

An Eternal People

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I had the zechus of spending over a week in Eretz Yisroel. The past two weeks were said to be the hottest since Israel began recording weather temperatures. Since we stayed in Geulah and my favorite mode of transportation there is by foot, the heat was more than a nuisance; it was a real hindrance to walk in 100-degree weather. But it didn't stop us from traveling to a few places.

Two of the places we visited stand out from the rest of the trip. The first was our visit to Be'eri, Kfar Azah, Nova, and other spots in the south of Israel near the Gaza border that were attacked on October 7th.

It's one thing to read about what happened on that awful day and another to be where it took place and hear from people who were there. It was surreal to be in a home where Jews were killed for being Jews and to touch a car that was torched with its passengers inside.

To be so close to tragedy and death is a numbing experience.

It may bring comfort to the martyrs to know that people come and pray and care about what befell them. It may be a sign of brotherhood that people travel there to share the grief and be reminded yet again that to be a Yid is not a simple endeavor and that our eternal enemies are always around the corner, plotting against us and preparing to strike yet again.

Even in this civilized, technologically advanced world, our enemies still believe and spout the same lies of worlds gone by. Millions espouse those falsehoods and chant them internationally at rallies and in governmental meetings and intellectual conferences.

You step foot into a small home, and the first thing you notice are the pockmarks on all the walls and ceilings. You imagine the horror of the couple who was sleeping in that tiny home when barbarians burst in, guns blazing and grenades popping. Everything is upside down and inside out, contents strewn about. You try not to think too much and leave.

Another home has breakfast dishes in the kitchen sink, frozen in time, bearing silent testimony to what happened in that house after breakfast was eaten.

House after house was burned, destroyed, and pockmarked, proclaiming that innocent, peace-loving people died between these walls because they were Jews.

One house and then another and another, each one suffering the same fate in the early morning surprise attack.

Some were killed quickly, some put up a fight, and some were taken hostage, some were taken while alive and others dragged away after they had been murdered.

The scene repeated itself in town after town, small peaceful villages and kibbutzim whose residents went about their business, leading simple lives, far from the noise and commotion of large cities.

Most of them were very different from us, and we would never have been there if not for the senseless tragedy.

I wasn't too excited about the idea of visiting the site of the Nova music festival, but the guide insisted. So many people were killed there and it has become the focal point of what happened that day.

The area is filled with memorials of young people who went down south to celebrate with music and partying. Every couple of steps you take, you are introduced to another face, another name, another brief bio of a victim or their favorite quote. Before you have time to absorb it, another one grabs your attention. And so it goes until you have had enough and wish to quickly leave that place.

Needless to say, these border towns are emptied of their inhabitants. The desolation compounds the destruction. Nobody knows if the people will ever come back and what shape they will be in if they do.

Sderot, which is considerably larger than those other towns, has come back to life by now. It lost 70 people in the Hamas attack and faced continued rocket shelling for days after. A fierce battle raged in its main police station for 24 hours. Twenty policemen were killed and the building itself was blown up and then razed. Today, the ground it stood on remains empty, except for a few memorials to the martyred and signs of a permanent memorial to be erected there.

We stopped where a small bus carrying 15 Russian seniors got a flat. The driver pulled over to change the tire. The terrorists pulled up and shot them all dead. That bus now sits on display at the large yard where hundreds of vehicles that had been attacked on October 7th have been towed, creating a most gruesome monument to the hundreds of people who were killed in those cars and vans with bullets, RPGs, and fire. Many of the cars and vans were burned to their steel frames, which rust in the elements and cry out for the world to see and acknowledge the carnage wrought by the savages they advocate and march for.

You look at the vehicles of all shapes and sizes and contemplate the horror their passengers experienced. You think of the people who died in them, and those who were gunned down escaping from them, and the ones who were miraculously saved. Each person with their own story.

And that leads us to the flip side of my trip. I met a survivor from the Nova festival. I met him in what we call Kiryat Sefer and Israelis refer to as Modiin Illit, the giant town of Torah. What was he doing there? As strange as it sounds, he was learning Torah.

As depressing as the trip to the south of Israel was, the visit to the country's center was invigorating and inspiring. You see, I went to participate in Lev L'Achim's preparation for Kabbolas HaTorah. Eretz Yisroel's largest kiruv operation centers around learning Torah with unaffiliated Jews. Volunteer yungeleit travel to irreligious towns one night a week and learn Torah with people who have never done so before. The Torah draws them in, and gradually they get interested in learning and knowing more, and mitzvah observance follows.

On the Sunday evening before Shavuot, five hundred pairs of yungeleit and their weekly chavrusos came together at the massive Bais Medrash Ateres Shlomo, which lies at the heart of the town.

As the country's media and politicians engage in non-stop full-throttle bashing of bnei Torah, five hundred people you would think would have been influenced by them left their homes and towns and traveled to a Torah community to learn Torah.

It was there that I met the survivor of the Nova tragedy. He had a broad smile on his face as he sat engrossed in the sugya with his chavrusa, who was as far removed from Nova and what it represented as possible.

He didn't want to speak about how he was saved that day, other than that it was miraculous and led him to take a serious look at life and ponder why he was saved. He also shared that he had been learning for a few weeks and that it has changed his life and brings him fulfillment and happiness.

He said that his wife is coming along, but slower. With a smile from ear to ear, he shared, "Last Shabbat was her first. And many more are coming."

