

How Time Flies When You're Israeli

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One year since Operation Protective Edge and in the Gaza Envelope settlements they're trying to recover—not a simple matter when there's unanimous agreement that the next round is just around the corner.

Monday. It's quiet, pretty and clean in the Gaza Envelope. The air is warm and crisp. The fields bask in the sun, indifferent to what's happening around them. And that's totally fine, because nothing is happening. It's almost one year since Operation Protective Edge. How time flies when you're Israeli.

Moti Madmoni of the Schmerling Meat Bar, located at Alonit Junction at the entrance to Gaza, begins to organize his day. During the war, soldiers, journalists and foreigners swarmed here as the skewers of meat flowed out continually. "We did pretty well during the war," he says with a smile. He then describes how hard it was to stand over the grill while his son, a Golani soldier, was fighting on the inside. "But I prefer the quiet, although I don't believe in it. Another round is just a matter of time. This isn't genuine peace—the next battle will come and we'll accept whatever comes with love. We're not leaving. We're here and that's it."

I talk with everyone I see, the vast majority of whom don't want to be photographed or quoted by name. They've had enough of the media. All they want now is for the calm to continue, despite the fact that nobody believes in it. Everyone seems to be reconciled with their fate: another round is just a matter of time. Gaza, so near to us, stretches out before our eyes; but it seems to me no one is looking in that direction. They turn their back on it.

I like the people of the Gaza Envelope, and not just because I have family there. They're a tough yet fragile breed, the result of 14 years of rocket launches and mayhem. The memory of Operation Protective Edge is far from being erased here, and it extends in all directions: On the one hand, the region has experienced a sort of Baby Boom, with scores of babies born. On the other hand, the number of divorces has risen at an irregular rate following the military operation. This is especially true for the communities closest to the border and which absorbed the greatest number of rockets and injuries, i.e., Nahal Oz (Sha'ar Hanegev), Nativ Ha'asara, and Nirim. These are also the places in which no one wants to talk to any journalist. People are withdrawing into themselves.

'That's the way it is,' they tell me. This sort of thing can either strengthen or tear apart a family. On the one hand dozens of families have left the region; on the other, dozens of other families have arrived here. Net immigration over the past year has been positive and, as of this writing, there are virtually no vacant apartments. This leaves a visitor here with a sense of amazement and surprise. That sense only grows when they tell you that there's nothing that compares with the quality of life here. On the kibbutzim the swimming pools have opened and children

are hopeful for a normal summer vacation. It's been a long time since they've had one.

Social welfare services in the region are handling more than one thousand active cases, most of them for sufferers of intense anxiety. At the end of the week it was announced that the Ministry of Education has notified Psychological Services that "due to the lack of a budget, we are forced to cut treatment allocations." However a swift protest led to the Ministry's staff establishing an Exceptions Committee that is expected to approve the immediate transfer of three million shekels for psychologically assisting children of the Gaza Envelope. The process of physically protecting clinic buildings in the region has just concluded. What hasn't yet been finalized is the process for receiving property tax compensation payments.

The girl still sleeps in the apartment's protected space

The entrance to Gabim Elementary School in Sha'ar HaNegev consists of a long avenue of shelters that, from the side, looks like a historical monument. In the abandoned section of the school we meet Livnat Kotz of Kibbutz Kfar Aza (Sha'ar Hanegev). She's been on the kibbutz for 11 years. Like many others, her world was shaken in the past year. During the war she worked at Intel, but wasn't able to take it anymore. While staying with her children near the city of Afula (I visited them last year as well) she was exposed to a mud crafts workshop and saw how her children were able to relieve themselves of their anxiety when engaged in art. The day after Operation Protective Edge, Kotz left Intel and established what she calls "the project of my life" at the school: the entire abandoned section will be made into a huge workshop where children can "touch and learn through materials". Working in cooperation with the school, Kotz put together a curriculum that combines crafts and theory.

"A year after Operation Protective Edge," she says, "I found within me new strength for helping to grow the region. The hostilities are going to happen again, I have no doubt about it; but I have no intention of being a victim. I want to create a new reality. I don't know what's happening with the government and I haven't watched the news for a year. I'm doing my own thing. It is we who will determine the fate of this place." I give her a quick quiz and discover that it's true, she hasn't watched the news. She doesn't have a clue, for example, of the recent incident involving Oded Kotler (extremely disparaging remarks aimed at a government minister). She has it good.

Quite a few initiatives have sprouted up in the past year Kotz tells me. "We are really trying to grow." Young people are coming here; community gardens that dried up are being replanted; they're reopening abandoned clubs; a Nahal army group has restored the animal corner in Kfar Aza (Sha'ar Hanegev) and more. This is authentic Zionism in action, she says. We are creating job positions here. I don't believe in the notion of 'there's no work'.

