WOMEN AT WAR: A FIRST-PERSON ACCOUNT OF FEMALE ABSENCE AND FEMINIST AGENCY IN ISRAEL

Ilana Blumberg

A personal account of the period following October 7, 2023, in which the Jewish Israeli author traces the ways in which women did not have access to official positions of power concerning war policy and the hostage crisis. At the same time, longstanding and pop-up feminist NGOs, among other grassroots groups, safeguarded civil society and proved powerful players in the public sphere.

When the photo came out, I knew immediately what surprised me. There sat the Chief of the General Staff of the IDF, Herzi Halevi, in uniform, and opposite him sat four women. It was the first photo I had seen, since the outbreak of the Gaza war approximately 500 days earlier, of a powerful Israeli man, a power-broker and decision-maker, among women. Listening to them. The four young women—Liri Albag, Karina Ariev, Agam Berger and Naama Levy—had been released under the terms of the January 2025 ceasefire after having been kidnapped on October 7, 2023, from their army base at Nahal Oz, where they served as spotters, *tatzpitaniyot*. In the press photo, the four sit in a row on a hard couch in civilian clothing, the Chief of Staff opposite them but leaning forward, hands on his knees. They lean backward, maintaining a distance, their faces registering what looks to me like alienation and skepticism. Fruit and cookies sit untouched on a small coffee table. The press later reported that he told them that they had served their state excellently. The army, he said, had failed them.

In the months leading up to October 7, the spotters, their eyes trained on Gaza, had reported seeing highly realistic trial runs of attacks on army



Figure 1. IDF Chief of Staff Herzi Halevi met with released IDF observers Naama Levy, Agam Berger, Liri Albag, and Karina Ariev on February 14, 2025. Photo: IDF Spokesperson's Unit.

bases and kibbutzim, with precise replicas of buildings and complexes within Israel. They reported a move from Hamas's ordinary exercise to intensive military training; drone activity; tests of the border wall between Gaza and Israel's kibbutzim in the so-called "Gaza Envelope"; simulated hostage-taking; and practice takeover of a tank. They reported attempted incursions on a daily basis. They documented everything they saw, growing more and more certain among themselves that something major was on the horizon. The spotters' parents also knew of the increased activity at the border. One spotter had specifically discussed with her parents the scenario of being kidnapped to Gaza. The young women had assessed the situation perfectly.

On the morning of October 7, when more than three thousand Nukhba terrorists mobilized to breach the border, it was already too late. Fifty-three soldiers would be killed at Nahal Oz alone, among them fifteen *tatzpitaniyot*. Seven spotters, among them the four in the "after" photo, and three tank

soldiers would be taken to Gaza (the latter for a two-year captivity). The rest of Israel would be left open-mouthed at the horrific image of Naama Levy, dragged from sleep with tied hands and bloody sweatpants.

I watched Naama Levy's disappearance into the tunnels of Gaza with the eyes of a woman, a feminist, an Israeli and an American citizen, a mother and a professor. The story of the spotters confirmed that entrenched Israeli sexism had played into the hands of Israel's enemies in a way that had made the entire nation far less secure. Painful as this is to say, sexism had helped to enable the murderous attack that outmaneuvered one of the most powerful militaries in the world. Yet, even after it became public knowledge that female intelligence had gone unheeded at unspeakable cost—that complacency and a stale political "conception" (*konseptziyah*) had weakened Israel—neither the government nor the IDF considered it advisable to prosecute the war with female input at the highest levels. The knowledge that female soldiers had fought heroically on the front lines of the unexpected battles of October 7 did not alter the balance of power.

Women's exclusion was not confined to the military. The government declined to appoint women to official positions to strategize or negotiate for the hundreds of hostages seized; or to arrange housing and rehabilitation for the tens of thousands evacuated from their homes on Israel's southern and northern borders; or to assist the families affected by the massive and extremely lengthy call-up of reservists; or to head the response to crises in schooling, medicine and mental health. Women were frequently absent from television screens as experts, serving far more frequently to facilitate the conversations of male commentators. Not one woman sat in the six-member War Cabinet. Nor did they have the ear of the Prime Minister, whose every photo showed him surrounded exclusively by men.

Yet, as the war got underway, another fact become evident: The absence of women in the state and military echelons where the critical issues of national budget and war policy were decided co-existed with *extraordinary female leadership in all other sites*. Nonprofit and grassroots activism became the force that stood between many Israelis and their sense of total abandonment (*hafkarah*) by the state. As a real, though unofficial, channel of activity, volunteerism restored to masses of Israelis a sense of agency and possibility, hope and connection, while also meeting genuine needs of every possible sort, from tracing missing persons, caring for children when schools were

closed, teaching displaced children, fanning out trauma treatment, locating clothing, housewares and equipment of all sorts, to cooking for soldiers, reservists' families and hostage families.

