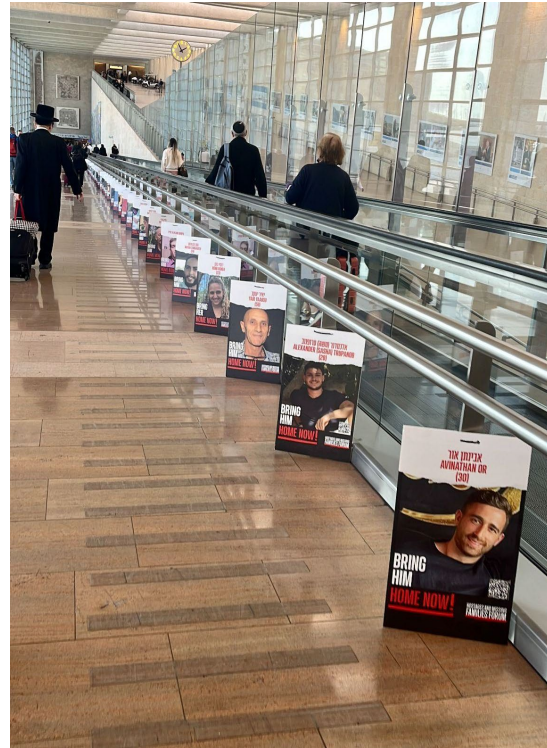


Mission to Israel

January 22-January 25, 2024

Day 1 - January 22



Thank you to all who helped contribute to this effort to support our soldiers. With your help I was able to donate close to 90 pounds of supplies on behalf of the community, which was roughly \$3k of much needed items, as well as monetary donations. While every trip to Israel is meaningful, this felt especially so. It wasn't just a visit or supporting the economy, but it was, in essence, a pastoral call.



There is something sacred about being there for those who are hurting. We are taught in the Talmud that a person who visits one who is ill takes away 1/60th of their pain. This was why we chose to be there to listen to, hold on to, and be present for our brothers and sisters, especially now, when the pain is so intense. As a Jewish people, this is just what we do. We sit with our loved ones in times of hope and sorrow.

Let me begin by offering a bit of background about this trip. We were a group of 7 rabbis (5 Reform, 2 Conservative) from the Midwest, including Ohio, Michigan, and Wisconsin. We traveled with a fabulous tour guide, Beni, who had a relationship with my friend and colleague Rabbi Dan Schwartz, who gathered this group together. Because there were only 8 of us, we were able to travel lightly, in a small van and not a bus, allowing us to experience even more than a usual group trip would afford us.



It was especially meaningful to be there with Beni, who was an Israeli citizen, born in Russia. He had been in the United States travelling for four months before returning to Israel 13 days before our trip began. He would be experiencing these visits as a first timer, as well, and had planned the trip from his own place of curiosity. He, himself, had lost several friends and colleagues on October 7th and in the days since then with the war.

Many of you know that my relationship with Israel runs deep. The first time my feet touched the ground b'Aretz was in 1992, with the March of the Living. Even back then I knew that a week was not nearly enough time to spend in Israel. I swore to return to Israel during my junior year of college and hopefully again for rabbinic school. My experience living in Jerusalem in 1995-1996 was tumultuous. That junior year of college was the year in which I fell in love with Israel but, unfortunately, this meant sharing in the pain when the country was hurting. I lived there during the assassination of PM Yitzchak Rabin, as well as the barrage of suicide bombings that followed after the Oslo Accords. Having come way too close to bus bombings and other terrorist events, I eventually succumbed to the intense fear of living in danger and left Israel a few months earlier than planned. Though I knew it was what I needed at the time, I never forgave myself for leaving my country in her time of need. I was grateful when I returned a year later for my rabbinic studies and have returned many more times, including a mission trip with Cincinnati in December of 2001.

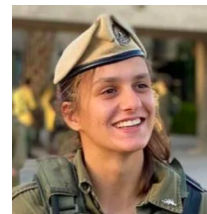
Back to this trip... I arrived in Israel on Monday, around 1:30 in the afternoon and everything felt different immediately. The airport was pretty empty and the walkway from the terminal to the baggage claim was surrounded on both sides with placards for each of the hostages. I was simultaneously heartbroken and hopeful seeing that some of the placards had been removed. Had they belonged to the hostages who had been freed? Or perhaps they belonged to those we now know have perished.

Our first stop was to Har Hertzl, the military cemetery in Jerusalem. It is where Israel has buried some of its most notable leaders over the years. As we arrived, I received reminders on my phone that I had been at Mt. Hertzl on that precise date, just one year before, when I was there with Jonah and other Temple Israel community members. I remember when we were there and our guide, Muki, pointed



out the section that held the most recent graves and also where the other sections were that would be opened as needed.

