

Emergency in Israel

From Amira Ahronoviz
CEO, The Jewish Agency for Israel

Dear Friend,

On Tuesday, I traveled to southern Israel, visiting our staff and beneficiaries during what turned out to be one of the toughest days Israel has gone through in many years, with rocket attacks hitting the region. I want to share parts of what I saw and experienced, though what I felt and faced is hard to put into words.

Jewish Agency Chief Operating Officer, Yehuda Setton, and I headed to Ashkelon where a Jewish Agency absorption center for new immigrants and an Amigour housing complex for seniors are located. The city was just hit by hundreds of rockets, some intercepted by the Iron Dome, some falling into open spaces and some hitting residences, buildings and even people. Never has Israel received a barrage of rockets like the ones that rained down on Tuesday in such a short time.

Even before we arrived in Ashkelon, a siren went off, forcing us to stop our car in the middle of the highway and lay on the ground until the bombings were over. I prayed that we would make it to our facility in the city without further attacks, but as we entered Amigour, another barrage of rockets started. We had seconds to run to the shelter together with the staff.

You can imagine how running to the sheltered rooms, time after time, in just seconds, becomes almost impossible for many seniors. Our team makes sure they are safe when the sirens go off and are there to offer comfort and calm.

Despite the signs of destruction and palpable fear, what left an indelible mark on me that day was meeting with and speaking to our dedicated employees as well as new *olim* (immigrants) at our absorption center there. Over the past year, The Jewish Agency has welcomed 21,500 new immigrants to Israel during COVID. For those *olim* in the south of Israel, having 15-45 seconds to run to shelters while whistling missiles and loud bombings surround them, often with small children, is a whole new experience. And this frightening experience comes at a time when most have yet to learn Hebrew or acclimate culturally – and with so much uncertainty in the air.

One moment that was very emotional was witnessing a *brith* (Jewish circumcision ceremony) for a newborn baby. His mother made Aliyah from Ethiopia just a few months ago. The brith took place at an Ashkelon shelter so if an attack were to take place, they would not need to stop the circumcision. Our absorption center staff took care of arranging a beautiful ceremony under unbelievable circumstances. For me, it was truly moving to see a celebration of life and Jewish values amidst the chaos.

On Wednesday, exactly 24 hours after I was at this Absorption Center in Ashkelon, two rockets hit the parking lot. An *oleh* (immigrant) was injured and taken to the hospital while another was treated at the center for anxiety. Five apartments and the manager's office were damaged, but thankfully, our security guards onsite acted quickly to evacuate the immigrants to safety.

There is no doubt that without the immediate and brave response of these security guards, who made sure everyone was evacuated to the shelter, this event would have ended much worse.



Photo: The Jewish Agency for Israel

In the face of this ongoing danger, approximately 100 Jewish Agency employees working across our eight absorption centers in Israel's south with 3,000 new *olim* have been busy not only helping them acclimate to their new lives in Israel but holding their hands in these emergency situations.

Between COVID and now horrific missile attacks, our employees are struggling. They are the backbone of our organization, modeling resilience to all they serve, leaving their families to run to shelters while they prioritize Israel's newest immigrants and most vulnerable. We need them to be as strong as possible. I did what I could to offer strength and comfort on Tuesday, but of course it was not enough, especially as this horrific situation continues.

Many of you have reached out to us to express your support. I cannot tell you how much that means. We couldn't have done this vital work without the support of our dear partners at The Jewish Federations of North America, Keren Hayesod, members of our Board of Governors and Jewish Agency for Israel North American Council (JAFINA).

I hope that, like me, you can draw inspiration from our dedicated colleagues who have sacrificed so much. They are true heroes, and it is an honor to be a part of The Jewish Agency family with them.

To more peaceful days,

Amira Ahronoviz
Director General & CEO
The Jewish Agency for Israel