

# **Missions:**

The First 100 Days of the Gaza War

Rabbi Leonard A. Matanky



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## *Introduction*

Shevat 5784

Nearly a thousand years ago, Rabbi Yehuda Halevi penned his classic poem, *לבי במזרח*, which opens with the line, “My heart is in the east, and I am at the edge of the west.”

I don’t know when I first heard those words, but until October 7th, I don’t think I ever appreciated them as much. True, I was reared in a home filled with Zionist pride, educated in schools that cherished the Land and State of Israel, studied there, traveled there countless times, and worked tirelessly to advance its causes. But ever since the morning of Shemini Atzeret, when I first heard whispers of a war, never have I felt so connected and yet so far.

It was for this reason that I jumped at the first chance to visit Israel, despite, or better yet, because of the war. And since the war began, I have been there four times, with a fifth mission soon to come.

The first visit was as part of the inaugural solidarity mission of the Rabbinical Council of America. It was still in the early days of the war, and we were among some of the first witnesses to some of the horrific tragedies. But we also witnessed tremendous hope, remarkable resolve, and, as so many have noted, extraordinary unity.

It was then that I felt the need to share my experiences with my community and wrote the first of my missives, “updates” to my shul. The

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response was powerful, and I heard from many unexpected corners that these reports were shared and read by so many.

My second visit was as part of the solidarity mission of the Board of the Jewish Federation of Metropolitan Chicago. While not a board member, I was invited as a member of the rabbinate and spent three more days learning, listening, and absorbing how this war has begun to change and challenge our beloved land.

As before, I wrote a daily update, chronicling what I saw and felt, and again the response was overwhelming.

My third and fourth trips were as part of the volunteer mission of the senior class of Ida Crown Jewish Academy. Before Yom Kippur this year, I had assembled the students to watch a documentary about the 50th anniversary of the Yom Kippur War. I shared my experiences as a student at Ida Crown during that war and told them, among other things, that we had sent the senior class to volunteer in Israel.

After Sukkot and the pogrom of October 7th, I gathered our students again and shared some thoughts, challenging them to rise to the occasion. “This is your hour,” I told them.

Following the assembly, members of the senior class approached me and said, “Rabbi, it’s our turn; when are we going to Israel”? It took three weeks to raise the funds, arrange a tour, and convince the parents to entrust their children to our care, and we left for Israel for a month-long volunteer mission in mid-December.

As before, I documented my experiences and shared them with both the parents of I.C.J.A. and members of K.I.N.S., at first my initial ten days with the students and then the final few days when, after two weeks back in Chicago, I rejoined them in Israel.

Upon my return, not a day went by when someone didn’t approach me to tell me about the “Israel Updates” they had read. But some also added that it would be very meaningful if I could gather those reports in one place and share them as a record of the first 100 days of the war.

This pamphlet is the product of that suggestion. But I have also added to it the sermons I delivered during those days. Not every Shabbat were my sermons focused on the situation in Israel, but many were,

and together with my updates, I believe they present a complete picture of what I experienced.

Six thousand miles separates us from the State of Israel. But as Rabbi Yehuda Halevi noted, we are never apart because our hearts and souls are in Israel.

I hope you find these messages meaningful. But more importantly, I hope these messages will encourage you to visit Israel yourselves, offering your support in every way possible.

May this terrible war end soon. May God reunite the hostages with their families. May He heal the broken bodies and hearts of so many. And may we see the ultimate redemption of our people speedily in our days!

B'vracha,  
Rabbi Leonard A. Matanky

*Rabbi, Congregation K.I.N.S. of West Rogers Park  
Dean, Ida Crown Jewish Academy*





# Rabbinical Council of America Mission to Israel – Day 1

October 31, 2023

Dear K.I.N.S. Community,

The past 24 hours have been extraordinarily powerful, as Margaret and I participated in an RCA/Mizrachi/Yeshiva University-REITS Rabbinic Mission to Israel.

There are so many experiences, people we've spoken with, and things we have seen that it is hard to know where to begin.

But I guess the beginning is a good place, which was at the Mizrachi building in Yerushalayim on Tuesday morning. We heard from Rav Doron Peres, the CEO of World Mizrachi. Rav Peres and his wife, Shelley, are parents of two chayalim, Yonatan, who was wounded on October 7th, but was able to walk down the aisle a week later at his wedding, and Daniel, who has been missing since October 7th. Just a few days ago, he was reclassified as a hostage.

It was the first time Rav Peres was back at his office since the massacre of October 7th and only the second time he spoke in person to a group about his family's challenge. It was a profoundly emotional

presentation and hard to capture everything he said. However, two items were clear – his faith in God and the Jewish people.

Repeatedly, he noted that despite the unbearable pain of not knowing the fate of their son, there were other families whose suffering was far worse – families who had three generations of people taken hostage or three generations murdered. His perspective and continued faith were inspiring, as was his ability to look beyond this war to imagine a future when the Jewish people will be stronger, and the world will understand the danger posed by the terrorists.

From there, we went to Hadassah Hospital, where we heard from the rav of the hospital, the CEO, the COO, and one of the social workers. Together, they drew a picture of the immediate response of the hospital and the continued care they provide – both for the refuat hanefesh and the refuat haguf.

We met with a soldier, Roni, who lost his leg in battle. We heard from him in excruciating detail about the first hours of the war, the bravery, and the confusion. One thing I will not soon forget is his description of how, as he hid, severely wounded, with his two comrades unconscious (they tragically died from their wounds), he frantically called friends to find someone who could rescue him. He ultimately found someone he knew in the Air Force, who dispatched a helicopter to extract him from the battle.

We visited the army base in Anatot, where there is an amazing volunteer effort, preparing 50,000 meals a day, and bringing in firefighters, EMTs, and others to support Tzahal. As we were heading to the bus, we saw a group of six Christian volunteer cooks from Texas who came on the second day of the war to work in the kitchen. They projected such a love for Israel. It was inspiring!

We ended the day at the army base in Ramle, called Shura. It's on this base where the headquarters of the IDF Chief Rabbinate is located and where the rabbinate works with the army to identify military (and, in the war, civilian) casualties. Rabbi Binyamin Zimmerman, who I know from his role in Mizrachi, led us on a tour of the place. As he was describing their work, we were standing less than 10 yards from 11 freezer containers where the remains of nearly 300 unidentified victims of October 7th are currently stored. Another member of Mizrachi staff,

Rabbi Bentzi Mann, who is also in service, described to us the heart-wrenching process of trying to identify the victims and the realities of this war, where many of the victims were tortured and their remains desecrated, making the job of identification so difficult. But they continue to work.

As they were speaking to us, some of the chayalim went over to one of the containers and opened the doors – revealing to us the makeshift morgue with shelves upon shelves of body bags. It was a heart-wrenching sight, and the stench of death was overwhelming. The heroic efforts of the military rabbinate were unbelievable.

Of course, they also showed us the inspiring work of distributing tzitzit, siddurim, and chumashim to the troops. Hundreds of thousands of tzitzit have been distributed, and nearly every soldier going into Gaza, observant and not-yet-observant, is wearing tzitzit.

Finally, we went into the storehouse for sifrei Torah that are provided for Tzahal, a room filled with hundreds of sifrei Torah is staffed by a full-time sofer, who sat in his military uniform and checked and repaired them.

This morning, we went to Yeshivat Shaalavim, now the home not only to its students but to nearly 250 students of Yeshivat Sderot. Rav Fendel of Sderot described what happened in the Yeshiva on October 7th, the miracle that Hamas did not attack them, and the heroism of his students, who ran to defend Sderot.

Then, Rabbi Michael Yammer, the Rosh HaYeshiva of Shaalavim, joined us. He shared with us that he can't sleep at night because his boys are now in Gaza, comparing this moment in history to the Akeidah. After all, we, too are now engaged in a battle to fulfill the will of God. Their faith in the Jewish people, the Torah that continues to be studied, and their mesirut nefesh for their students and Torah is impressive.

We are now on the bus traveling to Kibbutz Zikim, which was attacked on October 7th, and hear from the people who were there.

Over the years, I have been in Israel many times; I have been here during the Gulf War, the Intifadas, and other times of crisis. But never have I been here at a time such as this, when the stakes are so high, but the spirit of the people is so exceptional. This is truly a time when we should exclaim, **כּי כַעֲמַךְ יִשְׂרָאֵל!**

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Of course, we must continue to do everything we can to support Israel. But as we pray, and as we volunteer, and as we collect funds, we also need to remember, as Rav Yammer told the students of Sderot – לישועתך קויתי ה' – we remain confident and anticipate God's salvation.

B'vracha,  
Rabbi Leonard A. Matanky

# Rabbinical Council of America Mission to Israel – Day 2

November 1, 2023

Dear K.I.N.S. Community

Today has been a most meaningful day. When I last sent an update, we were on our way to Kibbutz Zikim, a HaShomer HaTzair kibbutz right on the northern border of Gaza. (For those who may not remember, HaShomer HaTzair is a secular, politically left-wing Zionist movement.)

We met there with some of the leadership of the kibbutz, which before October 7th had 930 residents, but today only 30 people remain. The reason they left is that they no longer feel safe in their homes. And while they were among the fortunate, having fought off the terrorists and suffering no loss of life, even those who remain told us how they will still enter their own homes with their guns drawn – which they know intellectually is not necessary, but emotionally they are scarred from that terrible day.

One of the questions we asked them was whether they had Arab workers from Gaza on the kibbutz before that fateful day and, if so, whether they were in touch with them afterward. The manager of the

kibbutz dairy said they had employed Arabs from Gaza, but Hamas had killed most as they tried to flee to the south.

Before we left, one of our rabbis offered them a tefilla for their safety – which years ago might have been rebuffed, but as one of the men told us, they each have a spark of religious spirit still inside them.

From there, we went to Ofakim, which has been one of the most emotional visits so far. Ofakim is a mixed community of 40,000 residents, and on Simchat Torah more than 40 people were killed. We began in the home of the Ohayun family, whose husband Moshe was killed while trying to defend his neighbors, as was his second son, Eliad. Moshe's sister took us on a tour of the neighborhood where most of the battles waged between residents and the terrorists took place.

As she explained to us, the terrorists knew what they were doing. They came in three vans, dressed as Israeli soldiers, and went to a part of the neighborhood where homes did not have safe rooms. When the sirens would go off, they could shoot people as they ran from their homes to the bomb shelters.

When the first sirens went off, Moshe Ohayun ran to unlock the shelters. But after opening the first one, he needed the keys for the others, so he went to get his car. That is when his son joined him. But they didn't get too far because, within a few blocks, they encountered the terrorists – Moshe killed two of them and saved many people, but he and Aviad were killed. However, of the two Moshe killed, one was the commander of this group of terrorists, which left the others on their own.

There were so many stories we heard, but two in particular are hard to forget. The first is the story of Rachel Edri, a grandmother who offered the terrorists who entered her house cookies. Working on an army base, she had learned that you could never talk any sense into a hungry soldier, and in a stroke of genius, she decided to do the same to the terrorists who entered her house and took her and her husband hostage. For 17 hours, she kept them at bay by feeding them until Tzahal sent, first, a drone to distract them and then special forces to eliminate the hostages. Her house is riddled with bullet holes, but she and her husband survived.

The second story was of the Bilia family. On the morning of the attack, Shoshana and Ariel Bilia, their three young children, his mother,

brother and sister-in-law, and their four children (including a one-month-old infant) were at home when they heard the gunshots. At first, they thought Tzahal had come to save them – they saw four soldiers walking down the street. But then they saw the four shoot a police officer, and they realized that these four were terrorists.

As Shoshana told us, her husband moved everyone into a second-floor back room and tried to convince her to take the children out the window and escape from the roof. But she hesitated. Finally, when they heard the terrorists in their home, she agreed and quickly moved everyone out of the window, over the roof, and into a small hidden shed in her neighbor's backyard.

But her husband never made it out, and as she later learned, he was murdered on the rooftop only after everyone else had escaped. For hours, they hid in the small storage shed, listening to the gun battle and trying their best to remain silent. They were saved, but not before the terrorists also shot an RPG into their home, destroying it, save for the Shabbat tablecloth that is somehow still white and still on the table.

Listening to her and watching her struggle to hold back the tears while sharing her family tragedy with us was so very difficult. I kept thinking of the many stories we have been told of the Shoah and before that of the pogroms in Europe, where Jews had to hide and sacrifice their lives to save others.

Walking down the street, we saw home after home with signs of recent shivas still hanging, and while the ice cream truck came around with the music blaring, the sadness of that place was palpable.

From there, we went to the military base of Tzelalim. At present, there are about 200 soldiers stationed there, and their job is to ensure that the large vehicles – from personnel movers to tanks – are working and able to extract them when they are disabled or stuck.

But the reason we came was not only to speak to the soldiers but to be part of a special visit by HaRav Yosef Zvi Riimon. Rav Rimon is an extraordinary human being, is a renowned posek, a man of great warmth, and a visionary who has succeeded in communicating the beauty and depth of Torah to so many. We were scheduled to have him visit our community next week, but due to the war, it will have to be rescheduled.

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Since the war began, Rav Rimon has been visiting thousands of soldiers, working with the army to get soldiers the equipment they need (from ceramic vests to tefillin), helping people who have been displaced find jobs, and inspiring the troops. And we were able to help by donating \$50,000 to support these efforts. (But he can use so much more – having already spent over \$5,000,000!)

On his visits, he speaks to the troops and, when possible, treats them to a B.B.Q., which we participated in. It began with brief inspiring words by Rav Rimon, after which the mother of a soldier who was killed spoke to the men and women. I had the honor to share a few brief thoughts on behalf of the mission.

The meal was served, and it was great. But I also got to do one more thing – hand deliver letters that ICJA students had written to the chyalim. I was amazed by their response – they treasured the letters, and their thanks were unending. Some even reached out to the high school students, calling or sending them a text or email of thanks.

Afterward, Rav Rimon spoke with us and told us his secret for success – whenever he plans to do something, he always plans as big as possible. Which I have seen him do over and over again. Klal Yisrael is fortunate to have someone like him – a man who can work with everyone, observant and those less so, young and old.

Tomorrow, we are off to Har Herzl and then to Shaarei Tzedek Hospital for bikur cholim visits and, finally, to distribute the gift cards to the residents of Sderot who are now living in hotels around the country (we'll be visiting them at the Ramada).

On the topic of gift cards, our community did something amazing. Between this past motzaei Shabbat and Sunday at noon, we raised \$52,000 for gift cards! We should be so very proud of our K.I.N.S. community – we have done and continue to do amazing things.

B'vracha,  
Rabbi Leonard A. Matanky



# Rabbinical Council of America Mission to Israel – Day 3

Dear K.I.N.S. Community:

Today was the third and final day of the mission, and we ended it with several compelling meetings and visits.

The day began with a series of meetings. The first was with Roi Abecassis, the director of WZO's Center for Religious Affairs in the Diaspora. Roi explained that 40,000+ families who live within seven kilometers of the northern or southern borders have been evacuated from their homes. And while there are many initiatives to find housing for them, he was charged with two major projects. The first is "My Home is Your Home," which is reaching out to the 34,000 people who own homes and apartments in Israel, asking them to lend their homes to an evacuated family, with guarantees by the WZO to maintain the home, pay the utilities and any repairs. The second initiative is to work with contractors completing residential buildings to open the building to the evacuees before the apartments are rented or sold.

Then came one of the most emotional meetings we've had, this one with Rabbi Shmuel Slotcki. Rabbi Slotcki is the Director of the World Organization of Orthodox Synagogues and Communities. On Simchat Torah, two of his sons who lived in Beersheva heard about

the attacks and rushed to the area around Gaza – reaching the road to Kibbutz Alumim.

Just this morning, the army shared with him a video they had created of the battle, and in that video, you could clearly see his two sons jump out of the car, armed with only pistols, and engage the terrorists. What happened next was outside the view of the cameras, but later that day, his sons' bodies were found dead, surrounded by five terrorists they had killed.

Three things he said were astounding for the faith he projected. The first was that this war was a gift – “מתנה” God has given to us, and what we do with it will determine the future of our people. The second thing was his observation that for thousands of years, Jews have been persecuted and killed. But never before have we seen brave souls rush into harm's way to confront evil. But on October 7th, so many brave souls did – because since the founding of the State, we have successfully instilled the רוח ישראל – the spirit of a strong Jewish nation into our people. And the third was the comparison he made of his sons' trip to Alumim to that of Avraham Avinu in the days leading up to the Akeida. Just as Avraham was undeterred in fulfilling the ratzon Hashem, despite the many things Satan did to stop him, so too were his sons. Despite roadblocks, cars escaping the area, and clear signs of terror – they didn't stop because they were on a mission to fulfill the ratzon Hashem.

Following that extraordinary display of faith and strength, we met with rabbis of kehillot in Israel, learning from them and listening to the challenges they now face. It was a fascinating meeting as we compared notes with one another. Unlike rabbis in America, many rabbis in Israel are not involved in leadership and pastoral care as we are. Instead, they serve as halachic experts and teachers – often not even officiating at the shuls with which they are associated.

The next stop was to meet with Sderot residents living in the Ramada. Walking into the hotel, there were children running all around, activities for adults and kids, and a wonderful “balagan” of a community (at the Ramada, there were more than 1000 people from Sderot). We met two of the rabbis from Sderot, who described their challenges, and then we walked around talking to people and hearing about their expe-

riences. Since they arrived, a temporary school for school-aged children was established at Hebrew University. Ganim are in place at the hotel, and activities for adults and children are ongoing in the afternoon. It's an amazing operation – but as one of the educators told us, the school-aged children are dealing with the trauma of October 7th. Classes are delivered in 20-minute blocks because that's about the limit they can expect the kids to focus on their lessons.

At the Ramada, we distributed 100,000 NIS shekel of gift cards, but as we continue to see, just being there was the strongest form of support we could offer. They were amazed that people would come during a war, and they were touched when they heard about everything we are doing in the States. When we asked one of their rabbis about the most important thing we can do, they said, “Come to Israel,” and show us that we are not alone. And if you can't come, send letters and call your friends.

From there, we traveled to Har Herzl to the funeral of a young soldier, Roi Dawi, דה"ר, who was killed in Gaza. Thousands of people came from all backgrounds, charedim, datiim, chilonim, young and old. The funeral was very emotional and had Israeli touches to it – including Yishai Ribo singing one of his songs, an honor guard, and the laying of wreaths.

On the way out, there was a charedi-looking man who had pulled up his car and was handing out hundreds of bottles of water to those leaving the funeral. When one of the rabbis on the trip asked him, “Who are you,” his response was “Am Yisrael.”

And that, I guess, sums up these past few days. Despite the painful stories we heard, the sites of tragedy and loss that impact everyone in Israel, what I saw more than anything else was a renewed sense of Am Yisrael.

It is because of this that I have no doubt Israel will emerge victorious. Because we are all in this together, and when the Jewish people are together, nothing can stop us.

I urge you to come to K.I.N.S. this motzaei Shabbat for Tehillim at 9:00 pm and continue supporting our brethren in Israel through donations and outreach. As Rav Banar of Sderot told us – , אנהנו צריכים: יחס, דיבור, חיבוק, וחיוק – we need your connection, your words, your hugs, and your encouragement.

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What an amazing three days this has been! Margaret and I look forward to seeing everyone soon (we return Sunday morning), and I will speak about some of the things I learned from this trip next Shabbat (Chayei Sarah) during my drasha at Main and Seudah Shlishit at North.

B'vracha,  
Rabbi Leonard A. Matanky

# Jewish Federation of Metropolitan Chicago/ Jewish United Fund Board Mission to Israel – Day 1

21 Kislev 5784

December 4, 2023

Dear K.I.N.S. Family

Late last night, I arrived in Israel for a three-day JUF Board Mission to Israel. I am one of eight rabbis who joined the JUF Board for yet another extraordinary visit to Israel (I'll return to Chicago on Thursday).

The day began with a surreal experience of trying on bulletproof vests and helmets for our visit to Sderot and the area around Gaza. Surreal, not only because it is hard to believe that we were traveling into an area adjacent to an active war zone but also because I still remember arriving in Israel the day before the first Gulf War and receiving a gas mask with the assurance that “don't worry, we're just giving this in case something happens.” Within 24 hours, something happened. B“H this time, the equipment was not needed. While we were in the Gaza area,

close enough to see the smoke and artillery of the fighting, there were no air raid sirens.

