

OU Women's Initiative I Rebbetzin and Lay Leader Israel Mission
Operation *Chibuk V'Chizuk*-
Hugs and Strength
By Rebbetzin Adina Morris

October 7th has no doubt changed our lives as Jews and as a nation forever. For me personally, November 27-30th has changed my life forever.

During the last week in November, Ariella Nadel, my lay leader representative from our community, the Young Israel of Southfield, Michigan, and I joined nine other communities as part of the OU Women's Initiative (OU WI) Rebbetzin and Lay Leader Mission to Israel.

We had the opportunity and sacred honor to witness first hand what life is like for many of our unsung heroines on the home frontlines.

Our sisters in Eretz Yisroel.

When I walked into the hotel in Yerushalayim Sunday evening for the first time, I was not surprised to see many families milling about and children playing in the halls. After all, so many times I have been to hotels on previous visits and the hotels are full with families.

What I wasn't prepared for in the morning, was when one of the hotel cleaning crew approached me and asked if I needed my room cleaned. I said "no thank you, I just arrived last night."

He then asked me if I was living here.

And that's when it struck me smack in the face.

Living here, in the hotel.

"Oh no," I replied, "I am just here for five days on a mission."

"Oh," he said, "how nice."

Walking into the hotel breakfast room that morning, I found young mothers with babies in strollers, families with elementary aged children, elderly and teens.

What was remarkably different were the school bags on the children's backs. They were preparing to go to school that morning, and their mothers were making their lunches from the hotel breakfast buffet.

These families were not on vacation. They were living in the hotel.

Two communities had been relocated to the hotel from the south. After speaking with some of the women, we found that they live in one small room with their family and eat their meals with the hotel.

They have no access to a kitchen or a laundromat. They also have almost no personal belongings with them. Most left their communities in haste when the war broke out nearly two months ago and took not much more than the clothes on their backs.

They haven't been able to return since.

For some, their homes were burned down by terrorists.

They have been relying on donations for clothing and other necessities.

Our community along with the other nine that participated on our mission, contributed to the winter clothes sorely needed for these families.

We had mounds and mounds of clothes to sort through and distribute. Each evening after a long day on the road, at around 10 or 11 PM we would sort through all of the duffle bags of donations and categorize them according to size.

One morning, Ariella and I came downstairs. We saw a number of bags in the front lobby that looked like they were from our sweatshirts collection. We decided to bring them upstairs to the room where we were sorting all of the donations.

As we were about to take the bags, a woman came hurriedly over to us and said, "Wait, that's my dirty laundry!"

We felt awful.

We quickly apologized and said we thought they were our sweatshirt bags.

She explained good naturedly that it was okay. She said, since she has nowhere to do laundry, a group of women come and take their laundry every few days and wash, dry and fold it for her and then drop it off for them at the hotel.

We were in awe.

Mi k'amcha Yisrael, who is like Your nation Yisrael.

She said she has to keep an eye on the bags though, because she has already lost some clothes because people take it by mistake or it gets thrown out by accident.

In the evening, we would see families sitting around in the lobby.

This is their living room.

One mother in the early morning is working on her laptop on the couch while her children play a variety of games on the floor in front of her.

This is their office and playroom.

Many of us brought presents and toys for the children, as they had none of their own. Anything they had was donated to them.

One mother shared how embarrassing it is to have to take donations for everything. She is not used to it and finds it very uncomfortable.

One of the lay leaders responded wisely that she should not feel ashamed, because if the tables were reversed, she would be the one giving out gifts and we would be taking them.

With that she smiled and accepted the toys, much to the children's delight.

One woman shared that her husband passed away and she was alone raising her two sons. They don't know how long they will be in this situation and don't see an end or an easy resolution.

All they want to do is go home.

Our mission opened with the eyewitness accounts of October 7th survivors from Sderot and Kfar Maimon.

Our first excursion was to Sderot where we witnessed some of what had been shared with us.

We stood at the site of the demolished police station where so many lives were lost. We were then invited into one of their homes in Sderot.

