

REFLECTIONS

SOLIDARITY MISSION: JEWISH FEDERATION OF GREATER METROWEST

With a high level of anticipatory anxiety, I made a rather immediate commitment to "Show up" to join my beautiful and committed daughter-in-law, Alex with a group of 20, to extend our on site support to Israel during this critically challenging time. It was to be my time to gain a deeper understanding of the conflict on this primary source mission. What I witnessed firsthand was beyond anything imaginable and can be documented as life-changing & transformational. Truth be shared, it was one of the most difficult moment to moment series of days that I have ever experienced. The Israel I know is subjected to a constant stream of criticism and we were able to see what Israel is up against in our world, hyper-focused on quick info and immediate resolution. So consider this reflection part of my moment to moment of unpacking some rather raw emotions as this is a way of sharing what I witnessed and came to realize as a result of what has been termed as an October 7th horror movie.

I start simply reminding of Rabbi Harold Kushner's books, "When bad things happen to Good People", the key word is, "WHEN bad things happen" and not, "WHY." Within moments WHEN they were attacked by HAMAS at 6:30 AM on Shabbat on October 7th. Israel's narrative was forever changed. Despite the uncertainty and disdain with the government, Israelis have become unified and a deep meaningful pride and resilience has developed.

And, yes, Israelis are angry at the government and yes, Military Intelligence shared that they acknowledged the many challenges that are now gradually known to us ...that this horrific attack was documented to have been carefully planned for 3 years with over 3000 armed militants...with civilians behind them...towards the rampage of murder, rape, terror and pillaging. We learned the specifics of how Israel's guard was down on the Holiday with security in what resulted in a highly sophisticated account. And yes, we were privy to talks with Pro Israeli Arabs who thanked Israel for their efforts. Military Intel also recognized the US support of Israel. And YES, we learned that the timing clearly was tied to the talks about the normalization of relations with Saudi Arabia. And yes we were thanked profusely as Americans for our support of Israel over and over and over.....and it was all of us who came to extend gratitude for Israel.

And now...as we know, Israel is confronting the problems of Israel trying to avoid the civilian casualties that no one in this Universe ever wants. And the overwhelming need is to BRING THE HOSTAGES HOME! Lots of talk on the Abraham Accord and even more talk on the use of Artificial Intelligence to extend the many false info sources that the entire world hears, views and BELIEVES! And we know this to be true, that Hamas is giving out the casualty and death numbers. AND that the wire fencing was what the attacked Kibbutzim communities actually wanted as they wished a peaceful co-existence for their Arab neighbors to come back and for their working relationships. All 11th hour issues that are going to be reviewed and discussed and debated for years and years

We heard about the realities of so much not being in place for ambulances, social welfare and on and on, and despite the initial chaos, Israelis immediately mobilized and literally got to work and the word, Resilience resounded in every encounter and visit we had. Restaurants found a way to get Kosher certificates to help others, hotels opened to evacuees, Jewish agencies sprung into action and our own Greater Metrowest created an initial Emergency Fund of \$28 million plus and growing to respond to the multitude of needs. And we heard about a 178% rise in enlistments. In the Haredi communities, ultra Orthodox came to be drafted to contribute their services. Bottom line of what we understood is that when the absolutely everything hit the proverbial fan Israelis didn't skip any beats and came unifiably together, instantly!

After landing at the crack of dawn, we went through a long quiet corridor to the Customs area, we silently eyed the all too many images of the Hostages with constant reminders of BRING THEM HOME. When we gathered together with our incredibly committed group, complete with an armed security escort, our guide introduced herself and noted accordingly, "You are in a country of war." In the very early AM, when no one was even there, we went to the outdoor open Hostage Square where we started to understand the roller coaster of emotions that Israelis are feeling each and every day. In the SQUARE, we once again viewed poster after photo of those kidnapped who we know to still be held. Art exhibits went up by lots of "whoever's" and were displayed which depicted an emotionally eerie series of sentiments which my photos can only begin to capture the emotional portrayals. We were told that each day post October 7th, Israelis ask each other, "How are you feeling?" I recognized how impossible it was to start to even respond to that question.

