

# **A Journey of Solidarity: Powerful takeaways from our impactful journey in Israel**

By Rabbi Menachem Lehrfield

I had the incredible privilege of traveling to Israel with Aish amidst a war, accompanied by a group of over 60 volunteers from across the US. It undeniably stands as the most profound experience of my life. Since then, I have grappled with attempting to articulate my journey to those who inquire, "So, how was Israel?" Describing it proves nearly impossible as I am tasked with translating emotions into words.

The closest I can come to conveying the essence of the experience is by likening it the feeling of being newly in love. Picture feeling the perpetual sense of butterflies in the stomach and all the intense emotion that comes with that constantly, directed towards every person all the time. The streets of Israel resonate with an overwhelming and pervasive sense of love and unity. This theme echoed consistently throughout our mission. When we asked individuals what message they wished for us to convey back to America, the resounding response was simple: Unity. In Israel, the prevailing hashtag of the conflict is "Yachad n'natzayach" - together we will win - and this sentiment is actively unfolding. The people there are united, and their message to us is clear: we, too, must come together. We need to foster unity and cultivate love for one another.

I have endeavored to share my experiences in writing, aspiring to inspire others as I have been inspired. I perceive this opportunity not merely as a personal encounter but as a responsibility to disseminate what I witnessed and learned to as many individuals as possible. We are in early talks of putting together another journey and we have ongoing campaigns to support the people and places we visited during this mission. **Many of the people and units we visited still have real needs that we can help with.** If you are interested in getting involved, please feel free to reach out to me at [mlehrfield@joidenver.com](mailto:mlehrfield@joidenver.com).

# Day 1

## **Arrival Amidst Clouds of Glory**

Embarking on our Israel Solidarity Mission at Miami International Airport was marked by a profound sense of purpose. Carrying supplies for troops, the airport staff's gratitude heightened our awareness of the significant undertaking ahead.

As our plane began its initial descent we were surrounded on all sides by clouds. You could actually see the clouds above and below and to the sides. It was reminiscent of the Clouds of Glory that surrounded the Jewish people in the desert. Just as those clouds protected the Jewish people, I felt this was a sign from above that Hashem was with us now as well.

As we touched down, the signs of kidnapped hostages adorned the airport, a stark reminder of the challenges faced by the people of Israel.

## **Whirlwind of Compassion and Resilience**

Our first day unfolded as a tapestry of compassion and strength. At Pantry Packers, where we packed food supplies, a serendipitous encounter with my cousin emphasized the interconnectedness of our mission. This set the tone for the days to come – a mission not of passive observation but of active involvement.

Learning about Pantry Packers to support displaced families further underscored the immediacy of our contribution.

Pantry Packers is the food distribution arm of Tzedakah Central/Colel Chabad, the oldest continuously operating network of social services in Israel – established in 1788! Every month Pantry Packers delivers crates containing the necessary foods and household maintenance supplies

to Israel's poorest families and senior citizens. Since the war began, they have shifted focus to the families that have been displaced.

The woman who spoke with us — who had given this speech hundreds of times in the past — began to break down and cry. After composing herself she explained that we were the first group who had come to volunteer since September. She was so moved and grateful we were there.

This was not the first time I heard these sentiments. The Israeli staff at both airports (MIA and TLV), the flight attendants and the passengers sitting next to me on the plane, all shared similar sentiments of gratitude.

This was so perfect for the first day of the trip as many of us weren't sure we had made the right decision. The emotional response from the staff, moved to tears by our presence, affirmed the significance of our decision to be there.

## **A Glimpse into Heroism – Rose Lubin's Shiva**

We then went to check into our hotel and after a short time headed out to the the Lubin shiva. Rose Lubin, a 20-year-old lone soldier, from Dunwoody, Georgia, moved to Israel in 2021 to join the Israel Defense Forces.

She spoke passionately about her commitment to defending Jerusalem and finding personal meaning in protecting Jews at the Western Wall. Rose bravely defended Jewish communities near the Gaza border during the Hamas terrorist attack on Oct. 7.

Her commander offered her time off to recuperate, but she insisted on resuming her duties and said she was more motivated than ever to protect civilians. Rose donned her uniform, grabbed her weapon and courageously protected Jerusalem's Old City in the Damascus Gate

area. Despite the horrors she had witnessed, Rose remained resilient and dedicated, continuing to safeguard civilians.

