

January 4, 2024 Jerusalem, Israel 90 Days Since Hamas Brutally Attacked Israel
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Last Installment!

Please allow me to put some cards out on the proverbial table — Israel was having an annus horribilis long before Hamas attacked the country ninety days ago. After several years of snap elections where coalitions could not be formed to run the Israeli government, the country finally elected Benjamin Netanyahu with a clear majority just a year ago. After a political period that best could be described as a bouncing seesaw, Israelis hoped that Netanyahu's government would bring stability to a teetering country. Unfortunately, that was not the case.

Many of you follow the political sphere in Israel, so you know that as soon as Netanyahu solidified his government, his Minister of Justice, Yariv Levin, began a move that would reshape how power and law is controlled in Israel. The Netanyahu-Levin proposal planned to weaken Israel's Supreme Court while concentrating power in the hands of the executive. With immediacy, Israelis began a series of protests, in which most citizens displayed restraint, but some, at least according to my new friends seemed like slow burning fires, but they noted that with just a little more kindling, felt like they could erupt into major blazes. Last July, despite reservists and some IDF members saying they would refuse to perform their military service if the judicial reforms went through, the Knesset passed sweeping legislation which many considered would lead to the development of an authoritarian regime.

In truth, many Israelis that I have met across socio-economic lines, age groups, religious beliefs, and even nationalities have told me that before October 7th Israel was well on its way to an implosion that could best be described as a nuclear submarine succumbing to the intense pressure of the deep. No one ever wants to say that war is a good thing, but what has happened since the despicable Hamas attacks, is that Israel has galvanized. Whatever the political divisions that may have developed during the proposals to revise the power of the Supreme Court over the last year, there has been a re-unification across the board since the attacks. In fact, just two days ago, Israel's High Court of Justice struck down the proposed judicial overhaul package. All of this is too complicated to explicate in a one page journal, but all of you have to remember that since Israel does not have a constitution, centering the power to make law with the executive branch was simply polarizing for the country. According to the Times of Israel, the most significant outcome of the court's decision is that there is now "fully actualized legal precedent" that the courts have the right "to annul Basic Laws if they undermine the key characteristics of the State of Israel as a Jewish and a democratic country."

My new friends seem thrilled by the decision of the High Court. Many legal scholars, as well as average citizen, felt the judicial overhaul proposed by Netanyahu's government would mortally damage Israel's democracy. What had been proposed would have given the executive, in this case Netanyahu and his coalition, the ability to control almost all judicial appointments and the Knesset would have lost its right of judicial review. Some have told me that referring to this as "authoritarian" does not go far enough — some envisioned the overhaul could have led to dictatorship. To put it bluntly, average citizens were scared that they were losing the democracy that they have worked so hard to build, protect, and defend since the birth of the nation just 75 years ago. As I get ready to leave Israel, it is wonderful to report that many people with who I have discussed the current political climate are resting easier.

On a completely different topic, I received quite the surprise this evening. I had told my dinner companion, Bella, that the Jerusalem Civilian Command Center was hosting a concert this evening and that it would be my last night in Jerusalem. Never in a million years did I think that she would attend, but just as the everyone got seated, who walked in but Bella! And, now I know her full name, Bella Brom. Seeing her also gave me the opportunity to give some shekels in her name and in her presence to the JCCC. What a great way to bring my trip to Jerusalem to a conclusion. It has all been about meeting incredible people and I will remember them!

January 3, 2024 Jerusalem, Israel 89 Days Since Hamas Brutally Attacked Israel
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Most of you, especially my Jewish friends, are well acquainted with the David versus Goliath stories which permeate Jewish culture. Starting with the Exodus from Egypt and the biblical story of David, the shepherd boy, tangling with his giant Philistine opponent, spanning to the Middle Ages when Jews were expelled from Spain, to the modern era of Jews surviving pogroms, and then to the last century with the Holocaust, the unlikely formation of Israel, and the several wars that followed where the new State prevailed against its neighboring Arab nations, Jewish people have been underdogs who, time and again, have emerged victorious.

Though by now most of you have read or even watched the stories of the massacres at Kibbutz Nir Oz and Kibbutz Be'Eri, you may not know the real world David and Goliath tale of Kibbutz Alumim. Thanks to Linda Rosenbluth, I learned the Alumim story firsthand today when I met the Assistant Mayor of the Kibbutz, a radiant young woman and mother of five named Julia, who bravely retold her tale without hesitation, not even a flinch. Linda's long time friend, Smadar Ronen, is the director of the six Jewish Community Centers in Netanya and when almost 10,000 evacuees from the Israeli border communities of Gaza were relocated on October 8 to her region, Smadar found herself in a leadership role to help accommodate these refugees. Over the last 3 months, Smadar has forged a relationship of deep trust with the dislocated people and she provided me the absolute privilege of meeting with Julia so I could hear what happened without varnish or edit from the media. Writing this Journal entry is hard.

With great courage, Julia recounted that when the sirens went off on Shabbat morning in Alumim, an agricultural Kibbutz of about 120 families, she hurried her five children ranging from age 3 to 18 into the safe-room of their home as she watched her husband join a security force of only a dozen men who would patrol their grounds. Security camera feeds allowed Julia to see that her Kibbutz had been infiltrated by as many as 30 highly trained Hamas terrorists riding motorbikes whose only goal was to seek out and murder residents. Julia told me in a stern and sober voice that the Hamas soldiers made a beeline to the area which housed a group of Thai and Nepalese workers. With great brutality, Hamas murdered 18 of the Thai nationals and one Nepalese worker and took six as hostages. By some miracle, the Alumim security detail aided by two brothers from Beersheba, former soldiers, who somehow came to their aid, not only held off most of the Hamas soldiers, but also killed many of them. According to Julia, as she watched the video feed and tried to keep her kids calm, one was vomiting while another was trembling from the need to urinate and she finally did so into a cardboard box, the men of Kibbutz Alumim held the line for six hours until the IDF arrived. Though some of the men of Alumim were wounded, the only people who lost their lives were the Beersheba brothers. Almost 30 hours later, without stopping to eat or even to wash, the 450 or so members of the Kibbutz, shell-shocked and exhausted, relocated to a hotel in Netanya where my new friend Smadar awaited them with her own form of army ready and waiting with meals.

Here is the irony: Julia's kibbutz sits two miles from the Gaza border and its members only wanted to live in peace with the Palestinians. They envisioned that a two state solution was not only possible, but also the best way to live in harmony. Now, she does not just feel betrayed, she used an American expression, "We were stabbed in the front." Members of her community want to return home, but they need an assurance of safety. As I heard Julia's story, the hairs on my arm stood at attention and I got the terrible feeling in the pit of my stomach that Julia will never feel safe again. Somehow I envision her sleeping with one eye open the rest of her life. I could not help but think that American Jews who are way too comfortable ought to become more vigilant. And when you ask these refugees how to best help, they are selfless and give you two simple answers: Support Israel in the Court of World Opinion and Buy Bonds. Tonight, I went to the Wall and said a prayer for Julia and her family.

January 2, 2024 Jerusalem, Israel 88 Days Since Hamas Brutally Attacked Israel
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Most of you receiving this Journal have known me for years and when I tell you that when KMART went out of business all I thought about were the real estate opportunities rather than lamenting that I would never hear the words “Attention KMART shoppers” ever again, you know I am telling you the truth. Today, I would have done anything to have had a KMART, Walmart, or Target nearby! The Jerusalem Civilian Command Center received a large shipment of skirts of all varieties and we hardly had any hangers with clips, or “klipseem,” as they are called in Hebrew, and my task was to go out and buy them and find a future supply.

