



**SHALOM HARTMAN מכון
INSTITUTE הרטמן שלום**

Reflections from November 2023 Rabbinic Mission to Israel

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Post 710 Israel Trip Lessons**

When I first heard about the Shalom Hartman Institute Rabbinic Solidarity mission, my urge to sign up was overpowering. I love Hartman. For those of you who do not know them, The Shalom Hartman Institute provides high level Jewish learning and thinking for community leaders from their beautiful campus in Jerusalem and through programs in North America. I was a research fellow with the Kogod Research Center in 2020–2021, and I am on the Hartman faculty. They run a program called *Rabbanut Yisraelit* which ordains rabbis from across the denominational spectrum throughout Israeli society. Our itinerary relied upon that network of students and alumni to share their experiences and the volunteer work they've been doing since 10/7. And I must also mention that I really wanted to go visit our friends from Kehillat Achvat B'kerem, Tamir and Adit Nir and whichever of their adult children were around, to stay in their home, enjoy meals together, and just see each other.

But I will say that my immediate powerful urge to sign up surprised me. First, I am temperamentally risk-averse, and so the idea of flying into a literal war zone was not obvious. Second, and this is more important, I was born in 1973, and my feelings about Israel have always been complicated. Prior to October 7th, solidarity was not automatic for me. I have often felt like Israel was a bully — to its Arab citizens, to Palestinians in the occupied territories, and to Reform Jews like me. I have been frustrated, revolted, infuriated, insulted and alienated by the policies of the state. I am a Zionist. I love Israel. I believe the Jewish people should have a state in our homeland. But, solidarity has never been a natural fit. Yet, the minute I heard about the trip, I knew in my gut that I had to go.

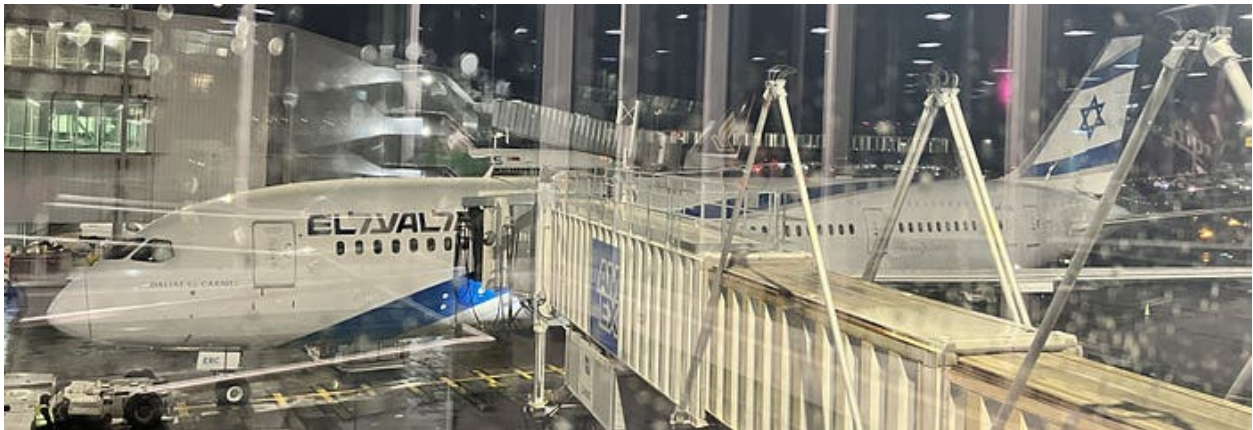
So as I departed I wrote about my confusion in my journal. The sheer horror of October 7th naturally made me want to do something, to act, to do *hesed*. The realization that this was a historic slaughter of Jews, deepened my sense of vulnerability, so perhaps I had a subconscious need to go to a place where young Jews are carrying big guns everywhere you look. But I think the most powerful driver of my participation was the almost immediate, loud, widespread progressive support for the Palestinian cause without equal declarations of outrage at Hamas and condolence for the Jewish people. I wrote in my journal about feeling bewildered, literally cast out by ideological allies in the fight for civil and human rights. So maybe through this trip I sought a path out of the wilderness.

