Living: A Letter from Israel

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I was asked to write this letter about one month into the war but was also asked to write as close as possible to publication, so that the letter would be timely. Rabbi Joe Prouser, editor of this esteemed journal, wisely knew that Israel in February would be different from Israel in November.

While there still are many similarities, looking back on the last four months feels like reflecting on four years. It's hard to recall life before October 7, and thinking about everything that has happened since makes me emotionally dizzy. We have gone from sheer horror and intense fear to unsurmountable grief and constant anxiety, to anger and disappointment, to despair and searching for hope, to appreciation of what we have and survivor guilt. With all that and more, we are trying to live. We need to go to work, make dinner, do the laundry and walk the dog—normal things… when life is anything but normal and everything is clouded by sadness and worry for our loved ones.

It's hard to describe the emotional effort necessary to encompass the dissonance between these opposing states of being. It takes a huge effort just to get out of bed each morning and live, when "living" has become such a taxing experience: listening with dread to the radio on the way to work, hearing the list of soldiers who fell the day before to see if you know any of them, breathing a sigh of relief when the anchor has finished the list because you don't know any of them but then feeling awful to be relieved while for other families the world has ended, fighting traffic and suddenly realizing that the person who cut in ahead of you might be in a hurry to see a loved one in hospital or a mother rushing to work, having left late because she is single parenting while her husband is in the army, or one of the ninety thousand displaced Israelis still living as refugees—some after losing loved ones to brutal murder or to captivity or to severe trauma—strangers in their temporary city and not knowing how to navigate life, then arriving at work and needing to function normally with mundane tasks and demands. At the end of such a work day you return home to care for your scared and worried children, who—despite your best efforts—have inevitably been exposed to human behavior which no one at any age should ever imagine possible. If you are lucky, your whole family is waiting for you at home. If

not, you return to a family having to function without a father or a mother or a grown sibling because they are away at war, and even if everyone is home you might be enjoying one another's company on borrowed time. My husband, who returned home two months ago after two months of *miluim* (military reserve duty), has been drafted for another six weeks, scheduled to begin two weeks hence. Not a moment of joy goes by in our family without a dark cloud looming over us as a ticking clock.

The sense of profound sadness and intense dread in which we are all wallowing has yielded a change in how we speak to one another. It has become pretty much taboo to greet one another with any phrase using the word "good": morning, evening, afternoon, week, month. The greeting *Shabbat Shalom* is widely used and said intentionally, and the common greeting for ending a conversation has become *besorot tovot* (we should hear good news). If you make the mistake of asking someone any version of *mah shlomkha* ("How are you?") the answer will seldom be the standard "fine" or "great" or even "OK." Even though normally both the question and the answer are mere pleasantries, at this point in Israel if you ask *Mah nishma*? ("How's it going?") you will likely receive the person's explanation of how they came to develop the answer they give.

Because we are most definitely not OK.

How are we?

Agility, Solidarity, and "Showing Up"

On the morning of October 7, after a few minutes in our bomb shelter, my family and I were preparing to leave for synagogue when the president of the congregation knocked on our door. She had come to confer whether we should hold services that morning.

"Of course," I said immediately. "There is a bomb shelter at the synagogue. We will restrain the *Simḥat Torah* celebrations but this is exactly the time to pray and be together."

"I'm not sure you know how bad it is," she replied. "Terrorists are driving around the town of Sderot, and twenty people have been killed."

Twenty people murdered in a terrorist attack! The number brought back memories of suicide bombings. Indeed, it was horrid. We went to synagogue, where a small crowd gathered. Some congregants who normally wouldn't had brought their cellphones. There was fear and trepidation in everyone's eyes, yet it was comforting to be together. I announced that we were going

to shorten the *hakafot* (the festive dancing around the room with the Torah) and sing one mellow song of peace, comfort, or prayer for deliverance for each *hakafah.* We ended up singing song after song in this manner.

Sirens disturbed our prayers again and again. The entire country was under attack. After running downstairs to the bomb shelter three times, we decided just to stay there and complete our prayers in the bomb shelter. We felt safe in the bomb shelter. Little did we know that the real danger was not one from which a bomb shelter could save you—that from that day on none of us would ever feel fully safe even in our locked home.

We carried down the Torah and all its paraphernalia. We sang and marched sadly around in a circular embrace, and it was surreal and powerful and awful. We wept as we prayed for Israel, for the safety of our soldiers, and for peace. As the news came in through those with relatives in southern Israel, every word in the service became ever so fraught with meaning: '*Ozi vezimrat Yah vayehi li liyshua* ("Strength of spirit and God's song shall be my salvation"), *Min hameitsar qarati Yah* ("In my distress I call out to God"), and *Ana Adonai hoshia na*' ("Please, God, save us!")

