

A Week in New York with Golani Veterans: "Take Some Good Chocolate—This is a Life-Changing Event"

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By Lior Ben-Ami, New York | Published: January 10, 2025 | 00:00. Photos by Ohad Kab

The scars of that day—August 4, 2006, during the Second Lebanon War—accompany them everywhere. To the skyscrapers of snowy Manhattan. To the subway passing under Times Square. To the synagogue of Rabbi Carlebach’s followers. Eighteen years after the bloody battle in which they lost three comrades, and after they went to war again in Operation Iron Swords, Lior Ben-Ami joined soldiers from the Golani Brigade’s 13th Battalion for a “Peace of Mind” journey in New York, run by the Metiv nonprofit organization.

“Back then, there was no one to help us. We were just kids,” explains Elad Kind. Elia Sommer sends a message to today’s generation of fighters: “Share what you’ve been through. Talk about it again and again, even if someone makes a face.”

Painting the Past

In the painting, a platoon marches in two columns under the cover of night. You can see a helicopter, which will later arrive to evacuate the wounded. You can see, sitting silently by the roadside, the houses of the Lebanese village of Markaba. Soon, gunfire will burst out from one of the houses. Sergeant Omri Almakes, Sergeant Daniel Shiran, and Captain Dr. Igor Rotstein will fall. Chaos will ensue. There will be wounded.

The painting lies on the floor. Around it sit 17 former soldiers of the Golani Brigade 13th Battalion’s support company in a circle. The “beinishim”—b’nei yeshivot, men who combined religious studies with military service—bow their heads toward the painting, humming a melody by the Baal Shem Tov, their arms around each other.

The artist is Elia Sommer, one of the soldiers in the column at Markaba. Only 21 years old and already walking into hell, toward what would become a defining moment of his life, sometime in the Second Lebanon War. The moment was never processed, waiting 18 years for this journey with his unit to New York City, the center of the cosmos, in the middle of a different war.

In the painting, however, it is still the night of August 4, 2006, a moment frozen in time, and the two columns of soldiers are still marching. They will arrive soon. Soon their lives will be turned upside down. “What would you say to the boys who are marching there, to the 21-year-olds who were there?” I ask Sommer and other fighters who are standing in the circle.

Advice to Their Younger Selves



Elia Sommer (right) and Elazar Stern: *“Take some good chocolate”*

“Prepare yourself,” Sommer replies. “Be ready. It’s going to be an event that will stay with you. Be the best you can. Try to help your friends.”

Elazar Stern adds, “Take some good chocolate. This is a life-changing event. Don’t judge what you go through by the rest of your life. This is an extreme situation. Take care of yourself.”

Shlomo reflects, “There will be a difficult situation you can’t truly prepare for. In basic training, someone sees the bigger picture. It won’t be like that.”

Sommer then addresses today’s young fighters, marching in Gaza or Lebanon: “Don’t keep it all in. Share what you’ve experienced. Tell it over and over, even if someone makes a face.”

Landing in a New World

At Newark Airport, Sommer stands on foreign soil near the baggage carousel, curious. “It feels strange,” he smiles. He barely slept on the overnight flight. To his left sat a Torah scholar studying for rabbinic ordination; to his right, a former officer from the 13th Battalion considering leaving Israel. “Worlds colliding,” he says.

Sommer, a physical education teacher and father of seven from Susya in the Hebron Hills, is traveling for the first time outside Israel—except for the battlefields across its borders. “Living in Israel means staying,” he explains.

Still, he couldn’t miss this journey, a chance to process old traumas and confront combat secrets.

Peace of Mind (Freedom Journey – *נסע שחרור* in Hebrew) is what they call this project. Yet this group is two decades beyond their initial release from military service. They’ve since become fathers to five, six, seven children, settled in places like Efrat, Petah Tikva, and Netanya, and built careers as

engineers, educators, and programmers. Gray hairs have sprouted, eyesight has weakened, but some things remain unchanged.

Tuvia is the one with high morale, Neiman is the nonchalant one, Sharon is the commander, and then there is the one who will always be seen as the kid, even at age 38, just because back then he enlisted a bit late.

Not everyone came. Many commanders, for example, chose not to. Some hesitated until the last moment. In one pre-trip conversation, someone compared it to a clock. "We all, thank God, have kids, jobs. Life is moving, the clock is ticking. Touch the hands, and it might stop working."

