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My Dear Friends,

Last week I joined the brave IDF soldiers in Gaza. Riding across the border was one of the most terrifying moments of my life: full military gear, armed escorts, machine guns drawn, bullets in the chambers. I witnessed the daily risks our soldiers take in defending the Jewish homeland. We passed the border fence that the terrorists broke through on October 7, the pockmarked houses and rubble of villages, and we came to the outskirts of the area where the IDF was actively operating. I was amazed by the professionalism, speed and dedication of the soldiers. During the visit, Hamas attacked a patrol nearby, and ten minutes later, the military ambulance that extracted two wounded soldiers pulled up in front of my jeep. As we prayed for the soldiers' wellbeing, a helicopter was called in and in just a few minutes the wounded were medevaced to the nearest hospital and have since fully recovered.



Amazing to see the efficiency and expertise of our soldiers in Gaza.

I came to Gaza [with our rosh yeshiva, Rabbi Meir Goldvicht](#), in coordination with the IDF to express to our soldiers the global support for their safety and their mission. I told the soldiers that Jews and people of moral conscience from all around the world are praying for them, [and I shared with them the thought that they are serving as God's messengers in this battle against Hamas](#), which is a battle for humanity against evil.

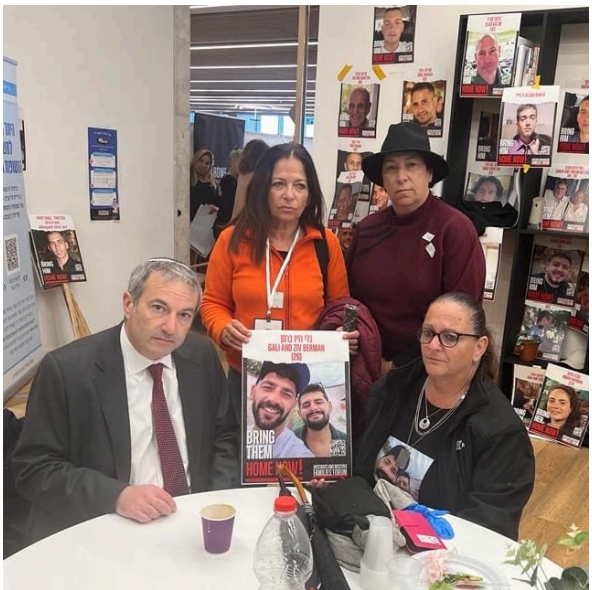
The soldiers were very aware of the grave danger they faced, but their morale was sky high. They embraced their mission to defend Israel in this existential battle. They gave me a tour of the terrain to better understand the battle zone, took me into their tanks to show me how they lived, and expressed to me their appreciation for the global Jewish community, which had donated so much of their high-quality military gear. I ended our visit to Gaza by singing “Am Yisrael Chai” with the soldiers in the very villages from which the terrorists attacked Israel. It was a stirring example of the enduring message of the song: Am Yisrael Chai, the people of Israel live, now and forever.



Singing Am Yisrael Chai with our soldiers in Gaza

As inspired as I was to be in Israel last week, I was also profoundly pained by the deep sense of loss and tension that gripped the country. Each soldier that falls in battle is a national tragedy, but recent losses hit close to home. I made aliyah 17 years ago, and the community in which I live when I am in Israel, Neve Daniel, suffered a brutal blow when one of its sons, Ephraim Jackman, was lost in combat. Most of my neighbors there have sons who are currently in Gaza, and while the heroism of their children is certainly a mark of deep pride, the uncertainty of their fate is frightening. A number of our YU families who made aliyah have tragically had to sit shiva for their sons who were lost in combat, and my time in Israel included attending a funeral and a shiva and making visits to bereaved families.

I also met with the families of hostages (below left). Gali and Ziv Berman are 26-year-old twins from the small kibbutz of Kfar Aza. When Hamas attacked, their mother, Talia, urged them to come into the safe room in their house, but instead they went out to protect their neighbors from the terrorists. Talia told me she emerged from the safe room to find that her two boys had been taken captive.



Yocheved Lifshitz, 85 (above right), was captured by Hamas and released last month. She told me her story. On the morning of October 7, she was taken by the terrorists, beaten along the way to Gaza, and brought into the Hamas tunnels. She will not rest, she said, until all of the hostages have returned home, including her husband, Oded, 83, who is still in captivity.

I have never experienced Israel in such a state. As someone deeply rooted in both Israel and America, I have never felt such a gap in our contemporary Jewish experiences. While the current crisis is felt by all Jews across the globe, and the threat of antisemitism is real throughout the world, the sacrifices demanded from the families in Israel are extraordinary and ongoing.

Returning back to America, one burning question continued to return to my mind: are we worthy of their sacrifices? Do our life choices honor their commitment?

With Israel engaged in a war lasting over 100 days with no clear end in sight, we need to stand vigilant in our support in all ways. While it is natural for the sense of urgency that gripped the American Jewish community in the first phase of the war to have passed, as long as our brothers and sisters in Israel have not returned to their normal lives, we cannot return to ours. When Klal Yisrael is in pain, we are all in pain. When Israel is at war, we are all called to service.

I had not returned to Israel since I was in Jerusalem on October 7. On that fateful day, my son Yehuda was called up as a reservist and has been serving in his combat unit throughout the war. I was blessed that during my visit Yehuda had a day off from the army. Seeing and hugging him for the first time since the attacks was an experience I will never forget.



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With all of the uncertainty of war, experiencing the incredible character and dedication of our soldiers in Gaza inspired in me great confidence in Israel's future. One soldier told me that he never previously felt the global hug of the united Jewish community like he does today. Hashem has a plan. We have the opportunity to write ourselves into it by continuing to fiercely support and hug our family in Israel.

Together we will rise; together we will win; Am Yisrael Chai.

My warmest wishes,

Rabbi Dr. Ari Berman
President, Yeshiva University



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