

## **A Visit to the South by Galit Ben-Ami Gibson**

### **Part I - Walking Through Memory and Ashes**

I did not expect the south to feel like this. I thought I was prepared, but nothing could have readied me for the silence, the heaviness, the unbearable closeness of loss.

I travelled, not as a tourist but as a pilgrim of sorts.

Last month, while on my annual visit back home to Israel, I travelled together with my sister Michal as part of an organised trip, to the south...

Neither Beer-Sheba nor Eilat were on our itinerary. We were not on a tourist trip but rather on a pilgrimage to the sites of the places and communities which suffered that horrific attack from the Palestinian hordes that crossed into Israel from Gaza on Simchat Torah on October 7, 2023.

The road south takes you down road 232, which became a killing field for motorists in both directions as they try to get through the Yad Mordechai junction which had become a staging area for many of the gunman from Hamas and Islamic Jihad, heavily armed and lying in ambush for anyone who passed them by.

The Hamas forces were planning to move north along the main highway towards Ashkelon and possibly to even reach close to the centre of the country. In a heroic battle they were halted by a small unit of Border Police special forces fighters. An attempted attack on Kibbutz Yad Mordechai was also repelled by the kibbutz's emergency squad, with most of the terrorists eliminated.

From there we continued south along Road 232, which would be known as the "Highway of Blood". We were told that the entire road, 80 kilometres was cleared and resurfaced after 7 October. Eighty kilometres had become completely unusable in the aftermath of that day's events. Eighty kilometres had to be cleared, scrubbed, scraped and resurfaced after the terrible massacre, during which hundreds of terrorists from Hamas's Nukhba unit slaughtered dozens of civilians and soldiers travelling on Road 232, having first seized control of all its access points. Today, the only testimony to what happened there are the scattered roadside shelters (Miguniot), memorial signs honouring the victims, signs and placards calling for the hostages to be brought home.

We carried on southwards towards the "Observation Post", the very outpost where 54 IDF soldiers were killed in battles against members of the Izz Ad-Din Al-Qassam Brigades, and where seven female soldiers were abducted into Gaza. The girls were the survivors of a larger unit of female 'lookouts' whose job had been to observe and report on any unusual or hostile movements in the area of the border fence along the Gaza strip. Sadly, the army did not allow us to enter the outpost, since 'the bus was too large a target'.



And so, without any warning, the surreal reality of life along the Gaza border hit us hard.



The next stop was the shelter (Migunit) along the road, where Yuval Rafael, who represented Israel at the Eurovision, narrowly survived a brutal and vicious attack by the terrorists.

The shelter itself has since been renovated; the bullet holes and grenade blast marks are gone. In their place are murals, photos, inscriptions and remnants of memorial candles lit for those murdered there. It is almost impossible to grasp how sixty people managed to squeeze into its tiny space, packed tightly together, trying to hide beneath the bodies of those who had been killed around and on top of them. From this shelter, only a handful emerged alive.

And all the while, in the background, we could hear the echoes of our army's bombardments in Gaza, with mushroom-like plumes of smoke rising into the air, seemingly within touching distance of us...

With heavy hearts, we returned to the bus for our next stop - the Re'im site, where on that Saturday the Nova music festival was being held...

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## Part II - Bearing Witness

In the south it is hot - always hot - in every sense of the word. But on that day the heatwave was unbearable: the sun beat down on our heads, the bus's air conditioning could not cool us, our bodies burned from the heat, and our hearts burned from the sights and the stories that our tour guide kept adding to the description...

In just a moment we were turning into the Re'im site, the Nova music festival grounds, and the scene of the massacre that unfolded there.

A silent memorial stone stands alone, greeting us at the entrance to the site. The open area before us is vast, endless, with only a few scattered trees. They stand motionless, a few metres apart,



pretending to form a sort of grove. Some dry cactus and thorny bushes are dotted across the parched earth - the only silent witnesses that remain.

The bus rolled slowly towards the car park... From a distance, we could already see the signs bearing the faces of the murdered and the kidnapped - an endless sea of smiling portraits fixed into the ground, scattered across the festival site, a mute testimony to those who came to celebrate life but did not survive the horror of that Saturday.



We stepped off the bus. My breath halted. I had not even taken a single step before the tears began to flow, unbidden, unexpected, before I was ready for them. I looked around me and did not know where to begin, where to walk first.

There were many people there with us that day - tour groups from abroad who had come to visit, to see, to hear, and like us, to struggle to believe what had happened there. And yet, the entire site was shrouded in silence - a silence that honoured and grieved for the place.

And then suddenly the silence was broken, not outwardly, but within, by the images, the sounds, the videos we had seen and heard that day and since, surfacing from the subconscious and overlaying themselves like a living translucent-overlay upon the memorial sites before us.