The day before the flight, some finished reserve duty. Most served together in the Golan Heights. During takeoff, I noticed one of them searching for the village of Markaba on the map on his screen. Want to go back, I asked? "I'd have skipped the first time," he replied.

They'll always have Markaba, wherever they go—even as wars pass by around them and new traumas emerge.

Their story watches from the sidelines, occasionally waking them at night or tightening in their chests. Now, with a full moon shining through the airplane window, they ascend.

The destination: the soul of soldiers.

A Feast of Thanksgiving

Nay-nay-nay-naa.

A quiet, heart-wrenching Shabbat tune fills the little synagogue of the Boyan Hasidim. It spreads upward and outward, seeking its way through the cracks, into snow-covered Manhattan. The morning is painted ivory, with bare tree branches and black garbage bags scattered about. Outside, it's minus seven degrees. First, the ears freeze, then the nose, the eyeballs, and finally, the thoughts.

Nay-nay-nay-naa.



Yohai Maimon: *"I divide my life into before and after"*

When the melody ends, Yohai Maimon rises and asks to speak. He describes how, at the beginning of the current war, just before entering Gaza, he gathered the troops. "Anyone who lives near the Gaza border or in the north, raise your hand," he requested. No one raised their hand. "So why are you taking this risk?" he asked. They answered, "Because they're harming our brothers." "You understand," Yohai addresses the

worshippers, who are moved by his words.

He is a father of five from Elazar in Gush Etzion, the head of the Yedidya pre-military academy in Beit Shemesh, and a rabbi in an elite unit.

On the very first day of the trip, as the bus winds its way from the airport into Manhattan, Yohai describes his experiences from Lebanon to Gaza. On October 7, soldiers from his unit fell near the

Gaza border, followed by others in a bombing in Jabalia. In his role as a rabbi, with 440 days of reserve duty behind him, he had to stand before those who were no longer alive—and later, before their families.

"A great storm, great sorrow, especially when you know them personally. And on the other hand, the understanding that the mission now is to give them the last respects that they deserve," he describes. "And that connects me to the Second Lebanon War. This isn't the first time I've seen fatalities. The initial shock is a little behind you."

The bus stops at the "Ohel" in the borough of Queens, the resting place of the spiritual leaders of the Chabad movement, Rabbi Yosef Yitzchak Schneersohn and his son-in-law, the Lubavitcher Rebbe. At the foot of the stone graves are thousands of notes with prayers and petitions. Above them, neon lights shine brightly, and through the cracks in the sky, raindrops dampen the wishes of the masses.

Back on the bus, Yohai returns to Lebanon in 2006. He was close to the medical team, standing beside the battalion doctor, Dr. Igor Rotstein. "Medic, doctor," a cry is heard.

"The doctor runs," Yohai describes. "I want to run too, but the sergeant grabs me and says, 'Maimon, you stay here to provide cover.' And in the middle of it all, a bomb explodes. Dr. Rotstein is killed."

What do you see? I ask. Yohai is silent for a moment. He sometimes has this habit of falling silent—or grasping for a parable from the Bible, a statement about the eternal nature of the nation, or a quote that transcends us.

"Mainly, you don't see," he finally replies. "But you smell a lot of battlefield smells—gunpowder, blood, sweat. You encounter chaos until the battalion commander, Yoav Mordechai, arrives and brings order."

Yohai pauses. "You can take this to a place of despair or a place of mission," he says, revealing that he returned from that war a different person. It's no coincidence that he became a military rabbi and head of a pre-military academy. It's no coincidence that every year, on the anniversary of the encounter, he holds a thanksgiving meal. "I divide my life into before and after Lebanon."

"In this war, when we came out of Gaza after a difficult incident, I gathered the soldiers. I said, 'Yes, we've been through hard things, and our friends were killed as heroes. But now we have to decide where to take this.'"

And now, Yohai faces a week of processing. It's unclear what—Lebanon then, or Gaza now. Perhaps both.

Coffee in a Soup Bowl

Broadway, Corner of 76th Street

Yehuda Lopian stands on the avenue, tightening his coat. He breathes in the air of the Upper West Side, stretches, and declares, "I'm in paradise." The bed is comfortable, the room is warm, and from there, I can see Central Park. "I'm happy to be alive," he proclaims. New York is indifferent to his declaration. Behind us is a quirky café that serves coffee in a soup bowl. A beggar lies sprawled just a meter and a half away, sandwiched between the luxurious skyscrapers on either side as though he's fallen through the cushioned cracks of life.

