

Ahavath Torah members bring Israelis gifts and moral support

ABIGAIL KLEIN LEICHMAN

Over the course of four recent days, 21 members of Englewood's Cong. Ahavath Torah brought tangible and emotional support to Israelis affected by the recent Operation Cast Lead.

"What an extraordinary trip this was for us," commented Englewood Mayor Michael Wildes, one of the participants.

"We saw firsthand a country packed with heroes. We had a chance to walk through the streets of Sderot; to meet with proud Israeli soldiers; see missile casings and scarred city streets where missiles had fallen; feel the resiliency of a nation constantly at war; and taste the dissatisfaction with failed diplomacy and the international 'politics as usual.'"

While in Sderot, the group stayed overnight at its Max and Ruth Schwartz Hesder Yeshiva — where young men commit to five years of Torah study combined with 18 months of army service — and visited its recently dedicated "Kassam-proof" study hall.

"It is especially meaningful for the residents of Sderot to see their fellow Jews from abroad visiting during these troubling times," said Rabbi David Fendel, the rosh yeshiva of the hesder. "It provides them with the hope and strength they need despite the difficulties living under the fear of rocket attacks."

The group visited families that had experienced Kassam attacks and saw a display of many of those rockets when it toured the local police station. It toured



Mayor Michael Wildes and Rabbi Shmuel Goldin give presents to the students at the Amit School in Sderot.

the city's new Magen David Adom (first aid) facility and bought toys for schoolchildren. The largesse was distributed at a school run by AMIT, an educational and social network supported by American fund-raising chapters — one of them based in Englewood.

The visitors also brought pizzas to an army base near Gaza and visited wounded soldiers in the trauma department at Soroka Medical Center in Be'ersheva.

"I felt the focus of the mission should be connecting to the people — the ordinary heroes, the victims of terror,

those who fought in the war or live on the front lines," said participant and coordinator Lee Lasher, owner of Lasher Tours.

"Visitors make you feel positive and stronger, especially when you know they picked up from comfortable lives in New Jersey to come," said Rabbi Seth Mandell, whose son Koby was murdered by terrorists near the family's home in the village of Tekoa in 2001. Mandell, a past guest speaker at Ahavath Torah, accompanied the group throughout the four days.

Ahavath Torah's senior rabbi, Shmuel Goldin, said this was the congregation's 18th mission to Israel. "My goals are always to cement the relationship of our community to Israel, to expose them to as much as I possibly can so that the issues they read about are real to them, and to make them understand the complexities of the situations that confront Israel and make them ambassadors back in New Jersey."

The itinerary included meetings with journalists and Knesset members intended to cast light on divergent points of view. "It gets me angry when people see things simplistically," said Goldin. "Our participants walked away with an awareness of the complexity of the issues, such as what it means to go into Gaza, and what the Obama presidency may portend."

Goldin told the participants over Shabbat dinner that in biblical parlance, "seeing" is to experience first hand, while "hearing" is to understand that experience. "I want them to convince others to come to Israel and to talk about what they saw and what they heard and began to understand," he said.

The changing nature of solidarity missions

ABIGAIL KLEIN LEICHMAN

Organized missions to Israel during and after January's Operation Cast Lead are a different animal from the solidarity missions of the first and second intifadas, or Arab uprisings, in 1987-1992 and 2000-2006.

Back then, groups organized by American synagogues, philanthropic organizations, and day schools aimed to bolster the sagging Israeli tourist industry and show support to its citizens. These extended family-oriented missions dwindled toward the end of the second intifada.

Today's model is mostly smaller groups made up of leaders of organizations — such as the Jewish National Fund and Magen David Adom — that stay for shorter periods of time and have pinpointed agendas that include enhancing their own bonds.

Rabbi Shmuel Goldin of Englewood's Cong. Ahavath Torah said the shul sponsored its first mission in 1991. A second group of about 30 people landed a few months later just as Scud missiles were falling on Israel. By contrast, the Orthodox synagogue's most recent mission was more brief, less structured, and attracted 21 men, as opposed to families or couples as in earlier missions.

"This trip was unique because our missions used to be primarily when no one was coming to Israel," said Goldin. "Now everybody tends to go on their own, so it's a big deal to get a group together. Some of the participants made their own travel arrangements and stayed in their own apartments rather than in the hotel. Many stayed on longer and not everyone came to every part of the four-day program."

In addition, this time Goldin acknowledged that among the trip's primary goals was fostering stronger

ties between the participants.

"An integral part of every trip has been the bonding within the group," said Goldin. "In a community of 750-odd families it's so easy to socialize only with your own group. When you go through intense experiences like this, it is also a wonderful opportunity for the rabbi to speak with the members of the mission informally about things we normally just don't get a chance to talk about."

The social aspect was not an afterthought for participants, either.

"My expectation was to do things I hadn't done before, with a group of close friends," said congregation president Kenny Eckstein. "It was a great success, really a great bonding experience for people who don't get an opportunity to spend significant quality time together with their rabbi."

Goldin said that during Shabbat meals he and his congregants discussed spiritual issues that the previous days had brought to the fore, including the importance of prayer and synagogue attendance.

"Their experiences inspired them to think about critical issues here in Israel," he said, "and the intensity of the experiences also got them thinking about their own



The Ahavath Torah mission participants gather at Herodion, in Gush Etzion, the ruins of Herod's palace. PHOTOS COURTESY MICHAEL WILDES

issues."

Rabbi Seth Mandell, an American immigrant who accompanied the men, said he was moved to observe the Englewood visitors interacting and growing closer to one another over the course of the four days.

"A mission connects the participants in a stronger way, and renews their friendships," said Mandell. "In addition to strengthening the communities they visited, it clearly strengthens the community of those who came."