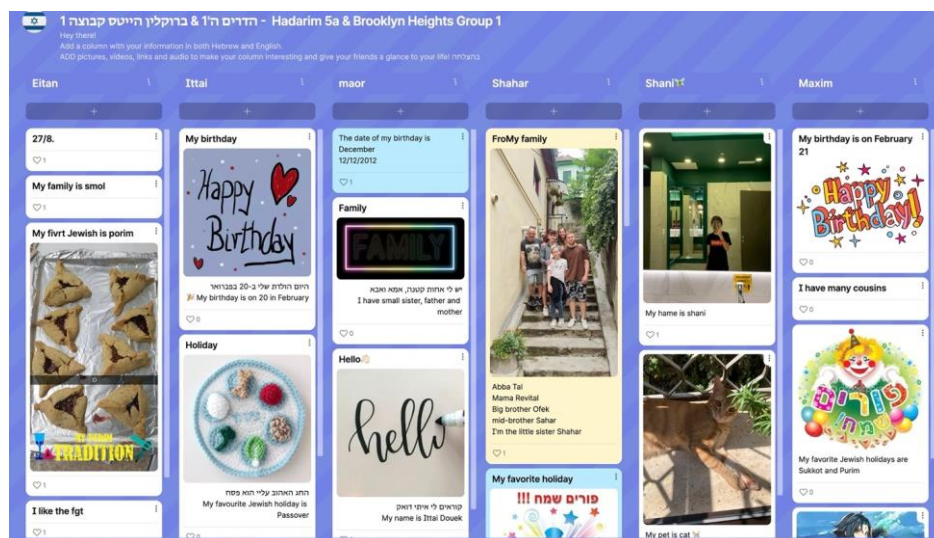
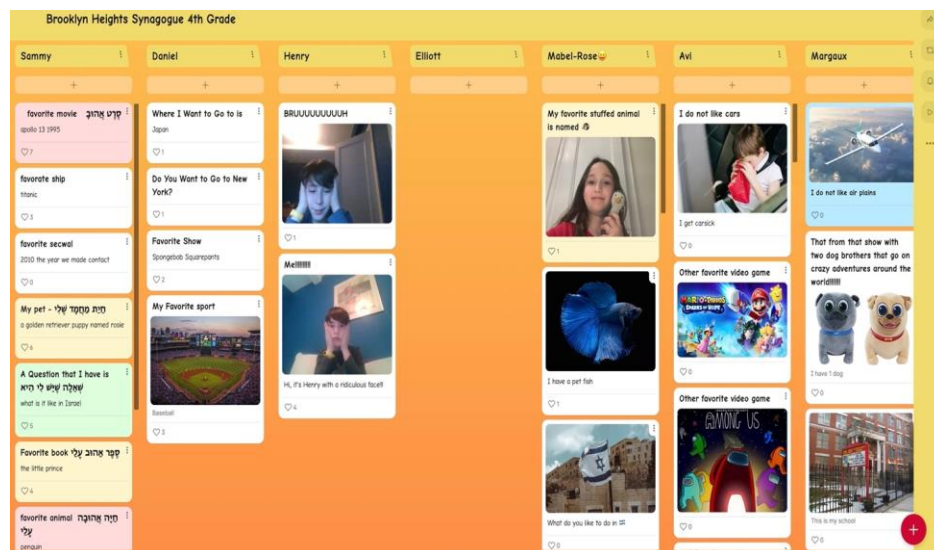


## Katie Rein's Mission Israel Trip January 2024 Reflection

Brooklyn Heights Synagogue together with the Israel Movement for Reform and Progressive Judaism (IMPJ) participate in the *Yachdav*'s educational twinning program which matches students in Jewish supplementary schools, grades 4-11, with their peers in Israeli Reform Jewish schools.

BHS began our *Mifgash* (encounter between Diaspora Jews and their Israeli peers) Program with the Hadarim School in Rishon Lezion, Israel in 2016. Our 4th graders along with 5th graders in Rishon Lezion come together two times a school year on a virtual call to learn about what life is like for 4th and 5th graders in Israel and in Brooklyn. With the help of our BHS Faculty and the Israeli teachers, students prepare questions in English and Hebrew, share pictures, stories, play games and converse with their peers. The goal is to begin fostering a relationship for our students with Israel. Below illustrates the padlets that our students create before the virtual call.