We climbed the stairs to his apartment and were welcomed with pictures of his smiling wife and children on the walls and backpacks still on the floor with shoes and toys scattered about.

He took us to the *mamad*, the safe room where he and his family, a neighbor's family and the local *B'not Sherut*, 17 people in all, were all huddled together for 30 hours.

Thankfully the air conditioning was working and the bathroom was not too far away. When they needed food, one person would dart out for a split second to bring back supplies.

He shared that as they left their apartment in haste to make their way to safety, there was no time to pack anything up. He took a quick glance around the kitchen and found the cookies from Yom Tov still on the table.

Who knew how long it would be before he could return home? He threw everything into the freezer so that when they would return, the apartment wouldn't smell of moldy food.

He shared that when they left, their apartment was still intact. Yet, when he returned this week in preparation for our visit, he found that all of the porch windows were shattered from the shrapnel of the RPG missiles landing in his neighbor's yard.

When he tried to open the *trisim*, the window shades, they were stuck. He placed his hand up into the slats in order to identify the cause. Feeling around with his hand, he suddenly landed on a small object.

He pulled out a bullet that had lodged between the slats. Once the bullet was removed, the *trisim* were effortlessly opened.

He smiled as he said that he and his wife are talking about collecting all of the shrapnel and making jewelry out of it,

While waiting outside the Sderot war room for our group, Ariella and I met a *chayelet*, a woman soldier.

She is from Sderot, however, was in Brazil on vacation when the war broke out. On October 8th, the next day, she got on the first flight home to sign up for duty in Sderot and has been there ever since.

The survivor from Kfar Maimon described how their family had galvanized to defend themselves with the only weapons they had, kitchen knives and a surfer's harpoon.

He was a witness to the widely publicized helicopter miracle. Terrorists had been about to enter Kfar Maimon, when they were chased away by the crash landing of a plane load of IDF paratroopers.

He shared his harrowing escape with his wife and four kids.

He then joked that his older son insisted that they divide into two cars so that there is at least one 'provider' in each car.

He said, as a father, he always prided himself on being a stickler for rules, especially driving rules. But that day, he told his son, hit the gas and do not stop for any lights or anyone at all. Just keep driving until they reach safety.

Both families recognized their escape as nothing short of miraculous, having witnessed the horror that surrounded them. Gratefully, they have both been relocated to safer areas.

Their ability to smile and joke with us in the face of such adversity was simultaneously astounding and inspiring.

When we visited the evacuated families in the dead sea hotel, the women shared how frustrating it was for them. They are really givers and being a taker all the time is very difficult.

They are very independent women and they have no kitchen to cook for their families. They are constantly relying on the kindness of others, and not all of their children like the hotel food. Picky eaters!

One woman explained how the hotel recognized their frustration. One day they kicked the entire kitchen staff out of the hotel and allowed the women of the community to do the cooking for their families.

This chesed was of the highest form. The hotel gave back to these women their dignity, and they were so appreciative.

There is a lot of fear and anxiety. Many of their husbands and family members are fighting on the front lines and some are captives.

Before the war broke out, eight families were in the midst of preparing for Bas Mitzvah celebrations for their daughters.

After October 7th, they couldn't fathom a party. How can they be happy and celebrate? How can they sing and dance?

As the war dragged on the women began to discuss the Bas Mitzvah again, but everyone felt stuck. Local organizations offered to host a party for them, but they declined.

It didn't feel right.

Then the OU WI approached them with the idea, for the Rebbetzins and Women Lay Leaders from America to sponsor, host and prepare everything. They were intrigued.

With great sensitivity the OU WI offered to plan a small yet beautiful celebration commemorating this special milestone for the girls, together just with the mothers and daughters and our group.

The mothers were so taken aback that women from America would come to do that for them.

They agreed.

The girls were initially hesitant when they entered the patio seeing the beautifully decorated tent and party area for the first time.

The first girl finally walked all the way in and then feeling overwhelmed ran back inside the hotel lobby.

We took a number of steps back to give the girls and their mothers the space they needed to comfortably enter the party. They then warmed up to the smiles and embraces of our group.

We made jewelry together and talked to the girls about the importance of celebrating their Bas Mitzvah.

