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'Are we running to our death?': Israeli survivors of Hamas attack tell their stories in Squirrel Hill

Updated: 11:33 PM EST Dec 7, 2023



PITTSBURGH — On the first night of Hanukkah, hundreds of people packed a room inside the Jewish Community Center of Greater Pittsburgh for a special lighting of the menorah.

"This event tonight is a way to show what happened in Israel and for us to show proudly the strength of this Jewish community," said Jeff Finkelstein, president and CEO of the Jewish Federation of Greater Pittsburgh.

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Together with survivors and families of victims of the Tree of Life shooting, four Israeli survivors of the Oct. 7 Hamas attack helped light the menorah to begin the first night of Chanukah.

"Pittsburgh just absolutely felt like it would be very fitting in this community to celebrate Chanukah and bring Israeli survivors here in solidarity," said Brian Schreiber, chief external affairs officer for the JCC.

As part of a partnership between the Jewish Community Center Association of North America and the Israel Ministry for Diaspora Affairs, Israelis who survived the attacks visited Pittsburgh and 19 other cities around the world to share their stories from that day.

The event, entitled "Light the World," was livestreamed in Israel.

"We're all alive," said Shani Teshuva, who survived an attack on Kibbutz Zikim. "We're grateful for that, and we have a long way to go."

Hila Fakliro was working as a bartender at the Nova music festival during the weekend of Oct. 7.

"Around 6:30h [a.m.], the missiles were starting," Fakliro recounted. "In the beginning, we thought it was fireworks."

Fakliro said she ran for five hours. Along the way, she saw "a lot of terrible things."

"Are we running to our deaths?" she remembered asking a police officer. "Do we need to stay and hide? Do we need to go back to the car?"

Ofer and Rony Kissin helped fend off Hamas terrorists after they tried to penetrate the walls of the Kissin's kibbutz, Kerem Shalom.

"It was a lot of luck on that day," Ofer Kissin said. "We are here to tell the story, but we are lucky to be here."

Finkelstein, Schreiber, and other organizers of the event emphasized the significance of having Israeli survivors in person to share their stories, as opposed to on their television screens.

"It's about making sure that we amplify the stories of real people who survived these horrible, horrible incidents in Israel," said Finkelstein.

During the nearly hourlong panel, one chair remained empty.

Schreiber said the chair signified the hostages that remain in Gaza.

"We've heard nothing about their well-being, don't know whether they're alive or dead, and the level of trauma that that's inflicted in Israel and on the Jewish community is palpable," Schreiber said. Israel strikes in and around Gaza's second-largest city in a bloody new phase of the war Israel orders mass evacuations as it widens offensive; Palestinians are running out of places to go Biden's allies in Senate demand Israel limit civilian deaths in Gaza as Congress debates US aid Who are the hostages released so far in the Israel-Hamas deal?

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On Chanukah, Israeli survivors of Oct. 7 share stories of terror and bravery with Pit

ISRAEL AT WAR / FINDING LIGHT AMID THE DARKNESS

On Chanukah, Israeli survivors of Oct. 7 share stories of terror and bravery with Pittsburgh

Two months after Hamas attack, four Israeli visitors recount horror and light a candle

By ADAM REINHERZ
December 8, 2023, 3:10 pm | 0



Ofer Kisin, Rony Kisin, Hila Fakliro and Shani Teshuva, survivors of the Oct. 7 attack in Israel, speak during a Chanukah candle lighting ceremony at the Jewish Community Center in Squirrel Hill on Dec. 7. (Photo by Adam Reinherz)

Seated adjacent to an empty chair and one lit candle, four survivors of the Oct. 7 attack in Israel welcomed Chanukah by articulating harrowing narratives inside the Jewish Community Center of Greater Pittsburgh in Squirrel Hill.

As hundreds of attendees silently listened to the survivors' words, Hila Fakliro, Ofer Kissin, Rony Kissin and Shani Teshuva detailed the horrors they experienced two months ago on a day many now call "Black Shabbat."

For 40 minutes on Dec. 7, Fakliro, Teshuva and the Kissins took turns returning to

Oct. 7.