In short, I can say that the trip was amazing, perhaps even life or career changing. I am still digesting what just happened, but I can say that my journey as a human, a Jew, and a rabbi, has been shifted in three profound ways. First, I felt the power of something so simple: an embrace. This trip brought me a totally different emotional connection to Jewish people and Jewish peoplehood, and a degree of intimacy I felt between my sense of Americanness and my Jewish peoplehood. Second, I saw the amazing power of activism, entrepreneurship, and institutions. And based on my learning through the Rebuilding Democracy Project since 2017, I think this is critically important for Israeli democracy. Third, I can say that we have all entered a total rethinking of the Zionist project. We are already in it, even if we were not aware. I will illustrate these three lessons with high points from the trip.

To explain what I found, I want to ask you to picture your past trips to Israel, for those of you who have gone. Think about the sense of anticipation, the excitement of seeing Jewish history — ancient and modern — all around you, the desire to experience a place where Judaism and Jews surround you, the fun of international travel, the spiritual yearning to experience a land called Promised, or Holy, Eretz Yisrael. This trip was none of that, which was apparent before I even arrived.

At the gate at JFK, gone were the boisterous birthright groups, the bubbling families heading to big B'nai Mitzvah or weddings, and the synagogue groups or tourists eagerly reading travel guides. There were even far fewer Orthodox families heading back and forth. Instead, the gate was filled with determined faces, adults like me traveling alone, and people traveling with IDF lone-soldier sweatshirts.

Then, walking down the gangway, I looked out at the rainy night and saw the El-Al plane. I was not prepared for the rush of emotion, seeing that blue and white plane, and the Israeli flag on the tail. Through the raindrops, the sight was overwhelming. The closest comparison was the sense of relief I felt when I received my first vaccination shot during Covid: doing something so mundane in the midst of a rushed and crowded public space, while feeling these profound and intensely personal emotions well up. Seeing that flag gleaming in the night, tears fell down my cheeks.



Boarding my flight, I was stunned by my first sight of an Israeli flag.

On the plane, when I opened the in-flight entertainment system, the normal El-Al advertisement began like it does on every airline. You know, the little video with sparkling planes, attractive flight staff, and exciting destinations. But this video was different. It was cell phone clips of messy planes, exhausted and disheveled staff, and young men and women filling the rows, standing in aisles, sleeping in galleys. Israeli flags hung from ceilings. These were from that first week after the attack, when the national airline told reservists to just show up at airports around the world,

and El-Al would fly them home to serve. More tears. Later in the trip when I shared this with Adit, she told me that many of her friends have said they will never fly another airline again.

When I arrived at Ben Gurion, I was staggered by two things. First, the normally busy airport was a ghost town, and second, there were posters of the hostages everywhere. Perhaps you remember that gigantic, grand sloping entry hall with images from Jewish history everywhere. Now it has a poster of a different hostage on every railing banister. It is one long, somber hostage display.



Ben Gurion Airport's entry hall.

This kind of emotional saturation continued throughout the trip. Pride and solidarity were constant. In a place where people are usually self-absorbed and rushing through the markets and streets jostling each other, this trip was filled with people in uniform, doing some kind of

volunteer work, carrying signs, wearing slogans, talking about the latest hostage release, or all of the above. The place is in a constant need to embrace one another. The popular slogan for this war that has emerged says *b'yachad l'natzeach* ("Together we will prevail").

In fact, the normal term to describe the area of the 10/7 attacks is *Otef Gaza*, which literally means "the Gaza envelope." But the residents want to discard that name, saying that they never again want to name the location of their homes in reference to Gaza. They want to call it *Otef Yisrael*, "the envelope of Israel," which has a double meaning, as the word *otef* can also mean "embrace."

