I founded Healing Across the Divides 20 years ago. Its mission is to measurably improve the health of marginalized Israelis and Palestinians via community based interventions. We have funded and provided managerial advice to more than 50 community groups, and we are currently funding 10 groups in Israel and the Palestinian Territories. We used to get the Israeli and Palestinian groups together (neither side would want this publicized). While this doesn’t occur these days we get the Palestinian and Israeli groups together separately. In addition, we encourage cross border community groups to work together. While we don’t have Israeli Jewish and West Bank Palestinian groups working together these days, as you will see below we are funding Palestinian groups from Israel and the West Bank working together. Our mid-term hope is to improve the organizational capacity and leadership skills of the groups we work with. Long term, my dream is that some of the community leaders we support, and each and every one of them is simply amazing, could be tomorrow’s political leaders. In the meantime, we have measurably improved the health of over 250,000 individuals.

We have a representative in Israel (Veronica Vigdorchik) and a representative in the Palestinian Territories (Nehad Fattah). I typically go at least once a year on a study tour done in conjunction with Mejdi Tours but I felt I should go now despite the fact that the horrors with an accompanying personal risk of some degree in the aftermath of October 7th are still ongoing.

Norbert’s FB Posts

Day 1 of my 4 day whirlwind stay in Israel and Palestine. I am here to visit with our staff and to meet with new grantees. Healing Across The Divides always funds one community group supporting African refugee asylum seekers. We are proud to be now supporting the Negev Refugees Center. Over a wonderful Iftar dinner, I met with amazing Israeli staff including Yehudit Keshet and some of the Sudanese leaders of the more than 1000 Sudanese refugee asylum seekers in the Negev (see below for photo). Some of the leaders have been in Israel for more than a dozen years. They are all whole hoping to leave to a third country. In the meantime, they are just beginning their health workshops that we are funding - focussing on the physical and, especially, mental health needs. In the morning I also meet with staff at two NGOs, Physicians for Human Rights Israel. Among many other topics we discussed about how sexual violence against one woman anytime/anyplace is unacceptable.
Day 2: Veronica and I first start at Al Baqour where we learn about an evidence based early childhood literacy intervention that, Al Baqour leaders are implementing. They emphasized the need to engage with the local culture (see photo below). At the same time, the milk and honey or Tipat Halav clinics throughout Israel have legitimacy. That is where the intervention is occurring. Later in the morning we meet with leaders of the Regional Council of Unrecognized Villages. They are implementing psychological interventions geared towards Bedouin women and children in the Negev. On and after October 7, many Bedouin were killed, a number were kidnapped and have not yet returned, and, for example, a bus with 200 Bedouin on October 7 just fled the area towards the Dead Sea. An intense day while appreciating the amazing strength of the women leaders of these two groups. To unwind I went see some art in the evening.

Day 3: Art can save humanity. Years ago, I saw an exhibit by Hadassa Goldvicht in Venice Italy in which she engaged via art with the Jewish community – ancient and modern of Venice – where part of my family is from. We’ve remained in occasional touch, and I saw her this morning. She told me about a popup exhibit that she helped organize shortly after October 7th. She expected no one to come. Instead, the art gallery was completely full; people just wanted to experience an engagement with art, with the
human spirit, during these traumatic days. Afterwards I went to the Jerusalem Print Workshop where the founder (1974) Arik Kileminik, who I’ve known since 1980 when, among other activities, I worked in Jerusalem at Hadassah Hospital as an internal medicine attending physician. Arik is still going strong at 89! Their current exhibit of prints, drawings, and animated films are well worth seeing. I then went to see old and new friends of the Balian Family – founders of Palestinian Pottery. We have a large mosaic artwork by Marie Balian, the matriarch of the family, in our home that we bought when I came with the entire family to Israel/Palestine in 1996.

I spent the afternoon with 2 grantees – Ladaat and Diabetes Palestine/ Ashjuan. The pioneering staff at Ladaat exemplifies what has happened with each and every grantee in Israel, the West Bank. Ladaat focuses on reproductive rights in Jerusalem in a joint effort between Jews in West Jerusalem and Palestinian women in East Jerusalem. They are not only working but going at an even greater pace. The Jewish and Palestinian leaders of Ladaat highlighted their reproductive rights programs to hundreds of students in East Jerusalem together with facilitating abortion rights services for Palestinian women – often under challenging and even perilous circumstances. Together with Nehad and Veronica, our Palestinian and Israeli representatives respectively, we also met with new joint project grantees Diabetes Palestine (based in Hebron, West Bank) and Ashujaan (based in Nazareth, Israel). They will be implementing the Chronic Disease Self-Management Program (CDSMP) developed at Stanford and translated into Arabic. Starting in May, I will be training the Israeli and Palestinian organizations in the CDSMP and they in turn will work with hundreds of diabetics in self-management/empowerment.

In the evening, I had a magical time with Emili and her husband Salim. Emili was one of our Mejdi Tour guides for our annual Healing Across the Divides Study Tour in 2023. Healing Across the Divides in conjunction with Mejdi Tours is having an abbreviated HAtD Study Tour in May. Salim, her husband, is a Palestinian rehabilitation medicine doctor working in a new rehab hospital where the vast majority of patients are Israeli soldiers seriously injured in the current war in Gaza. Magical in the sense that Emili and Salim are two young people who have not given up while deeply appreciating the complexities, are making a difference, and wanted to show me the beauties of Jerusalem from a new vantage point. See for yourself. You can see the Al-Aqsa Mosque and the Church of the Holy Sepulcher from our vantage point on the rooftop of the Notre Dame Hotel.