We met Shelley, mother of Omer Shem Tov, who has been taken Hostage for all too many days (all recorded on many digital billboards noting the moment to moment hours, minutes and seconds of captivity timing). It is one thing to read or see interviews with loved ones on the screen or in print...quite another experience to just listen and sense the intense pain of a mother talking directly to us. Shelley's drained nonverbals and almost robotic and stoic body language cannot be described and while I recorded (with permission) her shared story, her image and "quiet" left an indelible mark that can only be understood by all who have family members of any age. Imagine not knowing and as we departed the airport, once again, we were shaken by the image of Omer's photo in the airport corridor with the too many other Hostages remembrances.

We met Tomer, who oversees a volunteer incredibly well organized CHECK POINT Missing Families Forum who rose to be hyper-functioning in almost days to lend support to Hostage families by essentially the message out to the Media about the necessity to BRING THEM HOME! The goal of the organization is to become totally obsolete!

And we heard from a representative from The Jewish Agency for Israel to find out about their many services, and went to a special flag raising in the early morning to honor our Federation support. We met with a survivor who escaped the Nova massacre, who literally jumped in his car, having avoided an almost certain death, albeit reluctantly at first, to enlist in the IDF. This part of our journey happened at an ethereally beautiful setting which we learned was quite close to the October 7th site of the NOVA DANCE PARTY. The Survivor told us of the horrifying loss of friends, a sentiment we heard throughout our visit as every person in the tiny country knows someone who has been deeply affected by the terror attacks. And just as I thought I had no more tears that early morning, our survivor speaker, apparently one of the NOVA entertainers, took out his guitar to render his interpretive singing of the BEATLES song, "Imagine".

And then, we continued to beautiful and peaceful OFAKIM and the Kibbutz Eres ...where they awakened, like all of Israel to the sirens of October 7th. The community is one that I know so well from our Greater Metrowest Partnership and where our own Greater Metro West community know so many residents as near family. We listened intently to their stories and their own embedded recollections of the attacks on their lives. And then it was onto Kibbut Be'eri, another successful Oasis of beauty, one of the sites of the viciously heinous attacks that was recently made accessible to visits such as ours. The devastation is beyond explicable ...and my photos document the rocketed homes that were torn in half while the residents were peacefully sleeping. Safe rooms while bulletproof did not comply in some cases to the fires that were set and no one ever expected the firing squad rampages that went on that morning. These images of bullet holes and charred everything will be difficult to ever lose in memory. Still left with ongoing recalls that simply don't stop...

In almost rote retelling, surviving residents told of the stories we know how the quiet community could only try to defend itself from an unanticipated and highly sophisticated massacre. In one case, a barking dog apparently reacted to the slaughter of a 6 year old and caused the terrorist to run away and thus, the dog saved the rest of a family. The community once known as heaven has become its own Heaven with so much loss. Some of the returned Hostages from Be'eri shared the stories that we have heard through the media and those who share with us, referenced the intense trauma. And we heard about the vicious murder of Vivian, who had been recently been honored as A WOMAN OF PEACE, We were reminded that the rubble surrounding the community is due to continued excavation to locate body parts. And we learned how hard it has been to prove the rapes that occurred at Be'eri that morningeven as Hostages were kidnapped by the rapist terrorists. It's all about "ME TOO, EXCEPT IF YOU'RE A JEW!" as the world stays silent! The message of Ofakim is TO BUILD, TO CREATE PUBLIC PRESSURE, AND TO CREATE A SENSE OF SECURITY AND TO RAISE LOTS OF FUNDS TO MAKE THAT HAPPEN! The need resounded for communities to create atmospheres for residents to come back and live. Some understood sentiments heard echoed, "How can I raise kids here when death is all around?" Others refuted that notion and will return. One child was reported as saying, "Why are we not coming back...I don't care about the red color alerts." Another child asked her mommy, "What happens if someone knocks on the door and he wants to kill me?"

We listened to a speaker and were startled by interrupted loud gunfire sounds. We were told that the booms were "good" booms. Whenever did we get to know firsthand about, "Good Booms!"

Trying to sleep in a very beautiful hotel was challenging for me as my "anticipatory anxiety" clicked in as I couldn't close my eyes ...envisioning hearing sirens that would take me to the stairwell. And where was the stairwell and would I find my solidarity friends and what would happen during the many "if/if/if's" IF I had to be sequestered in a safe room for many hours? How I realized how fortunate we are that we have our country and we are not living in such fear from day to day.