When we arrived, we walked straight into a funeral of a young soldier, Major Rebecca Henrietta. She was bright and brilliant woman who made aliyah from the Netherlands and had been a member of Habonim, a type of Jewish youth group. Hundreds of young people were there to mourn her loss, especially since she was a Lone Soldier. Her friends eulogized her, describing a woman who gave deeply of herself and could accomplish anything she set her heart to. We walked on as the honor guard fired their shots in the air.



Then, we went by the oldest section of graves that had been filled during this war. It was quiet, filled with many newly placed flowers, candles, and trinkets, offering makeshift memorials to those newly buried.



When we arrived, we saw a grieving woman, crying over the grave of a young man, whose picture had been placed upon it. As she cared for the grave, our trip leader, Beni, respectfully went and approached her to offer her comfort. She was glad for the opportunity to be together with others and to share her son's memory with us. Her name was Ilana and her son was named Avi, short for Avraham. Avi was a young



man with a wife and young children. Avi Ashkenazi, age 43, had been in the Mossad unit in computer intelligence and had been killed a few months before. The details of his death are not public at this time. He was two meters tall, and had a kind and handsome face. Ilana told us how brilliant he was - a genius by all standards. He was an engineer who could have pursued a successful career in the tech country. He was much sought after. But she shared with us that whenever someone suggested he should go into the private sector or abroad, he would respond by asking "but who would protect the country?" Ilana was grateful that we would sit with her, hanging on her every word, appreciating the young life of her handsome son with such kavod. When we asked if she would be ok with us sharing his story, she was glad to know we would tell of her son and keep his memory alive. Ilana said to us at one point that "It's not good to be Jewish. Everybody hates us." It was not stated in anger, but in plaintive sadness, simply stating a truth.

We embraced her and cried with her, and then passed by other graves in the area, many draped in the flags of the units in which they served. I was deeply impacted by some of the personal words engraved on the footstones. I'll share a few with you. On the grave of a

29-year-old man was a verse from "Father's Song" by Naomi Shemer. "It is not in vain, my brother, that you quarried a new building because a temple will be built from these stones." This is an expression of Jewish hope and how each and every one of our efforts, big or small, helps to bring closer the messianic times. On another grave I saw the words "kol mah shehaKadoshBaruchHu oseh hakol l'tovah, yesh." I would translate that to mean "all that the Holy-One-Blessed-be-God does is all

for good, right?" Another had: "Ohev shalom, rodeif shalom, ohev et habriyot. Ani Shayach."

This refers to a Mishnaic saying by Hillel about Aaron that we should be like Aaron, one who was a lover of peace, pursuer of peace, and lover of humanity. The "Ani Shayach" at the end means "I belong." I found there is a song called "I belong to the people" by Yishai Rivo which includes lyrics such as: "I belong to a people that will yet see the end. I belong to a people about whom every philosopher had philosophized. I belong to a people whose logic does not grasp. I belong to a people for whom the miracle was created."



My heart was heavy as we drove away, having jumped right into the mourning process, unprepared. I also felt the gravity of the price for peace.

From there, we went into Jerusalem and met with the CEO (Dr. Stephen Daniel) and the Rosh Yeshiva (Rabbi Joshua Kolp) of the Jerusalem campus of the Conservative Movement (Fuchsberg Jerusalem Center). Together we looked over texts that helped frame our trip and to define what it meant to come there in

solidarity. Our hosts spoke of three types of solidarity: witnessing, providing sanctuary (physical, emotional, spiritual), and helping with "the day after". We were reminded that we would be feeling the pain in anecdotal, visceral, real ways, not like we find in the news. This was evident after spending time with Ilana that afternoon. When I set out on this trip I felt I was coming to Israel to bear witness and show support. Now I understood this was also a shiva call. We were there to empathize with our Israeli family and recognize the pain and loss of life. Solidarity is not a political statement. Rather, it means "I'm with you." We looked over Yevamot 47a:13 and other writings that spoke about finding

meaning in suffering. Knowing we have partners who care about us helps alleviate our suffering. As Jews, we do not abandon other Jews when they are suffering.

One of the points that our hosts made was that whatever the “next day” looks like, Am Yisrael has to come together from all parts of the Israeli and Jewish community. We need to work together. We will have lost an important opportunity if we do not reach out to people in our local Jewish communities and find ways to work together without losing our core values. They explained how after October 7th they created a space for zamru song circles, where people sit on the floor and sing niggunim and psalm. It has proven to be very therapeutic and is drawing in members of the wider community. They expressed the view that Judaism is essentially made up of micro-communities and all of these add up. Since right now we feel a connection, don’t we want to use it to connect to something bigger? I took those words to heart. While I have been stewing over the lack of support from non-Jewish groups in Dayton, I should be more focused on connecting with and working together with other local Jewish groups with whom I normally have less in common.

