

# WEEKEND

Shany Littman

As Hagar Brodetz sees it, she had one great stroke of luck in the story of her abduction to the Gaza Strip: that she was freed after just 51 days, and not one day later. From her viewpoint, that was the limit of her ability to survive with four small children in the appalling conditions in which she found herself. “Probably I’d have died on the 52nd day,” she says.

How did you hold on for 51 days? “Body and soul disconnect. You don’t feel anything, either physical or mental. I wasn’t bothered by the smells, even if I didn’t shower for six weeks. The physical things become marginal. You’re only afraid what will happen if one of the children gets sick, or if you get sick and won’t be able to take care of them. Even a toothache is something that can make you fall apart if there are no antibiotics or other treatment. Mentally, too, you’re disconnected. I knew I had already lost close friends, I was sure Avichai was dead, too. But together with the total despair, we lived on vapors of hope. One more day, and the maintenance of the body and the ability to survive would have faded.”

On the morning of October 7, Hagar, who is today 41, was with her three children – Ofri, Yuval and Oriya (now 11, 9 and 5, respectively) – and her husband, Avichai, in their home on Kibbutz Kfar Azza, across from the Gaza Strip. Avichai, now 43, was a member of the community’s emergency squad, and when he realized that terrorists had infiltrated the community, he went out to do battle with them.

On the path leading out of his house he met 3-year-old Avigail, the daughter of his good friend Roi Idan. She was covered with blood, and she told Avichai that her father had been killed. Avichai took her into his house, delivered her to Hagar and went back out. Not long afterward he was shot and wounded by terrorist gunfire; he hid for hours, waiting until he was rescued. In the meantime, terrorists entered his house and abducted Hagar and the four children who were with her. Cramming them all into Hagar’s car, they raced wildly to Gaza.

Thirty-seven children from the age of 10 months to 18 years were abducted that day from the communities abutting the Gaza border. Amid the general astonishment, that became another unbelievable detail we were compelled to accommodate. Almost all the children who were snatched were released in the first – and only – hostage deal that Israel and Hamas struck. Two who are still in captivity – 4-year-old Ariel Bibas, and his brother Kfir, who was 9 months old at the time – were taken with their mother, Shir, and their father, Yarden, from Kibbutz Nir Oz. The following month, Hamas announced that the two children and their mother had been killed in an Israel Air Force attack. Israel has never confirmed this.

Thus, in late November 2023, 35 children returned to Israel, after nearly two months in captivity. Some had been there with one parent, others with two, a few had been completely on their own. There were children who had witnessed one of their parents being murdered before they were taken away; others discovered on their return that they had lost a parent or other relative. The disasters occurred in a variety of satanic forms.

The number of variations on the painful stories is matched only by the variety of methods by which people dealt with their experiences. A year after they were abducted, and 10 months after their release, the children are still coping with the trauma, each in their own way. The same goes for their parents. The road to rehabilitation remains a long one. One reason for this is that they know that the episode isn’t over yet. Not only do the children remember the awful experiences they themselves endured in captivity, they also vividly recall the hostages they met in Gaza who are still there today.

\*\*\*

Within a short time of their release, it was already difficult to tell from ob-



Avichai Brodetz, on day one of his vigil. No interest in revenge.

Aharon Brodetz

## ‘We saw humanity, not only pure evil’

How do you raise children in captivity? And what about afterward? The story of two families from Kibbutz Kfar Azza a year after they were abducted to Gaza



The Brodetz family, today: Avichai, Yuval, Ofri, Hagar and Oriya. The road to rehabilitation remains a long one, if only because the episode isn’t over yet.

Tomer Appelbaum

so afraid, so they tried to say they didn’t like certain things, and they didn’t eat much. But afterward they ate whatever we were given, which wasn’t a lot. There was a period of a week or two when we were given one pita a day, and that was it. They were famished.”

Did they understand that there was nothing you could do about it?

“Definitely. There were also times when I went to beg [the captors] to bring us food. It didn’t help.”

Did the children ask you “why those people are doing this to us”?

“Yes. I explained to them they were doing it because they wanted to get back their prisoners who were in Israel.”

What’s easier to explain to children: that the people who abducted them were driven by evil, or that there was some sort of logic behind it?

“Absolute evil is impossible to explain. I was also concerned that maybe one of the captors knew Hebrew and might hear me, so I toned things down. It was important to maintain relations of trust with them. We weren’t in the same space much, but they were in the next room, and I preferred to be careful.”

Did the captors ever display any affection toward the children?

“In the first house there was a woman who treated them humanely. In the second house, one of the captors even played with them a little, did a jigsaw puzzle with them. We saw humanity, not only pure evil. If you ask the children about one specific person, for example, they’ll say he was nice. He treated them well, and they liked him. It’s good that they also remember those things. I want them to know that there isn’t only evil on the other side of the fence. Before October 7, they were always asking why there wasn’t peace between Gaza and Israel. My answer was always that there are good people here and good people there, but that the leadership there and the leadership here don’t always know how to make peace.”

