

6:30 am, October 7, 2023

SOPHIE CHEMLA

6:30 AM,
OCTOBER 7, 2023

Day-by-day,
the story of the massacre

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ISBN: 9798336538526

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*They had been educated to violence; violence flowed in
their veins, it was normal, natural.
It showed in their faces,
their gestures, their language.
To humiliate, to inflict pain on the 'enemy',
such was their daily mission;
they did not discuss it,
they had no second thoughts:
it was the one and only end.*

The Drowned and the Saved

Primo Levi

FOREWORD

A few words about me

What would I have done?

What would I have done if I'd been born in the 1920s, if I'd been old enough to decide on my actions at the time of the 20th century's anti-Semitic purges, when millions of Jews were being led to the death camps?

Would I have followed in fear? Would I have hidden? Would I have fled to another country when it was still possible? Or would I have joined the resistance movement, to oppose fate and save what was still savable?

This is probably the question that every Jew born after 1945 has asked himself/herself at some point in his/her life. In any case, it's the one I've been asking myself for a long time, from a very early age. Terrified of not knowing the answer. Ashamed of not being able to say loud and clear that, yes, I would have rebelled if I'd lived back then.

I was 18 when I signed up to protect the Jewish community. For several years, I had been observing these young people from afar, never imagining that I might one day join their ranks. Then one Sunday morning, through a misunderstanding, I was taken into confidence: I knew who they were and how to contact them. I had the necessary guarantors and a telephone number in my pocket. That was all it took for me to knock on their door, determined and convinced, making them understand that from now on they'd have to deal with me.

I was finally getting bold. And fortunately so, because being a young woman, and a shy and unsociable one at that, was far from easy in this world of men who were not very tactful, and with whom you had to constantly prove your strength and efficiency.

From then on, I spent my days at university, while my evenings - my weekends - my vacations, would henceforth be dedicated to my community involvement. I think I can safely say that this environment, a mixture of certainty, self-sacrifice and great responsibility, made me the woman I am today.

September 2000, as the second Intifada erupts in Israel, France experiences its biggest anti-Semitic crisis since the end of the Second World War. Threats were becoming more and more common, but above all, more and more violent. Acts of violence are a daily occurrence. Synagogues burn. Jewish children are being attacked in their schools, blowing up their transfers to community establishments, which themselves face proven threats.

The Jewish community is in shock. My friends and I are prepared, however, as we have been implementing emergency protocols for years.

It's been 2 years since I left university in 2000, and I now work for a company. My colleagues, most of whom are close friends, don't understand why I'm always wearing a beeper around my waist, or why I find it hard to join them for a drink in the evening. Nor do they know that I often spend my nights at our permanence and that it's not uncommon for me to shower in the security guard's cubicle before going into the office.

The pace is hellish.

One year before September 11, 2001, a milestone was reached in France and most other Western countries. Anti-Semitism would never again return to its former levels, and every year the figures became more and more worrying.

When Arthur Schnitzler wrote Vienna at Twilight in 1908, he had his Jewish character say - no, we're not paranoid. We know in our bones, in our flesh when we're dealing with an anti-Semite. We know today that he was right, and that no, the Jews of the early 20th century were not paranoid.

Since September 2000, numerous associations have been fighting to have anti-Zionism recognized as a form of anti-Semitism. They were told to "stop being paranoid, it's got nothing to do with it". We now know that these associations were right, and that no, Jews at the beginning of the 21st century were not paranoid.

In the years that followed, like many of my friends who work actively to protect the Jewish

community, I probably abandoned everything else.

As a result, my sphere of action was no longer limited to the gates of Paris, and it was not uncommon for me to travel to other cities. At that time, the idea was formed in me that Jews throughout the world must not only know their history, but also have the duty to work for their own protection. It is no longer a luxury or an option, it is now an obligation (and current events have never proved me so right).

2005, what had to happen happened: I'm exhausted.

Big black hole. I decide to move to New York to spend a year away from it all.

2006, I return to France. I let myself be persuaded and find my teammates. But I've changed. I no longer believe I should be the last to leave the ship. The last sentinel who will turn out the lights once all the Jews of France are safe elsewhere. Above all, I accept the idea, after so many years, of passing the torch. I accept the idea of returning to a form of anonymity and leaving the protection forces.

January 2009: I finally decide to go to Israel.
May 2009, I arrive with my suitcases.

Since my aliyah, I've been coming to terms with the idea of being “useless” to my country's security, and devoting myself to my own life. It's far from easy. But it's time.

The years go by - I find my balance.

Then one morning I look at my alarm clock.
It's 6:30 a.m., on October 7, 2023...

PROLOGUE

I wake up every morning to the sound of the radio. I've always found it to be a good way to clear your head and acclimate to the new day.

But in recent months, acclimating to the new day means remembering again...

Like most radios, the one I listen to has a news update every hour. Today:

"Lior Sivan, 32, from Beit Shemesh, reserve captain, officer of the 363rd battalion of the 'Harel' brigade, fell in battle. May his soul rest in peace!"

Every morning, new names. Every morning, absolute horror. Every morning, immense sadness. How can we explain to the rest of the world that each soldier killed in combat, each

victim of this endless war is a stab in the heart of all of us. We know the face of each one, their name, their age, their hometown, their function if they are soldiers. And even if we are not directly related to each of them, we all share the pain and heartbreak of their loved ones.

After the news, it's the turn of the radio hosts, who are a bit like family, especially for our wake-up calls. They comment, chat, and give us the weather.

- 75th day. The road is long, my darlings. It's a test, but we have no choice, we must move forward.
- I was reading an article yesterday that explained that 60% of the population, unrelated to the soldiers who have fallen or the hostages held in Ga, were living with some form of trauma. 60%... can you imagine?
- We all sleep badly Benny, we all have trouble getting back on our feet. To all of you, get up, get out of bed! I beg you, get up. Get up for yourselves, get up for your children, get up for your husband, your

wife, for yourselves, but please, get up.
It's a test, we know that. The road is long.
But we'll get there... all together.

I've been living in Israel for 15 years now, constantly tuned into Galgalatz. It's become a way for me to feel rooted in the country, to share the daily lives of the people who live here, who were born here. Historically, it was the army radio, which simply became the radio of all Isris.

Since the beginning of the war, first thing in the morning, it's been my first source of information. It's also a reassuring mirror. Listening to them every morning, to the sound of their voices and their comments, I understand that we are all going through the same things, that we are going through the same emotions. We face the same difficulties, we have had the same fears. It gives a semblance of normality to all this abnormality.

Israeli culture is rich in texts and songs linked to the country's history, fears, hopes, and expectations for the safe return of soldiers, their lives far from their loved ones.

Often, Adar Marx, the star host of the Galgalatz morning show, will pick up on the lyrics of a song that always resonate strongly with what we are going through. This morning, it turns out that I know these lyrics perfectly well... I love this song so much that it has become my ringtone when my father calls me. I had found a funkier version of it, and I thought it suited him well.

*הלוואי... -“

הלוואי ומענן תרד עלינו קשת
...הלוואי שלעולם הזה יש תקנה

הלוואי ויום יצמח מתוך סופה גועשת
הלוואי ולא תאבד לעד המתנה
הלוואי שהמדבר יצמיה עשב דשא
הלוואי ועוד נשב בצל התאנה

הלוואי שלא נכאב ואיש אחיו יאהב
הלוואי ויפתחו שוב שערי גן עדן
הלוואי ויתמזגו מזרח ומערב
הלוואי הלוואי ונחדש ימינו כאן כקדם

הלוואי ולא ישא עוד גוי אל גוי חרב
הלוואי ולא ננטוש את דרך התקווה
הלוואי והאדם יהיה רחום עד ערב
הלוואי שיש סיכוי אחד לאהבה

הלוואי שלא נכאב**...

**Halevai, which could be translated as 'if only'
or 'I wish'*

***I wish a rainbow would descend upon us,
I wish there were a way to heal this world...*

*I wish a new day could dawn from a fierce storm,
I wish hope wouldn't forever fade away,
I wish the barren desert could sprout green grass,
I wish we could gather again under the fig tree's
shade*

*I wish there were no more suffering and brotherly
love could bloom,
I wish the gates of Eden would swing open once
more,
I wish the divisions between East and West could
dissolve,
I wish we could rebuild our days here, just like in
the beginning*

*I wish nations wouldn't raise their swords against
each other,
I wish we wouldn't stray from the path of hope,
I wish humanity could embrace compassion until
the day's end,
I wish there were a single spark of love left.*

...I wish we wouldn't suffer anymore

(Ehud Menor - 1986)

DEFRAGMENTATION

Saturday, October 7, 2023

THE AWAKENING

It takes me a few moments to realize my phone is ringing. Especially since it's the ringtone associated with my dad's number. Ever since his health issues, he's been one of my emergency contacts, and no matter the time of day or night, I jump at the slightest hint of that melody.

I glance at the alarm clock... 6:30 am!

Crap! I had my earplugs in and was about to indulge in my inner sloth mode, scraping out a few more hours of sleep on this Saturday morning. But apparently, that wasn't in the cards today.

- Hey, Dad. Everything okay?
- Didn't you hear the sirens?

Any normal person might take offense at the lack of formality and the absence of a "good morning, sweetie, did you sleep well?" But hey, formalities and my dad have never been the best of friends.

- There are sirens?!

I remove my second earplug to listen, and sure enough, I can hear the siren in the distance, along with the commotion of my neighbors in the stairwell rushing to shelter in our building's basement.

- Ugh, it's 6:30 in the morning!

(Under other circumstances, I would have sworn like a trucker. But it's my dad on the phone, and Sephardic Jewish upbringing dies hard. "Ugh" is

already pretty good for expressing my displeasure.)

I get up, phone in hand, to continue chatting with my dad and head for my bathroom. Since I'm in my underwear anyway, I don't have time to get dressed to join my neighbors in the shelter. And lately, to the rhythm of the latest sirens, I'd identified the perfect spot in the center of my apartment, far from any windows and exterior walls. I'd chosen my bathroom: 2 square meters, four walls, perfect. By crouching on the floor, I feel protected from rockets and the disapproving stares of my religious neighbors at my scanty attire.

After a few resounding booms that confirm the Iron Dome's interception of the rockets, I blow a kiss to my dad and hang up, heading towards the kitchen. Might as well make myself some coffee since there's no going back to sleep now.

But that was without counting on the new alerts, repeating one after the other...

With each one, I hear my neighbors stampeding down the stairs, and once again, I head for my secret hideout.

The soundproofing in these old buildings is so bad that I can hear my neighbors cursing and exclaiming with each boom. There are more and more of them, getting closer and closer in time and space.

Very quickly, given the number of alerts and their frequency, we start to feel the atmosphere getting heavier. Through the door, I hear them talking about a "new Yom Kippur." This week, with the commemoration of the 50th anniversary of this catastrophic war, the event is very much on the minds of all Isris. The Yom Kippur War, which had caught the country off guard and caused so many deaths and reports of poor information management at the time, is coming back to haunt us like a boomerang. Especially since we know that our neighbors would never miss a good opportunity to mark this type of anniversary.

It must be around 8:00 am when I decide to turn on the TV to watch the news live. Evidently, the pace of rocket fire is accelerating across the country, which is usually a sign of a more intense

conflict that could escalate. What I don't know at this point is that I won't be able to tear myself away from the screen until late at night, so much will the events unfold, accumulate, each time climbing the ladder of horror, leaving the whole world stunned by the murderous tidal wave we are witnessing almost live.

Very quickly, we see these images of tractors sinking barbed wire, and a flood of armed men dripping from what appears to be our border with the Gaza strip. It's scary. At that point, I don't know yet that this barrier cost a billion dollars, and I still find it strange that we only installed fences there... but our army is competent, like our intelligence. They know exactly what they're doing. We are safe.

Between two tractors, I notice images of young people I don't pay much attention to. Boys and girls run through the fields to take shelter from the

rockets. They are in their twenties and seem to have been partying all night. I'm not very surprised, because it's the season for this kind of event. Every year during the holidays of Sukkot, which end today, there are festivals organized in the desert. I've often been tempted to join one, but stuck between family gatherings and my incompetence at planning such festivities, I always hit sold-out counters.

I see them running to the sound of the alerts. I understand that they are exposed, but I am still surprised that these images come and go, even in the written press, while we sense a serious security crisis on the border with Gaza.

And then very quickly, we see images of this white pickup truck in the streets of Sderot. At first, I think it's Israelis on board. In the streets of an Israeli city, what else could it be?

But these men are heavily armed and are running from one building to another. I pay attention to the captions and comments of the journalists, and

I learn that they are the men of Hamas. I must have misunderstood then. So these are not the streets of Sderot, but of the Gaza Strip. The men of Hamas must certainly be parading through the streets, celebrating after the numerous rocket attacks on Israel. They do it every time.

However... these streets clearly look like the streets of Israeli cities! These buildings recognizable among a thousand, the markings on the ground, the parks and playgrounds...

... Oh my gosh!

They entered Israel in their car; since it's just ONE car, right?!

The transition from genuine disbelief to denial, minimization, and the realization of a mass Hamas incursion into Israeli territory is a shockwave. In a matter of moments, it's the

annihilation of a deeply held belief and absolute trust in our security forces, our army, and the defense of our borders.

We are all glued to our television screens, in shock. We witness numerous vehicles loaded with terrorists entering Israeli territory. I repeat... numerous vehicles loaded with terrorists have entered Israeli territory!

The worst-case scenario we could face is unfolding before our eyes. The most daring TV shows have never gone this far. Hamas... has!

Hamas fighters are in Israel. How many? We don't know yet.

The people in the south are holed up at home, and film the dozens of terrorists who go from house to house to terrify them and try to kill them. Videos and testimonies scroll by, showing people confined to their homes witnessing the invasion live. They whisper, or they cry out in panic.

It's utter bewilderment, a festive Saturday, at 9:00 in the morning.

And then the images of motorized hang gliders...

And then the images of boats...

And then there's the gunfire echoing through the heart of the city, men running for their lives, their bodies strewn across the asphalt...

And then the images of the Sderot police station...

The connection to the Yom Kippur war takes on a new dimension. It's no longer just about the national trauma and the death toll that left an indelible mark on the country fifty years ago. Now, there's concern about a possible escalation of the situation. We wonder, given the scale of the attack, which is still hard to grasp and even name, if the other neighboring countries will attack. Jordan, whose peace treaty seems fragile (in my opinion) and could explode at the slightest

opportunity to wipe Israel off the map. Syria, which has shown what it's capable of all these years. Lebanon, and its Hezbollah remotely controlled from Iran. And Egypt... which could be tempted to join in if they're pressured. In short, for the first time in my life, watching the images on my screen, I'm starting to think that this could be the end for Israel.

For the first time in my life, the absolute security of the Jewish homeland seems to be seriously called into question.

A torrent of thoughts floods my mind, undoubtedly the same thoughts that generations of Jews have grappled with: what will become of us if Israel vanishes? What will become of Jews worldwide if Israel disappears? The shockwave we're witnessing firsthand is so intense that these questions are far from absurd. For a moment, and in the days to come, we all asked ourselves the same question! We all trembled for the survival of our country.

Until now, we had unshakeable faith in our army and our security capabilities, which are however proving to be complementary failing. It is utterly incomprehensible that an attack of this magnitude could have taken place without our knowledge,

and it is equally baffling that Tsahal failed to prevent it.

With so many misunderstandings in mind, the question of Israel's annihilation is no longer a mere fantasy but a chillingly real possibility. For most dual citizens, we still have the option of returning to our other country. However, native-born Israelis do not have this luxury. And we all know it well, Jews in the diaspora are often barely tolerated, because there is the shadow of Israel in the background. We are well aware that without this armed and nationalist arm, the diaspora would also be in great difficulty. Moreover, the wave of anti-Semitism which is hitting Western countries this afternoon of October 7, 2023 is the perfect illustration of this.

Between the incursion on Israeli territory to the south, the brutality of the massacre, the looming threat from Hezbollah testing the boundaries to the north, and the risk of igniting conflict with all our neighbors, each of these new threats is being taken very seriously.

We learn in the middle of the day that terrorists have arrived at the gates of Beer Sheva, just 30 kilometers from the border with Gaza. When one realizes that the distance to the center of the

country where Tel Aviv and its suburbs are located is only about 70 kilometers, one understands the surrounding terror. So, when the authorities ask us to stay home to facilitate the work of the security forces, we stay home and close the windows and lock the door. No one goes out. A heavy silence hangs outside. Not a soul in sight. We feel like we're alone at home, cloistered within four walls. The only sound is that of the news, running on a loop. We receive calls from family and friends in France who, like us, are watching the news and finding it hard to believe. They want to know if we're okay, if we're safe. It's almost as if they want us to deny what they're seeing on TV, as we often do by downplaying the successive crises we regularly face, but this time it won't be the case. And then there are friends who are currently abroad during these Sukkot holidays and who are desperately trying to find a way to get back home. The first planes are being stormed by reservists who didn't wait for the call to join their units, while flights are being canceled one after another. Some will take days to find a flight, and at astronomical prices. The airport operates intermittently, in sync with the rockets that are sent in its direction, in order to completely isolate the country from the rest of the world

We switch from one channel to another, eager for news. Unlike usual, it is not talking heads and their endless discussions that fill the live hours, but rather images of events unfolding. In a continuous stream. Images that are constantly being renewed, each one more terrible than the last.

We are starting to have a clear picture of what happened.

Hamas terrorists entered Israeli territory around 6:30 a.m., breaking into the border with tractors on several fronts. We are talking about dozens, even hundreds of terrorists. We will finally learn that there were probably 3,000 of them, plus the Gazan civilians who followed them in to steal, plunder, and kill... in short, to copy the behavior of Hamas terrorists. Complicated to distinguish between true and false terrorists.

Hamas entered kibbutzim near the border. Armed combat of unprecedented violence is still ongoing with the army that has finally arrived in the south. If the soldiers took so long to intervene, It's because the military bases near Gaza were put out of control by Hamas in the early hours of the

conflict (another event that seems like science fiction in our collective imagination !), demanding additional armed forces to go to the scene. We're talking about bloody conflicts, destroyed homes, and numerous civilian and military casualties... and hostage takings ! Hamas is broadcasting videos taken with GoPros, which they send to families via the victims' cell phones, or simply post on Telegram. The high command is asking the Israelis not to broadcast them. Hamas is playing on the terror generated by the shocking images to terrorize the Israeli population and leave a mark on the international imagination.

They entered mamads - the secure rooms - killed, massacred men, women, children, babies, and the elderly. Very quickly, we will see images of children's rooms smeared with blood, from floor to ceiling, mattresses lying on the ground suggesting a dreadful slaughter. Sometimes, there will be no images, because they have fired RPGs to set them on fire. There is nothing left.

In Sderot, and throughout the region within a distance of 30 kilometers from the Gaza strip, the army will take several days to go from house to house to clean the area of any terrorists. Just like

in the kibbutzim, they tried to break into all the houses to wreak carnage.

The Sderot police station is still under fire in a clash between Hamas and the Israelis. The terrorists have entered the building and are holding hostage the police officers and civilians who were present. It is not yet known if the Israelis are still alive. It is believed that the terrorists have likely hidden explosives inside. At the end of the fight, the police station will be so damaged, and the risk too great, that the building will have to be simply destroyed.

In Re'im, where the rave party was taking place, the story is much more terrible than I had first imagined. The young people who were seen running in the early hours of the day were actually trying to escape the gunfire of terrorists who were chasing them through the fields. They had nowhere to hide, no one to defend them. Their only option was to run and hope not to be in the sights of their pursuers.

We know that Hamas orchestrated a combined attack. By air, with rockets, but also with armed men aboard hang gliders. By land, on pickups and motorcycles. By sea, with speedboats that are quickly incapacitated by maritime security. Later, we will learn that they also launched a large-scale

cyberattack to neutralize the military bases at the border, thus paralyzing the forces in place, preventing them from assessing the attack and intervening.

This is an outpouring of hatred and terror. These people hate us so much that they put so much energy, years, men, and resources into coming to terrorize us on our own soil?! The hatred is dizzying. And the barbarity... let's not even speak of it! We are overwhelmed by all this violence. We know that we have been in conflict for years, since the creation of the state of Israel. And even before that. But this!! This barbarity!! We could never have imagined it. We could never have even imagined that such a deployment of violence could be possible in our human "dictionary".

And yet, this is only the first day of horror. We are not yet at the end of our suffering and discoveries of the prism of dread.

I'm trying not to watch the videos circulating on social media. I have no desire to inflict these images upon myself. My nephews and nieces, on the other hand, spent their entire day watching them. They are in a terrible state. I have never heard such distress in their voices. Such disbelief. They are deeply disturbed, and I am genuinely

worried about them. I don't know how they will be able to live their adult lives properly after what they have just seen. Again, I am far from the mark. Because we will all end up seeing these images. We will all end up living or surviving with them. But the worst thing is... it's not the most horrific of what awaits us.

We belong to the never again generation. Even though we have witnessed the rise of anti-Semitism in Europe since the early 2000s, we always thought that the Zionist cradle would be our shield against the rest of the world, that we would never experience pogroms and massacres. It's a double shock. Our whole scale of values and thinking has collapsed in the space of a few hours. Never again... it was all for show. It was all a sham. We, like all our ancestors' generations, are now familiar with violence directed specifically against our own people. We're taking the measure of what the Jews experienced during the Shoah. Who would have thought?!

By the end of the day, the death toll had risen to 200, with almost 100 hostages. It's a knockout. We've never had so many Israelis killed in a single day. And 100 hostages! Will they even be alive in the next few hours? And the women... what will happen to them? We all know what DAESH had in store for Yezidi women. Hamas is no better than the Islamic State, and our young girls are in their hands! Children! Babies!* Men and women of all ages, including the elderly, some of them Holocaust survivors. It's endless...

How are we going to find them in the slough that is Gaza? Here again, the Gazans are not to be left out. The promise of \$10,000 and an apartment in return for an Israeli hostage is too tempting to pass up. Perhaps this explains the hostage-taking of foreign workers? We know that Thai and Nepalese workers are among the victims and hostages. We don't understand what they have to do with this conflict. Why they too have had to endure the terrorists' hatred of Jews and Israelis. But is there anything to understand about this day of terror unprecedented in human history?

We're talking about 200 killed and 100 hostages

In France, this corresponds to 1,409 killed and 705 hostages

In the United States, this corresponds to 7,411 killed and 3,705 hostages

Based on Worldometer 2023 figures

Population Isr - 9,174,520

Population France - 64,822,746

Population United States - 340,960,200

**As I write these lines, we have been engaged in this conflict for three months. It's been three months since we had a clearer and clearer picture of all the atrocities committed by Hamas. Yet when I write that children and babies are being*

*held hostage on October 7, 2023, I still find it
hard to hold back the tears.*

Sunday, October 8, 2023

THE LEADEN WEIGHT

I have no idea what time I went to bed the night before. Time no longer matters, and over the next few days, the loss of temporal reference points will only become more pronounced. What day is it today? Have I eaten? Have I slept? For a few weeks, all these questions will be completely superfluous.

That day, I get up relatively early. I was surprised to realize, however, that I had slept very soundly. I fell asleep immediately, and then... the black hole.

I get up without thinking too much. I perform the usual gestures... warm water, water on my face. Then I set myself up on autopilot in front of my computer.

I turn on the news - in the background.

I scan the Internet news that might provide me with the information I'm looking for. The last time I consulted them was just a few hours ago. And yet the news just keeps on coming. Just in time. Like an infernal machine. To disgust. And the list of victims continues to grow.

350+ dead and dozens taken hostage

In France, this corresponds to 2,465 killed
In the United States, this corresponds to 12,969 killed

Outside, still silence.

Today, all the children were supposed to go back to school after the Sukkot festivities. That's not going to happen. Instead, each class is organizing psychological support for its students. By zoom.

There's no need to explain the situation to them. They've already understood everything. They may not have all the details, but they know it's not the same war as usual. No. Besides, these zooms aren't meant to lecture them, but to let them talk. To give them a window of dialogue just for themselves. And also to let them see and talk to each other, to let them know that their friends are still alive and well, despite the images of children taken hostage that they and their parents no doubt discovered the day before. Even through an interposed screen, it's a breathing bubble they accept, I think, with gratitude. But no school... not yet.

Nor, for that matter, for parents. Most companies gave all their employees one or two days off. So they can catch their breath.

Between two news items, between two announcements, we call each other. We pick up where we left off just a few hours before. It's as if it were a huge conversation with many voices. We're all talking about the same thing, we're all interested in the same thing. And we're all feeling the same thing... an abyss.

It's as if an immense thread of communication has been woven across the country, a transparent link that runs from house to house. Unbreakable, invisible and extraordinarily resilient. We're a huge family. Made up of 9.5 million people.

We exchange news, and take the pulse. Anyone who has set foot outside becomes an exception.

- I went shopping
- Did you? Where did you go?
- Near my house. I kept it simple. I didn't want to leave the girls home alone.
You should go. There's already stuff here you can't get anymore.
- Yeah, you're right. I'll go later.

I hang up, and continue what will become my new routine, news - social networks - zombie. On a loop.

In the early afternoon, I finally decide to go and take a peek outside. As the General Staff may have pointed out, it would be prudent to stock up on a few things. I'm also looking for a way to detach myself from these screens of doom.

It's very strange to put the first foot outside. And very uncomfortable. The world has just changed forever, and you don't really know what you're going to find outside. All our senses are on alert. Suddenly, there's nothing trivial about doing what billions of people in the rest of the world do every day: getting out and walking around.

As I walk along, I take in my surroundings. No one in the streets. No one at the windows. Not a sound. It's almost as if the TVs, which we know have been on since yesterday morning, have been turned down to the lowest setting, to be discreet. To avoid attracting attention. Which, in a country that loves noise, is all the more surprising. On the way, I notice that all the shops are closed. The greengrocer... closed!
The coffee around the corner... closed!
The pizzeria... closed!

The corner store, which is always open whatever the time of day or night... closed!

While I'm looking for an open supermarket, I get the urge to see Anouk, my friend who lives just a few minutes from me.

The idea of rediscovering her enthusiasm and zest for getting out and about makes me smile. When I suggest meeting her on a bench downstairs, she suggests pushing it towards the sea for a coffee. I have my doubts about us finding an open establishment, and I'm well aware that the sea as a shelter from rockets isn't optimal. But I need some fresh air, and her good mood is contagious.

Along the way, we make a mental note of the various places where we can protect ourselves in the event of an alert. We also keep in mind that since the previous day's incursions, many terrorists are still present and deployed on Israeli territory*.

We don't know where. We don't know how many. We just know what they're capable of.

