



GIDEON LEVY

THE PUNISHMENT OF GAZA

"Perhaps the most heroic man in Israel."

Johann Hari, *Independent*

THE PUNISHMENT OF GAZA

Described by *Le Monde* as a “thorn in Israel’s flank,” **Gideon Levy** is a prominent, award-winning Israeli journalist. For over twenty years he has covered the Israel-Palestine conflict, in particular the occupation of Gaza and the West Bank, for the Israeli newspaper *Haaretz* in his column “Twilight Zone.”

Israel’s 2009 invasion of Gaza was an act of aggression that killed over a thousand Palestinians and devastated the infrastructure of an already impoverished enclave. *The Punishment of Gaza* shows how the ground was prepared for the assault and documents its continuing effects.

From 2005—the year of Gaza’s “liberation”—through to 2009, Levy tracks the development of Israeli policy, which has abandoned the pretense of diplomacy in favor of raw military power, the ultimate aim of which is to deny Palestinians any chance to form an independent state. Punished by Israel and the Quartet of international powers for the democratic election of Hamas, Gaza has been transformed into the world’s largest open-air prison. From Gazan families struggling to cope with the random violence of Israel’s blockade and its “targeted” assassinations, to the machinations of legal experts and the continued connivance of the international community, every aspect of this ongoing tragedy is eloquently recorded and forensically analyzed. Levy’s powerful journalism shows how the brutality at the heart of Israel’s occupation of Palestine has found its most complete expression to date in the collective punishment of Gaza’s residents.

THE PUNISHMENT OF GAZA

Gideon Levy



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Chronology

Introduction

It was a theatrical moment if ever there was one. It happened a long time ago, sometime in the 1990s, after many years of going to Gaza—where I worked and which I love. We stood there, the three of us—Palestinian human rights activist Bassem Eid, my brilliant and steady cameraman Miki Kratzman, and myself—on the way out of the Erez checkpoint, which controlled entry and exit from the Strip then as it does now. Those were the euphoric Oslo days, and we (How foolish? How credulous?) thought it was all over, that the occupation had ended, that Gaza was free, liberated. We wouldn't be going there anymore, at least not in the capacity of Sisyphus, as we had done for so many years, to cover the Israeli occupation for an Israeli public that does not want to read, see or hear anything about Gaza. In one rare and unforgettable moment we turned, all three as one, and in a gesture straight out of the movies waved Gaza farewell. Goodbye occupied Gaza, farewell! We are never to meet again, at least not in your occupied state. We shan't be coming to you any more to write up your trials and tribulations, the futile bloodshed and destruction, the humiliation, destitution, deprivation and bereavement that have been your lot for years. Gaza is on a new road, we thought, as we made for Tel Aviv, the most distant point from where we were in the universe, where never a thought is given to Gaza, where its fate never stirs a soul.

Our gesture was misconceived. Very soon we did return to Gaza, to the daily tales of life and death. The occupation did not end. On the contrary, it is more cruel, criminal and inhuman today than ever before. Ten years later, in 2005, when Israel disengaged from Gaza, we were much wiser: this time we knew that the occupation had simply changed form. The jailer pulled out of the jail and was now holding its prisoners captive from without. Yes, Gaza was and still is the largest prison on earth, a gruesome experiment performed on living human beings.

Gaza, my beloved. I've always cherished going there, a statement that to most Israelis sounds lunatic. Since that dramatic wave of farewell, I've been back to Gaza dozens of times. On one occasion a reporter from French television's TF1 channel joined us. In a doorway in Rafah (or was it Khan Younis?) where a paralyzed Palestinian mother lost her only child to an Israeli missile, I said to this French colleague, "This is when I'm ashamed to be Israeli. This horrible missile was launched in my name too." The next day he called me: "We won't be able to broadcast your last remark. It is too extreme. Our audience may take offense." I was deeply distressed. That is precisely what I have been trying to elicit all these years: outrage, outrage and offense at what Israel is making a million and half helpless immiserated people living in the Strip endure. To the best of my meager abilities, I am asking all Israelis to be outraged—or at least to understand what is being perpetrated in their name, so that they may never have the right to claim: We did not know. We didn't know that the Israeli occupation was so devastating, so brutal; we didn't know this horror was going on.

November 2006 was the last time we were in Gaza. We went to the Indira Gandhi Kindergarten, a private establishment run by a teacher named after the Indian Stateswoman. We arrived during the burial of Najawa Khalif, a twenty-year-old kindergarten teacher killed by another Israeli missile. The school bus had been hit when ferrying the children to this beautifully tended nursery school. Khalif was killed in front of twenty of her wards. On the day we came they were drawing pictures of her lying bleeding on the road, the children huddling terrified beside her, with an Israeli tank shelling from a distance and a plane dropping bombs from above. That is the bloody childhood recollection of the Indira Gandhi Kindergarten kids, and it is my last memory of Gaza. I was no longer allowed to go

there. In November 2006 Israel shut down all communication with the Gaza Strip. Israeli journalists have been denied access ever since.