Have you ever gone on a scavenger hunt in a country where you do not speak more than ten words of the language? That is what today felt like. Everyone told me to run over to MaxStock, a store that is more like an old fashioned Woolworth’s 5 and Dime than a small department store or a retailer of home goods. On arrival, I was pretty proud of myself when I asked if they sold skirt hangers in fairly comprehensible Hebrew. Someone came out to help me, but they only had regular shirt and pant hangers. The manager came over and as hard as I tried to tell him that I needed hangers with clips was as hard as he tried to convince me that no one in the entire State of Israel sells hangers with clips and that all we had to do was fold the skirts on pants hangers. This manager was well trained; I swear, he was not letting me leave the store without making a sale. Six regular hangers was the price of my escape.

On the street that leads to the Machane Yehuda Market, better known as the Shuk, there is a line up of shops that sell almost everything you can possibly imagine except for, of course, any kind of hanger. There are several hardware stores and, uttering my broken Hebrew, I gave them all try, but no such luck. Striking out at the Shuk, I decided on a different approach. A few days ago on Ben Yehuda Street, a pedestrian mall which extends several blocks and attracts locals and tourists, I got acquainted with Uri, the shopkeeper of Shkalim, a T-shirt and clothing store. He had a great graphic for a T-shirt which I had not seen before featuring a map of Israel with a Jewish Star in the center and the following text: Israel, The Other Lone Star State. With one of my dearest friends now being a Texas resident and having married a Texan, I had to have two shirts made. Uri and I got to chatting as he pressed the shirts and he gave me suggestions of where to buy other things that I wanted to bring back home. In addition to T-shirts, Uri sells plenty of other clothing, so I knew he had to have a supply of hangers.

When I explained my predicament to Uri, his response was wonderful, “give me a few moments and I will run into my store room and get you all the extra hangers I have, but you have to mind the counter for me.” Uri was not joking! He grabbed me by the shoulders and installed me behind his counter and he disappeared into the back of the store. I was incredibly thankful that the few potential customers who came in all spoke English. He returned with about two dozen hangers and promised me that he would get more for the JCCC, but then I asked him if he might have some fellow shopkeepers along the street who would sell me excess hangers. Immediately, he wrote out a list of stores in the vicinity with the name of an owner or a manager and he wrote a personal note in Hebrew for me to show them.

Uri’s list took me up and down Ben Yehuda Street and all its alleyways and then to Jaffa Street and back to Agrippas Street which leads back to the Shuk. By the time I made it every store Uri directed me to, I had about 10 dozen hangers with clips in hand and promises for more in the future. Very few charged me a shekel for the hangers.

This story is not about a scavenger hunt — this became a treasure hunt in which I discovered how Israeli’s have galvanized in an effort to help each other in any way they can during this time of strife. I just wonder if this could have happened in Sarasota or anywhere back home!

January 1, 2024 Jerusalem, Israel 87 Days Since Hamas Brutally Attacked Israel

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In sharp contrast to watching fit young people navigate the steep landscape and winding, ancient roads of Tzefat, when I returned back to the hotel last night, a group known as The Next Step was gathering in the lobby to finish its several day conference. The Next Step, provides high-tech prosthetics for Israeli amputees as well as rehabilitation, training, and emotional support. Their motto is extraordinarily fitting: They Never Walk Alone.

Over the past few days, I have had the opportunity to meet some of the people and to hear their stories. Those with who I became acquainted endured what they describe as complex amputations. As you can imagine, I spoke with several people who were in tragic car accidents and one who was run over by a motor boat. They have devoted themselves to helping others through their respective journeys. Now they are preparing for a new mission. According to one of the group's leaders, in the 87 days that Israel has been at war, there are 35 new members of their club, a club that no one would ever want to join. Members of The Next Step are ready to reach out to these new amputees and offer them comfort, advice, and both medical and emotional expertise.

Israel offers some of the best medical care in the world and the amputees I spoke with assured me that surgical care in Israel is absolutely top notch; however, state of the art prosthetic care is not yet available here for those who have withstood the most complex injuries resulting in limb loss. The United States actually leads the way in fitting those who have undergone the most complicated amputations with the best prosthetic devices and now, more than ever, this group wants to be sure that those wounded in the war receive the latest and greatest the medical world has to offer. The Next Step's primary aim is to provide financial support for complex amputees to travel to the United States where they can be fitted with the most technically superior prosthetic devices.

In concert with the start of the war, The Next Step also launched what can best be described as a Volunteer Physical Therapy Brigade to work with the critically injured and help them return to their lives. From the bottom of their hearts, the few members with whom I spoke completely understand that both soldiers and civilians with grave injury which required amputation will also require years of emotional support and physical therapy to regain their lives. They recognize that the families of the severely wounded will also need assistance from people who have been there, who have thought that they lost much of what they believed they were entitled to, but who learned to reclaim their lives. These people know first hand that knowledge is power and by teaching the new amputees and their families what to expect on the road ahead, they feel they can prepare them to boldly pave a way to full recovery. The groups newest mission is to act as mentors to amputees and their families and to foster long-lasting relationships.

Speaking with members of The Next Step might not sound like a great way to spend part of New Year's Eve, but just like Christmas was canceled, the New Year is not being celebrated in Israel. Most of you know that Israel's official calendar is the Hebrew calendar rather than the Gregorian calendar, but Israelis usually celebrate what they refer to as "Silvester." Okay, I never heard of Silvester until two or three days ago. Though January 1 is not the official New Year for Israel as the official New Year is whatever day Rosh Hashana falls upon, I learned that Silvester Night has become increasingly popular over the last decade or two. Essentially, Israel's young people have not wanted to be left out of the New Year's bandwagon.

So, what does Silvester refer to? I had to look it up! Silvester, a 4th century Pope who converted the Emperor Constantine to Christianity, died or was buried on December 31. Israel calls New Year's Eve "Silvester Night" to distinguish the date from Rosh Hashana. Strange... Weird...but it is what it is!

December 31, 2023 Jerusalem, Israel 86 Days Since Hamas Brutally Attacked Israel

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Happy New Year!

Late in the day on October 7, 2023, Master Sargent Eliahou Binyamin Elmakayes, known to all as Ben, kissed his fiancé, Yoanna Jordo, goodbye and left for his IDF base instead of making the final preparations for his wedding which was set for November 5th. Ben made Aliyah from his comfortable home in Paris six years prior with the goal of joining the IDF and making a life in Jerusalem. According to two of his brothers, this 29 year-old member of the Combat Engineering Corp's 8219th Battalion had almost achieved his main objectives when Hamas brutally attacked Israel. Ben and Yoanna postponed their wedding ceremony which was to be attended by friends and family from all over the the globe, so he could do his duty. Instead of gathering in Jerusalem to celebrate nuptials, his loved ones had to face his funeral. Ben died in combat in Gaza on November 8th.

And so how do I know the story? Well, if you are in Israel for more than a few hours, you are bound to meet people who lost loved ones over the last 86 days. Last night, after spending a lovely Shabbat touring myself through the streets of Jerusalem and logging 15 miles, I sat next to Ben's older brother's at dinner and noticed how sullen they looked. A congenial young bartender, Avichai, poured them shots and as they made a toast to life, "L'Chaim," I asked Avichai what was wrong. He told me that these young men had just suffered a tragedy. As I leaned in to offer my condolences, suddenly a shot glass was before me and we were toasting to Ben and making a prayer for Yoanna to go somehow move forward into a fulfilling life.