Aware of this risk, in addition to the list of potential shelters, we remain very attentive to our surroundings. The slightest noise alerts us, the

slightest movement catches our eye, and we take great care to stay in open spaces where we're less likely to be surprised. It's not very comfortable, but it's the price we pay for flying an hour away from home, far from the news.

We end up in a supermarket that also serves coffee. In front of us, the sea is all to ourselves. It's an immense luxury, which we really appreciate.

After half an hour in this bubble of freedom, we realize that we've pushed our luck to the limit, and that it's time to go home.

Halfway between our two homes, we split up on this usually busy thoroughfare, full of activity and honking horns. But today... nothing! A huge nothing. Trees and pavement. Frozen in silence and absence.

After a few minutes, I finally find an open supermarket. I go in.

My friends were right, there's hardly anything left. In the entrance, there's all the fruit and

vegetables that nobody wanted, bananas with stains, onions that are peeling off. A cabbage... The fresh produce section isn't much better. So I do some 'practical' shopping. Pasta, rice, a few cans. No big deal. I'm just surprised at the state of the shelves. How can they have emptied so quickly when I've seen so few people in the street? All these people must have been particularly discreet. They came down. Did their shopping. Went back upstairs. And locked their doors.

As for me, I'm hurrying home... soon 6.00 pm... time for rockets!

**For this reason, the authorities asked the population to stay at home, so as not to hamper the work of the security forces. But in the days to come, the potential proximity of the terrorists will only reinforce everyone's fears. The whole country will take this threat very seriously, making each and every Israeli feel, for*

days to come, fragile and very vulnerable in the face of this additional danger.

Monday, October 9, 2023

A NATION OF VOLUNTEERS

Nearly 500 dead - hostage families demand information

In France, this corresponds to 3,522 killed

In the United States, this corresponds to 18,527 killed

The day before, Anouk and I decided to get out and make ourselves useful. The news is full of reports and initiatives springing up all over the country, with endless queues of people wanting to give blood.

Solidarity chains are commonplace in Israel. This isn't our first war, and while reservists are heading

for their bases, civilians are getting organized and setting up the well-known 'collect - distribute - dispatch' rhythm.

What's really special this time around is the immensity of the needs, which are increasing by the hour, almost uncontrollably, but also everyone's desire to participate. To be able to contribute. To feel useful. During these days of volunteering, I'll see people going past each other to be part of a team preparing boxes. I'll see long chains of cars desperate to get into the exhibition center, because that's where the various harvests have been grouped together. People honking their horns, passing each other. It's unbearable to think of going home without having participated, without having been part of the collective effort.

For two days, we'll be moving from one place to another to make ourselves useful. There... not enough activity. There... ah, they've closed Dizengoff Square for security reasons. From now on, you'll have to go to the sheds at Tel Aviv harbor. There... ah but it's too late girls, come back tomorrow morning at 8:00.

We'll be there the next day at 8.00 a.m!

On the way, we managed to grab a coffee on the sly, in the only open café on Place Dizengoff. There aren't many of us, less than a dozen people. We're enjoying ourselves, but we don't know when the next time we'll be able to have another coffee in the area. This place known and reputed to be the nerve center of Tel Aviv, this square symbolizing the city with the fountain formerly known as Agam, is totally deserted! Even the usual bums have moved on.

This street, which is usually targeted by armed terrorists, because they're sure to catch crowds of young people there every time... empty! Not a restaurant, not a store. For once, they won't have our young people.

In the meantime... they've already done it elsewhere, 3 days ago!

Solidarity actions are multiplying across the country, touching every level of society and every sector of activity. Whatsapp groups are opening up to relay information on where and how. There may be 10 groups, all offering different activities.

For weeks, everyone will be leaving their professional activities to devote themselves to the national effort. The only energy we're able to call on is that which projects us into collective action. We're just incapable of thinking about other tasks. In front of a computer, we lose all intelligence and concentration.

On the other hand, if it's a question of gathering forces and programmers to set up a new algorithm to reinforce communication and counter misinformation... OK. Yesterday's rival cybersecurity companies will be joining forces to come up with new innovations to better protect the country. Another start-up, which was due to confirm a highly advantageous exit, has cancelled everything in order to reorganize its teams and develop new skills to be used in 'hasbara', explanation, communication and the fight against disinformation.

Car owners travel hundreds of kilometers to bring their meals to soldiers spread across the country, while mothers have taken over their kitchens to prepare the famous meals.

In the early days of the conflict, it was these actions that got us up every morning. It was this ability and willingness to help that gave us hope

and brought us together around a single concern.
It is this unity that has restored our confidence and
strengthened the bonds between all sections of the
population.
And our will to move forward. Whatever the cost.

Wednesday, October 11, 2023

FIXER

This morning, I became aware of the peculiarity of my awakenings. Not only am I a heavy sleeper, but before I open my eyes, it's as if an internal force is holding me in my sleep. It's almost a physical sensation, as if something were clinging to my mind with all its might to prevent me from opening my eyes. To stop me remembering, again...

And then I realize again, and I cry.

It's my ritual every morning. My mind holds back my sleeping consciousness. With effort I finally open my eyes, curl up in bed under the effect of this immense sadness that invades everything, that takes its place again. Only then can I get up and start my day.

In the evening, it's the same thing, but in reverse. I go to bed, invaded by images of the last few days, and curl up crying. Finally, my mind goes blank and I fall asleep.

**Death toll from attacks on October 7, 2023
rises to 1,200**

In France, this corresponds to 8,452 killed.
In the United States, this corresponds to 44,465
killed

I've been putting off filling out this form for several days now. Through old acquaintances I had access to this opportunity to join a field group. I don't have all the details, but the form and its questions leave no room for doubt as to the type of activities. My problem is my knee. Even though I'm in good physical shape and train 4 or 5 times a week, I still have a major handicap in my right knee, and I'm afraid of assuming my strength and finding myself in a situation where I could physically pose a problem. Yet I'm dying to get out there, to the south, to feel useful, in a

context of activities I know better. I'm happy to have been able to help out, to have taken part in some voluntary activities, but it's a long way from what I'd like to do. It's far from what I really want to give, what I'd like to be involved in. And then, I confess, I'd like to see for myself. I'd like to know what's going on out there, other than through the cameras. I feel on the sidelines. It's terribly frustrating.

On this Wednesday morning, I finally realize that while it's laudable to want to help, it would also be very useful to visit my family and take care of my own. Sure, we talk on the phone every day, several times a day. But I haven't been to visit them yet, even though I've been leaving the house regularly since day 2.

I start with my father. I arrive for coffee. Sure... he's happy to see me. But he's not well. He's been telling me for days that he's very worried. Not about the rockets that fall near his home several times a day. No. He's concerned about the hostages held in Gaza. He's shocked by what he sees all day long. He doesn't understand it. He's

87 years old, he lived through the Vichy laws as a little boy in his native Algeria, he lived through the '62 war as a soldier. He has witnessed the various wars Israel has endured. But he never lived through them. And that disturbs him enormously. As an 87-year-old man, my father doesn't have the tools to understand what happened on October 7, 2023. Like everyone else, he's been through things in his life, he's recovered, he's managed to move on and keep his legendary smile. But this time, he's at the end of his rope. And it breaks my heart to see him spinning around in his kitchen, trying to remember what he came for.

And then, all the time I stay at his place, trying to talk to him and keep up a conversation, I notice that not once do I manage to catch his eye. In fact, it's a thought I'll often make to myself in the future, as I pass people in the street. We don't look each other in the eye. Not that we're ashamed of anything. It's just too hard. It's too hard to come out of our torpor and risk encountering someone else's. To risk encountering the battered souls of those around us.

When I leave, he asks me to hurry back. But unlike usual, he doesn't keep me on the doorstep. He has to get back to his news. It's his way of

taking part: to make sure he stores up all that sludge until he's sick of it. That's the only way to feel like you're up to par with the rest of the country. There's a certain degree of suffering required to be worthy of living there, to be worthy of those who lost everything on October 7, 2023, the day of the Black Sabbath.

Second stage... my niece and her husband. They've been cooped up at home for 5 days with a 1-year-old baby. While I can easily get out of the house, because I know I'll find somewhere to take shelter, there are risks you don't take with a child that age.

I don't even have time to get in the door before my niece hands me the little one in her arms.

- Here, take that!!
- Hello...
- Oh yeah, hello!

I think they're happy to see me.

And I'm delighted with the package, which I toss up in the air and pick up again with a burst of laughter. This is exactly what I needed.

At the sound of the afternoon alarms, the four of us find ourselves in the shelter. It's like a new reflex that our bodies have assimilated perfectly. Sirens... I take the little one in my arms, and we continue our conversation naturally as we head for the shelter. As if nothing had happened. My niece was just telling me that baby was starting to get nervous at the sound of sirens. We wake him up at night, during his nap. He feels a latent anxiety. In short, the sound of sirens has become synonymous with danger.

So we try to reverse the trend. We create little rituals to make him howl with laughter. He's the center of attention during the 10 minutes of the alert. If we'd had to put on a red nose, I think we'd have done it. But this child loves to laugh. That's what saves us adults.

I tell them what I've been doing these past few days. How I'd like to do more. That I'm going in circles.

That's when my niece tells me that Avigael, a mutual friend, is looking for a fixer.

- What's a fixer?
- You go out into the field with journalists, translate and move with them. Basically...
- No?...
- Yes!
- Would you call her and tell her I want to do this...

...

- Hello Avigael...

In the evening I talk to Samir. A great war reporter, he's a "baroudeur" by definition. He arrived on Sunday 8th, and it's not the first time he's been to Israel, where he has many friends. And he knows the country well and is well aware of the situation. Which, as far as I'm concerned, creates an immediate bond of trust. He's been on his own for the past few days, but now he'd like

some company to keep him going in the troubled areas. That's why he turned to Avigael to find him a fixer. With 10,000 journalists from all over the world about to descend on the country, he needs to get his back up as soon as possible.

- Hi Sophie, it's Samir
- Yes Samir, I've been waiting for your call.
- So you want to be a fixer?
- Yes
- Do you work on Shabbat?
- Yes
- Are you willing to come down south?
- Yes (mentally I add 'please', but it seems out of place)
- Can you be away for several days at a time?
- Yes
- If there's a raid in Gaza, will you come?
- Yes
- ... Ah... OK!

After a few clarifications, he'll call me on Friday morning to confirm our first meeting.

Friday, October 13, 2023

ASHDOD

That morning, Anouk and I decided to give blood. We were sure of our chances. In the suburbs of Tel Aviv, early on a Friday morning, we were convinced that no one would be there. Since the beginning of the week, we've been turned away in every attempt because the donor lists are full to bursting. Worse than an Omer Adam concert.

We were quickly disillusioned. Not only was the basement of the shopping mall where Magen David Adom - the first-aid service - was packed, but we soon realized that smartest people had signed up the night before. In addition, we don't have the right blood type, O-negative - universal donor, the one used in emergency conditions, the one preferred by blood donation centers. In short, a complete failure.

We did try to elbow our way out, to go and cry to the organizers, to prove our good will, like about 200 other people. Nothing works. Also, as long as

we're here arguing, the nurses can't start drawing blood from donors. So, resigned, we leave the mall, albeit with a wicked glance at those who disdainfully hold their registration forms in their hands.

I joined my friends for coffee. It's not so much that we deserved it, since none of us were able to donate blood, but on Shabbat eve we didn't have many other options.

For once, I joined in the conversation. Normally, I find it hard to get involved with more than two people, but during this time, everyone's nice and the social and friendly barriers are immediately easier to overcome. Of course, the only topic is the massacre, the war and what to do about it. In these tense times, specialists are not only to be found on TV. Everyone has their own analysis and is convinced they have the right view of the situation. But for once, no one brings up the political question.

After a few kind words, we part with a hug for each other. We don't promise to see again soon.

As we say in Hebrew - מה שיהיה, יהיה - what will be,
will be

On my way home, Samir calls me..

- Hi Sophie, are you available?
- Hi Samir. Yes !
- Can you make it to Ashdod... around 2pm?

I look at my watch. It's almost 11:00? Tough.

- Should I bring stuff for several days?
- Yeah, you never know
- OK

My bag is quickly ready. I need underwear and T-shirts. Pants... I look at the ones I'm wearing... yeah, they can last 2 - 3 days. Toothbrush, toothpaste, deodorant, face cream. I don't take the

time to think. I make a few phone calls, to let people know. I call my niece to relay the message: I'm heading down south, which has become a military zone, and I have no idea what to expect. So I prefer to cover my tracks. She'll be my buffer to reassure the rest of the family if need be.

Ashdod is almost 45 kilometers from my home. I've already covered the distance by scooter. It's a bit long, but it's doable. And anyway, I have no choice, there's no other way of getting there at this hour on a Friday afternoon.

The freeway is deserted. I'm overtaken by a few cars and wonder who these people are heading south and what their story is, but apart from them, the road is mine. My heart is beating fast. I don't know if it's because it's windy and makes the journey more dangerous, or if it's just because...

I don't know what to expect, I don't know what I'm getting myself into. I just know that not for a single second did I think about turning back.

I arrive at the hotel indicated by Samir. It's just south of Ashdod, about twenty kilometers from Gaza as the crow flies. It's one of the hotels that journalists from abroad flock to, because it offers

the double advantage of being very close to the conflict zone, while providing them with a degree of security. I know I'm in the right place when, at the entrance to the parking lot, I see a truck with a huge TV antenna for live broadcasts.

Looking up at the façade, I recognize the hotel we saw on the TV news the evening before. Journalists were commenting live from their respective balconies on an ongoing military operation taking place on the first floor of the building - they thought there was an incursion by the Hamas still present on the territory, and the gunshots captured live by the cameras caused a sensation.

It turned out to be a false alarm. Above all, it illustrated the permanent tension in which the military have been living since the start of the war. Not only because of the gravity of the situation, but also, as we all know, because of their guilt at not having been there in time on October 7, 2023. This sense of failure is very much present in the collective consciousness, and particularly in that of the security services.

In fact, as soon as you enter the hotel, you can feel the tension in the air. Military personnel everywhere, men and women, young and old, all

shades of khaki, permanently on standby for departure or a new mission, they haunt the hotel corridors.

I meet Samir in the lobby. We quickly introduce ourselves. Samir is a man of the field, he doesn't bother with words, he prefers to judge people's behavior in situations. So he attacks directly:

- Let's go?
- Where to?
- I don't know. We are going south, we'll see what we find
- All right

After a first coffee stop, I suggest I take the wheel. I don't mind living dangerously, but the phone - text messages - calls - watching articles and news while he's driving... let's not push it too far. He's fine with it.

But I need him to show me the way. He's been wandering around here for almost a week, but this is the first time I've crossed the Ashkelon line and come so close to the border with Gaza. He wants to go to Erez... we're less than a kilometer from the fighting. However, we meet an army 'block'

point (it's like a checkpoint, except you don't go through). This road is now a military zone, and journalists can no longer pass.

You can see them lined up on the side of the road, with their cameras pointed south, waiting for a scoop. But it won't be tonight.

As Samir isn't the type to join in nicely with the crowd of journalists, we get back in the car to go and “explore new roads”. I'm not entirely sure we're allowed on these parallel roads, given the number of armored vehicles we pass on our way, but we're not bothering anyone, so they let us drive on without stopping. After a few minutes, Samir decides to turn back: we won't find anything on this side, we must just be close to the navigation bases. Good to know, but for today, it won't make an article.

Back at the Erez crossroads, he says to me, eyes glued to his phone, “well... I think it's going to do it Sophie... it's going to do it”.

It looks like I've just passed my test.

However, for the next few days I won't be working with Samir. New journalists arrive in the

afternoon, and for logistical reasons I'll be continuing with Nadia. We had spoken on the phone the day before, and that evening we met in the lobby of the hotel where we had returned with Samir to work on his latest translations. We greet each other in the midst of her huge and numerous bags. I'm a little surprised, offering her my help and asking if she needs all this material.

- Oh well no. It's your bulletproof vest. Sandrine just passed me the extra one she had for you.
- Ah... great!

This thing is pretty heavy, still...x

Saturday October 14, 2023

CHANGE OF PROGRAM

We are + one week away from October 7, 2023. As we wake up, we all realize that exactly one week ago, men, women and children were being slaughtered, incursions were taking place from the southern border, and the history of our country was being transformed forever. Saturday morning awakenings will never be the same. Saturday morning awakenings will forever be tinged with the screams of the victims and the dread as we watched those cars ram the border. Saturday mornings will never again be serene.

I meet Nadia at the hotel in Ashdod. She's had time to set down, make the rounds of the other

journalists to take the temperature, contact the permanent office, and also find out about the necessary security measures. Nadia knows the region well, and like Samir, she fully understands what's at stake here.

As she smokes her cigarette, she explains how she sees our day. Apart from the emotional context of this first week, this is no ordinary Shabbat. Since 1982, this is the first time that El Al, the Israeli airline, has flown on Shabbat, in order to repatriate reservists, as well as Israelis stranded in the four corners of the world, who wish to return home. The rabbanim have instituted a “pikuah nefesh” - an action to save lives - to adapt the laws of Shabbat in times of war, and to authorize, among other things, listening to the radio to stay informed at all times. The train also operates exceptionally, enabling reservists without cars to reach their bases at any time of the day or night.

On the road, and before we get to the heart of the matter, I suggest we stop off at a French-speaking synagogue I know well in the south of Bat Yam. The idea is to meet worshipers near the synagogue, local people with whom she could easily chat and communicate. This would give her a first contact before getting down to business.

She accepts the idea, and we head towards the synagogue in the bright autumn sunshine. We meet up with a few people nearby, and start talking to some of the mothers the children have picked up to feed their curiosity. We stay well back, to avoid disturbing the service taking place inside, but that was without counting the rocket alerts.

When we are a few meters from the entrance, the siren sounds. As if on cue, we're ushered into the synagogue in the middle of Saturday morning prayer. I confess that this is not my finest hour: we're not dressed for a Shabbat, and on top of that we've got all the gear of the perfect journalist with us. Nothing very sabbatical.

We hurried down to their basement shelter, while the majority of the men remained on the first floor to continue their prayers. However, despite our initial determination to keep a low profile, our presence has spread like wildfire. As we hear the characteristic booms of the iron dome, more and more curious onlookers begin to surround us. Children, lots of them. The rabbi, of course. And then a man... very angry. I can see him striding towards me, finger outstretched and threatening. French journalists don't get much good press in the French-speaking community, and he's

determined to let us know it. When he realizes that I'm not the right person, he turns to Nadia. She's no more impressed than that, but I don't like the man's tone. As if by reflex, I step in. Deep down, he doesn't look very mean or dangerous, he's just extremely hurt, like the rest of us. But while I can understand it, I refuse to accept it. He may be angry, but I don't like being shouted at, nor that we attack a person whom, despite myself, I've brought to this place.

After a few moments, a semblance of discussion seems to emerge, allowing Nadia to introduce herself. People continue to talk around us.

- ... and what's more, her name is Nadia...

I'm praying to God she doesn't hear the murderous little phrase I snatched between the women behind me. And yet I can't really blame them. Some would call it racism. Others would call it community withdrawal. But in this case, it's mostly a lot of sadness and suffering. And it's a Saturday morning.

Once the tension subsides, the men go back to their office and the women take charge. They talk

with Nadia. They exchange. They communicate. They're on first-name terms, whereas a few minutes before they didn't even know each other. They understand that Nadia is a journalist, and that she needs material. They make an appointment for the next day.

- Nadia, come here tomorrow morning. It's Shabbat now, we can't do anything...
- ... yes, for a week we have been preparing meals for the military...
- ... then my son drives off to distribute them.
- Come, you can question us as you wish, you can see...
- ... it was the people of the community who organized themselves...
- ... I collect the money and do the shopping accordingly...
- ... we're here every morning...
- ... come tomorrow!

It's more than an invitation, it's almost a prayer. You can see that they want to show another side of the country. They want to show their

participation. They want to show what people are doing on a daily basis. It goes far beyond the armed conflict. We're talking about individuals, who stick together, and out of excruciating pain blossoms an uncommon solidarity. We're talking about what unites us all, in a way that's unfailing and with a strength we never imagined we'd possess.

Sunday October 15, 2023

THE WOMEN OF BAT YAM

As promised, we return first thing on Sunday morning. Immediately, Nadia seems touched by these women and men, gathered in the basement of their synagogue.

They've set up a huge table several meters long, and are standing on both sides of it, in a chain. On one side of the table, foodstuffs are rushed in, and on the other, a sandwich comes out, slipped into an individual bag and carefully stored in a box. Food factories, beware.

“50!... we need another carton please.” And again, and again... Hundreds of sandwiches are prepared every morning. It has to be done quickly, so that the meals arrive in time for the soldiers who are scattered across the south.

If this community resembles hundreds of others across the country, which also prepare food for soldiers and displaced persons, we appreciate the

exceptional nature of these people and watch them do it with great admiration.

I watch them from the side, while Nadia moves from one to the other, interviewing them between two hummus-tuna-mayo sandwiches. She takes the time to listen to everyone. Some come to her of their own, to share their vision of the world. Not once does she seem impatient or try to cut the conversation short, because, from a journalistic point of view, not everything is really usable. And for that, her attentiveness and respect for their need to talk, to talk to her as a French journalist specially sent to their country, I'm grateful.

Once they've finished preparing all the sandwiches, safely packed in their boxes, we all head back downstairs. In the street, cars bound for the various bases await their precious cargo. Hanging on the phone, the drivers confirm the details of the delivery points. These are the women's sons, who will be joining their units, and are therefore authorized to cross the various military roadblocks.

Nadia asks them if they're afraid. They brush the question aside. That's what has to be done, period.

We step back for a moment, to let the mothers say goodbye to their children. No superfluous words, no 'be careful on the road'. It's implicit. And then to say it out loud would make the risk more real.

The morning has gone by very quickly, and the time has come for us to break camp and move on to other places.

Against all expectations, it's been a lovely morning, full of respect and listening, and I can see these women who have nothing to do with each other, who would probably never have met if it hadn't been for this war, and even though one of them is called Nadia, hugging and kissing each other goodbye and wishing each other better days.

Monday October 16, 2023

ABU KABIR

For the first few days, we didn't understand the extent of the atrocities committed on October 7, 2023. Firstly, because they were beyond the reach of our imagination. Then because of the sheer number and depth of the perversion.

And then it all happened so fast. The reports from the kibbutzim, the trembling voices of the journalists who were the first to witness the scenes of horror, their distress live on our TV screens. The stream of videos, each more terrible than the last. The body bags piling up before our eyes. Sometimes their tiny size leaving no room for doubt. Sometimes even with a knife sticking out of the bag.

In that first week, 40 babies were among the ever-increasing number of victims. 40 babies killed. Shot. By knife. By fire. Dismembered. Beheaded. Faced with the extent of the massacre, on Tuesday October 10, Libé* carried out a highly

documented investigation and was probably the first newspaper in France to express doubts about the veracity of the beheaded babies.

Did Nicole Zedeck mix different testimonies? [...] But it is noteworthy that, faced with the extent of the commotion created, the journalist [...] gave a slightly less affirmative version than the one given on air, stating: “Soldiers told me they thought 40 babies/children had been killed. The exact number of dead is still unknown.»

Or, in another article...

Journalist Samuel Forey [...] published an update on the subject on X [...]. Insisting that he is not “minimizing the atrocities committed by the Hamas fighters (sic)”, he says he has not been able to verify these child beheadings: “I was in Kfar Aza yesterday. Nobody told me about any beheadings, let alone beheaded children, let alone 40 beheaded children. I checked with two rescue services [...]. Both say they have not witnessed any such exactions - without saying it didn't happen.»

40 babies murdered on October 7, 2023

In France, this corresponds to 282 babies murdered

In the United States, this corresponds to 1,482 babies murdered

Since 'certain' media around the world relay conditional information, on Monday October 16, the Ministry of Health and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs decided to open the doors of the Abu Kabir forensic institute to the world's press.

Nadia has just received information about the visit to the forensic institute. You have to register with Shira S., spokeswoman for the Ministry of Health. Unfortunately, the registrations are full, and we can't get permission to enter. However, with the news circulating in recent days about the number of victims and the atrocities committed, we understand that this visit is crucial and that we must go at all costs. We tried to call Shira, to get our various contacts to intervene, to emphasize the importance of the media we represent... Nothing helped.

So we went for it! We arrive at the forensic institute half an hour early.

While we wait on a bench outside, I turn my attention to the refrigerated trucks that come and go. Non-stop. I know what's in the center we're visiting, and I understand what they're transporting. But it's the insanity of the in-and-out rhythm that makes me dizzy and hypnotized.

And what's special about these trucks is that they're not white, as you'd expect in a medical context or when taking care of human bodies. No, these are the refrigerated trucks of the country's food companies. As I watch them pass one after the other, I know they haven't come to deliver

lettuce, as the drawings on their sides might suggest. It's just that the needs are so great and so disproportionate to the size of the country that the authorities have had to call on all available resources. In this case, they had to ask food processing companies to provide their refrigerated trucks to transport the bodies of the victims from the massacre sites to the various forensic institutions, which would then have to store them until they could be identified by their relatives, or by scientific means.

I don't know if we were lucky, or if we simply benefited from the various ministries' desire to communicate to as many people as possible, but we finally obtain permission to enter the building of the Abu Kabir forensic institute.

First stop: the narrow meeting room, improvised as a conference room. It is overflowing with journalists, cameras and cables to connect microphones pointed at the main table, where the various speakers are seated. You can see the logos of channels and media from the USA, UK, Australia, France, India... as well as local

representatives. The room is like a beehive, buzzing with curiosity and impatience for the news to come.

As I wait, I catch a discreet exchange in Hebrew between Shira S. and Dr. Nurit Bublil, Head of the DNA Research Department.

- Dr Bublil: What do we tell them?
- Shira S.: We tell them everything!
- Dr. Bublil: Everything?! Are you sure?
- Shira S.: Yes, that's the decision! You show them everything!

I'm stunned by the incredulity on Dr. Bublil's face. This woman in her sixties takes a quick look around the room, probably wondering if we're going to be able to handle what we're about to discover.

Next to her, Doctor Chen Kugel. Debonair, in his late fifties, the Shlomo Artzi of Abu Kabir. I confess I'm surprised by his good humor. He seems to take things much more calmly than his

colleagues, with whom he chats almost cheerfully.

Alongside them are Dr Hagar Mizrahi** and Dr Ricardo Nachman.

The conference begins. Doctor Kugel takes the floor first. He introduces himself: he is the Head of the National Center for Forensic Medicine in Tel Aviv. He apologizes for his presentation: he had very little time to prepare, so he put together a few photos and presented them to us as they were.