One of the Rebbetzins had brought lots of treats for the girls. She then requested that they share the treats with their friends, teaching them the importance of also being a giver.

It turns out that Rebbetzin Dr. Adina Shmidman, the OU WI Director, and group leader of our trip, is also a talented guitar player.

She played some uplifting and inspiring songs and we sang together. At the request of the mothers, prior to the Bas Mitzvah celebration, we didn't start a dance.

But suddenly two mothers started swaying a little and before you could blink, they grabbed each other's hands and started a circle with us.

I can't explain the feeling of exuberant dancing and singing of *Am Yisrael Chai*, *L'shana Haba'a B'Yerushalayim* and *Siman Tov U'Mazal Tov* with these women and girls who have experienced such pain and trauma these last two months.

It was otherworldly.

At the end of the evening, the mother I was sitting with shared her deep gratitude to our group. And even more that we have given them the greatest gift of *chizuk*, strength, and a huge hug.

It has uplifted them and she awaits the day when she will host all of us in her home very soon!

When we returned from the Bas Mitzvah that evening, we held an impromptu kumsitz in the corner of the hotel lobby inviting anyone to join. We were stationed near the elevator.

One of the mothers I spoke with earlier, who lost her husband, was downstairs and heard the singing. She joined us and sang along.

As it was late, many were walking by to use the elevator to go up to their rooms. You could see the smiles on their faces as they sang along, although they still chose to go upstairs.

We hope they went to sleep with a little more light in their hearts that evening.

Meeting with the wives of the displaced Yishuv Shuva was an apprehensive meeting for the women.

They weren't sure what to expect from us and weren't looking to be charity cases.

Throughout the trip we walked this delicate balance of being present and supportive while stepping back and giving privacy and space to the women we met.

We were expected to paint pottery together and just schmooze.

The leader of the group requested that we first go around the room and introduce ourselves, where we are from, our community and the role that we play.

In addition, we were asked to pick one item from a basket filled with random items and give a blessing to the group inspired by that item.

Each person spoke from the depths of their heart, sharing in their pain and giving hope for the future.

I shared how immensely proud I am of each one of them and that their efforts at home are enabling their husbands to fight this war. We are so grateful for their service and that Hashem should continue to give them strength. Because we know this is so difficult, this is why we came.

Suffice it to say, half way through the group, our leader announced that we would skip the pottery painting for now, and leave it for the teenagers, for a special evening event. Instead, we would continue with the giving of blessings to ensure everyone has a chance to speak.

What came next was a bit of a shock to our group.

One of the Yishuv women shared that she didn't realize that October 7th was significant for us too. She had no idea how deeply we in America felt for them.

We came all the way to Israel, during a war, leaving our husbands and children and taking off from work, to stand here with them and support them and shower them with love. She is so grateful. It gives her tremendous Koach, strength, to keep going.

We initially came for pottery painting. Instead we wove together the threads of a beautiful bond between women across an ocean filled with mutual love and respect.

We also visited the *miluim*, reservist, army wives living in Carmei Gat.

One woman I spoke with shared that it warms her heart and gives her tremendous strength, that I encouraged my children to stay in seminary and yeshiva despite the outbreak of the war.

I shared that there are many types of soldiers in this war. Her husband along with the over 300,000 other *miluim*, reservist, soldiers are fighting with weapons on the frontlines. We are praying for their safety and collecting merits on their behalf.

These brave and courageous wives are manning their home fronts and taking care of their families while keeping up the morale of their husbands.

This young woman is surely doing her part, and so I came here to stand with her and all of them.

Our own YIS family soldiers' wives and mothers shared how the outreach and support from family, friends and our community as well as the care packages are so strengthening for them.

They also shared how the unknown and the last minute changes are very hard.

They never know when their husband/son will have off or if he will have to return to the base unexpectedly earlier than planned.

The tumult of having to drop everything they are doing and drive out to the base to drop them off or pick them up at a moment's notice is very challenging.

When they are reunited, it is wonderful. When they drop them off at the base, it is scary and leaves them fumbling to gain a grasp on their reality for the rest of the day.

