Jen Gerson: In the burned kibbutzim, black flags mark where the dead were found

The Line's Jen Gerson from Israel, on the war still raging more than a year after the Oct. 7 attacks.

Jen Gerson

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Nir Oz, Israel: The kibbutzim that lie nearest to the armistice line between Israel and the Gaza Strip — the small villages most likely to have been invaded by Hamas on Oct. 7 — still stand like living shrines a full year after the attack that has now fully re-formed the nation of Israel.

The modest homes, gardens, and playgrounds remain virtually untouched from the days after the fires died down and the Israel Defence Forces arrived, finally, to clear homes of bodies and stray Hamas invaders. Save for the marks left in spray paint by the doors, the kids' scooters and bikes rusting where they were abandoned on walkways and grass, some parts of these communes remain idyllic and iconic. Founded in 1955, Nir Oz is still a garden of ficus, Cyprus, and citrus trees, flowering shrubs, and winding gardens of cactus. There are makeshift art installations cobbled together from repurposed tins and refuse.

Everything is silent here, now, except for the sound of parakeets and other birds I cannot name — and the distant boom, boom, boom, of artillery fire and airstrikes still hammering Gaza a year later.

It is still a remarkably beautiful place, the sort of familial housing co-op in which many of us would dream of raising children.

Then comes the rest.

Burned out homes feature framed pictures of the faces of the families that once lived there. Refuse, metal and charred wreckage is fronted with flags — black to mark where the dead were found, and yellow for those still held hostage.

The residents of places like Nir Oz have been relocated, placed in kibbutzim further north, or in apartments nearby. A handful have migrated back to their old homes, but those who return now do so mostly to provide tours to foreigners, political figures, and fellow Israelis who want to understand exactly what happened here last year. Just as we arrived, a delegation of politicians, there to mark the anniversary of the attack according to the Jewish calendar, were leaving.

This was the case for Shlomo Margalit, who gave a tour to myself and a collection of other Canadian journalists who were visiting Israel at the invitation of the Exigent Foundation, a group that sponsored a tour of the country to see for ourselves how it had changed after a year of war.

Image from Nir Oz, one of the hardest hit Kibbutzim on Oct. 7.

"We're still there, until [the] hostages come back alive, or in coffins. It's not over," he said, while gathering us along the path that runs through the community of (once) roughly 400 people, more than a quarter of whom were either killed or taken hostage on Oct. 7.

Kibbutzim were originally founded as Zionist Socialist communes, settlements that were often a means to expand Jewish presence across parts of Israel, both before and after the nation was established as a Jewish state via a UN resolution in 1948. The earliest Zionists began settling in Israel in 1910 —

part of an explicit project to transform desert into communal villages for Jews escaping centuries of persecution, pogroms and expulsions from countries across Eastern Europe and the Middle East.

Their early success has given these small villages an almost romantic hold over the country; a story of its early founding, of self sacrificing pioneers who turned the desert green. These stories are literally true, as Nir Oz can attest. Earliest photos of the settlement show only a few forbidding structures amid the ancient and forbidding desert wilderness of the Negev; nothing like the abandoned botanical village that exists there even today.

But this power also made the kibbutzim a potent target for those who see Jewish settlement as an encroachment — indeed, many kibbutzim were established to serve as strategic posts near contested land.

Given its proximity to Gaza, Nir Oz had been subject to attacks throughout its history; its residents were not initially unduly alarmed by the alert they received in the early morning hours. Each kibbutz has an internal security team made up of local community volunteers — teams that believed that their

job was to hold off potential attackers for 15 to 30 minutes until IDF forces arrived.

But that day, the IDF forces did not arrive. Over the course of eight hours, Margalit said, successive waves of Palestinian fighters entered the kibbutz, setting fire to the small communal homes, as residents took shelter inside of saferooms. The saferooms, though, were designed mostly with rocket attacks in mind, and many of them did not have locks on their doors. They were intended to stop blasts and shrapnel, not a determined ground force.

Many of those who escaped the flames by running into the open were shot or taken hostage. After the fighters left, Margalit witnessed waves of civilian Palestinians, including women and children, who entered the community to loot, and drag more hostages back to Gaza, including the elderly, the ill, and babies — Nir Oz was the home of the Bibas family. They took the televisions and the toys, and ate the food in the fridge.

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The irony is that, for all the kibbutz has come to represent to both Israelis and Palestinians, the people who live there now are often the most left wing, the

most ardently pacifistic members of Israeli society. Margalit and his neighbours were no exception.

"We believed we could live with them and coexist," he said, "We even believed that the Gaza Strip could be Singapore."

