

# The Week the Israelis Came to Wichita

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On Tuesday, September 11, 2001, a couple of hours after the attack on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon, I was alerted by a call from a Chabad rabbi in California that an El Al plane was being diverted to Wichita. The rabbi had already received phone calls from worried relatives about its passengers. He asked if the Mid-Kansas Jewish Federation could send someone to the airport to help these people. I replied, "Of course." His touching reply: "It's nice to know I have family in Wichita."

The family sprang into action. We quickly learned that some 75 people needed kosher food. One of the local rabbis and the Federation president immediately went to the airport to assist. A few of us went food shopping and then drove to meet them.

It was remarkable to see so many Israelis all speaking Hebrew at our little Mid-Continent Airport. They were greeted by Wichita Mayor Bob Knight and other city officials, who arranged to take everyone seeking refuge to a nearby Salvation Army facility. Once all the luggage was sorted out, some 125 people boarded buses for Camp Hiawatha.

Camp Hiawatha reminded me of a kibbutz. There was a large hall, where the passengers could congregate, eat and watch the news. There were individual cabins with bunk beds. Unfortunately there was only one pay phone. So members of the Jewish community brought their cell phones and phone cards for everyone to use. Others brought food, toys and games for the kids or just came out to shmooze and help. We got a call from a shopping center owner who said that Yia Yia's restaurant wanted to bring a meal to the passengers. I briefed him on kashrut and they brought out a delicious salmon dinner.

The City of Wichita had a constant presence at the camp. On Wednesday, when it became clear that the passengers weren't leaving anytime soon, the city provided buses to take them to Cowtown, an outdoor museum built to resemble Wichita in the 1880s. Another restaurant, Timberline Steak House, catered a vegetarian meal for lunch. That afternoon the city took them to Exploration Place, a new science museum designed by Israeli architect Moshe Safdie. In the evening, some went line dancing at a cowboy bar. Thursday morning they took a trip to the Sedgwick County Zoo. All places offered the passengers free admission. There was a steady stream of individuals and organizations dropping by with food, cash or to help out.


The print and television media came by to interview passengers and officials. In the interest of security, we tried to convince them not to say that there are 123 Israelis at Camp Hiawatha and arranged for extra police protection, just as a precaution. The Emergency Management Team of Sedgwick County kept everything under control.

Everyone was overwhelmed by the hospitality shown the passengers by the City of Wichita and Salvation Army personnel. Mayor Bob Knight, who visited the passengers frequently, was given a standing ovation when he bid them farewell. Passengers exchanged phone numbers

and addresses, and we planned for a reunion next year, when we are in Israel on a UJC mission.

We knew our Israeli friends needed to leave, but at the same time it was sad to see them go. Our Jewish community numbers barely 1200. It was indeed refreshing and enlightening to be able to interact with so many Israelis in the heart of the heartland. At this time of national grief, it was both therapeutic and inspiring to be involved in helping others and to experience the outpouring of support.



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