

Day 2 - Rabbi Aaron Melman's Message to the CBS Congregation

Dear Friends,

It's a little before midnight in Jerusalem. You may ask, why is he still awake? The truth is that I am still processing our day. It has been an intense day, but a very important day. If solidarity was the primary reason for coming to Israel then we certainly accomplished that today. We began our day by davening and sharing breakfast with students who are studying at the Conservative Yeshiva in Jerusalem. These are people who have not cancelled their plans to come and study Torah in Israel - a great way to start our day. We then headed south. Having had the experience of traveling in Israel during the second Lebanon war in 2006, I clearly remember the protocol for hearing a siren when on the bus. I briefed the group on what to do - one gets low on the bus below the windows so that if God forbid a rocket were to land near the bus the glass would not directly hit you - a reality of where we were headed, but a very necessary briefing.

Our first stop was Netzach Yisrael, the Masorti congregation in Ashkelon. We met with various members of the community, its rabbi, Gustavo Surazski, and they talked about the mood of the people as well as the children. The synagogue has opened its doors to the larger community - especially kids, so that they may partake in summer activities. We learned a little more about the city itself. Ashkelon provides seventy-five percent of the power to Gaza. The city also has the second largest desalinization plant in Israel and provides water to Gaza as well. Power and water have not been shut off and when you ask why, the answer is because it is not the Jewish thing to do. Over one hundred rockets have been shot down over the city with eight rockets landing in populated areas. These rockets are filled with ballbearings - they are extremely hot and are designed to spread up and out when the rocket explodes. These rockets have only one purpose - to kill. They are very resilient in Ashkelon, as they have had a lot of practice. At 11:05 am the siren went off and we headed into the shelter until the all clear was given. We then resumed our visit - clearly a visit that brought strength to the community, its rabbi and the children we met.

We then headed to Sderot - a city whose closest point is 1200 meters (roughly three quarters of a mile from Gaza). The smoke could clearly be seen and the constant sound of drones over our heads was very noticeable. The ground shaking from the firing of tanks into Gaza is not something that one quickly forgets. Even while underground in the Emergency Operations Center, we could literally feel the shelter shake from the outgoing fire. The Deputy Mayor and Chief Executive of the city spoke to us about how they are handling the current situation. Sderot is a city that has been heavily fortified over the last few years. Each bus stop is a bomb shelter. One has to remember that if a siren goes off in Sderot you only have up to 15 seconds to get to a shelter. There are so many shelters that at no time did I feel unsafe. We made our way to a lookout where we could clearly see some of the operation that was taking place. All throughout the area military vehicles are present and there are a tremendous amount of small outposts of soldiers. I can only imagine that what seems to be "make-shift" bases are holding areas for these soldiers before entering Gaza. We pray for these soldiers, their families and this entire country.

In Be'ersheva, the Deputy Mayor and the Head of Security and Emergency Services met us at "City Hall". So far, over one hundred twenty rockets have been fired at Be'ersheva with two landing. Children are spending most of their time in bomb shelters now and there are two hundred sixty-two shelters in the city. This city has been receiving "receiver" shelters. These are pre-fabricated small concrete shelters that can literally be put anywhere. The city is also operating a stress center, opened across the street from the

hospital, staffed with social workers and psychologists to deal with the psychological trauma from this terror. And while the news media at home might not be talking about "Israeli casualties" as much as we might like, the amount of psychological trauma that is taking place is at a very high level. War doesn't only injure one physically, it has had a huge emotional effect on much of the country and certainly in the areas that are under constant attack. At 2:31 pm and again at 3:59 pm we had to get low on the bus as the siren went off. These were tense moments. People in cars got out of their cars and went to the fields next to the road to lay flat on the ground (on their stomach) until it was safe to get up. These are the harsh realities of this region of the country. It is scary but thankfully people don't mess around and take the necessary precautions to keep them as safe as possible. Rabbi Mauricio Balter at Kehillat Eshel Avraham welcomed us to his "home". Mauricio is a friend and the current president of the Israel Region of the Rabbinical Assembly. To say he was grateful for our visit would be an understatement.

Our last congregation of the day was Magen Avraham in Omer, about fifteen minutes from Be'ersheva. Community members once again shared their appreciation for our visit. Their summer camp had to be cancelled because it was not safe to operate. Unlike the synagogue in Be'ersheva, the synagogue in Omer does not have a large enough shelter to accommodate kids for a summer camp. Rabbi Jonathan Sadoff told us how he was personally dealing with the situation - taking care of himself while taking care of others. He told us that on some days it's difficult to get out of bed. Again, the reality of war smacked us in the face - it is an entire nation that is being affected.

This evening we had the pleasure to share dinner with students studying at the Conservative Yeshiva, staff and students from USY Pilgrimage and Ramah Seminar. It was great to see their smiles and hear about many of the exciting things they have done this summer. Yes, their itineraries have been altered but not one group has left early and to my knowledge no parent has brought their child home. We must continue to stand strong with and for Israel. If we don't do it, nobody will.

Let us continue to pray for this land, her people and for peace.

Laila Tov from Jerusalem.

Aaron