Using technical and medical terms, he explains what their job is here at the forensic institute, which is not the morgue, as we all initially thought. Their role is to identify bodies when this is not possible by more traditional means. Following the massacre of October 7, 2023, and in view of the extreme deterioration of the bodies, the usual practice of identifying them has proved totally impossible for almost 900 of the 1,200 victims currently counted.

While they are used to dealing with a maximum of 100 - 150 cases a year, most of them resulting from terrorist attacks on Israeli soil, for the past nine days they have been totally overwhelmed by the task. Especially as the deterioration of the

bodies far exceeds anything he has seen in his 35 years of experience. They no longer sleep, they have had to repatriate medical forces from all over the country, and are organizing themselves in three shifts to be able to accomplish what has become a sacred mission: to identify each and every one of the bodies, each and every one of the victims entrusted to them, and to put a name to each and every one so that their loved ones can bury them with all due respect. And then, unexpectedly and overwhelmed by the task in hand, this white-haired man, who thought he'd seen it all in his career, bursts into tears in front of an audience of speechless journalists! He is sorry. He recovers quickly.

We move on to the photos he has assembled for the press conference. These are body parts that were brought to them for identification.

The first photo shows a charred mass (left). He explains that at first they didn't understand what it was. They knew they had a human specimen, but despite their anatomical knowledge, they were unable to recognize which part of the body it was. So they took a CT scan (right-hand side of photo) to better understand what they were looking at. CT imaging revealed that the charred

mass was in fact made up of two spinal columns and two rib cages. Very young bodies, probably babies. He then pointed to the cables surrounding the bones at several levels, perfectly visible on the scanner, and explained that these two bodies had been tied together with these cables, face to face, one against the other, and then burned together.

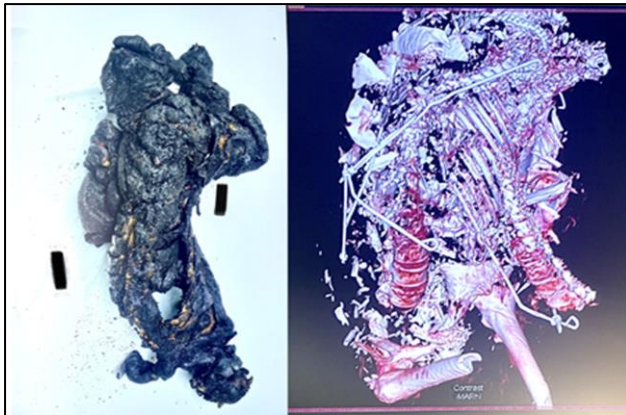


Photo and scan of parts of the two bodies tied together before being burned

Next photos...

We'll see other scans, pieces of hands and arms flayed by intense burns whose flesh has been fossilized, torsos, in the same state. He explains how they were able to establish that the victims had been burned alive: traces of smoke were found in their windpipes, implying that they were still alive and breathing when the fire was deployed.

He also tells us about the bullet holes on their hands, indicating that the victims tried to protect themselves from the point-blank fire. He goes on to give details of other extreme mutilations... which suggest that the terrorists' motive was to prevent the bodies from being identified.

Dr. Nurit Bublil, head of the DNA research department, takes over. In the vast majority of cases, body identification remains extremely difficult at this stage. They use all the means at their disposal. First of all, they took DNA samples from relatives in order to carry out genetic recognition tests. But the extreme temperatures caused by the weapons used by Hamas on October 7, 2023, have totally deteriorated the DNA of some of the bodies. They had to resort to

other methods. They have requested the medical files of all potential victims, in order to discover here the operation on a joint, there the breaking of a limb... in order to cross-check the information with the body parts at their disposal, and perhaps recognize a victim through these old injuries or operations.***

She then returns to Dr. Kugel's photos, particularly those showing appalling quantities of tiny pieces of bone. These are sometimes all that's left of the victims, especially those from the kibbutzim. She explains that, despite the hard work of the Zaka**** teams and other rescue workers who were at the scene of the massacres, some body bags still contain several bodies. Sometimes they have found 3 femurs, and sometimes it's even more minute details that put them on the trail. Sometimes they are able to identify a genetic identity, only to be confronted with the fact that in previous days they have already found the same DNA, from another body bag. The task is overwhelming, both in its scope and in the endless horror they discover as the days pass in their laboratory. Faced with the sheer scale of the task, professionals from all over the world have volunteered to take on the work,

increasing the number of staff from the usual 6 to over 30. But that's far from enough.

After this highly educational slide show, which all humanity could have done without, the doctors are available to answer journalists' questions. Of course, the first question is the one that prompted the meeting in the first place:

- Journalist: Have you seen decapitated babies?
- Dr. Kugel: Yes. The only uncertainty we have is that we don't know whether they were decapitated before or after death!
- Reporter: How many?
- Doctor Kugel: We don't know how many. We're overwhelmed by the task. Our job is to identify the bodies as quickly as possible, so that relatives can bury their dead. We haven't kept lists of the decapitated, but we have received many body bags with body and head... separated. Including babies.

He doesn't seem angry or surprised by the question. He simply answers it.

After the usual ten-minute of Q&A, the journalists are divided into two groups to continue the tour. The first group will visit the DNA department labs on the second floor. The second group, to the basement. Then we'll switch. Nadia and I head for the basement. I'm not sure what we were expecting, but after the photos we'd just seen, we thought the worst was behind us. At least, I think that's what I thought. Actually, I don't know anymore...

I follow the first group down the narrow staircase, where we start to pass teams in surgical scrubs, masks, caps and booties. An extremely strong odor immediately assails us. A smell I'm not familiar with, but which I instinctively hate and which suffocates me. I advance slowly. I take the time to steal a glance into each of the rooms we pass, which resemble operating theatres. I begin to understand where I am: in the heart of the forensic institute, where bodies are identified. And the smell we perceive is a mixture of rotting

bodies and the chemicals used in the various protocols. The journalists can't believe their eyes at being there and having access to all this information. With their cameras, they run from room to room to capture as many images as possible. Only then can they reflect on what they've just seen. For now, they know that they will never again have such an opportunity to be so close to the mass grave.

In some of the blocks, doctors are seen flushing their work surfaces... over and over again. In others, we see teams facing their jigsaw puzzle of bits of bone, most of them barely more than a centimetre long. And then there's this room I pass by several times, not really daring to look at what's going on inside. Finally, I discover a scene of horror. A whole body, its flesh statuesque with fire, with no skin left, no distinguishing marks. All that's left is the shape of a human body, turning green as it decomposes.

I take my eyes off it. I need some air.

I head for the end of the corridor, where I can see daylight. Strangely, the smell becomes stronger and the flies more numerous. I make out the exit to an outer courtyard, and head for it, convinced that things will be better there. Only before me... I discover the mass grave! A multitude of body

bags lying side by side, as the refrigerated trucks continue to dump them from the center's entrance. On the other side, I see what appears to be the scanner room. Bodies are brought in and out to be digitized, to facilitate their distribution to the medical teams. There's no time to lose; in the space of a few seconds, we're on to the next one. There's too much to dwell on.

I won't take any photos. I refuse. I refuse the very act of photographing these horrors. There are enough images and videos taken around me to bear witness to the rest of the world. I don't want these images on my phone. I'm dirty enough with them in my head.

We all stand there for a few minutes, helpless, watching the dance of doctors bustling about, barely aware of our presence. They work like automatons. They've been at it for 9 days now, and they know they're not out of the woods yet.

Before leaving the center, we find the energy to head up to the second floor. After what we've just

seen, the DNA research lab seems quite calm. Yet they too are going through their share of scares. Doctor Nurit Bublil patiently takes part in one interview after another. She's a beautiful woman. In her sixties, tall, elegant. poised. Extremely professional. All around her are children's mattresses covered in blood...

- It's for DNA identification. The teams on site send us what they can, so that we can make as many cross-checks as possible.

Sometimes it's these mattresses, other times it's recipe books with bloodstains. I have the same book in my kitchen. All the women in Israel have this recipe book. It could have happened to any one of us.

When she loses herself in emotion, we feel her fragile, on the verge of tears. Then she resumes her role as scientist, and calms down. She explains that working 15 hours a day is what keeps them going. Otherwise, they think too much. But they know they won't last long at this pace.

She also explains that in the course of their discoveries she has come to the undeniable conclusion that this is not just a massacre. Hamas did not “simply” kill. The terrorists took immense pleasure in their task. They enjoyed killing. They enjoyed mutilating. They enjoyed martyring bodies. Not because they were told to. But for their own pleasure!

She looks the journalists straight in the eye. She knows she's right.

On our way out, we pass the BFM TV team. If two hours earlier they were walking straight in their shoes, now they seem to be carrying a building on their shoulders.

- You're OK?
- Yeah
- Phew... we're going to have to put it all together now.

And then they walk away towards their car.

Nadia decides to go back to the hotel. She's got plenty to work with and doesn't need me anymore. Tomorrow... Tomorrow will be enough.

Before I go home, I'd like to stop by and see the kids. Hug them, touch them, see them. To laugh with them. But I can't. Not with these clothes. Not with this smell. I can't bring these two worlds together. I can't bring the smell of death into their home, with their baby.

When I open the door to my home, I head straight for the washing machine, in front of which I undress. I put all my clothes in the drum and immediately start a wash. Then I head for the bathroom. Shower, shampoo, scrub. I scrub like hell. There's nothing thoughtful about it. It's just what I have to do.

After that, I closed the box: no news, no newspapers, the minimum of calls to reassure loved ones. And then a book. To forget

everything and above all... above all... not to think.

Just a few hours.

**Libé is a popular newspaper in France*

***A few weeks later, we learn that Doctor Hagar Mizrahi will be in charge of determining the probable death of some of the hostages held in Gaza. Based on hundreds of hours of viewing videos of the massacres, testimonies, and the origin and nature of injuries, she and her team will be able to declare some of them dead, even though they are still being held by Hamas*

****A few days earlier, I read an interview with a father who couldn't understand why he was being asked for DNA samples. Why they didn't simply return his son's body to him, so that he could bury him. He kept telling them about the shape and arrangement of the tattoos on the boy's body. How with so much evidence and recognition... how could they miss and not recognize him?!!! He just wanted his child's body back. He just wanted to bury him.*

*****Zaka is a research and first-aid organization.*

Its volunteers are dispatched to the scene of attacks, accidents and natural disasters, in Israel and around the world, to rescue the injured and collect every body part from the victims, so that they can be buried in their proper place and in accordance with Jewish law.

Tuesday October 17, 2023

MIA SCHEM

Because of the incredibly high number of victims, and the extreme difficulty of identifying the bodies, it is virtually impossible to put an exact figure on the number of hostages held in Gaza since October 7, 2023. But a rough estimate puts the number at around 222 Israelis* and/or Jews of other or dual nationalities, and around 40 foreigners, mainly Thai and Nepalese, who have come to work or study in Israel.

Since October 7, 2023, ever since we learned that hostages were being held prisoner in the Gaza Strip, the people of Israel have been thinking of them, getting up with them and going to bed holding their faces.

Since October 7, 2023, we have seen the videos of these women, children, babies, elderly people, men... taken by force and in extreme violence, to

the other side of the frontier. We have seen the crowds, the screams and the beatings. We saw the images of Naama Levy violently molested, and her jogging suit covered in blood. We saw Noa Argamani terrorized, screaming to be released. We saw her friend, helpless, hands behind his back and surrounded by armed men, stunned by what awaited him. We saw Shiri Bibas, looking terrified and carrying her two children, Kfir - 9 months old at the time of the hostage-taking - and Ariel - 3 years old, while her husband Yarden Bibas was taken away separately. We have seen all this, and much more. We have no doubt about the cruelty and violence that our hostages have suffered, are suffering, and will continue to suffer. We have no doubt about the blackmail Hamas will carry out, and the astronomical price the country will have to pay if it hopes to free them. We have no doubt... and yet... each time, we fall a little further into our illusions, witness to their perversion.

So, despite our hopes, despite our fierce desire to bring them all home safely and as quickly as possible, we ask ourselves these same questions:

Are they still alive? We don't know!
In what conditions are they being held? We don't know!
Are they being cared for if they need it? We don't know!
Are they mistreated? We don't know!
Are women raped? We don't know!
Will they be broken forever? We don't know!
How long will it last? We don't know!

An estimated 222 Israeli and/or Jewish hostages have been held in Gaza since October 7, 2023.

In France, this corresponds to 1,564 hostages
In the United States, this corresponds to 8,228 hostages

While I'm in my box on my way back from Abu Kabir, during the night, the video of a young French-Israeli hostage floods social networks.

As part of its nauseating propaganda, Hamas has just broadcast the testimony of Mia Schem, taken hostage during the Nova party. It shows the young girl lying wounded, with pins protruding from her right arm, visibly drugged, and demanding to be freed as soon as possible. To add to the cynicism, it's impossible to date the recording, let alone confirm that Mia is still alive, even though the video is viewed all over the world.

Nadia calls me in the morning before our usual appointment and informs me that a press conference about Mia Schem's video is scheduled for 11:00 a.m. in a building behind the Tel Aviv Museum.

On arriving at the venue, I realize that we're in the lawyers' quarter, very close to the courthouse. The press conference is scheduled to take place in a large law firm on the seventh floor of the tower, and it's difficult to get close because there are so

many reporters from all over the world. This time Nadia has come accompanied by a technician, Karine, who is trying to sneak up on the connection sources to make sure she gets the best possible connection, while I watch over her bag and the rest of her equipment from the little corner I've dug myself into. With Nadia fishing for visuals, Karine for sound, and me translating live, we manage to get a good overall picture. In front of the cameras, Keren Schem, Mia's mother, two of her brothers, the family lawyer and Yaakov Peri, former head of the Shabak, who is there to support and accompany the hostage families in a more official capacity.

Her daughter has been held hostage for 10 days. Keren Schem is reeling from the anguish and emotional shock she experienced the evening before, watching the news and discovering her daughter's face on her TV screen. Hamas broadcasted the video via Telegram, and the official networks didn't have time to warn the family before they discovered the video.

Despite the pain, despite the difficulty of the exercise, she is upright and composed. She talks about her daughter, about her love for her child. She recounts the pain of seeing her suffer. She

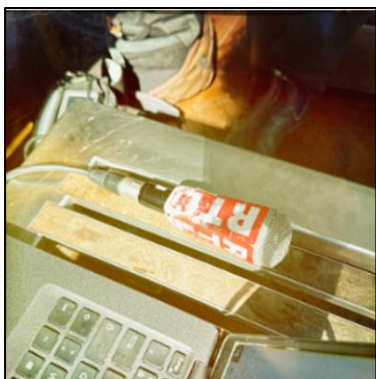
knows that these are not her words, and that the terrorists dictated the words she speaks in the film shot by Hamas. She knows that she's a fighter and that she'll get through this ordeal.

As this woman explains her struggle and her conviction that her “baby” is still alive, I understand. I understand the strength and determination of all those families who made the government bend so that the hostage issue could return to the center of the debate. These families who are fighting to keep on believing. These families who generated a national movement and brought the country together. These families who are not afraid to go to the UN to testify and make their voices heard. These families of dual nationals who have understood the strength of this dual nationality and who use it forcefully and intelligently. Families who go beyond their routine to fight and communicate together. These families, who yesterday were anonymous and today appear on television screens all over the world. These families who continue to believe that their loved ones are still alive and can be saved, when they have no information to hold on to. It all sounds so obvious when you put it like that. But at that moment, I'm filled with an

immense admiration and compassion for all these families, which will never leave me.

At the end of the conference, time is running out. We find a sofa in the lobby of the building so that Nadia can start editing her story and send it to her editors as quickly as possible. The subject is so sensitive, the mass of journalists so enormous, that if the information is not processed immediately, it will become obsolete within a few hours. The other teams are well aware of this, and we soon find ourselves surrounded by live recordings filmed on the fly in the entrance to the building, or by others taking to the stairs to type their article in a hurry.

While waiting for us to move on to the next subject, sitting next to other French-speaking journalists, I take the opportunity to snap a photo of this retro microphone, which I find very pretty, and which will be my smile for the day.



Micro rétro

While Nadia works on her own, we learn of the death of French-Israeli Céline Ben David-Nagar. In recent days, her husband had been appearing, in despair, on French and Israeli channels, to put pressure on the governments of both countries to join forces and find his wife.

She had gone to the Nova party on Saturday morning with a couple of friends. Her husband had stayed at home with their 6-month-old daughter.

Since her last messages dated Saturday morning at around 7.30am, those close to her thought - or

hoped - that she was still alive and had been taken hostage by Hamas.

On the morning of October 17, the news broke that her body and those of her friends had been identified among the victims of October 7, 2023. Her burial is scheduled for 3:00 p.m. in the Holon cemetery.

By the time we arrive at the Holon cemetery in the south of Tel Aviv, it is already very busy. Karine, who had taken part in the interview with Céline's husband a few days earlier, seems genuinely saddened by the news. The various Parisian newsrooms have asked their journalists to cover the funeral because of the victim's dual nationality, but you can sense that some are also there because they feel a little concerned. A certain closeness has developed with these families, whom they have been accompanying in their misfortune over the past few days. I'm sometimes asked about the meaning of the rites and prayers, which I gratefully share.

As we stand beside the freshly dug graves, I am struck by the number of funeral wreaths piled one on top of the other on the side. Burials follow one another at such a pace that there are too many

flowers. There's not enough room to hold them all. Yet this is only the beginning. There are still so many bodies stored in the refrigerators of the Shura morgue near Ramla, waiting to be identified and buried in their turn.

At the end of the ceremony, the few French journalists on site, who all know each other, gather naturally to exchange news and impressions. Maryse Burgot from France 2 TV Channel is astonished. A few days ago, she had attended the funeral of a young French-Israeli man, for whom there seemed to be many more people.

I then explain to her that this young man was a 'hayal boded' (a 'lone soldier'), a young soldier whose family was still in France. With canceled flights and the difficulty of getting to Israel since October 7, 2023, the community was afraid that there wouldn't even be a minyan - the minimum of 10 men for prayer - at his funeral and that he would definitely be alone, even on this painful day. That's why all the groups and whatsapp networks took it in turns to pass on the information and encourage those who could to go to the Jerusalem cemetery to accompany him to his final resting place.

As I tell my story and see the astonishment in the eyes of the journalists listening to me, I feel a great pride in my people and in their ability to show their humanity, even in these dark hours.

What I didn't expect, however, was that a few days later, this story would be at the center of an unpleasant disagreement I'd have with another journalist.

It's been a long day, and after wrapping things up with Nadia and Karine, I'm finally on my way home. I just have to make a detour behind the courthouse where I left my scooter. Hopefully, I'll be able to pick it up quickly and go home to get some rest. Bad calculation... at the end of the day, it's time for the rockets. And tonight they're in top form.

Alert #1 - On the way to the tramway. I followed people running down the street, they seemed to know where they were going.

Alert #2 - While on the tramway outside. We all got off the train to take refuge in the adjoining buildings, not sure if we have enough time.

Alert #3 - Before leaving the station. We're stuck in the basement, which adds to the feeling of claustrophobia when you feel perfectly subject to external events, without being able to hear or see what's going on above ground.

That's the tricky thing about rockets. Even if there are redundant moments, like the end of the day, you never know when they're going to fall. They can surprise us in the middle of the day or at night. While we're in the shower, which may amuse the neighbors, who see you coming down the stairs in our bathrobes, your hair dripping and full of soap. There may be just one, or ten. They may be intercepted by the iron dome... or not. Take casualties... or not.

And then it calms down for a few days, so it's back to business as usual. Children go back to school, parents to work. Confidence returns. But then it rings again.

All this creates a general feeling of danger and uncertainty, which takes root in our lives, even during ceasefires. Children develop fears that are difficult to calm in the long term.

People look for apartments with shelter, parents choose their children's schools on this condition alone. The first question asked of school principals is no longer 'what are their educational credentials or level of achievement', but 'what are their safety instructions in the event of an alert' and 'do they have a mamad'.

**17-year-old Aisha Ziyadne and 18-year-old Bilal Ziyadne will be among the hostages released on November 28, 2023. Coming from the Bedouin community, and like all other Israelis, their release will be guaranteed by the release of 3 Palestinian prisoners for each of them.*

Thursday October 19, 2023

SDEROT

Since the start of the war, all economic reference points have been turned upside down.

The government has had to make drastic changes to its previously approved budget. With military expenses, logistics for reservists and aid for tens of thousands of displaced persons in the north and south, the bill amounts to 1 billion shekels per week.

Companies are faced with many problems. Some teams have been cut in half, because employees have gone on milouïms - reserve period - overnight. In some cases, their colleagues are taking over the most urgent tasks, but companies are still having to review their general organization. Abroad, if their contacts and customers were understanding during the first week of the war, they now expect the projects and collaborations they signed up for to be completed and services delivered on time. Here too, budgets

are being reorganized, and certain operations that have become superfluous in the light of the situation are being cancelled outright, to enable new strategies to be drawn up, and finances and overall objectives to be reviewed.

Farmers are in dire straits, and the new season's harvest appears to be in jeopardy, which is all the more worrying for a country whose aim is to be self-sufficient. They have to cope with the thousands of foreign workers who have left the country in a panic, and with fields that are located in military or dangerous zones with little or no access. Some farms, such as dairies, have been extremely damaged, and in some cases the farmers themselves were killed on October 7, 2023, or in the days that followed, as they tried to get their dairies back up and running.

Finally, on an individual level, it's the apocalypse for many Israelis. Major retailers are laying off half their staff, while independents are seeing their projects cancelled one after the other, leaving entire families desperate and in an increasingly worrying financial situation.

Visibility for the vast majority of Israelis is short-term.

This morning we plan to head to Sderot for a press conference to discuss the economic problems the country has faced since the start of the war, as well as the military and political arrangements for the future. Ministers Nir Barkat - Minister of Economy and Industry - and Avi Dichter - Minister of Agriculture - will be on hand to take stock of the situation and answer journalists' questions.

This is my first visit to Sderot. Like all the southern towns I've passed through in the last few days, entry is conditional on passing through a makeshift checkpoint, a concrete block, or simply police cars parked across the road.

I discover a really pretty town. Flowers everywhere, kindergartens filled with colorful characters. Walking through its streets, it's easy to see why the locals are so attached to it. It must be a nice place to live... when there's no war or rockets.

And yet, once past the roadblock at the entrance to the town, we meet no one. Not a single passer-by in sight, not a single car. And now that we're

beginning to understand this type of atmosphere better, it seems that there's nobody in the buildings either. A totally deserted, dehumanized city.

We drive to the address given on the press release, Herzl 55. We're early, but still, we were expecting more movement. Above all, we expected to discover a building at the address indicated. There's only a median strip. Further down, we see two or three journalists in their protective gear. This gives us some hope, and we decide to park. As we turn left into a makeshift parking lot, we're suddenly confronted by partially burnt and bullet-riddled car wrecks. Sure enough... something's happened around here!

Once parked, we head for the journalists already present, wearing their bulletproof vests and helmets, but when we question them, they look just as surprised as we do.

Heavily armed police officers are present. I approach them to ask if they are aware of a press conference in the area. They don't know anything about it. They clearly don't seem in the mood to chat with me... I move on.

The sounds of close-by bombings echo through the air. We're just a kilometer from the Gaza

Strip. Should we put on our bulletproof vests too? A mix of laziness and perhaps a touch of recklessness wins out. We leave them in the car trunk and continue our search for the conference center.

After five minutes, and a few searches on our cell phones, we realize that we've come to the right address. It's just that there's no longer any building, because we're standing on the site of the old Sderot police station. The one that was destroyed following the clashes of October 7, 2023. There's nothing left of it. And if the address hadn't appeared in the various Israeli media, we'd have continued to doubt we were in the right place. As the time for the press conference approaches, more journalists begin to arrive. We follow them to discover that the meeting will take place in an underground bunker a few meters away, which serves as an annex to the GPO (Government Press Office). We go down into the shelter, and take our places among the people already present. The microphones are plugged in, the cameras are rolling. Sometimes they're aimed exclusively at the star journalist of an American news channel. Sure, he's got a great haircut, but it's funny to think that these networks would deploy two

camera crews specifically to cater to the ego of a news star... but who are we to judge?

The ministers arrive. No protocol, no ceremony. They've come to pass on a piece of information, and will then leave, followed by their bodyguards.

We soon realize that the journalists around us have little interest in the economic problem; what they want to know is when the Israeli ground incursion will take place, asking the question at every opportunity. I fidget in my corner, annoyed by this constant insistence. As if the government representatives were going to give them the action plan put in place by the army, in great detail.

Once again, as I listen to our speakers, I notice the logos of channels from all over the world. Some media “friends”, others much less friendly with the State of Israel when it comes to drawing their editorial line. I find it hard to understand what they're doing here. Their very presence offends me. But I keep quiet. I just throw up a utopian prayer, hoping that having been present on the very sites bearing witness to absolute horror

might make them revise their vision of the world and of our absolute need to defend ourselves. Probably in vain... but it doesn't hurt to hope.

To political questions, the ministers confirm that within the government, they all have their responsibilities and will be held to account. That this is just not the time, and that for the moment, the main objective is unity to lead the country to survival.

As I listen to them, I think back to all those Israeli flags that have been flying along the roads and on all the billboards since October 8. And that slogan inscribed everywhere we look, - ביחד ננצח - Together we shall overcome.

The authorities understand that the population fiercely needs to believe in its unity and in the country's ability to win this war of survival, despite the nightmare of the Black Sabbath, and the doubts that plagued us in the first hours of the conflict. That's why they want to remind us that we have the necessary resources to face these times. Together.

I have to admit that the press conference was not very convincing. There was some interesting information on the financial situation and local needs, especially as regards agriculture and the damage inflicted on various facilities. But the two ministers' desire to convey a message about the legitimacy of our point of view and the government's actions met with no indulgence. Especially not with the hungry, seasoned journalists in the room.

Since the start of the war, we've had a clear sense that the State is making a special effort in its communications, for which it has always been much criticized. The daily press briefings by the General Staff, the technological efforts made, the availability of the GPO to the world's media, the issuing of press passes, sometimes within 24 hours... all this is proof of an unprecedented effort. However, ready-made speeches, such as those by Nir Barkat and Avi Dichter who stand before us today, are far from satisfactory. Journalists leave as quickly as they arrived, trying to find more juicy news elsewhere for their press releases of the day. In fact, unlike Mia Schem's press conference two days earlier, where their colleagues had occupied every free space in the building to do a live broadcast or interview, this

time we quickly find ourselves alone in the bunker, while we're negotiating new GPO cards for the rest of the team.

