

### **Israel Solidarity Mission**

72 hours on the ground in Israel. 72 hours to try and understand the enormity of what happened, what's happening, and what comes next. I will admit I am still trying to process this myself. I shared some of what I saw and experienced in my updates with you this past week. This morning, I want to share a few vignettes – stories of a broken heart, a mending heart, and a heart striving to see a better future.

The square in front of the Tel Aviv Art Museum is usually bustling with life and vibrancy. For nearly two months, this square has been transformed into Hostage Square – a place of remembering, a place of yearning, and a place of testimony. Sitting in a dimly lit tent, we heard the story of Itai Svirsky (38). I share this story with you through the eyes of his cousin, Naama Weinberg.

My grandparents founded Kibbutz Beiri on October 6, 1946. 77 years later, on October 7, I woke up in Tel Aviv at 6:30 am to the sounds of sirens. In an absurd reality, this is routine for those who live on the Gaza border, but when this happens in Tel Aviv, you know something is really wrong. I immediately checked on my family, who lives in Beiri, just 5 km from the Gaza border. Soon, the messages started arriving in my family WhatsApp group.

The first message came from Orit, Itai's mother, at 7:30 am. She wrote, "Please pray for us. It's very scary." Similar messages continued for a few hours. They told us that they were hearing lots of gunfire. It's in the neighbor's house. It's very close. Orit told us that she and Itai were in their shelter. There was no electricity, and they were hiding under blankets. They wanted to know what was on the news. At the time, no one understood how big this was.

That morning, I had family members in six different houses on the kibbutz. One was the house of Orit, which Itai was visiting for Simhat Torah. The other house belonged to Itai's father. The third house belonged to my grandmother and her caregiver. Three other houses had additional family members. In one house, they were trapped inside for 16 hours before being rescued. In one house, they heard shooting outside. In another house, they reported that the house was on fire, and they were trapped in their shelter.

The messages continued until 10:14 am when Rafi, Itai's father, wrote, "They're here. Call for help." That was the last time we heard from him. Rafi Svirsky was murdered. Fifteen minutes later, Itai wrote to his brother that all the windows in the house were shattered, and he still doesn't know what happened to their father. He was scared and worried. Fifteen minutes later, at 10:48, we got the final message from Itai and Orit; it was just a red heart emoji. Itai was kidnapped, and his mother, Orit Svirsky, was murdered.

Another hour passed and we got a message from our grandmother's caregiver, a Philippino woman named Gracie, an angel that came to Israel to care for my grandmother. She wrote, "They are in the house. There are many of them. I am afraid. I am scared." That was the last message we got from Gracie. It took 2.5 weeks for Gracie's body to be recognized. She was murdered. Somehow, my 97-year-old grandmother survived, but she lost everything. She lost her home of 77 years, she lost her daughter, she lost her son-in-law, and one of her grandchildren was taken hostage. It has been 53 days (now 57), and we still have not heard anything about Itai. We don't know if he was injured on the way to Gaza. We don't know if he knows what happened to his mother. He certainly doesn't know what happened to his father. We do know that it is possible that the last thing Orit saw before she was murdered was her son being taken by Hamas terrorists. Or,

it might be possible that the last thing Itai saw before being taken captive was his mom being executed.

Itai is 38 years old. He was born and raised in Tel Aviv. He was, he is, a man of peace, of people, and love. He is a mental coach. His entire life is dedicated to helping people. Orit and Rafi were peace activists. Orit was at a peace conference at the Dead Sea just three days before the attack. That's the kind of people they were. In fact, for all of Kibbutz Beiri, that's the kind of people they are. Every month, the kibbutz would gather money and send it to civilians in Gaza who used to work at their kibbutz but were no longer permitted. Every single month, they sent them money so they could survive. And that entire neighborhood...was slaughtered...they were slaughtered. The kibbutz is a small and tight-knit community. 1200 people live in Beiri. 90 were murdered. 28 were kidnapped. Some have been returned. But the entire community was slaughtered.

