

Report from our Congregational Mission in Israel

Shabbat Ki Tavo 5776

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Only yesterday, I returned to Little Rock after an amazing congregational Israel trip. We eighteen travelers traversed the country, from border to border, sea to sea, in nine very long days that passed quickly. Even those of us who had been to Israel several times learned and saw so much that was new, and we bonded meaningfully as a group. Each of us could go on endlessly in recounting our experience. Let me focus, though, on impactful encounters with two communities, moments when our group came into contact with Israelis who shared their realities of war and peace, life and death.

On our second full day, we set out extra early from Jerusalem so that we could travel deep into the Negev desert to the Central Arava, where our Jewish Federation is engaged in a project with the Jewish National Fund. The region comprises seven communities dotted along the Jordanian border just south of the Dead Sea. Six percent of Israel's land mass there is home to only 900 families. David Ben-Gurion, Israel's first Prime Minister, dreamed of populating the Negev. He had two motivations: He was eager for our people to return to the land and to make the desert bloom. As founder of Israel's defense forces, he understood the strategic importance of planting significant populations hugging Israel's long borders with Jordan on the east and Egypt on the southwest.

The resilient pioneers who have settled the Central Arava continue to find new ways to expand the region's productivity. We visited their agricultural research center, where they are testing new hybrids, from dates to burgundy colored sunflowers, and newly efficient methods of drip irrigation. We tasted different varieties of honey: turns out that honey produced by bees that pollinate avocado trees tastes different from honey made in hives placed among rows of wildflowers. We were received with magnificent hospitality and treated to a sumptuous lunch.

We were deeply moved when we met the Vietnamese students at the Arava International Center for Agricultural Training. They have come at Israeli expense, all the way from Southeast Asia, to bring Israeli expertise home to improve the productivity of their own family farms. Our sage Maimonides taught that the highest level of *tzedakah*, justice through charity, is to enable others to

better their own circumstances. Our partners in the Central Arava are performing that mitzvah with their students from Vietnam and elsewhere every day.

The Jewish National Fund, JFAR's partner in the region, has recently built a medical center in Sapir, at the heart of the Central Arava. The nearest hospital is more than two hours away. Previously, all medical appointments were in one room, presenting many problems, not the least being privacy. What looks to us like an ordinary medical clinic is a welcome blessing to the folks who live in the region.

Volunteers staff a robust emergency response system. Most commonly, they are searching for lost hikers or transporting a person with a medical emergency or a woman in labor to that far away hospital, either by ambulance or by air. From time to time, coordination with nearby Jordanian first responders is required, and the cooperation is excellent.

That didn't surprise me. Until this visit, I would've thought the Central Arava to be a particularly peaceful and safe region of Israel. The border with Jordan is Israel's version of the U.S. border with Canada. Terrorists do not cross into Israel from Jordan, because the Jordanian military and police cooperate with Israeli authorities to stop them. Israel and Jordan signed a formal peace treaty in 1994, guided by President Clinton.

Sadly, though, Central Arava residents feel insecure about their future. Peace depends on the continuing stability of the Jordanian monarchy. With a Palestinian majority in Jordan, and a king whose grandfather was imported from Saudi Arabia and placed on the throne by the British, the kingdom is always somewhat fragile. With ISIS threatening to topple moderate governments throughout the Arab world, and a million refugees of the Syrian Civil War in Jordan, Central Arava residents understandably fear that violent Islamist extremists could be their future neighbors.

Therefore, regional leaders are eager to build up their emergency response apparatus. On an empty lot next to the medical facility, they plan to construct an emergency response center, supported by the Jewish National Fund. That project has been adopted by our Jewish Federation of Arkansas. We have the opportunity to be partners with our new friends in the Central Arava, as they seek to improve coordination of their current emergency response and to prepare for a frighteningly uncertain future. I hope we will all support this critically important JFAR project.

The next day, we went south again, this time not as far and further west, to the edge of the Gaza Strip. We met extraordinary individuals in a community called Netiv Ha-Asarah, right on the northern border of the strip. They showed us where one of the infamous Hamas tunnels, wide enough for truckloads of armed terrorists, was discovered in their community. They told us of getting themselves and their children into bomb shelters in the mere seconds they have between the moment the alarm sounds and the time when the rocket may land. Thankfully, the rockets are crude and unsophisticated. The terrorists of Hamas who control Gaza don't have guided missiles. Yet. Moreover, thanks to the U.S. military under the current administration, Israel has the iron dome defense system. Often, when residents of Netiv Ha-Asarah hear one boom it's quickly followed by two more: the first, the rocket launched by Hamas; the second, the iron dome missile being set off; and the third, the interception of the first by the second.

Perhaps we would expect these Israelis to fear for their lives and flee to a safer part of Israel. Certainly, we would understand if they hated their neighbors. Naturally, they do despise Hamas. And yet, they also know their Gaza neighbors, and enjoyed regular contact with them before Hamas gained control. Palestinians from Gaza used to work in their fields and elsewhere, with regular trade and interaction going both ways.

Of necessity, a wall has been built between Netiv Ha-Asarah and the Gaza Strip. The wall is cement. It's not pretty. However, a ceramicist who lives in Netiv Ha-Asarah has adorned the wall with a giant mosaic, tiles spelling out *Netiv I'shalom*, "path to peace," in Hebrew, Arabic, and English. Now, when people in Gaza peer across the border at their neighbors, they see art that does not reflect the reality on either side of the border but which does represent the prayer of Netiv Ha-Asarah, a prayer for peace.

From there, we went to Sdeorot, a city on the edge of the Gaza Strip that is most often in the news when the rockets fly. There, Jewish National Fund has built an indoor playground. Much of brightly-colored, fun space there is a bomb shelter, all of it accessible by even the smallest child within thirteen seconds.

We met Moshe, the playground's director. He toured us through the play space and he showed us a Qassam rocket. He also told us that he has a friend in Gaza. Moshe has invited his friend to bring Gaza children to the playground. His friend would love to do so, but would do so at his peril. Hamas executes collaborators without asking questions, judge, or jury. Still, the same Moshe who

is the director of a playground that exists only because of the threat of deadly terrorist aggression is the Moshe who dreams of peace.

In tonight's Torah portion, the Children of Israel are commanded to bring their first fruits, and to recall their history, when they enter the Promised Land after forty years of desert wandering. Tonight, we who return from the Land of Israel recount two stories we took from that sacred place: one, of a community living at peace with its Arab neighbors, preparing for an uncertain future; a second, of communities too often under attack, but preparing for peace.

Let the people of the Central Arava feel our tangible embrace as we contribute to their plan of being prepared for the worst. Let the people of both sides of the Gaza border experience our prayerful embrace, in words emblazoned on the wall at Netiv Ha-Asarah, a prayer for peace.

Amen.