Saturday October 21, 2023
HOSTAGES SQUARE

The day before, Nadia and Nino, her new technician, went to Be'eri. Places were limited and I suspect Nadia wanted to spare me the spectacle of one of the Black Shabbat's deadliest kibbutzim. So I stayed at home on standby, preparing topics for the week ahead. This Saturday morning, I don't ask them many questions, as I don't really want to hear more than what we're constantly discovering in the various media and on broadcast networks. All I know is that Nadia is a little shocked and annoyed by the behavior of certain journalists who thought they were on the set of a sensational film. You have to sell.

We are two weeks away from October 7, 2023. Two weeks and little or no news from the hostages.

In recent days, the families have begun to make their voices heard in earnest. Some are giving interviews to local and foreign media, while others are visiting the UN or meeting political representatives likely to relay information and make a difference to the fate of their loved ones. The previous week, on Saturday October 14, these families began gathering on Kaplan, where the anti-government protests had taken place a few weeks earlier. They created a “hostage wall”, a wall on which are plastered the faces and names of all known and suspected hostages. It's the first time we've been able to visualize the extent of the horror in terms of their numbers. The wall is immense, yet barely enough to contain the memory of each and every one. To date, their number is estimated at 222 - excluding foreign hostages - but the figures are constantly fluctuating as the deceased are identified.

The wall contains the portraits, but also words written by relatives or anonymous people who just want to show their support. Some families have been decimated, with almost more members in Gaza than in Israel, if they weren't killed on October 7, 2023.

As the days go by, we hear more and more about this place of remembrance, where families gather

in front of the Kirya - the military base in the center of Tel Aviv - to make sure that the government hasn't forgotten them.

On the other side of the government building, on the esplanade in front of the Tel Aviv Museum, a Shabbat table has been set... with 222 place settings. One for each hostage. This installation has given rise to other Shabbat tables in the rest of the world, including Rome, Paris and Washington, so striking is the symbol. Simple and poignant. Modest and courageous.

And then, as the days went by, we saw other installations and paintings grafted onto the public space, as well as a huge white scroll running parallel to the shabbat table, allowing those who wishes to write a word or draw a picture. To be there and bear witness to their presence and their pain.

The week before, Nadia had realized how difficult it was to shoot a story on the Sabbath. So she welcomes my proposal to go and meet the hostages' families. We meet in front of the Kirya. The streets of the town are still deserted, and the activity around the hostage wall stands out from

the surrounding calm. The few people we pass are either heading towards Kaplan, or back.

We assume that a larger demonstration is planned for the end of the day, as it was the week before, but there's always a presence around the place, whatever the time of day.

I've never seen all these portraits and names in one place before. Vertigo. I need to immerse myself in each person's face... it takes time to look them all in the eye, to read their name, their age and find out where they come from. It takes time, and it changes forever.

Some people agree to talk to us, others come on their own to be interviewed. I'm always amazed that people agree to talk to us, but I also see that they're driven by their need to testify and share. Nadia asks her questions, which I translate for them, and vice versa. I'm careful not to take too much credit for their words, not to make them say what I think, or hope they'll say. It's a delicate exercise, but I feel I create a special bond with each person. This experience brings me into contact with people I would never have met, people who are far, far removed from my usual circle. People of all ages, from all over the country. I'm delighted to be so close to them, and

to be able to speak on their behalf. It's an immense privilege.

In the course of the interviews, I get a good feel for this notion of unity. In the background, there may be differences of opinion about their political views, but not once do they want to put them forward. It's not the right time. They keep telling us, one after the other. They are there to support the families, to make sure the hostages are not forgotten. Everything else seems superfluous. Everything will come in its own time.

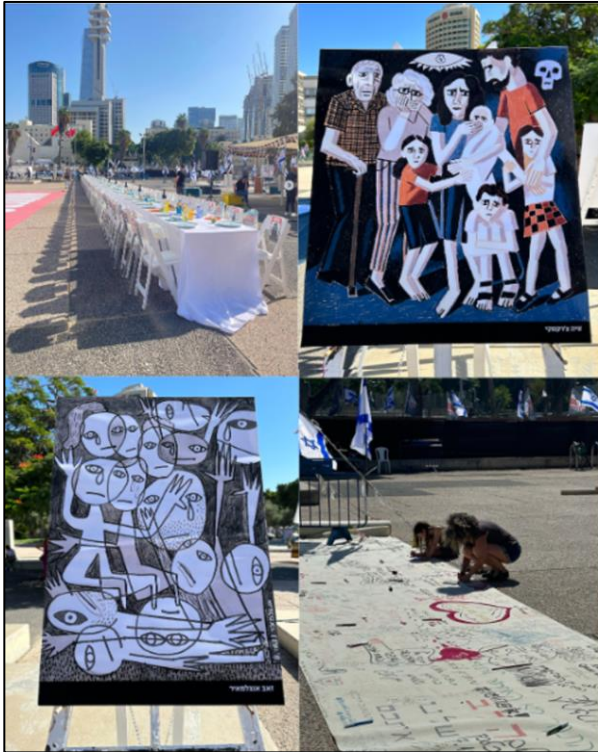
In just a few minutes, we've already completed our topic for the day, such is the quality of the testimonials. But we still decide to walk around the building to the esplanade of the Tel Aviv Museum. This place, which was to become the kikar hahatufim - the hostage plaza - is not yet the nerve center of the struggle to free the hostages. It's true that the printed portraits can be seen there too, but it's first and foremost the place where the huge table that we've been seeing on the news for the past few days is set up.

In the distance, we pass the Canal+ crew attempting a live broadcast. But it's mainly the

families who take turns allowing the children to write a word on the long white scroll on the ground. There's no age limit for showing support, and we can see that the children are very concerned about the few words and drawings they'll be leaving behind. So small, and already confronted with the reality that other children their age, as well as their parents and grandparents, have been taken prisoner while sleeping peacefully in their beds. It's enough to fuel years of nightmares for this new generation, who can't help but project themselves into this story that could have happened to any one of them, to any one of us.

While Nadia and Nino sit to one side to advance and set up their subjects, I take the opportunity to wander around the square. I take photos of the installations that are beginning to accompany the one on the table in the center, as well as of the paintings set up on easels. I don't think all this has been organized, but rather that it's been put together in good understanding between the different artists, who over the course of the days feed the place with their work. And I'm impressed by the expressive quality of some of the paintings,

which perfectly illustrate the horror scenes of October 7, 2023.



*Photo 1 - the table with 222 place settings
Photos 2 and 3 - paintings visible on the
Hostages square, representing the terror of
October 7, 2023*

Photo 4 - a child writing a word on the long white scroll

Before finally breaking camp in the late afternoon, we decide once again to go back to Kaplan, as it's normally assembly time. And indeed, we discover groups that have formed over the last few hours. The younger participants have gathered around a guitar and are singing.

Nadia looks at me a little astonished, and asks what the lyrics mean. Most of them are popular Israeli folk songs, sung by all the people gathered around the musicians. The atmosphere is calm, gentle. It's almost like the wake of a youth movement.

I realize that, from the outside, these songs don't quite fit in with the idea of a vigil for the hostages or a demonstration of solidarity for the victims. So I turn to Nadia and simply reply, "You know, here... we sing a lot".

“

The girls have been
raped

Sunday October 22, 2023

CRIME AGAINST HUMANITY

As the various accusations against Israel begin to proliferate on social networks, and in the total incomprehension of what took place on October 7, 2023 against the Israeli population, it becomes urgent to ask precise definitions of what war crimes, genocide and crimes against humanity mean.

We have an appointment this Sunday morning in Jerusalem with Yaacov Garson, a French-Israeli lawyer, who agrees to receive us in his downtown offices, to give us a precise and documented explanation.

The offices, like the rest of the country, are deserted, and the echo resounding.

We settle down in the meeting room to begin our interview, which will be rich in information.

Before getting to the heart of the matter, Nadia asks the lawyer how he's doing. How is he, as an Israeli Jewish man who has just lived through a

tragedy? I have to admit, I wasn't expecting this opening.

Yaacov Garson's response puts into words exactly what I feel, without having taken the time to fully understand it. He explains that on October 7, 2023, he only became fully aware of the facts at the end of the day, because he is religious and observes the Sabbath, during which he had no access to information. During the day he had sensed that something serious and unusual had happened, but he didn't get the details until late in the evening. Immediately, he decided to close his offices for the week, aware that anything else would be superfluous. But after a first attempt to return to the office on October 15, and the impossibility of concentrating on any files, he went home again for another week. He describes this inability to work as the same as during shiva - the first week of mourning - when it's impossible to think about anything other than the object of mourning. But he hasn't been idle. He has informed himself a great deal and tries to communicate on the legal issues that bring us to his office today, and which are crucial for Israel. He is driven by his desire to educate and inform on the subject.

It's at this point that he begins to explain the precise legal distinction between these terms, which are all too often overused, especially in the current climate.*

To Nadia's first question: is the massacre of October 7, 2023 a genocide, a war crime or a crime against humanity, Yaacov Garson is categorical.

According to him, there is no doubt about it: the massacre perpetrated by Hamas on October 7, 2023 against the civilian population of Israel is, from a legal point of view and according to international law, a crime against humanity!

Why can't it be called a war crime?

A war crime is associated with a “slip-up” during an already established war between two regular armies from two sovereign states. These are soldiers waging war on other soldiers. And when one of the two armies penetrates the enemy state's soil, committing blunders, skids, inadvertently attacking civilians or not, then this is a war crime. Crimes are committed in a context of war.

But in this case, we're not talking about two sovereign states at war with each other, still less two legitimate armies in conflict. Hamas is a terrorist group, and Palestine is not a state under

international law. Consequently, there can be no question of a war crime.

But what particularly determines the notion of a crime against humanity is the nature of the aggression itself. When civilians are deliberately targeted upstream of the aggression, it's not a question of skidding or collateral damage, and even less of a conventional war between two regular armies. It's a crime against humanity, because it's human beings who have been targeted and attacked from the outset. In this case, even the soldiers and armed forces who were killed on October 7, 2023, were killed with Hamas' primary intention of attacking, killing and massacring Israeli civilians.

It's one human attacking another. And when the attack is carried out on this scale, and with such cruelty, then the texts are clear: this is the definition of a crime against humanity. And in this case, there are only too many categories into which, following the massacre of October 7, 2023, we can fall: murder, rape, abuse, mutilation...

Many... many forms of crime have been perpetrated on Our soil and against Our civilian population, crimes that fit the definition of crimes against humanity.

It's a very loaded appellation.

To qualify the massacre of October 7, 2023 as a war crime would be to legitimize the Hamas as the regular army of the Palestine, to install the latter as a state governed by the rule of law, and to contextualize the violence engendered in what could be “tolerated as a war”. Today, there is no longer any doubt as to how to qualify Hamas: it is a terrorist group, and there is no doubt either as to the aim of the massacre against the Israeli civilian population. Nor on its premeditation and meticulous planning, with a view to spreading terror.

When Yaacov Garson stops speaking, we feel the weight of his words and their meaning. The silence becomes heavy, and we are surprised by the background noise of the computers running on one of the tables in the meeting room.

This is a lot of information we've just received in a very short space of time, and it's important to assimilate it quickly in order to contextualize and continue the interview.

Nadia is a journalist, and she's French. She's not here to take sides, even if I often credit her with an objectivity and empathy that many of her peers often lack. The following question is obvious,

even if it's a bit scratchy. Is Israel's bombing of Gaza a war crime?

To answer this question, it is important to contextualize international law, and in this case humanitarian law. In war, countries have an obligation to protect civilians and prisoners, with a view to preserving life. In this case, we're dealing with a terrorist group that doesn't see life as a value, but death as an end, even when it comes to the lives of Palestinians. Hamas goes against and abuses the norms of international law by purposely hiding in and endangering the civilian population.

International law as it exists today is limited, since there are no laws to date that act on the abuse of international law and that could rule on Hamas' behavior in endangering Palestinians. The terrorist group, using the population of Gaza as a human shield, as well as civilian infrastructures such as schools and hospitals, is perfectly aware of this and is playing on this loophole in international law. In the long term, the ICC will probably have to rule on these legal voids and on new laws that act on the abuse of international law, if it is to arbitrate the conflict

fairly. Otherwise, it will not be applicable to our current reality.

But what are the laws today, and is Israel in compliance with those that exist?

The lawyer's answer is unequivocal.

Yes!

Under international law, a building in a conflict zone is presumed to be civil until proven otherwise.

If an army decides to attack targets located in a civilian area, in order to comply with international law, it must first warn the civilian population (which we do), give them time to leave the target area (which we also do), and the presumption that the building is a priori civilian must be lifted - i.e., the regular army must have proof that the a priori civilian building houses a proven military target (which is the case). And if there's no alternative, the use of force is authorized.

What few people know is that Tsahal, like most large conventional armies, has a department of legal experts in international law, and that every military operation carried out in the field must be approved by this team beforehand, in order to comply fully with international law.

The law does not encourage war, but it does recognize the state of war. The Israeli army is fighting in compliance with local and international law, in a conflict that the country neither wished for nor engaged in. But as a sovereign state, Israel has not only the right, but also the obligation to protect its population and keep it safe, whatever the cost.

It's hard to take over after Mr. Garson's last words. His explanations are crystal-clear, and all three of us feel we've come away from this discussion with a clarity of mind we didn't have when we entered.

After the usual formulas, we head for the exit, almost without a word. We just turn to thank him and greet him on the doorstep.

But deep down I know that his words will stay with me for a long time, and that I absolutely must find a way of communicating them to as many people as possible.

Israel is a signatory to the Rome Convention, but had expressed reservations, fearing the political use of international law.

Palestine, for its part, was recognized by the ICC in 2015 as a state entitled to act before the international court of justice. **

Those who may find themselves under indictment are either states or individuals.

At the end of February 2024, many editorial offices around the world will quote Hamas figures of 30,000 victims, most of them women and children. Experts around the world claim that these figures are far-fetched, arguing that no conflict presents a constant, permanent and regular increase in the number of victims, all the more so by population category - suggesting that those communicated by the Hamas are clearly falsified.

Nevertheless, it starts to get very interesting when we look at the civilian casualty ratio commonly accepted by the UN and Europe, which is 80 - 90%, i.e. 1:8 - 1:9. It's terrible, but that's how it is. And states in conflict are very rarely accused

of genocide or crimes against humanity. They're at war. Period!

However, in the case of the conflict with Hamas, Tsahal claims to have eliminated 13,000 members of Hamas. This gives us a ratio of 1:1.3! Unheard of in urban warfare.

*According to John Spencer***, Chairman of Urban Warfare Studies at the Modern War Institute, who served 25 years as a soldier in the US Army, Israel has just set a new standard in urban warfare. For months now, Tsahal has been deploying efforts to protect Gazan civilians that no army in the world has ever done before. These efforts not only put Israel soldiers at risk, but also explain why the hostages have still not been found, since the Hamas, alerted in the same way as the rest of the Gazan civilians, can not only re-establish its positions, but also knows where to strike, since the alerts are communicated in advance.*

If we cross-check the analysis and testimony of various specialists around the world, the conclusion is unequivocal. Israel is not committing genocide in Gaza, having lowered from 6 to 7 the ratio of civilian victims commonly accepted by the major international bodies.

On the other hand, the question we are entitled to ask ourselves is: how is it that these international bodies, as well as the world's leading countries, continue to condemn Israel, when they are perfectly aware of these military data and have all the analysts they need to explain their significance?

The second question we are entitled to ask ourselves: are the journalists and influential figures who report these so-called genocidal acts the same ones who are incapable of positioning Israel, Gaza, a certain river and another sea on the world map?

*In the context of the definitions of crimes against humanity and war crimes, I will use Yaacov Garson's exact terms, sometimes word for word, so as not to distort his words, to preserve the accuracy of the legal word, and to avoid attributing to myself a thought that could become approximate.

**In January 2024, it may come as a surprise that South Africa, and not the Palestinian Authority, should file a complaint with the ICJ against Israel for war crimes, demanding an immediate and humanitarian ceasefire in the Gaza Strip. Could this be further hypocrisy on the part of the Palestinian Authority, open anti-Semitism on the part of the African state, or an action sponsored by the Hamas, which is doing everything it can to put an end to a conflict it has initiated but in which it is losing its foothold (which, in fact, would be implicit complicity and support on the part of South Africa for a terrorist movement recognized as such by the main international democracies)? Perhaps it's all this at once...

***<https://www.newsweek.com/Isr-has-created-new-standard-urban-warfare-why-will-no-one-admit-it-opinion-1883286>

Monday October 23, 2023

THE INVESTIGATORS

On October 12, 2023, Maître Nathanaël Majster announced to France Info that a complaint for 'Crimes against humanity' had been lodged with the national anti-terrorist prosecutor's office in Paris. The complaint has been lodged against Hamas, but is also intended to extend to all complicit bodies that have supported the terrorist group, with Iran of course being singled out first and foremost. The complaint was lodged on behalf of Marc Perez, a French-Israeli who went missing on October 7, 2023. He had gone to the Nova site to rescue his daughter, but was pronounced dead a few days later.

As Yaacov Garson explained to us the day before, it's not uncommon for individuals, and very often binationals, to launch this kind of action on a private basis. Individually, or as a group, they have the ability to take legal action before foreign institutions that are sometimes inaccessible to the

State of Israel, but which have recognized international legal value. It is also a way for families seeking information to move the lines more quickly, and to bring in outside forces to find their loved ones.

With a view to supporting the various complaints that will be lodged worldwide, many groups have set themselves the task of gathering as much information as possible on site. They go out into the field to take photos and videos, centralize existing ones, contact families and gather testimonies. Together, they build up a remarkable library of facts, some of which is already circulating on Telegram. The images of horror accumulate day after day, endlessly, competing in ignominy. By dint of it, we are all led to watch these videos, which I refused to watch the first few days, and which I now drink in every day to feed our subjects and my understanding of what my country and my people are going through.

But the effort doesn't stop there. These elements quickly begin to be analyzed, enabling the sources of funding to be traced and the implications of the Hamas massacre to be mapped out.

In the same way, Mr. Majster is working with his own team who, from Israel, are moving heaven

and earth to gather as much information as possible, before it disappears, but also because time is running out. The task is immense.

The day before, we met Dan. A young photographer, he is part of the small team that has been working non-stop for the past two weeks.

I'm touched by his youth and determination. He's awfully young to be discovering the cruelest aspects of humanity day after day. But he seems convinced of the importance of his mission, and how lucky he is to be able to tip the balance in the right direction.

Despite his busy schedule, he agreed to meet with us to plan a visit to Shura on Monday.

Shura is the military base located in Ramla, a few kilometers from Tel Aviv. This is where bodies awaiting identification are stored. A few days ago, we discovered its existence on our TV screens, as we watched the incessant round of parents coming to identify and recover the bodies of their children... well, those who could be identified.

Arriving in front of the base, I was struck by the immensity of the place. The soldiers guarding the various entrances seem accustomed to the stream of journalists and officials who have been visiting the site for one reason or another over the past few days. However, we won't make it past the main gate. We missed the delegation we were supposed to join, French officials who had come to see the abomination with their own eyes, and who would later be booed and sometimes insulted when they returned to France to tell their stories.

Literally between two security airlocks, Dan introduces us to Dr Sarah Fainberg. She is *Senior Researcher and Head of the Great Powers Research Program* at Tel Aviv University. She travels the world, and more specifically the war zones, to draw up the main lines of major global conflicts. Basically, she knows what she's talking about when it comes to describing armed confrontations of any kind and their consequences. She wastes no time in getting straight to the heart of the matter. It's up to us to jump on the bandwagon, if we're up to it.

Like Mr. Garson the day before, she speaks directly of Crime Against Humanity. We sense that she's in full possession of her powers, yet

there's a wave in her voice that testifies to a deep and marked anger. In a few precise words that tolerate no contradiction, she explains the particularity of the massacre of October 7, 2023. She has just returned from the Ukraine, where, it's no secret, Wagner has left a deep imprint of its exactions against the Ukrainian population. Among other extreme forms of violence, they used rape as a guerrilla warfare method, and have very precise guides to its use and impact on the population. These have probably served as examples for Hamas. However, the additional atrocities inflicted on Israeli women (and men) surpassed in horror and sadism all that we have seen and all that we know of international confrontations. Today, it is important to document all these elements in order to bring those responsible before the highest courts of justice, including, but not limited to, the ICC. Unsurprisingly, she points the finger at Iran, Russia, through which the financial movements that fueled the Hamas are said to have transited, and at cryptocurrency* networks, which by their very nature remain extremely complicated to track down... but not totally impossible. With this in mind, the ELNET (European Leadership Network) group, of which Sarah

Fainberg is one of the executive members, issued a press release in the stands of Le Monde on October 17, 2023, with 47 signatories including Alain Finkielkraut, Manuel Valls, Haïm Korsia - Chief Rabbi of France - and Mario Stasi - President of the Licra. Their intention: to rally expertise from around the world and combine all available resources to track down those responsible, whoever they may be, and bring them to justice.

In just a few minutes, she manages to outline the main lines of their research and work, which should keep them busy for the next few months, if not years.

I have to admit I'm in awe of this woman. She radiates a strength and willpower that I have rarely encountered. But above all, she's brilliant. And determined. The day before, Dan described her as his mentor and role model, and you could feel that he could follow her anywhere. Which I understand even better now that I'm sitting opposite her and listening to her. She represents what I aspire to be as a woman, and she gives me the strength to go forward in what is now the fight

of all of us in Israel, to let the whole world know what happened on our land, to obtain justice and recognition of the status of our victims, whatever the cost.

**A few days later, when I tried to put Dan in touch with a cryptocurrency expert, I learned that they were already in touch with her, in order to trace the incriminating leads. Which, just a few days after our interview, confirms Sarah Fainberg's suppositions.*

Tuesday October 24, 2023

B'TSELEM

Nadia is flying back to France today, and has taken the opportunity to pass on my contact details to another team who arrived the day before. One day follows another, without a break. I've totally lost track of the week. I get up in the morning with specific tasks in mind, but I can't tell which day of the week it is. I've lost all my bearings. It's as if my life no longer belongs to me, and I just have to get on with it and see as much as I can. I need to store up the maximum so that I can bear witness, so that I can say. To know and allow others to know too. My vision is short-term... the end of the day is not that bad. As for the rest, I really have no idea. My job ended on October 7, 2023, my projects are cancelled. And for the first time in my life, it doesn't really matter. Apart from the situation we've been in since the Black Sabbath, nothing else matters. Except my family and my quest for information.

Dominique has arranged to meet me in Ashdod at 8am. It stings the eyes a bit, as I'm leaving home at 7:00... but he's only just arrived, so I'm going through the motions. I take the liberty of pointing out to him on the way in that if we go straight to Jerusalem, as he intends to do, we'll pass within 5 minutes of my house. He doesn't seem to appreciate my humor, and we move straight on to the rest of the day's program... I have a feeling that the atmosphere is going to be different from the one I've experienced with the previous journalists I've accompanied, but I adapt. And I smile.

In the parking lot, I meet Jordan, also a special correspondent, who is teamed up with Dominique. He's jovial and in a good mood. That should help lighten the mood.

So we're on our way to Jerusalem to pick up their press passes. I suggest a route that will avoid the checkpoints and which I think is safer, especially as we're moving away from the conflict zone and it doesn't seem to be a priority for them. In hindsight, I think this idea was my first error of judgement. But little did I know the significance of my suggestion and the impact it would have on our team.

In the car, I quickly realize that Dominique has few contacts in the country and expects me to open all the doors for him. Okay... I don't mind. It's just that I like to be asked nicely.

While Jordan drives us to our destination, Dominique and I spend the drive contacting people, considering topics or contacts that might lead us to interesting information. I understand that he's just arrived, but I remember that with Nadia, all this was already taken care of before I arrived at her hotel, and we always had a very precise idea of how our day was going to unfold before it started.

- I'd like to interview Palestinians from Gaza

I lift my head from my phone

- Sorry?!
- I'd like to interview some people from Gaza to get their testimonies.

- Ah... (pause - and a desire to be formal, even if it's not at all my style)
You know, Dominique, since October 7, 2023, there are no more Gazans on Israeli territory. Except for terrorists captured by the army...
- I'd like you to search
- Sorry, I don't have those contacts!

Was it a test? Does the fact that I'm directly involved and he's not put us so much at odds? How can our perceptions be so different? I confess that I asked myself all these questions and many more, so incongruous did his request seem to me and so totally disconnected from our reality.

After these first few weeks, I've come to understand that the journalists who come to Israel are looking for a scoop, but this one seems to me to be inappropriate and cruelly undermines my intellectual availability. Despite all the good will I would (or wouldn't) put into it.

I watch him continue his research on his phone. Suddenly, he enthusiastically announces an “interesting” lead.

- I've just been referred to this NGO. Do you know them? We should interview them, I hear they're very good.

He shows me his screen, and I discover the page for... B'tselem.

B'tselem is an Israeli NGO based in Jerusalem. Since its creation, this organization has first of all tried to undermine the Israeli army and its principle of action, by speaking out in the Knesset and by relaying the complaints that Palestinians in Gaza make against Tsahal. They constantly hammer home the number of Palestinian deaths to anyone who will listen. However, this count is always one-sided and never takes into account the Israeli victims, nor the context in which the denounced conflict took root. Hagai El-Ad, its

leader until the summer of 2023, never ceased to deny the IDF any ethics or right to defend the country. Then, in 2016, as he felt that internally it wasn't making enough noise, he decided to lodge an Israeli condemnation request with the UN, against the settlements. And to remove any doubt about his political views and agenda, on the photos of his presence at the United Nations Security Council meetings on the situation in the Middle East, we see him sitting between the representative of Kuwait and that of the State of Palestine.

Danny Danon, Israeli's ambassador to the United Nations at the time, didn't pull any punches when he denounced his attitude and called him a traitor and a collaborator, a sentiment which illustrated what a large proportion of Israeli thought

B'tselem is at it again in 2021, once more taking a stand against its country by calling Israel an apartheid regime and supporting the report by the UN Economic and Social Commission, which had just condemned the Jewish state as an apartheid regime. This unfounded report had done immense damage to the country, both politically and emotionally. The NGO added

another layer by declaring that, in its view, Israel was no longer a democracy.

Alongside these political actions, B'tselem regularly takes part in pro-Palestinian and openly anti-Israeli rallies, during which we chant and hammer “from the river so the sea” and advocate a ONE-state solution, which of course is not the state of Israel.

I give Dominique back his phone. I admit that my first thought was to throw it out of the window.