Tragically, on Nov. 6, Rose was stabbed multiple times by a 16-year-old Arab terrorist near Herod's Gate in Jerusalem's Old City. Rose's remarkable character, vibrant personality and commitment to her faith were highlighted by family, friends and community members during her funeral. Her family and friends eulogized her as a true heroine of Israel, emphasizing her kindness, warmth and dedication. Rose's legacy as a symbol of love for Israel and self-sacrifice endures in the hearts of those who knew her.

The narrative of her final moments shook us to our core. Her smile and wave in a video recorded just days before her tragic end resonated with a haunting beauty.

The funeral, attended by more than 15,000 people, most of whom never met Rose, became a poignant tribute to her indomitable spirit. Eulogies painted a vivid portrait of a multifaceted individual – a warrior, a vibrant soul, and a source of inspiration. Her family, friends and even the Governor of Georgia paid their respects, acknowledging the gravity of her sacrifice.

Rose Lubin emerged as a symbol of love for Israel and self-sacrifice. Her legacy, immortalized on the grounds of Mt. Herzl Military Cemetery, serves as a reminder of the price paid by those who stand at the forefront of defending a dream.

## **An Evening of Inspiration**

The evening continued with a visit to Aish HaTorah opposite the Western Wall for dinner. We had the privilege of hearing from remarkable figures – Rabbi Berkovits, the dean of Aish; Rabbi Burg, CEO; and a Gen. Doron Gavish from the IDF.

Their presence, a testament to the unity between the spiritual and the protective forces in Israel, left an indelible mark on our hearts.

Gen. Gavish shed light on the objectives and harsh realities faced by Israel. Israel's aims, he explained, are to end Hamas as a military organization, rescue hostages and secure safe borders — a daunting task given the relentless rocket attacks, with thousands fired during the conflict.

The statistics on interceptions by the Iron Dome and other defense systems painted a grim picture of the daily struggle for normalcy. To put it into perspective, during WW II, 2,500 rockets were fired at Britain. In this war 3,000 rockets are fired in just one day. Of these, 1,000 rockets were intercepted by the Iron Dome and a few dozen by David's Sling. More than 1,000 fell short, inside Gaza.

Day one was a mosaic of emotions, ranging from inspiration to sorrow, laying the foundation for the days that would follow — a journey of solidarity etched with the indomitable spirit of Rose Lubin and the resilience of the people of Israel.

## Day 2

### **Preparing Meals for Soldiers**

There's a notable coffee chain in Israel called Aroma. Amidst the challenging times it transformed one of its larger locations into a dedicated wartime sandwich-making operation.

Every day, approximately 10,000 sandwiches are packed with the help of volunteers from diverse backgrounds and age groups, from children to the elderly.

This was our first stop that morning. In this bustling environment, I took on the role of frying omelets. The kitchen echoed with the joyous sounds of volunteers singing and dancing as they cooked. It was a remarkable display of unity and kinship.

One aspect that stood out to me was a designated section where volunteers, particularly children, were engaged in writing notes and

decorating sandwich bags for the soldiers. It reminded me of the loving notes a mother might tuck inside her child's lunch for school – simple expressions like "I love you! Have a great day."

These notes became a tangible symbol of the care and affection woven into each sandwich.

The soldiers receiving these meals would undoubtedly feel the warmth and love that went into every bite, a touching reminder of the support they have from a community that comes together in times of need. They would realize that we see them as our brothers, sisters and children.

## **United Hatzalah's Heroism**

Our second day in Israel continued with a deep dive into the harrowing experiences of United Hatzalah, the organization of volunteer first responders.

Raphael Poch, an EMT and United Hatzalah spokesperson, shared poignant narratives that shed light on the organization's unwavering commitment and the extraordinary challenges faced by its members. "The situation became dire as one Hatzalah member became a hostage, and seven others had family members taken captive by Hamas," Poch said.

He recounted an incident where Hamas took control of a police station in Sderot, necessitating its destruction.

Poch delved into Hamas' sinister tactics, revealing its training from Iran on house infiltration. They had maps detailing the layout of towns, including schools and escape routes. Their strategy was to immediately shoot the husband, hold the mother hostage and force a child to knock on doors of neighbors so they could gain entry.

This is how so many terrorists got into homes even after the residents knew they were in danger. He explained how the terrorists infiltrated the Supernova Music Festival with Paragliders and motorcycles. Amidst the massacre, a 23-year-old Muslim, Awat Darwashta, lost his life while trying to save others. His colleague wanted to leave, but he wanted to stay and help people.

