

Israeli communities devastated on Oct. 7 draw thousands seeking to bear witness, support victims

Visits play key role in fundraising efforts to support Israelis and in showing solidarity

By Tamara Zieve March 12, 2024



A macabre type of tourism has defined the trips of many visitors to Israel since Oct. 7. While some struggle with the concept of visiting the sites of the Hamas massacres, wary of invading the privacy of the victims, especially when the grief is still so raw, the act of bearing witness, showing solidarity and support and fundraising are among the key reasons why thousands of people have visited the affected Gaza border communities since security restrictions were lifted for civilians who wish to travel to the area.

Since Oct. 7, the Jewish Federations of North America and the individual federations have run at least 60 solidarity missions to Israel, bringing some 1,000 community leaders on brief visits, usually lasting about 48 hours, to show their support for the country and to bear witness to the atrocities committed during the massive Hamas terror attacks.

A JFNA spokesperson told *Jewish Insider* that these trips are part of the reason that the umbrella organization has managed to raise over \$783 million in emergency fund allocations for Israel, \$360 million of which has been allocated to supporting the affected communities, helping provide food, housing, mental health services and special needs. The money also goes toward supporting the Jewish Agency's fund for victims of terrorism, as well as funding rebuilding plans and business loans.

"Those leaders are often significant donors... and also people whose job is to go back and tell their communities what they saw. So certainly people come and it inspires them to donate but also people go back home to their communities and they can say, 'I was in Be'eri, this is what it was like, this is the help that they need, this is where the money is going.' It makes such a difference for people to understand the specifics of it," the spokesperson explained.

Not all the solidarity missions have visited the massacre sites, especially in the immediate aftermath of the attack, both for security reasons and out of sensitivity to the devastated communities.

"Every single thing is coordinated with the communities, with residents of the communities, every tour," the spokesperson said. A community member is always with the tour group and instructs them on which houses are off-limits, which residents don't wish to talk with them, which areas are not to be photographed and which conversations cannot be recorded.

"And the groups are very receptive to it, but it's an ingrained part of the protocol," they added, noting that they had a similar situation in Ukraine where JFNA led missions after the war with Russia broke out.

Adele Raemer, a survivor of the Oct. 7 massacre and an evacuee of Kibbutz Nirim, where 11 people were killed and five kidnapped, grappled with the concept of "tragedy tourism." She ultimately decided that its importance outweighs any feelings of discomfort, and she has shown people around her own ravaged kibbutz as well as visiting neighboring communities.

In a [blog post](#) for *The Times of Israel*, Raemer wrote of her visit to Kfar Aza: “As we made our way through the surrounding devastation, I grappled with my own inner conflict. On the one hand, it was important and meaningful to me to go in order to bear witness to these sites. As a survivor, myself, of the massacre, I felt an obligation to learn more so as to be an even better witness. On the other hand, I felt somehow as if I was trespassing on holy land, in a community that needed respect and reverence, where so many people whom I knew personally were slaughtered. Was I performing a brave, responsible deed or was I desecrating these places once again in what might be conceived as being a sort of gruesome ‘tragedy tourism?’”

Referencing both South Africa’s genocide accusations against Israel at the International Court of Justice, as well as the Holocaust-denial-level response that some have adopted in response to Oct. 7, Raemer concluded: “It is for this reason that we CANNOT just sit silent.”

“It is for this reason that it is our duty to bear witness any way we can, to every inch of proof, any way we can, in every place we can, and write, blog, vlog about what we have seen and experienced with our own eyes. It is for this reason that, as hard as it was for me, I needed to go to the sites of these atrocities, back to the region where I live, and my home, to bear witness and share that with the world,” Raemer wrote.



Indeed, the JFNA spokesperson said that colleagues in Israel had shared “that

the people that have come express an immense amount of gratitude, to be in Israel, to be with Israelis and to be able to bear witness. But on the flip side, they say that every time they meet with Israelis, the Israelis have expressed an immense amount of gratitude and support. As you know, Israelis are feeling pretty isolated right now. So people come in the middle of war, to show up and bear witness and give their solidarity and bring the support of their community has been something that they've expressed over and over is really important and that they really take to heart."

New York Gov. Kathy Hochul is among the leaders who have visited Israel on the solidarity missions, just weeks after the Hamas attack.

Mark Medin, executive vice president of UJA-Federation of New York, has led many of the trips. "I think bearing witness and understanding the scope of what happened and having people be able to serve as ambassadors to tell the story, I think is an essential component of diaspora Jewish responsibility right now," he told JI. "There are two wars going on. There's a physical war that, nine million Israelis are in the middle of and hundreds of thousands of Israeli young boys and girls, young men and women are fighting on the frontlines every day, and it's an information war for the Jewish world that the diaspora Jewish community has to fight as well, in order to help support the physical war that's happening on the ground."

"This is not as not an Israel-only issue, this is an issue facing the Jewish world," he continued, pointing to an antisemitic attack that occurred the night before in his own town of Scarsdale — just outside New York City. "So, the rise of antisemitism, the need to support Israel, the sense of 'we're all in this together' I think is paramount."