Day 4: I leave early in the morning for my bus trip from East Jerusalem to the West Bank. I myself have minimal concern for my safety while appreciating the concern that my loved ones feel when travelling these days in the West Bank. Bus transport to and from Jerusalem-Ramallah has changed since my last visit. Since October 7, instead of going directly between Jerusalem and Ramallah, the bus drops you off at the Qalandiya checkpoint, one walks through a long snake-like tunnel to the Palestinian Territory on the other side, and then one takes another bus to my destination, Lions Square in downtown Ramallah. I wait there for Nehad, our Palestinian representative, and we go to our first grantee meeting with Palestine: Sports for Life.
PS4L. See the picture below with myself and Tamara - the PS4L director (see below for photo). We meet at Amari refugee camp where the night before a Palestinian man from the camp was killed by Israeli soldiers in a raid (he was one of approximately ten Palestinians killed in Israeli military raids on Palestinian towns throughout the West Bank that previous nite, a regular occurrence almost never reported on in the foreign media). The principal of the UNRWA school tells us that the school, which serves approximately 500 students from grades 1-9 might close in commemoration of this death. We go ahead with our meeting which focuses on a nutrition and physical exercise intervention in refugee camps in the West Bank and Gaza. Coincidentally, the phys-ed teacher is from Biddu, the town where I used to see patients as an internist for several months in 1996. All the women and young girls speak in confident and joyful voices on the impact the PS4L intervention has had on their lives both at school and at home. These are incredibly challenging times for all these school children attending UNRWA. But they are even more challenging in public schools in the West Bank where teachers have not been paid for months as the Israeli government is withholding taxes from the PA. And the situation in Gaza is incomparably worse, though I do want to highlight that PS4L is still holding activities in Gaza whenever they can even though regular school is not occurring.

In thanking all the PS4L participants at the conclusion of the meeting I emphasize that each and every one of them ranging from schoolchildren to middle aged mothers could be tomorrow’s leaders.
It takes us “only” 90 minutes to get from Ramallah to Bethlehem (15 miles distance between the 2) where we meet with a new grantee – led by Rami. I’ve known Rami since almost the beginning of Healing Across the Divides when we funded a nutrition intervention at Dar El Kalima, now a university. The intervention focuses on the mental health of mothers, young adults and children who’ve been exposed and continue to be exposed to war violence. Rami and his team are implementing a train the trainer model for several different interventions. For those who are exposed to violence of any sort (Israeli military, domestic) they try to intervene within 24-48 hours after an incident. They use a model that consists of look, listen, link to what they actually need – protection, legal assistance; “light” counselling. They have established protocols for referral for individuals needing greater mental health assistance. The Bethlehem based organization plans to start a men’s group they think will be “popular” as after October 7th men can't go to their previous work in Israel with consequent dramatic fall in income, increased domestic violence and marital separation.

In the early evening, I have the most personally meaningful work related event during this trip – dinner with all the local Healing Across the Divides staff – Nehad, Tova and Veronica. I always knew about the clearly close relationship that all 3 three had before October 7th, a relationship which has only deepened since that day. They are not only still speaking with each other since October 7, not a small feat in these challenging days but have intensified their communication accompanied by respect for each other’s perspective. We start with a business meeting discussing our upcoming every 5 year retreat. Most of the time we share stories and joke amongst each other. At the end we celebrate Nehad’s upcoming birthday next week.

Day 5: As I prepare to leave for a few days of rest and relaxation in my birthplace, Italy, I hold two photographs / thoughts close to my heart.

The first thought consists of two photographs, variations of which are extremely widespread in Israel (and which everyone in the United States has seen) calling to bring the over 100 Israeli hostages back home. And there is a second that I saw in Ramallah in the West Bank (I would hazard that very few Americans have seen photos like the one below), a photo-montage memorial of a small number of the many thousands of children (see below) killed up till now in Gaza by the Israeli military. There is a constant reminder (as you might imagine there is nonstop news coverage of nothing else) in both populations of these ongoing traumas. To be sure, there is no mixing of the two traumas among the two populations. And yet, while I was in the West Bank for only one day, I was struck by the relative absence of this type of memorial photograph that you can see below (again there are photographs literally every block or two in Israel about the hostages).
Before I make an observation of this relative difference between the two in the sheer number of photo memorials, I would like to point out that in the West Bank since October 7

- Approximately 700 Palestinians have been killed by the Israeli army
- There are over 9000 thousand Palestinians in Israeli jail
- Checkpoints are everywhere making movement between geographic areas extremely difficult.
- Hundreds of thousands of West Bank Palestinians are out of work – in part because they can’t go to Israel for the manual labor jobs they had. In addition, the Israeli government has frozen taxes that are to be paid to the Palestinian Authority (PA). As a consequence, the PA hasn’t paid its employees including over 500,000 teachers and civil servants in months. This in turn creates suffering and learning challenges for hundreds of thousands of children.

All these pressures on Palestinians in the West Bank could be part of the explanation of the relative absence of official or unofficial memorials to those who have died in Gaza. It is not that they are not constantly thinking of the
people in Gaza and their own precarious existence in the West Bank. They are!! Palestinians have canceled weddings; the Eid holiday is much more muted this year. Palestinians have mourned the killings in Gaza by shutting stores and schools several times since Oct 7 to respect the dead. People in the West Bank are simply trying to survive. In addition, today everyone living in Gaza is a hostage. The children memorialized in the pictures are gone forever.

So, as I conclude this FB/email series, what are my particular take home messages from my brief trip. Other than the obvious ongoing horror about the situation, shared by all our staff, I am simultaneously deeply moved by the desire to live, have a little bit of hope, and make a measurable health difference as we at Healing Across the Divides are doing. And for those of us who have no hope, there is the human desire to live especially as we enter springtime and make an impact on other people’s lives as our both extraordinary staff and grantees are doing each and every day. Thanks to all of you for your support and we welcome your feedback.