

Live from Israel—Message from James Cohen

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From the moment I stepped off the plane it felt different. The normally busy arrivals hall at Ben Gurion Airport was relatively quiet. This feeling did not change regardless of where I went. Israel is taking care of what needs to get done and folks are rising to the challenge. But the sense of loss, frustration, anger, and worry is palpable. I am here on the first JFNA-sponsored Emergency Fly-In mission of solidarity to Israel. Landing at 11:00 a.m. local time, the day has been jam-packed. Straight from the airport, we went to Kibbutz Machale Achamisha to get an update from The Jewish Agency for Israel Vice President, Danyelle Neumann, on their Fund for Victims of Terror. As of today, the fund has issued 3,000 grants to those who need immediate financial assistance after the attacks, and the number is expected to rise to 4,500 by the end of the week. As of today, there are over 200,000 displaced persons in Israel - refugees in their own county.

Next, we traveled to a hotel outside Jerusalem where families from Moshav Nativa Sara are being housed. We met in small groups, but I bonded particularly with Rifka. Rifka is a retired art and preschool teacher, as is my wife, and we instantly connected. Her story is unfortunately all too common in the wake of this tragedy. She and her husband hid in their safe room for 20 hours until help arrived. But even scarier was the trail of body parts she and her husband had to drive past on their way to safety. And yet, she wants to return home as soon as she can.

Our next encounter was with the amazing Talia Levankom, the head of the Israel Trauma Coalition, and a client who was very open about how much help he was receiving. Raz, whose mother works as a Client Referral Specialist for the organization, serves on his moshav's rapid response team and saw some things he may never get over.

The visit to the Magen David Adom Jerusalem headquarters was both fascinating and sad. In addition to being the official government-sanctioned first response organization and the official partner of the International Red Cross, they are responsible for the nation's blood bank supply. Aroni Shamas, who is Chief of the Center told us that on October 6th, the Ministry of Health's directive was that in addition to the blood supplies at hospitals, Magen David Adom was to have 3,000 units of blood on hand. That has now jumped to 18,000 units per day.

Among the saddest anecdotes I've heard so far was from Ronit, who is a dispatcher at the center. She told us about being on the phone with callers, while desperately trying to get help, and then hearing the line go silent.

Our last stop was The Jewish Civilian Command Center. This pop-up facility was started on the afternoon of October 7th and is currently staffed by 5,000 volunteers. This amazing group works out of five floors of a performing arts school and does everything from distributing supplies, arranging for childcare, supporting short-term loans, and much more. You may have heard of the Brothers in Arms organization in Tel Aviv. This is a similar operation, albeit smaller.

Each organization mentioned above has received funds collected by the Federation system. One of the greatest takeaways from the day was how genuinely happy folks were to see us. Right now, so many Israelis feel abandoned and let down. Institutions that have promised them security and peace of mind have failed them. Seeing us, many said, "Jews in America haven't forgotten us. Thank you".

More soon—Am Yisrael Chai.

Jim

I woke up this morning to a gorgeous sunrise over the Old City of Jerusalem. Though the day was filled with difficult, emotional moments, that sunrise did fill me with hope that better times will come.

Our morning began at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and a gut-wrenching meeting with family members of hostages still in Gaza. Gili Roman told the story of how his sister was abducted from Kibbutz Be'eri. Initially, his sister Yarden, her husband Alon, and their three-year-old daughter Gefen, were hurled into a Hamas car at gunpoint. Before they reached the boundary, the family tried to escape. They exited the vehicle with Gefen in her mother's arms. When it became clear that Alon could run faster, she literally tossed Gefen to her father. Alon and Gefen escaped. Yarden was recaptured. Gili has told his story to a number of international audiences and has urged others to retell it until his sister is freed.

We then traveled to Ashkelon, where we spent most of the day. Our first stop was a teen youth center which has been converted into an aid distribution center. There we met with Ashkelon's mayor, Tomer Glam. He shared that over 6,000 homes in Ashkelon (which is only 9 miles from Gaza's northern border) have been damaged or destroyed. The municipality is serving 3,500 meals a day to the displaced. Of the over \$16 million spent in Ashkelon since October 7th, less than \$2 million has come from the government. The rest has come from donations, including funds from the Federation system.

At Barzilai Hospital, we got a very thorough briefing from Director General Chari Levi, who previously served as IDF Surgeon General. The hospital is well-equipped for emergencies. As the closest hospital to the hostilities, casualties began arriving on October 7th at 8:30 am. Patients who could be moved were sent to hospitals further north to create as much space as possible. Dr. Levi showed us the underground hospital rooms and operating theaters which were built after the First Lebanon War. By midnight, all hospital activity was taking place underground. Less than an hour after the above-ground floors were evacuated, the hospital suffered three direct rocket hits. Many patients would have perished had they not been moved.

We also learned from IDF representatives, all under the age of 30, about how the army is taking care of its wounded. Of particular interest was the Bereaved and Casualty Officer's description of the tremendous efforts made to assist the families of the fallen and injured.

On the way to Amigor-Ashkelon (a senior living facility owned by a Jewish Agency subsidiary), we stopped at a house destroyed by a Hamas rocket. Fortunately, no one was hurt. At Amigor, we met with its Executive Director, heard from residents, and delivered food packages. Amazingly, these seniors do not want to be evacuated. As one woman put it, "They take such good care of us, and we feel safe". Tamara, a Holocaust survivor to whom I had the privilege of delivering a food basket, summed up how so many feel: "Your visit is more nourishing than any food basket."

Back in Jerusalem, we learned from the team at JDC about all of their efforts to help those in need during this unprecedented emergency. The presentation focused on their tremendous work helping the disabled and those with mental health conditions to get through this ordeal. David, a soon-to-retire physical therapist spoke of his anxiety and the counseling he receives. Yesterday, he left his house for the first time since the war started. He described how while visiting his grandchildren, he became heartbroken and physically ill watching two toddlers take turns timing each other to see who could reach their bomb shelter fastest.

David's story resonated tremendously because on the ride from Ashkelon back to Jerusalem, the sirens blared and we had to evacuate the bus and hit the ground. As we watched Iron Dome take out the missile, and then return safely to the bus, I imagined what it would be like to deal with this every day. Our brothers and sisters in Israel have a long road ahead of them, and all the members of our mission promise that we will be with them every step of the way.

More when I get home. Am Yisrael Chai.

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