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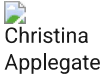
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Opinion / Columnists

HERSCU: Seeing Israel through new eyes after week witnessing hope, determination

As a Jewish Canadian, I have always thought I understood Israel. But this trip was different.

Corey Herscu, Special to Toronto Sun

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Corey Herscu is a full-time consultant with Daisy Group

I just returned from a week in Israel: Seven days that went by in a blur but felt like a lifetime.

STORY CONTINUES BELOW

As a Jewish Canadian, I have always thought I understood Israel. I’ve been raised with stories, history and resilience in the face of hardship. But this trip was different. I went on a mission designed for non-Jews to see and experience Israel — to strip away assumptions and see the country, in this moment of pain and resilience.



We went from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem, and south to Kibbutz Kfar Aza, near the border with Gaza, the same community that was torn apart on October 7. I met a survivor whose family miraculously survived and despite losing his home to fire, he somehow hadn't lost himself — he continued to smile through the grief, and it was impossible not to feel it all with him. Hugs and tears, talking through a tragedy that we stood in the middle of like it happened just the day before.

There's something about Israelis that defies despair. Even in the most broken places, they find ways to rebuild.

Time with IDF and at Nova Music fest site

While in the Gaza envelope we had the chance to spend time with IDF soldiers taking a break from a few months of active duty: One was of Arabic descent, one was African American, one Sri Lankan, another Catholic Argentinian. However, all were in the same brigade, brothers in arms, fighting to protect the country they call home



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When I stood on the grounds of the Nova Music festival site, I could still feel the pulse of what had happened there: The terror, the chaos, the fear, the innocence shattered. The ground is sacred now. People come quietly, leaving flowers, candles, flags, and messages of love. Standing there, surrounded by deafening silence, I thought about how quickly the world had moved on. How easily the narrative had shifted from the horror of that day to a distorted version of who the victims were and who the aggressors were.

That distortion is what angers me the most.

While in Tel Aviv, I had the chance to sit with members of the IDF — we had just finished a screening of the edited “October 7th” film — when news broke about another incident happening in real-time in Gaza. I watched as misinformation began spreading online, before the soldiers even had all the facts themselves. They knew what was coming: Propaganda, malicious headlines, and harmful accusations. I could see the exhaustion on their faces. Not just from battle, but from the constant fight to break through with the truth. There is something very unfair about watching people defend themselves from lies as much as they must from rockets.

STORY CONTINUES BELOW

And yet, despite all the lies and misinformation online, offline I saw hope everywhere I went. In Tel Aviv, the cafes were full again. As I ran along the boardwalk one morning at the crack of dawn, young Israelis were dancing in a fountain — you could feel a pulse of defiance, a collective decision to live. The pride was/is palpable. Israelis aren’t waiting for the world’s approval to heal — they’re doing it themselves, one song, one smile, one Shabbat dinner at a time.

Visited kibbutz hit by Hezbollah

We travelled north to the Lebanese border and visited the kibbutz hit by Hezbollah rockets. Although the death toll was lower, the

were killed playing soccer in July of 2024. On arrival, we saw kids playing as if nothing had happened, though shrapnel cut through some of the fencing, construction is underway to rebuild the pitch damaged by the rocket, partially financed, with love, from donors in Canada and Italy.

STORY CONTINUES BELOW

Despite its big city traffic, Jerusalem remains quieter, heavier and more spiritual. Regardless of religious beliefs, there is something very meaningful about experiencing the old city first hand: Taking the same steps Jesus took, walking through the Temple Mount, and standing at the Western Wall, stuffing a note of prayer and pressing my hand against it thinking about my late father, my family, and about a generation of Jews who dreamed of returning. It’s incredibly deep and meaningful to be around so much hope, prayer and vibrance.

When I boarded my flight home, I carried more than just memories. I carried a renewed sense of connection to Israel, to my community, to supporting the truth. I also carried a frustration that so many abroad don’t see what I saw: Humanity, heartbreak, unyielding hope.

Israel is not a headline or a hashtag — it’s a country full of people who get up every morning determined to build something beautiful out of the ashes. And if there’s one thing I learned from seeing it through the eyes of others, it’s this: The story of Israel is not just about survival, it’s about life — loud, messy, joyful life, and the courage it takes to keep choosing light over darkness.

Thank you to Exigent Foundation for bringing me on this sponsored trip.

— *Corey Herscu is a full-time consultant with Daisy Group. He graduated from Toronto Metropolitan University (nee Ryerson) where he studied public relations and communications. A career publicist and growth consultant, Corey helped launch several household tech brands and the legalization of adult-use cannabis in Canada. Corey lives in Toronto with his wife and three kids, his handful-of-a-dog Hank, his shoe collection, and runs hundreds of kilometres every month!*



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