

KEMP MILL SYNAGOGUE

Israel Mission

JANUARY 9-11, 2024

WRITTEN REFLECTIONS

SHOWING SOLIDARITY • SHARING THEIR STORY • BEARING WITNESS



עם ישראל חי!

OUR MISSION TO ISRAEL



Dear Friends,

On January 9th we embarked on a journey that was nothing short of life-changing. We did not just embark on a “trip,” we did not just “go to Israel,” rather, we had the chance to experience the State and People of Israel at this unique moment in time: A moment in which Israel is as strong as it is vulnerable, as united as it is attacked, as hopeful as it is bereaved, and as sunny, beautiful, and bright as it is charred and filled with rubble. We saw a snapshot of Israel that I know none of us will ever forget. Many have asked us: Why did we go? What was the goal of the Mission? What did we accomplish? Why are we so interested in sharing?

Before our departure, I shared with the group that in many ways our mission reminded me of the mitzvah of Bikur Cholim. When someone we know is ill, vulnerable, or hurting, we have an obligation to go and be with them. At times we don’t even know exactly why we are going, yet we feel drawn to be there. Ostensibly we go to help them in practical ways, but it is our sheer presence that also helps to alleviate their pain and simultaneously fill our need to be with them. As the Rambam says: “whoever visits the sick it is as if they have taken away a part of their illness and eased their burden” (Hil. Avel 14:4).

The Shulchan Aruch (YD 335:4) says that anyone who has come to visit a sick person but has not davened for them has not fulfilled the mitzvah of Bikur Cholim. Many wonder why davening during the visit is such a crucial component of the mitzvah when a person could also daven for the sick person even when they are not in front of them visiting. Physically helping the person, feeding them, tending to their needs, talking to them are all components of the mitzvah that must be done in the presence of the person, but davening for them could be done from anywhere so why is it a requirement of the visit? Clearly, our Sages understood that hearing about the plight of the ill is categorically different than seeing it firsthand. Clearly, our Sages understood that our thoughts, our feelings, our posture, our words of tefilla would be qualitatively different when the sick person is right in front of us. Clearly, our Sages understood that there is a power to an unmediated in-person encounter that has an effect on both parties.

Before leaving on the Mission many of us could not exactly articulate why we were going. Many of us were even nervous not knowing what this would feel like and how to prepare for the things we would experience. Yes, in broad terms we felt we needed to go “to show solidarity,” “to bear witness,” “to see firsthand...” But in reality, I believe that many of us simply felt that our loved one was hurting and that we needed to be there in their presence. Israel is strong, hopeful, and resilient. Israel will be fine... Nevertheless, Israel, the home we adore and the people we love, is hurting and we simply needed to be there. When your home is under attack you don’t run away, you run towards it. Even if you cannot directly help or make a big difference you just feel the pull to be there and be present hoping that your presence helps alleviate pain and helps bring you a sense of closeness. As we landed, we started to appreciate the fullness of what being present meant and to understand the reality of Israel at War in a whole new way.

Our three-day mission was an unmediated in-person encounter with the State of Israel in its 95th, 96th, and 97th day of war. None of the stories we heard, none of the Youtube clips we watched, none of the Facetimes or phone conversations we had with friends and family in Israel prior to the Mission compared to being there and seeing it firsthand. That encounter changed us: That encounter changed the way we think about Israel, the way we daven for Israel, the way we relate to the events of the war, and most of all the way we feel connected to those in Israel.

Our trip intended to focus on visiting the sites of the atrocities of October 7th, listening to the plight of the hostages' families and the crisis of the evacuees from the South and the North, hearing the pain of the bereaved families, and boosting the morale of the heroic soldiers of the IDF on the front lines of this war. On a tangible level, we did accomplish those things: we volunteered, we cooked, we served, we visited sick people, we gave heroes a chance to tell their stories in a cathartic way, we donated to various causes, we boosted the economy, we showed we care, we gave out cards and bracelets to soldiers, we saw sites of atrocities and of heroism that we can now bear witness to. All of that was crucial. All of that would have been enough. All of that was what we intended to do. But it turns out that we accomplished something even greater that was almost unanticipated – we connected in a very deep way to people and to the country. Our sheer presence allowed us to connect to the heroes of Israel and for them to connect to us, their brothers and sisters from across the ocean. Numerous times over the course of the trip, participants hugged those Israelis who spoke to us. Those embraces were filled with so much emotion and connectivity. After a tight tear-filled hug, I heard someone say to Rav Doron Perez, “I just met you, but I feel I have known you my whole life.” Someone on our trip remarked to me that “when we came all of these people were strangers to us, and yet when we left, they felt like family.”

Yoni Heilman, a former KMS member who moved back to Israel with his family in 2020, is now serving in the IDF reserves in Gaza. He has a Whatsapp group in which he writes reflections. On December 17th he shared: *“A handful of cakes arrived at our base for shabbat. A small note on one of them read: ‘it’s been 70 days but you are not forgotten. Come home safely!’ I miss the days when the walls were plastered with colorful pictures.”* Yoni’s words reminded me that these displays of solidarity are not getting old, but are very much still needed especially as some of the energy from world Jewry and even Israeli society of the first days of the war has subsided. They really do appreciate not feeling alone. They really do need the chizuk. We certainly saw that firsthand. Seeing hardened IDF soldiers just out of Gaza smiling from ear to ear when putting on the bead bracelets made by first graders in our community or when reading the cards and scribbled drawings of kids from our shul was as heartwarming as it was surprising.

I hope in some way we accomplished the goal of showing them that they are not alone. Those who came on the mission did so, specifically, as representatives of our shul as a whole – of all of you. Everywhere we went we told people that we are a group of about 33 people who represent a shul of 465 member units, 1000’s of people who stand behind them. We told them about our shul, about all of you and what you have been doing for Israel over the last three months of the war. We told them of your tears, of your concern, of your generosity, and of your love. It made a huge difference.

In retrospect: Did we change anything? Did we help anyone? Did our presence make a difference? I assume we did, but I cannot answer those questions definitively. Nevertheless, I can say with confidence that we left feeling more connected to the heroes of Israel, and that they emerged feeling more connected to us. And that was worth the entirety of the trip.

As they say in Israel: **בָּאוּנוּ לְחֻזַּק וַיֵּצְאוּנוּ מְחֻזָּקִים**, **“We came to strengthen, and we left strengthened.”**

We returned home filled with tears over the atrocities we heard about and the sites we witnessed, but at the very same time strengthened in our faith in Am Israel and its bright future. We returned strengthened by the unity of our people. We returned strengthened by the resilience and courage of average Israelis. We returned strengthened in our hope and optimism. We returned strengthened in our tefillot. We returned strengthened in our resolve to ensure that the hostages are freed **now** and that Israel vanquishes the evil Hamas regime very soon in our day.

