



## ISRAEL AT WAR



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**'WRITING THIS ARTICLE, I HAVE HAD TO GO TO THE SHELTER TWICE'**

# My first 48 hours back in Israel

While hundreds of Australians boarded planes to come back home following the Hamas attack, Sydneysider **Danny Hochberg** boarded a plane going the other way. He recounts his first few days in Israel.

IT'S early morning as we land at Ben Gurion Airport. It's the time of morning when night is still stalking the upcoming day. The normal bustle of Israel's main airport is absent, as are any travellers not Israeli, or any planes other than Israeli airlines.

So here I am on El Al flight LY82 out of Bangkok, one of maximum three or four non-Israelis. In my bag are letters and cards from Emanuel School children to soldiers and Israeli school kids. I carry three extra bags containing much needed equipment for the soldiers, organised through Project Golda, a group of dedicated individuals in Sydney who collect or purchase these items and give them to those who are returning to Israel to carry as excess baggage. The messages from Emanuel School and this equipment delivery already make me feel as if the trip has been worthwhile.

The best way to describe the last week would be to conjure up an image of a door. As I walk through it I leave the world I know and trust. The world that was filled with light and laughter. The world where I felt safe. And instead I enter an alternate world filled with darkness, fear and uncertainty. That is the only way I can describe the cataclysmic change from the world of pre-Simchat Torah 2023 and post. The atrocities perpetrated on innocent civilians in

Israel by Hamas along with the never-ending and spiralling count of dead, injured and kidnapped combined with the anger of the failure of the state to protect these innocent citizens, the dread of the days and weeks ahead as Israel responds, and the growing sense of loneliness that has haunted us after every disaster to befall the Jewish people, has shattered my equilibrium. No, it has shattered my soul.

**I enter an alternate world filled with darkness, fear and uncertainty.**

I am lucky. My involvement in the community gives me access to its leaders and the platform to engage, and contribute. Despite my despair, perhaps because of it, I connect immediately and am able to push the terrible news to the recesses of my tortured, overflowing Jewish soul. I became part of the amazing team that in just four days put on a rally that allows 9000 plus members of our community to come together and express their grief and solidarity along with our political leaders. I work with my colleagues at the Union of Progressive Judaism to ensure our voice is heard and to keep our communities informed,

engaged and safe. I attend a youth movement commemoration and listen to their grief. I look at their faces and wonder at their stoicism and fear for their optimism. I attend Emanuel Synagogue's beautiful and moving Kabbalat Shabbat, packed with others seeking community, and I hold my wife and the chazan's wife as they tear up to the mournful strains of *Hatikvah*. At home I post stories of devastation and the pleas of the families of those kidnapped. I scream at the TV news for its lack of sympathy and write letters of complaint for their failure to report facts and provide context.

I feel connected to my community, to the task at hand. And yet it is not enough. My anger, my hurt, my loneliness, my helplessness are never far from the surface.

I am the son of Holocaust survivors. The helplessness as they boarded cattle cars to be transported to their deaths, the screams of my family as they burnt in the crematoria, the silence of the world as this crime of all crimes was perpetrated, is etched in my DNA.

I am of the "Never Again" generation. The combination of this darkest of inheritances combined with growing up in Zionist youth movement Habonim Dror has resulted in a potent concoction of Israel as homeland, fortress and spiritual essence. But even more so, as the vindication of my survival



A sign at Ben Gurion Airport points towards the bomb shelter.

and the resilience of the Jewish people against all odds and in the face of the most wretched history. It is deeply connected to my understanding of who I am, my place in the world and as a result, my self-esteem. It's that personal.

And that is why I boarded a plane on Wednesday, October 18, just 11 days after the massacre despite an impending entry by the IDF into the Gaza Strip; with an increasingly unstable northern border bristling with missiles; with the constant fear of an uprising among the Arab population within; and, with the threat of enemies afar joining the tsunami of hate. To a country grieving. To a country at war.

My next 48 hours could not have been more intense. Israel is a country that forever seems to be in

constant motion; grief and laughter, war and peace, never knowing which will be around the corner. I am keen to get going so I contacted Leo Baeck, the pre-eminent Reform school in Israel, in the hope of giving the Emanuel School cards to Israeli students. I had visited the school only four months earlier when my wife and I participated in the World Union of Progressive Judaism Beutel Leadership Program.

I am informed that all schools in Israel are closed but that they will have kids at the school until 12.30pm. I tell them I will come, but have no idea how I will get there. I remember that the son of good friends lives near my Airbnb. He agrees to lend me his car. Within four hours of arriving in Israel I am driving to Leo Baeck, which is in





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Danny Hochberg (second from left) gives soldiers in the north cards from Australian school students.



With Ella, 15, from Kfar Aza. She spent 20 hours in the safe room. Both her grandparents were murdered in their home.

Haifa. Sadly, I arrive after 12.30 and miss the kids, but spend time with the rabbis and staff.

