



## **MICHELLE FALK**

How incredible that the WIZO Lev Echad group witnessed this moment live whereby Eden Golan sung the original words of October Rain for the first time.

Good evening and welcome. A bit of housekeeping, phones on silent and women's toilet to your left and men's toilet to your right.

I acknowledge the Traditional Custodians of the land, and pay my respects to their Elders past, present and emerging.

I also want to acknowledge the 120 hostages that are still being held captive.

Thank you to Double Bay Bowling Club for hosting us this evening in this beautifully renovated space and to Shweetie for all the delicious shweeties.

I am Michelle Falk and it is my great honour to stand before you as the President of WIZO Lev Echad. Lev Echad means 'one heart' and after the recent mission to Israel it was proven that we cry, laugh, and our hearts all beat as one.

When I joined WIZO, the concern was that there were no future generations stepping up, and the succession was in jeopardy. The inception of Lev Echad is a testament to the vision of Nilly Berger, the current president of WIZO NSW. Nilly called me one day with an audacious idea: 'Let's send a small group of women to Israel to showcase why WIZO is essential now more than ever.' My immediate reaction was, 'You mean they will leave their young families and head to an active war zone?' She confidently replied, 'Yes.' I, of course, am always drawn to bold ideas, and I was fully on board! We envisioned this group as the next generation that would ensure the continuity and succession of WIZO in NSW.

Together with Lorna Berger, we assembled a remarkable group of women, each passionate about Israel. Some had family ties to WIZO, others were driven to make a significant impact, and many were profoundly affected by the events of October 7th. Each had the heart, skills and determination to carry forward the legacy of WIZO.

Some of WIZO's biggest supporters were approached to specifically sponsor this mission and we are delighted that they are here this evening so we can thank them in person. Without mentioning any names, your unwavering generosity has transformed a dream into reality, securing a future for WIZO NSW. These women united, sharing their experiences of horror and strength, and witnessed the profound impact WIZO has on the children left behind, the women who have been abused, the elderly in need of care, and the vulnerable people of Israel. Your contributions go beyond financial support; they are true investments in the future of our beloved country, Israel.

For those of you new to WIZO here are some facts:

- WIZO stands for Women's International Zionist Organisation
- WIZO is Israel's largest welfare agency and the main agency working with the Israeli government
- WIZO facilitates 800 programs and institutions
- 70,000 lives are touched by WIZO on a daily basis.
- There are 38 WIZO federations worldwide with over 100,000 engaged volunteers spanning from countries like Chile, Peru, Norway and Brazil.

- For over 100 years, WIZO has positively impacted the lives of countless Israelis through all stages of life; from babies in day care centres to the unique youth villages, schools, and boarding institutions; young girls and women at pivotal life junctures; and the elderly in WIZO community centres.
- It is a volunteer led organisation at grass roots level. Money and supplies are specifically raised for projects which you can go and see. Just the other day a call came in while I was in the WIZO office urgently requesting funding for 31 severely disadvantaged babies and toddlers who come from dysfunctional and poor homes and needed care over the summer. Through the incredible support of our community, WIZO NSW was able to fund this immediately. This very month Lev Echad brought kitchen supplies for under privileged girls and women in Be'er shiva. Personally, knowing that I can make a tangible difference is what fuels my passion.

This evening is about stories, moments and people these 9 women came across during their mission to Israel. While each person is speaking about a specific element the sentiments of the entire trip and gratitude towards WIZO resonate in all their hearts.

I would now like to welcome Danielle Wakerman.

### **DANIELLE WAKERMAN**

I want to talk about the risk and the cost of playing it safe.

When I was asked to go to Israel with WIZO, my initial reaction was fear, I was frozen in the fear that I was putting myself in a vulnerable position to walk into a war zone. I was frozen in fear that I would need to bare witness to tragedies beyond my willingness to accept.

Not to ruin the end of the story, but I of course put my big girl pants on and accepted the challenge and began the preparations for what soon became my change your life forever experience.

I realised that if I didn't do this trip, the cost was too large of playing it safe, and although it sounds paradoxical but playing it safe emotionally felt more dangerous than playing it safe physically in the end.

