

Shabbat Shalom! I'd like to welcome Rabbi Bitran back from his Sabbatical and thank him for allowing me to speak instead of him on his first Shabbat back. I know you've been missing his sermons, so I apologize for making you wait to hear him for another week.

As you all know I have recently returned from a trip to Israel. I've been processing what I experienced there since I returned. I know I can't fully express my thoughts and emotions about this visit in the short time that I have, but I will do my best.

I had been planning to go to Israel the week of February 11th for quite some time. I am part of a professional organization for executive directors of Conservative Synagogues called NAASE (North American Association of Synagogue Executives), which holds an annual conference that I have been attending since I have been in this position. Every 5 or 6 years the conference is held in Israel. Six years ago, when I attended the NAASE conference in Israel it was my first time there in more than 25 years. That trip was also the first opportunity I had to learn first hand about the Masorti movement, which is the equivalent of our Conservative Movement in Israel. I was part of a group of some 80 colleagues from North America. In the fall of 2022 I was invited to participate in a leadership trip to Israel with NAASE, a short visit which focused more intensely on the Masorti movement and its ties to the World Zionist Organization. Both were amazing educational experiences but nothing like my most recent visit.

I was signed up for this NAASE conference in Israel long before October 7th. After the October 7th attack and the start of the war I was initially unsure if the trip would be canceled. Zoom meetings were held with prospective participants and ultimately the decision was made to commit to our original dates for the conference but pivot to a new focus for the trip. Instead of our original itinerary, the organizing committee created a solidarity and volunteer mission.

I have to admit I did have some reservations about traveling to Israel at this time. In the end, conversations with colleagues, my strong connection with Israel and the lasting

impressions of the previous trips I had attended with NAASE convinced me that I wanted and needed to attend this conference. I knew it would be a very different experience than the one I had originally signed up for. While Mark was very supportive of my decision, my children were not and tried to talk me out of going. I was nervous but was committed to my decision. I remember thinking it shouldn't feel like an act of courage to visit Israel.

The first noticeable difference on this trip was that we were a much smaller group traveling together than usual - only 24 of us from the U.S. and Canada. I opted to fly to Israel with about 1/2 of the group leaving from Newark airport. I always feel safe flying on EL AL, having endured cross examination by security before even checking in. The flight over was pretty typical, filled with young families and more children than I have ever seen on a plane.

Upon landing in Israel it struck me how easy it was to navigate our way through the airport and through passport control with no long lines, due to the lack of tourism and many fewer flights headed to Israel. The current mood in Israel was immediately evident with posters of the Hostages everywhere and signs saying Beyachad Ninatzeach, Together we will succeed.

Our briefing on the bus, on the way to the hotel, included a first for me - instructions on what to do should the Tzevah Adom, warning of an imminent rocket attack, sound. I've never heard those instructions when in Israel before. Fortunately, I never needed to use this information, but it was repeated several times at every destination we arrived at throughout our trip. Our tour guide, Kayla, also initiated a practice we kept for the entire trip on this bus ride. She explained that the family of one of the hostages, Hirsch Goldberg-Polin, had started writing the number of days the hostages had been held in Gaza on a piece of tape and wearing it over their hearts. That is something we continued to do every morning of our trip and that I have continued to do since I have arrived home. It sparked questions in Israel and still does. It's my small way of keeping the focus on the hostages who still need to come home.

Upon arrival at our hotel we were greeted with a typical, delicious Israeli dinner and had the chance to visit with and hear from Dr. Yizhar Hess, vice chairman of the World Zionist Organization and a member of Mercaz Olami, and Rabbi Mauricio Balter, Executive Director of Masorti Olami and Mercaz Olami. We also met with Rakefet Ginsburg, CEO Of Masorti Israel. They all set the tone for our visit, briefing us on the current mood and state of affairs in Israel. We heard about the incredible resilience of the Israelis all coming together to do whatever is needed in a surge of volunteerism. And also how so many thousands of Israelis have had to be evacuated from their homes in the Gaza envelope and in the North as well – all currently living in hotels that otherwise would be filled with tourists. They stressed how important our visit was, thanked us for being there and urged us to encourage others to visit and support Israel.

We spent much of our first day in Israel volunteering. We picked nearly 3 tons of Kohlrabi with an organization called Project Leket in Rishon L'Tzion. As I was picking I realized I was wiping sand off the vegetables, not dirt, and remembered how remarkable Israeli farmers are. We also helped pack food boxes at the Jaffa Institute for distribution to the elderly and others in need. Both of these organizations were already doing similar work before the war but have increased their capacity to meet current needs.

