

Mission to Israel

January 22-January 25, 2024

Day 3: January 24, 2024



Thank you to all of you who have been reading these entries. I have spent more time writing about this experience than I did in Israel. I've devoted so much time to this because these stories must be heard and not forgotten. It is so much more important now, when there are those spreading doubt about the atrocities of that day.

This third day that I am writing about was just as intense as the second, but in different ways. Today we heard many firsthand accounts from survivors - of the Nova party, those on the front lines, and families awaiting the return of hostages. I won't share these conversations in quite the

same in-depth way I have the others, as there are so many, but I will try to share the parts that were most moving to me.

Our day began with a visit that, when I first learned of it, I honestly thought was a bit superfluous. We were headed to an [elementary school](#) in Jaffa that had been intentionally created for Jewish and Arab children to learn together. I questioned why we were going because it hadn't felt like it was directly linked to the war. On previous trips, I've visited other schools, like in the cooperative Jewish-Palestinian village of [Neve Shalom](#) and the [Leo Baeck](#)

[High School](#) in Haifa, where Jewish, Muslim, Druze, Christian, and new immigrant children are in classes together. What I didn't realize until later was how significant this particular experience would become for me. Sometimes we just have to trust the process, right?

As I wrote about from the previous day, when we met with Ayesha in Rahat, she had talked about the different tracks of learning for Jews and Arabs, especially when it came to the Hebrew and Arabic



languages. She viewed it as a hindrance to communication and made building relationships harder. We learned much more about that today.

In Israel, there are four tracks for education: state-secular (Mamlachti), state-religious (Mamlachti dati), independent religious (Haredi or Chinuch Atzmai), and Arab schools. You can read more about the four tracks [here](#). Yad b'Yad schools are public schools that are free, as they are funded by the Ministry of Education and supplemented by philanthropy and parents' fees. The Ministry supports the work of the schools and wants to expand on these in mixed communities.

We arrived at the [Kulna Yachad \(All of Us, Together\) School](#), which is one of a handful of schools supported by the [Yad B'Yad](#) organization, which means "Hand in Hand." You could tell it was something unique before ever walking in the door. There were Jewish and Arab children playing together outside and you could hear them speaking in both Hebrew and Arabic. As we walked in we saw that all signs were in both Hebrew and Arabic. Neither one appeared privileged over the other. We were greeted by a woman named Amy. She explained how special Yad b'Yad schools are, in that the schools aren't built unless there is a strong grassroots movement of parents who demand that it be created.



The first thing we did when we arrived was visit some of the classrooms and talk to some of the children. They were adorable, of course. In the center of building was a space being used for

PE. They were just regular kids being kids, having a good time together. We then gathered in the library to meet with Amy and were soon joined by the principal and a few teachers. There, we learned much more about the formal program and how October 7th has impacted it.

The [Kulna Yachad school](#) was able to be up and running again a week and a half after the 10/7 massacres. They went right back into it. It was especially difficult for the

Arabs. Amy emphasized that Jaffa Arabs are not Hamas and what happened was a big shock for them, too. The Arabs there were grappling with their identities. Some Arab teachers were fearful (for the first time) living in Israel, as they felt that after October 7th Israel was like a wounded animal without restraint. Israelis seemed volatile. She shared that for the Jews, the



fight began on October 7, but for the Arabs, it's part of a larger fight that began long ago. At school, the children don't really talk about the war, because it is like letting the genie out of the bottle without knowing how to put it back. Rather, they relate to each other as children more than Arabs and Jews. They just want to play soccer together. Even though some of the teachers in the school may have a partner in the army who is in Khan Younis and another may have family living in Khan Younis, they still see their fates as tied together. As the principal shared, when the sirens go off they all go into the

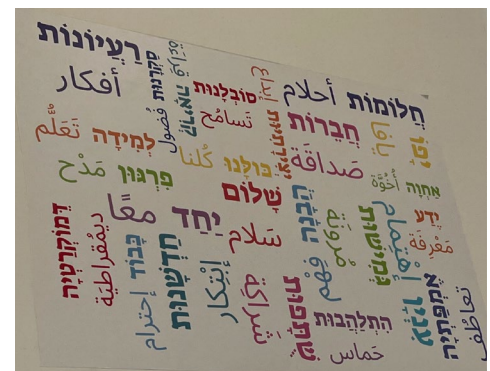
same shelter together, students and teachers, Jews and Arabs, Christians and Muslims, kippot, hijabs, and hipsters alike.

