

CHIZUK SPRING SOLIDARITY MISSION MAY 2-11, 2024, LECH LECHA

By Judy Freedman Kadish, Director

Written by Ken Freedman | Edited by Ilene Curtach



This AFSI Chizuk Mission was the first since May '23 and the Hamas attack on Israel and the outbreak of Operation Swords of Iron. As such we included some volunteer activities which we will be doing again on our next mission. With a smaller group than usual due to safety concerns, we are thankful to those who made it and we're now ready to get going on what will be a wonderful and meaningful experience. Following are some brief highlights along with photos from our past trip.

Day 1 - Yom Hamishi, May 2: Heading South and Remembering

Once again, we met at Ben Gurion Airport with our beloved friend and driver Ami Dadon. This is a very special start to our mission as the first stop will be Ami's hometown, Moshav Aderet in the Judean foothills.

After some delicious refreshments at Ami's childhood home with his lovely mother, we had the special privilege of attending an extraordinarily touching memorial event for Ami's nephew Itai Shlomo Moreno, z'l, who was also nephew to Emmanuel Moreno, z'l, one of the IDF's most revered heroes who was killed fighting in Lebanon in 2006. Itai, an extraordinary young man loved and admired by so many throughout Israel was killed while battling Hamas terrorists along the Zikim beach on October 11th at the age of 24. The outdoor memorial service, overlooking the gorgeous valley in these Judean foothills was almost too special to describe here, with hundreds of mostly young people, there was a wonderful buffet lunch followed by many beautiful tributes delivered in both words and songs from dear family and friends. Lastly before leaving Aderet,

accompanied by Itai's father Moshe, we visited the site of a new Beit Knesset being built as part of a project that means so much to Ami and the entire community named Am Echad in their name. It was a special start to our journey.

Our next stop was Beersheba and the Soroka Medical Center. Only 25 miles from Gaza and the South's largest and primary hospital, it was there that most of the wounded on October 7th were treated. Here we were able to arrange a very special couple of hours with some wonderful hospital administrators and IDF specialists while also having the opportunity to meet and engage with a handful of the wounded, who were in various stages of recovery. Both sad and somewhat uplifting, this was an important stop, and we left feeling that the wounded appreciated our visit and enjoyed the token gesture of chocolates we provided for them.



Memorial to Itai Moreno



At Soroka Medical Center



It was a big travel day and while we had hoped to do more, from Soroka we headed to our Ashkelon to check into the Tamara Hotel, our home for the night before getting ready for a great opening night dinner at the Ashkelon Namal before some called it a night and some enjoyed the exciting Thursday night action that the Namal has to offer.

Enjoying dinner on our first night in Ashkelon at Ashkelon Namal

Day 2 - Yom Shishi, May 3: GUSH KATIF - Past, Present & Future

After our first of many delicious Israeli breakfasts, we headed just a little north to Nitzan and the Gush Katif Heritage Center where we visited with old friends, including Dror Vanunu and learned and were reminded of so much of the history of the Gush Katif communities in Gaza that were forcefully evacuated in 2005. At this time in particular, the importance of understanding the beauty and strength of these communities in the face of the catastrophic decision to evacuate in advance of the subsequent Hamas takeover of Gaza and the continued attacks leading to the massacre of October 7th, could not be more critical.



Ken Freedman with Dror Vanunu



In Beer Ganim

Next stop after our tour was to the home of our friend Laurence in Beer Ganim to help her with the pre-Shabbat preparation and packaging of all sorts of goodies including challahs and salads to be delivered to IDF troops.

From there we had another short drive to visit our dear friend Anita Tucker in Netzer Hazani. Being the wonderful and



In Netzer Hazani with Anita Tucker

gracious host that she always is, we were treated to some wonderful salads and all sorts of deliciousness, while discussing and getting an inside look at possibilities for the future of Gaza and a better understanding of the effects of the 2005 expulsion on former residents of Gush Katif. Finally,

before leaving Netzer Hazani, along with Anita we visited her son's vast greenhouse's full of delicious cherry tomatoes and big bold signs, visible from Hwy 6, that say Gush Katif - returning home. Everyone we visited this day, who were unwillingly evacuated from their homes and communities in Gush Katif, has with much work managed to rebuild their lives so well. With that being said it's our understanding that they would all go back to rebuild in a heartbeat.



