

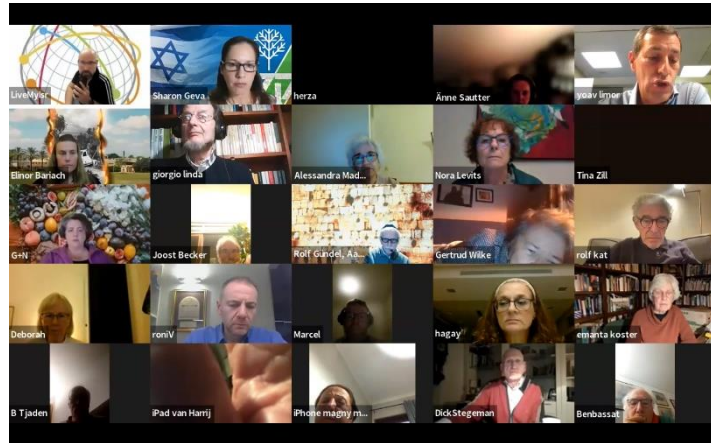
How does one express to friends worldwide what is happening in Israel? How do we tell of the horrors experienced by residents of the Gaza Envelope, and the shocking aftermath they are dealing with today?

THIS WAR IS ALL OF OURS – A ZOOM MEETING WITH KKL-JNF FRIENDS AROUND THE WORLD

The KKL-JNF Resource Development Division in Israel organized a Zoom meeting with KKL-JNF Friends around the world, in order to hear first-hand testimony from the Simchat Torah massacre and gain more insight on how to help the survivors.

Sharon Geva, KKL-JNF Israel Desk Director for Germany, Austria and Switzerland, began the meeting with a warm welcome. "Thank you for the hugs you send us from all over the world - it is not something we take for granted," she said. "Thanks to our unity, we will be strong and stand up to our enemies."

Ronnie Vinnikov, the Head of the KKL-JNF Resource Development and External Affairs Division, expressed his heartfelt appreciation for the support of KKL-JNF partners worldwide: "KKL-JNF entered the event from day one, and we are doing everything we can to support the people who survived the horrors. All over Israel we feel your partnership."



KKL-JNF zoom meeting October 24th, 2023.

Vinnikov noted that the KKL-JNF Board of Directors had toured the Gaza Envelope earlier that day to learn about the tremendous needs of the Gaza Border communities and emphasized that KKL-JNF has already transferred an emergency budget to support the local and regional authorities and is also helping to evacuate the residents to safe areas and provide them with housing.

The meeting was moderated by Israeli media personality **Yoav Limor**, who said: "We are dealing with over 1,400 casualties, more than 220 people abducted, over 120,000 Israelis

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evacuated from their homes, and an ongoing war with rocket fire from Gaza and Lebanon. We have many people with us today, all of whom share a love for Israel. This war is all of ours, and it is important that the world understands what we are up against. We will all get through these dark days together."

"I want my Abba"

The meeting's most moving moments were when massacre survivors Lishi Lavi and Elinor Bariakh, respectively from Nahal Oz and Kfar Aza in the Gaza Envelope, spoke of their horrific experiences.

Lishi Lavi said that the red alert had caught the Levi family asleep in their beds. Lishi and her husband Omri rushed to the shelter with their daughters, 2-year-old Roni and 6-month-old Alma. "There was a shootout going on in the apartment next to us, and we realized that if we were not quiet, we would be next in line. They pounded on the shelter door with their weapons and demanded that we open it."



Lishai Lavi, KKL-JNF zoom meeting October 24th, 2023.

The murderous terrorists took their neighbors' 17-year-old son Tomer hostage, and forced him to go with them between the houses and call out to the residents to open the doors. When Tomer finished his job, they murdered him. The terrorists broadcasted all these events live on Facebook.

"When we heard Tomer's voice, we opened the door, so that they wouldn't hurt him. Five terrorists took us into the kitchen of the house. My two-year-old daughter fell asleep in the shelter and awoke to the terror of guns being pointed at her. We were rounded up in one of the houses together with other residents. They took with them [my husband] Omri, another neighbor, and the [Israeli-]Americans Judith and Natalie Ra'anani, who have since been released. Before he was taken, I said quietly to Omri: 'I love you. I'll look after our girls. Don't be a hero, because I want you back home.'"

Her little daughter Roni started shouting: "I want my Abba!", and Lishi had to hold her tightly so that she wouldn't run after him. "I managed to make her fall asleep in my arms, and after 20 minutes, she woke up no longer two years old. Suddenly I have a grown-up girl who understands everything and doesn't ask for anything. We prayed that someone would come and save us."

When the army finally arrived, the family members were evacuated to Kibbutz Kramim in the northern Negev. At this point it is not known what happened to Omri, who remains captive in

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Gaza. Lishi recounts in a trembling voice: "Roni and I had a regular ritual every night before bed: we would go outside to say good night to the world. Now when we go out, Roni calls out in her sweet voice, 'Good night Abba (dad)', and I choke back my tears, not always successfully. I assure her that her father hears us. What happened here is not a war, it is our holocaust."



Lishai, Omri and their young daughter, photo courtesy of the Lavi-Meirani Family

"They came to destroy us"

Elinor Bariakh is the daughter of a child Holocaust survivor who was hidden from the Nazis in monasteries around Europe. "When I told my mother what we went through, she told me, 'It's the same as my childhood!'"

Elinor tells how she and her husband locked themselves in their shelter with their two sons, each of them holding a knife. "We realized that there was a massacre going on around us. They came to destroy us. The army arrived at noon, but they only managed to rescue us that night, after 16 hours. Even when the soldiers knocked on the door and called our names, we were afraid to open it. We were evacuated to a hotel in Kibbutz Shefayim in the center of the country, but we are reliving the events still now."

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Elinor has not returned to Kfar Aza since then, but has heard reports and watched video clips from the kibbutz. "I don't recognize the place. Destroyed streets, horrors. It's as if we entered that protected room on October 7, and will take years to leave it."

A soldier who arrived in Kfar Aza called Elinor and asked her if she needed him to try to salvage something from the destroyed house. She asked only for the necklace that she received as a gift from her grandmother, who had survived the Holocaust.



Elinor Bariach Bitton

"We have a strong community in Kfar Aza, and in Sha'ar HaNegev and the Otef in general. But this time, much more is needed. We need physical rehabilitation, emotional rehabilitation and above all we need to not be abandoned or forgotten," said Elinor.

Shariel Gon, director of the Fundraising Department at KKL-JNF, summed up the meeting: "We are strong, and we will win and emerge strengthened. KKL-JNF has always stood by Israel, even before the establishment of the state, and now we are facing a new challenge. KKL-JNF was the first to provide support to the local authorities that were affected by the attack. We assist in the evacuation of the residents to the center of the country, support the equipping of emergency rapid response teams, and run educational programs. We need your help in this challenging time, and I know we can count on you. Together we will be strong."

The meeting ended with the singing of Hatikvah, Israel's national anthem together, the voices blending through Zoom from all corners of the world. Despite everything, we are still here. Am Yisrael Chai – the People of Israel Live!