

Oct 7th, 2023

CHOL Writers Share their Thoughts and Feelings



Letters received from.....

1. Merle Levin (Stanford, Western Cape)
2. Karine Schomer (San Francisco)
3. Jack Hoffmann (Copenhagen)
4. Margaret Green (Cape Town)
5. Stephanie Berry (Penzance, Cornwall)
6. Avra Scher (Jerusalem)
7. Marlene Stanger (San Diego)
8. Basil Porter (Tel Aviv)
9. Joseph Rabie (Paris)
10. Laura Dison (Johannesburg)
11. Val Lis (London)
12. Stanley Barkan (Ein Ayala –Haifa))
13. Louise Leibowitz (Sydney)
14. Cathy Miller (Auckland)
15. Fonda Dubb (Eilat)
16. Richelle Shem-Tov (Kiryat Ono)
17. Jodi Schneider Neelin (Portland, Oregon)

1. Merle Levin

Dear Gail,

I write to you from a small town, Stanford, in the Western Cape. The shock and horror of what has happened digs like a dagger in my heart. I am with you in sorrow, in shock in disbelief that we have come to this day in this year.

My husband is online on zoom almost nightly with his students, encouraging them to stay strong and feel the support of the healing community he works with. They are a huge source of inspiration to us as they demonstrate the Israeli spirit of resilience and inner strength.

I go to the supermarket and wonder "how do they go to shop? How do they live normal lives? How does one bear the agony of having a loved one abducted into Gaza?" I walk around feeling as if someone I love deeply has died.

I will tell you a little story about a small upheaval that has paled in the light of this huge event that impacts us all in the deepest way. It concerns my small life in a small town, tucked away at the tip of Africa. A few weeks ago, you may have heard, a flash flood occurred in the Western Cape. A wall of water washed over the mountains. The hundred year flood arrived, unannounced and unexpected.

It destroyed about a hundred homes in our small town, including our new home. We were due to move into it in a few weeks. The owners of the house and their small baby were evacuated by boat from the roof of the house. No lives were lost, just "wereld-se-goed", the things of material value. In the light of what has happened in Israel, everything has fallen into a different perspective.

That flood caught us unawares. In the light of what has happened in Israel, the drama pales. We are alive. We are together. We are safe. We were homeless for a few weeks, but we are now able to find refuge. It all pales in the horror of the babies slaughtered, the terrible stories of what has happened to innocent people. Nothing can compare with this holocaust. In my small way, I use my own challenges to help me connect to those who are suffering and to offer my loving heart and prayers.

Thank you, Gail, for holding this forum. May all be safe and know that prayers are offered non-stop, to those suffering such immeasurable loss.

With my love to you and others in Israel at this time,

Merle

2. Karine Schomer

I so appreciate you sending around to the CHOL group members' communications during this crisis time, and otherwise sharing with us your on-the-ground experience and news. Slightly less directly related, though utterly relevant, was a lecture I went to on campus last Friday put on by the Institute of European Studies. "German Memory Culture at a Crossroad" by Dirk Moses (UCB PhD 2000): <https://events.berkeley.edu/ies/event/207911-gerald-d-and-norma-feldman-annual-lecture-german>.

The lecture was a real eye-opener about the strange twists that the search for some kind of national redemption from the horror of what was done by Germany to the Jews has gone through in the past 50 years.

From the earlier more grassroots and civil society efforts that led to locally based remembrances, Holocaust education, Wiedergutmachung and a widespread "nie wieder" sentiment to the present situation, where the German state deems support for Israel to be a Staatsräson for Germany, with policies effectively making any criticism of Israel nicht erlaubt.

And then, the greatest ironic twist of all: the right-wing idea, attractive to many white Christian Germans, that all these Arab Muslims now in Germany, including many Palestinians, should be made to leave Germany because of their antisemitism! This is seriously being considered, on a massive scale. So it means using "official" opposition to antisemitism because of the German past to justify present-day anti-Muslim racism. Even as the statistics on actual antisemitic acts in Germany is that they overwhelmingly come from the far right rather than from the immigrant Arabs or other Muslims. And the world only seems to be realizing slowly that "Palestinian" and "Hamas" are not the same thing. I can imagine that many, many Gaza Palestinians will, despite their anger and suffering now, be ultimately glad to get Hamas off their backs - if that's what happens

3. Jack Hoffman

Rockets from Gaza light up the skies and smash into homes in southern Israel. Israel retaliates by bombing targets in Gaza. Protesters in London, Toronto, Buenos Aires and Cape Town rampage against Israeli embassies. That is their right. But when they torch Jewish institutions, chant anti-Semitic obscenities and molest Jews in these cities, one begins to wonder.

When Turkey denies rights to Kurds, do protesters in Paris attack French citizens of Turkish origin and desecrate their mosques? When Russia invades Ukraine, do protesters in Amsterdam attack Russian expatriates and defile Russian cemeteries? When China rounds up Uighurs for "re-education" or forced sterilisation, do mobs in London vandalise Chinese restaurants and assault random people of Asian appearance? When Hindus in India terrorise their Muslim compatriots, are television news broadcasts and newspaper columns flooded with anti-Hindu diatribes?

If Israel errs, are all Jews guilty?

Misinformation nurtures mistrust. Hatred thrives in darkness.

The question that inevitably arises when debating the Israel - Palestine problem, is "Who struck the first blow?"

Did Hamas fire rockets as a reaction to Israeli aggression or did Israel bomb buildings in Gaza because of Hamas' stated desire to destroy Israel.

Which is the chicken and which the egg?

However, the origin of the problem arose much deeper in the past than the current conflagration.

Whether ignorant or enlightened, everyone has an opinion about the Israel– Palestinian conflict. Each assumes to know where to place the blame.

Where, in all fairness, should reasonable people place this blame?

In order to make a decision about right and wrong, one has to delve beneath the daily headlines. One has to start at the beginning.

J.H ctd 2-

Does Israel's right to the land give it permission to dominate the Palestinians? The answer is an unequivocal "No".

Does the fact of Palestinian legitimacy in the region give it the right to deny Israel's claims?

Again, no.

Should not the area of pre-1948 Palestine be divided into two states, two sovereign states living in harmony side by side?

Given the facts outlined above, the answer must be "Yes" and this was, in fact, what was offered to the Palestinians as long ago as 1937 by the Peel Commission and by the UN in 1947. They rejected the offer on both occasions. War followed in 1948, and then again in 1967 and 1973. In subsequent peace talks in 2000 and 2006, similar partition plans for a two-state solution were close to being agreed upon. However, these ended in the sand because the Palestinians demanded more than the Israelis, the victors of the wars, were willing to concede. Victors have this right. More wars followed.

Does Israel discriminate against and oppress the Palestinians?

Yes and no.