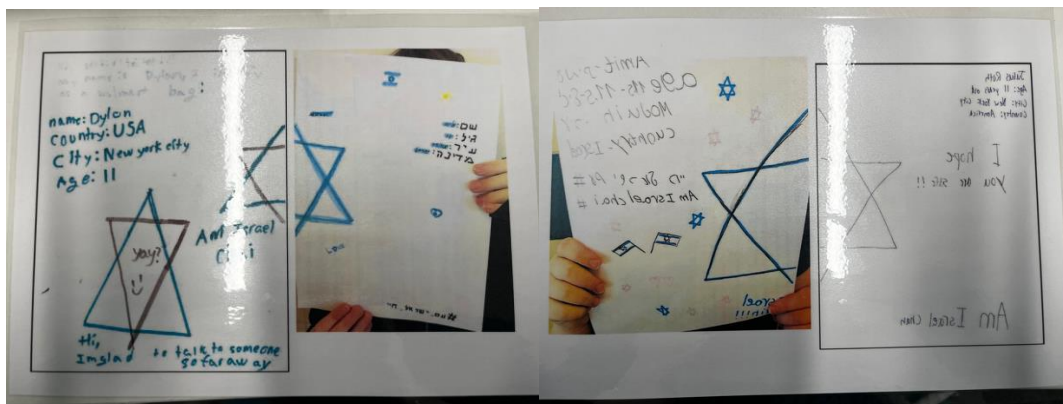
## Katie Rein's Mission Israel Trip January 2024 Reflection

When the war in Israel broke out post October 7, during Religious School when we asked how our students were doing and if they knew anyone in Israel, they shared that they knew kids there from the *Mifgash* Program. Unfortunately Rishon Lezion was one of the harder hit communities in Israel, located 5 miles south of Tel Aviv and 34 miles north of Gaza. Our peer students were only able to safely return to school until December because their school's building did not have enough *Mamadim* (safe rooms that are meant to protect individuals from bombs and rockets). When they did, the school was split into 2 groups, one attending their regular school and the other students at a local university campus to ensure classes could continue despite rocket fire.

In early October, I came together on a zoom with the Israeli faculty expressing our solidarity and asking how to help at a time of such national trauma. The teachers were concerned as to how they would return to school to teach when many of their family members or previous students had been called to *Miluim* (reserve duty) or had been killed in the massacres on October 7th. Oren, the male teacher photoed below attended 5 *shivahs* in just one day. Together we brainstormed ways to show our support and the #amyisraelchai project emerged. Our students made half of a photo and the students in Israel the other half. Below shows the picture of the final project. BHS students also wrote letters to Israeli soldiers that Cantor Porzecanski distributed to wounded IDF soldiers in December when she was on a mission trip. However, we still wanted to do more.



## Katie Rein's Mission Israel Trip January 2024 Reflection



In January, I was generously given the opportunity to travel to Israel with a group of Reform and Progressive Rabbis and Educators from Manhattan and Brooklyn on a trip organized by the UJA Federation of New York and the Brooklyn and Manhattan *shchlim* (emissaries) Elad Bar Ilan and Gali Rabin. Together we spent 4 days traveling through some of the hardest hit communities and bearing witness to the atrocities of the attacks and meeting with the many individuals who have helped others at such a difficult time. This included two of the teachers from Hadarim School as well as two staff Members from the IMPJ. They shared with us that us coming to Israel felt like a hug from the international Jewish community. In an effort to extend this hug, our faculty in the upcoming weeks will be joining a zoom with the faculty from the Hadarim School to share about their experiences as teachers, parents and citizens who face many similar challenges in the classroom on a day to day basis but also to extend our *Mifgash* beyond just the students to the faculty as well who work with such passion to educate our children. At the beginning of March our 4th graders will zoom again for the first time this year with their 5th grade peers in Israel.



## Katie Rein's Mission Israel Trip January 2024 Reflection

Upon returning from Israel, Rabbi Yael Katz from the IMPJ joined our 6th graders at BHS answering questions about life in Israel, life for soldiers and mostly explaining to our students the notion of the time difference and why we had to partake in the *Mifgash* on Sunday mornings in lieu of after school.



I share my experiences with you through the lens of education to express that little gestures truly make an impact on those in need. I invite you to think about the subtle ways in which you help our children make sense of the world especially in difficult times and how you can be a helper too. Below you will find a bit more of a recap from my peers and I of the mission trip for those who are interested, I am happy to converse with you as well, please reach out to me.

