

Full of Life

Israeli National Police officers who make up Group 18 of the Police Unity Tour gather for a group photo during a stop on the ride.



A month before the Hamas attacks and war breaking out, officers from New Jersey and across the country participated in the 2023 Israeli Police Unity Tour. From that journey have come messages of strength and support, which have resonated from Jersey to Gaza to the highest levels of Israel. And reinforced what they ride for.

■ BY MITCHELL KRUGEL

Mayhem, malevolence and murder had been reigning in Gaza for almost 48 hours when NJSPBA President Pat Colligan woke up from a dream. A month earlier, Colligan had been journeying through the land with other officers on the Israeli Police Unity Tour, his second year in a row making this incomparable pilgrimage through the Holy Land.

What happened there beginning on Oct. 7 with the inhuman acts of terror by Hamas transformed the view of the Tour, as well as the country, unimaginably, and elevated its emotional enormity. How could this freaking nightmare transpire in a place where they had seen and felt so much beauty, history, humanity and, of course, love just a few weeks earlier?

“I woke up on Monday morning and I had a dream that I was driving in Israel. I was picking people up from the Tour,”



Israeli National Police Master Sergeant Yigal Ilouz
End of Watch: Oct. 7, 2023

Colligan related. “I wake up, and I was like, ‘Whoa, man. Thank God that whole Israel thing was a bad dream.’ And then...”



The day the Tour journeyed to Jerusalem, Edison PD Sergeant Scott Luks, the Local 75 State Delegate for four years until he was recently promoted, realized a dream. He had started learning about Israel as a boy in Hebrew school. He envisioned venturing to the famed Western Wall, where Jews from all over the world come to touch and say a prayer.

Finally, the Police Unity Tour had brought him here. More than 20 years ago, Luks was on the verge of making it to the Wall on his “Birthright” trip, the program that grants Jewish young adults ages 18 to 26 free trips to Israel.

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Photos NJ State PBA President Pat Colligan took while visiting Gaza on the 2023 Israeli Police Unity Tour.



Edison PD Sergeant Scott Luks places his hand inside the sacred Western Wall during his visit to Jerusalem on the 2023 Israeli Police Unity Tour.

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“When my mother heard I wanted to go back then, she started crying, ‘Oh, my God, you can’t do it. It’s a war zone over there,’” Luks confided. “So even walking to the Wall, I was just excited because it’s something that I learned about my entire life. Literally the second that I put my hand on that Wall, I instantly started crying.”



One of the highlights of this Unity Tour brings participants to the homes of Israeli National Police (INP) officers to share the traditional Sabbath – or Shabbat – Friday night dinner. On Sept. 8, the Tour took the group to Ofakim, 25 kilometers from Gaza, for Shabbat.

Israeli bomb squad Master Sergeant Yigal Ilouz always invited riders to his home in Ofakim for Shabbat dinner. Many, many NJ State PBA members knew Yigal. He had been one of the dozen or more Israeli National Police officers who have been coming to New Jersey during National Police Week over the past decade to ride the Police Unity Tour. Wearing his sunglasses on his forehead and always willing to go out of his way

for his sisters and brothers on the Tour, Yigal had become one of those unforgettable Israeli riders.

Essex County Sheriff’s Office Chief Mike Safris first met Yigal when he hooked up the Israeli officers to start riding the Tour 15 years ago. He worked with Yigal, National Police Chief Superintendent Yoni Zeitak and others to bring officers from the U.S. to ride in Israel, and Safris again anticipated the 2023 Israeli Tour taking him to Ofakim.

“I did get to Yigal’s house for Shabbat,” Safris confirmed. “And then he said, ‘I want to see you again.’”

At approximately 7 a.m. on Oct. 7, Safris saw a message on the WhatsApp group chat he shared with Yigal and the many other Israeli officers who have become his friends.

“I’m looking at the chat, and I can’t believe it,” Safris added.

When Hamas attacked, Yigal locked his family in the house and responded to the fight. He told them not to come out until they heard from him.

They never did.