20% of the population of Israel is Palestinian Arab. They are Israeli citizens and, on paper, have the same rights as Jewish Israelis; full and equal democratic rights, including the right to vote for, and sit in, the Israeli parliament. An Israeli Palestinian can, theoretically, be elected prime minister of Israel. Israeli Palestinians attend Israeli universities and contribute, in vast numbers, to professions such as medical doctors, nurses and pharmacists.

But they, nevertheless, suffer discrimination, which is rather more socially based than politically mandated. Few would, however, dispute that Israeli Palestinians, especially women, have greater rights, more freedom and vastly more opportunity than the citizens of most Moslem countries and certainly more rights than Palestinians living under the leadership of Fatah and Hamas in the West Bank and in Gaza, where democratic elections have not been held for years.

J.H ctd 3-

The situation of the citizens of the occupied territories is decidedly less favourable than that of the Israeli Palestinians. It demands improvement and resolution. Continued occupation is unacceptable.

Why is nothing happening in this regard?

Most Israelis accept the right of the Palestinians to exist. Do Palestinians grant Israelis the same right?

The leaders of Hamas, Islamic Jihad and Hezbollah together with their sponsors, Iran, unequivocally and without qualification, deny the right of Israel to exist and preach vehemently for its destruction.

This is the background for the current stalemate.

Leaders like Yitzchak Rabin could possibly have made peace in the final decade of the last century. He was assassinated by a Jewish extremist. During most of the period since then a ruthless, amoral, egocentric Israeli leader has utilised the classic ploy of history's dictators: Stimulate and nurture the fears of the people and proclaim that only you can save them from their enemy. This leader has pulled the population to the right by cultivating and proliferating their fears. Hatred, bigotry and unbridled nationalism has resulted.

The leaders of Fatah and Hamas have used the same psychological weapons to remain in power.

A vicious cycle has resulted.

Israelis tell the Palestinians, "You want to kill me. I must defend myself by any means!"

The Palestinians tell the Israelis, "You are oppressing me. I must attack you by any means!"

Israelis ask, "How can we make peace with people who wish only for our destruction."

The answer: Japan is at peace with the USA today and Israel at peace with Germany.

Palestinians ask. "How can I make peace with foreign occupiers?"

J.H Ctd 4-

The answer to both parties is, "Peace is the only viable path towards a secure and prosperous future."

Is Israel's current bombardment of Gaza justified, or is it over-reaction?

What we witnessed on 7th October is, without doubt, the worst attack against Jewish civilians since WWII.

The scale of atrocity is beyond imagining - not simple shootings, but throat cutting, beheadings, burning alive, rape, hostage taking, displaying victims publicly as war trophies. The victims include babies, children and old people.

Statistically, what happened on 7th October is ten times worse than 9/11. On 9/11, there were 3000 victims among 300 million Americans, which is 0.001% of the population. On 10/7, there were 1500 victims among 9 million Israelis, which is 0.01% of the population. It's difficult to "overreact" to that.

One way of looking at the situation, is that Hamas is not only holding Israelis as hostages, but they are holding the entire population of Gaza hostage as well. They knew that Israel would react the way they are, and they knew that their own people would pay the price. They knew that Israel would be made to look as if they were nonchalant, brutal killers of civilians, bombers of schools, hospitals and mosques.

Israel went after Hamas with ground forces in Gaza in the three previous wars.

They stopped before crushing Hamas because of unacceptable casualties and pressure of world opinion, especially from the USA. The Israelis consider that the result of not completing the task this previous time, is what we have seen this month. They conclude now, that they have to eliminate Hamas, whatever the cost, even if it means killing the Israeli hostages.

Is it acceptable to kill civilians in order to achieve a military goal?

The Israeli thinking here is, if we are forced to kill their civilians in order to save ours, then "yes".

J.H ctd 5

Is there a precedent for this? Yes, the carpet bombing of cities like Dresden and Frankfurt by the British, and the use of the atom bomb by the USA against Japan in WWI, are pertinent examples. This approach was much debated even then, but it achieved the intended goals. The destruction of Hamas cannot be achieved without enormous destruction and losses on both sides - and even then, Hamas, or its credo, will arise again in another form. It could also mean re-occupation of Gaza, which the Israelis don't want or need.

It must be added that many believe that Hamas and the other organizations supported by Iran, are totally uninterested in a Palestinian state. Their ultimate aim is a Caliphate encompassing the entire Middle East and beyond.

4. Margaret Green

Dear Gail

Thank you so much for holding a space open for us group of writers and readers during this horrendous time of grief and destruction. I have appreciated the different perspectives of the people who have written to you and I did not want to stay strangely silent.

I don't suppose there is a Jew on the planet who doesn't have some kind of history with Israel and who remained unaffected by the events of October 7th.

So, I thought I would write some snippets of my story with Israel and how recent events have affected me. I am trying to bear in mind that you live in Israel and will read this differently than a Diaspora Jew like myself.

I was alive at the beginning. In 1948, I was seven years old and I went with my mother and I think an older sister to an event at the Weizmann Hall in Sea Point. It was bedecked with Israeli flags which I thought were beautiful, and people were very excited and thrilled.

In 1955, I went on an overseas trip with girls from my boarding school. Our first stop was Israel. It seemed almost unbelievable to be visiting a country that was only 7 years old! Tel Aviv in those days was a small seaside town. There were tent cities in many places full of refugees from Arab lands and most surprising of all to me as a White South African, the street cleaners and the caretakers were European and spoke Yiddish!

By the 70's, I had a married sister living in Tel Aviv and I had visited quite often, especially to attend workshops of an international network of peer counsellors that I belonged to in the UK where I was living. In those years, I was beginning to find it quite hard being a foreigner in England, particularly in left and feminist circles to which I belonged. Having a South African accent automatically singled one out for pariah status. I wondered if I wouldn't be a lot happier living in Israel. This was not long after the Yom Kippur War, a time when it seemed to me (naively in retrospect) that the occupation would end at some point and a two-state solution would be found. I was a budding psychotherapist so I dreamt: *I was looking at a big clock in a department store. It was close to 5.00 pm and it was closing time at Marks and Spencer.*

I took it as an injunction - it was not for me to go and live in Israel (an extremely small country) as a consumer, just because I was a little dissatisfied with my life. There was hardly space for the Jews who might need it as a refuge e.g., from Argentina or the

M.G ctd 2-

Soviet Union. And so, I continued my Diaspora life. More wars and a couple of *intifadas* later and I was pretty numb to what was going on. The situation began to feel pretty hopeless. I knew what I thought - the occupation should've ended long ago; there were two peoples with legitimate rights; they seemed to be headed for never-ending conflict. I kept my passions for other things.