When we visited a seriously injured soldier, in the Assuta hospital in Ashdod, I presented to his mother a gift from all of us expressing our *chibuk v'chizuk*, a hug and strength. She was so grateful for our love and support, and so appreciative of our visit.

We met so many wives and mothers during our visits.

And then we met with Dr. Debra West, Head of the Emergency Room at Assuta Hospital in Ashdod.

What was unique about her was that she felt that motherhood was part of her professional mission.

She described how she would wipe the soot off the faces of the young soldiers when they arrived via helicopter, offer them a drink of water, doing what a mother would do for their son.

Sometimes, she said, she had to step back because her compassion overcame her. The pain and suffering she had to witness inhibited her ability to properly care for the injured soldiers, for she knew in her heart that these soldiers were also someone's son.

Finally, she noted the unique joy that she felt each time during those first few days when a helicopter with injured soldiers continued its flight overhead.

If the helicopter flew on, not stopping at their hospital, it was an indication that the soldiers were not so critically injured and that the extra eight minutes of flight to the next hospital would not endanger their lives.

They would all breathe a collective sigh of relief.

She shared that October 7th has been compared to the Holocaust and we are witnessing the tremendous loss of sons and daughters.

She concluded that there is no getting over the loss of the Holocaust or the loss of a child. It is not something that one moves on from. Rather, it is something that one has to learn how to move forward with, as the pain never truly subsides and it leaves an indelible mark on one's soul.

We met many *giborot*, strong women, throughout the week.

We were inspired with words of chizuk, strength, from Jen Airley, mother of Binyamin and Idit Eliyahu, mother of Ariel, two bereaved mothers. Jen had just gotten up from shiva and Idit, lost her son on the first day of battle.

Jen shared a little bit about her son, Binyamin.

He created cell-free zones at his school and in their home to encourage more connection among friends and family members. Their family crafted a sign in their family room that read Cell-Free Zone and placed it at the entrance to the room.

Once they rented out their apartment to a family for the summer.

At the end of the summer, the family shared with them that they also observed the cell free zone policy in the family room.

One of her son's mottos was, "what is hard we'll do today, what is impossible we'll do tomorrow."

She shared his endless love for Am Yisrael and Eretz Yisrael, and his desire to fight for the land.

She then showed us a large binder with hundreds of entries of people taking on a chesed in Binyamin's memory, and told of the many Google docs filled with merits for Binyamin.

She is so comforted by the outpouring of love and support from Am Yisrael for her son and her family during this difficult time.

Idit shared her son's love of learning Torah and how he finished all of Tanach many times and made a Siyum on Shas.

He loved to help out with the children and was involved with youth groups.

She was so grateful to us for coming and showing our support for her and her family. It is strengthening and meaningful to her.

Both women displayed resilience and faith in their ability to move forward, as they introduced us to their sweet and strong sons whose characters and personalities would always live on in their hearts and the hearts of their families.

Our group was honored with the visits of two prominent Rabbanim known in Israel and throughout the Jewish world, Rav Yosef Tzvi Rimon, the Soldier's Rebbe, and Rabbi Doron Perez, the Head of World Mizrachi.

Rav Rimon poetically expressed that we are writing the next chapter in Tanach. Our soldiers' holy efforts on the battlefield alongside the halachic questions they ask, portray how they too recognized the holiness of their mission.

He spoke about the request of one soldier in particular, to leave the battlefield to travel home on Shabbos for his son's bris.

Rav Rimon, gave the soldier a scenario within the parameters of *halachah* which would enable him to leave the battlefield and travel on Shabbos.

He said that he could not leave if there was familial pressure or guilt on his part. Rather he could only come home for the bris if he needed an emotional break from the war in order to re-energize before returning to the base to continue fighting from a place of strength.

The soldier listened to Rav Rimon's response and then said he would think about it. He called Rav Rimon back the next day and said he decided to stay on the base. He really only wanted to be home for the bris but really didn't need to re-energize from the strains of battle.

