

Mission to Israel

January 22-January 25, 2024

Day 2 - January 23



We woke up this morning to the devastating news that [21 soldiers were killed last night](#). I believe they are now saying it was actually 24 soldiers. Hamas operatives apparently fired an RPG at an Israeli tank guarding soldiers who were preparing a “cleared” building for demolition. The hit caused the building to collapse on the soldiers, killing them. This was the single deadliest day of the war for the IDF thus far, with 10% of the casualties.

Sadness was palpable in every place we visited, especially the first stop we made in Rahat, a Bedouin village, that was home to one of the soldiers who had been killed, Sgt. First Class Ahmad Abu Latif. It turns out that he had been a former English student of the woman we would be meeting with in Rahat.

Before we move on, I want to share a quick word about our hotel. We intentionally stayed at the Dan Panorama in both Jerusalem and Tel Aviv, because both were housing long-term refugees. Though usually packed with tour groups, these hotels mostly were filled with displaced Israeli families. In addition to all of the communities in the south that were destroyed or continue to be bombarded with rockets, there have also been 80,000 displaced from the north because of Hezbollah at the border. Many of those who have been relocated are single families dealing with many types of challenges. In addition to the trauma they may have experienced, they are far from their homes, jobs, families, support systems, and schools. There were 35,000 children out of school following October 7.

As we made our way down to Rahat, our guide, Beni, spoke about Khaled’s talk and explained a bit more how Israel’s existence theologically undermines Muslim ideology. According to Muslims, he explained, Islam superseded Christianity, which had superseded Judaism. The Christians had been pushed out when Mohammad was chosen by God. Only those who show obedience to Allah are allowed to live in the land, according to the Quran. Thus, it is a theological problem for Islam to recognize Israel, as much as it is about land disputes. As I am not a scholar of Islam, these explanations likely are lacking, but the point Beni was trying to make was significant.

Beni also went into a history lesson about how the Arab community grew out of a nomadic society. Even though it is not necessarily still nomadic, it is still tribal. Part of this tribal identity is the importance of protecting their own. They embraced the possibilities of a big state, or empire, that

would protect Arabs and give them access to roads and trading routes (think Nabataeans and Hellenism), but, even then, they still had ethnic tribal differences. If we now fast forward to when the British and French came in during World War I and made divisions in the Middle East to create Arab countries (Sykes-Picot Agreement), the colonialists divided the states geographically, cutting through ethnic and religious communities. They were hoping that nationalism would bridge the groups they threw together because of physical borders, but what glued them together was their tribal identities. Tribes are exceedingly loyal to the interests of their tribes, while their allegiances may shift. This created many complicated problems for the region and its not surprising that terrorism would come forth from this. Tribal identity is still significant in the region. Just because two groups may be Sunnis does not mean that they get along with one another.

Today, there are six tribal groups in Gaza and they govern individually, tribally. There are tribes in the West Bank, as well. We were headed to visit Rahat, a Bedouin town. Bedouins, Beni explained, are basically Muslims without a mosque. This allows them, as nomads, to pray anywhere. Rahat is the largest Bedouin city in Israel, located in the south, less than 20 miles from the Gaza Strip. This community played a direct role in offering help on October 7 and ever since.



When we arrived at Rahat we were greeted with delicious cardomom coffee and introduced to Ayesha Ziadna. All I can see is “wow!” What an amazing individual! Ayesha is the Community Resilience Department Manager at Rahat Community center. She helped create “Have You Seen the Horizon Lately?,” which is an NGO that promotes Arab-Jewish partnerships. She shared that the Bedouin community was deeply impacted by the terror attacks.

Since October 7, twenty-two Bedouins had been killed and others were and are still held hostage in Gaza. She focused on the fact that there is a shared destiny for both Arabs and Jews living in that area and had wanted both to come together and build a relief center. Ayesha shared that the two groups of women from the Jewish and Bedouin communities volunteer together, laugh together, and have even learned to swear in each other’s languages. They work side by side to provide families with food and games for children. While discussing their relationship, Ayesha pointed out that in Israel’s curriculum for Jewish children, they don’t learn to speak Arabic until the 6th grade, while Arabs begin to learn Hebrew in 2nd grade. She’d like to see that changed, as it puts the Jewish children at a disadvantage and language is essential for the region in preventing misunderstanding.

Ayesha explained a bit about the Israeli Bedouin community. About half of Israel’s Bedouin families live in unrecognized villages (as opposed to townships) and lack infrastructure, electricity, water, or

even shelter from the missiles. There is a lot of crime and internal tribal conflict in Bedouin areas and in the last year only 5 of 216 deaths had been solved. Like Khaled, Ayesha wished for more Israeli policing in Bedouin areas, as well.

