

TBJ Solidarity Trip to Israel
January 20 – 26, 2024
Drew Bitterman

Saturday January 20

Depart Newark in evening

Sunday January 21

Afternoon arrival at Ben Gurion. Transfer to Tel Aviv and check into hotel. Drive to “Hostage Square” in front of the Tel Aviv Museum for opening ceremony followed by time in square. Then continue to restaurant for dinner. Guest speaker at dinner: representative of hostage families. Time to process and then return to hotel. Overnight: Royal Beach Hotel, Tel Aviv (D)

We landed in Tel Aviv after an easy flight. After we pushed through customs with our 20+ bags of donations that consisted of toys, Purim costumes and Air Jordan Sweatshirts, we met our tour guide Joel who took us to our hotel. We arrived just in time for a beautiful sunset going down into the Mediterranean Sea!

Our first all group meeting was on the edge of the beach with Rabbi Matt and Cantor Lucy. Rabbi Matt told the story of a man and his dream. Long story short - he was lost and was told to walk through the desert collecting sand, each grain of sand representing how rich he was with his experiences. He connected it to our trip by saying that we are going to be rich with everything we are going to see and hear in Israel and us being present. We thanked God by allowing us to see this moment by singing the Shehecheyanu!!

Our first “stop” tonight was at the hostage headquarters (volunteer run) and heard an aunt speak about her niece and nephew who were kidnapped. They were married and had a love for one another that was inseparable - literally. As Hamas broke into their safe room on their kibbutz they hugged each other so tight that they could not be separated and thrown into the truck together - which allowed them to be held captive together. They would make up stories, games etc to pass the time. One would always be awake to make sure they were “safe”. The niece was released with the other women and children. The nephew, Yagev Buchshtab, is still being held captive.

Next we walked to the Hostage Square - where every Saturday over 40k people rally for their release. Here we saw the Shabbat table that has a seat for each hostage, a makeshift terrorist tunnel and artwork. Here you can purchase the dog tags, shirts, etc. that benefit the hostage headquarters that prints the kidnaped signs, provide food for hostage families, purchases billboards for signs, etc.

At dinner we went around the room introducing ourselves and why we are here. So nice to be surrounded by TBJ family.

Monday January 22

After breakfast military and political overview of situation by Amos Harel, the military correspondent and defense analyst for Haaretz newspaper. After drive to Karmeit Gat, temporary home of members of Kibbutz Nir Oz and meet with them. Then, continue south to Kibbutz Nir Oz for walking tour of site. Return to Tel Aviv. Meet at hotel with Yaniv and Rachel Rosenfeld about his service and how they (like so many other young families) coped while he was away. Time to process followed by dinner in local restaurant. Overnight: Royal Beach Hotel, Tel Aviv (B/D)

This morning we listened to Amos Harel, the military correspondent and defense analyst for Haaretz newspaper. He shared with us his point of view, how everyone needs to accept responsibility (the army, press, government, etc.), the history between Israel and its neighbors and about the warnings Israel had — the Chief of Staff of the army had warnings at 1am and 5 am. It was thought to be an “exercise” and nothing more. He explained to us the events of that fateful morning, explaining the three waves of attacks. First came the trained “professional” terrorists, followed by the volunteers who were not as trained and lastly the civilians who were taught to hate Israel and the Jewish people (these were men, women and children). He told us about how the military failed its people and never imagined that this could happen.

Next we stopped at Karmeit Gat - a new community that is being built. Here the survivors of Kibbutz Nir Oz are starting to settle (after being in Eilat for the past 3 months). We heard two heroes, Yossi and Barack, who lived on the kibbutz Nir Oz.

Barack (whose father-in-law and brother-in-law was killed) was locked in his safe room (his wife was smart enough to put a lock on the inside) for 9 hours. They would hear the terrorist on the other side — shooting guns, etc. Since Hamas was not able to get into their safe room, they set their house on fire. As the smoke was coming in from under the door and through the electrical outlets (they used towels with urine on it to help protect them), he and his wife had to make a decision. Do they (along with their two young children) die by smoke inhalation or crack the window to try to get air. They cracked the window slightly and every time they saw a terrorist drive by they would shut the window for an hour or so. They were rescued by the IDF at about 3pm.

