

Three Days In the North of Israel Some Personal Reflections

By Yamin Levy

The news that I, along with Rabbi Avi Weiss (Rav Avi), would be embarking to the North of Israel on a mission of solidarity and unity was met by many friends and colleagues with a myriad of responses. Many were supportive of the mission, all were apprehensive about the dangers, and yet some were cynical about our motives and chances of success. ‘What can one person do amidst all the violence and terror?’ they scoffed. It was seen by some as mere *Rabbinic bravado*, a chance to acquire some good sermon material or to pad one’s personal resume and credentials.

I had many reasons for going. Among them, three years ago I started a foundation, The Maimonides Heritage Center, dedicated to rebuilding the city of Tiberias, a northern coastal city not far from the border of Lebanon, and rescuing it from the throngs of poverty. We have made much progress and I have become very close with many Tiberian families and thus felt compelled to visit them in their plight and time of need.

The nature of this current clash is not one of traditional armies battling for territory: the enemy does not seek to gain position; rather, they seek to destabilize and demoralize the people of Israel, to end not just lives but a way of life. No one should underestimate this conflict; the enemy is fully aware the impact psychological warfare has, and I understand now, more than ever, the importance of coming to the North and making my presence felt, to battle the enemy on this front, to repel the despair that is sent with every rocket, to combat not with guns but with solidarity and love.

What we accomplished in our three days will not make the newspapers or CNN, it will not end the violence or the destruction and to that end I’m afraid the world will go on much as it has. However, in just a few days we touched the lives of scores of families, and made a profound difference on a microcosmic - yet extremely important - level that I will try to describe below. I fear those who think changes happen from the top down or only in a sweeping fashion suffer from a certain narrow-mindedness and cynicism that is far too pervasive in Western culture. To change and improve the outlook of just one individual, even for a moment, can make a world of difference and a difference in the world.

I spent two days in Tiberias and a third day in Kiryat Shmoneh in town, and with soldiers on a base the location of which was never revealed to me. The North of Israel has seen over 1 million people displaced from their homes. Those that remained are the poorest, the weakest, the most hopeless, the ones with nowhere else to go. Tiberias, indeed much of the North survives on tourism. The height of the season is July and August as travelers from around the world take in the beauty and serenity of the Galilee and the Kineret. With these two months lost, the vendors, the hotel employees, the restaurant owners, etc. are destined to a year of poverty. Over 55% of their annual income is usually made in these two months. These are the “civilian casualties” that because of the violence are unfortunately often overlooked.

The scenes in these deserted towns are almost indescribable. Rav Avi, Yonah Berman, Dror LaLush (deputy mayor of Tiberias), and myself visited a poor neighborhood of Tiberias and came upon a group of families huddled outside their bomb shelter just waiting for the next siren to sound. Despite the utter despair of the situation, the one hundred degree temperatures, and the reality that at any moment we may all have to literally run for our lives, Rav Avi was able to bring smiles to everyone's faces with his natural warmth. He even found time to play chess with a small ten year old girl named Yarden, that is until he realized he was losing.

Within 15 minutes of our arrival the siren goes off. It is a somewhat surreal experience as instinct and adrenaline take over. Then a series of thunderous booms sound, the ground shakes, smoke clouds the air as several Katyusha rockets land, one a mere 50 meters from us. These particular rockets are packed with thousands of pebbles and nails that shoot out like bullets three hundred feet in every direction spraying shrapnel and devastation. Panic and fear abound as people run toward bomb shelters. The shelters themselves provide little refuge from anything more than bombs. They are 10 X 15 ovens in the hot desert sun. Old, hot, dirty, smelly they would be intolerable except for the knowledge that they are refuge from the carnage outside. As people emerge from these shelters, hysterical children search for their parents and the adults seem to be in a trance. They refuse to outwardly express their fear or panic, yet something in their eyes betrays their hardened exteriors. They are frightened for their homes, for their children, for their very way of life, but most of all they are weary. Weary of running in and out of bomb shelters, weary of wondering when it will end, weary of a conflict that is in scope far beyond them, yet seems to impact their lives in ways that are unimaginable to those of us living in the United States.

As soon as I could, I met with community leaders and we identified the needs of 400 families (nearly 1200 people) that are in crisis. We then set about acquiring and distributing the most basic goods and services (hygienic supplies, clean sheets, blankets, diapers, mattresses, bread, water, milk, baby formula, etc.). We bought and then we delivered Monday night, Tuesday night, and all through Wednesday. To see parents rejoice over a clean diaper for their infant or the elderly look in amazement at bottled water put my whole trip in perspective. We mobilized two chapters of Bnei' Akiva, who bussed two and a half hours from Jerusalem to help us hand out goods. We hired a band to come play music in the bomb shelter. We did all we could to relieve the monotony and bring hope to the hopeless.

As we handed out baskets of food and other basic necessities a man approached me. He looked tired, worn out, somewhat indistinguishable from the rest. As I handed him some goods he looked up at me very pensively, and in a whispered tone, almost apologetically said, "I'm an Arab". "You're my brother", I responded and we embraced.

I called my wife from Yirkat Shmoneh and she could, over the phone, hear the bombs falling. It is impossible to tell whether they are incoming or outgoing and I cannot truly describe how terrifying it feels to not know whether your next step is away from

incoming shrapnel or toward it. Once again, the families who stayed are the poorest and the weakest. Together with Rabbi Chaim Fogel and several wonderful boys from Kiryat Shmoneh Yeshiva we handed out food baskets, clothes, toys.

In the late afternoon, we visited an army base, which is clearly makeshift: long rows of armor and tanks lined the street. Soldiers, exhausted, lay motionless sound asleep on dirt roads or on top of their tanks baking in the sun. Most amazing to me were the women who like their male counterparts were covered in dirt and exhausted, yet it could be clearly seen beneath the dirt on their faces that they had put on makeup trying to recapture some semblance of normality in an otherwise unpredictable and unforgiving environment. Our guide was immediately recognized and we were permitted into a tent where soldiers were invited to meet with me. I sat with about 30 of them on the floor of this tent, and told them how proud I was of them. They are young, some short, some tall, most skinny; some still have the pimples of their youth. Dressed in green with helmets and backpacks that seemed to dwarf many of them, they sat around and talked not as kids, but as men and women representing freedom and the Jewish State. I think about my eldest son who is preparing to go study in Israel and then proceed to college, and about these boys, who could have been his classmates, now on the border of Lebanon, in makeshift bases, covered in dirt looking for inspiration. I opened up Maimonides' Laws of Kings, Chapter 5 and told them how Maimonides describes his love for Israel and how the sages, in the days of old, would kiss the ground and roll around in the dirt of Israel to express their love for the holy land. I repeated what I had heard Rabbi Weiss say the day before: 'Not only do we love these troops, but we know they love us and the Jewish people as well.'

I asked them to join me in saying the Mincha prayer. Most of the soldiers came from non-observant homes so we scrounged for a few kippot, but most wore their berets. After the Amidah we said the special Avinu Malkenu prayer, which includes the verse: "Our Father, Our King remove pestilence, sword, famine, captivity, destruction, iniquity, and persecution from the children of Your covenant." I reflected on these words and on the swords and rockets of our enemies, the famine and poverty of the families I visited, the captivity of the three soldiers, the destruction of the North, and the pestilence which is represented by economic devastation. As I left soldiers came up to thank me and I couldn't help but ponder the irony of the situation. They risk their lives to defend ours, but ask no reward. There is so much we owe these brave young men and women that we will never be able to fully repay them or express our gratitude, yet here they were thanking me for one afternoon visit.