About 18 months ago, I took my first pandemic trip to see my sister, my nieces and their families and to do some research on my "Finding Borys" story at Yad Vashem. We hung out with each other for the first time in many years; we got closer. So, this October, of-course, I wanted to reach out to them and give attention to anyone who needed it. An Israeli peer counsellor had written to her Diaspora Jewish and Gentile allies - 'if you want to give me attention, don't tell me about what is right and what is wrong. Think of a time you have been hurt or humiliated or bullied or sexually assaulted and deal with your own feelings about those, before you offer me any time.'

My niece challenged me because of a comment I'd made. She said "You don't understand - this is not about revenge. You are treating this like a horror movie." I thought she was probably right. I never do watch horror movies. That's exactly what I was doing and had been doing for years. Avoiding feeling anything!

I thought about a time I'd felt my life was threatened. I don't like to feel those feelings. I was little. I just wanted the perpetrators disappeared - I didn't care how; into some abyss - the mountain into which the children were led by the Pied Piper of Hamelin came to mind. And because I couldn't fight those perpetrators, I desperately wanted to be rescued. Remembering these feelings, I began to understand those first reactions in my Israeli family and in many other Israelis, not only calling for the annihilation of Hamas, but also so relieved at Biden's first speech in which he promised to have Israel's back.

About the same time, I listened to an old friend in Haifa. We had been colleagues in our London days. She had been distraught in the first 24 hours or so - her son was at one of the parties in the South. You probably know those stories - running in the desert for hours and finally finding a place to hide. She told me a very touching story about some friends of his - they were helped by a Bedouin man who risked his life giving them water and letting them hide packed like sardines under his house, while they watched the booted feet of the Hamas militia creating havoc all around them. Apparently, quite a few youngsters were helped by Bedouins. A few days later we spoke again - she had spent days crying. "I feel I have lost a parent," she said, "I feel so betrayed - where was the country? The security services, the police, the army." She did not mention the government against whom she has been protesting every week for three years now.

M.G ctd 3-

"Can you understand what I am saying? What that feels like?" She expected me to say yes, but I had to admit I didn't. I said I'd never felt that way - I'd never felt, on the three continents in which I've lived, protected by the authorities of the state in which I was residing. (If I'm honest, maybe a little in England - in the UK of the 70's, there was a functioning National Health System, a Welfare system and council housing).

Nevertheless, it was an eye-opening moment for me. So that's what the dream of a Jewish state was partly about - that children could grow up feeling protected and innocent - not really having to pay attention to the dangers surrounding them. What a luxury! As a Diaspora Jew, I can hardly imagine it. Although I have led a very privileged life as a White South African, there was always some arm of the state to be wary of - usually the police.

5. Stephanie Berry

One thing we often hear from people since 7 Oct is that there are just no words to express how they feel about the immeasurable horror and pain of the situation that has unfolded since then.

"This dim vast vale of tears, vacant and desolate" remarked Percy Bysshe Shelley in his "Hymn to Intellectual Beauty". True, the greats of literature may wield their quills a little more dexterously than some of us every now and then! But, as the very excellent Sophie Nicholls' "Dear Writing" newsletter, which made its way to my inbox on Friday, tells us, there are several good reasons to get things onto the page right now. So, I sent this to Gail and she has suggested forwarding it to the CHOL group. I hope some of you may find it useful and if you like, you too can become a subscriber to the "Dear Writing" newsletter which is sent out regularly. Just click on the link below.

[SOPHIE NICHOLL'S WRITING TIPS](#)

For now, please take utmost care of yourselves everyone wherever you are and irrespective of whether the blank page beckons or not.

Stephanie Berry

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## **6. Avra Scher**

### **Facts, feelings and thoughts by Avra Scher.**

#### **October 7, 2023. Shabbat / Simchat Torah**

Prior to Shabbat or Chag we switch off our cell phones. That Shabbat we were planning to go to Beit Knesset. It was the time to say Yizkor and I wanted to be there for this prayer in memory of my dear Dad. A wailing siren broke into the tranquil silence of the early morning. My daughter switched on her phone: "Ima, we are at war down South". We clung to each other. A message from my son, "I am on my way to base, will let you know when I get there".

The siren was wailing again, again and again. I said Yizkor quietly at home. A message arrived from my daughter's base "to be on standby for this week". Sunday, October 8, she was called up, put on her uniform and took her kitbag.

My two children are in uniform and on duty. My son is in permanent force in the Israel Air Force on an operational base down South. That Shabbat he was off base and was called to duty. Work has been intense, day and night. He is part of the ground force team, including working on the runways. He has been home for two separate overnights. I am grateful for any precious time together.

My daughter completed her two years' service in surveillance, on one of our borders, in the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) August 2022. She had an option to hand over her uniform and would have fulfilled her service or to sign up for reserve duty / "miluim". She chose the latter.

That Saturday night, I received a message from a Mom whom I worked with over the summer. Her husband was called to his unit down South, the toddler's kindergarten was closed and she needed help. Can I look after him? Of course, I replied. They were so grateful and I was calmer being busy. Ten days later, the Dad received an overnight time off to come home. The following morning, he brought the toddler to me. The little one clung to him saying "Abba, Abba". A few moments passed, me on the side watching this precious moment. Dad handed him to me. They live across the road to us. A short while later I saw him in uniform ready to return to the South. This was one of thousands of homes and families going through similar moments like I had recently experienced. Three weeks later

## A.S ctd-2

the Home Front finally gave the official positive response to reopen kindergartens and schools which have proper shelters.

The routine is important and keeps my mind off the constant news commentary. It allows a bit of sanity in these unreal times. I, like most people here in Israel, am worried, upset and try and find a small moment of goodness to hold onto and to move on.

We live opposite the Jerusalem forest, which surrounds Yad VaShem, Israel's National Memorial to the 6 000 000 Jews who were murdered in the Nazi Holocaust and Mount Herzl which is the National Military Cemetery. The first two weeks of this War, there were tens of funerals daily. The loudspeakers were set on a high volume. We, in Beit HaKerem could hear every word, the murmurings, the crying, the Prayers and the 3 gun salute shooting that finalized the funeral. Some nights it continued until 1:30 am.

My daughter was home from her base last weekend Thursday 26 - 29 October. We were surprised by an overnight visit from my son, Thursday afternoon until early Friday morning. My cup runneth over! It was the first time since the war started that my two children were together. I cried, tears of joy and awe, seeing them both in uniform, hearing snippets of conversation, even mundane stories. But, these are now treasured moments from this overwhelmingly sad time in our lives. We went to visit my Mom. She was overjoyed at seeing two of her grandchildren in uniform.

My daughter and I were invited to friends for Shabbat dinner. One of the sons, aged 7 years, in third grade, was chatting to us. He mentioned that one day they were in a park with their Mom. A siren went off. He related that he said to his Mom that "Avra's (i.e.my) son is in the Air Force. Maybe they should call him to help". I was amazed that at that moment when they were running to reach a shelter, he thought of this. A child tells this with a balance of innocence and maturity during the trauma that the population is experiencing. He continued explaining how the atmosphere in school is different because many of the teachers are now in the army.

