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Dispatches from the Gaza Envelope

Trauma and agency in Israel's south



GITIT ZAMIR BOTERA has been the manager of the National Digital Center (NDC) in Sderot since 2022. Part of her role is to help those living near Gaza tell the outside world about life on the border. When the war began, the NDC became the frontline communication center, making Gitit one of the main points of contact for foreign journalists covering the war.

Gitit exudes strength and determination. You would never know that two years before October 7, she'd been diagnosed with post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). Or that on October 7, she had a full-blown panic attack after hiding from terrorists for more than 18 hours. In 2021, on the second day of that year's Hamas war against Israel, Gitit, her husband, Eli, and their young daughter, Adele, took shelter in their home's reinforced *mamad* (bomb

shelter). Even through the *mamad's* thick walls and heavy door, the force of the blast threw Gitit back. When she opened her eyes, she said, everything was “smashed” and “all the room was smoke.”

For the parts of Israel under constant threat of rockets from Gaza, the ability to overcome fear and distress and recover quickly from each attack involves restoring a sense of normalcy. To serve frequently targeted communities, 12 Resilience Centers were created in 2005 with help from American Jewish communities and nonprofits. They provide tools and training for emergency preparedness, professional psychological support, and “community resilience.”

Regaining a sense of agency is essential for trauma recovery. This involves first controlling one’s internal narrative by speaking factually about the traumatic event. Reconstructing events chronologically and speaking about them without getting lost in emotion help the brain process what happened and put it in the past. Then it’s essential to take constructive action for moving forward. Gitit’s therapist suggested that if she planned to stay in Sderot, she should find work having something to do with what happened to her. “When you work and speak” about traumatic events, Gitit told us, “you feel more safety.” Her current position allows her to tell her own story and help others tell theirs.

After the rocket attack destroyed her house, she and her husband built a new home—this one with two *mamads*. But nothing could have prepared them for October 7. For hours, Sderot was attacked by hundreds of Hamas terrorists who killed roughly 70 residents, including 15 elderly people at a bus stop, some of them Holocaust survivors. About 20 police officers died defending the town.

After Sderot was evacuated, for five months Gitit and her family lived in a Tel Aviv hotel. But Gitit immediately returned to work, driving to Sderot in a helmet and bulletproof vest. When she told us about leaving her husband and daughter in Tel Aviv day after day, we were

sitting in what she explained had been the center’s “control room” during the height of the post–October 7 crisis. In the early days of the war, “all the time, I have panic attacks,” she said. Yet she came to work every day, sometimes even sleeping there.

Making sure the world knew what happened to Israelis that day was important enough to her to keep her moving forward. “We have a lot of people [who will] never speak again,” she told us. “And the world needs to know the truth.”



Nadav Tzabari brings journalists to his home in Kibbutz Nahal Oz, a small community about a half-mile from the Gaza border. As was the case in all the kibbutzim we visited, our conversation was punctuated by the sounds of artillery blasts.

On October 7, Nadav was a sixth-grade teacher. His husband, Rotem Katz, was the head of the kibbutz’s emergency team. They had recently finished renovating their house and they loved their community. They were, he told us, “living a good life.”

Early on October 7, after the first rocket alerts, the emergency squad commander, Beri Meirovich, told Rotem there were hundreds of armed, uniformed terrorists and thousands of people in civilian clothing running from Gaza toward the kibbutz. “I think you should prepare the community,” Beri told Rotem. “Because none of us is going to make it out alive.”

Beri survived, but during the many hours of Hamas occupation, terrorists murdered more than a dozen residents. From their *mamad*, Nadav and Rotem watched their neighbors’ ordeals on the live videos Hamas posted on Israeli families’ own Facebook pages—including that of the Idan family. Eighteen-year-old Maayan was murdered. Tsachi, her father, was one of the nine resi-

dents kidnapped. He is still among the remaining hostages, though it is unknown whether he is alive.

“Going through such a thing is devastating,” Nadav told us. He mentioned, almost as an aside, that in 2014, after serving in Gaza, he was diagnosed with PTSD. We asked why he would move to a community so close to the Gaza border, where there is always a threat of rocket attacks.

A lot of people wonder that, he acknowledged. Nadav lived in Sderot for several years as a child, and most of his family still lives in the area. The ability to live in Nahal Oz gave him “closure,” he said. It was important for his recovery to feel a sense of control. “I can live wherever I want,” he said. (After being evacuated, the community was temporarily relocated in an area north of Tel Aviv.)

Two weeks after the October 7 massacres, Nadav and Rotem’s home was destroyed by a Hamas rocket. Despite everything, Nadav returns regularly to Nahal Oz to tell people what happened. “This is how I deal with my trauma,” he said. “I just go to the place where it happened.”

In Ofakim, Itzik Krispel, the head of financial development in the municipality, told us that on October 7, residents armed themselves with whatever they could find—in some cases knives or even sticks. Many of the roughly 50 residents who were murdered that day died defending their neighbors and families. A large mural now honors the many courageous people who fought to protect the town.

