



## **Why I am so proud of Israel**

**August 19 2014**

I arrived recently in Israel to see for myself how Israelis are handling the crisis, and to learn the truth so rarely presented by a biased and uninformed media. I would like to share with you some of the people I've met and in my brief travels, and to extend to Israel on behalf of all Friends of Simon Wiesenthal Center (FSWC) supporters a message of strength and support as they continue fighting on behalf of their country and Jewish people everywhere. Here is what I found:

Despite the attacks Israel is solid. It is no longer afraid. City streets are lined with flags from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem and from Ashkelon to Sderot. Placards splash streets, bridges and buildings celebrating unity, strength and valour.

I was fortunate to meet yesterday with the mayor of the one Israeli city that has borne the brunt of Hamas terror over the years – Sderot. Alon Davidie is a man on the move, mobilizing over 150 youths in his city to take civic ownership by preparing bunkers, helping keep schools and camps running and even doing “Hasbara” - or “explaining” to the worldwide press the plight of Sderot.

Most surprising and impressive to me is the city's increasing population. Sderot has no less than a dozen new residential building projects – entire apartment buildings have been sold and beautiful villas are being built. Defiance is the essence of Sderot and Israel. Rather than running from Hamas missiles, the citizens of Sderot understand that their plight represents something bigger. Sderot is Israel.

But the traumatic pain of Sderot from rocket fire and sirens is not far behind. Will the International Criminal Court, the United Nations General Assembly and the United Nations Human Rights Commission recognize the psychological traumatic injury to the children of Sderot? Davidie shows me a picture his 14 year old daughter painted – a face with empty eyes and hands covering the ears with the word “Stop.” He explains that Sderot is not dealing with post-trauma - just with trauma.

The people of Sderot are solid. The valiant protectors of Sderot are people like Gabie – an incredible fearless man who attends to every rocket attack – by arriving first to the scene and dismantling the rocket. Alongside Gabie is Kfir, the deputy police chief and his team who are sensitive and caring, yet unflinching in their response to the threats that surround the city. Standing by his friend Kfir, Gabie confesses that if he was ever going to go into battle, there is only one person he would trust to cover his back - that would be Kfir.

Sderot's secret is Israel's secret: teamwork. The mayor, the IDF and the police are intimately connected with one another and trust each other implicitly. They are family. They are friends and they have a common enemy that wants to murder them. That enemy – Hamas – built a tunnel just 500 meters from Sderot. A massacre was being planned and scheduled for Rosh Hashanah, the first day of the Jewish New Year, when everyone would have their guard down.

But this time, the people of Israel are aware. They remember the surprise attack in 1973 on Yom Kippur – a war that nearly shook the nation to pieces. The Nahal Battalion I visited on the border of Gaza is ready for battle should it receive the order. The young soldiers told me courageously that they are not scared, that they are ready to protect and defend their home land. They are solid.

And oh how appreciative are the injured soldiers we visited in Barzilai hospital in Ashkelon. Despite their injuries, many of which are permanent, they are neither angry at the state or themselves. They feel proud and privileged to have fought to protect their country in a war against a terrorist entity that seeks their destruction.

But here is the lesson in all of this. None of the people with whom I spoke want a war. They prefer peace. But they are united in their belief that preserving democracy and their freedom is a sacrifice without option. How can they permit Hamas to fire rockets at defenceless children in Israel?

And everyone understands that the war for Israel is not only a physical confrontation –but an ideological and moral one being fought on the world stage. And so, the most significant aspect of a briefing at the Israeli Foreign Ministry when I was there dealt with the circling crows at the United Nations and its anti-Semitic affiliates who seek out Israel's demise.

Israel's capacity is huge – and the defiance and solidarity exhibited by everyone today was inspiring. That solidarity has translated into millions of non Jewish friends who have an understanding that in the same way that Sderot stands for Israel; Israel stands for the free world. For this reason- and so many others, I am and will always remain immensely proud of Israel.

Shabbat Shalom. Am Yisroel Chai VeKayam.