**Conscripted by and to Life**

Yael Bendat-Appell, VP Jewish Education and Engagement, UJA Federation of Greater Toronto

Visiting Israel during a time of active war meant that we were confronted with a society that was not only experiencing ongoing collective and individual trauma, but was functioning in a distorted reality. In great part, this was due to the absence of large numbers of people, mostly men, now conscripted to battle– and, relatedly, due to gaping holes in crucial societal infrastructure. Our visit focused on many of the country’s responses to these realities.

In an effort to boil down the rich and complex experience of our trip to a few key takeaways, here are three themes that emerged.

1. **Israeli Civil Empowerment and Agency:** In their dogged determination to live life, to not be defined by tragedy, and to continue into the future-- **Israelis** **have an high sense of empowerment and agency.** We met and heard from countless individuals who, despite navigating their own trauma, were crystal clear in their ability to see the needs of the people around them and to respond accordingly. Not one of them waited for an invitation from a government official or ministry representative to take action; they mustered their own strength and skills to fill the gaps they saw all around them. We heard from young educators in Jerusalem creating entire schools for displaced children, and from seasoned educators in Ofakim immediately turning their schools into food distribution centers and into places for children to gather in the aftermath of their town’s personal trauma. We saw educators committed to ensuring that displaced children and parents have the tools to protect themselves and their children from potential dangers like sexual abuse while they live in hotels. And, we learned about the mothers of Jerusalem neighbourhoods who, in addition to doing their own day’s work and caring for their own families, do the laundry of the displaced people in their city’s hotels. Regular citizens feel a deep sense of responsibility and *agency* in stepping up to influence the trajectory of their communities.
2. **Israeli Thriving:** Beyond the Israeli determination not to be defined by the massacre of 10/7; **Israelis are committed not just to *live*, but to thrive**. In addition to the commitment to strengthen civil infrastructures in the ways described above, the country’s documentation and memorialization of October 7th is seen through numerous public art installations, the use of music and prayer, and by cultural institutions like museums and libraries redesigning entire curricula to ensure that they are responsibly adapting to the new reality. The herculean volunteer efforts and infrastructure to return the hostages can be seen all over the country, but nowhere more than a Tel Aviv high tech company’s offices where the Missing Families Forum was abuzz with activity and determination as it mobilizes every resource possible to achieve their single goal: to Bring Them Home Now. Even Sarit Zussman, the mother of fallen soldier Ben Zussman z’l‘s main message to us was how essential it is that the nation’s children’s sense of hope be restored-- that children must once again believe in good endings to stories. This is not a country that is wallowing in (what would be appropriate) despair; this is a country that faces its future through a lens of thriving, contributing, creating, and unrelinquished-hope.
3. **Israeli women were often the central players rewriting this stage of the country’s history**. The women we encountered were working fiercely on behalf of Israeli society and its children. Inhabiting their own forms of leadership in numerous areas --education, advocacy, activism, culture, politics, and family life-- it is clear that while many men are conscripted into literal battle; the women heroes of Israel are conscripted in countless ways to ensure life and the future. Their leadership was breathtaking.

What are the implications of this visit and lessons learned for global educators?

* We must double down on showcasing the humanity of Israelis, especially in response to the tremendous forces actively working to dehumanize them
* Mifgash is essential, now more than ever
* Empower our own communities; both our leaders and educators to respond to, and meet, the changing needs of our time at Jews and Zionists, but also our students and lay people to develop a sense of responsibility and agency to contribute and co-create
* Challenge ourselves as educators to *feel* conscripted by and for Am Yisrael and to explicitly reprioritize the framework of Jewish peoplehood