End of October I started working with a new baby. I met the parents over the summer and knew that the Mom is a medical student and the Dad is studying to be a Social Worker. Tuesday, October 31, the Mom called to say she is picking up the baby early as she's going to a funeral at Mount Herzl. A soldier, in reserves, was killed on our Northern border. The Dad of the baby is the Company Commander of this soldier. As the funeral started here in Jerusalem, the siren was sounded. I rushed downstairs to our safety

### **A.S ctd-3**

room. My next-door neighbour told me that that soldier's wife had been her daughter's class teacher for two years.

Wednesday, November 1, 2023, the morning news, names of soldiers killed in Gaza. One name, from our neighbourhood, hit too close to home. That soldier, a year older than my son, was in the same kindergarten and junior school. His younger brother was in kindergarten with my daughter. I remember their Mom who was such a vivacious and active person on committees etc. She passed away a number of years ago.

I stood amongst hundreds in the intermittent rain as the funeral took place at Mount Herzl, Jerusalem. We heard the praises, the hopes for the future and the cruel reality of this death. His fiancée and family were trying to speak while crying over this devastating loss. They announced their engagement at the end of September. A week later, he was down South.

An injured soldier, who could barely stand, came from rehabilitation in hospital to pay respect and be there. One sees such a cross section of our population, many in uniform who received time off from their military positions to be there. All of us standing shoulder to shoulder, teary eyed and heartbroken. Instead of starting life as a soon to be husband, his life has ended.

Slowly, quietly, sighing, wiping away tears and moving away, I saw someone from Shaare Zedek Medical Centre. I remembered her from when I worked there. We quietly exchanged words. I told her that I knew the soldier when he was a child. She asked me if I remember Becky, who was the director of a Professor's clinic. Of course, I did. She told me that Becky is the soldier's grandmother. His late mother was her daughter. I couldn't believe it. Circles of knowing people from different places and times in one's life.

The academic year in Israel starts in mid or late October. Initially the opening date was changed to early November. At present, it is December 5. My children, like thousands of other students had signed up to start studies now. At this rate, they might lose out on the time of a semester.

The civilian population who immediately started volunteering is phenomenal. There are swings of change during these sad and chaotic times. People, citizens of all ages, who a few weeks ago couldn't say one decent word to someone who didn't think the same way, are literally sleeping (when they can) next to each other. The phenomenal 130 % reserve /

#### **A.S ctd-4**

*miluim*, attendance across the country is beyond anyone's imagination. They are all sharing a common, very serious goal to protect our country. The soldier standing wrapped with Tallit and Tefillin, while his comrade makes breakfast or coffee for them.

The beyond humane ZAKA teams who take on the task of lifting every single body, parts of bodies and sifting through the ground to pick out the ashes of the burnt bodies. They do this Holy work to make sure that the remains are treated with utmost respect. There are literally not sufficient words to describe the gratitude that they deserve. They talk about not being able to eat, sleep and function. The sights, the smells and the horrors that they were facing are beyond one's imagination.

The desire from the Haredi / ultra-religious communities to want to put on uniform and serve in the Israel Defense Forces is another example of change. Hundreds are already going through basic training now.

The phenomenal teams at the Abu Kabir National Forensic Institute who had the unreal tasks of processing, emotionally and physically, what their eyes were seeing and their noses were smelling and trying to sort through hundreds of body bags. Some bags had the parts of 5 or more different people.

The number of kibbutzim and restaurants who have switched their kitchens to totally kosher which enabled them to prepare food packages for our soldiers, including those who observe kashrut. As well as for thousands of refugees who had to leave the South. Many are mourning the loss of family members or kidnapped family, no home to return to, no clothes and no possessions. The population of the North was evacuated as precaution against Hezbollah attacks from Lebanon.

The incredible teams of Magen David Adom / MDA who arranged emergency blood bank donation outlets. Due to the overwhelming response from the public, more days had to be organized

This was the first time since I live in Israel (December 1979) that I saw helicopters on the Beitar sports field next to Shaarei Zedek Medical Centre. The Southern hospitals were overburdened and patients were evacuated to Jerusalem.

The medical staff, nurses, doctors, surgeons, social workers, psychologists, psychiatrists, laboratory technicians and cleaning staff have been on duty round the clock. All hospitals in Israel are overburdened with the heavy workload and the emotional upheaval of the national tragedy



May all our forces who are protecting us, come home safely.

May the world leaders open their eyes and realise that this is a serious international global problem based in Iran with feelers across the world. They have to deal with the despicable anti-Israel and anti-Jewish propaganda that they are witnessing in their capitals, on the university campuses and against the Jewish communities.

Personal update, November 3, 2023, Friday afternoon, erev Shabbat. My daughter came home from reserve / *miluim* duty. She put her life on hold and answered the call of duty. Now she has been released and needs time to unwind, return to civilian life and her work with youth in the Scouts Youth Movement, religious group.

She quickly changed out of her IDF uniform into civilian clothes. We were blessed to stand together, Mom and daughter, as we lit our Shabbat candles. We light an extra pair of candles for the Mothers who were kidnapped to Gaza and cannot bring the light and tranquility of Shabbat into their own homes. A bit later we went to Beit Knesset for Shabbat evening prayers.

May all our prayers, no matter where and how they are said, be answered. Amen

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7. Marlene Stanger

Here in sunny San Diego the sun does not shine so brightly right now.

As Jews have experienced through the millennia, even in the most egalitarian societies, it does not take very much for the veneer that hides antisemitism to wear thin.

In the quiet suburb of Carmel Valley, home to several shuls and many Jewish families, swastikas have defiled a local high school, a pro Palestine poster has been put up at the small liquor store that stocks all the South African and British wines and goodies and is owned by a gay couple that was erroneously blamed (it was posted outside and the Jewish client who saw it put a pic on social media that caused great anguish to the couple who have now placed their own message outside the store....unfortunately she did not speak to the couple first...), a local women's clothing store a few minutes' walk away was the scene of a screaming match between an Israeli woman and a young shop assistant who yelled at her that Palestine must be free and to learn her history...

And the university campuses here and throughout the country have erupted in calls for From the River to the Sea, Palestine must be free...

My former law school professor, a Jew herself, in our heated email exchange after the 7th, following the publication of her article in Truthout, said the stories of Hamas atrocities had been debunked. This was early days and the full extent of atrocities were not known, but enough was already known.

My non-Jewish liberal "friends" – I call them the BUT people – trotted out the usual tropes about oppressors and oppressed, occupation, apartheid, Israeli terrorism, open air prison – all the usual. Meanwhile, when asked to condemn the Hamas terror in absolute terms, there were still the yes we do BUT.

