

Our Columnists

The Tangled Grief of Israel's Anti-Occupation Activists

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Israelis who advocate for Palestinian rights are simultaneously absorbing two streams of traumatic news: the brutality and extent of Hamas's attacks and the bombardment and siege of Gaza.

On Saturday, October 7th, Avner Gvaryahu and his wife were awakened by an air-raid alarm. Their house in Tel Aviv doesn't have a safe room, so they huddled in a windowless corner of the house. Being awakened by a siren was distressing but by no means an unprecedented occurrence. Gvaryahu's wife is a journalist and nine months pregnant. Gvaryahu is the executive director of Breaking the Silence, an organization of Israeli military veterans that collects and disseminates testimonies on the cruelty and possible criminality of the [Israeli occupation](#) of the West Bank and Gaza. Both he and his wife are experts in finding and analyzing information. Still, it wasn't until about noon that they had learned enough about the Hamas attack on southern Israel to know that something extraordinary was happening.

Gvaryahu drafted a statement based on what he knew so far, leading with the [events of Saturday morning](#): "Hamas's attack and the events unfolding since yesterday are unspeakable. We are heartbroken to watch terrified civilians besieged in their homes, innocent people murdered in cold blood on the streets, at parties, and at home. Dozens taken hostage and dragged into the Gaza Strip. Every one of us knows someone who has been tragically affected." Then the tone of Gvaryahu's statement shifted: "We could go on and on about their cruel and criminal actions, or focus on how our Jewish-supremacist government brought us to this point. But, as hard as it is, our job as former Israeli soldiers is to talk about what we were sent to do." He framed the Hamas attack as a failure of the Israel Defense Forces, which, he wrote, were busy protecting settlers in the West Bank. "Our country decided—decades ago—that it's willing to forfeit the security of its citizens in our towns and cities, in favor of maintaining control over an occupied civilian population of millions, all for the sake of a settler-messianic agenda." It was time for Israelis to wake up to how unsustainable and unsafe that arrangement was.

Breaking the Silence was one of the first among Israel's anti-occupation groups to make a public statement about the Hamas attack. Then details, videos, pictures, and casualty figures began accumulating. By Tuesday, it appeared that the events were not just extraordinary—they were unlike anything that Gvaryahu, who is thirty-eight years old, had ever witnessed. He drafted a new statement, which began, "There are some things that must be made crystal clear: Hamas has committed crimes that should horrify any decent person. As people who firmly criticize Israeli policy in the Gaza Strip and the West Bank on a daily basis, it is our moral duty to state things as they are: this weekend, Hamas blatantly violated humanity's basic moral norms." The statement reiterated the group's commitment to fight against the occupation, but this one contained no hint of holding the Israeli government responsible for the attack. "Those who find some kind of twisted theoretical logic

in order to justify a massacre are not fighting for human rights, and push the goal of liberation further out of reach," it read. "We dedicate our lives to the struggle to end occupation and the siege on Gaza because no human being should live under tyranny, and because no one's blood is redder than any other."

That Gvanyahu felt he had to draft two separate statements in the space of three days, that he felt that he had to state the obvious—that the Hamas attacks had been horrific and unjustifiable—is one symptom of the excruciatingly complicated predicament in which Israelis who publicly oppose the occupation have found themselves. In Israeli society, which has invented myriad ways to keep the occupation invisible, their expertise is their ability to see the causal connections between the occupation and violence directed at Israeli Jews. But, at this moment, if the activists focus on these causal connections, or if they focus too much on crimes perpetrated against Palestinian civilians, now and in the past, they risk being irrevocably marginalized in their own country. Unlike most Israelis, these activists are simultaneously absorbing two streams of traumatic news: the still accumulating details of the brutality and extent of Hamas's attacks, and the real-time flow of information on the bombardment and siege of Gaza, whose two million residents are being collectively punished with lack of fuel, water, energy, and food.

