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Rob Roberts: The smell of horror in Israel's kibbutzim is hardest to forget

I've read much about Oct. 7 and everything after. I thought I knew about what happened that day, and I guess I did. But to be here now is to feel it

By [Rob Roberts](#)

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A visitor inspecting damage to house in Sha'ar HaNagev, Jan. 22, 2024. PHOTO BY ROB ROBERTS /National Post

Kibbutz Re'im, Israel — Ilan Cohen beckoned us into the scorched room. He wanted us to smell what happened here.

Hamas terrorists murdered four people in this room on Oct. 7. Two men and two women. The killers raped the women. Afterwards, they torched the place.

Cohen wanted us to remember what we were seeing, and remember who was responsible. And smell is the greatest memory trigger.

STORY CONTINUES BELOW



“I have no words to describe how
they are,” says Cohen, who leads

speechless about the evil that
Re'im.



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I am visiting the kibbutz, and other places in Israel, as part of a sponsored tour for Canadian journalists. The trip was organized by businessman Larry Maher on behalf of community leaders partnered with Toronto's Temple Sinai Congregation.



Ilan Cohen in a torched room where four people were killed in Kibbutz Re'im. Photo taken Jan. 22, 2024. PHOTO BY ROB ROBERTS /National Post

The Canadians behind the tour, and every single person we have met here, have wanted us to understand, to witness, and to share.

What feels like a clumsy intrusion into their personal trauma is a form of therapy with total strangers.

I've read much about Oct. 7 and everything after. I thought I knew about what happened that day, and I guess I did. But to be here now is to feel it.

On Day One of our trip, we visited two kibbutzim, both close to the Gaza border, both overrun by Hamas that Saturday morning.

Kibbutz Kfar Aza has printed and posted vinyl signs, filling in the details of a horror story for anyone who visits.

STORY CONTINUES BELOW



“Ofir Shoshani was brutally murdered in this house,” reads one sign, with a photo of a poised young woman.

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Another sign shows photos of seven smiling men and reads: “This is where the heroic members of the civil guard were killed while defending the kibbutz.” A member guiding visitors names one of the men and indicates where he died close by, near a tree.

Many of the other visitors to the kibbutz are Israeli soldiers, here to fully understand what they are fighting for.



The Nova music festival massacre, Jan. 22, 2024. PHOTO BY ROB ROBERTS /National Post

Our group of journalists also met with some soldiers at a respite area for troops engaged in the Gaza battle. We visited Sderot, a small city overrun by Hamas in the early hours of the attack. And we saw the site of the best-known atrocity that day, the Nova music festival massacre.

At the site of the Nova festival, we saw a forest of photos of murdered people, all of them Instagram-perfect and heartbreakingly vital in their youth. And across a service road, we saw a neat series of fresh holes with trees, planted a day earlier, each honouring the more than 350 killed there.

There are Palestinian stories to tell, tragic ones, but I'm not here today to tell them.

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Overwhelmed, I took few notes. '

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are photos, awful photos. On my
of a burned couch and guitar, being carted off to
what will someday be a museum about Oct. 7; a
cupboard filled with old rockets and mortars
launched from Gaza that have fallen on the
kibbutzim over the years; spray-painted markers on
the outside of homes and a bicycle shop, indicating
whether they had been cleared of terrorists or
whether someone had been killed there; many
burned living rooms; a bullet-riddled clothes
washer; a shell casing; a graveyard for orphaned cars
taken from the Nova festival and elsewhere, some
burned up and others appearing, at least from 100
feet away, intact.

One near-constant on our trip: signs pointing to
“secure” areas. There is one outside my hotel room
in Tel Aviv, directing me to a shelter somewhere
down the hall. In a place with constant threats, there
is constant need for safe spaces.



A gaping hole in a Kibbutz Re'im home where a tank took out Hamas terrorists. PHOTO BY ROB ROBERTS /National Post

At Kibbutz Re'im, I saw no such signs, and no vinyl signs marking the places where people died. What I saw were scars: a scorched table with a single shoe and a bottle of cologne; a blasted-out car; a massive gaping hole in the cement shell of a home, made by an Israeli tank that took out the Hamas terrorists hiding inside.

And, not far away, that burned-out room where people were raped and killed.

After the tour, Cohen stands outside the room and speaks. He has no filter. He admits to no longer being the reasonable man he was four months ago.

"I'm telling you, wake up. Wake up Canada. Today is Israel, tomorrow it could be in Canada. Wake up. Don't be sleeping. Wake. up," he said.

Cohen had harsher words for the people who did this. I won't quote them; I refuse to judge this man's pain 15 weeks after a day of horrors that you can still smell.