\*\*\*

On October 18, 11 days after they were abducted, President Joe Biden arrived for a visit in Israel. The Hamas captors were euphoric. “They were certain that Biden was bringing peace.” That’s what they said, that they

Continued on page 12

serving the Brodetz children that they had undergone a terrifying experience. Children, it turns out, are quick to adjust to a changing reality, at least outwardly. But their father, Avichai, says that their post-captivity smiles are different from those of prior to their captivity.

One of the things the Brodetz children remember most acutely is the smell of their abductors’ sweat. Occasionally the smell comes back to them. “They can suddenly say, ‘The smell of the terrorists is here,’” Avichai notes.

What else have they recounted?

‘At first they had no appetite, from being so afraid... But afterward they ate whatever we were given, which wasn’t a lot. There was a period of a week or two when we were given one pita a day, and that was it. They were famished.’

Avichai: “They were abducted in our car, and they drove fast, a wild careening through a cheering crowd in Gaza as they were displayed to the whole mob. Ofri said, ‘I thought they were going to kill me.’ It wasn’t fear of an imaginary monster, but of monsters who abducted them with weapons drawn.”

Hagar and the four children were moved between a number of homes in Gaza during their captivity. For most of the period they were held alone, with three terrorists guarding them.

Paradoxically, Hagar thinks that the fact that she was abducted together with the children worked in her favor. “The children were my shield,” she says. “Thanks to them, I and they are here today. And yet of course I would have preferred to be abducted alone.”

Because it’s more difficult morally to do harm to children?

“Children are children, and even the captors felt that. They are very religious. From their point of view, what is written in the Quran is the most important, and from the standpoint of their religion it is forbidden to harm children. On the other hand, Hamas’ level of cruelty never ceased to surprise me.”

Did they act in a frightening way toward the children?

“Definitely. In the final weeks there were two captors who were very distant and treated us nastily. We even called one of them ‘the wicked one.’”

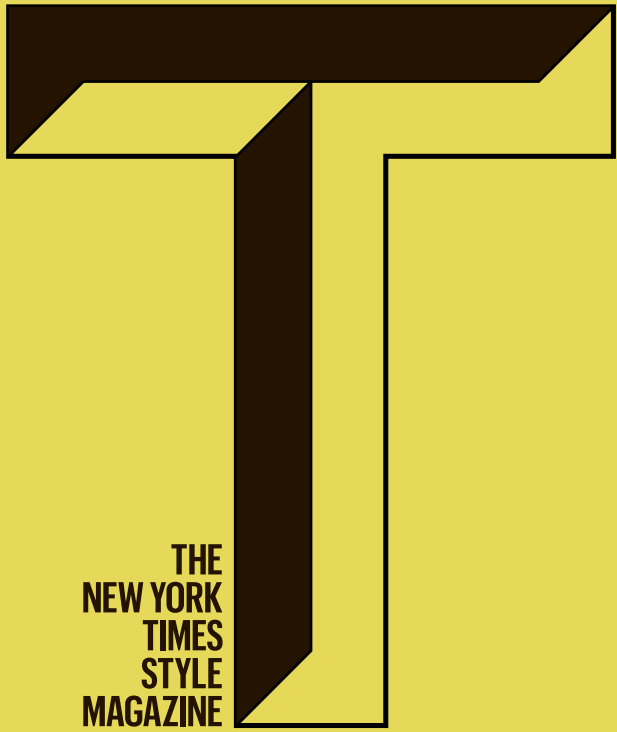
Ofri, the eldest, who turned 10 the day after she was snatched to Gaza, matured overnight, her mother relates. “It was very hard for her. She was extremely frightened, on the one hand, absolutely alarmed, and she needed the physical closeness to me most. On the other hand, she was my partner. Even before the abduction, she was a mature girl, but there she was transformed overnight from a 10-year-old girl to a 20-year-old. She lost her innocence, her childhood.

“Ofri and Yuval regularly waited for the younger ones to fall asleep in the early evening hours. There was no electricity, and in the evening it was pitch black, so we went to sleep early. They waited for the little ones to drift off so that we could talk like ‘big people,’ so they would have quality time with me. Most of the day was shaped by the needs of the younger ones, and in the evening they finally had their mother to themselves. We would make bets then, about when we would be released. When we knew there was a deal, everyone bet on a different day, and Yuval and Oriya won.”

Did you try to make a schedule for them?

“There was nothing to make it from. Sometimes we tried to do morning exercises in the square meter [of floor space] we had. We would talk, play cards. In the first house we got notebooks and two pencils, but they didn’t bring us a sharpener. And in the second house we were in a girl’s room and there was a board there for drawing on, and you could erase things, and that was nice. It kept us busy a lot, until it broke. But most of the time we were very bored.”