My Lebanese neighbor, my dear friend, with whom I had daily conversations and with whom, together, we tried to fashion our own plan for middle eastern peace, has been absent from our courtyard. Our two minor conversations have derailed because of the BUT factor. Her husband, a scientist with macular degeneration whose life is curtailed and who spends his days doing woodwork in his garage with his dogs at his side, is trying and asked that the war not be waged in our courtyard. I agree, his world is shrinking and his pleasure and ours has been to have long conversations, cups of tea, shared wine, sometimes whiskey, both in the courtyard throughout COVID and at each other's homes. He holds out the olive branch. He is also a BUT person – but we decided to cut him a little slack so as not to isolate him further into his closed garage.

M.S ctd 2-

We love the same food, have similar sensibilities, understand each other, have laughed together, partied together, but the pain on each side runs a little too deep now. Difference, I feel her pain too. Have not had evidence from her that she feels mine.

I am on the phone daily to my sister Netty in Tel Aviv. Many days she has had to run when I called and then I hear, briefly, the siren shriek before the phone goes dead. Her granddaughter Mia, with Safta while school is on the zoom only days, is too scared to go out in the afternoons. So they play at home.

It haunts your brain and hurts at cellular level to know what Hamas did.

The death toll will rise. It tears the heart apart. The thin veneers covering antisemitism are tearing too.

A lot of us feel we are sleepwalking. What I truly resent is seeing organizations I have supported ardently as a liberal person unable to call evil when they see it.

Wishing family and friends in Israel strength and resilience. Wishing Jews everywhere safety.

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## 8. Basil Porter

### WHAT “NEXT STAGE”?

How does one stay sane during a war? What does “stages” mean in the context of ongoing war? Doesn’t everyone know that success in war rests a lot on managing the unpredictable? Probably one of the best examples of the modern era is the Brits during a blitz and a five-year war. How did they do it? I’m not an historian, but seems that two things allowed them to survive and grow from the hideous conflagration – the national characteristic of the “stiff upper lip”, and the presence of a leader, Churchill, whose every word in every speech assured the country that after much loss of life and spilling of blood, and destruction, there would be a new day.

We have lived through the Six-Day war, the Yom Kippur war, in addition to the multiple smaller wars. The War of Attrition followed the Six Day war, when we felt that we had shown our neighbors who is the boss in the Middle East, and then was the horrendous period of the Lebanon wars, the intifadas, followed by the recurrent recent Gaza upheavals. We were away from Israel during the Gulf war, when large rockets hitting Tel Aviv was really terrifying, with no protection available, and Iron Dome waiting to be invented. It has always been scary to feel that the country is losing control, but up to now, even the surprise of the Yom Kippur war was followed within ten days by a turn of the tide, and restoration of our faith in our leaders and the country, warts and all. Our leaders have never put up a great show, e.g. Sharon neutralizing an ailing and depressed Begin in the First Lebanon war, and Golda never recovering from the shock of having been tricked into a major war, despite her calming voice, kitchen cabinet and never trying to reach a hand out to Sadat for a peace initiative. Of course, following every war, comes the endless new lot of funerals, touching every family in this tiny country. But life always somehow gets back to routine pretty quickly, and one learns that as much as the Jews are experts at arguing and infighting, in times of war, we rally together.

The ecology of the October Seventh disaster (as it should be called), was quite different. Only two years ago, we had managed to elect a broad-based government that functioned for a year like a government should, with a prime minister who clearly saw his duty first and foremost to his country. Prior to this, a protest movement had formed to demand that Bibi resign, for many reasons, but basically when it was clear that his first priority was not the country. Thousands of people demonstrated for almost a year to try and change the country’s leadership, and after a spate of elections, a fragile coalition was formed. But as usual, the Jews proved themselves experts at destroying themselves, and two right-wing conservative religious members of the coalition allowed a Bibi government to return, on steroids. Have we already forgotten? The judicial reform was another surprise attack, enabling a force from within to set an agenda for creating an autocracy. For nine months, we showed a huge democratic opposition that the country had never seen, but the reform crept slowly ahead with a dedicated core of right wing extreme religious - nationalists determined to take over the rules of the game.

## B.P ctd -2

But things change very quickly in this country. Just three weeks ago we awakened to the greatest surprise of them all, when the Hamas leadership showed us again just how not invincible, we are. The war is far from over, and the guns on both sides have not rested, while two hundred hostages have further tragically complicated the equation. Reading the news, and hearing from some of you about what is happening on university campuses, shows that another new element is raising its head, the Jewish opposition to Israel. This really hurts. Just as Hamas fighters are young people who have never had a serious discussion about the Arab-Israeli conflict, and have never met a Jew on any point of the political spectrum, now it seems that a generation of Jews with no backbone of Jewish identification or understanding, are allowing their liberal views to be expressed only through identifying with the suffering Palestinians (and they certainly are suffering!). Reasonable dialogue is dead.

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9. Joseph Rabie

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And so we witness with dismay the population of Gaza attempting to scramble to safety in the throes of humanitarian disaster. The Israeli military has warned them of impending hostilities, and is exhorting them to clear out. But at the same time, Hamas militants are allegedly ordering them to stay put, and threaten them if they leave. The Israeli military consider that they have done their humanitarian duty (whether lip-service or sincere is hard to say), and what happens to those who stay behind and get caught in the crossfire is considered unfortunate, collateral damage that is no longer their affair.

All this raises a troubling question: why are there no air raid shelters in Gaza, after so many years of bombing? Why hasn't Hamas provided a defensive infrastructure to protect their civilian population, in the knowledge that the Israeli air force attacks those densely populated residential areas precisely because they contain military targets? It's not as if Hamas lacks the know-how to build underground. Quite the contrary, they have spared no expense in the construction bunkers to safely house their military complex. In Israel, every inhabitant has access to shelter, either an obligatory strongroom in each apartment, or underground neighbourhood shelters.

When Hamas attacked Israel in the way they did last weekend, they knew pertinently that

J.R ctd 2-

Israel would retaliate with maximal force, far more extreme than in any previous engagement between the two. And this is undoubtedly part of Hamas's plan, they have drawn up lines of battle to greet the Israeli military with maximal lethality. But instead of Hamas doing all in their power to protect the civilian population in the confined urban configuration making up Gaza City, they have exposed them in the front line. Cynically weaponising the victimhood of their own citizens, for the most macabre political gain.

