

# 'No Place Better'

*Even though a war was being waged,  
the Jewish state gave these visitors much to savor.*

By Hillel Kuttler



GALI TIBBON/AFP/GETTY IMAGES

Last year, I wrote a piece for *Inside* about a child-friendly vacation in Israel with my sons: visiting historical sites, exploring ruins, and frolicking in national parks and natural pools.

Thirteen months later, we flew to Israel under far different circumstances. The country was being attacked, and I faced challenges: How could we have fun while Israel suffered? How best to help Israelis while not scaring off my 11- and 9-year-old boys?

Some colleagues, relatives and even friends in Israel advised me to cancel.

Anyone inquiring got this back: "Of course, we're going — and don't think otherwise."

Bailing on Israel? Inconceivable.

Yossi and Gil asked whether we would be at risk, and I assured them that, just as we avoid dangerous areas in America, so, too, we will in Israel — but that Israel remained inherently safe. They understood, and never

sought reassurance.

Sadly, the north's lush hills and valleys remained off-limits while Hezbollah-launched Katyusha rockets confined Israelis to bomb shelters and emptied roads and attractions. So much for our camping trip to Horshat Tal at the tip of the Galilee and a week's reservations at a ranch near Tzfat and at a kibbutz hotel along the Sea of Galilee.

Some wondered: Why go to Israel when you can't tour the Galilee or the Golan Heights?

Response: The Negev is not part of Israel? Spending extra time in Jerusalem and in the country's center is some sort of booby prize?

We went. We visited friends. We reveled in the four Shabbatot we were blessed to spend in Israel. We inspected the scale model structures of Mini Israel, rode the waves at Ashkelon's Delilah Beach, saw the Qumran cave where the Dead Sea Scrolls were discovered — even played baseball at Sacher Park near the Knesset and football at the

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Israeli combat soldiers, shortly after crossing back into Israel from Lebanon

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adjacent stadium built by New England Patriots owner Robert Kraft.

The terror in northern Israel opened the door to discovering Beersheva, Sde Boker, Mitzpeh Ramon and other places in the Negev that I'd shunned for years. The sun there was strong, but the days dry. We guzzled gallons of Gatorade.

We had wanted to volunteer, anyway — all the more so with *Meevzah Bein HaMeitzarim* ("Operation Change of Direction") underway. Many young people would be coming south to avoid the dangers in the north and might need our assistance.

A few e-mails, phone calls and visits to Web sites revealed plenty of ways to help. Once in Israel, I discovered more opportunities by keeping my eyes and ears open.

We'd arranged months earlier to volunteer one morning at Schneider Children's Medical Center, in Petach Tikvah. In the play room, Yossi demonstrated to patients and their parents several card tricks he'd mastered. In the computer room, Gil helped some boys draw pictures on-screen and then helped them print them out.

The next day at 11 a.m., the radio newscaster announced that at 1:30 p.m. at Jerusalem's Mount Herzl Military Cemetery, the funeral would be held for St.-Sgt. Yonatan Einhorn, *zichrono l'vracha* ("may his memory be for a blessing"), killed the previous night in the southern Lebanese village of Aita al Shaab. (In that battle, his commanding officer, Lt. Ilan Gabbai, *z"l*, and Philadelphia-raised St.-Sgt. Michael Levine, *z"l*, also were killed.)

While air raid sirens didn't shriek and buildings weren't shelled near us, the fighting penetrated our consciences entirely. The radio reported every day of

soldiers and civilians killed and wounded, and of funeral times and sites. On an Old City shop door, shuttered for Tisha B'Av, a handwritten placard sought toys and attention for 70 children who had been evacuated to Jerusalem. We watched a supermarket chain's TV commercials urging shoppers to purchase 75- and 150-shekel baskets of food and supplies for residents in bomb shelters, with the stores' forgoing even an agora in profit. Whether with soldiers at checkpoints or people at the beach, even casual encounters began with comments on the crisis. Yossi and Gil picked up on all of that, and we openly discussed Israel's losses.

The 11 a.m. radio report presented an opportunity to identify more deeply with the national trauma. My sons had attend-

ed the funeral of our elderly uncle, so they'd been exposed to death. A service for a 22-year-old man just embarking on life, fallen in defense of the homeland, was another matter altogether.

I weighed the mitzvah against its potential emotional effects and called a friend for advice — really, for support. Elli told me that he recently had brought his young daughters to the funeral of a religious leader and that the girls gained from the experience. "It will be imprinted on your boys' minds forever — for the good," advised Elli, en route to Kiryat Shemona to report on how residents were coping.

"Go."

As we drove across town after lunch, I prepared my sons for the experience: the flag-draped casket, grieving parents and



An Israeli man runs for cover after a Katyusha rocket set his car ablaze.

AFP/GETTY IMAGES

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Israel Defense Force comrades, eulogies and a three-gun salute.

We arrived early and grabbed a tree-shaded spot on that scorching August afternoon. During the 90-minute service, one or both boys tiptoed to the open, grassy area behind us. At other points, they returned, wondering why a eulogist had cried. I whispered translations of the remarks of both parents, of the yeshiva head who taught Yonatan, of an official from the family's moshav.

The rifles were fired and the wreaths laid. Men greeted David Einhorn, his white shirt collar ripped in mourning. Females escorted Revital Einhorn toward the tree where we stood. Two Magen David Adom paramedics accompanied her. The women supported the bereaved mother as she wailed, "Yonatan! I can't believe you're gone! Yonatan!"

