

Tetsavveh-Feb. 24 after Israel mission

On October 7<sup>th</sup>, the Shabbat of Simchat Torah, and for many days, even weeks thereafter, like so many of you and infinite numbers of others, I was in shock. After almost 75 years of life, I thought I had experienced the entire spectrum of emotions. Then, with an incomprehensible and disastrous suddenness, my world, our world, was shattered. There were no words to even begin to contain the multitude of contradictory, absolutely life shattering feelings that descended upon us.

Events were captured visually and verbally on the news. We had no idea the horrors at the Nova Music festival, and immediately thereafter, would continue for weeks...and now months. There are important questions still left unanswered: Why was the Israeli government so unprepared, so apparently ignorant that this massacre was coming? Why did it take the military so long to respond and even then, inadequately? Words and sirens swirled in peoples' heads as they hid in their secure rooms. Another siren and another. Twelve in all on Saturday, October 7<sup>th</sup>. By Saturday night there was a true Jewish catastrophe-the likes of which had not been seen since WWII. Fourteen hundred of our people are dead. Five thousand wounded. About 242 abducted and held hostage.

I wanted to cry. The tears did not come. I have a quote on the bulletin board above my desk, I don't know from whom, that defines crying as "an attempt for the soul to make itself known and to be grounded in reality." I had never felt as ungrounded as I did during those days and, still, following October 7, 2023. CJP and so many other wonderful organizations with which I am involved were sponsoring trips to Israel. I would meet with high level politicians and military personnel who would share their thoughts about various political and military strategies moving forward. I deleted each of those emails. And then came an invitation to join a "service mission" in Sde Boker,

a kibbutz in the Negev desert in the south of Israel. It was sponsored by JNF, the Jewish National Fund. Yes! A Service Mission on which I would actually be and, equally as important, feel, helpful. That was exactly what I needed. It was a truly blessed opportunity-A gift which showed up with perfect timing.

*For, as the prophet Hosea said: I desire loving kindness, not sacrifices; devotion to God, rather than burnt offerings. (6:6).*

I had little to no idea exactly what we would do but Rick and I both knew this was a perfect opportunity; unexpected but clearly perfect to nourish our souls. The entire country of Israel would have severe food shortages if fruits and vegetables were not picked and sold when they were ripe. Schools, stores, hospitals, kibbutzim and residences needed to be repaired and rebuilt so folks could, sooner than later, move back to the areas in which they used to live and have what they needed. Our “service mission” would provide us with the ability to take advantage of those opportunities. It was an “*hinenini* moment”. We were excited and ready to “show up” and be fully present, as so many Israelis (and Americans and folks from all over the world) had already done.

But do you know what is truly amazing? The events of Oct. 7 began at 6:00 in the morning. Israel called for a draft and they got 160% response. How did we get 60% more than the number of soldiers called up? *Volunteer Israelis*, from all over the world, rushed home; thousands of them, answering the call because they were of age to serve and they had an undeniable need and desire to protect their country. Both men and women showed up in a matter of days, to plan, organize and fulfill or continue their military obligations, with their bodies, hearts and souls. They “showed up” to stand with and defend Israel, their homeland and the only democracy in the entire region.

There were so many soldiers, the IDF had to fund raise to buy additional necessary military equipment. There was an over-abundance of love for their homeland and the will to more than survive.

The political and military situations in Israel are beyond complicated, as you may be aware. Despite that it is not clear whether the Netanyahu government really has the interest of its people as a priority in their minds and in their plans, the people showed up with strength, with courage, determination and demands. Each one demanded that the government address their desires with regard to the war, hostage return or more humane treatment for the Palestinians. These desires/demands of course varied, both here and in Israel. Each one valid; each one at best, with no clear path to its accomplishment.

*A quote from the book of Joshua, chapter 1:9.*

*“Be strong and resolute; do not be afraid or discouraged, for the Lord your God is with you wherever you go”.*

There were also the “at home” armies. Many women were called to fulfill their service obligations. Those not able to serve militarily contributed in their own uniquely determined way, full of creativity, determination and love. Neighborhoods of women at home with the children, performed what they called “mobilizing loving kindness”. They packed essentials for their people in uniform who had left home in the early morning of Shabbat/Simchat Torah, empty handed with the exception of their weapons. The women and older children filled bags with basic needs and with love. Some put a notice online that they were collecting daily essentials for their defenders in uniform. Within an hour, they received substantial and growing contributions from people who wanted to be a part of the “Packages of Love”, as they called their project. Hundreds of volunteers came together, creating and delivering in those early days over a thousand

packages of personal items that everybody would need. Volunteers from all over the world came and contributed their time and money. The people we met could not have articulated more often or with more passion how much they appreciated our having “showed up” for them, from so far away, in their time of deepest and most profound need.

