

JEWISHLINK

Heart of NJ Jewish Federation's Yom HaZikaron/Yom Ha'Atzmaut Event Shares Inspiration

By Harry Glazer - May 23, 2024



Three IDF soldiers at the Jewish Federation event.

With so much fear and frustration coursing through the local Jewish communities, the Jewish Federation in the Heart of New Jersey found the perfect solution for the season—a Yom HaZikaron/Yom Ha'Atzmaut celebration filled with prayer, song and inspiring speeches.

Held on the evening of May 13, the event reflected the strange new realities facing us. Publicity was carefully disseminated, with no social media presence, and with vague wording, only advertising that the event would feature “very special guests.” If you spoke to someone from the Jewish Federation, you would learn that the special guest speakers were three active members of the IDF.

Also reflecting the passions and longing for Jewish unity that the Israel-Hamas war and the stark rise in antisemitism have sparked, the Jewish Federation event drew a huge crowd; over 500 people packed the auditorium of the Marlboro Township Middle School for the program.



Display of support for the hostages.

The event started with a moment of silence, as a video played on a large screen on the stage of the auditorium, of a gathering in Israel standing silent as the Yom Hazikaron siren went off. Jewish Federation staff and volunteer leaders offered welcoming remarks; the Yizkor and El Maaleh Rachanim prayers and Shir HaMa'alot psalm were recited as the audience stood respectfully, and Mayor John Hornik of Marlboro presented a proclamation to honor Yom Ha'atzmaut in his town.

The highlight of the program, however, was clearly the presence of three currently serving IDF soldiers—Avia, an intelligence officer; Yan, an infantry commander; and Eitan, an infantry soldier in the reserves—who all received a standing ovation when their presence was first announced.

Eitan talked about his service, stating that “on October 7, we experienced our own 9/11.” He shared the story of how he grew up in the United States, attended public school, participated in USY Pilgrimage, and made aliyah in August 2014. He joined the Nahal Infantry Brigade, and after his service attended college and met and married his wife. He was called to return to service on the morning of October 7 and his unit went to secure the Nova Music Festival grounds, where he saw sights that were deeply upsetting. He remarked that he sees sights of unity all over Israel and is grateful for all the contributions received from American Jews and Jewish groups, stating, “Thank you for your endless show of love.”



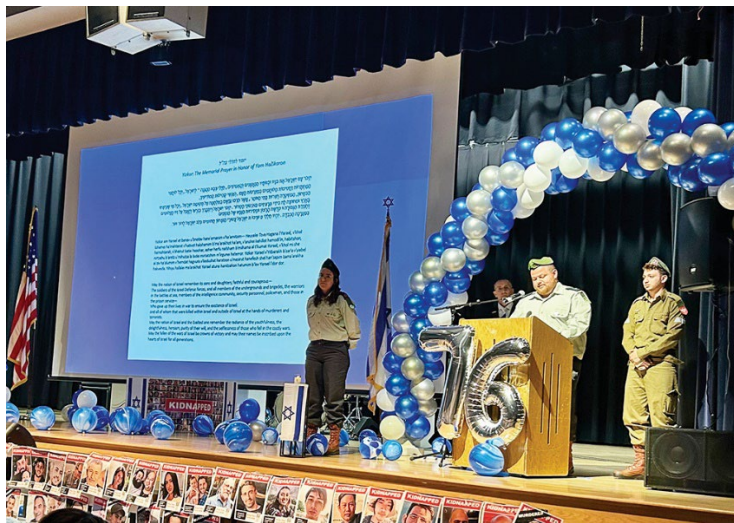
Moment of silence.

Yan, speaking in halting English, shared some of his personal background, including his love of basketball, and presented highlights of his service in Gaza,

using the framework of a basketball team playing opposing teams. He revealed that in one difficult battle, his right hand was injured and his good friend was killed; he got out of the hospital in time to attend his friend’s funeral. He told the audience, “It’s not bad to be a Jew, it’s a gift,” and thanked them for their support.

The evening transitioned to song and celebration with the audience reciting the “Hatikvah,” led by a community member on stage, and then a performance of popular Israeli and Jewish music by the Avi Maza Orchestra.

“The Federation pulled together a moving event tonight for hundreds of local Jews and supporters of Israel,” said Rabbi Ken Brodtkin, rav of Congregation B’nai Israel in Manalapan. “This was a meaningful and memorable evening for the Jewish community here in Central Jersey.”

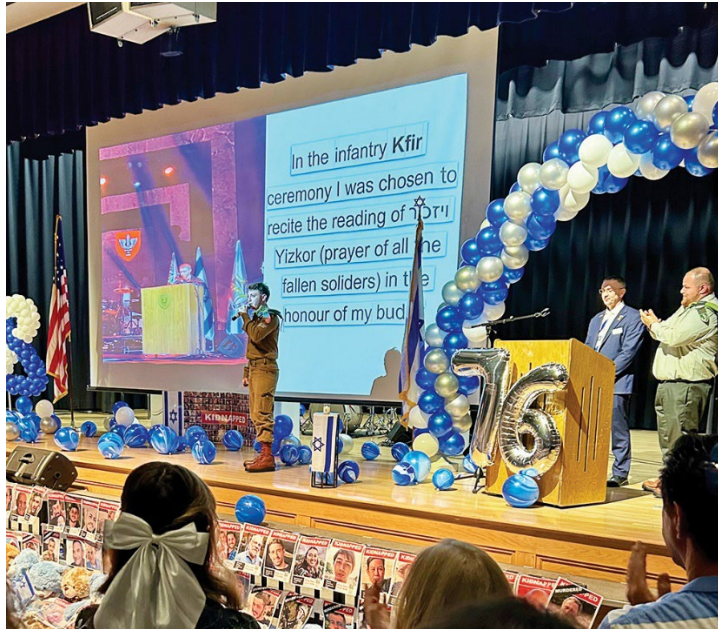


Eitan speaks.

Rabbi Chaim Edelstein of Temple Beth Am in Aberdeen commented that the event offered two important features. One was a thoughtful transition from Yom Hazikaron to Yom Ha’atzmaut. “That’s life, in which we often must switch from

solemnity to simcha,” he said. The other aspect was “bringing all our communities into one gathering, to experience these days as one Jewish family.”

Oxana and Gennady Shapiro of Marlboro commented that they attended the event “to be a part of this gathering, to support Israel in any way we could, and to make the Jewish community’s voice louder.”



Yan speaks.

“Tonight is about Israel’s people. Its place in our hearts and our history. It’s about our Jewish future and Israel’s centrality to fighting antisemitism everywhere,” said Susan Antman, Jewish Federation in the Heart of New Jersey executive director. “Federation is proud to lead our community in connecting with and caring for Israel in good times and hard times, keeping us ready to act when crisis strikes. Looking at this sold-out crowd, I am filled with hope and gratitude and a sense of unity. Together, we stand tall with Israel. We celebrate and support Israel. And we say, Am Yisrael Chai!”

Harry Glazer is the Middlesex county editor of The Jewish Link. He can be reached at harryglazer615@gmail.com and he welcomes reader feedback.

Most of the time.



El Maaleh Rachamim.