When we arrived at Sderot, the first thing that struck me was how quiet it was – no cars, no people walking along the streets, and no children in the parks. Of course, the reason is that more than 80% of the people have temporarily left and are among the hundreds of thousands of Israelis who are displaced from their homes.

Our first stop was opposite the police station, or more accurately, opposite the empty lot where the former stood, and the future police station will be built. On October 7th, some of the fiercest fighting occurred at that spot. We heard from the officer in charge of security who fought in that battle.

He is still recovering from his two gunshot wounds. Among the stories he told us was the story of a family who, when the fighting began, drove to what they thought was the safest place – the police station. On the way, tragically, the father was killed, **ד"ר**, and then when they made it to the station, the mother was murdered, **ד"ר**. Luckily, the terrorists didn't see the two daughters in the back of the car, and the officer speaking with us got them out and took them to safety.

It was a harrowing story of tragedy and bravery, something we keep hearing about and one of the things that continues to offer us hope – one of the many rays of light within the darkness of the massacre. But what made it all the more powerful was a few minutes later when we went to the command center in Sderot and saw the video of that terrible event – the murders and the rescue.

Afterward, we went to Yeshivat Hesder Sderot, which was evacuated temporarily to Yeshivat Shalavim. A few weeks ago, when I was here, Rav Fendel, the Rosh Yeshiva, described what it was like – an empty yeshiva building. But seeing for myself – the place that was always bursting with Torah and activity – so very quiet was, at best, disquieting. From the yeshiva's rooftop, we looked out towards Gaza and all around the deserted streets of Sderot – it was eerie.

From there, we went to the Magen David Adom station and heard from two paramedics. They both told us of their experiences on the day of the attack. One paramedic, Racheli, the mother of nine children, described spending two days with her children hiding in their safe

room. She described her internal conflict – knowing that she should be helping but also following the instructions of her superiors and remaining at home. And she also described the pain she felt when she furtively took down their Israeli flag, fearing that if the terrorists would see it, it might cause them to target her home.

Of course, being with our Federation's leadership, we were also very proud to learn that our community has given \$2.25 million to both Magen David Adom and United Hatzalah as part of our community's Israel Emergency Campaign (and let's not forget our \$175,000 purchase of the all-terrain emergency vehicle).

Another major beneficiary of JUF's funding is Soroka Hospital in Beersheva. Soroka is the major hospital closest to Gaza and is the place where 90% of the casualties of the war come for care.

It is an amazing place with more than 5600 employees and one that trained for a mass casualty event, imagining as many as 200 casualties. On October 7th, nearly 700 casualties were brought to Soroka, and with a lot of **סייעתא דשמיא**, they were able to manage it all. But, of course, the casualties were still coming, as were the hostages, and one of the pieces of good news they shared was that the former hostage, 84-year-old Elma Avraham, who had been in critical condition suffering from many illnesses, was doing much better and had been transferred today to a regular geriatric ward!

But of course, the war is still ongoing, and it was made all the more real when we went outside to see a helicopter bring three soldiers who were wounded. The hospital's CEO told us this was the third helicopter of the day, and he hoped it would be the last. Unfortunately, as we were leaving, another helicopter was coming with more casualties, and two more landed later. Hashem yirachem! May they all have a refuah shlaima.

We ended our day at United Hatzalah. In addition to celebrating our recent contribution to United Hatzalah, they shared a series of inspiring stories of Hatzalah volunteers who jumped into action on October 7th. One of the stories was told by Yisrael Kahn (his in-laws are the Dovid and Shoshana Schnair, who live in our neighborhood). On Simchat Torah, when he got the call, he jumped into an ambulance and drove to the Nova Festival. He and his "crew" – chassidim from Ger and Slomin, began to ferry people to safety. One of the wounded

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was a young woman who was barely clothed and bordering on losing consciousness. For over an hour, the Chassidim in full yom tov clothing sang to her, spoke with her, and even yelled at her to keep her awake. B"H she is on the mend and reached out to them to thank them – talk about building achdut!

This week, we read once again the opening words of the parsha – וַיֵּשֶׁב יַעֲקֹב of which the midrash comments, בִּיקֶשׁ לֵישֶׁב בְּשָׁלוֹה – that all Yaakov wanted to do was live in peace. But of course, it wasn't destined to be – not for Yaakov and not for us.

But just as the troubles we read in this week's parsha were the harbingers of the geulah, we pray that the tragedy of October 7th will also be the beginning of our geulah – a time when all of the Jewish people will not only believe but live as true areivim zeh ba'zeh – responsible and connect.

B'vracha,  
Rabbi Leonard A. Matanky



# Jewish Federation of Metropolitan Chicago/ Jewish United Fund Board Mission to Israel – Day 2

22 Kislev 5784

December 5, 2023

Dear K.I.N.S. Family

Today was a very different day than yesterday, as our JUF Mission focused more on the aftermath of October 7th, visiting a massive chesed organization, walking through Kikar HaChatufim, touring a premier sports complex that has now become a refuge for evacuees, meeting with President Herzog, hearing from the mother of a hostage, and finally participating a presentation by an organization the addresses trauma – all programs supported by JUF's Israel Emergency Fund.

We began the morning in Rishon Le'Tzion at a warehouse of Pitchon Lev, a chesed organization that, pre-October 7th, provided support for more than 130,000 impoverished people throughout Israel – helping more than 25% of them to break the cycle of poverty and become self-sufficient.

But then came the massacre, and Pitchon Lev was one of the organizations called upon by the central command to help provide life necessities – food, clothing, baby formula, and toiletries – for the hundreds of thousands of evacuees. The warehouse and everything we saw were donated to help with this effort. Pitchon Lev is now serving their regular clients and 65,000 families who are evacuees. How do they do it? They have representatives in the hotels where the evacuees are staying, and hundreds of volunteers come to pack the needs and get them shipped out. Just imagine Maot Chittim of Chicago operating every day of the year and serving ten times the number of families.

From there, we traveled to Tel Aviv and Kikar HaChatufim. Before the war, this massive square was a plaza in the middle of the cultural institutions of Tel Aviv. Now, it has been transformed into a place where people can come to pray together, support one another, and keep the cause of the hostages front and center.

There is so much there that it's hard to describe. A giant countdown clock records every second, minute, hour, and day since 7:00 am on October 7th. There are tents for people to gather and meet, and there are art installations to express the pain the families and the entire country feel.

But two things in particular struck me. The first was the items they were selling to raise funds for the cause: hats, sweatshirts, wristbands, etc., and the special dreidels that, instead of the normal letters, have the four words, "Bring Them Home Now."

The second was a poster – the hostage poster we have all seen. I passed it quickly and then had to take a double-take. Because instead of a picture of a hostage, there was a mirror, and as I passed it quickly, not realizing it was a mirror, I saw my image in the middle of the poster. I went back to look, and under the mirror were the words – "It could have been you." And that's what we need to remember.

Our next stop was Kfar HaMaccabia in Ramat Gan, a 22-acre sports complex – home to the World Maccabi organization. On October 7th, the leadership of the site decided to put out an open invitation to anyone who needed to leave their homes to come to Kfar Maccabia at no charge. More than 800 evacuees came, and while the number is now down to 500 or so (many of the people who were there but from

communities that were not officially evacuated – like Ashkelon have since returned home), it has become more like a small community than a hotel and sports facility.

It was amazing how they pivoted so quickly, setting up a K-12 school for the children in their conference center, creating a place for mothers and babies, a youth lounge, and bringing hairdressers, doctors, and even lawyers to help the evacuees.

At the same time, they also set up a program to help the survivors of the Nova Festival cope with the trauma of that day. Located in a separate part of the campus, this program includes month-long meetings, with three-day seminars at the beginning and end. All are very impressive and receiving funding from our Federation (they even unveiled a large plaque in gratitude for the support).

From there, we returned to Yerushalayim to meet with President Herzog and his wife, Michal. For months, President Herzog has been taking a role beyond what the President of Israel typically assumes – including his address to both houses of Congress and his attempts to negotiate a compromise on the judicial reform bill that nearly tore Israel apart. And now, the massacre has brought him the responsibility to comfort the nation and support the victims. It was clear that all of this was weighing heavily upon him. But he and his wife underscored the importance of our continued advocacy (I believe he used the word *fighting*) for Israel.

The last two meetings of the day were back in the hotel. The last one was with people from Natal, an NGO that supports trauma victims. As you can guess, it is critically important now. But the most inspiring and difficult meeting was the penultimate one, with Rachel Goldberg, the mother of hostage Hersh Goldberg-Polin. Both Rachel and her husband, Jon Polin, are native Chicagoans and ICJA alumni, and I've known them and their families, as do many of you, for many years.

Her strength throughout this horrific ordeal – today is day 60 – is inspiring. She took questions and answered them with great insight, highlighting the role *tefilla* plays in her life and the support she has received from so many. One of the last questions JUF Board member Wendy Abrams asked was what we could do for her.

Rachel thought for a moment, and she responded that we need to reach out to our non-Jewish connections and make sure they under-

stand that the hostage situation is not a Jewish issue but a humanitarian one because the hostages are not just Jews but Christians and Muslims, and others. As she noted, we're only 2% of the population of America, and the only way we will make a difference is by broadening this message and gaining the support of all people.

The second thing she asked of us was to continue to call our politicians, to take one minute a day, and reach out – [oneminaday.com](http://oneminaday.com) – to ensure this issue remains at the top of our political leaders' agenda. To date, 200,000 calls are being made daily, and she said she hoped to see one million calls made daily!

This week, we will read in the parsha of the sale of Yosef. But before he was sold, his brother Reuven tried to save him, dissuading his brothers from killing him and convincing them instead to throw him into a pit, where Reuven intended to return and rescue him. But before he could, the brothers sold Yosef into slavery.

Notes the Midrash, "that when a person performs a mitzvah, he should perform it with all his heart, for had Reuven known that the Almighty would write about him [in the Torah]: "Reuven heard and saved him from their hands," he would have carried him and brought him to his father.

Explained the great Rabbi Menachem Kasher that what this Midrash teaches us is that had Reuven been aware of the long-term, historical repercussions of his efforts to save Yosef, he would have approached it with even greater intensity and zeal, not taking a half measure and plan to return later to finish the job. Instead, he would have immediately given it his all, returning him to his father, Yaakov.

This mission reminds me that we, too, are in that moment where we have a choice to lead our lives as regular, offering some assistance to Israel and praying that all will be alright. Or we can go above and beyond, give more, do more, and be there more for our beloved land.

I pray we choose the path of doing everything we can and then doing some more!

B'vracha,  
Rabbi Leonard A. Matanky

# Jewish Federation of Metropolitan Chicago/ Jewish United Fund Board Mission to Israel – Day 3

23 Kislev 5784  
December 6, 2023

Dear K.I.N.S. Family,

I'm at Ben Gurion Airport after an intense but inspiring mission.

In some respects, today was the toughest of all days, as we visited Kibbutz Nir Oz, a small community of 400 people, which suffered the loss of 25 members who were murdered on October 7th and another 75 who were taken hostage.

But before I describe that visit, I want to begin with the first presentation of the day by Ayelet Nahmias-Verbin, a former member of Knesset who now serves as the chairman of the Fund for Victims of Terror.

She described to us the work of the Fund, the way they supplement the work of the Israeli Government, providing services and psychological treatment for victims of terror and now victims of October 7th.

As was true of many whom we met on the visit, politically, she had been associated with the left. Yet, when describing this war, she was

very direct – “It is us or them,” she said. But even more, she reminded us that what happened on that day will remain with Israel for generations, just as, and probably even more, than the memories of the Yom Kippur War. This is why the Fund is investing so heavily in mental health professionals, seeking trauma specialists who speak Hebrew and are willing to meet with patients even via telehealth. (If you know someone who fits that bill, please ask them to contact me, and I can pass their information along!)

But what brought her to tears was when she said, “It’s impossible to erase the memory of a young child who hid in a closet for hours, saw his mother murdered and his sister kidnapped.”

Or as Danyelle Neuman, who serves on the Senior Management Team of the Jewish Agency (and an ICJA alum), added, “What can you say to an evacuee, who tells you ‘this isn’t my shirt, these aren’t my pants, and I don’t know if I still have a bed even if I agree to go back and sleep there?’“

It was with this background that we traveled to Kibbutz Nir Oz. Today, the Kibbutz is empty, except for a few people and the soldiers stationed there. Our guide for the visit was Amit Rubin, who grew up there and whose daughter, son-in-law, and parents narrowly escaped the massacre, locking themselves in the safe room, climbing out a window, and then hiding for hours until the IDF finally came. But they didn’t escape the trauma – as he told us, his father, who, before the attack, was a vibrant, active person, is now in an assisted living facility, visibly diminished.

It’s hard to describe all we saw. Home after home was damaged, ransacked, and many burnt as a result of two waves of attackers – first, approximately 100 terrorists invaded the Kibbutz. Then, they were followed by local Arabs, many of whom in the past had relationships with the people of the Kibbutz, and even had been shuttled by members of the Kibbutz for medical treatment. Those barbarians murdered and tortured the residents of the Kibbutz, burnt down homes to smoke people out of their saferooms, vandalized the houses and buildings, stole items of value, and kidnapped babies, women, children, and men.

We saw it all: bullet holes in doors, blood-stained floors, and pictures posted on the doors of those who were kidnapped. Toward the end of our visit, we walked through the chadar ochel where no one

was found, but which was vandalized and burned nonetheless. While walking through the kitchen, there was a noticeable stench, which Amit later told us was because, in the first days after the attack, that's where they had set up a temporary morgue.

I asked Amit what took the army seven hours to arrive, and he just shrugged and said he didn't know. But what he did say is that he can no longer think of the Arabs of Gaza as anything but terrorists, and from now on, he no longer feels that we have a moral imperative to exercise any amount of restraint while fighting Hamas.

It was all too hard to imagine, but what is inspiring is the help our community will give them. Because while they don't have a home now, soon they will be moving into three new buildings in Kiryat Gat while their Kibbutz will be rebuilt. JUF has already committed \$1,000,000 to help them with recreating their lives. And most importantly, it will be a long-term project, initially planned for up to five years.

From there, we drove to our final stop, Kiryat Gat. For decades, the Chicago Jewish community has partnered with Kiryat Gat. I still remember my first visit there, to a city that was economically and socially challenged. While many challenges remain, today, Kiryat Gat and its adjacent suburb of Karmeit Gat are thriving communities.

First, we heard from two NGOs supported by JUF (and one more at the end). Ajeec (it's an Arabic word that means "I am coming to you") has done great work with the Bedouin community (there were Bedouin Arabs who were murdered and kidnapped on October 7th) and other Arab communities. Leket Israel is a fantastic organization that has provided food for thousands of people and is now providing meals for thousands more who were evacuated. Since October 7th, they have provided over 400,000 meals and expect to reach one million in the coming months.

These presentations were followed by an excruciating meeting, almost like a shiva visit, with the parents and siblings of Aviel Rahamim, אביאל. Aviel was one of the 364 young adults who were brutally murdered at the Nova Festival. His mother, Tamar, who has been an integral part of Chicago's Partnership with Kiryat Gat, spoke with us about her son, and then his older brother spoke, and his younger sister shared a slide show about him and his four friends who were all murdered. Their pain was

palpable, and I pray that our presence was a source of comfort, knowing that their tragedy is felt well beyond their community.

Finally, we ended almost where we began talking about the victims of terror, and this time, hearing from the Organization for Israel's Terror Victims. This organization works closely with victims to ensure they receive the governmental benefits they deserve and then helps them receive what they need. One of their most impressive accomplishments was getting the hostages to be recognized by the government as "victims" so that they and their families would be eligible for the same benefits as someone who is injured,

This week, we read the story of the sale of Yosef. Immediately before he is sold, his father sends him to see how his brothers are doing. Yosef travels toward them, and the Torah describes, "They saw him at a distance, and before he drew near to them, they conspired to kill him" (37:18).

Rabbi Simcha Bunim Sofer noted the Torah's emphasis on the distance separating Yosef from his brothers and he explained that the Torah is teaching us that they could only conspire because they saw him "from a distance" and imagined him to be a threat.

If they had only waited until he drew close to them, they would have never seen him as a threat. As their brother, they would have understood that his intentions were pure, and they would not have sold him into slavery.

Seeing something up close gives us an entirely different perspective on things. While we are bombarded by images and news, seeing the devastation in Israel firsthand and hearing the many, many inspired responses has left me with a sense of great hope for the future.

Of course, the pain is there, and it will take many, many years to heal the physical and psychological wounds of that terrible day. But the Jewish people have come together in ways no one could have imagined. Seeing the tragedy and the unity up close leaves me believing that we will emerge stronger and better.

I thank the JUF for the opportunity to join in this mission and thank them even more for all they are doing for the Jewish people in Israel and Chicago.



We still have so much to do, but I know we will do it.

I look forward to sharing more reflections on my visit this Shabbat in shul (at Main).

B'vracha,

Rabbi Leonard A. Matanky

# Ida Crown Jewish Academy Senior Class Volunteer Mission to Israel Update #1

6 Tevet 5784

December 18, 2023

Dear K.I.N.S. Family

Since October 7th, I have been fortunate to travel to Israel on two missions. Today I arrived for my third, wearing my hat as the dean of Ida Crown Jewish Academy and escorting the senior class for the first of the four-week volunteer mission.

Unlike my previous missions, this one will be significantly different, not only because I am accompanying 17 and 18 year olds, but also because my goal is not to bear witness but to volunteer.

Because of that, these updates will be different as well and based on the daily updates I send to the parents and students of Ida Crown. Nevertheless, I hope you will find them meaningful.

Over the years, I have led many groups of high school students to Europe and Israel, and in many respects, this trip is no different; there

were the same challenges with tickets and security, with seats on the plane and beds on the kibbutz where we are staying.

Yet, from the moment we arrived, there were small, subtle differences. It's quieter walking through Ben Gurion Airport, and the only planes parked at the gates are Israeli – El Al or Arkia. And walking from the plane to passport control, there are two sets of signs – those which direct people to a “mechav mugan,” a secure area in case of air raid sirens, and the posters of the hostages that line the final walkway down to the immigration agents.

We drove directly from the airport to the Kotel. Again, there were small differences, the signs at the Kotel directing us to the “mechav mugan,” the inner areas for prayer that now double as shelters, and a glorious tekes hashba'a (swearing-in ceremony for soldiers) where we noticed a preponderance of soldiers, who were clearly not observant, davening and taking their pictures at the Kotel.

It's the first time I've seen soldiers spend so much time at the Kotel. There was even a group who surrounded a Chasid, leading them in reciting/shouting pesukim that foretell our ultimate victory over our enemies.

After the Kotel, we made our way to the kibbutz, where the first reminders to our students were about their safety and security. One of the tour coordinators, Torah MiTzion alum and son of an ICJA alum, Eitan Grossman, began by showing them where the secure room was located, and later, we did an air raid drill practicing going from our rooms to the shelter in ninety seconds or less.

To put that in context, before we came to Kibbutz Kfar Etzion, the kibbutz had been hosting residents of the evacuated community of Shlomit, which is situated less than a kilometer from Egypt and about five kilometers from Gaza. When they heard an air raid siren, they had less than ten seconds to seek shelter, so when they came to Kfar Etzion, ninety seconds was a relief!

I'm not sure how much our seniors feel these small things. I do know that tomorrow, as we work in the fields of Nechusha pruning trees, they will begin to appreciate some of the smaller challenges of this war – that more than 200,000 workers are now serving in the army.

Unlike my other recent visits, this is not a trip for them to see the destruction of October 7th. Instead, this is a trip for them to touch the hearts and lives of so many, from the flight attendants on our flight who were overwhelmed that these young people were coming to help to passport agents who fast-tracked our entry because of what we're doing, and to every Israeli I speak with, those who are in positions of power and those who are risking their lives for the State.

I am very proud of what we are doing on this mission. As I have said on numerous occasions, I believe this is the opportunity of a lifetime that will uplift and inspire our students, just as other periods of crisis shaped my generation.

One final thought: in this week's parsha, Yosef, after having revealed himself to his brothers, sent wagons back to Canaan to transport his father Yaakov to Egypt. When Yaakov saw these wagons, he knew that Yosef was still alive, and he believed his sons that he was the Viceroy of Egypt.

The Baalei HaTosafot explain that these wagons alluded to the six wagons used to transport the Mishkan in the desert. But why would that allusion comfort Yaakov and lead him to believe his long-lost son Yosef was still alive?

One answer is that the six wagons served the 12 tribes. This means that every two tribes had to work together and join together in creating the Jewish future. That very sense of cooperation is so evident in Israel and throughout the Jewish world.