Her voice softens when we talk about what's happened to the communities. "I've witnessed a lot of families reconfiguring," Kotz tells me. "Many families slipped into crisis and split up; but many also came close together. This wasn't an easy period for anyone. People withdrew into themselves. It was difficult to place your trust in others. Slowly, people opened up and it's still happening gradually. Operation

Protective Edge jumbled everything from every direction. Firstly the children. There are still a lot of children who won't venture far away from the shelters. My daughter, who's 11, still sleeps in the protected space in our apartment."

"For many years we've been under threat, but Operation Protective Edge was different—the severity of the fighting, the intensity, mainly the tunnels. People here have developed a thick skin over the years, but Operation Protective Edge tore everything apart. Everything changed. It was scary. I was so angry." The program conceived of by Kotz will open up in the upcoming school year. "Today I feel like I'm alive," she says.

Three seconds difference

At the Sha'ar HaNegev Regional Council, situated opposite Sapir Academic College, we meet Noga Gulst, director of the Small Businesses and Initiatives Accompaniment Unit at Sha'ar Hanegev. The Regional Council suffers from a somewhat bizarre plague of herons and ibises, birds that have chosen to make their homes in the trees surrounding the Regional Council complex of all places. And they refuse to leave.

"Nothing helps," she tells me. "Normally they drive away these types of birds with supersonic booms; but these birds have gone through Operation Protective Edge so no noise deters them." The birds destroy the trees, their droppings are everywhere, and the noise they make is intolerable. "Let those be the worst of your troubles," I console her. She responds: "Where do I sign up for that?" with a smile that doesn't leave her face as we enter her air conditioned office.

"Up to now we dealt with psychological strength; now we're trying to build up economic strength in order to see people remain here," tell me Gulst, who was born in Nahal Oz and currently lives in Mefalsim(Sha'ar Hanegev). "It's been 20 years since I've been in Nahal Oz, but when they ask me, I still tell people I come from there. Even though I will never return."

I ask her why, and the answer I receive is difficult to hear: Gulst's daughter was a victim of psychological shock. Last year she didn't consent to returning home from the army; and, ironically, the one time she did return there was a rocket alert and the girl went into a catatonic state. "Excuse me for asking," I say, "but what's the difference between Nahal Oz and Mefalsim?" She answers me instantly: "The difference is three seconds. The siren allows us to live; in Nahal Oz there's no siren, just the whistling of the rocket." Her son still lives in the protected space. Unlike her daughter, he's in denial. He doesn't want treatment, doesn't want to talk.

"What's the mood like?"

"It was very difficult. A lot of pressure, divorces, arguments, but in the last two or three months, things are getting better. People are smiling again. Entrepreneurs are proposing initiatives and businesses are opening. Not everyone's come out of it yet, not everyone has survived it; everyone still carries on their backs. If we're fortunate to have a calm summer, that'll help things a lot. Operation Protective Edge ruined businesses. Whoever was about to open a business, didn't. Whoever opened a business near the time of the operation closed up shop. The country has taken its time with compensation payments, but in the end they came. More or less."

"What type of businesses are opening up in Sha'ar HaNegev?"

I have a total of 195 active entrepreneurs listed with me. There's less tourism here but a great many alternative therapists, massage specialists, and so forth, and they all have work. We're all in need of treatment and calming. There are also a lot of businesses that have opened due to Operation Protective Edge. A lot of social initiatives, a lot of parent-child businesses."

"How can one be an entrepreneur in such a situation of continual uncertainty?"

"An entrepreneur always lives in a state of uncertainty," Gulst replies, "and he or she is always optimistic, without regard for current reality. The fear is always there." Suddenly changing the subject, she says: "It's our sense that Hamas isn't equipping itself and won't embark on another adventure; in any case that organization is preferable to the alternative. ISIS."

As if people didn't have enough to worry about, now there's ISIS. Quite a few people here have said to me 'we've grown accustomed to Hamas, but if ISIS comes we won't stay.' Gulst smiles: "With each new day, I decide anew that I'm staying here. It's good for me here, and I won't do anything that isn't good for me."

Ramallah, Beer-Sheva.

Afternoon. The sun beats down and we're traveling to the Erez Crossing. Despite the government's hard-line declarations, the crossing is open and there's life here. People enter and leave, most of whom are in need of medical treatment in Israel. But there's also no small number of workers who are crossing. Vans await them at the entrance.

