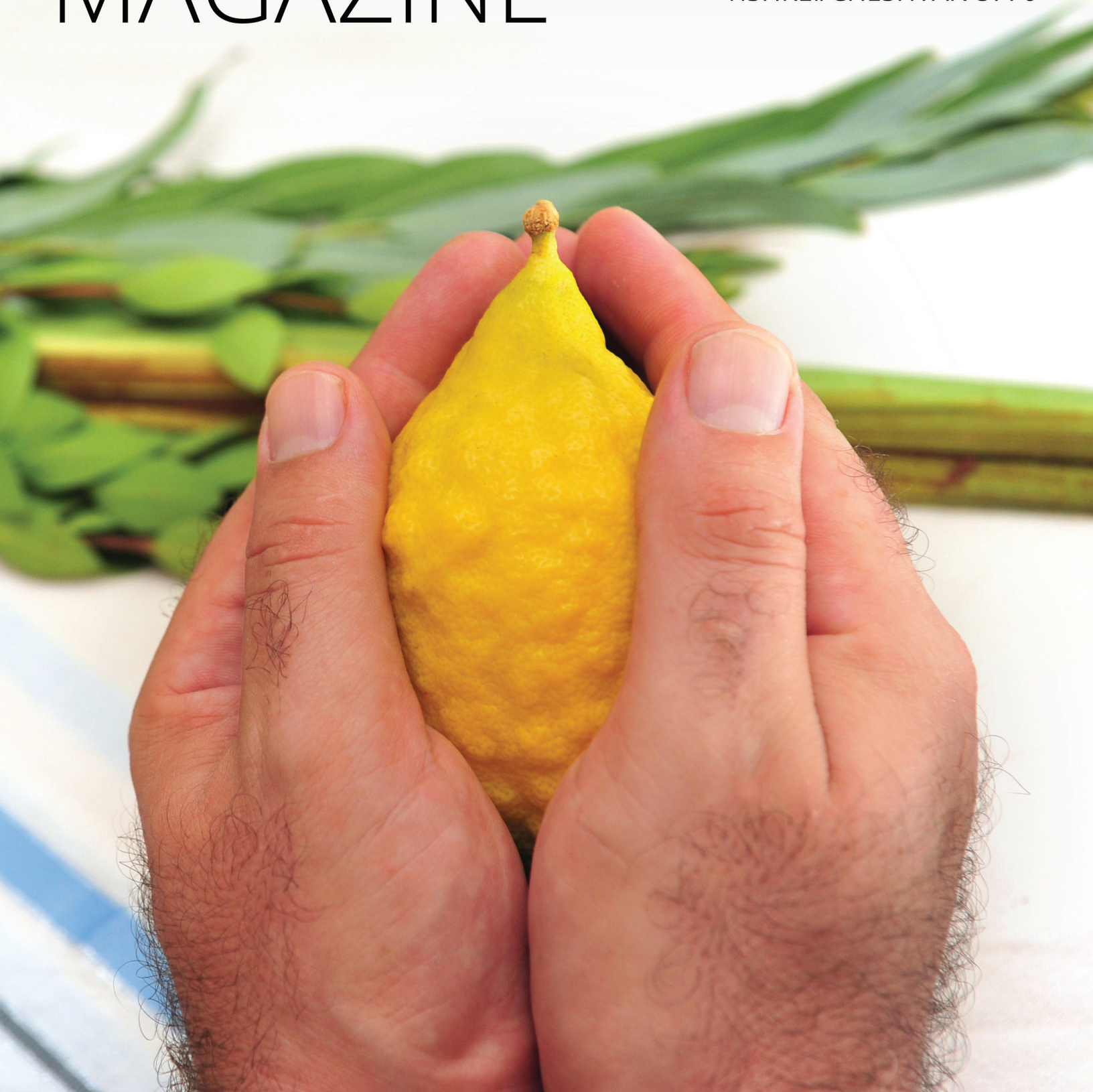


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Dancing Between the Worlds

Couple communicates in the universal language of dance.

By Robin Silver-Zwiren

Two Worlds: One deaf, one hearing but they collide with profound grace and beauty. Amnon and Jill Damti have been married for twenty-five years. They have two much-loved children. Their son is studying neuroscience at university while their daughter is in the IDF. Their story is like a fairytale even though there were some bumps along the way.