Our learnings: be bold, we know there are unimaginable tragedies surrounding us and there's only one way our generation will have any chance at keeping our community and our children safe and it is facing our fears head on and baring witness to the cold hard truth.

On the 11<sup>th</sup> May 2024, a group of women, some of whom were new to each other boarded the plane with 2 of WIZO NSW's icons, we had no idea what we were about to learn. We had worked through the itinerary and we had chosen some restaurants. The mood was high and palpable there was a desperation to finally sink our feet into the ground.

It quickly became apparent on arrival, that WIZO is woven into the fabric of Israeli society. As we met new people in the streets who asked why we were in Israel now, and we told them of our Solidarity mission with WIZO, we were received with great admiration for being a part of such an important and well-established organisation. A feeling that resonated with all of the girls was instantly one of pride at being a part of something so meaningful.

We arrived on Yom Hazikaron. How poetic, after 7 months of feeling heart broken, to land in Israel on the Remembrance Day of fallen soldiers was the perfect way for us to immediately be reminded that this visit was unlike every other time before.

We started the day laughing and connecting, like every good Jewish camp or trip, we got close, and we got close quickly, but we ended the day at a Yom Hazikaron memorial for 1 battalion of fallen soldiers. We didn't understand a word of their service, but they sang songs that were familiar, we looked into the faces of grieving mothers and fathers, friends, siblings, partners, and we collectively sobbed. We were so moved by this experience and we were so sobered by the reminder of what we had come to do. It rained that night, and as every Israeli said, even the sky is crying tonight.

The following day was Yom Haatzmaut and the sun came out. Again, how Israeli, to follow a day of mourning by intentionally placing a day of celebration and family right next to it, to remind us that this is what we live for, this life that is so worth living, even if our neighbours don't believe that to be true.

And so, on the 14<sup>th</sup> May we woke up at 7:30am to begin our program and we started our drive to Mount Carmel in Haifa to see Achuzat Yeladim and to meet the formidable Anat Vidor and ever humble Yossi Saragossi and other WIZO power houses.

Ahuzat Yeladim is a residential boarding school for disadvantaged youth, for troubled children whom in many other circumstances have been considered helpless. These children have suffered at the hands of abuse, neglect and have been rejected by their own communities, and are brought into the school often just before juvenile detention,

Ahuzat Yeladim is there to support them. This home, this school is so Jewish in essence, it delivers a model of warmth and respect, experiences these children may not have had before. They are set up to thrive, not just to survive, and WIZO NSW has been the back bone of its success.

As we walked along the pathway that many WIZO women have walked before, and excitedly noted all of the familiar names and plaques spotted throughout the school, we felt right at home. We heard from one of the students about what Yossi and Ahuzat Yeladim mean to him and we were overcome with gratitude that WIZO was there to catch this boy when no one else would.

One of the Lev Echad girls was able to see her own family plaque in the Jonas Dormitory and we were able to find the Esther Wakerman library. A beautiful link and homage to the future of WIZO NSW.

There is no Israel without WIZO, we see that now. The sad truth, is that WIZO is going to be needed now more than ever and our job going forward hasn't even been revealed yet. Israel is hurting and we in the diaspora are hurting too, and it is our commitment and our promise that we will do what we can to continue the work of these remarkable WIZO women and help our Israel.

I would now like to welcome Rachele Petrini.

## **RACHELLE PETRINI**

When it they say seeing is believing, it has never been more true than at **Nachal Oz Army Base**, which sits right on the border with Gaza.

The words terror, bravery, evil, survival, strength and pain come to mind when I think back to our visit there. This place has experienced unspeakable hardship and horror.

Our experience started with Benny, who is the head sergeant at the base. Despite speaking perfect English, Benny insisted on speaking Hebrew as he said that "this place deserves the respect of speaking our language."

Benny wasn't on the base the morning of October 7<sup>th</sup> and by the time he arrived, the devastation had already taken place. You could see the pain and guilt in his eyes as he wasn't able to do what any IDF soldier is built to do,,,, protect their own.

It was at Nachal Oz base where the terrorists used 500 kilos of explosives to blow up the boarder wall.

We climbed the stairs to the lookout and looked right at Gaza as we heard bombs going off in the distance.

We all wondered 'how did this happen', 'how did they get this close', 'how did no one see them coming from the look out'. The answers are irrelevant as the terrorists were on a mission and nothing was going to stop them.

