

Day 3 - Rabbi Aaron Melman's Message to the CBS Congregation

Dear Friends,

I don't even know where to begin telling you about our day today. I suppose I should start at the beginning of our day, however, I need to tell you that I have never seen this country that I love so much, so tense and stressed. This evening walking back to the hotel from dinner as an ambulance went by it had just turned on its siren. For the first second and a half (or so it seemed) the siren sounded identical to the warning siren that goes off when there is an incoming rocket. I saw a young woman at a cafe freeze - looking as if she was a deer in headlights - a look of panic came over her as if to say, "not again in Jerusalem". I thought her eyes were going to pop out of her head.

And speaking of psychological trauma, there is more damage being done to the country than ever before. We began our day at Kehilat Ya'ar Ramot in Jerusalem. We were greeted warmly by Rabbi Arnie Ben-Dor and then from a member of the congregation, Talia Levanon, Israel's foremost expert in psychological trauma. Talia is the Director of the Israel Trauma coalition and shared with me "this time it is different". She told us that in the past when the Charedi (Ultra-Orthodox) community has relied on its own, now they are even relying on trauma experts to help them. They have trained Imans in the Beduin community to help take care of their people as well. She told us that she has never seen anxiety of families of soldiers like this before. She said that "we have our work cut out for years". In addition to Talia Levanon's presentation we were honored by the Minister of Justice, Tzipi Livni. Her visit with us was short as she was on her way to a meeting with John Kerry.

We then travelled to French Hill, another part of Jerusalem and gathered at Kehilat Ramot Tzion. Rabbi Chaya Rowen-Baker talked to us about how she has been dealing with the situation and helping her congregants cope as well. There is not one person in the country who is not affected by what is going on. If rockets aren't falling in your city then you know soldiers who are in active duty or you know soldiers who have been called up. It is hard to talk to your friends (as I did this evening) whose children have been called up and now no longer have their cell phones because they are involved in an operation in Gaza. I cannot even begin to imagine what that is like for a parent. And then perhaps the most remarkable moment of the trip took place. We had the real honor of meeting Rachel Fraenkel, the mother of Naftali Fraenkel z"l, one of the three boy who was kidnapped and murdered. She said, "the loss is endless but the love is endless". Her strength was remarkable and her poise incredible. I don't know if there was a moment when she was not smiling. She allowed us to ask questions and nothing seemed off limits. We, of course, were respectful of her and asked her to tell us about her son. She told us beautiful stories but she also said that she does not have time for hate. She cannot waste her time thinking about the people who did this to her son. She has to focus on living life and that is what she has told her other children. She said that they will get through this and that they will find a way to keep Naftali alive with them. There wasn't a dry eye in the room and yet she did not crack. She knows at some point she will, she told us so. We thanked her for coming, mourned with her, and gave her strength.

The rest seems somewhat mundane of our visit with Rachel however it was an important afternoon. We went to the Knesset for meetings with member of the Israeli Parliament. Our first speaker was Speaker Yuli Edelstein. We then heard from Elazar Stern and unfortunately our last speaker was unable to make it. As we were waiting for what we thought was our last speaker we took a break in the hall. Walking by was MK Rabbi Dov Lipman, the only US born Member of Knesset. I met Dov in January when I was here and

reintroduced myself to him (not that I expected him to remember me). A number of us gathered around him, I gave a brief bio of Dov to the group and then we invited him in to our room to speak to everyone. It was a bit of chutzpa on my part and it ended up being a great conversation. Rabbi Lipman is a member of the Yesh Atid party, a newer party in Israel. He has Orthodox *smicha* and is viewed by some leaning towards the ultra-Orthodox, but that couldn't be further from the truth. He really wants to make changes in Israel and reform the way things are done. He made aliyah ten year ago and was exempt from Army service. This week he really felt the need to do something for the soldiers on the front lines and so he and his assistant called Ben and Jerry's in Israel. They ordered \$1000 worth of ice cream, drove to areas he probably should not have been in (in his own words) but used MK credentials to get to the soldiers and give out ice cream. He said they were like little kids again. Everyone is doing their part to help others - it is remarkable.

I am sure you are all wondering what happens now. You have been following the news of the cancelled flights. Unfortunately I did not fly El Al. And even if I tried to get on El Al it wouldn't happen until Monday. Thousands of people are stuck here. I know there are far worse places to be stuck but when you are looking forward to returning to your family and your community it is hard to have your travel disrupted. I was supposed to be home tomorrow afternoon but at this point I won't be home until Sunday. When you only plan to be away for four days and then end up being away for a week it has its effects on you. We have seen a lot in the last three days and while it pales in comparison to what those in the south are facing and what the soldiers are facing, it still has a strong affect. I will be here for Shabbat and will be thinking of you while I am here. I am in the East, but part of my heart will be in the West. Continue to pray for Israel, her people, her soldiers and for peace.

Laila Tov from Jerusalem.

Aaron