Just a few months ago, there were tremendous divisions that were the source of protests and strife; today, everyone wants to work together for Israel and to gain the release of the hostages.

The seniors who have joined me in Israel will be very fortunate to experience this first-hand as they help farmers, create programs for young evacuees, and volunteer in various settings. And our students back home will, please God have opportunities to make a difference as well.

My hope and prayer is that together, we, too, will join in creating a glorious Jewish future.

B'vracha,  
Rabbi Leonard A. Matanky

# Ida Crown Jewish Academy Senior Class Volunteer Mission to Israel – Update #2

7 Tevet 5784  
December 19, 2023

Dear K.I.N.S. Family

Today was the first day of our volunteer service, and we spent most of it in a vineyard and olive orchard outside the Moshav of Nechushim. Officially, our task was to clear the weeds around the vines in a vineyard, remove rings that restricted water flow around the drip irrigation system, and pick olives.

But unofficially, we were there to inspire and be inspired. As the vintner, Nadav Jesselson, told us from the start, “You don’t understand how important it is that you are here.” And then, he added the famous adage that *מעט מן האור דוחה הרבה מן החושך* [lit. a little bit of light pushes away much darkness] saying; your coming is much more than just a little light.

The work was intense, and it was also hot outside. But our seniors did admirably (I didn’t do too bad either) – pulling weeds and thorns

(which went right through the work gloves) and removing the rings from several acres of vines.

It all came together at dinner when one of the seniors asked me about the work and how they could do this regularly. At this point, I reminded them that “normally” there are other workers, but they’re all in the army. Without volunteers, the crops would spoil, and maybe the vines would be destroyed. And I saw the “light bulb” go off in her head and the realization that we had made a difference!

After returning to the kibbutz, enjoying some ice cream, coffee, and sweets at the Kfar Etzion “mall,” we had the pleasure of hearing from HaRav Yedidya Berzon, the head of the Mevaseret institutions (MMY and Yeshivat Mevaseret Zion).

His stories were amazing, and he left us with two key messages:

1. He explained that for centuries, Jews had been forced to live a galut experience, where persecution and crisis separated us from one another. Since October 7th, however, we’ve been living in a geulah experience, living through a crisis that brings all of klal Yisrael closer to one another.
2. We need to be proud and proclaim, “Ivri Anochi” – that we Jews share a common destiny of being different and living lives that celebrate that difference and our role as a nation of priests and a holy nation.

One last thought from K.I.N.S past president, Dr. Yigal Yahav. Tragically, his cousin, Captain Netanel Silberg, נטען, was killed yesterday in Gaza, and the family is sitting shiva in Alon Shvut (an adjacent community to where we are staying).

Earlier today, when we saw the announcement, while we didn’t know who he was, we began to plan for our students to go to the shiva for tefillah and nichum aveilim. This evening, Dr. Yahav helped arrange that visit, and he said, “Rabbi, I am so proud of your program, but even more, this program will change their relationship with the Land of Israel.”

I believe he is correct, but I must add that it will also change their lives.

As I noted yesterday, this trip is very different from my two previous missions. Those missions were to bear witness to the tragedy. While this mission is about being part of the effort to rebuild the land. But, as the days go on, I also am beginning to believe that this mission is about anticipating the geulah, bringing our young adults closer to the land, and ensuring that they begin to write their own chapters in that redemptive experience.

B'vracha,  
Rabbi Leonard A. Matanky

# Ida Crown Jewish Academy Senior Class Volunteer Mission to Israel – Update #4

8 Tevet 5784

December 20, 2023

Dear K.I.N.S. Family

Today, the senior class and I returned to the Anava Winery to work in the vineyard and the adjacent olive orchard. The kids were assigned two tasks in the vineyard: string wires to finish the vineyard trellises and dig out a perimeter fence while flattening the ground around it. While in the olive orchard, they were pruning olive trees that had gone unattended for nearly a decade and, as a result, were no longer bearing fruit.

The students worked with pruning shears and saws, wire-cutters, shovels, rakes, and hoes, not the typical tools for seniors in high school, but, as the owner of the 100 dunam property (that's about 25 acres) explained to us, more than 150,000 Palestinian workers are no longer coming into Israel and more than 300,000 reservists are serving in Tzahal. This wartime has created a severe shortage of workers. Without our students and the thousands of other volunteers from Israel and abroad,



the economy would suffer severe setbacks, especially in the agricultural realm where crops must be cared for or lost.

In the vineyard, our volunteer efforts were especially important because this will be the first year the grapes can be harvested and used. After all, as he explained, this year, the fruit is no longer “*orlah*” (forbidden by the Torah to eat) but “*neta revai*” – and once redeemed it will be permitted fruits. But only if the fields would be ready to yield a harvest. As one of our students commented, never before did she realize the risks farmers take when raising crops and the long-term investment needed. And with that, she had an “*ah ha moment*,” finally appreciating why we pray for rain!

And yes, I did string wires for the trellises (I can now tell you how the vine grows upwards, spreads out on the second wire, and then expands upwards onto the third wire). I was also digging with a hoe and even did a little pruning, all of which I discovered afterward was documented by our students on Instagram.

But they couldn’t possibly document the *nachas* I had watching them work and seeing their connection to the land grow.

This evening, we had a panel of three former ICJA students speak to our seniors about their aliyah journey. Heather (Taub) Andron, Aliza (Mainzer) Hughes, Orpaz (Levy) Levi, and Aaron Friedman. Each had a different story of their aliyah but shared the same story of their love for Israel and the opportunities Israel has provided for their children. It was one of those great moments when one generation looks back and shares their experiences with the next generation.

But it was more than that because they reflected on what living in Israel at this time means. One of the most inspiring stories was of Aaron Friedman, a former K.I.N.S. member, who made aliyah when he was 27 and was exempt from the draft. When the war broke out, he heard about the special program Israel had created for older Charedi yeshiva students. To enlist, Aaron enrolled in a yeshiva to enlist in the army through that program. He did his two weeks of basic training, graduated as the “*chayal mitztayen*” and has been serving for the past six weeks as a reservist. He arrived in full uniform and with his M-16 (active duty soldiers must carry their weapons), and he told us – “This has been the biggest privilege of my life, to protect my land and my family, to be part

of the Jewish story. Because this is not just a fight for Israel, this is a fight for the entire Jewish people.”

Another interesting moment was when Aliza Hughes (another former K.I.N.S. member) told the kids that despite her optimism, Israel is at war, and there are concerns and worries. But then she said that watching the news, what is happening on American college campuses seems just as scary.

This is an unfortunate reality of the media – something the Ralbag wrote about in Sefer Shoftim nearly a thousand years ago, that what people want to read and learn the most from are the extremes of life. Watching the American news, the only pictures you see are of Israel at war. Nowhere do you see the exceptional chesed, the volunteerism, and the day-to-day normal parts of life.

While on previous trips, I saw and learned so much about the tragedy of October 7th, this trip teaches me about the blessings of October 8th and beyond.

The challenges before us are great, but so are the Jewish people, and we will come out of this stronger and better.

To prove it, one needs to go no further than an amazing audio message I heard from Iris Chaim, the mother of Yotam Chaim, who was one of the three hostages whom Tzahal accidentally killed. The recording was sent to the soldiers in Battalion 7828 Unit 17, and she told them that she was “sending them her love and hugs,” assuring them that she and her husband and children bear no animosity towards them for the death of her son, “only Hamas, חמאס was responsible.” “Take care of yourselves... visit us as soon as you can so we can tell you that what you did, despite the sadness, must have been the right thing in the moment.”

Now, that is true greatness, and that is the reason we can be assured that we will emerge from this crisis closer to the ultimate geulah.

B’vracha,  
Rabbi Leonard A. Matanky

# Ida Crown Jewish Academy Senior Class Volunteer Mission to Israel – Update #5

9 Tevet 5784  
December 21, 2023

Dear K.I.N.S. Family

Today was a different kind of day, as our work moved indoors and shifted from supporting farmers to supporting soldiers in the field.

We began in Petach Tikvah in the underground garage of the headquarters of a pharmaceutical company called Medison. Medison is a well-known international firm founded by the Yaakovson family in 1996. Before October 7th, their primary philanthropic project was “HaTalmud HaYisraeli,” a daf yomi program for young children that distills ideas and stories on each daf of Gemara and presents it in a way that even seven-year-olds can appreciate.

But on October 8th, Medison jumped into providing equipment for soldiers in the field – everything from thermal underwear to drones, generators to helmets. To date, they have delivered over 17,000 shipments to soldiers.

## *Missions: The First 100 Days of the Gaza War*

The operation, now dubbed Medison-Aid, started small. But on the second or third day of the war, a man named David Hamelsdorf had a son in the army who needed some supplies, and someone suggested he ask Meir Yaakovson, who davened in the same shul as he did, to help. Within a week, Meir committed 1,000,000 NIS, then 2,000,000 NIS, and at present, over 20,000,000 to this cause – in addition to the equipment and donations from all over the world. Two jumbo-jets recently came with donated supplies and equipment – one from LA and another from NY.

What did we do at Medison? We were filling orders from chayalim, packing them, and getting them ready to be trucked by volunteers to army bases in the North and the South. There were phone batteries, thermal blankets, tourniquets, socks, underwear (– soldiers in Gaza can go 50 days without laundry – the only option is new underwear), burn kits, and so much more.

Of course, because the volunteers who created this operation came from the business world, everything is computerized, and the orders popped up on our phones. Checking their phones, the kids went from place to place in the garage and grabbed the supplies. And then, I saw something that “blew me away,” after our students packed and sealed the boxes, affixed the Medison Aid sticker (with a QR for soldiers to order more supplies), and the shipping label, they signed the boxes and added a bracha for the chayalim.

As has been true of every place we’ve gone, the volunteers who run this operation were amazed that we came but so very grateful that we were there to help. One woman even gave her number to the girls inviting them to come to her for a Shabbat next year when they are in seminary.

From there, we traveled to Chamal Yerushalayim. In army terminology, a cha“mal is a cheder milchama – a “war room” from which the battle is run. But since October 7th, the term has been appropriated by volunteers to refer to grassroots operations that supply the needs of soldiers.

This chamal was created by Michael Cohen, a marketing professional who started using his contacts immediately after the war began to supply soldiers with their needs. Unlike Medison, which will take

requests directly from soldiers, this operation, located in the Jerusalem suburb of Gilo, works with officers in the field.

Our job in the chamal was to help prepare Shabbat food for 3500 soldiers in the field. I asked Michael why it was necessary – doesn't the army provide food? His answer was simple: it does, but we provide food for Shabbat that has a home cooked feeling and reminds the soldiers that we are with them.

This entire operation is taking place in a house scheduled for demolition but has been donated by its owners for this amazing project, which brings together all of Am Yisrael. There was a definite Sefardi flavor to the operation, but there were people there volunteering with kipot and without, with payot and those with tattoos.

One older woman who was also volunteering walked in and asked about our group. I explained to her who we were, and her response was *אתם עם ישראל היפה ביותר בעיני* – In my eyes, you are the most beautiful expression of Am Yisrael. And Michael gave all our students a bracha of “May you continue to do and to give,” which I pray will come true for all our children – the future leaders of Am Yisrael.

As I watched his operation in progress, I asked Michael how it was funded. He answered that “it all works out.” This really means that he does what needs to happen, and he looks to God to help people see the importance and sincerity of his work and donate to the cause. And God has been pretty good about it! Because despite the donated building and supplies he receives, his monthly budget is 600,000 NIS, and he continues to expand the operation, not taking even a penny for himself (something that is true of so many projects that started after the war).

I am so proud of our students' energy to do chesed. But even more, I am humbled by the grassroots entrepreneurial spirit of those who have created and funded projects that support all of Am Yisrael during this war. And I am grateful that I've had a chance to be part of those efforts and tangibly help the chyalim and the mefunim (the displaced).

Tonight is Asarah b'Tevet, and tomorrow, beginning at 6:02 is the fast day – the only one that can occur on a Friday (and according to some, could theoretically even occur on a Shabbat were it not for our fixed Jewish calendar, which precludes that). We will be starting the day davening at the home of Netanel Silberg, *נחמן*, who was killed in Gaza,

and moving on to Har Herzl to visit the graves of the kedoshim who have given their lives for our people.

As a result, it too, will be a very different day for our students. Still, I'm sure it will be very meaningful as they continue to experience first-hand what it means to be part of Am Yisrael – having worked the land, supported the defenders of our people, and tomorrow, remembering those who sacrificed their lives so that we can be safe, and build a bright and glorious future.

B'vracha,  
Rabbi Leonard A. Matanky

# Ida Crown Jewish Academy Senior Class Volunteer Mission to Israel – Update #6

10 Tevet 5784  
December 22, 2023

Dear K.I.N.S. Family

Since it is a “short Friday” and the fast of Asarah b’Tevet, today’s schedule was very different but no less meaningful.

We began the morning with shacharit at the Silberg home. The Silberg’s son, Naftali, was killed earlier this week in Gaza, and the family is sitting Shiva in Alon Shvut. As I mentioned earlier, Netanel’s maternal grandfather is Dr. Yahav’s first cousin, and my son Yitzi knew Netanel from when Yitzi was studying in Har Etzion.

We arrived at the Silberg house, and with our 40 people, the room was packed. Netanel’s father davened for the amud, but as could only happen in Israel, the people there included HaRav Yaakov Medan, the Rosh HaYeshiva of Har Etzion, HaRav Yaakov Zvi Rimon, the Rav of Gush Etzion and Israeli Supreme Court Justice, Noam Sohlberg.

After davening, we sat with the Silberg family to express our condolences. His mother and father shared a little bit about their son with us. He was quiet but an organizer and a commander of a brigade within the elite Yahalom Unit of IDF. What he did for Israel, his father told us, is a military secret, but he earned the respect of his soldiers, many of whom spoke at his funeral and continue to come to the Shiva.

One of the comments his father made we have heard from others as well – that this war is a second War of Independence, a fight for Israel's survival and the future of our state.

It was a significant visit, and I believe we also brought the family a measure of comfort, knowing that we came at this challenging time.

From there, we went to Har Herzl and visited the newest sections of the cemetery, the ones filled with the graves of soldiers killed in this war. There were rows of graves with the date 07.10.2023 – the first day of the war, and there were graves that had yet to be covered with a stone.

There, we heard stories of some of the soldiers who died defending the land, and I met the mother of a soldier whose shloshim was today. She was speaking with the Bnei Akiva Mission, who happened to be at the cemetery at the same time as we were. Her grief was enormous, and she shared with me the depth of pain she was suffering.

Can you imagine her grief multiplied thousands of times in a country that is no larger than New Jersey? I can't – but that is the trauma that Israel is addressing while still pushing forward in this Second War of Independence.

This Shabbat, we will spend time with the members of Kibbutz Kfar Etzion – a kibbutz that was destroyed in 1948 and rebuilt immediately after the 1967 war. What they did, rebuild and thrive, is what Israel will need to do all over again, and I am supremely confident that our people will do it.

I saw one small measure of this in a brief video I received today. It featured the return of Yeshivat Sderot to their home. They had to be evacuated following October 7th. The way they celebrated their return was by finishing the hakafot of Simchat Torah that the barbarians of Hamas had interrupted.

They're dancing, and the spirit we have seen all week in Israel and throughout our history is what should strengthen us in these most difficult times.



May this be a true Shabbat Shalom, and may Israel emerge from this war stronger and more unified than ever before!

B'vracha,  
Rabbi Leonard A. Matanky

# Ida Crown Jewish Academy Senior Class Volunteer Mission to Israel – Update #6

12 Tevet 5784  
December 24, 2023

Dear K.I.N.S. Family

The past two days have been filled with emotion and opportunity, as our students spent Shabbat on Kfar Etzion and today, visited with a family who lost their son in the war and worked with young children who have been displaced from their homes.

We spent our first Shabbat in Kfar Etzion to get to know the kibbutz community better. To do so, we davened with the Kibbutz, and on Friday night, we divided up for home hospitality with members of the Kibbutz.

I had the pleasure of eating with the Rav of the Kibbutz, Rav Moshe, and Chaviva Spetter. As I introduced myself to him, we discovered that twenty-one years ago, the year my son Yaakov, z"l was killed in a car accident at camp, we had spent the month together at Moshava.

He and his wife were a young couple on shlichut, and he served as the Rosh Kollel at Moshava.

Since the war began, Rav Spetter has been in the army, and this was the first Shabbat he was home, which was true for many of the host homes we ate at. This says so much about the people of the Kibbutz – that they were willing to have guests on a “first Shabbat.”

After kiddush and before the meal began, their daughter left for shmira – a new task in the Kibbutz which involved watching the video monitors of the newly installed surveillance system, and one of the many things that changed on the Kibbutz since the war began. In fact, Rav Spetter told me that when he came home on Thursday after being away since October 9th, there were many things he noticed, from the soldiers at the entrance, the changes in the hours of stores, the chayalim living on the Kibbutz, and of course the many members who are still serving in the army and away from their families.

But my experience was unique; because there was a home where two families came together since both husbands were in the army, another where multiple members had just come back from service, and homes where many were still serving in the war.

On Shabbat morning after Tefilla, we had an outstanding presentation by Rav Yonatan Billet. Rav Billet is a teacher in Yeshivat Makor Chayim who is known for both scholarship and spirituality. He told us about the origins of the Kibbutz and used the life of Chanan Porat to tell that story.

Chanan Porat was raised in Kfar Etzion. As a four-year-old, he was evacuated along with all the women and children during the War of Independence and was one of the few children of the Kibbutz whose father wasn't massacred by the Arabs on May 13, 1948 (the day before the declaration of the State). Following the Six-Day War, Chanan led the charge to re-establish the Kibbutz (and founded Yeshivat Har Etzion).

Everyone told him his dreams were impossible, and many, even the widows, discouraged him. But he didn't listen.

Said Rav Billet, “Do you know how many first grades were opened this year in the Gush? There were 63!” (And don't forget that in Israel, a classroom can have as many as 40 students!).

Before Chanan Porat passed away, he left instructions that on his tombstone, they should write – *בנפשו יביא חלומו* (lit. with his life he brought about his dreams). Rav Billet used this to challenge our students, telling them there are two types of people in this world – those with stories and those without. Both types of people may experience the same things. But one type moves on, while another says “wow!” and always has a story to tell.

This trip has definitely been a “wow” experience, and I pray that our students will have so many stories that they will share and that will shape their dreams for the future.

One of the many things I have learned over the past few trips is that you can't ask an Israeli, “How are you?” Because no one is the same, and the war impacts everyone. This was brought home again after breakfast this morning as I spoke with one of the women on the Kibbutz who works in the Chadar Ochel. She told me that she hesitates to turn on the news every morning because she is afraid of what she might hear. And today was an especially difficult day, as we learned that 11 soldiers were killed in Gaza. But then she added that her mother called her unexpectedly this morning, and she was afraid to pick up the phone, not knowing why she was calling. B“H it was just for something small – but if you want to understand some of the underlying tension here – that's a perfect example.

The first thing we did today was visit the home of Jen and Robert Airly in Ramat Beit Shemesh. Their son, Binyamin, hv“d, was killed in Gaza on November 18th, and they had just finished his shloshim. They spoke with us for over an hour and told us about him and their grief and their faith. And what amazing faith they have.

She was asked if she would go back in time was there anything she would want to change. And her answer was, “No, everything that happened was the will of Hashem.”

Recently, they found an “I Want” list that their son had composed when he was sixteen with everything he aspired to accomplish, everything from not speaking lashon hara to doing mitzvot more seriously. His mother described this list as a gift from God. And she challenged our students to take upon themselves one mitzvah in memory of her son and to bring the geulah sooner. She also passed around a journal

for people to do just that. Afterward, some of our kids were so inspired they discussed creating their own “I Want” list.

And there was so much more she shared. Her faith in Hashem is exceptional. One more example was when a friend felt they couldn’t make a simcha in the middle of the war. She told them what Rav Asher Weiss told her: Everyone has a role in this world; her role for the moment is to mourn, and her friend’s role is to make a Simcha.

From there, we went to an exclusive 5-star hotel called Kramim. It’s a hotel that is so fancy it doesn’t allow children as guests. But for the past few weeks, it has been host to the community of Shlomit – 80 families with more than 350 children.

Shlomit is 6 kilometers from Gaza and .5 kilometers from Egypt, and on October 7th, four members of the Kibbutz were killed defending a neighboring community of Prigan. After the 7th, they were evacuated with only twenty minutes’ notice.