And from what we saw that day, they achieved their mission.

We were told that we were about to enter a room which we might struggle with, and honestly, I've found this the hardest part of our trip to speak about. It was only due to our WIZO connections in Israel that we were given access to this area, which is not even open to the public.

We were led into a large communications room where girls aged around 19 years old worked. Their job was to monitor activity on the Gaza boarder by watching the cameras and alerting the IDF of any suspicious activity.

For some reason, that day, the cameras weren't working, so they were caught off guard when the terrorists stormed the base.

These defenceless girls didn't even carry guns, as it was assumed they were safe surrounded by armed IDF soldiers.

As the terrorists approached, the girls locked themselves in the communications room. Unable to get in, the terrorists climbed onto the roof and set the building alight, with 15 young, innocent girls inside.

I can't even begin to imagine what they were thinking or feeling, what their final goodbyes to their families on the phone would have sounded like OR how they would have said goodbye to each other, because burning alive, was at the time, a better option than being killed, raped or kidnapped by those monsters.

It was haunting to be in that room. An eery feeling like I've never experienced before. The room was dark and still.

A moment frozen in time.

Computers, keyboards, telephones, still sitting on their desks, but now charred and melted.

The room had a smell which I can only imagine is what the smell of burning flesh smells like.

We all stood there in silence, in disbelief, in horror.

Again, more questions came to mind..'How could anyone have so much hate in them that they could do this', 'How does one recover from such tragedy and pain'.

Without consciousness or consideration, we found ourselves singing the Hatikvah, huddled in a circle, holding hands, needing the support from each other. We sung to those innocent and beautiful girls who died in that room.

The day that we were leaving Israel, the footage was released of the 6 young women, still in their pyjamas, that were taken hostage from an army base. We came to learn that that army base was Nachal Oz.

We watched this footage through a different lens. We were there, right there! We stood in that room, walked on the same path as those poor girls and those disgusting monsters.

We watched the footage of these girls who were pulled from their beds, beaten and tied up and taken from their homeland, as we boarded a plane to ours.

The irony and complete lack of fairness is something that did not pass us by and will haunt us until the day those girls, we watched being kidnapped, are safely returned to their homeland.

Thank you.

I now welcome Bec Abraham.

## **BEC ABRAHAM**

Makom BaLev means a Place in the Heart and it really left an impression on all of us. Due to confidentiality reasons, we weren't able to capture many photos but I hope to do it justice through my words alone.

Makom Balev is a treatment centre for young women aged 16 to 26 to assist women who have found themselves on the streets and involved in prostitution. Despite all of our frequent visits to Israel, Makom Belev unveiled a side of the country that often remains hidden from view to us in the diaspora. It's a reality that might challenge the image we typically associate with Israel and one that's certainly difficult to acknowledge. It is hard to imagine our Jewish sisters facing homelessness, struggling with addiction or trapped in the cycle of prostitution. This is not the kind of place you will see when you go on a regular visit, but it is the kind of place that WIZO jumps at the opportunity to support.

At Makom Belev, approximately 50 young women receive professional counseling and support tailored to their individual needs. The vocational rehabilitation programs are designed to cater to each resident's unique talents and aspirations, empowering them to pursue meaningful employment opportunities. The passionate social workers that met with us explained that their rehabilitation programs are meticulously tailored to the unique needs and circumstances of each individual. There's no cookie-cutter approach, instead, every aspect of the program is personalized to ensure that it resonates deeply with the person it's designed for. We could see and you can imagine how held and supported the girls feel as they walk through those doors.

The women are given opportunities for education and upskilling, what is popular right now are courses that certify them to give manicures and apply false eyelashes and we understood that these things can be transformative for these individuals at this moment in their lives. Sitting on those couches, I realised that it really felt like a home, and not a facility. The workers and volunteers had created an environment where women would not only feel welcome but also cherished. Numerous cozy nooks provided spaces for connection, where they could gather and share in moments of solidarity. Outside there were places to sit together in the sunshine and we saw the beginnings of a vegetable garden, a symbol of growth and renewal probably.