Amnon, the child of two traditional Yemenite parents who live on a small Israeli moshav, was born deaf and institutionalized when he was only five years old. Taken from his family at such a tender age without the aid of language was devastating. Several years later he found a way to express himself in another language: the universal, nonverbal language of dance. He can feel the vibration in the wood, and with his style, creativity and love for pantomime, he certainly comes alive on stage. He wears a hearing aid but can only hear very high pitched sounds. He may not have been able to converse out loud on a date with Jill, but between his expressions and her empathy, he won her over. He does the same for his audiences now.

Jill, who was born in the United States, is from a large family who made Aliyah. Her background is in gymnastics and water ballet. She trained dolphins, and this experience may have helped her better

understand those who communicate differently. Amnon may be the first deaf person she ever met, but their connection is unique. She narrates their story using a combination of English, Hebrew and sign language. However her love and admiration for her partner need no words. The sparkle in her bright eyes tells another story –one they both happily share with their audiences.

Orange County residents young and old became mesmerized watching Jill and Amnon perform. To say that the Tarbut v'Torah students were sitting on the edges of their seats is not an understatement. Then again, the Temple Bat Yahm audience was equally enchanted, regardless of age. Residents of Heritage Pointe joined TVT students for the third OC performance, and their outing was certainly a success. Every group came alive as members of the audience interacted with those on stage.

Every session was filled with participants more than willing to go onstage. Every act, whether it be a mischievous ape, moving like a robot, leaping like a frog, led to laughter and excitement. Audience members were enthralled with learning each step. The groups who listened to music and “taught” Amnon how to dance walked away with a better understanding of life in a non-hearing world. Sam, a 4th grader, said how amazing it is that

Amnon can dance so well without hearing the music.

TVT teacher Sarit Livnat could not sit in her seat during one exercise and joined the group on stage. “Dance to the Waves” was like an ocean breeze bringing these Californians alive. If they were riding surfboards, it could not be more thrilling. “Flying to Australia,” while Amnon pantomimed being a kangaroo, was met with robust laughter. “Man with a Dangerous Dog” brought Amnon off stage as he got audience members to “pet” his imaginary creature. There were all too many volunteers for the time allowed, but these performances will be talked about a lot longer.

“Man in the Shadow of Bird” was written for Amnon to perform at the White House. He enthralled everyone who wanted to hitch a ride on his soaring wings. Jill asked how it made the students feel watching Amnon dance this way. One boy eloquently stated how at the beginning it felt calm, like a bird coming out of a nest. The life cycle of the bird and Amnon’s tightly intertwined as his story evolves from a deaf child taken from his nest. Amnon is so light on his feet that it is as if he is in fact flying like a bird. Finding Jill, he need no longer fly alone, for she is the voice he was seeking for so many years.

They tell their story in the way they



know best. His version may be told differently, but his movements, expressions of joy, the pounding of his heart tell of his love. They connect on such a high level that there is no doubt that they have found their “bashert,” their fate. They often dance back to back, so he can adjust to her movements, but even as they break away, he dances off with fluidity and balance. It is no wonder he has won many international contests.

The last dance is to the Hebrew sounds of “A Beautiful Life.” No matter what language it is sung in, it seems to exemplify the lives of Amnon and Jill.

“... A wave washes the world, warmth goes and disappears, a laugh lights up the world... I look at you from in my eyes, I will hug you and together...with the magic in our hearts, let’s forget the pain...just another moment and in the meantime we will remember that the game continues and life is beautiful.” Their eyes meet, they move towards each other, they mesh in form and movement and share their lives with everyone blessed to take part.

The Orange County performances were touching family ones. Jill’s niece, Tal Feingold Wasserman, beautifully sang the moving “Eli Eli” at the Temple Bat Yahm show. Then Amnon and Jill danced together to the taped music, and each segment was extremely heartwarming. Tal’s

husband, Bryan, was one of Amnon’s ape-like volunteers, so it was really a family evening. Bryan’s grandfather, a resident of Heritage Pointe, sat beaming with pride. “Machtainista,” the Yiddish word referring to those united through marriage, is about how the in-laws of your brother are as much a part of your clan as your own uncles are or where your niece’s husband’s grandfather can watch with pride as her aunt and uncle dance on stage. There is no English translation, but Jill and Amnon certainly made up for it with nonverbal cues, combining their two worlds with all of ours.

Thanks to Jill’s brother, Chuck Feingold, and his wife, Dassie, and

Seth and Yasuko Siegel for bringing Amnon and Jill Damti into so many OC lives — and hearts. ■

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