With a broken heart and eyes overflowing I have watched the last war from afar. Operation Cast Lead Israel called it. It was a war that was no war, in which Israel met virtually no resistance, no counterattack worth speaking of. It was just a wild onslaught upon the most helpless population in the world, besieged and jailed, with nowhere to run, not even into the sea. White phosphorous shells scorching living flesh, Flechettes flinging their nails far and wide, manned and unmanned aircraft discharging missiles, disproportionate bombing and shelling. Hundreds of innocents were killed for no other reason other than they were Gazans. The people of Gaza, many of them born to 1948's refugees who had already suffered one tragedy by Israel's hand, now faced the next chapter in the tragic saga of their lives: an aimless, futile, criminal, superfluous offensive.

I spoke on the phone with my friends there and felt my heart give way. Over 1,300 dead, more than a hundred times the number of Israeli casualties, a horrific ratio rarely paralleled. Over 5,000 wounded, 2,400 buildings destroyed—among them 30 mosques, 121 factories and workshops, and 20 institutions of education. The houses of 350,000 residents were damaged, some beyond recognition. The numbers fail to convey the true dimensions of the horror. And above all there was the new IDF doctrine: a minimum of casualties on our side irrespective of the price. Virtually everything is no fair play.

I was not in Gaza through its last affliction. However, I did watch it very closely from a distance. A few hours after the horrendous attack on the Police College began on Saturday, December 17, 2008, which killed dozens of young policemen, my first article attacking Cast Lead was printed in *Haaretz*, the paper I work for. I have not stopped speaking out since, like a whistle in the dark, the horrible darkness that has pervaded Israel and the world. Yes, the world too. As the war was raging and the bombs rained down on Gaza, a delegation of EU heads came to Jerusalem to brace the Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert and give him courage. It was a terrible spectacle, a disgraceful parade of the New Europe. None of them took the trouble to visit Gaza, to learn at first hand what atrocities Israel had committed there. This is the same Europe that continues to participate in the blockade of Gaza and the boycott of its government, the only instance of which I am aware of an international boycott of the occupied rather than the occupier.

I think of myself an Israeli patriot. I want to be proud of my country, something that has become increasingly challenging for those Israelis who share my convictions. I also believe that only those who speak up against Israel's policies—who denounce the occupation, the blockade and the war—are the nation's true friends. A real friend does not pick up the bill for an addict's drugs: he packs the friend off to rehab instead. A year has elapsed since hostilities ceased, and Gaza is still in ruin, destitute, jailed and humiliated. The world continues to turn a blind eye. In a glamorous convention in Sharm al-Sheikh, international attendees promised to spend \$4.4 billion rebuilding the Strip, but the money hasn't moved from the banks' coffers. It is as if no explicit international commitment was ever expressed. The world looks on impassive.

The world has also read the Goldstone Commission's bold, probing report. Israel rejected it aggressively and bluntly, without even giving it a proper reading. Israel denounced Judge Richard Goldstone, a renowned international jurist—a self-proclaimed Zionist whose daughter spent twelve years in Israel—as an anti-Semite. What he had to say on Rwanda and Yugoslavia is applauded in Israel; what he wrote about Israel is considered treason. We have a tendency to shoot the messenger and lose the message under the debris. Even his modest demand that Israel investigate what happened was rejected out of hand. Israel should have been grateful to Judge Goldstone for undertaking a duty it has shirked. It should have been the most interested party in the investigation, yet it did not even trouble to begin an inquiry. In the long run Goldstone carries the day: he has laid down the future.

ethical code for the IDF, regarded by the blind and misguided Israeli public as “the most moral arm in the world.” Before they set out on another wanton rampage, Israeli generals and politicians will have to pause for thought. A document regarded in my country as vicious has made them understand that they may well have to account personally for any abuse of international law. This is interpreted as the result of pure spite, directed solely at Israel. True, international civil society is critical of Israel but it has every reason to be. A state pretending to be a democracy, one that presumes to belong to the enlightened Western world and is cashing in on this status, must expect its transgressions and caprices to come under closer critical scrutiny than, for example, the Sudan.

My hope is that this book is a modest contribution to efforts to change the present awful state of affairs. I have been trying to document the Israeli occupation for more than twenty years, during which time the occupation has inexorably tightened its grip. I have sought to record the increasing—and ever more rapid—accumulation of war crimes and human rights abuses committed during this period. It is an exasperating calling to write in Israel what so few want to read. Perhaps this book will prove that notwithstanding what has been said so far, Israel still possesses some dissenting voices.