Those long hours witnessed some of Israel's most courageous battles, fought not only by soldiers on duty but also by armed civilians, off-duty police personnel, and soldiers on leave or reservists. They surged, unprompted, barefoot and in their undergarments, to the battlefield—a battlefield of homes and kibbutz paths and a music festival (!). Women's combat units fiercely repelled the barbaric enemy, saving hundreds of lives in the foe's murderous and torturous path. In minutes, units mobilized to protect the breached border and literally to reconquer entire Israeli villages, blood-drenched home by home, amidst the heavy stench of burnt flesh and climbing over dismembered bodies, some of them booby-trapped.

I will never cease being in awe of the bravery and dedication that leads a person to run toward fire. Not for love of death but for love of life.

By evening that day, we were shocked to learn that the number of people murdered was likely going to exceed the number of soldiers killed in the Second Lebanese War—121. That sounded unreal. How oblivious we were.

The horrific details of the attack—its scope and viciousness—took time to unfold. We cast doubt on the rumor of a couple dozen civilians having been abducted from their homes into Gaza—how could that be true? In reality the figure was over 240! As the days passed, reports came in of many hundreds more murdered—entire families, elderly who could not hold the saferoom door handle shut, parents slaughtered in front of their children…

and bodies that remained unidentified weeks later, despite forensic teams working full force around the clock, because they were so disfigured.

Funerals with no bodies, because the bodies had been taken to Gaza; temporary burials; *shiva* on the heel of *shiva*; staggering evidence of sexual violence.... As the proportions of this atrocity were revealed, I found it hard to fathom the blindly unchanging attitude of our critics. How could those who condoned the attack on October 7 itself not adjust their response in the slightest, in the light of what had become known by October 14? Do information and reality really carry so little weight in molding opinion?

A refreshing agility of thought is surfacing in Israel. We have lost faith in constants; while terrible and disconcerting, this is also humbling. We all know in theory that reality can change in a moment, but for us in Israel radical and instantaneous change has become part of our daily routine. As a result, many of us are reconsidering truths and cultural norms, rearranging priorities, as our values take on new proportions and perspectives. Israelis are finding renewed appreciation of one another, bringing to the fore values of devotion, dedication, selflessness, and mutual support. Classical political "Right" and "Left" are wavering. While obviously not all change is desirable, I find this reexamination of paradigms to be inspiring and liberating.

The biblical verb for changing one's mind stems from the same root as the word *nehama* ("comfort, consolation"), as in Genesis 6:7: *ki nihamti ki asitim* ("for I regret that I made them"). The rabbinic verb for reconsidering is *nimlakh*, from the same root as *melekh* ("king"). Our heritage conveys the important message that flexibility of thought and ability to change paradigms are divine traits, charged with connotations of leadership and consolation.

Toward the end of that dreadful Shabbat, my husband (47) received a call. At that point we were answering the phone, which we normally wouldn't on Shabbat, anxious to hear that our daughter, who serves in a combat unit on the Egyptian border, was okay, and dreading the ring because it might mean otherwise.

He answered the phone, and on the line was a recording demanding that he depart immediately for his unit's base in the North. He is an infantry soldier, who has continued to volunteer for *miluim* since his official discharge at age forty.

Our children broke down in tears, knowing only a fraction of the horrors that had occurred that day and of the war that lay ahead. With sobbing and fearful children and a wife lying—as it turns out—to herself and to them

that it would only be for a few days until things calmed down, my husband packed his army equipment and drove off.

Later that night my daughter called to say they were being deployed to the Gaza envelope to guard the kibbutzim there and to search for terrorists who were still at large. From that moment on I stopped breathing.

With a husband serving on the Lebanese border, still under attack since October 8, and a daughter serving on the Gazan border, I needed to worry about the safety of my three children with me at home. We live in a neighborhood of Jerusalem that borders on two hostile East Jerusalem neighborhoods, home to several known Hamas terrorists. The police do not enter these villages without army accompaniment. For the first few weeks we heard shooting from the villages every night. Six days into the war our neighborhood went into lockdown because of information about shooting near our home. My nighttime routine included locking the porch doors with the small latch that separates us from the outside, and pulling down the blinds (we have no bars), thinking this might give us another ten to twenty seconds to find a place to hide when terrorists come to our porch with guns. I did not let my children sleep in rooms in the side of the house facing the other direction because they have no blinds, so a rifle could be inserted directly into the room through the bars. Such were the considerations and calculations of mothers in Israel every night: How do I protect my family while alone, afraid, and the only weapon at my disposal is my common sense?

One late, sleepless night I wrote to the listserv of women rabbis around the world about how we were doing. At 2 a.m. I described how my type-A personality had me convinced that if I was awake and aware I could protect my soldiers with my thoughts, and therefore I could not go to sleep and leave them unprotected. The outpouring of support that ensued still brings me to tears. A dear colleague wrote lovingly, from a distant time zone, "You can go to sleep, Chaya. I am awake, I will take the night shift."