"Six Degrees of Separation," a concept me and my Andover classmates know all too well as John Guare's play of the same name is about the parents of my classmates who were duped by a conman posing as a friend to those in the PA classes of 1980 and 1981, does not apply in Israel. In this country of just over 9 million, it is way closer to one or two degrees of separation, rather than six degrees. Everywhere I go in Israel, I learn the story of someone who just lost someone very close — a sibling, a cousin, a best friend, or a close classmate. So last night after hearing all about a promising young man cut down at the age of 29 in response and in defense of an act of pure evil, I did the only thing I could think of doing: I walked to the Western Wall and said a prayer for Ben and for Yoanna — two people I will never know, but to whom I am now and forever somehow inextricably connected.

With the stories of Ben swirling in my head, it was difficult to sleep, so I made it over to the Jerusalem Civilian Command Center quite early this morning and left early as my real plan for the day was to drive north to Tzfat, sometimes spelled "Safed" or "Zefat," to visit my old Andover pal Jamie Lebowitz whom I have not seen in about 15 years, but with whom I have kept in touch through the wonders of social media. It is quite amazing to get together with old PA friends — it is like we have seen each other with constancy...we fell right back into step.

Jamie's home is more than 300 years-old and he teaches in a building that might be even older. Walking through his city, which sits at the highest elevation of any Israeli settlement, you walk into an era pre-dating the Crusades. Safed has remnants of buildings constructed by the Knights Templar. It is a mystical place now filled with artisans and students which is perfect for Jamie as he traded his real estate chops for teaching Kabbalah, which is best described as a discipline which hopes to explain the relationship between a ubiquitous G-d and the mortal, finite universe. You might think of Jamie as teaching something from centuries gone by, but his approach is progressive. In fact, most of Jamie's students are women rather than young men!

As we toured the city which is home to many small synagogues and yeshivas as well as a secular university, Jamie explained his basic philosophy to me, which I need more time to digest, but the one thing I understood is that Jamie loves his four boys, his teaching, and his life in Israel. And, Jamie loves to learn more about Jewish law and its applications every day!

December 30, 2023 Jerusalem Israel 85 Days Since Hamas Brutally Attacked Israel

Fedoras and Kolpics and Shtreimels, Oy Vey! Today, I walked the streets of Mea She'arim, Jerusalem's Orthodox neighborhood. I am certain that I saw more black hats than if I were in the audience of a graduation ceremony for a huge state university gazing at a horizon of mortar boards. Though I have not spent much time in Eastern Europe, I felt as if I had been transported there and perhaps also funneled through a time machine. In many respects, time has stood still in the Mea She'arim. The narrow and cobbled streets were filled with ultra-orthodox returning from the many synagogues which dot the landscape. Most of the men wore black suits and white shirts, though some sported the bekishe, a silk frock, which is worn over pants cuffed at the calf with visible white stockings and black shoes. Most men have beards grown to a variety of lengths and many of the boys and men shave their napes and have sidelocks of hair called "payot." The women dress modestly, wearing dark sweaters or jackets with skirts that drift down below the middle of their calves. And, you see baby carriages, lots of baby carriages. The major sport in Mea She'arim, I think, is having children.

It was a bit of a lonesome walk as I was the only person in Western garb that I saw for the several hours I strolled through the neighborhood. There were signs everywhere warning me not to use my smartphone. In fact, big banners instructed the secular that there were guards ready to confiscate phones, but I took my chances and I listened to music with earbuds and snapped some photos along my route. A few men gave me snide looks and one even wildly shook his index finger at me, but I kept walking. I did realize that some of the children looked at me as if I were an alien from a strange land or another planet. This seems somewhat hard to believe as tourists walk through Mea She'Arim, which means "Hundred Gates," all the time.

Jerusalem is a 5,000 year old city that grew modern overnight. Israel was born 75 years ago and I have seen many photos of what Palestine looked like prior to the birth of the Israeli nation. A new State meant new neighborhoods and infrastructure and now modern buildings are everywhere and you see plenty of cranes erecting even bigger and better projects. Yet, Mea She'Arim is a throwback and is only slowly modernizing. On the surface, it looks poor, but I am told this ghetto has plenty of funding from the Western Jewish community and even from the State of Israel. The area is densely populated, many of the residential buildings are old and even decrepit, and trash is strewn through the streets which was difficult for me to fathom as the Kosher laws are as much about sanitary conditions as they are about what food you can consume. And there are cats — feral cats which are a problem throughout Israel are especially common in Mea She'arim. Several cats surround each open dumpster and there seems to be a major congregation on every corner. Someone should start a cat adoption drive.

There are new and elegant buildings in Mea She'Arim and I bet you can guess what they are — there are new synagogues, new yeshivas, and new apartment and condo buildings which cater to well-off American and European Orthodox who come for extended visits. Small shops line the larger avenues and if you are looking for hair extensions, you should make a trip. Jewish law requires married women to cover their heads and the Orthodox wear "sheitels," which is the Yiddish word for wigs. There is at least one wigmaker on every commercial block. Hat stores are also prevalent as are shops filled with Judaica that must mainly serve tourists. As for clothing stores, well, black is the new black. I truly felt like I had walked through a time warp.

Back in the modern world, I had a great visit from special friends of Linda and Bob Rosenbluth; Ronen and Shmadar Dromy drove in from Tel Mond to spend part of the afternoon with me. They had just dropped off their son at his army base where he works in an intelligence unit. If they told me his duties, they would have to silence me by a method that goes way further than taking my phone. We got well acquainted and I look forward to visiting them Wednesday in Netanya where Smadar is the director of a Jewish Community Center. Thanks Aunt Linda!

December 29, 2023 Jerusalem, Israel

84 Days Since Hamas Brutally Attacked Israel

Twenty months ago, the world lost a man who may have been diminutive of stature, but who was a tower of compassion and intellect, Rabbi Everett Gendler. He was 93 years-old and over the four and half decades that I had known him, he became ethereal to me, almost mystically ubiquitous, and though I know in my head that life comes to an end, in my heart, I never believed he could leave us. When he passed away, I believed that I would never refer to anyone as “My Rabbi” ever again; frankly, I am a betting person and I would have made that bet. As my Mommy, my grandmother, always said, “Erasers are on pencils,” and I am thrilled to acknowledge that I would have made a bad bet as here in Jerusalem, thanks to my Amherst friend Dawn Behr-Ventura, I have not only found one person to call “My Rabbi,” I have found two incredible people — My Rabbis Analia Bortz and Mario Karpuj.

I believe in old, tested friendships and most of you know that I do not make new friends easily, but when I met Analia and Mario, I knew Dawn had made a special “shidduch,” a match. The word for family in Hebrew, “mishpacha,” takes on particular meaning in Israel. Over 25% of Israelis are immigrants, so when people come from all over the globe and build a new home, they new choose family. I am adopting the tradition and choosing Analia and Mario as my Israeli siblings! They are visiting Florida soon and I cannot wait for them to meet my mom.

Before Shabbat, Analia treated me to a fabulous experience by touring me up and down and around and through the Tower of David in the Old City which was having a small festival complete with local singers, local crafts, and even local craft beer. As we walked through history, we discussed what will become history: Should Netanyahu remain in power or will he eventually go to jail? Will the Palestinian people return to the rubble of Gaza after the IDF destroys Hamas or will they make a new home in a place like the Sinai? When will the IDF launch a concerted offensive in the North and try to annihilate Hezbollah? Should the religious sects in Jerusalem pay taxes or at least contribute to the local economy? And, by the way, what is Jerusalem’s best restaurant and why is airline travel so hard?