Lastly, it is my great pleasure to express well-deserved gratitude toward the following. I wish to thank Verso Books and the editor Tom Penn, who courageously ventured to publish the English version of this book. Thanks are due to French publisher La Fabrique and its founding editor, Eric Hazan, for having earlier produced the French edition. My sincere gratitude goes to the exiled Israeli film producer Eyal Sivan for taking on this project, guiding it and selecting the articles that are included herein. I am most profoundly indebted to *Haaretz*, my home for the past twenty-eight years. In the ghastly days of the Gaza offensive my editors stood staunchly by me, with the publisher Amos Schocken and editor in chief Dov Alfon at their head. The constant support I have always enjoyed from *Haaretz*'s editors never wavered. Everything I wrote was printed. All I thought, I was lucky enough to see published. Free expression at its best, uncensored, my work withstood the harshest tests and was allowed to thrive through the noise of the guns. I don't take it for granted that articles like mine see publication. At the best of times such subversion is not easily tolerated in Israel; when war is raging, even less so. The pieces in this book were first published against a background of gunfire, at a time when emotional national unity reigned supreme, as it inevitably does in any society in the first days of almost any war. They were printed in the face of chauvinism, militarism, brainwashing, lies, repression and subterfuge. My *Haaretz* editors bravely withstood all this and never faltered, not even in the face of mounting readers' protests and subscription cancellations. This daily newspaper is truly a ray of light in the dark that has descended over Israel.

Having said all this, in both Hebrew and English, I take full and sole responsibility for what you are about to read.

A Just Boycott

June 4, 2006

The laugh of fate: The state waging a broad international campaign for a boycott is simultaneously waging a parallel campaign, no less determined, *against* a boycott. A boycott that seriously harms the lives of millions of people is legitimate in the eyes of the state because it is directed against those defined as enemies, while a boycott that is liable to hurt the academic ivory tower is illegitimate in the eyes of the state because it is aimed against itself. This is a moral double standard. Why is the boycott campaign against the Palestinian Authority—including blocking essential economic aid and shunning leaders elected in democratic and legal elections—a permissible measure in Israel's eyes, yet the boycott of Israeli universities is forbidden?

Israel cannot claim that the boycott weapon is illegitimate, because it makes extensive use of the weapon itself, and its victims are suffering under severe conditions of deprivation, from Rafah to Jenin. In the past, Israel called upon the world to boycott Yasser Arafat, and now it is calling for a boycott of the Hamas government—and via this government, all the Palestinians in the territories. And Israel does not regard this as an ethical problem. Tens of thousands of Palestinians have not received their salaries for four months due to the boycott, but when there is a call to boycott Israeli universities, a boycott suddenly becomes an illegitimate weapon.

Those calling for a boycott of Israel are also tainted with a moral double standard. The National Association of Teachers in Further and Higher Education (NATFHE) in Britain, and the Canadian Union of Public Employees in Ontario, which have both decided to boycott Israel, did not act similarly to protest their own countries' war crimes and occupations—the British army in Iraq and the Canadian army in Afghanistan. Nonetheless, the handful of human rights advocates and opponents of the occupation in Israel should thank these two organizations for the step they have taken, despite the flawed double standards.

It would have been preferable if the opponents of the occupation in Israel had not felt the need for the intervention of external groups to help in the struggle. It is not easy to call upon the world to boycott your own country. It would have been better had there been no need for Rachel Corrie, Jamie Miller and Tom Hurndall, bold people of conscience who paid with their lives after standing in front of the destructive bulldozers in Rafah. These young foreigners did the dangerous and vital work that Israelis themselves should have done.

The same is true for the few peace activists who still manage to roam the territories, to protest and offer assistance to the victims of the occupation within the framework of organizations like the International Solidarity Movement (ISM)—which Israel fights, preventing its members from entering its borders. It would be better if Israelis mobilized to fight instead of these activists. But except for a few modest groups, there is no protest in Israel and no real mobilization. Thus, all that remains is hope for the world's help.

The world can help save Israel from itself in limited ways. In a situation in which the governments of the West effectively support the continuation of the occupation, even if they declare their opposition to it, this role moves to civil organizations. When a group of American attorneys, including

Jews, calls for a boycott of the Caterpillar company, whose bulldozers razed complete neighborhoods in Khan Yunis and Rafah, that group should be thanked. The same applies to the boycott of the universities: When an association of British university lecturers boycotts Israeli colleagues who are not prepared even to declare their opposition to the occupation, we should appreciate it. If each group in its field—and perhaps this will someday also include tourism officials, business people, artists and athletes—all boycott Israel, perhaps Israelis will begin to understand, albeit the hard way, that there is a price to pay for the occupation, a price they pay with their pockets and with their status.

The occupation is not just the domain of the government, the army and the security organizations. Everything is tainted: the institutions of justice and law; the physicians who remain silent when medical treatment is prevented in the territories; the teachers who do not protest against the closing of educational institutions and the prevention of free movement of their peers; the journalists who do not report; the writers and artists who remain silent; the architects and engineers who lend a hand to the occupation's enterprises—the settlements and the fence, the barriers and bypass roads; and also the university lecturers, who do nothing for their imprisoned colleagues in the territories, but instead conduct special study programs for the security forces. If all these people were to boycott the occupation, there would be no need for an international boycott.

The world sees a great and ongoing injustice. Should the world remain silent? This is not, of course, the only injustice in the world, nor is it the most terrible. But does that make it any less necessary to act against it?