Greenhouse owned by Aviel Tucker



Gush Katif Commemoration Center is a legal national body established to tell the story of the community development in Gush Katif and Northern Samaria and to address the national and educational values of this enterprise for future generations.

Having finished our daytime activities with a focus on Gush Katif, it was time to head to our very special Shabbat destination of Hebron and the Hebron Guest House where we will be checking and joined by some very special guests for a most special and memorable Shabbat experience. To start with, the guest house which we had to ourselves and was recently redone was fantastic. The house holds some 45 people, and thankfully AFSI's great friends Akiva HaCohen and Yehuda HaKohen were able to join us with most of their big, beautiful families along with a few friends. How much they added to the Shabbaton is hard to explain here. Shabbat dinner and the most spirited Friday night Shabbat services full of dancing and prayer at Maarat HaMachpela were entirely amazing. More about our Shabbat experience in tomorrow's write up.

Day 3 - Shabbat, May 4: Hebron

This was a long beautiful and special day full of prayer, delicious food, walking, old friends and children



Our group before leaving Hebron

playing. A personal highlight for me at morning services was while praying alongside Akiva, who helped lead the service, was being called up for an Aliyah by Rabbi Simcha Hochbaum. The afternoon group walk to Tel Hebron to visit the Tomb of Ruth and Jesse as well as some old AFSI friends was another highlight for everyone. Throughout the day we had many visitors at the Guest House, great meals, some spirited discussion and some wonderful relaxation time on the beautifully furnished rooftop with fantastic vistas. A little while after Havdalah and wishing all of them a warm Shavua Tov, our Chizuk guests started to make their way home and our group stayed overnight while getting ready for an early Sunday morning departure. We have a big week in front of us.

Day 4 - Yom Rishon, May 5: Hebron Hills to Tel Aviv

Leaving Hebron bright and early, our first stop is Asa'el, a small Yeshuv on the frontier of the Southern Hills of Hebron that was recently "regulated" or given legal status as a community. Here, led by Mati, a young mother of 8 or 9 children with the youngest on her back and a handgun holstered on her hip, we were greeted by some of the most courageous and welcoming people you can imagine. We learned much about the community, how it's growing and how they protect themselves out on the edge. We also visited the pre-school where we were greeted by what seemed like hundreds of singing and flag waving children. The residents are clearly busy with way more than building and defending.



Jill Gerla, Mati & Baby, and Goats

Next stop was Chavat Maon where we visited and had a very special BBQ bison lunch prepared by Yonaton, an organic rancher and his lovely wife who happened to originally be from Brooklyn. Great conversation and connections were made while supporting a local business that, like many, is suffering through these times.



Cattle on Yonaton's ranch

Our next and last stop on our way to Tel Aviv was Ruca's Farm in Moshav Hemed, a meeting arranged by the Israel Independence Fund. This is a rehabilitative organic farm for the treatment of Israeli Veterans suffering from PTSD. Here we met with the founder and lead social worker, learned about the program and toured the farm. So much important work is being done around the country as we saw as we traveled.



At Ruca's Farm

Next stop was Tel Aviv where we checked into the very conveniently located Metropolitan Hotel. Once there everyone was on their own for the evening as many made it over to Hostage Square to share their prayers and pay their respects on this Eve of Yom HaShoah.

Day 5 - Yom Sheni, May 6: Strawberry Fields Forever

As part of a very busy and full schedule we were able to schedule a couple really special volunteering experiences with the help of Sword of Iron - Israel Volunteer Opportunities group which is doing amazing work helping many thousands of volunteers connect with opportunities to help out where the war has created disruptions in staffing and operations.



