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World / Columnists

LILLEY: Those lecturing Israel should walk a mile in a kibbutz

Seeing the devastation and brutality of the attacks in person is vastly different than reading about them.

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Brian Lilley

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Ilan Cohen, a resident of Kibbutz Re'im and part of the community's security response team, stands outside of a destroyed home. Cohen helped fight back against the Oct. 7 Hamas attack for days until the Israeli army could remove the terrorists. (Brian Lilley, Toronto Sun)

TEL-AVIV — Reading about the devastating terrorist attacks launched against Israel on Oct. 7 is one thing, seeing it in person, walking the ground, and smelling the lingering scent of a burned-out building is something else.

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The experience puts things that have been theoretical for now into concrete terms.



“After your memories of what you have seen fade, the smell will stay with you,” Illan Cohen said as we toured Kibbutz Re’im on Monday afternoon.

Cohen, whom I met in Toronto last November, was part of the community defence force that fought back against the Hamas terrorists for five days until the military finally helped them clear out the last of the buildings.

When we met a few months ago, he gave graphic commentary of what he had seen and experienced and shared videos of the attack — none of that compares to seeing it in person.

We stood in a dark, lifeless home where two young men who lived in the Kibbutz had been killed, along with two young women. For the four young people, who had been at the Nova Music Festival, Re'im was the closest Kibbutz and many concert-goers fled to the community hoping for safety.

Thanks to Cohen and his fellow defence force members, some did find safety, but others were massacred — not just killed, but their bodies torched. The room we stood in was charred black from floor to ceiling, the windows dripping down the walls like cheap melted candles.

“They didn’t just kill our people, they desecrated them,” said one reservist of the IDF who asked not to be named.

It’s the story you heard time and again, the brutality of the attack: It was not being enough for Hamas to shoot and kill someone, they had to do more.

We drove south from Tel-Aviv early Monday morning, visiting several spots, including Kibbutz Kfar Aza. It was there we met Chen Kotler Abrahams, who walked us through her community, describing what happened on Oct. 7.



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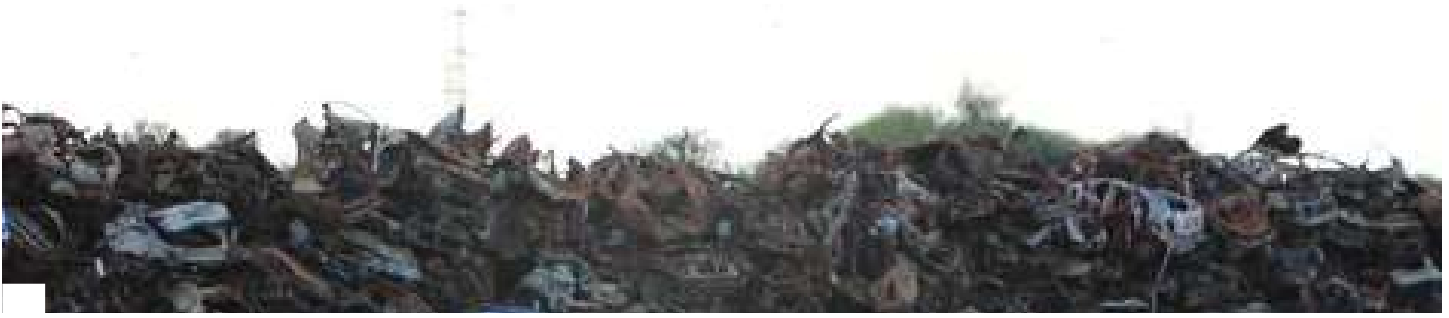
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On that fateful Saturday morning, Kotler Abrahams was actually out of the country, but immediately woke to the alerts going off on the phone apps all Israelis seem accustomed to. She spoke quickly to her father who was out for his morning walk and exercises near where the Hamas terrorists were breaching the grounds and helped ensure his safety from afar.

Despite being away, Chen detailed from her front deck where many of her friends were shot and killed. The terrorists had landed on her roof and took up positions all around her home, where they ambushed anyone coming to retrieve their weapons for the defence operations.

Kfar Aza was one of the Kibbutz settlements where Hamas clearly had detailed intelligence on the layout and security plans for the community.

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While Kotler Abrahams speaks of her youth, going to Gaza for the beaches, socializing with Palestinians who lived just a few kilometres away, she's not sure what the future holds, saying more than 20 years of living under rocket attacks — followed by the events of Oct. 7 — has taken away her trust in people.

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“I hope for peace, I say peace, everyday,” Kotler Abrahams said, while admitting she doesn’t know what that looks like anymore.

That’s a problem for many Israelis today: What does peace look like?

While the rest of the world clamours for a two-state solution and demands that Israel show “restraint,” average Israelis want to know that they are safe and that their families are safe. Sitting across the table, Elyon Levy, a spokesman for the Israeli government on the war, put it in simple terms.

“The war will be over when the diplomats at the UN feel safe babysitting the children at Nir Oz and being responsible for their safety,” Levy said.

That’s not something the UN diplomats, including Canada’s Bob Rae, are likely going to be comfortable doing. Yet, they will lecture Israel on their reaction to the Oct. 7 attacks and the threat of more to come.

Perhaps, they should come spend time walking the grounds, taking in the smells, and spend less time pontificating.



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