Can one imagine, at the end of all this, that both peoples rid themselves of the leadership that has served them so badly, that they defy the conflictual logic that seems to govern human nature, and envisage coexistence as their only viable option?

~~~~~

## 10. Laura Dison

Thank you for Jack's moving account and for these stories and reflections. In Johannesburg, from my experience of teaching at the university, the tragedy in Israel seems to have pushed people further into their silos. But a few Muslim colleagues and students have expressed concern and enquired after my family in Israel. The Joburg community has come out in full force to do what they can, and decent people are mourning the loss of human lives, trying to keep away from the echo chamber of dehumanised polarised views.

Our thoughts are with you constantly and please take care during this horrific time.

Much love

Laura

## 11. Val Lis

Dear Gail,

I cannot imagine what you are going through at this very worrying time and I hope that you and your family and friends are safe. I attended a memorial service on Monday evening where we heard testimony from three Israelis which made we weep.

It's when you hear personal stories that the scale of this horrific tragedy has maximum impact.

Many thanks for sharing Jack's excellent writing which I need to process.

The news coverage has been compulsive viewing but of course it feeds into my feeling of despair and helplessness.

Thanks again for all you have done and continue doing to enrich our lives.

Stay safe.

All the best,

Val x



## 12. Stanley Barkan

This post is about a funeral – the funeral of Rafi and Orit Svirsky. Their death is tragic and devastating and was also savage and horrific. They were murdered on Kibbutz Beeri on October 7th, as were at least one hundred other people. I knew Rafi and Orit well enough to be deeply affected and Tamie knew them intimately, from a young age. Words are poor tools for expressing the depth of sadness, injustice, rebellion and anger I feel. They are almost useless to express Tamie's emotions. Let me just tell you what happened.

The drive to Hulda was quiet. We came via route 6 and route 3, passing right by Wahat al-Salam/Neve Shalom, the Palestinian Jewish village located on the slopes of the Jerusalem hills. I thought of Rayek, who owns the café at the entrance to the village and wrote the book "The Anteater and the Jaguar" about living there. What would he be saying about all this? Right now, who cares? Leave that for another day. We need to get to the funeral on time.

As we enter the dirt road leading to the cemetery, both sides are lined with members of kibbutz Hulda, each holding a single red rose. We are surprised and inundated with a feeling of ocean-wide community. Rafi and Orit were from Beeri and Hulda is only a temporary burial site until Beeri recovers, sometime in the future. (Who'll go back to Beeri and who will leave forever, I think.)

We come to the first cars lining the path well before the cemetery. Should we park here? Some of the flower-bearers seem to be orderlies and beckon us on. We proceed and park in a large flat area right by the entrance to the cemetery. There is room for at least a few dozen cars. So why did people park so far away? Automatic behavior I guess – you watch the car before you park and assume the parking lot must be full. How common it is to believe a false conception. Wasn't that a core mistake?

We take our hats and water bottle and walk towards the cemetery. There are already tens of people thronging the entrance and the clearing before the swathe of trees that shades the existing graves. Besides the entrance there are tables with fruit and bottles of water for those who've driven a long way without refreshment. Tamie strides ahead to find the members of Beeri and of her "Garin Nahal" army unit who have also come to pay their last respects to Rafi. Soldiers of the "Garin" spent much of their time on Beeri and many stayed on – some for several years, like Tamie, and some for most of their life, like Rafi. I grab a bottle of water and lope after her.

Tamie finds a kibbutz friend Uri. Should I say a survivor? Yes I should. Uri survived. Uri is in the hotel at the Dead Sea. Like everyone there, each evening he hears who is dead and who

## S.B ctd 2-

has been abducted, officially. The definitive identification takes time. Everyone has known for several days that Orit and Rafi are dead but their fate was confirmed only the day before yesterday, after the dental experts finished their job. Uri's face is longer than I remember it and his gaze is downcast. He says this will be the last funeral he attends. He can't go through it any more.

Tamie finds her "Nahal" friends and they fall on each other's shoulders. They don't know what to say. They alternate between grim and smiling faces, mostly wet-eyed. I look around. There are now hundreds of people. The majority of those present are older — Rafi and Orit were 70 after all — but quite a few are younger, friends of Rafi's and Orit's four children I presume. I can't shake the thought off that almost all the attendants belong to the same milieu, descending from those who were pioneers or those who came from the holocaust. But then it is what it is, isn't it — these are the people that settled the southern border. In some other cemetery, others are burying 50 (!) people who were murdered in Ofakim, a parallel milieu. And what about the dancing throng of diverse people who were cut down at the Nova party? The grim Hamas reaper is blind.

Near where I stand there are two microphones and a chair with cables running off to one side. As I'm wondering about the layout the sound system starts up and someone announces that the ceremony is about to begin, clearly not a religious one. We learn that Rafi has made it clear long ago that the one request he has for his burial is that they play Rachmaninoff's Second Piano Concerto and so that is what they are going to do.

The piano starts and after thirty seconds the first lilting melody — da, da-da, da-da, da-da-da-da, ... — I break down, crying inside with duct glands working too. I think of Rafi at the Jazz festivals in Eilat. Always there and seeing twice as many concerts as us. I never knew he was a classics listener too. I hear about it later when the eulogies start. But mostly I think of Orit, whom I knew much better and counted as a personal friend. She had that rare ability to make you feel warm and wanted, even though you might see her twice a year.

After a full seven minutes and a complete spiritual journey they fade the sound. (I know it was more than seven minutes because I remembered where they faded out and I checked later YouTube).

A few meters in front of me Rafi and Orit's eldest, Yoni, rises to the microphone stand with his back to me. Yoni says Yizkor, not the Jewish "Yizkor Elohim" (God remember) but a moving secular version during which Yoni breaks into tears several times. Two siblings are holding his back on either side as he speaks. Where is the third sibling, Itai? Ah, he is somewhere in Gaza. I struggle to push down the anxiety that wells up within me.

A man rises to the microphone and begins to speak. He tells Rafi's story, simply and clearly, with respect and some admiration. Rafi clearly deserves no less. Originally a chemist and an

### S.B ctd 3-

economist, he became a key figure in the establishment of Beeri Press, the body that prints the payment requests of most large organizations and municipal authorities in Israel. What defined Rafi however was his breadth of culture – books, music, art, concerts and museums, a walking encyclopedia, introverted but socially aware, a socialist. Rafi is the person Beeri chose to manage their pension scheme and funds, for several hundred members.

And the reapers fell upon HIM, I think.

Now it is Merav, Yoni's twin sister's, turn. I know Merav. She's a very talented and original artist. I've been to her exhibitions. As she speaks, her aura projects a completeness and integrity. She speaks directly, and with palpable love, to her mother and father in the name of their children, also succumbing here and there to an uncontrollable gulp and shudder. She explains that her mother had a favorite song and this too they will play. She invites Maya Belsitzman to come and perform. A man pushes past me saying make way, make way and I finally understand what the two microphones and chair are for. Maya approaches and sits down right in front of me with her cello, tunes it a little and begins to sing and play. She has a looper at her feet and so we hear an exquisitely rich and original rendition of the moving song *Hayi Shketa* (Words – Rachel Shapira, Music – Yehuda Poliker). I break down again. Music does what words alone struggle to effect. This song IS Orit, in all her literal glory. I see Orit's home, shown totally burnt in one television broadcast, as it was when we were in it, having lunch after an Orit-led hike through the countryside around Beeri, –in the brown and green hills strewn with slashes of red anemones and croppings of smaller flowers that we stopped to browse.

Every corner of the house, even the window sill I look at when I'm in her bathroom, is filled with some aesthetic article, whether it be a small statue, a piece of fabric or one of her beautifully simple but intriguing art works. The incomprehensible loss of Orit runs deep in my body, more than I expected. I reach out to hold Tamie, whose much deeper emotions I can just imagine. The song takes forever and despite the sorrow, I don't want it to end. Is this catharsis?

Maya finishes, and someone else takes the microphone to speak. She speaks of Orit and her multiple roles – teacher, school principal, HR manager of Beeri Press who introduces the first outside paid employees and succeeds in banning smoking in the factory despite the grievances of all the veteran kibbutz workers, General Manager of Beeri Press, the list goes on.

Then the thought of the NINE HUNDRED souls (now one thousand, I believe), each an entire world, snuffed out pervades me and I can barely breathe.

The series of eulogizers reaches its end and someone announces that the ceremony will end with a piece composed for the funeral by Shai Maestro, the jazz pianist, in honor of Rafi. The

#### S.B ctd -4

piano recording starts and it's a beautifully lyrical composition that soothes ragged nerves and provides the drained audience a means to start up and move on.

I am now empty.

The audience mills about. I see people coming to comfort Merav and watch her close her eyes in her composed way, with each person she embraces. What inner strength – there is something complete and erect in her figure, just like her mother. I feel sad and encouraged at the same time.

We meander to the grave to place our memorial flowers and our friends Sefi and Dafna appear from the other direction. I didn't realize they were here, watching the speakers from the front side. Sefi's the one who grew up on Beeri and whom I worked alongside for seven years. His brother was also murdered (I can't believe I'm writing this) and we were at the shiva the day before. Sefi and Dafna are also the couple who take (took?!) us to Beeri to hike around the countryside with Orit. Stop the world, I want to get off. We commiserate again.

A few more hellos and goodbyes with old friends of Tamie's and we make our way to the car. Driving home is excruciating. All I want to do is sleep. To sleep, perchance to dream.

