

## Local Community Welcomes Israeli Families Seeking Respite

By [Barbara Dab](#)

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Nashville's Jewish community welcomed six families last month from kibbutzim located near the Gaza border. The families will remain in Nashville for two months, allowing them some respite from the near constant bombings and chaos unfolding in their region. The program was conceived, planned, and executed by Itay Reshef who lives and works in Nashville, but is originally from Israel. "After October 7 it was hard for the Israeli community and the Jewish community to see what was happening and not be able to do anything," he says.

Reshef, along with Avigal Soreq, had three main objectives for this program. First, they wanted to make a direct impact and provide significant relief for the families. They wanted to provide the local Jewish and Israeli communities with an opportunity to engage with Israel. And they wanted to provide an opportunity for the Israelis to tell their stories to the local community.

The program provided the families, all with young children, with flights, housing, transportation, schooling for the children, and other necessities while they are in Nashville. Jewish Family Service paired each family with an Israeli host family and with an American Jewish family, with the goal of providing comfort, friendship, and assistance.

JFS immediately hosted a welcome dinner so everyone involved could meet and get to know one another. Pam Kelner, Executive Director of JFS, says, "People have been craving ways to help. The goal was to create community with the families, and in just the first week it happened." That first dinner was attended by more than 75 people, both Israelis and local host families. Toni Jacobsen, Clinical Director of JFS says, "It was just a nice opportunity for everyone to get together in a casual way and share information and begin to get to know one another. It also was good for us to let them know we're here to provide support."

Dana Ida arrived with her husband and three young children, ages 11, nine, and six. All are settling in at Akiva school, with funding provided by The Jewish Federation of Greater Nashville. "Everyone is so kind, generous, and wants to help," she says, "It's so reassuring to see this is the hospitality we get."

Ida says before arriving in Nashville, the family was evacuated to a hotel in the immediate aftermath of the attacks. "It was a nightmare. We were evacuated to Eilat and stayed there more than two months trying to rebuild our lives." Ida is from the same kibbutz as Soreq. In fact, his parents are friends with her aunt who, upon hearing about the program, immediately urged Ida and her family to take the opportunity.

Ida's parents and extended friends and family are still in Israel and continue to deal with bombs and sirens. She says one of her closest friends was abducted along with her husband, who was shot and wounded in the attack. "The last we heard, she called for help, but the medics had been hit by a bomb and there was no one to help. We don't know if they are dead or alive."

Ida and the other Israeli families were invited to a Shabbat dinner at Chabad of Nashville and in attendance was United States Senator Bill Hagerty and Tennessee Governor Bill Lee. Ida had the opportunity to speak with them and tell the story of her friends. "They were so nice, kind, and willing to hear my story. It warmed my heart. I was overwhelmed," she says.



Jewish Family Service hosted Shabbat dinner for the newly arrived families and their hosts.

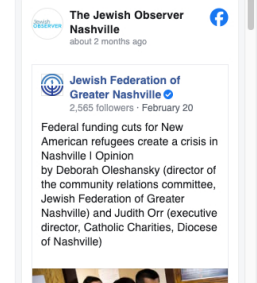


Students at Akiva School play with their new friends and classmates from Israel.

While they are in Nashville, Ida says they are provided a membership to use the facilities at the Gordon Jewish Community Center. She has been taking advantage of the gym and the indoor pool. The generosity has inspired her to volunteer at Akiva. Other of the Israelis have volunteered in other ways, such as helping staff of The Federation make calls to victims of the recent tornadoes who may need assistance.

For the Israeli host families, helping in this way is providing them with much needed connection to those back home. Anna Brameli and her family relocated to Nashville from Israel eighteen months ago while she is working on a fellowship in pediatrics at Vanderbilt Medical Center. She says before October 7, she felt separated from politics and life in Israel but now that has changed. "Before the war we felt privileged to not be part of the political storm that was happening. But since then, suddenly, I felt drawn back, like a true Israeli," she says. "I'm in both places. My body is here but my mind and heart is there."

Brameli is enjoying the camaraderie of Israelis who she says have similar experiences that are uniquely Israeli. "It's so different here. Parents want structure and scheduled activities for their kids. In Israel things are more intuitive. On the kibbutz we all know each other and everyone looks after each other's kids," she says. Brameli is also enjoying volunteering in Akiva's classes. "I never had much time to come to my girls' school. Recently I had the opportunity to sit with [the new children] and help in class with translating. Just a year and a half ago, my kids were in the same place with learning



English.” She also says she also misses the ease of being Jewish in Israel. “Living in Israel you never think about being Jewish. I miss the feeling of not needing to explain myself.”

When asked whether she thinks some of the Israelis might want to stay longer than their 90-day visa, Brameli says, perhaps. “Some people take this as a chance for a break. But all of a sudden, they might not want to go back.” Brameli says since several of the kibbutzim have been destroyed or nearly demolished. She describes a complicated process where members collectively must decide where, or if, to relocate as a community. Brameli says she and her husband have also considered whether to try and remain in the United States, but the war confirmed for them where they belong. “We’re needed back in our country,” she says, “Despite all the recent turmoil, I’m hoping we can understand we can’t fight amongst ourselves.”

For the American Jewish hosts, participating in the program was a welcome opportunity. Meryl Kraft and her husband, her adult children, and her brother and his family are all participating. “Toni Jacobsen from JFS called to see if we’d help and I didn’t even have to think about it,” she says, “This is something we can actually do. We jumped right on it.”



Nashville's Jewish community welcomes Israeli families at BNA.

Kraft is helping to make her new friends feel at home and provide some distraction for the children. “They’ve seen and heard so much. It’s been so hard to watch what is going on there, I want to do whatever I can from here.” Kraft says the recent tornado was an unfortunate reminder of the war. “Particularly for the kid, the sirens and the noise were traumatic. They don’t know it’s different. That they’re safe as long as they stay in their safe place.”

Meanwhile Kraft has plans for dinners, visits to the zoo, and lots of playdates with her grandchildren. “We asked them what they want to do. Everybody has something they want to do. We want to make sure the kids get together with other kids.”

Reshef says funding for the program came from private donors in the Jewish community and from the Shai Fund, a Christian organization. The Shai Fund is willing to provide for additional families to come and Reshef says they are considering whether to include other communities who want to be involved. “It’s a tremendous amount of work for a community, and we don’t want to burden the local community. We’re considering other Jewish communities, too.”

Ida says the benefits of the program were clear the minute she arrived. “It’s so vivid in my memory. The moment the plane landed, and we walked through the tunnel to the baggage area, I saw everyone waiting for us. I felt I could breathe again. I finally felt safe. It was such a powerful experience. There’s nothing worse for a mother than feeling like she can’t protect her kids.”

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