Yossi was celebrating his birthday that morning, sleeping on the grass outside his house. This was how he and his kids always celebrated Yossi's birthday. As the sirens went off on October 7th, he put his family in the safe room and got his gun (his WhatsApp kibbutz chat was telling him that this time was different than others). As he grabbed his gun (with 8 bullets) he saw two Hamas soldiers in a motorcycle driving very slowly past his house. As he has been told, they come in small groups - he thought that was the only group that invaded the kibbutz so he went after them and “eliminated” them. He then took the terrorists machine gun and as he started to walk back towards his house, he saw about 100 more terrorists moving around Nir Oz, so he went back to his house a back way - not to be followed. On the way he was able to take out more Hamas terrorists. As he began to run out of bullets he was starting to feel helpless so he went back to his family in their safe room. That day he heard his neighbors screaming and witnessed his neighbors, the Bibas family (the red heads and young child), being kidnapped.

A few hours later, he heard a knocking on the safe room door - it was his mother-in-law who was captured but able to escape, running back to her daughters house, as the terrorist vehicle she was in was turned over by a missile. She had bullet wounds in her leg and head. Yossi was

a medic in the army, so he was able to save her using a tourniquets and applying pressure with no peeking :). A few hours later, from inside his safe room, he heard “the third wave” blasting music and partying in the streets of Nir Oz. He even heard a group of women and children enter his living room, take his birthday cake out of the fridge and have a party for his birthday. Yossi and his family were rescued by the IDF around 2:30pm – after forcibly holding the safe room door closed for nearly 5 hours. Yossi then walked the soldiers around the kibbutz showing them where people were hiding and removing the dead bodies to be placed on the trucks that were going to the morgue.

From the newly built apartment buildings where the Nir Oz members (including Barack and Yossi) are living we went directly to their former home - the kibbutz. Here we were met by Chen (pronounced Ken). He is the only member that returns daily to Nir Oz.

He walked us around to show and tell us the stories of what happened on Oct 7 and the people who lived there. Nir Oz was hit the hardest — about a quarter of the 400 people who lived there were either killed or taken as hostages. We saw where Barack and Yossi lived, where Ken lived. Some of the houses were burned to an unrecognizable state, while others had proof of explosions in an effort to chase people out of their safe rooms.

On each house there were markings from the IDF as they searched the houses for survivors — green represented that someone was found alive, yellow represented the missing and black meant deceased. The houses where hostages lived had their kidnapped sign hanging on the doors as a reminder.

We got the opportunity to see where Chen’s father lived, and heard his amazing survival story. When Ken’s father heard Hamas coming, he left his front door and safe room door wide open in an effort to show Hamas that his house was already checked. He hid underneath a blanket in the backyard for over 9 hours as he heard and witnessed his friend being taken as hostage, tortured or killed. His fast thinking saved his life.

As I walked around Kibbutz Nir Oz I had a strange peaceful feeling (even though you heard bombs and gunshots from Gaza). You can tell how beautiful it still is - flowers offering color and tall trees offering shade. You can see what life was like there — kids running from house to house playing with their friends while the parents sat together on the porches watching and drinking wine.

There are rumors that the government is going to want the residents to return home and stop paying for their current housing in the next few months. the government feels that people need to return to the area to a) to prevent the borders from moving in, b) this area is a big crop area and it needs to be tended to as no new crops have been planted for next year c) the economy needs to get back to “normal”.

We were so fortunate to bear witness to what happened here. I have the feeling that we are either the first or one of the first to have the opportunity to walk these sacred grounds. We have been told that TBJ had to get special permission from the IDF to come here as they are still searching for remains and artifacts from Oct 7. Cantor Lucy lead us in Mourner’s Kiddish.

After the journey back to the hotel (and a good nap on the bus), we met with Yaniv and Racheli. They are our tour guide’s son and daughter-in-law.