The women that attend have access to essential medical care through referrals to trusted doctors and psychologists. We actually learned that there is a shortage of psychiatrists that specialise in the area. Hearing what a problem it is felt frustrating to us that have it all available in Australia. We kept throwing ideas their way, but it really just showed us how complex the mental health system all is. Again, another part of Israel that we wouldn't normally think about - but luckily WIZO does.

We also learnt that whilst it is not their main focus, they also have emergency housing facilities to provide a safe environment where residents can also find refuge from the dangers of the streets and their lives.

What was really special for us was to be able to donate items to their market days that they have where they able to buy or trade important items to help them with their lives. We did bring some products from Australia - thank you to Boody we brought organic underwear for the girls, Up To The Beat donated singlet tops and Palmers donated moisturisers. Thanks to the very generous donation from Vicky's mum, Mila's catering - we were able to also support the economy by buying products in Israel to donate. From the shuk in Tel Aviv we bought hair elastics, sanitary items, tea towels, kitchenware and other household items that we hoped would be useful to them.

It was abundantly clear that Makom Belev was more than just a place to seek refuge—it is a beacon of hope, and a sanctuary of possibility. With support they would be able to leave there having rebuilt their lives with dignity and resilience. It spoke volumes about the transformative power of compassion and community and I wondered that if WIZO weren't there for those girls, who would be.

I would like to now hand over to Vicki

## **VICKI RYVCHIN**

I always find that once I experience something, I can no longer remember what I had expected it to be like. The real takes the place of the imagined. But I know that I thought about the Nova site a lot. I know we all did. We had seen the images of bloodied young bodies, the faces of pure terror crying out just to live. Noa Argamani. Shani Louk. One story now ending with relief and happiness, the other in permanent horror.

The Nova site is beautiful. Calm. Peaceful. I hadn't expected that. It didn't bring up the immediate feelings of fear and horror one would associate with a scene of mass killing. In a clearing there are rows and rows of young, beautiful, joyful faces. Some of those names and faces we have come to know. Hundreds more died horrible deaths and their names were never known or quickly forgotten. I had expected to find a forest around the site. I guess, something like the tall, thick trees you see around Auschwitz. But instead, there were just thin, spindly, sparse trees. You picture people huddling there in terror, completely exposed, praying that the killers somehow don't see them. But they were like sitting ducks. They didn't stand a chance.

When we came to the memorial in the clearing with the row of photos, I saw something else that I certainly hadn't expected. Gathered around one photo was a family. A mother and father in middle age and 6 young men, perhaps their sons. They were all dressed in white. All religious Jews. And they were all singing. Singing soft, peaceful songs as one of the young men strummed a guitar. The fathers face was in a gentle smile. The mother slowly walked around them in rings reciting psalms. I looked at the photo that memorialised their loved one - Nissim Maayan Levy. In contrast to the rest of the family, he didn't look religious at all. His arms were covered in big, colourful tattoos. A huge, beaming smile. I looked again at the family, and seeing what they had lost, I crumbled into a blubbering, howling mess. I cried so much and so uncontrollably that I felt foolish for intruding on the grief of people I didn't even know. The family looked up at me partly bewildered, partly consolingly. Did I know their son? They seemed to be wondering.

The answer is of course no and yes. I didn't know him at all. But the emotions I couldn't control were because I know, we know, hundreds of families like theirs. And we feel it because we are all one. One heart. They are families just like ours. And we know, having all experienced loss in our lives, having had people we love and expected to be around us forever, taken long before their time. We know the pain of a family in mourning. We know the shiva that never ends for a son or brother lost. I know we each experienced moments that affected us on a deeply personal level. Moments that connected each of us to the full loss of that day.

Moments that took us beyond the statistics of dead and injured and abducted and made us feel the full agony of it all. For me, that was Nova. Reflecting on it all, this experience has forever changed who I am as a person. The way I view Israel and the Jewish people. Personally, I am now, for the first time in my life, lighting shabbat candles and I am deeply committed to supporting the people of Israel through WIZO.

I now welcome Dionne Taylor.

## **DIONNE TAYLOR**

It was important for us to meet with the people whose lives have been impacted positively by WIZO. Through my work I was introduced to an amazing young woman Mazal Tazazo, a 33 year old Ethiopian Israeli and mother to a 9 year old boy and she spent the day with us in Be'r Sheva after our visit at makom balev.

