



SHALOM HARTMAN מכון
INSTITUTE שלום הרטמן

Reflections from November 2023 Rabbinic Mission to Israel

Rabbi Adam Rosenwasser Darkness and Light in Israel

A midrash on the origins of the first Chanukah, from the Talmud. When Adam saw the day gradually diminishing, he said, “Woe is me! Perhaps because I acted offensively, the world around me is growing darker and darker, and is about to return to chaos and confusion, and this is the death Heaven has decreed for me.” He then sat eight days in fast and prayer. But when the winter solstice arrived, and he saw the days getting gradually longer, he said, “Such is the way of the world,” and proceeded to observe eight days of festivity. The following year he observed both the eight days preceding and the eight days following the solstice as days of festivity.”¹

This year, especially, I can relate to the beginning of that midrash. The world feels like it is growing darker and darker and perhaps, already has turned to chaos and confusion. Since waking up on Simchat Torah and learning about the horrors unfolding halfway across the world, I really haven’t been able to think about much more than that. October 7th has been the darkest day for Jews in my lifetime, and arguably the darkest day for us since the Shoah. But just as our days will continue physically to get darker until December 21st and then gradually will lengthen and lighten, I have to hope that the days of our people will do the same.

I felt compelled to visit Israel for the 3rd time this year. It definitely wasn’t my plan, and my husband is a true hero for holding down the fort each time I visited, but something called me to go. And so after celebrating a low key thanksgiving with our family, Shalom’s sister and our niece, on Saturday night I flew to Tel Aviv, joining nearly 40 rabbis and educators from across north America on a 4 day solidarity mission to Israel organized by the Shalom Hartman Institute.

I wanted to travel with Hartman because I am a huge fan of their work. The institute was founded in Jerusalem in 1976 by Rabbi David Hartman of blessed memory. **It serves as a pluralistic center of learning, advocacy, and community engagement and involvement. Each summer, they lead extended study sessions for rabbis and educators, and I’ve been fortunate to participate in two of those.** They run speaker series, in fact this past Wednesday evening at Adas Israel, Rabbi Donniel Hartman, David’s son and the current head of the institute, shared an engaging conversation with Adas’ rabbis. One of our teens is currently studying in a Hartman teen fellowship program. And I will continue to highlight their programming when I learn of it.

I also went on this mission because I knew it would not consist of posturing with elected officials, most of the Israeli ones I do not care for anyway, nor would it involve witnessing the wreckage of destroyed Kibbutzim which seems exploitative. I wanted to go to Israel to hear stories, to volunteer,

¹ BT Avoda Zara 8a

to lend support wherever and however I could. And I feel blessed so share that this was the purpose of Hartman's mission.

I brought a shabbat dinner along with some ghiradelli chocolates and trader joes ginger bread people, by special request, to Rabbi Orit Avnery. She was one of many who shared their stories with us. 50 years ago her father was killed fighting in the Yom Kippur War when Orit was only 10 months old. So Orit from an early age was accustomed to loss and grief. Every year her family travelled to the cemetery around Yom Kippur to visit her father's grave. Now, three of Orit's children are serving in the IDF. Her oldest is stationed at the Kiriya, the military headquarters in Tel Aviv. Her 2nd born is serving as a nurse in Eilat. And her 3rd child, Noam, is in Gaza. Orit shared that the last few weeks she's felt like she is on high alert all the time; a knock on the door brings dread and anxiety. She prays tehilim, psalms, every day asking for God to protect her children. What keeps her going is that she knows her children are fighting against, in her own words, the darkness of evil, of something we cannot live with. Orit, whose name means light, is serving as a beacon for her family, for Israel, and for the Jewish people.