Get The Jewish Chronicle Weekly Edition by email and never miss our top stories That morning, Fakliro was

working

as a bartender at the Re'im Music Festival. Around 6:30 a.m., Hamas terrorists began firing rockets. Fakliro said she and a co-worker sheltered in the bar, but their manager eventually directed them to run. They waited near the festival's entrance. People raced toward her and shouted that terrorists were approaching. Fakliro heard gunfire. A police officer directed her and others toward Ofakim. She ran, stopped, made it to Moshav Patish, saw a video of Hamas terrorists attacking nearby and finally understood what was happening.

Over the day, and as a result of Hamas attacks, an estimated 1,200 Israelis were murdered and about 240 others were taken hostage.

Shattered holiday and survival in Kibbutz Kerem Shalom

Ofer Kissin and Rony Kissin were celebrating Simchat Torah with their children and grandchildren in Kibbutz Kerem Shalom.

"It was the first time I could gather all my family — all my four children and my grandsons — in five years. I was so excited that I made so many meals I didn't have room on the table for plates," Rony Kissin said.

An alarm sounded in the kibbutz around 6 a.m., Ofer Kissin said.

More than 10 terrorists, according to Israel's Channel 12 News, breached two fences before blasting through a concrete wall surrounding the kibbutz.

A security team battled the terrorists for hours, Ofer Kissin said.



A decorative menorah is illuminated on the first night of Chanukah outside the Jewish Community Center in Squirrel Hill on Dec. 7. (Photo by Adam Reinherz)

As fighting continued, the Kissins performed multiple duties. The first involved family: The Kissins' daughter lives four houses away.

The grandkids were hungry, Ofer Kissin said, "so I called the head of the emergency team in our kibbutz and told him people are shooting outside the door, and I'm taking a basket of food to my daughter's house."

Kissin was instructed not to go; the grandfather dismissed the directive, ran to his daughter's house, deposited the food and ran back amid the gunfire, he said.

Shortly thereafter, he and Rony — the Kissins are medics — packed up emergency equipment and headed toward the fighting.

"I was running first, and she was running after me," Ofer Kissin said. "The A Team is on one side and the terrorists are on the other side."

The Kissins entered a house and began treating someone who was "badly injured." All the while, fighting raged nearby, the couple said. Nearly seven hours after Hamas entered Kerem Shalom, members of the Israel Defense Forces finally arrived.

"There was a lot of luck that day," Ofer Kissin said. "We are here to tell the story but we are lucky to be here. It was not obvious."

Minutes afford miracles in Kibbutz Zikim

Most Saturday mornings, Shani Teshuva leaves Kibbutz Zikim between 6 and 6:30 a.m. to bike near the beach, she said. On Oct. 7, she woke up, noticed it wasn't as hot as the week before and decided to stay home a little longer.

"I gave myself an extra 10 minutes and those extra 10 minutes are the reason that I am here alive," she said.

At 6:29 a.m., rockets began firing.

Given the kibbutz's location (about 500 meters from Gaza), "we have eight seconds to get to shelter," Teshuva said.



Shani Teshuva, a survivor of the Oct. 7 attack in Israel, clutches an empty chair that symbolizes 'every single one of the people that were kidnapped.' (Photo by Joshua Franzos)

Along with her husband and two children, ages 14 and 12, the family feverishly descended downstairs and entered their safe room.

She and her husband noticed an open window.

"We laid on the floor covering our children," Teshuva said. During a period of calm, "we got up, closed the iron window, we shut the door tight and we stayed in the safe room."

Teshuva heard gunfire but didn't recognize the sound.

"We are familiar with the army's, from training," she said. "And we are used to rockets. It's unbelievable to say, but we can handle rockets."

The sound of unfamiliar shooting increased.

There was a battle 30 feet from Teshuva's home, she said: The head of the kibbutz received a call from the head of security in the area, saying, "There are terrorists coming in through the ocean, from land and from the air."

That message gave the kibbutz's response team two minutes, but the team wasn't comprised of young soldiers, Teshuva said. "These are people that have families."

The response team, which consisted of individuals aged 25-70, spread out and noticed an army truck approaching the kibbutz's fence.