We helped arrange and cook at a barbeque for the IDF soldiers and that was fairly interesting as I am not known to be that servicing in my own kitchen. Some music was piped into the base area and in a rather unanticipated and incredibly warm and comforting series of remembrances, our very energetic crew started to dance with the young men and women soldiers. It was a resulting scene of such loving connections and some of our participants posted these images. Each image shared almost unilaterally had a disclaimer explaining that the dancing was almost cathartic so that the joys of "letting it all out" were explained accordingly. Iphones were jammed with these recorded moments. We didn't know who needed the outlet of dance more....us or the soldiers!

Over and over, I asked the now important question about the attacks: "What were they hoping to accomplish?" One of the scariest realities perhaps, may be that Hamas knew that Israel would retaliate and the world would respond as they are doing now. Again....no words...and the words we heard over and over were resounding, "We will prevail." The layers of trauma in Israel is different for every person, but, it is ever present, We met directly with personnel from Joint Distribution Committee and The Israel Trauma Center. We heard firsthand about the many traumashow a mother of 8 children, one of so many more displaced evacuees were being assisted at the Ramada Hotel. And yet, the display of assistance was evidenced through those offering the simple job of laundry services and other governmental programs that could be accessed. But, the red tape and paper work for such help is enormously frustrating and one can only imagine how multi-layered such services are to actualize. Some feel that the government is failing them and it is easy to understand how they might think this way ...but, assistance seems to be pouring in from so many agencies and from our peoplehood. And we met the young handsome son of one of our own GMW group, who just made

Aliya, who is taking on a vital role at the UN WATCH ...to monitor the often inaccurate anti-Israel releases from the UN personnel. He shared how much he is up against and how dismissive the UN has been to his outreaches.

We saw the affected displaced children who are being given whatever attentions they can possibly getand it is impossible to relate the multi-level traumas that exist for each and every Israeli. AND factor in what that does to tourism, uprooted lives, the economy, the family lives when parents and fathers and mothers and sons and daughters are called up for active duty.

We were told over and over again that Israel is in trauma and when a loved one is in trauma we simply "SHOW UP" and while I don't know the answers, I know this to be true....that after the darkness, comes the light as we understood at each and every juncture of our trip. While there was a chill in the air at this time of year, all of us felt the warmth and truest sense of Am Yisroel Chai throughout our short stay.

Our group consisted of some 30 plus somethings as well as some seasoned mission goers. At the time of my writing, I can share with certainty what I told our younger participants...that they, along with Alex, represented TIKVAH L'ATID ...HOPE FOR OUR FUTURE for they will be the leaders and need to be paving the way for the new generations of understanding the vital role of Israel in our lives.

At dinner last night, our amazingly efficient, caring, dedicated and committed mission professionals, Liz and Mandi, led us in asking us to share our deeply felt connections, memories and insights. And after we had no more words to say, and a plane to catch, our mission leader, Abbi, led us in the only way we could conclude our visit and that was to stand with her and sing HATIKVA together.

Hatikva means Hope. "Hatikva" becomes my takeawaythat, and wondering, how Israel and we as supporters go on? And the answer for me lies with having more faith and with extending more kindness. I'll be taking home and passing on this narrative for a long time and this transfer is not at all easy. On our El Al flight, I started coordinating a way to pass on my journaled thoughts by writing and writing on the long flight. One of the flight attendants asked if I was a journalist and I said that I was just trying to be a keeper of memory. They asked me to share some of my reflective thoughts and through many tears my flood gates opened up. For sure, I know when I ultimately am content with sending this out, I will regret omitting a story or a fact or an insight and for that, please forgive me.

I simply have a broken soul and my memory is filled with so much that perhaps, more time is needed to compartmentalize. But, it was important to share NOW when emotions and recollections are so very prevalent. I learned that the survival of this memory needs to lie in all of our hands. More times than I can count, Israelis constantly said, "Thank you" ...for showing up, for going home and sharing what you saw and for all we are trying to do.

We all know about upstanding in our lives and we all assuredly simply don't have all of the healing advice on how to move this narrative forward. For me, I am just a work in progress. I have said, "Please G-d" so many times and now it is clear that I need to do my own part in making some differences with a little hope, faith and kindness. I am really trying...

~Marjorie Feinstein

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