Poch told us about Aryeh, a volunteer with Hatzalah. After hours of helping non-stop in life-threatening conditions he was told to go home to rest, but he refused. He said he couldn't imagine being home while all this was going on. Finally, after much pushing, they convinced Aryeh to talk with a mental health professional. After four hours of recounting the horror he had witnessed, the therapist got up and begged him to stop. He said he couldn't handle hearing any more.

United Hatzalah's impact was profound, saving 3,000 lives on Oct. 7. "The intensity of the situation led to unprecedented use of medical supplies, with volunteers facing constant danger and challenges in reaching those in need," Poch said.

## **Shura Army Base**

If that were not emotionally draining enough, our next stop was perhaps the most intense experience of my life: Shura army base, an unassuming outpost that was transformed into a focal point for dealing with the deceased.

Aviad Simhoni, in charge of mortuary affairs, provided insights into the challenges faced by the Rabbinate, the institution overseeing Jewish customs related to life and death in the IDF.

"Shura Base, once among the quietest military outposts in Israel, gained prominence due to the tragic events of Oct. 7. With meticulous care, the base manages the identification and respectful handling of fallen soldiers and victims of the terror attacks," Simhoni said. The dedication

to preserving the dignity of the deceased stood out, even in the face of overwhelming numbers.

The operation at Shura unfolds not within the confines of a conventional, sterile forensic lab, but beneath the expansive cover of large white tents set up in an open area. These tents stand amidst an unsettling backdrop of rows of refrigerated containers like you would see behind a grocery store. Within each container rest dozens of meticulously wrapped lifeless bodies, as well as bags containing body parts collected from sites yet to undergo assessment.

They try to rely on multiple forms of identification before informing families of the fallen. This is challenging when so many bodies have been burnt to a point that even fingernails were no longer discernible. Forensic teams and teams from the antiquities department had to identify people via deep tissue DNA or dental records, because there is nothing else left.

Only two bodies were not able to be identified. Representatives from Shura flew to a lab in the United States to try and identify them. The professionals there could not understand why they flew all this way for just two bodies. Why was it so important to identify them so quickly that they were willing to fly across the world during a war? They could not understand the emphasis the Jewish people place on life and the dignity of the dead. For the Jewish people, every single life is an entire world.

Rabbi Bentzi Mann shared his experiences as part of the team handling the aftermath. The horrors he witnessed and some that he shared left an indelible imprint on all of us.

“How do you identify a body without a head?” he asked barely able to get the words out, reliving the images that must be forever fixed in his mind.



He shared that after so many days of the most gruesome work he thought he had lost the ability to cry. A few days later, after working around the clock for days on end, he had the opportunity to return home to his wife and children. During that short stay he was playing hide and seek with his son of three or four years old. His son hid under a sheet. The sight of that, no doubt bringing up images of murdered children arriving at the base for identification and burial under similar sheets, left him crying uncontrollably.

He explained that typically when a Jewish person passes away, the body goes through a purification process called “tahara” or “purification.” However, when soldiers die defending the Jewish people they are referred to as kedoshim, holy ones, and therefore they need no purification. In fact, soldiers are buried in their uniforms and boots instead of the typical burial shrouds.

Yedidya Atlas, a veteran with 30 years in the army, emphasized the spiritual and symbolic aspects within the military. The distribution of tzitzit, Shabbat candles, menorahs and Torah scrolls showcased the intertwining of religious practices with the daily lives of soldiers, reinforcing a sense of unity and purpose.

We visited the world’s largest Ark, which houses thousands of Torah scrolls for Army units. It was very moving to hear how the units begin each operation with prayers and the recitation of psalms. A special psalm book was made for the army with special thin paper to fit under the vests. The soldiers go into to battle shielded by their tzitzit and prayer books.

By now 100,000 pairs of tzitzit have been distributed to IDF soldiers. Many who don’t normally consider themselves religious wear them. They call it their “real bullet proof vest.”

## **Shlomit: A Community Bound in Adversity**

We then continued with a visit to the Cramim hotel, where we ran an event for displaced families from Shlomit who had found temporary refuge there. A beautiful spa hotel which normally does not allow children is now full of children running up and down the halls and elevators with sounds of laughter and play.

