

Sermon 11.30.23

Post-Israel Trip - "Israel will emerge victorious"

Andrew Trief

When I made aliyah and moved to Israel 18 years ago, I lived and learned Hebrew on a kibbutz in the north of the country. Kibbutz HaZorea, a beautiful and idyllic place right on the Jezreel Valley. Like one of the original Jews two thousand years ago, I worked as a carpenter, an assistant to Itai, a hardened, stoic and chain-smoking sabra, a retired high ranking officer in the Israeli paratroopers. He could speak no English and so I had to learn Hebrew fast in order to survive.

To supplement my Hebrew learning, I would hitchhike twice a week to the kibbutz right down the road, Mishmar HaEmek and learn with a master teacher, one responsible for teaching thousands of Israeli immigrants, the utterly delightful Daniela Azori. She would always have tea and cookies waiting for me upon my arrival. She left such an impact on me, I even brought my mother and grandmother to the kibbutz to visit her. She truly believed in achieving peace with our Palestinian neighbors in Israel and worked tirelessly to achieve it.

Though I did not know it beforehand, I would find myself visiting Mishmar HaEmek last week as part of my Israel trip. I found out the sad news that Daniela had died two years ago after a long bout with cancer. But, thankfully, prior to a meeting we had on the kibbutz, Itai drove the few miles and visited me. He came bearing gifts..two weathered and worn teddy bears for Maayan and Rafi, and a bottle from his personal harvest of olive oil. I immediately knew something by looking at him.

Israel was at war. Itai was sporting a fairly long beard, and I remembered that he always grows out his beard when Israel is at war.

The kibbutz movement, though it has changed a great deal in modern days, still carries strong weight in Israel and the members take care of one another. And so, when those awful crimes against humanity struck several kibbutzim in the Gaza envelope on October 7th, other kibbutzim volunteered to help. Unlike our hotel in Tel Aviv, which was housing hundreds of evacuees from the city of Sderot, the kibbutz movement stepped up to house the evacuees of the impacted kibbutzim.

It was for this reason that I found myself back on Mishmar Ha'Emek. It was hosting the survivors and evacuees from Nachal Oz, one of the most severely devastated kibbutzim in the South.

We met there some of the Israeli reform rabbis working tirelessly and heroically to attend to the survivors' spiritual needs, even though they themselves desperately struggled for answers.

We also met one of the most well-known survivors from that awful Shabbat of Simchat Torah, Amir Tibon and his wife, Miri. Amir is a well-known journalist from the newspaper HaAretz. You may have heard of him since his story was all over the press weeks ago. He was saved from hell that day by his father, Noam, a retired general in the IDF.

Armed with only a pistol, well into retirement age, Noam got in the car that morning and raced down to the South. He stopped several places to save the wounded before he finally made it to his son's kibbutz. Covering for one another, they checked house to house before they finally rescued Amir and his family. One of the few happy endings on that awful day.

Speaking with Amir, I was struck by how inspiring his story was. Prior to having kids, they decided to move to Nachal Oz 9 years ago after Operation Protective Edge, one of the mini wars to envelop the South of Israel. Unlike others who were escaping the area, they moved there for ideological and emotional reasons. They were struck by the lush and green pastoral beauty, “paradise on the verge of hell,” as he put it. They knew the security risks when they moved there...they knew they would have 7 seconds to get to shelter once the sirens sounded. And when they decided to move back there after covering Trump’s term in the White House, this time with two small kids, they knew they would have seven tiny seconds to rush their girls out of the bathtub into the safe room.

After all, Nachal Oz is THE closest village to the Gaza Strip, a mere ½ mile from Gaza city...not just the border, but the city of Gaza. And yet, they weren’t scared to live there. After all, this was a resilient and inspiring community and they shared a simple and beautiful unwritten contract with the State. They, the kibbutznikim, help keep the border and maintain the fields. And the State of Israel will always be there to protect them when necessary. They always kept their end of the bargain. Israel failed to uphold its end.

There were lots of military targets the terrorists could have chosen, but they purposely chose these civilian villages. They saw a baby stroller at Amir's house and started firing a barrage of bullets at his house. For 10 hours, they barricaded themselves in silence in a pitch-black safe room. Their daughters Galia, 3.5, and Carmel 1.5, woken up from their sleep, still in pajamas, unbelievably and heroically kept quiet for 10 hours without any food or water.

An Arabic speaker, Amir immediately knew what was happening through all of the gunfire and explosions. He knew keeping quiet was essential. It took his father hours to get there, but he still got there before the larger army arrived. Other kibbutzim were not so lucky. Nir Oz, a few miles down the road, was invaded by terrorists who murdered, raped and pillaged, and then left, hours before a single soldier would arrive.

What will victory look like? We asked Amir that exact question and this is what he responded. If one year from today, he and Miri can drop off their two young daughters at the nachal oz kindergarten and drive off with peace of mind. If so, we will have won this war.

If not, they admit that they can no longer live there and no one else will either. Then, we will have lost. And the implications for Israel's existence of that loss would be severe.

Amir's sense of betrayal was palpable. Can the contract be renewed? Who knows, And that's why Israel needs to repair the damage so quickly and so desperately. The stakes could not be higher.

Because it's not just the residents of the South who wouldn't want to live there. After all, who would want to live in the North where it has become clear Hezbollah has been planning a similar attack on the hundreds of thousands of Israelis there. And who would want to live where my kibbutz and Mishmar Ha'Emek are, a stone's throw from Jenin, a hornet's nest of terrorist activity in the West Bank.

If you didn't understand why many of us talk about this war as an existential one, I hope you better understand now. A country the size of NJ does not have room for these kinds of scenarios...scenarios which at one point seemed impossible, but no longer do.