The subject of food was also challenging. In the initial days, they received a reasonable amount to eat: a pita in the morning and evening, a few vegetables, rice at lunch, sometimes a bit of chicken. But very quickly the diet shifted to being based exclusively on carbohydrates, and the quantity of that too was soon reduced. The children adjusted themselves to the situation. “At first they had no appetite, from being



## The Greats.

Each year, T Magazine’s annual Greats issue celebrates the individuals at the vanguard of artistic and cultural innovation. This edition, we’re honoring four people who span the gamut of creative expression: Florence Welch, Lorna Simpson, Theaster Gates and Jonathan Anderson.

The international issue of T Magazine.  
Friday, October 25.  
Available to subscribers of  
The New York Times International Edition/Haaretz.



WEEKEND

‘We lived on vapors of hope’

Continued from page 7

wanted peace?

“It surprised them very much that Israel attacked in Gaza. They were certain that Israel would immediately want to get the women and children back home. So from their point of view, Biden’s visit heralded peace. We also, somehow, entered into a kind of euphoria.”

Hagar and the children were then being held in the home of a family, locked in a single room together with another female captive, and there were also other hostages in the house. “The woman of the house went to the market that day and bought new clothes for the children so they would have something to wear when they went home,” Hagar says.

Any such hope was dashed that same evening. “Ofri, Avigail and I were lying on the double bed in the room where we were being held, playing, using the notebook they gave us. Oriya and Yuval were sitting at the foot of the bed, playing with something they had found. Suddenly, out of nowhere, we heard an insane boom, and the house just blew up.

“Everything went totally dark, and for a few seconds I couldn’t hear a thing. When the dust began to settle, I started to scream out the names of the children. They weren’t hurt, only Ofri was slightly wounded in the hand and head. Straight off they came and took us out to the square. They covered me

‘It surprised them very much that Israel attacked in Gaza. They were certain that Israel would immediately want to get the women and children back home. So from their point of view, Biden’s visit heralded peace.’

and two other adults with a curtain, so that we wouldn’t be seen, but the children remained exposed and they could see what was happening outside. Then an ambulance arrived and took us all, and also treated Ofri’s wounds a little. We were all in total shock.”

*You were certain you were going home, and instead you were bombed.*

“At this stage, I already thought that the state knew where I was, and so it wouldn’t shell [the site]. And then you discover that all the shelling you had been afraid of for 12 nights, was happening. Now you already know for certain that it will happen to you, and you don’t know whether you prefer it to be only the shock wave, or you would rather that it be a direct hit on the building in order to finish the story. So there won’t be a situation in which one of the children is wounded, or you’re wounded yourself and can’t take care of them, or you’re dead and they are left alone, four little children. So you say: Let it be all or nothing.”

Hagar and the children were moved to another house, without the other hostages. She hasn’t seen them since – they are still in Gaza.

*What change did the children undergo in that situation?*

“Oriya became more pushy than usual. He’s small, and suddenly a little sister is added – Avigail – and that affected him. He needed to be the one who set the daily schedule. Yuvi, my sensitive child, who always needs to be close to Mom and everything with him is emotional – he was actually the one who was able to give me the space to take care of the rest of the children.”

The terrorists made it very clear to the children that they must not cry or shout. “They heard me shushing them, and so they learned the word *sheket* [quiet] in Hebrew, and one time one of them shouted at us in the middle of the street in Gaza, in Hebrew, ‘Sheket!’ We were walking in a street packed with people in the middle of the day, moving from one vehicle to another. I’m covered with a hijab, the children are dressed normally and not covered. And no one noticed us.”

\* \* \*

On the morning of October 7, as Avichai lay wounded after the battle for survival on the kibbutz, he sent a message to Hagar, but she didn’t reply. He was certain the whole family had been murdered. “It made more sense to me that they would murder them than abduct them,” he says. Many hours later the army arrived and Avichai was taken to the hospital. The next day a neighbor arrived who told him he had seen his family being led through the kibbutz by terrorists, so he realized that there was a chance they were still alive.

On the evening of Friday, October 13, Avichai took a plastic chair and sat

himself down on the sidewalk along Kaplan Street in Tel Aviv, opposite one of the entrances to the Kirya, defense establishment headquarters. That was effectively the genesis of the encampment of hostages’ families, who were demanding that the government strike a deal for the release of their loved ones. Avichai remained a regular presence there.

Avichai: “A few days earlier, I’d started calling army people and cabinet ministers. Some didn’t respond. Those who did, told me that although they were very upset by what had happened to me, it was very important now to take revenge on Hamas, and we have world support, and now finally we could go into Gaza. I realized that the thinking here wasn’t aimed in the right direction.”

*And you told them, “My children are being held captive in Gaza.”*

“They identified with my pain, but more so with their desire for revenge. It was clear to me that they were aiming in a different direction and that I was alone. Half of my friends had been murdered, and a large part of my community. And my family had been abducted. But I didn’t want revenge, and to this day I don’t want revenge. So I went to the Kirya. I thought I would sit there, and cabinet ministers would arrive for meetings and see me by the gate. I went there Friday night. By Saturday morning, I understood that the people of Israel were with me.”

