

*Shanah tovah.*

My husband, Neal, and I went to Israel this summer. Neither of us had ever been before. The trip we decided to take was not a traditional one.

But first, the context.

In March 2007, the Partnership for Jewish Life and Learning (the central agency supporting -- among other things -- congregational education in the greater Washington area) began its second Israel Educators Institute. Harvey Kaplan, who many of you know, participated in the first IEI cohort, as did my friend and colleague, Tamar Weinsweig - the director of our Rimon Center for Learning. Participants needed to be supported by their congregation, and commit to a 15-month course of adult learning. In return, we would "hug and wrestle" with our relationships with the State of Israel. And we would have the opportunity to take a highly-subsidized trip to Israel as a group. My IEI cohort went to Israel last December. Unfortunately, as they were finalizing their logistics for departure, my mother went into hospice care - and I decided not to accompany the group. The ticket was nonrefundable; however, if we could rebook within a couple of days, it wouldn't be lost. Neal and I - who rarely make huge financial decisions in a short period of time - picked out dates and made a commitment for a July visit within twenty-four hours!

March of '07 brought another watershed event to my life. With two others - Bill Begal and Steve Kerbel - I became a co-founder and treasurer of the Mitzvah Heroes Fund. We began the Mitzvah Heroes Fund in response to Danny Siegel's decision to close the Ziv Tzedakah Fund. We were concerned about the number of individuals and groups helping to meet critical needs on shoestring budgets that would be left with very little financial support. Most - although not all - of our Mitzvah heroes are currently in Israel. Steve and Bill had been to Israel many times over the years and knew many of our Mitzvah heroes personally. I, of course, had never been to Israel, but began to know people via email and Skype conversations.

So that's the context in which our trip took place.

Steve, Bill and I decided that I would spend one day (of our eight) meeting with four of our Mitzvah heroes. Neal had the option of whether to join us -- or spend the day in sightseeing or other activities. To my joy, he decided to join us -- and I am so very glad that he did. It's one more thing that we now can share.

We arrived on Wednesday evening, and met with Mitzvah heroes on Thursday:

- We met with the Rabbanit Kapach, a one-woman food bank who's been feeding the hungry of Jerusalem for 45 years;
- We met with Menachem Gottesman, the founder and director of Meled, an alternative school for teens that have dropped out or been thrown out of traditional, religious, schools - and often thrown out of their parents' homes as well.
- And we met with Caryn Green, of Crossroads, who works with some of the same kids as Menachem does -- only in a program that is available for teens outside of school hours. Caryn provides a haven for teens that would otherwise spend their time on the streets.

We also met with Karyn London, of Aztum, who works with survivors of terrorism. At the conclusion of our meeting with her, Karen invited Neal and me to accompany her the following week as she made home visits to some of her clients in S'derot.

That was how we ended up – on our last day in Israel – on the train to Ashkelon, where Karyn picked us up on her way to S'derot!

On the day we visited, S'derot was quiet, with few people on the sidewalks, and less automobile traffic than other places we'd been. That may have been because many of the residents of S'derot have lived for the last 10 years with regular bombardments of kassam missiles by terrorists from the Gaza strip - approximately 2 miles away. As a result of last winter's Operation Cast Lead, the missiles have been almost silenced, at least temporarily.

One might think, with the danger set aside, that residents of S'derot would be out and about – enjoying the freedom to roam their city. Unfortunately, although the attacks have ceased, the fear resulting from them remains unabated for many.

Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) is a psychological disorder that many of us are unfamiliar with. Paralyzing fear is triggered by sights, smells, sounds, or memories of the traumatic event. These triggers often occur randomly, with no prior warning. The fear causes the body to react as if it were in extreme danger and to seek to protect itself as best it can. Self-protection becomes the primary goal, frequently resulting in regression from previously-attained competencies. Sleep disturbances are common.

Most of us don't really understand the complex dynamic between fear, triggers, physiological reactions, and the body's natural reaction to protect itself. In our society, fear is often seen as a weakness, a lapse of moral fiber, something that can be conquered with just a little willpower.

Unfortunately, it's not that easy.

The first family we visited – mom, 15 year-old daughter, and 9 year old son, and grandma paralyzed from a stroke – still struggle with the aftereffects (both physical and psychological) of a rocket hitting their apartment. Aztum paid for tutoring when the son was unable to attend school because he was afraid to leave the apartment. It's a testament to how safe he feels with Karyn that he's willing to leave the apartment to show us the reinforced, "safe" outdoor playground. He demonstrates the apparatus for us, climbs through the concrete-reinforced, bomb-safe caterpillar and generally acts like a giggly, nine year old boy who's loving the attention. But the playground is a short car ride away – there's no place near his apartment for him to play outside safely. So, most of his time is spent indoors.