The highlight of the event, which was sponsored by the Abelson, Mackiernan, Miller and Shoflick families in honor of Ashtyn's Bat Mitzvah, was a magician who entertained the kids. Gifts were handed out, as well as a foosball table sponsored by the Boulder JCC. The children were so happy and grateful.

While the children were being entertained we heard from some of the adults about their harrowing experience on Oct. 7. We first heard from Rabbi Adler, a head of school. Fifteen graduates from his schools were murdered on Oct 7. He was part of a group of 15 families that left Gaza in 2005 and started a new area in the Western Negev called Chalutza. He later moved to Shlomit, right on the Egyptian border, to start a girls school.

On the morning of Oct. 7, the community was jolted by wailing sirens. Within 60 seconds, a rocket struck perilously close to his house, causing pictures to tumble from the walls. Miraculously, while two houses suffered damage, there were no reported injuries.

In these tight-knit communities, civilian units took on the responsibility of guard duty. It was during this chaotic moment that they received distressing news: the nearby small community of Pre Gan had been infiltrated by a group of 12 terrorists. Despite the commander, known as "Benny," not being obligated to intervene, a decision was made to leave his own community vulnerable and rush to the aid of Pre Gan.

The ensuing battle was intense. Later, as they combed through the aftermath, they found maps in the pockets of the killed terrorists and uncovered that their community was the next target. Tragically, two defenders lost their lives. Benny's bullet-riddled car stood as a

testament to his unwavering resolve, with traces of the terrorists' blood under his fingernails indicating a fierce struggle until the very end.

Despite the heavy toll and serious injuries sustained, they held their ground in Pre Gan, waiting for over 90 minutes for reinforcements. Remarkably, no civilians in Pre Gan were harmed, a testament to the collective strength and determination displayed in the face of adversity. Who knows what could have happened if the brave men from Shlomit hadn't run to help?

Next we heard from Tamar Ratzon, an English teacher specializing in special education. She shared the disbelief felt by her and her community when terrorists unexpectedly breached the fence. I smiled when she said that their community, right near Gaza and Egypt was so safe, not like Jerusalem, where terror attacks happen all the time. (From my time living in Jerusalem, I always thought of it as safe, unlike the border communities – just goes to show that our feelings of safety are just an illusion.)

She related, how they stayed in their bomb shelters all day until the following day brought a sudden evacuation order, granting them a mere 20 minutes to leave, with no clear indication of when they could return. What would you take if you could grab only a few items? Tamar emphasized the collective sentiment that going back without the job being done would be the worst outcome.

While the hotel is beautiful and people may see it as a nice vacation, it is anything but. The absence of her husband, who is fighting on the front lines, and the challenge of accommodating five kids, added layers of difficulty.

Tamar shed light on the dynamics between the more secular community in Pri Gan and the more religious one in Shlomit. The harrowing experience wove the two communities together in an unbreakable bond. Just a few weeks ago Tamar would have said that they had nothing in common, but when their lives were at risk the men

of Shlomit didn't think twice. She concluded her remarks saying, "Knowing that we have you with us in this difficult emotional time is so meaningful."

The concluding speaker, Dana Cohen, is the wife of the late community leader Aviad Gad Ben Osher, a student of Eli Adler, who had recently been elected as the leader of the community before his tragic murder in the fight against terrorists in Pri Gan. He was 41. Dana, now a widow and mother of six children, her eldest being 17, painted a vivid picture of her husband. "He was a gorgeous man. And a funny man."

In a heartfelt plea for support, Dana Cohen uttered, "Please help me," laying bare the emotional turmoil she experienced in the wake of her profound loss.

Her words resonated with a sentiment shared by many — a collective yearning for her husband's sacrifice not to be in vain. Dana implored the audience to confront the harsh realities they faced, underscoring the imperative for genuine love and connection among all Jews. Her second wish resonated with the vision her husband Aviad had for the community's expansion. Dana yearned for this vision to persist, finding solace in the continuation of the work he had passionately undertaken. She invited us to visit her in Shlomit when it is rebuilt and they return.

Dana urged everyone to cherish their loved ones: "And if you have someone in your life you love, love them." It served as a powerful reminder of the fragility of life and the importance of appreciating and nurturing the bonds that connect us all.

It was astonishing to listen to a woman who had just lost her entire world, yet spoke from unwavering strength. Her focus was on the daunting task of rebuilding and ensuring that her community of Shlomit would not only endure but emerge from this crisis even stronger than before.