Protest Turns to Rescue

The story of the role played by women in the national civilian rescue efforts (in the broadest sense) begins before October 7. Any effective response to a wholly unanticipated crisis is a response with roots. In this case, the most immediate roots were the networks established by a diverse and dedicated protest movement. Without the umbrella protest movement that arose in its widest historical form to oppose Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's extreme right-wing coalition government, formed in November 2022, it is difficult to imagine anything like the nimble, comprehensive, immediate, still-ongoing response of civilians to the range of extreme needs that arose on October 7 and in the years that followed.

When, at the turn of 2023, the government began its attempt to undercut an independent judiciary, the move was seen by leftist Israelis and many centrists as an aggressive bid against democratic norms. Centrists who had not demonstrated against Netanyahu in earlier rounds began joining the protests, while academics, feminists, and minorities looked in alarm at analogous conditions in Hungary and Poland, where freedoms had eroded rapidly.

I had moved to Israel with my family in 2014 from Ann Arbor, Michigan. Born in Israel to American parents, I had grown up and been educated in the United States and had come to Israel eager finally to be part of a Jewish majority culture. Since then, however, my work teaching Jewish and Palestinian Israeli citizens had altered my perspective considerably.[1] I increasingly saw myself more as an American immigrant who had absorbed democratic values during my four decades in the U.S., putting me in a position to share my commitment to this democratic ideal and its implications in a country where it had virtually no roots. As an ethnonational state, Israel often worked in the opposite direction, enshrining differential rights and benefits, as well as obligations, for different ethnic groups. With each semester that I taught, I came to grasp the lay of the local land better, to see the assumptions and blind spots and troubles and possibilities. Perhaps what my *aliyah* had to offer was uniquely American. When Israelis scoffed: "Zeh lo Amerikah," *this isn't America*, they shamed immigrants from the U.S. who wanted

something or other to resemble their American experience. But I knew that America was built on ideals that were worth importing. I had grown up to respect difference, not to shame it. And I had grown up as a post-Holocaust minority: a fortunate minority, but a minority nonetheless, so I knew well what minority rights set out to protect.

Israel's tradition of state democracy was less than eighty years old. After the passage of the Nation-State Law in 2018, formally anchoring the state's status as the national home of the Jewish people, various surveys that asked Israeli Jews to rank their commitments to democracy, on the one hand, and Jewish identity, on the other, regularly found that they prioritized the Jewish identity of the state. In my own conversation with Israelis, many did not see the necessity for through-and-through democratic values, even as our ethno-religious state gave over more power to religious fundamentalists. If an extreme version of Jewish power was dangerous for minorities, it was just as dangerous or worse for women, especially when it came to the growing power of rabbinic courts to decide issues of personal status. As the government moved forward to legislate for Knesset power over the make-up of the judiciary, protesting felt ever more vital.

What did protesting look like in the spring and summer of 2023? It did not look like a one-time drive to the nearest city or to the capital on one centralized day of televised opposition. Israel is a very small and very informal country, where people feel things intensely and personally and can mobilize immediately in relation to the news of the hour. Distances are relatively easy to traverse, and the combination of major protests in Jerusalem and Tel Aviv alongside strings of local protests, amounted to a comprehensive response. For thousands of people, protest simply became part of daily living. For me, it looked like showing up, often three times a week, for hours at a time, in all weather, on foot or having taken the bus or train, with a friend or two or alone, yet always seeing people I knew. The protests were a defense of democracy, framed not only as the right to vote or to majority rule (as many on the right argued), but as a constitutional safeguarding of minority rights, the independence of government branches, and freedoms of speech, press, and assembly; and as a refusal of the misogyny, overt racism and incitement to violence expressed by so many members of the government. Of that government's twenty-nine ministers, only five were female, not a single ministry was led by a female Director General, and the Ministry for the Empowerment of Women had been assigned to an antifeminist.

Those now long-ago protests and marches—at local intersections and highway junctions, at the Knesset, the President's house and the Prime Minister's residence, in the center of Tel Aviv and in town squares throughout Israel—were full of energy. While people looked determined and sometimes angry, there were also moments of jubilation, of hope and commitment to change and of solidarity among ordinary citizens, from the young to the many old people who came out on the streets, having built a country they loved and wanting to safeguard its security and freedoms. Music played. People bumped into old friends. Children played and ate on picnic blankets. Every protest featured speeches. And the speeches almost always opened with an autobiographical narrative (as a scholar of life writing, this stood out to me). People were linking their vision for the country to the stories of their lives, to who they were, where they came from, how they were raised, whom they honored and remembered, and what prices they had paid. Never had I been at demonstrations full of so much love of country; so many citizens who had invested in every possible way, in every sector of work and culture, to make a home.

