

GUEST ESSAY

Israel Is Falling Into an Abyss

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By David Grossman

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As the morning of Oct. 7 recedes into the distance, its horrors only seem to be growing. Again and again, we Israelis tell ourselves what has become part of the formative story of our identity and our destiny. How for several hours Hamas terrorists invaded the homes of Israelis, murdered some 1,200 people, raped and kidnapped, looted and burned. During those nightmarish hours, before the Israel Defense Forces snapped out of its shock, Israelis had a harsh and concrete glimpse of what might happen if their country not only suffered a punishing blow but also actually ceased to exist. If Israel were no longer.

I have talked with Jewish people living outside of Israel who have said that their physical — and spiritual — existence felt vulnerable during those hours. But more than that: Something of their life force had been taken, forever. Some were even surprised by the magnitude to which they needed Israel to exist both as an idea and as a concrete fact.

As the army began to strike back, civil society was already enlisting en masse in rescue and logistical operations, with many thousands of citizens volunteering to do what the government should have been doing were it not in a state of feckless paralysis.

At the time of publication, according to data from the Hamas-run Gaza Ministry of Health, more than [30,000 Palestinians](#) have been killed in the Gaza Strip since Oct. 7. They include many children, women and civilians, many of whom were not Hamas members and played no part in the cycle of war. “Uninvolved,” as Israel calls them in conflictese, the language with which nations at war deceive themselves so as not to face the repercussions of their acts.

The renowned kabbalah scholar Gershom Scholem coined a saying: “All the blood flows to the wound.” Nearly five months after the massacre, that is how Israel feels. The fear, the shock, the fury, the grief and humiliation and vengefulness, the mental energies of an entire nation — all of those have not stopped flowing to that wound, to the abyss into which we are still falling.

We cannot put aside our thoughts of the young girls and women, and the men, too, it seems, who were raped by attackers from Gaza, murderers who filmed their own crimes and broadcast them live to the victims' families; of the babies killed; of the families burned alive.

And the hostages. Those Israelis who for 146 days have been held in tunnels, some possibly in cages. They are children and elderly people, women and men, some of whom are ailing

and perhaps dying of insufficient oxygen and medication, and of hopelessness. Or perhaps they are dying because ordinary human beings who are exposed to absolute, demonic evil often lose the innate will to live — the will to live in a world in which such evil and cruelty are possible. In which people like those Hamas terrorists live.

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The enormity of the Oct. 7 events sometimes erases our memory of what came before. And yet alarming cracks were appearing in Israeli society some nine months before the massacre. The government, with Benjamin Netanyahu at its head, was attempting to ram through a series of legislative steps designed to severely weaken the Supreme Court’s authority, in that way dealing a lethal blow to Israel’s democratic character. Hundreds of thousands of citizens took to the streets every week, all those months ago, to protest the government’s plan. The Israeli right wing supported the government. The entire nation was becoming increasingly polarized. What was once a legitimate ideological argument between right and left had evolved into a spectacle of profound hatred between the various tribes. Public discourse had turned violent and toxic. Talk was heard of the country dividing into two separate peoples. And the Israeli public felt that the foundations of its national home were shaking and liable to crash.

For those of you who live in countries in which the concept of home is taken for granted, I should explain that for me, through my Israeli lens, the word “home” means a feeling of security, defense and belonging that envelops one’s mind in warmth. Home is a place where I can exist with ease. And it is a place whose borders are acknowledged by everyone — in particular, by my neighbors.

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But all these, for me, are still engulfed in a yearning for something that has never been fully achieved. At present, I fear that Israel is more fortress than home. It offers neither security nor ease, and my neighbors harbor many doubts and demands of its rooms and its walls and, in some cases, of its very existence. On that awful black Saturday, it turned out that not only is Israel still far from being a home in the full sense of the word, it also does not even know how to be a true fortress.

Nevertheless, Israelis are justifiably proud of the swift and efficient way they rally to offer mutual support when the country is threatened, whether by a pandemic like Covid-19 or a war. All over the world, reserve duty soldiers got on planes to join their fellow soldiers who had already been called up. They were going “to protect our home,” as they often said in

interviews. There was something moving in this unique story: These young men and women rushed to the front from the ends of the earth to protect their parents and grandparents. And they were prepared to give their lives. Equally stirring was the sense of unity that prevailed in the soldiers' tents, where political opinions were not important. All that mattered was solidarity and comradeship.

But Israelis of my generation, who have been through many wars, are already asking, as we always do after a war: Why does this unity only emerge in times of crisis? Why is it that only threats and dangers make us cohesive and bring out the best in us, and also extricate us from our strange attraction to self-destruction — to destroying our own home?