During all this time, Hagar was certain that Avichai had been killed while fighting for the kibbutz. “I eulogized him. At night I would imagine what things would be like when we returned, how we would live without him. I was also certain there wouldn’t be any place to return to, that no one was fighting for me, that there was no one left in Kfar Azza. I thought everyone there was dead.

“When we knew we were being released,” Hagar continues, “the children asked if Dad would come to meet us. But from my viewpoint, there was no Dad. I told them that he might be doing a shift, he’s probably in the hospital [he is a nursing student] because there’s a war on and he has to help. That’s what I could tell them. Because his being dead wasn’t something I could say there. When you’re there, you can’t extinguish any hope. The boys were sure that all that had happened on Kfar Azza was that we were abducted and Avigail’s parents had been wounded. They thought we would immediately return to the kibbutz. The whole time, we lived on [the idea] that we were going back and that all would be well. I couldn’t have sold them anything else.”

*All three of your children were convinced that Avichai was alive?*

“The younger ones had no doubt that he was alive. Ofri, it turned out, did think that the worst of all had happened.”

It wasn’t until the day Hagar returned to Israel and met her neighbor and fellow released captive from Kfar Azza Chen Goldstein-Almog, that she started to realize that the reception might be different from what she had expected. “She told me that she had heard Avichai on the radio a few times [while she was in captivity], and that he was waiting for us,” Hagar recalls. “She knew I thought he was dead, so she was waiting anxiously to give me the greatest news of my life. In the next breath, she then told me about the horrific disaster that happened to her family.”

Goldstein-Almog had also been abducted with her three children, after her husband, Nadav, and their eldest, Yam, had been murdered. “I think there was already no expression at all on my face,” Hagar recalls. “I only started to cry a few minutes later, and that was the first time I’d cried in 51 days. Because even when you’re lying in bed at night with the shelling and with your own hell in your head and the children not seeing – even then you don’t shed a tear, you hold back. Everything is pent-up. You know you mustn’t fall apart. But there I already knew we were going home, and suddenly there was an adult I knew by my side. It was a different feeling.”

It was no longer possible to protect her children at this stage, neither from the bad news nor the good news. “The children had already been exposed to the worst of all. It used to be that I didn’t want them to play with guns or play Fortnite [online video game], or to watch some horrible video on YouTube. That seemed like a joke now. Now when they play Fortnite, at least the weapons are in their hands, they decide what happens.

“For 51 days,” Hagar continues, “there were weapons beside them, they were afraid all the time that they were going to be killed. Even during the very abduction itself, even when they waited in the safe room, when they already knew that Smadar and Roi [Idan] had been shot, because Avigail [their daughter] told them. The terrorists shot Roi when Avigail was in his arms, and he fell on her. One of them lifted up



The extended Almog-Goldstein family is reunited on November 27, 2023.

Schneider Children’s Hospital



Avigail Idan with her grandparents and extended family.

Schneider Children’s Hospital



Agam and Chen Almog-Goldstein. “There were moments I would forget that she’s my daughter,” says Chen.

Hadas Parush

Roi’s body so that Avigail could come out from under him, and he signaled to her to run.”

As they met more hostages in the final stage before their release, they learned new facts they hadn’t known. “Other than October 7 itself, the day of the release was the most insane day I’ve had in my life. The moment when all the floodgates opened up for me was when a female army officer arrived to help me with the children. She came with the IDF’s armored jeeps into Gaza. I asked her in English what was waiting for Avigail in Israel. She said that her grandmother and aunt would be waiting for her at the Hatzertim air base. From that moment all I did was cry. I couldn’t stop.”

Hagar was stunned by the reception that awaited them in Israel, the medical teams and the reporters. She hadn’t grasped the public scale of the event. She’d thought, for example, that she would have to go to a drugstore herself that evening in order to get anti-lice shampoo. “We were bombarded with lice,” she says. It took a few weeks before they were able to rid themselves of them.

*You didn’t realize that your release would be a big story?*

“After 51 days, during which the state shells you and your children day after day, and you’re in concrete and constant danger, and you know the government

had opportunities to bring you back and didn’t do it – you don’t think anyone still cares. You lose faith in your government, in your nation. You lose faith that someone is fighting for you.”

*How do you and the family talk about it today? How do you shape the memory of the event?*

“At first we talked about it a lot, now a little less. I try to bring it up all the time, if I see something that reminds me of something there.”

*You don’t want them to forget?*

“The truth is that I very much want them to forget. And I also sometimes want very much to forget, but just like I don’t want any Jew or any Israeli to forget my story, I also want them to remember.”

*Do they have dreams, nightmares?*

Avichai: “Yes, mainly fears. It’s hard at night. We sleep together, sometimes we split up so that I am with part of the children and Hagar is with the other part. A few nights ago, I was supposed to sleep together with Ofri, and she told Hagar that she would rather sleep with her, because she’s afraid that Daddy will be shot at night and she would be next to me. She didn’t say it hysterically or tearfully, but as if it was something that’s logical to say. And then you realize that the trauma is embedded within us.”

