



SHALOM HARTMAN מכון  
INSTITUTE שלום הרטמן

## Reflections from November 2023 Rabbinic Mission to Israel Deborah Einhorn-Skulnick

I landed in Israel on Monday to an arrival corridor nearly empty of three-dimensional people, but lined with images of the hostages and crowded with the memories and spirits of so many lost on October 7th and in the ensuing war. That corridor feels both iconic and familiar, evoking for me a sense of being transported both back into the history of the Jewish people and simultaneously into its future. But this time felt hauntingly different. The corridor led me to a changed Israel, one powerfully transformed by the brutality witnessed and experienced, as well as a new sense of vulnerability. But, as everyone we've met has shared, the country has also been indelibly changed by the incredible and gritty efforts of Israelis to pull each other up and unite toward a shared purpose.



I want to share here some of my initial reflections and experiences in traveling with the Hartman Institute on what feels like a listening mission. We have no words to provide comfort, so we sit and hear the harrowing stories. My objective and hope in making this journey was to immerse myself in the grief, worry, fear, complexity, pessimism - and shards of hope - that Israelis, and the Jewish world by extension, are experiencing. In being here, what I have learned is that each visitor is another shard of hope, slightly easing the existential loneliness of Israel and Israelis. Their hope resides in our sharing and amplifying their stories to the world, so I will try to translate here my experiences for our MILTON community. Since it is too much for one or two emails, please consider this missive to be the first of several 'journal entries' and we will post the balance on our blog.

On my first evening, we met with Dr. Ohad Ufaz, a documentary filmmaker who is working with a large group of volunteer filmmakers and mental health professionals on EDUT 710, a project to collect the testimony of eyewitnesses to the atrocities of October 7. The project methodology is informed by the collection of Holocaust survivor testimonials, with the same thoughtful protocols, centering the eyewitness in the process. The volunteer group has already collected more than 300 testimonials.

That same night, I visited a group of mefounim (displaced families) from Ashkelon. They were Ethiopian olim hadashim (new immigrants) who had only been in Israel for six months before the war began and they were forced to leave their new homes. We gave them supplies for the impending winter and I was able to share letters from our students. It so touched their hearts

that our students had such beautiful and articulate Hebrew and were sending their love from afar.

The following day, we engaged with another evacuated community, this time from Sderot, who are living in a temporarily-created 8,000-person 'city.' What did they build first? Schools. Nonprofits and volunteers from all over the country have set up educational facilities, including in a hotel lobby and ballroom, with six-foot high classroom 'walls' made from plywood. As you can imagine, this quickly led to a cacophony which was a challenge for students with sensory needs or learning challenges. In turn, they found a nearby, free-standing spa and transformed it over a weekend into a school for children with special learning needs. A family comes each morning to cook a hot lunch for the students in the cafe. The students learn in small groups and use the repurposed massage rooms for Occupational Therapy and other one-on-one services. Volunteer teachers have gathered from around the country and are living in the local Chabad Rabbi's home. Here children have been given the opportunity to just be children.

Even many of those who were not uprooted by the war have nonetheless uprooted themselves to volunteer, teach children, and thereby hold families through this incredibly challenging time. I believe that this deep sense of responsibility for others, for community, and for country are at the core of Jewish resilience. As I will share more in entries to come, this trip has been so much about bearing witness to the grief and upheaval (both physical and emotional) but also observing how getting to work - stepping up and stepping in for each other - has stabilized individuals and the society as a whole.

I will continue to listen, observe, and share my reflections with you all – And thank you for also hearing their stories and making the Jewish world feel a little smaller and a little less lonely for all of us.



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As I continued my listening mission the last couple of days, my eyes, heart, and hands were opened ever wider. Perhaps, more importantly, my hands got to work. At our opening session, our facilitator observed that, in America, we have been experiencing this war in our heads and through our screens, all of which weigh heavily on our hearts each day.

Israelis, however, immediately jumped in with their whole bodies. Many have articulated feeling that they weren't sure if their actions had an impact but, at the very least, it was a reason to get up in the morning; the structure and routine helped their resolve and emotional resilience. Among the bittersweet blessings of my week were opportunities to dive into hands-on projects for mefounim (displaced families), chaklaim (farmers), chyalim (soldiers), and families of those in miluim (reserves). In place of the constant refresh and cycle of trying to comment, advocate, and support from a distance, I dug in, gave hugs, listened and - of course - fed people.

