

## Reflections from Israel: Despair and Resilience

Rabba Sara Hurwitz

When I woke up on Monday morning, I realized that it was time to do something. For two weeks, like many of us, I walked around in a state of mourning and shock as I tried to comprehend the sheer brutality by Hamas terrorists, the innocent lives held captive, and the senseless loss of life. I tried to do my part. I packed duffle bags to send to soldiers. I prepared and taught classes on responding to communal tragedies. And most importantly, I called and texted and called again to check on my people in Israel. In addition to friends and family, Maharat has about 25 alumnae, students, and faculty members who live in Israel. By the time Monday afternoon rolled around, I realized that I had to go and visit them. There was not much I could do from my desk in the Bronx, but I could jump on a plane with chocolates, hugs, and a small amount of *chizuk*, blessings for strength.

I arrived at Newark airport, and was surprised to discover that the E1 A1 terminal seemed to be “business as usual” with throngs of people impatiently pushing to get to the front of those long lines. There were, however, a few differences. A group of volunteers offered free food and drinks along with \$1 to give to tzedakah. There was a young man playing the guitar and singing Israeli folk tunes. There were two large comfort dogs bringing people, smiles, and joy. Signs of “am Yisrael chai” surrounded us. Many of the travelers were bringing supplies to soldiers. One woman bought 27 duffel bags making my one measly bag seem like a drop in the bucket.



My first stop was Tel Aviv where I visited Rabba Anat Sharbat and Ariel Freidenberg.

In Tel Aviv, there is an acute focus on the “*Chatufim*,” on the hostages. The streets are filled with signs, saying “where is my mommy” or “bring granny home.” The smiling faces of the hostages stared back at me on every street corner.

Rabba Anat and Ariel took me to the Museum Square, where an artist set up a long table, each place setting representing an empty chair for a hostage. Interspersed throughout are high chairs for the many children and babies who are still missing. I've seen this image countless times

on Facebook. Seeing it in real life, surrounded by people praying or talking in hushed whispers or just quietly standing there, highlighted the magnitude of this devastation.



Anat shared with me that she and her family walked over on Friday night as Shabbat was coming in. She lit Shabbat candles and led Kabbalat Shabbat services for families praying for their loved ones to return home. They asked her to come back on Saturday night to conduct a havdalah service. People are turning to one another, seeking and searching for community and to be held by our rituals.



I then traveled through some yishuvim, continuing the tour of checking in with my students. One community has 180 families. Eighty of the men have left for the frontlines. A young girl had made a sign: "Abba, return quickly, in peace." In one home, as we sat and cried and lamented together, her seven year old squealed with fear. It turned out that there was a large cockroach in the bathroom. That bug was one thing too many for the family. I watched her crumple, and knew that there was something I could finally do. With a gusto that would never happen in my own home, I got that bug and flushed it down the toilet, never to bother them again.

One student was anxiously waiting for her oldest son to return from the base down South. He had less than 24 hours to be at home and then would need to return. They were making him soup and other food that would nourish his body and soul. They did not know when they would see him again, but they were looking forward to holding him for as long as he would let them.

Yerushalayim had a different vibe. Here too, I visited with students. We drank tea, ate cake, and cried; I held their babies while they talked about their husbands who were somewhere out in the field, wearing uniforms, waiting for their instructions. In Jerusalem, everyone's focus seems to be on the soldiers. I visited Hadassah hospital where I met three soldiers, all who were injured on that first fateful day. Their bodies will eventually, I pray, recover. Their hearts and souls will be forever scarred.

I visited a *chamal* – a new word for me – a *cheder milchama* - literally a war room; a makeshift warehouse where generous donors have sourced equipment: helmets, vests, water bottles, shipping them directly to the frontlines.

There's only one conversation happening here. Everyone is focused on the *matzav*, "the situation;" they are talking about the hostages, losses, our soldiers, and the trauma that an entire country is reeling from. "What will be with this generation?" someone asked me.





October 27, 2023 | 12 Heshvan 5784

I have no idea how to answer that question. But there was another word that I heard a lot. I heard it in the corridors of the hospital. On the streets in Tel Aviv. In small still whispers in the homes that I visited: **תוסס**. Resilience.