I encourage you to take 6 minutes and watch [this beautiful news segment](#) that interviews parents and children about their experiences and why they feel this program is necessary for the future of the region. This is likely the most hopeful and moving link I have included up until now. There is also an [NPR clip](#) I found from the day before we visited describing a different Yad b'Yad school in Jerusalem.

We asked about some of the specifics of the school, curious to know things like if the children spoke in Hebrew or Arabic when they played. The answer was Hebrew, if you are curious. There are 800 children in the school now, 400 Arab and 400 Jewish, far more than the 35 they started with. The school has a shared community organizer who puts together holiday celebrations, events, and dialogue groups with the different families. They call it a "Hummus partnership." There is great diversity in the children's economic upbringings, especially as it falls across cultural lines. There are very wealthy and cultured families together with poor. For the Jewish population, most of the families send their children there because they strongly believe in

coexistence. That is likely the case for the Arab families as well, but learning fluent Hebrew also offers their children upward mobility.

A few more interesting things we learned were that they teach history from a multicultural position, not from religious books. They acknowledge the holidays using universal values so, for instance, on Yom Kippur they learn about forgiveness and on Ramadan they learn about compassion and giving to the poor. Regarding how they teach about 1948, they explained that it gets a lot more complicated when they teach it in the Yad b'Yad High Schools, but for the elementary age students it is celebrated as Yom Haatzmaut, though they recognize that for some it is considered Nachba. It can make for some tense days because of the two different narratives.



When we were leaving, I loved how on one of the walls I

found the Hebrew words in the same calligraphy font as you find in the Torah for "love your neighbor as yourself." This was the perfect place to see how words of Torah are lived in real life. That is the picture on the left. Also, in case you are curious as to what type of goodies were put out for us to nosh on, there is a picture of that, too. I'm going to guess there were more dried fruits than normal because it was Tu B'Shevat.



After we returned to our van, we made our way over to the [Ichilov hospital](#) to meet with injured soldiers. We were able to stop for about 20-30 minutes in the Carmel Shuk, which I appreciated. I had yet to pick up any gifts or spices. I have a ridiculous array of shuk pictures. It is probably because I didn't have time to actually buy any of what I saw, so I wanted to remind myself of some of my favorite Israeli foods, especially its incredible produce. I suppose with the fields not



being harvested right now, it was for the best. Anyway, since I couldn't take photos of the soldiers, I will be sure my pictures of the shuk adorn the following stories.

When we got to the hospital, we learned that the individual who would be showing us around, Ron, was a survivor of the Nova Festival. He hasn't been able to return to work, though he has tried, because of how traumatized he is. Now, his uncle who works at the hospital keeps calling him to help with visits like ours in order to get him out of the house.



We went up to the section of the hospital where the military is being treated. They made major updates to accommodate the numbers of people who were going to be treated there. We met with Cynthia Schlachter, the director of the Overseas Development. In talking with her, I learned that once upon a time, many years ago, she lived in Dayton and worked at Aulwood. Cynthia brought some of the soldiers to sit with us. I was so glad we were a small group and could do that in an unobtrusive way. We were there during their lunch time, so soldiers would come and talk to us as they had their meals. The social part is important to their recovery, so they eat together. This rehab

department, 52 beds, is made up entirely of soldiers. They began this hospital expansion on October 8 because of the sheer numbers of soldier and civilian injuries. The average time of rehab is about three months and then they continue with intensive outpatient rehab 3-4 times a week. She shared that what lies ahead is that there are now 400,000 people who have experienced severe emotional trauma and 20,000 who have PTSD. There are not enough staff in the country to absorb this psychological support. There are a lot of creative things going on at the hospital in terms of treatment, such as the use of augmented reality and virtual reality.



