

Solidarity with Israel from New Hampshire [or How I Spent My Summer Vacation]

By Davida Harris

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On the 4th of July I engaged in the age-old American tradition of having an icy cold beer, no big deal, right? Perhaps the only interesting aspect about this particular scenario is that I was enjoying my beer while sitting at the bar Mike's Place in Tel Aviv. Mike's Place, if you remember, was struck by a homicide bombing on April 29th of this year, which resulted in the deaths of 3 innocent victims and the wounding of at least 50 others.

My American friends and I (along with my 15-year-old daughter, Shauna) decided to go to



Shauna and Davida standing in front of the "Solidarity with Israel wall" painted by the volunteers last summer.

Mike's Place in a show of solidarity for our friends and

family in Israel. Our group, all participants in the "Volunteers for Israel" program (known as Sar-El in Israel) celebrated at "Mike's Place" by drinking beer and snacking on burgers and fries, knowing full well that Hamas and that ilk would love nothing more than to enact their hatred on not only Jews, but American Jews. Equipped with this knowledge, we still decided that it was of paramount importance to be there. For us, no one, no how no way, was going to dictate how we conduct our lives.

This is the mentality of many of the volunteers, which drives us to go to Israel in the first place amidst the warnings and pleadings from our friends and families. And it seems that none of us can articulate well enough our dire reasoning of why we MUST go to Israel – at least none of us has ever come up with an explanation that seems to satisfy and fully explain our sense of purpose.

Nevertheless, we all know why we go, and realize that words alone cannot fully describe our aspirations.

Basically it is a mixture that can be religious and/or political, along with the deep-seated need to not turn our

backs on Israel when Israel needs us most...in addition to having maybe a dash of renegade insanity. Most of the volunteers feel why should only Israelis be suffering the brunt of this terrorist horror? And like most of the volunteers, my daughter and I would much rather be showing support at Mike's Place inside Israel than comfortably sitting on the sidelines in my lovely New Hampshire home while watching TV coverage of the latest bus bombing atrocities.

I made a pledge to myself two years ago, which is why we have traveled to Israel as volunteers three times within the last year. I made the pledge because an Israeli woman asked our whole group of American tourists in Israel, during the summer of 2001 (we were there for Shauna's Bat

Mitzvah), where we were during the Gulf war. At first we didn't comprehend the meaning behind the question, but what she was really asking was, just how comfortable were we in the USA watching as the news showed scud missiles landing in Tel Aviv. At that moment, I swore to myself that I never wanted to be in the position of shrugging my shoulders to that kind of question again. This is why my family has become participants in the "Volunteers for Israel" program, and we hope to return again in December.

Living on an army base with the volunteer program is akin to what I like to call "Summer Camp for Old People," even though the age ranges of volunteers is typically between 15 and 90. Volunteers come from all over the world and are of every nationality, socio-economic background, profession, religion and belief system. As such, evening conversations can be quite lively and informative, and of course argumentative...it's thrilling and educational to compare and contrast opinions of current world events between a Christian Zionist from the Netherlands, an American Catholic journalist, a Jewish Australian holocaust survivor, and a secular Mexican teenager. While we all may view the current situation from different angles, we all agree that Israel has the right to defend her population, and our being there emphasizes our beliefs.

One of the volunteers, an 87-year-old woman from New Jersey, with tears in her eyes, clutched my hand one morning as she explained her reason for her 18th time volunteering: "Because on November 24th, 1942, in the New York Times, on the front page, bottom right-hand corner under the fold, it said that Jews were being carted off to Nazi death camps in cattle cars. And, no one did anything to stop it."

On base, we wear army uniforms and work doing whatever jobs need to be done. Our group was on a medical supply base outside of Tel Aviv where most of us were involved in the packing and shipping and labeling of medical supplies or refurbishment of medical equipment. We work with IDF soldiers and Israeli civilian workers. Strong bonds are forged and often times our "boss" or other co-workers took Shauna and I home to their families where we were treated to delicious dinners and terrific conversations. Young soldiers and reservists that lived off base would come in to work each morning and ask us how we were and if we needed anything in particular as their mothers' wanted to make sure that we were comfortable and well taken care of. We were showered with food and small gifts from people we hadn't ever met. A group of senior Israeli women also worked at the base that we were on and would bring in platters of mouth-watering baked goods for the volunteers several times a week.