Now it is our responsibility to share these stories with you as we bear witness.

Rabbi and Elana Weinberg

THE JOURNEY OF OUR FLAG

On our Mission to Israel, we had the opportunity to speak with and hear from many survivors of and witnesses to the atrocities of October 7. To help capture those powerful moments, we brought an Israeli flag with us from the KMS lobby that we asked each person we spoke with to sign as we memorialized those experiences to ensure that we and the world never forget what happened to our people on that terrible day.

The signed flag once again hangs proudly in the KMS lobby, sharing its stories with the entire community.



R Geller



R Doron



Eylon Levy



Shabtai Greberchik



Ichilov



Or Selah



Ron



Odelia Ben Porat



Yariv Shomron



Ari Katz



Shimon Elkabets



Sarah Weiss Mau'di



Michal Senthouse



Tzeelim Army Base



Yocheved Hartman



During the kickoff session of the trip, Rabbi Weinberg began his shiur on the rooftop of Aish HaTorah World Center overlooking the Kotel with the following words:

We begin our trip here in this place because we are going to have a difficult and emotionally complicated three days ahead and this is always the place the Jewish people have looked to for strength, and for hope, and for comfort, and to be the anchor for us in every turbulent time. We start our trip here so that we can draw strength from this place.



Rabbi Weinberg went on to cite the following passage from the Rav:

"The Rav Speaks: Five Addresses on Israel, History, and the Jewish People"

By Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik

If you ask me, how do I, a talmudic Jew, look upon the flag of the State of Israel, and has it any halachic value? I would answer plainly. I do not hold at all with the magical attraction of a flag or of similar symbolic ceremonies. Judaism negates ritual connected with physical things. Nonetheless, we must not lose sight of a law in the Shulchan Aruch to the effect that: "One who has been killed by non-Jews is buried in his clothes, so that his blood may be seen, and avenged, as it is written: 'I will hold innocent, but not in regard to the blood, which they have shed' (Joel 4:21)." In other words, the clothes of the Jew, acquire a certain sanctity when spattered with the blood of a martyr. How much more is this so of the blue and white flag, which has been immersed in the blood of thousands of young Jews, who fell in the war of independence, defending the country, and the population (religious and irreligious alike; the enemy did not differentiate between them). It has a spark of sanctity that flows from devotion and self-sacrifice. We are all enjoined to honor it and treat it with respect.



Rabbi Weinberg held up the flag he had brought from the KMS lobby and said:

This flag bears the sacrifice of every person that gave their life for the State of Israel. Everywhere this flag was planted people gave of themselves for the sake of the State which means there is sanctity to it. It is not just a flag that we wave because we identify with the State of Israel, it is not just a flag that we wave to show solidarity with the State of Israel, it is a flag that we wave because it has *kedusha*! We wave the flag because we want to show Hakadosh Baruch

Hu: "Look what we gave for our nation, for Your name, for Your Torah, for Your land, for this space we are in right now...that's why we wave this flag." We wave this flag to remind ourselves and others of the sanctity of everyone who sacrifices for this nation, this God, this Torah, this people, and this land... We brought this flag from the lobby of KMS and this flag is one that we are going to carry with us through our trip and then we are going to take home with us. Everywhere we go, every hero and person we meet who sacrificed for Israel will sign this flag. When we bring it home and we wave it proudly we will not only wave it because it is the *symbol* of the sacrifice, but because it is the very flag that *bears* the actual names, and stories, and signatures of those who sacrificed during this war. We are going to bring it home so we can retell their story and bear witness to those stories to make sure no one forgets the sacrifices that our people have gone through and must, unfortunately, continue to go through to be able to endure and flourish especially in this place.

MONDAY EVENING JANUARY 8TH - OPENING SESSION

Mincha at the Kotel

Kickoff at Aish World Center Rooftop: Short shiur and words by Rabbi Weinberg, Tehillim, Keria

Maariv and Walk from Aish to Mamila for Dinner and Introductions, Ice Breakers, Setting Goals for the Trip



TUESDAY JANUARY 9TH - TEL AVIV DAY

Mizrachi Headquarters: Introductory remarks by **R. Reuven Tradburks** & **R. Yossi Goldin**. Keynote Address by **Rav Doron Perez**, Chairman of World Mizrachi – the story of his sons Daniel (captured) and Yonatan (just married)

Volunteering at "Crave" in Machane Yehuda to make lunch sandwiches for wounded soldiers and hospital staff

Lunch at Biga restaurant in Sorona, Tel Aviv. Special Speaker: **Eylon Levy**, **Official Spokesperson for Israeli Government**

Ichilov Hospital Rehab Center: Bikur Cholim and hand out sandwiches from Crave to wounded soldiers and staff

Tour of the "Bring them Home Now" headquarters and meet with families of hostages (**Meirav**) (**Or Sella**) and Mincha

Ella Valley Winery: Wine tasting and talk by **CEO Yariv Shomron** about the winery, his job in the IDF, search and rescue, economic hardship, and what he has been through during this time of war

Maariv and Dinner at Mizrachi Headquarters



Bring Them Home Now



WEDNESDAY JANUARY 10TH - OTEF AZZA DAY

Tour of Sderot: Story of Oct 7th at the Destroyed Police Station presented by **Ari Katz** (Yeshivat Hesder Sderot)

View of Gaza and Sderot from Rooftop of Yeshivat Hesder Sderot and words from **Rabbi David Fendel**, Rosh Yeshiva

Tour of Kfar Azza: Story of Sites in the Kibbutz presented by **Shabtai Greberchik**, Spokesman for Israeli Police. Visit to the houses of Ofir Libshtein z"l, Itai and Hadar Bardichevsky z"l, Lili and Ram Itamari z"l, the young people's area of the kibbutz, and the fence where the terrorists infiltrated. Story of **Sivan Elkabets z"l** murdered on Oct 7th as told by her father, Shimon Elkabets, outside Sivan and Naor's home.

Mincha Outside Re'im – Site of Nova Festival Exhibit/Memorial

Tour of Ofakim: A conversation with **Michal Senthouse** about the life and death of her brother Moshe Ohayon and nephew Eliad z"l who were killed in a heroic battle against the terrorists on Oct 7th

BBQ with Chayalim at Tze'elim Army Base Satellite Location and Maariv



BBQ at Tze'elim Army Base – Thanks to all our Generous Sponsors!!



Thanks to the generosity of our incredible kehilla, we were able to not only host a barbecue for 150 chayalim at Tze'elim Army Base, but we also made 150 sandwiches at Crave which we distributed to wounded chayalim at Ichilov Rehabilitation Hospital in Tel Aviv.

