

Israeli news

Haifa feels empty as residents pass the time in basement shelters

By DINA KRAFT
HAIFA, Israel (JTA) — Danny Goldgeier sets up his legions of plastic knights and dragons at opposite sides of the couch in his family's combination home office-guestroom-bomb shelter, and re-enacts the military action nearby. "The good guys took the weapons of the bad guys," explains Danny, 8.

The Goldgeier family has been spending a lot of time in their small downstairs room encased in reinforced concrete, its one window made of steel sealed shut. Every time the sirens go off — they counted nine on Saturday alone — the family scurries down the narrow staircase and to their relatively safe corner of Haifa.

"I don't know how much safer it is, but it feels safer," says Carol Goldgeier, 49. "Psychologically, particularly for him, it's very good," she says, nodding in the direction of Danny. "He's basically moved in."

Some 80 per cent of Haifa residents have stayed in the city despite the barrage of rocket fire from Hezbollah in Lebanon, according to Mayor Yoni Yahav. But it feels like a ghost town. Streets are mostly empty and many shops are closed, as is the city's usually busy mall and open-air produce market. Only a smattering of people venture out for groceries or fresh air.

Carol and Paul Goldgeier made aliyah from the United States about 20 years ago and have found a comfortable home and community in Haifa, Israel's third-largest city. Carol is president of Ohel Avraham, a Reform synagogue, and services were held in the family's living room last Friday night when the shul closed because of



Israelis stand outside a destroyed building in the Bat Galim neighborhood of Haifa, July 18, 2006. Hezbollah continued to fire rockets at northern Israel resulting in one death and many injuries. Credit: Brian Hender/JTA.

the threat of missile strikes. One of the few times Carol has left the house was to meet a delegation from the Association of Reform Zionists of America that came to visit Haifa.

"Of all the places in Israel that we looked around, this was the best quality of life. We live on a mountain. We live by the sea. When the Galilee is not being bombed, it's beautiful," says Carol, who grew up near Philadelphia in Bucks County, Penn.

Her eldest daughter Hadass, 16, paints a water-color picture of a fairy with deep purple and green wings, and rattles off a list of where friends and neighbors have gone. "Everyone started running away after the first missile hit. I said I didn't want to run away," she says, her fingers pressed firmly on a small paintbrush, making neat, small strokes.

Hadass and Danny have passed the time inside with art projects and movies borrowed from

friends. The local movie rental store has closed because of the fighting. The family doesn't watch much television or movies, but things have changed since missiles started falling on Haifa. "We believe in cartoon therapy," jokes Carol, for whom the bomb shelter is usually her private domain — the home office from which she runs Israel projects for the Gimprich Family Foundation, a U.S.-based Jewish family foundation.

But the sirens and stress grow tiring, and the family is considering taking an invitation to stay with friends in Jerusalem for a few days. At the beginning of August they have a trip scheduled to the United States to visit family and friends.

Tamar, 13, the family's second child, spent the last two weeks at a summer camp run by the Reform movement. "Usually it's the parents calling the children at camp to see if everything is okay. In our situation, it was the 13-year-old calling the parents to see if they were okay," says Paul, 48, an electrical engineer originally from Rockland County, N.Y.

Paul commutes on a largely empty highway to Tel Aviv every day for work. "The strange thing is that I feel more relaxed when I'm here," close to his family and not listening anxiously to the news on the radio, he says. But the uncertainty is hard to take. "We don't what's going to happen next. We don't know when this will end," Paul says.

Tuty and Matisyahu Hochstadt live not far from the Goldgeiers. They too remain in Haifa, preferring the familiarity of the home and city they love so much. "We've been here for all the wars; my son was injured in the army, my husband served in the army and reserves," says Tuty, a Holocaust survivor. "We didn't want to leave Haifa. We have had to run enough times in our lives with suitcases in our hands."

Matisyahu jokes that he has stopped taking out the garbage because every time he does a siren goes off. Driving through Haifa, they marvel at its emptiness. "Look! It's a dead city, you don't see anyone," Matisyahu says.