Ofakim resident Itamar Alus is a Negev Traffic Police officer. On October 7, with only a pistol, he ran out of his house to fight terrorists. Throughout the day, he dragged injured people to safety, provided emergency medical aid, drove a badly wounded neighbor to a hospital, and returned to continue fighting. After climbing a pergola, he discovered the Bilya family hiding behind a rooftop water heater—including Nadav’s sister, Michal. Itamar was instrumental in evacuating them to safety.

Rachel Edri is, perhaps, the most famous of the town’s heroes.

Known simply as “Rachel from Ofakim,” she is the 65-year-old grandmother turned pop icon who, along with her husband, David, were held hostage in their home by five armed terrorists. Famous for her hospitality, Rachel served homemade cookies and Coke to the terrorists, singing to them and speaking rudimentary Arabic. After approximately 20 hours, police stormed the house, killing the terrorists and rescuing the couple.

Rachel’s likeness has been used in memes, on T-shirts, and even for an animated superhero. Itzik likens her to Yael from the Book of Judges in the Bible. After luring an evil Canaanite general into her tent, Yael gives the general warm milk, lulling him to sleep. She then drives a tent peg through his temple, killing him.

Itzik described the sight of Rachel emerging from her house with the police as akin to seeing the biblical Rachel *imeinu*, Jacob’s wife, the spiritual matriarch of the Jewish people. After the horrors of the day, seeing Rachel “[gave] us a pulse again,” he said. It “turned the story around” to “a story that gives us hope.”



Ohad Dreszmann, the deputy head of the Kibbutz Magen emergency-response team, is an imposing figure. When we met at the kibbutz, he showed us the view of nearby Nir Oz, which he saw engulfed in black smoke on October 7.

Early in the attack, when the head of the team was badly injured, Ohad took charge, leading a fierce battle against heavily armed terrorists. At first, he didn’t think they could win. In hindsight, he told us, the extra 15 minutes they had to prepare, time that Kibbutz Nir Oz did not have, made his community among the luckiest of those attacked. When the battle was over, two members of the civil security team had been killed and two were wounded. But Ohad and his team

prevented the terrorists from taking hostages, burning houses, and murdering people in their homes.

By April, many of the residents of Kibbutz Magen had returned. “Some of the resilience comes from personal actions,” Ohad told us, like “to get up and go to work.” Returning to a regular routine and focusing on moving forward is standard protocol for trauma recovery in Israel.

Ohad also offered his own suggestions for resilience: “If you love someone, tell them,” he said. And “enjoy the way.” He now recommends that to everyone. He hugged us as we departed. “I learned to hug people,” he said. “Because you never know what tomorrow will bring.”



What did we learn from these stories? Resilience, the ability to bounce back after adverse events, relies on a sense of agency, taking responsibility for one’s own emotional experience, and a commitment to keep moving forward even when times are hard. Liberal democracy, whether in Israel or the United States, relies on a civic impulse with similar elements.

In Israel, that civic impulse finds expression in a sense of ownership in one’s community and way of life. In exercising the basic principles of an antifragile ethos, Gitit responds to her trauma by transforming her personal pain into contributions to her neighbors, her community, and her country. Nadav’s response involves honoring members of his kibbutz by telling the story of the attack, by going “to the place where it happened,” exposing himself to reminders of trauma, and reminding himself that he can control how he reacts to it. He strips the trauma of its power and replaces it with his determination to give back to his community—and live life on his own terms.

To prevent a response to traumatic stress from becoming PTSD,

trauma survivors must put the events in the past, reduce feelings of helplessness, and increase a sense of agency. For survivors of October 7, rebuilding their communities is an integral part of rebuilding themselves.

The civic impulse in Israel's devastated southern communities is one that accepts the reality of tragedy, puts it in the past, and faces the future with a commitment to create rather than destroy. This runs directly counter to what we saw on American college campuses in the months following October 7. With adolescent histrionics, demonstrators trafficked in a form of narcissistic victimhood-envy. They acted out by destroying not just buildings, but others' confidence in their physical safety. For many Jewish students as well as others who reject the antisemitic "settler colonialist" conspiracy theory and its attendant "resistance is not terrorism" narrative, the campus protests devastated both the sense of belonging and the feeling of being seen as equals in dignity and humanity.

One lesson for Jews in the United States is to harness a similar civic energy in behalf of our local and global Jewish family. To support one another. To refuse to be cowed by forces trying to break us apart. And to take ownership of our Jewishness. It can seem wiser to take down the mezuzah, tuck the Magen David into the shirt, and cover the kippah with a baseball cap. But there has never been a more important time to resist that temptation. If "never again" is to mean anything, it must include never again having to hide.

Thankfully, rising to that challenge does not require becoming consumed by ugliness, tragedy, fear, or despair. "Our wings were clipped," as Gitit told us, "but we still have to fly again." Even in the hard and dark times, the Jewish way is to embrace life with all its disappointments, devastations, and rejections.

We are even commanded to "be joyful." As Ohad reminded us: "Enjoy the way." *