Rabbi Avnery is a member of the Rabbanut Yisraelit, progressive rabbis who have studied with and been ordained by the Shalom Hartman institute, like reform and progressive rabbis in North America and around the world. Orit refuses to sit at home in her fear and anxiety. Rabbanut Yisraelit members are lending support wherever they can. Every Saturday evening after Shabbat ends, a delegation drives to Ein Gedi, the lush desert oasis which contains a kibbutz, a well-known spa, and until recently, a beautiful beach on the Dead Sea. There, they meet with survivors of October 7th from Kibbutz Holit, one of the kibbutzim near Gaza which was infiltrated and decimated by the attacks. Our delegation went with some of the rabbis to Ein Gedi, where we met with Gigi, Pnina, and Shir, three brave women who shared their stories with us. Gigi came to Holit from Brooklyn after she made Aliyah in her 20s. She met her husband, also an American, on Holit many years ago. She was awakened at 6:30am on the morning of October 7th by the sound of rockets, not an unusual occurrence this close to the Gaza border. But a few minutes later, she started hearing gunfire and began receiving panicked whatsapp messages from other kibbutzniks and she knew something was different. Gigi went into the saferoom in her home while her 62-year-old husband, a retired member of the security committee, grabbed his m16, donned his helmet and vest and sat by the door of their home. Gigi received a message that terrorists had thrown explosives into her neighbor's home and so her husband ran out, made it to the neighbor's, pulled out their friend, and somehow made it back to their home unharmed and undetected. He sat by the door with his gun for 8 hours. By some miracle, the terrorists never came to their home and they survived.

We then heard from Pnina, who was fortunate to be visiting family in Tiberius, up north, that weekend. But as a member of the security committee, she started getting frantic text messages on her phone around 6:30am. Her 7-year-old niece sent her a message that she was hiding in a closet and her mother had been shot. She received messages like that throughout the day, and did her best to reassure people to stay quiet, and stay in the saferooms. She sent messages to the local army commanders asking them where they were. They told her they were "on the way" although it would be many hours before they materialized. Throughout the day, she tried to get in touch with her 91 year old father, a holocaust survivor, and his caregiver but she was unable to make contact with them. At 11pm that night, she learned that they had both been murdered.

Finally, we heard from Shir, 21 years old, who had grown up on Holit. She was in her own apartment on the kibbutz when she received a text from her mother to close and lock the door and go

into her saferoom. Most people on kibbutzim don't lock their doors. About an hour later she heard people outside her home shouting and speaking in Arabic. At 8:01am, she received a text from her brother Rotem that he had been shot in the stomach and that her parents were dead. After that, she lost reception and just stayed alone in the safe room. She heard the sound of hand grenades being lobbed into her house, and the sounds of terrorists outside the safe room. She managed to hold onto the door handle with all her strength and they didn't get in. Finally, at 4:30pm she heard a group of Israeli soldiers start to fight back on the kibbutz. At 7:30pm, she heard her sister knocking at the door. She grabbed apples, her phone charger, and a kitchen knife and met up with surviving members of the Kibbutz. She was evacuated to gvulot around 9pm and was able to finally call her grandmother who shared that her brother had just gone into surgery at Siroka hospital in Beersheva and was going to be ok and then, through tears, confirmed that her parents had been murdered.

The world has grown dark, for Pnina on the murder of her elderly father, for Shir who is now an orphan, for so many who have lost loved ones or who do not know whether their loved ones are dead or alive. But I also saw during my short time in Israel signs of light.

The morning after I arrived in Israel I woke up early thanks to jet lag. And I turned on the TV in my hotel room. All the news stations were broadcasting more or less the same story, interviews and stories with hostages who had just been released. One in particular captivated me. Ohad Munder turned 9 in captivity. He had been visiting his grandmother in Kibbutz Nir Oz during the massacre and was kidnapped to Gaza. He was one of the first hostages released, and the TV station was doing an interview with him and his young classmates who were so excited to be reunited with their pal. They spoke about how he seemed to grow while he was away, and they threw him a belated birthday party. They visited him in the hospital while he was being observed before he was allowed to go home and brought ice cream and treats. While some of these young boys, who clearly grew up so much in the last 2 months, shared their concerns about Ohad's long road to recovery, the unbridled joy they shared at being able to play with their dear friend again shone through.

