

WEEKEND

**‘I wanted them
to like me. That’s
how you survive’**

Liat Atzili was kidnapped from Kibbutz Nir Oz on October 7 and was held hostage by two young members of Hamas for months, not knowing if her husband and three children were still alive. The experience she endured is unlike any we've heard of so far

Shany Littman

One of the books in Liat Beinir Atzili's new apartment in the southern city of Kiryat Gat is "Demon Copperhead." The novel, by Barbara Kingsolver, a kind of contemporary take on Charles Dickens' classic "David Copperfield," was warmly recommended to Atzili by a cousin. It looks new, apart from a few sooty splatches on the pages. It was on Atzili's bedside table in her home on Kibbutz Nir Oz on the morning of October 7, and she was about to start reading it. More than nine months later, it's probably the most important book in her library, even though she hasn't read a word of it – she says she still can't concentrate enough to read. It was first thing she salvaged from her scorched home on Nir Oz, less than two kilometers from the Gaza Strip.

I first met Atili a few days after her release, 54 days after she had been kidnapped by Hamas terrorists, as part of the first and only hostage deal to date. The kibbutz organized a special evening in her honor and in memory of Aviv, her partner and the father of their three children, who was killed on that bloody Saturday while trying to defend Nir Oz, where he was born and lived until his last day. His body was abducted and is still being held in Gaza.

I wasn't previously acquainted with the Atzilis but about three weeks after the massacre I interviewed the eldest of their children, Ofri, 22, Aviv's mother Talma Atzili and Liat's mother Chaya Beinini, who had been evacuated to an Eilat hotel. No one knew what happened to the couple. All they knew was that Aviv had left the house and disappeared; no one had seen Liat and there was no sign of life from her. They weren't even sure she was in Gaza.

Ofri and his two grandmothers described a happy couple, both of them 49, who had known each other since the age of 14. A mechanic in charge of the kibbutz's farming equipment, Aviv had recently been revealed to be a sensitive, talented artist as well. For her part, Liat, who has U.S. citizenship, is a revered teacher of history and civics who also serves as a guide for groups of youths at the Yad Vashem Holocaust memorial in Jerusalem. Ofri and his brother Neta, 20, were in other homes on Nir Oz that morning; the youngest, Aya, 19, wasn't on the kibbutz. This is a family that loves to travel, that's enveloped by friends, a lovely and funny family. I was sorry we hadn't met earlier.

Then Liat returned home on November 29, the second-to-last day of the four-day cease-fire, during which a total 50 Israeli women and children were released in exchange for 150 Palestinian prisoners. The day after she returned, the Israel Defense Forces officially confirmed the family's worst fears: Aviv had been murdered.

that Saturday and Hamas had taken his body.

After Liat came back, I felt I had to see her with my own eyes. Now, seven months later, I wanted to hear first-hand what she had undergone. Her story is apparently not representative of that of most of the 250 or so people taken hostage: Not only was she not held in the terrorists' warren of underground tunnels and not only did she receive sufficient food, but she was not subjected to physical violence or treated cruelly. She makes a point of noting that she was very lucky.

Atzili realized that something irregular was happening on October 7 after a friend from outside the kibbutz called to tell her what she was seeing on social media. "I said that such a thing couldn't be," she recalls now.

She spent the first minutes in the safe room with Aviv. "The number of air-raided sirens was insane. And within just a few minutes we also heard rifle fire. Aviv said, 'There are people here in the kibbutz, I'm going out to see what's happening.' He was a member of the kibbutz security squad and he had a pistol. He returned after a few minutes, told me that he and our neighbor would be out walking around in the neighborhood, and left again. That was the last time I saw him."

Liat remained alone in their safe room with their dog. At about 11 A.M., two armed men in uniform burst into the unlocked room.

Were they scary?
Liat: "Not particularly. They had weapons but they didn't threaten me. They told me, 'You don't have to be afraid, we won't hurt you, come with us.' They gave me time to get dressed and organized, but I wasn't capable of doing that because I was in shock."

Did you try to argue with them?
"No."

At that stage she thought fleetingly about taking the Kingsolver book with her. Afterward, during the endless days spent in captivity in a private home in Khan Yunis, in the southern part of the Strip, she was a bit sorry she hadn't. "When they took me, I

'They were shocked that I'm a vegetarian. "So, what do you eat?" they asked. I told them I really like pizza. So one of them got on his bicycle and brought a pizza from Crispy Pizza in Khan Yunis. After that we asked for fruit and vegetables, and they brought them.'



Atzili in her new home in Kiryat Gat. "I was certain they were taking me outside and it would be like the Holocaust. That they would take everyone out to the big lawn. And when I saw outside there was no one, just me, I was pretty stunned. They didn't touch me, they spoke in English and said all the time, 'Don't worry, we won't hurt you.'"