The fact that, amidst her personal anguish, she expressed gratitude for our presence underscored the magnitude of her strength.

It was an incredible moment that reaffirmed, once again, the importance and justification of our decision to embark on this mission.

## **Innovation Amidst Crisis**

Our day concluded back in Jerusalem at the Great Synagogue with a dinner featuring inspiring young participants from Aish's TLI Leadership program. These tech-savvy individuals, engaged in real-time responses to the crisis, showcased innovative approaches reflecting a blend of resilience, creativity, and determination in the face of adversity.

From the heroic efforts of United Hatzalah to the solemn atmosphere of Shura Base and the stories of communities like Shlomit, each moment of day 2 etched itself into the narrative of a nation facing unprecedented challenges.

## Day 3

### **Picking Sweet Potatoes with Leket Israel**

Our day began in a field near Rishon L'Tzion, where we joined Nechama from "Leket Israel" in picking sweet potatoes. Leket, founded two decades ago, focuses on distributing surplus food to those in need. Last year alone, it served an impressive two million meals.

Nechama shared the organization's efforts during wartime, delivering food to Israeli refugees in hotels. Despite the challenges, Leket continued collecting excess fruits and vegetables from farms. The Benshalom family, owners of the farm, collaborated with Leket after the passing of their father. These farmers lost all their Thai workers due to the war. Some were killed, others kidnapped and whoever remained fled.

Together, we picked eight tons of sweet potatoes. It felt great to get our hands dirty with the soil of Israel and to make such a big impact during these difficult times.

## **Army Base in the Negev**

Our journey then led us to an army base in the Northern Negev, where we encountered a special forces unit, Unit 5, led by Commander Ravid. This base is a training facility that is made to look just like Gaza. Ravid was just in Gaza earlier that morning and still had the dust of Gaza on his uniform. He shared insights into the changing nature of warfare, emphasizing the importance of generals being on the front lines to make better decisions.

The unit then showed us a simulation of the challenges they face, highlighting the need for coordination and protection of the general during operations.

We were introduced to Dr. Sasha, a 69-year-old member of the unit responsible for saving lives and providing medical assistance to soldiers, underscoring the diverse roles within the army. The unit commander, a blond soldier with perfect English, expressed a resolute dedication to fighting against the horrors of war, drawing parallels to the Holocaust.

A Druze soldier conveyed a powerful message of strength. Another soldier, operating in Arab areas, emphasized the importance of staying united and shared a poignant connection to his grandmother, a Holocaust survivor.

Commander Ravid addressed the challenges faced by reserve units, requesting support for better equipment. As he put it, "If I played hide and seek in your house, who would win?"

He shed light on the dangers of Gaza and emphasized the need for media support to counteract misleading narratives.

We had time to talk personally with the soldiers and share the letters we brought with us from Denver. They were all so overwhelmed with gratitude that we came and so appreciated the letters.

They said that what gives them the most strength from the letters is knowing that Jews throughout the world are thinking of and praying for them. Many acknowledged that Hashem was fighting their battles and they were being protected by the prayers and support of the Jewish people.

## **Kibbutz Alumim: A Tale of Resilience**

Situated at Kibbutz Alumim for nearly four decades, Jeremy Mizel began by describing the idyllic setting – a beautiful village where life unfolded in harmony. Little did they know that a night of joyous celebration for Simchat Torah would turn into a nightmare. Rocket fire disrupted the peaceful night, signaling the onset of the dire situation.

Jeremy vividly portrayed the sudden shift from festive dancing in the shul to the harsh reality of imminent danger. The security team's urgent message prompted residents to seek refuge in protected rooms, bracing for a potential terrorist infiltration.

As the night unfolded, the distant sounds of gunfire indicated a threat that no one could have fully prepared for – five or six terrorists had invaded their haven. With the assumption that IDF assistance would arrive within hours, they huddled together, waiting for a rescue that seemed imminent. However, the reality was far grimmer. From 6:30 a.m. until midnight, the residents were held captive in their own homes. Jeremy painted a haunting picture of the attacks as he shared satellite images captured by cameras surrounding the kibbutz. Ten terrorists on motorbikes breached the back fence, shooting at those attempting to flee the nearby music festival.

Amidst the terror, the kibbutz faced severe challenges, including days without food for their 700+ cows. Fear-induced stress led to a significant decline in milk production.