Behind the headlines

Hezbollah fighting force small, but full of fanaticism and fury

By DAN BARON

TEL AVIV (JTA) — Just a few hundred fighters make up the hard core of Hezbollah, but thanks to its powerful patrons and Shi'ite fanaticism, the Lebanese militia is a force to be reckoned with. And reckoning is exactly what Israel, Western mediators and moderate Arab nations are doing as they try to come up with ways of taming Hezbollah and calming the Israeli-Lebanese crisis.

"One thing is clear to all, and that is that there cannot be a return to the status quo," said U.N. envoy Terje Roed-Larsen in what appeared to be a reference to Hezbollah's years of straddling Lebanon's southern border and menacing Israel.

For now, thanks to the offensive Israel launched after Hezbollah killed eight of its soldiers and abducted another two in a July 12 border ambush, the militia seems to be on the run. Israel says its forces have at least halved Hezbollah's fighting strength.

More than 100 gunmen are dead, Israel says, and dozens of its rocket launchers have been destroyed. But then there are holdouts — chief among them Hezbollah leader Sheik Hassan Nasrallah, who appears to have survived two assassination attempts by the Israeli air force and vows that his group has "surprises" in store for the Jewish state should it maintain its devastating assault on Lebanon.

Hezbollah has only around 600 full-time fighters, but it can quickly mobilize as many as 30,000 "reservists" from among Shi'ite loyalists. Funding is no problem: According to Israel's Military Intelligence, Iran is investing some \$100 million in this round of fighting, with Syria providing logistical support.

There is also evidence Hezbollah has held back on using its most dangerous weapons — Zelzal missiles supplied by Iran and capable of reaching Tel Aviv and beyond, perhaps with biological and chemical warheads — and maintains a network of tunnels and trenches in southern Lebanon where its toughest gunmen lie in wait.

"We are talking about utterly hardened and dedicated fighters, operating largely independent of Hezbollah's high command," said Alon Ben-David, Israel analyst for Jane's Defence Weekly. "Israel should not make the mistake of assuming they are the same sort of ragtag adversaries as Palestinian terrorists." Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert has refused to give a timetable for Israel's military operations, saying only they would end when the two hostages held in Lebanon are retrieved and Hezbollah is "cleared out of the region" — ambiguous phrasing that could be interpreted as requiring either the militia's total elimination or merely its removal from the frontier.

Israel, like the rest of the West, has made much of the need to implement U.N. Security Council Resolution 1559, which requires that Hezbollah be disarmed by the Lebanese authorities.

But no one quite knows how this could be achieved. Lebanon's army is small and weak, made up of many Shi'ite servicemen who would be unlikely to take on their Hezbollah coreligionists.

And messages from the government in Beirut have been mixed. Government officials have both proposed deploying regular military forces in the South and threatened to fight Israel should it mount a full invasion — neither with much conviction.

Israeli news

First person

Despite the fighting, writer finds vacation in Israel remains idyllic

By TOM TUGEND

TEL AVIV (JTA) — My concerned daughter in Los Angeles called me in Israel two weekends ago, shortly before my trip back home. I told her, truthfully, that I had just enjoyed the most idyllic and peaceful weeks of my long life.

Come again? Didn't I know that there was a war on, with missiles falling on Haifa and near the Gaza Strip, and that experts were predicting a regional conflict? Had I been holed up in a Dead Sea cave looking for missing scrolls?

Well, not really. What I was experiencing, as I have many times before, was a confirmation of what I have modestly dubbed Tugend's Law: The perception of a crisis intensifies in direct proportion to the observer's distance. That's not because the media invents or even exaggerates the facts on the ground; it's just that readers and listeners in distant lands lack the geographical and emotional frameworks to place the facts in context.

A joke from the early 1960s illustrates the point. A family had two branches, one living in Tel Aviv, the other in the northern corner of sprawling Los Angeles County. When news of a border incident with Egypt got prominent play in the American press, the Californians cabled their Tel Aviv relatives, "Stay if you must, but send the children here for safety." A year later, when the Watts riots exploded in south-central Los Angeles, some 50 miles from where the American family lived, they received a wire from their panicked Israeli relatives, who urged, "Stay if you must, but send the children here for safety."