"In the very first hours, you have this strange purity of the experience: we are the victims," Dahlia Scheindlin, a public-opinion researcher and political consultant to a variety of anti-occupation groups, told me over the phone from Tel Aviv. "And then, in a few hours, there are suddenly other victims: Palestinian civilians." By the time we spoke on Wednesday, more than three hundred children in the Gaza Strip had been killed by Israeli air strikes. But, Scheindlin continued, "This is not a situation where anyone, pretty much, recognizes the other side's need for protection" from excessive violence.

Except, perhaps, the people who have made it their job to recognize that people must be protected from war crimes. "In a regime of Jewish supremacy, being a Jew, under normal circumstances, means being the oppressor," Sarit Michaeli, who is the international-advocacy lead for B'Tselem, a prominent Israeli human-rights organization, which documents abuses in the occupied territories, said. "And being able to see also from the point of view of the oppressed is a privilege. But it can also be a burden, to know that an entirely different reality is possible." Michaeli, who is fifty-two, has been working for B'Tselem for nineteen years. She is an expert in providing context on events in Israel and Palestine, especially for foreign activists and journalists. (In fact, last weekend she was scheduled to take part in an educational tour of Scandinavian countries; she first learned that something was awry when a Palestinian colleague who was also supposed to be on the trip was prevented from leaving the country.) "The biggest challenge is how to talk about an event that is obviously grounded in context without having to get into that context," Michaeli said. "Because it's such a horrific event."

Throughout the weekend, Michaeli said, she was so emotionally detached that she felt unable to draft a statement for B'Tselem. Detachment is an essential skill in her line of work. "We've been here before," she said. "We know how to deal with large-scale Palestinian fatalities, in the sense that we know how to count them. . . . But, when it comes to large numbers of Israelis being killed so cruelly, how do we deal with that?"

One of the unprecedented aspects of the current situation is the number of Israelis taken hostage by Hamas. Among them is Vivian Silver, a seventy-four-year-old Canadian-Israeli peace activist and a former member of the B'Tselem board. "I just keep having images of Vivian there, as a hostage," Michaeli said, then cut herself off—she still needed to be detached to do her job.

When I spoke to Michaeli on Tuesday, she was on her way to a Bedouin village where she and other

Israeli activists had been practicing “protective presence”—spending the night, again and again, to try to deter Jewish settlers from encroaching on the land. The same day, I was trying and failing to get hold of Arik Ascherman, an American-born Israeli rabbi who leads protective-presence efforts. Ascherman called me back two days later: he had been in an Israeli jail, having been detained in the Bedouin village of Wadi al-Siq, where settlers, protected by the Israeli military, had been attacking residents. “In the station, they were cursing me, calling me a ‘fifth column,’ ” Ascherman told me. He encountered a similar attitude during his court hearing. “They don’t differentiate between Palestinian terrorists and Palestinians who are being terrorized,” he said. Ascherman was released after he agreed to stay out of the occupied territories for fifteen days. Meanwhile, the residents of Wadi al-Siq had fled. Ascherman told me that the number of volunteers involved with protective presence had dropped significantly after the Hamas attack. “For some people, it’s because of their own emotional stuff,” he said, “and some people are afraid of the settlers and the Army.”

The “emotional stuff” was playing out in WhatsApp chats of peace activists. “Some people are saying ‘Yes, we are completely critical of the Israeli government, but this is a horrific, unprecedented slaughter of Israelis,’ ” Scheindlin said. “Others are saying that the real story is happening in Gaza.” The disagreements, she said, didn’t always appear along predictable ethnic and geographic lines. (Some participants were outside Israel and the occupied territories.) Some positions, however, seemed predictable, if disappointing. “I will say honestly that I think some Palestinian activists and officials still need to make clear their condemnation of the actions by Hamas,” Gvaryahu said. It occurred to me that, just as it took Michaeli a couple of days to fully grasp that Israeli Jews had become victims of a large-scale atrocity, it may require an effort for Palestinian peace activists to realize that they are now in a position to express sympathy to Israelis.

