

Remarks Delivered to Wexner Professional Leadership Network  
The Wexner Foundation  
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*Note: These remarks were crafted for those present at the Institute only and were meant to be heard in person. Please do not share without permission.*

### **How are you? I suppose there was a time when the answer to that was less complicated.**

Even in passing, “how are you?” now feels like a question that merits something more than a perfunctory reply, even if the Trader Joe’s checkout clerk may not really care. Or maybe she does.

These days my answer is often something like, “Aside from the crumbling of democracy, I’m fine. You?” I say it to strangers as well as friends. The emergency lights are flashing, and I feel an obligation to shine that bright light in the eyes of the people I encounter.

I have felt the weight of that question even during something as simple as a walk from here to there—hat tip to Erica.

You all received our annual report, *Leadership Rooted in Hope*, distributed on Tu Bishvat. In my opening reflection I described a sprawling sycamore tree in our Bexley backyard. Today she stretches her empty branches toward the rare February sun. Over many decades, that tree has grown unevenly - precariously so - and our “tree guy” responded by stretching thick steel cables from one massive branch to another.

So many of you are those cables, stretching, holding tension, keeping the many branches of your people growing together toward the light. Even against the bitter cold.

Tu B’shvat confused me as a child growing up in Minnesota. We would sing *hashkediah porachat*, staring out of icy Hebrew School windows, knowing full well that nothing would blossom in our backyards for months. But the trees hold their ground. They grip frozen earth, and they keep working. Tu B’shvat teaches that change requires persistence, endurance, focus and a healthy root system. Maybe that’s why Minnesotans are so well suited to start a revolution.

My heart is broken - and buoyed - by what my home community is experiencing. This evening, I could speak only of what is unfolding in Minneapolis, a few blocks from where I lived after attending the University of Minnesota, but instead, building on last night’s beautiful poetry and drawings of hope, I want to share one description of how hope transforms into action, from a local journalist:

Every social theory undergirding Trump’s assault on immigration has been broken on the steel of Minnesotan resolve. The multiracial community in Minneapolis was supposed to shatter. It did not. It held until Bovino was forced out of the Twin Cities with his long coat between his legs.

Minnesotans, not the armed thugs of ICE and the Border Patrol, are brave. Minnesotans have shown that their community is socially cohesive because of its diversity, not in spite of it. They have found and loved one another, have filled each other up, where empty men have tried to fill their lonely souls with lies about their own inherent superiority. Minnesotans have preserved

everything worthwhile about “Western civilization,” while armed brutes try to tear it down by force.

### **So, how am I? Unbelievably proud of my hometown.**

I assume I speak for the gaggle of the Frozen Chosen in this room and send strength to all alumni working around the clock to care for neighbors in Minneapolis and elsewhere. Thank you.

During these same days, we have finally removed our yellow ribbons. In a news cycle that is intentionally chaotic, unpredictable, and shocking, it is hard to believe that it was only a week ago Ran Gvili, *zl* was returned home...a moment Jewish history will remember. The retrieval of his body was a complex operation involving hundreds of soldiers: engineering units, the Chief Rabbinate’s search team digging through graves with their bare hands, alongside dentists, doctors, and medical examiners. Ran was found 843 days after his body had been dragged into Gaza.

Our tradition teaches: *The redemption of captives takes priority over sustaining the poor and providing them with clothing. There is no greater mitzvah. (Mishnah Torah)*

The agonizing Hostage Square clock finally went dark after 843 days, 12 hours, 5 minutes, and 59 seconds. The last poster in Ben Gurion Airport’s arrival walkway was removed. Every Israeli exhaled a deep but bittersweet breath of relief: there were finally, finally, no more hostages in Gaza. And sorrow lingers.

Only eight weeks earlier, I stood in Hostage Square with 200 participants from Columbus, Ohio, on a community mission planned months before miraculously timed to arrive days after the return of the last 20 living hostages in mid-October. I am grateful to President Trump’s team of negotiators, and I pray they find the wisdom and a good measure of empathy to help determine a just and peaceful future for Israelis and Palestinians.

The Columbus mission—the largest community visit since October 7—was remarkable. We were unexpectedly treated like honored guests everywhere we went. We were thanked. We were celebrated. The mission was planned in partnership with Makor Educational Journeys, JewishColumbus (our Federation), and the Wexner Foundation.

Les gave me clear instructions: Make this mission Wexner quality. Make it the best. Make it memorable. Where help is needed, we will provide it. No pressure, right?

One essential feature of this mission was the work of planners around a table holding the cables, commitment to pluralism—literally—at all costs. I think of myself as a trained pluralist, a true believer. We convene across Jewish difference all the time.

The Orthodox rabbis insisted on *mehadrin* catering for all meals. The *hashgacha* at our beautiful Jerusalem hotel was therefore insufficient. An opening dinner planned with three celebrity chefs at the Inbal had new requirements—much to their surprise. A gala dinner with President and Mrs. Herzog on a Jerusalem hillside required menu reengineering. Everything became more expensive. And, as my Wexner colleagues will tell you, I spent more time pricing Glatt meat than I ever imagined possible. My feelings

were complicated, and my commitment was clear—but tested. Every meal and menu met the needs of every rabbi, every participant. The branches held.

Here is the end of that story.

The big picture? Our mission was a game changer for the Jewish community of Columbus, Ohio. A private picture: Walking through Hostage Square, a colleague—perhaps the most *frum* of our shul rabbis—stopped and said, “I have a comment and a question. The comment is thank you. The kashrut standards mattered. I know it took time and was more expensive. And I want you to know that there were times I was uncomfortable with some of the programming, but I participated fully because the Federation and the Foundation met my needs. It really mattered.”