A few days later, Police Unity Tour founder Pat Montuore was still devastated by the news of losing one of his good friends when he began posting messages of fortification to his brothers and sisters in Israel. He sent a video clip that was played for nearly every officer in the country, and word of its impact even bubbled up to Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu.

As the messages began making the rounds, Yoni left a voicemail for Montuore and his wife, Alita, about 48 hours after the attack. It is a message that resonates with anybody who has ever participated in the Unity Tour, one that creates an excruciating connection to the most horrific international atrocity since 9/11.

“Thank you very much for the clip. It was so important for us,” Yoni relayed. “We’re going to pass it on to the commissioner, all the chiefs and the officers. I’m going to show the family. We need your support. We’re going to win. See you soon.”

Tour stars

The contingent of Israeli National Police officers that comes for the Unity Tour every May rides with Chapter I in North Jersey. It is known, however, as Group 18. Eighteen equates to the letters in the Hebrew alphabet that spell “chai.” From Hebrew, chai translates to “life.”

Through his affiliation with the Jewish Federation of MetroWest NJ, Safris, who has been a longtime Unity Tour board member, worked with a program called the Living Bridge. The concept connected New Jersey residents with members of like professions in MetroWest sister cities in Israel, including Ofakim.

“We went there with five guys, I think, in 2007,” Safris recalled. “They did a demonstration. We all went to eat. We all kicked it off pretty good. And then we invited them to the Unity Tour.”

Three officers came to ride that first year. One was David Baton, who has become the assistant commissioner of the Israeli National Police. Another was Yigal.

Around 2015, Baton had been telling Safris that a new police academy had just been built in Beit Shemesh, Israel. When Colligan first stayed there, he described the accommodation as matching any high-end hotel. This year, he stayed there with his wife, Lynette.

Between MetroWest, the Israeli National Police and the Police Unity Tour, plans to create a ride and event in Israel to connect and unify law enforcement led to the start of the Israeli Police Unity Tour in 2016. Safris noted that more than 80 percent of the officers who have made the Israeli ride are not Jewish.

Another friend from Group 18 is Officer Amir Cohen, the chief of the Israel Border Police. Safris has ridden the Tour here with Amir a couple of times. After the war began, something about Amir came up on the WhatsApp chat.

“There’s a video of Amir chasing two terrorists with a long rifle,” Safris described. “I mean, he’s not a guy who sits back. I don’t think anybody does, but he’s up there with his men.”

Connections

Those who have done the Police Unity Tour know the ride for those who died is about the journey and the brotherhood that fills it. The 10 days of the Israeli Tour – Sept. 2–12 this year – generate the same type of emotion and intensity.

Although it might be more of a ride for those who have survived. Montuore described the Israeli Tour as the opportunity to “be on the soil and feel like, ‘Wow. This is the place where everything started.’” And then some.

“What mattered to me was just seeing and listening to people who care about preservation of their country,” he continued. “Whether it’s the cab driver, doctor, engineer – they all care about Israel.”

The Tour touches the history buff inside Colligan. But what he has experienced through taking the Tour in Israel is an unprecedented history lesson.

“When you think about it, we live in the U.S. and our history is literally a fraction of Israel’s or the entire Middle East. The Liberty Bell paint isn’t even dry compared to Israel,” he remarked. “You can still see it. You can still touch it. You can uncover it.”

And jump into it. When the Tour visited the Golan Heights this year, Colligan was looking down on Jordan and behind the scenes at bunkers used during the 1973 Yom Kippur War. The Israeli Tour presents these moments for 10 consecutive days, so Colligan wanted to make sure he didn’t miss a one. And that Luks didn’t.

“I said to Scott, ‘Look, you’re not going to get an opportunity like this again,’” Colligan recognized. “So you got to jump.”

There are so many stories like this Luks can tell. Like at the Israeli 9/11 ceremony on the last day of the Tour when, out of nowhere, he ran into the wife of the cantor from the synagogue his family belonged to in Metuchen. But there just isn’t enough time and space with a war going on.