"The response team thought it was the army coming to help us," she said. "But as people jumped out of the car, one of them jumped with an RPG, and that's the second they realized these are terrorists. These are Hamas terrorists."

Fighting lasted nearly three hours, she continued. Terrorists tried entering the kibbutz "in total over 10 times."

Teshuva remained in the safe room with her children until 10 p.m. Her husband left, however, first to extinguish a fire after a rocket hit a nearby car, and next after he was called to the kibbutz headquarters.

A cyberattack prevented the use of phones, so her husband's mission "was to run from house to house, under fire, and let people know that they're not allowed to leave the house or kibbutz because there were terrorists all around."

"Only later did we learn how many miracles we had that day in Zikim," Teshuva said. "We have family and friends that were killed, slaughtered, raped in all the communities, all throughout the Gaza envelope. We're one big community and you know each other, everywhere.

"Each and every one of us that's here alive, we had our own individual miracle and our communities had miracles that kept us alive."

Be a witness and a storyteller

Weeks before the Dec. 7 event, Jason Kunzman, the JCC's president and CEO, returned from a mission to Israel.

After learning that the JCC Association of North America and Ministry of Diaspora Affairs were sending survivors of the Oct. 7 attack abroad to tell their stories, Kunzman knew that Pittsburgh needed to be among the 20 cities selected, he told the Chronicle.

"I could not be more proud of having had the opportunity to host something like this — not only as a means for those stories to be shared, but to lift up our community in the way that we continue to explicitly demonstrate our support for Israel," he said.



Community members applaud during a Dec. 7 program at the Jewish Community Center in Squirrel Hill. (Photo by Joshua Franzos)

Brian Schreiber, the JCC's chief external affairs officer and special adviser to the CEO, said the event presented a good opportunity to learn from one another.

"We can learn from them to be the storytellers — to continue to be witnesses of what happened to people that survived Oct. 7; we can be in community with them. And they can learn from us what it means to have a supportive community in the Diaspora that cares about their well-being."

Throughout most of the program, hundreds of attendees sat quietly in the JCC. Moments before the event's conclusion, however, Teshuva clutched the empty chair beside her and said it represents "every single one of the people that were kidnapped."

"We won't stop until everybody's home," she continued. "Let's keep that in our hearts and in our prayers every single day."

Teshuva's statement was met with thunderous applause.

Keep the light going

Along with participating in the program, which was hosted by the JCC and Jewish Federation of Greater Pittsburgh, the visiting Israelis participated in several public and private events in Pittsburgh. Along with joining a press conference at the Federation's office on Friday morning, Fakliro, Teshuva and the Kissins are scheduled to meet with Pittsburgh's Israeli community this afternoon.

Hours before ascending the stage in the JCC to light a candle for the first night of Chanukah, the four Israelis met privately with survivors and family members of those murdered in the Pittsburgh synagogue shooting.

Following the event, Marty Gaynor and Dan Leger, Talmud study partners and survivors of the synagogue shooting, stressed the importance of standing beside the Israelis to publicly celebrate the Festival of Lights.

"I'm just grateful that we had the opportunity to be here with them, and to show them support and solidarity," Gaynor said. "Finding ways to connect and show kindness are so important, and this gave us that opportunity."