- Wednesday was a powerful combination of hands and heart. Farms and farmers have suffered from a dramatic labor shortage since October, so we joined the substitute volunteer effort. In a country that produces almost all of its own (amazing) fruits and vegetables, this is critical to the wartime effort, though it felt like our busload of volunteer harvesters could barely make a dent. Like almost everything we experienced, these efforts have all been coordinated by grassroots organizers using Facebook to share opportunities and recruit volunteers. Hearing the farmers' stories as we picked - and those of local leaders working to support the dispersed kibbutzim - expanded my understanding of Israelis' layered experience of displacement and disillusionment.
- Moving from hard work to heart work, we gathered in Kikar HaChatoufim (Hostages Square in Tel Aviv) with families of the hostages. The square was crowded with families of those stolen on October 7th (56 days ago now), desperate to amplify their stories and move their urgent needs to the forefront of the world's agenda. Many walk around holding posters and speaking to anyone who will listen about their loved ones. A massive clock ticked with the number of days, hours, and minutes these families have been waiting.
- People come to support them, sit with them, and listen to them. Artists have installed heartbreaking and powerful exhibits throughout the square. This included a display of 240 mirrors, reminding visitors that any of us could be in their place - a Jewish experiential learning tactic used for generations to create empathy and a sense of shared history and peoplehood. Since hostage releases happened this week, we learned more about the conditions in which they have been living for almost two months - without showers, beds, or anything other than one basic meal of rice and pita each day. We heard directly from two families waiting for their children to come home. One couple's daughter-in-law was released yesterday, but they were still awaiting their son
- Each day at 5pm, this community of desperation and hope gathers in prayer and song, which our mission helped lead. The hundreds who gathered, including those who had planned to be there and those just magnetically drawn to connect, seem to be mixed between 'religious' and 'secular.' But in this powerful national moment, politics and religion feel inconsequential - everyone is just praying.
- We spoke and sang with survivors from Kibbutz Cholit, part of Otef Azah (the area enveloping Gaza). Their prayers will never be answered; they just live in the nightmare of life without their

loved ones, with echoes of terrorist voices outside their windows, and with the ongoing trauma of October 7th - a day that has not yet ended in Israel, as they all say.

As we know, the most powerful and lasting learning comes only through reflection on our experiences, something we practice at MILTON daily. Over Shabbat, I will spend time with dear friends - one who is juggling four children while her spouse is in miluim (reserve duty), another who has committed herself to providing weekly meals to families of more than 50 reservists, one who lost a close family member on October 8th and another whose son has been in Gaza through the war. Each worries about those who have it harder than they do and wonders about what more they could do. I will continue to listen and learn, but I hope that I will also have time to download and further process all that I have seen and heard.

A new friend of mine - and a friend of Middle School Hebrew Teacher Avner Cohen-Zamir's from Kibbutz Nir Oz - shared a d'var Torah with me via WhatsApp today, a reminder that we can still always find comfort, hope, and wisdom in our text and from wise people in our midst (and, of course, from WhatsApp). Rabbi Eran shared that from Va'yishlach, when Jacob wrestles with the angel until dawn, he draws three eternal truths: "You have to keep believing. We are never truly alone. Always, in the end the dawn will rise." If our loved ones here can continue to hold onto these truths, so too can we.

I hope to be able to share one more 'culminating' conversation with all of you next week as we think together about how the MILTON community can educate, advocate, support, and continue to hear and truly listen to the evolving story of Israel and the Jewish people.

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I promised that this would be my third and final message about my Israel journey, but I am finding it almost impossible to encapsulate the balance of my experience - and the avalanche of thoughts and feelings since my return. The refrain אני כעמי is, however, the closest I've come to a description of the character of the Israeli populace at this moment - and also my best prescription for how we, as American Jews, can show up for Israel and Israelis.

As a colleague from my trip shared with congregants upon his return, "I thought I knew, I thought I understood." But we did not. And as I am keenly aware, I only encountered a tiny fraction of the stories that need to be heard and shared. But I am a sociologist at heart and by training which means that I am wired to spot trends, even from a small sample. The clear and consistent pattern of אני כעמי absolutely pervades the country. Israelis are only as well as their 'nation' - their people and country.

