

Israel after the Second Hezbollah War
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Until my most recent trip to Israel I never truly understood the old adage --- “two Jews, three opinions” --- but now I do.

In meeting with Israelis over the past two weeks, one of the questions that came up on more than one occasion was – Who won this summer’s war in Lebanon? Some people felt that Israel was victorious, and some felt it was not. And sometimes the same person held both opinions.

Standing along the border with Lebanon, the yellow Hezbollah flag, which until this summer had been visible in Lebanese villages was no longer being flown. Clearly, the terrorist forces had been evicted and pushed back from the places they took over after Israel withdrew its army in 2000. Many who live in the north feel they can now breathe a sigh of relief and can travel on roads they dared not take before, all of which they consider to be a significant achievement.

Yet by the same token, the three captured soldiers Gilad Shalit, Ehud Goldwasser and Eldad Regev still remain in captivity. Even more alarming, there are indications that Hezbollah has been busy since the cease fire heavily rearming and re-fortifying with weapons and munitions supplied by Syria and Iran. A military official briefing us on an army base told us that Hezbollah has three times more weapons than France.

Over 4,000 katushya rockets were launched this summer on an area that is home to about 500,000 residents of northern Israel in a one month period. The math isn’t too difficult to figure out: over 130 rockets a day fell for over a month. We saw the scorched Birya Forest, planted by the Jewish National Fund over the last 60 years. 9,000 acres of forests were burned, destroying about ½ million trees. Officials at the Nahariyah Hospital, a remarkable facility that serves the Arab and Jewish populations, told us that IDF forces captured a Hezbollah stronghold which had the coordinates of the hospital as a target on one of their maps.

There is an ominous feeling that the ability to hold out against Israel’s army for 34 days emboldened the enemy and that as a result, this summer’s onslaught was but the opening salvo, in a to-be-continued saga, whose next act is anticipated within the upcoming year. But following the two Jews, three opinions principle, some disagreed with that prediction, especially the Ministry of Tourism, who strongly rebuke those who make such dire statements, for they are anxious to emphasize the country’s return to normalcy.

And the restoration of normal life is the truly remarkable and inspiring part of the story.

Most of the physical evidence of the summer’s damage is gone.

Somehow a high school in Kiryat Shemona which had been shelled just two weeks prior to the school's opening opened on time. A bombed out community center in Ma'a lot will fully reopen within a month. A katushya rocket hit a synagogue in Tzefat shattering all the windows and causing considerable damage to the interior. Yet six months later it has been repaired. (We couldn't help but cynically think of the contrast between the Israeli response and what happened in New Orleans after Hurricane Katrina.)

The mayor of Haifa explained to us that in one instance, by the time the CNN camera crew arrived at a site hit by Hezbollah rockets, the news crew was upset, since they found that the area had already been cleaned up and cleared of all damage.

This attitude is not a coincidence. It is the product of a philosophy and way of life which demands that life must go on, and that we cannot surrender to terror or those who seek our destruction. It is the hallmark of a resilient people and reflects their remarkable spirit and determination.

But as we all know, the physical scars are often easier to repair. The emotional and psychological healing can be much slower and more difficult. We learned of the extraordinary work of Natal, an organization devoted to helping people deal with the stress and psychological impact of these occurrences, and who have become experts in post-traumatic syndrome.

Symcha and I traveled to Israel with 15 members of our congregation and then I stayed on for a rabbinic conference. Everywhere we went people of all walks of life went out of their way to tell us how much our visit meant to them, constantly thanking us for showing support by coming.

Our trip was a mission of solidarity and support. We wanted to see and learn how the country and people were doing, how they had responded and to offer support by our presence, by the mitzvoth we did and the tzedekah we were able to distribute.

So let me tell you about some of the extraordinary individuals and organizations we encountered.

We went straight to the north, to Haifa, immediately after our arrival where we dedicated a playground at Or V'Yishua, an Orthodox yeshiva-based nursery school. It was one of the places that continued to function and offer services throughout the war. Most people in the north either spent time in shelters or were taken in by relatives or strangers in the south. As the Director there told us, he asked his wife and family not to leave since the morale of those on the front lines is felt by the presence and support of loved ones and knowing that they were fighting to protect and defend them.

The children we met and their talented teachers showed their joy and excitement by singing for us. They were thrilled with the colorful new playground they were receiving as a result of the generous donations of our members, as well as a partner school for special needs where our donation enabled them to purchase hearing aids for children.