It is easy to exempt ourselves from our moral responsibility and attribute, as usual, any criticism to anti-Semitism. And there may indeed be some elements of anti-Semitism among those calling for the boycott. But also among them are groups and individuals, including quite a few Jews, for whom Israel is close to their hearts: people who want a just Israel, who see an Israel that occupies and clearly unjust, and who believe they should do something. We should thank them for this from the bottom of our hearts.

Collateral Damage

June 1, 2006

The entire family of Hamdi Aman, a twenty-eight-year-old Palestinian from Gaza who spent his youth in Tel Aviv's Carmel Market, was hit in the assassination of Islamic Jihad operative Mohammed Dahdouh in Gaza a week ago in May of this year.

Aman's seven-year-old son Muhand was killed; Naima, his wife, twenty-seven, was killed; his mother Hanan, forty-six, was killed. His three-and-a-half-year-old daughter Mariya is lying in the pediatric intensive care unit at Sheba Medical Center, Tel Hashomer, permanently paralyzed and on a respirator. Aman is not allowed to be with her.

His youngest son Muaman, two, was lightly wounded in the back by shrapnel, and Aman himself was hit by shrapnel throughout his body. His uncle Nahed, thirty-three, the father of two toddlers, is completely paralyzed and in critical condition at Tel Aviv's Sourasky Medical Center.

The Amans had bought a used Mitsubishi car eleven days before, and they took it for a maiden spin through the Gargash neighborhood in Gaza City. There were eight of them in the car: five adults and three toddlers. Mariya stood dancing on her mother's knees. When they drove down the busy industrial street and passed the home of Palestinian Authority foreign minister Mahmoud al-Zahar, they felt a powerful blow to the left side of the car, exactly when a Magnum van carrying Dahdouh passed them on the left. There was a massive blast, the van with the dead Jihad operative in it was in flames, and Hamdi Aman was faced with the horror that his entire family had been hit.

Israel Air Force chief Major General Eliezer Shkedi said the next day that "we still have to check what killed the Aman family. The IDF spokesman's office also told *Haaretz* this week, ten days after the assassination, that the IDF is "continuing to investigate in order to check the report that three Palestinians were killed as a result of the attack on Dahdouh's car."

“Quiet: We’re Shooting”

July 2, 2006

A black flag hangs over the “rolling” operation in Gaza. The more the operation “rolls,” the darker the flag becomes. The “summer rains” we are showering on Gaza are not only pointless, they are blatant illegitimate. It is not legitimate to cut off electricity to 750,000 people. It is not legitimate to call 20,000 people to run from their homes and turn their towns into ghost towns. It is not legitimate to penetrate Syria’s airspace. It is not legitimate to kidnap half of a government and a quarter of parliament.

A state that takes such steps is no longer distinguishable from a terror organization. The harsher the steps, the more monstrous and stupid they become, the more the moral underpinnings are removed and the stronger the impression that the Israeli government has lost its nerve. Now one must hope that the weekend lull, whether initiated by Egypt or the prime minister—and in any case to the dismay of Channel 2’s Roni Daniel and the IDF—will lead to a radical change.

Everything must be done to win Gilad Shalit’s release. What we are doing now in Gaza has nothing to do with freeing him. It is a wide-scale act of vengeance, the kind that the IDF and Shin Bet have wanted to conduct for some time, mostly motivated by the deep frustration that the army commanders feel about their impotence against the Qassams and the daring Palestinian guerrilla raids. There’s a huge gap between the army unleashing its frustration and a clever and legitimate operation to free the kidnapped soldier.

To prevent the army from running as amok as it would like, a strong and judicious political echelon is required. But facing off against the frustrated army is Ehud Olmert and Amir Peretz, an amateur regime, weak and hapless. Until the weekend lull, it appeared that each step proposed by the army and Shin Bet had been immediately approved for backing. That does not bode well for the chances of freeing Shalit, let alone for the future management of the Israeli government, which is being revealed to be as weak as the Hamas government.

The only wise and restrained voice heard so far was that of the soldier’s father, Noam Shalit, of a noble people. That noble man called, at what is clearly his most difficult hour, not for stridency and not for further damage done to the lives of soldiers and innocent Palestinians. Against the background of the IDF’s unrestrained actions and the arrogant bragging of the latest macho spokesmen, Major General Yoav Gallant of the Southern Command and Major General (Res.) Amos Gilad, Shalit’s father’s voice stood out like a cry in the wilderness.

Sending tens of thousands of miserable inhabitants running from their homes, dozens of kilometers from where Shalit’s son is supposedly hidden, and cutting off the electricity to hundreds of thousands of others, is certainly not what Shalit meant in his understated, emotional pleas. It’s a shame nobody is listening to him.

The legitimate basis for the IDF’s operation was stripped away the moment it began. It’s not an accident that nobody mentions the day before the attack on the Kerem Shalom fort, when the IDF kidnapped two civilians, a doctor and his brother, from their home in Gaza. The difference between us and them? We kidnapped civilians and they captured a soldier, which seems to mean that we are

state and they are a terror organization. How ridiculously pathetic Amos Gilad sounds when he says that the capture of Shalit was “illegitimate and illegal,” unlike when the IDF grabs civilians from their homes. How can a senior official in the defense ministry claim that “the head of the snake” is in Damascus, when the IDF uses the exact same methods?

