

Rabbi Matthew Gewirtz
Tuesday, January 23, 2024

And so today we put our hands in the Homeland earth. One of the serious national dilemmas here is harvesting the nation's fruits and vegetables. Most of it was done by foreign workers, most of whom returned to their homes abroad after October 7th. And some were murdered and kidnapped. And so, for the agricultural market to continue; for people to be able to eat; for farms to be able to survive, volunteers need fill in. And fill in we did. We awoke at 5:15 AM; and with full hearts, we headed down south. The job; was to weed blueberry plants. The plants were being overrun by weeds; "stealing" the water from the plants and so TBJ came to remove the weeds. For color, every 10 minutes was punctuated by bombs dropping a mile over. I'm actually amazed at how use to it our group has become.... I know we are not the brave ones given what is happening across the border, but given that we are suburban Americans, I am utterly moved by the courage of our utterly devoted group.

And then this bizarre surprise. Joel tells me that Cantor Fishbein and I are about to be picked up by the army to be taken someplace. I know, strange. I said, "What and where and why?". Joel told me that someone named Itsik called. Ah, this kind man Itsik who took my friend Rabbi Dan Cohen (TSTI) and me to see this incredibly high-level Paratrooper Base to watch exercises to prepare for the ground invasion when we were here right after the war started. He had told us that they needed drones, new ones that would literally save lives in every battle. We couldn't help but to say each of congregations would buy one each within a day. And because of many of you, both drones were in Gaza within 24 hours.

Well, he wanted to thank us by taking us to a place people just don't get to visit. And so, Lucy and I went to the central command center for this unit. Waze kept on going out because the army scrambles it all. We arrive with security that I've rarely seen in my life if ever.

We were taken into a tent full of technology that was mind boggling. This is the center from which the war, for this unit, is prosecuted. Indeed, right in front of our eyes, we see two terrorists preparing for attack. The unit on the ground confirms they are indeed terrorists. Then technology confirms that there are no civilians as in the area. Then a second time there is confirmation that these are indeed terrorists in the act of war. And then one more time, there is a check that there are no civilians in the area. And then we watched as both terrorists were "neutralized". Everything, every bit is recorded so that with all of the accusations of war crimes from a majority of the world, there is absolute proof of how meticulous the army is in NOT needlessly killing civilians. "We are not out to hurt innocents." I promised them I would report that word for word.

Now, I should tell you that Itsik's son is in this unit in Gaza (just like Itsik was himself once upon a time). His son has only been out of Gaza, home for 48 hours in the last three months. No communication at all. Here there were secure transmitters. He had to ask, "Might I talk to my son?" All of them, soldiers and sons, said, "Of course". As they were making contact, there was suddenly intense activity. An attack and battle had begun. They said, "Itsik, we're sorry, your son is in this battle." He can't talk." Our hearts sunk for Itsik's searing heart.

Every soldier hugged us; thanked us, took a picture with us (their request). We assured them that we, you; are with them. They told us our love from afar helps them maintain their stamina. And I promised we won't stop; we can't! It's existential...has been and still is!!!

As Itsik took us back to rejoin our group, he grilled us with questions about antisemitism in the States...he was really engaged...and then he just stopped and apologized for his distraction. I understood immediately. He couldn't stop thinking about his boy in battle at that very moment.... that very moment. He said, "I shouldn't have asked to speak to him. It's better that I don't know, and better he doesn't worry about me worrying." He went on, "I know better. I was in the exact same unit. But it's my boy." I don't understand because I don't live here. But having children made my imagination run horrifically wild to try to understand. We offered love. I pray (and please join me) in praying for him.

Before I left, I told him I was embarrassed....as I am to say this publicly for this first time. I am struggling to find something that has always come naturally to me....my sense of empathy. I'm trying but I'm so constantly worried and still angry, that I am not as successful as I want, need and should be. Itsik looked at immediately and shot back, "No, Rabbi, that you mustn't lose. Find it as fast as possible. In fact, when my son left back to Gaza, I told him only one thing: "Don't lose your empathy ever. It's not just important to cultivate empathy for those against whom you're fighting, but for you, you can never cross over into the darkness....and so Rabbi, if he can't, you can't!" And so, the warrior teaches the rabbi. I needed a rabbinic rebuke, and he purposely taught me. If he and his son can, then....me, you; all of us can and should, no?!!

Lucy and I rejoined the group at the site of the mass killing at the Nova Music Festival. Most of the remnants of the horror were taken away, but the eeriness is ever present. There is a picture of every single person killed there. And it is a makeshift memorial to each soul. And more, there are family members of the dead all over; coming to sit by their loved one's picture; writing notes, shedding tears, laying flowers; and stuck in bereft disbelief. Their tears chilled our souls and induced our own. We heard stories of unfathomable misery.... I still don't believe it....and can't understand the utter inhumanity. The evil. The degradation. There's no way to compute...but there is action to take. People to hold. Solidarity to express. Investment in a surety that this will not be allowed to ever happen again.

We have seen so much; heard so much; listened to so much. It becomes numbing. Our defense mechanisms kick in because how much horror can any of us process? We want to escape to another reality. And frankly, when we go back home, we can disconnect. But I remind myself; and I know my fellow travelers kick themselves and do the same. We can go back to disconnection. But no one here can because they live in this reality; one that continues like a metronome of tragedy and trauma daily. And, so the least we can do, is remain present even as we want to escape. And so we do.... for our brothers and sisters here; for ourselves and for you at home. When and how will it stop?

We arrive in Jerusalem. It is raining and winter. We bundle up and go out to a meal of deliciousness and libation. The paradox is crystal clear. And the reality of life here knocks at the door of our souls. The country, our Homeland reels. Last night, 21 soldiers fell in a collapse of a building in Gaza. No one can move as the names and stories are revealed. Heartbreak doesn't begin to describe the mood. The boys come from towns and cities that are no more than one degree of separation. Everyone knows one of them or knows someone who does. The

21 funerals have begun and will continue over the next 24 hours. The Shivah, the Shloshim; the lives of heartbreak will span entire lives. War. This is the reality, but not for families who have cracks etched in their hearts that will have stopped them from breathing; and will never be able to breathe freely again.

We have two days left of our mission. It has all entered our consciousness, but I am not sure any of us have made sense of any of it. But we will not stop. We will bring back a call for more action. We are not deterred from our call.

Please continue not just to follow but share it; internalize it; vocalize our witness. Our work in some regards has just begun.

As I look on to the rainy streets of the City of Peace, I and we send you love from perhaps my most precious city in my being.... I send you love from Jerusalem.