

Rosy Bagolie - Israel Trip Reflections

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I am honored to share with you the impactful experiences from my recent Mission to Israel and the Gaza border. Our delegation included fellow members of the NJ State Assembly, local school administrators, and community leaders. Despite objections to the trip by some groups, I firmly believe that observing unfiltered realities is crucial for understanding the complex dynamics of the region. Knowledge is paramount, and I stand by the principle that community leaders should witness these situations themselves. I also extend my deepest appreciation to the Jewish Federation of Greater MetroWest NJ for orchestrating and hosting this Mission. Your role in facilitating these encounters is truly commendable.

Together, we embarked on a 40-hour fact-finding journey to witness the realities on the ground in Israel and connect with those affected by the recent attack. On my return, many have asked how my trip was. My response is simple- it was meaningful. The journey may have been emotionally taxing, but it fuels my commitment to leveraging our collective strength to build a world where no one has to endure the horrors of terrorism.

Some world events are so shocking they are forever inscribed in the psyche of its generation. Our grandparents remember Pearl Harbor, December 7th, "a day that will live in infamy." Growing up, I remember my elders often asking, "Where were you when JFK was assassinated?" I never truly understood why that question was so meaningful until my generation had its own question to ask, "Do you remember where you were on 9/11?" I do, and in response, on September 12, the United States came together as a nation, with the world, in solidarity to condemn the cowardly attack. President George W. Bush said, "Today, our great nation saw evil, the very worst of human nature, and we responded with the best of America." The world embraced our democracy, our right to defend our nation and avenge those murdered by terrorists.

Fast forward 22 years to October 7th, where Israel saw the same evil, the very worst of human nature - where Hamas terrorists killed, raped, mutilated, burned alive, and kidnapped Israeli civilians, men, and women, the elderly and infirm, children, and babies. Like the U.S. on 9/11, Israel put aside its political differences. It united against evil with the support of all its citizens with calls of "never again" and "bring them home now" in reference to the 240 hostages ripped from their homes that day, and now being held in deplorable conditions. The comparisons between these tragedies underscore the universality of the struggle against terror.

As I stepped out of Ben Gurion Airport in Tel Aviv and boarded the bus headed toward Gaza with my fellow legislators and educators, I couldn't help but think that Israel's tragedy mirrors our own 9/11 and is a stark reminder that terrorism knows no borders, knows no limits and must be stopped, everywhere, at all cost. Arriving near the Gaza border, we traversed through cities where Hamas terrorists unleashed unspeakable terrors on innocent civilians and witnessed the destruction of K'far Aza and Ofakim. My journey through these areas was an emotional and somber experience. The echoes of bombs, the acrid smell of gunpowder lingering in the air, and the haunting aftermath of the Israeli lives lost were stark reminders of the harsh realities faced by those living in Israel who continue their daily lives despite the never-ending threat of annihilation and the continuing threat to democracies everywhere.

Our trip continued to Jerusalem. Conversations with Israeli leaders grappling with the dual mission of bringing hostages home and protecting their people from the constant threat of attack from Hamas, Hezbollah, and Iran highlighted the delicate balance they must navigate. The dedication to finding a resolution while safeguarding innocent civilians emphasized the complexity of the geopolitical landscape. We became acutely aware that Israel is fighting for its very survival.

Meeting with Israeli-Arab leaders navigating the complexities of reconciling their faith with the atrocities committed by Hamas and the desire to uplift their people provided a glimpse into the internal struggles within the community.

The challenges of finding common ground in pursuing peace underscored the intricacies of fostering understanding and unity. As a lifelong teacher and now Chief School Administrator/Superintendent, the transformative potential of education particularly inspires me as a beacon of hope as we toured Hand in Hand. In this Jewish-Arab school, educators cultivated hope by harmonizing diverse student communities. Bringing diverse children together, while not necessarily the solution, is perhaps a step in the right direction.

We ended our short but powerful trip by heading to Tel Aviv to visit Hostage Square, a place where the families of the hostages and visitors from around the world who want to pay tribute to them gather. It is unsettling that a place like this with a name like this even has to exist. Comforting parents grappling with the unfathomable loss of their children was both heart-wrenching and humbling. The resilience displayed by these families in the face of tragedy was a testament to the unwavering human spirit. In those moments, I remained quiet—reticent. Borrowing words from Rabbi Gewirtz who was attending his own TBJ Mission to Israel, “I was embarrassed... as I am to say this publicly for the first time. I struggle to find something that has always come naturally to me... my sense of empathy. I became angry.” Feeling anger at the realization that humans are capable of committing profound acts of evil is a visceral response rooted in compassion and the innate desire for justice and mercy. Recognizing such darkness in human behavior can be deeply unsettling, challenging our beliefs in the inherent goodness of humanity.

The conflicts in Israel are deeply rooted and complex, involving historical, political, and religious dimensions. The attacks from Hamas in the south and Hezbollah in the north further complicate the situation. Resolving these issues requires addressing longstanding grievances, fostering open dialogue, and finding a balance that respects the rights and aspirations of all parties involved. There's no quick fix, and any sustainable solution must not only consider the multifaceted nature of the challenges in the region but must also recognize that no solution is viable until the people of Gaza are freed from the oppressive grip of Hamas. It is also essential to distinguish opposition to Hamas's actions from prejudiced views against any group or religion. Criticizing Hamas is a stand against terrorism, violence, and the suffering of innocent people.

As a leader, my heart is heavy, but my resolve is unyielding. We must learn from these experiences, share the burden of those who have suffered, and commit ourselves to the pursuit of peace. Our shared humanity demands it, and our duty as stewards of justice compels us. Just as we remember and honor the victims of 9/11, let us also remember those affected by the events of October 7. Let their stories be etched into our collective memory, driving us to work together to support peace initiatives and advocate for the end of senseless loss.

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