We ended our day at Kikar Hachatufim, Hostage Square, an area in Tel Aviv that has become a gathering place for family members of hostages, visitors, supporters and protesters. A number of installations have been set up including a Shabbat table, beautifully set at one end with empty chairs waiting to be filled by the hostages still in Gaza. At the other end the table was draped in cloth and set with tins and bottles of dirty water representing the experiences of hostages still in Gaza. While at Hostage Square we met with the son of two hostages, Yair Moses. He told us the stories of how both his mother and father had been abducted. Although they still live on the same Kibbutz they are divorced and were abducted separately from two different houses. Thankfully his mother has been released from Gaza but his elderly father, Gadi Moses, is still in

captivity. Before leaving we joined a daily Masorti prayer circle to lend support to the many families still waiting for their loved ones to be released.

The second full day of our trip was definitely the most difficult. We started the day meeting with a survivor of the October 7th attacks whose family is from Nativ Ha'asara, a moshav in southern Israel, located in the north-west Negev, just at the northern border with the Gaza Strip. The moshav was founded in 1982 by 70 families who were residents of the former Israeli settlement of Netiv HaAsara in the Sinai Peninsula, which was evacuated as a result of the Camp David Accords. The original moshav had been named for ten soldiers that were killed in a helicopter accident south of Rafah in 1971. After the Israeli disengagement from Gaza in 2005, Netiv HaAsara became the closest community in Israel to the Gaza Strip, located 400 meters away from the edge of the Palestinian town of Beit Lahia.

I was amazed by how calmly and eloquently (and in perfect English) Barak (whose last name I unfortunately don't know) was able to recount his story to us. He has lived at Nativ Ha'asara for 23 years with his wife, who grew up there, and his 4 sons. The entire time he has been there they have lived with the constant threat of rockets, but stayed, he said, because 95% of the time it is heaven and 5% of the time it is hell. He told us that at times when the situation got bad he and his family packed a bag and left until the situation got better. It eventually got to a point that they felt it necessary to keep a bag packed so they could leave quickly if necessary.

He told us before the attack on October 7th there were warning signs that were ignored when brought to the attention of authorities. The electricity would cut out and then come back on line, gun fire was heard from across the border – having lived with the sound of gunfire so long they could tell the difference between Palestinian arms and Israeli arms – they were told not to worry about it. They were also promised that they would just have to hold off an attack for half an hour and help would arrive. On October 7th it never did.

When the Tzevah Adom sounded on October 7th it was evident from the start that this was different from the “usual” attacks. The electricity went out, wifi was spotty, there

were many more rockets than “usual”. Barak told us the harrowing story of how his family sheltered in place for hours. Realizing this was not a usual attack Barak got dressed and got his gun, at the suggestion of his wife. Not knowing that his neighbor had already been killed he ran out to his car twice to find a charger for phones that were starting to lose power. Finally he made the decision to pack his family in 2 cars and leave. He followed his wife out and described how they had to swerve to avoid dead bodies as they drove out on the highway and were lucky to make it to their family near Tel Aviv alive.

He told us this attack was the result of an epic failure on many levels. Signs of something going on were ignored, troops were sent home for the holidays, forces from Gaza were moved to the west bank. The government needs to figure out everything that went wrong here and fix it. Was gathering intelligence the problem or interpreting it wrong? The underlying ruse was that if Hamas got to rule Gaza they would leave Israel alone. Palestinians knew Israel relied on high tech so they went “old school” and put their intelligence on paper not computers. Many Palestinians who were working in Israel were gathering information that was used in the attacks. They had detailed maps of Jewish settlements down to who lived in each house with names and ages of occupants.

Barak is now living in a hotel in Tel Aviv with his family and is back to work. His children are attending school but it isn't easy. They are farm kids living in the city. The hotel has 2 washing machines for all the families living there. Before saying goodbye he shared with us that he is in therapy. It is clear that Israel as a nation has been traumatized and there is a lot to heal from on many levels.

We left our hotel and headed to the Gaza border. On the way we had a different security “heads up” we were told that we might hear bombs when we got near Gaza, but not to worry, they would be Israeli bombs on the other side of the border. It made us realize how close to the border we really were.

We had a picnic lunch at Moshav Shokeda, until recently used by soldiers as an R&R station. Just that week residents were cleared to return to their homes there. We had a quick visit to Reim, site of the Nova music festival where so many young people lost

their lives or were kidnapped. It has become a makeshift memorial with photos and mementos of those who perished or disappeared there. Many gather there to bear witness. We stopped for a quick mincha service and mourners kaddish before continuing on to Kfar Aza, one of the hardest hit Kibbutzim on the Gaza border.