While I remain polite, I have mentally drawn a red line. And I know that I'll refuse to work on this file if he persists in this direction.

- It's a very, very left-wing organization. They get a lot of flak in Israel...

Jordan announces that we're approaching the GPO offices. Unknowingly, and unintentionally, he has just put an end to what was going to be a

tense conversation. At least from my point of view. As for Dominique, he has no idea what he's just raised.

The morning continues in the same vein. I rummage through my contacts book and suggest subjects, which my journalist refuses one after the other. He's not convinced, and I suspect he thinks I'm trying to steer him. And maybe he's not entirely wrong...

Finally, after receiving confirmation from his editor that he couldn't think of anything better, he accepts my recommendation to interview Yaëlle Ifrah on the economic issue that is preoccupying the country and its inhabitants.

Indeed, Yaëlle has long been affiliated to the Knesset and knows a lot about the financial stakes facing Israel in the context of this new war. We meet her in a café in Baka. It's one of my favorite neighborhoods in Jerusalem, offering the double advantage of being close to the city center and allowing you to travel back in time, with its narrow streets and tree-lined courtyards.

I'm happy to see Yaëlle. It's the first time we've crossed paths since the beginning of the conflict, and it feels good. These last few weeks, any trace of friendship fills the heart, and I receive this one as an offering, all the more so in the context of this new day, which brings out all the stress I'd been carefully burying for the last 2 weeks. While Dominique is interviewing Yaëlle, I'm cogitating in my corner, seriously weighing up the pros and cons of continuing this mission with a journalist for whom, I realize, I have very little sympathy. I finally manage to reason with myself, reminding of the importance of this job and the hasbara. Tomorrow will be a new day...

On the way back...

Dominique: "There are a lot of flags, no?..."

Yes, tomorrow will be a new day.

Wednesday October 25, 2023

BE'ERI

Nadia had tried to spare me the 'kibbutz and other massacre sites' step. But the moment arrives when I can no longer escape it.

The GPO's WhatsApp once again suggested that journalists who wanted to visit Kibbutz Be'eri should do so, so the three of us signed up for an afternoon visit.

The evening before, warning systems indicated terrorist incursions by sea at Zikim, a small coastal town on the northern border of the Gaza Strip. Before heading off to the kibbutz, we plan

to take a look around and meet the residents, who are regularly confronted with this type of danger. Arriving in this little town in the south of Israel, we set about finding people to talk to, but the task proved difficult. We're barely 2 - 3 kilometers from the border, and the inhabitants are still under orders to stay in their homes, under cover. So we look for assembly points and food stores, where we come across a few people who have come to stock up. I approach to ask them questions, trying to be as delicate as possible; I know what these people have been going through for years, and especially in recent weeks. But I can feel my journalist getting impatient in my back. Either he doesn't understand what these people and I are talking about, despite my efforts to translate as much of our exchanges as possible, or their answers don't satisfy him.

I think he expected to find a terrified population. He seems disappointed to come across such simple people who, despite the news, are showing incredible courage and resilience. Of course they know about last night's incursion, of course they're scared and the situation is difficult. But this isn't their first attack, and they have plenty of stories to tell him if he wants to hear them.

Despite their kindness and good will, these people don't seem to interest him, and we quickly get back in the car and head off elsewhere.

We try it a little further north, towards Ashkelon... We cross the southern part of the waterfront and arrive near a yacht club. As in every city I've explored in the last two weeks, the streets are perfectly deserted.

We do, however, come across a family at a table. They're the owners of the café we've just accosted them in, as well as the adjoining convenience store. They tell us that this is usually a very lively neighborhood, but that people have been holed up in their homes since October 7, 2023, either out of fear or because of instructions.

Like all Tel Aviv residents, I have a (perfectly ridiculous) preconception about people who don't live in the center of the country. I keep asking them about the situation, but I'm afraid I'll get superficial and politically extreme answers.

I can't remember why we turned to the youngest brother first. Maybe because he was the first to agree to talk to us. Or perhaps the others had jokingly warned us that dealing with the older

brother would be a different matter. However, as the discussion progresses, Elie, who at first seemed tough and closed-minded, joins in. I soon realize that he has things to say, and that I'm interested.

As we're speaking mainly in Hebrew, and my companions are unable to intervene, the exchanges accelerate and turn into a dialogue. I try to translate quickly, but everything goes too fast and I take the lead on the subject and the questions. I'm well aware that this isn't exactly what's expected of me, but I let myself get caught up in my conversation with this man anyway.

In addition to the impact of the war and the constant attacks, he is keenly aware of the political stakes he and the people of the south are victims of. He's no fool. Whereas I had always heard that the south was an unconditional supporter of Netanyahu and his government, I hear that this is not the case.

On the contrary, these people feel victims of the government in power, which promises to protect them in the face of a proven risk, which in this case has clearly been underestimated. In his view, this is the consequence of a long-term policy. Moreover, if the Prime Minister and others like

Ben Gvir don't come to meet the bereaved families shut away in their homes, as they usually do when there are victims, it's because they know full well that this would be a mistake that would leave a painful mark on their political careers. This time, the people of the South are not ready to forgive them. But these people are patient, and this is definitely not the time to settle scores, when the whole country is embroiled in a war of survival.

I'd like to continue this conversation, but that's not the purpose of our visit, and we're pressed for time.

I warmly thank this family for their welcome and trust. And while we settle back so that Dominique can start editing and organizing his subjects, I hang on to Elie, following him with my eyes.

Once again, I realize how lucky I am to be able to meet and talk to all these people across the country, to hear their stories and see their vision. I have a feeling that fills me with immense pride to be (finally) fully part of this country and this nation. I'm no longer the simple *ola hadacha* - the new immigrant - who arrived almost 15 years ago. My work and the experience I've been sharing over the last few weeks have put me

firmly rooted in this land. And this encounter will remain etched in my memory.

As we sip our coffee, I sense that Jordan is keen to chat. He's a pleasant fellow traveler, and despite my usual stance of staying out of the way while the journalists set up their stories and keeping my personal vision out of my work, I answer his questions.

As I let my guard down, he gives me his take on the conflict at hand. Unlike the previous columnists I've worked with, who have perfectly understood the unique nature of the October 7, 2023 massacre, who have taken on board the fact that there is no contextualization, understanding or connection with anything else, Jordan tries to explain to me, as others have done at the UN, that this massacre didn't come out of nowhere, and that it is a direct response to Israeli politics in recent years.

When you know that the Hamas charter clearly states that they categorically refuse the existence of Israel, it's to be expected that I don't share his vision of things. However, I could have been less

condescending in my answers, if I'd felt more empathy in his words.

And to continue...

- It's really provocative, why do you want to go to the Temple esplanade? What is holy among the Jews is the end of the wall... up there it's nothing for you.

I'm speechless. This man has never heard of Solomon's Temple (let alone Herod's). Or he's forgotten. On the other hand, he did follow the 2016 UNESCO resolution denying the link between Jews and the city of Jerusalem. Which, at the time, sent serious historians around the world into a frenzy.

- And then you also committed massacres. This guy, who entered a mosque and killed more than 250 people...

Bam. Take that, darling.

I immediately grasp the event he's referring to. However, a single man walking into a place of prayer and single-handedly killing 250 people... even in an Avengers movie I'm not sure they would have dared.

Let me put this in context...

So yes, we have our fanatics. But they are tried, convicted and imprisoned, as would have been Baruch Goldstein, who committed this attack in 1994 (!!!), but was killed on the spot. The movements from which they originate are declared terrorist movements and remain banned in Israel, as was the case with the Kahana movement in question here, and Israeli society, including politicians, clearly condemns such acts. As for the figure of 250 killed, this is clearly a fantasy.

An hour later, he comes back to me to confirm that he had checked, and that indeed there had been 29 deaths. I tell him that 29 is too many, and move on. The subject is closed. I give him credit for the intellectual honesty of having checked and come back to me with proven information. However, while I'm pleased to have found the necessary arguments in our discussion, I remain troubled.

Special envoys deployed in conflicts around the world arrive with a point of view and their political acumen. Objectivity, which in my immense naiveté I'd like to see in them, doesn't exist. What I associate with disinformation, they associate with taking all points of view into account. What seems intractable to me, turns out to be interesting information for them, an angle to exploit. What seems to me to be basic knowledge and characteristic of so-called enlightened people, often appears to them as a trivial "detail". I have to admit that the hours are ticking by, and I'm becoming increasingly doubtful about the usefulness of my mission. It's no longer just a matter of accompanying and guiding journalists across the country, but of juggling the pitfalls of their beliefs. Of course, under these conditions, we can't have the same perception of what happened. Our postulates follow parallel lines, which by purely mathematical definition can never intersect. Yet I keep hoping. I keep hoping that I'm on the right track, the one that can enlighten as many people as possible about what happened here on October 7, 2023.

Time is running out. We hadn't planned to stay this long in Ashkelon, and we have to get to Be'eri. We've just got the time. In the car, I avoid thinking too much about what I'm about to discover, but I'm tense.

We meet all the teams at 3pm in the Netivot parking lot to board the armored army bus that will take us to the kibbutz. Waze tells us to take route 34. Only, at the Yad Mordehai intersection, we are stopped by a checkpoint. Since the terrorist incursions of the previous day, this road is once again a military zone, and we can't get through. In a quarter of a second, the atmosphere in the car changes. Jordan rants and raves, banging on his steering wheel, and Dominique utters an "that's unbearable". I can see them all bursting into flames, but I don't know where this anger comes from - it seems sudden and totally disproportionate. They are convinced that the army is hiding things from them, that they are being prevented from doing their job and that we are faced with dictatorial methods that gag the press.

They try to force their way through the roadblocks, dodging to the right or left... without much success. I can feel the animosity growing in

the cabin, and I don't understand why I should feel responsible.

Resigned, they decide to take the detour indicated by the soldiers, taking us via the 40, which is indeed a big detour when we're already late.

Finally, we arrive at the rendezvous parking lot just in time. We quickly put on our bulletproof vests and helmets. It's a bit like chest protectors for a workout - it stinks! But very quickly, you forget the smell and this shell becomes a part of you, a part I cling to with all my might, because I'm feeling more and more vulnerable.

As we're among the last to board the bus, we settle wherever we can, cluttered as we are with our equipment.

I sit at the back, near the window. Silent.

As I scan the faces of the journalists around us, I don't recognize any of the emotions I'm feeling. The teams seem relaxed and start chatting amongst themselves. There are those from Greece, Poland and Portugal. I listen to them talk.

- Yeah... I was in Ukraine
- We too, we returned not long ago

- We agree... the rockets here are... damn, they're nothing at all compared to there
- You're right
- Last night I was in my hotel... a little boom. Frankly, it has nothing to do with it.

...

- Do you know the kibbutz we're going to?
- Yeah, it's the third time we're going there
- Oh. And how is it? What's there to see?
- So when you come in, you go to the left... don't go around with the GPO, it's worthless.
- OK. And why are you returning?
- Oh like that... and also, it's close to Gaza

Listening to them, I'm seriously starting to feel nauseous. And I know it's not from the bus.

I look out of the window as we reach the entrance to Be'eri. The only photo I'll take is of the sign at the entrance to the kibbutz. Still in place, still going strong. I, on the other hand, much less so.

We park a little further away. The journalists come down and the army and GPO

representatives give their instructions. They ask us to respect the premises, but the space is open and journalists can move around.

The first alley we enter is a field of desolation. The sidewalks have been turned over, and the first houses are partly burnt. Huge metal frames litter the ground. I don't understand how men on motorcycles could have done so much damage in such a short space of time. One of the kibbutz's volunteer residents is there to answer journalists' questions. His speech has become automatic, he seems totally detached, devoid of emotion. How many times has he had to tell the story of this hellish day?

I continue down the alley. I notice numbers painted on the houses. I understand that once the investigators' work is done, the owners of these houses will never be able to return, but I have no idea what will become of them.

I decide to turn off down one of the perpendicular alleys. I don't feel very comfortable being here. I'd feel like I was violating people's privacy if I entered one of their homes. So I stay outside, moving slowly, step by step. Destroyed children's toys litter the ground. The gardens are topsy-turvy, but you can imagine what life must have

been like before October 7, 2023. You can imagine the tranquility of these places, the sweetness of life. I imagine them that morning. Perhaps sitting in their garden, coffee in hand, listening to the birds that fill the air with their songs at this time of day. As, I listen... nothing! Not a sound. Just empty space. I remember the silence that marked my visit to Auschwitz. It's the same here. Not a cricket. Not a bird. Not an animal rustling the leaves. Not a thing! I keep moving.

In the 18 days since the massacre, there are no more bodies. And the unmistakable odor I perceived at the forensic medical center has also disappeared. All that remains is the desolation of the place. And the images of the videos we've seen, which are etched in our minds. If I close my eyes, I might be able to hear the sound of that spade trying to separate the head from the body of a man on the ground... the one in the yellow shirt. So I'm careful to keep my eyes wide open. I'm still moving forward.

I meet up with Dominique, who is taking notes. We pass men with dogs. We ask them why their presence, but they're not allowed to tell us why they're there nor what they're doing. Further on, we make out a denser group. We approach them,

and the soldiers allow us to pass through the security tape. The side wall of the building has been completely destroyed by the fire, giving us a direct and desolate view of the interior of the house.

Dominique calls me. He wants me to interpret for him with a man who has agreed to answer his questions. His name is Yariv. Through a trickle of voices, he tells us that we're in the garden of his parents' house.

I'm petrified.

Nodding to the left, he tells us that this was the living room... where they found his father. And then over there, to the right, was the kitchen. He knows... he knows his mother was there. Understand... we didn't find her body, but I know she's still here.

I'm running out of air.

Dominique keeps asking questions. After what we've just heard, continuing to torment this poor man seems beyond me. I throw it back at him, more nastily than I would have liked...

- You really want to ask him this question?!
- Yes.

Finally, the commotion at the bottom of the garden prevents us from continuing our interview. People ask Yariv to come quickly. But the journalists have to leave.

A few days later, we will learn that the Abu Kabir teams, unable to identify some of the bodies, had called in archaeologists to help them in their task. It's only then that I understand the scene we witnessed at Kibbutz Be'eri. The teams we met were there to continue their search for the bodies of people still missing. They were looking for traces of the mother of Yariv, the man we spoke to. And I believe that when they interrupted us, it was because they had finally found traces of this woman.

After our meeting with Yariv, I move away from the houses and find myself walking along the kibbutz fence. The gate has been refurbished, but

the ground is still marked by huge tractor tracks, probably from those who entered from Gaza and broke down the initial fences. As I scan these marks on the ground, images of October 7, 2023 come to mind. The unfolding of the nightmare. The entry of Hamas terrorists into Israel. The motorcycles. The pickups. The gunfire. The home invasions. The fear. The screams. Incomprehension and terror. Repeated rapes. The mutilations. Beheadings. House burnings. Hostage-taking. Desolation!

These marks on the floor force me to bite my lips to keep from collapsing. Yet all around me, I encounter nothing but indifference. As soon as they arrived, many journalists showed no interest in the horror. No. They were far more interested in the fact that Be'eri, less than 5 kilometers from the Gaza Strip, is probably the closest they'll get to the conflict now being played out on the other side of the border. That's why they come here again and again. Some take video selfies, screens pointed westwards, to comment on the Israeli army bombardments that can be heard in the distance. But not a word about the massacres. Not a word about where they're filming from. Not a word... and not the slightest emotion. Detachment and disinterest in the Israeli victims, whatever the

conditions of their executions. I feel powerless and useless. And quite possibly I am at this very moment.

Dragging my feet and my head low, I head back towards the bus, hoping that it will soon take us away from this place and these people.

An hour later, when the army takes us back to our cars, it's easy for me to distinguish between the Israelis and the international journalists. The Israelis have horror in their eyes. The others are light on their feet, intent on finding their vehicles and getting back to their routine.

I didn't expect the whole world to take the pain of the Israelis so seriously. I had just hoped that human beings, historical witnesses to the scene of a massacre that happened less than 3 weeks ago, would take the measure of the pain felt and understand the significance of what they had just witnessed. But on the face of it, it was too much to ask. And that, I confess, I didn't expect at all. Anti-Semitism, I knew. Holocaust denial, I knew. Terrorism, I knew. Human indifference to the

massacre of Israelis... I didn't know. And that's very disturbing. Especially as I have neither the weapons nor the answers to this one..

It's getting dark as we pull out of the Netivot parking lot. I didn't open my mouth. I sat in the back of the car, leaving Dominique and Jordan to talk quietly in the front.

When we were in Be'eri, an AFP photographer had told them how to get around the IDF checkpoints by taking unknown routes. Determined, they scoured their maps on their cell phones to find the right route.

We cross the entrance to a kibbutz adjoining the town with impunity, and found ourselves on dirt roads crossing the farm's fields. My two companions are very excited at the prospect of achieving their goal, especially as we've been told of ongoing manoeuvres by Israeli tanks, who are training nearby in preparation for their forthcoming ground incursion into the Gaza Strip. We are clearly trespassing on a private, military zone.

Finally, after a lot of detours and dust, we end up a little further north on Route 34. We may come across two or three civilian vehicles, but nothing spectacular.

It's true that a little further on, along a field to the west, we hear the movements of large vehicles. Most likely the tanks and armoured vehicles we've been told about. But as dusk slowly gives way to night, we can't make out anything. Finally, after a few kilometers, we get back on the main road and simply head back towards Ashdod. As I look out of the window, I realize that we were almost shot at by Israeli soldiers who could very well have mistaken us for infiltrating terrorists, as we're only a few hundred meters from the border with the Gaza Strip.



Sign at the entrance to Kibbutz Be'eri

Thursday October 26, 2023

THE LIST OF BURIALS

This morning I woke up with an immense feeling of loneliness. The previous day's ordeal is imprinted on my heart, creating an increasingly oppressive malaise. Unexpectedly, it wasn't so much the visit to the kibbutz that left me feeling the most bruised. Although the vision of these places will stay with me forever. But what has haunted me most since the day before is the behavior of the journalists I met, and their assumed indifference.

I'm overwhelmed with doubts. The battle is too big for me, and I feel terribly alone. Like the rest of the country, I weep for our dead, I tremble for our hostages, my heart bleeds. And this morning... well, I'm wondering if there's any point in adding this other pain to my suffering.

So it's without conviction that, on this Thursday morning, I head for Bnei Brak. Dominique has learned from his editor that this is the Orthodox district in the eastern suburbs of Tel Aviv, and he wants to go there for his next subject: the enlistment of ultra-religious Jews in the IDF.

After the shock of October 7, 2023, and like the rest of the country, this community has responded to the collective effort and is lining up in front of the army offices. While few become seasoned fighters, the religious are increasingly active in Israeli society, and it's not uncommon to come across them in organizations such as Zaka, or as drivers for emergency units.

But that's not the only subject Dominique is asking me to work on. This morning he remembered something Nadia had told him on the day she left. That of the relays running in the French community's WhatsApp groups, calling on those who can to attend the funerals of hayalim bodedim. He has also heard of 'funeral lists', and is very interested in getting his hands on them. I've never heard of such a list, and I'm very uncomfortable with the idea. But I don't have the strength to fight this battle, and I'm looking for people who would be willing to testify.

We meet in the religious quarter in the late morning.

Unexpectedly, the subject of Orthodox Jews turns out to be easier to handle than I had first feared. We meet many men from yeshivot - the Talmudic schools - who agree to talk to us.

However, there are two opposing currents. Some defend the idea that everything remains in God's hands and that prayer is all that counts - these people don't bat an eyelash when we find ourselves in the middle of the street and the rocket alert rings out across the city.

And then there are the others, who seem happy and proud to share with us their new awareness and their willingness to participate in the national effort. It's been a few years now, more precisely since the Covid crisis during which this community paid a heavy price, that many religious have become aware that they need to catch up with the rest of the country. As a result of this crisis, many Orthodox homes are now equipped with an Internet connection, something that seemed perfectly utopian before 2020.

By October 7, 2023, the Orthodox were better informed than they had been before, taking the

full measure of the massacre that had just occurred, and aware of the shockwave it represented for the Jewish people and its survival. Nevertheless, and probably for the first time on this scale in the country's history, it is no longer totally bizarre to see a religious Jew with a huge schtreimel on his head and an automatic weapon slung over his shoulder.

When we interview them, we discover that they now have in their mouths all the jargon associated with the army, terms that the average Israeli uses on a daily basis, but that only a few months before, few of them knew. And they feel a strong sense of pride and belonging with the rest of the country.

It's been a productive morning, and we leave for lunch with a light step. Yet I find it hard to let my guard down.

At the end of the meal, we settle down in the sun to prepare for our next appointments. Once again, Dominique comes back to the subject of funerals. I don't understand this passion for cemeteries. Especially as, nearly three weeks after the

massacre, I'd like to think that the media world has seen enough burials to want to move on. But he seems determined.

- Did you find the list of burials?
- No
- I know, it's a bit out of line...

I look up from my cell phone and answer a little abruptly

- Yep!!

I remember his insistence on questioning Yariv the day before in Be'eri.

- Yes, well that's our job!

This is said in a tone that does not admit contradiction. I feel like a naughty child who's just been given a blow. And it's very unpleasant.

Especially as no... I don't think that's your job,
Dominique.
I've made up my mind.

We're on our way to our next appointment, just two blocks away, in the offices of the leading newspaper in the Orthodox community. After our little outburst, he decides to take the reins. I decide to observe. We're on the same wavelength. We hit the first floor. The guard at the entrance to the building doesn't understand a word he's saying and is unable to guide us. As I stand back, he finally turns to me.

- Can you ask him where it is?

At this point, I think any outside observer would notice that we're not the best of friends.

During the whole interview, which turns out to be fascinating, I stay out of the way. I clearly feel that I'm no longer in the picture, and I start to relax. I become aware of the hellish rhythm of the last few days, and I understand that I don't want to put myself through this extra pain, which has no place. And shouldn't be.

As we leave our appointment, we settle down at a café to get on with the morning's last translations. Only, it's 6.00 pm... time for rockets.

I take it upon myself, close the laptops and look for a place to take shelter. From the time it takes them to follow me, I know they don't like it and don't take the rocket threat seriously. Not enough deaths... Not enough damage. If the missiles could hit their target while they're there, it would still look better.

The Iron Dome is to blame. The very thing for which the US Congresswoman Rachida Tlaieb is trying to stop funding. The Israelis wouldn't have the right to protect or defend themselves... so we could really respect their dead.

We find ourselves in the lobby of a building surrounded by bay windows. It's not a very smart move, and if there's even the slightest explosion, I don't give much of our skin. But we've wasted too much time before deciding to enter the building, and this was the last option we had. The only thing that reassures me is that we're facing north, so I use the pillars in the lobby as the best shelter.

When we return to our seats after the alert, I'm greeted by another round of exasperation. I've crashed the machine by closing its flap and it needs to be restarted.

A few minutes later, Dominique can't take it any longer, and the animosity we exude towards each other is becoming painful for everyone. He explains that he can see I'm at the end of my rope, and that it would be a good idea for me to rest for a few days. A priori he hadn't anticipated my reaction, probably expecting me to apologize, and seems taken aback when I not only don't intend to apologize at all, but also put an end to our collaboration.

Well, that's it. Bye bye Dominique...

In hindsight, given his extreme reaction to some of my suggestions and his repeated insistence on checking everything I told him with other sources, I have the idea that he and Jordan have taken me for a government envoy. Someone who'd been sent to stop them going around and uncover secrets that the state of Israel is doing its utmost to hide from the world's journalists. We're in the middle of a John le Carré novel. However, it seems that his theory is having an effect, because in the weeks that follow, I learn from various sources that new special envoys have either cancelled my missions, under false pretences, or simply refused to call me.

Perhaps I should have made it clear to them that we weren't in a Soviet-bloc country during the Cold War, that our conversations weren't recorded or catalogued in secret files, and that if I happened to suggest one route rather than another, it certainly wasn't because their deaths would have brought bad publicity to the country, as Jordan had suggested to me the day before, but

because in Israel, everyone's safety counts. And we're willing to devote everything to preserving it.

I come out of the experience feeling drained. At the same time, I feel an immense sense of relief. The relief of not having to get up for a few days and then having to go back. Dominique was right about one thing: I'm exhausted. I've been putting in the days without interruption, without taking into account the physical fatigue or the traumas of all the experiences I've been through or witnessed. I'm well aware that at some point I'm going to need help. But later... later I'll take the measure of the impact all these images have left in my mind. Later I'll take into account my distress. But not now. There's no time. Right now, we don't have the luxury of time. Now, we're not allowed to think about ourselves. Now, all we have to do is store up, move on and collect as much as we can so that we can bear witness to the rest of the world. So that we remember. So that we remember October 7, 2023.

Saturday October 28, 2023

9 000 ROCKETS

In May 2021, 4,360 rockets had been launched at Israel from the Gaza Strip. More than 90% of these rockets have been intercepted by the Iron Dome, but sometimes the pace is so intense that some manage to get past Israeli protection, causing great damage and many casualties. When we see the carnage caused by just one of these, we are terrified by the thought of all those that didn't reach their target... but which, without our defense, might have.

It's always difficult to assess the damage that didn't happen, because protection was in place. However, specialists agree that in 2021, without the Iron Dome, we would have had thousands, if not tens of thousands of victims. Not to mention the material damage, and the entire south of the country would literally have been wiped off the map if we hadn't installed our military defenses.

My phone is set up to receive alerts for the whole country, not just the area where I live. I eventually turned off the sound because the incessant siren was becoming seriously distressing, but I continue to receive the written notifications. Since October 7 2023, they've been popping incessantly on my phone. As soon as I pick it up, I discover new ones. When I'm typing a message, I often get stuck because the intensity of their rhythm prevents me from accessing my screen. Sometimes I miss calls, because the answer button is hidden behind all those alerts.

From our respective shelters, we've got into the habit of calling each other, to confirm that we're fine, that we're all safe. It's a real game of chase. We know live where every member of the family is. Sometimes several times a day.

On Saturday, October 28, 2023, just 3 weeks after the start of hostilities, some 9,000 rockets were fired at Israel. Twice as many as in 2021. Without Iron Dome, how many victims? How many towns destroyed?

It's vital to understand that Iron Dome in no way nullifies the lethality of the rockets launched from

the Gaza Strip, nor the desire to kill Israeli civilians. These rockets are primarily fired at towns, hospitals and schools.

Over the years, Israelis have come to understand that when a siren sounds, it's never... never! to be taken lightly. And that all these measures put in place, all the military protection deployed over the years, is the only reason why we don't count our dead in the tens of thousands during the various conflicts.