My two best friends in Israel, Avner and Yoav, both after reserve age, nonetheless enlisted in their town's citat conenut, the emergency response team. Each of them issued long M-16s to take home with them, something that would have been inconceivable a few months ago. After all, both of them live a few minutes drive from the Green Line. Again, the stakes could not be higher and the margin of error, tiny.

Make no mistake about it. Israel will emerge victorious, but she is depending on us to stand firm. In the face of the chorus of condemnation, hateful voices coming from under every rock and stone, we must maintain our unconditional support, and our moral clarity.

I conclude with some words that stopped me in my tracks from this week's Torah portion. We are at a climactic point in the Genesis narrative. Jacob is terrified of his brother Esau, who is pursuing him with menacing military might. Esau, the progenitor of the Edomites, biblical Israel's renowned enemy. Jacob prays to God, passionately and purposefully.

הַצִּילֵנִי נָא מִיַּד אָחִי מִיַּד עֵשָׂו

כִּי־יִרָא אֶנְכִי אֹתוֹ פֶּן־יָבֹוא וְהִכָּנִי אִם עַל־בָּנִים:

Deliver me, I pray, from the hand of my brother, from the hand of Esau;
else, I fear, he may come and strike me down, mothers and children alike.

וְאַתָּה אֲמַרְתָּ הֵיטֵב אֵיטִיב עִמָּךְ

וְשִׁמַּתִּי אֶת־זֶרְעֶךָ כְּחֹל הַיָּם אֲשֶׁר לֹא־יִסְפָּר מֵרַב:

Yet You have said, 'I will deal bountifully with you
and make your offspring as the sands of the sea, which are too numerous to
count.'"

Starting with the bible, the Jewish People have always had faith. Thousands of
years later, as we'll celebrate next week with Hanukkah, we hold the torch and
the future is bright.

Amir's dream will yet be realized as he will drop his daughters off with nothing to
fear.

Itai will stop growing his beard, and Daniela's vision of peace will be realized. But
until that moment, may we remain strong and resolute against a cruel enemy.

Shabbat Shalom

We all have to look within and receive permission “ha’ishur rak me’atmeynu”. Israel has received this. And so it doesn’t matter what the nations of the world say

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- What he says is victory
- Vayishlach: katonti 32:11

Every newspaper in Israel. Gettysburg. Nahal oz did not like the speech bc it was too dark and aimed for peace. He was on their side then. Now after 10.7 he’s on the side of Dayan. They knew security risks when they moved back this time with kids. 7 seconds while bathing kids to get to mamad. Beautiful resilient loving community. Beautiful simple contract. We protect the border, .5 miles from Gaza city, we hold the line and work the fields until border fence. Not settlements. 1948 villages as recognized by everyone. And the state of Israel protects us. The contract was broken on 10.7. They fulfilled their end. There were lots of military targets but they close civilian town. They saw baby stroller and started firing bullets. 13 against 100. The guy with rpg who was aiming at another stroller house, was killed before he could shoot. They chose civilian

Murdered 14, 9 and 15 hostage in family of 5

Barricaded in dark for 11 hours, no light, no AC, no entertainment for girls. They were heroes. Did not make any noise for 11 hours. Sat there quietly and waited. 1.5 and 3.5 year old. Window is complete darkness, you can’t see b/c of iron disk cover. Shouting, gunfire, explosions as he tries to listen in arabic. He realized all the border was under attack. In some communities, like Nir Oz, the army didn’t arrive. They killed, raped and murdered and left without confronting a soldier. They will never forgive, never forget.

Their community is here now Mishmar Ha’emek, right down the road from me. Biggest failure in the history of any government in Israel. Failure has also been continuing every day since...200,000 internal refugees b/c they don’t trust gov’t. The nightmare they experiences

might have saved the northern ones. Not a single government person has come to visit them. Bennet and Lapid did. Others in opposition. And yet, most inspiring moment, he's never been so proud of Israeli civil society.

4 soldiers died in nachal oz that day and he visited them, and several others since within Gaza who were there that day.

What will victory mean? If one year from today, they can drop off their young girls at nachal oz kindergarten and drive off with peace of mind. If so, we will have won the war. If not, they can no longer live there and no one else will want to. Then, we lose. If these communities fail, the implications for Israel's existence are severe. The gov't must commit and even prioritize rebuilding. No one will ever compromise the security of their children.

Can the contract be renewed? Who knows.

This other guy, Yotam, from Kibbutz Gevim thought that after tzuk eitan things would be different and it would be safer. They were naive. He was part of the security force, kitat konnenut. Just two weeks before they did an exact simulation. IDF officer was there and frustrated with the group. Why are you training? No need, we have this billion dollar fence with cameras and sensors, impenetrable.

They heard gunfire, 9 yo twins, but not on front line. No one had gun at home, they trusted army. Ran to armory under fire, head of security saw three tenderim, armed terrorists. Every place the terrorists met resistance, their results were mediocre. 2 killed, 2 wounded in gevim. At 1pm, Yotam (his name), 7 hours after beginning of event. Former 669 fighter. One wounded in head, paramedic in field does not do complicated operations b/c you know it's a matter of minutes before special forces will come rescue. Here, wounded bleeding for 7 hours before someone came. He finally sees soldiers and asks if they're there for evacuating wounded. No, they're Golani soldiers and they were ASKING FOR BULLETS. In Israel prior they were never worried seeing weapons b/c you knew they were soldiers or trained. Now it's very different. Everyone has, as a reaction to the failure of the IDF. This is the solution from the government. Nir Am female tattoo artist repelled all the terrorists.