

# TBM volunteers witness weight of war on Israeli civilians

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A rocket hit Leora's high-rise apartment building in Israel, but she found protection in her "safe room."

Later, one of her three adult children came to her apartment in blood-drenched clothes before leaving again. He soon returned a second time in bloody clothes, needing to change again.



Leora, an Israeli citizen, was in her high-rise apartment building when a rock hit. She shared her story with Texas Baptist Men volunteers when they delivered food to a hospital in Ashkelon, about 10 miles north of Gaza. (TBM Photo by Doug Hall)

The Israeli woman shared her story with Doug Hall, who served on the second Texas Baptist Men volunteer team cooking meals in Israel since the

war began.

“There’s an obvious weight of war that sits over the country all the time,” Hall said. “It affects everyone.”

Hall met Leora when he and other volunteers arrived at a hospital in Ashkelon, about 10 miles north of Gaza, to deliver food. Twenty-nine TBM volunteers in two teams worked in the first few weeks of fighting. A third TBM team arrived in Israel this week.

“We spent maybe 30 minutes talking” to Leora, Hall said.

On the first day of fighting, a rocket hit the lower part of her apartment building and “wiped out a market that she visited three or four times a day,” he added. After spending about 10 minutes in her safe room, the woman went downstairs to help the injured.

On the first or second day, her son arrived wearing the bloody clothes. Leora was “obviously emotional when she would speak about that because you’re seeing your son return, then he walks right back out the door and goes out to be involved in the fighting,” Hall said. “And then he comes back later and says, ‘I need some more clothes.’ And then disappears again.”

The son had been “helping wounded and dying people, dragging them out of harm’s way,” Hall said.

After the first days of conflict, the children of the woman at the hospital were all safe and none of her family members had been injured or killed.

“She had gone to several funerals of kids that were at the concert that you saw on the news,” Hall said. “Her children had friends that were at that concert, so she went to their funerals.”

# **‘Always felt safe but I never felt at ease’**

TBM volunteers do not get involved in the issues behind the conflict. “We were there to provide help and hope to the folks there, whoever it was, whether it was Israeli, Palestinian, Arab; it didn’t matter,” Hall said.



Doug Hall (left), a member of Community Life Church in Rockwall, and Mike Shumock from Hattiesburg, Miss., served with TBM in Israel. (TBM Photo)

Though in a safe location, the volunteers still caught glimpses of the war.

“We would hear the rockets,” Hall said. “We would hear the booms in the air.”

A team driving to Tel Aviv one evening “saw an interception of a rocket by Iron Dome,” which involves Israeli missiles intercepting rockets intended for populated areas.

Since returning to Texas, Hall often receives questions about whether he felt safe.

“I always felt safe,” he said. “But I never felt at ease, because there is a constant presence of the reality of war and the fact that for centuries war has raged over the land.”

The war is ever-present in the minds of the people who live in Israel and Gaza, while the volunteers work preparing up to 3,000 meals a day.

Hall told of the long days of work faced by TBM volunteers. They rose early, some by 4:30 a.m., with a devotional at 6 a.m. After prayer time together, the volunteers ate breakfast and then started cooking, which continued until early afternoon.

After a light lunch, Israeli and TBM teams delivered the sandwiches and meals “to wherever our Israeli partners said they needed them,” he said.

“Sometimes we wouldn’t get back from that until 5:30 or 6 p.m. or even later,” he said. When there were evening cooking opportunities, volunteers didn’t return until 8:30 or 9 p.m.

## **‘Thank you for coming’**

As the Americans encountered people living in Israel, a pattern emerged in the response they received. Hall recalled being in a market one evening when a woman approached him along with her son and his wife and infant. The young man, about 18 or 19 years old and in the military, had his weapon with him.

The TBM volunteers tended to stand out when in public, especially when they were together as a group. The woman asked him “who I was and why I was there,” Hall said. “So, I told her we are with an organization called TBM, and she kind of looked at me then asked, ‘What does that stand for?’

Hall explained that TBM is a Christian volunteer organization that helps people whenever there’s a disaster or a problem.

“And that, you could see, registered, and she reached out and touched me and said, ‘Thank you for coming,’” Hall continued. “Every person that we encountered like her, the conversation would always end, ‘Well, thank you for coming.’”

TBM is “providing help, immediate help with food, and hope” to people in Israel, and it moves them to know “they have a partner, a Christian partner,” Hall said.

“We may not ever see the ultimate healing that we normally look for,” he continued. There are few opportunities in Israel right now to actually share the gospel with people, “but they do arise in intimate conversations with various people,” he said.

“Certainly, we provide the help that everybody is used to seeing TBM provide and then, from our conversations, I do know that they would see that as us walking alongside them and providing some hope as well, that they weren’t standing alone.”