Those who fought the terrorists endured multiple gunshot wounds, with a lone midwife providing critical aid over the phone in the absence of ambulances.

The resilience of the 12-member security team shone through as it fended off 40 to 50 terrorists, all surviving the ordeal. Benny, a 80-year-old, faced terrorists head on, surviving two gunshot wounds to the stomach.

Shachar Bergsten, a 32-year-old, was tragically murdered. The aftermath saw the kibbutz homes mostly empty, with residents seeking refuge in hotels. Offers of support flooded in, from stand-up comedians to volunteers aiding with daily tasks.

Jeremy Mizel, reflecting on the traumatic events, acknowledged that the kibbutz's future security would require a paradigm shift. Residents grapple with the decision to return, with many eager but cautious, especially those with young children. The uncertain future is marked by a collective determination not to rely solely on protective rooms. This close-knit community stands as a testament to the strength of the human spirit in the midst of chaos and tragedy.

At an Army Base near Ofakim, Aish, sponsored a BBQ for 700 soldiers. It was an opportunity for us not only to enjoy a meal together but also engage in meaningful conversations, share hugs and express our deep love and appreciation for their dedication.

We distributed more cards. The response from the soldiers was overwhelmingly positive. They expressed genuine gratitude for our presence and the thoughtful items we brought, particularly the cards. As one soldier stated, "I can make my own sandwich, but the cards are something special." The impact of our gesture was clearly felt.



# Day 4

## **The West Bank**

The next morning we departed for Gush Etzion, a cluster of Israeli communities located in the Judaean Mountains, directly south of Jerusalem and Bethlehem in the West Bank. Just the day before there was a terrorist attack, there so we went with a bit of fear and trepidation.

Once there, we heard from injured heroes from Oct. 7. One of the trip participants asked, "Do you wonder where G-d was during the attacks?" His response was, "You're asking that question 3,000 years too late. We don't know why things happen the way they do. One thing I can tell you is that Hashem was with me every step of the way in battle." He then proceeded to tell us stories of amazing Divine providence that protected him.

Following the presentations, we were organized into small groups, each assigned a child guide and a set of boxes. These packages were intended for the wives of men called into reserved duty. The boxes were labeled "Eshet Chayil," a phrase often translated as "woman of valor," but in this context, its literal meaning resonated profoundly, "wife of a soldier." The contents of these packages, including pampering soaps, salts, chocolates and more aimed to convey our gratitude.

As these packages were presented to the women, many were moved to tears by the heartfelt gesture. In acknowledging their role on the home front, we sought to express our deep appreciation for the sacrifices these women make as their loved ones serve to protect and defend.

We then had the privilege of hearing from two soldiers. A room, once used as a cafeteria, had been transformed into a barracks for reserve soldiers, now filled with rows of cots and lockers. Meeting these soldiers face-to-face offered us a glimpse into their daily lives.

They shared a profoundly impactful statement with us. Their reserve unit, a diverse assembly of individuals from various walks of life—Jews and non-Jews, liberals and conservatives, religious and secular—offered a compelling perspective. Merely weeks ago, these individuals might have found no common ground. The prevailing disunity during discussions on judicial reform would have categorized them as adversaries. However, a transformative shift occurred; they now viewed each other as brothers, bound by an unexpected camaraderie. Their close quarters and prolonged contact facilitated conversations on deep topics, including those that seem so divisive. To their surprise, they discovered a shared ground that transcended their apparent differences. An astounding 85% of their viewpoints aligned, and the remaining 15% became subjects on which they could peacefully agree to disagree. In a world where politicians seek to create divisions, framing it as "us vs them" and encouraging conflict, the reality is quite different.

The truth is, most of us fall in the middle. And as Jews, we've disagreed for most of our history (two Jews, three opinions!) At the same time, we can maintain respect and love for each other, recognizing that our differences contribute to the rich tapestry of perspectives rather than tearing us apart. It was worth traveling across the world just to hear this message.

To show our appreciation, to the reservists we brought Shabbat meals donated by a Denver family. They were beyond thankful for the gesture. It was a small yet meaningful way for us to express our support and gratitude for the sacrifices they make while stationed in the West Bank.

After a brief lunch stop, we hurried back to the hotel to prepare for Shabbat. The Friday night atmosphere at the Western Wall was filled with uplifting singing and dancing that momentarily transported us from the reality of the war. Despite the challenging times, Jews from diverse backgrounds joined together in prayer, creating an atmosphere of unity.