The Tower of David, the iconic symbol of Jerusalem, is the Citadel of the Old City and it just reopened after undergoing a \$50 million renovation. Located next to the Jaffa Gate, the ToD now serves as the true gateway to ancient Jerusalem. Archeological excavations at the ToD reveal the 5,000 year evolution of Jerusalem. Yes, according to scholars, Jerusalem was established during the Early Bronze Age, about 3000 years before the Common Era. Approximately 1000 years before the Common Era, King David conquered the Canaanites and made Jerusalem the Capital City for the Israelites. The fortress and tower that we walked through today was built in the 2nd Century BCE and it has been destroyed and rebuilt more times than I can count. You must add the ToD to your bucket list and step into history!

Like me, Analia is a devoted walker, so we walked while Mario swam, but I got to spend a little time with Mario before they set out to visit cousins about an hour and half a way. I look forward to dinner with them Tuesday. So speaking of dinner, I must digress and tell you about last night’s dinner at one of Jerusalem’s hot spots. Machneyuda which is on the World’s 50 Best List. I scored a seat at the bar where I met an octogenarian from South Africa who made Aliya in 1959. She knows from Apartheid and has words to describe Americans who refer to Israel as an Apartheid state and I am not going to repeat them. She was thrilled that I had come to volunteer and we had a great talk. She left a little before me and when I asked for my check, all I got was a big “Thank You” from Bella — she had picked up my tab. I have no way to thank her, but I promise to pay her generosity forward and make a special donation for her kindness. I feel so lucky that we snapped a selfie together and will I remember her. Jerusalem is now shut tight as a China during Covid. Going for my walk and then shabbat dinner.

December 28, 2023 Jerusalem, Israel 83 Days Since Hamas Brutally Attacked Israel

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When I took my afternoon break today to get a Diet Coke from one of the few stores which stocks them instead of Coke Zero which is the preferred Israeli drink, I bumped into two young women who could not be more than twenty years-old who have come into the Jerusalem Civilian Command Center a few times to look for warm clothes. They immediately recognized me and told the shopkeeper, who already knew my name and that I am volunteering, that they met me at the JCCC and that they are grateful to me and other Americans for coming to support Israel. They speak a little bit of English, but the vendor is bilingual, so a four-way conversation began and, boy, did I finally get a new view of the IDF.

The twosome were members of an IDF unit known as the “Tatzpitaniyot,” an all-female group which literally serves as the “eyes of the army” conducting border surveillance of both Gaza and the West Bank. These young women explained through the shopkeeper now serving as a full-fledged interpreter that they had been embedded at the base in Nahal Oz near the kibbutzes massacred on October 7 and that their unit had reported up through the proverbial chain of command that Hamas had been preparing for an onslaught for months, maybe even longer. Every day, these army women who frankly still look like teenagers and co-workers sit for 9 hours in front of a computer screen linked to security cameras and sensors in Gaza and they are responsible for observing stretches of land encompassing just a few kilometers. Their job is to report anomalies. They both humbly said that they watch their screens like hawks.

Through my interpreter, I learned that some of the clues they witnessed firsthand were incredibly subtle. Some of their co-workers, for example, began to notice that the people they constantly followed completely changed their work routines. But what these two related was far from subtle — both of them witnessed training exercises where men practiced jumping out of moving trucks with their guns ready to shoot. They related that others saw men train with explosives while they watched men rehearsing to capture hostages. Also, they saw more and more drones being flown each day from Gaza which one can only assume were deployed to spy on the kibbutzes that Hamas planned to massacre. At this point of their story, I found that I had to sit down and take a deep breath. Of course, I have heard much of this on the news, but it is incredibly different hearing it directly from the people who were there.

One of the pair was much less communicative than the other, so I asked my interpreter if talking about her experience was too upsetting and maybe I should let them go on their way. They spoke in Hebrew for a bit, and he explained to me that the quieter young woman was feeling a sense of survivor’s guilt, but that making sure people know her story actually makes her feel better. So, we continued to talk and I asked what I thought were tough questions: Did these women feel that the their commanders ignored their warnings because they were women or did the superiors ignore the warnings because they were not officers?

I wish their answers shocked me, but as I have read quite a bit about the “Tatzpitaniyot,” I was hardly surprised to hear that they both felt factors combined into a perfect storm to create the dismissal of their warnings. They both reported that there is definitely sexism present in the IDF and the more vociferous of the two said in broken English that if she were a man, she would have been taken far more seriously. Both they also expressed that this a matter of rank; the “Tatzpitaniyot” are not officers and they are often given short shrift by command.

Through discussions over the last ten days, I have also learned that what these watchers reported simply did not fit the narrative that top Army officials and the Intelligence services wanted to hear. No one thought Hamas was fixing for a major confrontation. Let us just hope the IDF has learned a lesson and what these women report is never overlooked again. I thanked them both and tried to buy pay for their snacks — they were too proud to accept.

December 27, 2023 Jerusalem, Israel 82 Days Since Hama Brutally Attacked Israel

Just like the human body seeks to return to homeostasis after it has been stressed, socio-economic systems tend to do the same thing. That became evident today when one of my favorite Jerusalem Civilian Command Center co-workers bade farewell to me as she will be starting her semester at Hebrew University this Sunday. Israeli colleges and universities typically begin their school year right after the observances associated with the Jewish New Year — Rosh Hashana, Yom Kippur, Sukkot, Shemini Atzeret, and Simchat Torah. Had the attacks not happened, most schools would have begun session on or about October 15. Of course, with so many students and faculty called up for reserve duty, known at Miluim, it was impossible for the school year to launch.

Oren tells me that the start of college and university classes this Sunday is actually quite controversial. Those some young people and their teaches are itching for a return to some sort of normalcy, many feel that this is unfair to their fellow students and teachers performing reserve duty. Oren explained to me that there have been several false starts to the school year; she actually thought that school would begin around December 3rd and then there was a delay until December 24th. When that did not happen, she began to wonder if the school year would be delayed until the spring. Though Oren has already served in the IDF, she will be called up for her reserve duty in May and she is already concerned about how this will interfere with her studies in Environmental Strategies.

Many students feel that their classmates who are serving will be left behind and perhaps that they may even lose specific grants and aid packages for student housing even though according to local news sources like THE TIMES OF ISRAEL the Association of University Heads in concert with the IDF Administration are doing their utmost to insure that reservists will receive what is described as a diverse basket of aid along with creative individual solutions to enable student-soldiers to continue and complete their educations. In a combined statement, university leaders and the IDF committed to ensuring that no soldiers will be left behind and that faculty members will be able to go back to their various grants and projects as well as to their classrooms. By the way, an estimated 30% of Israeli students and teachers are serving!

I asked Oren if soldier-students receive any academic credit for their service and she said that many do, but she shrewdly went on to say that though schools may allow them to graduate in a timely manner, they lose out on their actual education. Some schools will offer pass/fail options which means some students will choose to get by doing the minimum. More compromising is that the university heads made the decision to drastically shorten the academic year to two shortened semesters of 11 weeks each which means that the school year will be about 90 days shorter than usual. Oren believes that many courses to which she looked forward will be streamlined to such a degree that she will only receive a cursory education this year. She rues that the same thing happened during the Covid pandemic.