~~~~~

13. Louise Leibowitz

Dear Gail,

We are all with you, even though we are so far away.

Here in Sydney people talk of nothing but the conflict. We carry on our normal lives halfheartedly, exercise, shop, meet friends for coffee, pick up our grandkids from their heavily guarded Jewish schools, all with a heavy feeling, with a constant palpable anxiety for Israel, and an ever-present fear of antisemitic action here in our supposedly multi-cultural safely isolated country.

We know there is no more normal, wherever we live. It's a new scary world for us and we can only imagine your situation. Our thoughts are with you all.

Hamas's horrors have reached us down under and exploded our liberal peace seeking beliefs: turned us upside down and moved us all to the right: I can feel myself supporting some form of extreme military reaction I would never have wished for or thought justified before. I don't know the new me.

Many non-Jewish friends have reached out, including the fruit shop man, the beautician, hairdresser, cleaning lady. I have not heard from one of my non- Jewish university colleagues. It's like getting a wakeup call when you are already awake, an affirmation of the Jewish narrative.

We will be ok, we always will be, but this generation, in a diaspora that has never experienced war, we will be different.

Take care

We pray for peace, whatever action that demands and whatever form that takes.

Sending you love and hope that you stay safe.

Louise

14. Cathy Miller

Since we were travelling, I marked your Sept email as "unread" and today, after receiving your Oct email and sharing stories, am finally replying.

I celebrated my 71st birthday in Japan, 6th October, and the very next day heard the shocking news of the attack on Israel. So this has been very much on our minds during our travels first in Japan, and now in Taiwan. I have been following posts on Facebook, as well as my high school WhatsApp group which includes a few of my year group living in Israel and a large number of other school friends with family or friends there.

I also came across Ori Hanan Weisberg on Facebook and his writing on 11th October echoes what I was feeling at the time - so I am now following him and I think/hope I shared his writing of that day on my Facebook page - but perhaps I did not and today I will double check on that. He has a wonderful way of expressing the conflicting emotions one feels when considering the multiple layers involved in the current conflict between the peoples involved - seemingly to me an irreconcilable conflict with both sides having compelling stories to tell - which nevertheless does not mean that the barbaric brutality is in any way to be explained or tolerated. I get the impression that Hamas is not protecting their own citizens either, and are being rather cynical about neglecting them (e.g. stockpiling fuel) and then blaming the Israelis for their suffering - which of course gets the rapid-fire social media news up in arms.

I was also interested to read the views of Professor Lord Verdirame KC (see links below - you may have already seen it) - setting out what seemingly amounts to support under international law for Israel's response.

