



Visiting Israel During War

I started reading the Israeli newspapers, two or three daily the day the war started. It was also the day that one of my closest friends told me that her nephew was one of the hostages. The Polins grew up a few blocks away from me. I was constantly at their house for holidays and gatherings of sorts. Bonnie's brothers moved to Israel at some point Bonnie's daughter lives there now as well. Her youngest brother's son, Hersh, had gone to the musical festival and when the massacre started, he and 29 other people ran to some shelter like structure. Hamas kept throwing grenades into the shelter and Hersh and his friend were throwing them back out. One did get in and killed Hersh's friend and took off Hersh's arm. Almost the rest of the people in that shelter died. We know what happened only because one young woman stayed under the other dead bodies and she saw what happened and pretended to be dead. She saw the terrorists take Hersh into other people out. Anderson Cooper was the one who saw a video of Hersh being loaded onto a truck toward Gaza. No one knows what happened to Hersh since that day. As I was reading the newspapers, I kept seeing articles about the people who had been living on those Kibbutzim their tragic loss, and how they were being moved to hotels all over the country. Certainly they weren't going to be any tourist coming. And then the article started talking about all the crops, and the food that not only supported local families, but supported the country both in produce and in revenue. That's when I got in my head that I needed to go there and help. I needed to do something for the country

that was fighting for my own survival as a Jew. What was one of the most amazing things is that I was so not alone. The idea that so many people from all over the world, Jews, and non-Jews alike, came to help Israel in their time of need. In my group alone there were people from Hong Kong, Switzerland, Ukraine and Australia.

I had read that the terrorists were planning on destroying the crops and destroying morale, and they did a really good job of it. But they didn't succeed. Different people from all over the world came to help for different reasons. Organizations came together, and instead of doing what they normally do, they restructured, and figured out who needed help and how to get it to them. You wouldn't believe the number of lists and chats that are out there for people to find opportunities. The fact that people were coming both from Israel and from abroad was heartwarming. I joined a group that was started by a Rabbi in DC, who also saw the same problem that I did. He put together a place for people to stay, a bus to pick you up each morning and a farm in need for the volunteers to go. I did that the first week --we helped the farmer who more or less had a dead field. The cauliflower needed to be picked up thrown away and then the fennel planting needed to start. Israel was quite happy that there had a good amount of rain, but it made for an extremely muddy experience. The people who were working before I arrived, came up with innovative ways to keep yourself clean. Large garbage bags around your feet, garbage bags taped to your legs. We were quite the fashion. I don't remember how many fennel plants we planted but I think someone said that we were doing about 18,000 a day. They are little tiny plants and you just use your thumbs to stick them in the mud. I'm sure the farmer gave us this plant because they are supposed to be pretty hearty and there's not much you can do to really ruin them. We also went to a garden house that had us sort cucumbers and tomatoes. At that farm they did have some Rwandan workers there. The guy told me that he had arrived on October 4 and was crazy scared when the war started. He was very impressed that I knew a few words to speak in Rwanda and the fact that I had been at the annual gorilla baby naming ceremony. So we did have things to talk about. However, my Rwandan friend should have stayed with me when we were pruning tomatoes because I made a big boo-boo and cut the main stem instead of a shoot. I felt terrible that the entire tomato plant went falling to the ground. At that point, I was wondering if having volunteers from other countries who have no experience was a good idea. They said it was and they said that, they appreciated it and the one farmer said that we not only saved his farm. We saved his life. So that did feel good.

The other week that I was there. I did things on my own because there were so many opportunities coming up. One of the people in our group was the father of a young 23-year-old woman who was starting a Facebook group for all the volunteers' needs, and for those who could fulfill the needs. If you are on Facebook, look up the group Swords Of Iron, and you'll see not only posts, but she also has Excel spreadsheets that help you figure out where to go if you have a car, if you don't have a car, who needs what. Now she is working on building partnerships with programs to offer rebuilding programs in the south as well.

Anyway on that particular site or maybe it was another serve I saw call out volunteers for the Bibas farm. For those who haven't seen the news, there is a family that was taken hostage with a one-year-old and three-year-old. The two kids with the red hair. The wife and her sister had a farm about 10 minutes away from where the Bibas family

lived and the sister of course was in no state to do anything with her farm. Not only was her sister and her sister's family in captivity but her parents were also shot dead. So when they had an order from Europe for their clementines, they were nowhere near ready to send it off. So they put out a call for volunteers to come collect the clementines so that they could fulfill their order. It was awesome to see how many people showed up and how groups of people from the country organized buses to bring people there. I think there was just a handful of us that were from the United States volunteering. The rest were actually people who live in Israel. At the end of the day they told us that they were pretty sure they would be able to meet the expectations for the export. That felt really great.

Another day I went to help at an animal rescue farm. The woman had been taking in sick animals but then when animals were lost their owners in the kibbutzim, she took in these animals as well. They all just wanted love and attention although the number of the dogs seemed a little traumatized. We cleaned their areas and walked the dogs and just took some of the pressure off of her. Another day I found a vegetarian restaurant in Tel Aviv that had heard that the vegetarian soldiers were not getting the best home cooked meals so they, on their own dime, were packing up hundreds of vegetarian meals to bring out to the soldiers. I helped pack up while others helped cook and other others helped deliver. There were also constant cooking groups cooking for the soldiers, baking challot for the soldiers or making meals for the people stuck in hotels.

The one day that I wasn't volunteering, but had a scheduled meeting, I was taking the bus into Tel Aviv and that's when I heard the siren go off. There was nothing that made me nervous about it because the bus driver stopped. Everyone calmly got off the bus. People had on their phones where the closest bombs shelter was, but I just followed some people to a stairwell and we stayed in there for a while. You actually heard the iron dome crush the rocket and after a few minutes, everyone got back on the bus. It just made me think this way of living for the people who lived there. No panic. And I was just so thankful for the iron dome. The fact that there is debate right now about US supporting aid, makes me really nervous because I saw how effective it was and how much it is needed. It also made me realize that if they didn't have the iron Dome and secure shelters for people the number of dead would be the same as those in Gaza. I think the reason that this trip stood out for me was that there are so many divisions-- of what people think should be done with the hostages, with Hamas, with the government and you can feel that tension. Yet, you also felt was a universal kindness. No matter who you met someone thanked you for being there other or worked beside you and you felt like you were in a country that was one big family. They were people who were more vocal, and people who were more depressed, but it just seemed like everyone was together. It made me realize even more how important Israel is for the Jewish people. Because we really need a place to call our own.

I took away a lot of things from this trip, understanding the bias of the news, understanding the Israelis better and a new bra. I forgot to mention that my luggage was lost until three days before I returned home. Thanks to friends and family. I got a bunch of clothes to borrow so I was pretty much set. But I did have to buy a few things. My favorite item of purchase was my bra. For some reason, the store I went into only had push-up bras, which I really didn't want. So the only regular bra had, I love you written all over it. I crack up every time I put it on.

If you want information on how to do something, please fill out the information below. Also, there are tons of needs for money and supplies. While I was in the United States, I had connected with someone who was monitoring the army units' needs, and I was helping collect either money or equipment. They soldiers were completely not prepared for this because so many of them in reserves really hadn't used anything in 15 years. Plus, it was really cold and they needed warm clothing. So we did get some of that out to them and we received great thank you videos from the soldiers.