“I was taken aback by the hospitality and just genuine excitement to be sharing their country with us,” Luks acknowledged. “I don’t even have the word to describe it.”

But it’s fair to say that those who do the Israeli Tour get to see the country with access that few other people are allowed. Luks noted how everywhere they went, they were greeted by the commander of that police district.

They met with every type of unit in the INP. Uniformed officers, plainclothes, officers operating drones and those in deep cover. They spoke to bomb squad

officers and went out with the marine police, SWAT and the border patrol. They were briefed by Israel Defense Forces (IDF) intelligence officers about what was going on there (before the war).

“It was just like talking to other cops, here. You had that instant connection and instant bond. You meet them and you can instantly start joking with them,” Luks revealed. “They opened their country with a red carpet to us, and we left there feeling like they were family. There was no difference other than to see how they live with the constant state of terror.”

War stories

The tour inside the Tour tells a lot about how war has hit Israel. From his visits to homes, Colligan described how most of them have “safe” rooms. These are tantamount to bomb shelters, though they are above ground.

“Can you imagine walking into your house in New Jersey and saying, ‘Oh, my safe room is the second door on the right,’” Colligan emphasized, like he tends to when sharing an observation of something incredible.

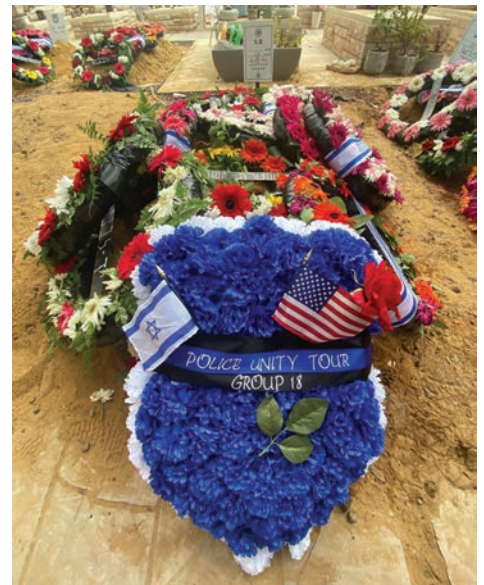
“Every place you go in Israel, you hear, ‘Oh, well, you have four minutes here. You have six minutes here before the bombs,’” he continued. “In Gaza, they’re like, ‘Well, you have 15 seconds, but if you can hear it launch, you get an extra seven seconds.’ It always hits you that you’re in a place where there are people who want the country gone, but you just don’t think that...I don’t know. I just never assumed that it would be this bad.”

During the Tour stop in Gaza, they had a chance to speak to Palestinians. Colligan recalled meeting a guy who would transport people who needed medical treatment in a cab. And how he learned that this was the guy people would pay if he could get them to the border crossing.

“I took three pictures in Gaza on Sept. 3, when we were getting a tour of how Palestinians get processed,” Colligan added. A month later, he looked back on that and realized, “It hit me today that we were at the police station that just got razed.”

The Tour passed the orchard field turned into a concert venue in Ofakim that Hamas hit early in the attack, killing more than 250 civilians. Colligan and Luks suspect they had visited the homes of at least six of the officers who were among those killed.

During the Tour, Luks learned about the Red Alert app that goes off whenever an attack might be coming. It’s a staple



Yigal Ilouz is laid to rest.



Yigal Ilouz (dark shirt), with Essex County Sheriff's Office Chief Mike Safris to his left, raises a glass during a Shabbat dinner at Yigal's home in Ofakim, Israel.



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for anybody who lives in Israel. So he downloaded it matter-of-factly, but actually forgot that he had done so.

Like every law enforcement officer, he keeps his phone on 24-7. The texts that might come through all night, especially since he is the communications sergeant in Edison, don't typically register. Phone calls will wake him up. He had set Red Alert to the sound of an air raid siren, and early on the morning of Oct. 7, Luks heard it go off.

And then again.

And again and again.

He texted the host family where he had Shabbat dinner in Ofakim.