And that explains the mood right now, the entire country wants to embrace the survivors, the displaced, the soldiers, each other, visiting Americans, and especially the hostages and their families. And it explains why the first time I saw Tamir he gave me an enormous hug, and then later the first time I saw Adit, I got an even bigger hug. *Otef Yisrael*.

On the first night of our trip we talked with the leaders of a program called Edut 710. Edut means "witnessing" and the program applies the techniques of recording testimony from Holocaust survivors to capturing the experiences of Israelis on 10/7, which Israelis know as 7/10. They explained that their guiding philosophy comes from French Philosopher Emmanuel Levinas, who says that we are obligated to help other people find the ability to respond to their traumas and sufferings, something he calls "response ability." It is a powerful lesson, that my humanity includes a duty to help others express their humanity.

And I saw the importance of this "response ability" throughout the rest of the journey. On the second day, we started with learning from Melila Hellner Eshed, scholar of mysticism, who talked about how in the first weeks after 10/7 people needed grieving circles, gathering just to experience the pain together, and how people are still not fully able to find words to describe the moment.

Then we went to our first volunteer projects. I went to visit a school set up by the displaced residents of Kibbutz Sa'ad, a religious kibbutz that successfully kept the Terrorists outside their gates, but had to be evacuated, nonetheless. There are 250,000 displaced people like this in Israel, staying in hotels everywhere, but mostly in Jerusalem, the Dead Sea area, and Eilat. Setting up schools for all the children has been a major challenge. The 7–9th graders of Kibbutz Saad were meeting in the national parks facility at the foot of Masada.

In the shadow of the Jewish monument to tenacity and vulnerability, these young Jews and their teachers had to build a school. Once a week, classes take the cable car up the mountain to have morning meetings to process the Hamas attacks, in the exact place where Jewish Zealots once held out against Roman attacks.

We were coming to practice English with the 9th grade English class, but the students wanted to talk to us about their experiences. They complained about normal 9th grade things, and also about the hardships of living in hotels for 2 months, dealing with the constant noise, the lack of privacy, the repetitive food, the inability for most of them to be in the same room or even on the same floor with parents. The kid next to me wanted to talk about his love of rap music and his desire to become a barber, a plan frustrated because there was no longer a regular barber shop nearby where he could learn his trade. Then one of the girls said she was afraid that all her friends from the surrounding Kibbutzim would not be there when they will go home, and that she would never be able to go back to her old life. Everyone nodded. In addition to grieving the people who died on 10/7, these kids were grieving imagined teenage years that will never be. I could not help but think about Nicole's grandmother Ursula who, in 1937, had to flee Berlin at their age. Her family still feels that trauma generations later.



Three of us practiced English with a class of 9th graders displaced from Kibbutz Sa'ad now attending class in the visitor center of Masada National Park.

After Masada, we went to Kibbutz Ein Gedi, a beautiful garden and guest house by the Dead Sea, for lunch and small group discussion. My group got sidetracked by a cute dog sitting with an older couple having lunch. The man spoke perfect English and said, who are you and why are you here. The three of us explained that we were a group of rabbis visiting from the United States to learn about how Israel is doing right now. He said, "You want to know about October 7th? I'll tell you about October 7th!" His hands started shaking. "I was there. I held my gun and shot those damn terrorists at my front door. I shot one, and the other two ran off and left a bomb outside my house. I sat outside my shelter with my family behind me and my 25 year old son said, 'Dad, maybe we need to do what they did at Masada.' And I said I would sit outside and never do that." Over the next 45 minutes, Yishai and Yael Admati from Beiri related their story to us. As we had to wrap up, Yael took out her phone and opened Facebook, and showed us her list of friends: "Dead, Dead, Kidnapped, Dead, in the U.S., Dead, Dead, Dead, Kidnapped... this one is alive."



