



08/02/2006

## Violence pushes woman to Israel

By: Nick Norlen , Staff Writer

**When Israel responded to Hezbollah attacks with air strikes, most people probably cancelled plans to visit the country. Blue Bell resident Ilana Wilensik did the opposite.**

Along with 35 members of the American Jewish Committee from around the United States, Wilensik, executive director of AJC's Philadelphia chapter, traveled to Israel July 16 to 21, in the midst of the conflict with Hezbollah forces situated in Lebanon.

"We went there because of what was happening, not in spite of it," she said. "It was actually arranged within 24 hours." Along with visiting hospitals that housed many of the wounded civilians, the group met with Israeli residents, military members and leaders, including the mayor of Haifa, a hotspot of military activity.

Noting that the AJC is a 33-chapter multinational organization, Wilensik explained that the group was granted such access because of the extensive connections of the director of the Jerusalem office.

According to Wilensik, the AJC was "formed on the premise that in order for the Jewish people to feel safe and be safe, that we must reach out to other communities other religions, other groups, in order to build bridges of understanding and cooperation."

She said initiatives such as the recent trip are intended "to show Jewish communities around the world that we are standing beside them and with them and they are not alone."

Wilensik's recollection of her experience - her first trip to Israel - seems to indicate that the trip had an impact on her.

"First of all, what you see on TV is very different from when you're right there. I expected to be frightened. I expected to see a frightened country," she said. "What I saw was a very determined population who are unified incredibly behind their government and behind their army who are determined to see this through to the end, and who really believe that their very sovereignty was attacked, and that they're are fighting not only for themselves, but for the entire western civilization." Wilensik called the journey "life-changing."

"I think part of it was because I am Jewish, and I was in the Jewish homeland, and this was my first visit. The only tourist place I went was the Western Wall, because I needed to go there."

But despite Wilensik's personal excursion, the trip was no vacation.

"Air raid sirens happened three times in Haifa. One of the times we actually heard the rocket hit," she said, labeling such situations as surreal. "It's like you almost can't believe that it's happening. But again, I wasn't afraid. I felt well-protected. I felt like I was in the wrong place, but not really. Like I was meant to be there. And I would go back in a second. In a second." Part of the reason for Wilensik's willingness to return to a country that has been involved in nearly constant conflict since its inception seems to be a result of her encounter with its citizens.

"Everywhere we went, the minister of defense, the public figures that we met, every one of them said, 'Thank you for coming. It is so meaningful to us that you made this trip.' It totally blew me away," she said, noting people's surprise that she would come at such a time. "People called me brave. And my response to being called brave was, 'We don't live there. I got to come home to my family.' The brave people are the ones that I left behind."

Even though she spent less than a week away from home, Wilensik said she returned a different person.

"It's very interesting. I went to a concert Friday night when I got back," she said. "So I'm sitting there and I have not slept more than 10 hours in that week and I'm sitting in the audience and I'm watching everybody. I just felt sort of melancholy. It remains there. My heart is back in Israel. It's like I left a part of myself there."

Wilensik said some of the experiences are still vivid in her memory.

"There's certain visions that remain in my head. When I was in the hospital in Haifa, we met with a group of people who had been in one of the homes that had been bombed with rockets the week before," she said, describing an injured elderly man whom she met. "The doctor had told me that his kids were in Canada and they were not able to come right away to see him. He was so sad. When I went to hold his hand, he just looked at me and he started to cry. This is a man who is 90 years old. He has seen everything. He was there at [Israel's] birth. He has been there through everything, and then his house gets bombed by an unnamed rocket that just happened to hit his house. And he just kept saying, 'Shalom, shalom, shalom.' In Hebrew, that means peace."

Despite Israel's history of violent conflicts, Wilensik said she thinks such hopes of peace from Israelis aren't simply empty words.

"Although it's difficult to imagine it, it's still a fervent desire of the people of Israel. But it's hard to reason with the unreasonable. It's hard to reason with an organization like Hezbollah that doesn't want to reason with Israel," she said. "They want Israel off the map."

From the lectures of Israeli leaders and military members, Wilensik said she gained a better perspective of the ordeal.

"What I got out of it, too, is 'why now,' and why they are responding the way they are," she said, citing the criticism of many

that Israel is responding disproportionately to Hezbollah's attacks. "People need to understand that this is not a response to a single event. This is a response to six years of events. Six years of being shelled, six years of being attacked. And it gets to be the last straw. We all have our breaking point, and I think Israel got hers."

Comparing Hezbollah's menace to Israel to the threat that al-Qaeda poses to the United States, Wilensik said she wants to use her position with the AJC to put the conflict in perspective for both Jewish and non-Jewish audiences.

"As director, what I'd like to do is speak with local synagogues, Christian organizations, churches, and talk about my visit and what I learned and show the pictures that I took. My personal next step is to bring this home, to make it more of a personal thing instead of a thing you watch on a tube- on a television set," she said. "It's so easy to distance yourself from this. And I want to bring it home."



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