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ISRAEL

Neighbors

A day in the life on the Israel/
Lebanon border



Photo credit: Hillel Kuttler

A Lebanese van flying Hezbollah's flag drives by the edge of Levav Weinberg's orchard.

JUF News' Israel correspondent Hillel Kuttler made visits in April to two places along Israel's border. This month's report is from the northern border town of Metulla. His next dispatch will be from the eastern Golan Heights, where the sounds of Syria's civil war are all too audible.

By HILLEL KUTTLE

MY SON YOSSEI and I are driving on a glorious afternoon through one of Levav Weinberg's orchards in the northern-Israel village of Metulla.

His three-year-old son Harel perched on his lap, Weinberg stops his pickup truck at a chain-link fence between rows of nectarines and Golden Delicious apples. Parallel to the fence, not 50 feet away, a gray Toyota van travels on a road that's in Kfarkela, Lebanon.

The van flies the yellow flag of Hezbollah, the terrorist organization that controls southern Lebanon. The passenger sees me photographing him and barks what Weinberg explains are epithets.

Several minutes later, on the same Lebanese road, a white SUV rides nearly alongside us, as if we're just two lanes, rather than two countries, apart. Weinberg turns his head, smiles, and waves. The female passenger reciprocates.

"You see that one time, the Hezbollah people drive by and curse; the next time, I wave, and they wave back. This is the situation," Weinberg notes matter-of-factly.

Like the vehicles across the divide, Weinberg's reality is both normal and not so much. He tends to his crops—Weinberg's fruit trees fill 212 acres on 55 plots of land in Metulla—like any farmer, but in the odd context of neighborliness with

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those in a state that's formally an enemy.

Across the road stands a two-story gasoline station. Normal Israeli-Lebanese relations would enable Weinberg to refuel his truck there. After all, he remarks, smiling, the price per liter is half of what he pays in Israel.

Weinberg, his wife Anat, and their two young children moved into their home last winter. Two hundred yards down the road, at the end of the warehouse of Metulla Fruits, the cooperative through which Weinberg sells his produce, is a yellow gate—an Israeli-Lebanese border location. Weinberg says he's concerned about living right there, because a terrorist could cross into Israel—to say nothing of the well-armed Hezbollah and its Iranian sponsors. As he speaks, we see two United Nations cars passing a Hezbollah checkpoint.

Near the edge of town, the Good Fence, through which



Photo credit: Hillel Kuttler

Metulla farmer Levav Weinberg—standing outside his home—hopes to someday be able to drive across the street from his orchard to refuel at a Lebanese gas station.

Lebanese civilians for decades had entered Israel each morning to work and returned home each afternoon, is now just a fence. It's been closed since 2000, when the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) withdrew from Lebanon after an 18-year presence. Lebanese high schoolers had been throwing rocks and bottles at Weinberg and other Israeli

farmers, which led the IDF to declare those spots in Israeli territory a closed military zone. Weinberg is among the few civilians permitted entry.

With fewer than 2,000 residents, Metulla is tiny, its economy relying on agriculture and tourism. One can cross Metulla on foot in 15 minutes. Every Israeli knows the village's name from the legendary

“Song of the *Palmach*”: “From Metulla to the Negev/From the [Mediterranean] Sea to the desert ...” Weinberg is an active volunteer in the youth-hockey program that brings together Jews, Christians, Muslims, Druse, and Alawites. Metulla is home to Israel's only regulation-size hockey rink.

Metulla remains vulnerable, a hilly peninsula of land in the northernmost spot in the Galilee. It's been attacked during the two Israel-Lebanon wars. In 2006—when Weinberg was serving in the IDF reserves—Katyusha rockets and gunfire struck Metulla's fields and structures but killed no one.

Weinberg won't relocate. “There are threats, but no fear,” he says. “If I were not here, those threats would be upon Tel Aviv.” Besides, he says, “I love the place: nature, the views, hockey. That's what keeps me here.”

We leave the field and come upon Israeli homes again. One, with two cars in the driveway,

belongs to a Christian family. The husband was an officer in the IDF-allied South Lebanon Army (SLA); upon its 2000 withdrawal, the IDF resettled scores of SLA households in Israel. The family in this house has four children. One of the grandsons will attend nursery school with Harel next year.

Weinberg thinks that's great.

“A person is a person,” he says. “It doesn't matter if they're Israeli or Lebanese, Muslim or Christian or Jew. Whoever wants peace will live in peace.”

Weinberg hopes that the quiet generally reigning here is formalized, that the Good Fence reopens, that the 15–20 Lebanese who entered daily to toil in his fields return.

“I worked well with them. They just wanted to make a living,” he says. “They're neighbors. I'd be happy to work with them again.” ■

Hillel Kuttler is a freelance writer living in Israel.

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