

This Is Hitting Close to Home

Back in April, our community marked Israel Independence Day with a terrific celebration. We sang with joy as the band 613 performed; we prayed together as we marked Israel's 75th birthday; and we smiled with pride as young people from our sister region in Israel, the Eshkol Region, performed as a band/choir. Earlier in the day, the band came to Schenectady and spoke with students in our Religious School. As the kids interacted with each other, the teacher [Judith Weinstein Haggai] schmoozed with me and Arnie. We spoke about teaching, our spouses, and our kids. Just a couple of teachers engaging in simple friendly conversation.

On Saturday morning October 7—Judith and her husband Gad went for a walk as the usually did in the mornings. That is when the assault began. Motorbikes came rushing toward them. They were shot—Gad was struck quite seriously. Judith called the Kibbutz and spoke to the nurse, looking for help. The nurse said that they were under attack. Judith called the Israeli version of 911 for assistance. The ambulance deployed to rescue them was bombed. As Judith waited for help, she called her daughter Iris who lives in Singapore. The call dropped—hours later the cell phone was found on the side of the road. Judith and Gad were gone--- presumed to be taken as one of the 220 hostages in Gaza. Their fate is unknown; questions surround their disappearance such as where are they and what is the extent of their injuries... people wondered if they are still alive.

What happened that day hits close to home. The Eshkol Region is a series of small communities, kibbutzim, and moshavim. It is a beautiful area—although it is close to the Gaza border. For years, many Israelis in that area work with Palestinian neighbors on joint projects. But security concerns are always heightened. In the hot and dry summer months, kites fly over from Gaza with firecrackers to try to start brush fires. The “Red Alert” sirens blare warnings, giving Eshkol residents seconds to take cover. But if you were to ask them if they wanted to leave, they would be emphatic in their response—NO! Yet, no one could have imagined the atrocities and sheer brutality of October 7. The death toll within Israel is around 1400 people—children to the elderly, concert goers, families at home. One teenage girl who was in our community in April lost both her parents who were murdered—right in front of her.

Let us be clear--- HAMAS is a terrorist organization. They have pledged to destroy Israel and kill Jews. No longer can Israelis be secured with that group in power a few miles away. The Israeli military has responded with a harsh bombardment—the casualties and death toll are staggering. Yet, the hostages are still being held. HAMAS still is launching rockets. Israel is still firing into Gaza. A ground invasion is imminent. HAMAS terrorists are holed up in a vast network of underground passages. This has been brutal and it promises to be even uglier.

For us in this community, we are shaken. People are concerned and feeling very vulnerable. Antisemitism and anti-Israel sentiment are intensifying, but so are the reassurances of our non-Jewish neighbors. Seek comfort from them. Ask for support from your synagogue community. Donate to help rebuild. Follow the news—don't turn away. Remember the words of the Psalmist who pleaded with God: "From out of the depths, I call out."

Call out! Speak the words that Abraham proclaimed: *Hineni!* We are here. We are care. We are vulnerable. We will not be defeated. *Am Yisrael Chai*—the people Israel are alive... and WE will survive and thrive!

And may Judith and Gad return home quickly and safely...