"She responded right away, thankfully," he sighed. "But she told me what was going on. They were stuck inside their house. They couldn't leave. She said Hamas was very close, and there were dead and wounded everywhere."

To Yigal

Reading on the chat that Yigal had been lost in the attack created an almost

unbeknownst sadness, perhaps akin to what any officer felt who lost a brother or sister on 9/11. But then Safris read what Yigal's son posted on Facebook the night his father was killed. The message, translated from Hebrew, read in part:

My role model, the man who made me who I am, how can I talk about you in the past? You had to get home. You finished the night shift, but it was impossible to get the work out of you...Before you were taken from us, you told me, "There are shots. Lock yourself in the house and don't go out. I'll call after that." You didn't call...We've been waiting. I knew you were no longer with us...You did everything to keep the citizens safe...No one knows how much you contributed secretly and for people in need.

In tribute, Safris explained how there was no better way to experience Israel than spending Shabbat dinner with Yigal and his family. He even took his grandkids there last year and stayed at Yigal's house.

This was the brother so many who ride the UnityTour will remember forever. He never knew limits to going above and beyond, or out of his way, to serve and protect.

Montuore experienced this to a degree nobody should have to know when



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riding the first Israeli Tour in 2016. Coming up on a hill in the Negev Desert near Ofakim, one of Montuore's bicycle tires went flat. As he kneeled under a tree on the break, a crushing pain overcame him. He was having a heart attack.

"That type of heart attack is called the widow maker," Montuore said.

Yigal put Montuore in a vehicle and drove him to the hospital. Saved his life.

"It was the most beautiful time of my life," Montuore recalled. "Even though I had a heart attack, it was realizing that people cared so much like Yigal to carry me from where I was. You're saying to yourself, 'Who's going to help me?' And one person did."

When Montuore returned to Israel in 2022 for the first time since the heart attack, he wanted to go back to that tree and have a little service to commemorate surviving. Yigal had just come off a 20-hour shift. He had just become a grandfather. But he drove Montuore and Alita an hour and a half back to that tree.

Safris learned that Yigal was shot at the police station while helping younger officers get out before it was razed. Alita described the Yigal she knew as a man with a golden heart who felt there was never too much to give.

"He gave his life for the young kids,"

Montuore praised. "So how much more of a hero? No matter who you were, when he spoke, you would listen because his words were true, compassionate and real."

To 'Life'

When Montuore recorded his message that went out to Israel, his intent was to remind those from Group 18 and beyond how heartwarming support for law enforcement can be. He wanted them to see that the right people support them and that "the bullshit they are seeing on TV is not how people feel."

Now, 48 hours after sending those sentiments, Montuore had more in his heart to get off his chest. This message goes out to all who know the power of the Tour. And beyond.

"They fight for the same things you fight for," he began. "You fight for the colors of your flag. They fight for the colors of their flag very strongly, very passionately and with the most unbelievable grace and ability to preserve their country. No different than you. Group 18, our Israeli family to the Police Unity Tour, they are survivors. Everybody there is a survivor. I pray to God that they come back here and ride with us. And when I talk to people there, they're saying, 'It's going to be over quick, so not to worry.'"

As Colligan shared some of his emotions with other members of the PBA leadership and staff a day after that dream, he heard thoughts comparing the murder, mayhem and malevolence to the atrocities of the attacks on 9/11. And he had a thought about what happened the day after the attack, perhaps like many first responders were feeling here on 9/12.

"The rules, to me, are simple," he explained. "I put on a uniform. I strap on a vest and a gun like every other cop in the world. You know that you have the potential of facing danger. When you're in the military, that's even that you can be shipped to a war. You want to go after somebody in uniform, OK. But when you fly planes into buildings filled with innocent people or you come and decapitate babies, there's something wrong there. You know."

The best closing thought here is inspired directly by Group 18 of the Police Unity Tour. When raising a glass in Israel, and at Jewish functions around the world, it is customary to hear a refrain evoking the letter from the Hebrew alphabet that stands for 18. And the translation.

L'chaim.
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