

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).

Day 2 of the COP/JFNA emergency solidarity mission was long, somber, meaningful, and impactful.

We started the day with meetings with President Isaac Herzog followed by meetings with the Foreign Minister Eli Cohen and his chief of staff. Then we had lunch with NY Gov Kathy Hochul who came to Israel to show her solidarity and support. After lunch we went to the Prime Minister's office for short meeting with PM Netanyahu followed by a lengthy meeting with Ron Dermer. As you can imagine the meetings were serious and to the point.

Some key points: Israel will act to fully destroy Hamas, the paradigms of the past like containment, negotiate, if they just get enough financial support all will be fine, are over. This is a war of self-defense, and this will likely be a long war. More graphic details of the atrocities were provided and there are just no words. Among other atrocities were that people were bounded and burned alive. Bibi stated, "these are the new Nazis and worse than ISIS". It was made clear to us that the details of the massacre, pics, videos (including many that have not been released to the public) were provided to President Biden and his team. All of the Israeli leaders expressed tremendous gratitude to President Biden and USA for their support in this most critical time. We also spoke about the hostages and efforts to save them. These Israeli leaders were very grateful to the US Jewish community for the outpouring of support on all levels and to our group for coming to Israel. They need to feel our love and support now more than ever.

They asked us to speak with a loud voice and remind the world that this is not a clash of civilizations but rather a war of humanity. And they asked us to remind the world that the people of Gaza have the same enemy as Israel – Hamas.

If Israel does not stop Hamas/Islamic Jihad/Iran the West is next. And that the days of killing Jews just because we are Jews must be over. I was particularly impressed with Ron Dermer who spoke with great passion, fortitude, and resolve and stated we must restore the "dream of Israel". The leaders recognized that many mistakes were made that led to this attack and where we are now. One said "there is no right or left, religious or secular in Israel right now. Only a united people ready to face the greatest challenge in 75 years since the founding of the modern State of Israel."

After these high-level meetings, we went to a Jewish Agency school to pack boxes of food for elderly residents with minimal resources in Ashkelon. We did this with some young kids from around the world who were on various MASA/gap year programs and chose to stay after the terrorist attacks of Oct 7 to volunteer. I was paired with Max from Boston who is going to Rutgers next year. We made a good team despite him being a Red Sox fan.

From there we went Hadassah Hospital. We lit memorial candles for the victims, received a briefing from Dalia Itzik and members of the senior leadership team at Hadassah Hospital. We broke up into small groups to meet soldiers who were wounded and recovering. The soldier I met – “Commander O” was on ground fighting with his elite unit only a few hours of getting word of the attacks. His unit was undermanned and under armed against the enemy yet killed many terrorists and rescued some female IDF soldiers. At one point they were ambushed and most of the soldiers were wounded. Commander O. was shot in the shoulder and leg but continued to fight. Even while injured, shot and killed a terrorist perched above his unit on a house roof firing at them. They were rescued by a helicopter rescue team.

Hadassah Hospital had three helicopters per hour for 24 hours arriving with wounded IDF soldiers.

I thanked Commander O. for his heroism, service and said he is not only fighting for Israel, but for me, you, and all Jews around the world. Commander O. was very thankful for our visit. After this we went to see how the hospital has now set up OR rooms in the underground levels in case of missile attacks. They took conference rooms and offices and turned them into emergency operating rooms within seven days. Why should any country have to do this? How can the free world accept this? As Mayor Adams said, “It is not alright”.

The long day continued, and we went to a Moshav Called Ma’aleh Hamisha (near Har Hadar outside Jerusalem) that is now hosting families from a village called *Netiv Ha’asarah* located in the Gaza envelope. It is a beautiful moshav that I have been to before. They are famous for a Peace wall they created. When I was there 7-8 years ago, I visited an elderly English woman who lived there and talked about how she would invite her Gaza neighbors for coffee, and they would get together and talk about peace. How different the world is now. *Netiv Ha’asarah* has approx. 1,200 residents and “only” 22 were murdered. They told us about other places like Be’eri and *Kfar Aza* and others had 30% of their residents murdered or taken hostage. We heard from the regional council about the devastation, brutality, dead and missing friends, and family. Maj General Doron Almog, chair of the Jewish Agency, spoke to us. Six members of his family were thought to be taken hostage and just yesterday they identified 2 bodies of his family members so now four are believed to be hostages in Gaza. These communities will need our support and it may be a lengthy period before they can return.

Yes, it was a very emotionally draining day, but I saw great strength and resilience as well and especially resolve that Israel now has a holy and difficult mission ahead and with God’s help the IDF will defeat the evil Hamas.

I see some of the so-called rallies in USA, Europe, elsewhere against Israel and supporting Hamas. Comments by the “squad” and others. I have a job for each of you. Call this out, expose hatred, antisemitism, and evil.

Make people choose sides – good or evil, light or darkness.

Write letters, contact Politicians, speak to your non-Jewish colleagues and co-workers. Tell them what happened. We need to call out any newspaper, media outlet, reporter, or any organization that is willing to accept the brutal and inhumane massacre, murder, rape, kidnapping, and brutality against Jews.

There is no excuse, no rationalization. Terror is terror. This happened in sovereign Israel. A pogrom is a pogrom. And “never again” must mean never again.

Be Strong!

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to be 'LL' followed by a long horizontal stroke.

Lee Lasher

Jewish Federation Past President