**Letter and photos from Mission Participants:**

We are writing this on the last day of our mission in Israel with hearts full of gratitude. It has been a meaningful, thought provoking and deep few days. At each stop on our trip we felt like we wanted to slow time and that we could spend several hours with each person we met. There is so much to say, and so much we will continue to say as we process and bring back this journey to our communities but we wanted to take a moment to say thank you and highlight two major pieces of our trip that have been so gratifying. The first is the thoughtful choosing of our group specifically; it has been such a gift to spend time with other young Jewish community leaders who are engaging in the same questions we are, holding the same grief, and dealing with similar challenges and complexities in our own communities; what a breath of fresh air to spend time in that nuanced and emotional space together.

The second is the thought and care that went into choosing each destination in our journey. We were able to meet with activists, thought leaders, national heroes, and truly kind hearted individuals who are all working to advance the democratic ideals of Israeli society. We said over and over again that each incredible person we met is giving us strength and hope for the future, at a time when hope feels very hard to come by. We also want to say a HUGE thank you to Elad and Gali for their thoughtful leadership and open-heartedness in guiding us and being willing to share their own experiences and grief with us. Their unique perspective as Israelis who live in America and who are embedded in our communities was invaluable, bridging us to one another and the incredible people we met over the past few days. Their sensitive presence was invaluable. Truly no amount of words can capture what an impactful and meaningful experience this has been, so we are each enclosing a picture and snapshot of one small moment in a sea of many moments that we are thankful for. Thank you for your generosity in sending us here and investing in us. We are looking forward to sharing these experiences with our home communities.

**From Katie Rein, Director of the Religious School at Brooklyn Heights Synagogue:**

I saw Heaven and Hell in one day and in multiple ways. The slumped shoulders of Israelis, the exhaustion on the faces of adults, how Israelis in the south have normalized the booms from artillery and the quiet streets of Tel Aviv and Jerusalem all shook me. It is important to paint a picture of the reality that I've been seeing and experiencing and acknowledge that Israelis and Palestinians, Jews and Muslims will continue to live together on the land here. It's unclear the way forward, but gratitude always helps me, so I've chosen to start there and share that perspective of my trip with you via some of the people we were gifted to meet and be in dialogue:

-to Elad and Gali, our Shlichim for organizing a trip that was not intended for their Shlichoot and who did it with such grace, honesty and determination to help us envision an Israel of the future and to show us the multiple faces of the people here

## Katie Rein's Mission Israel Trip January 2024 Reflection

- to Asaf, our Israeli tour guide who's humor helped and his attitude of gratitude for a few days out of his new job at a bakery and back into tourism for the first time in 85 days
- to the Abu-Arara family's orchard who allowed us to help harvest their clementines
- to Gil, the Israeli intelligence officer who finally left a career in the service to resume a civilian life to be with his family in August, who has now been back to work for 3 months and shared sushi with us and his experience with a smile
- to Raoul, Itamar and Alon, who have been working tirelessly with Omdim Beyachad (Standing Together) who envision peaceful ways of being and who embody that daily in their work and their reminder that to ask ourselves, "is what we're saying helping or hurting Israelis and Palestinians and if it's not helpful to please stop" (check out their website [here](#))
- to Michael Bauer, educator, Geopolitical lecturer and father for guiding us in the south in Sderot, Kibbutz Beeri, Shuva Junction, Nova Music Festival site and for his work dedicated to history and understanding the complexities of the region
- to the living members of Kibbutz Be'eri who wake up every day to a continued nightmare and choose to show us their home and share their story because it matters all while being displaced from their home and living at hotels. And to the member of the kibbutz who choose to still get married after the massacre, having gone to 40 funerals and sitting 40 Shivahs because it's what his parents would have wanted, bless you
- to the Shuvim Ochim at Shuva Junction who make 3,000 meals a day, provide clothing, a smile and a hug for IDF soldiers entering and exiting Gaza and the opportunity to sit and have lunch there and witness humans helping humans (check out their website [here](#))
- to the teachers and staff at Hadarim School in Rishon LeZion for their ability to go to work every day and teach children while living through a national trauma
- to the food, oh the Israeli, tasty and plentiful food and the chefs and the people who volunteer to make food for the displaced people (check out [Citrus and Salt and Citizens Kitchen](#))
- to Givat Haviva's staff, Michal Sella and Muchammed Darawshe for their work in bringing together Arabs and Jews in culture, art, language and a boarding school for Israeli, Palestinian and international teens
- for the Israeli by citizenship and Palestinian by heritage high school student from Givat Haviva, who's father, a police officer in a northern village recognized trouble and drove to Sderot on October 7th and helped fight terrorists while the police station was burned down, who continues to go to school every day in a hope for living and learning together
- to the families at Kikar Ha'chatufim (Hostage Square) a place that should not exist but that work endlessly to bring awareness and conviction to the hostages and the work they do to demand their return
- to Shira Eting (a former combat helicopter parent, mom, wife, Investor and speaker from Brothers and Sisters in Arms) for her petite size and mighty power (watch her interview from 60 minutes [here](#))
- to Roy Neuman and Shikma Bresler, leaders of the civil protests that ran for 39 weeks against the judicial reform

