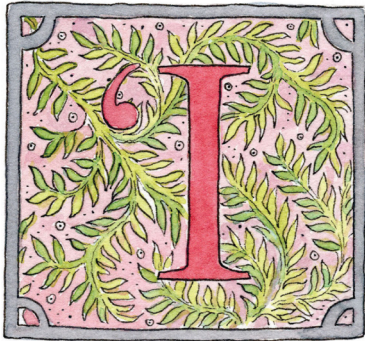


MOTI BARAK & NICOLE HAZAN

# Returning to Kibbutz Be'eri

*Devastation and healing on the farms  
desecrated on 10/7*



*ISRAEL'S FUTURE lies in the Negev," David Ben-Gurion often said, and that future is our present. Large swathes of the western Negev form the backbone of Israel's agriculture, producing approximately 70 percent of the country's vegetables. Of the 45 communities attacked on October 7, more than half were agricultural kibbutzim and moshavim. Hamas took aim at the farming infrastructure in these communities, destroying greenhouses, barns, irrigation pipes, and fertigation systems. According to Yuval Lipkin, deputy director general of Israel's Agriculture Ministry, "Israel's agriculture is in its biggest crisis since the establishment of Israel." The Hamas attacks have cost \$500 million in lost income, affected nearly 100,000 acres of agricultural land, and threatened Israel's food independence by severely damaging equipment and infrastructure, crops, labor, and communities.*

*Entire farming communities have been uprooted from their land and internally displaced. They must now navigate unimaginable destruction and psychosocial trauma.*

*To understand how a sense of resilience persists amid challenges and dire limitations, SAPIR is publishing the story of Kibbutz Be'eri agricultural manager Moti Barak as told to Israeli writer Nicole Hazan.*



It's October 9 and I'm back on Kibbutz Be'eri, standing between tanks and cows. The cows need feeding—the soldiers probably do, too, but they, at least, can look after themselves. The roads stink and the sun is already burning the back of my neck, but I can't stop because there is work to do. Looking after cows is not my job—I'm the manager of Be'eri's agriculture, but that is not important right now. For the past two days, my home of 51 years has been a battlefield. The houses around me are wrecks, burned to husks or blown up. Horrors took place inside them that I couldn't have dreamed of. But after a car accident, the only thing to do is get back in the car. If you ever want to drive again, that is. Being on my burned, ransacked, beloved kibbutz is like getting back into the smoking car before it's even been taken to the mechanic. It's too soon for my friends and family to return, and I don't blame them, but it's the only thing I know how to do.

The feeding takes a long time because a) there are cows everywhere, since the enclosure holding them was knocked down and they are freely wandering around, b) the army is getting in my way, still scouring our kibbutz for terrorists, and c) there are Red Alerts all the time, so I have to keep running to the shelter. Rockets are being fired constantly from Gaza, and since Be'eri is one of the border kibbutzim that form what is known as the Gaza Envelope, we have 15 seconds to

get to a shelter. The soldiers won't let me go anywhere without them because Hamas has boobytrapped houses and corpses. All this, as I say, is tiring, but I have brought my sleeping bag. I can't sleep in my house (it's intact but not safe), but I can use the shelter — and I plan to — until all the work is done.

Despite the distractions, I manage to make good progress, though wherever I look, I experience intrusive reminders of what we suffered two days ago. *Flash:* Hamas terrorists are inside the kibbutz gates, running toward my house, firing an RPG at my neighbors' door. *Flash:* The army is packing survivors onto buses. *Flash:* We drive past piles of corpses on the highways. *Flash:* We're checking into a hotel. "Where's your ID?" the manager asks, and we try to explain we don't have a toothbrush, let alone identification.

*Flash, flash, flash.* I know every inch of this kibbutz — every house, every person murdered or taken hostage. But the cows won't feed themselves. I scatter hay in their paths. They bend their heads and munch, unaware of the catastrophe around them.

Somehow, weeks pass. In Tel Aviv, where part of our kibbutz has been moved (and where I am supposed to be recovering), my wife tells me people are going back out in public. Most people hid inside for days, and though they are surely afraid of terrorists still inside Israel, and certainly of rockets, there is life again outside. Parents huddle in playgrounds, eyeing their children on the swings, and when they walk, they hold their hands tight. Cars honk on the streets. Hearing this encourages me, though I am grateful that until now — when we are four people to a hotel room — I haven't had to live like a Tel Avivan. I've always needed to be in nature, in the open. It's these cramped Tel Aviv apartments that make me feel as though I'm losing my mind.