Our group meeting with survivors from Kibbutz Holit on the beautiful grounds of Kibbutz Ein Gedi where they have been relocated.

We gave them hugs and departed for our next program, where our group sat in an enormous circle and listened as four women from Kibbutz Holit related their similar story. And then as I left that group and walked to the bathroom, I was stopped by another woman who grabbed my arm and asked me who I was. I told her I was a rabbi. She said in Hebrew, "From America?" And I said, "Yes, where are you from." And she said "Sderot," which is a small city near Gaza. Then one of her children interrupted us, and I asked how many she had. Four. I asked if she had help. She paused and tilted her head, and told me her husband was a police officer in Sderot. And I said, "he is not here." And she said, "He is dead." I hugged her. She took out her phone to show me his picture. I was overwhelmed and forgot to remember his name. I hugged her again, I told her

I would not forget her and her family, and I said goodbye. What could I do? Take a selfie? That was the hardest single moment of the trip.



The image of police officer from Sderot on his widow's cell phone. The interaction was so sudden, and her need to tell her story so unexpected, I forgot to record his name.

From there we went up to Jerusalem to the **Hamal** ("**Heder Milchama**" war-room) volunteer operations center which is in a performing arts school that has been donated to the cause. Under the name *Lev Echad*, (which means "One Heart,") there are 25 Hamals set up all over Israel. They function as a one stop shop for 20 different projects to help the country. They collect supplies for those in need or for reservists and soldiers. They operate free "stores" where displaced people can find clothes, toys, books or personal items. They provide volunteer opportunities, which keeps the average Israeli sane. And perhaps most importantly, they have united a massive range of civic and political groups, from across the spectrum into a coalition whose only requirement is to put ego aside.

Our group had brought tons of supplies, things that the Hamal had specified before departure. You should know that I spent about \$1,000 from my discretionary fund to buy soft-shell jackets and flashlights that clip on to M-16s. This was from a list generated by the Hamal. We spoke with the leader who said that before 10/7 it was not obvious that the Jewish people had the ability to give so much, and he said that it was not obvious that American Jewry would give. He said that our generosity has been noticed, and has felt like another embrace.

He also said that Israelis are aware of what we are facing in the United States, aware of the anti-Semitism, aware of the criticism of Israel, aware of the pro-Palestine marches. And they are sending us their support.

This sentiment was surprisingly common during my trip. I heard it again the next day, on Wednesday, when I spent the afternoon in the community garden with Rabbi Nir and our sister community Achvat B'kerem. I was there to help out, to take photos, to be honored because NVHC has supported the building of their garden pavilion, and to talk with members. As Tamir taught the children how to make beer (something he might be arrested for in the U.S. but that is perfectly normal to teach in Israel), their parents and other volunteers spoke with me.

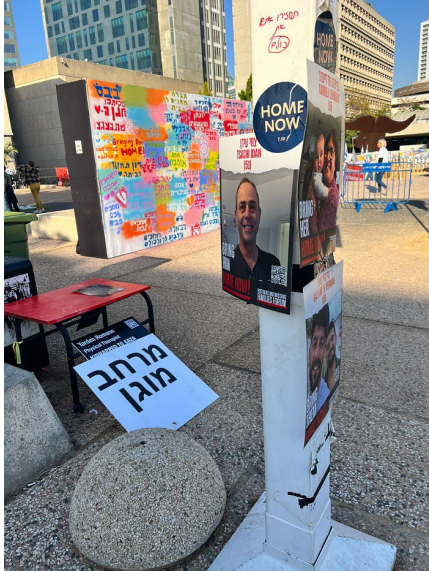


Rabbi Tamir Nir teaching children from Kehillat Achvat B'Kerem how to make beer in their community garden.