At first, they stayed in Kfar Etzion. But soon after, they were moved to the hotel. There is a room for a gan, and there are rooms for school; there is even a classroom in the manager’s offices. We came to provide some respite for the parents and enjoyment for the kids – working with 5-9-year-olds.

After hearing about the heroism of the four and the challenges the families face, I had a chance to meet the hotel manager. I told him how amazed I was with what he was doing. And he told me how amazed he was with what we were doing. It was as if we were talking right past each other – he couldn’t get over the fact that parents would send their children to volunteer, and I couldn’t get over everything he was doing for the evacuees.

And then I went to see our kids in action. I am so proud of how they played with these children, brought such joy into their day, and the creativity and compassion they showed. I even joined in, sitting on the floor and playing a game of “Duck, Duck, Goose.” It was an absolute joy to be there, and we’ve already heard from the families asking that we come back – that this was the first time a group had come and given the children such a meaningful and fun time. And we will go back!

We ended today with learning. The girls had a chance to study with world-renowned scholar Dr. Jeffrey Sachs, and the boys went to

Yeshivat Har Etzion for night seder and shiur. Both learning groups had a great experience, and I thank Amudim (a women's seminary where Dr. Sachs teaches) and Har Etzion for creating opportunities for us.

In this week's parsha, Yaakov Avinu gathers his sons and declares that he will tell them what will happen **בְּאַחֲרֵית הַיָּמִים** – at the end of days. Rashi, quoting the Midrash, explains that Yaakov intended to tell his children about the Messianic era, but God took away his prophetic powers, and therefore, he was unable to do so, offering instead his final charge to his children.

But the first Chief Rabbi of Israel, Rabbi Isaac Herzog, ztz"l, the grandfather of the current president of Israel, suggested that Yaakov did reveal what would happen when he said in the following pasuk: **הִקְבְּצוּ וְשִׁמְעוּ בְּנֵי יַעֲקֹב** – Assemble and hear, O sons of Jacob.

In other words, he explained what will happen in the Messianic era – the Jewish people will coalesce and come together, listening as never before.

On each of my visits to Israel since the beginning of the war, what has struck me is the faith of the people, their willingness to work together, and, most importantly, their unity. It is as if the words **הִקְבְּצוּ וְשִׁמְעוּ** are coming to life in this time of great challenge and danger.

May this continue, and may the geulah shlaima arrive quickly, the hostages be released and those who threaten us be removed from this earth.

B'vracha,  
Rabbi Leonard A. Matanky

# Ida Crown Jewish Academy Senior Class Volunteer Mission to Israel – Update #7

13 Tevet 5784  
December 25, 2023

Dear K.I.N.S. Family

One of the great things about being in Israel on December 25th is realizing that it's just another day. In fact, if you didn't look at the calendar, it would seem no different than the 24th or the 26th, which is something I mentioned this evening at a reunion dinner we hosted for our 12th graders and ICJA alumni studying in Israel.

Yet, as regular of a day as it was, it was another memorable day of volunteering, because today, we went out to the orange orchards of Moshav Eitan and began picking oranges. Why? Because, like so many things in Israel today, there is a labor shortage. In the past, they had Arab workers working the fields, but after October 7th those workers are no longer allowed in Israel. Therefore, if volunteers didn't help, an orange crop would rot, and a farmer would lose his livelihood.

And so, along with the ICJA Senior Class and another forty ICJA alumni who spanned more than 60 years of ICJA students, I wore a canvas bucket on my shoulder and started to work. It's not as easy as it may seem. There's an art to it! Because to harvest the oranges – you don't pull. Rather, it's a twist-and-snap action that removes the fruit from the tree.

All told, we filled about ten massive bins of oranges which were then lifted by forklift and put on a truck to be packed for the market.

Which is what we did, but not what we learned. I learned that the owner of the orchard, Moshe, had arrived in Israel fifty years ago from Iraq and planted the trees himself. And I learned, through a conversation with ICJA alum Rabbi Dr. David Mescheloff ('62), that once the oranges made it into the crate, it was then that they were obligated in *trumot* and *maasrot* – unless the orange was damaged and would typically be rejected. If so, you would be able to eat the orange without tithing.

But even more, through conversations with alumni, our students learned about all of the fantastic things ICJA alumni are doing in Israel. They are doctors and lawyers, volunteer police officers and professors, homemakers and fundraisers, and so much more. One of the *madrichim* noticed how proud everyone was of the 12th graders, but even more how connected everyone seemed to be with one another. It was one of those great "Chicago moments," where even if you don't know a person, you know their parents, or aunt, or uncle, or teacher, someone you have in common.

One more thing I learned was yet another response to the question (which shouldn't be asked): "How are you?"

"שלומי בשלום המדינה שלי" – I feel as my country feels.

It's a powerful answer because it recognizes the trauma people faced on the 7th, the grief experienced with every funeral attended and every *shiva* visited, and the constant concern that grips the country.

While things seem normal where we are, we know that beneath the surface, families are suffering, men and women continue to risk their lives in Gaza and on the northern border, and parents must reassure their children, while coping with their own fears.



Yet, despite it all, today was a day of great nachas, of seeing old friends, watching the next generation of leaders working alongside those who lead and have led, and celebrating friendships and relationships that continue despite the separation of distance and time.

And then, to top it all off, this evening, as we were driving back to the kibbutz, one of our students, Joseph Rothner, shared a picture on the group WhatsApp – of a smiling soldier standing next to a box of supplies from Medison Aid.

We had gone to Medison Aid last Thursday and packed supplies. And as I noted then, many of our students wrote a brief message to a chayal and some even included a contact number. Joseph did just that, and the chayal who received the box he packed took a picture and sent it back.

You know it's a good feeling when we do an act of chesed. But doing an act of chesed and then seeing it reach its intended audience is proof that you've made a difference!

In the opening words of this week's parsha, Yaakov calls his son Yosef to his bedside to ask him to promise that he will perform an act of **חֶסֶד וְאֱמֶת**, of kindness and truth, and bury him in Eretz Yisrael.

Why chesed and emet? There are many answers. But the book Ma'asei Hashem suggested that when Yaakov asked Yosef to promise to perform the chesed, he transformed that voluntary act of chesed into an obligatory act.

We've been in Israel for a little more than a week, during which we have spent many hours doing chesed. And while sometimes, when doing chesed, a person can fall into the trap of self-aggrandizement or self-importance, that hasn't happened on this trip.

Why? Maybe because our chesed has been a chesed of emet – a chesed driven by a sense of community, and therefore, a chesed that's required and not voluntary.

I think that's how so many of us have felt since October 7th. We've given more, done more, and felt more, not because we can, but because we have to. It's who we are, and it's an expression of our identity as klal Yisrael.

*Missions: The First 100 Days of the Gaza War*

Tomorrow will be a very busy day, with many more oranges to pick, a sicha with Rav Doron Perez, whose son is among the hostages, and a BBQ with the elite paratroop unit, Duvduvan, together with HaRav Yosef Zvi Rimon.

B'vracha,  
Rabbi Leonard A. Matanky

# Ida Crown Jewish Academy Senior Class Volunteer Mission to Israel – Update # 8

14 Tevet 5784  
December 26, 2023

Dear K.I.N.S. Family

What an amazing day this has been! From the morning through this evening, we've had once-in-a-lifetime experiences.

It all began back in the orange orchard of Moshav Eitan, where, in addition to picking oranges, our boys had a chance to package and sort them, and our girls had a chance to work side by side with 12th-grade girls from Ulpana Merkaz Shapira.

The Ulpana is a Bnei Akiva girls' school in the same Shafir region as the orchard, and Shafir has been part of JUF's "Partnership Together" project for over twenty years. Just last year, I hosted the principal of the Ulpana at ICJA, and today, he brought his students to meet ours.

By the time we were ready to leave, the girls were "old friends," begging for more time to hang out together, inviting our girls to come for Shabbat and trading Instagram accounts. But the real beauty of this

“mifgash” was that it was proof once again of the sense of global Jewish peoplehood – the reality that no matter where we’re from, we have so much in common that binds us together.

A bit later, as our kids were busy picking oranges, a truck from Leket Israel pulled up to the orchard. I doubt that most of the kids noticed it – but I did.

For those who don’t know, Leket Israel is the largest food bank in Israel that, before the war, helped to feed more than 175,000 people weekly, and since the war, has been assisting farmers with their harvests and buying produce that farmers are unable to export.

The truck pulled up because the oranges we were picking were being divided into two categories: the larger ones, fit to be sold in supermarkets and the smaller ones that were being donated to Leket. This led me to tell the kids that what they were doing was not only helping a farmer whose produce would have rotted without volunteer support but also feeding those in need! Two mitzvot in one.

When we returned to Kfar Etzion, we had the honor of hearing from Rav Doron Perez, the CEO of World Mizrahi, but for today’s visit, the father of two sons who were in the battles of October 7th. His older son, Yonatan, was wounded in the battle but is now back with his unit. However, his son, Daniel, was wounded and abducted from his tank.

Rav Perez spoke for about 20 minutes. During that initial presentation, he was entirely composed, as he described the difficult choice he and his wife had to make about whether or not to postpone Yonatan’s wedding, which was scheduled for October 17th (they didn’t), and the different phases of Daniel’s classification, first as “missing,” then “abducted,” and most recently learning that he was wounded before he was abducted. Rav Perez then opened the floor to questions.

The first question was asked and answered. But then, one of our students asked him “How they could celebrate at Yonatan’s wedding?” and his tone changed. He began to weep, explaining to the kids that he never knows when he’ll start to cry. It comes, he said, “in waves,” but it also passes, which it did, but not fully.

He told us that before the wedding he had decided to put Daniel’s absence and situation out of his mind, which proved impossible, because the mesader kiddushin began the wedding by recognizing not only those

who were there but also those who were not, and then leading everyone in reciting chapter 130 of Tehillim – all before the chuppah began.

Said Rav Perez, “Those were the most difficult three minutes of my life.” In the end, he said a friend called to say that the wedding was the “happiest, saddest, most beautiful and holiest wedding” she had ever attended.

Moving away a bit from the specific trials he faces, Rav Perez spoke of the difficult choices the government must make in fighting “two wars” – the war to retrieve the hostages and the war to eradicate Hamas. Each of these “wars” requires different actions and different measures of success. How to balance the two, he explained, is something that he will trust the war cabinet to choose.

But he also noted that when Hamas attacked Israel, “they unleashed unimaginable pain and unexpected unity.” The pain we will overcome because we are a resilient people. The unity we pray for will only grow as we see the extraordinary response of the entire Jewish people to this historic moment.

Before he concluded, he asked everyone to have his son, דניאל שמעון בן שרון, in their prayers – which I know we will. I also know that this conversation will have an impact on our students as they continue to learn what it means to live in Israel during this war.

Our next stop was for a barbecue at the military base of Yishai, the home of the Duvduvan unit of Tzahal. Duvduvan is an elite unit that executes secret missions to combat terrorism, primarily in Yehuda and Shomron and now in Gaza.

HaRav Yosef Zvi Rimon, the Chief Rabbi of Gush Etzion, organized the event, and he brought his full warmth and talents to it. He spoke with the soldiers, hugged them, offered them brachot, gave those who wanted a shiur, and then talked to all of us, encouraging the soldiers and using our students as an example of how all Jewish people are on their side.

One of the most beautiful things he said was when he pointed to his suit and told the soldiers that he had hugged so many soldiers while wearing it that it was now a “holy garment.” When he said it, it reminded me of a comment attributed to Rav Soloveitchik, ztz“l, who once referred to the uniform of the Israeli soldiers as holy garments.

And then we sang, and we danced – the chayalim with the boys and the chayalot with the girls. It was so moving, looking around and seeing the full range of klal Yisrael singing “Am Yisrael Chai,” “V’ha’ikkar lo l’fached klal,” and other songs.

As the food was served, I scanned the scene and saw the soldiers sitting and talking with our kids, telling stories and thanking them. In fact, one of the things that struck me the most was the number of people who approached me to thank me for coming and bringing the students. Here they were, soldiers who risked their lives fighting a war, and they thanked us for coming to Israel to volunteer.

Why? I believe it is because by coming, we show them that they are not alone and that their battles are for Am Yisrael. A little later Rav Rimon reinforced that idea to me when he told me that was speaking to a soldier about lighting Chanukah candles, and he asked the soldier if it bothered him that his family was having a Chanukah party without him. Said the soldier, “It would only bother me if they didn’t. Because I am fighting so that my family can celebrate!”

Due to the secrecy of the Duvduvan unit, we were not allowed to take pictures of the soldiers or the base, and even when a Major spoke to us, he only used his first name, “Rafi.” He described the duties of Duvduvan, and then he told our students that “this is a historic moment for the Jewish nation. Being here at this time is something you will never forget because you are now part of history.” And then, he, too, thanked us for coming.

Our students continued to speak with chayalim, listening to their stories and answering their questions. In a way, it was the next step to the morning’s gathering with the girls from the Ulpana because it was so very natural, young men and women who all cherish their identity and their role in the future of the Jewish people, being together, learning from one another and enjoying each other’s company.

As I write these words, I am in the airport, about to fly back to Chicago. But I’m so proud that our students will continue volunteering until January 10th. But even more, I’m thrilled that I and my students were able to have the experiences of these past ten days, experiences that have confirmed to me the unique character of our people and taught them the power and beauty of being part of a *ממלכת כהנים וגוי קדוש* – a

nation unlike any other, a people that cherishes life, regales in our new-found unity and continues to inspire each other through the values of Torah and klal Yisrael.

As I told the soldiers, may all of our chayalim return home to their families soon, shlaimim u'b'shalom!

B'vracha,  
Rabbi Leonard A. Matanky

# Ida Crown Jewish Academy Senior Class Volunteer Mission to Israel – Update # 9 – The Final Few Days

27 Tevet 5784  
January 8, 2024

Dear K.I.N.S. Family:

I arrived in Israel just a few hours ago, so I cannot offer a first-hand account of today's activities beyond what I heard from our students – that picking strawberries was hard work but a lot of fun; the presentation from Rabbi Efraim Rimel was meaningful; and the evening program with NCSY of Efrat was an opportunity.

But what I can report on are three items: The first began right after I stepped off the plane in Ben Gurion and entered the airport. Standing there, at the bottom of the steps, was a young woman with a sign that read, "Welcome, Olim." What is so unusual about that?



Well, in the past, I've typically seen people holding those signs right before passport control and not at the end of the jetway. But that's not what caught my attention. Rather, it's that Israel is in the middle of a war – in the ten days since I was last here, nine more chayalim, חיילים, have lost their lives in Gaza. But despite the war, despite air raid sirens that were sounded today to the south of Tel Aviv, despite it all, people are still making aliyah, choosing to throw their hats in with those who are building and defending our land.

The second item was my cab ride from the airport to Kfar Etzion, where the Ida Crown kids are staying. I still remember that years ago, the late Nechama Leibowitz, נחמה ליבוביץ, would revel in telling of her exchanges with her cab drivers – their faith and insights into life.

My driver was cut from that mold, except that, unlike the stereotypical Israeli driver, he was a very cautious and slow driver (at one point as we approached Gush Etzion at a painfully slow twenty-five miles an hour, he pulled over to let a long line of cars pass him).

His name was Ehud, and his parents emigrated from Yemen to Israel. When he heard that I had students finishing up a month of volunteering in Israel, he couldn't stop talking about it. אתם החלוצים האמיתיים – “You are the real pioneers,” he said. You are teaching them the morals and lessons of the Torah and the Talmud. (While not observant himself, Ehud told me that when he went to school, they studied Talmud, while he lamented that it's no longer part of the public school curriculum in Israel.)

Then he added that the leadership of Tzahal, the people defending the land, are from the best of our youth, the talmidei hayeshivot. While this is not 100% accurate, it is true that a disproportionate percentage of elite troops are from the dati community.

For nearly an hour and a quarter (yes, that's how long my 45-minute ride took), he couldn't stop – admiring the volunteerism of our students and the spirit of the Religious Zionist community of Israel. “If only all of Israel had the faith and trust in God that they have,” he said.

And finally, the third item was the one part of today's program I did get to see, a basketball game between our students and students from Makor Chaim. Two weeks ago, they had spent Shabbat together at their yeshiva. And tonight, the boys of Makor Chaim received permission to come to Kfar Etzion for a game.

I have to admit, after traveling for sixteen hours, I didn't stay for much of the game, but I did stay long enough to "shep nachas" at the boys playing and interacting with one another as if they were old friends. If you didn't know who was who, it would not have been easy to distinguish who was from Chicago and who was from Israel.

And this was the point of nachas – because we have successfully preserved the many commonalities that all Jews should share – whether in the Beit Midrash or on the basketball court.

Yet, there was one difference I couldn't ignore. Next year, the vast majority of our students will be spending a "growth year" in yeshivot and seminaries. At the same time, these boys from Makor Chaim will be entering or preparing to enter the Israeli army. It's a sobering alternate reality that our people in Israel must face, one that has become so very frightening this year in particular and one that we must not forget.

Because despite everything we are doing for Israel, despite our visits, our volunteering, our contributions, and our advocacy, they are putting their lives on the line while we remain on the sidelines, watching, praying, and helping.

At the beginning of this week's parsha, we read of the four expressions of redemption – the **ארבע לשונות גאולה** that, according to the Talmud Yerushalmi, we commemorate with the drinking of four cups of wine at the seder. Why drink four cups and not just one? Perhaps because each stage of the redemption, though incomplete, was significant enough to merit a celebration – a cup of wine of its own.

It's that perspective that I find so very inspiring. Despite this war's many tragedies and sorrows, we have also seen amazing miracles, from a continued aliyah to the celebration of the Jewish spirit and a re-discovered unity of our people.

And while there is so much more that needs to happen – military victories we pray will occur, communities that need to return home, and lives that need to be rebuilt, we must not forget all the good that is around us. And that's what I was able to get a glimpse of today.

Next month, our shul in partnership with Congregation Or Torah will be leading a Solidarity Mission to Israel (February 12-15, 2024). If you can, I urge you to join us and see for yourselves both the challenges

and the glory, the glimpses of redemption that are all around. For a tentative itinerary [click here](#), and to sign up, [click here](#).

May God protect the State of Israel, its soldiers, and citizens, and may the ultimate geulah come speedily in our days!

B'vracha,  
Rabbi Leonard A. Matanky

# Ida Crown Jewish Academy Senior Class Volunteer Mission to Israel – Update #10

28 Tevet 5784

January 9, 2024

Dear K.I.N.S. Family:

Last week, when I was in Chicago, I had the opportunity to meet with Rabbanit Chana Henkin, a pioneering Jewish educator and founder of Nishmat. We spoke for over an hour, but among the things we discussed was the situation in Israel.

She commented to me, something I can't forget – that since the war began, she has been reluctant to turn on the radio in the morning, afraid that she might hear the name of someone she knew among the casualties of the war.

This morning, the very first WhatsApp I received was from Rabbi Moshe Taragin of Yeshivat Har Etzion, where our boys were supposed to visit today. He wrote “Two of the soldiers killed were very close Gush talmidim. Will update you on funeral info and whether we have to reschedule.”

And that's the way we began our day here in Israel. With news that four soldiers had been killed, the two from Yeshivat Har Etzion (they had been chevrotot) Major David Schwartz – 26 years old and Major General Yakir Hexter – 26 years old, and Sergeant Roi Tal -19 years old and Major Gavriel Bloom – 27 years old, **י"ה**. Tragically, since then, we heard of five more soldiers who were killed: Amit Shahar – 25 years old; Denis Krokmalov Veksler – 32 years old; Ron Efrimi, 26 years old; Roi Avraham Maimon – 24 years old, and Akiva Yasinskiy – 35 years old, **י"ה**.

By the time I made it to Shacharit, all I could think of was the poem, written 76 years ago by Natan Alterman entitled, “Magash HaKeseif” – The Silver Platter. It was a poem that we all learned in Bnei Akiva and at the Academy, and it presents the painful reality of the many lives – mainly of young men and women – that were sacrificed to create the State.

It's a powerful poem, and I encourage you to reread it ([https://zionism-israel.com/hdoc/Silver\\_Platter.htm](https://zionism-israel.com/hdoc/Silver_Platter.htm)). Its closing lines are:

Then a nation in tears and amazement will ask: “Who are you?”  
And they [the young man and young woman] will answer quietly,  
“We are the silver platter on which the Jewish state was given.”  
Thus they will say and fall back in shadows, and the rest will be told  
In the chronicles of Israel.