There was another fellow there who providentially met up with Lev L'Achim shortly after he retired. Pointing at the large Gemara on the shtender in front of him, he told me, "Until four years ago, I didn't even know that this existed. I never heard of the Talmud. I was robbed. Boruch Hashem, four years ago, someone came and asked me if I was interested in learning. I had no idea what he was talking about. In the beginning, I didn't understand a word. It took a hammer to bang it into my head. Then, slowly, I began getting it, and here I am tonight about to make a siyum with my chavruta."

Each man there had a story. If you had met many of those people learning that night, you would have no idea that they learn Gemara once a week and are on their way to full shmiras hamitzvos. And then there are others who look as if they are frum from birth. One man I met presented himself as a descendant of Rav Akiva Eiger. "And it is in his zechus that I am here today," he said.

His story? "Thirty-five years ago, shortly after Rav Uri Zohar had become frum and began speaking at Lev L'Achim rallies, exhorting people to follow his path, do teshuvah, and return to

Hashem and Torah, I went to hear him. Then I went again and again. I began keeping some mitzvos and then more... And here I am thirty-five years later.”

With a white beard and peyos, in a black shiny suit and hat, he looked like any other man who has spent his life hunched over seforim in a bais medrash. He introduced me to his son, a fine young man, who had come to learn with his chavrusa who he is introducing to Torah.

The country is in a terrible state, fighting a war on its southern border, while its northern border is under serious attack. The citizens of the northern area have fled and don't appear to be going back anytime soon. Israel has been fighting this war for eight months already. Soldiers are being hurt and mortally wounded every day, over 100 people are being held hostage by beasts, the economy is in shambles, politicians are battling each other, and Hamas's global support increases exponentially.

With this as a backdrop and people of goodwill seeking to hold the nation together in unity, at least for the duration of the war, the Left decided that now would be the perfect time to fight the long-simmering, on-and-off-again war over drafting Torah students into the army. The Knesset held a fierce debate last week, and all of the media outlets made certain to fan the tension.

To note that the pre-Shavuos Lev L'Achim learn-a-thon took place with that going on is to appreciate the inner strength of the Jewish people and their eternal attachment to Torah. Having strayed from a life of mitzvos, the bond of Jews to the Torah is stronger than any propaganda and the lies that people are taught and brainwashed with.

It is said that Ben Gurion only agreed to free those who dedicate their lives to Torah study from the army because he and the other secular founding leaders of Israel firmly believed that the religious community would peter out and, in a matter of time, there wouldn't be any draft-age men forsaking careers to study Torah.

Providentially, Ben Gurion and his friends were proven wrong. The Torah community has expanded greatly since near decimation during the Holocaust. And it continues to grow. So, while the heated debate over the draft and what it will lead to is frightening on one level, on another it is a sign of the Torah community's triumph that the debate is taking place. And just as Hakadosh Boruch Hu has protected us until now, He will continue protecting and nurturing us so that we can achieve the prophecy which tells of the time when “Umolah ha'aretz dei'ah es Hashem.”

My visit came to an end on Motzoei Shabbos when I flew back to the United States. On the same flight was the Slabodka rosh yeshiva, Rav Moshe Hillel Hirsch, who was traveling to address the massive Adirei Hatorah event and create awareness for the financial needs of Israeli yeshivos and their yungeleit.

A product of this country, Rav Hirsch learned under Rav Aharon Kotler back when there were but a few dozen talmidim in the Lakewood Yeshiva. At the time, most believed that Shabbos,

kashrus, limud haTorah, and shemiras hamitzvos stood no chance in the United States and that there would never again be a market for seforim such as the classic Ketzos Hachoshen.

This week, Rav Hirsch addressed an arena packed with people studying the Ketzos along with sifrei Rishonim v'Acharonim, as well as seforim that weren't yet written or published when Rav Aharon Kotler opened his yeshiva and was given little chance of success.

Most of those who filled the arena were not alive in those days of little and have not known of the deprivation that was prevalent after the war and the struggles that were necessary to keep Yiddishkeit alive in those years.

Today we live in a new era, with new challenges and tests, but we stand on the shoulders of those who preceded us here and in Eretz Yisroel as well.

We can sit in a stadium and clap and stand and dance and proclaim, "Netzach Yisroel lo yeshaker," demonstrating it by being there, by leading lives of Torah, by dedicating our lives to Torah and its principles, and always behaving according to the ways of Torah.

As the words of the speakers bounced around the stadium, older people closed their eyes and imagined what the world was like as they were growing up, and the younger people opened their eyes wide and were pumped with pride as to where we have come without compromising on the ideals of our rabbeim who brought the Torah here after the war.

A visionary came up with the idea of Adirei Hatorah, and thanks to him, all of us who were in Philadelphia on Sunday were able to see and appreciate how far we have come, how great we are, how great our community is, and how great we can be in the years to come.

We went from being the poor and downtrodden, who were pitied and written off, to a burgeoning world of many tens of thousands of bnei Torah families, blessed by Hashem with aliyah in Torah and success in business. Zevulun and Yissochor are motivated each in their own way to grow and to contribute and to give birth to generations who will place Torah uppermost in their lives.

They support Torah, and the Torah shall support them. Every day, we are getting closer to the time the nevi'im spoke of and we daven for, when the world will be filled with Torah and we will merit the final redemption with the arrival of Moshiach, who will answer all of our questions and right all wrongs.

May it be very soon. Amein.