They spoke about how the war is descriptive to their family (Yaniv is in the reserves). He has been fighting since October 8, while Racheli is at home with two young children and a dog! In the weeks right after October 7th, the sirens would go off at least once a day giving them 90 seconds to from their apartment to the safe room located 1.5 floors below them. She is the real hero :)

This was an overwhelming day filled with emotions that will be processed for many months. These are only some of the stories we heard...

Tuesday January 23

Check out and early breakfast. Then, depart south for agricultural volunteering on moshav. Moment of Day in greenhouse. Then, visit site of Nova music festival near Kibbutz Re'im, where hundreds of participants were murdered by Hamas terrorists. Drive to Ofakim for home-style lunch in one resident's home. Meet with Michal Tzur, director of the Greater MetroWest Israel office and member of Kibbutz Erez, and with residents of Ofakim to learn about their experience on October 7th and what's happened there in its aftermath. Time to process. In afternoon drive up to Jerusalem. Panoramic view at Haas Promenade. Check into hotel. Dinner in local restaurant. Overnight: Inbal Hotel, Jerusalem (B/L/D)

This morning we got up early to drive back down towards the Gaza envelope. We went to a moshav named Meshek Korin to volunteer and help on the farm. The southern part of Israel grows tons of oranges, potatoes, berries, tomatoes, zucchini's, etc. We met Eyal, who has been at the farm for a few months. This moshav had about 40 Thai workers to help harvest and replant the crops. Since Oct 7, only 3 workers remain. He told us that we would be "cleaning" the blueberry bushes. Since the greenhouses have been left virtually untouched, there were weeds in and around the blueberry bush pots. We had to remove the weeds, so the blueberry bush can get all the water, sun, etc. and clean up around the pots to make it passable again. After about 3 hours, the greenhouse looked much cleaner! As we were leaving, we met a few other Israeli volunteers there. They have been driving 3 hours once a week to come help. That is a sentiment that we keep hearing and seeing. Army people just driving to bases or fighting, civilians going to help at farms, etc. Israelis are resilient and have a tremendous amount of hope. As they say, "It is the only way for us to survive " as we continually hear Israeli bombs and gun fire in the distance.

The next stop was the site of the Nova Music Festival. Here about 400 people were murdered, tortured, and raped by Hamas. They were mainly young adults between the ages of 17 - 30 years old. Some were killed instantly and others as they tried to drive off and Hamas was waiting for them on the roads. It has become a makeshift memorial for them, each person having their own stand with their picture, yahrzeit candles and messages from loved ones.

As we got off the bus, we met with Yitzi, a Major from the IDF, who said that the IDF failed on October 7th and will need to regain the trust of the Israeli people. "An army is prepared for the last war they fought in, and we were not prepared. We needed different equipment and better protection of the border, the army bases and police stations. Hamas knew to target those places first so we were not able to respond," he said. He continued, "We will win this war. While we like 6-day wars, this will be a long one and we are prepared to do what is necessary." We got the sense that while he is a reservist, and was not on active duty on Oct 7th, he had a sense of guilt and remorse. He even cried a few times in the 10 minutes we shared together.

As we stood in this peaceful setting, looking at the faces of people who have been killed or being held hostage, we were reminded that we are at war. Very loud booms could be heard — the launching of rockets being shot towards Gaza.

Nir Oz was hard, this was harder. It personalized each and every person that was murdered or taken hostage. Prayers of hope around some and kiddish was being sung around others. Local volunteers planted one tree for each person that was killed in the field next to the camping grounds of the festival.

After leaving the Nova music site, we drove to Ofakim, a city about 35 km from the border. This small city has never heard gunshots before as it is considered safe due to the distance from the Gaza border. On Oct 7th, about 20 Hamas soldiers drove the 20 minutes into the city to kill as many people as possible. Fortunately, they entered the city in an area where “young” people lived. I say fortunately because those were the people that would have guns to protect themselves and the community. If they entered the city through the Main Street, they would have seen religious or elderly people that were not able to protect themselves. They lost 52 members of their community before they could either eliminate or chase the terrorists out of the city. Ofakim is important to our temple as it is the sister city to the Metro-West Jewish community back in Northern NJ. We had lunch in a beautiful home of a person who has been involved with the MetroWest community for years.