This is manifesting in the deepest sort of empathy I've ever witnessed. Each person I met, some completely new to me and others I've known for decades, de-centered themselves from the worst suffering. Without fail, each one of them said something along the lines of "there are so many who have it harder than me." The parent of four with a spouse in reserves quickly points out that at least her husband isn't serving in Gaza. The mother whose son is serving in Gaza, who cannot bear a knock on her door, immediately reminds me that it's nothing compared to those families with hostages, or soldiers who have died in combat. The mother-in-law of a slain soldier is quick to point out that her pain is not as great as her daughter's or the soldier's family of origin.

What's beautiful is that they channel their empathy into action. Instead of turning inward toward the pain, they turn outward to their communities:

- Neighborhoods where mefounim (displaced families) are living have set up laundry networks, with daily pick up and delivery systems. The laundry is done each night by families and picked up the next day to be brought back to the mefounim.
- Makeshift schools and day cares have been set up wherever children have been relocated. These are staffed by volunteers who have come from all over the country, tents in hand because they are unsure where they will sleep, trying to bring some structure to kids' and families' day-to-day lives.
- Thousands of Israelis - and now folks from the Diaspora as well - are spending their days harvesting fruits and vegetables to support farmers and the food system.
- Chamals (civilian command centers) were set up overnight - collaborations of NGO's with drastically different politics - to provide for the needs of mefounim, soldiers, and civilians. Their support ranges from food and diapers to a 24-hour mental health hotline.
- People stand in the streets as a family leaves for a funeral, just to show up, and then show up for shiva each night, whether they knew that individual or not.
- Gentleness and blessings pervade mundane, daily interactions - in a country where this is not necessarily the default. Most transactions end with 'besorot tovot' (good news) with the response of 'amen, amen, amen.'

This is not a society where people wallow in self-pity (though they would be justified in doing so), nor do they complain about not getting their entitlements. They simply go out and take responsibility for others' needs. They do not let perfect be the enemy of good. They iterate and improve along the way and they find ways to bring their own capacities, talents, and passions - baking, organizing, art-making, deliveries - in service of their neighbors and their country. This is a deep Jewish value, embedded in the structure of Jewish law, about which Ruth Messenger wrote in the early 2000's and has always stuck with me. We are a people of responsibility and obligation - driven by empathy - and it is how we survive the most challenging of times. Israelis express candidly that their empathy is not limited to their own and yet, in this moment of tragedy, trauma, and a just war - that is where their focus lies.

When I left Israel on Saturday night, having stopped on the side of a highway to sit in a ditch while rockets were intercepted overhead, I left part of my heart there. It piled onto the countless layers of grief that continue to emanate from October 7th and since. There are so many layers, so many different ways that our hearts break. I believe we have room for it all, even as we have to stretch in ways that we never could have imagined.

Many generations from now, when Israeli archaeologists are excavating the tragic 'tel' (mound) of this period, they will be amazed by the countless layers of grief they uncover. And they will wonder, with awe, 'how did so many American hearts and tears get all the way here?' Whether we know it or not, whether we are ready to face it or not, we are all there. Perhaps it's our next Sinai moment, a turning point in Jewish history that expects all of us to listen and to truly hear - Sh'ma Yisrael. As a school we will bear witness to this revelation, teach our children as they are ready, and help them build the same tools of empathy and resilience that have always characterized Jewish peoplehood.

Thank you for hearing, for your deep listening and care, for engaging with these painful and complex stories - and for continuing to ask complex questions. I believe the best way we can 'be as are our people' is to listen - to their stories, music, poetry, even WhatsApp voice messages - and amplify the

light they are shining. Together, we can commit to the work of Hanukah - expelling some of the darkness by embodying the Israeli culture of deep empathy, action, and connection across difference.

To that end, my inspirational colleagues in Israel created a new ritual for lighting Hanukkah candles (in Hebrew here) during these dark days. I am amazed by their fortitude and creativity: "Coming together to light the Hanukkah candles reminds us that even in the darkest times, our forebears believed in the power of one little light, and then another, lit alongside many others, to change the world." I encourage you to pay special attention to the sixth night's meditation, which is very much within our means, even from a distance: "The candle of consolation celebrates gestures, both large and small: a warm embrace or a silent presence, a wordless glance that says, 'You are not alone.'

May we all feel less alone as we light each others' candles through this dark time.