

OUR JOURNEY- *8th January - 18th February 2024*

When Israel was attacked on October 7th and war was declared, we knew that we wanted to do more than just continue writing checks. We knew we wanted to go to Israel and volunteer to help. It turned out that they didn't need retired Doctors or Funeral Directors; Israel needs volunteers to help with more basic menial jobs. So off we went not knowing what was ahead of us.

With the help of an Israeli guide, we spent the first four days volunteering. We started with an NGO at the Museum of Tolerance boxing winter apparel for soldiers stationed in the North; we helped at Pantry Packers, where we bagged red lentils for needy families (they provide food packages for over 130,000 families a week); we tied Tzitzis for the IDF under religious supervision (there has been a huge increase in requests by soldiers to wear Tzitzis, even from non-religious soldiers); we sorted fruit at the Leket sorting facility (the two of us sorted over 600 kg of apples, providing fresh fruit to over 300 families.) Leket is the largest program in Israel for processing and supplying food to over 170 different agencies, and now also helping farmers sell their crops; and we helped prepare a hot meal with the NGO 'Grilling for Israel', where we grilled dinner for 100 amazing reservist IDF soldiers stationed at an outpost bordering Ramallah. We were so close to Ramallah that we could hear the Palestinians talking, and they could smell what we were grilling. The soldiers were most appreciative of our being there to support them. Their morale is very high, despite being called upon for active duty for over four months.

Our volunteering continued when we joined Sar-El for a three-week stint at the Tel Hashomer Army Base. The Sar-El offers logistical support through the efforts of its' volunteers on IDF bases throughout Israel. We were given army uniforms; we slept in military barracks, ate army food, started the day following breakfast with flag raising and singing Hatikvah. If there had been any fatalities the previous day, we observed a moment of silence as we were read the names of the fallen IDF heroes. All of this transformed us into proud auxiliary members of Israel's army. It was very empowering physically, mentally, and spiritually. I had experienced the emotional journey of helping cancer patients for over thirty years and Mort helping bereaved families for over fifty years. Yet, this was like nothing else we had ever experienced in our lifetimes. We lived through two 'Red Alerts' while we were in Israel, something Israelis live with each and every day. To us it wasn't unnerving because we knew Israel had the situations under control.

We worked in a Medical Logistics Center from 8:00am until noon and from 1:00-4:00pm unpacking medical boxes rotating in from the field and sending out newly packed medical kits and boxes back for the soldiers, medics, and field hospitals. We found this activity particularly rewarding as we knew that with every kit we could be saving our soldiers' lives in the field. The tourniquets and saline we sorted and packed were a constant reminder of the injured soldiers we visited at Sheba Hospital, who related stories of their bravery and heroism in using medical supplies from the kits Sar-El volunteers had packed. One soldier told his story of survival after tying a tourniquet on what was left of his leg after the tank, he was commanding was hit by rocket fire. He was impatient for his rehabilitation to proceed, since as soon as he got his prosthesis, he planned on returning to his unit. Another young man we met at Sheba Hospital lost a thumb. His Israeli doctors replaced his thumb with his index finger. He didn't complain about his situation, instead he started an NGO to pair previously injured soldiers with recently injured soldiers who had experienced similar injuries to provide the moral support and show that there was life even after a devastating injury. Just another story of Israelis looking out for each other. These were just a few of some incredible stories we witnessed.

There were opportunities to go to other bases and help with other activities, but we kept going back to the same base because it was so meaningful and emotional for us. We volunteered with likeminded people from over seventeen different countries, including a few non-Jews, who became good friends in a relatively short period of time. All there with one common purpose and goal, to help Israelis and Israel do what it had to, to win the war.

In addition, we participated in an AIPAC Mission as well as a FIDF Mission. We visited two of the Kibbutz, K'var Aza and Kibbutz Be'eri both overrun in the October 7th attack, as well as the site of the Nova Music Festival at Ra'im. As we walked through each site, we felt burdened with the responsibility of bearing witness to the atrocities inflicted by the terrorists and even the 'civilian' Gazans on that day. We learned from survivors that terror came to Israel in waves; first it was the terrorists with their savagery who breached the walls, and then it was Gazan civilians who followed, all of them killing, raping, burning, looting, and pillaging, as well as taking Israelis hostages. We saw Sukkahs that weren't taken down, frozen in time, because the holiday had just ended, pictures on homes of victims who were brutally murdered or kidnapped, homes which were scarred by fire and randomly riddled with bullet holes that challenge the imagination of how anyone survived; and pictures of beautiful young Israelis who were viciously slaughtered or kidnapped on the pastoral plains of Ra'im. Hundreds of soldiers were there visiting the site and the

silence and respect were deafening. We went to the field where the vehicles from the Rave were taken, many burned beyond recognition and we thought that we were witnessing a new Holocaust exhibit, paralleling the mounds of shoes we had seen in the Polish concentration camps from the Shoah.

