



Speech in Pro-peace rally in Tel Aviv's Rabin Square, 16.8.14

By Nomika Zion, Resident of Sderot and member of "Other Voice"

Recuperating from a war is like recuperating from a difficult illness. At one moment, multi-dimensional violence befalls you and then suddenly, you find yourself in an entirely different emotional place. Your body returns to running on automatic. The stress overwhelms your soul. In the mornings you run humiliated to the safe room. At night, the IDF grinds Gaza, as if there is no tomorrow. At the same moment, you are an eye-witness to the fright of your loved ones, and you hear the destruction of your neighbors. The music of the war sounds in your life 24/7, at insane decibels. And then, in one moment, silence descends.

(And at the time of writing these lines, the quiet is broken again. David Grossman is right: Spring here is so short.)

It is hard to explain to someone who does not live in the Sderot vicinity, what another escalation means for residents of the region, without relating to their political views. What is the meaning on life in a violent space, one that is really the ongoing present. It is easier to endure one month of war, than to survive a never-ending conflict with no hope. It's the again and again and again. It's the over and over and over, and always more of the same – military operation, small war, war. Language always packed with lies, as if to soften the intensity of destruction. Wrapped in those words is a promise of the next round of violence.

Six and a half years ago, in one of the most difficult times in Sderot and the area, we established Other Voice. We were sick of the repetitive rituals. We were sick of the trauma with no post. We were sick of war as a way of life. We were sick of the blocked horizon. We sought to open a civil channel of dialogue with residents of Gaza and to crack the wall of hatred that separates us. We called upon the State of Israel to remove the siege, to negotiate with Hamas, to try to reach a long term treaty that would bring a bandage for the wounds of the two sides. Too many opportunities for negotiations were missed, when there was relative quiet or total quiet. Since then the reality has just become more complicated, and the walls of hatred are soaring.

In Cast Lead (2009) a resident of the area announced on Channel 2: "I've never reviewed a concert, but the music coming from the bombed Gaza is the most wonderful music I've heard all my life." The hill at the edge of Sderot brought an excited crowd from all over Israel with chairs to watch the big show in Gaza. Blasts and pillars of smoke were received with clapping hands and the crowd roared: More, more. In Pillar of Defense (2014) the people were dancing on the rivers of blood, tough guys holding squall in Tel Aviv and Haifa, when they scream to no opposition, "Two thousand dead. Two thousand dead." That hill now is called "Sderot Cinema." The noble Jewish command, "Do not rejoice at your enemy's loss," evaporated and was buried in the city center, in social media and in the choir of the media. Its time has passed.

During the war, the peace bus went to Sderot to show solidarity with the suffering of the residents and offer dialogue instead of violence. Instantly visitors descended on us, members of Other Voice – angry residents, cursing and exalting. With police protection we were driven out of our city: "Why don't you go to Gaza, you dogs."

What happened to us? Why do words such as dialogue or peace strike fear more than do missiles? Why does containing a different narrative or recognizing other people's tragedy, without eliminating your pain, has almost become an invitation to an assassination in 2014 Israeli society?

Two contradictory and opposite sides roll inside of us - a kind of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde - and I admit that I cannot reconcile this contradiction. On the one hand, we have huge reservoirs of compassion and deep empathy and solidarity, expressed in the pain over the kidnapping of the three boys and of Gilad Shalit, and they always rise to sublime levels at times of war. At the same time, there is so much hatred and cruelty and blindness to the suffering of our neighbors.

This is not the place to ask how we managed to make the paradigm of power and control over another people our way of life, how we made the occupation second nature and its subjects invisible. Nor is this place to ask whether we chose to be blind, or whether this is congenital blindness, originating in countless practices of wiping away, forgetting and excluding of the Palestinian narrative from our lives, practices, so that even a peaceful society, like the one I grew up in, adopted without even blinking.

But this is the place wonder, what happens to people who lose their ability to empathize with others? What happens to a nation whose empathy skills have eroded to the point that it is unable to look over and see the suffering of the other – suffering, which that nation is largely responsible for shaping? Is the loss of the capacity to feel empathy is not a reduction of our humanity?