The bigger concern among all of Oren's fellow classmates is what will happen to the school year should the war expand in the North. Hostilities along the Israel-Lebanon border have heated up and there is great concern that the conflict will widen especially since many believe Hezbollah, which is rooted in the North, basically has received a blank check from Iran. Israel has been resolute that it wants to finish its work in Gaza before opening up the front in the North, but sometimes the spread of conflict is not within the control of the nation that is defending itself.

One thing is for sure, though the system may seek homeostasis, it will not be business as usual at colleges and universities as many students and faculty will be dealing with affects of war and the trauma associated with the initial attacks and the ensuing conflict. I wished Oren "mazel!"

December 26, 2023 Jerusalem, Israel 81 Days Since Hamas Brutally Attacked Israel

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Last night I had the privilege of dining with a dear friend of one of my oldest friends and we finished the evening, at least in my opinion, feeling like we had known each other forever. While en route to meet Carice Witte in Tel Aviv, I developed a set of questions to pepper at her regarding Israeli politics, Hamas, the war, what to do about Gaza, and what is it like to have a child in the IDF, but as began to speak, I realized that life goes on in Israel despite the war.

Carice is a New Yorker who made Aliyah to Israel in the late 1980s and she has worn many hats working in family businesses run with her former husband while raising five children. Now sans husband and children grown, she has embarked on an effort that has intrigued her since her Yale days — China's role in the world and specifically, China-Israel relations. She founded SIGNAL, a think tank with whose name truly states its aim: Sino-Israel Global Network and Academic Leadership. Carice's group focuses on how China's policies in areas as diverse as defense and education may impact Israel and the Middle East region and vice versa. She is quickly explained that it may seem to the West that China's rise to the top of the world stage happened rapidly, but Carice envisioned it for years and recognized that there are many misconceptions about China's policies toward Israel and the Middle East. Her endeavor is to educate around misconceptions by building relationships with academic and foreign policy communities through creating coalitions. For example, she invites Chinese educators to come to Israel to learn Israeli teaching methods; in turn, they bring those modalities back to China. It may be as simple as explicating the Socratic method prevalent in Israel in hopes that it will one day help to erode the more pedantic methods prevalent in China which may help future generations learn to work together seamlessly.

What Carice's group hopes to achieve is much better explained on SIGNAL's website, but what I want to bluntly convey by telling all of you about her is that the Israeli people continue to pursue their businesses and their passions. One large problem for many is the uncertainty around institutions like Israeli universities reopening and a restoration of confidence in travel. Diplomatic travel that does not concern the war, I am told, is almost non-existent, and that tracks with what I see on the ground.

The Jerusalem Civilian Command was busy today, but we had a full compliment of volunteers, so restocking the store and taking in new inventory of went quickly. The extra hands allowed me to leave early and walk over to the Israeli Museum which houses art, antiquities, Judaica, and, of course, the Dead Sea Scrolls. Tuesday is usually the busiest day for the Museum and it stays open til 8 pm. When I arrived before 6 pm, I was almost sure the museum was tight shut, but a soldier told me that though the lights were low, the museum was open.

On days when the Metropolitan and MOMA are open late, throngs of visitors walk through before bustling off to dinner. I am sad to report that the Israel Museum was as empty as an insincere promise. Though I tried to sign up with an English speaking docent, after a wait, I learned the guide had canceled because she figured no one would show. More disappointing was learning that the Shrine of the Book which houses the Dead Sea Scrolls was closed due to security concerns and a dearth of staff.

A self guided tour was available via app, so I forged ahead on my own. The collection is phenomenal, especially the Safra Gallery for contemporary Israeli art filled with artists that I did not know, but with whom I must become familiar. There was some amazing talent including the work of Ziva Jelin, who hails from Kibbutz Be'Eri which was massacred on October 7. Observing her work, "Curving Road," a saturated red landscape, sent an electric shock through my body. You must view this work made in 2010 on the Museum's website!

December 25, 2024 Jerusalem, Israel 80 Days Since Hamas Brutally Attacked Israel

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Can we all agree that some of the things that I write in my Jerusalem Journal stays between us and that there is no need to share all of it with my mom? Today started early, actually just before midnight when I asked the hotel concierge what was going on in the Old City to celebrate Christmas. He was certain that if I walked through the Jaffa Gate that I would find many Christian Pilgrims heading to the Church of the Holy Sepulchre to celebrate along with a full complement of security. I neared the Church at midnight, and indeed, I saw plenty of soldiers and small group of Christian Arabs walking toward one of the holiest sites in the world for Christians. Imagine everyone's disappointment when we found the Church completely locked down. Though I got the memo that Bethlehem decided to shutter for Christmas, I was shocked that this critical pilgrimage site was closed tighter than a safety deposit box.

As we made an about face to leave, a priest walked by and assured us that the Church would be open to the public in the morning. As I had not taken a day off yet from my volunteer work, I decided that I would spend Christmas Day in the Old City rather than go to the Jerusalem Civilian Command Center mostly because I wanted to be able to report to my Christian friends just what goes on in Jerusalem for the holiday.

Upon returning to the hotel early Christmas morning, I asked the desk managers whether Christmas was ordinarily a big event in Jerusalem. Overwhelmingly, they insisted that Christmas is a huge tourist time and that the hotel is usually at full capacity with a very large percentage of guests identifying as Christian. The night manager actually said that Christmas attracts as many tourists as Passover, which is a huge holiday in Jerusalem, and that guests make reservations almost a year in advance. I asked if potential guests started canceling reservations right after October 7 and he said that most called to cancel within a few days of the outbreak of war. Let me just tell all of you, that with the exception of restaurants being quite busy, business is so bad that it is sad. Many shopkeepers are only open by appointment.

After getting some sleep, I spent Christmas morning at my favorite coffee shop and then walked through the Bloomfield Gardens, then down through Teddy Park and Mitchell Park & Gardens, and then walked up to the Hutzot Hayotzer Artist Colony where only two or three artisans out of about twenty had their studios open, and then I crossed into the Old City. Some things do not change, they just get more intense. The shopkeepers on David Street, also known as the Arab Shuk, can sniff out Americans faster than my dog smells his dinner, and they were incredibly aggressive with every yankee who even glanced at their shop. Without even knowing it, I suddenly had shopkeeper as a guide. I can just say it is quite a hustle, but you have to feel for these people as there is so little traffic.

Though I knew the way to the Church of the Holy Sepulchre, Abed, was keen to take me by a less popular route through the Christian Quarter. He assured me there would be a big line to enter the Church, but that he knew a guy that would get us in quickly. Well, not only was there no line, the Church was astoundingly empty. I saw one girl lighting a candle, a few people were kneeling by the Stone of Unction where people believe Jesus was laid and prepared for burial, and the only queue was at the entry to the tomb where Jesus was buried and from which he was resurrected. Abed and a priest told me that normally thousands pour in on Christmas Day, but this year the count would probably just be in the hundreds. It seemed like Christmas had been canceled.

I toured some other sites and then got ready for dinner Carice Witte, a friend of one of my oldest friends. More of what I learned from Carice, an expert on Israel-Chinese relations, tomorrow. Merry Christmas Everyone!

December 24, 2023 Jerusalem, Israel 79 Days Since Hamas Brutally Attacked Israel

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(Merry Christmas to all Celebrating the Holiday!)