Shacharit this morning was a fascinating experience because the Kibbutz currently hosts over 100 new army recruits, all staying in the Beit Sefer Sadeh alongside our students. As we were getting ready to daven, a few of them in uniform and with their weapons came into our minyan wanting to daven.

We, of course, welcomed them but explained that we were waiting for a few more boys before we started. Their commander said it might be a problem because they only had twenty-five minutes to daven. I suggested that we wait a few minutes and that one of them start to daven – which they did, jumping straight to Yishtabach. You see, while the army always allows soldiers time to daven, they don't have a lot of time, so they only use their minyan for the part that needs a minyan. It was then that we decided to move to another space and give them ours,

which was a good idea because other soldiers began to stream in, and there wouldn't have been room for all of us.

But, I did get to see something fantastic – the broad spectrum of chayalim who came to davening, some with kippot and tzitzit, some without kippot who then took them out of their pockets for tefilla, Ashkenazim, Sefardim, Beta Yisrael and Yemenite. All of them came together for a minyan that may have been necessarily brief but gave new meaning to the “tefilla b'tzibbur.”

Because a tzibbur is not only a “congregation,” which sounds so formal and neat, but also a “pile” or a “heap.” And looking at these chayalim, all dressed alike but all so very different from one another – I couldn't decide which meaning of tzibbur would apply to them. But one thing I know for sure – it is this collection of Jews from every imaginable background that is not only a sure sign of redemption but also the greatest hope for our future.

The rest of today has been a logistical “tour de force” as our students visited yeshivot, seminaries, and universities they hope to attend next year. There were twenty cabs, a van, and a bus that were used to transport them from place to place, and B"H they all returned safely and in time for their AP classes and shiurim with Rabbi Reuven Taragin for the boys and Rabbanit Shani Taragin for the girls.

With just one day left of the trip, I must thank our “ground team” – IsraelDestination and their representatives, Sarah Dena Katz and Eitan Grossman. They have done an amazing job creating a program with almost no lead time and untold twists and turns of scheduling.

Tonight, the seniors will be packing, and tomorrow morning, we will be leaving the Kibbutz for one last time.

Before I sign off, let me leave you with a Dvar Torah I heard at the funeral of David Schwartz, ד"ר, which took place in Kfar Etzion. David's father, Yair, spoke of their last conversation before David's most recent and final mission in Gaza. His father said he didn't know what to say to his son as he was about to go to the front. So David reminded him of a shiur they had both attended in which they learned a comment from Rashi.

The comment was on the words in the Torah that describe the destruction of Sodom, as “God raining down upon Sodom and Gemo-

rah, fire and brimstone from the heavens.” Noted Rashi, that this same phrase of “raining down” also appears when God gave the Jews manna in the desert.

Said David to his father, “Everything comes from the heavens. Just as the war, which began with tragedy, was ordained in the heavens, so too, please God, will the manna fall – will goodness soon come to us from the heavens.” Tragically, David Schwartz and so many others have died in this war, all “al kiddush Hashem.” Yet, their faith in the future of the Jewish people serves as a beacon of hope for us all – because they believed, and so do we, that “goodness will soon come from the heavens.”

May it be so!

B’vracha,  
Rabbi Leonard A. Matanky

# Ida Crown Jewish Academy Senior Class Volunteer Mission to Israel – Update #11 – The Final Update

29 Tevet 5784  
January 10 2024

Dear K.I.N.S. Family:

I am writing this final update from the plane as the ICJA students return after nearly a month of volunteer work in Israel.

It would be an understatement to say that this was a meaningful trip, as we heard from the seniors themselves at this evening's final "sichat sikum" [lit. recap]. From discovering new connections to Israel to understanding new ways of looking at "am Yisrael," our students participated in a life-changing experience I am so proud to have helped create.

Today was no exception as we focused on the fate of the 136 hostages still held by Hamas, beginning with a visit to Kikar Hachatum – Hostage Square in Tel Aviv.



Hostage Square is a large open plaza in front of the Tel Aviv Art Museum and directly across from the Kiryah – Israel’s military headquarters as a reminder to Israel’s military leaders that as they plan their next action, never forget the plight of the hostages.

The Kikar itself includes art installations, from the simple to the complex, and tents where families of the hostages can tell their stories. It was my second visit to the Kikar, and not only does it continue to change – they are in the midst of building a “tunnel” (above-ground) to allow people to feel the experience of being taken through tunnels – but coming with teenagers, the experience proved to be very different.

I sensed it immediately as we got off the bus, and the group’s mood changed – from fun-loving teens to somber and serious young adults. They walked around, and they looked, they listened, and they “felt” the place.

I had a chance to listen to Nadav Rudaeff, the son of 61-year-old Lior Rudaeff, who was kidnapped 96 days ago from his home in Nir Yitzchak. Nadav began his presentation by asking a series of questions to the young adults who were with him in the tent – the last question was, “Who makes the schnitzel at your home – your father or mother?”

He said that for 96 days, he and his family have not eaten schnitzel because their father was the one who made it – and they can’t bring themselves to eat it as long as he is in captivity. It was a small thing – but it brought home the message of the struggles of the families of hostages in a very real way. For them, it is not merely the big, existential concerns that they are struggling with but the little things, the simple things that have changed and they struggle to overcome.

From there, we traveled to the Old City of Yerushalayim for lunch and to meet with ICJA alumni Jon Polin (’88) and Rachel Goldberg (’87), the parents of Hersh Goldberg-Polin. The meeting took place in the library of Yeshivat HaKotel, and it was amazing, inspiring, and uplifting.

Jon began by telling us that we were a group they felt very comfortable speaking to – because of our common backgrounds, values, beliefs, and language. He then gave the background to Hersh’s capture, the heroic efforts of his friend, Aner Shapira, אָנֶר שַׁפִּירָא, who saved so many lives by tossing hand grenades out of the bomb shelter they were in, only to lose his life when one exploded.

Then it was Rachel's turn, and because our meeting took place before a massive tefilla gathering at the Kotel – but more about that in a moment, Rachel shared with us her faith in God and her belief in the power of tefillah.

She said, "Every morning, I wake up and say modeh ani and thank God for giving me another day to save my son and another day to be a human being." Being a human being is a theme that the Goldberg-Polins continue to hammer home as they frame the hostage situation not as a battle for land or rights but as a fight for the soul of humanity.

And then, Rachel told our students that when we finish, we would be going down to the Kotel to "storm the gates of heaven with our prayers, for while we are speaking with everyone we can, to the Pope, the President, the Prime Minister, and his war cabinet, everyone, I know" she said, "that it is Hashem who is going to figure it out. What I don't know, however, is who He will choose to be the 'kli' [vessel] to save the hostages – who that person will be, and so Jon is going to the United States next week, and I'll be going to Europe, and we continue speaking to everyone who might be the 'kli' to save our son."

"My identity changed on October 7th, and" looking at our students, she said, "so did yours."

There was so much more that they shared with our students: stories about Hersh, about his extraordinary respect and his kindness; stories about their interactions with world leaders – especially their meetings with President Biden and his empathy and willingness to listen, putting off an aide who told him he had to go to another meeting, but to whom the President said, "you work for me" and then stayed on the call another 60 minutes; and even a story of Jon's visit to HaRav Yitzchak Zilberstein, who, when he heard who Jon was, interrupted his shiur, and told everyone that they had to stand and recite Tehillim, an act that gave Jon tremendous encouragement.

This coming Sunday will be 100 days since the massacre of October 7th, and the Goldberg-Polins are spearheading an international effort to have everyone take a piece of masking tape, write the number 100 on it, and then affix it to their shirts. It's something Jon and Rachel have done every day since Hersh was kidnapped, and for the 100th day,

they even asked the Pope to do so, hoping to have 1,000,000 people wear the number.

At the end of the meeting, they thanked us for coming and said they would send us a list of things we could do. Rachel concluded by saying that “a few days ago when they saw the announcements from the Chief Rabbinate that this gathering at the Kotel was happening, several of the hostage families said things like, ‘I am totally secular, but I will be there because it will strengthen me.’ And so I don’t know if they’re going to be 100 people down there or 100,000 people, but this expression of tefilla helps us and strengthens us and the other families of hostages, so thank you for coming, and thank you for your prayers.”

And with that, our meeting ended, and we headed down to the Kotel. The entire plaza was packed, and after about twenty minutes, the event began with Chief Rabbi Lau being the first to recite Tehillim. The hostage families were on a balcony to the left, and one of them joined in with the other rabbis leading Tehillim. Next, as is traditional on a Yom Kippur Katan, we recited selichot. But what was atypical was that the shofar was sounded after each section of selichot, followed by the sounding of two silver chatzotrot [trumpets], reminiscent of the trumpets that were sounded in Biblical times when the Jewish people were summoned to war.

Over and over again, after each of the selichot (many of which were recited according to Sefardic customs in a beautiful tune), the shofar was sounded, followed by the chatzotrot, and all I could think of were the sections of Gemara I had recently taught my class which discussed these kinds of blasts. The only difference was that I taught the gemara as a description of what once was and what will, please God, happen once again. But there I was at the Kotel, seeing it with my own eyes and hearing it with my own ears – and it sent shivers down my spine because of the Messianic overtones of this event and the past three months of war, unity, crisis, and hope.

Interestingly, I thought about the last gathering I had brought the ICJA seniors to attend – the rally in Washington. For those who went, I’m sure you remember that the size of the crowd overwhelmed the cell towers, and there were no cell calls, WhatsApps, or texts. For me, leading

a large group of high school students in that communication black-out was frightening, not knowing if I would find them or if they would all return to a meeting point.

But today, standing shoulder to shoulder with so many people at the Kotel and knowing our kids were among them, I had none of those feelings. Instead, it felt safe and strangely serene. But what else should I have expected – I was at the Kotel surrounded by thousands of prayerful Jews!

We live in historic times, extraordinary times, and times that have changed our identity and, despite the many tragedies, offered us a vision of a brighter future. But as Rachel and Jon Goldberg-Polin reminded us, it is up to us, especially the younger generation, to help bring that future forward – to find new ways to bring light into this world and to write the next chapter of our people.

Watching our students grow and experience so much this past month has been a unique privilege, as has watching our community continue to advocate and support Israel. But there is so much more to do – yet tonight, I'm going to take a break and “soak it all in.”

But before you go to sleep, I urge you to consider joining us on our upcoming Solidarity Mission to Israel, so that you too can experience some of what I have tried to describe. To sign up, [click here](#).

May God protect the soldiers and the citizens of the State of Israel. May the hostages return safely to the embrace of their families, and may all the Jewish people seize this opportunity to be better, grow closer, and have faith that God will help us find the path forward to ever greater heights.

B'vracha,  
Rabbi Leonard A. Matanky

# Parashat Noach 5784

This morning, I want to share with you a fascinating insight into a famous question from the beginning of our parsha – the debate among Chazal as to whether Noach, who saved the entire world was a man of extraordinary stature – a tzaddik for all times, or just a cut above the average person – a tzaddik in his generation, but not so remarkable when held up to towering personality like Avraham Avinu.

The source of this debate begins in the Gemara and continues to Rashi's comment on the opening verse – a comment that's prompted by what seems to be a superfluous word in that verse – the word – בְּדוֹרוֹתָיו – that Noach was a righteous and perfect man in HIS generations – בְּדוֹרוֹתָיו.

Does that mean that in another generation, he wouldn't have been so great, or does it mean that despite the depravity OF his generation, he remained extraordinary?

Yet, there is something unsettling about this entire debate.

When you look at the end of last week's parsha, we are told וַיִּנָּח מִצָּאֵן חַן בְּעֵינֵי ה' – that he found favor in the eyes of God and then later in the parsha when God says to Noach: כִּי אֶתְךָ רָאִיתִי צַדִּיק לְפָנַי בְּדוֹר הַזֶּה: – “I have found you righteous before Me in this generation” – it sure sounds like there is no room to even question his greatness. So why would some Rabbis want to cut him down to size?

Why Chazal look at the only person in Tanach who is referred to as a tzaddik, and say: ok, he was a tzaddik, but not such a big one!

The late Lubavitcher Rebbe, offered a fascinating explanation.[1]

He said that, in truth, Chazal were not trying to minimize Noach's virtues. Rather, they actually wanted to highlight his praises while teaching us a transformative lesson.

Think about it: what did Noach accomplish? He single-handedly saved humanity. Which, on the scale of accomplishments, is a monumental success, if there ever was one.

And who did it? A person the Torah later calls an **אִישׁ הָאֲדָמָה** – “a man of the earth” – a farmer who planted a vineyard, became intoxicated, and then, tragically, exposed himself. That's our hero!

The bottom line is that Noach was a fine man who lived a decent, moral life and tried to do what God wanted, but was not without his flaws, doubts, and struggles. And compared to Avraham Avinu, he didn't amount to much.

But look what he achieved!

In a society filled with greed and temptation, Noach held to his morals. He walked with God, swam against the tide, and saved the planet from destruction.

In other words, civilization survived NOT because of a towering, titanic figure but because of a simple man who dared to live morally when everyone around him behaved despicably.

Looking at it from that perspective, by diminishing Noach and suggesting that in other generations Noach would be eclipsed, Chazal, explained the Rebbe, turned him into the most inspiring figure, someone who serves as a model for all of us ordinary men and women.

Which is a life-changing message.

You don't need to be an Avraham or a Moshe to transform the world – instead, you can be a Noach, who may have been just another kid on the block, but look what he accomplished – and think about what you can accomplish! All it takes is the courage not to toe the line of corruption, fakeness, and falsehood but extend a little gentleness, friendliness, compassion, and kindness, and you can save lives, ignite sparks, and create an “ark” of sanity and goodness amidst a raging flood.

I would suggest these are some of the very lessons we are learning all over again these past weeks as we read the stories, and there are so many, simple people who saved the lives of so many, men and women

who rushed to the aid of besieged yishuvim, of reservists, of all ages, who came flooding back to their units, and even of the volunteers who are stepping forward to fill the roles of those on the front.

There are so many stories, but let me share with you just one, from just a few days ago – of Chaim Outmezgine, the commander of the special ZAKA unit.

Chaim and his volunteers were among the first to rush into the yishuvim around Gaza, including Kibbutz Nachal Oz where nearly a quarter of the residents were slaughtered by Hamas terrorists.

Among the first people saved was 12-year-old Ariel Zohar, just two weeks away from his bar mitzvah, who as fate would have it was out jogging with Hamas attacked and was able to find refuge in a safe room. But his parents, two sisters, and his maternal grandfather were not as fortunate. They were brutally murdered.

Saved, but now orphaned, Ariel asked Chaim if someone would go back to his house to get something for him – before the house was destroyed.

Chaim asked what he wanted, and Ariel said he wanted his father's tefillin, because even though he had a new pair for his bar mitzvah, he wanted to put on his father's tefillin instead.

Immediately, Chaim agreed, and with the support of צה"ל and despite bullets and mortar fire he managed to get to the house safely and find the tefillin.

"I shouted, said Chaim – התפילין בידינו – 'the tefillin are in our hands' – כמו שפעם צעקו הכותל בידינו – just as they had once shouted 'the Kotel is in our hands.'"

That evening, Chaim delivered the tefillin to Ariel, who was now staying with his grandparents in Rishon LeTzion.

When Ariel saw his father's tefillin, he broke down in tears."

But it wasn't just him, everyone was crying uncontrollably.

And then his grandfather said: 'My parents were murdered in the Shoah when I was 14, but I survived and now I have a grandson. Ariel, they did this to you at the age of 12. You will make it and I promise you that and you will have grandchildren in the land of Israel.'"

And then, this ninety year old survivor saluted Chaim and the other soldiers who were there.

To see such a sight, a 90-year-old man who lost his children and grandchildren – standing alongside his grandson and promising him that there would be a future, this, said Chaim, is what you fight for, and this is what you are ready to risk your life for.”

Some may be like Avraham Avinu, but most – like Chaim, like Ariel and his grandfather, are simple Noachs – who can save the world.

And let’s not forget what we just did – when a call went out to raise money for Hatzalah – and within four days, we did it – we raised over \$175,000 not because there were a few big gvirim who ponied up, but because everyone pitched in and made it happen.

And so if you ask me who I want to hang out with – a perfect Noach or an imperfect one? It’s the imperfect Noach who is so much more inspiring. It’s the average person who does extraordinary things that reminds me that we ALL have a role to play, an opportunity to make a difference, to save the world.

This is the message I leave you with this Shabbat as we face what will most likely be very challenging weeks ahead.

Don’t wait for the big guys to make things happen. Make them happen yourselves.

Emulate Noach: A simple man who was true to his soul and his God.

And stop giving the excuse that you are just a regular guy mind-ing your own business. Because so was Noach – and look what he did!



# Parashat Lech Lecha 5784

This week, the Federation sent a letter to rabbis asking that we dedicate this Shabbat to the Israeli hostages, to the over 200 men, women, and children who were abducted and held by Hamas.

Why? Because in this week's parsha, we read about the first hostage situation, as Lot was taken captive during the battle of the four kings against the five.

And while I don't think there is anyone in this shul who needs a special Shabbat to remember, to pray for, or to be concerned about the hostages of this war – there are two midrashim that I think are important for us to consider.

The first is a midrash based on the initial report of Lot's capture, as we read in rev'i – that the armies of אֲמֹרֵי, אֲרִיזָה, גְּדֻלְעִמֹר וְתִדְעָל attacked Sodom, taking אֶת־כָּל־דָּבָר־שֶׁבַח וְעִמְרָה – all the wealth of Sodom and Gemorah and all their provisions, and while they were at it, they also captured Lot וְאֶת־דָּכְשׁוּ – and his possessions – Lot who was the בֶּן־אָחִי אַבְרָם – the son of Avram's brother who was living in Sodom.

But why did the Torah have to tell us, once again, of Lot's relationship to Avraham?

After all, at the end of last week's parsha, we first heard about Lot and Avram. Then this week, we read that Lot came to Canaan with Avraham, went with him to Egypt, and then relocated to Sodom.

This means that Lot appeared in shevi'i of last week, rishon, sheni and shlishi of this week – so we know a lot about Lot. Why must the Torah remind us that he was Avraham's nephew?

Commenting on the phrase, **בן אחי אברם** – that Lot was Avraham’s nephew, the Midrash HaGadol writes, **שהיו מתפארים ואומרים** – they boasted and said, ‘We captured Avraham’s nephew!’ Proving **שלא באו שלא בשבילו** – that their real motive was not Lot, but to lure Avraham into battle and kill him.

Which, more than half a millennium later, the Netziv, in his Ha’amek Davar, found the same idea in the final phrase in very pasuk – which adds that Lot had been living in Sodom – **הוא יושב בסדום** – which is yet another superfluous comment – because we already knew that fact.

Wrote the Netziv that the Torah wants to emphasize that at the time of the war, Lot was in the city, not on the battlefield. And that the four kings made a point of entering Sodom for the express purpose of seizing Lot – “Avraham’s nephew” – because their primary goal was to lure Avraham to war.

This is precisely what we are seeing today – with Hamas, **ימ”ש**.

While there is a temptation to explain away the heinous crimes of Hamas simply – as a product of their hatred of Jews, their evil was much darker and more profound.

Because Hamas had a plan – they knew that by massacring innocents and kidnapping men, women, and children, Israel would be drawn into a war that would cause not only more suffering and death – but, as one pundit has suggested,<sup>[2]</sup> advance their nefarious goals by creating a crisis, where Arab countries who were slowly making peace with Israel, would now have to pull back, and where countries who had grown tired of the Israel-Palestine conflict, would have to take a stand – perhaps at first with Israel, but as we know all too well, probably against her.

And yet, what our parsha reminds us is that despite being drawn into the conflict, Avraham prevailed. Despite the dangers and against the odds, he did what needed to be done, rescued his nephew, and earned the admiration of others.

We pray there will be the same outcome in this conflict: that Israel will emerge victorious, the hostages will be released, and nations will understand that it is Hamas who is to blame for the deaths of innocents, both in Israel and in Gaza.

And yet, there is one more midrash to consider, a midrash based not on the beginning of the story with Lot's capture but its aftermath – אַחַר הַדְּבָרִים הָאֵלֶּה – after the military victory and after Lot was saved.

Because it was then that God appeared to Avraham in a vision and assured him אֵל תִּירָא אַבְרָם – Don't be afraid, Avram, אֲנֹכִי מִגֵּן לָךְ – I will protect you and reward you.

But what was Avraham afraid of that he needed to be protected by God?