True, when the IDF and Shin Bet grab civilians from their homes—and they do so often—it is not to murder them later. But sometimes they are killed on the doorsteps of their homes, although it is not necessary, and sometimes they are taken to serve as “bargaining chips,” like in Lebanon, and now with the Palestinian legislators. What an uproar there would be if the Palestinians had grabbed half the members of the Israeli government! How would we label them then?

Collective punishment is illegitimate and it does not have a smidgeon of intelligence. Where were the inhabitants of Beit Hanoun run? With typical hardheartedness, the military reporters say they were not “expelled” but that it was “recommended” they leave—for the benefit, of course, of those running for their lives. And what will this inhumane step lead to? Support for the Israeli government? The enlistment as informants and collaborators for the Shin Bet? Can the miserable farmers of Beit Hanoun and Beit Lahia do anything about the Qassam rocket-launching cells? Did bombing an already destroyed airport do anything to free the soldier, or was it just to decorate the headlines?

Did anyone think about what would have happened if Syrian planes had managed to down one of the Israeli planes that brazenly buzzed their president’s palace? Would we have declared war on Syria? Another “legitimate war”? Will the blackout of Gaza bring down the Hamas government or cause the population to rally around it? And even if the Hamas government falls, as Washington wants, what will happen on the day after? These are questions for which nobody has any real answers. As usual here: Quiet, we’re shooting. But this time we are not only shooting. We are bombing and shelling, darkening and destroying, imposing a siege and kidnapping like the worst of terrorists, and nobody breaks the silence to ask what the hell for, and according to what right.

The Wahbas' Last Meal

July 6, 2006

They'd all sat down to have lunch at home: the mother Fatma, three months pregnant; her daughter Farah, two; her son Khaled, one; Fatma's brother, Dr. Zakariya Ahmed; his daughter-in-law Shayma, nine months pregnant; and the seventy-eight-year-old grandmother. A Wahba family gathering in Khan Yunis in honor of Dr. Ahmed, who'd arrived home six days earlier from Saudi Arabia.

A big boom is heard outside. Fatma hurriedly scoops up the littlest one and tries to escape into an inner room, but another boom follows immediately. This time it is a direct hit. A skilled Israel Air Force pilot fired the second missile and it came right into the dining room through the ceiling. Fatma is killed on the spot by the shrapnel that hits her spine. Her brother, Dr. Ahmed, is also killed. Her daughter-in-law miscarries her child; the little girl, Farah, is moderately injured; and the baby of the family, Khaled, is critically injured in the head. A pool of blood collects on the floor. Only the grandmother is unhurt. It will be many minutes before the ambulance arrives. This was the last meal of the Wahba family.

In neighboring Rafah, taxi driver Mohammed Wahba is transporting a family of vacationers to the beach. He hears about the disaster on the radio. His cell phone rings and on the line is his brother Nidal, the father of the family that was hit. "Come quick to get me!" Nidal shouts. The two brothers rush to Nasser Hospital in Khan Yunis, where they see the horror.

Before he became a cab driver, Mohammed worked for nine years at Tel Aviv University as the maintenance man for the Faculty of the Arts, and later for the Faculty of Law. He lived on Einstein Street in Ramat Aviv, and knew many professors by name. It's been ten years now since he was permitted to enter his second city, Tel Aviv. Now he's here, having sat for ten days in a row at the bedside of his toddler nephew, who is in grave condition in the intensive care unit at Dana Children's Hospital next to Ichilov.

Little Khaled is unconscious, paralyzed and on a respirator, wounded in the head by shrapnel from the missile. "I don't know who to blame, if it's the pilot or whoever gave the order to attack. Who bears the responsibility?" Mohammed asks in excellent Hebrew. The targeted assassination, which was aimed at a vehicle carrying members of the Popular Resistance Committees that was driving down the street, and fell instead right on a family in the middle of their lunch, he calls "an accident."

His brother Nidal, now a widower, calls all the time from Khan Yunis to ask how his unconscious son is doing. The Coordination and Liaison Office has already called to say the child will have to be brought back to Gaza, due to lack of funds to keep him hospitalized in Israel. The father and uncle are terribly worried about what that will mean. This week, Ibrahim Habib of Physicians for Human Rights tried to prevent the child from being returned to Gaza.

The Wahbas had tried for years to have a child. They underwent fertility treatment in Gaza and finally, two and a half years ago, their daughter Farah was born. Khaled was born a year later. Nidal is a metallurgical engineer who studied in Germany and works as a supervisor in the professional schools in Gaza, and Fatma was a teacher. He is forty, she was thirty-six. Their house is located under the Welcome to Khan Yunis sign at the northern entrance to the city, on the highway between Gaza

and Rafah. Israeli tanks will probably be rolling down the road before long, but two weeks ago on Wednesday, all was quiet in the city as the family sat down to a special lunch to celebrate Dr. Ahmed's return from Saudi Arabia.