Tomer Appell

Tomer Appelbaum

thought, 'What, I'm thinking about a book now?' It looked stupid to me – I thought it would take two-three days and it would all end. I don't know why I thought that. I also didn't take any clothes. I looked for my glasses, and they also helped me look, we didn't find them. When I got home, two months later, the glasses were exactly in the place where I remembered they were supposed to be. But at the moment of truth the brain doesn't function."

What went through your head?
 "I was certain they were taking me outside and it would be like the Holocaust. That they would take everyone out to the big lawn, and then I don't know what they'd do with us. And when I saw outside that there was no one, just me, I was pretty stunned. They didn't touch me, they spoke to me in English and said all the time, 'Don't worry, we won't hurt you.' Then they took me to a car next to the dining hall. There was someone else there from the kibbutz, who is still in captivity."

The Atzilis' dog, she learned after returning, was shot that day.

In the Gaza Strip, she was separated from the other captive she'd seen and taken to the home of the family of one of the abductors. "His mother welcomed me. I couldn't stop crying. She had me sit down on the sofa, hugged me and said, 'It will be alright, it will be alright.'"

“Did you try to tell them something?”
“At first I told them, ‘Listen, I don’t know what’s happening with my children, with my husband.’ I asked them to try to tell them somehow that I was alive,” she says now, with a laugh. “They kept telling me, ‘In another few days, in another few days.’ I kept crying all the time. They seemed really worried about me and wanted me to eat and drink. They said, ‘We will protect you, you’re safe here, nothing will happen to you.’ They let me shower, change clothes. They washed my clothes.”

Weren't they afraid you would try to escape?

"No, and rightly so. Where would I go? The house was completely open, I could wander about freely inside. They asked me if I needed anything and whether I wanted to be alone in the room. They didn't guard me at all. They understood that I wasn't going anywhere, because what would I do alone in Khan Yunis? We didn't talk much, because they didn't speak English [or Hebrew] and I don't speak Arabic. With me in the house were the abductor's parents, his brothers and his sister with her children. When you are in a house with little kids, it's calming."

On the evening of Sunday, October 8, Atzili was brought to another apartment where there were a few Hamas militants. There she met some of the Thai workers who had been taken

hostage from the Gaza border communities, and also Ilana Gritzewsky, 30, another hostage from Nir Oz. Gritzewsky was released the day after Atilzi, on November 30, as part of the hostage deal; her partner, Matan Zangauker, is still in Gaza. Atilzi says the Thais were taken away that same night, and two guards stayed with her and Gritzewsky. "Ilana and I remained with them for the whole period. They were about 30 years old. They weren't armed or in uniform. We stayed in that apartment for about 10 days and were then moved to another one. And that was it. We'd started our period of captivity."

* * *

Although Atzili and Gritzewski were from the same kibbutz, they didn't know each other. Gritzewski immigrated from Mexico 14 years ago, and she and Zangauker had only recently moved to Nir Oz. The fact that the two women were held together was a great comfort to them both. They shared all their feelings and talked about everything. But they didn't only talk to each other. During their long weeks of captivity, Atzili attests, a type of trust developed between them and the two guards.

"It was all very confusing," she recalls. "Obviously I was scared, certainly at the beginning. But they kept telling us that Hamas wanted a deal, that it was about to happen, and that their job was to safeguard us. That it was in their interest for us to be in good condition. After a few days, it was pretty clear that they weren't going to hurt us. I was really afraid they would transfer us to other people. Occasionally they raised that possibility and I would say, 'But you're staying with us, right?'"

The guards allowed Atzili and Gritzewski to watch Al Jazeera's flagship Qatari-based channel every day, so they were able to glean something about the events of October 7. But there was no mention of Nir Oz on the Qatari-based channel, so they didn't know what had happened to their loved ones, nor did they have the faintest notion of the number of those on the kibbutz who had been killed.

Continued on page 8

A black and white photograph of a horse's head, facing right, serves as the background for the poster. The horse has a light-colored coat and dark eyes. Overlaid on the image is the festival's name in three languages: Hebrew, English, and Arabic. Above the names is the date range. Below the names is the ticket information. At the bottom, there are logos for various sponsors and partners.

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The Atzilis' house, after it was torched by Hamas terrorists. "I love Nir Oz very much and I don't want October 7 to be the only day that defines it."

WEEKEND

Continued from page 7

and/or taken hostage. To date 115 Nir Oz members are still in Gaza; 41 of them have been officially reported as dead. Earlier this week the Israel Defense Forces announced that the body of Alex Dancyg, 75, kidnapped from Nir Oz, was found in Gaza, along with that of Yagev Buchshtab, 35, abducted from Kibbutz Nirim.

