

Echoes of My Soul: A Journey Through Israel's Pain & Resilience

It was on October 7th that Israel, and by extension, the entire Jewish world, was thrust into a maelstrom of events.

The news of the October 7th massacre in Israel was a seismic shock that reverberated through the core of my being. These were not distant occurrences; These were deliberate and brutal attacks, unfathomable to the mind and heart, inflicted upon real people—my people, my nation.

In response, I felt an urgent need to proclaim my Jewish pride, not through mere words on social media but by taking tangible action. The decision was made and I embarked on a volunteer mission to Israel.



While this trip is far from my first trip to Israel - this time, it wasn't family I was going to visit, or a milestone celebration or for vacation - this time I was motivated by an unyielding fire within me. Though I was and remain conflicted on how to share much of what I bore witness to over the course of this mission trip, I remain steadfast in my obligation, as an Israeli and a Jew, to help tell the the stories of what happened in Israel on October 7th, what has transpired in the nearly 100 days since, and the importance of our unified fight for the return of all hostages and soldiers, for the truth and for justice.

The below, is a collection of personal thoughts on some of the sites visited and volunteer efforts (in no particular order) of the 4 day mission.



January 2024:

Stepping onto Israeli soil, the air itself seemed laden with the weight of harrowing stories etched into the collective consciousness of a nation grappling with tragedy. No longer a distant news report, the reality demanded a response, and my very presence became a pledge to be part of that response.

Be'eri:



In the soil of Be'eri, I witnessed the tales of unimaginable horrors as survivors painted their stories with hues of pain and perseverance. Their narratives echoed through the air, leaving an indelible mark on my soul.



Yet, amidst the horror, a strength emerged, defying the darkness—the resilience of the human spirit transformed into a symphony of survival.

Israel, often characterized by its resilience, revealed itself through pioneers emerging from the ashes of tragedy. Determined to rebuild and reclaim what was

lost, the landscape shifted from despair to tenacious hope—a testament to a collective spirit that refused to be broken.



Journeying southward near Gaza, I stood alongside soldiers and police as they shared firsthand accounts of heroism and loss. The borderlands became a stage where bravery clashed with adversity, each narrative vividly portraying sacrifice

and unwavering commitment. The palpable dichotomy of emotions echoed the nation's ongoing struggle for peace.





Nova/Kissufim:



Amidst the tales of strife, the Nova music festival unfolded as a deeply personal experience, given my love of music. The rhythmic beats and melodic tunes that once enveloped this wide expanse in harmony, has now become an almost silent refuge, a poignant reminder that even in the darkest moments, the human spirit seeks solace in the beauty of artistic expression. As the sun was setting, the guitar

strumming and a crowd of strangers began to sing in unison, I was reminded that music, a universal language, bridges the gap between despair and hope.



Netivot:



Netivot, strewn with the wreckage of incinerated, bullet-laden cars, became a canvas of destruction and resilience. A police officer overseeing the aftermath shared a sentiment that resonated deeply. His revelation—that he would rather see his children die fighting Hamas than witness Israel lose this war—spoke to the complex emotions entwined in this conflict.



In the midst of chaos, a carnival for displaced families provided a fleeting moment of laughter and joy. It served as a poignant reminder that, even in displacement, the human spirit seeks moments of respite and connection, transcending the harsh realities that besiege them.