Strawberry Picking

On this day we helped pick strawberries at Porat Farms in Kadima about 30 miles north of Tel Aviv and not far east of Netanya. The farm had been operating with a handful of regulars in the fields down from 80 after losing both their Arab and Thai employees in October. We did pretty well with this hard work as most of us learned that strawberries grow from the ground and require some serious bending over or sitting in the dirt. As we wrapped up the 3-hour session we learned that the season was coming to a close and that they managed through the year with the help of volunteers. Hopefully by next season they can get back closer to normal production levels of these delicious berries.

Then, sweaty and spirited, we headed north to the picturesque and historic town of Zichron Yaakov on Mt. Carmel. As it was Yom HaShoah we didn't visit any of popular sites such as Beit Aaronsohn that the

town has to offer but we did take an hour to stroll down the old-style pedestrian mall surrounded by boutique shops and outdoor cafes and by now we had worked up some big appetites. Off to the Tishbi Winery Restaurant, where we all enjoyed so much delicious food and wine at a big farm table in their exquisite outdoor garden. Finally, before heading back south to our next stop many of us visited their wonderful shop for wine, chocolate and other treats.



In Zichron Yaakov



With Barry Shaw

Next stop on the way back to Tel Aviv was Netanya where we met our friend Barry Shaw of Israel Institute for Strategic Studies for coffee, tea and a very spirited discussion at the Sunshine Cafe, where one can often find or meet our friend. Barry has written many books and is a tireless speaker, digital creator and Israel Advocate who has an excellent blog called The View from Israel. We enjoyed this stop very much and left with some of his excellent books.

Back to Tel Aviv for a free evening and night. Tomorrow is another early morning.

Day 6 - May 7, Yom Shlishi: Giddyup

This was the 2nd of our two dedicated volunteer days, and I enjoyed it so much that I've since gone back.



Orion Horse Farm

Again, after another delicious Israeli breakfast we made our way to the Orion Horse Farm in Shafir in the Kiryat Malachi region about 35 miles south of Tel Aviv and several miles northeast of Ashkelon. Here we helped the delightful owner Mor and her 1 helper care for a dozen or so horses and ponies (and one very frisky goat) by getting them out into their corral, cleaning their stalls, cutting their hay and brushing them down. These are therapeutic horses that in normal times work with children and were approved to work with recovering soldiers. Being that they were and still are short staffed due to the war and the owner's injury, volunteers are playing a critical role in keeping this beautiful place going and I'm certain that we not only were very helpful but that the group as a whole really enjoyed our morning here.

From here we head back to Tel Aviv for a free afternoon. Whether it was meeting up with friends and family, getting some rest, going to the beach or wandering around the Shuk HaCarmel, I'm sure everyone enjoyed this time.

To close a fun and fulfilling day, we headed to the Tel Aviv Namal for another festive dinner, this time at Lechem Basar where we were joined by another long time AFSI friend, Yifa Segal, who aside from previously serving as Chief of Staff of the Israeli Ambassador to the United States has done so much more that I can, or she would allow me to list here. It's always great to have her with us for her wonderful and often outside the box insights. Oh, and the food was excellent!!



Patrick Assad with Yifa Segal

Day 7 - May 8, Yom Revi'i: Gaza Envelope & IDF BBQ



Nova Music Festival Memorial

After breakfast we were joined at the hotel by our friend and tour guide for the day Gary Alon Rogoff who was with us for the entire May '23 Chizuk Mission. Our first stop is a quick one in Sderot where we pick up longtime AFSI member Phil Rosenblatt along with a few of his family and friends.

Heading further south our first stop was right on the Gaza border at a new lookout very close to Kfar Azza. The views into Gaza were as clear as can be and Gary was sharing his insights into how movements might have taken place on 10/7 when a couple security officers drove up and suggested that it would be a good time for us to vacate. Obviously, we complied.

Then on to the Nova Music Festival grounds next to Kibbutz Re'im. We have all heard and seen images of what happened there, but we think it's important to bear witness to the location of one of the most gruesome and horrific events in Jewish history. It's an extremely somber experience to say the least.