Atzili: “I didn’t know what had happened to Aviv. I had exchanged messages with the children right until I was abducted, but I didn’t know what happened afterward. That was one of the things that drove me crazy: How had that day ended? What finally happened? On Al Jazeera they talked about [Kibbutz] Be’eri and about the military base at [Kibbutz] Nahal Oz. Our guards told us that not much had happened on Nir Oz, and they didn’t know anything about my family. They didn’t talk to us about the atrocities, about the acts of rape and murder.

“When we told them there had been looting, that we had actually seen it, they looked surprised. And they kept repeating, ‘We don’t understand why they kidnapped you, you women – we don’t fight women.’ I said, ‘Okay, you don’t understand why they abducted us, but you’re the ones who are holding us.’ They didn’t have a reply to that. When I felt more confident I said to them, ‘Take us to Abasan’ – a town in the Strip that’s close to the border with Israel, across from Nir Oz. I told them that we would manage from there. I also said that my father would pay a lot of money if they returned us. They said, ‘If it were up to us, we would help you. But you know that if we do that, either the Israeli army will kill us or Hamas will.’”

Many of the hostages who have returned from Gaza report suffering acute hunger. But Atzili and Gritzewski were lucky in that respect, too: They were held in Khan Yunis at a time when there was a more or less reasonable supply of food there. One of Atzili’s stories sounds surreal. “They were shocked that I’m a vegetarian. ‘So, what do you eat?’ they asked. I told them I really like pizza. So one of them got on his bicycle and brought a pizza from Crispy Pizza in Khan Yunis. After that we asked for fruit and vegetables, and they brought them. Eggs ran out quite quickly and it was impossible to get more. There were days when there wasn’t much food. It’s really weird when suddenly you’re not in control of what you eat or when. But we didn’t suffer from hunger. They tried see to it that we had enough food.”

As the days passed, the two women began to hold long conversations with their guards. “I understood that what would help me survive was as much communication as possible with them. They wanted us to see them as people, and we wanted them to see us as people. So very quickly conversations started about family, about our lives, and it worked. I was totally dependent on those people. I wanted them to like me, I wanted them to get to know me, I wanted them to care about me. That’s how you survive.”

Atzili attributes the decision to take that approach, which may have saved her life, to the other person from Nir Oz who was taken in the same car on October 7. “There was something about his behavior, about the conversation we managed to have before we were separated, that helped me understand that in captivity, too, I needed to be myself as much as possible.”

Do you know the guards’ names?
“I know what they told me their names were.”

What did they tell you about themselves?

“One said he’s a lawyer, the other a teacher. Both are married and each has a child. The wife of one of them came to the apartment one day with their newborn. We talked about our children, about our spouses, parents, siblings. They talked a lot about their life. One of them had a cat, so we talked about our cats. They told about weddings, about day-to-day life. We talked a lot about food. One of the guards really likes to cook, so they described all kinds of foods: makluba, stuffed vegetables, all kinds of salads.”

Atzili asked them why they were affiliated with Hamas. “I was able to understand a little about the place Hamas has in their lives. They talked a lot about the poverty in the Strip, about how hard it is to leave it. Both really wanted to make the pilgrimage to Mecca. They’re considered to be middle class – from native Gazan families, not refugee families, and property owners – but said they still could not afford to leave. They asked us curiously whether we had ever eaten at McDonald’s. We said yes, what’s the big deal, the food is disgusting. They said that in the ads it looked so appealing.”

Did you talk about politics?
“Yes. There were things they knew that totally surprised me. On one hand, they had heard a great deal about politics in Israel and about the army; on the other, they were totally ignorant about other things. For example, we talked about Sabra and Shatila [the massacre of thousands of Lebanese and Palestinian civilians in Beirut in 1982]. I told our captors that it wasn’t the IDF that massacred them. I explained that it’s true that



Liat and Aviv Atzili, during their travels years ago in Australia. “What has become the central and most difficult thing for me to cope with in my life is his loss.”

Courtesy of the family

there are some who think it was the army’s responsibility, what happened, and that I agree that the IDF should have prevented it, but it wasn’t the army that carried out the massacre. They were surprised and asked, ‘So who did it, then?’”

Another time Atzili felt she was enlightening her captors about something they barely knew about was in a conversation she had about the Holocaust. As a history teacher and a guide at Yad Vashem, this is a subject she’s very familiar with. This jaw-dropping conversation took place between her and one of the guards who she says, until that moment, was actually less of a talker. “At first he was very shy about speaking English, but as time passed he became more confident. There were a few days when Ilana and the other guard were sick

‘It’s clear to me that their [the captors’] worldview is fundamentally mistaken. But here in Israel, too, there are people whose worldview is fundamentally mistaken. And despite all my easiness when talking about it, I really had amazingly good luck.’

and slept a lot, so it was just the two of us and we spoke freely. He said he had read about the Holocaust on the internet and asked me to tell him more. I told him, and at the end he said, ‘It’s terrible what happened to you [people].’ I said, ‘Yes, really terrible.’ He said, ‘I didn’t know so many Jews were murdered.’”

