

Impressions From Israel
by
**Members of Temple Shir Tikva's
Israel Action Committee**



In Jerusalem:

Rabbi Blumberg, Joan Hoffman, Julie Kniznik, Susan Brisk, Batsheva Zakin, Menachen Kutner
Netta Zakin (*survivor*) (connector)

Behind the camera:

Dina Lutin
Richard Brisk

“Adopt-a-family” program summary

In response to the intifada of 2001, our congregation rushed to help survivors of that terror with our characteristic generosity. We established our temple’s “Adopt-A-Family” program to provide a bridge for so many of those survivors. As a result, we were able to make a difference in the lives of survivors that the intifada created. In your name, Shir Tikva has given over \$196,000 to 64 Israeli families. You can be proud that you are directly responsible for helping Israeli families whose need is a consequence of a terrorist attack.

Your attention and your money helped them in their isolation, their fear and their extreme need. They understood that, and were enormously grateful to you for that. They all knew that Temple Shir Tikva in the USA cared about them. They all felt a sense of connection that went far beyond the money we gave them. As Rabbi Blumberg put it, “In every encounter people told us that our gestures from afar buoyed their spirits. Their all too real feeling of being forgotten, as their peers and friends move on with their lives, often left entire families isolated and alone. You can be proud that Shir Tikva’s contact and attention brought light and smiles to profoundly sad lives.”

In this coming year of 5766, we pray for Shalom, in Israel and in the entire world. Let us honor the courage and conviction that the families described in this booklet have called on to survive. Let us be thankful for all that we have and all that we are able to share. On behalf of the Israel Action Committee, we thank you and wish you a beautiful and sweet New Year.

L’Shana Tovah

Making A Difference

Susan Brisk
September, 2005

In the summer of 2003 Richard and I decided to join a mission to Israel that focused on the Passport To Israel program (a CJP sponsored program to get our teens to visit Israel). From those humble beginnings until now I have been on a mission that has added new depth to my understanding of *tzedakah*. The rewards have been without measure. As one of the members of the Israel Action Committee, I sat around a table with other members, reading biographies of individuals and families that have been victimized by terrorist acts, leaving them severely injured or caring for an injured family member. It was our responsibility to find trustworthy “connectors” to identify and serve as liaison to those families that have fallen through the cracks and needed more help.

During our meetings, we never forgot the fact that it was your money we were giving out, and always were concerned that what we gave would make a difference. I’m not sure how the idea started, but the next thing I knew, the group was going to Israel. For us this meant coming up with the money for two tickets and expenses for ten days to Israel with no personal time for sightseeing or to visit family, nor time to shop (at least not much time to shop). None of us really understood what we were getting ourselves into. We spent nine days visiting more than 30 different families. Each one told what seemed like the most horrific story. Only when we got back into the car and made the next stop did we begin to understand the horror we were now a part of. So, what did we accomplish by reaching out and holding the trembling hand of a mother, or looking into the scarred face of a once beautiful 20 year old girl?

We came to understand what despair looks like, how hopelessness can destroy a family. We even came to accept that when a father feels so helpless, that in his most desperate moment, he can reason that killing himself would put his son in a better position to get aid. I talked to a girl whose legs were mangled and feet surgically pinned, wearing high heels. When I asked why she would put herself in such additional pain, she exclaimed, it made her feel normal. Normal was a word that was often used, but always used to describe another’s life, never their own.

I still can’t get out of my mind the story of Eliazer Biton. He was a bus driver taking troops to their outpost. A man got on the bus and Eliazer instantly knew he wasn’t a soldier. Eliazer jumped on the man and threw him off the bus. In the fight that ensued, the attempted homicide bomber was shot by soldiers, but so was Eliazer. Now with severe back and leg injuries, he can no longer work. He is having trouble keeping up with his mortgage and family needs. Eliazer has nine kids, seven adopted. He is a good man who never thought twice about being a hero. Now he is a hero with no medals, just pain and worries.

The stories never ended. There was the mother that drives ten miles out of her way to avoid passing the bus stop where her daughter was killed. Ten members of the Shtayer & Almog family went out for a Sunday dinner, only to lose five in a bombing. The living

son has to spend the rest of his life remembering the argument he had with his parents about being too old for such a family gathering, never again to have a family to gather.

It was amazing to see Anna Ibragimov, the first terrorist victim we adopted, because she projected hope. A year ago when she was visited by temple members with money to give her, she pleaded with them to give the money to others who needed it more than she did. Now, with pride she had us as guests in her home. Finally, she had the opportunity to meet Dina Lutin, her original contact at TST, her lifeline of hope. Anna is going to school to become a social worker to help others. But, does she sleep at night? No. News of another bombing sets her back. Progress is slow, set-backs are easy.

We also met our connectors. They are those who have made it their business to find and help victims of terrorist acts. Galina Shraiman concentrates on young Russian immigrants cut down in the prime of their lives. She helps with schooling and their psychological and physical needs. Galina has sold her home to have more of her own money to help others.