I was deeply moved listening to the first soldier, Yair, and his wife Naamah. Yair had been injured previously and was not supposed to be in combat, but he had volunteered anyway. He was involved with clearing hundreds of tunnels. When he moved from Beit Hanoun to Khan

Younis, the way the ambushes were set up was different and he was hit by an explosion. He had shrapnel in his eyes, wounds on his body, burns on his face, and his neck collapsed because he was hit by a shockwave that collapsed his blood vessels in his neck. He was evacuated to a helicopter, where he had an emergency tracheotomy, and then was taken to the Soroka hospital. That was his story about how he got to the hospital. It was really moving to hear his wife share how she kept davening the psalms all the way to see him, praying he would have the best possible outcome.

Yair shared some other eye-opening experiences that really gave me pause. He talked about what happened in Beit Hanoun. When they first went in, he had been told their job was to kill terrorists, find hostages and find lots of intelligence and weapons. He shared that, at first, it seemed weird to him, because if you asked him to walk into NYC and find guns, it's a big job! Right? You would have to go through every trash can and every closet. But, even though Beit Hanoun was also a big city, it wasn't hard at all. Every house they would walk into, they would walk in and open a closet and find a pack of grenades. He'd flip over a bed and there'd be an RPG launcher. They'd open up drawers and there were drawings to tunnels and guides about how to shoot tanks, use various weapons, and so much more. He eventually got desensitized towards it.



That is, until they found a very significant tunnel under the house of a young, 24-year-old, Hamas Lieutenant. He was a young man, good looking, recently married, and successful. In his house they found a huge number of RPGs, warheads, guns, and explosives, as well as loads of intelligence. There were maps, translations, lists of operatives, locations, and tactical guides and booklets. None of this was new to Yair, as he had seen a ton of it already. But what was new and really left a mark on him was a 400-page book printed by the Hamas press. Most army presses make small tactical booklets. But this was a big, full size book with a picture of the Knesset on the front and pictures of the prime ministers on the back. It was called "The Political Organization in Israel." Yair reads Arabic and said that nothing ever actually says "Israel" in their books. It is always "the Zionist entities," "the Jews," "the Jewish state," "The occupation forces," etc. But this was a book. There was no hyperbole nor any pictures of

weapons. It was just a deep dive into the state, how laws are passed, what the different factions in the Knesset are, descriptions of the different streams of Zionism, what the various ethnic groups are within Israel, information about health, education and foreign policy doctrines, and more.

This is the part that really sticks with me. I actually recorded it. Yair said:

“This guy's 24 years old. He's not the leader of Hamas, but they're investing in his future. They really wanna understand who we [Israelis] are on a different level because in 20 years or 30 years this guy will gain insights into how we work and who we are and he's gonna be able to use that against us. I'm an officer, too, but I never learned about this, about my own nation, this way. I definitely did not learn about Iran or Hamas. I knew general things. I know there's ayatollahs in Iran. I know maybe the different brigades in Hamas, but I don't know who the different families are. I don't know their modes of thinking.

And I realize they've been thinking. They've been playing the long game and we've been playing the short game. I realized this is something I have to tell people who come to talk with me. It's that if we wanna change the way things are going, if we want to make it possible to survive, these are the people that we'll go up against. We really need to change - change over our way of thinking. We need to change our cassette. We need to start thinking decades in the future. I expect that of everyone. Our leaders, our voters. Anytime somebody comes up with a plan I'm asking people “ok, what's 20 years ahead.” “What's in 20 years? 30 years? 50 years?” because that's the only game that's gonna work at this time. We need to stop thinking short term. I'm talking about Israelis, Jews, all of us. When you play chess if your only thinking two moves ahead and the other is thinking 20 moves ahead. You're not gonna win. No matter how good those two moves are, you need to invest in the future. So that made a change for me.... the real challenge is how we work as one big body for many years in the future.”

There was a lot to think about in those words. When we asked if he was returning to work he said he was, but he also hoped to go back to the army. “There's a lot of things coming up. There are people still inside.” I was amazed by how dedicated he was to his country and that he was ready to go back out there, even after surviving two major injuries.