Just two weeks ago, Lopian was on reserve duty, running missions into Lebanon and, before that, Gaza. And now he's here.



Yehuda Lopian: *"I left this war focused and sharp"*

Lopian serves as the liaison to Jewish communities for Peace of Mind. Behind the initiative stands **Metiv**, the Israel Center for the Treatment of Psychotrauma, founded by Dr. Danny Brom and affiliated with Herzog Medical Center. The Ministry of Defense also supports the program, which organized about 35 similar delegations over the past year. Still, it's far from enough. Many dozens of units, whose soldiers have experienced trauma, are still waiting their turn.

In the coming days, Lopian will spend his time in meetings, sipping whiskey at 8 a.m. with Jews—not necessarily Zionists—who might donate. He cannot afford to let even the faintest thread slip away.

"I came out of the war like a cannonball—completely focused, razor-sharp," he explains.

"I know what these guys need, and for that, I'll stop at nothing. This is a matter of urgency, a matter of life and death."

The air carries a sweet whiff of marijuana. In the background, the beeping of a garbage truck reversing echoes. During the war, Lopian served on a mobility team, transporting food and ammunition.

He recalls the start of the campaign in the Gaza border region when they came under attack by Hamas. "Within seconds, we were in the war. Chaos, shouting. I see one guy flying out of the tank into the air, and another on his knees—hit by shrapnel in his side and back. I run to him. The guy is soaked in blood but intact," Lopian demonstrates with his hands how he held the soldier's head and tried to lift his legs.

"He asks me, 'Am I okay?' I tell him, 'Bro, you're fine.' I notice he's a yeshiva guy, so I say, 'Tell me, got anything interesting to say about this week's Torah portion?' He cracked up laughing. Turns out, I'm good under pressure. But my mind and heart were sprinting, and meanwhile, I was thinking about my parents. About how I dream of them standing with me under the wedding canopy someday, and praying I could tell them this story myself—not someone else knocking on their door."

Lopian has a long beard like Herzl's, but red. His eyes are somewhere between blue and green, with a tear at the corner. After the incident, he shaved off his blood-soaked beard. "I felt there was something bad in it," he smiles.

Later, at a camp up north, Lopian met that same injured soldier. He saw he was okay. "He was on the tank, instinctively raised his hand toward me. I don't know if it was to say thank you or goodbye. We looked at each other, there was a smile, and that was it—moving on."

I ask if he doesn't need his own "Peace of Mind" retreat. He waves the question off. He explains that the real heroes were the ones he met on the way into Gaza, delivering supplies, letters, and care packages.

“Some of them grow stronger; they’re on the mission of their lives. But some have such delicate souls, and they miss home so much. You see a person who just needs a break, who needs a hug.

“So, you come. You bring surprises, gummy candies. Do you know anyone who doesn’t like gummies? And a guy comes out of the tank. He says, ‘It’s so great you came.’ A week later, he steps out of the tank, looks at you, doesn’t say a word. And a week after that, he doesn’t come out at all. And you see the decline. Some people fade.

“And you have to bring them pulses of energy. You tell them about successes back home. You bring cigarettes and socks, share two minutes of jokes with them.”

In a few days, we’ll go to Central Park for a demonstration for the hostages. A few dozen people will gather with signs in minus 10 degrees. On a whim, Lopian will take over the microphone. “The people of Israel will persist in their stubbornness to survive because of people like you,” he will say, filling the freezing heroes gathered there with pulses of energy. Then, one by one, they will come to hug him—the man with Herzl’s beard who flew here to raise funds for the souls of our soldiers.

A Capsule of Unity

Processing session begins.

Unit 6 gathers in a circle at the Carlebach Synagogue on 79th Street. After sketching a frozen moment from the past, each soldier is asked to share their story. Each has an hour. What happened back then, what has happened since.



Therapist Yoel Bar-Ilan: *“A process that normally takes half a year we do in one week”*

Yoel Bar-Ilan and Moti Button, the group’s therapists, will soon explain that being disconnected from home, the intensity, and being with the friends who were there—only they can understand—create a dynamic. “A psychological process that usually takes six months is experienced in a week,” Yoel will say. And Moti will add, “You see the sharing, the togetherness, and enter a capsule of unity.”

On the floor, beyond the synagogue wall where the former soldiers are convened for the session, sits Elazar Stern. A blank, yellowish wall. But in Stern’s eyes, he’s next to another wall, a house on the outskirts of Markaba.