One more story, this one actually true. After the War of Independence ended in 1949, I decided to work for a few months on a left-wing kibbutz before returning to the United States. One day I fell into conversation with a highly intelligent kibbutznik who assured me that he would never visit the United States. When I asked why, he matter-of-factly informed me that it was far too risky to visit a country where — as everybody knew — gangsters were continually gunning down innocent people in the streets and lynched Negroes were hanging from every other lamppost. He listened politely while I explained that there were indeed gangsters and lynchings in America, but that the average citizen was unlikely to encounter either one in his lifetime. He didn't believe a word of it.

OK, here's a short report on my Israel stay. It started shortly after the kidnapping of Cpl. Gilad Shalit near the Gaza Strip triggered fighting with the Palestinians, and ended a few days after Israeli planes pounded targets in Lebanon and missiles fell on northern Israel in response to the kidnapping of two more soldiers. My Jerusalem-born wife, Rachel, and I came mainly for a family reunion of her extended mishpoche, accompanied by three of our grandchildren, ages 1 to 6, and their parents.

Rachel's family, the Spitzers, is extraordinarily fecund, and at the grand reunion at the Living Museum Ein Yael, adjoining the Jerusalem zoo, we were welcomed by 85 sabra relatives, spanning three generations and the entire political spectrum. We had had long dinners and conversations with many of them, as well as with old friends, during the preceding week, complemented by interviews with political scientists and journalists, so we had a good sample of the Israeli citizenry.

The warmth and openness of the vast Spitzer clan made our trip, but so did our decision to go for broke this time and stay at the Sheraton Moriah in Tel Aviv. The hotel offers some major amenities. One is a bracing salt water swimming pool. Another is the nearby Panorama restaurant, with generous portions of Israeli specialties. Best of all, we scored rooms with balconies directly facing the Mediterranean and its beaches, which bustle with



The Sheraton Moriah hotel in Tel Aviv, where the writer stayed.

swimmers, joggers, bicyclists, dancers, lovers, paddle ball players and patrons who jam restaurants well past midnight.

Watching all that under a glorious Mediterranean sunset, we felt we were as close to heaven as we were likely to get, despite warnings of a stealth invasion — by jellyfish. What surprised us was that Shalit's kidnapping near Gaza and the Israeli retaliation did not break the mood or stir up our Israeli relatives and friends. Rather, they appeared surprised by our questions and concerns about "another incident down at the border."

The disconnect between the global headlines and the bland reaction among Israelis is rooted in two major attitudes, we were told again and again.

One is a preoccupation with personal and family concerns, the other the need for a certain emotional distance in a society constantly beset by political and military crises. Maya Bar-Tov, the bright and attractive daughter of a cousin and a university student in geophysics, reflected the opinion of other young Israelis when she said, "We live our own lives. We may talk a little about politics once in a while, but it gets boring and we turn to something else."

The sense of national familyhood still exists at some level, but in a weaker form than at Israel's creation, when the country had one-tenth of its current population. A grandson of my wife's sister put it bluntly. "I live in an apartment house where my neighbor may be a Russian, Ethiopian, Orthodox or Iranian," he said. "What do I have in common with them?"

A sense of emotional remoteness from the headlines is Israel's "abnormal normality" — otherwise you go crazy," said Uri Dromi, a retired air force colonel and former emissary to Los Angeles who now

works for the Israel Democracy Institute in Jerusalem. The attitude should be understandable to Californians, Dromi added. "You know that a devastating earthquake will hit you sometime, but you don't think or talk about it at every waking moment," he said.

In a recent poll measuring the happiness quotient of citizens in various countries, Israel ranked near the top, certainly a surprise for a nation and people known as whiners. Yet nearly every relative and friend I met agreed with the poll results. They cited good economic conditions, close ties to family and comrades and a solid faith that the nation would survive. As for the likelihood of peace, real peace, a friend guessed it would take several generations. Another sneered at such wild optimism. "At least another 200 years," she said.

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