Meanwhile, I have been texting the son of good friends. He has been called up and is in the north in a temporary base near Nahariya. He invites me to join him, and give out the cards I received from Emanuel School for soldiers. My timing is not great. I arrive at the base just as Hezbollah missiles shoot overhead. They were close. The swoosh of the missile and the bang that follows, whether intercepted or having landed, is terrifying. Especially as I am out in the open. I join the soldiers in the bomb shelter, although I have yet to find my friend. There is a family who arrived on base with food and a cake for their son, celebrating his birthday. Soldiers mill about, or watch computer screens for updates. I decided it is a good time to start handing out cards. The soldiers' response is immediate and warm. They read their cards to each other, while I tell them about the school. I take photos. I am so proud to be with them. To be able to distract them. They thank me again and again. For coming. For being there.

I finally meet my friend. He takes me to meet his squad. These are paratroopers. Each team has a role: drivers, intelligence, anti-tank, snipers, etc. They tend to

congregate together around their specialty. I am introduced to my friend's team: Omri, their officer whose wife is due in two weeks; Yaniv, who made aliyah from Chile; Kfir, who was touring Vietnam but chose to return; Keshut, a real clown who shows me his New Zealand tattoo with pride; Rotem, who was due to leave for Asia after Simchat Torah.

There is a whiteboard in the foyer that announces today's funerals. There are eight ... There are at least 100 yahrzeit candles burning.

They are a great bunch. I tell them my sacrifice is much greater than theirs as I am missing the Rugby World Cup. This instigates a discussion around how to play Rugby. I explain the game and they listen attentively. I ask why Golani (another infantry brigade) seems to have such a high rate of casualties. This instigates a discussion of which infantry unit is best. It's playful rather than morbid. They have a lot of food, donated by Israel's citizenry who have mobilised to fill the gaps the government cannot. I met Evan and James, who came from the US. They served in the unit previously and came over to provide support

and provide equipment.

As I walk around the base, I am welcomed, offered food and made to feel special. The cards from Emanuel School students are a hit. But despite the camaraderie, the positive mood, I cannot help but look at the armoured vehicles bristling with communications and weapons, with their mouths agape awaiting these soldiers.

I am exhausted. And the trip home is long.

The next day was difficult. In the morning my Israel Reform friend, Noga, takes me to the hotel at Kibbutz Shefayim. This is where the survivors of Kfar Aza are based. Kfar Aza is a kibbutz about three kilometres from the border with Gaza. Over 100 Israelis died, and another 73 have been killed or are missing. The attack was brutal in the form of beheadings, dismemberment and victims burned alive. There is a whiteboard in the foyer that announces today's funerals. There are eight. It's heartbreaking. There are funerals for more than one in a family. The board displays

Sunday's funerals as well. There are at least 100 yahrzeit candles burning.

I met Avichai Broditz, whose wife and three daughters have been kidnapped. He seems small, and lost, but I sense a great strength within. He tells me he led a prayer group at the Kotel that morning. He talks about the challah his wife makes every Shabbat. I am left without words when he tells me that maybe they will be home this Shabbat. I can only hug him. We walk around giving cards to young children and teenagers. They all wear armbands with different colours, which identify their level of trauma. Amy is sitting with her mother who wears the armband. Amy doesn't have one and it annoys her. Ella, 15 years old, spent 20 hours in her safe room. She is going to the funeral of her grandparents today. Eitan rode up to me on his scooter. He is polite, a gentle soul. He records a message for the Emanuel School kids. Having limited time, and aware that the level of trauma here is complex, we put the rest of the cards up in the coffee shop, with a sign telling them they are from Emanuel School.

In the afternoon I attended the funeral of Nizan Libstein, son of the head of the Sha'ar Hanegev Regional Council. His father, Ofir

was killed during the fighting with Hamas terrorists on Kfar Aza. His body was not found initially and the family hoped he was alive or a hostage. The mother spoke with such strength. Famous singers Mooki and Yonatan Rechter sang mournful, but beautiful tunes. Many present had no connection to Kfar Aza or the family.

On Friday night I attended Beit Daniel, the largest Reform synagogue in Tel Aviv. Rabbi Meir Azari invited me to speak from the bimah. I was honoured to speak about our community's response and support for Am Yisrael.

As I have been writing this article, I have had to go to the shelter twice. Nice way to meet the neighbours – a woman and her son from Ashkelon, her older son in a Givati (combat) unit in the south; and a couple from Shlomi, on the border with Lebanon. I understand up to 200,000 Israelis have been displaced by the war.

I am looking forward to starting my volunteering. There is much to be done.

Everyone I meet tells me the same thing. Tell them what happened. Fight the disinformation. Pray for the hostages. Stand with Israel.

**Jewish Sydneysider Danny Hochberg sits on a number of Jewish communal boards.**



Embracing Avichai Broditz, whose wife and three daughters were kidnapped.



Mourners gather at the funeral of Nizan Libstein.