

Rabbi Matthew Gewirtz
Sunday, January 21, 2024

He understood the call of the hour.

There are certain lines that people utter that we just can't forget. "He understood the call of the hour" is one line I won't forget for a while. I will tell you what I mean in a moment below. I am trying to keep to one post a day, so this is one that will be combined of two.

Joel and I eagerly await as our group who are in the air to arrive in a couple of hours. In the meanwhile, we continue to do. Yesterday we went to two rallies. Yes, two. The first we went to was the second ever rally for a call for new elections. They specifically separated from the rally to free the hostages to make sure the families of such were not seen as political. Here at this rally was anger; real anger at the government for not doing enough to free the hostages. Many spoke, but I will describe the most moving. A sister who lost her brother. He told his family he was going to fight, and they begged him not to do so. He said, "The hour calls for me to respond." He valiantly fought. He was a hero. He died in fighting on October 7th. He did what he felt called to do. Why was his family so upset at his response? Because 50 years to the day, his grandfather responded to the call on Yom Kippur of 1973 and also died. They lived their entire lives with the pain of his death. They didn't understand why Israel wasn't ready for the surprise attack then and they couldn't fathom that Israel wasn't ready again. And once again, the municipality knocked on their door 50 years later to inform their family that another member of their family fell. How could they relive the pain of the death of a hero, a generation later, 50 years later? Her brother, her grandfather both died, and she demanded their government do better. I don't judge, I just report what I heard....and what chills of misery I felt as I heard her words and could only imagine their pain. They didn't speak against Israel, but for the first time I felt the cracks of society wondering how to navigate a solution, not only militarily, but also, politically. Everyone wants Hamas to be defeated, the question is how. The call of the hour. I listened to another conversation between a son, a soldier, and his father. The soldier doesn't want to "simply" guard the border. He wants to something "meaningful". If he is going to be in uniform, he wants to fight the enemy in Gaza. He understands that his wife and kids; his parents and friends would prefer him to defend on this side of the border. His father tells his son, "I affirm your need for meaning, but I can't fathom, I can't live in a world where you don't live." The son feels heard, but it's not enough. The father feels like his son knows his own need for his family to be whole.

The Rally for hostages, one painstaking story after another. This rally, 50,000 strong, pleading that we do not forget the misery of every moment being as horrible as the moment that they realized that their family members were kidnapped. Unfathomable.....Can you imagine your closest and dearest being held in Hell?

The call of the hour. Joel and I await our TBJ group to come forth from the arrival gate. The plane makes it to Israel in a record 9-hour flight. We figure, "Great, we can actually have the group refresh in the hotel before we begin our packed schedule." But our group shows up with so many extra bags of clothes, Purim costumes and Air Jordan sweatshirts for evacuees (to donate) that Customs stops them for an extra 2 hours to question the "danger" of the clothing. The danger?!! Why would Customs stop us for clothing? Even in a time of war, the system still grinds. But the group comes through.... exhausted, but ready with smiles, solidarity beaming through their eyes, nothing will stop them...us from being here.

We check in to a normally “luxury” hotel. It is packed, but not with tourists. We are the only group from out of the country. Everyone else in the hotel are evacuees from a Moshav down south. They have been here for weeks, their kids running the hallways, the laundry machines running on overload; they look at us, wondering why we are here. We simply tell them, “We are here because we are with you.” And they retort, “Thank you, we are with you too.”

We go to Hostage Square. We listen to an aunt recount the story of her nephew and niece kidnapped from their Kibbutz. She tells us of their love story. Their love so strong, that Hamas had to kidnap both because they refused to let go of one another. His guitars were “Kidnapped” with them. He reassures his wife, “Don’t fret, if the sound of my guitars can somehow comfort even the children of our enemies, it is a good thing.” These are the colonialists about which ignorant marchers protest? Really? The wife was released 53 days ago, but her husband is still captive. She says her heart is still in Gaza....as do the dog tags that so many of us wear around our necks. And then we go to dinner to eat and process. Our unbelievable group.... brave, ready, strong and aware. We want to process just a bit, but we can’t stop talking. Talking about why we got up to go, leaving jobs and families. Nothing like the sacrifice being made here, but our part...our refusal to stand idly by....our understanding that this is our time to step up and bear witness; to activate; to be counted; to be heard; to comfort; to do a bit of our part. All ages, all demographics; all political stripes; all unified in our purpose and intention.

I am cheating you out of so much more, but I hope this gives you a taste. I have to get up in less than 5 hours to start our journey down south. I and we will share more tomorrow from our visit to decimated communities in the Gaza Envelope. I am sure my fellow travelers will share more. For now, we are representing you with full voices and full hearts and full souls.

Love from Tel Aviv. We, too, understand the call of the hour....the best we know how.