On the other hand, Atzili adds, it was clear that the two men are messianic Muslims who believe in global jihad. “We talked about the two-state solution. One agreed that it had to happen, but said it would only be ‘temporary.’ In the end the whole world will be Muslim.’ That is the goal, they said. Although today the leaders of the Arab states and the Arabs of Israel don’t support them enough, one day that will change, they said. They spoke a lot about wanting us Jews to leave Israel and return to the countries we came from. We explained to them that that is not really a possibility.”

So you feel their views stemmed from deep religious belief?

“With one of them I felt that this is truly what he subscribes to. But with

the other my impression was that he has his feet more solidly on the ground, that he knows that ideology and faith are one thing, and reality is another.”

Were you afraid because you were women being held by men?

“At first we were very apprehensive that something would happen, that we would be sexually assaulted. But afterward we understood that it was okay, that they were staying within the limits.”

While the deal to release hostages was being worked out, the captors tried to deceive them. “They told us all kinds of nonsense – that we were on the list, that we were not on the list. They lied and tried to trick us a little, but they weren’t good at it. We saw through them very quickly, and then they apologized. I still don’t know how much they really knew about what was going on.”

In the weeks before the deal, Atzili says, there were power outages, so they were not always able to watch Al Jazeera. “There was talk about a deal for a long time, about a month, until it happened. We sensed that they were talking about it all the time. Generally we would ask to watch TV in the afternoon or evening. Then one day we said we wanted to watch in the morning, and suddenly they weren’t reporting on the war, but about the elections in Holland and about a volcano that erupted in Iceland. That was a kind of moment of, like, wow, other things are happening in the world. It really made me glad. I have a good friend who lives in Holland, and I thought that when I get out of here I’ll ask her about the elections, maybe I’ll show I know something about Dutch politics.”

A few days before they were released, Atzili and Gritzewski were moved to the Nasser Hospital where the hostages who were to be freed had been gathered. “It was like something out of ‘Hasamba’ [a popular series of Hebrew children’s adventure books]. The guards told us ahead of time that we would be taken at night because they were afraid we would be lynched” – perhaps by angry mobs of Hamasniks or civilians. “And in fact the men showed up at night and blindfolded us. One of our captors came out of the apartment and put us in the van.”

How did you part?
“Before he left us, he said, ‘Good luck, may God bless you.’ We thanked him. There were mutual pats on the shoulder. After all, we’d spent a period of time together. On one hand, it’s a terrible crime, what they did to us, and the fact that they chose to participate in it. On the other, they treated us humanely in a way that made it pos-

sible for us to get through that period alright, all in all.”

Atzili doesn’t know what became of her captors. She is silent for a while when I ask if she would like to know. “I don’t know,” she says finally. “Sometimes I do, sometimes I don’t. Sometimes I’m curious about it, sometimes I would rather not know. I don’t wish for their death. But they made a wrong choice. It’s clear to me that their worldview is fundamentally mistaken. But here in Israel, too, there are people whose worldview is fundamentally mistaken. And despite all my easiness when talking about it, I really had amazingly good luck.”

When she and Gritzewski were taken to Nasser Hospital, they met other hostages and heard news that astonished them.

You didn’t know there were other hostages?

“One day on TV we saw demonstrations for the release of the hostages and one of the signs had a picture of Ofer Calderon and his children. I was shocked. What? There are six captives from Nir Oz? It seemed insane to me. In the hospital I met Shani Goren and Irena Tati. Shani filled us in, because she had been in the hospital for a long time and had met more people from Nir Oz who were held there or had gone through there before being released. Some had heard Israeli radio while they were in captivity. I was stunned by what she said. She

didn’t know anything about my family. I asked: ‘Do you really not know, or aren’t you telling me?’ She swore she really didn’t know.

What were the details that stunned you?

“I had imagined that as along as the war was still going on, the residents of Nir Oz wouldn’t go back home, but I hadn’t imagined the scale of the destruction on the kibbutz. I hadn’t imagined that the school was gone. I thought that maybe 20 or 30 people from Nir Oz had been murdered – statistically, that sounded logical – but I never imagined that so many had been abducted. And above all, I couldn’t have imagined all the atrocities. I knew Hamas had murdered and kidnapped, but I didn’t imagine other things. It’s lucky I didn’t know, because that’s information you can’t bear in a situation like that.”

So actually not knowing helped you?

“Yes. I didn’t know Aviv wasn’t alive, I didn’t know anything. Psychologically, I was protected. Other people endured completely different things. It’s clear to me that the way I endured this thing is what helped me to be in the place I’m in today and to speak as I do. I really understand people [i.e., families of hostages and victims] who only want revenge and are filled with anger. Those voices need to be accommodated. But it’s also important for there to be other voices. It’s essential for there to be other voices.”