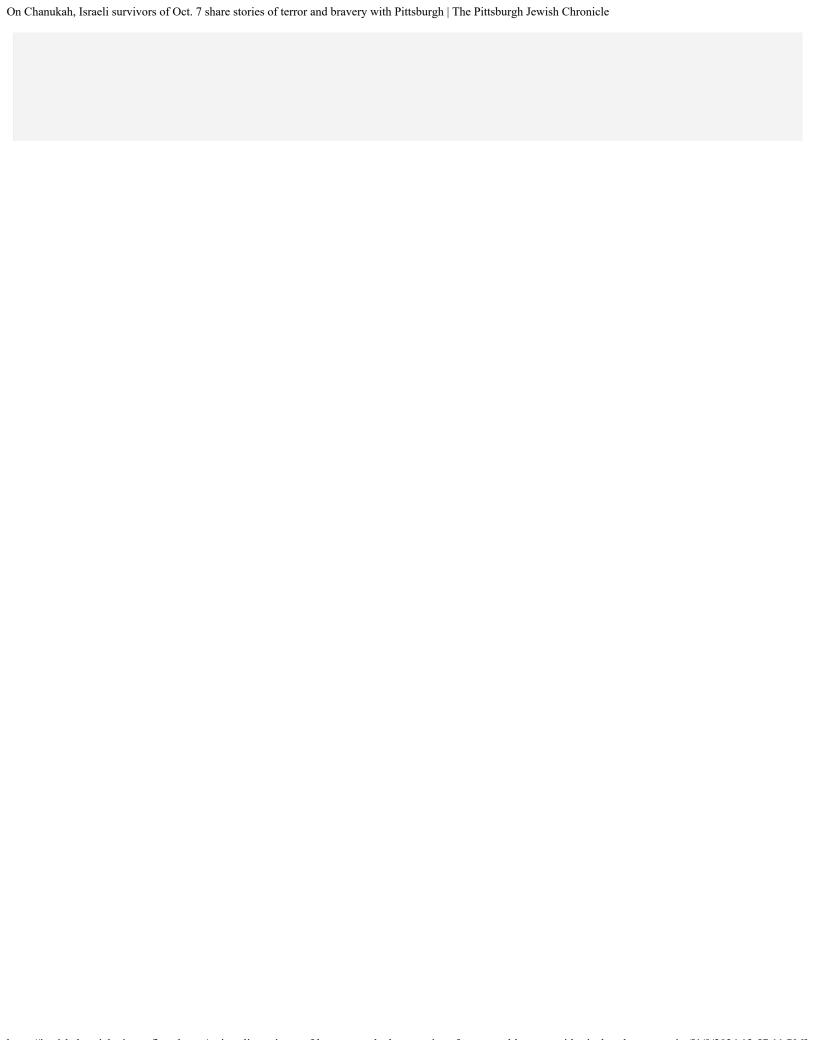
"Rony [Kissin] said that what we need to do now is bring light into the world," Leger said. "Being together with people who have been through a horrific experience, and were not crushed by it, is really life-affirming." **PJC**

Adam Reinherz can be reached at areinherz@pittsburghjewishchronicle.org.

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LOCAL NEWS

Pittsburgh Jewish organizations mark first night of

Hanukkah

By Alexandra Todd
December 7, 2023 / 11:16 PM EST / CBS Pittsburgh

PITTSBURGH (KDKA) — Jewish organizations in Pittsburgh marked the first night of Hanukkah amid the war in Israel and a surge in antisemitism.

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The room at the JCC was filled with community members who were there to understand what happened on Oct. 7 when Hamas attacked Israel.

"Three of my friends were kidnapped," Hila Fakliro said. "Six of them are dead. A lot of them got injured, but thank God me and most of my friends are OK."

Pittsburgh was one of 20 communities that welcomed survivors of the attack to share their experiences. Community leaders are hoping events like the one on Thursday will help combat mass misinformation and spread awareness.

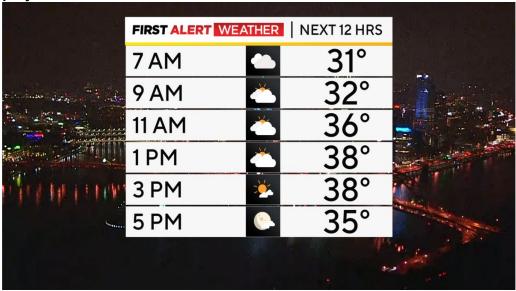
"It's really important that we hear their stories," Jeff Finkelstein, CEO of the Jewish Federation of Greater Pittsburgh, said. "It's important that we know the stories of what's taken place in Jewish history so that it doesn't repeat itself."

On Thursday morning, Tree of Life unveiled its plans for a <u>new memorial</u> five years after the nation's deadliest antisemitic attack.