He wants the government to "do whatever they can for the people, for the well being of the people, so they can live decently. Once they live decently, there is less chance they will want to kill us," he said. Israelis his age remember a time, before the intifadas, when there was still relative ease of movement between Israel and the strip. He said the residents of Nir Oz once had plans to build business centres there.

Margalit has no hope, now, for true coexistence. It's clear, also, that he's lost much faith in the Israeli government.

"We lived here because we believed it was secure," he said.

No one can give him any such assurances, now.

I consider myself quite privileged to have been able to visit Israel for about a week, and to have been able to see for myself many of the places that now central to the news and politics emerging from the Middle East, from Tel Aviv and Jerusalem, to the borders of the Gaza Strip, to the rocket-besieged towns that lie within sight of the hills of Lebanon.

Moments before we arrived to the Alma Research and Education Center — which tracks the military situation in the north of Israel — a rocket landed in Ma'alot-Tarshiha, killing a 24-year-old Muslim man who failed to reach a bomb shelter in the few seconds that he would have had once the alerts go off. The towns in this verdant, mountainous region known as The Galilee, are a collection of Arab, Jewish, and Druze enclaves. The rockets launched from Hezbollah-occupied towns just north of the border are a scattershot affair, as likely to hit a Muslim home as any other.

Hundreds of these rockets are launched each week, even now. Thousands have been sent over the northern border since Oct. 7. Since the IDF expanded its war to the north, it has uncovered tunnels, rockets, weapons — all the makings of an invasion, now thwarted. Yet dozens of Israeli and Lebanese

towns remain under evacuation order, and hundreds of thousands of citizens have been displaced as rocket fire continues.

After our briefing, we were taken to the site of that day's attack. We could see the edge of a terracotta roof that had been clipped by the rocket, which killed a man named Mohammad Naim, and wounded 13 others, including children. By the time we arrived, police forces and forensics units were plying their way through the alley, blocked with red tape, and filled with dozens of friends, neighbours, and relatives who were milling about, arms crossed, hands in pockets, watching the scene. It was like the site of any other homicide; the latest in a long string of common tragedies. Nearby, other children had already been let back outside to play.

We were then taken to a nearby hill, an ordinary walking trail lined with thick lavender bushes, that afforded a better view of the geography. We could see hints of what was occurring only a few kilometres away. We could hear the planes, but never see them — they came too fast. But their bombs left large plumes of dust and smoke that were visible to the naked eye.

It was an exhausting tour, filled with scenes like these, sites and interviews with security experts, former members of the IDF, sitting members of the Knesset, and ministers in government. The conversations were open and

candid — even if the tour itself was, unquestionably, intended to provide an Israeli perspective on the current conflict.

I'll address my own questions of balance and fairness in a follow-up column that will appear tomorrow. Not everything I saw or heard allayed my concerns about Israel's current course of military action in Gaza. I don't see a clear exit strategy for Israel, nor is there an obvious consensus on what needs to happen in Gaza once the fighting comes to an end.

The week I was there, the Knesset passed a law barring UNRWA (United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East) from operating in Israeli territory. Given the organization's links to Hamas, and the numerous reports of its staffers participating in Oct. 7, or hiding hostages, and the role UNRWA's education programs have played in propagating terrorist ideology, the Knesset's new law was understandable. But to do such a thing while bombs are still falling, while basic aid in the strip is dwindling, and without any plans for a credible replacement, is a disastrous decision for a country that is actively being prosecuted for genocide.

The current state of Israeli politics is shambolic; shortly after I left, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu fired defence minister Yoav Gallant. Israelis took to the streets *en masse* shortly after the announcement, though I would not hazard a guess as to what impact this might have on Israeli politics, or the war, in the long term.

I had three major takeaways from the whole of the trip, and I offer them to you, dear reader of *The Line*, to find useful, or to discard, as you wish.

The first is that while many North Americans presently hold deeply passionate opinions about what is happening in Israel, we generally have a very poor or misinformed understanding of either the history of the conflict, or the mindsets of the people actually engaged in it.

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We are self-involved people. Most who are born here have no lived experience of the kind of threats of violence faced by the Israelis, the Palestinians, or the other religious groups that comprise Israeli society. Instead, we are projecting our own pathologies, our feelings of grief, and our historic guilt about race and colonialism, onto a conflict that doesn't fit neatly along those frameworks.

Israeli history and culture and politics are complicated, and studying it in even the slightest depth is a humbling experience. There are no angels in war. And if you do not feel empathy for everyone involved, and conflicted by this war, by the death toll in Gaza, by the sights of Oct. 7, by the scenes of chaos and destruction on both sides of the line, by the echoes of history, you are simply not paying attention.