On the day after arriving in the hospital, Atzili was separated from Gritzewski, who was taken into a tunnel ahead of her release. After a few hours, Atzili was the only one in the room in Nasser. “At around 8 or 9 P.M. someone said, ‘It’s not for sure that you’re going home today. You are the only Israeli in the hospital.’ I got really scared. I called out to him; I wanted to tell him to sit with me. I felt that I wasn’t capable of being by myself there. And then he suddenly said, ‘Want to go home?’ And they took me out.”

Atzili was taken to a place where the other hostages who would be released that evening were waiting. “I got there feeling that a catastrophe awaited me. I was afraid of finding out what happened to Aviv and the kids.”

It was actually those minutes, just before Atzili was released and enjoyed her first taste of freedom – until she met with the officer from the IDF’s casualty unit, who told her what had happened to her family – that are seared into her as moments of acute terror. “There was no relief and no joy until I was told that my children were okay. That was the moment I suddenly began to breathe. At that stage, the official account was that Aviv had been wounded and abducted. Only 12 hours later were we formally notified that he had been killed on the kibbutz and his body had been kidnapped.”

They waited with the announcement until you came out?

“The official account is that they didn’t. That the moment there is a definite conclusion, the family is notified. That doesn’t bother me.” She adds that the fact that she got the announcement about Aviv while still experiencing the immediate shock of her return helped buffer her, in a way, from the horror of the news.

“It’s now more than half a year after I was freed and there are still things that are hanging in the air. Aviv always said that a nightmare that ends can be looked at as an experience. The hostage situation has been shifted aside, and what has become the central and most difficult thing for me to cope with in my life is his loss. It’s obvious that I have psychological baggage and emotional scars from being held hostage, but that isn’t the main thing. I won’t say it’s a footnote, but it’s not the central thing.”

Atzili arrived at Kibbutz Nir Oz at the age of 20, after becoming involved with Aviv. “I’m a personal import,” she says with a smile. She was born in 1974

on Kibbutz Shomrat, in the north, to parents who immigrated from the United States via a “core group” affiliated with the Hashomer Hatzair movement. She met Aviv at the age of 14 at a course for young group leaders in the movement. “We were in touch here and there, hikes, seminars. We both did a year of volunteer national service [before enlisting in the army] and lived in a commune in Haifa. Toward the end of the year our relationship grew closer and we became a couple at the age of 19.”

After the couple finished their army service – Aviv served in the Egoz commando unit, and Liat was an officer in the Adjutant Corps – they lived for a time on Nir Oz and then embarked on a long trip. “We traveled for three years

‘Without peace, we won’t survive. And peace isn’t eating falafel in Khan Yunis with my captors. Peace is the absence of war. And if this war won’t be leveraged to create dramatic change, then we really can pack our bags and leave this place.’

and returned to Israel when we were 26 because I wanted to study and I wanted a child. By the age of 30 I had a B.A. and we had three children – Ofri, Neta and Aya. We were kids with kids. In the last few years, Aviv always said, ‘How fortunate it is that you forced me to have children early. We’re not 50 yet and our baby has finished 12th grade and is doing a year of national service.’ We were again a couple without young kids. Everything seemed to be wide open.”

The couple’s liberated style of parenting was mentioned with a smile at the memorial event held for Aviv. Someone said that at any given moment one of their children was flying off somewhere. “When they were 5, 7 and 9, we spent a few months in India, and the East. Aviv told me that before that trip, he realized he didn’t really know them. That besides knowing which type of fried egg each of them liked, he didn’t know who his children were. It was important for him to know them, so he invested a great deal in that.

“On the other hand,” she continues, “we are very free as parents. Our relationships with the kids are more along the lines of ‘because we want to,’ than ‘because we have to.’ It makes me happy that they know that I am okay and that they don’t have to protect me, that I’m still the one who protects them. When I returned from Gaza it took them time to get used to the fact that there was a parent in the picture again, because they were effectively alone during that period.”

Atzili doesn’t know exactly what happened to Aviv after he left their home for the last time on that Saturday. But from what the army has told her, she believes that he was indeed killed on Nir Oz and his body was then taken to Gaza. “All the time I have in my mind that moment when it was clear to him that he was going to go out and that it was okay to leave me in the house. That his commitment was to the general public, to the community, to the place.”

Does that make you angry?
“No. It’s very much like him. It’s very much like every security squad. On Nir Oz that day there were stories of supreme heroism by members of the squad and other people. They risked their lives. Aviv fought until the last minute for the things that were most important to him. He would not have been capable of living with himself if he hadn’t gone out and done everything he could.”