That moment lasted seconds. Nothing in terms of a lifetime, but an enormous rupture. Stern is panting. His eyes are red. He’s there now. Chaos, gunfire, terrorists, injuries.

And then Stern describes the moment of rupture: One of the commanders, during the shooting, orders him to run to evacuate a casualty. He hesitates for a moment, not understanding. The [commanders’] slogan is “Follow me.” But he’s being told to run alone into an area under fire.

Later, he will run, treat, apply pressure to stop the bleeding of a wounded soldier, and say, “They’re coming to evacuate you, it’ll be okay.” It won’t be okay.

But now, beside the wall and the order, Stern freezes. “He’s abdicating responsibility,” he says about the commander. “If I had gone in that moment of fire, I wouldn’t have returned. I’m a decorated soldier. But to this day, I feel guilty that I didn’t go. I can’t let it go.”

When the battle ended and they were still in Lebanon, Stern was allowed a 30-second phone call to his mother. She told him that both of his sisters were pregnant. “We still had a body under the house—hadn’t been evacuated yet. And it killed me. That dissonance. Life and death,” his voice trembles. His breathing is heavy. And his soul, too.

When he returned to Israel, he realized he hadn’t returned to himself. “Constant tension, my attention and focus were completely shot. Not a moment of rest. I suffered. I didn’t enjoy life.”

The door opens. “Well, are you coming?” Moti asks. The friends inside are waiting.

Stern, a career soldier, father of four from Ramat Gan, was the one who, along with Sommer and another friend, initiated this journey for their unit.

He pushes himself up from the wall in Markaba—or rather, the wall of the synagogue. Maybe today, maybe tomorrow, he too will be asked to share. He’s waited too long for this moment. And as you can imagine, he has plenty to tell.

“What do you think will happen?” I ask him, just before he joins his friends.

“I suppose I’ll cry. I’m one of those emotional types.”

A Big Upheaval from a Tiny Piece of Shrapnel

Heading northwest.

The Manhattan skyscrapers grazing the edge of the sky are replaced by a winding, dark road leading to luxurious houses wrapped in green lawns.

Here we are: Englewood, New Jersey. A town with 290 Jewish families. “Your pain is our pain. Your sorrow is our sorrow,” says Rabbi Akiva Black of the community outside the Jewish Community Center.

Inside the hall, there’s a basketball game. Egoz unit fighters versus local community youth. Uniforms, an enthusiastic announcer, signs saying “Go Egoz,” the works. On the court, Egoz player #5 races toward the basket, goes for an easy layup, jumps, boom—crashes. Then misses the free throw too. It’s N., the company commander.

Just a minute before the game started, he and Sgt. D., a fighter in the unit, were revisiting moments from Gaza—moments they are here now to process, as part of another Peace of Mind group.

Both are reservists in their 30s. N. fought in Rimal, Shuja'iyya, and al-Bureij. In one operation, his company led an assault and captured a building. When they climbed to the top floor, they spotted terrorists running on a nearby roof. Before they could react—boom—an RPG hit the room they were in. N. doesn’t remember the moment of impact, only what came after: dust, silence, darkness. “I touched myself, saw that everything was in place, looked at my radio operator, and saw he was okay too.”

N. and the radio operator were the only ones uninjured. Around them lay wounded fighters. “Get to the stairs!” he shouted to those who could move. “And I still didn’t understand what I was seeing.”

Perhaps it was better never to understand. One of the fighters, just a few meters away, didn't survive.

"Survivor's guilt," N. now puts a name to the feeling. "I ask myself why things happened this way, what's the role of fate, why him and not me."

D., stretching his legs while listening, also returned from the war with existential questions. Questions he hopes to find answers to here. But for him, in a twist of irony, the story is the opposite.

They had just captured a route in Gaza, throwing grenades as shrapnel ricocheted back. One piece hit D. He extends his right arm, pointing to a mark so faint it would require electro-optic equipment to detect. "It shook me. There were ten other fighters there. Why me?"

A big upheaval from a tiny piece of shrapnel—I didn't quite understand. He starts explaining from the beginning.

"When we entered Gaza, the most important thing to me was to bring my comrades back alive, even if it meant I'd get hurt. Every fighter feels that way. You feel like some higher power is watching over you, that you can do anything. And when I got hit by the shrapnel, I felt like God was giving me a sign. Wake up, He said. Start taking care of yourself—not just in the war, but in life. Questions arose about how much I care for myself."