Rav Rimon, promptly asked the soldier for his wife's phone number. Rav Rimon personally called her and spoke to her and their children in order to give them words of *chizuk*, strength, and praise for their father and husband's safeguarding the holy Torah and keeping all of the *halachos* while fighting this holy battle for Am Yisrael on their behalf.

Mi k'amcha Yisrael, who is like Your nation Yisrael.

Rabbi Doron Perez shared his own personal struggle of balancing *simchah*, happiness and sorrow. He had two sons fighting on the frontlines.

One was injured early on in the war and was then married a few weeks later, all while his other son was taken captive during the intense fighting, Daniel Shimon Ben Sharon.

He said that he used to think that the words of Kohelet meant that sometimes there is war and hardship and other times there is peace and happiness.

What he has come to learn through a very challenging lesson, is that life is complex and we live with both at the same time.

Although we can't understand the reason and purpose for the pain and suffering we experience, really in Hashem's world, everything is okay.

He tasked us to daven to Hashem to allow us to see the world through Hashem's eyes, in His world, where everything is okay.

Rabbi Perez concluded that in our reality, we can't fix the situation, but our coming to Israel on this mission shoulders some of their burden and lightens the load of the women.

Standing with them, listening to their stories, sometimes not saying a word and just hugging them, gives them such strength.

When we went to Chevron, we met with Mr. Eliyahu Libman, the mayor of Kiryat Arba, and the father of a captive soldier, Elyakim Shlomo Ben Avishag.

He shared proudly how his son fought bravely for hours rescuing many women and then unfortunately fell into captivity.

He remains strong and prays for his safety and quick return.

His wife was unable to join us. Seeing all of us come from America to be here with them is so strengthening and he will share our message of love and support with her.

He then shared an insight with us on Parshas Vayishlach.

Yaakov's name was changed to Yisrael after fighting and prevailing over the *malach*, the angel.

Interestingly, he noted that when Avram and Sarai's names were changed to Avraham and Sarah, they never again reverted back to their original names.

Yaakov is unique in that his name continuously changes back and forth depending on the situation.

The commentaries explain that whenever it is a personal challenge, he is called Yaakov. When it refers to our collective national future or a national challenge, he is called Yisrael.

Right now, Mr. Libman said, we as a people are facing a Yisrael moment in history.

We are called upon as a nation to come together to fight for Am Yisrael and Eretz Yisrael and to support one another during this most difficult time.

The next morning we had the opportunity to volunteer at Eretz Chemdah through Thank You IDF. We packed boxes of supplies for bases that were specifically requested, as well as special packages for the soldiers we would soon be visiting.

We packed our bags onto the bus and traveled south to the Reim Army Base. It is located on the Israeli side of the Gaza border and was hit terribly during the October 7th battle.

We met with a large group of *chayalot*, 18 year old women soldiers, to prepare challah dough and perform the mitzvah of *hafrashas challah*.

As they added each ingredient, Rebbetzin Dr. Shmidman shared the blessings to pray for.

As their commander was about to perform the *bracha*, the blessing, one of the *chayalot*, women soldiers, requested that among the prayers for their safety, they should also daven for their Shidduchim, marriage matches!

We of course happily complied and prayed not only for their safety and all of the soldiers, wounded and captives, but also for their future husbands!

Seeing their hope in their hearts for their near futures gave us hope for the future of all of Am Yisrael.

Rebbetzin Dr. Shmidman then began to play on her guitar the song, *Gesher Tzar Me'od*. As we sang out loud *v'ha'ikar, lo l'fached klal*, 'the important thing is to have no fear,' with these brave young women who have experienced such trauma and pain these last two months, the emotions in the room were running high.

With the singing reaching a crescendo, we all began to dance around the room. There was such a feeling of renewed *koach*, strength.

We then settled down to the business of challah braiding. A few of us went around teaching the soldiers how to braid different types of challah.

When we finished, we joined the women and men soldiers, for a BBQ lunch all together, that our community helped sponsor.

We had the opportunity to meet with the soldiers and hear more about themselves.

The women soldiers are all on active duty and stay on base for two weeks at a time.