They told me two main things. The first was that concern about anti-Semitism. Separately five different people asked me about it. Here I was going to support Israel and they wanted to support me and you. And the second thing seemed obvious but was actually even more interesting. They said that the community garden had become a kind of refuge for them, a source of resilience. They spoke about how gathering there, having a joint project, about decision-making, about the stability of the community, all provided a refuge against the chaos that has fallen on Israel not just since October 7th, but also for the past year during the pro-democracy protests.

This concept also was a major theme of the trip — the need for institutions. When describing displaced people, we heard three different times that residents from the kibbutzim and moshavim had fared far better than people from cities like Sderot. The city folk were isolated, alone and disoriented, like that woman I met from Sderot. The kibbutz communities had not just familiar faces, but also established roles, rules, processes and duties. One kibbutz had even told the hotel staff to stop cleaning and cooking so that the kibbutz members could re-establish their old *toranut* schedule (the responsibilities that children and adults have for work). As Rabbah Tamar Edad Applebaum from Hartman said at one point, the word *Torah* contains *toranut*, the spiritual need for work and duty.

I saw this again when I went to Hostage Square on Thursday afternoon of my trip, which formerly was the plaza of the Tel Aviv Art Museum, but now is a combination public art installation, venue for vigils, prayer services, and performances, and a place where strangers can sit in circles of chairs and talk with the families of the kidnapped. We spoke with one woman who was selling solidarity symbols whose daughter had been released the night before. When I said, “What are you doing here? Go be with your daughter!” She said, my daughter is safe, she wants quiet, and I need to be here, with these people, doing my job.



A corner of Hostage Square, a pop-up gathering place in the plaza of the Tel Aviv Museum of Art and across the street from IDF headquarters.

The pop-up nature of Hostage square, the circles of chairs, the public art, is its own uniquely Israeli form of resilience. Israel also has a system of permitting and permissions, but enforcement is far more selective. The square happened there because it is across the street from Israel's version of the Pentagon. The families want the IDF to never forget to prioritize the hostages. I have a few necklaces and ribbons from Hostage square to give out, but I ask that if you take one, you wear it, and you tell anyone who asks why you are wearing it, how the entire Jewish people is thinking day and night about the hostages being held by terrorists.

Another pop-up Israeli project was the site of my volunteer work on Thursday. I went to meet students from the Keshet High School — a mixed religious and secular school set up after the Rabin assassination. During the pandemic a teacher, who also happens to be a Rabbanut Yisraelit ordaine, had set up a program to cook for about 20 elderly couples in the neighborhood. Because it was the pandemic they cooked in the school garage. Now they serve 300 soldiers, displaced families, and people with reservists away on duty. Still in the garage. As I worked with the students, chopping vegetables, putting trays into portable ovens, we had to pause and move

aside when cars had to drive through. As I stood there, I could almost feel a health inspector from Fairfax County going to my house to fine me. But in Israel this was nothing.

If the first lesson of this trip was the need for an emotional embrace, the obligation of witnessing or “response ability,” this was my second major learning, the uniquely Israeli way of creating institutions.



A few of us rabbis with the volunteer team from Keshet High School, operating a kitchen in the school garage, to prepare meals for IDF reservists and their families.

In the Rebuilding Democracy Project we talk about this a lot — the importance of institutions. Best articulated by Alexis de Tocqueville in the 1830s, American democratic norms and behavior are nurtured in our country’s vast network of civic associations and formal leadership opportunities. Institutions are places where ordinary people learn how to function collectively, based upon a larger sense of purpose, within rules established by the collective. They are little incubators of citizenship. And America has tons of them.

When I went to Israel in 2021 to research Israeli democracy, one of the most important takeaways was the dearth of a similar Israeli infrastructure. I spoke to scholars, journalists, activists, and rabbis. They all said that institutions that once provided democratic glue, especially the IDF and the kibbutzim had become divided by class and ethnicity, and no longer created a larger sense of

duty. One person derisively said the kibbutzim were nothing more than real estate developers. At that time, in 2021, people said that the government was the only major institution left in society.