Daniel & Marissa Kaplow
Barry & Carole Silvermetz
Bev Morris & Art Boyars
Victor & Pesha Malka Jacobson
Milton Cahn
Pesy & Tobie Hollander
Mort & Carole Pancer
Audrey & Neil Siegel
Rachel & Ari Pinchot
Beth Schwartz
Joshua Schwartz & Eileen Solomon
Ellen & Saul Singer
Lauren Shaham & Ariel Winter
Ken & Gisela Loisselle
Jeff & Sara Elikan
Carin Gottlieb
David & Judy Pollak
Ken & Cheryl Jacobson
David & Karen Kardon
Moshe & Risa Margulies
Howard & Nancy Bassel
Paula Tobenfeld
Marcelle & Sol Chalom
Jen & Steve Singer
Ed & Linda Zurndorfer
Marilyn & Don Schwartz
Michael & Aviva Kelsey
Alana & Seth Isenberg
David & Mandi Lowenstein
Jeff & Judy Graber
Ellen Marks
Orlee & Joseph Turitz
Jeffrey Gluck
Gary & Shanna Winters
Neil & Tina Rosenbaum
George & Leora Hellman
R Saul & Susan Koss
Alex & Lisa Stone
Robin Avery & Michael Lauer
Aaron Toys
Ben, Sarah and Zachary Osborne

Stephen Blank & Barbara Trainin Blank
Pesach & Nancy Mehlman
Alana & Brett Fine
Melanie & Steven Fleisher
Barbara & Richard Marcus
Mark & Laura Warshawsky
Rise Goldstein
Rachel & Natan Tor
Dave & Talya Weinberg
Adele & George Berlin
Jay & Rhonda Lehman
Joseph & Selena Snow
Grunberger Family
Sue & Arnie Schwartz
Hope Taragin, Phyllis Polinsky
Fred & Mindy Shuback
Betsy & Reed Rubinstein
Bertha & Jack Spiro
Aaron & Leah Cypess
David Lerner
Jill & David Loshin
Aliza Blumenfeld
Evonne & Jerry Marzouk
Gadi & Jaclyn Rozmaryn
Lloyd & Ann Subin
Jacob & Yael Meisler
Toby & Rich Munz
Sarah & Buddy Stern
Naomi & Ori Carmel
Barbara Sicherman
Isi & Sandi Teitelbaum
Zachary & Vivian Dyckman
Sharon & Felix Kushnir
Howard & Miriam Rosenblum
Jennifer & Jeffrey Zukerman
Jennifer & Joel Tabin
Deborah & Dov Zakheim
Leah & Michael Bandler
Sharona & Leo Rozmaryn
Betsy & Alan Chanales

Lynn & Morrie Weinberg
Norman & Sue Javitt
Noah & Alice Baer
Miriam Morsel Nathan & Harvey Nathan
Eddie Snyder & Ann Wimpfheimer
Menahem & Judy Herman
George & Fran Wollner
Chava & Howard Kern
Rose Mitrani
Gary & Barbara Isen
Sabina Radin & Seth Ornstein
Deb & Dave Sloan
Lori & Ed Tolchin
Daphna & Daniel Raskas
Ronna Eisenberg & Steve Rabinowitz
Dena & Yehuda Krantzler
Shmuel & Roz Shafner
Ira Thompson & Pesha Rubinstein
Aton & Arielle Teitelbaum
Sharon & Mayer Samuels
Ina & Larry Lerman
Maris & Kevin Liss
Michael & Debbie Ungar
Michele & Isaac Reitberger
Angie & Robert Liberman
Yehudah Potok & Shira Loewenstein
Don & Joan Walter
Carrie Gluck
Tsipi & Jerry Hawk
Mr. and Mrs. Marnin Lebovits
Hadas & Steve Kozlowski
Avi & Janet Litwack
Peggy Yacovone & Jeffrey Becker
Berman Lower School
Jeanne & Jonathan Rosenberg
Marina & Paul Denicoff
Seth & Julie Coplin
Joseph & Debbie Cohn
Nurite Notarius-Rosin & Craig Rosin
Shoshana Parker & Ari Fridman



THURSDAY JANUARY 11TH – JERUSALEM DAY

Shacharit for Rosh Chodesh at Beit Kneset Ramban with greetings from **Rav Itiel Oron**

Presentation by **Odelia Ben Porat**, Evacuee from Sderot

Shiva visits to: Family of David Schwartz z"l in Elazar, Family of Elkana Neulander z"l in Efrat

Lunch at Nefesh B'Nefesh Offices

Talk by **Ms. Sarah Weiss Mau'di**: Senior Adviser and Deputy Team Leader of the Legal, Budget and Reform Team in the Cabinet of the President of the 77th Session of the U.N. General Assembly.

Mincha and Processing Session about the trip at Mizrahi

Maariv and Closing Banquet



Shiva of Elkana Neulander z"l - Efrat



Odelia Ben Porat Evacuated from Sderot



Sarah Weiss Mau'di



Closing Program

REFLECTIONS FROM PARTICIPANTS

KEREN RABIN

Is there such a thing as being too resilient?

Two weeks ago, I was privileged to travel to Israel with KMS on its solidarity mission, to bear witness to the unspeakable atrocities committed by Hamas on October 7 and to express and demonstrate support and love for the people of Israel. While there, we met with and heard from, among others, family members of hostages, families of those who were murdered, survivors, reservists, injured soldiers, mourning family members of slain soldiers, displaced families, and government officials fighting media and legal wars against silence, propaganda and libels. We heard devastating stories, saw hellish landscapes and stood on ground where the most horrific massacres had taken place.

The common thread I witnessed in everyone we met was resilience. Israelis have a well-earned reputation for strength in the face of the unimaginable.

For example, the strength of Shimon – the father of 23-year old Sivan Elkabets, brutally murdered along with her boyfriend Naor Hasidim, in their small house in Kfar Aza. On the wall now in their destroyed home is a blown-up screenshot of the WhatsApp messages between Shimon and his daughter, Sivan, in which she said they were hiding under the bed in the safe room and asked if her father, brother and sister were okay. The last message from Sivan was sent at 11:12 AM. The heartbreaking messages that followed from her father, “Sivani,” “Sivani,” went unanswered. It is hard to understand how Shimon found the strength to speak with us, but he felt it was critical that his daughter’s story be shared, and that people understand the importance of making sure that the people who committed the atrocities of October 7 can never do anything like it again. He was one of many who noted that sadness can, and indeed must, live side by side with our commitment to rebuilding and protecting our children.

The strength of Or, a young music producer, who had 3 family members murdered and 9 taken hostage (including Yahel Shoham, the adorable 3-year-old with blond curls whose picture I remember vividly, who was released with her brother, mother and grandmother in late November, but whose father, Tal, remains captive). He, like many others, told us how he and his wife woke up on October 7 and immediately started sending WhatsApp messages to check in on their family members who lived near the Gaza border – a standard routine during rocket attacks. He now spends all his time fighting on behalf of the 136 remaining hostages to ensure the world does not forget them and does everything possible to Bring Them Home. As the grandson of a Holocaust survivor, and the son of a man who fought in the Six Day War and Yom Kippur War, Or told us, “We really hoped that our parents’ generation would be the last to have to fight for our very existence.”