The ability to articulate the emotions of war isn't something to take for granted. Unlike the veterans who waited 18 years, the Egoz fighters have just left the battlefield.



Egoz fighters on the basketball court

Dr. Yehuda Shaham, 76, from Carmiel, who is the Peace of Mind therapist for the Egoz group and fought in the Six-Day War and Yom Kippur War, recalls how, as a young soldier, he encountered paratroopers showing signs of PTSD. Back then, he called it cowardice. "We had no idea. Back then, you weren't even allowed to cry at funerals or anything like

that. It wasn't considered manly."

Soon, Dr. Shaham and the Egoz group will head to a barbecue at one of the hosting Jewish families' homes—a sprawling estate. Endless real estate, top-quality meat, bottomless wine, and a sense of euphoria in the air.

If you're going to confront the aftermath of shrapnel guided by the GPS of fate, these are the conditions to do it in.

A Painting of the Rescue Tank

Back to the "Beinishes" (religious soldiers).

It's late at night on the subway. We board at 79th Street, transfer at 72nd. Above us are Times Square, Broadway, and the Hudson River Park. But here, in the engine room of the Big Apple, it's a different universe—crowded subway cars, screeching at every station, faces coming and going.



Elad Kind: *"The battle was chaos and you try to understand – did I perform under fire?"*

Meanwhile, Elad Kind stands and tells me his story. It happened yesterday. He opened his heart in a circle of friends, revealing secrets.

"We're here to deconstruct and rebuild ourselves so we can return whole," he said back at the airport, waiting in line for check-in. He explained: "Back then, we didn't have anyone to help us. We were just kids. An ambush is chaos, and you try to figure it out—where were you? Where was that guy? Was I effective"?

In the sharing circle, Kind showed the group a tank he had drawn—a rectangle, with an oval turret on top, and another rectangle for the barrel.

"Looks like a popsicle on a doughnut," one of the friends joked.

That same tank evacuated Kind from the battlefield Markaba with other wounded soldiers after his part in the battle was over. But for him, it was different. He had helped with the evacuation—he still remembers how it felt to hold one of the casualties. Dehydrated, with no water, at some point, he collapsed.

And now, on the subway, Kind is back in the cramped turret of his popsicle-and-doughnut tank. Terrified of missiles. Overwhelmed with uncertainty. Guilt. He has no idea what happened in the battle. He only knows he left his friends behind. "And they stayed. I wasn't hit by bullets or shrapnel. But the evacuation was incredibly tough. It was disappointing".

That guilt would revisit him in the years to come—when he was discharged from reserve duty with his platoon or on October 7. "And again, I wasn't with them".

Kind, a train conductor, father of four from Nir Galim, served in the reserves as part of a rapid-response team. Between duties, he volunteered. A friend organized a bus of treats for soldiers, offering shaves, massages, and food, and Kind would be there, meeting exhausted fighters fresh from the battlefield. He'd sit with them, listen to their stories, and sometimes, in the dusty faces, he'd see himself. He offered what he had lacked: "Just being a listening ear, showing interest".

The subway car is emptying out. Soon, someone will step in and start singing in this underbelly of New York. No one will drop a coin into their cup; humanity has moved to Venmo.

In the sharing circle, Elad revealed another personal secret. His mother passed away before he enlisted. He was granted leave every Shabbat, but his friends didn't understand why, and he never explained. Now, there's no reason to hide it anymore.

We've arrived: Atlantic Avenue Station. Across the street is the Brooklyn Nets basketball arena. In just a bit, they'll face a crushing defeat at the hands of the Utah Jazz. It's Kind's first basketball game. He'll watch in amazement and hand out gummy candies. Then, we'll head to "770," the famous house of the Lubavitcher Rebbe in Brooklyn. Hundreds of friendly faces in black-and-white will be absorbed in a "farbrenge," a gathering of inspiration. Around a table, there will be whiskey, matbucha, words of Torah, and songs. "Ya-ya-ya yaaaai!" they'll chant, banging on the table.

Kind, surrounded by his comrades from the battlefield, will watch it all from the sidelines. He'll smile. His heart will feel light.

The Jews of October 8th

A Siren Wails

It happens on Friday evening at the Carlebach Synagogue. No need for a shelter—this is an alert from a phone, 9,000 kilometers away. Yet, the synagogue falls silent, frozen mid-prayer. Moments ago, there had been circle dances, chants of "Yisrael, Yisrael," and lengthy prayers in the spirit of the late Rabbi Shlomo Carlebach.