From somber to somber, our next stop was Kibbutz Re'im where we were greeted by one of the resident heroes named Imri who helped fight back against the Hamas terrorists. Imri shared details of the invasion and subsequent battle that took place, showed us many of the homes that were burned down or shot up and shared his hopes for rebuilding and return.

Kibbutz Re'im



Next, we returned to Sderot where after going for lunch we met up with Dorel Abramovitz, Director of



In Sderot

Development for the city. Mayor Davidi was busy and unable to meet with us. The city looked like it was coming alive as they were working towards bringing the Mefunim (evacuated mostly to hotels) back home. Also, many of the businesses seemed to be back up and running, even if not at full strength. We meet Dorel at the site of the old Police Station which no longer stands. This is where most who visit Sderot these days convene and it's where Hamas massacred 20 police officers and at least 50 nearby civilians. Here, Dorel gave us a clear explanation of what happened there on that tragic day and what was being planned going forward. As of this writing, and as back to school nears, we can tell you firsthand that many if not most of the Mefunim

have returned to their homes although many who are suffering from PTSD are resisting or struggling. These are all such difficult situations.



Our next stop on this pretty brutal day was the Tkuma Car Cemetery where over 1,600 vehicles of various stages of being burned and obliterated, sometimes with people inside. Many of these cars belonged to Nova attendees and others just people in the region. Tkuma is a Moshav about 3 miles east of the Gaza border and the yard is just to the west of the Moshav. Not much more to say but if you are in the area and you haven't been, it's probably worth a brief visit to witness for yourself.

Tkuma Car Graveyard

Finally for some relief from all the misery and an opportunity to experience the greatness and resilience of the Israeli people we head just about a mile west to the Shuva Moshav junction, site of the Shuva Brothers rest station for IDF soldiers and other Israeli service providers. This place which started as a field hospital due to its location at the edge of the war zone on 10/7, has evolved into a remarkable roadside rest stop providing 24/7 refreshments and fresh hot delicious kosher meals from morning into the night. Soldiers come to eat, hangout, rest, listen to and play music, pray, smoke, play backgammon and get free essentials from socks and underwear to toiletries and energy bars and pretty much everything in between. A group of loyal volunteers as well as many visiting volunteers and supporters help round out the picture by both helping make the place work and engaging with the soldiers who are so grateful and appreciative! On our visit, aside from all we did as volunteers and friends, we sponsored a BBQ which is always so



Shuva Brothers with Ken Freedman

greatly appreciated by the soldiers. This place is truly amazing and while we hope one day it's no longer necessary, in the meantime I suggest everyone visit, help out and enjoy meeting Israel's finest.

It was a very full day, so we headed back to Tel Aviv for our final night before heading to Jerusalem.

Day 8 - MAY 9, Yom Hamishi: Touring Jerusalem!

The drive up to and approaching Jerusalem for the first visit every time is always so special. Shortly after arriving, we met up with our friend Dan Luria, Executive Director of Ateret Cohanim and master storyteller. As most of you know, Ateret Cohanim is the leading land reclamation organization in and around the old city



With Dan Luria in Jerusalem

of Jerusalem, focused for over 40 years on restoring Jewish life in the heart of Jerusalem. With Dan we visited and heard the stories behind homes, apartments, synagogues and yeshivot that have recently been purchased. Along the way we also were given a broad explanation of the mission and history of the organization and its place in practical Israeli politics. Always an interesting and good time with Dan. We just had time to grab some lunch in the Old City before our next activity.

After lunch we ascended the Temple Mount with our nice and very smart young guide Abe Truitt from Beyadenu, the organization headed up and founded by Tom Nisani. After making our way through security fairly easily, although the Israeli police were

pretty strict and somewhat busy moving us along, we had a nice walk around and noted that it felt a bit more free than past visits with hours of accessibility improving, and some quiet prayer and singing being allowed. That being said, this most holy of Jewish places is still under Jordanian control and treated as a playground, garbage dump and safe zone for Muslim troublemakers with Jews being treated as second class citizens.

Then it was time to check into the Cassia Hotel which would be our home for the next couple nights including Shabbat. As we settled in, we took note of and started to meet many Mefunim families, mostly from the North. It was a surprising addition to the experience as they were very pleased to meet us, and we would get to know many of them over the next couple of days.