The strength of Yitzi, a reservist whose daughter turned one on October 7. He left his wife and daughter at home to serve in a unit where he protects medics and doctors treating injured soldiers in the field. As much as he doesn’t want to be away from his family, he said he feels “itchy” during his brief visits home – he feels this is the job he needs to be doing. In his regular life he is a civil engineer working on plans for a new rail depot for Israel Railways.

The strength of Sarah, an attorney and diplomat with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, who was tasked with reviewing the most horrific images of rape and sexual violence, in order to select and present that evidence to U.N. Women in the face of the shameful silence from that body. She didn’t sleep for weeks but felt a strong sense of duty to give voice to the voiceless.

The strength of Odelia, a mother from Sderot, who has lived under constant rocket fire for years, and whose family has been displaced from their home since October 7. She recounted her pre-October 7 routines, including regular rocket fire for the past

almost 20 years, since the disengagement from Gaza. From the time the sirens sounded until the first rockets fell, they had 8 seconds to get to a shelter, which was never enough time, despite the shelters in every building and on every street corner. She remembers running with her children from car to kindergarten as fast as possible with rockets overhead. She now wonders, "were we insane" to live like that?

Driving along the road in the south are signs directing you to "Resilience Centers." No question, Israelis are remarkably resilient. But have we asked too much of them? Have they demanded too much of themselves? Have they adapted to threats and violence that no one should ever accept? In thinking about when she and others might feel ready to return to their homes, Odelia acknowledged that they are used to periodic rocket fire, but also wondered how much is too much. "Would you accept a terrorist knocking on your door once a week?"

Perhaps there is such a thing as too much resilience - if it causes you to accept the unacceptable.

(Pictured: Menorah fashioned from Hamas rockets from Gaza, in Sderot, Israel)



ARYEH SHUDOFSKY

It's helpful to tie things neatly in a bow. People enjoy narratives with threads that wind through from beginning to end. And I suppose there are some obvious ones from our Mission to Israel: Sadness. Horror. Atrocity. Pain. Anguish.

However, those are themes too painful to weave through a three-day trip. And not necessarily wholly accurate – Rav Doron Perez told us about the wedding of his son. Sandwich making was alive with the spirit of both the mitzvah we were participating in and the owners' we were taking our cues from. Rabbi Fendel's students at the Hesder Yeshiva in Sderot welcomed Rabbi Weinberg with song and dance. The barbecue at Tze'elim Army Base was an explosion of hakarat hatov and new friends.

But then there was the pain. Rav Doron married off his wounded son while his other son remains in captivity in Aza. We made sandwiches for chayalim who have been injured in countless ways while fighting a war. Sderot was hit hard on October 7 and the Yeshiva survived but for the grace of God. Our new soldier friends have been serving in Aza for three months with nary a break.

What did we experience in Israel aside from pain? Can we see past the horrors that we witnessed and learned about standing in Kfar Aza? Can we ignore the whispers of the dead and missing from the Nova Music Festival long enough to consider the beauty of a fruit tree or a flower fighting its way towards the sun through blood-soaked earth?

How do we share the smile Michal Senthouse wore as she lovingly told us about her brother and nephew, murdered defending Ofakim? Or the can-do attitude of Sderot evacuee Odelia Ben Porat? How can we be anything but decimated by their stories, by the testimony they conveyed to us in the hopes that we will keep the memories of October 7 alive for eternity?

I continue to relive pieces of the trip at random. A recollected snippet or something I happened to see. Until Odelia Ben Porat's talk I had not

internalized the fact that Israel had celebrated a peaceful and typical Simchat Torah night. hakafot, layning, a celebratory chag meal. People had plans for Simchat Torah morning(!), to see family or to celebrate a friend's honor. To dance with the Torah and put a final stamp on another season of chaggim. October 7 didn't happen in a vacuum! Some teenagers may have just made their way to bed when the rockets and sirens awoke them.

My head spins every time I attempt to make sense of the sights and smells and sounds that we experienced. There is no "sense" to be made. What happened in Israel on October 7 is incomprehensible.

And everyone's reactions are fair. Not everyone is up and about and talking to visiting groups. I'm sure that plenty of Israelis have been curled up in bed since Simchat Torah. Others have returned to work and life and "normalcy" since what I'm sure was an initial period of shock and grief. Volunteering has become a regular part of people's weeks, keeping the country humming along, even if a bit hobbled.

So, where's the thread? Is there more than pain to be found in our beautiful homeland? Can we *feel* but at all now that we've experienced the depths that humanity can sink to – and yes, they were humans. Calling them anything but lets them off the hook.

A friend of mine has been back in uniform since October 8. His unit was not released several weeks ago when many others were because they have been so successful (what a reward). His life is on hold. His parents (and I) worry when they don't hear from him...as well as when they do! His exhaustion has turned him zombie-like, his unruly beard a challenge to any homeless person on the street.

Another friend has been back in uniform since 7am on October 7. In the brief interludes when he gets leave, he drives home to take his wife to the hospital for chemotherapy. An officer in the IDF herself, she has been battling stage four cancer for

almost two years. Their three young children have been living with his parents while he is at war. We commiserate together. I offer them my shoulder and my support. We share videos and pictures of our kids. Anecdotes and funny stories. Casual messages that belie the tanks and missiles on their end, and the fear on mine.

From both, I also get a glimmer of something else – hope. The hope for a better tomorrow. The hope of fulfilling the wish of a dying spouse. The hope that what they're fighting for will make our worlds a little brighter. A little warmer.

That's what I saw on our mission. Amidst the darkness and the gloom, the sorrow and the pain.

Hope.

The hope of welcoming the missing back home.

The hope that those who have sacrificed so much have done so for a greater purpose.

The hope that this shared sorrow will put our fractured nation back together again.

The hope for everlasting peace.

The hope that birthed our nation almost 76 years ago.

עוד לא אבדה תקוותנו

And no one can take it away from us.

SAMSON WACH

My son is living hundreds of miles away from our Baltimore hometown, and he is talking about flying home and spending close to a thousand dollars for a ticket to see his beloved Ravens in a playoff game. Why? Is he crazy. Or perhaps he knows what we all know that pictures, even high-def large screens, are not the same as being there. Even the best TV announcer does pack the emotion of fans on game day.

That together with the still lingering sense of shock from October 7, compelled over 30 of us to travel to what people from work call a war zone to be with our greater family. We volunteered, we hugged, we listened, observed and we cried. We cried a lot.