I felt a great light shining on a beautiful late morning in Hadassah hospital, where some of the participants on my mission and I greeted soldiers who had been wounded in Gaza. We visited Yotam, who was critically injured as a missile worked its way into the tank where he had been positioned and exploded, cutting a major artery in his neck and depositing shrapnel throughout his upper body. This had happened several weeks ago, and he was nowhere near ready to leave the hospital, but he shared that he was grateful to be alive and he believed he had been saved because a nearby medic had seen the wedding ring on his finger and vowed he would save Yotam's life. Yotam's wife was in the room with him along with the principal of his high school yeshiva, and they marveled at his bravery and his tenacity and how he was pushing through the terrible pain and suffering to recover.

Another soldier we visited was Yosef. Yosef was a Mizrahi dark skinned Jew who lived in the old city and was wounded when while in Gaza an RPG, rocket propelled grenade, exploded near him, sending shrapnel into his left arm and left side of his body. He shared a beautiful analogy with us- that Israeli Jews were like the injured left side of his body and the rest of the world's Jewry the unharmed right side. But he proclaimed that all Jews are of one body, and when he feels like his left side isn't working properly, he leans on the right. Even though we in America are physically ok, we have been affected by what has happened in Israel, and it is up to us to support the wounded and suffering as best we can. Yosef shared he wanted to get out of the hospital as soon as possible to return to Gaza and defend his people.

But the greatest light I noticed during my time in Israel was the way society has banded together to heal, comfort, and support one another during these terrible times. One evening we met Adir, an up-and-coming local politician who was running for city council in Jerusalem before the elections were postponed in the wake of 10/7. He has turned his energy towards the chamal, the civilian command center in Jerusalem, which he and others set up in a building usually used for a local theater company. There are 25 command centers like the one in Jerusalem which have been set up in the wake of October 7th. Downstairs we toured a makeshift store designed like a target or a Walmart, with groceries, food, clothing, even a children's section. It is for families who have been displaced, families with soldiers serving in the IDF, or anyone who is struggling due to the war. Folks can come in, do their shopping, and take whatever they want, all for free. We walked up a few flights of stairs to the theater and I was amazed to see the stage completely filled with boxes and packages- baby formula and diapers and canned goods and clothes and furniture donated from the states, Israel, and around the world. Adir shared that more than 5000 people have been volunteering at the command centers, doing what they need to do to persevere and take care of each other.

Perhaps nowhere represented this amazing sense of solidarity more than the space outside of the Tel Aviv Museum of Art, recently renamed Hostage Square. By now you've probably seen images of long, empty shabbat tables set and waiting for hostages around the world- several weeks ago one was erected by the Lincoln memorial. Beyond that table in Tel Aviv there were countless artistic creations- expressions of sadness, fear, and anger, but also art exhibits dedicated to tenacity, courage, and hope. A few stood out to me, a yellow poster declared "Alon, you are not alone" atop a piano, waiting for 22-year-old Alon Ohel to return to play the music he so loves. Folks would just stroll over to the piano and play whatever songs they liked. Chairs with stuffed animals and hearts, waiting for the children to be released and many of them were during my time in Israel. Photos and signs and cards and the families of the hostages themselves, coming up to visitors and sharing their stories and asking us to share their stories with the world. I saw children and elderly in the square, and our group held a prayer service at the end of our time where we sang Israeli songs of hope, ending with a beautiful rendition of HaTikva, our national anthem which means the hope.

I'm only one week out from my time in Israel, and I'm still feeling so many different emotions; gratitude, sadness, anger, disbelief. Like Adam of the Torah, I am frightened, frightened that the Jewish people is being enveloped by an almost existential darkness. But as I know our days soon will grow longer and brighter, my time in Israel gave me a beautiful glimmer of hope that even in the very worst of times, even amidst horrible suffering, pain, and war, the miracle of the light which has inspired and sustained the Jewish people for thousands of years, will continue to shine upon us.