

Bliss, Loss, Under Fire, Peace? My Summer in Israel

By **Rivka Hia** - 27 Av 5774 – August 22, 2014

Photo Credit: way to really understand what happened in Israel this summer is to have been here.

I arrived in Israel on May 27. It felt the same as it had the last time I was here, a little under a year ago. I roamed the *shuk* eating fresh figs, hiked my ancestors' paths, camped out on the beach, learned at seminary, and met with friends all over the country.

On Friday, June 13, my adventures were marred by the taste of what living in Israel really means. I was waiting in the Central Bus Station with my friend, Phil, who was in uniform. A soldier hearing us speaking English asks if we know what happened. Three of our boys have been kidnapped, he says, near Hebron. We think: *Impossible, Phil would be the first to know, his unit is in Hebron.* As *Shabbat* arrives, the news is verified. *Shabbat* in Tel Aviv; the synagogue packed with scores of Jews of different affiliations, gathering together to recite *Tehillim*, the words ascribed to King David. They worked for him, let this be over soon.

Sunday comes, but it's not over. Travel plans with friends are still on, though it's hard not to constantly check my phone for updates. I feel the urgency during our *tefillos*. Natives slap me with "Are you crazy?" as I wait for a hitchhike, and I retort "We can't live in fear." I see my the face of my seminary teacher, Rachele Fraenke on television. This was happening.

One minute you're shaving shwarma off a pit, then the shwarma guy tells you he read a (fake) WhatsApp that the boys are dead.

I visit Phil's base in Hebron, and see the conditions his unit works under. Soldiers are no longer the attractive gun-holders I knew from teen tours. These are my friends, spending their 20th and 21st years following orders and "eating dirt" in the field. The condition of their equipment helps me decide on my latest project. I contact friends and family, and raise enough money to donate headlights and water backpacks, around \$10,000, through Yashar LaChayal. The project was personal. I couldn't just prance around the country, freeloading protection from kids my age. They were putting their lives on the line to ensure our safety. What was I doing?

I start volunteering with Ethiopian teenagers in Kiryat Malachi, teaching English in a summer camp with YU Counterpoint. I learn about the government's low expectations for the teens. This manifests itself in camp, where my campers tell themselves they have poor English. I see that without us, most of these campers would be on the street, many without food at home, with no aspiration to even finish high school. But we believe in them.

It's June 30 and we're eating dinner. After nightly words of Torah, our head counselor rises. She generally speaks only when there is news, and in these past few weeks no news has been good news. I haven't checked my phone in the hour since dinner started, and in a way I was grateful that the news was coming from someone I knew. It was over: the three kidnapped boys were dead. We walk back to our dorm in silence. All staff meetings were canceled, all plans postponed. All we could do was lie on the grass in silence. We ask each other: Why do bad things happen to good people? What happened to all of our prayers? Will I spill my theological crises to strangers on the bus, or will I put my headphones back in my ears as if nothing has happened? I think of Robert Frost's poem "Home Burial" – is it better to mourn or better to move on? A question I would find myself asking all summer. For camp at least, my personal answer didn't matter. The next day I would come to camp with a smile and my usual excitement. Our campers needed us.

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Rivka Hia

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Photo Credit:

On July 6, the dorm is on lockdown. Our program head reminds us where our *merchav mugan*, safe area, is in case we need it.

Malachi's first siren blasts the next day, and we miraculously all reach the safe area in under forty-five seconds. They tell us to pack overnight bags for a day or two. As I pack my bag, I'm on the phone with Phil who updates me. In the middle of their search for terrorists, his unit is packing up and getting ready to go to Gaza. In the middle of my packing, our head counselor tells us to bring our suitcases with us. At that moment I knew we weren't coming back. The counselors call that night "the Exodus." We left in a rush in the middle of the night to Jerusalem, leaving our campers behind without saying goodbye. We were free to leave, and they would stay, sirens, rockets, and all.

I try to make the most of my time, but I miss my campers, I miss what I came to Israel to do. I don't think we're running our second camp in Dimona after leaving Malachi early.

To my surprise, we go to Dimona after all. Objectively, the media knows Dimona by headlines: sirens, rockets, depravity, soldiers at war. But I know my Dimona campers, whose favorite activity is singing "Am Yisrael Chai," in the most unexpected of places – the safe room of camp during the siren. Death looms over the country, but camp moves on. We make cards, videos and cookies. We give the cookies to soldiers and Dimona residents, "cookies to lift your spirits," I say, because people don't like handouts. We were part of the city, more than just working with the municipality and the education ministry. We were with them, lived every red alert with them.

On the last day of the program, we bring our Malachi campers to Jerusalem for the day to finally say goodbye. Our summer comes full circle. They remember the vocabulary words we taught them. I tell them they could do whatever they put their mind to, as they look at me with wide eyes; they'd never heard that before. The counselors can't help but compare Malachi and Dimona, both development towns in the South, but they couldn't be more different. And why would I, or any of my American friends, or any Israelis living in the center or north know this? Israel exists beyond Jerusalem and Tel-Aviv, as does its potential and talent.

On one of my last days in Israel, I saw Rachelle Fraenkel at the learning in memory of her son Naftali, and Eyal, and Gilad. Through her gleaming eyes and smile it was hard to see a woman who had just lost her son. I saw a woman who strengthened a nation. Israelis have never felt so close to each other. And while my donated flashlights didn't find the boys alive, they helped the soldiers through difficult days in Gaza. The light at the end of Hamas' terror tunnels is the IDF, maybe with one of my flashlights. I don't know when this operation will end, but I wonder if we'll be left with something more than battle wounds. In the words of one of my friends who was in Gaza: "The important thing is to increase the love in the nation, and try to maintain the unity that was formed through the Operation after it's over." I hope we can do that.

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