Before I begin to share how today began, I must digress and discuss how yesterday ended. After the beautiful havdallah ceremony and joyous singing with my new friends, Rabbis Analia and Mario, I returned to the pop up shop as I knew the Jerusalem Civilian Command would be short of help post Shabbat, especially as it was a windy and rainy night. We were not busy at first, but a steady stream of people came by after they finished their dinners. As closing time neared, a young black man with a Cheshire Cat smile breezed into the store and a young woman accompanying him immediately told me that Ezra had journeyed to Israel from Uganda to help farmers harvest their crops.

Well, how could you help but ask the big question — why would a young Ugandan volunteer in Israel when there must be plenty of problems to conquer at home. There is a simple answer: Ezra explained that he hails from the Abayudaya tribe of eastern Uganda and members of his sect have been practicing Judaism quite devoutly since 1919 when a military leader named Kakungulu studied the original Five Books of Moses and decided to be circumcised himself and to circumcise his own boys under Jewish law and then he fled with followers from his village to an area near Mt. Elgon and declared that he would lead a “Community of Jews Who Trust in the Lord” known as the Kibina Bayudaya Abesiga Katonda. Shortly after forming the community, Yosef, an Ashkenazi Jew, visited the area and stayed for several months imparting traditions, teaching rituals and the kosher laws, and even having the people follow the Jewish calendar. Yosef and Kakungulu even started a Yeshiva, a Jewish school for children.

Ezra explained that multiple leaders of Uganda including Idi Amin persecuted the Abayudaya people and places of worship were destroyed and some members of the sect defected to Christianity or Islam, but a core group of several hundred remained devout. Furthermore, he told me that during the time of Idi Amin when people were indiscriminately murdered, his grandparents practiced Judaism openly in defiance of government power. By the end of the 1970s, there were perhaps only 200 to 300 practicing Jews left in Uganda and they began to refer to themselves as She'erit Israel —the Remnant of Israel. Today there are more than 1000 practicing Jews living in Uganda and there are several active synagogues and Jewish schools.

Many of the Abayudayan people are farmers and though their own economic circumstances are far from good, when the attack occurred one of their Rabbis took immediate action to raise money to send two young men to Israel to assist the farmers who found themselves without staff. Ezra has been in Israel about a month and though he was about ready to depart, someone suggested that he visit the JCCC and bring home much needed clothing to his mother, father, and four siblings. It was heartwarming to help someone who had left his own needy family to help others and I will never forget him. He carries a prayer book with him and had people he met sign it — maybe he will not forget me either.

Now for today, which I fear, since I play by my own rules of sticking to one page, will receive short shrift. When I told my dear friend Stephen Matloff that I felt compelled to volunteer, he went into immediate action and introduced me to the Director of the American Committee for Shaare Zedek Hospital, Rachel Wolf, and she in turn introduced me to Adir Schwarz whose dad was the long time boss of the the hospital's Development Office in Jerusalem. Rachel arranged for Audrey Gross to tour me through SZ's astounding new 18-story, for Chai, 900-bed hospital tower. Most of you know I have spent way too much time as a hospital patient, so I know a good medical complex when I see it. From the state of the art technology, to the fabulous user friendly design, from the expressions on the faces of staff and patients and their families, to the fact that the hospital smells like a hotel and not a medical center, I can say that every detail of the new Shaare Zedek was top-notch. The Shaare Zedek team should be proud of such an accomplishment and I only wish I could write much more!

December 23, 2023 Jerusalem, Israel 78 Days Since Hamas Brutally Attacked Israel

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If I was not as clear as a wine glass freshly cleaned by mother that Jerusalem is serious about Shabbat, let me iterate that sabbath in Jerusalem is a synonym for “retail is verboten.” Despite my schedule at the Jerusalem Civilian Command Center, I have kept up my 8-10 mile daily walks, so I figured this was a great day to find a coffee shop, explore, and add some extra clicks. It was drizzling when I left, so there was a premium on finding my morning iced latte quickly, at least before I would actually need something hot. Let’s just say I might have found a husband more easily than I found a cafe! I finally came upon a bustling Arab run coffee bar filled with an international set working on their laptops and was delighted to order my morning usual.

Sitting next to me was a young man doing the New York Times Spelling Bee, something I fervently do daily, so I was sure he was an American. Wrong! He was a South African who, like me, had traveled to Israel on his own to volunteer. We bonded over online NYT games and we raced to see who could reach Genius and then Queen Bee first as we exchanged stories about our experiences. Like my friend Claudia, he is helping out at a farm in the south leaving early each morning and returning to Jerusalem each afternoon. Though he described it as hard work, you could tell he loved contributing with his own two hands.

Wanting to get in my miles before the expected harder rain, I went off to explore the neighborhood around Zion Square, Ben Yehuda Street, and Jaffa Road. Zion Square is a little like Five Points in Sarasota and it serves as one of the vertices of what is known at the Downtown Triangle. This is the local commercial hub and it is ordinarily packed with locals, tourists, students, street performers, and some homeless. But today, it was ghost town. Save for a few people walking their dogs and some religious people strolling home from synagogue, a strategically placed bomb would have only hurt me and seven or eight others.

Finally, I got the memo —Saturday is for rest. As it started to pour, I cut my walk short and

returned to relax. Chilled and wet, I stopped at the hotel bar to get a hot cup of tea and found it filled with a sea of Hasidic Jews wearing either “kolpics” or “shtreimlech,” large round hats typically made of sable or fox that look like furry crowns. As I nursed my hot tea, several men came over to tell me, not ask me, to turn off my phone. This came as no surprise as the same thing happened to me last night at dinner. I simply told them the phone would remain on as I expected a call from my 90 year-old mom. One man had the nerve to tell me my mother should not be calling me on Shabbat. I am staying at an American hotel; my bet is that if I were at an Israeli hotel I would have been asked to leave. Jerusalem may be home to a diverse population, but the majority of its Jewish population is either “Haredi,” ultra-orthodox, or quite observant. According to the Central Bureau of Statistics in a report released in May of 2022, only 18% of Jerusalem’s Jewish population characterizes itself as secular.

To end shabbat, I was privileged to be invited to the home of Rabbis Analia Bortz and Mario Karpuj who are old friends of my Amherst classmate Dawn Bear Ventura. How special it was to observe Havdallah, the ceremony which concludes Shabbat, with them and two other new friends. Mario plays the guitar and Analia has an amazing voice, so we spent almost an hour filling their beautiful home with songs, many of which I have not heard since my school days. I already realize I have made new friends for life. I was grateful for the wonderful hospitality!

The Jerusalem Civilian Command opened back up this evening, so after Havdallah, I went off to work. I have promised to stick to a one page journal, so more on who I met there tonight in tomorrow’s installment. But I will just tempt you: Do any of you know about the Abayudaya?

December 22, 2023 Jerusalem, Israel 77 Days Since Hamas Brutally Attacked Israel

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My new friends at the Jerusalem Civilian Command Center had warned me that Jerusalem closes up to observe Shabbat by early afternoon on Fridays, but they failed to tell me how much hustle and bustle goes on from early morning til about 2 pm. By the time I arrived at the JCCC pop up shop at around 10:30 am, the store was filled with people and empty hangars seemed to have been flung around the premises as if they were frisbees. Certainly, today was big shopping day back home as we zero in on Christmas, but I think it was just as busy here. I spent the morning tidying the racks and restocking.

Before work, I stopped at what I now refer to as “my iced latte place,” the Kadosh Cafe, which my soldier pal introduced me to and which has some of the best pastry and breads in Jerusalem, and I found its display case almost picked completely clean. Okay by me — less temptation. The nearby small fruit and vegetable stand had little left in its bins and by the time I went to get my hair done at 12:30 pm, the dried fruit and nut shop which yesterday could only be described as overflowing looked as if it had just had a Going Out of Business Sale. Israelis no different than American grown Jews — they know how to shop for food!