From all over the country, Israeli citizens showed up in the most remarkable ways. One gentleman, too old to serve in the army, brought together some buddies. He took 200,000 Israeli shekels (the equivalent of about \$56,000 dollars) from his bank account. In the Negev on a vacant street lot, they created an open-air BBQ with free food and drinks for the soldiers going into or coming out of Gaza. We had put together, with the help of JNF, small individual boxes of goodies and treats for the soldiers. We handed them individually to each soldier present at the BBQ we attended. We exchanged smiles and handshakes. It was heartwarming and at least a small remedy for everyone involved.

That evening we witnessed an extraordinary example of how the IDF (Israel defense forces) takes care of their own. In addition to the free BBQ for military people and all of us, there was a small IDF band. It was composed of special needs Israeli young people who would otherwise not have been able to fulfill the required military service of every Israeli citizen at the age of 18. This band was created in order to enable these special young people the ability to fulfill their responsibility to serve. They wore military uniforms. They were thrilled to be considered a part of the IDF and they were able to share their own unique gifts not only with their fellow Israelis but also with guests from other countries. They had beautiful voices, enormous energy and commitment to their jobs. Their huge smiles and remarkable energy, were able to get all of us up on our feet, singing and dancing with wild abandon. They were proud of themselves. We were so proud of them. It was a heartwarming demonstration of the

kind of caring community that exists, even in the areas most devastated by the events of October 7<sup>th</sup>.

Israel and her citizens are not the same as they used to be. A 20 something year old soldier with small children at home, would serve for 30 days and then maybe, have a week at home, before they were required to return to the war. They have had to put their lives on hold; and for who knows how long? And of course there are many, who will not ever, go home.

The priestly blessing:

יברכך ה' וישמרך  
*May the Lord bless you and keep you.*

יאר ה' פניו אליך ויחנך  
*May the Lord make her face shine on you and be gracious to you.*

ישא ה' פניו אליך וישם לך שלום  
*May the Lord turn her face toward you and give you peace.*

I could not have envisioned what our work opportunities would look like. Jerusalem and most parts of Tel Aviv were, physically, not severely damaged. But in the south, especially near the border with Gaza, there was destruction everywhere and ongoing for both the Israelis and the Palestinians. Some humanitarian truckloads of food and healthcare products did successfully get into Gaza. Their goal was to provide physical and emotional nourishment as well as much needed medicine, to the Palestinian people, but they were taken immediately by Hamas for their own use-nothing for “their people”.

We worked primarily in Ste Boker located in the center of the Negev Desert in southern Israel. Ste Boker is a kibbutz community founded in 1952 by a number of pioneering

families. David Ben Gurion, Israel's first prime minister, who had a passion for the desert, retired there. It is a misunderstanding that the original settlers of Palestine “made the desert bloom”, but it certainly is true now. We picked weeds away from the bottom of cherry tomato vines so they could grow hearty and strong. Their usual farm workers were from Thailand, but they fled immediately when the war began. We washed, painted and repaired schools that had been damaged. In a matter of days, they would be re-occupied by children and teachers living, learning and being together in a relatively normal but certainly not carefree life. We also spent a lot of time cleaning an outdoor gym. It was totally safe from the bullets and the war outside. One of the JNF workers sent us a beautiful video of children playing, totally carefree, in that space.

The Negev is not only blooming with native grown fruits and vegetables. It is also blooming with large new buildings. There were cranes everywhere. It is beginning to look like a new and quickly evolving city.

We stayed at two different hotels. One in Tel Aviv and the other in the Negev. In both cases we shared the space with evacuees from areas in the southern parts of Israel. JNF and the hotels provided rooms, food for them to eat, access to washing machines and dryers so they could do their laundry and play areas for the children, many of whom brought their own bikes, scooters and other toys. I was grateful that my underused Hebrew vocabulary came back to me. I shared hugs and not so atypical “parenting under duress” conversations with mothers whose husbands were on the front lines and whose children were running around and playing with other children who had also been evacuated from their homes. I wasn’t surprised, but it was sad to see many children 6, 7 or even 8 years old, constantly with their pacifiers in their mouths. They were well cared for by their mothers, but of course, they were dislocated, scared and not in their own homes, most of which had been destroyed. Kibbutz Be’erie within what is called

the Gaza envelope, was the first and most severely devastated at the beginning. Located about a mile away from the Gaza border, they suffered the most devastating losses of both lives and buildings. The expected stay in the hotels for these evacuated families could be one to two years (at least).

One afternoon, we went to the Soroka medical center in Be'er Sheva. We heard Dr. Tzvi Perry, the head surgeon, speak with passion and with deep sadness. On October 7<sup>th</sup> the medical center was receiving a new patient, severely injured, every 39 seconds. There were some with missing body parts and injuries the likes of which they had never seen before. There was no time for the usual intake process. They just came, the doctors did the best they could and then moved on to the next patient.

