

# Opinion | Who Will We Be After the War in Gaza Is Over?

Michael Sfar Dec 26, 2023 8:15 am IST  Follow

About two and a half months have passed and the sadness doesn't leave us, doesn't let up. The days are sad and the nights are sad. Grief has settled in the land, from the river to the sea, the darkness that has covered us doesn't offer even a small slit through which a ray of light will glimmer from between the clouds. Only sadness. These are terrible days, without forgiveness and without mercy.

Two types of sadness are filling the atmosphere: The type that pierces the heart, squeezes the tear ducts and makes the soul tremble, and the type that sinks in slowly, narrows the arteries of our existence and darkens our awareness.

The first is pain. Pain over loss, shock in the face of the horror that landed from outside. Hours in front of the television and exposure to the stories of the hostages and the distressing anxiety of their families and the loss of the fallen soldiers, are like a transfusion of grief that is constantly flowing into our body, dripping and dripping and it's impossible to stop consuming it because our brothers and sisters are among the murdered, the fallen and those suffering in the darkness of hell.

Along with the volunteering, the demonstrations demanding to return the hostages and the donations to the Gaza border communities and the evacuated residents, the constant exposure to and immersion in the suffering of the victims is considered an expression of solidarity. We have to know, and the knowledge leads us along paths of great sorrow.

The second type of sadness is in effect an insight. A terrible insight, that percolates slowly. I try to chase it away by any means, and in order to avoid the obstacles that I place before it, it changes its shape, from a tough statement with an exclamation point to a frightening question mark: What will we be after the war? What kind of Israeli society is being cast at present?

Watching and listening to the stories of the abductions and the sadism of the murder, the abuse and the sexual assaults exact a high price. The daily exposure, for the past two and a half months, to the life stories of the fallen and the facial expressions of their parents whose world has been destroyed, changes us. October 7 is replacing the 1929 Arab riots as the event that for us defines the image of the national enemy and the nature of the fears that we harbor.

Flooding us with the horrors ensures that we will continue to be controlled by our fears. It also concretizes to the level of a nuclear bunker the feeling that we're right. The most right in the world. And poet Yehuda Amichai already said: "From the place where we are right flowers will never grow in the spring."

And really, what will be the image of a society that in its endless and axiomatic rightness killed tens of thousands, most of them children, women and the elderly? Indeed, they were killed in the aftermath of a horrifying and unforgivable crime. And yet. My grandmother, who survived the Holocaust after escaping with her mother and sisters from the actions in the Warsaw Ghetto and hid until the end of the war in attics and cellars, wrote in her memoirs, that the greatest challenge in the face of the extreme inhumanity was to maintain humanity.

What will our deeds in recent weeks etch into our souls – the destruction of cities, towns, villages and refugee camps, the total demolition of residential neighborhoods and civilian

infrastructure, the erasure of families and leaving hundreds, if not thousands of children orphaned?

How many tons of coldness and indifference have settled inside us in order for us to turn high-rise buildings into dust, promenades and plazas into ruins and a million and a half people into displaced people who have nothing? Is there a way back from the hardness we have decreed on our hearts in the face of hundreds of thousands of people who because of our war are fighting like animals for pieces of food, a safe place where their children can lay down their heads, medicine, clean water and dignity?

And what will become of a society whose media outlets, which provide it with information about its deeds, have refrained for over 10 weeks from bringing even a single interview – a single one! – with a resident of Gaza to tell what's happening to them; who censor the pictures of the dead children and the weeping mothers, the children that we killed and the mothers whose bereavement we caused? The Israeli TV channels are shaping our collective perceptions not only by means of what they show, but also, and perhaps mainly, by means of what they're hiding from us.

That's why we're shocked that in the UN General Assembly, 153 countries are demanding a cease-fire and only 10 are opposed; when 13 of 15 members of the Security Council support a decision demanding an end to the fighting and only one casts a veto; when the campuses in the Western world are becoming an arena for anti-Israel demonstrations.

Israelis don't see the horrifying sights that are bringing many of the students out into the streets,. They see only politicians, former military men and social media influencers, who openly incite to revenge against all Gazans, ethnic cleansing and even genocide.

And what will our political values be after the war, in which the police force and its Kahanist minister, with the total

support of the attorney general, are destroying political freedom of expression and the right to demonstrate, and the Supreme Court turns a blind eye and sometimes even helps them? Yes, yes – that too goes almost unreported except on the pages of Haaretz.

In a series of decisions from recent weeks the Supreme Court justices allowed the police to prevent demonstrations and even to posit conditions for engaging in demonstration vigils that don't even require a permit, fully aware that the police prevent only one type of protests – those in which there is criticism of the government and which express opposition to the continuation of the war.

The Arabs too, no matter what they want to say, are prevented from engaging in protest activities. This conduct of the gatekeepers – the same ones that the camp that professes to be liberal spent eight months in the streets defending – is so anti-liberal that I dare say that it would be preferable if these cases on preventing demonstrations were being discussed by the justices who sat on the bench in the 1950s.

Moreover, if the Kol Ha'am case, which enshrined political freedom of expression in Israeli law back in the 1950s, had come up before some panels of today's Supreme Court, I wouldn't want to bet on how they would have ruled. Yes, that's how far we've deteriorated.

And it's not that our situation was wonderful on October 6. Already then, fascist-racist movements had achieved a foothold in the Israeli political system. Already then we had experienced 15 years of unbridled exacerbation of incitement against anyone voicing criticism of our treatment of the Palestinians and the government policy regarding the conflict with them.

The bullet that killed Yuval Kestelman, who foiled the terrorists in Jerusalem, was loaded by all of Israeli society in

the muzzle of the rifle of the soldier who badly wanted to etch an X on his rifle butt.

It's what has dragged the value of human life down to the abyss and in effect given immunity to killers of Palestinians. We all enabled and funded the criminal gangs of the settlement movement, who under cover of the war have already expelled 16 impoverished Palestinian communities from their land in the West Bank, using the methods the greatest antisemites launched against Jews on the steppes of Russia and Ukraine.

Long before the accursed Shabbat we were at the height of a culture war that the government declared against anything that radiates humanist and universal values, while enforcing an ultranationalist and religious agenda. After October 7 it seemed for a moment that these battles were suspended, because after all, only "Together We Will Win," right? Well, no. The spread of these festering wounds has only been accelerated under the sponsorship of the disaster and the war.

Therefore the question gives us no rest. It pounds on our temples and rages in our bellies. Who will we be after the war? Will there be a place here after the war for anyone who still believes, like Shaul Tchernichovsky, "In man, in his spirit, a strong spirit," who insists that in the future "It will bring peace. And a blessing from nation to nation"? Will as Natan Alterman promised, the melody that we abandoned in vain return?

Is it true, as in Lea Goldberg's scorching question, that "days of forgiveness and mercy shall return?"

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