

Tuesday, January 16, 2024

95% Heaven

My day started driving down Road 4. I looked out the window attentively knowing that I would pass by Kfar Silver, the boarding school where I lived for 3 months when I first arrived on my 10-month Israel trip 18 years ago. I caught a glimpse of the school and the shopping center across the street. Every day, we'd have ulpan (immersive Hebrew class) in the morning, and we'd go to the cafe in the shopping center in the afternoon to practice our flash cards. For a fleeting moment, I felt a wave of good memories representing some of the best times of my life. Living in Israel. Learning Hebrew. Having fun. Not worried about where life might take me.

We were headed south to Sderot, the Eshkol municipality, the site of the Nova music festival, and Kibbutz Nir Oz, the sites of the worst massacres in Israel's history. Why would people choose to live here, a mile from the Gaza border, where rocket attacks were so common that some didn't even bother going to their bomb shelters when they first heard it on Oct. 7?

"This place is 95% heaven," we heard again and again. They didn't mention what comprised the other 5%, and didn't need to. These were beautiful people, who built beautiful communities filled with nature and love, and they wanted nothing but to live in peace. And 95% of the time, they did.

On Kibbutz Nir Oz, 25% of their community was killed or taken captive in Oct. 7. No picture I've seen, including the ones I took myself, do justice to the sheer destruction that took place there. It is a modern day Pompeii. One day, normal life. The next, nothing. And a few weeks after, people on solidarity missions walking under the melted vinyl of your porch awning, stepping over your broken dishes, and dodging your charred wooden roof beams as they traipse through your living room like it is some sort of a museum. This description only gives a small fraction of the complete picture, compared to the stories from those who survived about what happened in those gruesome hours when evil terrorists ran rampant through their picturesque neighborhood.

We finished our day by providing dinner to army reservists who turned a kindergarten into a makeshift army base. Amazingly, I met a soldier who had lived in my hometown (Rockville, Maryland) as well as one with family from Allentown. We got a chance to interact with these amazing young men (the IDF's amazing young women serve elsewhere). Their love for Israel and Judaism is palpable. They view it as an honor and a privilege to be able to protect their homeland and their people. They have no hesitation about serving and are prepared to stay for as long as it takes. I thanked them and told them that they are not only protecting Israel, but protecting all Jewish people, because I do not believe Jewish people anywhere would be safe without Israel. They are the brave heroes that we should aspire to be and that our children should admire.

How is it possible to start and end a day with such amazing positivity, such love, such brotherhood, only to fill the middle with such horrific sadness? This is the story of Israel. It's 95% heaven.