I took a deep breath and turned towards the “Main Stage”, the very one around which hundreds of festival-goers danced, and from which the announcement came that they were under missile attack from Gaza: “Red alert! Red alert! Red alert!” shouted the DJ.

The place where dancers once celebrated life was now filled with photographs of the murdered and kidnapped: a silent sea of personal shrines adorned with belongings - small tokens reminding us, beyond the pictures and the names, who they were and what they loved in life.

Picture after picture, face after face - smiling, laughing, a voiceless testimony to who they were before the horror... And then suddenly familiar names and faces stood before me: Inbar Hyman z”l, Elkana Bohbot, Alon Ohel, Rom Breslavsky, Avinatan Or – all kidnapped and still held, together with 45 other hostages, beneath the cursed ground of Gaza.

I kept moving among the memorials towards the “Poppy Garden” when I suddenly stopped in front of the photograph of Hersh Goldberg-Polin z”l, one of the “Beautiful Six”: Eden Yerushalmi z”l, Carmel Gat z”l, Almog Sarusi z”l, Ori Danino z”l and Alex Loubenov z”l, who were all brutally murdered together in cold blood in an underground tunnel by





the terrorists who held them, once they realised the IDF was drawing close.

More and more faces, more and more names, more memorials, more plaques, an ocean of faces and names, and still we did not manage to see them all...

I looked around me and the only thought running through my head was: *Where? Where on earth did they try to hide when they ran towards the grove?* The trees are sparse, their leaves few, their branches neither thick nor tangled nor strong enough to climb and hide in. The ground is hard and dry, cracked in places, but not deep enough to provide cover - not for an adult, and certainly not for hundreds of men and women fleeing for their lives...

Perhaps that is why, on the right side of the site, the Jewish National Fund planted the “Memorial Grove”, a tree for each hostage and each victim from that day, each with a photo and a name on a plank next to it.

Opposite the dance area stands the Nova bar, alone - the very bar to which partygoers fled and hid, even inside its giant refrigerators, hoping to save their lives... “Is anyone here?! Is anyone alive?!” called out the lone policeman as he moved through the site after arriving there together with soldiers later that Saturday. But no answer came, at least not the kind they had hoped for...



From the bar we moved on to the “Yellow Rubbish Container”, where some of the people had hidden. Only a handful came out alive, after the terrorists realised that people were inside and sprayed it with bullets and grenades. We stood and looked at the photos of those who had huddled there, the screenshots of their last messages home - to their families, their friends, their loved ones - another silent testimony to the fear, the terror, the horror that consumed them there.

Wiping away the tears that would not stop flowing, we continued to the “Wall of Glory and Bravery” commemorating the few

policemen and women who were on guard duty at the festival and who fought like lions against the swarms of terrorists who stormed the site that day.

And then came the story of the ambulance, into which twenty people fled and hid for their lives. The ambulance that took a direct hit from a RPG (Rocket Propelled Grenade) fired by the terrorists, igniting its oxygen tanks and burning both the vehicle and all those within it...

So much pain, so much sorrow, so much loss, so much that is beyond comprehension. The thoughts of the atrocities that took place here do not stop, do not relent. And yet, how quiet it is here, how calm, how dignified and respectful the place feels. But the place does not forget, the earth cries out, and the air chokes!

Every Israeli in the country, secular and religious, young and old must come here, at least once in their life.



We wanted to stay longer, to see them all, to walk among them and look into the eyes of each and every one now standing silently on placards fixed into the earth. But the tour had to go on.

The next stop - the site of the burnt-out cars collected from the “Highway of Blood”...

### Part III - Am Israel Chai

Road 232 - a long, winding strip of fresh black asphalt - now conceals the horrors that unfolded upon it less than two years ago.

Everything seems so peaceful, so calm. Only the sounds of explosions, the echo of blasts, and the mushroom clouds rising on the horizon remind us of where we are, and how close we are to the Gaza border, some three kilometres in a straight line, to be exact.

A short drive from the Nova site and we arrive at the “Burnt-Out Vehicles Compound”. The sign at the entrance explains: *“This compound contains 1,568 vehicles that were evacuated from the roads and communities of the Gaza border area in the weeks following the surprise attack on the morning of Simchat Torah, 7 October 2023.”*

The sign goes on: *“Behind each vehicle lies a story of families, children, parents, the elderly and the young - people who were at the festival or in the border communities. Each story adds another piece to the spirit of courage that shone forth in full strength, alongside the unfathomable cruelty of that dreadful day.”*

I take a deep breath and step inside...





The first vehicle I see is a burnt-out ambulance - the very ambulance from the Nova festival into which revellers fled for their lives and tried to hide. That same ambulance which took a direct RPG hit from the terrorists; the oxygen tanks inside exploded, incinerating the ambulance and those within it...

Beside it stand other cars: windows shattered, some with no windows at all, and everyone riddled with countless bullet holes.

