

Rabbi Matthew Gewirtz
Monday, January 22, 2024

We began with one of the most important writers in the country....Amoz Harel. He spoke with a blunt honesty that woke us out of our jet lag.

Many of us because of our daily lives, can't help but to return to our routines. We crave normalcy. But he shook us with the reality that nothing, absolutely nothing is normal here. He bluntly reminded us that the worst catastrophe in Israeli history happened on October 7th. A catastrophe that even for him, who sees himself on the political Left gives Israel no choice but to defeat the utterly evil; ultimately terroristic, Hamas.

And yet, he declares that as evil as Hamas is, that Israel must accept its culpability in order to navigate the current mess of complexity. The Government must. The Army must. The Press, including himself, a military expert must. None of those parts of society believed it was possible. There was not the propensity for the proper imagination. And the news he broke with us; and for me. it truly was breaking news: The army, up to the Chief of Staff was warned first at 1 AM and then at 5 AM on the morning of 10/7 that something was about to happen. Ultimately it was written off as a "Hamas Exercise" at best and at worst, a small potential, infusion to kidnap one citizen at most. That realization, that part of the trauma will take years to reconcile, if at ever. The covenant between Israeli society and Israeli was that no matter what, citizens would always be protected; on the beach; at work; in one's home. How will we feel safe again.... he wondered.

So much more, but the final challenge is the challenge of challenges: Is winning this war compatible with returning of the hostages? Everyone thought YES.... up until the past couple of days when they realized that the army cannot successfully rescue them because they themselves, the hostages are the first line of human shields of the cowardly Hamas leadership. And more, to stop the war is to allow avowed terrorists to continue their mission of not creating a Palestinian State, but of eradicating Israel and Jews everywhere. He didn't have an answer to how to mitigate this most existential question. And quite frankly anyone of us who thinks we have the answer doesn't understand the depth of this ultimate question.

And then there were Barack and Yossi. They were residents of Nir Oz. We listened to their stories of horror from October 7th. Barack's father-in-law and brother-in-law killed. They, lucky enough to have had a lock on their safe room. Their house burned around them. Do they open the window and take the chance of being killed by gunfire or die of suffocation? Their kids vomiting, in and out of consciousness. They open and close the window. They barely make it until the army gets there.

Yossi put his children and wife and other family members in their safe room. He has one gun with 8 bullets. He goes out; he kills two terrorists thinking it was over. No, he then runs into more. He is able to grab a machine gun from a dead terrorist. He's able to take on more. And then he's almost out. He runs back to his home, as he watches the terrorists kidnapping the Bibas Family (red heads, the sweet young baby). He hides with his family in the safe room. The terrorists enter again, literally partying as they take a break from killing. And since it was Yossi's Birthday, he and his family hear the terrorists hanging out eating his intended birthday cake. His gift for his birthday: When they were finally freed by the army, he went home to

house taking the bodies of the dead; his family; his neighbors; his community from the homes to the trucks intended for the morgue.

The tones of their voices were strong and resilient; but a tenor of soulful misery that I can only hear; and wish I could somehow articulate for you.

And then Nir Oz itself. I want to tell you just how tragic it is here. I wish I could tell you that a tornado had come through or a hurricane.... because then I could say I could describe it. But all I can say is that we witnessed ultimate inhumanity. We saw the remains of torture; of horror; of burnt life. Yes, burnt life. Homes burnt to a crisp. The remains of a holiday; of a Shabbat that was in ruins by hatred and behavior that you can't imagine; I still can't imagine, and I saw it. There were just shoes; and laundry lines of hanging clothes; wine bottles from holiday dinners; swing sets; bicycles; house keys. There were cacti; lush vegetation; pastoral paths; communal gathering spaces.... all of it to the backdrop of utter destruction. Homes gone, sniffing dogs still trying to discern the ash of homes from ash of human remains. We could see life stopped in its tracks; for so many never to be continued; for too many, still tortured hostages in the tunnels of Gaza.

It was unbearable to witness. We will never unsee it. We will be haunted by the emptiness of what was once vibrant and flourishing. And as much as you can see from the pictures above; and the words inarticulately written, please, you must share every bit of it. We promised we would never stop sharing and reminding and remembering. The world has to understand why we are in the position we are in...because quite frankly, we are clear eyed. And we all need to be.

Cantor Fishbein chanted the traditional prayer of mourning; and we all said Kaddish with the generous resident, Chen who guided us through what was his living nightmare.

And in the midst of a horror zone, there is one other group at Nir Oz; and who is there but my awesome and beautiful brother-in-law, Jeff. I knew he was coming to Israel. But here at Nir Oz...and I sort of just knew he would be there and he was. Our hearts smiled to cosmically meet each other, but we didn't smile because of the ache of our hearts.

And then the end of the evening, my man; my "younger" brother, Yaniv and his unbelievable wife, Racheli described their lives in intricate detail about what it is like to live life with Yaniv in the army for months at a time with Racheli taking care of the children.... just doable; just impossible; just bearable. They were vulnerable and real and open. Not trying to prove anything; just trying to tell us everything. I continue to be so proud of him and pray daily for his safety as he defends us; and his family needs him at home.

Okay, it's a lot. I want and we want to tell you so much more. But we want you to keep you reading.

Tomorrow we go back down South to pick blueberries. We won't stop sharing. Please don't stop reading.

Love from Tel Aviv.