The last year of Aviv’s life was amazing and fulfilling, Atzili says, which gives her some consolation. “He flew with his brother Ronen to India and went skiing with the Erez association” – a non-



President Joe Biden and Atzili meeting earlier this month. “The day will come when you will remember Aviv and smile before you cry,” he told her.

White House Twitter account

profit of present and former members of the IDF' alpine unit, who help disabled soldiers and children with special needs – “in which he was active and which he liked so much. We went on a trip to the United States with our kids and the extended family. I think he died very ‘whole.’ His WhatsApp status was “Better to burn out than to rust” (in English).

Aviv would have been 50 on June 21. Those who loved him marked his birthday by opening an exhibition of artwork that he left behind, in Tel Aviv's RawArt Gallery. “He always painted, always worked in metal, but during the past year he also exhibited and sold some works,” Atzili explains. “That was new. He scattered a lot of his art around Nir Oz, he felt that the public space was his. He managed to do only a little in terms of art, and that is truly heartbreaking.”

Even though Aviv's body hasn't been returned, the family held a funeral for him on Nir Oz, on December 6. A line from a song by the Mashina band – “I will wait for you in the fields” – was engraved on his headstone, in a facsimile of his own handwriting, inspired by an episode some years back: “One time the kibbutz created a new concrete space for washing down its fleet of tractors. Aviv engraved in the concrete the phrase ‘I will wait for you in the fields,’ and took me to see it. Below those words, the headstone reads, ‘Fell in battle for our home Nir Oz.’ Very minimalistic.”

Atzili wants to emphasize that as far as she is concerned, there is no reason for other people to risk their lives in order to return Aviv's body to Israel. “I'm pretty convinced that his body will never be brought back and I have no problem with that. It would give me no rest if a hair from the head of someone were to fall in order to extricate Aviv's body and bring it back to Israel. It's not possible to bring him back to life, and it's not logical for people to pay with their lives so as to bring back a body. Always before he took his siesta, Aviv wrote to the children, ‘Chicks – shhh, Daddy is sleeping.’ And to me, he'd say, ‘I wish myself perfect rest [a phrase from a prayer recited during burial]. As far as I am concerned, he found perfect rest.’”

* * *

Early this month, Atzili met in the White House with President Joe Biden. He was the first to call her parents to congratulate them on the day she was released from Gaza. From the Israeli government, she says, not even an SMS arrived. “That doesn't disappoint me in any way, it doesn't make me angry – it's a disparity that obviously reflects the role of leadership in different places. The concept of an elected official who serves the public is not very deeply rooted here. The personal connection, the deep commitment and the caring that exists between citizens and their elected officials in the United States is no less than inspiring. We have much to aspire to.”

The encounter with Biden was very moving. “He is a charming man. He told me about his first wife, who was killed in a car accident, and talked about the destiny he and I share [having lost loved ones]. He said, ‘The day will come when you will remember Aviv and smile before you cry.’”

‘It would give me no rest if a hair from the head of someone were to fall in order to extricate Aviv's body and bring it back to Israel. It's impossible to bring him back to life, and it's not logical for people to pay with their life so as to bring back a body.’

Following her return home, she resumed teaching in Nofei Habsor School, part of the ORT vocational schools network, in the western Negev. She had served as the homeroom teacher of a 12th-grade class there before October 7. “While in captivity, I made a decision that I would complete 12th grade with my class. I went back quite immediately to both to the school and to Yad Vashem. I needed that very badly. I don't know if it was the right thing for my students to receive me in this state, but it did me good. I wanted to say to myself that I am still something of what I once was. But next year I will take a break.”

Has your guiding work in Yad Vashem changed after what you went through?

“Not very much. I understood that I needed to mention what I went through, because if I didn't say anything, the other guides would talk about me.”

Are you asked there whether what you experienced in Gaza resembles what happened in the Holocaust?

“Yes, and the answer is no, it doesn't. I taught 10th grade at a school organized in the hotels of the evacuees at the Dead Sea. The class consisted mostly of children from the Be'eri and

Kissufim kibbutzim, and I took them for a tour of Yad Vashem. One of the pupils asked, ‘Liat, were they [the Jews of Europe] afraid the way we were afraid on October 7?’ I replied that they were afraid like that for six years. Almost everything I said about the Holocaust evoked an association with October 7. I hope they felt they had a safe place that made it possible for them to ask questions – that it gave them a few more tools to understand and process what they went through.”

Her plan for the year ahead is to devote herself to rebuilding her community and her kibbutz, whose members have meanwhile been relocated to new apartments in the neighborhood of Karmeit Gat, in Kiryat Gat, until they can return to Nir Oz.

“We succeeded in creating something here from the ground up, a functioning community. People are still suffering an acute trauma and respond differently to all kinds of things. Some people feel the right way to cope is by moving full-speed ahead, some don't. And along with all this there is the matter of the hostages. It can be said very simply that without ending the story of the hostages, we will not be able to rehabilitate ourselves, we will not be able to build a new life. The community will not be able to move on.

