

Reflecting on a lifetime of service to the Jewish State

BOBBIE GOLDSTEIN

My involvement in the pro-Israel community didn't start early. I was raised in a secular home, and didn't grow up with Zionism. Tragically, my father died when I was just 13, severing most ties to my synagogue and the local Jewish community in Rockland County. However, through the mentorship of others and sheer chance, I can now look back with pride on decades of service on behalf of a strong and secure Jewish State.

It all started when, in my youth, I was approached by Israel Bonds lay leaders, asking me to get involved. I didn't know how to say no, so I agreed. Initially, they weren't sure what to do with me, but when my new friends discovered I had excellent handwriting, they set me to work addressing envelopes for letters being sent all over the country calling for Israel Bonds support. I couldn't have known then that this small duty would touch off a lifelong commitment to Israel.

Shortly thereafter, I took my first trip to Israel. Gazing upon the Kotel for the first time, I felt the foundation I had been standing on up to that point begin to shift dramatically. I felt at home, and a sense of duty and belonging overwhelmed me. It was nothing short of a revelation, and there and then I committed to doing as much as I could, for as long as I could, to help make the Jewish homeland a better, stronger place. My friend Ruth Gruber, the celebrated journalist and author of "Haven", once told me, "Even though we are born Jewish, there is a moment in our lives when we become Jewish." My moment had come.

Since then, there have been countless Israel Bonds delegations to Israel, many of which I attended, and later, led. We met legendary Jewish leaders on these delegations—including businessman and philanthropist Sam Rothberg, a founder of Israel Bonds—as well as iconic Israeli leaders that until then we had only read about—Golda Meir, Menachem Begin, and Shimon Peres, to name a few. We climbed Masada and watched the sun set from its summit, held candlelight ceremonies, and visited Jerusalem's holiest sites. Each experience was transformative.

There were many memorable occasions. During one delegation, toward the end of the Cold War, when the Soviet Union began allowing Jews to emigrate, we went to Ben-Gurion Airport to welcome a plane of arriving Russian Jews. It was Purim, and I will forever recall seeing a man helping his elderly mother, whose name was Esther, from the plane, finally reaching Israel and the safe haven they had yearned for. The symbolism was not lost on me.

There were also tense moments. During a delegation in 1991, we found ourselves in Israel as the Gulf War raged. We were handed gas masks and told emergency protocols, and our bus frequently had to change course as the trajectories of incoming missiles were mapped in real time. It was a stark, searing reminder of why our Israel Bonds involvement was so important, and what was at stake.

Those reminders also came beyond Israel's borders. One delegation led us to Austria, where we visited the Mauthausen concentration camp. It was my first experience visiting a camp. Sol Goldstein, a Mauthausen survivor, met with us, and as he spoke, snow began to fall. "Look," he said, "it is almost as though God is crying." Events like these, as well as the annual March of the Living in Poland, drove home the importance of supporting a safe, secure Israel as a homeland for Jews everywhere.

My mission continued throughout the years, during which I served as National Women's Division chair, and, eventually, national campaign chair. Today, I'm a member of the Israel Bonds National Campaign Advisory Council. Now, on the seventieth anniversary of Israel Bonds, I am heartened and inspired by the progress Israel has made since my first visit there, thanks in part through our efforts. Whereas once I remember a land of dirt roads best known for its oranges, today the world marvels at a thriving economic and technological powerhouse, an innovation hub that is the envy of the world.

And on a personal level, as I look at my children and grandchildren, I delight in the opportunities available to them that I never saw as a child. Although I grew up outside my local Jewish community—only becoming involved in pro-Israel advocacy by chance—they attend Jewish day schools, are involved in Jewish youth programs, and have participated in Bonds missions, mitzvah projects and trips abroad. I see them carrying this mantle forward, and I know they will be the leaders of tomorrow.

I don't believe in coincidences; there was a reason I was called to start addressing envelopes all those years ago. While I didn't realize it then, this was the beginning of a call to service, one that has lasted a lifetime. I have five children, and at a recent Israel Bonds event at which I was slated to speak, one of my daughters introduced me. She said, "My mother has six great loves in her life: the five of us, and the State of Israel." I couldn't have said it better. **ISRAEL BONDS**

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