While women were almost always featured speakers at the protests, the absence of a tradition of women in the top echelons of the military and the government made a profound difference in the visible basis for trust that male leftists (many of them reservists) could point to. Still, women in academia, law, the judiciary, NGOs, hi-tech, medical and social work, and the arts, along with daughters and widows of famous men, raised their voices, and feminist groups were active participants in the broad protests throughout the summer of 2023.

And so, as news of the horrors traveled throughout Israel on October 7, networks were already in place, organized mainly through vast nation-wide but also locally-specific WhatsApp groups. These were people who were regularly active, used to leaving their homes and to responding quickly to changes in plans, ready to brave all sorts of weather, and eager to tap into every set of skills they had, to mobilize all their contacts, to work with others, to make something where there had been nothing. Though the protest movement had been intended to halt the erosion of democracy, it now mobilized and repurposed itself to fill a yawning vacuum left by a shockingly dysfunctional state. By October 8, the Expo Tel Aviv Convention Center had opened as a hub for civilian activity (the "Civilian War Room") under the direction of men and women such as Moran Zer Katzenstein, the founder and strategist of the feminist organization "Women Building an Alternative," and leading



Figure 2. Women from "Women Building an Alternative," demonstrating near the Knesset for an end to the war and the return of the hostages. Photo: Ilana M. Blumberg, September 3, 2025.

information scientist and activist Prof. Karine Nahon.[2] Under the leadership of Nahon and two other specialists, the "Missing Persons Array" mobilized at its peak 1,500 hi-tech workers, who built advanced algorithms to do the urgent work of finding and identifying missing, kidnapped and murdered Israelis. For a full ten days, they were the only centralized contact point for families desperately seeking their loved ones.

Within fourteen days, some 15,000 volunteers at the center had done the intensive physical work of distributing approximately 10,000 items of donated civilian equipment. As reported in *The Times of Israel*, the infrastructure thus created

> had [. . .] found accommodation for nearly 8,000 displaced families, distributed 120,000 food portions and 200 packs of medical supplies, transported 8,000 civilians and soldiers, provided more than 1,000 activities for evacuated children, and sent out 150 sets of *shiva* equipment—gazebos, plastic tables and chairs, fans, water heaters and refreshments [. . .] and rescued 120 pets.[3]

In the south, volunteer social workers cared for the survivors of massacres at the kibbutzim, and volunteer teachers set up makeshift schools. Across the country, volunteers gathered up all that civilian equipment, often in private cars, and drove it wherever it was needed.

I accessed information through two WhatsApp groups: my synagogue group (disproportionately full of Jerusalem activists, but also simply devoted citizens) and a feminist activist group I had been a member of for years. When I arrived in Israel in 2014, it had been important to me to learn the lay of the land from other feminists. By 2023, much of what I knew I had learned from the feminist activists organized by Prof. Yofi Tirosh, the leading legal activist against the segregation of men and women in the Israeli public sphere. (I had known Yofi since 2001, when she was earning a degree from the law school at the University of Michigan; she had been the person we asked to stay with our newborn the first time we left the house without her.) Yofi's group was made up of approximately ninety Israelis, almost all women: legal scholars and working lawyers, artists, educators, physical, mental and public health experts, journalists, historians, scholars of Jewish text and culture, storytellers, social workers, entrepreneurs, at least one venture capitalist, one orchestra conductor, one neuroscientist, one urban

geographer, and leaders of NGOs of all sorts. This group collectively produced a running commentary and challenge to the mainstream news. Her group constituted a space not only for critique, but also for trying out ideas, for argument and shared chagrin, for building initiatives and resistance to patriarchy and militarism, and for mutual support across differences of ethnicity and religious identification. It was focused and businesslike, and it continually educated me about Israeli feminist activism. For me, as the war got underway, the group signified all the difference between a world in which women were invited to contribute their expertise and vision to solve immediate, pressing problems and a world in which a select group of men postured for power and never held back from using it.

In this group, I saw postings from Yael Yehieli, an activist I deeply admired. Yael was the founder of 50/50, a nonprofit initiative to equalize male and female representation in all Israeli political settings. While her primary mission was seeking commitments for all slates of candidates for political offices, local and national, to be 50% women, Yael understood the value of social media campaigns, where she would invent ironic hashtag trends, like #totally.unrelated.to.gender and #questions.no.one.ever.asked.a.man, and post countless daily examples. With small teams of volunteers, she launched small, important projects that mostly required eagle-eyed attention and commenting. "Always comment," was her motto, whether that meant noting the unequal representation of women as expert commentators on news panels, then pressing news channels and anchors to include them; or, by contrast, congratulating channels on social media for 50/50 representation; looking at lists of speakers for upcoming conferences and forums and contacting the organizers when women were missing; counting prize-nominees and winners, and soliciting names of women to submit in advance; or looking at international news for meaningful lessons.[4] Yael's hero was Ruth Bader Ginsburg, and each year on Ginsburg's birthday, Yael hosted some sort of local event to mark her legacy.