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In: Pittsburgh

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'A night that begins shining light on the community': Looking ahead to Hanukkah celebrations

Updated: 10:54 PM EST Dec 6, 2023

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Reporter
PITTSBURGH - On the eve of the first night of Hanukkah, staff at the Jewish Community Center of Greater Pittsburgh are preparing to the first night of Hanukkah, staff at the Jewish Community Center of Greater Pittsburgh are preparing to the first night of Hanukkah, staff at the Jewish Community Center of Greater Pittsburgh are preparing to the first night of Hanukkah, staff at the Jewish Community Center of Greater Pittsburgh are preparing to the first night of Hanukkah, staff at the Jewish Community Center of Greater Pittsburgh are preparing to the first night of Hanukkah, staff at the Jewish Community Center of Greater Pittsburgh are preparing to the first night of Hanukkah, staff at the Jewish Community Center of Greater Pittsburgh are preparing to the first night of Hanukkah, staff at the Jewish Community Center of Greater Pittsburgh are prepared to the first night of Hanukkah, staff at the Jewish Community Center of Greater Pittsburgh are prepared to the first night of the first night night night night of the first night night night night night nigh
accommodate hundreds of people for a ceremonial lighting of the menorah Thursday night.
"Tomorrow is going to be a night that begins shiping light on the community" said Dahhi Dan Symans, the conicy divastor of Jawish Life

Tomorrow is going to be a night that begins shining light on the community," said Rabbi Ron Symons, the senior director of Jewish Life at the JCC Pittsburgh.

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Together with the Jewish Federation of Greater Pittsburgh, the JCC is hosting four Israeli survivors of the Oct. 7 Hamas attack. They will help light the menorah and detail their experiences from that day.

"We need to hear their stories of what it is that actually happened to them and to their friends and to their families on Oct. 7," Symons said. "And we need them to give us hope that eventually we're gonna get to a time of peace."

The Israelis' visit is part of the "Light of the World" Hanukkah event, a program organized through a partnership between JCCs and the Israel Ministry of Diaspora Affairs.

Symons said Pittsburgh was one of only 20 cities across the world chosen to participate in the program. In an interview with Pittsburgh's Action News 4, he stressed the significance of the decision, pointing to the recent history of terror inflicted upon the Pittsburgh Jewish community.

'It's important to stand with Israel': Pittsburgh Jewish Federation holds vigil for Israel

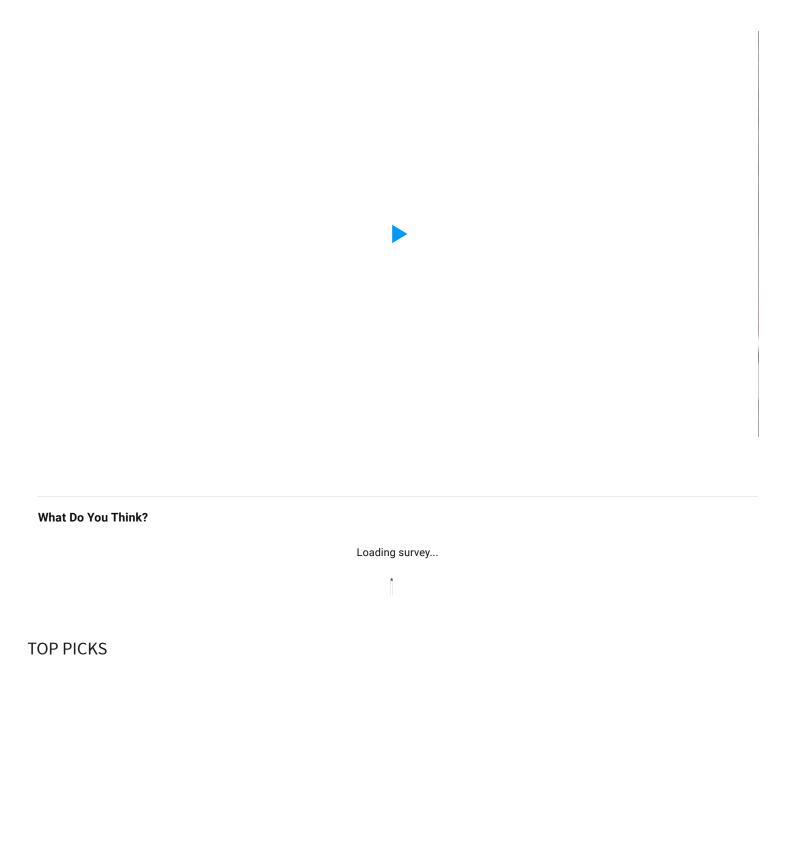
"Pittsburgh understands what it means to live in trauma from a Jewish community's perspective," Symons said, referring to the fatal mass shooting at the Tree of Life Synagogue.

