

Wednesday, January 17, 2024

## **Ananhu Lo B'Seder**

I always took a liking to Israelis, even before I ever first visited Israel. I couldn't really tell you why - something just always seemed to "click" between us. Maybe it was their humor, or their spirit, or outlook on life. Maybe it was just coincidence. The most amazing thing, though, is that you can go for years without seeing an Israeli friend, and the moment you reunite, you pick up right where you left off.

I was able to make some new friends today. We met with the Israel Association of Community Centers, and heard from a variety of directors of *matnassim* (community centers) from around the country. Like our JCCs, they run a variety of programs to serve their local needs, and face similar challenges. In fact, when the IACC formed about twenty years ago, the founders came to the United States to tour our JCCs, as a model of what was possible. So it should not be a surprise that we are so similar! Today, many of the community centers are tasked with the challenge of responding to new needs from the war. Some communities have been displaced entirely - over 250,000 Israelis who have been displaced and are living in hotels and similar accommodations because their home community is not safe. Their community center staff has traveled with them to establish make-shift programs in their new accommodations, providing critical services and providing continuity of community. Other centers are helping bereaved families, or providing extra support to families with parents and children who have been in army reserve duty for over 100 days now.

I had the opportunity to have lunch with one such director, Reut. She comes from a unique community that serves a mixed population: some Jewish, and some Bedouins. The Bedouins are the traditionally nomadic tribes of Muslim Arabs who live in Israel, primarily in the south. Many of them serve in the Israeli army and are proud Israeli citizens. Just as with our JCC, there are challenges to serving a mixed population, but also immense satisfaction from the work of building relationships and strengthening community. We hope to work together in the future on programs that build on our communities' similarities.

In a small bit of free time on this trip, I also met up with an old friend from my earliest days working at Jewish summer camp as a teenager. She made aliyah (immigrated to Israel) over 20 years ago. I wanted to hear about how she has been, where she's working, and all the usual things - but also how she's feeling since Oct. 7. "My mom [in the United States] called me that horrible day when the Israeli army mistakenly killed three hostages. She asked me how I was doing, almost unaware that this tragic event took place. I got so upset. *Anachnu lo b'seder* - we are not OK. We are not OK."

Before dinner, we had met up in Hostages Square, a memorial that popped up in the plaza in front of the Tel Aviv Museum of Art after Oct. 7. We took in the art exhibits, listened to family members of hostages, looked intently at the photos of those missing, and walked through a concrete tunnel meant to demonstrate the conditions that they are living in. Everyone that you

talk to here has a story. And whether they articulate the words or not, you always come away with the same impression - we are surviving, but we are not OK.

How can one be OK when Kfir Bibas--whose porch I stood on yesterday while touring the devastation of Kibbutz Nir Oz--will celebrate his 1st birthday today in captivity? How can one be OK when it seems like the entire world cares nothing of the murder of innocents for one reason and one reason only - because they are Jewish? How can one be OK when their sons and daughters are fighting for the survival of their nation and their people, with no timeline to return home?

And yet, if you don't listen intently, you might only hear optimism, perseverance, resilience, humor, solidarity, and love. Maybe these are the reasons I've always been drawn to Israelis. But if you listen carefully enough, you'll also hear something else - that no, they are not OK.