It was Yael who posted the announcements on October 8 or 9 that I responded to, seeking help in Jerusalem to reactivate an organization she and Rachel Azaria, formerly a Knesset member and deputy mayor of Jerusalem, had founded in an earlier war: "The Ogen (Anchor) for Reservist Families." On October 9, I joined that initiative as a coordinator for Jerusalem and continued my work with the organization over the course of six months, as it grew to unprecedented numbers and spread first across the city and



Figure 3. On Israel's Independence Day, the Ogen for Reservists' Families organized a nature hike for families with a parent in service. Rachel Azaria, founder and executive director, gives out T-shirts. Photo: Ilana M. Blumberg, May 14, 2024.

then rapidly across the country. At a Zoom meeting that week, when no one could even see for tears, we learned how to use the spreadsheet and to circulate forms online where women could register and list their needs: name, neighborhood, phone number, how many children and of what ages, what sort of help wanted. At the outset, the idea was for volunteers to pick up the phone and call each woman. Human contact. Their husbands had all just disappeared for who knew how long into a war unlike any other we had known, schools were closed, missing people were found only to be buried, and the losses were constantly adding up. I was not used to phoning people, especially people I did not know, in my non-native, if fluent enough, Hebrew. But suddenly I had twenty, then thirty, then forty new contacts on my phone, and they were my responsibility.

While my close friend, also called Yael, chopped enormous piles of cilantro and parsley for sandwiches and salads in a local restaurant that had turned into a factory for meals for soldiers, I spoke to women on the phone and then turned immediately to my synagogue community to find volunteers for the jobs that needed doing. The most straightforward help was preparing home-made meals for the hundreds of reservist families who were suddenly missing a parent. But the needs were varied. We found volunteers to assist women home alone near the end of their pregnancy or struggling alone with new babies: Breastmilk banks and lactation consultants helped. We brought birthday parties to displaced children who had left their homes on October 7 with almost nothing in hand. The Sukkot holiday had just ended, and a woman asked for help taking down a sukkah (the ritual "booth" erected outdoors for holiday meals); within fifteen minutes, my teenage son and two friends were at her house, and the sukkah was done. She couldn't believe it. When a mother of young children was stuck with piles of laundry and a broken washing machine in days when no delivery services were yet back to work, I found a young man who was willing to wheel the broken machine to a repairman and get it back to her when it was fixed. Perhaps the least likely need to which I responded was finding a snake-catcher. Most of the time, we located volunteer teenage babysitters, laundry-folders and dog-walkers. We joined forces with a kitchen operated by Habad ḥasidim to get some families food with the stricter kashrut supervision they required. If volunteers didn't have a car, someone else would do the transport. These acts of assistance exerted disproportionate influence on how everyone involved felt. Each warm exchange of messages after such a success affirmed the worth of the cooperation.

Some time later, Racheli, a woman I knew only by sight from my synagogue community, told me she had located three acupuncturists who wanted to open a free clinic one morning a week to help wives and mothers of reservist soldiers who were struggling with immediate demands and the terrible tension of the war's risks. The idea was "social acupuncture," a circle of women being treated simultaneously. Racheli and I found a space; we began to advertise, and women came. I noticed something immediately: They were almost always unsure that they "qualified," even if they fit the description of our target population perfectly. Like the women I called from the Ogen, these women, too, wanted to make sure we knew that they could go without this help if it would allow us to treat women more need than they were. No, we reassured them, we wanted to help *them*, now, here, today. It was okay if they were not at the very end of their tether. A woman could get help without first finding herself in the hospital or in tears, alone. Even if she had children who were wonderful or a neighbor who sometimes brought her shnitzel, even if her husband sometimes got a release to come home for a few hours, she could receive our help.

When they came, Racheli or I would greet them, offer them tea and, for half an hour, hold their babies or rock their strollers. Meanwhile, the acupuncturists talked with them about what ached and treated them, and then the women would lie down side by side on mats while we continued to hold or rock their babies. Week after week, two female and one male acupuncturist donated their time, and we signed up women, and the word spread. Later in the war, returning soldiers joined our circles as well. Racheli went on organizing this project weekly for nearly two years of war.

The Ogen continued to expand as well, through the volunteer work of women across the country. In time, more centralized activities were organized for the families: hikes in nature on days that families would normally be together, plays and fairs for children, pizza evenings in neighborhood centers. Over the course of the war, with Rachel Azaria at the helm, the organization expanded its reach to 30,000 families and 20,000 volunteers (and I fully overcame my anxiety at making cold calls in Hebrew).