Mazal is also a survivor of October 7. She escaped the Nova music festival where her two friends were murdered beside her. She was struck in the back of the head with a rifle and her once white tshirt was covered in stains of fresh blood. She could feel the terrorists tying her legs together to be taken away as a hostage.

When the terrorists came close to her face to check if she was breathing, she held her breath to fake her own death. This brave act saved her, and she lay there unconscious for two hours before being woken by the smell of the burning fields of Nova. When she woke up she called for her friends only to find that they were murdered. She untied her legs, and ran for her life. She now has a deep scar on the back of her head and her finger is permanently disfigured following surgery.

As hard as it is for her to share her story, she's making it her duty to tell her story for those that can't and to honour her friends.

Mazal's journey of survival started long before October 7. As a successfully functioning woman, her life is credited to the good work of WIZO. She was a child at risk and left a sexually abusive experience as a young child and lived in WIZO accommodation with her mother for years. As a teenager she was rebellious, turned to drugs and alcohol and was once again assisted by WIZO where she was given accommodation and education and they assisted in putting her back on the straight and narrow path.

As a young adult, WIZO identified Mazal had an artistic talent so they assisted her with her education and this year she will graduate as an architect, interior designer and engineer.

As an adult, she met and fell in love with a man who later on turned out to be a marriage of living hell. She experienced repeated domestic violence to her and her son, and when her son was 4 years old she once again turned WIZO for accommodation and support.

As she approaches the completion of her degrees, Mazal shared a story with us and I hope one day her plans can come to fruition and she can achieve her dream. She has designed a refuge home for women at risk who can benefit from the services that she was fortunate enough to receive. Interestingly and by pure coincidence, she named her refuge home 'Lev Echad' which she has now changed to 'Daniel' to honour her best friend who was murdered on October 7.

I will finish off by reading you a message that Mazal sent to me after spending the day with us in Israel which sums up her gratitude to this incredible organisation.

"Thanks to WIZO I learned to love myself. I really learned who I am. I was in a never-ending nightmare without any awareness at all that I was being severely abused. I learned everything there, how to behave, how much I truly deserve love and I went through really bad abuse and really bad psychologically. My childhood was also really, really hard and in the end what saved me is everything WIZO did for me. I would like to thank you and thank WIZO for existing. You have saved not only one soul but forever my future. Taking care of my child also taught me how to deal with really bad situations and how to accept my mother. Because of WIZO so many things in my life have changed, so I say thank you for all of my life, thank you for existing".

Mazal is a survivor because of WIZO.

I now welcome Tracy Fishl.

## **TRACY FISHL**

A feature of our trip were the opportunities we had to visit various, call them, projects that cater to children and families. It was through visiting these projects and initiatives where we saw WIZO's aim to build a stronger, more inclusive society in Israel come to life.

Our initial encounter unfolded at the WIZO **Benghouzi** Daycare Centre in Sderot, its location very close to the Gaza border. Here, amidst the tumultuous backdrop, lies a sanctuary for the youngest members of society, catering to infants and toddlers up to three years old.

Stepping off the bus, the reverberations of nearby bombings echoed threateningly, a stark reminder of the harsh realities endured by these children and their families. It's a scene that starkly contrasts with the tranquility and security associate with dropping our own children off at daycare centers. Here you can see the backpack of the security guard – a gun across his body and his tefillin for that extra protection too.

This centre is built within a complete bomb shelter. Yet, upon entering the center, one is met not with the cold, sterile atmosphere of a typical bomb shelter, but with the warmth and vibrancy of a nurturing educational environment.

Hidden within the walls lies a remarkable haven, seamlessly integrating safety with normalcy. Here, amidst the chaos outside, the children find solace, shielded both physically and psychologically from the ever-present threat of bomb sirens. We were graciously welcomed into a scene of pure joy—a birthday celebration in full swing. Laughter filled the air as the children danced, sang, and embraced each other with an abundance of affection. In the face of adversity, their spirits remain undeterred, a testament to the unwavering resilience of this community.

In the area of childcare WIZO's main objective is to create a high quality, comprehensive support system model that focuses on the interaction of children and parents. Care-givers and allied professionals help the parents develop skills for taking care of their children at home, thus working to prevent the disintegration of the family unit.