One soldier shared with me that he hopes to become a Rabbi. The woman soldier standing next to him, shared that it is because of his inspiration that she is now keeping Shabbat.

Mi k'amcha Yisrael, who is like Your nation Yisrael.

At every location we traveled to, we had the opportunity to share the letters our community wrote for the people of Israel and the soldiers.

These letters are so meaningful for them and give them much strength. They testify to our love and care for them. They are so appreciated.

On our way out of the army base, we stopped for a restroom break.

One of the soldiers directed us to the shared facilities repeating over and over, women to the right, men to the left. When we came in for a closer inspection we were confused.

I turned to the soldier directing us and stated while waving my hands, "this is the right and this is the left."

"Oh!" he cried out, "So sorry! Women to the left and men to the right!"

We all had a good laugh.

Before we went inside, one of the women soldiers quickly handed us a roll of toilet paper, sharing that there is never toilet paper in the stalls.

Our group of activists wasted no time! “Do you need toilet paper? We will have cases transported to you!”

“Oh no!” said the woman soldier quickly! “We have plenty of toilet paper! I have a full case in my barrack! There’s just never enough in the restroom, they can’t keep up with the demand!”

We all had a good chuckle, and were relieved that she had all of the necessities she needed.

We noticed at the challah bake, that the women soldiers had beautifully decorated nails and makeup.

We tactfully inquired about their beautiful nails. How do they keep them looking so good?

They shared with us that someone comes to the base and makes their nails for them to keep their spirits up.

Mi k’amcha Yisrael, who is like Your nation Yisrael.

This mission has transformed my world view. We can feel connected to Eretz Yisrael in many ways.

These last few days we learned up close and personal, the individual stories of our people.

That evening in Chevron, I thought a lot about what Mr. Libman shared with us.

Me’aras HaMachpela has always had strong importance and meaning for me.

When I was in seminary, I used to go every Rosh Chodesh on Motzai Shabbos on the bus from Har Nof with my cousin to Daven there. Whenever I am in Israel since then, I always make it a point to get to Me’aras HaMachpela to Daven.

I wasn’t expecting to be able to go to Me’aras HaMachpela on this trip, although I requested it.

We were fortunate enough to meet with Mr. Libman and then daven Maariv at Me’aras HaMachpela.

Whenever I would normally daven there, I would focus my *tefillos* on myself, my husband, our children, family, friends and community members in need of *yeshuos*, help, *refuos*, healing and *nechama*, comfort.

As I sat at the entrance to the burial sites of our foremothers and forefathers, Sarah, Avraham, Yaakov and Leah, I declared that this time I have come to daven as a Yisrael, and not just as a Yaakov.

I see the personal stories and have a whole new connection to Am Yisrael.

Our nation is in desperate need of *yeshuos*, help, *refuos*, healing and *nechama*, comfort.

There is a lot of strength in our people as we have seen throughout the country. They are strong like rocks. But there are also a lot who are struggling.

A wise and strong woman in our community who has seen lots of celebrations and unfortunately, much sorrow in her lifetime, once shared with me that even rocks cry, they just cry in private.

There is much to do and much to daven for.

Our community has come together to support our brothers and sisters in Eretz Yisrael with much needed supplies, resources, prayer and sentiments of love over these last two months since the war started.

I am so grateful to our community and the OU WI to have had the honor to represent our community and show our support in person.

And now we must continue.

We must double our efforts.

We will stay in touch with the displaced families and continue to ascertain their needs and how we can help.

We will continue to outreach to the families of soldiers and send WhatsApp messages of support and love, and letters to the soldiers as we now know this really boosts their morale.

If anyone is able, there are missions constantly going to Israel now with a wide variety of agendas to help the people of Israel. Please consider joining a mission.

I have seen first hand what it means to the people of Israel that we show up and stand up to support them.

There is so much that we can be doing.

It does not have to be grand acts of kindness but the simple act of showing up and demonstrating that we are present. Reach out with letters of support, send WhatsApp messages and continue to be a witness to their stories.

Together with G-d's strength and help, our soldiers on the frontline, the homefront and those of us overseas, we will prevail.

Am Yisrael Chai.