In practice, organized people were saving people. But it was also professional women who were serving the state in critical ways. In days that evidence of sexual violence from the attacks was lost because first responders did not think to preserve it or know how to do so, it was women such as Prof. Ruth Halperin-Kaddari of the Rackman Center for the Advancement



Figure 4. Social Acupuncture in Jerusalem, all volunteer. Photo: Ilana M. Blumberg, April 3, 2024.

of Women's Status at Bar-Ilan University, Dr. Cochav Elkayam Levi, founder of the Civil Commission on October 7th Crimes against Women, and lawyers at organizations such as the Association of Rape Crisis Centers under the leadership of Orit Sulitzeanu, who mobilized immediately to document those crimes. They were the writers of the multiple, comprehensive letters and reports on the rampant, extreme sexual violence of October 7, violence so quickly cast into doubt that every bit of evidence was critical. These women understood that the sexual violence enacted by Hamas was central to its attack; as Elkayam Levy remarked, it was not a "by-product" of the conflict, but a weaponized "tool of control and intimidation."[5]

And it was women who first knew—on October 10—to stand in front of the President's House with signs holding paper printout images of the hostages' faces, before those faces become familiar as rain. These women, many of them longstanding feminist activists, had been around the block. They intuited immediately that an internal battle awaited for the return of the

hostages. "Mothers Against Violence," first founded by Ketty Bar in 2020 to protect women protesters from police violence, now turned their energy to showing up every single evening, to hand out their yellow ribbons, to stand silently as witnesses, in a promise to the hostage families that they would not let the public move on until the very last of the hostages was returned. Activists, poets, storytellers doctors, grandmothers, students, just women, day after day. Anonymous. Silent. There.

One among them for hundreds of days, until the last hostage came home, was Hamutal Gouri, a longstanding feminist peace activist, a storytelling agent for social change and an early member of Mothers Against Violence, daughter of the great Israeli poet Haim Gouri. Like so many other feminist activists, Hamutal *does*—she immediately established story workshops for Israelis affected by the war—and *writes*. Editorial column after editorial column, and at many Jerusalem-based protests, so many women from the WhatsApp group kept pushing into the public sphere, raising a voice. Then we did all we could to amplify each other's voices, sharing as widely as we could.

As the war revved up, women worked ceaselessly, but also invisibly. I began posting to social media, as a matter of course, all the news photos that exclusively featured men—from the men-in-black war cabinet, to the olive green army higher-ups, to the men-in-suits security cabinet, to the slick hi-tech entrepreneurs, to the rough and ready Brothers-in-Arms. Netanyahu did not invite any women to join the ranks of the War Cabinet, and no women were called to the top tiers of the IDF. After the disaster of the female spotters, nobody called a halt and said: Let's pay attention to the research on security and gender parity—the established evidence that tells us that security cannot be fully attained without the consideration of a wide swath of social needs, without the participation of representatives of many forms of expertise and many sectors of society.[6]

Mothers at War

Perhaps it did not surprise most Israeli feminists that in spite of women serving with distinction in many combat units and in intelligence units, this war, too, was masterminded only by men. But it was nevertheless shocking that—for two years—not a single woman was brought into the negotiating teams to wrestle a return of the hostages: not to negotiate, not to advise.

The grassroots hostage forum that came into being immediately was full of women. The women—mothers, sisters, friends, survivors of rape

or abduction on October 7—spoke around the world, were listened to and reported on abroad and by many in the Israeli public as well. Yet they had no state-sponsored platform in Israel. Their voices, unsurprisingly, were increasingly sidelined as "emotional," "hysterical," "incapable of tough choices."[7]

Of the mothers who had no sway internally, my friend Rachel Goldberg, Hersh Goldberg Polin's mother, was the one with the greatest following internationally. She and Jon, my friends since high school in Chicago and now in Jerusalem, traveled the world trying to save their son and the rest of the hostages. They met with anyone and everyone, including President Biden, to whom they had a direct line, and the Pope.

My friendship with Hersh's parents taught me that political leaders do only what they choose to do, when they choose to do it, no matter what they say out loud. Eventually, Rachel would say, "equities and interests." Only these forces motivate the men in charge.

At Day 184 of their son's captivity, Rachel read aloud a poem at a massive rally in the U.S. "To the Boys in the Room" got over thirty thousand watches on their campaign's Facebook page. Yes, it was a campaign, with a full-time team. Because the Israeli government had been clear that they would not be doing the work. Families and the forum had to do it themselves.

Rachel spoke her powerlessness slowly, with intense irony and a rhetorical mastery that seemed born of otherworldly pain. A messenger from another planet, she said into the microphone:

> To motivate and incentivize you, you will be asked to hand over one of your family members [. . .] We will then hold onto your beloved one and treat them exactly as our beloved have been treated until you come up with a plan for how to get these people back.

