

Tony Wolk Reflections

Courageous, determined, unified, appreciative, resilient, patriotic, even-tempered, laser-focused and remorseful. These are some of the adjectives that describe the dozens and dozens of IDF soldiers I met during my 3.5-day visit to Israel on a solidarity mission led by the FIDF (Friends of the IDF) from December 17-21. FIDF is a non-political organization that works closely with the IDF to provide for the wellbeing of the IDF soldiers – a terrific organization that does invaluable work. It was an emotional, meaningful, intellectually stimulating, and inspiring experience, and the bonds formed with my 12 fellow travelers from around the country will last for years to come.

Throughout my visit, I did not hear complaining by the tank commanders we visited along the Lebanon border of sleepless nights and being away from their families for 80+ days, I did not witness self-pity by the wounded soldiers we visited at Sheba hospital in Tel Aviv, I did not hear second-guessing by the combat soldiers returning from Gaza at the Maglan Army Base, I did not hear cries for vengeance and blood from the residents of Kibbutz Kfar Aza along the Gaza border whose neighbors were slaughtered and taken hostage on 10/7, I did not sense fear or panic by the 26-year old air force pilot who had just returned from flying a \$130 million F-16 fighter jet to Gaza to take out a Hamas military target, I did not hear complaining from the IDF soldier who showed us the heart-wrenching 47-minute video that documents the atrocities of 10/7 and has the unimaginable and lonely task of curating the video from thousands of hours of raw footage, and I did not hear divisive political talk of looking backwards and assigning blame for the events of 10/7 from any of the Generals and other high-ranking military officials.

Rather, I saw strength and unity in purpose, I heard a calm approach to a perceived unambiguous mission, I felt a remorseful sense of personal and collective culpability by the soldiers for failing to protect the Israeli citizens on October 7, and I experienced a genuine appreciation by the IDF soldiers towards non-Israeli visitors who showed up to offer a heartfelt hug and personally thank the soldiers for their courageous service.

I left my short visit in awe of the strength and resilience of the Israeli people and feeling prouder than ever to be a Jew. I also left cautiously optimistic that better days lie ahead. However, there is much work to be done militarily, politically, and in the world of public opinion. For my miniscule part, I intend to share my experiences with those who align with my beliefs, but more

importantly, with those with different and/or opposing views in an effort to make a small dent in the war of public opinion. Am Yisrael Chai!