How terrifying it must have been to sit inside those vehicles while outside, groups of terrorists sprayed them with bullets and RPG fire - while inside, passengers screamed down the phone, begging for help that never came. All that was left was to say farewell - to parents, to siblings, to friends, to the world. A cruel world that, on that cursed day, turned its back and closed its eyes to the atrocities committed in what had once been called *"90% paradise and 10% hell"*. On that day it became 100% hell on earth.

Here too, beside every vehicle stands a sign telling its story - the story of those inside who did not survive.



And then suddenly, a picture with a familiar face: Ben Binyamin Shimoni z"l, a hero of Israel, whose story of bravery will forever be told and remembered. Ben had been at the Nova music festival. He managed to escape the inferno and reach safety, but chose to return again and again to rescue others. Three times he drove in and out of the massacre zone, loading his car with as many people as he could - friends, strangers - under heavy fire. Eventually he was ambushed by terrorists at the Alumim junction and murdered, together with his colleague Gaia Khalifa z"l. Ben was the one who

rescued Ofir Tzarfati z"l and Romi Gonen from the festival. Both were kidnapped alive from the vehicle into Gaza. Ofir was later murdered in captivity and his body returned for burial in Israel after 54 days. Romi Gonen was released after 451 days in Hamas captivity, as part of the January 2025 agreement.

Another car. And another. Then once again I stop in my tracks. In front of me stands a battered blue Seat Ibiza, and beside it, on a sign, the face of another hero: Ori Danino. On the car's bonnet, a sticker with three more familiar faces: siblings Itay and Mia Regev, and their close friend Omer Shem Tov. Ori Danino, so the story goes, almost escaped the massacre at the Nova festival that Saturday. But he chose to return to look for the two siblings and their friend, whom he had met only a few hours earlier at the festival, just before the attack began.

He insisted on going back to find them, even as friends pleaded with him to save himself. Ori found them and managed to get them into his car, but the terrorists caught up, opened fire, and stopped the vehicle. Ori leapt out and tried to hide in the bushes. One of the terrorists found him and dragged him out, but Ori did not surrender quietly. He struck the terrorist with a blow that fractured his skull, leaving him blinded. Eventually, though, all four were kidnapped into Gaza. Even in captivity Ori's bravery continued, according to testimonies from hostages who were with him for part of the time and later released: "*Ori never stopped fighting. He physically struggled with the terrorists so that they would treat Hersh Goldberg-Polin z"l, who had lost his arm during the abduction. Thanks to Ori's fight, they closed his bleeding wound,*" Eli-yah Cohen told Ori's father, Rabbi Elhanan Danino. Ori Danino was brutally murdered underground in a Hamas tunnel, together with Eden Yerushalmi z"l, Carmel Gat z"l, Almog Sarusi z"l, Alex Loubenov z"l, and Hersh Goldberg-Polin z"l.



I move on along the first row of vehicles. Among them stand two pick-up trucks fitted with mounts for machine guns, and several charred motorbikes once used by Hamas terrorists to storm the border communities that morning.

Behind this row, piled five high, like a wall of scorched and rusting bricks, are the remains of hundreds of cars. These were the vehicles in which people tried to flee, hoping to reach safety - or to encounter soldiers in familiar uniforms who had come to save them. Instead of rescue and life, they found death - or abduction into Gaza.

Further on, in an open area arranged like an ordinary car park, stand row upon row of more vehicles, all recovered from the border region that day and brought here to their "final rest".

In the centre of the compound stood alone, a rusted skeleton of a burnt-out car, stripped of every trace of what once covered it inside and out. Above the rear window frame hangs an iron plaque with a single word: "*Love*" (and I add silently: "*your neighbour as yourself*"), a searing



testimony to the boundless of selfless-love that revealed itself on that cursed day, when they rose to destroy us. From the empty frame of what was once the rear window spills a long trail of red poppies, ending at a solitary stone memorial inscribed with the word "*Yizkor*" ("Remembrance"), above which flies the flag of Israel.





Just before we leave the compound, near the exit gate stands a large mosaic sign in shades of blue and white, inscribed with the words “*Am Yisrael Chai*” - “*The people of Israel live*”. Around it grow more of those same poppies. A small plaque nearby reads: “*Poppies before the rain*”, and beneath: “*Created with love in the midst of war by thousands of volunteers, in memory of the ‘Black Sabbath’ and those who fell in battle.*”

Once again, we are back on the bus, this time we were heading back north.

When I returned to Tel-Aviv, people asked how the trip was. I couldn’t answer. How do you explain walking through a landscape of ghosts? How do you describe a silence that shouts louder than sound?

What I know is this: I came home with more than sorrow. I came home with a responsibility to remember, to tell, to ensure the names, the faces, the stories are not lost.

Am Israel Chai!