“But it's more complicated than that. The story of the hostages is an open wound, it is constantly present. It's a complexity that is difficult to come to terms with. It's hard to find words that explain precisely the place it holds in the life of the community. It's a reminder of the abandonment and the neglect, a reminder of a horrific failure most people want to put behind them – which is still impossible to do.”

Atzili notes that the failure she mentions did not begin nine months ago. “We've been living for 20 years with abandonment and neglect and zero political strategy. October 7 is the result of Netanyahu's policy and of that of the right-wing governments throughout that period. This includes cultivating Hamas at the expense of the Palestinian Authority, the attempt to cover up the Palestinian issue and the failure to conduct diplomatic negotiations.”

Didn't that scare you before? Didn't you live with a feeling that everything could explode?

“No. Aviv was involved with security matters and told me that there was a scenario that included a possibility of massive gunfire and penetration by terrorists of a few communities. But no one imagined that it would be on this scale. We were ‘numbered’ by tax breaks, safe rooms. A fools' paradise.”

For now, Atzili is happy with her temporary home in Kiryat Gat. “There are still things that function well in the country. Few countries, even those termed first world, would have succeeded in mobilizing like this for an event involving civilians of this nature. We received furnished apartments down to the level of the teaspoon and the potted plant. True, it's not a kibbutz, but there's a field and there's a sunset. In general I prefer to concentrate on what there is, on what can yet be, and not on what there isn't and on what will no longer be. And I look at the alternative: a United Nations tent and packages of humanitarian aid? Most people in the world who go through what we experienced – that's what they get.”

Are you referring to the people of Gaza, in this sense?

“Obviously,” she says, pauses for a moment and takes a breath. “I was and I remain a leftist from the radical edges who believes in coexistence and peace,” she continues, softly. “Peace is not a dream of bleeding hearts. We have no other alternative. Without peace, we will not survive. And peace isn't eating falafel in Khan Yunis with my captors. Peace is the absence of war. And if this war will not finally be leveraged to create dramatic change, then we really can pack our bags and leave this place.

“The wretched statement that the whole Strip is Hamas is factually wrong. They were wrong in their support for what was done, like the Israeli public was wrong about many things. Here too there is a horrible government. Here too an unworthy prime minister is elected time and again by an disturbing majority. And yes, I think about what is happening in Gaza. I feel compassion for people who suffer, bereaved families on both sides are families that are overcome with sadness and loss, and my sadness and loss are no more important the sadness and loss of other families. War is not an end in and of itself. It's clear to me that this war at the moment serves only political interests. And it's clear that the government has sacrificed the hostages on the altar of its political survival.”

Will you return to Nir Oz?

“I want a tunnel built from my home to my neighbors' so that if something should happen again, at least I won't be alone,” she laughs. But she evades an unequivocal answer. “My intention is to return. My son is there. It depends on who the people are who will return, who will come. Some members of our community don't want to return. But I definitely want it to go back to being a living place, one of both continuity and renewal. I love Nir Oz very much and I don't want October 7 to be the only day that defines it. It's also my connection to Aviv. Without hesitating for a second, he sacrificed his life for that place.”

A plan to save Israel:

A vision for separating religion and politics

The melting-pot idea isn't democratic and heterogeneous societies must recognize diversity. A religious Zionist from the settlement of Efrat offers some new values for everyone between the river and the sea



Israel Piekarsch. His aim is remove from the national ballot the cardinal areas of dispute within Israeli society in the spheres of religion, education, culture and identity. Instead, decisions on such subjects would be made at the community level.

Naama Greenbaum

Meirav Arlosoroff

Israel Piekarsch, 39, was brought up in the religious Zionist movement and currently lives in the settlement of Efrat, adjacent to Bethlehem. He is also the CEO of a movement called Anahnu (We), which aims to forge social cohesion in Israel. But before consigning Piekarsch to one of the usual rubrics, it's worthwhile to hear about the two basic values his movement is promoting in order to achieve what it calls “a new Israeli consensus.”

One is that between the Jordan River and the sea there are two peoples – Palestinian and Jewish – each of which has legitimate national rights. Accordingly, there is no alternative but to establish a kind of joint state for the two peoples. Piekarsch envisions a Palestinian state alongside Israel, within the so-called 1967 borders but based on mutual recognition of the rights of both sides to the entire territory.

As part of this vision, Jewish settlements in the heart of Palestine would be able to remain, provided their inhabitants assume Palestinian citizenship (in addition to their Israeli citizenship). Moreover, Palestinians from the occupied territories and the Arab countries would have the right of return – about a million of them would be permitted to live in Israel as full-fledged citizens, on condition they recognize Israel as a Jewish and democratic state.

