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TBJ Israel Solidarity Trip Reflections

4 days that seemed to last forever. 4 days filled with pain, destruction, trauma, anger and sadness. Yet somehow, we still have hope.

Our first stop after taking in the sunset over the beach in Tel Aviv was Hostage Square. The art installations are dedicated to those taken . . . the empty Shabbat table, the display marking Baby Kfir's 1st birthday, the simulated tunnel with sounds of gunfire all around and the ticking clock of days, hours, minutes, and seconds that the hostages are not home. We speak with the aunt of Yagev Buchshtav, who was kidnapped with his wife Rimon. Taken and held together because they would not let go of each other. Rimon is home after 53 days, but her heart is still in Gaza. We **MUST** bring them home now!

We met with Amos Harel an Israeli journalist and military analyst for Haaretz. He spoke to us with brutal honesty about how the events of Oct 7th will take years to reconcile with the Israeli citizens. How there were warnings the night before that something could happen. The promise of Israel society that its citizens would always be protected. How will they ever feel safe again? Hamas must be defeated. And is this compatible with the return of the hostages? They are being used as human shields.

We visit Carmei Gat where the displaced residents of Nir Oz are living. 25% of their population brutally murdered or kidnapped. We met with Barak and Yossi. They both shared their harrowing and heart wrenching stories of the atrocities of Oct 7th. Barak miraculously had a lock on his saferoom. His house was burning all around, smoke coming through the electrical sockets and under the door. His children were in and out of consciousness. Eventually, having to make the decision to open the window slightly and risk getting shot or dying from smoke inhalation. Yossi put his family in the saferoom and instinctively grabbed his gun with 8 bullets. He was able to eliminate 2 terrorists on motor bikes outside his home. He killed another and grabbed a gun from one of the dead terrorists. He saw his neighbors, the Bibas family, being kidnapped. Back in the saferoom with his family, he could hear the terrorists in the house laughing. 9 hours of horror before the army arrived. They both lost family members and have family still being held in Gaza. They are both poised, strong and speak with resilience and yet neither can see going back to Nir Oz. We leave but not before a million hugs are shared.

We stop at a rest area in the Gaza envelope. There are lots of soldiers sitting around, getting some food. Susie grabs her bag of letters written by her daughter and friends to give to the soldiers. They are so thankful and appreciative! There are smiles!

And then our visit to Nir Oz - there are no words. We've all seen the footage on TV, but in person it brings a different sense of reality of the brutality of that day. While we are there, we can hear the booms and machine gun fire in the near distance, a constant reminder of the war Israel is fighting. Lucy leads us in saying Kaddish.

We head back to the hotel and meet with Yaniv and Racheli. They tell us about Oct 7th. They give us a brutal and honest look at what it is like to be a family with 2 young children and to have a spouse away at war. Yaniv is a hero for being a soldier in the IDF. Racheli is a hero for being home with the family. It is not easy. It is hell.

Our hotel is filled with refugees from a moshav in the south. We are the only guests. We give toys to the kids in the lobby, and they are so happy.

We head south again to Ein HaBesor to Meshek Korin (Korin Farm) this time to weed blueberry plants. The farm is relying on volunteers to keep the farm going because so many of their workers left for their native countries after Oct. 7th. In the pickup truck on the way to the bathroom Eyal shares some of the story of the farm. We also learn that they received a warning from another moshav close by and were able to fight off a small group of terrorists.

The site of the Nova music festival is one of the hardest. There are makeshift memorials for each of the over 300 beautiful young souls so brutally murdered. You can feel the heartache of everyone there.

Next, Ofakim where 53 residents were killed on Oct 7th. We have lunch at Osi's home, and she shares her story. Michal, who works for GMW in Israel, also shares her experience at Kibbutz Erez where the terrorists were fought off and unable to get through the gate. Will she go back? TBD.

We visit Brothers for Life – injured soldiers helping injured soldiers. The words on their gates say “Choose Life”. We listen to Ori tell his story. Wounded in Gaza in 2021, he is not in the reserves. But that did not stop him from grabbing his gun and heading south on Oct 7th. Due to his military skills (think Fauda), he is taken along by other units. He stays and fights for a week. We want to stay longer, but we have to keep going.

Sheba Hospital – we hear from the head social worker and psychologist who prepared for the return of the hostages. It was complicated. They started preparing from the first day. And then Shlomo. He is a soldier who was on duty at the border on Oct 7th. He tells us his story, his mom by his side. We visit the ward upstairs. A 21-year-old soldier (originally from Chicago) is being wheeled back from surgery back to his room and stops to talk to us. He tells us how proud he is to be fighting for Israel.

And finally, a stop in Lod, a mixed city to meet with Arab Israelis for their perspective. I don't think it went exactly as planned but these discussions are important if there is ever to be a solution.

Of course, no trip to Jerusalem is complete without a visit and prayer at the Kotel.

On our last day, we put on our volunteer hats again and we head to Pantry Packers and pack food boxes for those in need. Our last stop was to the Israel Religious Action Center.

And finally, a little free time to shop before dinner and heading to the airport. Every shop owner we encountered is so appreciative that we are there.

As I sit here and try to process all that we experienced (and this doesn't begin to describe it all), I come away forever changed. As Itzik said so perfectly when someone in the group asked how do you not feel hopeless, he replied: "We are Jews. That word is not in our vocabulary. We always have HOPE!"

Am Yisrael Chai

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