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Federation Hosts Presentation in East Brunswick on Israel Post-Oct. 7

- [By Deborah Melman](#)
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From left, Susan Antman, executive director, Jewish Federation in the Heart of NJ; Dani Wassner; Dan Rozett, director, Community Relations & Israel Engagement, Jewish Federation in the Heart of NJ. (Credit: Deborah Melman)

The Jewish Federation in the Heart of New Jersey held a special briefing on the current situation in Israel on Sunday, Nov. 9 at the Young Israel of East Brunswick. The session featured Dani Wassner, managing director, government and media relations of the Jewish Federations of North America. Attendees came to learn more and better understand the challenges on the ground and explore how the Jewish communities in the United States can respond with empathy and purpose.

Wassner began his presentation with a humorous story that highlighted that being someplace is critical in understanding what is going on there. "If you are not there, it is hard to understand from an emotional, factual, behind-the-scenes, or future perspective." He acknowledged that the last three weeks preceding the talk had been incredibly emotional for Israelis. The remaining living hostages have been returned as well as most of the

remains of those killed. The nation also remembers the nearly 700 civilians, 373 soldiers and 71 foreign nationals killed on Oct. 7, and the 1,600 wounded and more than 250 kidnapped. The nation of Israel also remembered how the Palestinians celebrated the killings and proudly posted YouTube videos of their actions.



Wassner follows up with an attendee after the presentation. (Credit: Deborah Melman)

The happiness of the return of the living hostages is tempered with the memory of the more than 600 soldiers killed in the war and fear that something similar could happen again. “There is worry about what Hamas is doing in Gaza: executions of suspected collaborators and continued hijackings of relief trucks,” Wassner said. “More than 250 convicted murderers number amongst the prisoners released from Israeli prisons. It is hard for the families of those killed to see the murderer of their loved one be released. But we did get the 20 back, and we see the reservists return to their families and life begin to return to normal.” He noted how hard it has been for families and places of business when reservists were gone for extended periods of time.

Wassner then discussed the situation Israel faces on the border. “Hamas is not like Hezbollah,” he said. Hezbollah was compared to wild animals in the jungle and Hamas compared to mosquitos. “You watch out for the tigers and lions, but it is OK as long as they stay where they are. The mosquitos bite every night and are annoying, but you think the animals are the more dangerous.”



East Brunswick Mayor Dr. Brad Cohen and Dr. Penny Cohen. (Credit: Deborah Melman)

The mistaken assumption of prospective danger was prevalent and proved disastrously wrong on Oct. 7. “Israel grossly overestimated Hezbollah, and underestimated Hamas.” Most military and intelligence resources focused on the well-funded and well trained Hezbollah, which Israel was able to neutralize.

The incredible victories taking out senior figures since Oct. 7 was a miracle. The country’s rebels were able to take over and a new leader, who says he wants moderation, heads Syria. The new leader was a former member of Al Qaeda, but says he has left those days behind. “It is a complicated situation, but things look better than they have in decades, and may lead to an expansion of the Abraham Accords,” Wassner said.

The Iranian-funded Houthis in Yemen also present a problem. Their missiles may not be highly accurate, but create fear for airlines when aimed in the vicinity of Ben Gurion airport. The airport closes from time to time, causing some foreign airlines to suspend flights to Israel, which has a further negative economic impact on the country. No Israeli has been killed by Houthi missiles, but there has been a great deal of property damage and a significant emotional toll. Fear and lack of sleep prompted by sirens warning to go to safe rooms takes an economic toll as well. Wassner noted that when his family has to immediately go to the safe room, they make plans as to the order in which they will use the bathroom when the “all clear” is given. With warning of a potential siren, they line up to use the facilities before entering the safe room. “Even though the Houthis are not part of the

Hamas ceasefire agreement, they said they would abide by it. Baruch Hashem, they are,” he said.



Dani Wassner presents. (Credit: Deborah Melman)

The miraculous Twelve Day War that stopped Iran’s nuclear program was really a miracle. Israel gained air superiority almost immediately, flew over 1,400 miles and didn’t lose a pilot. They damaged the nuclear program and took out stockpiles of missiles and nuclear weapons. Even if Iran wanted to rebuild their weaponry, they lack senior military and nuclear scientists to put it together. While civilians died in missile attacks, it was miraculous that not a single soldier died in battle.

Moving on to the future of Gaza, it is unknown what governance will look like. We saw Hamas break the ceasefire agreement and Israel responded swiftly and heavily. Hezbollah also broke their agreement once, but didn’t again after seeing the response from Israel.

While the situation for Gazan civilians is tragic, “what we need to keep in mind is that Israel didn’t start or want this war,” Wassner said. “Israel has nothing to gain by civilian deaths, but Hamas does. Hamas has everything to gain by civilian deaths and that is why we see so many.” Non-Jewish military scholars such as Colonel Richard Kemp in Britain and Major John Spencer, chair of urban warfare studies at West Point have stated that Hamas is to blame for what the Gazans are experiencing.

Readiness will be key as Israel looks to the future. The reason aid was able to flow to Israel after Oct. 7 was because groups like Federation were ready on Oct. 6. Israel needs moral and political support in addition to financial. Seeing support by other countries, such as rallies and groups waving Israeli flags, is much appreciated.

Wassner concluded by sharing stories about life in Israel today. A neighbor's son was coming home with a friend for a brief 12-hour leave after Shabbat. His mother asked what special things he would like to eat or do. His reply was that all he really wanted was to wash his uniform items. His mom put out a request on the neighborhood chat group for anyone to help with an additional washing machine. The response was so overwhelming that she told her son to bring as many of his unit's uniforms as possible, and they would all be washed. The uniforms were disseminated and returned, folded and clean, by 6 a.m.

In another story, he told of a funeral procession for a fallen soldier from his community. The entire neighborhood came out to escort the car leaving for the cemetery. Seeing the Israeli flags and support, the grieving mother made the shape of a heart with her hands to show her appreciation. The bookend to that was when one of the returned hostages drove by the community en route to his hometown, people also came out and lined the roads. The returning hostage also made the shape of a heart with his hands.

East Brunswick Mayor Dr. Brad Cohen attended with his wife, Dr. Penny Cohen. "Most people are concerned about the outcomes and situation post-October 7 here and in Israel," he said. "Issues such as security, education and elimination of misinformation still remain. No matter who elected officials are, it is incumbent to begin strong programs of advocacy."