



Sharing Their Stories, Part 5: Voices of Young Israelis

The Bronfman Fellowship <office@bronfman.org>

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Reply-To: office@bronfman.org

To:



Voices of Young Israelis, Part 5

We continue to check in with our Israeli community, seeing how we can help and offer care during this difficult time. Below are several accounts written by young Israelis (fellows and alumni of Amitei Bronfman). We'll be sharing more of these stories going forward, as well as voices from our North American community.

Shabbat Shalom. For those in the U.S., we hope you had a good Thanksgiving.

The following are all translations from Hebrew; please excuse any mistakes.



Name: **Tamar Shalem '10**

Normally lives in **Tel Aviv**

Currently lives in **Tel Aviv**

If you ask me how I am now, then, in all likelihood, I'll answer, "Fine" in an optimistic manner, quietly and tersely, and I'll pull my shoulders up.

But the truth is that nothing is fine. For a month now, I've been raising my son Kedem alone, because my partner is at the Lebanon border. Yes, war is taking place there now, also—not a tense calm and not intermittent rockets, but actual war.

Between moments of anxiety and worry about my partner (and my brother-in-law, my cousin, my husband's nephew and more and more people who are situated at the front and

about whom I worry all the time), the national mourning also bursts out; really it is omnipresent. There are days when the mourning is so heavy that it's impossible to breathe. The air is physically so dense and tough that it's impossible to expand the lungs to take a breath, not even a very small one. Because the human evil spread out over the land and consumed every piece of good, of beauty, and of quiet. And how can we possibly ever go back to being anything like we were before that terrible Shabbat?

A week and a half ago, my close friend was notified that his father-in-law and mother-in-law's bodies were identified among the killed in Kfar Aza. Yes, you're reading that correctly: it took more than two and a half weeks to locate and identify their bodies. And, yes, there are still tens of bodies that have not yet been identified. When I went to offer condolences to my friend and his wife on their personal loss, I couldn't find any words of comfort. Because I, myself, don't find any points of hope or light amidst the great darkness. Thus, I am so not fine.

There are certain moments when I succeed in laughing and smiling, mostly thanks to my child who still doesn't understand anything but manages to light up my world. But then I look at him and understand that he is not yet two years old, but it's been a month since he saw his father. Not to mention that he doesn't sleep in his bed and doesn't play with his friends, because we relocated to live with my parents since that Shabbat. And then I remember that it's nothing and inconsequential. It's nonsense. We're alive and that's what's important! Everything else shrinks and disappears compared to that. But again, there's no air. It's impossible to breathe.

The hardest thing to recognize is that our lives will never be the same again. Everything changed. Forever. There's no more security, not even inside my house. The only thing I can think about is how I would block the door if terrorists tried to burst in. And that's only the tip of the iceberg of the new fears that have been created inside me since that dark Shabbat.

If only it were wrapped up in one Shabbat! But we've been at war for a month already, and we don't know how long it will continue, the other costs it will exact from us, and how we'll come out on the other side of it. I remember in the first week, I thought to myself that certainly, my partner will return by Kedem's birthday in January and we'll celebrate it together. We will make a big, festive party. Yet suddenly I'm uncertain that it will happen.

And it's impossible to breathe. And nothing is fine. And what of the young children who were kidnapped? No, no, I must not think of them. That's a danger zone. There, it's not just that there isn't air—there, one also can't sleep, or eat, or function at all.

This is my life. I don't know if it will ever look different, and if so, how it will be. I can only hope that I'll be able to, once again, feel the faith that I had before, that there can be good here.



Name: **Naama Benmocha '23**

Normally lives in **Pardes Hanna-Karkur**

Currently lives in **Pardes Hanna-Karkur**

When everything started, I was in Morocco with my family on a trip that had been planned long ago. We had big plans to travel. We were supposed to finish the trip in Marrakesh, visiting my great-grandmother's grave there, as well as the Jewish neighborhood where my grandparents grew up.

On the morning when everything started, we got up to see the sunrise in the Sahara Desert, but we awoke to chats and notifications from family and friends at home. I had difficulty understanding and believing [what was going on] because of the contrast and the distance—on the one hand, I was opposite a breathtaking view, while at the same time my country was undergoing one of the most destabilizing and difficult events of our history. We quickly decided to leave Morocco for Barcelona and from there we were able to get on an earlier flight home.

As soon as we got home, we began to truly feel the war. Family members went to do their reserve duty and other family and friends evacuated from their homes in the Gaza Envelope regions, from Sderot, and from the North.

I remember our first day home as day when the house was full. Friends who wanted to be together during this time, family members who didn't have a shelter in their home or who wanted to go somewhere quiet for a moment, away from the places filled with sirens—everyone came to us.

Since the start of the war, I've participated in all kinds of volunteering. I teach children who need extra help during this period, I participate in agricultural activity in my region, and I've done other small volunteer activities for the past month and a half. In my region we've already returned to a kind of routine, but a fabricated routine, not a real one. We go back to school, but not for the whole week. I start to work, but every day begins with instructions about how to conduct ourselves during dangerous situations. I can call it a routine, but it's not a real routine.