We visited and learned of the heroic work of the staff of Nahariya Hospital, a place where many of the wounded were brought during the war. Two emergency rooms worked around the clock, one for the wounded and one for people suffering from traumatic stress. The floor and parking lot outside the hospital is painted with colored lines so that as soon as people are brought to the hospital, personnel could identify what kind of emergency services an individual needed and put a color tag on them. The new arrivals were then taken immediately to the appropriate area, often by volunteers who did not speak the same language, but who could follow the colored path. Within one hour of the outbreak of the war, over 200 patients were evacuated from their rooms to a fully functional below ground basement shelter. The staff carried out their work under amazingly trying circumstances. And lest people forget, this was the place that was a specific target of Hezbollah fire.

As Haifa Mayor Yonah Yohav told us in a private dinner with the members of our group, they were shocked to discover that each warhead of the rockets that hit contained 15,000 ball bearings, to increase the damage and the range to over a one mile vicinity.

The mayor described to us how the city responded to the attacks, with concern for all its citizens, including the Arab residents of the area, who in many cases, shared shelters with Jews.

A special crew was assigned to patch and clean up every area that was hit as quickly as possible, and to place an Israeli flag there. The city is working to develop programs so that should there be another outbreak of violence, school children will be able to continue their studies in the shelters by hooking up to computers for “e-learning.” What a country!

A psychologist with Natal, an organization that we also contributed to, helps people deal with the psychological impact of the war said that the sound of sirens could be as traumatic as the actual falling of the missiles. Haifa is a quiet city, which has a mixed population of Jews and Arabs, and which has always been relatively immune to past wars. The fact that the army did not deal a wipe out blow to Hezbollah also had a devastating impact and shattered some of the people’s sense of confidence and security. In one instance, they took a group of frightened Ethiopian Jews at an immigration center in Tzefat who could not speak Hebrew, and gathered them in a circle, where they stood in a circle and repeated the shema. Some individuals who had experienced previous traumas, such as the Holocaust, were able to rationalize, that compared to what they had been through, this was nothing.

He emphasized to us how important the presence and every act of support by Jews around the world helped them cope with overcoming the feeling of being alone.

The people we saw and met and their stories were unbelievable and tell a great deal about what it means to be a Jew today.

We met a charismatic young man, Natan Golan who moved to the Galilee to help bring more jobs and Jews to the area. He told us that during adversity is when the true spirit and unity of the people is revealed. Despite the fact that 40 – 50 missiles fell in an industrial park area, 60 – 70 % of the work force continued to come to work, and against all odds, there were no production delays. In fact, since the summer, property values in the area have increased.

We felt the true pioneering spirit when we worked as volunteers alongside a group of idealistic young Israelis who had banded together to settle in the Negev and poor areas in the north. After having completed their compulsory military service they are setting down roots in places which need them. So they live in apartments, and work in regular jobs, but agree to each give ten hours a week of their own time to volunteer to help needy kids in an after school program. They also work to beautify the area, and we helped them with some painting and gardening in an economically deprived community, which is already benefiting from the results of their efforts.

In the northern Negev, we dedicated a park at an air force base which has been made possible through our donations to the Jewish National fund project.

I cannot begin to describe to you all that we saw and did, and do it justice in one sermon, so I will save some of the stories for a few weeks from today.

One word we frequently heard was, “miracle.”

A synagogue in Kiryat Shemona was hit a few minutes after everyone had dispersed upon finishing their morning prayers.

The rabbi at a synagogue in Tzefat told us that on Friday evening since there were not enough people for a minyan, after a while everyone went home to pray on their own. As a result the building was empty when a few minutes later, the synagogue’s roof collapsed when hit by a rocket.

As the secular, non-religious mayor Yohav put it, “in the last war, God visited us many times.”

A lot was learned in what is being referred to as “The Second Lebanon War.” The military has already adjusted and totally revamped its training protocols. Part of the reason for the lack of greater initial success was underestimation of the prowess and resolve of Hezbollah’s army. Part of it was due to the need to train more for the challenges presented by the Palestinian fighters in Gaza and the West Bank. Incompetence at the higher levels is being dealt with, as evidenced by the resignation of the Chief of Staff, Dan Halutz. Israel will be better prepared for the next go-round, but so will Hezbollah. Instead of rockets, there is concern they will have missiles, which are guided, and of a longer range.

It was important to be in Israel at this critical time so that our fellow Jews on the front line know they are not alone. It was important to visit Israel to offer our support for the individuals and organizations devoted to helping people. But it was also important to visit because of the inspiration we received and the heartening message of hope, faith, resolve and determination.

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