After the attack on October 7, many in Ayesha's community have needed support. Several lost their livelihoods. Some because they had worked on the Jewish farms that were ransacked and some were let go from their jobs because of their Arab background. Ayesha shared that the juncture where Arab, Muslim, Bedouin, and Israeli identities intersect is very complex. Sometimes, she shared, she feels like the unwanted child in a divorce - neither Palestinian enough for the Palestinians nor Israeli enough for the Israelis. She was very emotional as she related this to us and it was clear it was something that troubled her greatly. Ayesha shared that since October 7th, there has been an uptick in fear and



suspicion of Arab-Israelis within Israel. She is constantly being asked whether or not she condemns what happened on the 7th. She absolutely does. But, it is hurtful that people continue to question her allegiance. She and her community are deeply loyal to Israel.

Her Sheikh, Jamal Aluvra, joined for a bit and we had a good discussion about the importance of positive relationships between the Bedouin and Jewish communities. The Sheikh was quick to point out that the savage behavior of Hamas and

on October 7th was not accepted by or based in Islam.

Before we left, Ayesha shared with us a video of one of the members of the community, Ismail Alkrenawi and other members, who helped save 30 or more people from the Nova festival and Kibbutz Be'eir. The film brought most of us to tears. It was very moving, and I hope you will take 7 minutes to watch it. These stories are what connect us to the experience in Israel far beyond what we can see on the news. Check it out here: [Partners in Fate - Arab citizens heroic rescue of Jews from the Be'eri Massacre](#)

On our way down to Gaza that day, we had been joined by Ruth Chen and Julia Gelbard, two members of Beni's travel team at LET. Beni asked that they share a little of their own experiences with us. They sat behind me so I had trouble differentiating voices to see who was speaking, so I am combining their stories a little. They shared that since October 7th they've felt that the ground has been pulled out from under them. For the first time since moving to Israel, they felt unsafe and helpless. After the massacre, their whole way of life changed. They will no longer leave home without car keys and a

phone. White pickup trucks incite panic in them. Interestingly, Ruth and Julia were the first people we met with to really address the overseas response to the war. They shared how watching the world come down so hard against Israel has made their hearts twice as heavy. One of them even had to cut off ties with a close relative because of it.

As we continued to drive, we passed groves and groves of citrus trees that were heavy with fruit. Beni pointed out that even with volunteers helping, only 25% of the produce is actually being saved. I recently came across an interesting [article that talked about Hamas intentionally attacking the agriculture in Israel](#). Also, Beni explained a little about a non-profit effort he has started to help with both the need for extra farm support and the lack of tourism at the moment. It is called “Fund-a-Farmer,” and it is an opportunity to offer a day’s farming wage to members of the tour industry who are not working right now. If you are interested in supporting this effort, [click here](#).



We then passed by a lot of cars awaiting burial. Yes, burial. I was confused, too. It was explained that there was a halachic ruling made to bury many of the vehicles from that Black Saturday. It became necessary to bury them because the human ashes and blood stains found inside of them were unable to be

separated from the fabrics and materials of the car. You can read more about this here: [This is why Israel plans to bury hundreds of cars, with ashes and blood stains](#).

We soon arrived at Kibbutz K’far Aza, where I had been almost a year ago to the day. The photo on the left was taken on Jan. 24, 2023, and the one on the right on Jan. 23, 2024. I thought I was prepared for what I would see there, having watched many videos, heard from our kibbutz tour guide Chen via Zoom after the attack, and already having seen pictures. But I don’t think anything can prepare a person to see that level of destruction. I was personally relieved that enough time had passed (or my

sinuses were adequately infected) that I did not smell the stench of burnt and decaying flesh that many who had visited have written about.



Kibbutz Kfar Aza is located about 3 kilometers from the Gaza border. When we visited last year, many Temple congregants found it to be a beautiful, idyllic home where they could easily see themselves living. The ground was lush, the flowers were beautiful, and the homes were well kept.



Everyone knew each other and looked out for each other. There were bicycles all around (as you can see in the pictures) and children were out playing together in the courtyard areas. My son, Jonah, kept looking longingly out at the children playing soccer on the lawn, likely wishing to be playing with them instead of learning about incendiary balloons and bomb shelters with us.