“This isn’t the time to say ‘Let’s look at Israel’s responsibility in this,’ ” Scheindlin said. “But we say that every time there is a crisis. And, in between, we never look at it.”

Still, the this-isn’t-the-time argument holds. “Judaism has shiva,” Sharon Kleinbaum, the senior rabbi of Congregation Beit Simchat Torah, in New York, reminded me. The word, which literally means “seven,” refers to the week following the death of an immediate family member that Jews devote to intense mourning. They don’t leave the house; they don’t cook; they don’t wear shoes, don’t go to parties, don’t look in the mirror; all they do is grieve. “It’s very hard to experience the grief of the moment and also be super articulate about what it all means,” Kleinbaum said. Kleinbaum has strong ties to the community of Jewish anti-occupation activists in Israel and the United States. Talking to people in the course of the past few days, she said, she was continuously impressed by the depth of grief, shock, and trauma. “It’s Holocaust trauma,” she said, referring to the effect of horrific images of murder, humiliation, and dehumanization of Israeli Jews at the hands of Hamas militants.

American Jewish opponents of the occupation have to thread the same needle as Israeli activists, but with one crucial addition: unlike their Israeli counterparts, Americans can feel pressure to express loyalty to the Israeli state. Rachel Timoner, the senior rabbi of Congregation Beth Elohim, in Park Slope, sent a letter to her congregation on Sunday, pledging to “stand in unequivocal solidarity with Israel and Israelis.” She added, “Usually at C.B.E. we pray for the Israeli protesters fighting for democracy and justice and we pray for peace, freedom, and equality for all inhabitants of the land. That is still our long-term prayer, but at this moment we pray that Israel defeats Hamas.” Kleinbaum, for her part, resisted conflating Israelis and Israel. “I stand with the Israeli people trying hard to create a different future,” she said. “And I stand with the Palestinian people trying hard to create a different future. I don’t stand with the Israeli government. There is no future that’s not a shared future, a shared future with complete equality.”

By the standards of the day, that may come across as a radical statement. Scheindlin, who studies public opinion, said that, though the events of the last few days are unprecedented, their impact on

Israeli politics could be predicted with some certainty. “When there is a major violent escalation, there is only one way public opinion ever goes: right.” The right becomes ever more unified around ideas of victimhood and revenge. The center drifts right, largely because, for many people, security concerns outweigh political views and the belief they may have in a two-state solution. And the left is likely to splinter, as some of its members come to see talking about the role of Israeli policies in bolstering and emboldening Hamas as justifying the attacks. “These ideas have the power to divide the left,” Scheindlin said. “Nobody is thinking subtly right now.”

“This is a real moment of no return,” Gvanyahu said. “I don’t think anything will be the same.” This is the one analytical idea that most Israelis can agree on right now. They interpret it differently, though. “The right expects us to say that we were wrong,” Scheindlin said. “That we were wrong to think we can make peace with the Palestinians. That we were wrong to think we can live with the Palestinians. That we were wrong to see them as equals.”

In fact, anti-occupation activists on the left such as Gvanyahu believe that they were right. “This proves a lot of what we’ve been trying to highlight,” he told me. “That you can’t ignore what’s happening in the Gaza Strip, that it’s not some ex-territory.” Israeli human-rights activists had long said that maintaining Gaza as an open-air prison was not only inhumane toward the residents of Gaza but also a security risk for the region. “We’ve warned for a long time,” Michaeli agreed. “But, when it actually happens, it’s the most devastating thing.”

Masha Gessen

P.S.

- The New Yorker. October 13, 2023:
<https://www.newyorker.com/news/our-columnists/the-tangled-grief-of-israels-anti-occupation-activists>
- Masha Gessen became a staff writer at The New Yorker in 2017. Their latest book is “[Surviving Autocracy](#).”

Masha Gessen’s articles in The New Yorker:

<https://www.newyorker.com/contributors/masha-gessen>