

**Michele Kaplan**

## **TBJ Israel Solidarity Trip Reflections**

When TBJ announced a solidarity mission to Israel, I felt a calling to sign up. I never once wavered in my decision to enter a war zone, I knew I had to go. While my husband and two teenage boys understood my desire to travel to Israel during war, my 14-year-old daughter couldn't understand why. I felt helpless here - reading, watching tv and social media was not enough, I needed to be in Israel. Following in the footsteps of a distant relative, Yehoshua Hankin was a Zionist activist and responsible for acquiring large amounts of land for Israel. It was in my blood to go and be there for the people of Israel.

Throughout our mission, we bore witness to the devastation and destruction, and we prayed. We prayed for children, we prayed for healing (Mi Shebeirach), and we recited the Mourner's Kaddish. Story after story, we listened to hostage families, survivors, soldiers share their pain, their heroism and their resilience.

Bearing witness means listening to stories of heroism. In Kibbutz Nir Oz, Barack's family survived the attack because his wife had insisted on building their safe room with a lock on the inside. Yossi, another Nir Oz survivor, singlehandedly fought off terrorists and then used his strength to hold the safe room door shut for hours while terrorists attempted to gain access. Nir Oz Kibbutz manager Chen, kept his family alive in the safe room also because he had a lock inside and he had his children urinate on towels to stuff in the doorway and vents to prevent smoke from seeping in.

Bearing witness means listening to the struggles of a young family coping since October 7th. We heard from Yaniv, an IDF reservist, and his wife Racheli, who struggled with managing a young family in and out of bomb shelters on her own, while Yaniv is off fighting in the IDF.

Bearing witness means finding moments of light and hope. We stopped at a gas station filled with IDF soldiers near the Gaza envelope and when I offered to pay for the soldier in front of me, he adamantly refused saying, "Absolutely not, we are all in this together." We also visited Sheba Hospital, a facility that treated 31 hostages and is currently rehabilitating soldiers with their motto "Returning to Life - Rehabilitation". We met a young soldier being wheeled out from surgery and he was so grateful for our visit and so proud to have served in the IDF.

Bearing witness means showing up at Meshek Korin, a moshav in the Gaza envelope, to help the farmers now being held hostage or fighting in the IDF. We weeded blueberry bushes to allow for new growth, as the agricultural needs are so great and to help ensure food security for the people of Israel.

Bearing witness means standing amongst the mourners of the 400 beautiful souls lost at the Nova Music Festival. The grounds were peaceful with stands of pictures for each life lost, while rockets launched startled our group. IDF soldier Itzik, said it was us bombing into Gaza, which was only a 30-minute walk by foot. We witnessed his sadness and he shared that the soldiers were not prepared to fight but he was hopeful for a good outcome.

Bearing witness meant sharing a meal in moshav, Ofakim, that lost 53 souls on that fateful day. Osi shared her story, she couldn't work after the attack but eventually began to cook for the

soldiers. She welcomed us into her home and used her love of cooking to prepare a delicious, traditional Israeli meal for our group.

Bearing witness means listening to wounded soldiers share their stories of survival and resilience at the non-profit *Brothers for Life* whose motto is "Choose Life". This organization is created and run by injured Israeli veterans, which gives critical and immediate help to other injured Israeli combat veterans who sacrifice their lives for the safety of the Jewish people. Ori, a former IDF soldier injured a couple of years back, shared how he secretly went to fight in Gaza, keeping it from his parents. He was able to assist an elite unit because of his prior service, returned home after a week and risked getting in trouble for fighting, by turning his gun into the police.

Bearing witness means volunteering at *Pantry Packers*, an organization which provides monthly delivery of non-perishable household food items to help provide nutrition security to needy families, which is needed now more than ever. We learned about the resiliency of those living on Kibbutz Be'eri who re-opened their printing press to print food cards for the needy the day after the horrific attack, when many of their own were massacred and/or taken hostage.

The stories go on and on, every person we met had a story to tell and being there to listen will hopefully help begin their process of healing. People are hurting and I feel their pain. Through the devastation and destruction we witnessed, there is also the beauty of Israel and its people. I've never felt prouder to be a Jew and I stand firm in my commitment to Israel. I pray for the return of hostages, I pray for the IDF soldiers, I pray for all the mourners and I pray for Israel. Am Yisrael Chai.