Speaking of balloons... Many of the members of the kibbutz were involved in efforts towards making peace with their neighbors in Gaza. Every year, Kfar Aza holds a kite festival for peace. They create colorful and joyful kites and, as a community, send them towards Gaza with messages of peace. This event began as a response to the Gazan population sending incendiary kites to Kfar Aza to catch homes and fields on fire as well as to the balloons filled with explosives intended to detonate when children approached. That day, October 7th, was the annual kite event. Instead of flying kites that day, Aviv, who planned the event, was found murdered, with his arms wrapped around his family. His kites were there, too.

When I entered the kibbutz this time, I was greeted by Lir, a 27-year-old lifelong resident of Kfar Aza who survived the attacks on October 7th. Our group was only one of many that were there that day, as well as some reporters. Lir works with dogs and trains them to be therapy dogs. She began our visit by telling us about herself and her dogs. Once she turned to the subject of October 7th, she went

on to say that she was glad her dogs were not outside with her that morning, as Hamas killed most of the dogs they saw.

Lir had woken up on the morning of October 7 because she heard rockets. At 6:30 that holiday morning she went outside to look and see what she was hearing. She immediately could sense something big was going on. She saw loads of terrorists: 5 paragliders and 10 terrorists from the Nuchba elite combat unit of Hamas. The Nuchba fighters came first and took out the gate, which was then opened for others. The picture above is the replacement gate. By 9:30 a.m., the second wave of

terrorists had infiltrated and the gate and the path became a nonstop road for Hamas and

Palestinians between from Gaza and the kibbutz. Lir immediately went into her safe room when she saw what was happening and connected with other kibbutz members through WhatsApp.

That morning the kibbutz was attacked from four directions. The first line of defense Hamas took out was the emergency squad of the kibbutz, who were all just regular volunteers. The IDF did not arrive until 12 hours later.

During that time, 63 members of the kibbutz were murdered and 16 were taken as hostages into Gaza. At least ten more kibbutznikim are still in hospitals, injured. As she showed us the newly replaced gate, she spoke about one of the young women who was taken hostage behind it and who remains in Gaza. She is a close friend of Lir's and Lir is very worried that her friend may be pregnant. Women were raped on the 7th and hostages continue to be raped in captivity. Every week that passes makes that scenario harder to think about. There was deep pain in Lir's eyes. She openly shared that her own mental health has suffered greatly since that Black Sabbath of October 7th. I can't imagine the



strength it must take for her to return to the scene of the crime and tell the stories of her friends and neighbors. It was important to her on a level I would never be able to understand.

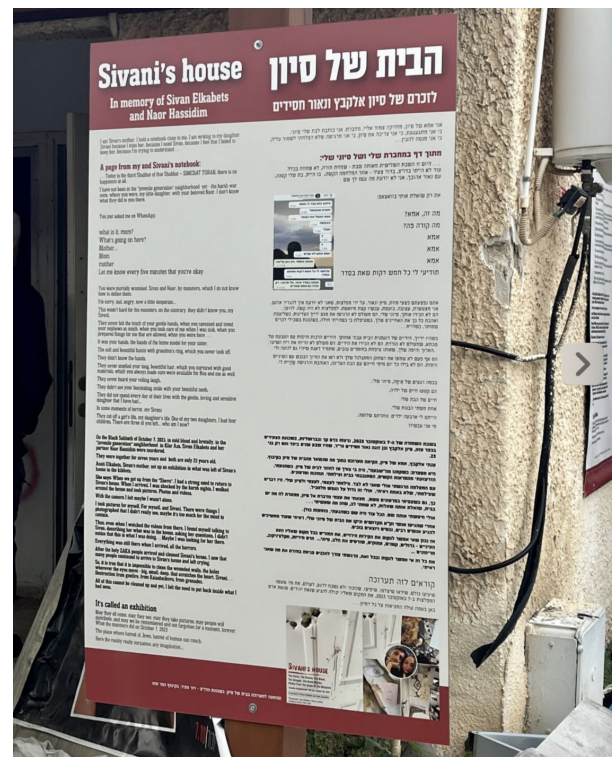
After we passed the gate, we were brought to the Dor Tzair area, the “Young Generation” homes. This area is where young adults, newly married couples, and young families live. The terrorists had done their research and went straight to that location. She told us of horrible atrocities: men and women raped, decapitated, amputated, and families



bundled together and set aflame. As awful as those are, they don't touch the surface of the cruelty she witnessed. For the sake of the families and their privacy, she wouldn't go into more detail. There were different colored markings on the walls. These told the stories of the atrocities: the number of people who were found, how many corpses remained, a note from

ZAKA to declare the space clear of bodies or body parts. Most of the homes remained off limits, to guard the privacy of the families. Only one had been approved for people to enter, and that was the home of Noar Hasidim and his partner, Sivan Elkabetz. Inside, there were bullet holes everywhere, like Swiss cheese, and the family had photos to memorialize the scene after they had been murdered, including the Hebrew words saying, “human remains on the sofa.” The young couple had been tortured for hours and the words they shared that day on WhatsApp were posted on the wall. I felt nauseated by the darkness that had befallen their home.