9,000 missile attacks against Israel

Across the territory of France, this corresponds to 223,914 missiles*

Across the United States, this corresponds to more than 4 million missiles*

*Based on Surface Area (sq. km) from Trading Economics

Isr - 22,070 sq. km 2021

France - 549,087 sq. km 2021

USA - 9,831,510 sq. km 2021

“

Victims have been
found with broken
lower limbs and
pelvises as a result
of too many rapes

NEW NORMALITY

204

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Sunday October 29, 2023

I'M GETTING DEEPER

I have few memories of this period. All I know is that I go from the bedroom to the living room, and that despite the very pleasant weather at this time of year, I don't get out of the house much. I don't even go to training, which have partly resumed. But I do wash, often... 2 or 3 times a day. I'd love to go to the sea. But access to the beaches is still forbidden because there's nowhere to take shelter, and during massive rocket attacks, populated areas are favored by the Iron Dome, leaving agricultural fields and the sea uncovered.

For the first two days, I took advantage of my new-found freedom to spend time with my family. But as soon as I leave them, I feel an immense fatigue invading everything.

I read, a lot. I try to escape, but the reflexes I've acquired over the last few weeks seem stronger. As soon as I put down my book, it's to pick up my phone and look for new information. I spend hours on social media, and I'm never disappointed. Enough to sink me a little further. It's like a drug.

I watch more and more videos. The more horror I see, the more I seek out. In fact, it's the first one that's the hardest, after that you can't stop.

Then flashes come back. The bloody pants of one, the screams of another. And imagination begins to take over. Naama Levy. As soon as her name comes to mind, I close my eyes. It's unbearable. Unbearable to think of what she's been going through since October 7, 2023. Unbearable to see her stoic in that video, when the terrorists have already raped her and are shoving her screaming into a car. Unbearable to realize that she knows exactly what is happening to her - she's 19! Unbearable to know that her parents have seen these images, and know that she is still in the hands of these monsters.

Some parents say they're relieved when they learn of their daughter's death - at least she's not being held hostage, raped, repeatedly every day. Some

parents wish their children dead, rather than know that they are at their mercy.

In the rest of the world, anti-Israeli protests are in full swing. In US universities, and on the streets. In England, France, Australia (what the hell do kangaroos care about the Israeli-Palestinian conflict?!), and everywhere else. Everything is well organized and planned. The slogans from one country to the next are identical, shouting out their hatred of the Jew, be he 'Zionist' or not.

For us in Israel, these demonstrations are shocking on several levels. First and foremost, we are dumbfounded by this hatred, and we fear for our families, loved ones and friends. When stars of David appear on the walls of Paris, when we see the words 'forbidden to Jews'... we understand perfectly well what that means. It's written in our Jewish bones.

But these outbursts of hatred also have a direct impact on us Israelis. Because they illustrate the denial of the massacres of October 7, 2023. They deprive us, with unprecedented violence, of our status as victims. The Black Sabbath represents

the worst day in the history of our country, the worst day for Jews anywhere in the world since the Holocaust, one of the worst days in the history of mankind, and we are denied this. We are denied. We are Jews, and in addition Israelis... by definition we cannot be victims. This intellectual and emotional violence from the rest of the world has taught us, the hard way, that we can only count on ourselves, and that whatever we do, we will always be on the sidelines. We waited many weeks for the institutions defending women's rights to speak out, for the stars of the world to speak out, for feminists to be outraged. But nothing. In doubt, we tried to contact them. Maybe the violence of the shock had been too much, and they needed more time. But no. Still nothing. At best, an immense abyss. At worst, an accusatory disdain.

And that... that hurts like hell.

From now on, don't come to us wondering where our empathy has gone. Because we Israelis didn't have that luxury. This primary right to support and recognition of our pain when we learned of the massive rapes, mutilations, hostage-takings... We were denied it! From now on, we reserve our empathy for ourselves. Our needs are immense. So is our ability to come together!

Wednesday November 1, 2023
KIKAR DIZENGOFF

My friend Sasha has just arrived from France. Like many others, it's hard for him to be away while the country is suffering and under attack. He has managed to find a plane ticket, which is no mean feat when almost all the airlines have cancelled their flights to Tel Aviv.

We meet at Dizengoff Square. I haven't been there since the first week, when Anouk and I went on a quest to offer our help to anyone willing to accept it. I know that over the last few days, the fountain has become a center of recollection. I've seen many photos and videos showing candles, words of support and flowers. I've also seen these huge, blood-stained teddy bears, representing the innocence of the murdered children and those held hostage. One for each child. The square is overflowing with them.

I've arranged to meet him at this very spot because I'd like to see these testimonies, and I know he would too. Besides, it's one of the few places where we'll find an open café, where we can have a drink and sit by the fountain.

I'm happy to see my friend. But it's impossible for me to show it to him as I usually do. I'm closed, totally hermetic. He doesn't know that on the way here, protected from the gaze of others by my helmet, I was crying because the images of Naama Levy are running on a loop in my head. He must think I've changed, but he says nothing. In any case, no one has allowed themselves to smile since October 7, 2023. I've noticed to myself that for almost a month now, I haven't worn a piece of jewelry, I haven't put on make-up once. My outfits are as simple as possible: jeans, a T-shirt and a pair of sneakers. And if I'm not working, a pair of shorts. No one allows themselves to be superfluous or flirtatious.

Before settling down in the center of the square, we walk around it, several times. Side by side, we discover the words, the images, the candles. Each face is a stab in the heart. Photos of the hostages are everywhere, alongside those of the victims.

But while we look each face squarely in the eye, we the living cannot look each other in the eye. We pass people, are aware of their presence, but we can't make eye contact. Everyone is locked in their pain and sadness. And move on.

Eventually, we settle down on the lawn. Unwittingly, my mind is on the lookout for every little noise. The first milliseconds of a tire squealing, of a door jamming, immediately put me on the alert, because they remind me of the siren going off.

Next to us, a father plays with his two young children. It's impossible not to make the connection... and if this family had been in the south that day, would this father be alive? Wouldn't those children be held hostage too? And if, on top of that, they're redheads, then... it's impossible to take your eyes off them. Especially since they're about the same age as Kfir and Ariel. It's the same with young girls. Whenever I see one, I can't help but project her back to Nova, on the morning of October 7, 2023. Telling myself that she too, if she'd been there, could have been repeatedly raped. It's endless. As if everyone around me was wearing a death mask for a split second.

It could have been any one of us.

Before leaving the square, I approach one of the cafés on the right, where I used to go regularly with my friends. The photo of the young man who used to clear our drinks sits on a table, also surrounded by candles and flowers. He died at the rave party. He was sweet, cute. He looked like an angel, with his long blond hair.

“

Will young woman
be able to dress
sexy again?
Will they have the
courage?

Saturday November 18, 2023

THE PHOTOREPORTER

Well... a French telephone number appears on the screen of my cell phone... I pick it up, with question marks in my voice.

- Hello...
- Hi Sophie. Raphaël G. speaking.

I look at my phone, astonished. I haven't spoken to Raphaël in... wow, that must be 25 years. Nor do I remember him ever calling me directly. But I'm curious and, all in all, happy to hear him.

In a few sentences, he explains a 180-degree career change: he's become a photoreporter, and has just arrived in Israel to cover the conflict. And since he'd heard about my latest activities, he got in touch.

I love this kind of initiative. Totally impromptu, and promising new discoveries. We make an appointment for the next morning.

Over a morning coffee, we talk about our lives... but not too much. We're much more interested in getting to the heart of the matter and discovering how we can support each other and move our respective projects forward.

I discover his photos... they're beautiful and elegant.

He tells me about his past subjects, and I understand from talking to him that he's right. The perception we have here, what we take for granted, is far from that when we discover events from abroad. Even for a well-informed person, the apprehension of facts remains different, and access to information is through a much narrower prism. It's interesting to realize this, because it opens up immense perspectives on the work we still have to do in our communication.

One of the subjects close to his heart is cohabitation with the Arab population, and the evolution of this relationship since October 7, 2023. Indeed, since the beginning of the conflict,

the Israeli authorities have praised the behavior of the Israeli Arab community. Not only have we not witnessed the scenes of jubilation that can occur in Yaffo when a new conflict erupts, but this community, which represents 20% of Israeli society, also seems shocked by the images of the massacres. Also, the Arabs are not to be outdone either: they too have been the victims of terrorists blinded by hatred, who have sometimes shot them at point-blank range whenever they had the chance.

A few weeks earlier, I had visited Yaffo with Nadia. She, too, wanted to hear from the Arab community, and I thought of some of the shops I visit from time to time on Yeffet, the main road through this town south of Tel Aviv.

I was struck by the immense fear I saw in their eyes, their eagerness to talk, and yet their categorical refusal to be recorded, even anonymously. The owner of a café had explained to us... They had been marked by the massacres, but at the same time, some of them also had family in Gaza. They feel torn apart. But I don't

think that's the only reason they've been muzzled. The Yaffo mafia is renowned for its violence and its sense of shortcut. It's best not to take unnecessary risks.

After the numerous refusals to talk to us, I had begun to feel the vibes change in the street. Two women asking questions who weren't from the neighborhood... you could tell.

Finally, we met Omar. Officially, he runs a hardware store on Central Street. But when I met him, I immediately sensed a change in the atmosphere. As soon as this man agreed to talk to us, Nadia and I were safe.

He had told us about the fear of Yaffo's Arab population since October 7, 2023. The fear that vengeance-mad Jewish Israelis would descend on their streets to attack their families had made them consider leaving the town for more remote villages.

Fortunately, nothing of the sort happened.

Nevertheless, patrols between Jews and Arabs have since been organized, and cohabitation between the two communities may well be strengthened as a result.

With Raphaël, we share the stories we've collected over the last few days, the photos of Arab women volunteering and sending food to the soldiers, the articles about the Bedouins who welcome the displaced from the south, about those who, on the morning of the massacre, risked their lives to rescue the young people of Nova and escort them to safety. Among the many policemen killed by the terrorists, the Arab community also mourns its own. And then there are the Arab influencers who are doing a remarkable job, fighting every battle and appearing on every TV set to denounce the massacre and remind the world of its responsibility.

So yes, it's important to point out the behavior of the Arab community when it's worthy of it, and it's only natural that I agree to accompany my new partner so that together, we can find material for our little miracles.

Thursday November 23, 2023

THE SOUTH OF TEL AVIV

We meet in Yaffo. I wish to introduce Omar to Raphaël. I'd like us to meet some families, take their photos and hear their stories. There are many ways in which the different communities work together, and that's what we'd like to find out.

Arriving in the neighborhood, I noticed that, as in other parts of Tel Aviv, life was returning to normal. Shops have reopened, cars are more plentiful... but there's still a kind of torpor that seems to transform even the smallest activity, bringing it to a standstill.

This time, Omar seems to want to stay in the background, and introduces us to Amir, the man who has resumed his activities within the community. He's younger and his French is perfect. Like many of Yaffo's Arabs, he was educated at the Brothers' School just down the

road on Yeffet, one of the establishments offering education to all children, regardless of religion. Talking to him, you can sense his determination to get things moving in the right direction, and his pride in his community.

He invites us for the next day. A few blocks away, near the French Ambassador's residence, they organize a weekly collection for needy residents. They raise funds, buy foodstuffs in bulk, and organize the parcels directly on the street. These basic necessities are then distributed to families in need. This week they collected 35,000 shekels, all from private donations from Yaffo. The people around the parcels speak Arabic, Hebrew and English. Veiled women are there with their children, helping to distribute the canned goods and packets of sugar and flour. When we say that education is the basis of everything... we're not wrong!

In short, what I thought was a cross-cultural exception turns out to be much more widespread than I expected. This makes me both very proud, and a little sad at the same time. Why don't we know this any better?!

Earlier this morning, before joining Raphaël, I had discovered in an article that artists have set up in the Florentine district, south of Tel Aviv, to paint huge frescoes in memory of all the children held hostage. It's not far from Yaffo, and perfectly accessible on foot from where we are. I really want to see them, and my traveling companion is not hard to convince.

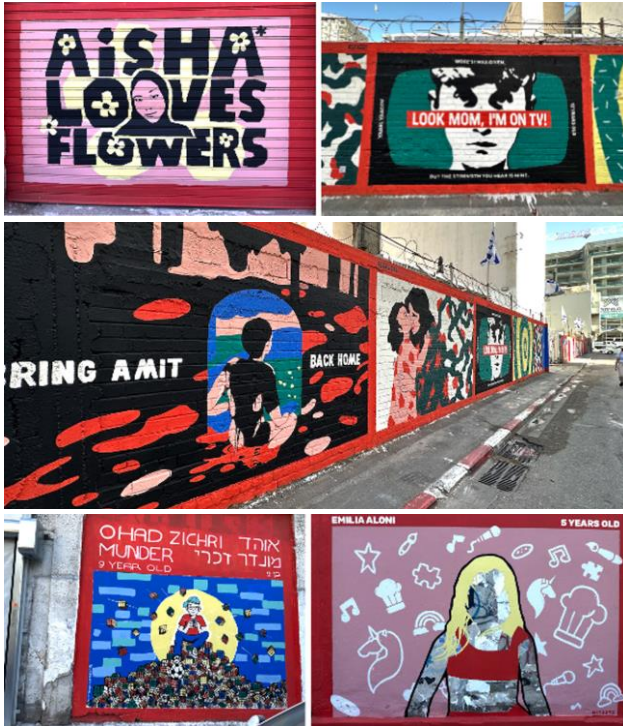
Between Salamé and Kibbutz Galouyot, in the furniture merchants' district, we discover walls covered with frescoes. Each artist has chosen a child, and executed his or her fresco according to his or her art expression. All children are represented. Jews and Arabs alike. Yes, there are also Israeli Arab children held hostage in Gaza. Aisha is one of them, and she too has her own fresco. Some images attract us more than others, because we recognize the children depicted. For example, that of Yagel Yaacov, the young teenager who was in one of the videos sent by Hamas on October 30, to put pressure on the government. Or Ohad Zichri, a 9-year-old boy enthroned on a pile of rubix cubes. Because all his friends have told the Israeli media that their friend is really good at rubix cubes. And then there's 5-year-old Emilia Aloni, depicted without a face. Here again, we had seen her mother Danielle, also

a hostage in Gaza, in one of Hamas shock videos. We don't know if they're together, as the video only showed the mother, surrounded by two other female hostages, Rimon Kirsht and Lena Trupanob, their eyes rimmed, their faces scarred and about to lose it.

Meters and meters of walls, filled with far too many frescoes, spread out before our eyes. As we take pictures of them, we realize the immensity of the pain and horror. Dozens of metres and images to represent all the children held captive by Hamas. There are so many. Far too many. While in American universities they tear up their portraits, they deny their existence and their suffering. While the rest of the world prefers to look the other way rather than denounce the unimaginable...

Here, every possible means is used to remember them. They're everywhere, on building facades, in front of café terraces, in our media, our posts, on city walls. Everywhere!

It's an ambiguous feeling, because it's a lot of pain, all the time. But it's necessary. Because to remember is to take upon ourselves a tiny part of their pain. To remember is to act for their liberation. Remembering is what holds us together. Remembering is our humanity.



The frescoes in memory of the children taken hostage in Gaza - Florentine district

For several days we've been hearing about an agreement to free some of the hostages, with priority given to children, women and the elderly. This morning, we received confirmation of a truce. We're full of hope, but also very incredulous.

Friday November 24, 2023

FIRST LIBERATIONS

We've been waiting for the first hostages to be freed since yesterday, since the beginning of the truce. The early morning alerts are making us more and more cynical. As much as we hope so, it's hard to believe that Hamas is keeping its promises, and these latest rockets only reinforce the feeling that we're being played.

But even more than usual, we're glued to the news. All our attention is focused on the hostages. However, despite our hopes, the pain and apprehension are still very much with us. We don't know if they're alive, or in what physical condition they're in, and we're very worried about what we're going to find out. We're all the more concerned because we know what awaits them. Some, as soon as they are released from captivity, will learn that they have lost their fathers, mothers, brothers and sisters. Parents will learn

that their children and grandchildren have died, sometimes in atrocious conditions. They'll discover they have no home, nothing. The children, many of them, will learn that their fathers are still being held hostage, and we don't know if they are alive. They will return to a country deeply hurt and in mourning. If they are freed, and if they are alive, they are not yet out of hell.

We don't know in advance who is to be released, and our thoughts are with the families waiting for the phone call. For several weeks now, we've been hearing their testimonies on all the channels, at support events, and we've come to know them all by their first names. We know everyone's story, from which kibbutz they come, or whether they were at Nova's party and with whom.

We think of Avihai Brodutch, whose wife and three children are hostages. Early on the morning of October 7, 2023, he discovered little Avigail in his garden, covered in blood. Unaware that the girl's entire family had been wiped out, he had left her with his family to rescue his neighbors in Kfar Aza. When he returned home, there was no one left.

Or Yoni Katz Asher, who was supposed to meet up with his wife Doron and their two little daughters, aged 2 and 4, in Nir Oz, only to discover videos of their abduction on TV.

Hadas Kalderon. Her mother and niece were murdered on October 7, 2023, and her two children were kidnapped with their father.

Hundreds of similar stories, all just as difficult. All illustrating the impossible distress of these families. We wait with them. We are well aware that no words from us can alleviate their pain and distress, but we feel bound in an unspeakable way. The whole country is holding its breath and waiting.

The day passes. No announcement.

The Sabbath begins, and for many, that means no more access to the news until the following evening. But we don't care. The TV is turned on in the background, and the family meal is held nearby. But still nothing.

After the meal, everyone goes home. Once again, it's impossible not to turn the TV back on.

By midnight, we can feel the excitement on our screens. The Egyptian teams are standing, ambulances flashing their lights. The Israeli's' medical teams are on standby.

Initial information... the hostages are in the hands of the Red Cross. Nothing further.

And then an image, two elderly women and another younger woman leaning forward. But the video is blurry, and it's difficult to identify the people in the vehicle.

The news goes on and on. Journalists try to identify the first women to be freed, but there is no certainty. Finally, at around one o'clock in the morning, we receive images of the medical base in Egypt, and the list of the 13 Israeli hostages, as well as a dozen Thai and Nepalese hostages, mainly agricultural workers.

The freed hostages range in age from 2 to 85!

They are alive, and appear to be standing on their own two feet.

After a quick initial medical examination, the hostages are taken to Israel, where they are dispatched to a number of waiting hospitals. All specializations have been coordinated to provide immediate care, whatever that may be. The whole country is showing its impatience to see them home at last. On the road to the south, Israelis have gathered to welcome them, applauding and

singing as they pass. We see smiles on their faces, but we also sense a kind of detachment, and the difficulty of living and understanding the present moment.

As soon as their identity has been confirmed, their families have been notified and are waiting for them in dedicated areas set up in each of the hospitals. Toys for the children, all the little things that can reassure them and give them immediate support, are spread out on the tables. A few journalists have had access to the entrances to the medical establishments, but it's clear that a great deal of work has been done to protect the privacy of the families. And everyone is ready for it.

That's it, they're home.

The whole country would like to hug them, but everyone understands that they must be left alone. Especially as there are still 230 others on the other side, the road ahead is a long one. As well as the immense joy of knowing that the first hostages had been freed, alive and on their own two feet, there was anguish for all the others. Still, the pain of the next few days and the discovery of the terrible news that awaits them. There is still the

struggle of the next few days. Still, the sadness of the names missing from the list.

It must be two o'clock in the morning when I turn off the TV and go to bed. I carry with me an ambiguous feeling. It's a huge relief to know that thirteen Israeli hostages have just been freed. But the pain of the last few weeks is too present in my heart and body for me to really rejoice. It's as if a spring broke on October 7, 2023. I still can't smile or be happy. I just can't do it. Nor am I sure I have the right to.

And then there's the unease of Hamas having just kept its word. It's not in the scheme of things, and I can't help wondering what the next catastrophe will be that will restore the balance that coordinates the forces of the world.

Saturday November 25, 2023

WE SAW IT COMING

The first reunion videos are flooding the networks. We're all looking for the slightest image that will allow us to share the joy of the families, to discover their emotion and the happiness of being together. We are all extremely moved. What we're experiencing is out of the ordinary, and we're not at all ashamed of our overflowing sentimentality.

The hostages have lost up to 15 kilos, which is a lot. They've been undernourished, and they tell us how they used to share a pita to get through the day. They will have to stay in hospital for a few more days, to undergo further medical tests.

We learn that some were held by Gazan families, others in the Hamas tunnels, often in total darkness. But there are few accounts of the conditions of their captivity and what they endured. The instruction was not to ask them any

questions and to let them broach the subject at their own pace, and only if they felt like it.

On their side, the Nepalese confirm that the Israeli men are regularly beaten, and from their look full of innuendo, we have the feeling that these are watered-down words that are taking the place of a far more painful reality.

Despite the difficulty of this news, we remain focused on the next group of hostages.

As on the previous day, the release that was due to take place later today is still a long way off. We still don't have the list of those who will be released next, and the joy of the previous day, despite the reunion videos, is slowly evaporating. At the end of the day, the authorities seem to be getting agitated, which doesn't bode well, especially when we learn that Hamas has new demands. The “ease” with which the hostages were released the day before suggests that they can demand more, and their new demands, apart from going beyond the agreement, are outrageous. We are well aware that they are raising the stakes, but above all, they want to

make Israel bear responsibility for a possible failure of the ceasefire.

The Israeli government is adamant, and for once, the people seem united behind their prime minister. The bad news comes at the end of the day: Hamas refuses to release the next hostages. No one is surprised in Israel. If we were surprised by the brutality and sadism of the October 7, 2023 attacks, we still have plenty of experience of the manipulation and perversity of the terrorist movement. However, the Israelis are not ready to give up on the idea of new releases, and a huge instant rally is organized near the hostage plaza. Tens of thousands took part, and the streets above and below are packed with people. The demonstrators know perfectly well that their action can do nothing against the evil of Hamas, but the people needed to get out of their homes and feel united in their determination.

Behind the scenes in international diplomacy, things are moving fast. Qatar, it seems, is taking a strong stance and demands that Hamas lives up to its commitments under the treaty they've worked so hard to put in place. If I had a twisted mind, I'd say that some of them have a serious need to restore their image and look good in the eyes of international opinion, which is beginning

to point the finger at Hamas funding that isn't just coming from Iran. In short... against all odds, a new group of hostages is freed late into the night. Once again, we all remain glued to our TV screens, at least until we learn that the hostages are finally in Israeli hands, on their way to various hospitals.

The next morning, we have the list of the 13 new hostages who were freed during the night. 9 children, and 4 women.

This time, we're beginning to get more details about their captivity. Emily Hand, for example, whose father cried his grief in the international media, thought she had been in captivity for a year. After 7 weeks in confinement, the 9-year-old lost all her bearings.

Those close to her soon realize that she barely whispers and seems shy and fearful of everything. She tells them that everyone, including the children, had been threatened with death if they made the slightest noise. They were reclusive and shut-in, with constant fear as their only companion. For others, like Noam Or, 17, and his

younger sister Alma, 13, we just understand that “they've been through a lot”. On leaving captivity, they learn that their mother died on October 7, 2023.

This is the second day of the agreement. The treaty provides for 4, with the release of 50 hostages. That's not enough. It's too short. Every day we mix the joy of discovering the new names with the disappointment of those who are still missing, those who are still being held in Gaza. Those for whom we have no certainty.

It's complicated to live with this in mind, while at the same time trying to get on with our lives. The country is torn, short of breath. It's more than a case of conscience, because we don't even ask ourselves the question. Their presence is always on our minds.

Thursday November 30, 2023

THE VILLAGE IN GALILEE

I don't know much about the Druze community, but it appeals to me. I've often heard about their involvement in Israeli life, and especially in the security forces and Tsahal, but I don't know much about their history, or what has enabled them to integrate so well. All I know is that they speak Arabic at home, and make good coffee. While this is a good start, it doesn't take me very far in understanding this minority at the heart of Israel. As part of his research, and also as a bit of a pretext, I suggest that Raphaël and I go and meet this community to learn more. However, it's not just a matter of typing 'Druze Village' into waze to arrive at the right destination, we need a contact who can introduce us to the right people and point us in the right direction. So I get in touch with Amir, a former colleague. Before a career as a high-tech analyst, I remember that he was part of an elite unit in the Israeli army, but above all that

his family comes from a Druze village in the north of Israel. He replies immediately, and promises to help me.

Once I've made initial contact, I start researching to find out a little more. What I discover is extremely interesting.

Since the creation of the State of Israel, the Druze have had a very special status. They are a Muslim community with customs that differ from those of traditional Islam. They don't have a mosque, don't call for prayer, and have their own courts for all matters relating to their private and marital status. The Druze were already present in the region before the creation of the State of Israel, and even long before the British Mandate, their point of origin being near Mount Lebanon. However, as their ethic implies a certain form of neutrality and respect for the laws established in their adopted country, from the outset of the 1948 war, a large majority sided with the Israeli fighters, thus claiming the legitimacy of Israel and its existence. Today, within Tsahal, where many hold officer positions, they often act as interpreters when communicating with terrorists, and are a great help in understanding and apprehending their intentions.

Since October 7, 2023, like the rest of the Israeli population and in almost similar proportions, the Druze have been paying a heavy price in the fighting between the country and the Hamas terrorists. This is probably what motivated Yaacov Margi, a deputy from Shas - one of the most right-wing Orthodox Jewish parties on the Israeli political scene - to propose a bill on November 19, 2023, granting the Druze special recognition within the Jewish state. We remember the July 2018 law defining Israel as the nation-state of the Jewish people. Some minorities, including the Druze community, took this law as a refusal to recognize their attachment to Israel. This new bill therefore appears to recognize their presence, their involvement and their identity as Israeli citizens.

We have an appointment with A.W., an IDF reserve officer with the rank of lieutenant-colonel, with whom we have agreed to meet at the Druze Cultural Center in a village high up in the Galilee.

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When we arrive by car, we're surprised by the size of the village, which looks rather like a small town. Nothing very bucolic, but rather a series of narrow streets. Everyone seems to know each other, because as soon as we get out of the car, we feel a few questioning glances. A woman emerges from the butcher's shop just down the road. She observes us for a moment, and then, unable to take it any longer, approaches us. We quickly realize that it's mostly curiosity, and we explain to her the reasons for our visit. She seems delighted that outsiders are interested in life in their village. She explains that the village is divided between different communities. The vast majority are Arabs and Christians, followed by Druze and Jews. Everyone seems to live together perfectly and respectfully. She'd like to offer us a cup of coffee to tell us a little more about her village and her family, but as our appointment approaches, we leave her with the promise of returning later.