By November, my friend who was vacationing in Greece and became stranded after the attacks manages to fly back to take care of the cows. I

give myself a new, less glamorous task: dealing with the sewage. It's not pretty. On October 7, Hamas deliberately and systematically destroyed all the water tanks, so while I have been looking after the cows, dirty water has been flowing through the kibbutz, flooding it. The soldiers have had no working toilet systems to relieve themselves, so there are plenty of surprises to deal with.

I'm no longer sleeping in the shelter — my wife has made it clear I'm too old for that — so every day, I travel back and forth from the hotel in Tel Aviv. It's an hour-and-a-half drive, but there's no traffic because nobody else is traveling to Be'eri. People think I'm crazy, going back each day, but I can't sit in the hotel doing nothing. What would be the use of that?

Slowly, visitors — not only residents — begin to come to Be'eri. I take them on tours, a walk down a nightmarish memory lane. On your left is Gal's house; he grows peanuts and potatoes. Both his parents, Meni and Ayelet, were murdered by Hamas terrorists. Straight ahead, you'll see where Yarden lived; she lost her brother who was protecting the kibbutz as one of the first-response guards. Here's Ori's place; he's responsible for wheat and tractor maintenance, and his parents were killed in their dining room in an exchange of gunfire between the IDF and Hamas after Hamas took them hostage. And that's just those working in agriculture. The list goes on. People cry, shake their heads. I nod, grimly. I keep talking, somehow, though the words don't sound like mine.

It's hard for people to hear these terrible truths, harder for me to tell them. The loss is staggering: My best friend, Yuval, and his wife Ma'ayan; my dear friend, Roni, with whom I had planned to go on a bike ride that morning, fought Hamas without a weapon but didn't stand a chance. We ate breakfast together every day for 10 years. Avida saw his son killed instantly by a grenade but held his wife for hours as she bled to death. His daughter's body was riddled

with shrapnel after three grenades were thrown into their shelter. He himself was shot in the leg, which was later amputated above the knee. When their shelter was set on fire, he and his daughter survived by breathing into cushions so they wouldn't choke on the smoke. Women were raped before they were killed, others tortured in ways that I can't bring myself to describe. Thirty of us from Be'eri were taken hostage to Gaza. As survivors, we will live with this trauma our entire lives.

I'm lucky. My wife is lucky. Many of Be'eri's 1,200 residents are lucky. We survived, hiding for 15 or 20 hours in our shelters until we were rescued, emerging to the burning of our homes and cars. But 99 of my friends and family were very unlucky. And nothing can change that.



Eventually, something breaks me. My daughter's mother-in-law, Vivian, is found. Many people have heard of her; she was in the news often, an immigrant from Canada and the founder of Women Wage Peace. None of us knew until this point what had happened to her. A forensic expert confirms that she was killed in her shelter on October 7, that her body was burned so completely that only her teeth and bones are left. Terrorists used chemicals to make the fire hotter, more aggressive, to do the job so thoroughly that none of us knew that Vivian was even there. We assumed she'd been taken hostage to Gaza, and I've walked through her destroyed shelter 10 or 15 times in the past five weeks, stepping again and again on her remains. My grandchildren, six, eight, and 10 years old, were supposed to sleep there the evening before and would have been there that morning but at the last minute changed their plans and stayed at home in Tel Aviv instead. These thoughts destroy me. I can't eat or sleep. Thinking of her last moments, how she must have suffered, being burned

alive, makes me weep. In Judaism, we bury bodies 24 hours after a death, but without a body, we haven't had a burial. How stupid we've been, praying she was alive. In those moments, it's too much. I feel old. Angry. I lose hope. I don't have the strength to go on.

But Israel does. It won't let me give up. It knows what it wants, and that's to heal. For months, the nation has been by my side. They come from all over: professors, doctors, and teachers, traveling hours to pick the fruit and vegetables that need to be harvested. So many of the agricultural workers have been injured or killed that without outside help, the food would rot and the agricultural produce would be lost. But the volunteers are relentless. They come in the heat and in the rain, from Canada and the United States. Someone flies in from Louisiana, staying a whole month. They are religious and secular, forgoing days of work. There is so much to be done. And they keep coming, no matter what.

I pick myself up. What choice do I have? Hamas came to destroy as much as they could, but little by little, we glimpse green. The potatoes that we planted several weeks ago are sprouting, and we are creating new homes on the kibbutz. It won't be through blood, sweat, and tears — we've had enough of that — but with love. We will rebuild Be'eri. We will regrow the fields. We will return, and we will not lose hope. \*