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RELIGION

Israeli families visit Nashville and rabbis trip spur reflection on strengthening bonds



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Key Points

Nine Nashville rabbis travel to Israel for a week to meet with Israelis from communities that Hamas attacked on Oct. 7.

Six Israeli families, who are from communities that Hamas attacked on Oct. 7, travel to Nashville for two months for respite and share stories at community events.

At the same time 30 Israelis who evacuated their homes after Oct. 7 resided in Nashville for respite, nine Nashville rabbis traveled to Israel where they met with Israelis who evacuated their homes due to the Hamas attacks.

One of those rabbis, Laurie Rice, who's long been plugged into news about Israel and publicly vocal about it, found the encounter critical to her education.

“It’s almost like I came back and don’t need to watch the news because I got the real inside track,” Rice, who co-leads Congregation Micah in Forest Hills, said in an interview. “Every single interaction for me layered on the previous one. It’s like all the pieces that you can’t get from the news.”

Both the rabbis’ weeklong trip to Israel and the program providing two months of respite to Israeli families in Nashville sought to further bond the local Jewish community in Nashville with Israelis. At the same time, it also inspired deeper reflection on opportunities for strengthening connections among Jews locally.

For Itay Reshef, that deeper reflection includes assisting other Jewish communities in the U.S. to follow Nashville’s lead and facilitate more programs to offer respite to Israeli families.

Israeli family in Nashville: She was trapped in her house as her neighbors died: An Israeli in Nashville tells her story

Opinion: We Nashville rabbis went to Israel to witness a horror and returned home with great pride

Reshef, a Nashville resident and executive at Delek US Holdings, an oil company, and his business partner, Avigal Soreq, took the initiative themselves to organize the program for the six Israeli families that traveled to Nashville for two months. To their knowledge, their effort is uncommon for other American Jewish communities of a similar size.

“We felt this is the right thing to do and sometimes you need to be brave and step ahead and do the right thing and people will follow,” Reshef said in an interview.

With fundraising from local Jewish leaders and a Christian nonprofit called the Shai Fund, Reshef and Soreq paid for the six Israeli families to fly to Nashville, live in Airbnbs and rent cars. Also, the children in those families attended local Jewish schools.

The Israeli families weren't expected to speak to local groups, but many chose to. There were about eight community events they attended in their two months here at the Jewish Community Center, local synagogues and even a church.

Reshef said he and fellow organizers were mindful of the kind of trauma they were equipped to care for, so a criteria was that Israeli participants in this program did not have direct family members who were killed or abducted on Oct. 7. Still, it was hard for many of them to share their stories, especially since all the families are from communities that Hamas attacked.

“It was not easy for them, and you saw when they were talking that it was really emotional,” Reshef said. “But they saw the importance...It put the people in front of the event.”

Personal stories resonate on trip to Israel

Rabbi Mark Schiftan, rabbi emeritus at The Temple in Belle Meade, said the rabbis trip to Israel had a similar effect.

“We are able to relate the personal stories and really cut through all the articles, all the TV images and get to the core impact of the human beings there,” Schiftan, who organized the trip, said in an interview.

During their three days on the ground, the group traveled to kibbutz's that Hamas attacked on Oct. 7, met with frontline workers responsible for agricultural and medical needs for Israel's military, visited a military cemetery that is also the burial site of former Israeli prime ministers, and interacted with families who resettled following the Oct. 7 attack or are involved in advocacy for the Israeli government to ensure that hostages return safely.

Rice said the trip involved a more-than-usual level of interaction with Israeli civilians.

"We were heartened to hear so many Israelis say they were not only fearful for the safety of hostages, but for the safety of Palestinian civilians," Rice said. "I didn't think I would hear that, but I heard that a lot."

The rabbis on the trip represent different Jewish communities in Nashville that hold various stances on Israeli politics and Zionism. But that was never a source of division among the rabbis on the trip, Rice said.

"We weren't of differing views with regard to Israel," said Rice, who journaled extensively about the trip. "We really were of one view, which is 'Israel needs our support. We're here to listen, witness, hug, and let our Israeli families know that we are in the states are mourning with them.'"

Schiftan felt the trip was unique because it involved collaboration across different Jewish sects, a rarity compared to Jewish communities in other U.S. cities.

"The rabbis had an experience of unity and of sustained communication that we've never had before," said Schiftan. "It basically helped to massage away and minimize our differences and focus much more on what we have shared through this experience."

The group of rabbis will talk about their trip at the Gordon Jewish Community Center (801 Percy Warner Boulevard, Nashville) on Feb. 8 at 7 p.m.

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