The crowd was rapt, but also powerless. Just as she was.

A month later, at 217 days, she uploaded a post to Instagram that quickly got forty thousand likes, in which she told the negotiators that giving up because they are tired or frustrated "is not acceptable [. . .] Get back in that room and don't come out until you have a solution to save these human beings." She literally pointed her finger at them, instructing.

Some human authority is born of torment and of the moral conviction of a private person, suddenly exposed on the world stage because she has no choice. Listening, I felt shame. It was like seeing a person naked. Reduced

to sharing everything because she was past the point of certain kinds of considerations. At the same time, she seemed like the most sane person among us. She was certainly the most honest.

What would the negotiations have looked like with Rachel on the team? With Einav Tzangauker, mother of the hostage Matan, on the team? Why should we assume that intense investment works against the creativity necessary for solutions? Why should we assume that mothers can't think straight? The thing people consistently said after they heard Rachel was that she waw clearly. She has a gift for speaking in ways that reach people. That riveted people. Though she spoke in English, Israelis came to know her, too.

All the Left Is Now Female

Within a few months of the start of the war, protests return in the hundreds of thousands of Israelis. There are protests on behalf of the hostages, with an attempt to bridge political divides. Right, left, come out to stand beside the families of the hostages and beg or demand that the government make a deal. Yet soon enough, in spite of the valiant efforts of most of the hostage families, their cause becomes identified with the left, as the government chooses to intensify the war rather than negotiate for the hostages' return. Sides are drawn. Many Israelis are at each other's throats.

Over the course of that first year, as deals are torpedoed, I witness the government ignore the unceasing protests of hundreds of thousands of Israelis, effectively feminizing all those on the left.[8]

I watch the sidelining and dismissal of former generals and supreme court justices, of fathers of wounded and fallen soldiers, of returned hostages. Their words have no weight. As they and countless women continue to arrive at the Knesset in order to bear witness at committee meetings, the hostility with which they are greeted becomes a new norm. Whoever wants a trade of the hostages for Palestinian prisoners is labeled a "defeatist" by government ministers, or described as subject to irrational emotion. Women. The ancient Jewish ethic of the return of captives is apparently for women, not for the men to whom the decisions have fallen.

Protest, like housework, is ceaseless, repetitive labor.

You know a society cannot stand without it; you know that at the end of the day, it is the very texture of life that we are standing to protect, but even

so, no one thanks you for it. Protesting is showing up, for almost all of us except the occasional celebrity, namelessly.

In Baka, my neighborhood, five women from my synagogue community organize a weekly outdoor shabbat gathering, at a central intersection in South Jerusalem, where hundreds of South Jerusalemites, mainly but not only observant Jews, arrive after prayer services from all the surrounding neighborhoods. They take the cue from the mothers of the hostages, who have begun silent, seated, dressed-in-white protests. Now, on shabbat, we also wear white. We stand or sit silently. Someone from the broad umbrella community speaks briefly to orient us in Jewish time, whether it is in reference to the weekly Torah portion or to the holiday season. We sing, then different voices in the crowd are asked to read aloud the names of the hostages for whose return we pray, Alon Ben Idit, Nimrod Ben Viki, all the names we know by heart, the living and also the dead. We close the vigil by singing the haunting song "Bo'i Ima," "Mother, come to me, sit with me." Mothers, all of us. There are aging and elderly women whom I recognize from other vigils at different locations. Their names will not go down in history, but they are tireless and loyal, and when I look at them from the vantage point of my fifty-some years, I know how I want to age.

In the spring of 2024, it looks like a deal is nearing. In July, we can feel it. The top brass of the IDF have asserted that a deal is the only way they see the hostages returning alive. Strategy A—greater military pressure—has been applied and applied and applied—Gaza is in ruins—and it has not done the job. More hostages have been killed (in the end, it will be 41) than saved by rescue (only 8).

It doesn't happen. Months later, both American and Israeli non-partisan news sources reveal that the deal was derailed by the Prime Minister's introduction of new terms after an agreement had been reached with Hamas by the negotiators. The government torpedoed it, while trying to look as if it had not. (Later still, in the last few months of the war, Israeli coalition members—masks off—*boast* that they scuttled earlier deals.)

On August 31, 2024, Hersh is murdered along with five other young hostages: Carmel, Eden, Almog, Alex and Ori. Hamas guards shoot them all when they believe IDF forces are nearing to attempt a rescue. The terrible ending has arrived. We have been powerless to stop it.



Figure 5. Women in white sitting in solidarity with the hostages and their families. Photo: Ilana M. Blumberg, Nov. 22, 2025.