At Piccolino Restaurant

Then it was time to get ready for our last night out before Shabbat and we had a special evening planned. Dinner tonight was at Piccolino Restaurant located in Music Square with its beautiful courtyard and live music going on. It's a special place in Jerusalem. Our special guest for dinner is another dear friend of AFSI, Arie King, Deputy Mayor of Jerusalem and the founder of the Israel Land Fund. The meal was great and the discussion, while vibrant and invigorating, was only enhanced by Arie receiving good news while with us regarding UNRWA's removal from Jerusalem. Am Yisrael Chai!

Day 9 - May 10, Yom Shishi: Judea and Gush Etzion

It seems like no AFSI mission is complete without a visit to Oz V'Gaon and our dear friends Yehudit Katsover and Nadia Matar, leaders of the very important Sovereignty Movement, which AFSI's Helen Freedman, z'l in addition to many members of AFSI played an important role in encouraging and supporting. The Oz V'Gaon Nature Preserve was established by Yehudit and Nadia as part of the 'Women in Green' movement alongside the residents of Judea and the Gush Etzion Local Council as a Zionist response to the 2014 terrorist murder of the three youths Gilad, Eyal and Naftali. The preserve, which continues to evolve every year, overlooks the Gush Etzion Junction and has become an active educational and tourism site. There are playgrounds, picnic areas, a camping area, a new wading pool with outstanding views, a synagogue and an event hall for 150 or more. After being warmly greeted by Nadia and Yehudit and joined by long time AFSI Advisory Council member Ken Abramowitz, we received a briefing on the current situation in Israel and developments of the Sovereignty Movement. After our briefing and discussion, we visited the Helen Freedman, z'l Compound as well as the new wading pool with its beautiful vistas.



Nadia Matar with group at the Helen Freedman Pavillion, Oz v'Gaon

Finally, before leaving the Gush, we took a short ride across the street and up the hills to the Ari Fuld



Atop the Ari Fuld Lookout

Lookout. While most reading this are likely familiar, Ari Fuld, z'l who was murdered by a terrorist in Gush Etzion in 2018, was a fearless Zionist and family man who as stated in The Ari Fuld Project website was committed to the truth, the Torah, the IDF, Israel and the people of Israel.

Our next and last stop before heading back to Jerusalem to get ready for Shabbat was also in the Gush with Tirael Cohen, another dear friend of AFSI and

one of the founders and leaders of the Kedma Youth Village Program, an extraordinary organization of youth that works to strengthen community resilience in smaller Yishuvim and Moshavim in border communities through all of Israel with projects aimed at groups of young people aged 18-35. It was another uniquely AFSI visit as we sat around a big, shaded picnic table in the backyard enjoying all sorts of refreshments.



Tirael Cohen with Judy Kadish

Shabbat Shalom! We have a wonderful Shabbat dinner in the very nice Cassia Hotel Dining room where we are joined by three Lone Soldiers introduced to us by another great AFSI friend Rabbi Ben Packer, Director of the extraordinary Jerusalem Heritage House.

Day 10 - May 11, Shabbat and Shalom

This last day of our May '24 Chizuk and Solidarity Mission was a really special one. With another delicious hotel breakfast, many Shabbat Services to choose from, an amazing city to take a stroll, a beautiful hotel full of some new friends and a really nice swimming pool at which to relax, it was perfect close to the week and an opportunity to get ready for the week to come. But before we close out this report, we must share that in typical AFSI form, we have more special guests when we are joined for Shabbat lunch by Doug Altabef, chairman of the board of Im Tirtzu and director of Israel Independence Fund. Doug and his artist wife, Linda, who also joined us, live in the North so while there was much to share with regard to the work of the organizations, it was also interesting to learn about life in their region as aggressions from Hezbollah were continuing to heat up.

And so, another wonderful, meaningful AFSI Chizuk mission came to a close.

L'Hitraot and we hope you will join us on our next AFSI Chizuk Mission - November 11-18, 2024!