The midrash offers many answers. One of which is given by Rabbi Levi, who said Avraham was afraid because perhaps אֹתָן אֶבְרָםִין שְׂדֵדֵי גֵוִי – among the people he killed were righteous, God-fearing people.

To which God assured him that no, no such person died in the war. Instead, the only people who were killed were קִוצִים בְּסוּחִים – sharp thorns, people who were wicked and deserved to die.

Which must have been a comforting thought to Avraham. And yet, doesn't that answer imply that Avraham should have been afraid if he HAD killed "righteous or God-fearing" men? Doesn't it suggest that Avraham's actions would have been morally problematic if innocents had died?

During the Second Intifada, it was precisely this question that HaRav Aharon Lichtenstein addressed in a sicha.[3]

He said, "To our sorrow, we currently find ourselves in the midst of an armed struggle with our neighbors. It is possible that during the course of this struggle, we may come to forget that" we cannot ignore "the moral questions and issues that arise from the situation in which we find ourselves."

"It is clear that our battle is just and that terrorists must be fought with all our might... at the same time, we must ask ourselves why the concerns that so disturb Avraham do not disturb us."

Which needs to be on our minds as well. While there is no doubt that the battle being fought is just, the objective to eradicate Hamas is moral, and the deaths of so many civilians in Gaza are the fault of terrorists who use them as human shields – we must not ignore the fact that innocents in Gaza are suffering and dying, despite צה"ל's best attempts to avoid those losses.

*Missions: The First 100 Days of the Gaza War*

And so, if we paint every Arab in Gaza with a single broad stroke and gloss over their losses because of the pain and suffering they have caused the us – we will lose something of ourselves.

Therefore, this Shabbat, as much as we pray for the salvation of the hostages and the victory of Tzahal, I also pray that in this war, we will preserve the **טוהר הנשק** – the purity of arms for which Tzahal is known, and the sanctity of life we cherish.

Because, if God could mourn the deaths of the Egyptians who pursued at the Red Sea, if Avraham could fear that he caused the deaths of innocents, we must be pained at the loss of those civilian who were not **קוצים פסוּחִים** – sharp thorns, but simple souls caught in the vise of evil terrorists.

May God protect the soldiers of Tzahal. May the hostages be returned safely and quickly to the embrace of their families, and may God protect the soul of the Jewish people as we face a bitter war that will test our will, challenge our morals, and define the future of our beloved land.

# Parashat Chayei Sara 5784

Last Shabbat, after the RCA-Mizrachi Rabbinic Mission to Israel ended, Margaret and I were in Rosh Tzurim, a kibbutz in the Gush Etzion, spending Shabbat with her sister and brother-in-law and their family.

On Shabbat morning, after davening, we got together for kiddush with some friends from our days in Bnei Akiva – Sharon and Alan Green. My brother-in-law made kiddush, we all sat down, and I turned to Sharon and asked – “how are you?”

She paused for a moment and said, “That’s a hard question to answer – but I learned a new phrase, **נורא... בסדר**.”

**נורא... בסדר** – in normal times this phrase would be translated as “very good.” Yet, with the brief pause between words, and in the context of this war it’s come to mean, “terrible, but ok.”

Which encapsulates so eloquently the experiences Margaret and I had last week in Israel. I wrote about many of the things we saw in the emails I sent, the people we met and the places we saw – which included visiting the streets of Ofakim, where just a few weeks earlier, forty-four people were murdered by Hamas; seeing their destroyed homes, bullet holes in their walls, and the places where bodies of valiant, heroic fighters were found.

And I also shared with you the joy of joining Rav Rimon for a BBQ with soldiers at the Tzeilim army base, an event we helped make possible through our fundraising, and his words of encouragement to the soldiers, when he said **אנחנו לא מסכנים, ולא חלשים**, we’re not pitiful nor weak because **יש לנו מדינה חזקה** – baruch Hashem – we have a strong country, **יש לנו צבא חזק** – we have a strong army **ובעזרת השם ננצח** – and

with God's help we will emerge victorious, **ואת זה אנחנו צריכים לזכור** – and that's what we have to remember always, and with that message in mind, we danced, religious and secular, young chayalim and milluim-nikim, all of us together.

It truly was **נורא... בסדר**.

But there are some things we heard and saw that I still am processing.

And top of that list was a meeting we had with Rav Shmuel Slotki. Until recently, Rav Slotki was the Rav of the Young Israel in Ramot and now he is the director of the World Organization of Orthodox Synagogues and Communities.

On the morning we met, he had just received a video from Tzahal that he played for us. It was just a few seconds long, but in it, you could see a car pull up outside the gates of Kibbutz Alumim and see two men jump out of the car, weapons drawn, and start to run toward the shooting.

The two men were his sons, Noam and Yishai, **ה' יקום דמם**, both married, both fathers of a young child, and both residents of Be'er Sheva, who, when they heard the reports of the invasion on Simchat Torah, jumped into a car together, armed only with their pistols and drove to towards Gaza.

And there they were, running with guns drawn, ducking into an embankment, until they were off camera and as was discovered later soon killed. But not before they eliminated five terrorists and helped save the Kibbutz.

It was remarkable evidence of remarkable courage, only surpassed by what their father then said – **אני לא מאשים הקב"ה** – I don't blame God for what happened to my sons. **הם בחרו בעצמם והחליטו שזיה שווה** – because they chose to sacrifice their lives, they saw value in trying to save others.

Which was an amazing thing to say. But that wasn't all, because then he continued **זו מתנה שהקב"ה נתן לנו, המצב הזה** – this war, **המצב הזה** – is a gift from God – **כדי לגבש אמנה חברתית חדשה** – so that we can form a new social covenant.

**אם לא נצליח** – he said, if we fail to reshape Israeli society, if we don't heal the divide and build the bridges, **אנו חוטאים לדורות**, – we will be guilty for generations. And therefore, **אסור לנו להחמיץ את השעה**, – we can't miss this moment.

Can you imagine – this man lost two sons, and there are now two widows and two orphaned children, and yet, he said **זו מתנה** – October 7th was a gift from God.

And it was sort of deep faith that we saw over and over again during our week in Israel – there was pain, but there was strength; there was despair, but there was joy.

And it wasn't confined to one place, instead you could feel it everywhere. Perhaps best expressed in the words of the payytan, who wrote **עֵין בְּמַר בּוֹכָה וְלֵב שֶׁמֵּחַ** – there were bitter tears, but there was also joy – a joy that came from a newfound sense of unity and purpose, a joy built on the reality that more than 360,000 reservists ran to duty, and a reawakening of Jewish pride and connection.

And so while the current situation is **בסדר ... נורא** – we left Israel confident that in the end – may that end come very soon, things will be not only ok – but better.

And that's the sentiment of so many we met, people who looked back to the days immediately before the massacre when the country was divided and there was talk about civil war, when arguments devolved into fights over a mechitza in a public space in Tel Aviv and whether or not pilots would do their reserve duty if called up.

But then it all changed on the 7th – and whether we have the depth of faith to say that it was a **מתנה** or simply the fulfillment of what the Navi Yeshayahu spoke about when he said **בְּרַגַע קָטַן עֲזַבְתִּיךָ וּבְרַחֲמִים גְּדוּלִים אֶקְבְּצֶיךָ** – for a brief moment I have left you, but with great mercy I will bring you together – things will be ok and please God, even better.

One final thought – when you compare this week's parsha to last week's, there is an undeniable contrast. Because Vayera was filled with unbelievable, cosmic, history-changing events. Angels visited Avraham, Sodom was destroyed, Lot's wife turned to a pillar of salt, and Avraham nearly sacrificed his son.

But this week, as we read Chayei Sarah, there is not a single earth-shattering event. Instead, Avraham buried his wife and sought a wife for Yitzhak, and that's all — simple, ordinary, regular, everyday events.

According to Rav Steinsaltz, **זי"ל**, the reason is to remind us that life, a normal everyday life, is sometimes one of extremes like Vayera and

sometimes the normal of Chayei Sarah. Yet both require us to have faith and trust in God. Both offer challenges and opportunities.

But I would suggest that maybe the message is to remind us that after the excitement, after the unbelievable cosmic challenges, and the whirlwind of change, life will return to normal and every day. Therefore, the challenge we have is to take the faith and the fortitude from the former and bring it forward into the latter.

Or, in the case of this war that has brought all of us together, that has lifted up the spirit of unity and faith into the forefront of our existence, we need to do all we can to ensure that it CONTINUES when things have quieted down and the time has come to lay the foundations of the next phase of Jewish history.

We need to take the faith and fealty of Vayera into the normal of Chayei Sarah.

And that's going to be our greatest challenge and our most significant opportunity – or to quote Rav Slotki – אם לא נצליח – if we don't heal the divide and build the bridges, אנו חוטאים לדורות – we will be guilty for generations.

And because we're all in this together and living a life of אסור לנו להחמיץ את השעה – we can't miss this moment.

May God protect the chayalei Tzahal, may He bring home the captives, and may the State of Israel and the entire Jewish nation emerge stronger, more unified, and with greater faith in God and in one another עד ביאת גואל צדק במהרה בימינו.



# Parashat Toldot 5784

Some of the most interesting lessons of a parasha – especially a parasha that is so filled with intrigue and suspense as this week’s, are the small items, the little twists of the plot that can get lost among the towering themes and events.

It’s something I realized once again when reviewing the parasha, with the story of the pregnancy of Rivka – the struggle of her two unborn children, her existential self-doubt, and ultimately her attempt to discover what was happening as she set off to inquire of God – וַתֵּלֶךְ לִדְרֹשׁ אֶת־הַשֵּׁם.

But what does “to inquire of God” mean?

According to the Ramban, she went to daven, while Rashi explains that she went to the בית מדרשו של שם – study house of Shem to seek his prophetic insights.

But if she wanted to pray – why leave home? And if she wanted to speak to a prophet – why not speak to the greatest prophet of her time, her father-in-law Avraham?

According to the Tur, the reason Rivkah went to Shem and not Avraham was because she didn’t want Avraham to worry. And yet, the Netziv suggested something entirely different.

He wrote that Rivkah didn’t go to Avraham because Avraham wasn’t able to address her concerns since his prophetic powers were not as great as Shem’s and did not include the ability to see into the future.

Therefore, Rivkah went לְאָדָם גָּדוֹל – to a great person, כִּי הוּא רֹאֵה, וְיִוָּדַע – because she knew that HE knew what the future held for her and her unborn children.

But how could Shem's powers have been greater than Avraham's? Why would this son of Noach, who sat secluded in a yeshiva with his great-grandson, Ever, outshine the Avraham Avinu – the progenitor of our faith, the one who recognized God and spread His message throughout the world?

The answer is found in the Netziv's comments from last week's parasha – where he explained that while Avraham was a great prophet, he didn't have the same level of Divine inspiration, *רוח הקודש*, as his wife, Sarah.

Because *רוח הקודש* requires a person to withdraw from the world *ולתבודד* – and seek a special connection with God.

While Avraham in his righteousness, *היה מנהיג העולם ומדריכם* *לעבודת ה'* chose not to withdraw, but to engage – to lead the world and direct others to the service of God. And when he made that choice, he forfeited a measure of his own potential to achieve the same level of *רוח הקודש* as others.

But that's not all – because the Netziv then referred us to the Chatam Sofer – and a comment he made in his introduction to Bereishit that addresses the question, “But was it fair that Avraham lost out by doing the right thing? Maybe he should have found an open shtender in Shem v'Ever's yeshiva, and sat there secluded from others, communing with God, and rising to new levels of personal self-actualization.”

The Chatam Sofer wrote that such a suggestion is wrong.

Because when Avraham forfeited some of what he could have been – he did exactly what God wanted him to do. Life is not about our own needs; rather, it's about the needs of a community, the needs of a klal.

And therefore, even though Avraham may not have reached his potential of spirituality, God rewarded him, protected him, and even offered him a remedial connection by refusing to do things without his foreknowledge.

And that's what happened, said the chatam Sofer, before the destruction of Sodom, which Avraham couldn't foresee, but God made sure he knew about – as God said *המכסה אני מאברהם דבר* – can I hide anything from my faithful servant Avraham?

This past week, Rabbi Berel Wein was contacted by one of his talmidim to ask him about the Kol Korei coming from Lakewood and opposing the rally in Washington.

For those of us who were there, it was an experience of a lifetime, a moment of unity and pride... despite the lack of cell service, the bedlam, and the balagan. Or, in the words of John Podhoretz, "It was more like a Fourth of July parade in a small town than it was the most populous single event in the history of American Jewry."

And if you didn't notice, at the rally there was no kol isha – but there was Yishai Ribo, and there were politicians and the requisite preacher, but there were also tehillim and tefillot, kippot, and community.

Yeshiva University canceled classes so that they and their Roshei Yeshiva could come, and so did Landers, and so did thousands of day school students.

But for some, that just wasn't enough. And so, despite the initial communications from the Agudah that helped spread the word, right before the rally, six members of their Moetzes came out against going to the rally.

Which led to the call and a fascinating recording of Rabbi Wein.

Said Rabbi Wein – "I don't understand it. I just don't understand it... the Jewish people are on the line, and that means Lakewood, too."

"It's a melchemis mitzvah, and therefore **הכל יוצאין**, everybody goes, **אפלו חתן מחדרו וכלה מחפתה** – even a bride and a groom. It's going to affect your learning seder!? ... If we don't win this, there's not going to be any seder!"

"A lot of it," he said, "is because the Orthodox community has no guts. They know it's wrong. But they have no guts because who's going to stand up to it? You talk about cancel culture; we're the ones who invented it."

"[They] weren't alive in the Holocaust. I was," said Rabbi Wein. "And they don't remember what it looked like in 1946 after the war when a Jew in America couldn't raise his head, they don't remember what Eretz Yisrael did for us..."

"This war in Israel has made more Jews traditional. I don't want to say I can't measure 'tzidkis.' But it's made the country become tradi-

tional. It's Shabbos and Yom Tov, and kosher and this and that. What do you want?"

"Eighty percent of America is eating 'nevalus' and 'traifus,' right? And here, everything is kosher, and here, it's no good because it's not MY kosher."

"I remember my Rebbe, I remember Reb Mendel Kaplan, זצ"ל, who certainly was no Zionist. But when Ben Gurion came to Chicago in the Stephens Hotel to sell Israel Bonds, he went down there to see it. And the next day in the shiur, and said, 'You know what I saw? I saw the Bnei Avrohom line up to give money.' So I'm coming from a different cheder, you know, I can't relate to it. I just can't relate to it."

And then he concluded by saying – "In the 1930s, European Jewry had no awareness either. They said, how could it happen? Everything can happen. That's what this war taught us. Everything can happen. You can burn your baby alive in front of your eyes. Everything that's written in Parshas [Ki Tavo] happened."

"But we don't learn; we learn Chumash, but we don't believe in it. We don't think that you know, that they actually meant it."

And that's just some of what Rabbi Wein had to say. And what I want to add is that to be a Jewish leader means there are times and there are causes for which you must leave the safety of the Beis Midrash and be involved in the complexities of real life. Because to be a true leader means that you don't always get to be a spiritual person.

והלך לדרוש את השם – that's why Rivkah went to seek God through Shem and not Avraham.

Because the "I" is not as important as the "WE," and therefore, while there are those who choose to seclude themselves from society and feel safe in their bubble, I believe that the greater fulfillment of God's wishes is for us to be involved in life – to take the risk being "out there" bringing people closer to understanding the truth of God's world.

And that's what happened in Washington this past week – 300,000 Jews marched in the ways of Avraham. They may have missed a seder, and they may have stood shoulder to shoulder with Jews who think differently and act differently, but that's what it means to be מבני אברהם אבינו – the heirs of Avraham Avinu, to be a Jew who believes and a Jew who does the right thing.

# Parashat Vayetze 5784

Earlier this week, I was sent a link to an article by Rabbi Daniel Gordis, entitled “How my toddler grandson convinced me it was time to leave Conservative Judaism.”

Gordis is part of a family that could be described as royalty of Conservative Judaism.

His grandfather was a towering presence in the movement, his uncle was the chancellor of JTS, another founded the West Coast branch of JTS, and Gordis himself was the dean of the rabbinical school there.

But for years, Gordis has been moving away from Conservative Judaism, or to be more accurate, Conservative Judaism was moving away from him.

But he didn't leave and continued to identify with them out of respect for his grandfather. That is, until recently, when he finally left the Conservative movement.

And what moved him to do so was the way some Conservative rabbis were criticizing Israel after October 7th – the willingness of some to promote opinions and positions that excused a massacre and blamed the victims.

As he wrote, “Try this edgy thought on for size: rabbis should care about Israel more than they care about Israel's enemies. Rabbis should care about Jews more than they care about people who despise Jews and seek to slaughter them...”

But the real breaking point was when his son Avi was called up to serve in the war, and Gordis watched him say goodbye to his two-year-old son.

Gordis saw that his grandson, as young as he is, understood something was different about this goodbye, and it seemed as if he was trying to hold back his tears.

“Then I remembered,” wrote Gordis, “the moment that Avi had said to me, a couple of weeks ago, ‘You know, if anything happens to me, the kids won’t remember me.’ And now,” wrote Gordis, “It was my turn to cry.”

That look on his grandson’s face was the straw that broke the camel’s back. Or in this case, the final insult that led Gordis to resign from the Rabbinical Assembly and the Conservative Movement.

Of course, there is much more in that article, and if you have a chance, I encourage you to read it in the Times of Israel, but this morning, I’m sharing it with you, not **חם ושלום**, with a measure of triumphalism or joy – because the demise of any group of Jews, even those we disagree with, carries with it possible loss of Jews to our community – and every Jew is precious.

Instead, I share it as a means to reflect for just a moment how such a thing could happen – how Jews who are well educated, connected, and even prepared to dedicate their lives to klal Yisrael could allow themselves to fall prey to such vile lies.

I guess part of it is that we live in a bubble, and it’s hard to imagine that there are people who cannot be reasoned and want nothing more than to see us disappear from this earth. And it’s hard to accept that not everyone shares the universal values of liberty, equality, and fraternity, and that there are people who continue to see us as “*untermenschen*,” who can be killed without hesitation or pause.

And part of it is ignorance. There is a lack of historical perspective and a refusal to accept, as much as we’d like not to, that evil can and does exist.

But this morning, I would also suggest that part of the reason is that we expect so much of ourselves that sometimes we criticize behaviors that if other people, nations, or armies had done so, we would laud them for their morality and restraint.

This may be one of the lessons we should learn from the story of Yaakov and Lavan.

For more than two decades, Yaakov worked for Lavan – despite Lavan’s continued deception and lies. Finally, he demands to be paid – **מִתִּי אֶעֱשֶׂה גִסְדָּאֲנֹכִי לְבֵיתִי** – in order to provide for his family.

Lavan agrees, and as Ramban explained, the flocks are divided between them according to the colors of the animals, based on the assumption that the animals that will be born in the future will resemble those who bore them.

This arrangement, explained Ramban, would preserve the ratio between the various colors.

And in return, Yaakov accepted upon himself to tend all of the sheep, his own as well as those of Lavan – **אֲשׁוּבָה אֲרַעֶה צֹאֲנֶךָ אִשְׁמֹר**.

Lavan accepted this proposal, but, as only Lavan could do, on that very day, he secretly gave his sons all of the animals Yaakov was supposed to receive. So when the two came to divide the flocks, there was no animal for him.

It was then that Yaakov knew he had to fight fire with fire, and he cunningly restored to himself, by way of the rods, that which had been taken away from him through deceit – ensuring that the flocks would bear speckled and striped sheep.

But isn’t this deceit, isn’t Yaakov stooping to the level of Lavan?

Why didn’t Yaakov simply accept defeat and traverse the higher moral ground?

Wrote HaRav Yaakov Meidan,[4] that “there is no greater lie than giving in to a wicked person... Giving in to such a person perpetuates the evil and rewards the evil-doer.”

“And therefore, a person must fight with all his might for a better and more just world, even if he sometimes has to use the tools of those who try to deceive him.”

Yaakov began his life as an **אִישׁ תָּם יוֹשֵׁב אֱהָלִים** – he lived in a bubble and had the luxury of viewing the world in simple ways.

But then his mother pushed him to deceive his father, to stand up for what was right, even if the way he would do so was unnatural and felt foreign and wrong.

But he did so – for a greater good – to preserve a people and outwit his brother – who was at his core a man who was **איש ציד** – who preyed upon others.