We met Rabbi Nof in Haifa who runs more of a community center than a Reform temple. He puts endless hours into reaching out to the many survivors of terror in Haifa.

In Jerusalem we have Kids for Kids (K4K) headed by Yeshara Gold. K4K helps children to express the pain and loss they have experienced, through art and drama. But, the work of K4K does not end there; Yeshara has her pulse on every bombing and every family's needs in all of Jerusalem. We hear about it, but she is always there.

So, was it an exciting vacation? No. It was heart wrenching and tough work. We did come back wiser and with a lot more understanding of what it is like to live in a country under attack in the most cowardly ways. Now when we read the bios, we read between the lines. We know your money is making a difference, but we also know one other fact for sure. They know that in America, a Reform temple in the suburbs, where children are safe and life is good, Jews took the time and energy to reach out to them. They know we care and that does make a difference. No vacation ever made me feel so good.

L'Shanah Tovah,

Sometimes The Message Is Not In The Words

Richard Brisk
September, 2005

Last April Susan and I, along with Julie Kniznik, Joan Hoffman, Dina Lutin and Rabbi Blumberg traveled to Israel for the sole purpose of visiting with most of the survivors of terror (*nefgei terror*) that Temple Shir Tikva (TST) helped through your generous donations to the Israel Action Committee's "Adopt-A-Family" program. At the time, TST had given approximately \$150,000 to about 40 individuals and families. We arranged to visit with 34 of those families over the span of nine days. We met with a third of the families in their homes (apartments), a third in hotel sitting areas, and a third at the "Kids For Kids" office in Jerusalem.

All the meetings were emotional, but a few burned images into my head that make me uncomfortable even from this distance. Surprisingly enough, the emotional impact of many of the meetings came as much from what was not said as the stories themselves. On a few occasions, I saw the harsh reality of a survivor's situation in their bodies and expressionless face.

We met Carmite in her apartment in Haifa. She had lost her husband, her 22 year old son, and her 18 year old daughter when a suicide bomber blew up the deli where she and her family were having lunch. After briefly telling us about her loss, she showed us a video her daughter's friends recently made for her. It opened with a photo of the restaurant after the bombing. There were no walls, no roof, no tables, only twisted steel beams in an otherwise open space. Was she really there that day? How did she survive? I could not believe that I was talking to someone who was at that bombing.

The video shifted abruptly. We saw Carmite's daughter at her 16th birthday party. She was laughing, dancing, hugging; surrounded by happy family and friends. I looked at Carmite. She seemed to see none of it. She stared blankly at the floor while I wiped a flood of tears from my face. It took me a while to grasp the significance of what was happening. At first, I thought that Carmite could no longer cry because her pain was now beyond tears. When I looked into her hollow expression, however, I realized I was wrong. She was crying, but without tears. She was Israel's Sisyphus, doomed to replay the same event over and over again. Crying each time.

Her emptiness drained and emptied me. That emptiness left me little doubt that she wished she had died that day along with her family. That emptiness made it hard to imagine that she would ever feel the joy of life again.

A few days later we met Foran. Her husband had brought her to our hotel in Tel Aviv. With only a cocktail table between Foran and me, I sat with our knees almost touching. I sat in disbelief, watching her as her husband talked with us. He told us that, she had been in the vicinity of a bombing two years before; that she had no physical injuries from the bombing; that she had previously been a good wife and mother of four, that she had been in psychotherapy once a week since the bombing. He said all these things while she sat

lifeless and motionless, except for the constant wringing of her hands. She stared at the floor in a way that made me suspect she did not really see or hear what was going on around her. Her expression was so blank that I could not help but think of the cartoon where a person knocks on the head of another and says, "Anybody home?"

Her husband told us of how Foran's trauma has spread throughout their whole family; how she was no longer capable of caring for their children; how he had to find a job as a bicycle messenger so he could come home four and five times a day to give Foran her medication, as well as, care for their 3 year old child. I could not imagine what her children thought about their mother who sits lifeless all day long.

I found myself thinking about the images I had seen of liberated concentration camp survivors. Her mental hollowness struck me as the mirror image of the physical hollowness of those other survivors. I found myself asking the same question I am sure others asked when they saw the concentration camp survivors, "Where was God?" Surely, Foran provided no answer. There was not even a spark of life, no evidence of a soul in that body that once had been a person.

Susan and I had Shabbat dinner with Kinneret Boosani's family. Her mother, Yaffa, and her oldest sister, Nitzan, cooked and prepared while we all sat and talked. The talk was the joy-filled talk of a Shabbat dinner. We talked about Israel, dancing, food, movies and their cousin who was so proud to have just been admitted to an elite branch of the IDF. Everything seemed so normal, so upbeat. Nothing indicated the hollowness that Kinneret and her family must feel. There were no clues to how horrible it is to be burned over 80% of your body; to be declared clinically dead, while struggling to survive.

Later Kinneret told Susan that she still can not sleep because of her horrible nightmares. I recently saw a video diary she made during her first year of recovery. She said that her tears now are different than any she cried before. She refers to them as tears that can not end. It seemed that, for a few hours the joy of Shabbat had kept her from the fate she shared with Carmite.