We cried about the mother who would not live in a hotel because she refused to let war disturb her sense of family. We cried because the symbol on the walls of the home in Kfar Aza represented that Zaka found blood on walls or dead bodies. We cried because we recalled what Rabbi Weinberg said on the first night of the mission, that blood on the wall sends a powerful message to the heavens. We cried because after the army blew up the Sderot police station a terrorist remained in the sewer waiting for his opportunity to attack. That reminded me of a late-night call from my niece where she cried about being afraid of terrorists jumping out of alleys in Tel Aviv and Raanana, just a few days before a terrorist attack in Raanana. We cried and cried, but we knew that they are good tears, because those tears mean that we feel, and we can share those feelings.

A gemorah in Brochos says that since the destruction of the Beis Hamikdash the gates of prayer are closed, but the gates of tears are always open. The Kotzer Rebbe asked, why does the doorway need a gate if it is never closed? He compares the tears of prayers to children. If a child cries in its home, the parents hear and are moved to act. It is nature. Orphans who cry are sometimes crying out of hopelessness. They don't expect that anyone is listening. They imagine that the open gate of tears is closed to them. October 7th created many orphans, but Hashem is always listening. So go ahead and cry. It helps.

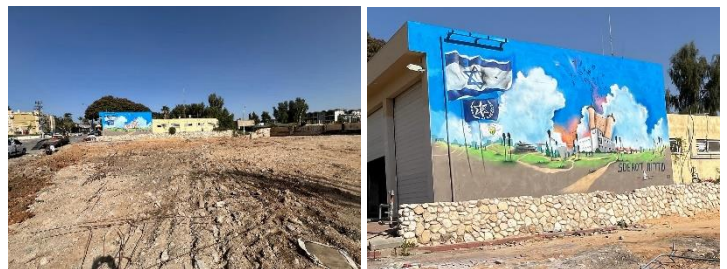
BECKY SIMKOVICH

I had never visited Sderot, but I was aware that it borders Gaza and regularly experiences rocket fire whenever there's a breach in the ceasefire by Hamas. What surprised me was discovering that Sderot is a large and beautiful city with over

30,500 residents. Despite facing the constant threat of missiles, the residents have adapted to this reality. Playgrounds even have bomb shelters, and the Yeshiva's symbol is a menorah crafted from missile shells. זה לא נורמל. It's far from normal, yet everyone behaved as if it was.

During our visit, Rabbi Katz, a leader of the Sderot Yeshiva, escorted us to the remains of the city's police station. This location witnessed a remarkable and painful event where off-duty police officers, civilians, and Hesder soldiers bravely confronted nearly 30 terrorists. The intense battle lasted for hours until an Israeli plane dropped a bomb on the building, eliminating the threat and saving the city from further destruction. Lives were lost, but some were miraculously saved. (If you're unfamiliar with this incident, please look it up).

Now, Sderot, once a bustling city, remains mostly deserted, except for half of the yeshiva boys who have returned to continue their studies. Families have been evacuated, unwilling to return until they are assured of their safety. They can't trust that their border is secure, especially when Hamas has shown their intentions and vowed to repeat such attacks. The people of Sderot deserve a truly normal life, whatever that may entail. They didn't seek this war, didn't ask for it, and endured more than anyone should have before.



Meet Michal Ohayon Senthouse, sister of Moshe Ohayon and aunt to Eliad. From a place of remarkable strength, she shared insights into her brother's social activism spanning more than two decades in Ofakim. Moshe initiated local, national, and international programs to assist children at risk, individuals with disabilities, and adult/child mentorship programs. He also served as the CEO of the 929 project. Eliad, his son, was following in his father's footsteps.

When the attack on Ofakim occurred, Moshe and Eliad rushed to the streets to aid their neighbors with disabilities, helping them reach safe rooms. They encountered terrorists and engaged in a shootout to prevent the attackers from reaching the main block, where several synagogues were in service. Moshe and Eliad sacrificed their lives as heroes for the town of Ofakim, alongside many others.

Michal's request to us is to take pride in our Judaism and to honor our heroes who go to any length to keep us safe. She encourages us to keep their legacies alive.



Meet Yariv, the CEO of Ella Winery. Recently, he returned from an intense 80+ days in reserves, serving in the specialized Search and Rescue Unit dedicated to locating the 4000 missing people after the invasion on 10/7.

Yariv shared the tireless commitment his unit displayed in bringing closure to many families, emphasizing that they continue working to locate those who are still missing.

Yariv is undoubtedly a hero, and it was an absolute honor to take a moment to savor his wine. If you ever find yourself in Israel, don't miss the opportunity to visit his vineyard and raise a l'chaim.



Sivan Elkabetz lived with her boyfriend, Naor Hasidim. Her father, Shimon, described her as a sweet girl, someone he would playfully tease to do something naughty because of her consistently sweet nature. Sivan would even go out of her way to pick him up from the train simply because she loved him. Recently certified as an Autism Specialist, she was enthusiastic about embarking on her new career.

Shimon requested that I inform him whenever my daughter or I perform any act of kindness in Sivan's memory. Such a loss. May both Sivan and Naor's memories be blessed.



This was a music festival, set in a beautiful park with its trees, open fields, and the joyous, carefree spirit of its attendees. 364 lives were lost, and 40 individuals were taken hostage. The footage and survivors' accounts reveal the savage and brutal nature of the killings.