From there, we headed to Aish for dinner, where we had the opportunity to hear several inspiring speakers. Among the guests, all of whom spoke and introduced themselves, were many family members of participants, adding a warm familial touch to the evening. One noteworthy guest was Yakov, the grandson of Denver's Rhoda Reiss, who is stationed on the northern border. He wasn't in Israel on Oct. 7; he was on vacation in the Dominican Republic when he received the call. Without hesitation, he dropped everything and boarded the first available flight to Israel.

Yakov was in an elite unit in the IDF and was now being called into reserve duty. Yakov's courage and dedication were awe-inspiring as he shared stories of many of his fallen brothers in arms and some of the difficulties they endure.

Yakov reminded us that while the news often focuses on Gaza, the war also unfolds on the northern border.

## Day 5

### **Shabbat Shalom**

At this point it feels like we've been in Israel for already a month and at the same time everything seems to have flown by so quickly. For the first time since we touched down in Tel Aviv we had a calm quiet day. I chose to wake up early and walk to see some family in a Jerusalem neighborhood not far from the hotel and shared Shabbat lunch with my family, including my grandmother I had barely had a chance to talk with while in Israel.

Our group was honored to have a private audience with Rabbi Berel Wein, the distinguished rabbi, prolific author, eloquent lecturer and renowned historian. One of the participants asked about the state of American Jewry today. Rabbi Wein responded with a joke about an accountant who wanted to steal from his company but instead of taking the cash he ran away with all the accounts payable. Many

Americans, he explained, are first realizing that there are liabilities to being Jewish.

The problem is that they see the liabilities but they lack the assets, so it is very confusing. Their books are out of balance. The way I understand his statements is that many Jews are paying the price for being Jewish but don't enjoy any of the benefits.

Jewish immigrants from Europe arrived in America with a fervent desire to provide their children with everything they themselves didn't have. They succeeded in blessing their children with education and material abundance. However, they didn't pass on what they did have — the rich spiritual and cultural heritage.

Shabbat concluded with a musical Havdalah as other hotel guests, including families displaced from the south, joined in singing and dancing.

On Saturday night, some participants went to visit injured soldiers in the hospital. When they asked what they could get or do for them, the only thing that was requested was tzitzit. I turned to my cousin Alex, who has been arranging for the tying of hundreds of thousands of pairs of tzitzit. He supplied us with a dozen or so pairs that we brought back to the hospital the next day.

## Day 6

Our final day was a solemn one, commencing at Har Herzl, Israel's military cemetery, where over 25,000 fallen soldiers have been laid to rest.

We learned about a poignant tradition — the annual ceremony held on the anniversary of a soldier's death. During our visit, we attended the ceremony for a soldier who lost his life in the Yom Kippur War. The IDF

undertakes the sacred responsibility of ensuring that no soldier is ever forgotten.

As we walked through the memorial hall, the impact of the sacrifice became tangible. Each soldier was commemorated with a dedicated brick bearing his or her name and the date of death. The sight of numerous new bricks engraved with the date 7.10.2023 was haunting.

The brick roof that adorns the memorial hall is constructed with bricks stacked one atop the other, symbolizing the unity of the Jewish people and the importance of connecting with and relying on each other. Crafted from the same material as IDF tanks, they echo a profound desire for the realization of the prophecy of digging our weapons into the ground and turning them into instruments of peace.

During our participation in a Sheloshim memorial service for a fallen soldier, we observed the preparations for another funeral. It had just started to drizzle and a soldier walking alongside us casually remarked, "This always happens." Intrigued, I inquired what she meant. She said that over the past few weeks whenever there was a funeral, it rained. It's like the heavens themselves are crying with us.

As much as we wanted to stay for the funeral we were already late for a meeting at the Knesset with Speaker Amir Ohana. Later that evening on the way to the airport, I learned that the fallen soldier whose funeral we missed was my childhood friend's nephew, as well as the cousin of my dear friend and colleague, Rabbi Yonatan Nuszen. I felt terrible being so close and not participating in the funeral or shiva.

At the Knesset we heard a briefing on the current situation from the Speaker who also expressed his gratitude to us for coming during this difficult time. He explained how they have been offering foreign dignitaries from all over the world the opportunity to come and see firsthand the destruction and barbarism and smell the smell of death that is still present weeks later from the October 7 massacre but most countries have not taken him up on the offer.