“I also wanted all of us to sleep in the same room,” Hagar says. “Not

only because the children are scared out of their wits and want to be next to me – I also needed them next to me. They couldn’t disconnect from me and I couldn’t disconnect from them. Today I can already go out to a café for an hour or two. Even that wasn’t possible at the beginning. Oriya wouldn’t let me go anywhere; every departure from the house was accompanied by a crisis.”

Avichai relates that when they returned, he observed that the hunger they experienced in Gaza had left a mark. “In the first days, Oriya ate very slowly, because there he received one pita a day, so he took around two hours to eat it. They also spoke very quietly, but that passed quickly. I was also sure that when they came back they would eat everything, but they went back to their bad habits really fast. One boy doesn’t eat vegetables, the girl won’t eat soup.”

“They are also very insecure, afraid,” Hagar notes – afraid that any moment a terrorist will show up. “During the Iranian missile attack last April, Ofri knew from social media that something was happening. She was sure the Iranians were sending in terrorists. After all, until October 7, we felt safe even when shells were being fired from Gaza. Now you can’t fob them off with things like that. You have no card to play. You have no way to make them feel secure. We are still in the midst of a war, the captives who were with them are still there, they are afraid for them. Every morning when Ofri wakes up, she asks immediately, ‘Is there a [hostage] deal?’ Seven times a day she asks whether there is a deal.”

*So she’s not able to recover.*

Hagar: “Recovery is impossible until they all are back. We can try to move ahead, try to live, we live and we do everything to be happy. But we’re still stuck on October 7. We live that day, and the children and I also live the 51 days that followed.”

The first months after the release were the most difficult, Hagar says. The children had a hard time returning to their various frameworks; they wanted only to be home, with the family. This year they returned to school regularly and to social activities, and they seem to be happier.

*What was the rehabilitative process? Did anyone know what to do?*

“No, no one knew. People tried very hard and they really wanted to help, and people are helping all the time, but I don’t know what’s right and what’s not right. After a month we started therapy for the four of us, but the children just weren’t there. They didn’t cooperate.”

*They didn’t want to talk?*

“Not to talk and not to have new people enter their lives. They had hydrotherapy and physiotherapy and horseback riding and everything you can think of. When I think of the first months after we got back, I get unpleasant physical sensations. It was an extremely traumatic period. We were in total shock. Our house was like a train station. All the therapists came there, because we weren’t able to go out. It was a flood. Two weeks after we returned from captivity, Avichai went back to his nursing studies, and handling all of that fell upon my shoulders – which aren’t as broad as they once were.”

*Are you a different mother then you used to be?*

“I’m a more anxious mother. What happened to us is something I had never imagined. And now, everything sounds possible. Anything could happen to my child, and that creates anxiety.”

Avichai also had a hard time with the therapy. “The event is so complex that I don’t know whether the world of psychology has anything to offer.”

Not knowing how to cope with the situation, Avichai adds, he made mistakes that he now regrets. One of them was giving the media access to his children immediately after they returned. “I wanted all the hostages to come back home,” he explains. “My approach was that, hey, my family is here, I can exploit this to get the government to continue getting hostages released. I’ve experienced a miracle, and the other families also deserve a miracle. I wanted people to see that it was possible. I also felt a very great debt toward the people who were living our story, who prayed for us.

“I felt it wasn’t fair to disappear. So at first, after the release, there was this string of interviews, the house was full of reporters from morning to night. I thought it would serve the goal. In the end it only hurt my family and didn’t serve anything. Ten months have passed since they got back, and people have mostly died there.”

Indeed, in contrast to the first weeks after the hostages returned, many of them, both adults and children, are not eager to be interviewed. Hagar, though, is prepared to talk now, because she views her story as part of an important chapter of history that she doesn’t want to be forgotten. “I will not forget, and I will not forgive all those who had a hand in it. Someone could have prevented the attack, and someone could have brought me back sooner, and that wasn’t done.”

Their approach at present is not to force anything on the children, Hagar adds: “For 51 days, people told them what to do, so now I am not going to tell them what to do.”

*How do their friends treat them?*

Hagar: “When we got back, their friends were very excited, they had waited for their return. So at first they behaved differently with them. But after a time it passed – they’re kids. In the new school they were received very nicely. The children are very curious, but are sensitive about it. My children don’t care if others know they are former captives, but they don’t want to be asked questions about it.”

Avichai felt vividly the change that had occurred in Ofri after her return from Gaza. “I was at Schneider [Children’s Medical Center, in Petah Tikvah], combing Ofri’s hair and telling her who had died on the kibbutz. She asked, ‘What happened to Avi?’ I said he was killed. ‘What happened to Roi?’ Killed. ‘What happened to Sergei?’ Wounded. Right away we talked about everything. Suddenly you’re talking with your 10-year-old daughter about who on the kibbutz had been murdered,

‘If you ask the children about one specific person, they’ll say he was nice. He treated them well, and they liked him. It’s good that they also remember those things. I want them to know that there isn’t only evil on the other side of the fence.’



and who was alive. I am conducting an insane discourse with her. She picks up nuances, talks about the political situation, about demonstrations. A child was abducted, she came out of there like she's 18."