Mohammed was driving his cab through the streets of Rafah. Thirty-five years old, he was born in Rafah's Yavneh refugee camp and at the age of fourteen came to Tel Aviv University, where he worked in the Student Association cafeteria. When he became a maintenance man he lived in a rented room in the apartment of an elderly man named Yaakov Kleiner, on Einstein Street. He remembers the cigars favored by faculty dean Arnon Zuckerman and the times of the classes given by guest lecturer Haim Yavin (Thursday afternoon) and Rafik Halabi; he remembers student Zvika Hadar and theater professors David Zinder, Tom Levy and Hana Taragan. He especially enjoyed the International Student Film Festival the department held every year. "It was so nice there," he says. He remembers the security people there, too, though not their names. And Livio Carmeli and his film archive.

From the Gilman Building, Mohammed remembers Professor Israel Gershoni, and from the Faculty of Law, he remembers professors Eliezer Lederman, the late Menashe Shava, Kenneth Mar and Shlomo Shoham. All were very friendly to him. It was the best time of his life. In 1994, when entry into Israel was limited to married men with families and Mohammed was still single, this nice period of his life came to an end. There was just one more time that he was able to enter Israel, and then he went directly to the Ramat Aviv campus. That was in 1997, right after his marriage, and he enjoyed a day full of memories. He hadn't been back since, until now, when he finds himself waiting by the door of the pediatric intensive care unit. Professor Lederman has promised to come visit him.

It was the longest day of the year, June 21. At about 4:30 in the afternoon Mohammed Wahba was driving a family to the Rafah beach, not far from the ruins of Rafiah Yam, when a report came on the radio about another targeted assassination attempt. At first, the announcer said it was the "Barbav family" that was hurt, and Mohammed was somewhat relieved: He didn't know them. But later, on his way back from the sea, the report was that a pregnant thirty-six-year-old teacher named Fatma had been killed.

His heart skipped a beat. There was only one pregnant teacher named Fatma in Khan Yunis, he thought—his sister-in-law. And then his brother Nidal called: "Did you listen to the news?" "No, I didn't hear it," he lied, to avoid scaring his brother. Then his brother-in-law, who works at Nassif Hospital, also called, confirming Mohammed's worst fears. It had been his brother's family that had been hurt by the missile. Mohammed picked up Nidal from the center of Rafah, and together they drove to the hospital in Khan Yunis. Khaled was in critical condition, with extensive bleeding in the brain. Fatma and Dr. Ahmed were already dead. Farah had been wounded in the back by shrapnel. Khaled was immediately taken to Shifa Hospital in Gaza, where surgeons operated on his head. The grandmother told them afterward that she'd tried to lift Khaled off the floor, and that's when she had seen that her daughter and son had been killed.

The intervention of a family friend—an American who had lived in the Shabura camp in Rafah for years and called from America—led to Khaled being transferred to the hospital in Tel Aviv. The Light to the Nations organization, an American foundation, promised to pay for the treatment. Not the IDF, not the air force, not the Defense Ministry.

On Sunday, three days after the event, Khaled was transferred to a hospital in Israel, accompanied by Mohammed. This week his condition was described as close to hopeless, and the family was told that he'd have to be taken back to Gaza. The doctors told Mohammed that "the situation is out of our hands." A spokeswoman for Ichilov Hospital confirmed that Khaled's condition is critical as a result of the injury to his head. At the beginning of the week, the defense minister's adviser had not replied to the request from Physicians for Human Rights that Khaled not be returned to Gaza. Mohammed is convinced that bringing the child back to Gaza will seal his fate.

According to the IDF spokesman, this week: "The IDF attack on June 21 was directed against a terror cell that was on its way to perpetrate a terror attack. The attack was carried out shortly after two previous aerial assaults in which, for various reasons, uninvolved Palestinian civilians were hurt. In this assault, lessons learned from previous assaults were already implemented, as far as going to greater lengths to ensure that no civilians are within the risk area.

"However, for reasons that are not yet entirely clear, one of the two missiles that were fired deviated from the target at which it was directed. The result of this deviation was a strike on a residential building located dozens of meters from the target, a building occupied by the Palestinian civilians who were harmed.

"It should be noted that the method used by the IDF in performing such missions has been proven over the years as accurate and cautious, and in the majority of cases enables the IDF to act against terror organizations and activists who deliberately take shelter among and act from within a civilian population, under the cover of a population that is not involved in its activities.

"It should be emphasized that in a situation in which it is clearly seen that there is a risk to the population that is located near the target, the planned assault is then canceled, even when it is clearly known that the object of the attack constitutes a serious threat. Unfortunately, in ongoing combat of this sort, accidents happen and innocent civilians are harmed. We regret this, yet the responsibility lies entirely with the terror organizations and the leadership of the Palestinian Authority which do nothing to stop them.

"When the investigation of the incident is completed, the findings will be presented to the chief of staff."