We were privileged to be met by Chain, a lifelong resident of the kibbutz who probably owes her life to the fact that on Oct 7th she was in Portugal visiting her sister. She described the attack in painstaking detail from outside her home, which the terrorists used as a base for their assault on the Kibbutz. Her neighbor happened to be the head of security for the Kibbutz and the building that housed the settlement's guns and ammunition for self defense was right outside her home. The attackers knew this and were able to kill the Kibbutz's entire security team as they attempted to protect their homes. Chain was on the phone and whatsapp from Portugal helping to make sure her father was safe as well as her sister's family, all of whom miraculously survived. The kibbutz still has an area where young adults live together, which was known by the terrorists and that is where they focused much of their attack, killing and kidnapping many of the young occupants. In the midst of their attack they took breaks and raided refrigerators for snacks then went back to their mission. And then they came in with trucks and stole and looted. The state that the Kibbutz was left in was horrifying and speaks to the terror that occurred there.

I should note somewhere that every home along the Gaza border has been outfitted with a safe room, a room built to withstand a bomb blast. That is where everyone went when the Tzevah Adom sounded that morning. No one ever anticipated an attack by thousands of terrorists, and therefore the saferooms do not have locks. Occupants literally had to hold doors closed against attackers the best they could. What happened on October 7th was truly inconceivable.

Before leaving Kfar Aza, we stood with Chain on the Gaza border. She said that even after all that she told us she keeps Shalom, peace, in her heart and hopes that we will too.

We ended the day by hosting a barbecue dinner for soldiers, a reserve unit that had been called up to fight, stationed on the Gaza border. We brought them gifts and cards

made by children in our religious schools. They were thankful that we came to visit and appreciated our well wishes. It was a long day and it was hard to sleep after all that we heard and witnessed. Definitely the most difficult day of our trip.

The next day we left our hotel in Tel Aviv and met with injured soldiers at Tel Hashomer, the leading rehab facility in Israel. We gathered in a lobby area and many soldiers came out to speak with us. They told us the stories of how they were injured and what it was like fighting off terrorists on October 7th, as many of them did, and also what it was like fighting in Gaza. We were cautioned to be careful what kinds of questions we posed. We gently asked about the innocent Palestinians caught in the fighting. Without hesitation they replied there are no innocent people in Gaza. They retracted slightly to say maybe 10%. They told us of the weapons they found hidden in almost every home along with a lot of intelligence that was gathered. They said the problem is that everyone is dressed as a civilian, but they come out of one building, enter the next, pick up a gun and come out shooting. But they were quick to point out that they still cleared out civilians before bombing buildings, to create a corridor that soldiers could pass through without fear of snipers shooting from rooftops.

When we thanked them for their service they all acted as if it were nothing. One said thanking them for fighting on behalf of Israel would be like them coming to the U.S. and thanking us for attending college.

We then headed to Jerusalem where some of us went to Mt Herzl to say kaddish over the scores of new graves there. Some of us went on to volunteer at Pantry Packers to help pack more care packages. I went with some of my colleagues to Magen Adom where I donated blood for the first time. I was very proud to be able to do that and leave a small piece of myself in Israel.

We ended our day with some much needed “down” time at the Tower of David sound & light show.

On Friday we had the opportunity to daven Shacarit at the Masorti egalitarian Kotel, took a brief tour of the old city and had time to explore on our own before Shabbat. I headed to Machaneh Yehuda where I stocked up on Zatar, Halavah and sweet tea.

It's always special welcoming Shabbat in Jerusalem. You can feel Shabbat entering the city as everything almost naturally slows down. We attended Kabbalat Shabbat and Shabbat morning services at the Fuchsberg Center - a conservative Yeshiva. What do a group of executive directors do when they are visiting a sanctuary that is not their own and get to sit and pray? Count the number of light bulbs that are out and look for other items that need to be repaired, of course!

We spent our final day in Jerusalem at the National institutions building talking about Israel Diaspora relations with leaders from the World Zionist Organization and discussing what we can do when back at home. Our last stop before dinner was a quick tour of the truly magnificent newly opened National Library. It gave me hope for the future, life goes on.

I just want to express in closing that although this was a deeply meaningful experience it was also deeply disturbing. We were told that if Israel does not get Hamas out of Gaza it will be tragic for Israel and catastrophic for the Palestinians living in Gaza. Nothing in the middle east is simple or straight forward. There are no easy answers. But we have to work to find solutions and continue to hope for the best.

Golda Meir is an Israeli Prime Minister I have always admired, a strong female leader in a time when there were not many female leaders. I want to leave you with one of her quotes that I believe still rings true. She said, " We can forgive the Arabs for killing our children. We cannot forgive them for forcing us to kill their children. We will only have peace with the Arabs when they love their children more than they hate us..."