Then he asked his question. Pointing to the lone photograph of Ron Gvili, z”l, he said, “So, Elka, tell me what does it say about a people—about *our* people—that we will stop at nothing to redeem even the dead? How complicated is that idea to grasp beyond us?” In that space where I might usually have initiated a hug of mutual comfort...there were just tears.

Then he answered himself: “We are something special, aren’t we?”

I responded, “We are. We are.”

### **How am I? I am buoyed by the knowledge that we are something special.**

Since October 7, Les and Abigail have leaned in to sustain that specialness. Their philanthropy has meaningfully increased. They are ensuring that security costs do not consume Jewish organizational budgets, motivating increased giving, local learning, and community building. In the last year alone, thanks to Les’s generosity, the Jewish community of Columbus chartered two airplanes to visit the Nova exhibit in Miami and Toronto. On a third trip, we brought 50 prominent businesspeople, almost all non-Jews. On the flight home, I sat with a small group of CEOs and asked what they were feeling. One said simply, “Embarrassment. I had no idea.”

Les is determined to make Columbus a model Jewish community and a model civic community. Beneath the cold February trees, beautiful ideas are stirring, and I hope to share more in the weeks ahead. One is unfolding as we speak. Our funders, recognizing the growing needs and numbers in our community, asked us to launch not one but two Wexner Heritage Groups this summer. Jay and David are in Columbus to select 40 volunteer leaders from an abundance of outstanding candidates. This would have been unthinkable a decade ago.

New roots are taking hold, and I am sure Les, especially at 88, extraordinarily proud and extraordinarily demanding, is energized by the potential of *his* beloved hometown.

Already in full blossom is our new Israeli leadership initiative, *Wexner Resilient Leaders*. After our departure from Harvard and an extended pause while Israel faced profound internal crisis, we tenaciously built the next model for developing public-service leadership at a time when “complex” hardly captures reality. And I am so grateful to share that we are back in the business of developing Israel’s Public Service.

Despite efforts to discredit us within extreme right-wing segments of Israel, applications exceeded expectations. The program launched last fall thanks to an extraordinary Wexner team. It is a living model of *both/and* leadership. It refuses false choices. It insists that we can rebuild the North and the South of Israel with optimism and resolve, while refusing to rush past the trauma that lives in our bodies and our communities. We are teaching 50 leaders, evenly divided between North and South, to plan forward while remembering backward; to invest, imagine, and act—without denying loss, fear, or grief. This is not abstract theory. This is leadership practiced in real time, under real pressure, with moral seriousness and hope held together.

The report I referenced describes the program in greater detail, but I want to note that Tali shaped the curriculum together with Field Fellow alum Keren Fraiman, who served as faculty chair. We housed the program at Spertus Institute here in Chicago for most of November drawing faculty from a wide variety of academic and organizational settings. In other words, we trusted our Wexner experience to build an impressive executive leadership program—without an Ivy League *hechsher*.

This would have been unthinkable not long ago.

### So—how are you?

As you heard earlier, Stef became Director of the Wexner Professional Leadership Network about a year ago. After returning from medical leave—right around this time last year—she embraced the holy challenge of building a rich, responsive, and ambitious menu of offerings. Stef understands that *how are you?* has so many different, unique and complex responses. And while no one can meet every need, I promise you: Stef together with our team will tinker, research, survey, chart, analyze organize, and care to the fullest extent possible.

Most of all, Stef, we thank God that you are here—healthy and thriving—and today, on your birthday, we say: *ad me'ah ve'esrim*.

**In Proverbs we are taught, “Iron sharpens iron.”** The Talmud, *Bavli Ta'anit*, applies that image to people explaining that scholars sharpen one another. This Foundation, this Fellowship, in all its names, iterations, and chapters, has proven the ancient teaching right. These relationships—these people, these convenings—shape us in profound ways, stretch us. There is tension and we sometimes feel the strain required to hold our community together.

And later in that same passage, Rabbi Nachman bar Yitzchak asks, “Why is Torah likened to a tree?” As it is written, “*It is a tree of life to those who hold fast to it*”? He explains that just as a small piece of wood can ignite a larger one, so too those who are younger or less experienced can ignite sparks in the more experienced. Nachman bar Yitzchak would surely know this to be true were he standing in the back of this room.

In the Talmud’s train of thought, iron gives way to trees and trees to firewood. And my train of thought take me to our family room which smells like a campfire all winter. We use our fireplace constantly, and anyone who builds fires knows there are three essential components: tinder, kindling, and fuel. Tinder—the smallest, most fragile pieces—is where the fire begins. Rav Elka teaches, placed with care, one piece leaning gently against another just so, catches - and slowly the flame grows. But tinder placed without thought or too hastily collapses the effort, it smothers the flame before it can take hold. Done with

intention, kindling is added, the heat builds, and eventually the logs—the fuel—and the roaring fire is lasting.

That is what you do for one another. You ignite. You inspire. You thoughtfully and with extraordinary care fuel ideas, sharpen one another's thinking, carry one another's complexities, forgive inconsistencies, and show up over time and across difference.

In our brainstorming session this morning, one of you noted that we should heed a call to action rather than merely a call to gather. Speaking personally: because we gather, I am more deeply motivated to act. Here we find and love one another; we fill each other up.

Rabbi Hanina closes this Talmudic teaching on iron and fire with words many of us know well. And in the spirit of being moved—and motivated—by you to be more, to *do* more, I too close with them:

הִרְבֵּה לְמַדְתִּי מֵרַבּוֹתַי,  
וּמִחֲבֵרֵי יוֹתֵר מֵרַבּוֹתַי,  
וּמִתְלַמְּדֵי יוֹתֵר מִכֻּלָּם.

*I have learned much from my teachers, more from my colleagues, but from my students I have learned more than from all of them.*

**How am I? Because of you...always, better.**