

Rabbi Matthew Gewirtz
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מחניק קצת בגרון

That is an expression from a famous Israeli song. It's intent, again, it comes across differently in Hebrew, means, "I'm just a little choked up." The singer is writing about his emotions when his children leave home. It is about separation and reunion; about growing through the stages of our lives with the highs and the lows punctuating our days.

I've been choked up a lot of these past five weeks, for reasons I have tried to articulate as clearly as possible in this space. Last night might have been the height of the "choke" in my throat. As I wrote to you yesterday, Yaniv's unit finished their mission in Gaza this past week. Last night Joel and I were invited to share one of their final meals as a unit before they are released for what will have been five months in uniform. These men are reservists and 90% of them are married with children. It has been quite an ordeal for them, as well- and as importantly- for their spouses and children.

Frankly, they invited us to something to which people aren't generally invited because so many of you when I asked, stepped up immediately and generously to supply these soldiers with equipment they needed desperately for battle.

I had no idea what to expect. When we arrived, Yaniv hugged us and brought immediately to a private conversation with the commanding officers. They were greyer than I expected. These are not kids, but men in their 30's and 40's. They were sweet, kind, smart, sensitive, wise, funny, but also quite serious. We could see from their faces that they had just come from something also indeed quite serious. After some initial chitchat, they came straight out and said, "We invited you here to thank you and your congregation. Without your help, some of us would not have returned alive." I stared a bit shy, not knowing exactly how to respond. They could tell I was in shock; that my throat was a bit choked. They said, "Let us show you what we mean." They had video, a lot of footage, of what the drones we had purchased captured. They explained that they were there to 'clean' houses of terrorists and weapons of terror in Khan Younis. Instead of soldiers having to go in blind to each of these homes, instead the drones entered to do recognizance. Video after video showed IED's and other explosives waiting to blow up Israeli soldiers. And they also showed terrorists hiding to kill them. Because of the advanced intelligence, they were able to fight accordingly and indeed, I could tell what they meant when they said, lives were saved in each house. To add, they also found maps in these homes of 50-100 missile sites, used to attack Israel. All those sites were then eliminated. Then, I understood full well what they trying to tell me. I was choked up and couldn't speak.... not like me not to talk.

They went on to explain that they weren't taken as seriously by the army at first because of their age and lack of fighting experience. But when they entered, prepared, confident, and equipped, their confidence level was noticed by high command in Gaza, and they were immediately attached to one of the most elite units in the IDF. Indeed, they were asked to participate in higher-level duty because of how well prepared they were for action. They explained to me that their own lives changed during this mission. Their sense of confidence as men, husbands, fathers and as soldiers grew exponentially. They now saw life differently and would carry a sense of purpose they had never quite carried before in their lives. They showed me the rest of the equipment we purchased but I was in a fog; choked up.

Before dinner as the 110 soldiers filed in, the commanders asked me if I would like to say a few words to the unit. I actually didn't want to.... I was embarrassed. We didn't fight. They did. They pushed me and as I was introduced, the unit started cheering, not for me, but for you and your support and love. I turned around because I wasn't just choked up, but I started to cry. I didn't want these warriors to see my tears. There was no way I was going to speak in Hebrew this emotionally tied up. Yaniv translated for me. I told them that our initial connection was my and our love for the Rosenfeld Family. They are not friends, they

are family. And I told them that we were frankly scared for Yaniv and would do anything to keep him safe. We joked about Yaniv being a younger brother to me, but what did that make Joel...well also, a brother, one just a few years older and the other, many years younger....and that feeling of familial connection goes for Gail, their children, spouses, and grandchildren. They are my (and Lauren and the kids) and TBJ's family. Second, I told them that we all woke up on October 7th in America. That we didn't sleep the same. That we wondered and worried about the Jewish future. I told them that our congregation is not one of casual Zionism, but steadfast supporters. I told them we would always do anything to help. And finally, I told them finally with a full throat that when they defend us here, they are defending us at home in the States. That their fight lends us the fight we need to stand up to hatred against us at home. That it was a symbiotic relationship. We can't live without them. They heard me loud and clear.

After, almost every single one of them came up to hug me and each of them said, "Thank you, your congregation allows me to return alive to our families." I hugged them hard and thanked them from the deepest place in my heart and from yours as well. I felt you hugging them as I embraced each one of them.

Now, this unit returns to their families this Shabbat. They will be released from the army after 5 months...and will have to do the arduous work of returning to their families after being absent for so long. This will be emotionally as complex as their service was in the army. There will be a lot of emotional untangling to do. And after a week off, they will return to their lives as teachers, consultants, engineers, students, salesmen, doctors, and social workers. How they will suddenly play those roles again will be another mountain to climb.

Yaniv walked us to the car, and we embraced again and told each other that we love each other. I cried because I don't have my next trip planned yet and I will feel far away. That is especially the case because their unit performed at such a high level that they are to return to duty for 40 days in starting in May. My heart will long and hurt and choke up again.

Joel and I didn't talk a lot on the long ride back to my train. I asked him how he felt. And all he could express was pride at his son's extraordinary growth. Every officer told Joel how much they respected and loved Yaniv for his leadership and devotion. I felt pride for my dear friend's pride, and I felt trepidation because of the unsure future.

I will go as far as to say that this was one of the most important nights of my life. Full of pride, complexity, shyness, gratitude and meaning.....and with a full understanding of how this impacts people of all types everywhere.

I am indelibly choked up.

Love to you from Jerusalem. I am going to be late for my teacher. And so, I run, with my throat a bit choked up.