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

The Israelis were heartened that we had come and had questions: “Why are so many calling for a ceasefire when there was one in place broken by Hamas on Oct. 7?”

Nashville rabbis Guest columnist

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From afar we heard about it, read about it, watched it on our screens-images of death on Oct. 7, 2023. A horror unimaginable in our homeland of Israel. So we traveled there together.

Upon arrival a chill went up our spines. Kibbutz Kfar Azza, just a mile from Gaza, was a desert paradise with lush, green gardens and orchards. A place that hundreds call home was invaded by barbaric, ruthless terrorists. In this once cozy community close to 80 men, women and children were slaughtered. Seventeen people were kidnapped by terrorists and taken to Gaza.

House after house riddled with bullets, charred homes, each housed a young person either murdered or kidnapped. Students, soldiers, and the next generation will no longer have to visit Auschwitz to see what “never again” looks like. They will enter this once vibrant neighborhood and know.

Community celebrates the birthday of 1-year-old hostage

After the untimely death of his sons in the Bible, Aaron’s first reaction is silence. With a loss for words we walked around the destroyed homes, visited the military cemetery in Jerusalem with its graves marking the deaths of young adults.

We sat with the mother of Omer Shem Tov, kidnapped by Hamas over three months ago. Words fail to describe the barbarism of Oct. 7. It is almost unbearable. The thought of waking up to hundreds of terrorists rushing through your neighborhood, burning homes, and committing a whole range of war crimes.

Yet here and abroad people justify the unjustifiable. It does not make any of this any easier. We went to Israel together, representing the community we proudly serve, to show our unwavering support and to stand in solidarity with the only country in the world required to ask forgiveness for its existence.

In Hostage Square in Tel Aviv, families gathered to celebrate the saddest birthday ever, marking the day when Kfir Bibas turned 1-year-old while in captivity. The square was packed with orange balloons, reminding everyone of this beautiful redheaded boy (and his brother Ariel and parents Shiri and Yarden), who has spent a quarter of his life as a hostage because he is Jewish.

Injured soldiers spoke of Hamas' terrorists walking around Gaza's streets pushing strollers with babies inside them, knowing that the Israeli army won't do anything under those circumstances. They told us the best they could for the sake of both innocent Palestinians and Israelis. Israelis would love to see the day when they don't have to send their children to the army, and still struggle with the painful reality of living next to a group of people committed to their destruction.

More: Jewish Federation leaders: There is no moral equivalence between Israel and Hamas

We bear witness to the resilience of the Israeli people

We worked hand in hand with Israelis in the Gaza envelope, as 50 rockets were launched by Hamas. We volunteered preparing produce in an agricultural factory since most Israelis are in the reserves and foreign workers have left the country. We had the blessing of witnessing two members of our delegation donate two ambulances to United Hatzalah, which brings together volunteers from every sector of Israeli society by providing first aid. The best of the Israeli spirit in a nutshell: a people who love life and are committed to saving lives, regardless of race, gender, or religious affiliation.

We made the sacred pilgrimage to Israel to embrace the people, offering support to wounded soldiers, family members of hostages, and refugees; to volunteer, helping Israeli civil society fill in the gaps where the government falls short; to bear witness, carrying the stories of the kidnapped, the slaughtered, the traumatized back to Tennessee. We went to hug them and give them support but, on more than one occasion, Israelis strengthened us with their love for life and their willingness to fight for what is right.

The Israelis were heartened that we had come and had questions: "Why are so many calling for a ceasefire when there was one in place broken by Hamas on Oct. 7?" "Why does the world

not care that women and girls were raped, sexually violated en-masse? Is that not a war crime?" "Why are we vilified for responding? They kidnapped our people and still hold them hostage?" We had no answers.

"You are My witnesses," cried the Prophet Isaiah. We bear witness to the resilience of a people committed to building a multicultural society in peace and security for their sake and that of their neighbors. We bear witness to the unity of a nation who responded to being attacked. We bear witness to the hope that resonates in the hearts, minds and souls of Israelis, who continue to dream of a new Middle East, where people will finally beat their swords into plowshares and their spears into pruning hooks.

We traveled to Israel with trepidation and left with a sense of great pride to be part of the Jewish people.

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