My second takeaway: we in the West have a fundamentally different understanding of Oct. 7 than do the Israelis.

Those of us who have the privilege of distance understand Oct. 7 as a discreet terrorist attack, not unlike September 11 — bigger, certainly, in terms of relative population, but a fleeting, brief and awful event. A thing that happened, and then was over. The nearly 100 hostages who remain in Gaza to this day are not a factor to consider.

To the Israelis, though, Oct. 7 was the opening barrage in a new phase of a long-running three-front war. Israel sees itself at war with Hamas in the south, Hezbollah in the north, and with Iran, which funds, trains and arms both. In recent days, that war has taken on a fourth and arguably even a fifth

front, as Islamic militants, also believed to be backed by Iran, launch drone strikes on Israeli territory from Iraq and fire missiles at shipping in the Red Sea from Yemen, risking, or seeking, a U.S. intervention that would escalate the conflict even further.

This state of war lingers across every aspect of Israeli civic society. A protest camp with a Shabbat table fully set for the outstanding hostages has been established in "Hostages Square" in front of both the Tel Aviv Museum of Art, and the Israel Defence Force headquarters. Yellow ribbons remain tied around fence posts and highway passes and boulevard trees. Placards featuring pictures of hostages line public places, hang in airports and on street corners, in the empty chairs of the public gallery overlooking the Knesset. The message is the same: "Bring them home." "Bring them home." "Bring them home."

I'm not sure that Hamas — no doubt emboldened by the hostage taking of IDF soldier Gilead Shalit in 2006 — could have understood the psychological impact of taking not one soldier, but rather hundreds of Israeli civilians. The effect has been a remarkable unity in Israeli civic society.

The Hostages and Missing Families Forum, which advocates for the hostages and their families, has stated as their goal, for example: "By any means necessary and through all available channels, our most important mission is to bring all hostages back home." Many of these protestors and groups have been heavily critical of Netanyahu and his government, claiming it has done too little to advance a ceasefire deal that would include the release of further hostages.

This tension is what has given the firing of former defence minister Gallant such particular resonance in Israeli society. After the announcement, Gallant gave a speech admitting that a deal for the remaining hostages was "possible" albeit with "painful compromises," further noting that abandoning those still remaining captive in Gaza would amount to the "mark of Cain."

All of this brings me to my final observation from the tour: I am not sure Israel has a clear vision of victory.

The stated military objectives are, at first glance, straightforward: bring the hostages home, and eliminate Hamas as an effective military force. But pull at

the threads of any of these objectives, and they quickly unravel into an infinite regression of questions.

What if the remaining hostages are dead? What if their remains are now lost in so much rubble that they are unlikely to ever be recovered? What if Hamas — or what's left of it — is now so decentralized and disorganized that it no longer even knows where these people are?

As for the second objective: what does destroying Hamas mean? What percentage of the fighting force needs to be killed or captured? What will replace it?

Perhaps most disturbing: What if the objective of returning the hostages is *at odds* with the aim of eliminating Hamas?

