

Rabbi Matthew Gewirtz
Wednesday, January 24, 2024

Choose Life! That is the logo of the sacred organization called Brothers for Life. I wrote to you all about their unbelievably important work and a few weeks back when I was here with Lauren and the kids. And this time our TBJ group was equally moved in ways we couldn't expect.

Here is a snippet of that:

There is the 22-year-old, Ori. He was badly injured in the Gaza action of 2021. He actually couldn't walk because of the number of bullets and shrapnel he took to his legs. It was a miracle he could walk again. He was in an elite unit.... actually the one we see portrayed on the show, Fauda. He did indeed learn to walk and even run again. He worked on his family farm. October 7th happened. He literally lied to his parents about where he was going. He took a small pistol he had, got in his car and headed down South to fight. What he did was illegal. One cannot conscript oneself back into the army. But it was his instinct to fight. His grandfather, uncles and cousins were in Be'eiri. His uncles were murdered, while his 94-year-old grandfather, told Hamas to leave his home at once; and somehow, they heeded his call. The soldier, Ori, stayed down there, picking up the guns from dead terrorists and fought for a week. Military units seeing his prowess took him along to fight. He returned home after a week; he still hasn't told his parents that he fought. He is, as you can see from the pics attached, as humble and as sweet as can be.

Brothers for Life, a sacred organization that does for wounded soldiers was the IDF just cannot. They start in the hospitals, visiting as a first point of comfort contact. They send in soldiers with the same injuries, so one can say to another, "Look, I have life after life-changing injury, so can you. Life-changing, like lost limbs, blindness, burnt skin...I could go on. A beautiful soul took us around and said, they also work on the intangible...the emotional pain and loss.... the enormous PTSD that so many experience without knowing it's possible. So many are told they will not walk again; and everyone that does then trains to climb Kilimanjaro; and they do. They come regularly to eat and cook; play music and tell stories. It is totally military, each of them boasting about which of their units are better than the others, and yet they are replete with love and comradery for each other. They are in the same club and as bad as the hand they were dealt, eventually through this incredible organization, they become equally determined to create life for themselves and in turn for the next round of wounded soldiers. There are currently 4,000 wounded soldiers in Israel; and almost 750 dead soldiers since 10/7(most of whom died that day); and they fear that so many more are to come. But it is not a sad site, it is one of miracles and love, hope and resilience. Brothers for Life does all of this work by raising its own funds. It is impossible not to want to support them. The technology, the innovation, the kindness, the bravery, the toughness, the compassion were too overwhelming to take all at once. One of the leaders who just came back from a tour in Gaza, several weeks ago where he was wounded a second time in his life, said, "By the way, I know people back home keep on calling us monsters. I promise you, Rabbi, my comrades, and I are not monsters. We do everything we can not to take life. I can't tell you how many times, we gave our food to obviously reeling, starving Palestinian civilians. We went a couple of days without food because they seemed hungrier than we. This is not a fight we want, but one for which we have no choice." The tears in his eyes were watered with honesty and earnestness.

These young men are the furthest from monsters as one can meet. This young man was part of the unit to create the plans to break through tunnels under the hospital. He is not a monster, but a hero.

They tell each other that injury is not an excuse for pity, but a new opportunity to choose life. We do can choose life every day, I thought to myself.

And then to Sheba Hospital to listen to the stories countless soldiers who come in by helicopter daily injured from the war. Started with chaos in October and now a well-oiled machine of love and healing. Soldiers being wheeled out of surgery, stopping their attendants to yell to us, "I'm healing and I'm going back to continue. Thank you for being here. I'm okay and you're going to be okay, Am Yisrael Chai"literally he just came from surgery from the wounds of war. Bravery, humility, determination, grace and love.

All of the hostages returned first there; to be treated with dignity; privacy to reconnect with family; to heal from their physical and deep psychological wounds. Cantor Fishbein realizing that she walked past a former hostage; beautiful and etched with a face of trauma. But healing.

We visited rooms; distributed cards made by so many of you and told them about you; and your messages of love, solidarity and support. They received it and kept telling us to tell you that from their hospital beds of healing; they want and need us to heal also from our wounds of fear and transform them into a determination to be whole.

And finally, to an explosive painful meeting with Israeli Arabs in a coexistence group. On one hand, they said what we've never heard: They categorically condemned the attacks of October 7th. They said the attacks were utterly barbaric. And.... but, began with the talking points of a fantasy that it will all get better if just....and there is not enough room here to make the list. On one hand, it was a meeting of generosity; of actual dialogue.... when every one of us knows that ultimately there can't only be a military solution, there will have to be a political one. The dialogue of difference was a start, but some of the ideas were frankly replete with fantasy; that unless it becomes a practical reality, the maze of complexity will bear no light. We and they became angry. And we calmed. We became angry and then calmed. It was never violent anger, but the feeling of the incendiary was palpable. And then as we are leaving and we are telling people we need to get on the bus, I look and to my surreal surprise, there is a line of our folk, who just angry moments before, waiting to offer an embrace; that maybe just maybe these talks of despair may one day transform to those of peace.

It's too cloudy in the skies of Israel right now; and so it's too cloudy for me to reflect on there being a possibility right now. And I am an optimist. But the blood filling the fields right now makes it hard for me to see light.

We ended with a 90-minute session of song and reflection back at the hotel. For many reasons about which we will all illuminate, every single person in the group shed tears of a combination of hope, catharsis, gratitude to be here and a bond created that made us feel like, well what we are...family. We concluded by doing only what we could. We sang Hatikvah...with its name seared on and soaring from our hearts.... HOPE....and a sense that it is incumbent upon us to choose life!