For nine days, the six of us were the eyes and ears of every member of Shir Tikva. I learned more than I bargained for about our "adopted" families, *our nefgei terror*. Through us, they thanked you again and again for every measure of help and support: medication, hearing aids, counseling, special chairs, medical attention not available from the government, driving lessons and supplements to diminished income. God willing there will be the cessation of violence in Israel. But thousands of our fellow Jews will not be at peace because their wounded spirits and bodies are so hard to heal. I can not forget them. I hope Jews throughout the world do not forget them or abandon them.

L'Shanah Tovah,

The Story of Liora Goldman

Joan Hoffman
September, 2005

I am not a crier. But after walking into an apartment stairwell that smacked of drugs, crime and squalor, then walking up five flights of stairs into the apartment of our “adopted” family Liora Goldman and son, I was near tears. It was sad to see a place in Israel that mirrored the kind of slums we have here in the States. I entered Liora’s apartment. What I saw was a sparsely furnished darkly lighted, but pristine space that was in stark contrast to the filth I had just walked through.

Liora was sitting on an old worn out couch with her two year old son, Tony. She looked lovely. Her son was squirming to get off her lap. He greeted us with great joy. A young man in military fatigues stood in the far corner. He could not have been much older than 21 years, but he looked like he had all the world’s problems on his back! Liora introduced him as her brother, Yuri.

She then told us her tragic story. She had been working as a lawyer’s assistant while going to law school. One night, after parking her car, she walked past the Dolphinarium, a discoteque in Tel Aviv. Unfortunately for her, that was the night a terrorist set off a bomb outside the “Dolfi.” She woke up in the hospital with severe head trauma and shrapnel throughout her body. After several weeks in the hospital, she went home to her husband. Her severe injuries greatly added to the hardship of her marriage which was already strained by the problems of being new immigrants from the former Soviet Union.

One year later, she was diagnosed with a brain tumor which was found after she had been complaining about losing her sight. Her husband could not take the stress. He left, then came back. But when he heard that she was pregnant, he left for good.

Before the bombing, Liora’s mother and father had gone back to Lithuania with her brother, Yuri. With her husband gone now, she was destitute. Having no food and no future - especially for her baby, in desperation she attempted to sell one of her kidneys. She was afraid that the DSS of Israel would take her baby away. Yuri came back to be with his sister. Over time, Yuri became her confidante, surrogate father of her baby, bread earner and guardian. Then Galina, one of our connectors, found out about her case and stepped in to rescue Liora. Galina gave her money to put food on her table and helped pay her rent. Most importantly, however, Galina became Liora’s “mother” and advocate. Galina helped her turn her life around and get back on her feet.

Liora told us she wants to go back to school and become a social worker so she can help others who have been in terrorist attacks. Her goal is to make a better life for her and her child, while at the same time doing *tikkun olam* for those who are worse off.

I was overwhelmed by Liora’s strength and resilience. I felt she was destined to do what she told us she was going to do. In the end, my tears were not for Liora, they were for Yuri. He looked ravaged. Shouldering all the pain, stress and tremendous responsibility took a huge toll.

This encounter sent a powerful message to me about how, with a little financial and emotional support, a person can get back on her feet. All of us at Temple Shir Tikva should feel pride, knowing that we are restoring broken, shattered lives one family at a time.

L’Shanah Tovah,

Your Israel Action Committee in Action

Julie Kniznik
September, 2005

As many of you know, several members of the Israel Action Committee had an opportunity to visit with our adopted families in March of 2005. All of us had been to Israel before, but never had we shared such an intimate experience.

Some members of our committee have described our experiences for you. Rabbi Blumberg sent a special letter to *Vat's Nu* from Jerusalem on our behalf. Many of you have heard the stories of survivors and how important our connections have been – for them as well as for us.

I'd like to describe the experience as a member of the most wonderful committee filled with the most amazing individuals. Traveling for ten days together, seeing and hearing such horror filled stories, is not easy. The stress can fray nerves. That stress caused us to go through many boxes of Kleenex.

And for those of you who might not know us personally, none of us are the “shy, wallflower” type. So, we had our work cut out for us. First, we had to all learn how to be good listeners. (This was no trivial matter!) Whenever we met altogether we were filled with so much energy and enthusiasm and emotion that everyone talked at once. None of us could finish a sentence without being interrupted by another! It required patience, but we *started* to get the hang of it by the end of the trip...

As the days passed, we got to learn so much about each other. We are all extremely passionate in our distinctive ways. Suffice it to say that we grew to appreciate the different expressive styles each one portrayed. At the end of our journey, at the hotel in Jerusalem, we reflected on each one's experience and shared our high points and our grief. We bonded and grew to respect one another more than I could have ever imagined in my wildest dreams.

This experience has made us all more passionate about our work and our desire to share it with others who care to listen (and even those who don't). We are a group of phenomenal individuals. I feel blessed to be a part of this team. I am grateful and privileged to work with such beautiful people.

L'Shanah Tovah,