

Rabbi Matthew Gewirtz

Thursday/Friday, January 25 & 26, 2024

And now, I sit in my temporary apartment in Jerusalem. The group got on the bus last night. I am here now for the month. I am empty and full. And so are they.... the 4.5 days felt like 4 weeks in the best and most painful ways. Their hugs were full and replete with longing. We were and are so connected on so many levels. What we experienced, although hard to fathom, is a bond that we will always share and will punctuate our lives for years to come.

I woke this morning and I felt like it was all some kind of surreal dream. I looked for the other 35 faces and I wondered what had happened. I packed my things, moved my stuff a few blocks away, unpacked, shopped for Shabbat, and then took those last two bags of like 30 that our group brought over, of toys and clothes to evacuees at a local hotel. And then I sat with an evacuee for a half hour and visited. One more story of misery. She, her husband and three kids are from Sderot. They were trapped in their home for three days straight from 10/7-10, while local residents and army fought Hamas. They actually stayed one extra day than they needed because they wouldn't leave without their two cats; and wanted to make sure they would get someplace that would take pets. Now, her youngest son, stays glued to her side, still after three plus months and therapy. He is too frightened to leave her protective arms. And she herself, can't move past her trauma she told me. Her husband recently had a cold; and she couldn't sleep because every time he breathed heavier from his illness; she swore she was hearing the breathing of terrorists outside of her hotel door. Just do the math here and multiply exponentially this trauma and its ripples for those from the south and the adjacent trauma that is spread through our Homeland.

Our last day yesterday was a day of packing food for hungry Israelis, of all races and religion. Hunger that existed in various sectors before the war; and has worsened because of skyrocketing inflation due to the war. Our last "official" stop was to the Israel Religious Action Center. There we heard of our Movement's valiant legal battles to ensure freedom of pluralistic religion and expression; advocacy for women's rights, LGBTQ+ and fighting against racism in any form. They have done extraordinary work to fight the judicial overhaul efforts of last year....and they of course are Israelis who simultaneously have family defending Israel. This was not a typical trip of shopping and entertainment sewn into the itinerary. But we needed to allow everyone to spend a couple of hours helping the economy and buying for their loved ones who held down the fort back home. And frankly, every shopkeeper expressed enormous gratitude because there has not been shopping traffic for months. They hugged and thanked over and over again.

And then before dinner where we also celebrated dear Amy Ladetsky's birthday, we gathered to both create an action plan for our congregation to continue our steadfast obligation to continue to support our brothers and sisters here. You will all have tremendous opportunities to continue our work. Literally every single member of our congregation will be able to help. Please stay tuned; and you will hear from our clergy team on how and when and where...including the planning of up to three different kinds of opportunities to come to Israel yourselves in the next 6-9 months. Stay tuned. You will not hear about it from me because I will be here, but you will hear. First though, come to Shabbat Services a week from tonight (and of course, tonight as well:)to hear and SEE firsthand reflections of our mission.

And then we reflected, sang, cried, expressed a mixture of pain, joy, emptiness, and fulfillment. We prayed and wondered, worried, and looked forward. It was the crescendo of a trip that continually reached all types of crescendos.... a roller coaster of emotions, with eyes wide open. We only had 2 hours, but I mean it when I tell you that we could have sat there all night. This is so unfair because it was so much more and so much deeper, but here are snippets of lessons learned:

1. We had to be here, just like we all needed to be in New York and its surroundings after 9/11. It is a time of war, but our fears were assuaged by being here to witness and help and listen and comfort. And in that process, we didn't just feel safe, but we counterintuitively felt fulfilled and comforted and whole...right in the midst of the brokenness. There was no place else to be than here. Why?
2. Because we also learned that the world of false binaries is a world of falsehood. We internalized the fact that we have no choice but to live in dichotomy; in the chasm that bridges hope and hopelessness; brokenness and wholeness; difference of political opinion; religious observance; and even war and peace.... reconciliation with a neighbor that for now shows more propensity other than to abhor our existence.... than it does to live in peace.... We have to hold it all.....false binaries will push us further into the darkness. Dichotomy of thought, openness to others will indeed bring light.
3. And, so, placing ourselves right in the thick of complexity actually and surprisingly brings us relief. So, stay in folks, please stay in it because eventually we will find the kind of relief that will bring light and perhaps the end of something that feels totally endless.
4. Be vulnerable as much as you want to act and be tough. There is no other people as tough as the Israeli, but what has made them tougher than ever is this deep sense of vulnerability that is on full display. As hard as they are fighting to survive, they are simultaneously allowing themselves to shed tears, laughter, anger, kindness, fear, generosity, and double servings of hope. Real toughness is toughness only if it comes along with the ability to feel all the other feelings on our spectrum of life.
5. There is real trauma here. Trauma that will take at least a generation to endure. We saw it etched on the face of every single Israeli we encountered. And, so.... We can't get fatigued in our steadfast efforts to support our brothers and sisters here. They need us; and guess what:
6. We need them too.... almost every Israeli we spoke to offered their love and solidarity for the onslaught of hate we are encountering at home in the US. For the first time in my life, I feel the absolute need flowing each way of support in a symbiotic manner.
7. Israel serves as a sort of umbilical cord that nurtures us, especially when we are here. It just makes us better and more fortified in our identity as people and Jews.
8. Choose Life....in every situation we face, we have a choice. The choice is being made not to choose pity, but to choose the embracing of life. No matter how narrow the place, we can't become comfortable in the uncomfortable. Choose life!
9. Perhaps most important. There are well over 100 hostages who are living in utter Hell and misery. Every moment we have and even those we don't, we must let everyone know that they must be returned. Tell every elected official over and over again.... the pressure has to be amped up.
10. And so, again, I apologize for the length. I could have filled 100 more pages. I have frankly been in and out of crying all day long as I have walked my favorite streets in the rain. I barely did all week with the group. But today I can't control it at all.

I will still “dispatch” from here during the next weeks, but with less frequency. I will be splitting the weeks between study and volunteering.

I can't stop the tears because I am indeed here walking on a bridge that spans the chasm between hopelessness and utter optimism and hope. We will overcome and will not only survive this but thrive again. Am Yisrael Chai!!

With profound gratitude to:

[Debbie Bloomfield Evans](#) for years of deep and loving friendship. But here for chairing this mission with wisdom, steadfast commitment, devotion to action and her simply saying when I wished her happy birthday months ago, “For my birthday, I want you to actually set dates for a solidarity mission” And so I did. Happy Birthday my dear friend.

Cantor [Lucy B. Fishbein](#), my sacred partner for leading with me...with love, wisdom, deep insight, a sense of humor; and voice that lifted us and for being her authentic self...not pretending to know it all, but instead modeling by struggling. You are indeed a rock star! And to one of the most important friendships of my life: [Joel Rosenfeld](#)...for not just being a superlative guide. But for allowing us into the depths of your own vulnerability and trauma. You didn't merely guide a group, you shared every crevice of your mind, heart and soul. You inspire in ways I've rarely seen in my life. And you allow my family and me to be a part of your family in ways that I cherish. The scotch always helps process it all.

To my fellow travelers.... We will share this experience as a bond that will last years if not forever. I'm sorry we are not in Jerusalem together for Shabbat tonight.

Much love to you and all of you from Jerusalem.