*And the younger ones?*  
"Same thing, only they started from a different point: They're boys, and also younger. But the smile isn't the same smile."

*Are there jokes about the captivity?*  
"Sometimes, instead of telling Ofri 'you're being fresh' [hatzufa, in Hebrew], I say, 'you're being a hostage [hatufa].'"

*Did they pick up any words in Arabic?*

"No. I hoped they would come back and start speaking Arabic, but it didn't happen."

Avichai succeeded in completing his nursing studies and took the qualification exam. Hagar, who had previously worked as community director on Kib-

'Suddenly you're talking with your 10-year-old daughter about who on the kibbutz had been murdered, and who was alive, an insane discourse. She picks up nuances, talks about the political situation, about demonstrations. A child was abducted, she came out of there like she's 18.'

butz Magen, hasn't returned to work yet. "I will go back to working. The moment I know that the children are stable, I'll be able to think about myself, too." At the moment, they are living in the community of Arsuf, near Herzliya, and Hagar says she can't even imagine them returning to Kfar Azza.

*Did what you went through make you more self-reliant?*

"Yes. I discovered powers in myself I didn't know existed. When you try to think about some disaster that will happen to you, you say, 'If that happens to me, I won't be able to survive.' And you discover that you do survive. Every time we encounter a difficulty, I say, 'We got through Sinwar, we'll get through this, too.'"

She occasionally sees Avigail, who, along with her brother and sister, was adopted by their aunt Liran and her partner. "She used to visit us a lot even before, because Roi was one of Avichai's best friends. She is always part of my heart, part of my body, of my soul."

\* \* \*

Chen Almog and Nadav Goldstein met in high school, and were already an item when they were 15. He was born on Kfar Azza, she's from Kibbutz Gevim, nearby. Nadav was vice president for business development and innovation at Kafrit plastic industries, which is based at Kfar Azza; Chen, a social worker by training, chose to devote herself to raising the couple's four children.

"It was a good, strong love that developed over the years," Chen says. "I felt that with each child our relationship was upgraded. The family was my strength. I loved Nadav very much, I admired him, he thrilled me to the end. He was also into sports, a triathlete. He would have been 49 last December."

Five years ago, they moved to a new house on Kfar Azza that they labored over extensively. "We were very excited to be moving into it and to live at last spacioously, in comfort. From every window in our house we could see both the [rocket] launches and flight of the missiles from Gaza, and the inter-

ceptions by Iron Dome. The children would run from window to window and take pictures of it."

On October 7, that home was invaded by terrorists. They murdered Nadav and the couple's eldest child, Yam, who had fainted, and then took Chen from the house along with the three remaining children – Agam, 18, Gal, 12, and Tal, 10 – and spirited them away to the Gaza Strip. "The boys kept their cool incredibly. They didn't shout, didn't cry, didn't do anything daring in the way of trying to escape, didn't pull on my shirt. There was model obedience."

In the café we're at, women who don't know Chen occasionally come over to hug her and show empathy. It happens quite a bit, Chen notes. She and her daughter, Agam, have become quite well known in the wake of being interviewed extensively about their experiences in Gazan captivity.

"There were moments I would forget that she's my daughter," Chen says about Agam, who was effectively part of the group of adults in captivity. "She would cheer me up. There were nights of shocking shelling, when I felt I was about to lose it, and she would calm me down. 'Mom, we're alive,' she would say. I could talk to her. She was my full partner."

The younger children occupied themselves as best they could. "The difficult moments were when they were bored," she relates. "It was very hard to see my children sitting idly, children who are so active at home, outside every day on the lawn. Instead, they were shut up in a house or a tunnel, listening to the conversations of adults. When they fought I got really uptight."

At first they received notebooks and writing utensils, and the boys passed the time learning words in Arabic. "Gal wrote 250 words in Arabic, and they tried to make sentences out of them. The terrorists were very moved by that. We were passed between a few squads, and every time we came to a new squad, they tried to impress them with the aid of the words they'd learned in Arabic. We wanted to be alright with the captors so they would be alright with us. And we didn't want there to be tension; we didn't want to make them too angry."

*Did it work?*

"Most of the time. One time there was a quarrel between the children, and one of the guys from the squad, an older man, who actually really liked Gal and Tal, got angry and raised his voice. To placate Tal, he brought him a folder for storing his drawings. But Tal was angry and didn't want to accept it. There was a stage when they prohibited the boys from writing in Hebrew – only in English, or they could draw.

"Tal and Gal sometimes put things in their pockets, because they wanted to take them to the next place we would move to, and the guards made them remove them. There was a teddy bear that Tal found in one of the apartments, which wasn't even pleasant to touch. When we were moved, he wanted to take it, but they refused to let him. So he started to cry. In the end, one of the younger guys came and stuffed the bear into a bag, and Tal walked for an hour in the streets of Gaza with the head of the pink teddy bear sticking out of the bag. Those were the healthy aspects of the children, to try and keep something that would connect them or give them a sense of comfort."

