

Women's League Shabbat 2025 - Message from Rabbi Ellen S. Wolintz-Fields

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Shabbat Shalom!

Since October 7, 2023, the plight of our brothers and sisters in the State of Israel, has not left our minds and hearts. I cannot fathom how the parents and families of the hostages feel, not knowing where their loved ones are. Many of the hostages have begun to feel like our own family members, although we are not related; yet some of our Women's League Sisters are related. The entire Jewish people are related, even if not by blood, by our linked heritage, and our connected goals, and our lived values.

One of the values which link us together is our support for the future of a vibrant Jewish Community. Our support of Torah Fund, the designated philanthropy of Women's League for Conservative Judaism, provides us the opportunity to participate in preserving, promoting and perpetuating Conservative/Masorti Judaism. The Torah Fund Campaign of WLCJ helps support programs and student scholarships at the Jewish Theological Seminary in New York, NY, the Ziegler School of Rabbinic Studies in Los Angeles, CA, the Schechter Institutes of Jewish Studies in Jerusalem, Israel, the Seminario Rabinico Latinoamericano in Buenos Aires, Argentina), and our Seminary in Potsdam, Germany (which is being renamed). The theme for this year's Torah Fund Campaign is *Am Yisrael Chai, All people of Israel Live. Am Yisrael Chai* is an expression of Jewish solidarity for the Jewish nation and the continuity of the Jewish people.

Since the brutal attack by Hamas on Israel on October 7, 2023, *Am Yisrael Chai* is a rallying cry to express our resolve and unity. From outdoor banners to social media posts, this special Hebrew phrase is all over Israel, as Israelis are determined to overcome this dark chapter in Jewish history, and to defeat Hamas and protect the Jewish homeland. It is most appropriate that our Torah Fund campaign this year is *Am Yisrael Chai*, and your financial contribution to Torah Fund gifts you the beautiful pin that states *Am Yisrael Chai*.

This phrase *Am Yisrael Chai* has both Jewish and Zionist meanings. Furthermore, it is a patriotic phrase, as an equivalent of “Long Live Israel.” The word “*Chai*” – meaning life, living, or alive, the number 18 – itself has a very special meaning and long history as a Jewish symbol. While the phrase *Am Yisrael Chai* is quite common today and widely used across the Jewish world and especially in Israel, it is actually relatively recent as far as Jewish history goes.

It is unclear who first introduced the phrase *Am Yisrael Chai*. There is a recording of the liberated Jews of Bergen-Belsen concentration camp singing *Hatikvah* on April 20, 1945. When the anthem ends, there is a brief silence and then a single voice, that of British Army Chaplain Rabbi Leslie Hardman, cries out, *Am Yisroel Chai!* When Golda Meir visited the Great Synagogue in Moscow as the Israeli Ambassador in 1948 the crowd of 50,000 ecstatically welcomed her with shouts of *Am Yisrael Chai*. In 1965, Jacob Birnbaum was looking for songs to energize the Soviet Jewry movement. He asked Shlomo Carlebach to compose something, and Shlomo wrote the famous *Am Yisrael Chai* that climaxes with the phrase *Od Avinu Chai*, our Father is still alive. Although the song and the phrase itself were initially used to express solidarity with Soviet Jewry and their struggle for freedom, it was later connected to the 1967 Six Day War and the 1973 Yom Kippur War in Israel. In 2009, Prime Minister Netanyahu visited Wannsee Villa in Berlin, where the "Final Solution" for the destruction of Europe's Jews was planned in 1942 by Hitler and leaders of the Third Reich. In the visitors' book he wrote just three words in Hebrew and then translated them into English: “*Am Yisrael Chai* – The people of Israel live.”

The saying *Am Yisrael Chai* has gained popularity among Jews everywhere, and has taken on a double meaning: as a statement of Jewish unity, pride, and the enduring longevity of our people; and as an expression of support for and solidarity with Israel, particularly when the nation faces wars and existential threats. As a slogan, *Am Yisrael Chai* affirms that despite the systematic attempts to exterminate and annihilate the Jewish people, thanks to God’s guiding hand and our tenacity and resilience, we stubbornly persevere. *Am Yisrael Chai* is our prayer and our longing for a united Jewish people living together in safety, security and with unity and harmony.

In *Parashat Vaera*, we read the word, “*V’lakachti eschem li l’am*, I will take you to Me as a people,” Exodus 6:7). On this phrase Rabbi Soloveitchik writes: “The political-historical unity as a nation is based on the conclusion of the covenant in Egypt, which occurred even prior to the giving of the Torah at Sinai. This covenant forced upon us all one uniform historical fate. The Hebrew word **אֶם**, **nation**, is identical to the Hebrew word **אִם**, **with**, pronounced *im*. Our fate of unity manifests itself through a historical indispensable union.” The entire Jewish people, no matter their observance level are united as a people, and included in one nation. The secret to a strong *Am Yisrael* is a sense of *Im* Yisrael, being in it together, united, loyal, giving one another the benefit of the doubt and judging each other favorably. *Am Yisrael Chai* cannot be a slogan alone, it must also be a prayer, because we still have a long way to go to fully be an *Am*, a united family. Rabbi Yisrael Meir Lau, standing in Auschwitz-Birkenau at the March of the Living several years ago said, “We always knew how to die together. The time has come for us to know how to live together.”

As members of Women’s League for Conservative Judaism, we have sisters all across North America and the world. We are united in our devotion to the people of Israel, the state of Israel, our mission to engage, enrich and empower Jewish women, and to continue our dedication to Torah Fund. No matter where we live, we are united by our shared values. *Am Yisrael Chai* The People of Israel Live!