"And in order for American Jews to fully understand and appreciate what happened on Oct. 7, the scope of the impact, the trauma that the country is feeling, the personal conflicts and mental health challenges that every Israeli is going through, I think you have to bear witness and, and understand that," Medin said.

“If you do, you’re able to be a much stronger advocate; back in in America, you’re able to talk to your family, to your professional colleagues, to your friends, to the media, to members of Congress to elected officials, with firsthand authenticity, about the barbarity of what happened on Oct. 7, about the struggle that the people of Israel are facing to bring the hostages home, about the struggle the people of Israel are facing in public safety and security, not only to the frontline communities, but to people that live in Modiin and Tel Aviv and Yerushalayim as well,” Medin continued, noting that this was also important for philanthropy to Israel.

Medin also noted that large numbers of delegations have been traveling to Israel to volunteer and support the hard-hit agricultural sector, by picking, packing, sorting and cooking produce.

“The sense of appreciation and solidarity that we feel from Israel is beyond profound,” Medin told JI. “The amounts of thanks that every Israeli that we meet with, every hostage family, every kibbutz survivor, every injured soldier, every bereaved mother, the sense of appreciation that they say for recognizing that they’re not alone at this time, that people care enough to put themselves in harm’s way to come into a war zone, to help volunteer, to bring solidarity, to bring support, is really, I think is a very important factor for the people of Israel. And I’ve just been stunned by the level of appreciation and the sense of gratitude that the Israelis have shown towards us in every meeting we’ve had.”

Yossi Hoffman, a ZAKA volunteer, together with other volunteers from the emergency response organization who were among the first responders to the Oct. 7 attack, has throughout the war been volunteering to support the soldiers, delivering equipment to them and providing them with barbecue dinners. The donations that had made these efforts possible began to dry up, so Hoffman and his colleagues put their heads together to think of a way to continue their morale-boosting efforts for the soldiers.

Hoffman subsequently began leading guided tours, predominantly for tourists, to Kibbutz Takuma, where cars burned on Oct. 7 are piled up; to the

Nova music festival site at Kibbutz Re'im, where terrorists murdered some 360 people and kidnapped about 40; to Kibbutz Nir Oz, where about a quarter of its members were killed or kidnapped; and finally to the Magen army base where the group cooks a barbecue for hundreds of soldiers. "There is no greater joy than knowing that soldiers who are now going into Gaza or coming out of Gaza, fighting for us, are enjoying, eating well and getting strength to go and fight," Hoffman said.

The tour costs 1,000 NIS per person (some \$ 277) and the money goes towards the barbecues, the bus and donations toward the rehabilitation of Kibbutz Nir Oz. Tourists from Australia, the U.S., South Africa, New Zealand and Europe have participated in his tours, Hoffman told JI.

But some Israelis also wish to bear witness. Lee Sefton, a British immigrant to Israel, joined one of Hoffman's tours together with a fellow British-Israeli friend.



Despite her apprehension about participating in the tour, she ultimately decided to go. "I felt it was important for as many people to see the devastation with their own eyes, to bear witness to the brutality that took place on Oct. 7 and to share it as widely as possible given the extent of the denial that I'd seen on social media," she said. "I also felt it was difficult to grasp the scale of the atrocities through the fragments you see on the news."

“It quickly becomes very clear, however, when you are confronted with what looks like a car junkyard, but is actually piles of hundreds of burnt-out cars stacked one on top of another scattered with bullet holes that had been removed from a road nearby; or after you’ve walked through a peacefully quiet kibbutz where half of the homes have been completely burnt out or destroyed and you hear the stories of how the people tried to escape or were killed by Gazans, who they believed to be their colleagues and friends; or when you’re standing at the site of a massacre at a music festival where you see rows and rows of wooden posts dug into the ground, each one topped with a photo of a beautiful young person that was there to dance and had either been slaughtered or kidnapped,” Sefton told JI. “Witnessing this brings it all into terrible clarity and it is overwhelming to process.”

At the site of the Nova Festival, Sefton met a soldier who had been at the party with 12 of his friends; all of them managed to escape. Within hours of reaching home, he was called up for reserve duty. “He was happy to share his experience of what happened on that fateful day, and I was blown away by his composure and how surprisingly upbeat and reassuringly positive he was,” Sefton said of the soldier, who was on temporary release from the army when she met him.

The barbecue at the end of the day, she said, was uplifting and heartwarming, and she was struck by the volume of gratitude the soldiers expressed for the group.

“I found it incredibly humbling to speak to these young men who seemed fearless at the prospect of returning to Gaza to fight,” Sefton reflected. “I wondered if they found the arriving tour buses to the base annoying or tiresome, but they were more than happy to share their experiences with us and were just as inquisitive to hear ours. They were so thankful to us for being there, which seemed so ridiculous. We had just come in to help for a day, we were the ones that were so grateful to them”

Sefton said she would urge anyone who has the opportunity to go on a tour of this kind to do so.

“Lots of what I witnessed on this tour will be etched in my mind forever, but my main takeaway from the day after everything that I’d seen and the people I’d spoken to is just how resilient this country and its people are and the hope they have for the future,” Sefton said.