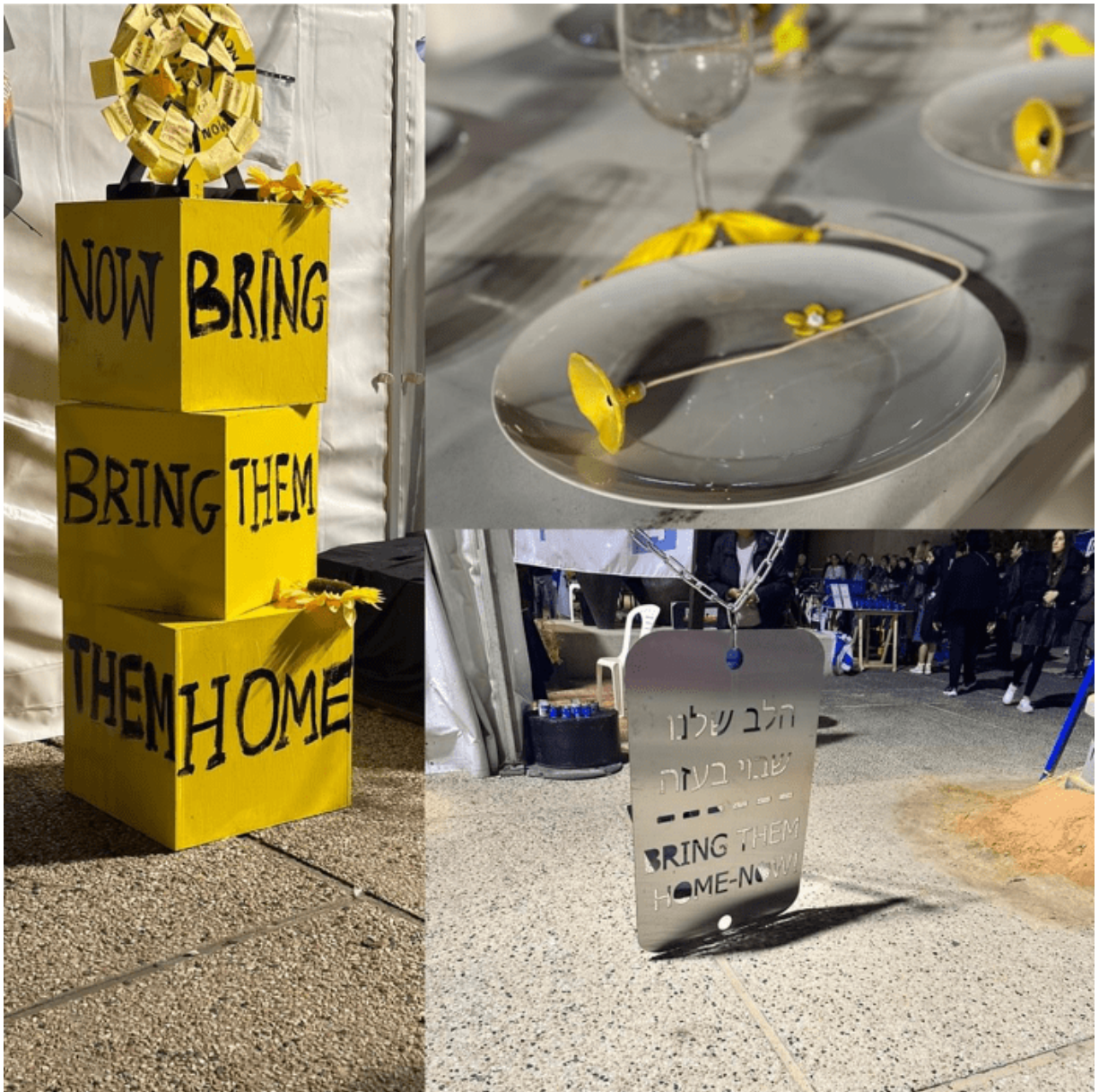


Picking lemons in a generational orchard, almost decimated during the October 7th terror attack, became a tangible link to a heritage determined to withstand the onslaught. Barbecueing, feeding and dancing with soldiers evolved into symbolic acts of gratitude, transcending language to express appreciation for those standing on the front lines.



Hostage Square:

Visiting Hostage Square in Tel Aviv offered an unfiltered glimpse into a city scarred by its history, both old and new. The scars of the past laid bare, the wounds of the present still healing; hostage families huddled together as the triage this country is bleeding for, and yet the country's resilience became a living testament to the strength found in confronting, rather than suppressing, the shadows that linger.



Tel Hashomer:

Tel Hashomer hospital opened its doors to the wounded, each face carrying the weight of survival. Their stories, etched in the lines on their faces and in the scars still healing from battle, revealed a profound commitment to return, to finish what they started. It was an insight into the unyielding spirit that defines those who face the ravages of war.



Yet, as I documented these experiences, a conflict emerged within me. How do I share these stories—tales of pain, heroism, and resilience—in pictures and words while respecting the dignity of those whose lives are intertwined with these narratives? The responsibility to bear witness became entangled with the ethical imperative of preserving the humanity within each story.

Now, standing at the crossroads of comprehension and confusion, the impact of those days in Israel continues to unfold within me. How does an Israeli American volunteer for a few days and then leave with the knowledge of brutality, tragedy, and the enduring hope of their own people? The journey through Israel's October 7th and its aftermath poses a profound challenge—a challenge that extends beyond borders, resonating with the shared struggles of humanity.

As I navigate the path ahead, I am left with the fragments of stories, the melodies of a nation's spirit, and the images etched in my memory. The journey has been an ever-evolving narrative of pain, resilience, and the indomitable human spirit. It prompts introspection, a questioning of how we move forward from here. Yet, amidst the complexities, there lies a glimmer of hope—hope that, by bearing witness and sharing these stories with respect and dignity, we can contribute to a future where understanding triumphs over division, and where the echoes of tragedy are replaced by the harmony of a united people.



Gila Stern, an award-winning content and marketing executive, brings over two decades of experience in driving growth for hundreds of brands, ranging from global category leaders to startups.

Highly regarded for her leadership, strategic thinking, and execution capabilities, Gila has earned industry awards and recognitions, including multiple Aegis awards and more than 45 Telly awards for her productions. She has produced more than 1500 episodes of business television programming and secured significant sponsorships and funding with major global entities.

Gila has been interviewed for her authentic approach and millennial perspective on deep topics that create meaningful change in people's lives.

The underlying drive for her corporate successes lies in Gila's greatest motivator: her children and community.