A further condition is that the proportion of Palestinians residing within Israel proper will not exceed 30 percent of the country's total population, in order not to pose a threat to the Jewish majority. This second idea stems from the fact that the greatest threat to Israel is its lack of internal, societal cohesion. Piekarsch seeks to change the face of Israel and transform it into what he calls a “Jewish-democratic-neutral” state. Yes, he's talking about a type of separation between religion and state, or at least separation between religion and politics. In order to achieve that, he suggests that all the volatile religious-educational-identity issues plaguing the country be removed from the purview of the national government, and be managed instead by autonomous communities. Effectively, he is proposing a plan for a layer of government in Israel that's similar to a regional model, consisting of some 10 to 15 separate communities whose members/residents are actually scattered around the country – i.e., not defined by geographical location. The electoral system would be based on a combination of the current process, whereby the majority determines governmental representatives on the national level, and one in which people also cast votes for representatives of

their own community, along with casting a ballot for president, along the lines of the model used in France.

Piekarsch/Anahnu's plan for a new type of governance in Israel was one of four such proposals presented by the Jerusalem Institute for Policy Research in an article published this month (in Hebrew), entitled “Futures for Israel – Proposals for a New Social-Governance Order.” The proposals are being examined as part of project that is being overseen by Ehud Praver, former deputy director general for governance and social affairs in the Prime Minister's Office, and Lior Shilat, a former director general of the Ministry of Energy. One of the other proposals being considered – drawn up by Hebrew University economist Prof. Eugene Kandel and Ron Tzur, who lectures on national resilience and economic growth at Ono Academic College – envisions Israel as a federation.

Liberty, equality, fraternity

Specifically, Piekarsch seeks to convince Israeli voters of the importance of two formative values. One is recognition of the Palestinians' rights, which would help in promoting an innovative solution to the conflict; the second is religious

neutrality. With these components, the new Israel could be formed, he believes: a Jewish and democratic state that is committed, as are French citizens, to the values of liberty, equality and fraternity. Liberty, because every citizen would have the freedom to choose their own way of life; equality, because all citizens, including minorities, would have full and equal rights; and fraternity, because this model would make it possible to overcome domestic schisms and recreate Israeli *mamlakhtiut* – a statesmanlike orientation that supersedes divisive, sectarian ideologies.

Piekarsch cites three basic problems that he believes are destroying Israel from within. First: non-recognition of the legitimate right of the Palestinians to a state, an issue that has entangled Israel in an unlawful occupation that has sparked both major domestic and international disputes. Second: the “melting pot” concept.

“A heterogeneous society cannot resolve its internal differences by means of the melting pot, which in practice forces values that are not acceptable upon large parts of society,” he says. “It's an undemocratic step. Democratic societies resolve their heterogeneity by means of a federation, and recognition of the rights of

the different communities.”

Third: the attempt to impose the melting pot ideal by means of a single ballot, which exacerbates disputes between different communities. “It's a reasonable assumption that you and I could agree on nine out of 10 subjects. But because I have only one ballot, I will be compelled to vote on the basis of the 10th – divisive – issue. If the discussion were split, and if we were to remove the divisive subject from the voting, we would be able to reach broad agreements.”

Indeed, that is Piekarsch's aim: to remove from the national ballot the cardinal areas of dispute within Israeli society in the spheres of religion, education, culture and identity. Instead, decisions on such subjects would be made at the community level. According to this plan, any group that constitutes 7 percent or more of the population would be eligible to create its own community, which would then determine its own education system, religious values and identity. Members of the community would elect, receive religious and educational services from and pay taxes to those representing their community in their city of residence.

The central government would consist of a president who would be directly elected and would himself or herself appoint those serving in the executive branch, eliminating dependence on a parliamentary majority to ensure his rule, as is the case in France. There would be two Houses of Parliament, one whose members would be elected by a majority in a general election, and the other whose members would be chosen to represent the various communities in a process akin to regional elections. The president will be able to dissolve the Houses of Parliament, but they too will be able to dissolve the government or unseat the president – a form of mutual checks and balances.

Still, the main point is that the central government would barely deal with the divisive issues of religion, identity and education. They would be the province of the communities, thereby freeing up national leaders to deal with issues that are perhaps less steeped in controversy, in an effort to create areas of consensus within Israeli society. Moreover, removing the thorny issues from the elections could alter voters' behavior. Thus, liberal religious Zionists might be willing to cast their lot with secular parties, because there would be fewer disagreements over religion-state relations. By the same token, there would be a place for parties, such as those representing environmental movements, which are not preoccupied solely by questions such as control over the territories.



A Haredi protest against the draft in Bnei Brak, on July 16. Haredim would have to finance their “society of learners” themselves, which could spur the decline of their society.

Ohad Zwigenberg/AP

Continued on page 10