As others followed suit I found myself sobbing. I realized that we are a people who cannot be defeated; a people who makes sure there is always someone awake to protect the fold. Perhaps this is another way of reading the verse *Hineih lo yanum velo yishan Shomer Yisrael* ("Behold, the Keeper of Israel shall not sleep nor slumber," Psalm 121:4).

The level of stress and distress in Israel is overwhelming. So many families are missing loved ones; 136 abductees hang between life and death; scores of thousands of children are scarred for life, some having to cope

without the embrace, guidance, and protection of parents; thousands of men and women will never heal from the smells and sights they encountered as victims, relief forces, or forensic specialists; hundreds of thousands of Israelis for the next six or seven decades will carry wounds, some of them visible, others not. The list of pain and damage goes on and on.

Everyone is hurting. So, who will help whom? And yet…somehow there is an outpouring of initiative, kindness, compassion, and resilience among Israelis and from Jewish communities around the world, offering all sorts of assistance to families of victims and abductees, to evacuees, to soldiers and their families, to the families of fallen or wounded soldiers…you name the need, someone has created a situation room to help. People have opened their homes and given of their time, money, and talents with immeasurable generosity. This is a glimpse of the Israel we once knew, of the sense of peoplehood we recall sharing with diaspora Jewry—and it is refreshing and centering.

Sanctifying Life

We are still in the thick of a difficult war. At this moment 136 abductees are still being kept hostage in Gaza. Even now, four months into the war, Hamas continues to fire missiles at civilian populations in Israel. Its military power has been diminished but not annihilated. Israeli evacuees still cannot return safely to their homes. Our soldiers are fighting a battle unprecedented in its complexity, because the enemy does not distinguish between civilians and soldiers—neither among us (every male over eighteen is a potential soldier, and all civilians are a fair target) nor among their own people. They disguise themselves as, are embedded in, and hide behind civilian populations. The IDF aims to fight only against military combatants, not civilians, but sometimes it is hard to tell the difference, especially when our soldiers find a weapon stash under a baby's crib, or when missiles are launched from within a school or a hospital.

The IDF strives to hold itself to a high moral standard and to condemn any wanton malice—a difficult task when faced with such criminal warfare. I have heard firsthand from soldiers who wrote letters of apology on the walls of ruined Gazan homes, although unfortunately there are those who fall short of that standard. In what seems to be a redefining moment in the IDF ethos, its challenging mission is to save Israeli lives while upholding its commitment to morality of the highest standard, inspired by the sanctity of life.

Sanctifying life means recognizing the value of Palestinian lives, too; acknowledging them as parents, as siblings and spouses, as home owners, as people who need stability, security, and faith in the good, just like anyone else. Gazan families are suffering terribly, too, many of them also displaced from their homes, in mourning, and afraid. It is hard for some of us—even for peace activists—to summon such compassion at this point in the war. It is also hard for us, knowing that the lives of our relatives serving in the war are put at greater risk for the sake of protecting Hamas's human shield. That, too, is a part of how we are. Some Israelis are capable of such magnanimity. Others are still very much inside their shells, too fraught with pain to think about others' well-being right now.

In this entangled reality we look at our young soldiers, perhaps our children and grandchildren, in awe at their stamina, determination, and dedication—traits we were not sure this young, comfortable generation necessarily had. We pray for their safety, but we are also proud of their readiness to put their lives on the line to protect our nation, and we encourage them to do so.

Parents face a terrible conflict. No parent in their right mind would knowingly encourage their child to put their life at risk, but moments like these with existential ramifications also make you think about how "life" is not only breath and pulse, but also direction and inner strength and purpose.

On one of my many dark, late nights I made the mistake of engaging in a Facebook correspondence with an October 7 denier. After a long futile exchange, she ended with "Free Palestine," and I replied with *ʿAm Yisraʾel ḥai* ("the People of Israel lives"). I am proud that in juxtaposition to the genocidal call to rid Israel of its Jewish inhabitants, the Israeli "slogan" for this war is an expression of peoplehood and life—death only when necessary to serve the value of life, and life in spite of death.

The sentiment "We love death as you love life" has been expressed by terrorists such as Mohammad Sidique Khan and Osama bin Laden and is quoted proudly by members and supporters of Hamas. Its champions assume that since Islamic terrorists are eager to die they are untouchable by the Western world, whereas Westerners are weakened by their love of life, because at war they have everything to lose.

Israelis have a strange combination of loving life but also being willing to die for it. It is an approach deeply rooted in Jewish heritage: Life is to be protected at all cost, even at the price of transgressing all of the *mitsvot*; all but the prohibitions of murder, incest, or idol worship—representing extreme harm to others, or to our spiritual identity. We do not aspire to martyrdom,

but we are willing to endure it if our spiritual existence is threatened: our loved ones, our people, and our right to live freely as Jews.

Dying for life is a paradox, and for that very reason it holds a strength and depth of meaning and purpose that neither component alone can provide. That is why we will prevail.

ʿAm Yisraʾel ḥai.

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