

A Blog by Lee Lasher

Jewish Federation Past President

Reflections from his experience on an exclusive mission he attended with Jason Shames, Federation CEO. The mission was for Jewish leaders and sponsored by Jewish Federations of North America (JFNA) and the Council of Presidents (COP).

How does Amazon do it? I found out today that when you bring 12 duffle bags/suitcases on a plane and you arrive (in Israel) it is not so simple and it takes a team to get it all moved and delivered, but we got it done! And due to some delays at the airport with the bags, customs, etc. I had the fortune to see Air Force One land.

This was a very important action and statement by President Biden/USA. We will undoubtedly need this support in the weeks and months ahead. The bad news about seeing Air Force One land is that all the roads out of the airport were closed for almost two hours and almost everyone just stood outside of their cars hanging out (and I must say the Israelis were more patient than !!). I did get to make new friends, though.

A woman around my age who grew up in Israel moved to Houston and, a year ago moved back to Israel because she missed "being home". She wanted to know where I lived in Israel, and I said I didn't live in Israel and was just visiting she responded "Why come now? Are you crazy?" I explained that I was representing my New Jersey community and wanted to show solidarity, and support and give hugs. I said, "How could I not come now after what has happened? We are family!"

They were visibly moved, and so was I. The other classic Israel moment was when some Chabad guys walked over to various stopped cars on the highway road and asked drivers if they wanted to put on tefillin. "*Mi Ka'amcha Yisrael*".

As the day went on it got more challenging...

I arrived in Jerusalem in the afternoon and brought some of the supplies that were collected to my close friend who has three sons who were called up. He shared with me battle stories that his sons told him including the brutal scenes they each saw and the tactics of the enemy including booby-trapping the dead bodies of Israelis. Each son has been in major combat battles since the Sunday after the terror attacks. Hard to imagine the feeling of an Israeli parent and their self-sacrifice but, they are all crystal clear on their mission now and this battle against evil.

This evening, the COP/Jewish Federation of North America delegates here with me met with three families of the hostages. It was painful to hear their stories and try to offer support and help. One family has five members held hostage including the 80-year-old grandmother and 12 and 14-year-old grandchildren. It was her birthday last week, so they made a party for her in absentia trying to send positive thoughts.

Another family who thought they had four members held hostage found out yesterday from the army who recovered the body that one was killed. They said this was better than being kidnapped. And the family of Hersh Goldberg-Polin, originally from Chicago, was also in tremendous pain. I know Hersh Goldberg-Polin's father, Jon Polin. I met with him a few years ago for a business-related meeting. Now their son is wounded badly (he lost an arm in a grenade attack at the music festival) and is being held hostage. Hersh had Shabbat/Simchat Torah dinner with his family; that was the last time they saw him.

They appealed to the Jewish Community in the USA to demand their release with elected officials, the Red Cross, UN and to not allow any aid to Gaza unless the hostages were released. The latest estimates are that 199 people are held hostage and likely more. We saw some videos of the hostages and kept hearing about "survivors' stories".

Think about that – this is 2023 and not 1938-44, and we are again hearing survivor stories about Jews.

Can that really be? Can we accept that?

The long day ended with an IDF briefing by a high-ranking General and a report from the Editor of the Jerusalem Post, who visited Be'eri and other destroyed communities and saw first-hand the shocking barbaric brutality (He broke down when speaking about the children murdered and what he saw).

I can't go into too many details on the military briefing, but it was somewhat sobering, and somewhat uplifting, especially on the current morale and work the IDF has done the last few days, including eliminating Hamas leaders, shocking the intelligence and other failures and hopeful that the IDF can do its job to destroy Hamas. But the General did say it will take time, and the US Jewish Community (and World Jewry) needs to be a loud moral voice to Government and elected officials to allow Israel the time and space to get the job done.

He appreciated President Biden's visit and said this sends a strong message to Iran. He said this is not about land or political conflict, but rather pure evil, and make no mistake, Iran and Hamas want just to kill Jews. They started this war and showed the world their plan. He was certain the IDF would defeat them, and with God's help and all the prayers, chesed, advocacy, and donations, we are all doing will come to pass speedily.

Best Regard,



Lee Lasher

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