

Israelis Finding Ways to Smile in the Middle of a Horrific War

I'm still processing all the incredible things that happened this week.

Thanks to my good friend David Nekrutman of the Isaiah Projects, who spearheaded an incredible initiative to relocate and care for the needs of scores of people evacuated from the Gaza area, and my good friend, Jeffrey Mark, owner of J. Mark Interiors, who made magic happen, we were able to give dozens of beautiful people a night they'll never forget.

Arts and crafts and movies for the kids. Pizza and popcorn. Felafel and cotton candy. Singing and smiles. Volunteers stepped up in a way that still astounds me including all of Mark's staff, family and friends; Ruth and Francis, Christian friends I had only met only yesterday on a webinar briefing I hosted at 4:00 a.m. and who happened to be visiting; and my own children. Everyone wanted to do something to help.

All this was possible because of the thousands of generous donations from Christians and Jews all over the world. Each one, from as little as \$1, made all this possible, as well as so much more that's planned and needed. I'm just privileged on behalf of the Genesis 123 Foundation to be entrusted with these donations and to be able to make it all possible.

Under normal circumstances, images of happy, smiling kids are, well, normal. It's what we as parents expect and strive for. But for the kids we've been able to help this week, simple activities such as playing outside, watching movies, doing arts and crafts, and feasting on pizza and junk food are far from the norm. For the first 10 days of the war, living six miles from the Gaza border, they didn't leave their houses

because they only had 15 seconds to seek cover each of the hundreds of times rockets were fired. Daily. Last night, these precious, beautiful children had no worries.

It's impossible to share how much this was not just good but essential for the parents as well. It was a critical respite for them in which they too were able to breathe. Seeing their children happy and cared for, engaged and not afraid was more than enough. It's impossible to share here how much they all, each one, articulated how grateful they were, often with tears in their eyes. The idea of Jews and Christians standing together to make this happen blew them away, especially considering that many had never had even met a Christian before. Until they met Ruth and Francis.

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For us, Jewish Israeli adults, the experience was a much-needed respite as well. Nekrutman, Mark and I, who moved to Israel too old to serve in the Israel Defense Forces but whose children have served and are serving now, all left inspired. Hopeful. Grateful. Grateful that we each had the ability to step up and partner like this, coalescing family and friends and generous donors from all over the world to make this possible.

For a few hours, while we do not live under the threat of hundreds of rockets a day as our new friends the evacuees have, we did not have to be obsessed with the horrors of the news of continued death count and atrocities that took place against our people, our neighbors, less than two weeks ago. For just a few hours, like our new friends, we were able to live in the moment of warmth, happiness and the ability to give to others. For that, each of us will be grateful forever and grateful to everyone who donated so generously to make this happen.

But there are many, many, many additional needs. Despite their smiles, the children have experienced unspeakable trauma and will need months, if not years of counseling. We have been privileged and grateful to have raised enough money to pay for their hotel next week, one more week of an opportunity to breathe safely without living and sleeping in fear. Actually, what we heard was that they weren't even sleeping as they anticipated the rockets all night.

But the hotels only provide breakfast, and so lunch and dinner are on us. Yesterday I received a call from an American organization here on the ground that wants to help with meals. On the way home with my two daughters, touched and moved by all the amazing kindness that we were able to be part of, we planned a barbecue for next week and will receive donations to make that happen, not just to stretch the financial donations that we've already received as far as we can but to give as many people the opportunity to participate in this tremendous, and tremendously necessary, act of kindness.

We are appealing to everybody, Jews, Christians, friends, family and complete strangers everywhere in the world to join us with their most generous support, because the needs will be great for a long time, and we want to be there and with them as much and as long as possible.

All of this has taken place in the context of an unprecedented and unspeakable war where thousands of our civilians have been butchered, violated, gravely injured and kidnapped in the most horrific ways. It's a war that we must win, and it's a war that we will win. It's a war that will have many more losses and much more grief. It will likely get worse, much worse, before it gets better. But we're praying that it gets better and then our new friends will be able to return home soon.

At one point, two young men arrived with guitars, just wanting to sing and make people happy, breaking out in a song in which everybody joined. It's a song of peace, a song in Hebrew and

in Arabic. It was surreal listening to people who days earlier had been living in fear and stress, who had witnessed horrors and only by the grace of God were spared, now, in a safe place, singing that “soon there will be peace for us.” Incredible. Unimaginable. Moving. Inspiring. Hopeful.

Today I will go to the hotel and have the privilege of swiping my credit card to pay for the entire week’s stay for dozens of evacuees for all of next week. When I told the adults last night that we were covering their next week, they smiled, they held their hands to their heart, they wept, and they could not stop thanking me. {eoa}

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Jonathan Feldstein was born and educated in the United States and immigrated to Israel in 2004. He is married and the father of six. Throughout his life and career, he has become a respected bridge between Jews and Christians and serves as president of the Genesis 123 Foundation. He writes regularly on major Christian websites about Israel and shares experiences of living as an Orthodox Jew in Israel, and hosts the popular “Inspiration from Zion” podcast. On behalf of the Genesis 123 Foundation, the Israel Emergency Campaign gives a vehicle for millions of Christians around the world the opportunity to do so virtually as well.