

Adam Zivo: As Tel Aviv gets back to normal, those in 'Hostage Square' weep

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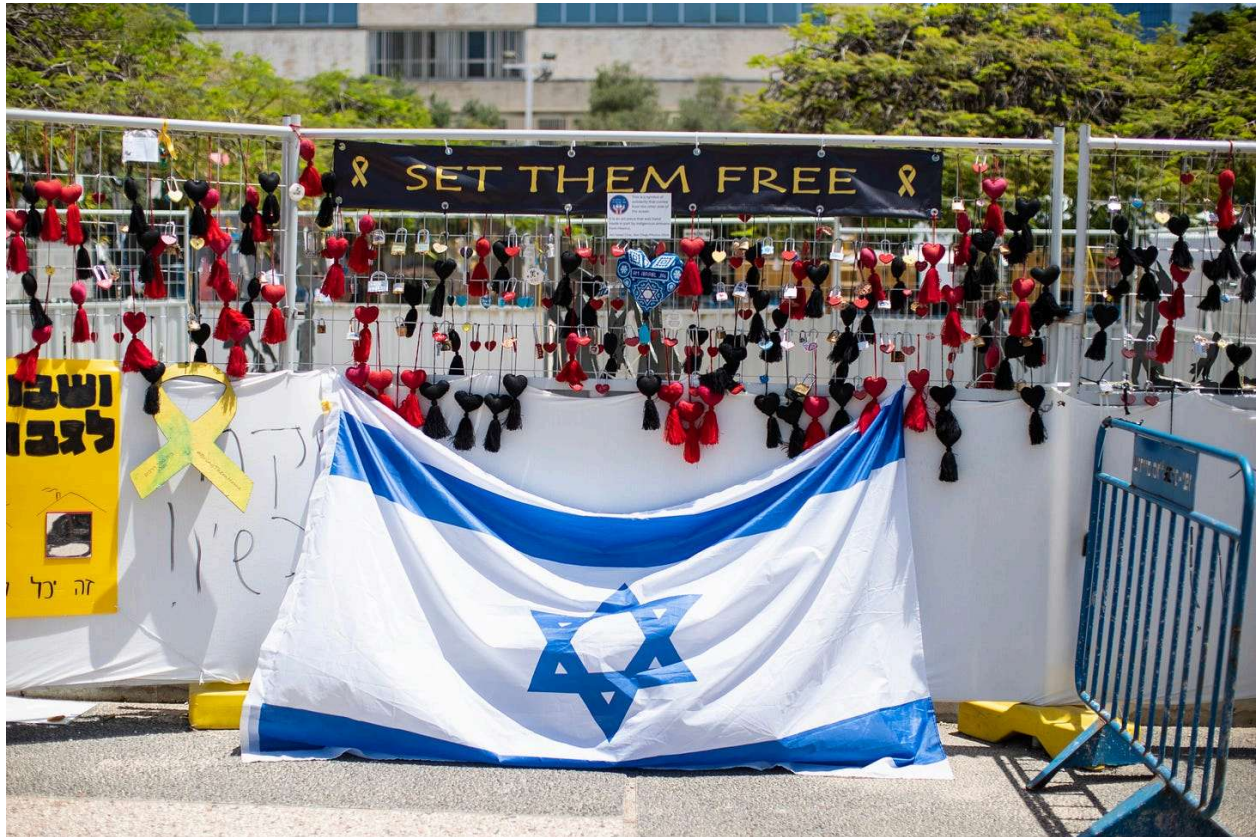


Photo courtesy Adam Zivo.

By: Adam Zivo

TEL AVIV — In a plaza beside the Tel Aviv Art Museum, tents and art installations commemorate the Israeli hostages still held captive by Hamas. Families and friends wait here, day after day, and call for the return of their loved ones by any means necessary – but with each passing month, their frustration and pessimism grows.

“Hostages Square,” as it is now called, began as a one-man protest on a sidewalk. A week after Hamas kidnapped his wife and three children, Avihai Brodutch stood outside Tel Aviv’s army headquarters and refused to leave until they were brought home. Over the ensuing weeks, others joined him and, as the crowd swelled, the protest was moved to its current location, where there was more space.

In the plaza, volunteers patiently explain the plight of the remaining captives, whose faces are plastered on posters and banners. There is a long dining room table with empty chairs, wine glasses and dinner plates for 234 people – one seat for each hostage. Whenever new hostages are released, the settings for their corresponding seat are

replaced with mouldy bread and dirty water to represent the conditions they experienced. Elsewhere, one can find a replica tunnel which allows visitors to imagine what underground captivity in Gaza must be like.

New installations are always popping up in the plaza, reflecting a desperate need to maintain the public's attention. Yet as time passes and life returns to normal in the rest of the capital, Hostages Square seems out of place — like an open-air museum. It has become a popular attraction for tourists and foreign volunteers, scarce as they may be during war, but this only reinforces the plaza's disconnection from the surrounding urban fabric.

Each weekend, tens of thousands of protesters congregate at the square, spill into the surrounding streets and demand the hostages' return. "Bring them home now," goes the popular refrain. Though these rallies were, at first, narrowly focussed on repatriation, they have grown increasingly critical of Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's

conservative government, which is widely seen as corrupt and jingoistic.

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I visited Hostages Square earlier this month through a trip organized by the non-profit Exigent Foundation. At the time, there was a large hourglass filled with red sand in the plaza, which reminded passersby, “Hostages are still there.” Cards filled with well-wishes dangled from tree branches like confetti.