The Israelis have a profound connection with the actual, physical land in Israel. You may be aware that there, bodies are buried directly in the ground; without a casket; “from dust we came and to dust we will return.” (Gen. 3:19) That is not the case now, for the deceased members of the Be'er kibbutz. The kibbutzniks have a special plot of land in the Revivim cemetery where their deceased kibbutz members are buried in caskets, all above the ground. When Be'eri is rebuilt, those members will be transferred and buried in the traditional way, on the land of the reconstructed Be'eri Kibbutz.

It looks like the war will still be fought for who knows how long. We and many groups of others will continue to go there to help. Thankfully, these service missions are multiplying rapidly and easily available for those who want to and are able to go. Israel needs the help desperately and many, like us, and many of you, need to feel useful and helpful to them while at the same time, accepting our own limits.

Last week's Torah portion, *terumah*, kicked off the extensive instructions surrounding the building and decorating of the *Mishkan*, the Tabernacle in which God would dwell among the Israelites on their trek to the holy land. The People of Israel donated materials for building this portable sanctuary, and the first design specifications have been named. The discussion continues in this week's parsha, *Tetzaveh*, meaning "You shall command". It opens as God instructs Moses to appoint Aaron and his sons as priests. God goes into detail about how to make priestly garments and sanctify the priests. The procedures for offering sacrifices and building a special golden altar are listed. The parsha describes the implements and clothing of the Priests and finally, the ceremony of Priestly consecration. During that consecration ceremony each one present could or would become priests and priestesses. That is true even of us today as we cultivate and nourish the *indwelling* presence of God in each of our lives.

I was deeply moved often, almost perpetually, during this journey. There were 50 people in the group, each one sensing and sharing, in their own way, the profound nature of our "service mission". The presence of God was tangible within the communities, with which we worked. We all worked tirelessly, together, to rebuild, to clean and plant around the schools that opened even while we were there. To the best of our ability, we were able to support families whose members were still held hostage and simultaneously to share gratitude for having survived the destruction of their homes. With the help of volunteers pouring into the land and the tangible feeling of hope among the Israelis they are already starting to build new communities, in whose midst God clearly resides.

Our days in Israel were much more than a trip. We were sharing ourselves, despite the aches and pains that developed. We wore the same clothes daily; clothes stained with pain, turpentine, sand, soil and grass from our holy land. It felt good to be on a mission



of service. We received gratitude daily from the Israelis with whom and for whom we worked. Our days were filled with hard, physical labor and at the end of each day, so much satisfaction. We visited several villages that were destroyed or severely damaged on October 7<sup>th</sup>. We listened to and understood how the attack had affected those communities and together, we began the process of rebuilding in order to bring people home. Each of us came intending to help rebuild not only the physical building but also the spirits of our Israeli brothers and sisters. It was a privilege to do so. The work was fulfilling and visibly productive. We had our own “whatsapp” site. Someone sent, just this past Thursday, a video of the indoor playground we had cleaned. It was teeming with kids of elementary school age, running around, swinging, climbing, exploring their new, indoor, totally protected and safe, indoor playground. We saw their little faces and we heard the words of our new Israeli friends: “Thank you so much for ‘showing up’. We appreciate that you have come so far to be here with us. We are so very grateful for you and that you care.”

I want to conclude this first part of my sharing our experience with you by telling you how blessed I was on the first night of our arrival. We began our journey together on our first night, which was Shabbat. Our group was seated in a large room designated just for us. Close by were many other families observing erev Shabbat in the manners to which they were accustomed. Candles were lit as Shabbat began and remained in a separate room for safety’s sake. I knew some of the people in our group but was unfamiliar with many. There were 4 ordained rabbis in the group. I was privileged to begin our journey with a blessing. I began by sharing with my new and old friends, the way our daughter, Shoshana, blesses her son Jonah every Shabbat evening. She puts him on her lap and sings:

יברכך ה' וישמרך -

*May the Lord bless you and keep you.*

יאר ה' פניו אליך ויחנך

*May the Lord make her face shine on you and be gracious to you.*

יְשׂא ה' פְּנֵיו אֵלֶיךָ וַיִּשֶׁם לְךָ שְׁלוֹם

*May the Lord turn her face toward you and give you peace.*

And then she takes his little face in her hands and she says: may you grow up to be exactly who you are meant to be. I blessed our little *kahal*, our little congregation, similarly. “May each of us bring and share as many of the blessings of who we are, to this awesome opportunity. May each of us and all of us together, be blessed by and with this opportunity to share ourselves with our brothers and sisters in this holy land that we all cherish. May we share love, labor and the comfort of knowing each one is appreciated for exactly who they are, bringing their own unique gifts. May we share time, deeply felt appreciation and memories as we work with and then separate from our Israeli friends, but only physically. May the Lord turn her face toward each of us and all of us together. May we and all of Israel find and spread peace, safety, security, good health and love.” And let us say together, now: Amen, Amen