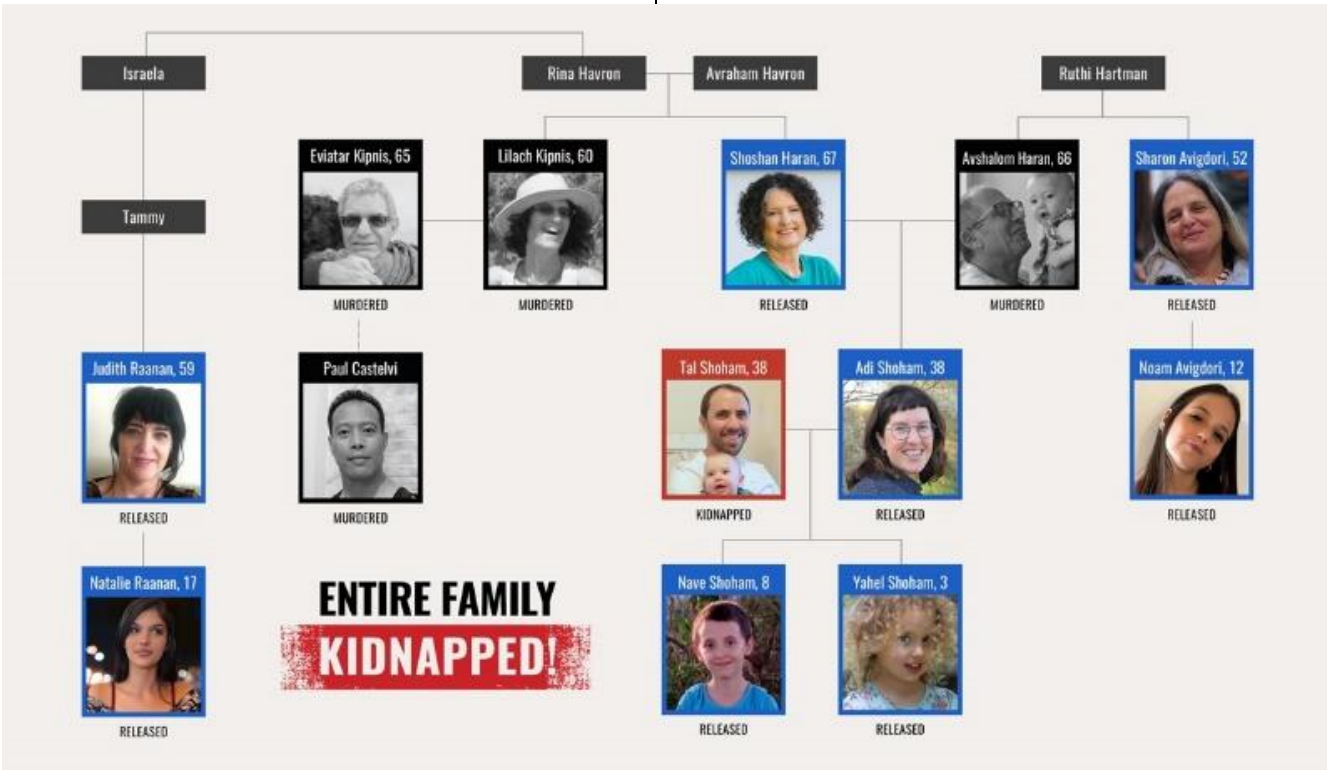
Despite the horror, the memorial on the festival grounds paints a picture of people who had a strong desire to live and celebrate life. They will not be forgotten, and please #bringthemhomenow.



~

Or Sella shared with us the heartbreaking account of his 12 family members (**see the chart below**) who became victims of the attack on 10/7. Tragically, three lost their lives, and nine were taken hostage, with one family member still held in captivity. Sella conveyed that even those who have been released "will always be a hostage."

He describes his family as a multinational one, instilled with values that stress the significance of respecting all humans. Now, they are ensnared in a severe humanitarian crisis. Despite speaking from a place of deep pain, Sella clings to hope. Together with Or, we offered prayers for Tal's swift and safe return, and continue to pray for healing for all.



ALANA ISENBERG

Picture a handful of 30-something year old women relaxing, schmoozing, and watching TV on a Thursday at 7:00pm. In a hotel lobby. For the 97th day in a row. Strangers to each other only three months prior.

This was the scene of my last night in Israel, as I was checking out of The Bat Sheva Hotel in Jerusalem. These women were among 80 people living in the hotel since the start of the war. A lovely hotel manager, Shalom, apologized for the noise in the lobby. Noise? I told him this was the opposite of noise. It was so incredibly moving that his hotel lobby was now a comfortable, safe living room to evacuees from the North. Shalom went on to tell me that every morning he leaves his family at home to come to his (new) family at work. I held back tears.

Then a young woman dressed in all black, holding 2 toddler girls on each of her hips, approached Shalom and asked if the kids could eat the chocolate bar she was holding. Shalom answered her quickly and then turned to me and said, "She was asking if the chocolate was kosher. She's not their mother. She's the hotel cook. But she loves these 2 little Israeli evacuees like they're her own. And she's an Arab." We continued the conversation about his devoted, trust-worthy, happy employees until my ride pulled up.

This. Is. Israel.

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I had never been on an army base in Israel and I had never been in Israel during a war. Until my visit to Tze'elim Army Base, just miles away from Gaza. Our mission was to "help" barbeque for the soldiers and shmooze. Although we were told beforehand that hands-on assistance would probably not be needed, upon arrival, the KMS participants noticed there was much left to be done, so we quickly put on our gloves and got to work- chopping onions and flipping burgers. As the meat was cooking, I introduced myself to a soldier near the grill and told him I was a First Grade Teacher from Maryland. "Oh. My sister works at Berman Hebrew Academy, the soldier exclaimed!"

Within minutes, we were both on our phones messaging Leili (one of the incredible B'not Sherut in the Lower School at MJBHA). The Jewish world really is that small.



After the Jewish geography, it was time to gift the IDF superheroes with beautiful hand-written letters from KMS and the Lower School Students at Berman as well as custom bracelets hand-made by my talented First Graders. These heroic men and women humbly accepted our words of gratitude and love as they proudly wore their new bracelets with our wishes of safety and protection from Hashem. Since October 7th, I've felt such an overwhelming sense of helplessness. But on this army base during a war, I hope I was able to help bring even an ounce of joy to our incredibly brave brothers and sisters fighting for our homeland and our lives. Am. Yisrael. Chai

SHOSHANA PEARLMAN

We arrived at Reim, the site of the Nova festival, after visiting Kibbutz Kfar Azza. The sun was growing lower on the horizon and the air felt cool. I began to regret my decision to wear open toed sandals in January, even in the South of Israel. The site was a rather unremarkable open piece of dusty earth with a few skinny trees covered in sparse foliage. What a contrast to the kibbutz, where our senses were flooded with signs of carnage and destruction. I remember thinking that it is hard to believe that such horrors occurred at this exact site, as it was so still, with only the dust stirring in the gentle breeze.

A memorial was established to the 346 individuals who were brutally murdered here. A circular maze-like ring of poles with pictures of beautiful, smiling

young faces stared back at us as we walked through the memorial erected to honor these young souls who came out to dance and celebrate life. There was a large piece of wood covered in Yahrtzeit candles next to a sign filled with all the



names of those who were killed. Several personal memorials were established by family members alongside the ring of pictures and further back in the woods. Some were quite elaborate with benches, pictures, letters, and hopeful messages such as "We will dance again."

I listened as Shabtai, the IDF spokesman, shared the events that unfolded at Reim on October 7th. He told us that there were 8 or 9 police officers who were tasked with securing the festival and protecting the crowd from safety concerns related to large gatherings. When the attacks began, those officers stepped out of their usual role and bravely tried to fight off the terrorists. Police officers typically only

carry pistols. These officers were faced with mobs of Hamas terrorists wielding machine guns and RPGs. The officers called for backup as the number of terrorists proliferated at the site. A handful of additional officers arrived to help. By now, it was difficult to access the site, as the Hamas terrorists had spread in many directions, essentially blocking safe passage to Reim. Many officers died trying to protect the group.

People ran in all directions. I remember thinking, there is nowhere to hide in this field. Those thin trees could not provide cover for a child. As I stood there listening to Shabtai, I heard the booms of the war being fought several kilometers away from Reim. There was nothing to absorb the sounds in this open space, just as there was nothing to absorb or protect the innocent party goers who were attacked here on October 7th. May their memory be for a blessing. Your beautiful faces will not be forgotten and when we dance, again, we will think of you.