At the **Raya Jaglom** Daycare Centre, this ethos came to life. Here, amidst the bustle of urban life in the heart of Tel Aviv, a sanctuary emerges—a Day Care Centre that stands as a beacon of hope for at-risk children, often bearing the scars of neglect and abuse. From 7am until 7pm, its doors stand open, a safe place from infancy to the tender age of four. Several years ago, with the generous support of WIZO Australia, renovations were undertaken. However, in the time since these enhancements, it has become evident that the centre requires revitalisation once more. The rooms are lacking in essential resources, including age-appropriate books, toys, furniture, and amenities. Work is already underway to further identify the specific needs and to work towards providing these essentials. WIZO NSW recently provided funds to establish a sensory room at the centre. This space has allowed for the inclusion of a gross motor program for all enrolled students and is now a highlight of their daily activities.

The final daycare centre that I am going to highlight today is the **Joy Balkind** Daycare Centre in Jerusalem. Named after a giant of a lady who dedicated so much to our collective cause. Our time here truly highlighted the profound welfare requirements inherent within Israeli society and the indispensable collaboration between WIZO and governmental entities.

Distinguished as a hallmark of WIZO's comprehensive childcare model, the Joy Balkind Centre stands as a beacon of hope. These young souls emerge from environments plagued by familial strife, economic hardship, and societal challenges.

The social worker at Balkind cannot currently attend to all those in need. Our sense was that she was needed almost in triplicate. The current state of war and the complexities this has brought into society has only placed more demand and pressure on families and services.

Yet, amidst these challenges, the ethos of dedication and compassion radiates brightly, embodied by the devoted staff, the tender affection of the children, and the palpable sense of communal care that pervades each interaction.

In essence, the Joy Balkind Daycare Centre serves not only as a haven of solace and support but also as a testament to the unwavering commitment of WIZO and its partners to uplift the most vulnerable members of society, one child at a time.

I now welcome Kelly Sacks Coghlan

## **KELLY SACKS COGHLAN**

The Day we visited the massacred kibbutz's still haunts us all. I don't believe you need to stand on the burnt ground or walk through their desecrated homes to feel the true horror Israelis experienced on October 7, however having tour guides who walked us through their family members' homes whose lives were taken a mere 7 months before just further highlighted the incredible resilience and bravery of these people.

On Kibbutz Be'eri Hamas militants massacred, tortured and abducted residents, leaving their homes charred and their community in ruins.

96 civilians killed and 11 taken hostage. Time has been frozen everywhere, leaving overturned relics, children's bicycles, basketball hoops and garden chairs along the streets. In front of the rubble hang photos of the dead and hostages who lived there, in what the survivors unanimously described as a "paradise." An Eden at the gates of hell. Thanks to the Iron Dome, no rockets from Gaza had ever fallen on the houses or injured anyone. Whenever the sirens sounded, everyone went to their shelters with armored windows, often transformed into sewing rooms or children's bedrooms. In most cases, these rooms

contained no provisions, not a bottle of water, even had fewer weapons, and not even a lock. These safe rooms protected them from rockets, not from terrorists.

Whilst walking through the Kibbutz we saw a small group of people releasing yellow balloons into the sky. We stopped to talk to them and they told us they were returning to the same spot their friend and daughter – Carmel Gat was taken hostage. It was her 40th birthday and whilst she was spending it in captivity, her friends were opening a bottle of rose in her honor and singing songs in hope that she would be returned to them safely. These young girls and boys trying to celebrate their friend not knowing her fate – girls and boys just like us. The loss unfathomable, the pain irreversible and the unknown tormenting. What struck us most is that her father was standing with them...his strength and sheer exhaustion displayed on his face – sadly and unbelievably, this is the epitome of Israel at present, a place where your heart can break and can feel hope in a moment. Those that came out of the hell of Gaza captivity at 54 days reported that Carmel did yoga and practiced meditation with the children being held hostage.

We pray for her immediate release from captivity.