We circle the block to enter the courtyard of the Druze center. The buildings look new, immaculately white. Large green spaces below. We feel an immense serenity as soon as we pass through the gates. Everything is calm, composed

and elegant. The man who greets us at the entrance seems to have stepped out of time. Wearing a large white robe and a large cap on his head, he resembles the photographs of Arabs from the beginning of the last century, with the same kindly, benevolent gaze. He directs us to the central office, where A.W. greets us at the top of the stairs.

After brief introductions, he takes us straight into the meeting room, where a carafe of coffee awaits us in the center of the table. I'm finally going to discover Druze coffee. I'm not disappointed, it's extremely strong.

As a community leader, A.W. gives us a quick overview. Around 150,000 souls in Israel. The Druze are also found in Syria, Lebanon and, to a lesser extent, Jordan. In recent years, while families were mainly grouped together in villages in the north, new generations have tended to move to the major cities, such as Haifa and the center of the country, where the main professional and business areas are located.

After this initial introduction, we quickly move on to the question of security in Israel. We won't know what his activities have been since October

7, 2023 - that's not the point. On the other hand, as an erudite man, he has a much broader and historical view of the situation, which, interesting as it is, goes a little beyond the framework of this war which has been tearing us apart for several weeks, going back to the beginnings of 1948 when Muslims attacked Christians, pointing out that all Christian Palestinians have, since the withdrawal of Israel in 2005, left the Gaza Strip. Continuing in the same vein, in his opinion, what is happening now is much more than a war between Israel and Hamas. The terrorist group is not here to create a Palestinian state. Hamas and those who fund it have a bigger project in mind, that of rebuilding the Arab-Muslim Empire, which goes far beyond the borders of the Middle East.

Nevertheless, despite this dark and weighty vision, he remains optimistic. A great deal of education is needed, and he expects religious leaders, whoever they are, to be more involved in setting up a dialogue that will lead us to peace. This is probably the first time I've heard someone talk about a solution outside the diplomatic arena, and I have to admit that the idea appeals to me and resonates with a little hope. Utopian... most certainly. But I said "a little hope".

After this meeting, which was nothing like what we'd expected, A.W. suggests we go for a walk in the gardens of the cultural center. We are happy to accept. Unfortunately, we meet very few people. But we're literally under the spell of the place.

Just as we're about to leave, one of the guards at the entrance suggests we visit a nearby Orthodox school. We're a little skeptical about our chances of getting into a school, but he offers to accompany us, and we accept, grateful for his help.

At the bottom of a sloping street, we find ourselves in front of a narrow gate. A guard keeps watch from a small gatehouse, and in the distance we see young children and teenagers shouting and running about. Against all odds, the guard agrees to let us in. Raphaël and I look at each other in amazement, overjoyed at our windfall.

Once past the long entrance courtyard, we enter the schoolyard, where the children are bustling about. It's a huge surprise.

The children don't seem too surprised by our presence, and keep running past us. They're all wearing plum-colored t-shirts and black pants. Their ages range from seven-eight to fifteen. But

it's the decor that immediately catches our eye. It's all there. On the left, a Christmas tree made of wooden planks, on the ceiling, Orthodox frescoes mixing biblical scenes with Hebrew and Arabic scriptures. Everything blends together, creating an immense harmony.

After a few minutes, a man approaches us. He's tall, strong and dressed in a long black robe. It's Father Mihaël, the school principal. He asks us why we're here, and we tell him how curious and surprised we are to see such a mixed group. That's all it takes for him to show us around. He opens the doors to a tiny chapel at the far end of the courtyard. It's a Russian Orthodox rite, and we find the icons painted in gold on the stone walls and carved wooden panels at the front of the service. It's sublime. I feel like I'm back in the films of my childhood, depicting the splendor of the Tsarist era.

Father Mihaël then takes us into his office, and agrees to answer our questions, which are motivated above all by our curiosity, and our delight at having discovered such a place.

He tells us that it's a mixed school for boys and girls, bringing together Christian, Jewish and Muslim children, without any form of discrimination. According to him, this is the

beginning of education and of living together. On his shelves are books in Hebrew, Arabic, Cyrillic and Latin letters, and you soon realize that he speaks all these languages perfectly, as well as English, and probably a few more besides. Without making a big deal of it, you can sense that he's very proud of his school and that he's perfectly aware of what's at stake within its walls, in terms of integration and acceptance of others. This is certainly why he agreed to open the doors of his establishment to us, and let us see for ourselves what the open-mindedness of the teachers and parents who accept (or demand) to send their children to school here can produce.

Our visit is coming to an end. It was completely unplanned. And yet, we discovered something fundamental, an immense hope, and the concretization of what coexistence means in everyday life.

After this pause in time, I realize that it's going to be complicated to leave this village in Galilee. For a few hours, I forgot all about the hostages, the dead and the massacre. Then suddenly, in the car on the way home, I pick up my phone and the latest news appears on my screen.



A.W. at the Druze Cultural Center



Father Mihaël, in his school chapel

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Women, men,
children
were raped

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Friday December 1, 2023

SO MANY LEFT BEHIND

After a week and an extension of the initial treaty, a total of 105 hostages have been freed from the hands of Hamas, including 80 Israelis, mainly women and children.

Every day, we learn more about their conditions of detention, and what those still held by the terrorists continue to experience. The Bibas family and their two children, Kfir and Ariel, who are still in captivity, are particularly saddened.

Every day, despite the joy of new releases, we can't completely rejoice. There are still so many of them out there. And we know perfectly well why they refuse to release the girls. We can't close our eyes, because when we do, we can only imagine what they're going through. And it's unbearable.

Among all the hostages, some touch us more than others, and concentrate our pain and rage. For me, it's Eitan Yahalomi, a 12-year-old French-Israeli. We soon learn the horror of his captivity. This young boy was forced to watch the images of October 7, 2023. These famous images, which even the most seasoned journalists sometimes find hard to watch all the way through, the terrorists forced him to watch everything. This young boy was beaten by Gazan civilians when he arrived in Gaza. They burned his leg to mark him, supposedly to prevent any risk of escape. His jailers led him to believe that Israel had been destroyed, and that nothing and no-one was waiting for him. Most of the time, he had to remain silent, without moving, at gunpoint. What's most striking is the look in this kid's eyes. The before and after is terrifying. The before-and-after is the result of what these monsters are capable of doing to a child's psyche. The before-and-after hints that this boy will never again become the adult he should have become. The before-and-after hints at a life of pain... and that's a gut-wrencher. Especially since his father Ohad is still there, and we don't even know if he's alive. The smiles we see in their family photos, in their old photos... are gone!

The day before, Keren Schem's video of her daughter Mia's release made the rounds of the media and social networks. One can only imagine the family's ordeal, knowing that the young girl was still there, as the treaty was coming to an end. However, against all odds, Mia is about to be released. Her mother sobs into the phone as she hears the news, and the whole country wipes away tears as they share their joy and hopes.

Once again, we're glued to our screens to follow the live release of two young women, Mia Schem and Amit Soussana. From the very first images, we discover the screaming, menacing Gazans gathered around the Red Cross car. Not only are we impressed by the violence of the scene, but we also know from previous testimonies that the hostages don't know what's going on until they're in Israel. We can only imagine the terror of these women in the midst of this unrestrained crowd, all the more so as we also fear that the situation will degenerate and that they will be massacred live on air.

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Finally, at nightfall, we see them arrive in Israel. Mia is greeted by her mother and one of her brothers. She's home at last. We can turn off our televisions and go to bed. Both are with their families.

Two more!

But there's so much more to come...

A few weeks later, we know more about the conditions in which the hostages were held. We know that at least 10 of them have suffered sexual violence. We know that some of them have spoken with the young girls who are still in Hamas hands, and that they have been repeatedly raped. We know that men, like women and children, are beaten. We know that the simple act of comforting one another was forbidden to them under threat of execution. Indeed, many confirm that the terrorists regularly pointed a gun at them, purely as a form of entertainment, keeping them in constant fear and anxiety. We know that they were starved and kept in deplorable hygienic conditions.

With a view to a future release, we expect some of the women detained to come back pregnant. There are no words to describe the violence of this thought, but we have to take it into account so that we can give them all the support we can on the day of their release... and hope that day comes soon!

Former hostages are the first spokespeople in the fight for the release of those who remain. They have lived through the same horrors, and they know the hell those they left behind are going through. They know the psychological torture of constantly being told that Israel no longer exists, that their families, if not dead, have turned their backs on them, and that this is how they will end their lives.

To add to the nightmare, Hamas regularly sends photos of the hostages. Those of three young women, their faces swollen and bloody, their hands tied. We know they've been raped.

Others show faces that have lost all soul, eyes empty, lifeless and deeply scarred.

Videos are also regularly sent to the local media, who refuse to broadcast them, to avoid playing into the hands of the terrorists.

We have learned of the deaths of some, sometimes during a quiz game sent by Hamas, which asked us to press 1, 2 or 3 to guess who was dead, who was alive, in what proportion... the result being revealed the following day. No, this is not a hit South Korean series. These monsters actually sent out the quiz, confirming the men's murder the very next day.

Every day is another step into the world of horror. Every day we learn a little more about the imaginations of these deranged people and their sadism. We're never disappointed, wondering again and again... when will we finally hit rock bottom? When will it stop? That's it, we've realized that our lives will never be the same again. But make this nightmare stop. What other country could put up with what Israel has been enduring since October 7, 2023? Surely not those who are calling for an immediate ceasefire, without any consideration for the sacrifice demanded? The sacrifice of risking another October 7, 2023, as Hamas and other terrorist groups promise. The risk of never seeing our hostages again. The risk of annihilating our country. Pure and simple.

Saturday December 2, 2023

THE TUNNEL

This morning I'm meeting Gaël, a journalist who's just arrived from Paris. I'm surprised to learn that he's heard “good things” about me, but during our first exchanges I discover a respectful and well-informed man. That's enough for me to accept this new mission.

Saturday is always a difficult day to broach new subjects. Offices are closed, people are with their families, and many don't even pick up the phone. And then, after several weeks of hard times and non-stop work, I realize that, religious or not, we all need the Sabbath break to rest and recharge before facing a new week and its nasty surprises. That's why, on Shabbat, I always try to steer journalists towards outdoor subjects, which allow us to approach people where they are.

After a first cup of coffee (it's 8:00 a.m.), Gaël introduces me to Francis, the band's technician who'll be with us all week. Francis knows the region well, having covered previous conflicts on either side of the northern border.

From the very first hours spent with my new companions, I come to terms with the fact that we don't agree on everything, but we manage to talk things over. And we tacitly avoid value judgments and political rhetoric.

It's been a month since I last worked with journalists, and I realize that the editorial lines have shifted a little. We're less about scoops and sensational news, and more about in-depth subjects and the impact of the conflict on society. This gives us more room for manoeuvre, and allows us to do a better job of researching and profiling the people Gaël wants to interview.

After spending a few hours planning interviews for the week ahead, we look for the story of the day. It was at this point that I remembered a work that Raphaël and I had discovered a few days earlier, which is on display at the Suzanne Dellal Center in south Tel Aviv. It's a large tunnel that runs through the entire entrance hall of the dance

center, and represents the tunnels of the Gaza Strip.

Gaël accepts. I think it's mainly out of curiosity.

We arrive in front of the Suzanne Dellal Center, and the tunnel is still there. I was afraid it might have been dismantled by now, but no. We see people, often with young children, coming in and out of this enormous gray mouth. I can see the disbelief in the journalists' eyes. Is this a tunnel brought back from Gaza? It's still a very disturbing sight.

The first time I found myself in front of it, I refused to enter. I felt I'd been through enough painful things already, not to have to deal with any more. My position hasn't changed: I don't want to “experience the tunnel”.

Gaël wants to interview the passers-by, and understand why they're there. By chatting a bit with all these people, we discover very different profiles. There are families who want to understand through the experience of confinement. We meet a grandmother who lives in Otef Aza*, who knows how lucky she and her family were that their kibbutz was not chosen by

the terrorists, and who says to herself “it could have been us”. Or those mothers who take young children by the hand and explain to them that they are there with them and that they have nothing to fear. They've seen the tunnels on TV, but they're safe.

We feel the need for these people to identify with the hostages and their ordeal. This desire to discover, through experience. This experience of a few seconds that gives them a window of understanding on what the hostages have lived through for more than 50 days, and that others continue to experience. It's their way of saying “We haven't forgotten you.”

Meanwhile, the timer at the entrance to the tunnel continues to tick down the seconds, hours and days for those still captive.

On the descriptive sign near the tunnel, we discover the name of the artist, Roni Levavi. After a little research, I finally discover his telephone number, and try my luck.

I find a very approachable man, happy that the French media are interested in his work. Against all odds, he offers to join us later in the day to answer our questions.

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Roni Levavi joins us at the dance center right on time. He has come with his wife and their big dog. As we make our introductions, we learn that they live in a moshav a few kilometers north of Tel Aviv. The moshav where Nova's victims have been gathering for the past few weeks, seeking help and various forms of therapy to help them overcome what they have or are going through. Everything is so close in this little country.

But let's get back to the tunnel.

Before describing his work, Roni quotes a phrase in Hebrew - - יש אור בקצה המנהרה There's a light at the end of the tunnel.

The artist goes on to explain that he wanted to create a work that was strong enough to shock people. He is well aware of the discomfort felt when walking through it. That's exactly what he wanted to provoke: an experience and a questioning!

He was directly inspired by photos of the tunnels in Gaza. He tried to reproduce its shape exactly, with a rounded top, low ceiling and narrow walls, all in concrete gray. The lighting is very sparse, and the floor is covered with sand. He wanted people to recognize the tunnel instantly, to reinforce the idea of claustrophobia, and cause

discomfort before they entered. What's more, its location in the entrance hall of the dance center allowed for a certain length - 25 meters. It's a long way from the kilometers of tunnels that exist in Gaza, but it's long enough for those who choose to experience being trapped for a few dozen seconds... before finding the light at the end of the tunnel.

At the end of the tour, Gaël decides to interview people from the inside. He wants to catch them on the spot, and understand how they feel while they're inside. So I decide to accompany him, to assist him in his exchanges with those who speak only Hebrew. I quickly get into the mood. I don't want this experience to screw me up even more, I don't want to find myself 'in a state of', especially as I normally have a few claustrophobic tendencies. I shut everything down and move forward like an automaton. I concentrate solely on the questions to be asked and the translations to be provided.

As I emerge from the tunnel, I realize that the experience wasn't as painful as I'd feared. However, I'm not sure how reassuring this is for my mental state.

We have a few hours before we have to go to the demonstration that takes place every Saturday evening at the kikar hahatufim - the place of the hostages.

Before going back up to his room to write his report, Gaël tells me about an article he found in 972 Magazine. I'd never heard of this site, which he assures me is a reference among French-speaking journalists. The article he tells me about describes Tsahal in an accusatory way, and I have to admit that my antennae are pointing. But if I want to be able to argue with Gaël, I need to get more information from this website that claims to be independent and objective. Good thing I've got a few hours to spare while he puts together today's interviews.

Phone in hand, I set off in search of the website. Opening their home page, I see that they present themselves as “From Israel-Palestine” reference media. I guess that's why they use 972 as their name... it's the country code.

I go straight to the list of journalists freelancing for the magazine, to find out who I'm dealing with. Very quickly, I realize that many of them don't live in Israel, being very often based in the

USA or London. Surprising for a newspaper that presents itself as a local observer. Many are portrayed as 'activists', without their battles being clearly exposed, but I have the idea (I may be wrong), that it's not within the International Zionist Congress. In any case, we have here a fine line-up of politically committed personalities, which in no way augurs well for the journalistic objectivity we would be entitled to expect.

I understand that I won't have any more information on the journalists' profiles, so I choose some at random, to google them and learn more about their professional backgrounds.

The first person I come across is Samer Badawi, whose articles are regularly picked up by, among others... Al Jazeera. How about that! The titles are edifying, but I accept that we may have different opinions. However, the Hamas is often portrayed as a victim, or the UNRWA as a political hostage. Fair enough. Nevertheless, when we learn a few days later that representatives of the UN organization took part in the massacres of October 7, 2023 and that around 12% of its employees are directly affiliated to the Hamas, that access to the tunnels was found under its offices and that the electricity to power them came directly from UNRWA meters, we have

every right to question the objectivity of these articles.

I continue my quest, and choose to select a woman. I type in the name Henriette Chacar. I google her name, and I'm not disappointed. Henriette Chacar first came to prominence during her university years at Columbia, where her articles and podcasts reflected a pro-Palestinian activism that some say runs counter to the Code of Ethics of the Society of Professional Journalists. Later, in the Washington Post, she flatly denied the legitimacy of the State of Israel, condemning the two-state solution(1).

[(...) all it offers is the two-state solution — an outdated, irrelevant vision (...)](2).

There's a long list of articles and podcasts denouncing the “injustice of Zionism”. So much so, in fact, that one of her employers, Reuters, finally gave her a hard time about it in February 2023, following an “outrageous” email she sent to her editor, linked to her political stance(3).

I turn off my phone screen. I think I've learned enough about the editorial staff of 972 magazine to have a clear idea of their line and their clearly

“activist” stance, as they so aptly describe it. And I know that if I keep looking, I'll find more. But what's the point? In ten minutes I've learned more than all those who consume their news as safe and proven values, without ever questioning the integrity of their articles and their motivations.

Well... seriously, French journalists. Is this what you use as a reference to get information on what is happening in Israel?! You should definitely go to Al Jazeera**. You would waste less time... and Qatar is the real treat.

*Otef Aza is the border area with Gaza, along Route 232. It is on this line that Hamas defined its targets. Nova and the kibbutzim that were attacked are part of this zone.

**By the way, I will learn from Gaël that some very popular French cultural magazines regularly draw inspiration from it, considering Al Jazeera to be 'a very suitable source'.

(1)

<https://www.camera.org/article/one-huge-embrace-of-hyperadvocacy-on-henriette-chacar-reuters-was-warned/>

(2)

<https://www.washingtonpost.com/outlook/2019/09/20/no-matter-how-many-Patosians-vote-Isri-elections-we-still-cant-win/>

(3) <https://honestreporting.com/revealed-reuters-journalist-rebuked-by-editor-after-sending-outrageous-email-about-Isr/>

“

Breasts cut off,
genitals mutilated
with scissors,
gunshot wounds to
the genitals,
abdomen, legs,
buttocks

Tuesday December 5, 2023

THE DEAD SEA

Following the massacre of October 7, 2023, the border populations were displaced. Some, particularly those from the kibbutzim that were violently attacked, no longer have a home, have nothing left. Others live in areas considered to be at risk, because they are too close to the borders, and are under constant fire from missiles sent by Hamas and Hezbollah, which endanger them at all hours of the day and night. And then there are those who have taken fright, and no longer dare return to their homes, because they have seen the incursions of the terrorists from a little too close. For all these families, we had to find immediate solutions to bring them to safety. And to provide them with some comfort, despite the dramatic situation. In all, 200,000 people - men, women, children and elderly - were displaced. When they had pets, many were allowed to take them with them. In the most tragic cases, when families

were completely decimated on October 7, 2023, associations went to collect all the animals they could find at the scene of the massacre, to take them into shelters. Sometimes to care for them, when they too had come under fire from the terrorists, if they had not been killed by the terrorists.

Sometimes, these evacuees stayed with their families in the center of the country. But for most of them, hotels were made available, sometimes at the request of the government, sometimes by the establishments themselves. Private individuals, living in Israel or from abroad, gave up their second homes to those in need. The chains of solidarity we saw from the very first days were also aimed at all these people, who often had nothing left. The main seaside towns, such as Eilat and the Dead Sea, became the essential places of welcome, allowing these populations to organize themselves according to their communities of origin.

200,000 displaced since October 7, 2023

In France, this corresponds to 1,413,043 displaced people

In the United States, this corresponds to 7,391,304 displaced people

Gaël would like to meet the families of the kibbutzim, and ask them about their living conditions over the past two months. His editor suggests going to Eilat, because the whole city seems to have been transformed into a giant kibbutz, and also because some of the families of the French hostages who were freed two weeks ago are currently there. I'm not familiar with the distribution of towns, but I suggest we head for Ein Bokek, a small town made up exclusively of hotels overlooking the Dead Sea, which seems a good geographical compromise, and where I think we'll be able to find people interested in sharing their story with us.

At less than 400 meters below sea level, the Dead Sea is the lowest point in the world, offering a unique, sumptuous landscape as far as the eye can see. Halfway between a desert and a lunar setting, especially when you're near the salty shore, with its saffron-colored sand. In summer, the town is packed with tourists, who divide their time between massages and mud baths.

We arrive in a silent town. I wonder if the displaced people are still in Ein Bokek. We drive around for a few minutes, looking for groups of people who might be able to give us some information. Perhaps near the shopping center. But when we stop to buy water, we find we're the only customers there. On our way out, we meet two young girls. I ask them questions to find out what's going on in the city, and also to find out a little more about who they are and what they're doing there. They are two young volunteers, who have come to look after the children and give them psychological support. They explain how each of the hotels is divided up by city and location. Many are reserved for the city of Sderot, which has been almost entirely evacuated. Here, the residents of Sa'ad. A little further on, Holit. And up here, she points to a slightly out-of-the-

way settlement, the inhabitants of Kibbutz Be'eri. We look up and see the façade of the huge hotel that now protects this community so sorely tried. My heart goes out. The image of their burnt homes, of destroyed toys strewn across the ground, of what was and what is no longer... reminds me of all they have lost, to find themselves in this place, wandering victims in the middle of the desert.

A few days earlier, I had seen this report on Channel 12. The young teenagers from the kibbutz were recounting their day of October 7, 2023, their terror, their friends who had been murdered, their loss, their sadness. Above all, the feeling that their reason for living and everything that constituted their equilibrium had been snatched from them. I was deeply moved by their testimony, but above all by their strength of character, which they drew from their unity and love for each other. In addition to the horror of that day, their whole way of life had been dealt a blow. One was missing, the whole balance was in question. So after October 7, 2023....

We decide to concentrate on the other communities first.

In a parking lot near the shopping center, we come across Nofar and her daughter. She seems a little frightened, but eventually agrees to answer our questions. She's from Sderot. On October 7, 2023, she was spending Shabbat at her mother's home with the rest of her family. Very early on, concerned relatives sent her videos of the Hamas incursions into Sderot. Like everyone else, she was incredulous at first, refusing to believe that these rampaging hordes were moving near her home. But very soon, in the flood of information she was receiving, she discovered the videos of the assault on the Sderot police station. That's when it hit her. That Shabbat, she was just a few blocks away, but her apartment is right across the street from the police station. Who better than her to recognize the setting and understand that the terrorists were in her city, spreading terror. After the initial shock of avoiding being so close to disaster, Nofar and her sisters soon realized that the whole town was under threat, and that they had to barricade themselves in. They turned off all the lights, locked the shutters and the door, and took refuge in the shelter. At certain moments, they heard the terrorists knocking on the doors of the apartments in their building, looking for their new victims. It was impossible to make the

slightest noise or move, for fear of alerting people to their presence. Like everyone else in Sderot and the surrounding area, those who were lucky enough not to be massacred spent hours overcome by fear and incomprehension. Nor did they know how they would escape. Later that night, as Tsaahal began to gain ground and move from house to house to secure the area, they were finally able to emerge from their hideout.

They had only a few minutes to leave their homes and get away from the conflict zone. Nofar explains that she had no papers on her, no clothes, nothing. Herself, her daughter and her telephone. She shows us the clothes they are wearing and explains that they had to buy everything again. They've been away from home for almost two months now, and other worries have interfered. Nofar doesn't work. She has no papers to prove her identity to her bank, and has found herself totally helpless, unable to confirm her identity to go ahead with the administrative procedures that have become crucial.

As she tells us her story, I feel moved by this woman. She's touching. She's just told us that she's lost in the middle of nowhere, that she doesn't know when she'll be able to return home, that she doesn't even know if she has a home

anymore, and yet she looks at us with her big eyes and huge smile, shyly asking us at the end of the interview if she's answered all our questions correctly, almost apologizing for having to leave us because they're waiting for her elsewhere.

We make the rounds of a few hotels, but each time we get the same answer. No way in. All these people have been harassed by journalists from all over the world, and have started to organize themselves, in order to protect their communities from an outside eye that's a little too intrusive. Just as we're about to move on, we meet a woman and a young boy, Liel. She's in a hurry, but agrees to let us accompany them for a while. She tells us that the boy is a friend of her son, whom she picks up from school. I'm surprised, I didn't know there was a school in Ein Bokek. In fact, this one has just been built for displaced children.

We arrive at a long wooden barricade. At the entrance, we introduce ourselves to the men on guard, and ask them to meet someone in charge who can tell us more about the school and its

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history. A man in his forties quickly joins us at the entrance. His name is Ilan. He's not a teacher, but he's part of the group behind the school.

For the first few days, children and adults received immediate psychological support. But nothing was in place to ensure the resumption of the school year. All these people had fled the battered areas, including the teachers. Parents were as lost as their children, and a solution had to be found quickly. Initially, classes were organized in each of the hotels, but this system soon showed its limitations. That's when they decided to create a school space for all the displaced children in the area. They took over an old center dedicated to skin problems, which had the advantage of being insulated by wooden walls. They built a few cabins which they organized as classrooms, brought in teachers from neighboring towns, and set up an educational system that could take care of all school-age children. All this... in just two weeks! My jaw drops.

Ilan is aware of what they have achieved in such a short space of time, but he takes no credit for it. His main concern remains the children and the importance of offering them a little stability in their lives, which are sorely lacking in it. He tells

us about the difficulties of some, the lack of concentration of others. Some had their lifelong friends held captive in Gaza. Many of them returned during the treaty at the end of November, which brought some comfort. But so many died on October 7, 2023. These kids carry around this guilt, and the memory of the last distressing messages they exchanged with their friends, before they were slaughtered.

No one knows how all these children will manage to rebuild their lives. The primary mission of this school is not so much to teach them, even though this is crucial. Above all, it's there to help them reconnect with their new normal.

After visiting the school, which leaves us speechless, we head for the hotel housing the Be'eri inhabitants. Following our previous attempts, we don't have high hopes of talking to anyone, but we've ridden too many kilometers to simply give up.

As we climb, I notice the many cars. In other circumstances, you'd think the place was full of tourists and holidaymakers who'd come to spend

a few days with their families. Opposite the main gate, I see what appear to be new outdoor activities, around which children are bustling, and I'm touched to see all the efforts that have been made to bring them a little joy. And to give them tools for resilience.