When I returned to the JCCC around 1:30 pm, the streets were noticeably emptier, more than half of the volunteer staff had gone home, and the shop was in complete disarray. Dana, the co-founder of the JCCC, asked if I was religious and when I responded that I was not, she drafted me to be what I can only jokingly say is a “Shabbas Goy.” For my non-Jewish friends, a “Shabbas Goy” is a non-Jewish person who performs chores for Jewish people on the Sabbath when Jews are commanded to be at rest. I grabbed piles of clothes left behind in the make-shift dressing room and started getting them back on hangars and back to their respective racks, tidied up the tables with folded jeans, returned stray socks to the proper baskets, refolded a ton of children’s clothes, and swept up underneath all the clothing racks.

Last but not least, I got the toy area back into order which felt especially appropriate since yesterday was my Grandmother’s yahrzeit, the anniversary of her passing. Some of you know that my MomMoms was in the toy business for over 40 years, so it was a special way to end the day while remembering both my MomMoms and my PopPops. While straightening up the tiny kid’s book section, the landscape architecture student, Aaron, swung by to show me a full-sized rendering of the rock garden plan he is submitting to a national competition — that is once the competition is back on as it has been postponed. It is a dramatic plan that looked astonishingly different on the story board than how it looked his phone’s screen. I was almost speechless when he told me he had gone to a print shop to have the full-sized plan made just to show to me. I had so much fun listening to him explain his thought process and Sira, his girlfriend, told me it was the first time she saw Aaron’s beaming smile return since they left the North on October 7th. What a privilege.

By 4 pm, Dana and her significant other who is a professor of architecture as well as a practicing architect, had to close up shop, but it was the first time we had a chance to talk. To date, the JCCC has had about 3,000 volunteers, most come in one or two days per week for a few hours, so very few of the volunteers are regulars, and they have only had one other American, a young man from New York City who came to help out on a farm, but he failed at tomato picking and wound up opening boxes instead. Dana told me there are about 25 core people running the show and I was thrilled when she referred to me as “new regular.”

December 21, 2023 Jerusalem, Israel 76 Days Since Hamas Brutally Attacked Israel

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When I arrived at work today, I got my first taste of what it is really like to be an Israeli. Just as I put my jacket away, an alarm resounded through the building — and nobody did a thing. It was literally business as usual. My new pal Ohad told me not to worry as this was not the Homefront Command Siren system — it was merely a fire alarm. Apparently, with what goes on in Israel, no one bothers to vacate in the event that there actually is a fire. The sirens echoed through the Jerusalem Civilian Command for about 10 minutes and people just went on with whatever they were doing. I did walk outside, mostly just to get away from the blaring noise, but I did not even see a fire truck come by to check out a thing. So it goes in Israel.

The pop-up clothing store we set up received a good deal of traffic this afternoon and it allowed me the opportunity to interact with those who came through who spoke English. I spent about an hour helping a young man who had evacuated his residence in the North on October 7th taking with him only a change of clothes and what sounded like what American's call a "Go Bag" filled with essentials to get him through a few days. All I wanted to do was learn about him and I think he really wanted to practice his English, but when he learned that I traveled from Florida to Israel to help with my own hands, he asked if he could give me a peck on the cheek to thank me and I, of course, obliged. And yes, he was cute!

As we spoke, I discovered he was studying landscape architecture at a University in the North and that he did not have a clue when classes would resume. He then told me about a design contest he was about to enter which had now been shelved for an indefinite period. I asked if he had the plans on his phone, which he did, and we sat down together and he went through his concept for a truly elegant rock and sculpture garden meant to surround a fictitious institutional building. Almost immediately, he realized that I knew something about real estate development and, ultimately, I told him that the most important thing to me about a building which people live in, work in, or spend a lot of time in is that they feel a sense of "Pride of Place" and that great landscaping helps provide it. "Pride of Place" is a term he had not heard before, at least not in English, and it truly does not translate well into Hebrew, but he still asked me if he could repeat it when making future presentations. Who knows, maybe the term will catch on! I helped him bag his new clothes, wished him well, and then returned the peck!

My education of what it is like to live in Jerusalem went into higher gear over the course of the afternoon. In the many years since I have been to Israel, the city of Jerusalem has grown much more religious. My new friends at the JCCC began to warn me that anything I might want to do in the commercial sphere should get accomplished before noon on Friday when businesses start to shutter for Shabbat. Okay, all of you know that I fuss over my hair and I just presumed I would get my hair blown out at the hotel's salon late Friday afternoon. Well, no so luck! My new friend Frida from the JCCC made a quick phone call to a hair stylist who is a transplant from Miami and he agreed to add me on at 12:30 pm tomorrow as a special favor! I even rushed out to a liquor store this evening to buy a house gift for new friends who kindly invited me to their home for Havdallah, the service which completes Shabbat, and then for dinner. My honest belief was that Jerusalem closing up for Shabbat was some sort of urban myth — boy was I wrong and I stand corrected.

Visiting a foreign city as a tourist is vastly different than taking a stake in the local culture even simply as volunteer worker. My experience thus far has been remarkable and if any of you has an opportunity in the future to engage in a similar way, I will be the first person to tell you, "Don't think, Just Do!"

December 20, 2023 Jerusalem, Israel 75 Days Since Hamas Brutally Attacked Israel

Up until today, I have had two distinctive experiences in the retail industry. The first, of course, is something most of you already know — I am a pretty good shopper and perhaps that is some sort of genetic predisposition or flaw because so is my mom. My other experience came from helping my grandmother and grandfather stock their toy, bike, and juvenile furniture store late at night during the Christmas holiday season when I was still a young child — and that may explain why I am a night owl. But today, my job at the Jerusalem Civilian Command Center was to rack up a temporary clothing store for the refugees from the South, and, actually, anyone in need so they could come in and find exactly what they want. Of course, this is not true retail as nothing carries a price tag, but the JCCC is encouraging people to make whatever donation they feel they can so funds may be used to purchase new merchandise that people so badly need like under garments and socks which normally are not sent as donations from the public at large. I have to say, stocking a store must be like riding a bike — once you know how to do it, well you always know how to do it.

With a gang of about 10 people, we were able to set up full garment racks of menswear, womenswear, clothing for teenagers, infant's and children's clothing, and baskets full of accessories. We even set up a toy small toy store complete with a tot-sized table with coloring books and crayons to keep the kids busy while their parents rebuild the family wardrobe. While we set up the store, the public relations team spread the word to refugees being temporarily housed throughout Jerusalem. People started coming in even before we had everything in its proper place.

The real treat of the day had little to do with actual work, but perhaps it had everything to do with the spirit that brought me to Israel to volunteer. I was lucky enough to meet up with Claudia Kraut, an old friend from Andover, who is here assisting farmers harvest their crops. Andover's motto is Non Sibi, Not for Oneself, and I guess that is the spirit that brought us both to Jerusalem and brought us together. Claudia is having an incredible experience working with farmers who have lost the majority of their labor force. Many of you probably are unaware that Palestinians provide much of the day labor for the farmers as do temporary workers from the Philippines and Thailand. We all know what happened to the Palestinian workforce, but also the foreign laborers have mostly returned home. There are also young Israeli's working on the farms, but many of them were called up for army service or are on reserve duty. Without volunteers who have come from around the world, a vast amount of fruits and vegetables would literally wither on the proverbial vine. Claudia helped round up a group of 65 people who are staying in Jerusalem and leaving at the crack of dawn each day to go to the farms. She deserves kudos for this mitzvah from all my PA friends. Check out her Facebook posts!