Pittsburgh's Action News 4 asked the Jewish Federation of Greater Pittsburgh about any security considerations ahead of public Hanukkah events. The organization's director of community security sent the following statement:

"We have been working very closely with our organizations who are holding menorah lighting, and Hanukkah related events to ensure that they have appropriate security given the heightened threat tempo. We are collaborating closely with law enforcement and our intelligence partners,, and are proactively monitoring for potential threat activity. We are not aware of any direct or indirect threats to the community at this time. We encourage all to remain vigilant and to report anything suspicious or concerning to law-enforcement, as well as to us at the Jewish Federation."

In addition to the event at the JCC, a crowd is expected to gather in front of the City-County Building in downtown Pittsburgh Thursday night for a **menorah lighting**. Mayor Ed Gainey and other local leaders are slated to participate in the lighting.

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PITTSBURGH

8 seconds to get to shelter': Hamas attack survivors hare their stories in Squirrel Hill

RIB IVE

STEPHANIE RITENBAUGH \square | Thursday, Dec. 7, 2023 8:58 p.m.



Top





















ava always felt safe in kibbutz Zikim, along the beach in Southern Israel, just north of Gaza.

the planned to ride her bike, as she often did on Saturdays. But she allowed herself 10 extra minutes to leave her home.

a 10 minutes are the reason I'm sitting here today alive," said Teshuva. "At 6:29, rockets started flying very second. We had eight seconds to get to shelter."

with her husband and two children to the family's safe room. The parents shielded their teenage kids odies.

ck had cut all communication in those early morning hours. Teshuva's husband was tasked with running to house to warn people to stay put, that this was different — the community had gotten so used to hat sometimes people would feel OK leaving their homes, she noted.

charge was one of four survivors of the Hamas attack in October who shared their experiences Thursday with an

the Jewish Community Center in Squirrel Hill. The JCC and the Jewish Federation of Greater worked together on the event, which was made possible through the Jewish Community Center of North American and the Israel Ministry for Diaspora Affairs and Combating Antisemitism.

night of Hanukkah, the survivors were part of a group to light the first candle on the menorah.

The group of four were among 20 such groups speaking Thursday at Jewish Community Centers around the world.

One seat on the dais remained empty in honor of the hostages that were taken and not returned home.

For Teshuva's family, they got out safely.

"Only later did we learn how many miracles we had," Teshuva said. "Each and every one of us is here alive because we had our own individual miracles and our communities had miracles that kept us alive."

Before the event, Jeff Finkelstein, president and CEO of the Jewish Federation of Greater Pittsburgh, noted the pain of Squirrel Hill being the site of the shooting at Tree of Life, the worst antisemitic attack in the United States.

"We understand the pain of when Jews are targeted," Finkelstein said. "But Pittsburgh is also a really special community. And the fact that we were chosen as one of the first 20 (communities to host survivors) really talks about how cohesive a community we are."

Hila Fakliro <u>was a bartender during an all-night music festival</u> in Israel when the attack started on Oct. 7. Fakliro hid in a ditch, sending text messages to her brother and friends. She joined a group that was fleeing the violence and eventually reached Moshav Patish, a town in southern Israel.

Two of her friends were taken hostage in Gaza, and three others were killed.

"Thank you for coming to hear me," Fakliro said. "It's good to know that I'm not alone."

Teshuva said as the Jewish community observes Hanukkah, the Festival of Lights, it's critical to be a light in dark places.

"Even a small light shining makes a big difference," Teshuva said. "Let us shine a light. Each and every one of us can make a difference by being kinder to one another.

"Let's remember that we're all brothers and sisters. If we shine all these little lights, we will have a great light in the end. We're alive, and I am grateful for that.

"But we have a long way to go."

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