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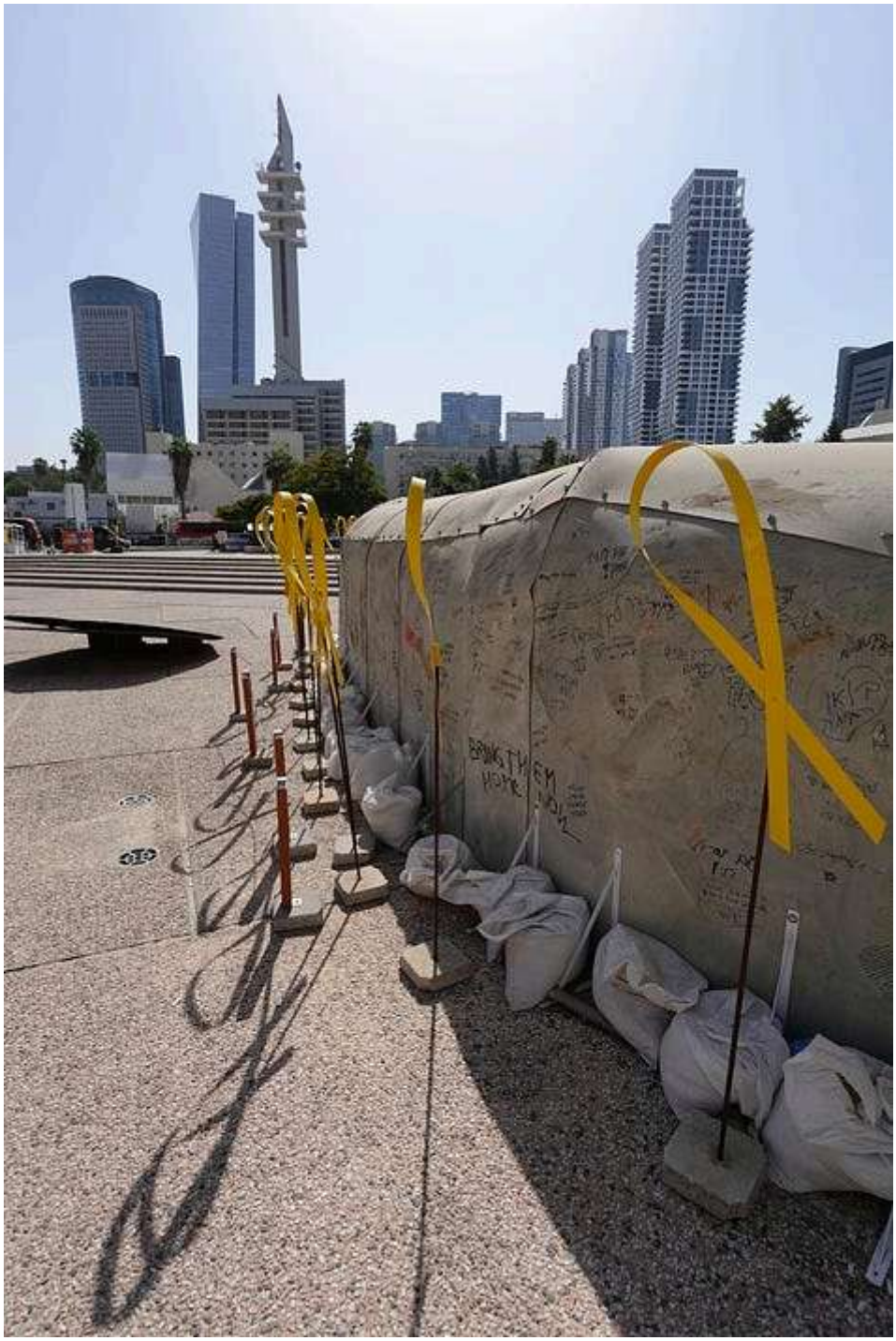

Images from Hostages Square in front of the Tel Aviv Museum of Art.

As part of the tour, we had the chance to pose that question to Simcha Rotman, a controversial member of the Knesset who is part of the governing coalition as a member of the far-right National Religious Party — Religious Zionism.

"For victory in war, you don't need objective [goals], you need subjective. But not your subjective, your enemies' subjective. So the people who will define if we've won or not in Gaza, will be Hamas. If Hamas exists after the war in Gaza, then we did not win," he said.

Rotman, it should be noted, isn't necessarily representative of Israeli society at large, but as a right-wing voice, he was candid. He drew a comparison to Nazi Germany, as he is wont to do: he drew a distinction between "Nazis" and "Nazi Germany," noting that the Allies did not need to kill all the Germans — nor even all the Nazis — in order to eliminate the Nazi power structure and civic identity.

"The same goes for Hamas in Gaza. If Hamas will be in Gaza after the war in any way, then you did not win."

I have no real doubt that Israel can meet all of its objective military goals in the immediate future. What concerns me are the subjective and political ones. Some hostages may never come home; Hamas may never wave a white flag; some mutation of that organization may forever seek to establish itself in the Gaza Strip.

To further Rotman's Nazi analogy, I see no solution here that doesn't involve a Marshall Plan, a sincere effort to reconstruct and re-educate the Strip in the hopes of creating a healthy, well-off, and independent state in which future generations can again feel safe to travel between enclaves.

We also spoke to Sharren Haskel, another member of the Knesset, albeit from the New Hope party — who understood who spoke of the need for UNRWA reform, but also understood the fact that it needed to be replaced. Is Israel prepared to do this? Is anyone else?

The goals Rotman identifies may be the necessary preconditions for a true and lasting peace. Or they might be subjective aims that cannot be realistically achieved, setting Israel up for war without end. Again. Or, at least, a war that continues until the country wears itself out militarily and economically as international support peters out, and anti-Semitism targeting Jews abroad continues to grow.

Whether Israel can win, and whether I can be a fair judge of the situation there, are important issues that will be addressed in a column *The Line* will publish tomorrow. It will also share what was, for me, the most emotionally difficult moment of the trip. Stay tuned.