These questions provoke a painful insight: The profound despair felt by most Israelis after the massacre might be the result of the Jewish condition into which we have once again been thrown. It is the condition of a persecuted, unprotected nation. A nation that, despite its enormous accomplishments in so many realms, is still, deep down inside, a nation of refugees, permeated with the prospect of being uprooted even after almost 76 years of sovereignty. Today it is clearer than ever that we will always have to stand guard over this penetrable, fragile home. What has also been clarified is how deeply rooted the hatred of this nation is.

Another thought follows, about these two tortured peoples: The trauma of becoming refugees is fundamental and primal for both Israelis and Palestinians, and yet neither side is capable of viewing the other's tragedy with a shred of understanding — not to mention compassion.

One more shameful phenomenon has come to the surface as a result of the war: Israel is the one country in the world whose elimination is most openly called for.

In demonstrations attended by hundreds of thousands, on the campuses of the most respected universities, on social media and in mosques all over the world, Israel's right to exist is often enthusiastically contested. Reasonable political criticism that takes into account the complexity of the situation can give way — when it comes to Israel — to a rhetoric of hatred that can only be cooled (if at all) by the destruction of the state of Israel. For instance, when Saddam Hussein murdered thousands of Kurds with chemical weapons, there were no calls to demolish Iraq, to wipe it off the face of the earth. Only when it comes to Israel is it acceptable to publicly demand the elimination of a state.

Protesters, influential voices and public leaders should ask themselves what it is about Israel that provokes this loathing. Why is Israel, of the planet's 195 countries, alone in being conditional, as if its existence depended on the good will of the other nations of the world?

It is sickening to think that this murderous hatred is directed solely at a people who less than a century ago were, in fact, almost eradicated. There is also something galling about the tortuous and cynical connection between Jewish existential anxiety and the desire expressed publicly by Iran, Hezbollah, Hamas and others that Israel cease to exist. It is furthermore intolerable that certain parties are attempting to force the Israeli-Palestinian conflict into a colonialist framework when they willfully and stubbornly forget that Jews do *not* have another country, unlike the European colonialists with which they are falsely compared, and obscure the fact that Jews did not arrive in the land of Israel in conquest but seeking safety; that their powerful affinity with this land is almost 4,000 years old; that this is where they emerged as a nation, a religion, a culture and a language.

One can imagine the malicious glee with which these people step on the Jewish nation's most brittle spot, on its sense of being an outsider, on its existential loneliness — that spot from which it has no refuge. It is this spot that frequently dooms it to make such fateful and destructive mistakes, destructive for both its enemies and itself.

Who will we be — Israelis and Palestinians — when this long, cruel war comes to an end? Not only will the memory of the atrocities inflicted on each other stand between us for many years, but also, as is clear to us all, as soon as Hamas gets the chance, it will swiftly implement the goal clearly stated in its original charter: namely, the religious duty to destroy Israel.

How, then, can we sign a peace treaty with such an enemy?

And yet what choice do we have?

The Palestinians will hold their own reckoning. I as an Israeli ask what sort of people we will be when the war ends. Where will we direct our guilt — if we are courageous enough to feel it — for what we have inflicted upon innocent Palestinians? For the thousands of children we have killed. For the families we have destroyed.

And how will we learn, so that we are never again surprised, to live a full life on the knife's edge? But how many want to live their lives and raise their children on this knife's edge? And what price will we pay for living in constant watchfulness and suspicion, in perpetual fear? Who among us will decide that he does not want to — or cannot — live the life of an eternal soldier, a Spartan?

Who will stay here in Israel, and will those who remain be the most extreme, the most fanatically religious, nationalistic, racist? Are we doomed to watch, paralyzed, as the bold, creative, unique Israeliness is gradually absorbed into the tragic wound of Judaism?

These questions will likely accompany Israel for years. There is, however, the possibility that a radically different reality will rise up to contend with them. Perhaps the recognition that this war cannot be won and, furthermore, that we cannot sustain the occupation indefinitely, will force both sides to accept a two-state solution, which, despite its drawbacks and risks (first and foremost, that Hamas will take over Palestine in a democratic election), is still the only feasible one?

This is also the time for those states that can exert influence over the two sides to use that influence. This is not the time for petty politics and cynical diplomacy. This is a rare moment when a shock wave like the one we experienced on Oct. 7 has the power to reshape reality. Do the countries with a stake in the conflict not see that Israelis and Palestinians are no longer capable of saving themselves?

The coming months will determine the fate of two peoples. We will find out if the conflict that extends back more than a century is ripe for a reasonable, moral, human resolution.

How tragic that this will occur — if indeed it does — not from hope and enthusiasm but from exhaustion and despair. Then again, that is the state of mind that often leads enemies to reconcile, and today it is all we can hope for. And so we shall make do with it. It seems we

had to go through hell itself in order to get to the place from which one can see, on an exceptionally bright day, the distant edge of heaven.