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- to Yazid our bus driver from Deir Chana a town in the north who has been without work as a bus driver for tourism for the the last three months and who has transitioned into a public bus driver
- grateful for Rabbi Becca, Rabbi Hayley, Rabbi Yael and Luka to witness these atrocities and moments in our history together
- to Ismail Elkarnawi, a Bedouin who understands humility, humanity and chose to save over 40 lives on October 7th with three of his family members (watch his story [here](#)) who lost family members on October 7th
- to Chatam from [Desert Stars](#) for her hope, vision and help for the Bedouin community of the Negev who lost friends, colleagues and family on October 7th
- to my staff at BHS who allowed me to come so I can share



**Rabbi Hayley Goldstein, Park Slope Jewish Center**

I feel so deeply grateful for this experience to bear witness to the pain of my people in this moment. It's one thing to read and doom scroll, it's another to be here and cry with people, talk to people. I have been so grateful for the wide range of perspectives we've heard from, and I feel like I am coming back to the states much clearer about my position and what I think we need to do as liberal American Jews to support Israel and Israelis.



**Rabbi Becca Weintraub, B'nai Jeshurun**

The very first thing we did together as a group was join Nadi Abu Arara to pick oranges. After 4 intense days of feeling hopeless and hopeful, broken and whole, confused, sad, inspired, and overwhelmed, I look back at this photo and realize how Nadi and his pardes (orchard) are a microcosm of the nuance and complexity we hold during these cruel and challenging times. Nadi and his family are Bedouins, they lost family on Oct 7th and they have family in Gaza. Nadi loves and works the land. He has deep and meaningful relationships with Jewish Israelis like Elad. His family has been working the land for years and years. We were there to help because all of the field workers, a mix of Thai farmers and Palestinians are no longer there to harvest the fields. The large majority of the Thai workers left on Oct 8th worried that they too could be killed or kidnapped. The Palestinians are no longer given work permits to enter and work in Israel. Nadi said they are suffering without an income. Some can't even get food. Nadi even sends some of them money. We picked oranges and we were not nearly as skilled as his workers. Nadi appreciated the support and it made me think about our role in all of this as American Jewish leaders. The orange trees are full of oranges ripe and ready yet there is no one to pick them. Soon they will go bad which does not only impact the trees this year but also next year's fruit and perhaps the fruit for years to come. In so many ways it feels like the oranges we picked and held represent the pain, fragility, complexity, and nuance of what is happening both in Israel

## Katie Rein's Mission Israel Trip January 2024 Reflection

now, how it will impact the Israel of the future, and the question of our role as American Jewish leaders in helping to harvest the Israel of today in order to plant the seeds for the Israel of hope, equality, dignity and maybe even peace we dream of and work toward building for tomorrow.



**Luka Dubnick, Engagement Coordinator at Kane Street Synagogue**

It's so difficult to incapsulate this trip in a few words or an image. At Kibbutz Be'eri, Lotan, who had lost his home and both of his parents-in-law, demonstrated such strength as he walked us through the kibbutz that had offered him so much. "If you look in this direction, you can still see the Be'eri as a Gan Eden," he shared. "And one day it will be a Gan Eden again."

Even as we heard gunshots and missiles, with the potential for war to drown out his story, Lotan shared "our history teaches us that we are good at rising again, but we can't do that without the help of the Jewish community." The purpose of our mission had never felt clearer. "We feel the hug of the Jewish community, your visit gives us that." Hearing these words made clear what I couldn't quite figure out. Amid hopelessness, the simple act of being there provides strength. It gives people like Lotan proof that we care and they matter, and we are committed to Be'eri rising again. Lotan is one of many whose stories shaped my first trip to Israel. I came away from this experience with a strong sense of Israeli resilience. I am so grateful to have had this opportunity.



**Rabbi Yael Werber, Congregation Beit Simchat Torah**

I have been struggling with how to capture anything at all worth saying in a snapshot or a picture. It feels hard to capture nuance and depth in a phot, so instead I am sharing a moment where I felt extremely moved. In kikar hachatufim where I felt we were all able to see ourselves as someone with a loved one missing, the heartbreak is beyond words. I feel grateful for the opportunity to come to Israel and feel deeply, to feel the loved experience of everyone living in the land here, and hopefully in some small way to let people know they are not alone.

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