Name: **Idan Breier Ben Moha '22**

Normally lives in **Pardes Hanna-Karkur**

Currently lives in **South Tel Aviv**

**The before: October 6, 2023, the eve of Simchat Torah.**

I began on that emotional Friday at my pre-military preparatory program, the secular yeshiva Bina, which is located in south Tel Aviv. It was nothing less than an amazing Friday. We prepared for Shabbat and celebrated Simchat Torah that evening in a Reform synagogue in Tel Aviv. People say that for many Israelis, that Friday was happy and light in a special way. That's interesting to me.

And sad.

October 7, 2023.

We woke up completely discombobulated at 6:30 am from the sound of the siren.

We allowed ourselves to believe that maybe it was a false alarm. Another siren. Then, maybe it's not a false alarm, something is happening. We could not have imagined the magnitude of what was taking place.

The atmosphere was very surreal. We got phone calls from our parents, who also awoke to mixed-up chaos. Slowly, we began to understand that something big was happening, but we were still in some kind of denial. Because how could it be...?

My parents were the first to come and they took me home. We also took two friends with us who couldn't go to their homes; one of them an American who came to my program to do a gap year in Israel.

We arrived, unable to sleep, and tried to understand what was happening, still in massive confusion.

The first week of the war was very hard for me, as it was for many, many people, each one for a different reason. They discovered that women whom I knew had been murdered at the dance party, and I became engrossed in the terrible news and the slow understanding of the magnitude of the tragedy. I was flooded with sensations of fear, deep helplessness, and a destabilization of my beliefs regarding humanity and ethics; regarding my political and social stances; regarding what will be.

During the second week of the war, we were among the first of the preparatory programs to start functioning again. During our daily "normal" [before the war] we busied ourselves with study, learning the lay of the land, and social action, but when we returned after, we returned with a clear mission: to enlist in the military struggle through volunteering.

We divided up the volunteers: some to the headquarters for the hostages and the kidnapped; some to "Zikaron BaSalon" [originally an Israeli social initiative where people

gather in people's living rooms to listen to the testimony of Holocaust survivors, share, and discuss; it now happens for Yom HaZikaron, Israel's Memorial Day, and for those lost in this current conflict, too]; some to a community convenience store, and, primarily, to hotels in which evacuees from the north and the south are staying, already for more than a month now.

I've already been volunteering for four weeks at the Orchid Hotel, where around 100 children are staying who were evacuated from their homes in Sderot, Ashkelon, and Kiryat Shmona. For a long period, these children didn't have a regular educational framework, and one can recognize during conversations or playing with them that they've experienced nothing less than trauma. There are children who fled from their homes without almost anything; there are children who are there with their grandparents because their parents are in reserve duty in the army; there are children who do not have a home to return to because it was destroyed.

There are children whose friends were kidnapped into Gaza. There's even one boy for whom the only thing that gives him a drop of comfort is a toy rifle that he walks around with all day. A few children told me about the terrorists who were in the yards of their homes. The situation is very challenging.

On the other hand, my group of volunteers are a significant part of the hotel operations, since we're regulars there who have been coming already for four weeks in a row.

The work and the volunteering strengthen me and move me emotionally. The children are already close to my heart and I feel like a meaningful presence to them. I am grateful for the opportunity to nurture them and to give their parents some serenity. We help the children to learn, read them stories, play with them, draw with them, and are there simply to listen, to assist, and to hug.

In all honesty, reality is hard, sad, and stressful. We hear sirens regularly in Tel Aviv, a few times a day, and we're immersed in a great deal of uncertainty about the situation. The moment we step outside of our dwellings, we are wrapped in a cloud of anxiety about the siren that might catch us [unprotected] and we'll be injured. You plan the shortest path and have constant vigilance to be on the lookout for hiding spots in case there's really a siren. The streets of Tel Aviv are packed with photos of the hostages, and thoughts about them and about the murdered come upon you at every hour of every day.

An emotional and very encouraging thing is the broad enlistment of civilian volunteers, in which I, too, am taking part. Civilians are enlisting to volunteer for many tasks, part of which were supposed to be carried out by other parties.

From agriculture, to babysitting, cooking, logistics, packing, providing emotional support, conducting workshops, transporting goods, and donating and collecting equipment, money, and food. A feeling of unity within the nation follows close behind so much volunteering.

Occasionally, I feel a belief in the goodness of humanity (even though, considering the circumstances, this can feel cynical or naïve), and I try to hold onto it.

A broad outlook is critical. There is great evil that we never thought we would experience, but there's also good, and there's humanity, and we don't have a choice but to grab tightly to them. עוד לא אבדה תקוותנו. We have not yet lost our hope.*

**Note: this is a line from Hatikvah, Israel's national anthem.*

View our [resources page](#) for ways to help, educational links, and mental health resources.

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The Bronfman Fellowship

420 Lexington Ave., Suite 331

New York, New York 10170

518-660-3090 | office@bronfman.org



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