Along the trip we have been dropping off donations of Purim costumes, toys and Air Jordan sweatshirts to communities and to refugee children that are staying in the same hotels as we are. These families have been displaced due to the war up North or near the Gaza envelope and can be seen eating the breakfast buffet in the hotel restaurant or the kids getting dropped off by the school bus in the afternoon. They are appreciative that we are here to support them, Israel and to bear witness to what happened on October 7th.

We are now in Jerusalem and tomorrow will visit some hospitals who cared for the hostages.

Wednesday January 24

After breakfast, drive to Kfar Truman to visit Brothers for Life center (<https://www.brothersforlife.com>) and learn about how injured Israeli soldiers are being helped to reclaim their lives physically and emotionally. Time for Moment of the Day. Continue to Sheba Hospital to learn about care of hostages after they were freed and also learn about psychological issues being dealt with by health professionals in country. Drive to Lod. Eat lunch in local restaurant followed by bus tour of this mixed Arab-Jewish community. Meet with Shahira Shalibi, Co-Deputy Executive Director of Programs at Abraham Initiatives (<https://abrahaminitiatives.org>) about the Israeli Palestinian community today. Time to process. Free evening; dinner on own. Overnight: Inbal Hotel, Jerusalem (B/L)

Our first stop was at Brothers for Life, a non for profit that was created and run by disabled Israeli officers. We heard two wounded soldiers talk about their experiences and how this amazing organization changed their life. They have written on the gates of the facility “choose life”. The soldiers here have such a positive outlook and want to help others.

They told us that as wounded soldiers; they know what each other needs. It starts at the hospital where they send a soldier in with similar injuries to give a hug, then moves to emotional support, physical therapy. After rehab, they have sports teams and social events to keep like minded people together.

Here, if they cannot offer the best medical care (which Israel IS known for), they are funding soldiers to go to places that are on the cutting edge of medical care. For example, 2 soldiers were just sent to Dubai for prosthetic fingers - a very new procedure. Think about it - losing your fingers is a lot worse than most injuries. You cannot use your phone or even pick up your child!

We met with Ori, a 22-year-old, who back in 2021 was badly injured in Gaza. His legs were filled with bullets and shrapnel, and he thought he would never be able to walk again. Ori defied the odds, regaining his mobility – Brothers for Life helping him along the way. On Oct 7th, he drove down south with a small pistol and started to fight. Doing this was illegal as you cannot rejoin the army this way. Impressed by his skills (he was in an elite division of the army) he got “picked” up by a unit to help with the intense combat, taking guns from dead terrorists. After a week of fighting, he returned home, keeping his whereabouts a secret from his parents.

At the end of our time together we said the prayer for healing all together - a moment that I will always remember.

Next, we went to Sheba Hospital which is the biggest in Middle East and top 10 in the world. After Oct 7 they moved the geriatric and intensive care patients to the underground floors as they are not able to get to the bomb shelters in 90 seconds. They then converted these floors to accommodate the wounded soldiers. Here we were able to meet with 2 mental health experts from the hospital to learn about how they have been able to support soldiers and the hostages.

Most of the hostages were transported by the IDF to Sheba hospital. In order to be prepared for them they started to research how to support hostages (Israel has never had to deal with this before), they turned to other countries for help and guidance. The team included 120 staff to support the 31 hostages that arrived here. Each hostage got a smaller team of a physiologist and social worker as they did not know what each hostage was going to need.

Before the hostages arrived, each person had a file of their backgrounds and if anything happened to the family before their release. While they were gone the world changed and they had no idea. For example - what happened to their homes, did it burn down? Did Hamas kill or take other family members as hostages? The teams studied these files so they would be able to help them process all the changes, in addition to their mental distress.

When they arrived for the first time, only 2 people met them to walk them up to their room — each had a nicely decorated room that made them feel comfortable. In their quiet, dimly lit room, they got medically examined, talked with their team of 2 doctors, etc. making sure everything was personalized for each hostage so they could be met on their level. It was done slowly and intentionally.

