



WHERE I STAND

Uzi Baram, Alliance Programming Chairperson

I attended a Simchat Torah celebration on October 6, 2023. For the next day, I had signed up for a National Alliance on Mental Illness fund raising walk as part of my volunteerism in my Sarasota, Florida community; before I headed to the NAMIWalk, I read the first reports of the Hamas invasion of Israel. As I joined hundreds of others oblivious to ongoing pogrom, I compulsively checked the news on my phone. Finding other Jews among the hundreds of volunteers, we shared the little we knew.

As the hours, days, weeks stretched, the concerns grew. I responded to misguided or wrongheaded social media posts and conversations but did not have inspiring words to help get through the crisis. So many of my Israeli American friends felt the same way: calls to family members in Israel and silent screams. The shock of the Hamas massacre, the accounts of evil done to children and the elderly, the kibbutzniks and Nova Festival participants - each detail indicating the depth of the depravity of the militants. I was born in Haifa though raised in the United States, as a graduate student I excavated in Israel and my doctoral

research focused on the archaeology of the eastern Mediterranean. In the early 1990s while in Israel, I joined others in the optimism for the Oslo Accords; over the decades, I stood with Arab and Muslim colleagues and community members and many with me, believing the peace will come through the power of positive social interactions, people's goodwill, and a reframing, decolonizing (in the serious use of that concept) of eastern Mediterranean history.

Before I could regain that optimism, that similar to aftermath of the Yom Kippur War, the Simchat Torah war could show that the masses had had enough of violence, reports that the torches of hatred were being relit, not by the right wing as in the 2017 Unite the Right rally in Charlottesville but by supposedly left-wing students and faculty on elite American campuses.

As a teenager, I wore a necklace with a Chai but I hadn't worn jewelry around my neck since the 20th century; after October 7th, I got a Magen David to make a visible statement and, similar to the NAMIWalk, I use my body. I stand - *Hineni* - with other Israeli Americans for a weekly vigil at the Sarasota Farmers Market as well as walk for the Run for Their Lives on Sunday afternoons. The latter is an international movement; the former was created by a family in Sarasota.

Both events were committed to bearing witness. Answering questions and engaging those who wished to talk. At first, my appearance at the weekly vigil was sporadic but as the weeks became months, I came more regularly. The experience continues to be illuminating. Even as thousands passed by the vigil at the Farmers Market each week, less than a handful have ever been hostile; the vast majority were supportive, taking bracelets stating "Bring Them Home" or small Israeli flags and

expressing solidarity with us, the hostages, and Israel, some emotionally so.

As an archaeologist, I know many examples of hinge moments in human history, when a long-standing social order became reorganized - for the worst as well as for the better. All I can say is we need to reflect on how much our political and social world is changing. We need to remember the hostages and we need to keep standing to ensure a hopeful path to security and peace.

November 9, 2024