After dinner, I decided to take a walk to the Old City and explore the Jewish Quarter at night as I have been told it stays pretty lively til late. I was shocked to see pizza joints, ice cream shops, and small markets open after 10 pm! There were also lots of young people, many affiliated with the Yeshivas, strolling through the Quarter. Though I had not intended to walk down to the Wailing Wall, I realized that the Wall must possess its own gravity. I was pulled there. It was quite a surprise to find a full line-up, mostly of young women, praying right at the wall, and the seats in front of the wall were also well occupied. The men's section of the Wall was even more heavily populated. Prayer does not keep hours.

When I approached the Wall to say a prayer for my family and for Israel, I heard a young girl chanting names. Ordinarily, I would not have listened in on her, but I have been told that many have memorized the names of the hostages and they pray for them day and night. Indeed, she seemed to have organized a song from their names. From her mouth to G-d's ears is all I can say.

December 19, 2023 Jerusalem, Israel 74 Days Since Hamas Brutally Attacked Israel

My second full day in Jerusalem began with meeting a soldier clad in boots with a machine gun slung over his back in the hotel elevator — not something I see at home! I asked him where he was going and, in perfect English, he said he had just returned from the Gaza border for a 24 hour leave. I profusely thanked him for his service and offered to buy him breakfast, but he interrupted me to ask what I was doing in Jerusalem. When I explained I was volunteering, he insisted that he buy breakfast — I reminded him that there is a commandment to respect your elders, but he argued that he receives a paycheck for his work. I suggested we flip for it and we walked off to Kadosh, a well known cafe.

Immediately, he told me he was fortunate to be manning a station at the border and that he has not been inside Gaza, but his friends have crossed inside and he explained that he would rather not discuss their missions. My guess is that he was not trying to protect me, as I don't look fragile, but that he was being polite as he cannot discuss what he knows. He articulated that the task before the IDF is both monumental and essential. He also noted that among his buddies, there is a strong presumption that serious problems in the North are imminent.

We sat together for about 10 minutes before I had to walk to my first day of work and when I left I asked if I could give him a good luck hug — he welcomed it — and I also made the “Mi Sheberach,” a prayer for soldiers in English and as I struggled to say it in Hebrew, he said it along with me. We were together for 15 minutes and I don't even know his last name, but his face and voice are now imprinted on my mind and I pray he remains safe.

My walk to work seemed somewhat lonely — you know, the way you feel when you say goodbye to a trusted friend — but, at the same time, I was excited to begin at the Jerusalem Civilian Command Center. On arrival, Dana, the gal in charge, assigned me to work under Ohad, a film animation student, in one of the warehouse areas. The JCCC has taken over a theatre complex at the Campus for the Visual Arts which has experimental theater spaces with roll-away bleacher seats that provide enough floor area to accept all the goods that are coming in from Israel and abroad. Our task was to sort clothing which sounds easy enough until you try to figure out what sex a garment was actually meant for and for what age group it might be appropriate. Let's just say it was a long day and there are going to be more long days ahead.

For those of you who feel compelled to donate clothing or other goods, I have to tell you to take whatever you want to send to Israel to your local Goodwill, get your tax break, and send money instead. That is what is truly needed!

Without getting too political, there was much to learn from the young people with whom I interacted throughout the day. There were two overwhelming themes: The first is that most were incredibly sympathetic to the Palestinian people, at least until 74 days ago. Now, they seem to feel a true sense of betrayal. They wanted to help these people and instead, the Palestinians literally stabbed their extended family in the back. Everyone I met today knows someone who was murdered and their anger is palpable. The second theme is that these kids, mostly students, have contempt for the Ultra-Religious who escape service and contribute little to the economy. They all tell me that they believe in true scholarship, but that they find it hard to believe that there are over 100,000 scholars gaining new insights into Torah and other religious texts.

It was an energizing day, but I look like the grandmother to this group. Hope I can keep up... and yeah, I bought the soldier his coffee and pastry!

December 18, 2023 Jerusalem, Israel 73 Days Since Hamas Brutally Attacked Israel

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A few weeks ago, I reached out to an acquaintance I was lucky to meet through the Gendler family, Sam Norich, to suggest that the publication for which he had been the Publisher for 19 years, The Forward, write about a Palestinian defector who happens to be the son of a Hamas leader. In my communication with Sam, I mentioned that I was planning a trip to volunteer in Israel. In turn, Sam asked me that if I was keeping any sort of a journal or relaying my observations to friends at home, that I include him in my email chain.

Honestly, it had not occurred to me that my friends would be interested in receiving any sort of daily account. People lead busy lives and though I figured many would watch for my Facebook pictures coupled with a one or two line blurb, I hadn't considered sharing a journal. With Sam's suggestion on my mind, I started asking friends if they would have the bandwidth to read my firsthand reflections on what I would see in Israel; to my surprise, many told me to start writing the minute I hit the ground.

My journey and what Israel means at its core became real to me the moment I sat down on my El Al flight from Frankfurt to Tel Aviv. Sitting across from me was a 92 year-old family matriarch and her granddaughter or perhaps her great granddaughter. Before I had a chance to exchange a "hello," the stately woman told me that her immediate family, 25 people in total, had been lucky enough to leave the south of Israel on October 9 and they had been living in safety, in what seemed to her to be self-imposed exile, with extended family scattered through Europe. They were now back together for the first time in almost 70 days and returning Home to rebuild their communities. Though I saw no tattoo from the Shoah on her forearm, she explained that less than 80 years ago her small family had been decimated and a fortunate few had successfully run. Those who survived created new lives out of Nothing. This time, her family was returning to Something they had helped build. Please note the strategic use of capital letters as the elderly woman's voice commanded that I employ them. The true resolve and steadfast determination on this woman's face may as well have been carved out of granite.

When we touched down in Tel Aviv, all 25 members of her family simultaneously erupted into a combination of cries, laughter, and even screams. Their raucous sound will be with me the rest of my life. I am not a crier, but I shed tears then and a tear is rolling down my cheek as I write this entry. This family understood the meaning of "Home" in a way I hope no one I know will ever be faced with comprehending it. Launching my journey to do what little I can while watching a family return to rebuild has a symmetry that is impossible to articulate.

I am about 30 hours into my visit and what I can tell you is that in Jerusalem there is little evidence war. Israeli flags are everywhere which is quite reminiscent of the days following 9/11 when so many people flew American flags. And, there are The Posters — the same posters we see in the US of the hostages. There are also signs in yellow print, "Bring Them Home." The first poster at the Damascus Gate, an entry into the Old City, was of Sagui Deckel-Chen who was taken from Kibbutz Nir Oz. It is a small world — Sagui's family lives in Sarasota. I said a prayer for Sagui's safety at the Wailing Wall even before making a prayer for the health of my own mother. For those of you who speak to Rickie often, let's keep that between us!

The only hint of the conflict I saw firsthand was a random security stop of cars heading out of the airport. All of you know me well and I am not known for packing light, but I told the soldiers to knock themselves out and if they saw anything they liked, they should help themselves. Everyone laughed and they took a peek and we were on our way to Jerusalem.

Already making new friends and my volunteer work starts tomorrow, so I am going to call it a night! More tomorrow!