<https://rozenberg.substack.com/p/the-law-of-armed-conflict>

So although I don't have any stories to share, my thoughts are captured well by Ori and my conflicting emotions were somewhat soothed by reading what Lord Verdirame said. I will be interested to hear your thoughts on this.

~~~~~

## 15. Fonda Dubb

Dear Gail

I hardly sleep at night. The planes fly as if they're going land on my roof!!

They fly from the Army Airport of Ovda. Where will they land I wonder?

Who will they kill? Will it be Hamas or a civilian in the wrong place, at the wrong time. My heart bleeds for the hostages

My heart bleeds at all those missing, and all those bodies of the missing that have been found. I have a job to do.

I 'share' all the missing in the wee hours of the morning in the HOPE that they will be found, alive. I also see the goodness of people at this time.

Waiting for a dentist appointment at Maccabi in Eilat. The receptionist asks " would you like something to eat" (I had a two hour wait as I had other tests and Drs to see at Maccabi) and insisted on going to get a takeaway from a *shwarma* restaurant. She must have stood in a long queue, the *shwarma* restaurant was a 10-minute walk. She came back a half a half an hour later. She refused to accept any money. As many times as I insisted to pay the 40 or 50 shekels (it came with chips) she refused to accept any money from me. At the end of our strong vocal discourse, Yael said with such a lovely smile.

Please give the money to a Charity. An act of Humanity!! These acts of kindness and caring are taking place all over Israel not only in Eilat. I read about the generosity of people on Facebook.

It's this, the people's spirit and kindness that keeps me going: The Spirit of life.

The Spirit of Hope. The Spirit of Humanity.

## **The Little Miracles of Life**

**When things turn out alright and everything fits into place**

**Do we call these daily happenings a coincidence? Or the new word  
Synchronicity?**

**I call them " little miracles " when everything turns out just right**

**It's such a joy to know that miracles we see and feel**

**Our souls are lifted**

**with gratitude when we experience the little miracles of life**

**How much happier we would all be**

**to acknowledge the little gifts of life**

**which can switch from a bad day to a good day**

**It's just a different perspective we pursue**

**A loving one and a giving one**

**To say thank you to the Lord**

**For the little miracles of life**

**Sometimes in haste we forget the gifts of life**

**Let's take a breath and close our eyes at the brilliance of life**

**and feel and touch our heartbeat pounding and getting stronger with the  
power we feel**

**about the little**

**miracles of life**

**It's like picking a fresh and dewy Rosé just picked off a tree**

**with its perfume floating in wisps across the landscape that I see**

**far out to sea like a beautiful concoction of twists and turns of a melody of  
love**

**that travels across our precious land and heals all the people of the land**

**As we recognise and give thanks to the little miracles of life**



## 16. Richelle Shem-Tov

Dear Gail,

Your "shattered dream" touched all my chords and spoke directly to my heart. The murder of that wise and courageous man did indeed murder the dream = a dream of peace. I heard an interview with Yossi Beilin. He was asked if there was any place left for the "left". His reply was in my language. He believed that if Rabin, if Oslo, if the non-violent people who cared for lives more than land, if there were clear cut borders, a fair deal in Jerusalem, a solution for the refugees - just the good will. though not universal - that did reign at that time, things might have been different. But now it seems that hatred has the upper hand. God knows how and if it will end. Sabih, my late husband would say in Hebrew: "כגודל הדיכוי כך גודל האנטיפאדה" The harsher the oppression, the harsher will be the kickback". How cruel is this truth.

Keep safe and sane

Love

Richelle

**7<sup>th</sup> October – for my diary**

I keep starting a letter or essay or something to Gail who is putting out letters from people on this most horrific of wars. I find myself too disturbed to finish – so I start and stop. I read from others and I see that much of what I think, others have already written. I see that in some cases we agree but not all. For sure though, we all grieve. I will try and write in some of my thoughts – though confused and disturbed.

I'll start off by saying that I am unapologetically Jewish, South African and Israeli. I am also very much on the left in my political outlook – am, was and will be. I grew up in a home where Zionism was our religion but neither I or my parents understood the depth of the conflict. We believed what we were told, that this country was ours and our enemies were transparent militants – We believed our narrative without question, but we did not know or accept the Palestinian narrative. Only after long years in Israel did I understand that our War of Independence was their Naqba. Only then did I realize the depth of their bitterness at their military defeat in the wars from 1948 and on and at the dispossession of the land where they had lived for many generations. I also learnt that my own people who I believed carried the highest moral values were in fact no different from other nations. There were those that were governed by extreme nationalist, perhaps religious and ideological behavior and others who believed that only through harsh occupation is it possible to live in this land. There are also many very good people who care about all people – such were most of those living on the kibbutzim on the borders of Gaza.

This conflict breeds hate, fear and cruel human behavior - back and forth. I weep at the suffering - on both sides. This recent and still on-going war (God only knows for how long), could have been expected but we, and I include myself, were totally surprised and taken off our complacent feet. Indiscriminate killing, mutilating, taking hostage - men, women and children of all ages; destruction and burning of our people can never be condoned. It will also bring fierce retribution, revenge and more and more human suffering and hate. Will it ever end?

I know that war brings out the worst in man. He will lie, rationalize, justify and kill indiscriminately. I know that this is part of the history of all nations – from the earliest of times; I know that extreme ideologies whether religious, nationalist and certainly fundamentalism can only ignite these actions; I mourn the suffering of my people and it can never be justified, but this must not be compared to the Holocaust.

Indeed, the Hamas did not invent cruelty. We need only to think back to Yugoslavia, Vietnam, Ireland, Africa, India and where not. We need to remind ourselves of ourselves - bombing out the city of Beirut, Gaza – again and again; the cruel burning of homes and dispossession of land in the West Bank to this very day. Perhaps comparisons are odious but we need to remember.

I hear and read and watch so many different horror stories, thoughts, interviews. I saw of a young guy whose father was killed on Kibbutz Beeri; his mother was taken hostage. He spoke of his father – a man who believed and taught his children of peace, that the Palestinians were people and were not all Hamas; that both our peoples must throw off our governments which have wrought such destruction, and bring in leaders who will make peace.

Would that that could be.

~~~~~

17. Jodi Schneider Neelin

Going to a Jewish school within the Cape Town Jewish community as a child, I was isolated in a bubble of kids who were like me. We sang Hebrew songs, held the shacharit services at school every Friday. We recited the *shema* by rote, the meaning of it washing over me as something we just did, learning about the various holidays and the ways we celebrate, but I never felt a strong connection to these customs and teachings. I never had a Jewish identity until I moved to the United States, and, away from my bubble, I suddenly found myself the only Jew in the room. Hearing insidious antisemitic remarks as part of the general conversation. For the first time, I felt an acute sense of being other.

I drifted, pulling further and further away from the religious customs of my faith, as I started questioning the world and my place in it. If I had a religion, I would joke, it would be kindness. I felt religion inherently set up an “us versus them” construct among people that was superior at best and dangerous at worst. I felt a strong connection to God but in my own spiritual way, rather than as a Jew.

Now I’m a mother, and my and my husband’s secularism has led us to preach kindness first, religion second. Do unto others resonated with me more than anything I’d read in my siddur. Yet here I find myself, on this first night of Hannukah in 2023, with an almost desperate urgency to fill up my children with the story of their birthright. I suddenly want to sit them down and let all the words tumble out, to make sure they understand who they are, to grasp that against all perilous odds, we have prevailed as a people for thousands of years.

No longer just the stuff of ancient village storytellers or words on tattered scrolls, this threat to Jewish lives is immediate and loud. The ink has just barely dried on the pages of history since the Holocaust, and another chapter is already being written, the words penned in a new font but the parchment is as old as time itself.

Tonight, my heart was heavy as we lit the menorah and recited the prayers. Tonight, we lit the menorah almost defiantly, a tiny flicker of light in this vast sea of darkness, joined in solidarity with the tiny flickers of my people all over the world, from our kitchens and dining rooms in the west to the outskirts of countries where there are traces of Jewish communities still standing. Tonight, we lit our first candle for the hostages in tunnels under Gaza, for the children who huddle alone without their parents and who couldn’t light theirs. We lit for the kids in colleges who are being harassed and assaulted and are afraid to light theirs. We lit for the Jewish business owners whose livelihoods are under siege and are intimidated to light theirs. We lit as a stand against the terrifying antisemitism that is breathing down our necks. We lit for the very survival of our people.

Hannukah began thousands of years ago with the miracle of one day's worth of oil that burned for eight instead. There have been many miracles over the millennia as we have been chased down through time and persisted. Perhaps the true miracle is that we're simply here to light our candles at all. Maybe one day, Jews will be able to practice whatever version of our faith we choose to honor in real peace. Until then, we will keep the light going.

~~~~~THE END~~~~~