We withdrew from the raw scene. We joined the men a few steps below. David locked arms with his late son's comrades back from the front, most in uniform, one injured and hobbling on metal crutches. David propped up the men with his words. The circle dispersed, and we approached.

"I never thought, leaving for Israel one week ago, that my sons and I would be

attending a funeral of a soldier, but we wanted to express our profound sadness to you and your wife," I began. I shuddered and froze. David grasped my shoulders. "Don't worry," he said. "We are strong. Israel is strong. We will defeat our enemies and we will emerge victorious."

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Just before the trip, I read an e-newsletter article about Jewish National Fund camps for children relocated from northern Israel. I got a name and phone number of a contact person.

So, one Sunday, we drove to a boarding school in Jerusalem's Bayit Vagan neighborhood. Three buses soon discharged 150 children ages 8 to 15, toting backpacks, sleeping bags and snacks. The kids came to spend six days far from sirens and confinement.

In the group to which we were assigned, Yossi, Gil and I helped campers unpack luggage and make their beds. After lunch, everyone drew posters for their dormitory doors. Our group's boys recruited my sons to take colored markers to paper and write in English: ENTRY TO GIRLS ABSOLUTELY FORBIDDEN! and ENTRY TO BOYS ABSOLUTELY PERMITTED!

We did a double-take as "our" kids

nominated and voted on names for the group — the winner being, in their precociously black humor — or more likely their coping mechanism — The Katyushas.

We joined the counselors, Ruti and Noa, and campers in a scavenger hunt that led through the campus's yard and corridors. The kids unscrambled made-up words to spell the names of fruits. Each pair of children invented unique ways to advance between trees using only two of their feet.

Because of my sons' rudimentary Hebrew, their attempts to blend in were frustrated. So, standing beside a bed sheet in the courtyard that another JNF cohort had painted the previous week to mock the Hezbollah enemy — NASRALLAH: WE KNOW WHERE YOU LIVE! — we bade farewell to our new friends.

Eventually, the firing stopped, Hezbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah went into hiding and a U.N.-sponsored cease-fire took hold. Two of the 24 days remained for us in Israel. We went to Haifa for Shabbat, and on Sunday drove to Rambam Hospital. At the coffee kiosk in the lobby, we loaded two bags with delicious pastries and marched to the orthopedics ward. The duty nurse listed

"The terror in northern Israel opened the door to discovering Beersheva, Sde

five rooms where soldiers wounded in Lebanon were recuperating. David Gattegno stuck his head out of his son's room and waved us in.

St.-Sgt. Elad Gattegno, 21, had been wounded in the leg in a Hezbollah ambush. His parents and siblings rushed up from Beersheva, staying in a Haifa hotel all week. Elad improved nicely. Messages and snapshots adorned his wall.

Chaya Bina, a grandmotherly IDF volunteer wearing a pressed white dress, entered the room and asked Elad how he felt. She left a poem for him, as she had for the other soldiers on the ward. "Dear charming, emotional, warm, hearty and, most importantly, human soldier," her typed note began.

A quartet that included a mandolin player and someone on a washboard strolled in, as if circulating at a party. They noted the patient's name and played *Elad Yarad el Hayarden* ("Elad Descended to the Jordan River"). His father cried.

Yossi proffered the snack bag, and Elad dug in. We visited other soldiers: Tal Berhad, a Technion computer science student; Said Khatib, from the northern Druse village of Sha'ab; Moshe Zini, from Rehovot; Moti Dahan. They nabbed some danishes and offered thanks. Gil blew up

balloons he'd uncovered in our camera bag, I tied the four balloons together, and Gil presented the gift to Elad. Yossi took a picture.

Later that afternoon, we wound by the bay, scooting past Haifa's krayot (inner suburbs) and skirting Akko, turning east and north from Nahariya nearly to the border, seeing no destroyed houses but bemoaning Hezbollah's keeping us away until then.

We pulled up to Mitzpeh Hila. It is a lovely yishuv (community), home to just 140 families: a few quiet streets, vistas to die for, a grassy park where an amateur photographer snapped her friend at play, and every vehicle's bumper sporting the sticker, GILAD: WE AWAIT YOU AT HOME.

Aviva Shalit awaited him in her manicured yard, but all she got was us. Face blank, lips taut, Aviva sat on a lawn chair, as forlorn, perhaps, as anyone outside a shivah house. Such was the visage of a parent consumed with heartache for two months following Hamas's kidnapping of her baby boy/soldier. Such was grief.

Recently, she related, a New York businessman stopped in just to say that he'd named his newborn son Gilad. Journalists appeared and withdrew. Friends came by.

A Hezbollah rocket descended just meters away, burning a hole in the neighbor's grass.

Aviva brought lemonade and glasses. She heard rumors of a deal: Gilad for Hamas prisoners. She hoped that they were true. She craved a snippet of information, a clue, even a third-party's confirmation of her son's welfare.

I conveyed what only another parent — another human being — could: We ache for you and your husband. We pray for Gilad's return. We care about you. We want you to know that we care about you.

We held her hand. We departed.

At Mitzpeh Hila's gate, blackened tree trunks and a dirt clearing testified to another missile that Aviva said fell. We snapped photographs of the large "GILAD" banner hugging the metal. Harm and hope, just meters apart.

The cool dinnertime air felt fine and clear. A man and his teenage son bicycled in.

"A nice place," I said, thinking of his town.

"No place better," the man responded from beneath his helmet, referring, I believe, to Israel herself. 🌿

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*Hillel Kuttler is a frequent contributor to Inside.*

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