Six months ago, at an event in DC, I even asked Donniel Hartman how the protest movement might turn into an ongoing institution, and he responded by saying it should not become a political party. I pointed out that I had not asked about a political party, and he suddenly realized his assumption. He said, Israelis automatically think every movement should be a party. They don't think of institutions that way.

Observing Israel during this trip, I think that has changed. The conflict, coming on the heels of 10 months of protests against judicial reform, following Covid, have created a new ecosystem of institution building. The resilience of the kibbutz communities, the experience of people like members of Achvat B'kerem, the volunteers who set up the vast Hamal network, the leaders at Hostage Square, the alumni network of Rabbanut Yisraeli, and the volunteer projects operating in places like High School garages, all reflect the ways that Israelis govern, lead, deliberate, and build. They are informal, resourceful, creative, determined, flexible, and spiritual in ways that American organizations are usually more bureaucratic and rigid. If we learn democracy through procedures and meetings run by Robert's Rules, Israelis may be learning democracy on WhatsApp. I believe that this moment has crystallized the need for a renaissance in Israeli institution building.

And Judaism's role in creating institutions may be shifting as well, but that would take too long to explain today.

And that leads to the third major learning of this trip. I went out of order in describing my itinerary, because scattered throughout the schedule were meetings with scholars to discuss this moment. Some of these were with the big group, and some I set up on my own.

In extremely broad strokes, I heard one overpowering message, from speakers across the huge range of society: Zionism needs a reboot. Let me explain. From its origins, Zionism has been a

multi-faceted thing. Its core idea, that the Jewish people need a Jewish state in our homeland, requires commentary. Kind of like the Shema, which in 6 words articulates a clear, simple dogma, but which requires a Torah of elaboration, Zionism has layers of interpretation.

Leading up to October 7th, an array of assumptions had become ossified in Zionism. At one point, Micah Goodman ticked off how all the assumptions had been shattered, some revealing enormous weaknesses in Israel, and others revealing tremendous strength. Zionism had assumed a competent, powerful state; that is gone and replaced by a vibrant civic volunteer culture. Zionism had assumed a terribly divided society, held in place largely by political maneuvering; that has been exploded by the absurd levels of solidarity, service, coalition building, and activity explicitly crossing political lines. Zionism had assumed little need for or expectation of the diaspora, American Jewry or even really the U.S.; those myths have been busted and replaced by a deep yearning for worldwide Jewry, a gigantic gratitude for us and for President Biden, and a concern for our wellbeing. Zionism had assumed that the Palestinian Citizens of Israel (who I will call Arab Israelis for short because no consensus name exists for this group) would join any Palestinian uprising against the State of Israel; the exact opposite has happened, and Israeli Jews really do not know how to respond. Zionism assumed that the Palestinians under occupation could be “managed” with walls and with electronics; 10/7 has shown that the current “conceptzia” is simply not secure.

There are so many other examples, but the message remains the same: we need to be preparing ourselves for what happens next. All of the assumptions are wiped away. Micah Goodman spoke about how this is an enormous opportunity. “Nothing is sacred. Everything is on the table.” And then he spoke about the threat that when this is over, all the grief and trauma that is now directed at Hamas will be directed by Israelis at other Israelis.

Rana Fahoum said that already Israeli Arabs are being arrested if they merely express sympathy for their families in Gaza. Nobody has been prosecuted, but there have been arrests, lost jobs, threats. The distrust is deep. Many Arab and Druze Israelis have refused to evacuate their homes,

which are actively under threat of missile attack, because they have memories of 1948 and do not trust Israel to allow them to return. So the moment is filled with promise, and with mistrust. Precarious.