And then, for years, he worked for Lavan – the master of deceit – a man who the Torah recalls as an **אֱרֹמֵי אוֹבֵד אֲבִי** – the one who wanted to destroy Yaakov.

But he couldn't.

And then, at the final pivotal moment, Yaakov once again relied on deceit to get what was rightfully his and defeat his antagonist with the tools that had been used against him. Because “there is no greater lie than giving in to a wicked person.”

And for that, concluded Rav Medan, in hindsight, we can be proud of Yaakov.

To turn the other cheek is not a Jewish concept but a Christian one. Instead, for the Jew, standing up for what is right and defeating evil is our mission.

And while many innocents have died, and for them we must mourn, many more lives have been saved as we use the means necessary to root out evil, destroy our enemy, and end the constant threats to our lives.

And maybe that's the most important lesson we need to teach others – that while we might always want to be among the **יושבי אודל**, we can't.

And while we might always want to avoid casualties and loss, we can't.

Because to do so would be to give in to evil and embolden our enemies.

That's what those who criticize Israel don't understand. Because we are not dealing with reasonable people who abhor violence, respect the rules of war, and want peace. October 7th and its aftermath have proven that we are well past trying to curry favor with the extreme left or even desire to prove our commitment to universalism. Rather, this is a war of good versus evil, a war against those who have committed the worst war crimes, and want nothing more than the destruction of the “Great Satan” – America, and the “Little Satan” – the State of Israel.



And while we must never BECOME Lavan – there are times, and now is such a time, when we must unapologetically employ some of the devious tactics of Lavan to survive his attacks, react with power and strength to preserve that which is good, and just in this world.

And for that we can and we should be proud.

# Parashat Vayishlach 5784

This week's parasha is a story of triumph and reconciliation, as Yaakov defeats an angel, comes face to face with his brother Esav and... depending on the commentator, departs with a truce, or perhaps even with an understanding of mutual respect.

Everything seems to be going right for Yaakov, when suddenly his wife dies, his daughter is violated, and then... Yaakov's sons launch a surprise attack against the citizens of Shechem, break their promised alliance, and murder all of the males of the city.

Where Yaakov was during these negotiations and subsequent slaughter, we don't know. But what we do know is that when Yaakov heard about it he denounced their actions with the words – עֲבַרְתֶּם אֹתִי – you have sullied my name and made me abhorrent to the inhabitants of the land.

And then berating Shimon and Levi, Yaakov added that you have endangered the entire family, since וְאֲנִי מְתִי מְסָפָר – my family is few in number, וְנִאֲסַפּוּ עָלַי וְהָבוּנִי וְנִשְׁמַדְתִּי אֲנִי וּבֵיתִי – and therefore, I and my household are vulnerable to attack.

Which is a powerful rebuke, one that Yaakov will repeat years later on his deathbed. But it's understandable – both because of the brutality of the attack and also because of the feared military response.

But why did Yaakov deliver this rebuke in so very personal terms? Why did he employ so many first-person pronouns such as – אֹתִי, וְאֲנִי עָלַי – making it seem as if he was more concerned about what their actions meant for HIM, rather than what they meant for them?

One answer begins with a gemara in Shabbat [5] which explains that in gratitude to God for the miracles he brought, Yaakov would go

to a city and do acts of chesed, ויזן את פני העיר – he would grace the city – create systems and structures for the benefit of others. And so for example, according to Rav – Yaakov would establish monetary systems, while Shmuel said he would create systems of commerce, and Reb Yochanan said he would build bathhouses.

This could be understood as an expression, of what Rav Soloveitchik in his famous essay called “The Lonely Man of Faith” described as our responsibility of *הוי דיומה לו* – of being more than just “like” God – but of fulfilling our potential to master the physical world around us. To build and create, engage and inspire; not to retreat and restrict.

And which, according to Rav Avraham Yitzchok Ha-Kohen Kook in his commentary to that gemara, weren’t just random acts of kindness, but a means to create stronger communities, ways that we are commanded to provide benefit to the world around us.[6]

Because, wrote Rav Kook – all too often, people assume that those who live spiritually centered lives are too otherworldly to contribute to the “real world,” unable to relate to the needs and concerns of others.

But along came Yaakov, whose life was focused on the “tents of Torah study,” – and he shattered this misconception by interacting with the people around him, establishing institutions that would benefit others. Yaakov’s actions, explained Rav Kook, established the compatibility of Torah and the world beyond the walls of the beit midrash.

And it was from that perspective that Yaakov was so greatly displeased with Shimon and Levi.

For while, from a halachic perspective, Shimon and Levi’s actions could be justified, Yaakov was looking at more than just that letter of the law. He was looking at the role he had fulfilled – the connection he had made with others and was now lost. He was looking at the fact that he had spent a lifetime caring for others. And he was looking at the broader vision of the relevance of Torah and the responsibility of its adherents to the betterment of society.

All of which, because of Shimon and Levi, could now be lost. And so it was about him, more than the rest of his family. And because of that, the first-person pronouns were inappropriate.

This is also an idea suggested in a brief comment of the Seforno – who noted that it wasn’t just the Shimon and Levi’s brutality

which troubled Yaakov – but the fact that their subterfuge included the conversion – the brit milah of the people of Shechem.

Because when they did so, they added a religious dimension to their plan. And therefore, they diminished our faith and tarnished the reputation of the Torah.

This leads me to one final comment. A challenge we all face in this world filled with complexity, contention, conflict, and as we saw on October 7th, evil. It's an idea I have addressed before, but I believe bears repeating as Israel struggles with the temporary cease-fire that is leading to the release of hostages and the need to fight the war in order to destroy Hamas.

And that is that even when we are in the right and must destroy an enemy who wants to destroy us – we must never descend to the level of how other nations may react.

Rather, we need to be exceedingly moral – despite the immorality of others. We need to stand up not only for what is best for us but for what is best for all. And we need to be exceedingly honest in our assessment of what has been done – despite the lies that are thrown about by others, in rallies, on social media, and in the streets.

Because we are a people who need to be both parochial and universal, and we are a nation charged with inspiring a world by creating a higher standard that cares about the world.

And so while the battle with Hamas must continue until that evil is eradicated, and while the battle against anti-semitism must continue until we turn the tide, the way we wage that battle must be different – not because others hold us to a double standard, but because we hold ourselves to a higher standard.

That's what Yaakov Avinu teaches us today. That's why even after his sons explain their actions, he never forgets what they did and the damage it caused and rebukes them again as he lies on his deathbed.

Therefore, as descendants of Yaakov, we must be concerned not only that we are right – but that we are good; and that our goodness, our care, and concern contribute to the world around us because this is our mission as a *ממלכת כהנים וגוי קדוש* – a kingdom of priests and a sacred nation.

This may be an impossible responsibility, but we've never shied away from seeking to achieve the impossible, and it's a responsibility God expects us to fulfill.

# Parashat Vayeshev 5784

This morning, my drasha is going to be a little different than normal because this past week has been a little different than normal, as I've spent three days in Israel on a JUF Board Mission to Israel.

And while I've already shared so many of the experiences of the trip via my email reports – our visits to Sderot and Nir Oz, Soroka Medical Center, Magen David Adom, and Hatzalah, meetings with President Herzog and so many amazing organizations supported by all of us via the JUF, there are two more stories that I want to share.

The first is one of the most touching, tragic, and inspiring stories I've ever heard, and it was told to us by Dr. Shlomi Codish, the CEO of Soroka Medical Center. In that role, Dr. Codish was responsible for all that has happened at Soroka since the day of the massacre when more than 600 casualties arrived at the hospital and until today as soldiers are airlifted from the battlefield and brought directly to Soroka.

But one of the things we may not think about is that on October 7th, in addition to all of the medical and logistical challenges they faced, one of the most difficult tasks was to identify the injured who were brought to the hospital unconscious and without ID.

One such patient was a young man who tragically suffered terrible injuries, lost his leg in the massacre, and was fighting for his life. Fortunately, soon after he arrived, his family came and identified him, and the hospital confirmed his identity via photos they provided.

For 48 hours nonstop, his mother and father were at his bedside, praying and hoping that soon he would regain consciousness and ultimately recover.

On the second day of his infirmament, his sister, who had been away, finally made it to the hospital. One can only imagine what the scene must have been like, the emotions that must have been felt as she was reunited with her parents and her brother.

But when she saw him, she looked at the doctors and her parents and said, “It’s not him, it’s not my brother.” How did she know? Because... “his toes were longer,” she said.

This was a strange reaction, but for some of the medical personnel, it was not as unusual as you or I might imagine. After all, following many tragedies, people tend to deny their fate and have a difficult time accepting that the person who is wounded or, worse, is their loved one is fighting for his life.

But his parents had identified him, and the staff confirmed their identification, so the bedside vigil continued, regardless of his sister’s claim.

While all of this was happening, and for days to come, the hospital was fielding frantic calls from people who were searching for their relatives, hoping that they would find them in a hospital instead of discovering something much worse.

One such call that Dr. Codish’s staff received was from the parents of a soldier who had been seriously wounded and, according to army records, had been airlifted to Soroka.

But Soroka had no record of that soldier.

Fortunately, soldiers have fingerprints on file, and when the army gave that information to the hospital, they realized that he was the patient who had already been identified as someone else, the young man whose leg was amputated and whose parents were at his side. The sister had been correct after all – it wasn’t her brother.

Dr. Codish told us about what happened next: when the hospital staff had to deliver the heart-wrenching news to the first set of parents that this man they were praying for was not their son, and then when the soldier’s parents, the second set of parents, came to see their son.

I can’t begin to fathom what those two moments must have been like – but not long after there was a changing of the guard as parents #2 changed places with parents #1.

Tragically, two days later, the first set of parents learned that their son's body was found and that he had been murdered on October 7th – may God grant them a *נחמה*.

And miraculously, the injured soldier is recovering. He regained consciousness and is now beginning the long, arduous task of rehab and recovery.

But that's not the end of the story.

Because, as Dr. Codish told us, after sitting shiva for her son, the first mother called the hospital... to thank them for the care they provided to the soldier who she had thought had been her son.

And when I heard that story and wrote down a few notes so I would remember it, I added three words of my own – *מי בעמך ישראל* – what an extraordinary nation God has chosen – what a remarkable nation we are.

And the second story I want to share I didn't see, but I heard from Yonit – our photographer who had accompanied us on the visit.

As I described in my final email report of the visit, on Wednesday, we went to Kibbutz Nir Oz, one of the twenty-two communities that were attacked on October 7th, and the community that proportionally, suffered the worst losses, with more than a quarter of its residents either killed or kidnapped.

House to house, we walked, going through many of the homes that were looted and burned, stepping over fallen beams and broken glass, bearing witness to the barbarism of Hamas and the savagery of Nir Oz's Arab neighbors.

While 100 Hamas terrorists initially attacked the kibbutz, they were later joined by hundreds of neighboring Arabs, many of whom had relationships with the members of the kibbutz and some of whom had been helped by the members of the kibbutz. Both groups are responsible for the pogrom of October 7th as both murdered and kidnapped, tortured and stole, vandalized and destroyed a community.

(By the way, you may have noticed that I haven't referred to the terrorists as "animals." Why? As former Chicagoan Rachel Goldberg, the mother of Hersh Goldberg-Polin, taught us the night before, to call them animals is an insult to animals – since animals would never do what Hamas and the Arabs did to a member of their species.)



At the last home in a long row of houses, we noticed Zaka volunteer workers coming out the door. I stopped one of them and asked what they were doing. He said that even though 60 days had passed, they were still sifting through the ashes of the homes, hoping to find DNA evidence that could be used to determine if one of the unaccounted-for missing people may have been killed.

Sixty days later and they were still working – what incredible mesirut nefesh!

But we moved on, and behind us was Yonit, hard at work creating a photographic record of our visit.

A few minutes later, Yonit rejoined our group and told us that after we left, the Zaka volunteers had returned to the burnt and darkened home to resume their sacred work. And when they did, and she began to move on, she heard something she couldn't believe – they were singing as they were working – not just any song, but *על הגמסים* – a song that celebrates Chanukah, and its miracles and our salvation.

And once again, I wrote a few notes and added the three words *מי כעמך ישראל* – what an extraordinary nation God has chosen, what a remarkable nation we are.

And why did I pick these two stories to share with you today?

It's because of something the Sfat Emet once taught, a lesson based on the famous Gemara that recounts the miracle of Chanukah.

And it's there, on daf 21b of mesechet Shabbat that we read *לשנה אחרת* – that the year after the miracle of the menorah, the rabbi – *קבעים* – instituted those days, *ועשאו* – and made those days *ימים טובים בהלל והודאה* – holidays with the recitation of hallel and thanksgiving.

Wrote the Sfat Emet (Chanukah, 5641) that *חז"ל* were not merely creating a holiday with this decree.

Rather, they were creating an opportunity via the lights of the menorah to feel as if we were in the Beit HaMikdash itself – or in his words *בימים אלו נמצא קצת קצת הארה מבית המקדש* – and with that feeling beckoning us to sing, asking us to find the beauty in this world, the light that is sometimes hidden and the connection with God.

These past 64 days have been dark days for the Jewish people, days of intense grief, heart-rending choices, and ever-present dangers.

And because of that, so many are anxious and afraid, feeling as if the shadows of evil are closing in on our people.

And that's the reason I chose to share these two stories today, on this Shabbat of Chanukah. Because they reminded me of the power of goodness to erase that darkness, the capacity of the human spirit to overcome the fear and opportunity of mitzvot to move us forward.

For just as a single candle can illuminate a darkened room, so too do each of the acts of chesed that people do light up this world and lift our spirit. That's what I saw in the story of a grieving mother thanking a hospital for the care they gave to another's son, and that is what I heard in the song of hold Zaka volunteers who could sing of miracles and salvation while sifting the ashes of destruction.

And that's what I witnessed over and over again in Israel.

I saw the darkness of the 7th and the ever-expanding light of each day since, a light that should bring us to singing Hallel and Hoda'ah, especially today because these days, our sages taught that when God grants us special permission to sing.

And so my message to you today is one of hope and of joy, a reminder that cannot stop what we are doing to support Israel, visit Israel, defend Israel and advocate for Israel.

Join us tomorrow from 11 a.m. to 2 p.m. for a Chanukah Extravaganza to raise money for Israel and in the evening for the Simcha Leiner – Unity Concert in the evening to raise funds for Israel and support JUF's Israel Emergency Campaign – they are doing so many amazing things, and continue to daven and continue to do all that you can.

May this truly be a lightige Chanukah, days when we see the light, the goodness, and the greatness of our people – **מִי כַעֲמֵךְ יִשְׂרָאֵל** – what a remarkable nation we are.

# Parashat Miketz 5784

In the middle of this week's parsha, when the brothers come down to Egypt, and Yosef – the all-powerful Viceroy of Egypt sees them, remembers his dreams, and accuses them of being spies, saying – **מִדְּגָלִים אַתֶּם** – not once but twice.

Of course, they deny his charge. But he is unwilling to believe them unless they prove their innocence by sending one brother back to Canaan to bring their younger brother as proof of their story. AND in the meantime, he'll put the rest of them in jail.

And to prove that he's serious, **וַיֹּאכֶף אֹתָם אֶל-מִשְׁמֹר שְׁלֹשֶׁת יָמִים** – he throws the brothers into jail for three days.

But then something strange happens because he suddenly brings them out of jail and says, **את האלוקים אני ירא** – I'm in awe of God, and therefore, I've reconsidered my demands.

Instead of only one brother going back to Canaan, let one brother stay in Egypt, and the rest of you can go back to your father.

And then, another surprising twist of events occurs, when two verses later comes the dramatic, emotional, even heart-wrenching declaration, as the brothers say to each other, **וְלֹא שָׂמְעֵנּוּ** it's all our fault because we stood by as our brother was pleading for his life, **וְלֹא שָׂמְעֵנּוּ** and we didn't heed those pleas, **עַל-כֵּן בָּאָה אֵלֵינוּ הַצָּרָה הַזֹּאת** that's why these troubles have come upon us – that's why all this is happening to us. **עַל כֵּן** that's why all these terrible things are happening to us.

It's an incredible series of verses, filled with a tremendous amount of drama, and according to the late Rav Shimon Schwab, a great lesson for us as well, a lesson that begins with a simple question.

Why now? Why is it only after Yosef reconsidered his demands that the brothers express regret and find a connection between the challenge they're facing in Egypt and their sin of selling Yosef?

Why didn't they feel those pangs of conscience after the earlier accusation of מרגלים אתם – that they were spies?

Why is it only now, when they get a break, when they receive the encouraging news that only one of them has to stay in jail, that they start suspecting maybe there's a connection, a divine, spiritual, mystical, metaphysical causality between what's happening to now and what they had done to their brother all those years before?

Said Rav Schwab because it was only now that they witnessed the Viceroy of Egypt not only change his mind but do so because את אלהים ירא – he is in awe of God.

With those words, Yosef taught them that if someone truly believes and is genuinely in awe of God, their perspective on life is completely different.

Because if you believe, then you can be at ease. And if you believe, you realize that you're never one hundred percent confident that you did the right thing – because only God is perfect.

And therefore, on a big decision, on a complicated issue, you're willing to rethink it. Because you believe in God and, therefore, you're not arrogant, and you're willing to reconsider even decisions you had made previously because you realize that only God is infallible.

Once they saw that someone as powerful as the Viceroy was willing to rethink his position because of his yirat shamayim, the brothers said to themselves, who had once upon a time rationalized their sale of Yosef were willing to rethink and reconsider what they did – אֲבָל אֱלֹהִים אֲנַחְנוּ.

And to prove his thesis, Rav Schwab goes one step further and explains a seemingly inexplicable phrase.

Because in that pivotal verse, when Yosef finished speaking and changed his mind, saying that only one of you has to stay, the verse concludes with the words ויעשו כן – and they did so.

But what did they do?

From the context of the statement, coming as it does after the offer for all but one to go back, it would seem to be that they went back to Canaan.

But clearly, that's not the case because the very next verse describes that as they reconsider their actions, they didn't realize **כִּי שָׁמַע יוֹסֵף** – that Yosef understood what they were saying, meaning that they hadn't moved and they were still standing before Yosef.

So what does the phrase **וַיַּעֲשׂוּ כֵן** mean?

Explained Rav Schwab, it means that they did what Yosef did. Just as Yosef was willing to change his mind, they were willing to rethink their position, BECAUSE just like Yosef, they were in awe of God; they had yirat shamayim. And that understanding of God changed their perspective on life.

This past week was a very difficult week in Israel as 21 soldiers were killed and countless others were wounded.

And among those soldiers who gave their lives for Medinat Yisrael was Elisha Loewenstern, a 38-year-old father of six, who was exempt from miluim, but chose to serve and whose mother many of us remember, because she was a former Chicagoan, Sharon Goldrich Loewenstein.

I first heard about his death early Thursday morning from a fellow ICJA alum, and it was one more instance where this war felt very personal. And then, on Thursday afternoon, I watched portions of his funeral online.

It was a heart-wrenching moment, as you could see some of his children and recognize some of the people in attendance.

Soon afterward, a nephew of mine in Israel sent me a recording of an interview that his wife, Hadas, had with Israeli radio the night before as she was driving to the army base of Shura to identify his body.

There are so many things she said that bear repeating. But among the most poignant things was her request that on the notice of his passing, people should NOT use the word **בְּצַעַר** – with pain or regret; instead, they should use the word **בְּגִאוּוֹה** with pride.

Because, as she said, he did “what my grandfather could only dream of doing. He defended his land and commanded a tank with artillery to reclaim national pride and honor.”

“Just a few generations ago,” she said, “Jews in Poland had to light their candles indoors, afraid of what might happen, and they sang על הנסים. But we, in our generation, all our lives are songs of miracles.”

And she continued with even more pronouncements of hope and thanks.

My nephew wrote to me האמת לא יודע מאיפה היא שואבת את הכוחות שלה – truthfully, I don’t know from where she is drawing her strength. And he added that Elisha היה שנה מתחתי בירוחם – was a year behind him in yeshiva.

But I know where she drew her strength. It is from the ultimate source of strength – from faith and a connection to God – את האלוקים. אני ירא.

Yosef used his yirat shamayim to teach his brothers, and by extension, each of us a lesson in our own imperfection and, therefore, the need to rethink and reconsider – to never be too sure.

While Hadas Loewenstern used her yirat shamayim to teach us of the power of faith and the comfort it can offer in times of trouble.

May her faith continue to offer her comfort as it inspires us all.

May Yosef’s faith drive us to be better, to know that we change, and we can regain our greatness with the humility of standing before God.