The Future?: "Many People Are Alive Today Who Would Have Been Dead"

There is the now and there is the future. The now is ceaseless protests to end the war and to bring home the hostages. The future is an enormous question mark. Diplomacy is not the strong suit of our current leadership.

I am ready for a big peace. My son will be drafted into the army next year, to an elite combat unit. On his last day of sixth grade, six years earlier, he had said to me, *It's summer, so when do you think the war will break out?*

On May 9, 2025, I attend the People's Peace Summit Conference at International Conference Center in Jerusalem, as the government expands the war in Gaza, with 25% of Israeli survey respondents in support. I want to hear the visiting speakers from Ireland, and I want to be one more body when they count up the attendance, which numbers in the thousands. But when I arrive, it is announced that the Irish speakers will not be able to attend, because of the risks posed by the war's escalation. And so, on a large-screen Zoom, we meet the female activists who laid the groundwork for the Good Friday Agreement in Ireland, well before anyone believed it could happen.

Monica McWilliams says to a room full of Israelis exhausted by war, "You know, you Israelis were ahead of us. Who would have guessed that it would happen for us before it happened for you? No one—*no one*—believed a peace could happen here, but it did."

When an Israeli in the audience asks, "Do you think the treaty has been a success?," McWilliams says simply, "Many people are alive today who would have been dead if not for the agreement."

She says, "People had to speak to men who killed their brothers, their children. Terrorists became political leaders. They hammered out details from jail cells."

The thought is terrifying but also electrifying. It can be done.

When I see the photos of Northern Ireland flash on the large screen—masked men hurling stones, wire fences, grafitti, bombs exploding, the husks of buses and buildings, men in uniform sent in to curtail violence—I am amazed, because they look exactly like the photos of Israel, the West Bank and Gaza.

When McWilliams tells us that it took more than a quarter of a century for the women involved in brokering the agreement to become a part of the history, I believe her more than ever.

As the war grinds on through the summer of 2025, I continue to demonstrate on behalf of the hostages and their families with no less fervor. But it becomes impossible for me to hold their images alone, as if there is only one tragedy. The images from a destroyed Gaza need also to be given their awful due: the famine and suffering of a population with nowhere left to

retreat, without a functioning hospital or school or morgue in sight. Nothing is left intact there. We have reduced it to rubble. People have been left with nothing but their mourning.

The very same government of the Jewish state that averts its eyes from the ethical claims made by its hostages' faces is easily able to avert its eyes from the Gazans' great suffering. A government capable of abandoning part of its own people to the likelihood of a protracted, horrific death, alone, an hour from the people they love, without a word or a moment of reunion, has too little imagination to extend to innocent Gazan civilians ("there are none!" runs the dominant Israeli refrain).

So, in addition to going to the demonstrations demanding an end of the war, the return of our soldiers and the return of our hostages, I go as well to the small demonstrations of Standing Together, with hundreds of Israelis who brave the shunning and the deep unpopularity among Israeli Jews of radical democracy, dedicated to shared society, Jewish and Palestinian, in which membership is based on citizenship, in which every life is absolutely equal in value. Perhaps it is the American in me that cannot give up on the ideal—the ultimate aspiration, if never entirely realized—of an equality that does not discriminate on the basis of race, religion, ethnicity or gender.

Cross-cultural cooperation has long been the province of women in Israel. And these protests are no exception. But it is not easy to trust. I, too, feel fear and mistrust of Palestinian partners; how could I not, after all that has happened? And I do not agree with everything that gets said at these demonstrations. I am awed by the courage of Ghadir Hani, the Palestinian-Israeli female peace activist. But she can say things that set me off-balance, that are extremely painful to hear, that I cannot currently accept.

When she says such things, likening the situation in Gaza to the Shoah—here is the point—I nerve myself not to walk away. Boutique activism, in which I must agree with every talking point, with every speaker, stands no chance. Ghadir is crying out from terrible pain. She is trying to awaken her neighbors—me and my children—who are almost entirely nonchalant about her people's unbearable suffering.

I don't agree with Ghadir about all things. But I do not live in a magic circle in which everyone is a mirror of myself. Like her, I cry out to others. I recognize that I, too, depend on strangers.

On July 22, 2025, I take the train to the Tel Aviv protest alone because, reports say that there is famine in Gaza. Other reports in Israel deny it. But

whether or not there is famine, there is certainly terrible hunger. There is dire need. Whether Hamas or Israel is responsible (from all the information I have gathered, it appears to me that both bear responsibility; beyond that, I cannot say), I refuse to stay silent if a battered civilian population is growing weaker by the day for lack of nutrition. The less food they have, the less food our hostages will be given as well: That is a certainty.

At the protest, the sun is setting. This was to be a "flour demonstration." Indeed, women hand each other very large sacks of flour. Many people come carrying small bags of flour from their kitchens.