Our visit to Kibbutz Kissufim was equally as harrowing. This Kibbutz felt like a silent museum of human and physical destruction. A museum usually showcasing things that happened in the past, these scenes of inhumane tyranny are our generations' Auschwitz. The destruction and debris is testament to the hours-long attack that gutted this once serene haven. It is evidently clear that this was so much more than a terrorist attack, this was a military invasion on Israel, the intention to slaughter, massacre and humiliate. Dreams of a peaceful life with their Arab neighbors obliterated, just like their lives. We had Shai – our tour-guide show us around the burnt down home of his sister, his brother in law, and nephew all slaughtered on October 7. Shai described them as peace loving people who even spoke Arabic with the Gazans who had worked in their homes for years. Shai explained to us that after the IDF entered the Kibbutz they found that the gazan workers had tied thin green string around trees outside the houses that had the most young children. When Hamas entered the kibbutz, they went straight to these homes so they could kill families that had the most future soldiers. I asked Shai who was standing in his sisters home, if he feels her presence and energy.

He responded: “ I am not a spiritual man, I don't believe she is with me. BUT I will live harder and smile more and be even more happy in her honor... else they win and if we die with those murdered on October 7, Hamas wins.” Shai is another living example of a man whose heart was broken but full of hope, all at the same time.

Shai is a true soldier – he does not fight because he hates what is in-front of him, but rather because he loves what is behind him.

A few moments after we walked away from Shai's sister's home, he looked down and found her watch amidst the rubble. It was a moment of time stamped in hell – a moment that truly summed up our experiences visiting the devastated Kibbutzim.

I now welcome Dina Bloom.

## **DINA BLOOM**

We had a long and extremely emotional day in the South. We saw the worst of humanity, the scale and depravity of the massacre, the truly incomprehensible and unimaginable horrors of that fateful day. So a bbq with and for the soliders of the IDF that night was exactly the tonic we all needed.

The base we visited was called Be'eri Army Base which is situated 200m from the Gaza border. There are many bases around the country and since October 7, individuals and organisations can sponsor a bbq to feed the soldiers who are on the frontlines of defending not only our holy land, but the Jewish people. WIZO NSW generously sponsored this particular bbq and it was a standout moment from our trip - filled with immense meaning, connection and inspiration.

Whilst we were bbqing, one thing that really stood out was the other volunteers. I spoke to one from NYC, one from France, one from Canada. Me obviously from Australia. We were all from different corners of the globe and the unity really struck me. After what we saw that day - the brutality unleashed upon the Jewish people, it was so deeply meaningful to be standing there together with Jews who have shown up from all over the world, saying to Israel - you will not stand alone. We are all in this together. I

We spoke to the soldiers, many of whom had been in Gaza. We were overwhelmed by their strength, bravery, courage and selflessness. Speaking to one soldier I met I asked him "was it scary?" Referring to his time in Gaza. He replied "not really, it would have been harder not doing anything".

Speaking of soldiers in Gaza, I want to tell you of another soldier we met, this one not on this army base but recovering from his injuries in Soroka hospital. I'm telling you about him because he had an important message for all of us - he said "go home and tell everyone, you belong to a nation of heroes". And I'm telling you not only because he told me to, but because it's true. We do belong to a nation of heroes.

In another conversation with a soldier he asked "why are you in Israel?" I replied that we are all one, we are here to stand with you and remind you and show you that we are all in this fight together. He smiled and said "thank you, that means so much to us" and I realized how much strength we gave each other. How important it was for US to show up for them, and how important it was to THEM that we showed up.

After we finished dinner on the army base, out came the DJ and for all of us from Lev Ehad, this opened the emotional release valve that we desperately needed. While everyone else was sitting around, eating, standing, chatting, we ran to an open area in front of the DJ and started dancing. He played the song "tel aviv" and we danced and sang the words from the deepest corners of our souls about our beloved Tel Aviv. I have no doubt when any of us hear that song we will be transported back to that moment. Some soldiers came up and joined us and together, dancing on bare soil in an army tent in what felt like the middle of nowhere, these Jewish girls from Sydney together with these brave Israeli soldiers - danced and sang as one. When Jews around the world have vowed "we will dance again", I can now vouch for it. Nothing will break us.

We were taken around the army base to have a look. For many of us this was the first time on an army base and the reality of what an army base really is, hit home. The conditions are hard, there are many many beds to each tent, there is no privacy or personal space. And directly outside the sleeping quarters there were rows and rows and rows of massive tanks. The number of tanks was quite confronting, especially when you think this is just one base amongst many. It put into context the unfathomable amount of money Israel has to spend simply to defend itself and survive.