I mostly chatted with Iris Shellhav Nahal, who originated from Nahal Oz, a kibbutz located less than a kilometre from the Gaza Strip. Her story was illuminating.

In Israel, “kibbutzim” are traditionally left-leaning communal villages, usually based on agriculture, which fuse socialist and Zionist principles. Members generally advocate for peaceful co-existence with the Palestinians, which is why a ring of these communities surrounds

Gaza. In a cruel twist of fate, this meant that peace activists were among the first to be slaughtered on October 7.

Iris was in Greece when Hamas assaulted her kibbutz. She awoke to her phone buzzing with red alerts, indicating rockets. It was immediately apparent to her that the scale of the attack was unprecedented. Through text messages, her friends let her know that they were hiding in their bomb shelters — almost every home near Gaza has one — and that there was shooting outside. They could hear Arabic.

Every second, the situation became more frightening to them all. Then Iris started receiving messages from friends confirming deaths within the kibbutz.

She did not go into the full details of what happened in Nahal Oz, but she recounted how Hamas took a 15-year-old boy, Tomer, and ordered him to go from house to house and make his neighbours come out. He

obeyed and told his fellow Israelis that if they didn't open their doors, he would be killed. The doors opened, but Hamas killed Tomer anyways.

Ultimately, 15 people were murdered in the kibbutz and seven were kidnapped. The carnage was well-documented, as Hamas' soldiers often forced Israelis to open their Facebook accounts and livestream their own torment.

Yet Nahal Oz had been lucky, according to Iris. The night before the attack, 12 soldiers had, through sheer coincidence, arrived at the kibbutz while on leave from their outposts. The soldiers, who were trained in anti-terrorism, fought off Hamas with the help of four local residents, allowing many people to escape unharmed.

Had they not been there, the situation could have been far worse. In other kibbutzim, up to a quarter of the population was murdered or kidnapped.

Iris now lives in northern Israel, only 10 km from the border with Lebanon. She was afraid when she first arrived at her new home — all of the villages adjacent to the Lebanese border have been evacuated since October 7 due to incessant bombardments from Hezbollah. So the first thing she did was confirm that her new bomb shelter could not be opened from the outside, and then she then filled it with food, water and other supplies.

While the scars of war still bleed in Israel's north and south, life in Tel Aviv has, for the most part, returned to normal. The beaches and restaurants pulse with life, although the city is quieter than usual, as almost all of the tourists are gone. So Iris diligently comes to Hostage Square to remind the public of the captives still left in limbo.

"I think a million people should be on the street and they're not in the streets. So I'm angry at that," she said. "At the same point, when I see people happy, I say to myself, it's OK. This is how we cope in Israel from 1948, from the Holocaust. People should come back to life ... but

for me, personally, it's very difficult... I will go to the cafes and sit there and have a coffee with someone. But I don't celebrate. I understand, it's human. I mean, it's not that they don't care. It's not... I think it's natural."

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Though Iris had always advocated for peace with the Palestinians, her faith in this possibility was badly shaken. She recalled how, just a month before October 7, there was a council in Nahal Oz where, for several hours, her neighbours shared knowledge about potato cultivation with Gazan farmers. These Palestinians were welcome guests, but now she wonders if they had simply come to scope out the community and plan their executions.

She intellectually understood that the mothers and children of Gaza are suffering, which she called "terrible," but she was too exhausted to feel anything for them. "I'm in my trauma. My heart is somewhere else. I don't have a place for them."

Most of her anger was reserved for Netanyahu. As a progressive, she had never been a supporter of his, but her hostility only grew after October 7. She said that “the state was not there” in the weeks after Hamas’ attack, and that civil society organizations “took over everything,” such as transporting soldiers, procuring equipment and caring for evacuees.

At the time of our interview, Iris had “no confidence” in the government and said that many of the hostage families she knows are “very disappointed” as “nobody thought it would take so long” to get the captives back. Collectively, they have been advocating for a ceasefire for months. “I would say, leave it. Bring those people back. You can’t make war on their backs,” she said.

At one protest she attended, Israelis set up a table with wine, representing the hostages, and set it on fire. “A lot of people cry while protesting.”

But in many ways, the political situation was “undecidable” for Iris. She believes that it is impossible to simultaneously topple the Netanyahu government and safely repatriate the hostages. “How do you do it at the same time? It will take time to get him down ... I think really in my heart, I feel that we should first bring them home.”

Like many Israelis, Iris was aware of the pro-Palestinian student protests on North American university campuses, many of which glorify Hamas and advocate for the destruction of Israel. She condemned the extremism of these protests as “terrible” and believed that many of the students, while not bad people, had “lost touch with reality” and were “ignorant.”

“They don’t know history. They don’t know what Hamas means. They think that to say peace for Palestine is to be with the Hamas,” said Iris. She theorized that many students side with Hamas because it is perceived as the weaker party, and “people automatically support the

weak,” but she emphasized that, if Israel is not strong, then millions of Jews will face ethnic cleansing and mass murder.

“We were weak and, in a moment of weakness, that’s what happened to us. So we can’t allow ourselves to be weak. I want people to understand this. We are fighting for our lives. It’s not for fun. It’s not for territory. We will do whatever we need to do to live,” she said. “We need peace, but it is difficult now to make peace. We’re trying to do things as morally as possible, but no war is moral.”