

Dear Friends,

I write to you from Jerusalem where I am privileged to participate in a Solidarity Mission, arranged by the Rabbinical Assembly, to visit afflicted communities within Israel and to connect with people suffering from the pressures of this war with Hamas.

As you may recall, the Israeli communities closest to Gaza, most famously Sderot, have suffered from thousands of missile attacks for the last 13 years, causing that community to adapt to what are shocking but realistic measures including instituting building codes that require **any facility intended for educating and entertaining children to be built as a bomb shelter**. The same is true for each and every bus stop. In Ashkelon, volunteer Dr. Alan Markus devised software that instantly collects the necessary data he needs from an area where a missile has hit that tells him what support personnel need be dispatched to help the people living in that immediate area, i.e. the numbers of elderly, children, families with single parents, etc. In this way, these communities have become adept at absorbing and responding efficiently to the traumas and stress of living with rocket attacks. It was interesting to note that despite it all, Sderot's population continues to increase, and the people of Ashkelon are very proud of their community and would never think to live anywhere else. Why? I believe it has something to do with the leadership making sure that each and every person's needs are somehow attended to, including and especially the weakest and most vulnerable, and that the municipality's responsibility is to keep building and maintaining public services, such as new pools and parks, to continue growing quality of life. And it works.

But there's something different about this round of attacks from Hamas in Gaza, and it isn't just the increased reach and numbers of rockets from Gaza that have put 75% of Israel's population at risk. The Iron Dome technology has taken most of the edge off that threat. It is the tunnels.

We heard from Natan Sharansky who shared that for years Israel was under severe international pressure to lift restrictions of building materials, such as cement, to Gaza so they could build and maintain much needed infrastructure for their population. At the time, Israel's intelligence had determined that much of it was being used to build tunnels, but that couldn't readily be proven. (The notorious Flotilla incident of a few years ago was in protest of such restrictions.) It turns out, we see now, in fact that's exactly what Hamas has been busy doing: building an elaborate network of tunnels into Israel, replete with rails, phone lines, and electricity, with the express purpose of murdering and kidnapping Israelis (and building within Gaza has ground to an intolerably slow pace.) The horror that comes with thinking that a terrorist could pop-up out of the ground anywhere is the very definition of terror, and has taken its toll.

While visiting Ashkelon, a young mother named Ilana expressed to me that this, above all, has started to push her over the edge. With her 4 year old daughter on her lap, she shared that she has become practiced at holding in tears and outbursts

of stress during the day, waiting until the kids are asleep to cry and express her grief. I was bereft of words or advice. Just then, a siren went off and somewhere in the distance I heard the thud of a rocket's impact...

What can we do? I've found there's a lot we can do to help strengthen and comfort our family in Israel. Mr. Sharansky shared with us that the Jewish Federations in the US have been incredibly supportive with the finances to the Jewish Agency to help relocate children in afflicted areas. They can't do this without our financial contributions. I've long been a fan of UJA-Federation and the great work they do for our people internationally, so please give generously to them, or find the institution you feel is making an impact here in Israel. The Masorti (Conservative) movement in Israel is, as well, in dire need of financial resources to its communities and is worthy of our support.

Also, come visit! Tourism is down, but security is aggressive and sound. I realize to many it sounds crazy given what you're watching on the news, but it really is easy and safe to be here. The country needs our support, and is a single most inspiring place to be. You will leave filled with hope, and **it cannot be overstated just how much strength it brings the people here to see you**, even as a tourist. You can help by showing up and having an amazing time. Or, if you have gifts like being able to tell stories to children, our counterpart communities in Israel will be thrilled to welcome you in and your presence will be healing.

Kol Yisrael areivim zeh la'zeh, every Jew is responsible and interconnected to every other Jew, teaches the Talmud. Now is the time to engage.

May calm and quiet be restored, and may the pain of this war with Hamas lead to a lasting peace with our Palestinian neighbors.

Shalom from Jerusalem.

--Rabbi Josh Katzan