The second family is fairly new on Karyn's caseload: two children, a mom and a dad. Both parents struggle with PTSD. She used to support her family by cleaning houses. Now, neither is able to leave their apartment to work. Recently they needed to make a choice – tutoring for the almost-bar mitzvah aged son? Or shoes for him? ... Tutoring? Or shoes? They chose ... shoes. It's hard to envision needing to make such a basic choice. Karyn tells us later the money was designated for tutoring. She sighs. She, too, understands – shoes or tutoring?

The last family we visit is more financially stable. The first attack destroyed their roof; the second one hit the front room of their house. Mom relayed that after the attacks her now-ten year old son began to wet

the bed. He refuses to leave the house without her, and sleeps with her at night. She quit her job because he was unable to function without her physically near him. He's agreed just this summer to attend camp each morning, allowing Mom to work four hours a day, but refuses to go on field trips to the swimming pool with his camp group. So she takes off work on those days.

Most of the families Karyn works with are people who would otherwise fall through the cracks. It would be easy to think of them as "victims." She – and we – prefer to think of them as "survivors" whose daily lives demonstrate great courage.

That was our first three hours in S'derot.

The next hour, we spent with Avichai Amusi.

Nine years ago, as part of Afikim B'Negev, Avichai began the Mercaz Chesed/ The Chesed Center. In his "real" life, Avichai is a sofer/ a scribe, and an EMT worker.

The Chesed Center, under his leadership, manages to accomplish the following:

- They reclaim food that would otherwise be unused and wasted
- They package the reclaimed food into bags to be distributed to approximately 600 hungry families a week
- They prepare and feed lunch to approximately 150 additional people a day
- They maintain a clothing center where people can buy gently used or new clothes – for a few shekels
- They run a young parenting room, filled with floor-to-ceiling bookshelves, a wide assortment of toys and games, and other baby/toddler equipment – all available for parents to borrow and then return when they are done.

Mind-boggling, isn't it? That one organization can manage to accomplish so much. Even more amazing is that all the work is done by volunteers. Avichai volunteers his time and his energy. Volunteers pack the food bags, cook, clean up. and donate supplies and clothing.

I saw the same look in his eyes as I saw in the Rabbanit's eyes: the awareness that the work they are engaged in is sacred work. That it must be done. And that, somehow, someday, people will be generous in donating their time, energy, money and stuff in order to get the job done.

After we left the Mercaz Chesed, we decided to try and find the new indoor playground in S'derot that Karyn had heard about. We asked someone for directions and were told "Look for the Big Blue Box at the end of the street" Sure enough, there it was!

The entrance was bright and welcoming, with a big blue arch to pass under and a sign proclaiming: Welcome and *baruchim haba'im!*

We were greeted warmly and enthusiastically and given a guided tour of the facility. It was HUGE. The main open play area was probably about twice the size of this room. And then there were several adjacent rooms. We saw DDR stations, basketball hoops and punching bags, a half-length soccer field with two goals, a climbing wall, a fuse-ball table and a separate room for teens to have dances. There

were areas for little kids to play "pretend" - in the preschool world, we call this a "housekeeping center" -- and a ball pit, in which they can jump and roll around.

The Big Blue Box has a computer room, an arts and crafts room, two party rooms - one with "boy" décor and one with "girl" décor, and a comfortable area in which to have snacks. There's also a parent area, in full sight of the play areas, where parents can gather and talk.

The colors are bright and cheerful; the facility is well lit; and kids can do the running and jumping and bouncing that kids need to do.

What you don't see is how the building has been reinforced. Not only has extra reinforcement been added to the structure itself, but each individual room within the "Big Blue Box" has been reinforced as if it were a stand-alone bomb shelter. It's that extra that makes the kids -- and their families -- feel secure here.

Over the ball pit, on our way out the door, I noticed the sign: Jewish National Fund – USA. The light bulb went off: JNF + blue tzedakah box = "The Big Blue Box"

I used to think JNF's job was growing trees. I guess they're in the business of "growing kids," too.

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As we had an opportunity to learn with these Mitzvah heroes – Karyn and Caryn, Menachem, Avichai, and the Rabbanit, several thoughts kept echoing in my mind:

Margaret Mead's: *Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world; indeed, it's the only thing that ever has.*

From the Babylonian Talmud, *Shevuot* 39a: "*Kol Yisrael Arevim Zeh laZeh* /All of Israel is responsible one for the other"

And Elie Weisel's "*The opposite of love is not hate, it's indifference.*"

*Pirkei Avot*: 2:21: "*It is not your duty to complete the work, but neither are you free to desist from it.*"

Israel needs us. And the people of Israel need us. They need us to be thoughtful and committed, to be responsible one for the other, to put aside our indifference; to begin the work – even if it seems never-ending.

As Molly McGuire wrote in my high school yearbook in 1969, "Our lives are shaped by those who love us...by those who refuse to love us." We have – in our hands and through our deeds – the ability to make a difference in the lives of others. Let's just do it.