All the flour is destined for Gaza, but right now, the white sacks look to me like symbols.

Symbols of the real, the most real there is. Flour. Ground from wheat. Grown from this earth that we are fighting over.

In the gray twilight haze of Tel Aviv, the August air is all sweat and moisture. Everything seems porous and wet. Human skin sticks to human skin. We are not so different from each other.

I want to hold a bag of flour. Hand it to me. Let me hand it on to someone else. Maybe we can transfer it this way, hand to hand, from Tel Aviv to Gaza. It really is not that far.

I catch a train back to Jerusalem. At the station, there is barely a wall to see, because they are all covered with images of fallen soldiers and dead young men and women. Every single time, it is too much for me. Every single time, eyes look out of faces I know. Knew.

I am ready for a big peace.

When people—my children, someone on the radio, on the bus, on Facebook—tell me I am not realistic, about peace, about the Gazans, about sharing, I think: You can be committed to something you don't think is likely. Values don't come from the daily news—what *is*— and they don't necessarily come from history books—what *has been*. I don't know precisely where they come from, just that they are ongoing attempts to imagine, not to give up on imagining. Someone imagined the flour at the protest.

I root my imagination in an unbounded place.

I imagine many children in the sea, swimming happily, safely, noisily. The world is momentarily turquoise.[9]

I'm much older than the *tatzpitaniyot*, the spotters. I have been looking out over borders for a long time.

Ilana M. Blumberg is Professor of English Literature at Bar-Ilan University. She is the author of two memoirs and two monographs, most recently, *George Eliot: Whole Soul* (Oxford University Press, 2024). Her current research, "First Person: Learning to Read Life Writing in Israeli Higher Education," funded by the Israel Science Foundation, concerns teaching autobiography and memoir to diverse groups of students embroiled in conflict zones. *imb400@gmail.com*

Notes:

1. See my essay, "The Life Writing Classroom as Civic Education: The Case of Palestinian and Jewish Narratives in the Israeli Undergraduate Classroom," *Pedagogy: Critical Approaches to Teaching Literature, Language, Composition, and Culture*, 22/2 (2021), pp. 207–228.
2. Karin Nahon was awarded the 2024 Rapoport Prize for Women Generating Change after October 7. Her work is described on the prize website, at: https://www.rappaport-prize.org.il/en/karine-nahon (all sites accessed June 22, 2026).
3. Sue Surkes, "In Stunning Response, 15,000 Volunteers Fill Leadership Vacuum to Help Victims of Hamas," *Times of Israel*, October 23, 2023, at: https://www.timesofisrael.com/in-stunning-response-15000-volunteers-fill-leadership-vacuum-to-help-victims-of-hamas/.
4. Her efforts may be seen on the 5050 website, at: https://www.5050il.co.il/5050-english. See also Peggy Cidor, "Jerusalem Day: 10 Iconic Israelis Who Called Jerusalem Home," *Jerusalem Post*, May 13, 2023, at: https://www.jpost.com/israel-news/article-742732. Note that of the 10 influential Jerusalemites profiled here, three are female; of these, only one, Yehieli, is photographed.
5. Cochav Elkayam Levy, "For a Better Future in Iran and Everywhere, Women's Freedom Is a Must," *Times of Israel*, March 8, 2026, at: https://blogs.timesofisrael.com/for-a-better-future-in-iran-and-everywhere-womens-freedom-is-a-must/.
6. See, e.g., Marie O'Reilly, "Why Women? Inclusive Security and Peaceful Societies" (October, 2015), Inclusive Security website, at: https://www.inclusivesecurity.org/publication/why-women-inclusive-security-and-peaceful-societies/; and Julia Poch, "Women in Security Decision-Making" (March 11, 2025), Women, Peace and Security Helpdesk, at: https://wpshelpdesk.org/articles/women-in-security-decision-making/.
7. Lior Zaltzman, "Rachel Goldberg-Polin Has an Essential Message about Repentance After Son Hersh's Death," *Kveller*, October 11, 2024, at: https://www.kveller.com/rachel-goldberg-polin-has-an-essential-message-about-repentance-after-son-hershs-death/.

8. The exception was the reinstatement of Minister of Defense, Yoav Gallant, after mass protests. To understand the successful vilification of the mobilized center-left, see Eva Illouz (with Avital Sicron), *The Emotional Life of Populism* (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2023). Illouz, however, does not address the gendering of the protest movement or of protest more generally.
9. In 2022, Rachel Afek imagined bringing Palestinian children to the sea in Tel Aviv because they had never seen the sea. The resulting trip of children and their mothers was documented by the Israeli public broadcasting company, Kan, at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YXEmWua6X5g (accessed June 22, 2026).