



# Birthday, with rockets

Missiles clash in the sky above, life moves on below



NIR ELIAS / REUTERS

Residents take cover in the stairwell of their building during a rocket attack on Tel Aviv

## **BOOM!**

We scrambled to the stairwell for safety from rockets.

“You didn’t sing happy birthday to me yet!” my aunt said rushing to her three-year-old granddaughter whose hands were clutched to her ears as her mother held her tight. The little girl’s lower lip was twitching and she looked dangerously close to tears. Hustling to the stairs for shelter we were semi-organized – kids first, then the adults and my uncle in his wheelchair.

Then we started an impromptu Hebrew rendition of “Happy Birthday” in the stairwell. A neighbor joined in. Someone took photos of the 19 family members dispersed among the stairs. The eight-year-old grandson clapped and cheered. The three-year-old started laughing, showing off those dimples, big blue eyes dry. Disaster averted – both tears and rockets.

As a New Yorker spending a few weeks in Israel, I can say this was a first for me.

Before we sat down for dinner in her home in Holon, just outside Tel Aviv, my aunt had set out a plan after pushing aside the living room furniture to fit a long dining room table. The plan was simple: if a siren goes off, we’ll go slowly to the stairs – like a game – so the kids don’t get frightened.

But who can plan these things? First of all, only one of us heard the siren. By the time everyone else was convinced there was a siren we were scrambling.

So we left mid-salads and hung out at the stairs. And sang “Happy Birthday.”

Before the second siren of the evening sounded, we were already almost through with the homemade fish and brown rice my aunt’s two daughters brought. Her third daughter had brought the chocolate cake and the grandchildren. This is a household dominated by women averaging five feet tall, and, I’ve learned, all gourmet chefs.

**BOOM! BOOM! BOOM!**

“Fireworks!” someone said.

Well, no, it was the Iron Dome in action. How many booms did we hear? Three? Four? Did that mean four Hamas rockets headed in our

direction were intercepted? The Iron Dome has a 90-percent success these days, the Israel Defense Forces says. That must be one of the reasons we are blasé about the whole thing. The Iron Dome will save us.

When the sirens in Tel Aviv first began I had some questions. What if I’m jogging and a siren goes off? Find the closest building and go inside, or jump to the ground and cover your head. What if I’m driving? Pull over, jump to the ground and cover your head. How long do I stay in the safe room? Ten minutes, give the shrapnel time to land not on you. What happens to dogs? Train them to go to the safe room with you. And take the cats in, too!

Sirens are a tricky business. One cousin was driving down the highway and heard a siren but saw an ambulance, so she pulled over to let the ambulance by but didn’t get out of her car. By the time she realized it was a rocket siren, it had ended. The main worry is being hit by the falling shrapnel.

During that week, sirens served as my alarm clock twice. The first time, it was at 7:55 a.m. I had a fever and strep throat and almost didn’t get out of bed to go to the safe room, even though it’s inside the apartment. The second time, at 10:30 a.m. on Friday, I was already on antibiotics, feeling better, and, yeah, it was time to get up.

One Saturday, Hamas warned rockets were to hit Tel Aviv at 9 p.m. The sirens began a few minutes later, at 9:07 p.m. The booms seemed louder, closer to home. An orchestra of sirens and booms lasted longer than usual. On Tuesday evening, I was at the Tel Aviv Museum when the sirens went off. We all ran to the cafeteria downstairs. That time the boom shook the ground.

I’m lucky the apartment I’m staying in has a safe room (a safe room, is a requirement for recent constructions in Israel) making it easy to rush over no matter what. But a cousin convinced me that sharing a common safe room in an older building or a stairwell can be great for socializing. She met her neighbors of three years only after a siren brought them to a safe room this week. They’re now friends, making plans to see each other outside the confines of the sirens.

And so it goes. Rockets clash in the sky above, life moves on below. ■