Next, we heard from Uri (age 20) from Hadera who had been in the Egoz Unit and was called in on October 7th to go down to the kibbutzim near Gaza, where we had been the day before. He



was hit by two terrorists at the front of the kibbutz who were dressed as soldiers. He was running and it was miraculous that the bullet that hit him hit his key in his pocket. This prevented it from hitting a major artery. He was taken on a helicopter to that hospital. If the entry wound on his leg was a half-inch over from where it was, he would have had to have it amputated.

We then heard from his commander, Noam, age 23. He was on his own on October 7 and went south to the base and fought at Kibbutz Be'eri, rescuing people from their homes while under fire. A few weeks later he was in Rimal, an affluent part of Gaza City, and they surrounded a building and an IED exploded next to his head and he was also shot in his leg, lung, throat, and head. He is now receiving mental and physical rehabilitation. He knows it looks and sounds bad, but he says it is better than what happened to the bad guys, who were all killed. He thinks its important we know that the army is making headway in Gaza and are ready to get their hostages back.

Then we heard from Elad, age 23, who lives in Holon, who was wounded in Nachal Oz. He was joined by two of his friends, who we spoke to after him. Elad is a Lieutenant in the Combat Engineering Unit, which is an explosives unit. On October 7th he was stationed at the border in Lebanon. It wasn't until two days before we saw him that his commander was able to share what they had been doing there. He shared how he was injured in Shujaiya on the 12th of November when an IED went off as they entered a building. He had two surgeries and had been incapacitated for a few days because of the damage to his nerves from the shockwaves. He was preparing to go back to the Lebanon border.



Then we heard from Elad's two friends, David and Mich, who were brothers and pretty entertaining, actually. I think they needed to have a little levity to get through it.. The first

thing David told us was that we all had to make aliyah. He would speak more about this before he had to leave. David had completed his army cycle the month before the war, but his brother was still in the army in the Givati unit. David shared that he hadn't been called to help on the 7th, but when he saw the white Toyota in Sederot that was on the news, both men grabbed their pistols and got in the car. They were told that if they wanted to help they should go to Nahal Oz. So, they drove all the way down to Nahal Oz. When they arrived at the base they could tell that it was under fire and if they tried to go in, they would die. So, they went across to the kibbutz where they ran into five of the special border police and decided to join them in



the fight. They shared a harrowing story of how they saved many families that day and took out several terrorists. But what stuck with me was their bravery and heroism. They were not called to be there, but took it upon themselves to fight and then stayed for three days. They just felt very strongly that if they had the capacity to help, they needed to.

David's injury was from when he was in Gaza on October 21. A terrorist had come out of a hidden tunnel and opened fire, shooting an RPG right next to him and injuring his knee. One of the points David and Mich made was that there is a great deal of psychological games being played by Hamas. But David shared these powerful words: "We are a strong country and we need to be strong and we need to be here.... We need to be together. We need to be here, and you need to make an Aliyah." He concluded by saying, "We have to go but if anyone makes Aliyah because of it, I'll be very happy."

As we concluded, Cynthia shared her thanks not only that we visited Israel, but that we specifically came to the hospital. She shared that it is part of the soldier's rehabilitation to be able to share their stories over and over again. She left us with this thought: "I think at the end of this long tunnel there is a light and one of those lights is the people in this country and how, despite all the divisions, everybody has come together at this time. And there's a call for that to

remain, despite politics and religion and all of the other reasons for the division in the first place”

Before we left, I presented the notes and cards from our congregation to the soldiers and hospital employees and they were touched by the gesture. I left the remainder there for soldiers to pick up when they came out for snacks during the day.



Our next stop was to go to the Nova Festival Survivor's Center. It turns out that Ron Segev, our guide and a survivor, lives in an apartment right there. He is pictured with



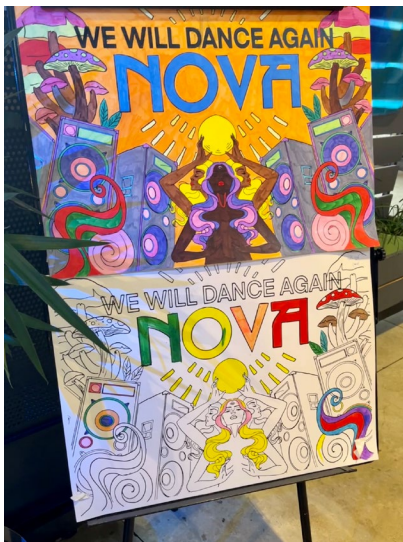
Cynthia, here. We invited him to join us in our van for a ride home and to tell us his story.