Many other houses in that neighborhood had memorial banners on them with the names and photos of those who had been killed inside of them or who had been taken hostage from them. Everywhere you looked you faced death and destruction: burnt walls, charred roofs, and furniture strewn around. As we passed through, Lir shared story after story about the inhabitants of the houses we passed and their fates, sharing near-



misses, deaths, and kidnappings of each one. Over and over she said that there was no logic to the day. There was no rhyme or reason to who survived and who didn't. One family tried to jump out of



the window of their house as it burned, only to be gunned down by three terrorists waiting for them outside, while another individual had survived from doing the same thing. I imagine that sense of not knowing what choices would help them versus hurt them made everything feel even more out of their control that day.

As we turned the corner, I was surprised to run into someone I knew. I ran into Rachel Waldorf who used to work at GUCI and was also there with a mission. Overcome

by the gravity of the situation, I think we were both glad to share a big hug.



The picture to the left is a lamppost with a bullet hole from the bullet that killed the mayor of their kibbutz, a strong advocate of peace.

As we completed our tour, Lir shared with us that she wants to return to Kfar Aza and raise a family there, but first, she needs to figure out if she will be able to sleep at night again if she returns. Lir requested three things from us: knowledge, missions to enable survivors to share stories, and fundraising.



Knowledge: This request is to help put Lir in touch with someone who has worked with communal trauma and knows how to rebuild a community that has suffered like this. The people who survived the atrocities of that day are deeply traumatized and will need a lot of

support and care moving forward. They need specialists and senior therapists who specialize in trauma and can provide the staff there with advanced tools and methods to treat the community.

Missions: The kibbutz would like to help raise the voices of survivors to testify to their pain and the depravity they experienced. They are seeking community leaders who will help create platforms for kibbutz members to share their personal stories with people overseas, to bring the greater community and kibbutz members together for an unmediated encounter. I hope to help with this effort for our congregation.



Fundraising: The third request is to help with financial support to help the kibbutz rebuild. I was proud to share that Temple Israel had already made a generous donation to their cause. If you are interested in further supporting the rebuilding of Kfar Aza, here is the link by which to do so: <https://www.jgive.com/new/en/usd/donation-targets/110326/about> or you can reach out to kfar.azza.fund@gmail.com.



As we got back into our van, we were all quiet. It was hard to say anything at all. We just needed to sit in silence and process what we had just seen. Sometimes there are just no words, and this was one of those moments.

We didn't travel very far before we stopped for lunch at a small food truck and had lunch (shnitzel) with some soldiers. One of the rabbis of our group generously (and quietly) bought lunch for all of them and for all of us. I took this opportunity to share some of the beautiful cards for brave soldiers with them

that had been written by our Temple members. They were a bit surprised but very touched. It was also a chance for us to transfer some of the items we had brought for the army, though much of what we brought had been picked up by the organizations we worked with when we arrived. I would share a picture of our lunch, but for security reasons, we were not allowed to photograph any soldiers.

After lunch we drove to the site of the Nova Festival outside Kibbutz Re'im. For those unfamiliar with what the festival was, Nova was a yearly dance party that closed out the holiday of Sukkot. It was put together by a close-knit rave community that enjoyed listening to and dancing to psytrance music. It is a very hippy-like, eco-conscious group of people who gather at various parties throughout the year. Their events celebrate love and life. Neither weapons nor plastic cups are allowed. There were between 3,000-4,000 young people at this party.

Along the road to Re'im there were still some areas that remained blackened from where burnt cars had been. The day had become gray and wet. The rain would come and go, leaving us chilled, which somehow felt very fitting. As we drove along, Beni helped explain the terrain and layout of where we were and how the event had been laid out. The festival was held near the woods with a single entrance where the security sat. We entered heading to the west, which was toward Gaza and the road we had been on, [Route 232](#), went north and south. To the east were fields headed near a long wadi, Nahal Gerar.



