

Under Fire

ISRAEL SENDS FIREFIGHTERS TO CALIFORNIA

“You have less than 72 hours to pack the equipment, get your visas and passports in order and fly to California. They need our help.”

This was a first for Israel. The first time the small country had sent a fire-fighting delegation to help its powerful ally, the USA, fight fires on American soil.

10 officers and firefighters from Israel's Fire and Rescue Services, rescue and forest fire experts, and a Foreign Ministry representative, recently returned to Israel from Sacramento, California, where they assisted local forces in battling a wave of wildfires sweeping through the area.

Since the beginning of the year, there have been nearly 7,900 wildfires in California, burning over 3.3 million acres. Since August 15, when California's fires increased, there have been 25 fatalities and over 4,200 structures destroyed. With no significant

precipitation in sight, California remains dry and ripe for wildfires.

Straight into the fires they went, after quickly learning procedure and strategy from the Cal-Fire (California Department of Forestry and Fire Protection) team. They gathered all their equipment and joined the battle. Due to COVID-19, the Israeli delegation joined a capsule of Cal-Fire firefighters and they worked side by side in 24-hour shifts over the next 12 days.

“We really felt the importance of our Jewish identity in California,” said Edgar Blum, one of the Israeli firefighters. “The Jewish Agency and the consulate ensured we had kosher food, we recited *kiddush* on Friday night and met with the Jewish mayor of Sacramento, who thanked us for our efforts. It was certainly a proud-to-be-Jewish/proud-to-be-Israeli moment.”

Many of the firefighters left families and young children at home to make

this life-saving, property-saving trip. Not only were they putting their lives in danger and away from home for two weeks, they knew that upon their return, they would also have to spend another two weeks in mandatory quarantine. And not just any two weeks, but two weeks of *chagim*. “Now that all of Israel is in lockdown, it's like they're joining us in support, so that makes it feel a bit easier,” Blum added.

“While we played just a small role in saving forest lands in Sacramento, it was extremely heartwarming to see firefighters from all around the world – especially Israel and the USA – joining forces and working together to save lives, forests and property. To see the humanity in helping those who needed to be relocated from their homes. This is what people are meant to do. Our most important work is coming together and helping each other.” ■