By the way, if you are wondering about military strategy and the war in Gaza, sadly the message I received on this trip was exceptionally clear: things are going to get ugly before they get better. I heard a range of expressions of this idea. Even the President of Rabbis for Human Rights, as liberal as you get in Israel, said he still works toward peace and co-existence but he has to turn away from Gaza as long as Hamas is there. He grew up going into Khan Younis as the nearest big city, and going to Gaza beaches after work in the fields of his kibbutz. He said they used to sing about a time when there would be no fence between Khan Younis and his kibbutz, but then he lived through a day with no fence. He cannot even think about peace with Gaza as long as Hamas is across the fence.

While people here seem to be obsessed with the suffering of Gazans, angry only at Israel for their deaths, people in Israel think only about Hamas, and see Gazans as unfortunate victims of their own leaders.

Yishai Admati, with his dog at Ein Gedi, simply said “No mercy, no mercy, no mercy,” to my face. Yossi Klein Halevi talked about the need for a massive reorientation of power in the entire Middle East and said that Gaza was the simplest part. A 9th grader at Masada gave maybe the most sophisticated political analysis: we cannot go home until we know Hamas is gone, because we cannot let Israel assume we will live with that threat. Over and over, the message was, the war will continue, they have to defeat Hamas, they have to get every hostage back.

While over here we are hearing about calls for Cease Fire, and people are working to end the war, over in Israel there is exactly zero appetite to end the war. They are still grieving, and they are solidly determined to change the status quo ante with Gaza.

To conclude I will say, I do not know if I lived up to Levinas' ethic of "response ability," but I can tell you that every Israeli I met felt this intense need to share their stories and their concerns, especially with American Jews. It was painfully clear that my presence, and my listening, provided one more filament connecting them back to reality. Their need was almost like someone underwater who needed air. Not just to be heard, but to be heard by us in particular. I think our Americanness was important. We are Jews, but unlike other Jews in the world, nobody expects us to make Aliyah. We are separate and we are supposed to be secure. We are equals. And this conflict has revealed that we are not entirely separate or secure. The conflict affirms a Jewish bond that transcends time and space, and thus in a way, mortality. I felt a true *otef*, an embrace.



The sign for the "Otef" store at the Jerusalem Hamal (volunteer headquarters) where displaced people can pick up personal items or receive counseling.

I will say that I was blown away by the institution building everywhere I looked. It does not resemble American institution building. It happens in garages and acting schools converted into war-rooms. It forms in a Kibbutz movement that rediscovers its depths of resilience and in rabbinical alumni networks who activate in communities across the country. It happens in community gardens and in public plazas. I asked multiple times if this energy was sustainable and could be converted into a durable constellation of civic institutions, and I never got a firm answer. But I believe this would be essential to what comes next.

And on the question of the future, the answer is far from clear. Zionism needs a reboot. I know everyone is thinking about it, but I also know that people are comfortable not knowing yet. The

now is too intense. The grief still too raw. The strength, solidarity, determination, relentlessness, and pride is too dedicated to the hostages and the soldiers. But beneath all of that is an openness to an undefined future. And for the first time in my life and career I hear a strong desire that we, American Jews, are part of figuring it out.

I started the trip by sitting on the airplane writing in my journal about my reflexive urge to go. I realized that since October 7th a huge tension had been growing within me, one that emerged from the deep wound inflicted on our particular Jewish family, and one exacerbated by the behavior of my allies in the fight for universal human rights. **This trip affirmed for me that the universal principle of God's image embedded in every human can only be expressed and sustained through collective particularism. My Jewishness makes me more human. My particularism sustains my universalism.**

We cannot have universal human dignity without the Jewish *otef*, without institutions to sustain that embrace, and without a vision for Zionism that will rebuild the Jewish state. I felt a reflexive need to sign up for the trip, because I knew in the depths of my soul that my humanity depended upon the Jewish state, and an expression of my Zionism that pushes the Jewish state to be its most humane, universalist and fair. October 7th opened all these things for us. I have no idea what comes next.