"Ramallah, Ramallah," shouts one driver. "Beer-Sheva, Beer-Sheva," another one calls, and so on. I sit with them at the entrance. At first no one talks to me, but eventually they open up. It's Ramadan now, and I pity them somewhat. It surely isn't easy to fast in such heat. An older man from Beit Lehiya in northern Gaza who's entering to receive treatment for his legs tells me that there's no work and nothing to eat. Everyone's unemployed. "I need two hundred shekels," he tells me, "but I only have forty and I'm waiting for a lift." He asks for money from the Israeli drivers waiting at the open sided shelter—from Jerusalem, Rahat, Beer-Sheva—but they don't give him any. "They're all liars," they tell me. "They have plenty of money, believe me." They scream out to the man to take a bus.

Aside from the old man and another young lad who mumbles in Hebrew that he doesn't speak Hebrew, the Gaza inhabitants don't want to speak to me. "What are they like?" I ask Rafat, a driver from Rahat. "*Wallah*, they're tired. They come into the van and they sleep. They don't say a word," he says. His buddies confirm that impression.

Here too everyone agrees that it's only a matter of time until the next round. "It's all cosmetic," says Muhammad from Jerusalem, "and why? All everyone wants is to just live. Let them work and you'll see how everything will be OK." I reply: "True, but one can understand the Israeli side too, which makes it hard for people to come in. It's difficult to trust them."

"I studied physics," the driver says, "and when you have friction you always create a spark. End of argument." All of the drivers, despite being Palestinian by definition, speak in the second person plural when we talk about the conflict. When they say "we" or "we'll give" or "ours," they mean Israel. They don't say 'Palestine' or 'Gaza'—it's "they". That's except for when talk about national identity, certainly a very important thing, but less important than life itself. They experienced Operation Protective Edge as Israelis. The old Gaza man continues to ask for money and everyone continues not giving him any.

"A mortal economic blow"

We continue making the rounds. Despite my repeated entreaties, people from Nativ Ha'asara and Nahal Oz (Sha'ar Hanegev) continue their silence. 'You have to understand us' one tells me. 'Not only do I understand,' I say, 'in your situation I'd do the same thing. "We just want people to leave us in peace for a while. We don't want to talk about our dead again, about our terrified children, about our livelihood that's been destroyed," another one tells me.

We drive to look out over Gaza from one of the hills that journalists swamped to during the war. One sees smoke and hears explosions. Hamas is training they tell me. The organization serves this up as a provocation to Israel, despite the fact it knows very well this isn't a good time to mess with Israel.

Israel for its part acts the same: combative declarations and a tough façade, but fully understanding that this is a time for carrots and not for sticks. People and trucks enter and leave Gaza. Thus one sees the show of 'anger' of Knesset member Ghattas, who embarked on the recent flotilla. They play it macho on the flotilla, but they're just going in the direction of a harbor in Gaza.

In the Eshkol Regional Council we meet the head of the Council, Gadi Yarkoni, the last injured person from Operation Protective Edge. Yarkoni was injured severely by a mortar shell in the final hour of the war and lost both legs. Now he's running around on prosthetics and a cane in the Council offices. He insists on making us coffee, until it's obvious to us he doesn't really know how. There's something in this Yarkoni, a silent strength that inspires trust and calm.

One day earlier, the UN publicized the report of the international commission for investigating the Gaza operation and its conclusion of there being "founded accusations of war crimes" by both sides. "The world doesn't understand us," Yarkoni says, "and one is able to understand it—the strong and dominant side can never come out looking good. That can't be disputed, despite the fact that no other army would have conducted itself like the IDF did. We certainly need to be cautious, but no less important is to defend our inhabitants."

"I was born in Nirim, and I'll die here," Yarkoni declares. "My aspiration is to die a natural death. Listen, this is the most beautiful place in the Middle East. Fourteen years we've lived under constant threat and they've got to solve this for us. We need to be able to work our fields, grow our fruits, be a productive Regional Council. That's the prime obligation of the country to our region. This must be given to us. We've experienced a mortal economic blow; many have collapsed here and many haven't succeeded in recovering. We've suffered."

Positive immigration to the region—consisting mostly of native born inhabitants who are returning as well as dozens of new families replacing those that have left—doesn't satisfy Yarkoni. He wants more. "You need to develop the region, extend grants, subsidize apartments. We've got a big problem with the perks being offered; at this stage they constitute a decision rather than law. So that can be cancelled any year. How am I supposed to persuade a family to come here in such a situation? I want to be able to offer them a 100 sq meter home for NIS 350,000. At this moment I don't have even one vacant apartment in the whole Regional Council. More people want to come and I don't have any place to put them. We have excellent education, which is important, but it's not enough. We need to transform Gaza into a threat that can be lived with. Look, even in Tel Aviv or Jerusalem there's a sense of insecurity. The IDF needs to protect us, and it can. I have no doubt about it. We've learned: if war breaks out you don't need to stay put; you can retreat for a while and then come back. It won't be the end of the world."