of his blond head to grab the knob at the other end. Two more knobs later, I hurried from the room and back downstairs with my prize.

Miraculously, the knobs fit! All we had to do was place screws into the holes at the edge of the knobs and secure each one to a broomstick, just as they had been secured to the curtain poles upstairs. We jimmied the whole thing together in fits of laughter. We had our chuppah.

The next morning, we ran around in a frenzy of preparations. As mother of the bride, it was my job to make everything as easy as possible for my daughter. The world was newly fearful of this thing called COVID-19. So, like everyone else, my Elie's friends were staying away. Keeping things smooth was my responsibility. I was fortunate that my friends and neighbors were eager to help. Before we left for the farm, I sent out one last WhatsApp to my friends, letting them know what was left to be done at home as I hurried upstairs to get dressed.

"How much time do you need?" asked Avi. We were already running late.

"Ten minutes," I answered as I rushed off.

Ten minutes to get ready for my first daughter's wedding. Ten minutes to throw on a dress, some jewelry, and shoes (no high heels—those weren't going to work at this new wedding venue on a farm). Today wasn't about looking perfect. I dressed quickly, trying to stay calm.

Ten minutes later we were on our way, crammed into our van with everything we needed for this makeshift wedding. I sat in the back seat, ducked under chuppah poles, having given up my customary spot in the front to the bride. And then there we were: at my daughter's wedding.

Green and rocky mountains spread out in waves all around us. The expansive view was one you could never get



used to—a deep canyon down below, hills in the distance, and an open sky. On the farm itself, vineyards grew, just like in Tuscany. An ancient olive press sat at the edge of a field. A small, domed “meditation room” stood in the center, built from stones found all around the property.

When the groom’s family and the clarinet player (also a close friend and mentor) arrived, we were ready to get started. In the distance, we saw our neighbor, Mendel, setting up cameras for video and Zoom. Beyond the cameras, some of our extended family had pulled up and were watching from their cars—like a wedding safari.

We passed out tambourines and the ceremony began. Ancient wedding tunes poured out of one lone clarinet, with the beat of tambourines and a darbuka played by members of our small wedding party completing the sweet music. As we made our way to the chuppah, my husband and I on either side of our firstborn daughter, holding her hands, I thought to myself that nothing could be more perfect. The simple wedding canopy, the striking setting. The rocks and hills and the mountains, dramatic and intense. Simple and imperfect and beautiful. This was my daughter and everything she stood for.

And nevertheless, this scene was deeply surreal. Nineteen years ago, when Elie was born in Englewood Hospital, New Jersey, I never could have imagined a wedding day like this one. On a farm, in the midst of sweeping mountains and valleys, in the hills of Judea and Samaria. Except for our family, every member of our small wedding party, from the groom to the rabbi to the witnesses, spoke only Hebrew. How did we get here?