"They always said the helicopters were the smartest weapons. Suddenly it's the dumbest weapon," says Mohammed, bleary-eyed. "It's happened to other families, too. I don't know when it will stop. If it keeps on like this, I don't know how it will end. Who can put a stop to it? Only the two people. They're the ones with the pain and the suffering. Not the governments or the leaders. Only the people can put an end to this business. The Israelis and the Palestinians. Olmert's son doesn't serve in the army, and Haniyeh's son doesn't go around with a rifle opposing the occupation."

How does it feel to be back in Tel Aviv?

"It feels quiet and safe here. Not like in Gaza. There, you feel unsafe all the time. Don't forget I'm a cab driver. Maybe they'll attack the car in front of me or behind me? It's like how I heard it was for you during the time of all the terror attacks."

Mohammed's brother Nidal is in a bad state. He lives on coffee and cigarettes and suffers attacks of fury and anxiety. "What happened, happened, and who's gone is gone, but what about this boy?" he said to his brother this week on the phone. Every half-hour Mohammed goes to the intensive care room to check on his nephew's condition. Khaled lies there unconscious, stitches crisscrossing his forehead and tubes sticking out of his mouth and body. Mohammed says Khaled has actually moved a little bit in the past couple of days.

Who Started It?

July 9, 2006

“We left Gaza and they are firing Qassams”—there is no more precise a formulation of the prevailing view about the current round of the conflict. “They started it” will be the routine response to anyone who tries to argue, for example, that a few hours before the first Qassam fell on the school in Ashkelon, causing no damage, Israel sowed destruction at the Islamic University in Gaza.

Israel is causing electricity blackouts; laying sieges; bombing and shelling; assassinating and imprisoning; killing and wounding civilians, including children and babies, in horrifying numbers—but “they started it.”

They are also “breaking the rules” laid down by Israel: We are allowed to bomb anything we want and they are not allowed to launch Qassams. When they fire a Qassam at Ashkelon, that’s an “escalation of the conflict,” but when we bomb a university and a school, it’s perfectly all right. Why? Because they started it. That’s why the majority thinks that all the justice is on our side. Like in a schoolyard fight, Israel’s assurance that they started it is the winning moral argument to justify even the most obvious injustice.

So, who really did start it? And has Israel “left Gaza”?

Only partially, and in a distorted manner. The disengagement plan, which was labeled with fanciful phrases like “partition” and “an end to the occupation,” did result in the dismantling of settlements and the Israel Defense Forces’ departure from Gaza, but it did almost nothing to change the living conditions for the residents of the Strip. Gaza is still a prison, and its inhabitants are still doomed to live in poverty and oppression. Israel closes them off from the sea, the air and land, except for a limited safety valve at the Rafah crossing. Residents cannot visit their relatives in the West Bank or look for work in Israel, upon which the Gazan economy has been dependent for some forty years. Sometimes goods can be transported, sometimes not. Gaza has no chance of escaping its poverty under these conditions. Nobody will invest in it, nobody can develop it, nobody can feel free in it. Israel locked the cage, threw away the keys and left the residents to their bitter fate. Now, less than a year after the disengagement, Israel is going back, with violence and force.

What could otherwise have been expected? That Israel would unilaterally withdraw, brutally and outrageously ignoring the Palestinians and their needs, and that the Palestinians would silently bear their bitter fate and not try to fight for their liberty, livelihood and dignity? We promised a safe passage to the West Bank and didn’t keep the promise. We promised to free prisoners and didn’t keep the promise. We supported democratic elections and then boycotted the legally elected leadership, confiscated funds that belong to it and declared war on it. We could have withdrawn from Gaza through negotiations and coordination, while strengthening the existing Palestinian leadership, but we refused to do so. And now we complain about “a lack of leadership”? We did everything we could to undermine their society and leadership, making as sure as possible that the disengagement would not be a new chapter in our relationship with the neighboring nation, and now we are amazed by the violence and hatred that we sowed with our own hands.

What would have happened if the Palestinians had not fired Qassams? Would Israel have lifted the

economic siege that it imposed on Gaza? Would it open the border to Palestinian laborers? Free prisoners? Meet with the elected leadership and conduct negotiations? Encourage investment in Gaza? Nonsense. If the Gazans were sitting quietly, as Israel expects them to do, their case would disappear from the agenda—here and around the world. Israel would continue with the convergence, which solely meant to serve our goals, ignoring their needs. Nobody would have given any thought to the fate of the people of Gaza if they had not behaved violently. That is a very bitter truth, but the first twenty years of the occupation passed quietly and we did not lift a finger to end it.

Instead, under cover of the quiet, we built the enormous, criminal settlement enterprise. With our own hands, we are now once again pushing the Palestinians into using what petty arms they have; and in response, we employ nearly the entire enormous arsenal at our disposal, and continue to complain that “they started it!”

We started it. We started it with the occupation, and we are duty-bound to end it—a real and complete ending. We started the violence. There is no violence worse than the violence of the occupier, using force on an entire nation, so the question about who fired first is therefore an evasion meant to distort the picture. After Oslo, too, there were those who claimed that “we left the territories,” with a similar mixture of blindness and lies.