Before we left, our hosts also spoke to the difficulty of living in Israel now and how hard but necessary it is to go on living a normal life. Simply being there means participating in the pain, even during normal times. Every morning they look to see who the fallen are and if they were someone they knew. And often, it is.

We left and went to our hotel where we met with Khaled Abu Toameh, an award-winning Muslim Arab-Israeli journalist who is a correspondent and analyst of the Palestinian affairs in the West Bank and Gaza. He admitted he was being more candid with us than he normally would be, though I have found many of the same sentiments in his published pieces. I encourage people to read them. Khaled wrote for the Jerusalem Post, was a producer and consultant for NBC News for more than 25 years, and continues to write in three languages. He was raised in the “Triangle” area adjacent to the Green Line until the mid-70s when he went to Hebrew University. He was offering us a perspective as a reporter who has been working this beat for nearly 40 years. He has been meeting with key leaders and Hamas since the days in which it was formed.

Our lecture began with Khaled’s analysis about which parts of October 7th were a surprise and which were not. The first thing that surprised him was the magnitude of the savagery and barbarism. He acknowledged it has always been bad, but it was shocking how this was much more like what we see with Isis. The second thing was the timing. He explained that this happened at a point when Israel thought Hamas might really be interested in helping the economy and the people in Gaza. As a result, Israel had started easing up. There were more than 18,000 Gazan workers in Israel and there was an increase in Gazans receiving medical help. But, he said, this was all a deception that began in 2019.

Khaled also shared there were parts of October 7 that were not a surprise at all. After all, Hamas has been saying it would raise a holy war in Israel for 35-36 years. He gives them credit because they have been honestly consistent about their intentions. Hamas can never recognize Israel. There is a belief that the land where Israel is all Muslim owned land and Muslims are not allowed to give an inch. It is the Islamic State. This is a theological barrier to a two-state solution.

One of the big points Khaled started with was that of deception and double talk. He explains that people are often misled by some of the things they hear in the news. This is because what is being said in Arabic is different from what is being said in English. He referred to the 2017 political document (which he emphasized was NOT a charter) that Hamas wrote. It was intended to reach out to Europeans and to fool Americans. The document made it sound as if Hamas was ready to accept the land within the 1967 lines (West Bank, Gaza, East Jerusalem), but it was without recognizing Israel's right to exist and without giving up any land. Essentially, the document said: "I'll take what you give me and use it as a launching pad for future attacks." In the same breath he explained that it really isn't deception at all, because it is simply who they are. They have been telling everyone they will attack and even five days before October 7, they held a simulation across the border. They openly talked about a massive invasion for a year. In December of 2022, while Hamas celebrated their anniversary, they said: "Hey Israel, we are coming at you with a flood!" But now, Hamas immediately came out with a campaign of deception on October 7, putting out propaganda that they didn't do any of the things they were being accused of, even though there are body cams that prove otherwise. Some are denying it happened, saying it is one big Jewish conspiracy and that Israel allowed it to happen. The problem, he pointed out, is that the western world is hearing all the propaganda diminishing the atrocities of the massacre or denying what happened and they are believing it. This is spreading to campuses and anti-Israel protests. I found a YouTube video with Khaled from November and I felt it was really helpful in understanding some of his points. [Arab-Israeli: Hamas is Deceiving the World | Our Middle East](#)

When asked what happened that the Israeli's hadn't been prepared, Khaled suggested the Israeli intelligence blunder was a kind of self-deception through indifference, arrogance, and not taking their enemy seriously. This new generation has been indoctrinated by Hamas and are highly motivated jihadis. They see a path to paradise if they murder a Jews. There is massive incitement, rhetoric, and graffiti everywhere. This is also coming from the PA on the West Bank. And nobody is calling them out! Nobody has said to stop it. Khaled believes there is a lack of strong leadership and an absence of education about peace with Israel. This generation has been given no preparation for coexistence in their Arabic curriculum. It is the opposite. It is a radicalization of the Palestinians who have been indoctrinated by Hamas. But Israelis are under a lot of pressure by the international community to stop the war. With nearly 200 soldiers killed it would be going backwards to accept a ceasefire. They

need more time to achieve their goals. Israel shouldn't stay in Gaza forever, but will need to remove Hamas's power to ensure they won't resurface.