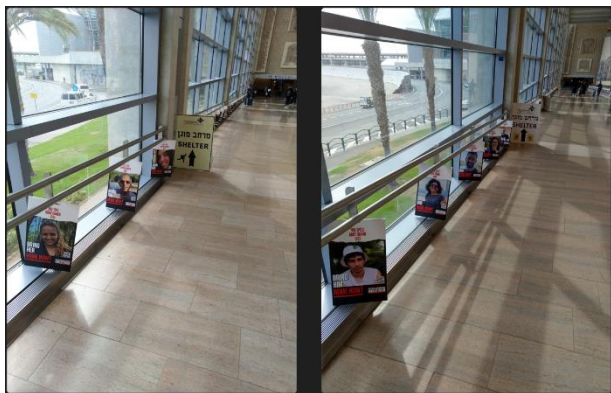


ASHLEY PHILLIPS

Upon arrival at Ben Gurion, you see the posters of the missing hostages and bring them home signs. As soon as you enter Israel its very apparent that the whole country wants to bring them home and that is the most important aspect of the war. Israeli flags donned the airport. This was a common theme throughout our mission – grief and patriotism.

As I made my way out of the airport on the walkway I tried to stop and look at each of the

posters showing the missing hostages. I recognized some of the photos and names. During the week, I took in more names and stories of people that had died on October 7th.



Once back at Ben Gurion a week later, having spent time in Tel Aviv, Jerusalem, Efrat, Sderot, Ofakim and Kfar Aza, plus a shabbat in Modiin, I now knew their stories, where they live or lived and had met their families. Now back home whenever I see the hostages names or stories I can relate to them and feel a real part of the grief that Israel felt on that appalling and horrific day on October 7th, 2023. Am Yisrael Chai



MAX RUDMANN

Our trip left me with compelling and opposite juxtaposed impressions. The starkest were:

- in Kfar Aza: scenes of carnage and destruction... pulverized walls and roofs, refrigerators left ajar, police tape and markings on doors to designate the inspection of homes, the crashed motorcycle of one of the marauders. A police spokesman,

Shabtai Greberchik, described the acts of courage and selflessness shown by residents to repel the invaders and rescue those wounded. A little later, at Nova, he recounted the massacre of hundreds and the rescue of many more at the festival. As we turned to Mincha, he noted that we stood on blood-soaked, holy ground. That was quite affecting.

- in Sderot. The deserted city, still-standing sukka structures, vacant homes, and empty lot where once stood a two-story police station. We also went into a yeshiva, climbed to its roof, while, below, we could hear the hubbub of yeshiva bochrim, among the first to return to the town. Our guide Rabbi Katz shared that the undaunted Rosh Yeshiva was looking ahead to a significant expansion of the campus.

- in Ofikim, a town where Moroccan immigrants were brought years ago, I was captivated by Michal Ohayion Senthouse. Months after the day of infamy, she delivered, with affect and admiration, a hesped for her brother and nephew, whose lives, she said, exemplified creativity and caring and who died while defending their town. Modestly, she added that her tribute was to expand their good works in developing social leadership programs to serve special needs students. Asked for a bracha, she wished for us to find our path in life, to remember to greet people with a smile and love every Jew.



Apart from these riveting and desolate scenes, I sensed the heaviness borne all around us, as we stayed another 10 days in Israel. The war has brought in death and injury to many homes, or their neighbors. As battles continue, there is no agreement on what the endgame looks like, or any sense of exultation. It underscores for me how important that we pray for clarity, strength, and help. Services in the Beit Shemesh shul attended, ended with tehillim and prayers for the IDF. We have to forge ahead despite the pain, draw into and deepen our emunah, and strive for unity with our brethren.

JON SICHERMAN

Rabbi Tradburks was one of our first speakers of the trip and provided some important insightful comments that allowed our KMS group to obtain our first taste of directly hearing about the situation on the ground in Israel and how we can help. Rabbi Tradburks helped organize and lead the first of the Rabbinical Council of America missions in the aftermath of the October 7th massacre. Prior to October 7th, it was not his job but afterwards he understood this was a job that needed to be done. Broadly speaking, he wished to avail anyone participating on these missions such as our group (or anyone just visiting Israel for that matter) of the notion that they are not helpful to the Israeli people as people sometimes are afraid to visit because they cannot think of practical ways to assist. It is, rather, just the opposite as Israelis are very appreciative of us just being there, and he expressed a personal comfort in the support provided therein as it helps reinforce and build the resilience I came to see in nearly every person we engaged with on the trip. He talked a bit about his exceptional niece Adi, and the way in which she was murdered (her two small children survived) by Hamas terrorists in the tragic massacre of Israelis at Kibbutz Chulit. His niece's spirit was and still is inspirational to him and has helped build the aforementioned reliance. Overall, this was the first testimonial on the trip and the heartbreaking story really ignited for our group the power to *know* the stories of the individual victims and understand immediately the duty to

pass them forward to our family, friends, and larger community.

Rav Doron Perez was our second speaker. Before Rav Doron discussed the story of his two sons, he discussed some of the flaws that led to Oct 7 thus providing our group with a framework to understand how the attack was possible. Most notably, he noted the echo chamber that existed within Israel highlighted by the inability for Israelis to think like the enemy (example: Palestinians don't think about 1967 and mainly refer to 1948 while Israeli society constantly discusses the former). He explained that we need to listen to our enemies and what they're saying. Sinwar, the leader of the Hamas military wing in Gaza, is "married" to the cause and we need to understand what that means and how we should be reacting. Israel's training was looking to the enemy to the north (Hezbollah), not Hamas who is our weakest foe. Israeli soldiers are mostly dying in the Hamas tunnels. Israel's standing army is weak from years of neglect. He then discussed the importance potentially of the number 73 (King David's kingdom, Hashmonaim, 2021), how it might be a warning sign to Israel and the critical importance of Israel's citizenry remaining united which is something Hamas was not counting on. This was a theme that our group saw time and again amongst the Israelis we spoke with – the ability to yes, mourn the loss of those fallen but still also press forward with living life and making sure this kind of attack never happens again.

He continued with the story of his two sons in the IDF. Admittedly, I knew this story before a word came out of his mouth. Yet, when he told it, being there in person versus watching a video or reading a text, I truly felt it so much more. On October 7th, his son Yonatan, a paratrooper, heroically fought in 6 different places to help fight the terrorists. He was unfortunately wounded in the leg but was treated and recovered. His other son, Daniel, an officer in the tank core, fought the terrorists at Nahal Oz where it was unclear for days after October 7th what had happened to him. There was no trace of his body and the IDF has subsequently only confirmed that he is missing as well as presumed held captive in Gaza. His tone

suggested that he is not optimistic but he requested we all pray for his son. Yonatan's wedding was scheduled to occur but the family was torn on what to do with Daniel missing. Ultimately, the family decided to scale back the wedding but to still go forward with the event. When he described this debate in what was (and many ways still is) a truly horrific situation, I could see the pain and joy in his face all at once which segued to his lessons learned from this experience that he previously did not think was possible previously.