*Could you communicate with your guards?*

"Yes. We spoke with them. One of them knew a little Hebrew. He was a smart person, he said he'd started to learn Hebrew because he was getting organized for his arrival in Israel. 'We're coming to live with you,' he said."

*He said 'with you' and not 'instead of you'?*

"Yes. That was relatively nicely put – on the day of the release, the terrorists who surrounded us said, 'Go to another country, because we are coming to Israel. Pass on the message.' That was spoken coarsely. But the person who had learned Hebrew wrote us a four-line letter one day, without a single mistake. When Agam was in a



Kfar Azza in the wake of the October massacre last year.

Olivier Fitoussi

good mood, he asked her to be his Hebrew teacher. He would sniff around in the morning to see what kind of mood she was in."

*She would show them that she was angry?*

"Yes. They were right next to us for hours, or they stared at us. There was hardly a time when the four of us were alone. In the evenings, there would be deep and meaningful conversations, and then, in the morning, he would sit and stare at us like that. It's an invasion of privacy. It drove Agam crazy, and she would become hostile. And then I would say to her, 'Agam, work on yourself, he's reading your body language.' One morning he asked how we were doing, and she said, 'Shit.' He thought she said he was shit, and the whole day he was angry and didn't talk to us."

*What were the conversations about?*

"About the depth and the root of the conflict. Agam would ask them challenging questions. They kept returning to the Quran and saying that it was very simple and guided them about how to behave in life. So she asked whether, according to the Quran, it was permissible to abduct women and children out of their home in pajamas. I remember that they huddled together and pondered how to reply to her. A consultation. They said that according to the Quran, it was forbidden to harm women. So I asked them, 'Then why did you murder my daughter, who didn't pose any sort of threat to you, but only fainted? Or Nadav, who could barely stand on his feet?' [At the time, Nadav was still recovering from an accident he had had riding his bike that same summer.]

"They also asked us a lot about our lives and about how much all kinds of things cost in Israel. They said they wanted to move and live with us. I thought about the disparities between us, about how they thought these shared lives could work. Here we're occupied with development, innovation, thinking; in Gaza they're still busy with day-to-day survival. When we walked in the streets of Gaza, more than once, it wasn't easy to see the destruction and the poverty. It makes you feel bad. And we did meet people there who had compassion, a sort of

humanity."

Throughout their whole time in Gaza, they showered only once. "There is no running water in Gaza. There are drips and drops, saltwater in the sink, sometimes no water at all. The electricity came on occasionally, sometimes only one hour a day. And then the water pumps would start working again and they had to decide who would shower – one of the children or someone from the squad. I always passed it up so one of the children could shower. I showered only on my birthday, October 23. I felt weak that day, unwell, and they said, 'Go and shower.'"

"It really bothered them that we cried," Chen continues. "They didn't even let us mourn quietly. And in the midst of all that you try to keep things alive, to survive. So there were also moments when we laughed."

\* \* \*

Since returning from captivity, the family has been living on Kibbutz Shfayim, on the coast north of Tel Aviv, with the rest of Kfar Azza's displaced residents. At first, Chen asks that the name of the kibbutz not be mentioned, even though it is public knowledge. "There are all kinds of fears. That it will be easy [for Hamas] to come and settle accounts with us. But I am trying not to let fear manage me, and I feel that I am in control of that."

During captivity, she worked hard training herself in this self-control. "I felt that I was surviving. I told myself, 'I am alive, I survived, I need to act properly, the children are watching me.' The sight of Yam, shot, stayed in my mind a long time. I forced myself, precisely in the evening, before sleep, at the most difficult moments, when the shelling was very strong, not to forget how I had seen Yam. I don't know exactly why I did that. Maybe to make things harder for myself, a kind of self-flagellation, to prove to myself I'm strong. Over time those images grew blurred – today I remember her beautiful and happy, with all her vitality. Here I feel my strength, my control, that I can choose."

The children went back to school after just a few weeks. Agam returned to her senior year in high school and finished her matriculation exams. "All in all, they are integrating well, and we are really enveloped [with support]."

*Did they want to go back to school?*

"Who asked them? There were a few adjustment problems, but it was important for me that they have a full day as soon as possible, with friends, social activity, learning, as much as possible. And very quickly, each of them had individual and family therapy. Gal, who's 12 and a half, asked for a mental coach to accompany him in soccer training, things he had with his father."

*Did you feel that you and others knew how to help them?*

"You learn on the go. At first the kids resisted everything, even the good things. Rebelliousness with everything, everything was rough going. It was tough and tiring. And then someone said to me, 'In Gaza there was obedience, there was terror. It's fine that they're resisting everything now. Give them the opportunity to resist.'"

The boys don't talk to Chen directly about the sense of loss they have over the death of their father and their older sister. "I don't see them being sad. I assume that as they grow older they'll want to know more things. At the moment it's not in the discourse. I try to awaken it in them, but it doesn't flow."