Ron spoke to us the longest, close to an hour, and I could tell how traumatized he was just by the way he spoke, the tremor in his hands, and the look in his eyes. His story is much too long to recount here, but there were a few big things from it that I want to share. First, was his kindness and dedication to his friends. After many near death experiences, he had finally made it to safety with 12 injured people in his car. At that point, he decided he needed to turn back around to find the two people he had gone with to the festival. He said: “look, I’m turning back. If someone doesn’t want to come you can stay here and I will come pick up, but we are in a safe place and I must find my friends.” He explained that they came with him, so he must have them come home with him. He knew that if he didn’t go back, nobody would bring them to safety. He was able to find his friends, but his ordeal was far from over. At every turn he faced near death experiences. At one point they went to Be’eri for help and when they approached the entrance to the kibbutz they could tell something was wrong and made a U-turn. Then his brother thought he was having a heart attack (it was a panic attack) and they almost went to a police station in Ofakim that was overrun by Hamas. When they arrived at the hospital with 12

broken people, there was blood all over the floor and nobody there understood what had happened. Soon after, more and more people were showing up. When it was time to leave, they were told they were not allowed to go home or have family pick them up for 24 hours. Ron was crying on the floor when two brothers who were also at the Nova festival just came and picked him up and hugged him, even though they didn't know each other. They took them to their home in Beer Sheva, along with three other people, for 24 hours and their family made sure they had everything they needed. They called their friends and family and, in an hour, cars were coming with food and everything else they needed. To that, Ron said, "That's when I found out what it means to be Israeli, or Jewish abroad. What it means to be an amazing person. And we have so many of these kinds of people over here. These people will sacrifice everything for people they don't know and this is what happened to me with this family." As he summarized the story, he explains he is not a hero. "For me it was not a story of courage or bravery. Just love. Just love to my brother and to my best friends. It's not like I had other options in my head. There was only one option. I am going home, together. We are four. We are going back as four. ...You call it bravery. I call it love. Maybe it's the same."

Ron was especially appreciative we were there. He said, "We know it's very difficult for you to come here. We know some of you have a lot to do back home with your families, with your communities. We know that, and yet we want you to understand that this is very very important - Jewish people coming here. Not only Jewish, but Jewish people coming here supporting us, and us getting stronger from our stories. So, it's a win-win situation for both sides. And one more thing. I want you to know many people think once the war is over it's over. But no, then the real war starts. Then the real fight starts because we have thousands,

hundreds of thousands, of people and families suffering. I, for example, didn't get back to work since 7 of October and I still can't. I can't do it. Until the hostages will be here, I don't think I



will be able to work.” Before we left, we surrounded Ron with a big group hug.

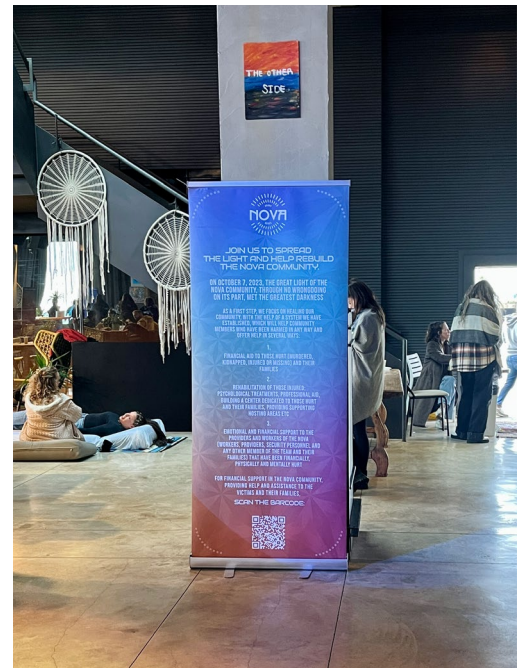
[You can click here](#) if you would like to hear Ron tell his



story.