Gaza is in serious trouble, ruled by death, horror and daily difficulties, far from the eyes and hearing of Israelis. We are only shown the Qassams. We only see the Qassams. The West Bank is still under the boot of occupation, the settlements are flourishing, and every hand limply extended for an agreement, including that of Ismail Haniyeh, is immediately rejected. And after all this, if someone still has second thoughts, the winning answer is promptly delivered: “They started it. They started it and justice is on our side.” But the fact is that they did not start it, and justice is not with us.

Gaza's Darkness

September 3, 2006

Gaza has been reoccupied. The world must know this, and Israelis must know it, too. It is in its worst condition ever. Since the abduction of Gilad Shalit, and more so since the outbreak of the Lebanon war, the Israel Defense Forces has been rampaging through Gaza—there's no other word to describe—killing and demolishing, bombing and shelling indiscriminately.

Nobody thinks about setting up a commission of inquiry; the issue isn't even on the agenda. Nobody asks why it is being done and who decided to do it. But under the cover of the darkness of the Lebanon war, the IDF returned to its old practices in Gaza as if there had been no disengagement. So it must be said forthrightly: The disengagement is dead. Aside from the settlements that remain piles of rubble, nothing is left of the disengagement and its promises. How contemptible all the sublime and nonsensical talk about "the end of the occupation" and "partitioning the land" now appears. Gaza is reoccupied, and with greater brutality than before. The fact that it is more convenient for the occupier to control it from outside has nothing to do with the intolerable living conditions of the occupied.

In large parts of Gaza nowadays, there is no electricity. Israel bombed the only power station there, and more than half the electricity supply will be cut off for at least another year. Since there is no electricity, supplying homes with water is nearly impossible. Gaza is filthier and smellier than ever. Because of the embargo Israel and the world have imposed on the elected authority, no salaries are being paid and the street cleaners have been on strike for weeks. Piles of garbage and clouds of stink strangle the coastal strip, turning it into Calcutta.

More than ever, Gaza is also like a prison. The Erez crossing is empty, the Karni and Rafah crossings have been open only a few days over the last two months. Some 15,000 people waited for two months to enter Egypt, and some are still waiting, including many who are ailing and wounded. Another 5,000 waited on the other side to return to their homes. Some died during the wait. One must see the scenes at Rafah to understand how profound a human tragedy is taking place. A crossing that was not supposed to have an Israeli presence continues to be Israel's means to pressure 1.5 million inhabitants. This is disgraceful and shocking collective punishment. The United States and Europe, whose police are at the Rafah crossing, also bear responsibility for the situation.

Gaza is also poorer and hungrier than ever before. There is nearly no merchandise moving in and out, fishing is banned, the tens of thousands of PA workers receive no salaries, and the possibility of working in Israel is out of the question.

And we still haven't mentioned the death, destruction and horror. In the last two months, Israel killed 224 Palestinians, 62 of them children and 25 of them women. It bombed and assassinated, destroyed and shelled, and no one stopped it. No Qassam cell or smuggling tunnel justifies such widespread scale killing. A day doesn't go by without deaths, most of them innocent civilians.

Where are the days when there was still a debate in Israel about the assassinations? Today, Israel drops innumerable missiles, shells and bombs on houses and kills entire families on its way to another assassination. Hospitals are collapsing, with more than 900 people undergoing treatment. Last week, Shifa Hospital, the only such facility in Gaza that might be worthy of being called a hospital, I saw

heartrending scenes: children who had lost limbs, on respirators, paralyzed, crippled for the rest of their lives.

Entire families have been killed in their sleep or while riding on donkeys or working in fields. Frightened children, traumatized by what they have seen, huddle in their homes with a horror in their eyes that is difficult to describe in words. A journalist from Spain who spent time in Gaza recently, a veteran of war and disaster zones around the world, said he had never been exposed to scenes so horrific as the ones he had seen and documented over the last two months.

It is difficult to determine who decided on all of this. It is doubtful the ministers are aware of the reality in Gaza. They are responsible for it, starting with the bad decision on the embargo, through the bombing of Gaza's bridges and power station and the mass assassinations. Israel is responsible, once again, for all that happens in Gaza.

The events in Gaza expose the great fraud of Kadima: It came to power on the coattails of the virtual success of the disengagement, which is now going up in flames, and it promised convergence, a promise that the prime minister has already rescinded. Those who think Kadima is a centrist party should now know it is nothing other than another rightist occupation party. The same is true of Labor. Defense Minister Amir Peretz is responsible for what is happening in Gaza no less than the prime minister, and Peretz's hands are as blood-soaked as Olmert's. He can never present himself as a "man of peace" again. The ground invasions every week, each time somewhere else, the kill-and-destroy operations from the sea, air and land are all given names that whitewash the reality, like "Summer Rains" or "Locked Kindergarten." No security excuse can explain the cycle of madness, and no civil argument can excuse the outrageous silence of us all. Gilad Shalit will not be released and the Qassams will not cease. On the contrary, there is a horror taking place in Gaza, and while it might prevent a few terror attacks in the short run, it is bound to give birth to much more murderous terror. Israel will then say, with its self-righteousness: "But we returned Gaza to them!"

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