These were Israelis who believed they could live in peace next to their Arab neighbors, who volunteered to drive children and adults sick with cancer and other life-threatening illnesses from Gaza to Israeli hospitals for modern medical treatment, Gazans who worked in the Kibbutzim. We looked at each other and asked 'Why'?

We met a promising female artist who was held hostage for over 8 weeks before being released during a ceasefire. She related how after her capture at the Rave, she was drugged by her assailants to the point that she couldn't function; she was not held captive in the tunnels but rather was moved from house to house, always disguised as a Palestinian woman, sometimes being held by Gazan civilians, malnourished to the point that she lost over thirty-eight pounds in captivity, slender to begin with, suffering from an untreated compound fracture of her leg. She was told she had to walk without a limp, or they would shoot her. And though she didn't talk about it directly, we concluded that she had sexually been abused by her captives.

At Hostage Square we interacted with families of hostages, hopeful that their loved ones will survive and be released. We felt part of a strong and resilient people.

We picked avocados at Kibbutz Be'eri, which would have rotted on the trees had we not helped. By the way, the avocados blend in with the leaves of the tree, so it wasn't so simple.

We had briefings from journalists and government officials, and inspiring visits to several Israeli institutions. At Elbit Industries, they are producing helmets for the F35 fighter jets which are helping outmaneuver the Russian air defense systems in Iraq and Syria; and they are actively working on the Laser Missile Defense system, Iron Beam, hopeful that it will be ready to deploy by the end of the year. At Palmachim Air Force Base, which has both Black Hawk Helicopters and a major drone installation, we heard from the Commander who was in charge on October 7th and as a result was suffering PTSD. The single drone that was available to him that day had a payload of only four missiles instead of a full payload of twelve. He saw the terrorists who were overrunning Kfar Aza, not realizing that this was only one of twenty sites attacked that day. He told us of the helpless

feeling he had to endure watching the invasion, with such limited weapons, even though those four missiles were deployed and saved lives. Today, he commands a squadron of drones, each with up to twelve missiles, protecting our active ground forces in Gaza.

At Rambam Hospital we witnessed how Israel turned an underground hospital into a parking lot and then back into a 2000 bed secure underground hospital in case of attack from the north. This underground hospital had previously been used as a 1000 bed unit for dealing with Covid not long ago.

Hope and survival are contagious in Israel. The terrorists use the hospitals and ground under hospitals in Gaza to commit murder. Israel uses the hospitals and the ground under it's hospitals to save lives.

One weekend we stayed at the Dan Panorama Hotel in Tel Aviv where we joined 650 'displaced Israeli families' who were living in the hotel. They stayed in rooms similar to ours, ate the same food we ate, with their children attending school. The press complains about the treatment of the 'poor Gazans' ignoring that Hamas was in charge. We marveled at the way Israel was taking care of its citizens.

We also visited Mount Herzl to honor the memory of the recently killed IDF soldiers, too, too many; their young ages heart breaking. The cemetery reflects the respect we have for those who are buried there, and it tells a story about our lineage.

We took a few days to play tourist driving to Hebron and visited the Tombs of the Matriarchs and Patriarchs. While there, we were asked to participate in the mitzvah of the ritual ceremony of a three-year-old boy's first haircut. Life goes on. We drove to Bethlehem to visit Rachel's Tomb. Imagine the unthinkable visiting Judea, so called Disputed Territory, during a war.

We visited the Judean Foothills where we saw Tel Azekah and the Valley of Tears where David slew Goliath. We explored Beit Guvrin National Park, the land of 1000 caves, a UNESCO World Heritage Site: Tel Lachish the Biblical city of Hezekiah, and Gezer, the Biblical city of Solomon. We also went East and visited Tel Shilo, the ancient site of the Tabernacle and the religious center in the time of Judges, as well as the Tel Afek National Park, an ancient Roman City. As we were walked through these Biblical sites we read from the Bible, which brought them to life for us. It is hard to comprehend anyone questioning what is historically Israel. As amazing as it was to walk these historical sites,

it was disheartening that we were often the only visitors there. We were determined to not allow terrorists and war control our lives.

We are planning on returning to Israel and we encourage anyone who is physically able, to go and create your own journey. Israel's tourist industry has suffered in-measurable damage because of the war. And Sar-el, the adjunct to the IDF, has been asked to double its volunteers from ten thousand a year to twenty thousand a year, given the increasing needs of the Army. Everywhere we went, we were told of the importance of both volunteers and tourism to the Israeli economy. Every visit matters.

When your children and grandchildren ask, Saba and Savta, what did you do when Israel was at war, what will you tell them?

Mort Weinstein & Stacy Nerenstone

Delivered to the congregation of Temple Menorah on 24th February 2024