Next we were able to listen to Schlomo’s story. He and his unit was stationed on the Gaza border for patrol the night of Oct 6th. He woke up to bombs and gunfire around him. He was shot in the arm and had shrapnel in his back. After 10 surgeries he is starting to get feeling

back in his elbow, which he hopes will travel down to his fingers so he can use them again. At the hospital he is getting physical therapy and mental health services that he needs.

In the afternoon we focused on the Israeli/Arab relationships that exist in Israel. We visited the town of Lod, where Jews and Arabs/Palestinians live in a community together. We spent time in the community center where the Abraham Initiatives is located.

Since October 7th, the relationships have struggled to maintain their balance. We heard their point of view regarding the war. As Israeli citizens they understand why we are at war, but as Palestinians they are constantly hearing about family members being killed that are in Gaza. We did question their commitment to Israel.

Before dinner we all got together to process and discuss the last few days. We shared what the trip meant to us and why we came on this journey. The common theme was hope, so it was only fitting that together we sang the Israeli national anthem, the Hatikva, "The Hope".

Tonight we had dinner on our own. A group of us walked down to the Western Wall to put in our prayers. Traditionally the male side of the wall would be much busier than the female side. Tonight it was the opposite. I wonder if it has anything to do with the fact that most of the men (along with plenty of women) are with the IDF fighting the war?

I was fortunate enough to arrange a meet up with, Josh Simko, a former Watitoh camper and staff member! We had dinner together and talked about the war, Israeli politics and our families.

Thursday January 25

After breakfast, drive to Pantry Packers to pack food parcels for needy. Drive to Hebrew Union College. After Moment of the Day, meet with Orly Erez-Likhovski, Executive Director of IRAC (Israel Religious Action Center) to learn about the work that IRAC has done protecting civil rights and its defense of democratic institutions against the Netanyahu government legislative onslaught. Lunch on own in Machane Yehuda market. Free time for shopping. Return to hotel for summary discussion. Final group dinner in local restaurant. Transfer to airport for flight back to US (B/D)

Our first stop this morning was at the overlook of Jerusalem. Here we were able to see the old city, learn about its history. The Dome of the Rock (the gold dome behind the Western Wall) is the spot in our history that is always mentioned. It is where the Garden of Eden is believed to have been, where Noah's Ark landed after the flood, etc.

Rabbi Matt called it the umbilical cord of our religion. He felt it was appropriate to read one of my favorite prayers - the prayer for children. I recommend you read it - can be found here: <https://www.appleseeds.org/childpry.htm>.

He reads it every Yom Kippur. Then overlooking Jerusalem, we sang the Hatikvah!

The majority of our morning was spent at Pantry Packers. Here we were able to pack over 400 bags of coffee and flour that will get distributed to Israeli families in need. Since Oct 7th, they

have also added to their distribution debit cards to those who have been displaced. These cards are used to food or clothing. So many of displaced Israeli citizens left their home with nothing but the clothes on their backs.

We then went to the Israel Religious Action Center to meet with Orly Erez-Likhovski, Executive Director. Orly spoke about how the organization is protecting civil rights and its defense of democratic institutions against the Netanyahu government.

We were on our own for lunch so we walked to the Machane Yehuda market where we had coffee and lunch with Metanya, Eliya and Adam (family on the Redbord side). It was so nice to meet them and hear about their Israel.

We had one last debrief session where we continued to share our feelings, created an action plan on what we can do once we are home — stay tuned. :)

This trip has been life changing to say the least. It was amazing to reconnect with Israel. It reminded me that I need to do more for Israel. More to support Judaism at home. More for my family as life is too short.

We need to take the lead of our brothers and sisters in Israel. In the darkness of their history, the light was how the people came together in solidarity to volunteer and help where they could. People would wait 5 hours to donate blood, families opened their kitchens to make meals for soldiers and most importantly always have the notion of hope.

Friday January 26

Arrive at Newark