Even still, there are also many Palestinians (10's of thousands) who want to see Hamas gone. The problem is that they ALSO want Israel gone. He explained that they don't want peace, only armed resistance. More than 70% of Palestinians from the West Bank and Gaza support the October 7th attack. Khaled pointed out that waiting 10 days to invade was too late. They should have gone in and taken full occupation of Gaza in three days, but the estimate is that it would have led to the death of 75,000 Palestinians, which Israel wasn't ready to do. Doing it this way has created the impression that this is a temporary operation. In the Middle East, power is the most important thing and right now, to the world, Israel is seen as weak and embarrassed after October 7. This will be even more so if there is a ceasefire without the return of the hostages or the destruction of Hamas. When it comes to strength, if Israel is weak, the Arabs and Muslims abroad would rather meet with Hamas and the PLO. They are trying to turn the PA into an enemy.

Khaled expressed that Hamas is bad for moderate Palestinians, Muslims, and Arabs. Hamas's goal was to cause damage between Israelis and Palestinians, to stop Israel's normalization of relationships with other Arab countries, and to ruin the Arab and Israeli relations within Israel. The problem, as he sees it, is that there is no leadership among the Arab communities who will condemn the massacre on October 7, even the death of the Israeli-Arabs.

As to the Arabs within Israel, most Arab Israelis have come out and condemned it. This is not like what happened in May of '21. This time Arab Israelis saw firsthand that Hamas didn't differentiate between Jews and Muslims. They only cared if they had an Israeli ID. They even killed an Arab woman in a hijab who was speaking Arabic and had seven kids. Also, Arab Israelis learned from May of '21 that it was not in their interest to engage in violence. Today they want integration with Israeli society, not separation. They feel they have been partners and have helped build Israel, but that Israel has not been loyal to its non-Jewish community. Khaled explained that Israel has failed them in three areas: employment, infrastructure, and public funding. These Arab-Israelis are loyal to Israel and their religion shouldn't cause doubt.

So, what does loyalty mean? Khaled surprised me with his answer. In many classes about the conflict I have been told about how the Israeli flag and national anthem don't resonate with Arab-Israelis and is problematic. Khaled shared that loyalty is to RESPECT, not identify, with the Jewish symbols. And they do. They believe in what Israel stands for, which is why they want integration into a Jewish state. He reiterated that Israel needs to stop delegitimizing the non-Jewish community. Only 3,000-4,000 out of 2 million Arab-Israelis acted out in May of '21. The problem, as he sees it now, is that Israel is not enforcing law and order in Arab areas, especially as there is a growing mafia. Arab-Israelis want to see peace, but they want to stay in Israel. They are more comfortable here than in Gaza, the West

Bank, or other Arab countries. Israel needs to improve relationships, stop delegitimizing and dehumanizing Arab Israelis, as it can turn them into enemies. But some of the responsibility, he believes, is on the Arab Israelis because of the bad Arab leadership in the Knesset. Those they have elected in the past did not represent Arab Israelis. They met with Hezbollah and went to Ramallah and made Israel see them as bad. For the last two elections MK Mansour Abbas focused on Arab Israeli interests and their desire for integration. He has publicly condemned violence and terrorism in Hebrew and English. He's recognized the right of the Jewish State to exist and says it is NOT an apartheid state. He hasn't provoked Israel, but is still being slandered as bad. Bibi was the first to recognize him and invite him to his residence. But not this time, because he went to another coalition and is now seen as a terrorist who can't be trusted.

When asked about "the day after," Khaled said the real question is about who will be in charge of security in Gaza. Who can rein in the Palestinians and Hamas? As a journalist, he believes Israel is the only one who will be able to maintain security there unless there is no proof it can be maintained. He believes most Palestinians will allow Hamas to continue and have dual loyalties. Khaled said that "the head of the snake is Iran" and everyone else are proxies for Iran to eliminate Israel. One objective of October 7, in addition to slaughtering as many Israelis as possible, was to thwart Israel's normalization of relations with Arab countries like Saudi Arabia, damage relations between Israelis and Palestinians, drive a wedge between Jews and Arabs in Israel that would lead to violence like in May of '21, and undermine moderate Muslims like himself. Iran wants to replace Israel with an Islamic state and then will enter in more jihad. The west is next, if not now. If Hamas/Iran wins, they will come for us. This is all a religious conflict. Israel needs a victory here. If Israel wins this war, it will weaken the Iran-led axis of evil in the Middle East and improve the lives of the Arabs and Palestinians in the region.

It was a lot to take in and I clearly took copious notes. What I heard we need most right now is strong leadership in the region, people to speak up and make bold decisions. To summarize the positive parts of the conversation, there are 2 million Israeli Arabs who are resilient, denounce Hamas, and feel a part of the Israeli society, even serving in the police, army and Magen David Adom. This was a lot for me to think about and to try to process for a half day. By then, we had worked up an appetite and walked to Emek Rafaim for dinner. I was tired, but it felt good to be home.

Goodnight from Jerusalem.