Otherwise, how can flatten entire neighborhoods on top of their residents, bomb schools and hospitals, shelter homes and ambulances, and infrastructure for water and electricity - and pump up our narrative that all, but all, the guilt belongs alone to

the bastardly Hamas. How can we bomb whole streets with hundreds of mangled bodies of women and children and talk about the sanctity of life? It requires some emotional infrastructure to be ready to embrace this Orwellian rhetoric, and shake off comfortably and righteously all imaginable responsibility for the levels of destruction we sowed and destruction yet to be disclosed, and of course the question of how we rolled into this war at all.

Writer Sholem Asch once said, "When you stop to see the people by your side as humans -You wind up ceasing to be a human being yourself." These words should haunt us.

At the tail end of the war, and after weeks of barbaric media, generally masculine, and a monolithic discussion to no end – I want to leave a perspective on my neighbors in Gaza, that live a short distance from my home, and to ask in the words of the poet Nathan Zach – "one moment of quiet, please."

I want to leave with you the image of hundreds of thousands of refugees, again refugees, returning now to their erased neighborhoods, spending long hours to wait for a loaf of bread and bottle of water. And also our friends in Gaza that left us mute, as we watched them slowly fade into desperation, waiting quietly for their turn to die, piercing us with text messages when they are terrified: How can you Israelis allow such an atrocity to happen?

I do not want to live in a society that sends its sons to fight over and over again in an unnecessary war, the confronts them with an impossible situation, and sowing within them traumas and wounds of heart and body, that will shape, in one way or another, the rest of their lives.

I do not want to live in a society that buries repeatedly this wasted youth, and drowns parents, stunned with endless sorrow, when they join the circle of grief, the same circuit whose members repeatedly declared: "[We do not want you here.](#)"

I do not want to live in a society where a fourteen year old girl from Gaza has to remind me that they too are human and a forty year old woman cries out to us by e-mail after the Rafah Hannibal situation, saying "I lost faith in humanity."

I'm not willing to live in a society where I need police protection to voice a different opinion and find myself banished from my city -where the voices of revenge are considered legitimate, while the voices of peace are considered spitting in the faces of the residents of Sderot. But the real spitting in the faces of the residents is the attempt to cram us all into the same one stereotypical collective.

I'm tired of living in a society where all media interviews with representatives of the peace camp, ends with the question: "And you do not think you are naive and delusional". To teach you, that those who spent the past 14 years operating a destruction arsenal of the most powerful army in the Middle East, always arriving at the same results - only more destructive - is balanced and rational.

And most of all, I am scared to live in a society, whose generations of leaders and their faithful spokespersons in the media – have succeeded systematically to sentence cognitive and emotional death on the feasibility of an alternative, and to design only one single agenda: the next war.

Responsible leadership that truly cares about its citizens should ask day and night: have we done everything, but I mean everything - to prevent this war? And the previous one? And previous one? Rhetorical question.

Let us admit the truth, the IDF never left the Gaza Strip. The military just ruled over the Strip by other means – from the water, air and terrain.

Let's challenge the amazingly populist saying that the state of Israel left the Southern residents out in the lurch. Israel spent millions in protecting the communities, in preparing the front lines and in wars that were supposedly determined to protect our security, however from a strategic level this becomes clear, time after time, that these are false assumptions.

Let's take apart the false statement "Silence will be met with silence." There is no silence in Gaza for tens of years. For fourteen years there is a closure and for eight years a siege – these are despicable crimes against civilians, just like rocket fire against innocent civilians is a despicable crime. When there is relative quiet in Sderot, we forget about Gaza. But the despair in Gaza always comes back at us like a boomerang, knocks on the roof and reminds you of its presence. Regrettably, only through violent means.

The world's largest prison must be opened to the world!! We must restore and rebuild the port and the infrastructures, recruit international assurances, and design solutions that will ensure our security, without compromise. This is a complex endeavor, one that is not our responsibility alone, but we are responsible to try.

Let us not forget the straight line that connects the occupation from the West Bank to besieged Gaza. Both have become the status quo, and that status quo must be destroyed. Both have to be included in any agreement, as two parts of the same whole.

As a resident of Sderot, who is emotionally damaged by the ongoing conflict, like the rest of my city, I stand here and call on the government of Israel: Don't protect us with airplanes and bombs. Protect us with dialogue and agreements. Iron Dome saved our lives, and we are most grateful for this. An Iron-Dome policy may be what can save our future. This choice is mostly in our hands. The question is which do we really prefer?