Ever since that fateful day, our lives have changed. I needed to quit my job. My only job now is to care for the family that has survived, specifically, my 97-year-old grandmother, who no longer has a caregiver, and Rafi and Orit's other children, who have become orphans. When both of your parents are murdered, it doesn't matter if you are 8 years old or 40; you become an orphan. We just hope that the loss of Itai is temporary and not permanent. We have been traveling all over the world, speaking our family's story, speaking Itai's story, and making sure the world will not let their story go silent. The war will not end until all the hostages come home. I am grateful for the women and children that have been released. Itai has yet to be released because he is a healthy young man, but he is also a son, a brother, and an uncle. He's my cousin, and he has a grandma waiting for him.

I have only one request from everyone here listening this evening. Go back to your community and tell Itai's story. Tell Orit's story. Tell Rafi's story. Thank you for coming. Thank you for listening. Thank you for spreading their story.

There are more stories of hostages that we heard. There is the horror that I witnessed at K'far Aza, documented in video footage that I sent everyone on Wednesday. Nearly every person in Israel has their Oct 7 story. Each one is devastating. Each one broke my heart.

A broken heart does not mend easily or quickly. It takes time. But I also saw what is happening today, glimpses of hope that can heal a broken heart. We met with leaders of *Achim l'neshek* – Brothers and Sisters in Arms. The organization began as a protest movement against judicial reform and, because of its vast network, was able to immediately pivot. They now have three priorities: 1) Help the IDF win; 2) Help civilians survive; 3) aim for unity, not protest. Just one example of their amazing work was utilizing their tech experts to create an online button, “k'var ba'im – here we come,” that could be embedded on every Israeli website. When someone clicked on the button, they could enter their name and location in order to be rescued. One woman testified that after clicking the button, she got a WhatsApp call, “Hi, my name is Uzi, and I'm on my way to save you.” Several hours later, she hears a knock, “Hi, this is Uzi. I'm outside your door. I'm here. Uzi saved a mom and two children. In the first 48 hours, *Achim L'neshek* saved over 3000 people.

My heart also began to heal when I met Rasha Athamni, the first Muslim woman to represent Israel in Israel's Ministry of Foreign Affairs. She shared with us that Oct 7<sup>th</sup> has brought the Arab Israeli community together with the Jewish-Israeli community. There is a realization within the Arab Israeli community that, at the end of the day, we only have each other. Israeli Arabs saw that Hamas didn't care if victims were Jewish or Muslim; they killed anyone they saw. There

are Muslim citizens volunteering and trying to make change. They saw what Hamas did and now want to join the IDF. In Rasha's words, "We are not Jews, Muslims, and Christians; we are all Israelis, and we are in this together."

I shared briefly in my video message on Tuesday about Kibbutz Mishmar Ha'Emek, but after visiting Miri and Amir I want to share a bit more. What I saw at Mishmar Ha'Emek was Israeli society at its best. There might be a long list of complaints about the government, but this was Israel in her finest hour. The IDF finally rescued the residents of Kibbutz Nahal Oz, Miri and Amir's kibbutz at 1 am, Oct 8. They were given 5 minutes to pack what they could and get on a bus. Walking out of their homes, they saw that their beautiful kibbutz had become a full-on war zone. They were all taken to an army base about 20 minutes south of Nahal Oz. It was there that they met other evacuees from Nahal Oz. At 4 am, they got on another bus and drove two and a half hours north to Mishmar Ha'Emek. There were children who arrived without shoes because a parent forgot to grab them. People arrived without long-sleeved shirts and were cold. They arrived looking like ghosts. And Mishmar Ha'Emek said, "We got you covered."

