

Reflections from an Operation Embrace Volunteer, Johnathan Rosenberg

Dear Avivah,

Thanks for writing; it would be good to meet you some time. My own part in this is really very small, but as you heard my son Ari and I did go along with Aviva Tessler on the recent Operation Embrace trip. I have to admit that we probably went more for personal reasons (to see family and friends, to spend Yom Yerushalayim in Jerusalem, etc.) than because of Operation Embrace, which provided a convenient excuse for going. So I'm really speaking more as an outside observer of your organization than as an active participant. But I can say that I was really impressed with what you are doing. What I mean is that we all know that the need is there (and even more pressing this week than last), but I was previously somewhat skeptical that a few short visits to a few places would make much of a difference. I've changed my mind about this after going on the trip, for a number of reasons:

1. You are working through the existing system, as exemplified by the social workers at Hadassah and Tel Hashomer, rather than at cross-purposes with it. I think this is really important, since the people on the scene have to deal with the "matzav" day in and day out, and are in the best position to evaluate needs and set priorities. I think there are other organizations that have not been working through the local social services networks, and this is a mistake on their part.
2. In part because of #1, you have been careful not to impose on people, and not to visit those who really don't want to talk to outsiders. Again, this is a really important consideration. I have seen people who want to do bikur cholim, not really to help the sick or the injured, but so that they can feel good about themselves. Then they end up tiring out or overburdening the person they're visiting, which is really a perversion of the mitzvah.
3. Many of the people we saw really welcomed the opportunity to tell their stories to the outside world, and especially the opportunity to connect with the American Jewish community. In some cases, this was the first time that they felt that someone outside of Israel really cared about what was happening to them.
4. Some of the people we saw are those you have visited repeatedly over an extended period. For the seriously injured and their families, the psychological aspect of the healing process really takes a long time, often years. So long-term follow-up really counts.
5. In some cases (and I think especially because we brought along Ari and Saphira), I think we managed to take some people's minds off their pain and their troubles, if only for a short time. Aviva probably told you about the scene at Har Hatzofim when Ari was passing out the "yo-yo balls". What a riot!
6. I think your idea of connecting specific families with specific congregations makes a lot of sense. This may be the best way to help with the long-term follow-up issue I mentioned in #4.
7. I was quite impressed with the way you are bridging the Chiloni/Dati divide (and even the Jewish/Gentile divide). We saw two Asians (a Filipino woman and a Korean man) and people from all segments from Israeli society. Personally, I was quite impressed by the comments of the Arab driver of the bus that was blown up yesterday (this was quoted in Haaretz): "Their [Hamas's] bombs don't distinguish between Arabs or Jews. An attack on either is forbidden. We are all human

beings. When a bullet is fired or a bomb explodes, people are hurt, and it doesn't matter if they are Arabs or Jews."

As far as the Gozlans are concerned, I knew about them because of the involvement of our synagogue (KMS), and we had heard enough about them before the trip that I felt as if I already knew Aaron before I met him in person. The main credit for this has to go to Susan Weinberger, who is the person at KMS who has been in touch with the Gozlans on a regular basis. For instance, she just sent me this message today:

Dear Friends:

I spoke to Shira earlier today. Roni was in the hospital for further tests needed prior to the surgery. They are going through very hard times, as Roni is expected to spend about 2 months in the hospital. She needs a lot of support and help to pull through this period. We need to generate additional funds to help them with summer camp for the kids and additional expenses while Roni is in hospital.

So maybe you would like to hear from her. Her email address is sweinberger82@yahoo.com.

Shabbat shalom,

Jonathan