This is a community deeply connected to Israel. Among its dwindling Manhattan followers are those who keep the Israeli alert app on their phones, waking in the middle of the night to its notifications—like Israel and Tani Foger.

Now, we're sitting in their living room. The Beinishes (religious soldiers) are staying with local Jewish families during their time in New York, mostly members of the Carlebach community, who have made room for reservists. Three of them are staying at the Fogers' home.

Tani, 68, a psychologist and grandmother of 11, has been organizing accommodations for soldiers within the community for years. Pointing to a picture of Rabbi Carlebach and his brother Chaim, she describes the hustle of going between Jewish businesses to gather donations.

The "October 8th Jew"

There's a term for it now—"October 8th Jew." Those whose Jewish or Israeli identity once meant little to them, but who woke up the day after the disaster transformed. By asking who was chasing them, they learned who they were. "Those born after the Holocaust, who thought there could never be a world without Israel, suddenly understand it's no longer 'Never Again,'" Tani explains.

Is there guilt in this, I ask.

"Why am I doing this? I have four sons here. None of them serve in the IDF. They're not in danger. This is the least I can do."

Not Just Carlebach

The Carlebach community isn't the only one supporting the Beinishes. The Boyaner Hasidim in Manhattan have also pitched in. They don't resemble the insular ultra-Orthodox communities in Israel; they're more about business suits. Still, it's hard to call them Zionist. Unlike the Carlebach synagogue, you won't see pictures of hostages on their shtiebel's doors. Even so, they donated \$30,000 for the trip.

Tani leads us to the living room: piano, hardwood floors, an Israeli flag. "Here," she points, "about 20 Boyaner Hasidim gathered—men only." Through the door, she heard the rabbi urging, "Put your hand in your pocket until it hurts." "I was stunned," she says.

There's something about being far from Israel—away from its murky politics—that makes religion feel different. Unburdened. Pure. Oceans away from Israel, secular Jews who rail against religious coercion might embrace morning prayers. Hasidim who warn against assimilation might study and work.

That doesn't necessarily mean they'll advocate for drafting ultra-Orthodox men into the military. One evening, when the group is being hosted for a gathering at a prominent Boyaner family's home, a debate ignites. A woman firmly claims that a Torah scholar cannot enlist. Another guest, a singer named Eliot, argues the opposite—that they must.

The argument heats up. Eliot recounts how, during the last Simchat Torah, he went to Israel to bring joy to soldiers at their outposts. At one point, he handed a Torah scroll to a Givati Brigade soldier. "I'm not religious," the soldier hesitated.

"I told him, 'This is the story of all of us,'" Eliot says, now raising his voice. Then he plays a video. It shows the soldier holding the Torah scroll. It also shows Eliot bowing his head as the soldier gives him a blessing.

"The Spirit of Susya"

Time to Land

The plane shakes as it descends. Through the window, the sun emerges, spreading warm rays—but behind them lie troubles and traumas piling up.

Still, as the wheels touch the ground, the Golani soldiers will sing a song that has gone viral during the war, **"Even better, even better."**

A few days ago, in New York, I remember, three of them approached Racheli Brooks, the director of Peace of Mind. "Thank you," they said, "but we're taking the place of others who've been through more. Younger people. We don't deserve this."

It wasn't easy for Racheli. "What do you mean, you don't deserve it?" she seems to be saying things she hadn't managed to tell them. "Why not? Because you're strong? Because you're older, with children? You don't deserve healing? My heart breaks."

"Even better, even better," the singing on the plane continues.

Soon, as we stand by the baggage carousel, a cheerful energy will fill the air. "Guys, take someone else's suitcase; I'm taking Naiman's—it's the best one," quips the August 2005 cohort's medic, filling Ben Gurion Airport with laughter.

And when the luggage arrives, it will truly be lighter. Inside, there will be less judgment, anger, questions, fewer pangs of guilt about what could have been done differently.

Then Sommer, who had earlier described the loneliness following the ambush—how everyone returned to their homes and lives as if nothing had happened—will use the word *healing*. Along the way, he'll reflect on his first trip outside Israel, saying he brought the spirit of Susya to New York. "But there's no place like Susya," he'll add.

In the background, **"Even better, even better"** will continue to echo, as if rising from the very souls of the soldiers.