Roommates/volunteers. From Left to right: Celeste (St. Louis) / Myra (NJ), Davida (NH), Shauna (NH)

The bunk that Shauna and I slept in held seven women. It was small but clean and efficient and thank G-d had air conditioning. Many nights we would stay up very late talking, laughing, and playing practical jokes on each other. One night I actually thought my teenage daughter was going to "ground" me as three of us middle-aged women stayed up the entire night collapsing into fits of giggles every time we tried to settle down and go to sleep. Another night, two women from the room

next store "escaped" to our room after hearing so much laughing and merriment through the walls, and came over to join us, increasing our already somewhat cramped population to nine. One evening another volunteer and I even played spy games, creeping behind shrubs and buildings as we stalked our madrichot (the women IDF soldiers/group leaders of the volunteers) as they tried to sneak off to the luxurious officers' showers. When the madrichot got into the showers, the other volunteer and I ran over to the door, knocked very loudly, ran screaming away into the night and hid. It was like being nine years old again.

The "Volunteers for Israel" program coordinates interesting events for the volunteers to participate in. For instance, one night the author, Zipporah Porath, author of the book "Letters from Jerusalem, 1947-1948" spoke to our group. Zipporah, or Tzippy as she is known, relayed the events surrounding her time in Jerusalem during 1947-48 as a college student and Hagannah member. As a journalist, she had written eloquent letters to her parents in New York explaining her day-to-day activities during this time in Jerusalem. After her parents' death, she found all of her letters saved in their attic and realized that she had an awesome slice of history worth sharing.



Women volunteers taking a break before the daily flag-raising ceremony. From left to right: Arja from Finland, Myra from NJ, Celeste from St. Louis, Shauna from NH, Davida from NH, Myrtle from NJ, Deborah from The Netherlands, Anne from The Netherlands, Debbie from NY, Mindy from NJ.

Yet another night, the volunteers were treated to a "read-through" of an upcoming play production in Israel entitled Matsav (which refers to the current situation Israelis find themselves living in during this second Intifada). The producer and playwright were eager to "perform" this work in progress for us to thank us for being in Israel and to also get the opinions from the English-speaking volunteers

from North America since they plan on bringing the play over here. The play was a gut-wrenching story which contrasted the lives between an assimilated American Jewish doctor who half-heartedly meets a distant Israeli cousin for the first time, all while a homicide bombing takes place in Israel.

This six week experience was unlike the other times we spent as volunteers, in that no major suicide bombings occurred in Israel, not like last summer's Hebrew University bombing and Tsfat bus bombing and this winter's bombing at Tel Aviv's old Central Bus Station. However, each morning IDF soldiers would give us news reports of mortar shellings from Lebanon, kidnappings, stabbings, sabotage and several IDF thwarted terrorist attempts.

The so-called ceasefire allowed us to see an Israel we had not seen before. Israelis seemed calmer and more hopeful than during our prior trips, and they were out and about in great numbers. There was a massive two-day rock concert on the beaches of Tel Aviv where we saw thousands of young Israelis (mostly Jewish, but some Arab) dancing, singing, and partying, just kids being kids. Shabbat evenings along Tel Aviv's famed Tayelet were filled with throngs of people strolling amongst street magicians, palm readers, masseuses, musicians, henna tattoo artists, portrait and caricature artists, booths selling CDs and jewelry, and tables for betting on three card Monty. The streets seemed to vibrate with liveliness. Ben Yehuda Street in Jerusalem was positively mobbed with Israelis shopping along with a handful of tourists and of course several of the volunteers. It was so nice seeing the Israeli population outside and enjoying themselves. Although skeptical of the cease-fire, Israelis took advantage of the relative quiet while they could, all the while anticipating that it wouldn't last.



Shauna getting her "volunteer stripes" from Madrichot (IDF soldiers/group leaders of the volunteers) Avigail and Olga.

Since I have returned from Israel, my phone has not stopped ringing. I have heard from dozens of volunteers all, who are depressed at having left the program to return home, or are getting ready to leave Israel and are despondent at the upcoming prospect. I'm also getting other phone calls too, from well meaning friends who call to tell me that they are so glad that I have returned safely from Israel, and aren't I glad that I am not there right now, considering the renewed escalation of terrorist violence. And they just never seem to understand when I answer, no...I would give

anything to still be there.

Davida writes: "I am a 44-year-old Zionist, wife and mother who is currently enrolled at UNH getting a degree in microbiology, a career change after spending almost 20 years in the graphics arts/photography/printing/publishing industry. I share my New Hampshire home with my wonderful husband Bob, my beautiful, highly intelligent, 15-year-old daughter, Shauna (do I sound like a Jewish mother or what?), 2 German Shepherds, 1 Chocolate Lab-Akita mix, and a cat. We are members of Temple Emanu-El in Haverhill."

For more information on volunteering in Israel, contact the national or local office of **Volunteers for Israel** or visit the web site at <http://www.vfi-usa.org>.

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