

Dear Friends:

I'm writing to you one last time from Jerusalem, where my time in Israel has been extended by a few days due to the flight cancellations by the FAA (probably overly cautious, in my view, but I am very biased since it really messed up my flights!).

This past Tuesday I joined a "solidarity mission" <http://www.timesofisrael.com/us-rabbis-use-their-feet-to-show-solidarity-with-israel/> sponsored by the Conservative movement's Rabbinical Assembly to visit with communities in the south, closest to Gaza. We visited Ashkelon, Sederot, Beersheva, and Omer, being hosted by municipal governments and local Conservative (Masorti) congregations. Our message to them was that we are thinking of them, praying for them, and supporting them, whether we are in other parts of Israel or in North America. In turn, we heard from them both what life is like under threat of tunnel commando and missile attacks, and the inspiring ways in which they have responded.



Our group had the "opportunity" to learn first hand what life is like in this part of the country. While in Jerusalem we've had 4 "red alerts" over 2 weeks, during our short 6 hour visit we experienced 3 sirens. In one, we were already in the "miklat" -- the safety shelter -- visiting with a group of kids in summer camp. Unfortunately, because there is only 15 seconds to get to a shelter (as opposed to Jerusalem, where we have a leisurely 90 seconds!), this summer "camp" means staying inside the shelter for most of the day. Imagine summer vacation with no opportunity for sports -- especially soccer! It is tough. But what was most impressive perhaps was that while the siren was clearly audible in the shelter, the kids took no notice. They went about their activities, drawing pictures of Nachshon, the midrashic hero of the story of the parting of the sea, who courageously jumped into the waters before they split, and through his merit allowed the waters to part and the Israelites to move safely to freedom.

By contrast, our other two experiences were while we were on the bus. When the alarm sounds, traffic comes to a stop. On buses, passengers crouch down below the height of the windows, while drivers in cars quickly get out of the car, find cover by a ditch, and "duck and cover." After the alarm, everyone gets back in their cars and continues on, business as usual. But given all of this, it's easy to understand why 80% of Israelis are fully supportive of Israel's efforts in Gaza to remove the threat of the rockets, even given the toll in Palestinian civilians and Israel's image abroad.

The officials, synagogue members, and rabbis we met with were clearly moved that rabbis had taken the time to come to Israel (while I've been her a few weeks, many others flew in especially for the visit) to show support. But even more inspiring were the ways that the communities in the south of Israel have responded with acts of kindness and caring:

- In Ashkelon, one of the synagogue members is the director of emergency planning for the city. He described a program in which the entire city is mapped on computer, and each block has data about the kinds of people who live there -- ages, ethnicity, special needs or disabilities. Should, God forbid, an attack occur, the municipality knows whether to send personnel who speak Amharic or Russian, or if someone will need special kinds of transportation away from the scene. The attention to the detailed needs of every household was just incredible.
- Sederot is under a mile away from Gaza -- in fact we went to an "observation point" where we could hear the bombs and see the smoke in the distance from Israeli attacks. We visited the command center bunker, where the deputy mayor told us with tremendous pride how the local teenagers visit specific households each day, checking on elderly or special-needs residents, seeing if they need help getting medicine or food.
- In Beersheva, Rabbi Mauricio Balter described the special summer camps that they've set up to help provide relief and support for local families.
- In Omer, a suburb of Beersheva, Rabbi Yonatan Sadoff described the synagogue's efforts to call every member family to check in, and to invite them to a special concert as a way to relieve the stress and tension. He himself goes out every day to check in with families, counsel those who are feeling stressed, and match up volunteers. On days when they can't run their summer camp (because they don't have enough bomb shelter capacity), the teen staff often goes out to people's homes to run activities so that the parents can go to work.

I found all of this very inspiring, and it makes me wonder if we do enough at home in Maryland -- not only in creating connections to folks here in Israel, but also if we are working hard enough to create our own caring community. It's one of our "2020" goals as a congregation, and these efforts, developed in a time of crisis, could also inspire us in our more ordinary and safer lives to find people who need extra support and match them with efforts to connect and help.

In one of my classes at the Hartman Institute this week, we learned a commentary on a passage in the Talmud (Menahot 37a). It deals with the case of a child who has two heads (perhaps attached Siamese twins). In trying to determine whether the legal status of such a child is "one person or two people," the commentary suggests inflicting pain on one of the heads. If both children cry, then it is really just one child.

It seems to me this is also a metaphor for how I've come to understand Jewish peoplehood over these past few weeks. When an individual or smaller group of Jews faces a challenge, we respond as one, as a family. This week, among the 29 soldiers who have died defending the country, there were two "lone soldiers" who immigrated from the US and therefore don't have close relatives here. But defying all expectations, tens of thousands of people attended each of their funerals -- obviously not knowing them personally, but feeling a profound connection to them in their dedication and sacrifice for Israel and the Jewish people. And in just a little while I'm going to downtown Jerusalem to pay a visit to the family of Max Steinberg, z"l, whose parents are actually here in Israel for the first time -- to attend their son's funeral yesterday and now to sit shiva, to which the public is invited.

There are things that you can do as well. Reach out to friends, relatives, and even remote acquaintances living in Israel, and let them know you're thinking about them. Find organizations in Israel that are doing work you think is meaningful, and send them a special donation. Keep the soldiers who are fighting in

Gaza, and the millions living under the threat of missiles and tunnel terrorists, in your thoughts and prayers.

There is so much more to share, and so much more I need to absorb and think about. At such a difficult time, with violence and loss of life on all sides, and a sense of insecurity and vulnerability, how do we maintain hope and look towards a better future? How do we balance the strength we need to defend Israel with our Jewish values of compassion and care for all human beings?

Each day there is a beautiful line in the morning prayers, in which we say that God is "Hamehadesh b'tovo b'chol yom tamid ma'aseh bereisheet -- the One who renews the work of creation each day." It's a reminder that each day is a new beginning, an opportunity for renewal, progress, and hope, where possibilities that were invisible the day before become apparent.

Meanwhile, I'm looking forward to returning to Maryland and sharing more experiences and learning with you soon!

Warm regards and Shabbat Shalom,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Jacob Blumenthal".

Rabbi Jacob