# Parashat Vayechi 5784

Many years ago, Rebbetzin Mescheloff said to me, “You go to Israel like I go downtown.”

For those of you who remember the Rebbetzin, this may have been a bit of an overstatement. She was so very prim and proper. Hers was the only home I was ever invited over to for tea. I have a feeling that sometimes, she may have spent more time getting ready for her trips downtown than I do for my trips to Israel.

And yet, these past few weeks, she would have been right. Because I’ve been back and forth so many times, more than she would ever go downtown, and I still have one more trip to go.

It’s been a whirlwind of travel.

But I don’t regret the hours on planes nor the days away from home. It’s also been, as I’ve shared in my emails from Israel, an opportunity of a lifetime, with each trip different from the other.

The first was a mission of RCA rabbis, to see what had happened and to offer comfort.

The second was a mission with the Federation to see and to understand the impact of our community’s support, how Chicago Jewry is helping Israel, and with our continued contributions to JUF’s Israel Emergency Campaign, will continue to help Israel.

And the third, this most recent trip with the seniors of ICJA, was not to see, but to do, literally to roll up our sleeves and work in the fields, cook, provide respite for families, and encouragement and joy for the evacuees.

And while the schedule was challenging – a few days ago I told Margaret that the seniors were having trouble keeping up with me, but I was also having a little trouble keeping up with me, it’s also been inspiring, exhilarating, and exciting.

Because I was able to bear witness to what is being called a second War of Independence – a time of rebirth and redirection for the State. And I saw people, who just a few months ago were protesting in the streets, now working shoulder to shoulder – in the army, the volunteer sector, everywhere.

Or as a Major in Duvduvan, who for security reasons could only go by his first name of Rafi, told our students – 120 years ago the Kishinev pogrom shocked the world, and propelled the Zionist dream forward – leading to the Second Aliya and tens of thousands of Russian Jews, many whom were the early founders of the State, making aliya.

“Do you know how many Jews were murdered in that pogrom?” he asked. “There were 49 victims. Compare that to the pogrom of October 7th – and you will understand how that tragedy will have an even greater consequence for the future of our people.”

And so we’ve seen an Israeli society that is morphing into something different and exciting. And it’s not just the unbelievable *achdut* that is so rapidly erasing divisions, but the grassroots efforts that continue to grow, filling in for what the government may have once assumed as its responsibility, but now simple citizens are doing it better, more efficiently, and with greater commitment and passion.

There are the *chamal'im* that provide food and supplies, the entertainers who bring joy, and share in the sorrow of families, the 300,000 Israelis who came back home to serve, and the countless numbers of volunteers who took leave from their jobs to work.

Each of them brings their unique skills and talents to the effort of rebuilding. Each brings their passion and love for the Jewish State to their duties.

This is amazing, but maybe not surprising, because of something from this week’s *parsha* – the way Yaakov Avinu blessed his children.

Writes the Torah, that Yaakov called them together, **וַאֲגִידָה לָכֶם אֵת אֲשֶׁר-יִקְרָא אֲתֶכֶם** – assemble and I will tell you – **בְּאַחֲרֵית הַיָּמִים** – what will happen in the “End of Days.”



Which seems only natural, to want to gather his children for their final blessing. Except for the fact that according to the Midrash they were already there! And therefore, the Midrash explained that Yaakov was actually asking of them something else – *ציוה אותן על המחלוקת* – commanding them to avoid familial division and strife, to be, *כולבון*, all of you, *אסיפה אחת* – a single cohesive unit.

But if cohesion and unity were the goal, why did Yaakov proceed to give each son a different blessing, some positive, some complimentary, and some harsh words of condemnation?

HaRav Aharon Lichtenstein, זצ"ל suggested that the answer is found at the end of those brachot, where the Torah concludes – *ויברך אותם* and he blessed them, *איש אשר כבדך*, – each according to his blessing, *ברך אתם* – he blessed them.

Why the repetition and the shift between the plural of *ויברך אותם* – and he blessed them and the singular, *איש אשר כבדך* – each according to his blessing?

It's because a real bracha has to be individualized, has to address, what the Or HaChaim described as, *כפי בחינת נשמתו וכפי הראוי לו* – a blessing that is fit for a person's personality and deeds. And that was *איש אשר כבדך* – each according to HIS blessing.

But Yaakov also wanted the brothers to remain together – to be ready to create a nation – and therefore *ברך אתם* – he blessed all of them at once since they were all on the same “team” – and could only succeed if the entire family would succeed.

Rav Lichtenstein said this is the real meaning of the *אחדות* – the unity that Yaakov sought when he gathered his sons together.

He wanted unity and diversity. He wanted them to discover a synergy that respected each other's unique abilities, differences, and talents so that each could contribute to the whole – rather than merely duplicating the contribution of others.

And that's what I've seen time and again on these trips to Israel.

I saw it on Tuesday night when we danced with chayalim of every background – together in a single circle. And I saw it in the *chama*'l where we were surrounded by volunteers with payot, and those without kippot; women who covered their hair and women who did not cover that much at all.

And I saw it when another officer of Duvduvan, named Gilad, received permission to take me on a tour of the base, where I saw soldiers with their weapons, guns that could take out a target at 1200 meters, and equipment that he wouldn't explain. And I saw soldiers preparing for an operation – those with kippot and those without, Sefardim, Beta Yisrael, and Ashkenazim, working together, ready to risk their lives for one another.

And by the way, before I forget, I also began to understand some of the equipment they are missing – in particular Gilad asked if we could buy a tactical breaching kit – a piece of equipment they use to break into the homes of terrorists without being heard. It's a \$10,000 item, and the Duvduvan unit needs one. If anyone wants to help purchase it for them, please let me know – because I want to help them get it.

One more story that Rav Rimon shared with me – a psak he gave that had to remain secret until just a couple of weeks ago.

Some soldiers – dati and not yet dati, approached him and wanted to light Chanukah candles while in Gaza. The only problem was the light – because if even a sliver of light was seen by Hamas, their position would be compromised and most likely bombed.

Asked the chayalim of Rav Rimon – there is a vacant building a few hundred meters away – we can see it from our location – can we light the candles there, and make the brachot while seeing it from here?

Said Rav Rimon, that vacant building is not where you are living and therefore, it doesn't meet the halachic criteria for lighting Chanukah candles with a bracha. But if you were to go there and daven mincha and maariv you could light the candles with the brachot and then return to a secure location.

Which they did, dati and not yet dati soldiers, they made a minyan, lit the candles, and then returned to their secure location, were able to see the candles from a distance.

That night, the building where the candles were lit was bombed, but the chayalim remained safe and together.

From October 7th until today there have been too many losses, too many tragedies, and too much sorrow.

But out of this calamity has emerged a new hope and strength for the future. A strength built on the belief that we will rebuild not what was,

but what will be a better and brighter future. A future where the diverse voices, strengths, and talents of the Jewish people can come together to support one another and lift each other up ever higher.

Because, as Rav Rimon told the soldiers – for thousands of years we have faced tragedy, dispersion, and persecution, but never before could we protect ourselves, never before did we have a strong army, a strong nation, a strong people who have joined together for one purpose to protect the State of Israel.

Never before ...

**הִאֶסְפוּ וְאֶגְדָּה לָכֶם** – come together and I will tell you what will be in the end of the days. And maybe this is it, maybe this coming together is finally the beginning of the geulah.

Shabbat Shalom

# Parashat Vaera 5784

A few days ago, I was in the Old City, waiting to meet with Jon Polin and his wife, Rachel Goldberg, when I was stopped on the street by a former student, Rocky Fishman Brody.

Rocky had come to Yerushalayim after paying a condolence call to Meital Schwartz, whose husband, David, ד"ר was killed in Gaza, and whose parents, Joe and Leelah Gitler, are her good friends.

I hadn't seen Rocky in many years – and so, it's only natural that after a few seconds, I was about to ask, "How are you"?

But I caught myself. Because in Israel today, after what was then ninety-six days of war, you don't ask that question.

After all, what can the average Israeli answer?

They're fine? But they're not. Because if their spouse isn't in the army, then their kids are in the army, or their cousins, or nephews, or nieces, or all of the above.

In fact, Rocky's family has more than a dozen immediate relatives in the army, many in Gaza, some up north, and some at points in between.

So how are they? They're on edge.

And they are praying that the knock never comes to their door as it did to the Schwartz family at 11:00 at night this past Tuesday to give them "the news."

And they're off-balance because they know that life as it was 100 days ago will never return.

And they're anxious for the war to end, nervous to listen to the news in fear that someone they know will be named as a casualty of the war.

But amazingly, they're also so very hopeful, optimistic that after this war ends, things will be better, the future will be safer, people will continue to work together, their children will return from the front safe and sound, and the hostages, the 136 men, women and children who are held captive by Hamas will be back with their families.

But even that they know is too much to ask for – because while the official number is 136, those in the know already know that 25 have died, and unless things change quickly, others may as well.

So how are you? It's not a fair question to ask of an Israeli.

Everyone is just one degree removed from someone who is mourning, and everyone is doing their best to keep it together and to help someone else make it through the longest war of Israel's existence.

All while we in the States do our best to help and to understand.

But it's hard.

I came to realize this more and more during my trips to Israel until it finally hit home when speaking with my brother-in-law and sister-in-law this past week.

Three of their four sons are on active duty, and two are in Gaza. Last Shabbos, one of their sons, my nephew Shlomo, was finally given his first leave since October 7th to visit his wife, Daniella, and their two small children.

Based on the psak of the Rabbanut of Tzahal, Shlomo traveled on Shabbat to his parent's home – where his wife and kids were staying, and surprised them on Shabbat afternoon.

That it was an emotional reunion goes without saying.

But what they told me next – just in passing – is something I still can't wrap my head around.

They told me that on Sunday, when Shlomo's leave was up, my brother-in-law Chaim drove him back to his base on the border of Gaza.

Which they reported matter of factly. Yet, I still can't fathom that scene – a father having to drive his son back to the front, back to the dangers of war, back to face an enemy that values martyrdom more than life and regales in the deaths of civilians and of soldiers even more.

But Chaim is not the only one who does that. Because when I told Rocky the story she told me that her husband has had to do the same numerous times.

So, “How are you,” is not a question you ask nonchalantly in Israel today unless you’re ready to share in the pain, the worry, and the commitment.

And yet, despite it all, the Israel that I’ve been visiting, and that I urge everyone to make the extra effort to visit, is an Israel that is inspiring, an Israel where the phrase **יחד ננצח** appears on billboards, on the sides of buildings and signs everywhere; and means not only that together we will be victorious, but, because we are together, because of Israel’s renewed sense of unity and shared destiny, because of that we will be victorious.

Which is so very different a reality than what the Meshech Chochmah described in this week’s parsha.

His comment appears after Moshe Rabbeinu delivered the stirring vision that we know as the arba leshonot geulah – the four stages of redemption, the four phrases that begin with the verbs of **והוצאתי והצלתי וגאלתי ולקחתי** – the promise of redemption and ultimately the deliverance of the Jewish people to the Land of Israel.

But what was the people’s reaction to Moshe’s vision of soon-to-be greatness?

Says the Torah **וְלֹא שָׁמְעוּ אֶל-מֹשֶׁה** – that they were incapable of hearing these words **מִקְצֶר רוּחַ וּמֵעֲבֹדָה קָשָׁה** – because their spirits were crushed by the cruel slavery of Egypt.

Explained the Meshech Chochma that at first, when Moshe promised them freedom and redemption, they were totally on board.

But then, when Moshe began to speak about the Land of Israel when he said **וְהֵבֵאתִי אֶתְכֶם אֶל-הָאָרֶץ** – I will bring you to the land. **וְנָתַתִּי אֹתָהּ לְכֶם מְוֹרָשָׁה** – And I will give it to you as a heritage – it was too much for them to accept.

Why? **מִקְצֶר רוּחַ וּמֵעֲבֹדָה קָשָׁה**.

Because when a person is in the midst of difficult, tragic, harsh times, they don’t have the bandwidth to imagine anything beyond an end to their suffering and pain. Redemption and the Exodus – that they could imagine. Freedom and a land of their own – it was too big of a dream,

so they couldn't hear it – not because they didn't want to believe – but because they just couldn't see future greatness.

But not in the Israel of today.

Because, somehow, miraculously, the people have risen above the pain, above the loss, and above the fear – to dream, to imagine not merely an end to the war but a better and brighter future.

You see it everywhere.

Take, for example, what happened last week, when the entire kibbutz of Nir Oz, a community of 400 that suffered the loss of 25 members on October 7th and 75 more who were kidnapped, when they all moved into two brand new apartment buildings in Kiryat Gat – buildings that the owner gave for the use of these mefunim, these evacuee families until their kibbutz can be rebuilt.

Or consider the chamalim, the grassroots kitchens and distribution centers that prepare tens of thousands of meals per week for soldiers – so they can have “home-cooked meals” and not army rations, and provide them with everything from socks to medical supplies.

Or the pre-Shabbat deliveries of food and gifts to families whose husbands and fathers are in the army – simply to give them something special along with a personal note that is written.

It's the miracle of this war – that the tragedies did not beat us down – instead, somehow, they've lifted us up.

And if you have any doubt, listen to the words of so many widows and families who have lost loved ones. Inevitably, their tears are mixed with prayers for the future, and their cries are interrupted by words of thanks.

Because, unlike our ancestors, the dream and the wonder of the Land of Israel, the promise of **יְהִי בְּיָמֵינוּ** is something we can and we do imagine. And that is the miracle of this war.

One final request.

Tomorrow will be 100 days from the beginning of the war and 100 days since the hostages were taken.

And when we met with Rachel and Jon Goldberg-Polin, they told us of a dream they have for tomorrow – that if the hostages are not released by then, that one million people would take a piece of masking tape, write the number 100 on it and wear it on their shirts – just as

Jon and Rachel have been wearing the day of captivity on their shirts, every day since their son Hersh was taken hostage.

One million people – it sounds impossible, but we can help.

So tomorrow morning, take a piece of tape and wear it. Share in their effort and help their dream move forward.

Because who knows, maybe this small symbolic gesture will move someone to do something that will ultimately lead to the return of the hostages. Who knows, as Rachel said, who God will choose to be His *כלי* to bring them home?

May God continue to protect us. May our tefillot be answered, may this war end soon, and may the hostages be returned to their families. And may the State and the people of Israel draw ever closer to the dream of ours – ultimate geulah, *במהרה בימינו*, Amen.



# Parashat Bo 5784

This past Wednesday. I was “whatsapping” with Rabbi Moshe Taragin in anticipation of his visit to K.I.N.S. next month. In the middle of planning his schedule of shiurim and drashot, he sent me a picture of a man beaming from ear to ear, holding a baby, at what looked like a brit milah. Under the photo, he wrote, “Unfortunately, another talmid – three children – doesn’t end.”

Of course, I knew what his cryptic message meant – that yet another talmid of Yeshivat Har Etzion, by my count the eighth such student, had been killed in the war.

I wrote back – “What was his name?”

He responded with a voice note that his name was Zechariah Haber, זכריהו, and his mother was a Segal from Silver Spring, Maryland.

To which I wrote back the acronym of BDE – baruch dayan haemet.

And that was the end of our exchange.

But not the end of the story.

Because yesterday afternoon, I received a heart-wrenching email from a friend, Rabbi Yehiel Poupko, who reported that:

“Today, at 6:00, my daughter Chaya is taking my grandchildren Sara, 17, and Yonatan, 14, to the funeral on Mount Herzl of their cousin, 32-year-old Zecharia Haber, a Talmid Chacham and a holder of a doctorate in agricultural technology, father of three who was killed yesterday in Gaza.”

When this war began, I was interviewed by one of the papers; I don’t remember which one, but among the things I told them is that

what has made this war so different is that it's personal. Every one of us knows someone or knows someone who knows someone who was killed, kidnapped, or putting their life on the line serving in the army.

All of us know someone or know someone who knows someone who is grieving, is lying awake at night worried, or who is working tirelessly to help someone in need because of this war.

And what was true then is even more true today, as we learn of the connections we have to others, the rebbi who just lost a talmid, who was a nephew of someone I taught and someone we cherish.

This is the reason, not only for the pain felt when even one soldier falls, but also the anger we feel when the world only looks away, equating the terrorist with the victim, the murderer with the protector.

Rabbi Menachem B. Sacks, whose 37th *yahrzeit* was observed this past Thursday, commented on an unusual exchange between Moshe Rabbeinu and Pharaoh found at the beginning of this week's *parsha*.

It appears immediately after Moshe insists that Pharaoh let the Jews – men, women, and children – go to worship God in the desert; to which Pharaoh responds that he has no intention to let the children go, **רָאוּ בִּי רָעָה נֶגְדַּ פְּנִיכֶם**. Clearly, you are up to no good.

But that's not how Rabbi Sacks explained it. Rather, he wrote that Pharaoh told the Jews, you may be intent on going into the dangers, the **רָעָה**, of the wilderness – **וְאַתֶּם אֲדוֹנִים לַנְּפֹשׁוֹת כַּחֲפֻצֵיכֶם** – and you can do what you want.

But I can't let you endanger the lives of your innocent children, **לֹא בֶן**. Therefore – for your own good, **לְכוּ נָא הַגְּבֻרִים** only the adult men can go.

This is a fascinating take on this exchange, but not the *pshat*. And until recently, it's an explanation that I found so hard to accept.

After all, wasn't this the same Pharaoh who enslaved and tortured an entire nation, a ruler who tried to kill every male child born to the Jews!?

How could he have the gall, the audacity, the temerity to present himself as a compassionate king who cares so much for the children?

But then came this war – when nations can accuse us of genocide, when terrorists who place weapons in hospitals and schools indict us for killing civilians, and when despots and dictators can lecture us on human

rights – that Rabbi Sacks's take on Pharaoh **רָאוּ כִּי רָעָה נֶגְדַּ פְּנֵיכֶם** – became so very real.

Because that's the way our enemies present themselves. Not as brutal murderers who attack, kidnap, maim, and murder men, women, and children, but as the underdogs, the victims of indiscriminate bombing and attacks by Israel.

They claim that they care about the children, they care about our future and even our souls, as they continue to endanger the lives of their own children and hold captive some of ours.

And they claim that they are the victims, while they promise more terror attacks and additional pogroms against Israelis.

And all the while, life in Israel goes on.

And conversations, whether on Whatsapp or in person, take place only to be punctuated by the sad news of a former student, a friend, or a relative who has been killed, or that a funeral will be taking place on Har Herzl where another **קדוש**, another soldier who has sacrificed his life so that others may rebuild, will be put to rest.

On Wednesday, Zecharia Haber was laid to rest. At his funeral, his uncle, using the words of a beraita, described him as the ultimate mensch, as a person whose personality and actions caused others to appreciate and love God – **שְׂיֵהָא שֵׁם שָׁמַיִם מְתַאֲדָב עַל יָדָךְ**.

Rabbi Poupko referred me to the words of Agnon's famous petichta, his introduction to the Kaddish, written in 1947 during the Independence War, that concludes:

Therefore, **אחינו כל בית ישראל** – our brethren of the House of Israel, who mourn in this mourning, we turn our hearts to our Father in Heaven, the King of Israel and its Redeemer, and we pray for ourselves and for Him: **יתגדל ויתקדש שמייה רבה**... that we may be worthy to live and see with our very eyes, **עושה שלום במרומיו** – that He, who, in His mercies, makes peace in the heavens, will make peace for us and all Israel.

That's who we are – a nation that cherishes peace, prays for peace, and works toward peace. A nation that remains true to our faith and true to our belief in the sanctity of all life. A nation that yearns for the

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day when we can feel safe in our own homes, our communities, and our land.

May the life of Zechariah Haber and all those who have given their lives al kiddush Hashem inspire us, move us forward and bring us closer. And may this war end soon, the hostages be returned, and life restored to an entire nation.

## Notes

1. Shabbos Parshas Noach 5725, October 10, 1964. Published in Likkutei Sichos vol. 5 pp. 281-283.
2. <https://mosaicmagazine.com/response/israel-zionism/2023/10/the-extremists-gambit-helps-explain-why-hamas-attacked-now/> by Tanner Greer.
3. Shabbat Parashat Lekh Lekha 5763 (2002)
4. <https://www.etzion.org.il/en/tanakh/torah/sefer-bereishit/parashat-vayetze/vayetze-did-yaakov-deal-justly-lavan>
5. שבת דף ל"ג עמ' ב
6. עין איה (שם) סעיף דפ"ה