As soon as we arrive, we head straight for the reception desk. Unsurprisingly, we learn that we cannot enter or interview anyone without authorization. Journalists don't get much press around here, especially when they come from abroad. We understand that these people have been hounded by many media outlets, and that they have too often seen their words distorted, and their suffering trampled underfoot. They have become suspicious, and have organized themselves to ensure that this never happens again.

The procedure is simple. Just call M.M., who'll do a little fact-finding and decide "if", "when" and "with whom". In short, we can get back in our car and drive home - we're not going in today.

We step to the side to make a few phone calls, but it's late and nothing gets done. At the entrance, Mario gives me a sign. The fact that I speak Hebrew and seem genuinely concerned by all these people seems to work in my favor. I

approach. I'm amused to see all these children hovering around him, clamoring for his attention. He tells me that they're all children from the kibbutz, and that he acts as their grandfather. It's true that he always has a huge smile on his face, his arms wide open. He agrees to talk to me because he understands that we won't get anything else today. I call my two companions, who approach me, delighted at the turn the situation has taken.

Mario tells us that he was abroad with his grandson on October 7, 2023. The rest of his family were there, and for hours he tried to reach them. He doesn't dwell too much on his own suffering. He tells us mostly about what he found when he returned. Houses burnt, destroyed. The families who lived just 5 meters from him... completely decimated. There's no one left. His house is "just" riddled with bullets, but he doesn't know when it will be repaired. Not within a year, that's for sure. On the other hand, if the four walls of his house are still standing, while the houses adjacent to his have all been destroyed, there's nothing left. Not a single shoe. They stole everything, took everything.

Sometimes, listening to him speak, you can feel a break in his voice. But he recovers very quickly.

This man has a joie de vivre that I have rarely encountered. While perfectly aware of the horrors he's telling us about, of the pain of all those around him, he's right there in front of us, smiling. It's almost as if he wouldn't take us in his arms to console us for having had to tell us all these horrors. Like so many others, he has lost everything, and yet he feels he has all the riches of the world, surrounded by his family and all those children.

I find it hard to leave him. I almost want to claim my hug too, so comforting is the look in his eyes. But we've got to go. It's a long way back to Tel Aviv, and night is showing the tips of its stars.

I watch the landscape unfold through the car window. The desert slowly gives way to the freeway. Unlike usual, I don't feel the immense weight that accompanies me when we go to meet the victims. I was expecting to find people crushed, paralyzed by grief. Instead, I met people of incredible humanity and strength. Israelis are often described as resilient. But this is something else. They draw strength from their community.

They draw strength from their children. They draw strength from... well, I don't know exactly where they draw all that strength from. But I sincerely, deeply, immensely admire all these people we met today. And it gives me a hope I haven't felt since October 7, 2023. It gives me the certainty that we're going to make it!

“

I have to live with
what they did
(An investigator,
on the rapes of
October 7, 2023)

Thursday December 7, 2023
THE MACCABEES

Gaël has asked me to accompany them to Jerusalem, for an evening event. The March of the Maccabees was organized to remind us of the historic battle of the Maccabees against the Greeks in the second century B.C., which then, via the miracle of the vial of oil, led to the celebration of Hanukkah. Tonight we are to light the first candle, and an ultra-nationalist Israeli movement has chosen this date to mark the occasion, much to the delight of the media, who are expecting an outburst just a few meters from the Old City.

We arrive in Jerusalem in the late afternoon. Tonight is the first night of Hanukkah. I'm extremely sad not to be with my family for the

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lighting. But I did bring my hanukiah with me. Only, as I'm setting up my paraphernalia, I realize I've forgotten to take fire. I head out into the street to fetch what I need, and take the opportunity to dive a little further into the streets that border the hotel.

After my short visit, I go back up to my room. And while the boys finish getting ready, I light my candles before we set off again into the cold city.

We meet up in the lobby at around 6.30pm. The event is scheduled for an hour later, so there's plenty of time to get there and settle in. We make our way in the opposite direction to the car a few hours earlier. As soon as we arrive at the Damascus Gate, we can feel the electricity in the air. The scenery is nothing like it was a few hours earlier. Police from various units in every corner. Armored vehicles, horses. A water tank parked in a small side street, the one spilling stinking water. We are impressed by the deployment of all these security forces, and understand that the city is

determined to avoid any outbursts, whether from Jews or Arabs. We present ourselves as journalists to be authorized to enter the perimeter, but are sent back a little further up towards the Tsahal kikar, where the lighting and departure of the rally is to take place. The rally is scheduled to go up to the Damascus Gate, through the Arab quarter of the Old City and finish in the direction of the Kotel. Among other demands, the movement is calling for sovereignty over the Temple esplanade. Without dwelling on the matter, I can't help thinking that this demonstration is not very contextual in relation to the current conflict, in the defense of which the whole country is embroiled, but everyone has their own fight.

When we arrive at the meeting point, we see that the police are also present en masse, and determined. Gaël recognizes some French colleagues with whom he exchanges information, but nothing too juicy. I learn that the kids who act as demonstrators are called the 'hill children'. Observing the surroundings, I rather suspect that they are the contingents of the leaders who remain in the background, watching from afar.

In short, nothing very Maccabean.

Very quickly, we realize that the evening is a flop. The lighting is non-existent. A hundred or so demonstrators at the most, and as many journalists who were expecting pure juice. The police seize the placards and destroy them. The youngsters call them traitors and fascists. Not very imaginative, but they don't have the last word, and are soon dispersed.

In the short time we were there, I'd still have been surprised by the deployment of security measures, whatever the origin of the demonstrators. I'd never have imagined that the police would be so determined and threatening, especially towards young Jews. Even though I live in this country, I'm still bombarded with images opposing the police to the demonstrators, who are most often Arabs and Palestinians, and turn out to be very violent. Rarely those pitting them against right-wing politicized Jews. Not only does this reassure me about the state of our democracy, but in a way, I'm also glad that the media present were able to see it for themselves. Not that I expect this kind of conclusion in their collective newspapers, but it's good that they witnessed it.

Finally, after an evening and a demonstration off topic, everyone returns to the primary concern,

which is October 7, 2023 and its consequences. For the past two months, this has been the only thing that matters in the country, and I don't quite understand why or how we let ourselves be diverted from our primary reason.

We make one last detour to the old town. But there again, nothing for our journalists to sink their teeth into. We decide to return to our hotel. It's cold, it's late, and the gear is getting heavy. We come across a lonely cab in a dimly-lit alleyway, and even though he's asking us for a fortune, I think we're capable of giving it to him.

Friday December 8, 2023

THE NORTH

We meet for breakfast, as planned the evening before. Except that Francis got confused with his alarm clock, arriving sheepishly an hour later, his eyes still full of sleep.

The opportunity to gently bicker with him is just too good. It lifts the mood before we start our new day.

For some time now, Hezbollah has been stepping up its missile attacks on northern Israel, and despite the protection of the Iron Dome, casualties are multiplying. The day before, a civilian died in the fields near Mattat, a community less than 2 kilometers from the border with Lebanon, and Gaël decided to go and interview the people living nearby.

From Jerusalem, on Shabbat eve, it's a 3-hour drive. Two-thirds of the way there, the scenery

changes to green mountains, and I smile when Francis points out the difference with the desert mountains of the Dead Sea, which we crossed just 3 days earlier.

Once we've passed Meron, we try to stop off at the kibbutzim on our way to Mattat, to gather as many testimonies as possible.

It's been two months since I've been concentrating on the southern part of the country near the Gaza Strip, and I'm very surprised by what I'm discovering in the north. All the villages and kibbutzim we enter have been deserted. It's as if we're in some old Hollywood set that has been abandoned after its glory years.

We learn that the inhabitants have left their homes to take refuge in safer areas, mainly in the central cities. I know that the threat from Hezbollah is to be taken seriously, and that previous years have taught us about their destructive power, but I had never imagined that the populations here had been displaced in the same way as those in the south. Only the military are present, standing guard and protecting the area. A few civilians come to bring them food, and they're the only ones we come across.

We then decide to push straight on to Mattat, to ask its inhabitants about the previous day's tragedy. Given the lack of success we've had so far, and the long drive we've just made, Gaël is determined to gather information from this community perched high up in the mountains.

Our destination is at the end of a small mountain road. We pass a few staggered concrete blocks to which we pay little attention, and find ourselves in front of a closed gate, guarded by 2 soldiers who don't seem very keen on chatting. No matter how hard I try, no matter how much I plead... nothing works. We can't get in.

Outside the gate, we pass some locals in their car. They're in a hurry, but promise to check inside and find a way to help us. In the meantime, the military are back at it again. They make big gestures with their hands, pointing to the hill in front of us. They seem very annoyed by our behavior. That's when I realize... the concrete blocks... their insistence. I look in the direction they're pointing, and realize that the entrance to the kfar is in the mir line from the plains of southern Lebanon. Hezbollah are watching the area and shooting at anything that moves and is likely to hit. At the distance we're standing, we're within range of an elaborate RPG, and therefore

in direct danger if we stubbornly leave our car in the middle of the road.

We're in an absolutely marvellous setting, the kind of setting in which you'd love to take a stroll whenever the opportunity arises... but actually you wouldn't. In the north of Israel, this kind of walk is no longer possible, on pain of being shot at point-blank range. We're 250 kilometers from the Gaza strip, having just crossed the country from south to north. And here again, our populations and the integrity of our country are directly threatened, while we are still within our borders.

We stow the car in the thicket on the side of the road, and take cover behind the concrete blocks. We don't wait long. After a short while, a man in his thirties emerges from the car. We accost him. He agrees to talk to us, but we have to stay under cover. He gets out of his car, and takes the opportunity to roll a cigarette, leaning against the door. His automatic weapon is on the passenger seat. He tells us that he's just returned from a period of reserve duty, and that he'll be going back in a few days. He's a big, strong man with a full beard. At the same time, he exudes an immense sweetness. We've only been talking to

him for a few minutes before his parents come out. He introduces us, and they readily join in the discussion. It's not so often that journalists take an interest in them, northerners, while the south is constantly, and rightly, in the international spotlight.

Talking to this family, I learn that the people on the northern border took the shock of October 7, 2023 like a detonation. Although they have learned over the years to live in close proximity to their direct neighbors, they know perfectly well what they are capable of, and have realized in hindsight that the Black Sabbath massacre could very well have taken place at their home, rather than in Otef Aza, the border area of Gaza. It's a bit like Russian roulette. Either you shoot blanks, or you get a bullet in the head. And in this case, it's literal. While no one really knows what Hezbollah is up to, the authorities have preferred to take the lead, which is why they have evacuated the entire region, close to Lebanon. In any case, the inhabitants of the north are terrorized, and would have packed their bags and moved elsewhere, even without a government order.

In fact, what these people are calling for is quite simple. They are calling for the application of UN

Resolution 1701, passed in 2006, which stipulates the existence of a demilitarized zone in southern Lebanon, allowing UNIFIL to do its job as peacemaker. However, despite the presence of 10,000 UN Troopers, Hezbollah is nibbling away at the distance between Lebanon and Israel, occasionally making incursions of its own. In one of the most recent incursions, on July 9 2023, Lebanese soldiers accompanied by Hezbollah terrorists spent some twenty minutes on the Israeli side. It's not hard to imagine that this was no country outing.

They speak perfect English, so I stand back to listen and watch, while Gaël continues his interview.

I think we spend a long time talking to these people. But I've totally lost track of time. Once again, I feel very privileged to meet all these people and hear their stories.

After perhaps an hour, we let them go back to their alternative homes. They don't know how long it will be before they can return to their real home. I was going to add “in complete safety”, but no. The appropriate definition would be... “in relative safety”.

As we're in the north, the boys want to stay in the area for our subjects the next day. I have a huge lump in my stomach. It's Friday afternoon, everything's closed, and I have no way of getting home. I'm forced to stay with them, and spend this Shabbat, the second day of Hanukkah, far from my family. These are the first holidays since October 7, 2023, and they're particularly resonant.

I resolve to call them to let them know I won't be coming home tonight. While I'm on the phone, I imagine Gael and Francis agreed, because they come and tell me they can't find a hotel, and that finally they've decided to go back to Tel Aviv. I feel like a child. I have tears in my eyes, and I could throw myself at them, I'm so grateful. It's all totally disproportionate, but the attention of these two men, whom I've been accompanying for a week now, touches me deeply.

Saturday December 9, 2023

THE RAPES

Two months and two days have passed. Nine weeks exactly. Saturday mornings will never be the same. And every time we wake up, we pray to God that it won't happen again.

Testimonies of rape are beginning to emerge. Yet feminist institutions around the world remain mute at best, denialist at worst. Anchored in a nauseating disdain, every time. Leaving the Israeli population bruised and battered, in its entirety.

There are no direct testimonies from rape victims. For two reasons. Either because they were executed during or after their rape (sometimes they were raped post mortem). Or, because the only victims still alive are in such a state of shock, with appalling injuries and mutilations, that they

are totally disconnected from reality, from their bodies, unable to communicate with the outside world.

This morning, the JPost published a lengthy interview with Yael Shearer, head of Israel's Survivors of Sexual Violence Advocacy Group, who has been commissioned by the Israeli government to investigate and gather forensic evidence regarding the sexual exactions that took place on October 7, 2023.

This woman has been doing this work for nine years, and has visited and studied many conflict zones around the world where rapes were committed. She has never... never come across cases similar to those she has been studying for the past two months.

She explains the taboo associated with rape. Also, it's the first time that the country has been confronted with violence on such a scale, and is therefore obliged to gather enough information to officially report the extent and characteristics of the rapes committed on our soil.

She also adds the moral duty of all those involved in this investigative work, towards the victims

and their families, preventing them from communicating all the details and throwing out photos of these violated bodies, just to please the body snatchers, or to justify the facts to the international gaze, which in any case finds a malicious pleasure in looking the other way, leaving an abysmal void between them and us, the nation state.

After this initial work by the investigators, we know that when the terrorists entered Israel, the rapes were perfectly planned and orchestrated by the Hamas. We found printed lists in the terrorists' belongings, with translated orders such as “undress”, “take off your pants”, “hands up, and spread your legs”, “don't make a sound”, “I'll kill you”, “don't make a fuss”.

Patterns were clearly defined for each rape zone, with different behaviors and characteristics depending on the location, suggesting that in each place there was probably a leader whose task was to orchestrate and guide the rapes.

In Nova, the rapes and rapists followed one another at breakneck speed, whereas in the kibbutzim they took their time. Those who managed to escape told of the appalling screams they heard from their neighbors... all day long.

First-aiders and Zaka's people describe the bodies they discovered. One of them talks about the victims he found in a bedroom. This woman, and probably her daughter, both face down, naked from the waist down, their lower backs stained with seminal fluid. And blood. Lots and lots of blood.

All the testimonies of the volunteers who were first on the scene specify that most of the time, when the bodies were not burnt, they found a husband, a parent, a relative, facing the raped women, on his knees, in the position of the one forced to watch.

But the men were not reduced to mere spectators of the horror. Like the women and children, they too were raped.

Nova's witnesses recounted the ordeal of young girls screaming, begging to be killed because they could no longer endure the repeated rapes. They told of the women who were passed from one terrorist to another, dragged by their hair. They told of the mutilation of their breasts, which the terrorists then used as soccer balls. They told how the terrorists continued to rape them after stabbing them. They recounted the discovery of a multitude of bodies with their legs spread, naked

down to the pelvis, when they were freed from their hiding place. They told of genitals cut off and lying next to the bodies. They told of the victims' limbs lying at right angles to the ground. They told of the blood on the victims' lower backs. They told of naked bodies on their knees, tied to tree trunks.

As for the hostages, we know that at least 10 of those who returned in November suffered sexual violence. Young girls were forced into marriage.

The rapes committed on October 7, 2023 are only part of the massacre. We discovered them later. As with everything else, we were initially incredulous. It was impossible to imagine that Israeli women could be raped on Israeli soil, by Hamas terrorists.

Today, we're beginning to realize the scale of the massacre, and the task we face in establishing (re-establishing) the whole truth. People like Yael Shearer know that their next 50 years will be dedicated to this fight.

One of the difficulties faced by our investigators is the scarcity of forensic evidence. In the early days, overwhelmed by the number of victims and pressure from families to recover the bodies of their loved ones, the authorities moved as quickly as possible. They had to identify the bodies, most of which were in an appalling state. The professionals who should have drawn up full, documented reports on the rapes were literally overwhelmed. Not only had no one at that time yet assessed the extent and abomination of the rapes perpetrated, but time, means and personnel were terribly lacking.

And even if it had been just the rapes, it would have been impossible to draw up a formal report for all the victims, establishing the number of rapes they had each suffered, taking the necessary samples, and drawing up a precise list of the violence and mutilations. And yet, they all deserved such a report, to be remembered. But at the time, we also had to protect the families. How could we tell them exactly what their daughters and sons had suffered before they died? Hundreds of parents, spouses.

The day after the massacre, a young woman went to Nova to try and find her missing friend. Among the bodies she discovered was that of a woman

dressed in a black dress, whom she photographed in an attempt to help any relatives who might recognize her. She was identified as Gal Abdush. Her husband was found next to her, shot through the head. It is assumed that he first witnessed his wife's ordeal before being executed. They leave behind parents and siblings broken forever, because they know the details. They leave behind a little girl, who will forever know the circumstances under which she became an orphan.

Rape has left a gaping wound in the collective mind of Israelis. Every time we come across a photo of a Nova victim, especially a young girl, it's impossible not to wonder under what circumstances she died. Was she raped? How many times? In what way? It's an ordeal with every photo. And the country, the streets, the newspapers are full of the faces of these young people from Nova. Of these families from the kibbutzim. There can be no illusions. We can't turn a blind eye.

The country is now marked by the monstrous rapes that took place on October 7, 2023. We will never be the same again. We will live with this

immense pain, until our last day. Rape has become part of our collective thinking.

On a national scale, the gauge indicating the horror experienced has gone up a few notches. We can never go back.

At the end of February 2024, ARCCI - The Association of Rape Crisis Centers in Israel - will publish a report on the Sexual Crimes of the October 7th War.*

The report's findings include

- *Systematic use of brutal violence to commit rape:*

Testimonies mention serious injuries following rape - rape despite the victims' injuries - victims stabbed in the back when they resisted.

The victims were then executed.

- *Multiple assailants and gang rapes*
- *Rape in the presence of family or community members:*

In the kibbutzim, male relatives were often found kneeling in front of the rape scenes, suggesting that they had been forced to watch the rapes of their family members, before they were all executed.

In Nova, the rapes took place in the open air. Eyewitness accounts confirm that the men were forced to watch their wives or girlfriends being repeatedly raped, before their throats were slit in turn.

- *Sexual abuse of men*

Men have been raped. But for many of them, the ablation and mutilation of their genitalia is the most common allegation. Shots were also fired at the sexual organs.

- *Execution during or after the rape*

Almost systematic execution of the victims. By stabbing them or shooting them in the head. Sometimes by burning the body after the rape.

- *Sadistic practices*

Bodies were bound to other bodies. Victims were found bound - gagged - tied, sometimes to trees.

Male and female genitalia were horribly mutilated. Breasts cut off. The terrorists almost systematically shot the victims in the genitals. In women's bodies, medical teams found nails, grenades or knives. Sometimes, the services in charge had to evacuate the base where the bodies were gathered, because some victims had arrived "booby-trapped".

**The full report is available on the website of the Israeli Ministry of Foreign Affairs
<https://www.gov.il/en/departments/news/arcci-submits-first-report-to-un-21-feb-2024>*

AND NOW...

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*“I AM SO AFRAID OF THE
FUTURE. THIS WILL NOW BE
THE NORM.”*

Yael Shearer

One day I was listening to a lecture by Frédéric Encel (I like listening to Frédéric Encel's lectures). This was titled 'Génocide, le mal absolu' (Genocide, the absolute evil). So far, the title doesn't pose too many comprehension problems. What was interesting was to discover how genocidal evil had taken its roots and primary meaning in the genocide of the Jews during the Second World War. It was the first time in human history that the outright execution, the global annihilation of a distinct and defined part of the population - because in this very specific case, the plan was to wipe all Jews from the face of the earth, not just from Germany - had been so well orchestrated, prepared, thought through. That complex plans combining logistics, training and long-term resources were so perfectly planned,

with the sole aim of eradicating the presence of Jews from the face of the earth.

It goes without saying that the Roma, the handicapped and homosexuals were not spared in this massacre. However, the consensus is that the Jews were the primary and ultimate motivation for the genocide perpetrated during the Second World War.

Then the genre developed, and the pattern was repeated oh too often throughout the 20th century. The method existed, making the genocide of other populations intellectually and factually possible, through other conflicts.

For October 7, 2023, it's the same thing. Admittedly, Jews do not have a monopoly on suffering and terror. However, the horror and shamelessness of October 7, 2023 remain unique. The darkness of the acts committed, the organization of every detail, the distribution of tasks, including that of galvanizing the rapes according to precise and defined methods, to the point where patterns have been established depending on whether they were committed in the kibbutzim or in Nova, the mutilation of the

bodies, the sadism, the humiliation... then the recording and recurrent dispatch to the victims' families - all this is new in the spectrum of horror. And what makes October 7, 2023 so special is that we now know, and tremble with dread at the thought, that a new pattern has been set. What happened on October 7, 2023 will be taken as an example and applied again in future conflicts. Once again, less than a century after the Holocaust, less than a century after the first genocide, this irrational hatred of the Jew has written a new chapter in the never-ending book of abjection, raising the stakes even higher for the next massacre.

Once we understand this dynamic of violence, we understand two things.

How Israel was built, and what are its motivations in its self-defense.

First, there's an unequivocal understanding of the danger we face. It's as sharp as a razor blade permanently close to our throats. We may long for peace, we may desire it, we may touch it with our fingertips, we may even sign it. But under no circumstances can we trust it. It's far too fragile. It allows no rest.

It constantly requires new strategies, it demands extraordinary strength. And probably also the absence of compromise. In fact, it's a trait often found in Israelis, and one that can sometimes become a handicap in international negotiations: this total inability to compromise. The Israeli is not programmed to compromise. Their survival depends on it.

In the current conflict, it's exactly the same thing. And despite the distortion we often see in the media, which wishes to show a disunited people, the country has clearly understood the dimension of this war, which involves its own survival, that of its inhabitants, and to a certain extent, that of Jews worldwide. We understand that what has been at stake since October 7, 2023 is what we have been trying to build and protect for 76 years, since May 14, 1948.

SIMCHAT TORAH

October 7, 2023 was the day of Simchat Torah. Its literal translation means 'the joy of Torah'. The last holiday of the month of Tishri - the first month of the Hebrew calendar - it punctuates the Jewish New Year celebrations. It's one of the most joyous times of the year, when we honor our holy book by dancing with it and celebrating it. The men drink a little too much, the children run around and gorge themselves on sweets. In short, it's the last kick-off for a joyful and serene start to the new year. But Simchat Torah will never be serene again. Simchat Torah will never be joyful again. On the scale of the Jewish people, the massacre of October 7, 2023, in addition to its intrinsic horror, represents the annihilation of an ancestral holiday. This date resonates with biblical catastrophes, in that it will have an indelible impact on the celebration of our religious holidays, which have origins dating

back thousands of years. We'll never be able to celebrate Simchat Torah again. In any case, never again with the insouciance of previous centuries, since this holiday is definitively stained with the blood of the victims of the massacre of October 7, 2023.

From now on, for Simchat Torah, we'll remember Adir Tahar, the 19-year-old whose Gazans left with his head to sell for \$10,000. Several months later, after his parents had decided to bury him without his head, it was found in a freezer in Gaza.

At the time of the Second World War, certain French civil servants had expressed the 'duty of disobedience', and had risked their freedom, and probably their lives, to put it into practice. Now, we know that celebrities around the world have failed in their 'duty of courage'.

From now on, we'll remember that South Africa, after refusing in 2015 to arrest on its soil Omar el-Béchar, the Sudanese president being prosecuted by the ICC for crimes against humanity in Darfur

- some 300,000 dead - filed a complaint with the ICJ against Israel... and was unsuccessful.

Now we know that the Red Cross remains true to its position from the Second World War, when it visited the extermination camps and noticed nothing in particular.

This time, the Red Cross claims that it had 'no' way of meeting the more than 250 hostages held in Gaza. That he had no way of getting them any medication. That it had no way of obtaining proof of life from any of the hostages. Astonishing... for an organization that has just been pinpointed by the Palestinian Media Watch* NGO, which claims that this same Red Cross has for years been providing the necessary paperwork to enable Palestinian terrorists held in Israel to collect their blood money, which is paid by the Palestinian Authority to any terrorist who has spilled the blood of Israelis. A task made all the more complex by the fact that these papers have to be renewed every 3 months.

From now on, we'll have to get used to seeing amputees on the street. An arm. A leg. There are so many of them. And then this couple, Gali and

Ben, both amputees with the same leg, because they had taken refuge in a shelter into which the terrorists threw a grenade.

From now on, Mor Bayder will remember the last images of her grandmother, the ones she discovered on Facebook after a Hamas terrorist murdered her, taking photos which he then posted on the deceased's Facebook wall.

From now on, 84% of Israeli children between the ages of 2 and 12 show signs of emotional distress.

And from now on we know who our friends are. And who are the others.

So to the others, I suggest this exercise...

Imagine a Saturday morning. You are with your family, everyone is still sleeping, it is 6:00 in the morning.

Imagine that terrorists violently enter your house. **Imagine** the screams.

Imagine the shots in all directions, your house ransacked.

Imagine they take your wife and daughter into a bedroom.

Imagine that they violently tear off their clothes.

Imagine they rape them. Each has their turn. That there are too many for you to count.

Imagine them forcing you to watch, over and over again, with a gun to your head.

Imagine the screams of your wife. Your daughter's.

Imagine the look on your wife's face. Your daughter's.

Imagine the moment when they cut off their arms and legs. And you, who continue to watch.

Imagine the blood. So much blood. Everywhere.

Imagine the smell of burning bodies, because others are burning down the neighborhood.

Imagine the last image you take with you before you die, that of your loved ones, dead and martyred, lying on the ground. This is the last image before the terrorists shoot you in the head.

That's it?... is it clearer?

Well now you multiply by 1,200.

[*https://www.jpost.com/international/article-792583?utm_source=jpost.app.apple&utm_medium=share](https://www.jpost.com/international/article-792583?utm_source=jpost.app.apple&utm_medium=share)

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Writing a book is a solitary adventure. Nevertheless, it is impossible without the presence and support of the fellow friends you choose.

They have inspired me, accompanied me, read me and re-read me. They have supported me from start to finish, and for that I am infinitely grateful.