We departed from the Knesset and returned to Aish for the conclusion of our program. There, we had the opportunity to meet Yael, the aunt of the teenager Ofir Engel, who was abducted on October 7 and is currently still held hostage in Gaza. Yael shared a poignant account of her family's experience on that fateful day when they learned of Ofir's kidnapping.

Accompanied by her daughter, Yael expressed gratitude that her daughter couldn't understand English, shielding her from the distressing details. She revealed that her daughter refused to be separated, fearing the possibility of being kidnapped herself "I'm afraid they are going to kidnap me from my bed, and don't tell me that it's all okay and they aren't going to, because you see it happened to Ofir." The gravity of the situation and its impact on the family is palpable in Yael's words. This presentation was followed by a farewell banquet where we were all encouraged to step outside of our comfort zone and do something uncomfortable just as all the heroes we heard from throughout the trip stood up and did what was needed regardless of how it made them feel.

After dinner, the group headed for the airport. I took a detour to Peach Tikva, armed with treats from the renowned marzipan bakery in the shuk, along with chocolates, to visit Omer—an injured soldier who served as an Israeli emissary in Denver in 2019. He was, in fact, back in Colorado training to work in the Breckenridge ski area for the upcoming season when he received the call on October 7. Without hesitation, he boarded the first available plane back to Israel to rejoin his reserve unit.

When I arrived at his room he was nowhere to be found. I asked a nurse who informed me that he escaped. She clarified that he was just hanging out outside. I finally found the smiling happy Omer. You wouldn't know that that Omer had just sustained injuries from an RPG (rocket-propelled grenade).

I spent an hour or two with Omer and some of his friends who were also recuperating in the hospital. It turned out to be the most enjoyable time I had experienced in days, if not weeks. The group welcomed me as if I were a long-lost friend, even though, aside from Omer, I had just met everyone that moment. Listening to them joke around and retell their stories from battle was truly something special.

Among his friends present, one of them humorously pointed to his injured arm, jokingly claiming that he took his friend's bullet. He gestured toward his friend sitting there, and explained that he was shot but the bullet grazed his friend and hit him instead.

Out of the 20 men in Omer's unit, six were injured and required evacuation. Fortunately, there were no casualties. Two out of the five released soldiers had already bravely returned to the frontlines in Gaza.

Once again, I was deeply moved by Omer's resilience and gratitude. Despite enduring significant challenges, he expressed heartfelt appreciation for my visit from America. He shared his appreciation with all of our Instagram followers back home in Denver for our support, love and prayers.

I returned to the airport with a heavy heart, reluctant to leave my homeland and my people during their moment of distress. Yet, I knew I had responsibilities awaiting me back in Denver coupled with the assurance that I would return soon.

At the airport, I reunited with friends from the trip and met others on similar missions to aid the people of Israel. Sharing stories with individuals who had been on our inbound flight, we exchanged experiences that we knew others wouldn't fully comprehend without having lived through them.

One of my favorite Rak Ba'Aretz (Only in Israel Moments) occurred at the airport. Thirsty, I went to the store to buy a drink. I grabbed a Coke from the refrigerator and proceeded to pay. Upon reaching the

cashier's desk, I noticed a sign indicating they were closed and would reopen at 5 am. It was close to 2 am, yet nothing was closed or put away—refrigerators open, magazines and snacks laid out. I placed the drink back in the refrigerator, deciding to wait until I was on the plane for my Coke.

It was a quintessential Israeli moment, reflecting a profound trust in their people. They never considered the possibility of theft, with no inclination to lock anything up. Why would I think my brother or sister would steal from me? I even imagined the cash register might be open (although I didn't check).

This incident reminded me of something Jeremy, the survivor from Kibbutz Alumim, shared on day 3. When asked about concerns regarding looting during the evacuation of communities in the south, he humorously responded, "Looting? This is the one place on earth that when you ask for socks, you get more pairs than you can ever wear." He referred to the unyielding Israeli spirit that prompts people to show up with ten times what is requested, whether it's food, toys, or clothing, showcasing a deep love and unity. It was that spirit of unity that drew me to Israel, and it's what I deeply miss and am committed to bringing back to the States. If you'd like to join me in my mission of Jewish unity here in America, please reach out at [mlehrfield@joidenver.com](mailto:mlehrfield@joidenver.com).