Whilst looking at the tanks we somehow managed to find ourselves sitting atop one, with a bunch of soldiers singing at the top of our lungs "Am Israel Chai" ..... and how true those words are. There on that tank, in that camp, Israeli soldiers together with Jews from around the world during a fight for Israel's survival - we were the embodiment of Am Yisrael Chai and we felt it.

WIZO provided us an invaluable experience that night, it filled our cups in a way we couldn't have imagined. We got back on the bus for the long drive home and despite, or perhaps IN spite, of one of the most challenging days of our lives, we turned on Am Yisrael Chai, blasted it loud and sang it with more koach and conviction than ever before.

I now welcome Karen Bowen.

## **KAREN BOWEN**

The Israel I just experienced with WIZO on this mission was completely different. I felt the Israel I knew had changed. Construction was at a standstill and people were struggling. Yes there were people still on the beach and in the cafes but the feeling was that of sadness, fear and exhaustion unlike I have ever seen before. I left Israel with a sense of abandonment, feeling why should I be allowed to leave and go back to Australia and they have to stay and fight for the Country? I have made a commitment to WIZO for the future and I think every Jew in the world can do something to help, whether it be financially, going to a rally or speaking up for Israel whenever possible. This mission gave me the opportunity to see the challenges and trauma facing the Thelsraeli people and to realise that it is my responsibility to do whatever I can to support them until peace and security return to their lives.

We have been back for a month now and as this evening comes to an end I would like to offer a reflection. The common theme that Lev Echad experienced each day was one of deep connection for the country and the people. It became clear to us that our focus will be raising money and awareness to support this ongoing , untold trauma, we are committed to ensuring our funds continue to go directly where are they needed in Israel to the people.

We have some special ladies we would like to thank. On the trip, we affectionately called them the bubbies: Lorna and Esther. Lorna, your sense of humor combined with your warmth was the absolute perfect blend. You had us in line, but you also had us in fits of laughter . Thank you for guiding us through this journey with such love and patience.

Esther, having you on the trip was like having our mum with us. You were always there, ready with a hug when we needed it most—and that was often. You were the perfect person to teach us about WIZO. You live and breathe its mission, and now so do we. Nilly, this was your dream, and we hope we made you proud. We aimed to fulfill your vision, and we hope it was everything you imagined, if not better.

I would now like to welcome back Michelle Falk.

## **MICHELLE FALK**

Can all the Lev Echad Women please come up now.

Thank you to each and every one of you for being vulnerable, for sharing your experiences and for being ambassadors for Israel's future. Let us continue to support one another and to drive meaningful change. We are the future and must ensure Israel's future. So in saying that, what are our plans?

- We want to create more missions, like this one, to Israel
- Education in the schools
- Increasing WIZO's membership to our keep our seat in the women's council at the United Nations
- Fundraisers and inspiring events plus much more

How can you get involved?

- If you are not already a member, please become one  
 - Follow us on Instagram and Facebook to keep up to date with what we have planned  
 - And speaking of plans, I am thrilled to announce tonight our distinguished keynote speakers for our annual campaign event. We are very excited to have Alex Ryvchin moderating a panel featuring: Nate Buzz - who I'm sure you have all have heard of, Clammy Fraud who is fighting the anti semitism battle online and Raya Gal. Raya is the head emergency nurse at Soroka Hospital in Israel and dealt with the aftermath of October 7th. The event will be on Sunday 25th August. Lev Echad will also be hosting a private pre cocktail event with Nate Buzz so please save the date as tickets will go on sale soon.

In closing I would like to quote what Anne Frank said in her diary 'The good news is that you don't know how great you can be! How much you can love! What you can accomplish! And what your potential is!'

How wonderful it is that nobody need wait a single moment before starting to improve the world.

Join us in a quest to keep WIZO - the heartbeat of Israel, alive.

In closing please join me to end the event by singing Hatikvah.

\_\_\_\_ SING HATIKVAH \_\_\_\_

The Lev Echad ladies will remain behind if anyone has any questions or would like to chat.

Thank you for joining us. We look forward to a future filled with promise, progress, and profound impact.