The loss is apparently expressed in ways that are less verbal. "In therapy they process the experiences they un-

Almog-Goldstein: 'Despite all we went through, something in the children's basic trust in the world wasn't damaged. That's good. They're fully devoted, both to the therapy and to the counselors working with them.'

derwent in captivity, and in the house beforehand. The bursting into the house, the shooting of Nadav, and that we walked over him as he lay on the floor, shot. I don't know what they saw and what they didn't. It's their father who lay there, and they weren't able to part from him."

*Have they changed?*

"Despite everything we went through, something in the children's basic trust in the world wasn't damaged. And that is good. They devote themselves fully, both to the therapy and to the counselors who work with them."

*Has the connection between you changed?*

"They quarrel a lot between themselves. On the other hand, their togeth-

erness is a very positive force, and they take responsibility for one other. Since the return the two boys have been sleeping in one bed. Before, they each had their own room, but after the captivity they wanted to be together. Lately I've felt that Tal, the younger one, wants his privacy again. And that's also part of his rehabilitation, the return to life. They need each other very much, but that intense contact very quickly becomes violent."

The connection with Agam also had to revert to what it was, Chen says. "I needed to work on restoring her to being my daughter, to being a teenager. Because sometimes she tried to put me in my place. She is very critical toward me. I wanted her to go back to being a girl, to experience things of girls her age."

There are also family jokes that were created in captivity. "Agam, that nervy girl, calls me 'Mama Chanhuna' [a play on 'Chen'], because one of the young guys who guarded us called me that. Lately she sometimes calls me 'Chen,' so I remind her that for her I am still Mom."

*How do you see your future?*

"I hope that the future shines brightly on us. We are working on it to be good. The loss of Nadav and of Yam is a black hole. I enter and come out of that hole, but am drawn to the goodness in life. I am alive, I survived. That's where I'm aiming."

## HUMMUS

Continued from page 10

manifesting this nativist sentiment.

The most prominent of the messengers of the glad tidings of hummus in this generation was the illustrator and journalist Dudu Geva, who wrote regularly about hummus in the local papers of the Schocken Group. Geva embodied the unpretentious spirit of the Israeli hummus aficionado. Here's a typical excerpt from one of his hummus reviews: "It was an orgasmic experience that connected the depths of the psyche with the palatine glands and climaxed with the singing of Hallelujah accompanied by rising and falling blasts of the shofar. To this day I customarily visit this place and ingest into my innards the supple hummus balls that cascade in a bath of tahini and olive oil, with rivulets of saffron and paprika floating atop."

The current cultural climate would not permit this form of expression. The religious public would say it's anti-Jewish; feminists would brand it sexist; postcolonialists would label it colonialist; and foodies would simply be appalled at the excessive use of paprika. One way or another, contemporaries would have a hard time understanding this ecstatic worship.

The writer Eyal Megged, who was also one of the hummus experts of the Boomer generation, specialized in obscure hummus stands in East Jerusalem. But when the second intifada broke out, he declared that he would no longer frequent those places, "because they are tainted with the blood of Jews." Subsequently he was cool with it again, but that remark represents a frame of mind that is growing even more intense in the present terrible war. The nationalistic thrust of Jewish society in Israel is certainly not enhancing the popularity of hummus. As the sociologist Dafna Hirsch noted, since the 1980s the prestige of fresh hummus was

based on its identification as an Arab dish. "Arab-made hummus is distinguished from Jewish-made hummus and deemed better and more authentic," she wrote. But periods of nationalism here stir suspicion and hostility toward all things Arab.

### Not on TikTok or Netflix

In any event, the war is not the only cause of the decline and fall of hummus. In the COVID period, many hummus places started to use disposable plates and utensils. But that synthesis in itself conflicts with the earthly and local character of this food, and slightly spoiled the experience. At the same time, the millennials who had now grown up simply didn't get it; hummus doesn't work well on Instagram and TikTok. It's not eaten at Christmas or Halloween, and there are no series about it on Netflix. One Zoomer told me he once he doesn't eat hummus because it's "mushy." What can you say to that?

The Israeli culinary scene has progressed from the hummus era. But progress isn't always a good thing. Hummus is one of the most sympatic things that can be credited to Israeli popular culture – a rare combination of simplicity, health and ecologism. Many have been critical of the concept of Arab-Jewish coexistence in Israel, within the framework of which Arabs are expected to be grateful that they're allowed to serve hummus to Jews. But in times like these it turns out that even this minimal fabric of life is far from being self-evident.

Although the hummus trend went global in the past decade, and hummus can be found in supermarkets across the Western world, the version that's sold there is quite different from what's served in hummus places in these parts. It's mixed with beets, pumpkin, avocado, pesto, even with chocolate. Regrettably, if hummus gets a revival here in the future, it will likely be as a local version of the alienated global stuff. Maybe it won't even be called hummus, but just plain "chickpea spread."



Agam, Gal, Nadav, Chen, Tal and Yam Almog-Goldstein. On October 7, Nadav, the father, and 20-year-old Yam were murdered in the presence of the others, who were then kidnapped to Gaza.

Courtesy of the family