The bus pulled in around 6 am, and they were told to head to the dining room; breakfast was waiting for them. When they entered, all along the windowsill were diapers, toothbrushes, toothpaste, shampoo, soap, baby formula, and more. The members of Mishmar Ha'Emek simply opened their general store, took out everything they had, and set it out for their brother and sisters of Nahal Oz. After breakfast, the first of many cars came with clothes. The parent of the barefoot children said, "I need shoes," and she found shoes for her two older children but not her youngest. The volunteer asked, "What shoe size do you need." The mother told her the shoe size, and within hours, ten new pairs of shoes arrived. Everything Miri and Amir are wearing, everything their friends are wearing, are all donations. And then, clothing companies began asking for sizes and

donating clothes as well. Mishmar Ha'emek is also providing housing for everyone from Nahal Oz, over 400 people. The very next day, October 9, they set up a *gan* so the little children could go to nursery school. For the children, this was so critical for their well-being so they could see that their world is not completely broken, it's not completely shattered, there is still a *gan*. If it weren't for Mishmar Ha'Emek, Miri, and Amir, their daughters (Galia and Carmel) and their community would be in dire straits. On October 7<sup>th</sup>, they were exposed to the purest form of evil. Since October 8<sup>th</sup>, they have witnessed the purest form of good.

Thursday afternoon, I had the opportunity to drive back to Mishmar Ha'Emek. Amir picked me up after finishing an article in Tel Aviv, and I spent the rest of the day with Miri, Amir, and their family. I saw first-hand the guest house they were living in. I went with Miri and Carmel to a children's concert for Nahal Oz kids, sponsored by Mishmar Ha'Emek, with bubbles, light sticks, and a clown singing songs for Hanukkah. We all had dinner together, a BBQ for the Nahal Oz families. We hugged, we laughed, and we talked about memories of being at Agudas. When it was time for me to head to the airport, I gave Miri a big hug, and she said, "Thank you so much for coming all the way to visit us. You made us very happy."

In thinking about what comes next, there is a real sense that Israelis are not there yet. Sitting here in Washington or anywhere in the diaspora, it is easy to ask questions about the future of Israeli society, the future of the citizens of Gaza, and the future of the Israeli / Palestinian conflict. I asked many Israelis these questions. Nearly everyone told me that they were just not ready for those conversations. It is not that they don't care. They really do. They just feel that in the midst of a crisis, when their house is literally on fire, they cannot think about the day after. It is not a luxury they have. But, I will say, they were not upset that we were asking the questions. In a way,

the role of diaspora Jewry, in general, and American Jewry, in particular, is to ask the difficult and important questions. Ensuring that we keep an eye on the future is the sacred role we can play.

We read in Parashat Vayishlah of Jacob's confrontation with an angel. When he awakens, the angel said: "לֹא יַעֲקֹב יֹאמַר עוֹד שְׁמִי כִּי אִם-יִשְׂרָאֵל כִּי-שָׁרִיתָ עִם-אַלֹּהִים וְעִם-אֲנָשִׁים וַתּוֹכֵל" – your name shall no longer be Jacob, but Israel, for you have striven with beings divine and human, and you have prevailed" (Gen 32:29). This was not Jacob's struggle. It was Jacob's striving – striving for God, for humanity, and for possibility. Whether he prevailed or he found potential, we don't know. We just know that somewhere in that space, Ya'akov became Yisrael and lived the rest of his life going back and forth, from *Ya'akov* to *Yisrael* to *Ya'akov* to *Yisrael*. Our brothers and sisters in Israel are striving to protect and defend their country, they are striving to mend broken hearts, and they are striving to create a better future. As *am Yisrael* – the Jewish people – we join in that collective striving.

Wednesday night, I got on a train in Jerusalem heading towards Ra'anana. When I got off the train, I approached a black Audi and out jumped Yasmin. We gave each other a long hug. I spent the night with her family, followed by a typical Israel breakfast with her parents. I learned that her sister is expecting in May and that Yasmin will soon become an aunt. Yasmin shared about her long days on base, called up to the military like so many in Israel. She also shared her excitement to begin her studies at Hebrew University in January, likely going to school and continuing to serve her country on a part-time basis. Together with her boyfriend Oren of over two years, we strolled in a nearby orange grove. We found a ripe orange and picked it. It was still a little sour. It was definitely juicy. It was, perhaps, representative of this entire trip; it was full of potential. My journey was only 72 hours, but my broken heart began to mend. The road ahead will be long, but I began to see rays of hope peeking over the horizon.

When Oren left Thursday afternoon, I told Yasmin, “We need to make sure that the next time I come, it’s for a simha.” Yasmin blushed and said, “What are you trying to say?” I smiled and left it at that.