The two primary lessons were:

1) Despite the tragic circumstances, it is possible to have a "full hearted" wedding. Even after the family decided to go forward with the wedding, he literally did not think he could be truly happy at the event until the wedding actually occurred.

2) Life is challenging but it's "good". There is the idea that when bad things happen that Hashem "owes" us to rectify the situation. We need to ask ourselves: does Hashem owe us anything? This last comment about whether Hashem "owes" us anything was something that took me aback initially as anyone in his situation would clearly have questions (I will let you fill in the blank) and prayers for Hashem all at once. I was not even sure I agreed with him. Yet, now several weeks removed from hearing this, I feel I can now better absorb what he was saying – don't employ the "bad" that may happen in life as a vehicle to give up on religion and enjoying the hopefully immense good components of the finer aspects of humanity. This idea or approach of engaging and celebrating life (not martyrdom or death) is something I feel all Jews can all hopefully aspire to as a whole community to bring about our best version of ourselves individually and collectively.

TED MORDFIN

On the second day of the mission we visited Kibbutz Kfar Azza, which is just a few kilometers away from the Gaza Strip. The Arab terrorists attacked it on Simchat Torah morning (Shmini Azteret). It is eerily quiet - a ghost town - mostly frozen in time. We saw utter destruction in some places, while some houses simply looked like the

residents had gone on a long vacation. Doors locked, grass and gardens overgrown. But the quiet and pastoral scene must not be allowed to hide the sheer horror of what happened here. The terrorists – Hamas, Islamic Jihad, Fatah, and regular civilians – including women and children – raped, tortured, burned, murdered and mutilated 1200 people in southern Israel on this holy day. I will not speak the details of these unspeakable atrocities. You have heard them, read them, and seen them. There is no way to capture the magnitude of the horror of that day. To paraphrase Josef Stalin, one death is tragedy; 1200 deaths is a statistic. So I will memorialize a small number of the dead to bring forward the magnitude of the crime and tragedy.

We stood near the home of 30-year-old **Hadar and Itay Berdichevsky**, hashem yikom damam. I saw through the kitchen window



the utter destruction inside. Their bicycle still stands on the porch, awaiting another ride across the kibbutz. When the couple heard the terrorists, they hid their twin 10-month-old babies Guy and Roi in the safe room and fought the terrorists who entered their home. They were murdered in cold blood, while the babies cried. The terrorists then sat down for a meal, apparently hoping that the cries of the babies would attract more unsuspecting victims.

Twelve hours later **Lt Col Tomer Greenberg**, commander of the Golani Brigade's 13th battalion,



killed the terrorists and rescued the children, who have since been living with their maternal grandparents **Nurit and Miki Rosenfeld**. Tomer went on to

fight in the Gaza Strip, from where he promised them that on his first furlough he would come visit them even before returning to his own family. He did not have the opportunity. Tomer was killed in action along with twelve of his soldiers on December 12. Hashem yikom damam.

Mira had dinner on Wednesday evening this week with the Rosenfelds. She found that despite it all, they are incredibly resilient and cheerful. One of their other daughters, who has children of her own, is considering adopting the twins. Nurit appears second from left in the photograph below.

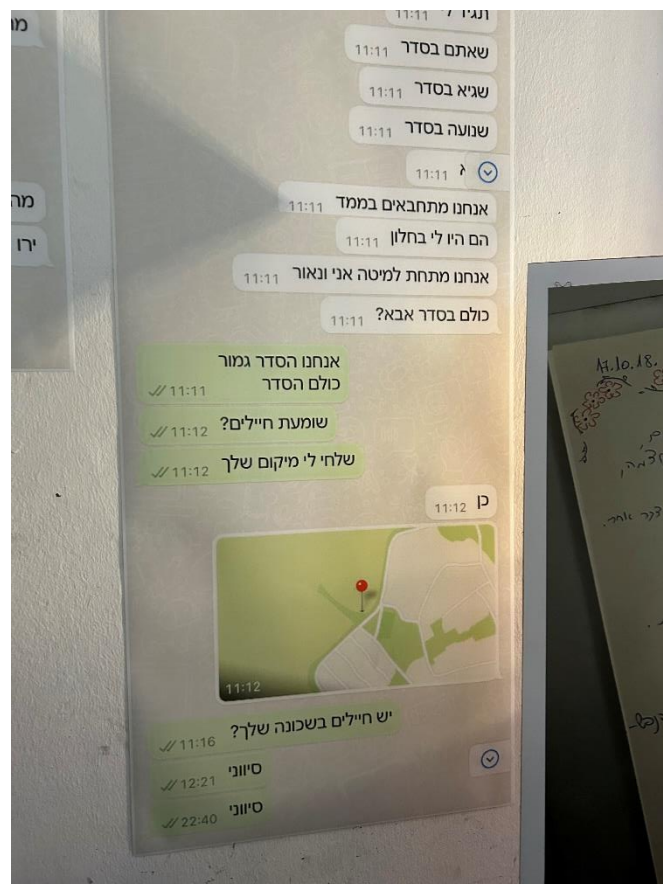


We then visited the first area of the kibbutz to be attacked. Given the level of destruction one could easily think that this had been a strategic military target. It was the young adult neighborhood. One apartment was the home a young man whose name I do not recall. The memorial indicated that he had been a loner who often performed acts of chesed. Our guide explained that he held the door handle to his apartment for ten hours to prevent the terrorists from entering. Nothing that an RPG could not resolve. A soldier died outside his front door. Hashem yikom damam.



Rabbi Weinberg has posted a video of Shimon Alkabetz telling the story of his 23-year-old daughter Sivan. She and her boyfriend held off the terrorists for some time until they too were murdered; hashem yikom damam. There are bullet holes throughout the apartment; one wall is now adorned with a floor-to-ceiling printout of the texts that she exchanged that morning with her father.

Shimon related that he and his family are broken people. They feel like they have lost everything. The terrorists not only destroyed their house, they destroyed their home. Their personal home, and their nation's home. But he takes strength from the memory of Rabban Yochanan ben Zakkai, who lived not far from Kfar Azza. Instead of descending into the depths of depression after the destruction of the Temple, Ben Zakkai built for the future. Shimon Alkabetz is determined that we shall utterly defeat our enemies and continue to build for the future. Together. United. May we merit the description "Mi K'amcha Yisrael" – who is like Your people Israel.



(Pictured: Last Whatsapp between Sivan z"l and her father)



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