When we first pulled in, we were overcome by rows and rows of freshly planted eucalyptus trees, more than 400 of them, each memorializing one of the fallen youth or hostages taken to Gaza. They had been planted by the victims' families, together with KKL-JNF, in honor of Tu B'Shevat, the new year of the trees. To see the country bloom again is a statement of resilience. If you look closely at the pictures of the rows of trees, you will see a few bright red flowers peeking through. These are called *calanit* in Hebrew, known to us as the red crown anemone (*Anemone coronaria*). It is Israel's national flower. Between mid-January and the end of February these beautiful red poppy-like flowers carpet the

fields. There is a yearly "Red South" *Darom Adom* festival for people to come and see them. They were only just starting to bloom. Personally, I was glad not to see the land covered in red, as it still felt blood-drenched from the Nova Festival.

When we exited the bus, I immediately responded to the sounds around me. We were further south now from K'far Aza, which meant we were nearer to the fighting in Gaza. Every few minutes we would hear the sound of artillery going off. I am easily startled to begin with, but even more so with the sound of an explosion. Those sounds still trigger me



after my experiences with the bombings in Jerusalem from when I lived there. Each time the artillery would go off, my back would spasm and it would become quite painful. Every time I started to relax again; I would jump. I recorded the sound, if you would like to hear it [click here](#). In the background you can hear birds chirping and also windchimes that were hanging from one of the memorial poles.

We walked from the area of the newly planted trees over to where the festival took place. Beni pointed out where the DJs, dance areas, tents, port-a-potties, and more had been on that day. We wandered in the drizzling rain toward an area near the trees that had been set up as a memorial, with

placards on top of individual poles. Each represented a single life and they were all together in the space where they had been dancing in the early hours.



Before we left, we recited El Malei, only for the clouds to begin raining tears upon us. We quietly alighted the steps to the van and began to make our way up to Tel Aviv.

Here is a quick [360 degree video](#) that can give you a glimpse into what we saw at the memorial.

When we arrived in Tel Aviv, I was greeted by one of Temple's own, Molly Buchanan, daughter of Dennis and Bonni Buchanan. Molly made aliyah to

Israel more than a year ago and has been studying and working in Tel Aviv. Molly joined the group for our last session of the day, which was a meeting with Israeli actress Dana Dvorin. Before October 7, Dana worked with an organization known as ["Platforma Theatre,"](#) an artistic project that provides women victims of violence with the opportunity to express and heal themselves through theatre.



Dana and her colleagues, Arel and Amira, shared their new project called "Rays of Light." In Hebrew, אורות באפלה translates directly as "lights in the darkness" or "lights in the despair." This new project uses artists and sound engineers to document the stories of female survivors of October 7, 2023, using sand art as an artistic medium. Dana began this project just three days after the Black Sabbath because she believed that the testimonies of these brave women needed to be told and expressed creatively. She was thinking about "the day after," in that she wanted to help these women to heal through sharing their stories. As I was having difficulty constructing words to describe the day's events, I could appreciate how art is an important way to communicate trauma, as well. I was deeply moved by what I saw and heard.



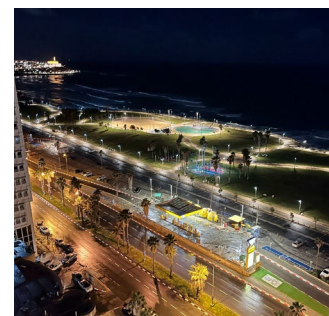
The medium of sand was very powerful, and very intentional. Dana explained that Israelis have been fighting, living, and dying on this land and that the sand comes and goes in the wind. For me, the reddish hue of the sand reminded me of Genesis 4:10, when God tells Cain to listen because: “the voice of your brother’s blood cries out to me from the ground.”

Rays of Light is considered “docutherapy.”

It is a chance for women to reframe their stories and find strength from them. Thus far they have only done two of these in English, though all of them have English subtitles. I hope you will appreciate experiencing these as much as I did. We watched [Rays of Light | Episode 7: Alina Master's story](#) and [Rays of Light | Episode 14: Agam Yosefzon's Story](#). If you are interested to watch or listen to others, you can follow it [on Instagram](#) or [on Facebook](#).

After this session, Molly and I went out to eat at a restaurant nearby. It was great to catch up with her and to hear her talk about how at home she feels in Israel. She is a remarkable woman. When I got back to the hotel, I was so exhausted, emotionally, and physically, that I barely remember falling asleep.

Goodnight from Tel Aviv.



**If you are interested in learning more about the Nova Festival, there is a documentary from i24news on YouTube. I can provide a link if you would like, but I have found the video very hard to watch because of the violence and graphic nature. CNN also offered coverage of the festival and it, too, is not for children.