

January the 17th. - evening

Hi everyone,

Coming to think about it, this earthquake shouldn't be such a surprise since the earth was fair enough to send in the last week several little quakes (that couldn't be ignored in our 7th floor apartment). However, when at 4:31AM, during my sweet and dreamy sleep, came this strong quake, accompanied by this terrifying roaring sound and the whole room was shaking as though it was possessed by demons - it was a hell of a surprise.

I woke up instantly and ran to sit under the doorway. But then I recalled the movie "Grand Canyon" where they ran out to the street and I decided that I would feel much safer out there. The problem was that the darkness was total. I couldn't see my own hands, and that's not merely a figure of speech. I went to sleep with a big mess on my desk and clothes all over and therefore I couldn't find my keys, my watch and some other basic stuff. I grab a jacket and socks and went outside. The way to the staircase (which I never used and didn't even know where is located exactly!) and down the stairs where you can't see ANYTHING was very difficult - but once we were out, I felt much better. Many neighbors gathered there and I decided to go and check on Rinat (a neighbor with two kids and a husband that is always planting hearts in people's chests in such hours). Her husband was home and he told me that they prefer the "under a big table" strategy.

We went out for a trip in the neighborhood. From the transistor of our dear neighbors - Emanuelle and Ziva Atsmon (who are approaching the age of 70 and are always so well prepared and know everything) - we understood that the center of the quake was about 10 miles north to us in the neighborhood of Northridge (in San Fernando Valley) and that it was 6.6 in the Richter scale, one of the strongest in the last 100 (or 150, according to some) years. Our neighborhood looked calm and undamaged, but cars were racing dangerously in the streets. At 6AM we decided to end our tour and return back home. There was absolutely no damage. Two drawers were opened and the coffee jar failed. I myself did in 1 second of carelessness last month a much bigger damage by braking our standing lamp-post... The phones worked (surprisingly) so I could call home. But the electricity was off so we had to learn from Israel about the content of the CNN reports!

Remind you of something? Of-course: The first scud attack night! The similarities go much beyond that:

- A bad and frightening surprise in the middle of the night.
- A new and unfamiliar danger (at least for me earthquakes are new).
- Uncertainty. Questions.
- The next day is kind of a holiday (Friday on 18/1/91; President's Day here today).
- The phone operators collapsed after a while.
- Outside or Inside? The sealed room or the shelter? Who knows?
- A major criticism on the authorities and a sense of entrusts in the public.
- A feeling of great luck (if it happened in a regular daytime, hundreds would have been killed just on all the highways that collapsed).
- Constant round-the-clock reports on TV, live reports from the ruined areas, an increasing number of dead victims (currently 30), instructions to the public (stay calm, drink water - but only after 20 minutes of boiling them), instructions about "which schools where will be open" etc.
- Experts are being interviewed all the time and they start their answers by "Probably...", "I would say..." or "Chances are...". The experts here are the Cal-Tech (California Technical

institute) seismology doctors who speak all the time about newly discovered "faults" (faults are the cracks between the earth plates that cause earthquakes).

By the way - just now came another strong after-shock (each after-shock is also shown instantly on TV on the CalTech seismograph). I believe it was between 5 to 5.5, judging by previous after-shocks. And - on TV they just said that there are no classes tomorrow at UCLA but faculty and staff members should come to help in cleaning!!! (I'm writing now from home in case that you wonder).

In 1971 there was a great 6.1 quake in the same area, more or less, and the damage was massive. The authorities claimed that the lesson was learnt and that the new buildings should survive strong quakes and also the highways were strengthened or checked or something. However - new buildings did not survive and in many major highways bridges collapsed. Hollywood also suffered painfully. The quake came in a surprise. So - the public feels depressed and more and more people ask: Why the hell do I live in Southern California? Just to remind you - we had this year fires and a dry season; the economy is in a bad shape; there's a high rate of unemployment; there's always a lack of water; and to top it all - the seismologists talk about THE BIG ONE that will turn California to an island or something apocalyptic like that!

I hope that the after-shocks will die out, but they will last for 2-3 years! As for the state of LA - it's "on the face". Although I hardly use my car in weekdays, I will probably feel the lack of all those highway bridges (which will take a year to repair!). Thousands of people sleep outside tonight and we're lucky to have a warm weather. We have to boil water, we can't use the elevator (7th floor, remember?) and we can't go outside (a curfew). So, as I said - "on the face", but I believe that things will return to normal soon.

One funny thing: Remember the famous scene in Jurassic Park where the small waves in the cup of water indicated the approach of the monstrous dinosaur? We have here the same indicator in our coffee cups. So we just don't fill them up to the end. Speaking about coffee - this quake was a good excuse for another Israeli tenants meeting. This time it was a meeting over a cup of coffee in Rinat's apartment where everyone told his or her exclusive stories from the night. It was fun. We decided to have that more often (coffee, not quakes).

Thanks to the many of you who called to find out whether I'm still alive (although I didn't appreciate the tone of disappointment that I could detect in the voices of some of you when I picked up the phone, alive as ever). Take care, pray for California and keep in touch,

Tamir.

January the 18th - morning

Update: The night was calm. There were many after-shocks but not serious ones. The elevator works and we have already enough boiled water. The campus is closed but I managed to get in and there's property damage. My office floor was covered with books. But - "Haseder hushav al kano". Thanks for the exploded mail box that I found this morning. This long long mail is my personal response to every one of you.

Bye, Tamir