

RABBI SHALOM HAMMER

INSPIRING LECTURER...DYNAMIC EDUCATOR...COMPELLING ORATOR

Rachel's Story A Visit to SDEROT

After spending almost a year in Israel from Jan-Oct in 2008, I came home with a renewed sense of connection to both the land and the people of Israel. I was learning in a seminary in Har Nof called She'arim where every morning we would say Tehillim and sing a hauntingly beautiful version of Acheinu in a successful effort to express honor towards soldiers in the IDF. This emotional connection motivated me to continue to pay attention in the news media, read up on Jewish History, and try to understand more about what was happening in Israel so I could not only talk about it, but nothing could have prepared me for actually meeting Hesder Yeshiva students or for seeing Sderot with my own eyes.

Upon hearing the news of the war in Gaza that took place in an effort on part of Israel to stand up against Hamas' attacks on Sderot, I felt a stronger sense of connection as a result of my time in She'arim singing those songs and yet, I still didn't have a clear picture of what Sderot looked like or what was happening there that precipitated the war in '08 or how people lived on during the attacks. Rabbi Hammer came to Aish Philadelphia to speak in the beginning of 2009, and he gave new dimension to the spiritual awakening that was occurring in the IDF and the impact Hesder Yeshivot. Before he spoke, I was unaware of such a yeshiva. And I became both interested and curious.

In July of 2009 I decided to spend another month in Jerusalem to learn and to reconnect. Rabbi Hammer had sent an email offering to give a 1/2 day tour, I jumped at the opportunity. I could have never imagined what I witnessed with my own eyes.

First, the city is developing and the Yeshiva is breathing life into it with every tree they plant and every new addition that is built. It was the shock of realizing that the inhabitants of Sderot's only cause for being under attack was their proximity to Gaza, nothing else. They were assaulted and still rushed to build protected bomb shelters, and what did they protect? What values did the people of Sderot cling to? Learning, protecting families, building schools, reinforcing their values to live and continue developing their ability to do chesed, study Torah and re-build.

I was moved by the strength of Sderot to plant trees and sculpt a "spine" that led through the city with the Sderot Yeshiva as the tallest building, a beacon of inspiration saying that on a soul level we will not be destroyed or deterred by the terrorists attempts at instilling fear into innocent people.

I looked around from the ground view of the play grounds and the trees to the view from the rooftop of the yeshiva and stood with awe over both how close Gaza was to Sderot and how vulnerable Sderot is. Then I swelled with pride and love for the teachers, students, and all of the people -- 22,000 of them! -- that lived in this widespread city at the strength and commitment to live, learn Torah and defend the Jewish People.

Rabbi Hammer took me to see a lot of places, including the Gaza Strip and the Yeshiva at Kiryat Gat.

Seeing the Yeshiva at Kiryat Gat was very emotional, and brought tears to my eyes. The students work on building the yeshiva, the dorms, and the very table that they sit at in the small lawn. There was such a sense of community and commitment to building not only the physical environment but also themselves. When I overheard that two of the boys were leaving in 2 weeks from the day I was there to fight in the IDF and saw their Rabbi embrace them and speak words of encouragement, I could sense the magnitude of what they were involved in. I met a boy who was the grandson of an important figure in creating the State of Israel, and realized that what I was seeing here was the effect of generations of carrying the torch of why it matters to be a Jew. Why it's important to learn Torah and to understand who you are and how you can impact generations to come, how these boys inspired me to want to give.

I met another boy who just wanted books. These were boys who if in larger schools or who if dismissed because they seemed a little rough around the edges, would have perhaps been discouraged to tap into their strong potential -- but here in Kiryat Gat, they were given permission to be themselves and enhance their core with Torah learning and purpose.

While it isn't new for a Jew to be encouraged to "Remember" and to "Be a Witness" to our collective Jewish History, I think it is imperative for us now in this generation as we face more threats of anti-semitism and even internal strife at reconciling to ourselves what it means for us to have a Jewish State or to be Jews in the 21st Century -- there are 3 places that every Jew must bear witness and take responsibility to build future generations of active and proud Jews: Poland, Sderot, and Kiryat Gat.

There is so much to say. Thank you to Rabbi Hammer for his humility, generosity, commitment, and dedication. The self-sacrifice and Torah that I witnessed merely scratches the surface to what the people of Sderot and Kiryat Gat survive daily, but what we can do together as Jews no matter where we live will have a much deeper impact if we can connect, bear witness and give from ourselves whatever we can give to support these boys and by doing so, rebuild our people in Israel.

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