

"Our safety and our morale changed overnight thanks to KKL-JNF and for that, we will be forever grateful." – Digi Levanon, Bnei Netzarim evacuee.

FROM OVERNIGHT HELL TO HAVEN: KKL-JNF'S LIFELINE TO THE RESIDENTS OF BNEI NETZARIM

The enormous lobby of the Jerusalem Gates Hotel was packed to capacity on Thursday, October 12, 2023, which was the 6th day of the Israel-Hamas war. All those present were women and children from Bnei Netzarim, an agricultural village situated in the Eshkol Region just South of the Gaza Strip. They had been evacuated from the area under fire a few days earlier and brought to the hotel. All 10 floors of the luxury hotel were occupied by Bnei Netzarim evacuees. The reason why there were only women and children present was because the men were mostly all reserve soldiers who had reported for military duty. Those who were not soldiers had remained behind to protect the village and take of the agricultural livestock.

In one corner of the hotel lobby a group of teenagers were playing music and singing; around them, others, including mothers and grandmothers, were drinking coffee and talking; and there were children of all ages running and playing everywhere. Also wandering around the lobby were clowns in full costume trying to engage anyone and everyone with their playful antics. There were activities all over the hotel



photographed by Dennis Zinn

designed to help the residents relax and lose some of their anxiety.

Avia Visner, one of the young women enjoying the lobby, said that she was at home with a few girlfriends from Bnei Netzarim when the Red Alert sirens began. "My parents were celebrating Shabbat and the Simchat Torah festival with family at Kibbutz Kerem Shalom and so we were at home alone. Red Alert sirens were not new to us because we grew up



photographed by Dennis Zinn

in the area but we quickly realized that this time it was different. Firstly because of the number of alerts and also because of the other booms and explosions we were hearing all around us. We quickly found out that the situation was bad and that all our friends who were reserve soldiers had been called to their units. I later also heard that my brother at Kibbutz Kerem Shalom had been wounded badly and evacuated to the hospital. We were told to remain in our safety room and to lock the door because terrorists were gaining entry to many of the communities in the area and murdering the residents. To add to the scary situation, there was an electricity cut and we were in total darkness with no way to charge our cellphones. We were terrified. Towards evening when the volume of Red Alert sirens lessened we left the safety room and met a few people to catch up on what was going on. On Monday morning we were told that we were going to be evacuated out of the village by way of a safety route that had been forged through the agricultural fields on the southern side of the village. We arrived here at the Jerusalem Gates Hotel within hours to a completely different atmosphere to that of the previous couple of days."

Bnei Netzarim was founded in 2008 by families who were formerly from the Netzarim Settlement in the Gush Katif region of Gaza. They created their new home in a desert area just south of the Gaza Strip close to the Egyptian border. It's an agricultural community that also emphasizes the importance of Judaism and religious study.

On a large patio at the Jerusalem Gates Hotel, overlooking the city, a group of girls were crowded around 3 tables cutting, sanding, and shaping wooden planks with electric tools under the close

guidance of several woodwork instructors. Nearby in another area, were two ODT, outdoor training, guides who were leading a group of children through a series of activities intended to establish a sense of comfort among the anxious young participants.

KKL-JNF Outdoor Training Guide **Matanyahu Levinger** said that he has been leading ODT groups for years "but this time it's different," he said. "One feels that these participants have come out of hell and that it's going to take some time to bring them back to believing in themselves and their surroundings. I believe it's wonderful that they were able to leave the dangerous war-torn area and come to Jerusalem."

Digi Levanon who had assumed the task of temporary Bnei Netzarim spokesperson at the Jerusalem Gates Hotel explained that it is simply thanks to KKL-JNF that they were able to pick up and leave their homes on the Gaza border almost immediately and evacuate to Jerusalem. "It was on Saturday night after the Sabbath that we realized the extent of the danger around us. Almost all the men had already been conscripted and we then heard of tens of friends and acquaintances who had been killed or wounded while protecting their homes. It was clear to us that we had to evacuate fast. At that point, KKL-JNF stepped in and offered to take charge of bringing us to Jerusalem and housing us in this luxurious hotel. Besides that, all the activities you see around us, including the clowns, the candyfloss stand, the ODT, and more, are part of the incredibly generous package provided by KKL-JNF. To understand the enormity of this gesture you must realize that 48 families arrived here, each with an average of 7 to 10 children. I have eight. This coming weekend some of the men will return for the Sabbath and we will be over 500 people. Our safety and our morale changed overnight thanks to KKL-JNF and for that, we will be forever grateful."



photographed by Dennis Zinn