We then went into the Nova Center to meet with Raz Malka, one of the planners of the Nova event. It felt like walking into a different world. It was a chill, open space. The room was set up with big windows looking out over the Mediterranean. It was still raining, so there wasn't much to see, but it was a serene location. There were comfortable spaces to sit, various types of therapeutic activities, and some pieces of the "[6.29 exhibit](#)" that had recently closed. [The exhibition](#) was named for the moment the music stopped. Before this center in Tel Aviv opened, survivors were meeting daily in Caesaria. There is a beautiful short news clip about the healing work that is being done there. [Click here](#) to view a YouTube video of how the wellness center supports Nova music festival survivors. This new location is now open only once a week, on Wednesdays, as survivors are trying to return to work again.

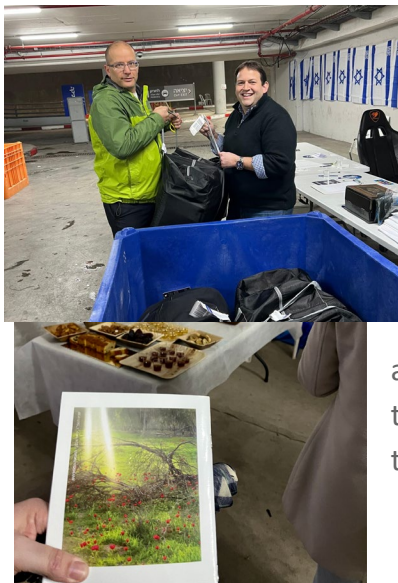
It was beautiful to watch how they all helped one another on their healing journey. I could go on and on about this, too, but I will never finish writing about this day if I do.





After this, we went and visited Brothers in Arms, Achim Laneshek, an incredible grassroots effort to meet the many needs of the families who were displaced and the soldiers who needed supplies. It began immediately after October 7, because they were already organized through WhatsApp from all of the government protests they had put together. You can see some of the incredible work they did in the early days of the war in [this short video](#). When we visited they were now

located in a gigantic space at the Expo Center. That day, I believe, they announced they would be closing the location.



It was incredible to see how organized everything was and how easy they made it for people to get what they needed. Apparently, many of the people in this organization are in the high-tech industry and have a lot of experience with handling this amount of logistics. While we were there, we dropped off the rest of the supplies for the soldiers.

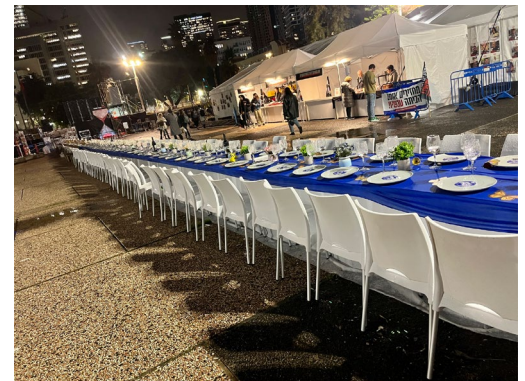


After this, we visited the Hostage Square, Kikar HaChatufim, where relatives of those being held hostage have set up camp in front of the Tel Aviv Museum of Art. It has become a place of prayer, of music, of holding one another, and today, a space to observe Tu B'Shevat. It is overwhelming to see the diversity of the people who are visiting. It was powerful to see religious, secular, and of all walks of life, coming together as a nation.

As you have noticed, I am writing with far less detail as this day goes on. Though I am moving more quickly, I will be writing one last piece to summarize my thoughts and feelings. However, if you have any questions about anything I am sharing, please reach out to me.



After we left Hostage Square, we went out to dinner. Beni had invited Noam Pappi Lev Rom, another Nova survivor, to join us and to share his incredibly heart wrenching story with us, as well.



From here we went to the airport and returned home. There is so much to say and much more to share about this trip, but it will have to wait until next week.