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Being there – community educational psychology after October 7th

Abstract

This paper offers a reflective, narrative-based account of community educational-psychological work with two Israeli communities displaced following the collective trauma of October 7, 2023. Drawing on psychoanalytic concepts of witnessing, holding, silence, and shared traumatic reality, the paper explores what it means to "be there" with individuals and communities whose sense of safety, continuity, and meaning has been profoundly disrupted. Through clinical vignettes and field-based reflections, we describe encounters with children, parents, adolescents, educators, and community leaders during five months of sustained presence in evacuation centers and temporary housing. These fragments illuminate the collapse of language in the face of trauma, the centrality of bodily and relational experience, and the gradual re-emergence of narrative through relational containment. Rather than presenting an empirical study, the paper positions writing itself as a form of witnessing and a restorative practice, contributing to psychoanalytic discussions of collective trauma and therapeutic presence.

Keywords: collective trauma, witnessing, therapeutic presence, shared traumatic reality, community psychoanalysis

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Introduction

The events of October 7, 2023 constituted a massive collective trauma, shattering not only individual lives but also the social, communal, and symbolic frameworks that sustain a sense of continuity and meaning. In the weeks that followed, thousands of residents from communities in southern Israel were displaced and relocated to evacuation centers and later to temporary housing. Within this fractured reality, educational-psychological services were called upon to respond not only to acute distress, but to the collapse of communal holding environments, relational trust, and the basic experience of safety.

This paper presents a reflective, psychoanalytic account of five months of professional presence alongside two such displaced communities. Rather than offering a systematic intervention model or empirical findings, we bear witness to moments of encounter, silence, bodily attunement, and fragile meaning-making that emerged in the aftermath of catastrophe. Grounded in psychoanalytic perspectives on trauma, witnessing, and shared traumatic reality, the paper explores "being there" as both a clinical stance and an ethical position-one that holds the potential to support the slow reweaving of personal and communal narratives in the wake of collective devastation.

Entering a space saturated with collective trauma

The starting point of our journey within the circles of trauma begins with the personal experience of October 7th and continues on October 23rd, when we were assigned to reinforce the educational-psychological services for two communities from the Gaza envelope who had been relocated to evacuation centers. The intervention lasted five months and concluded after the communities moved to temporary housing and connections were established with local psychological services.

Throughout this period, we were part of a group of professionals called upon to serve as a containing and restorative environment within a space saturated with trauma-trauma experienced simultaneously at the individual and collective levels. From the very first moment of our arrival, every sight and sound bore the traces of devastation. Each attempt at closeness was permeated by powerful transferential dynamics marked by uncertainty, helplessness, terror, and guilt.

Witnessing, silence, and the body in a shared traumatic reality

Alongside these dynamics, we encountered behavioral manifestations such as difficulty forming closeness, impaired trust, avoidance, and reluctance to engage. These expressions reflected the fact that trauma is not merely a psychological rupture, but also a profound disturbance of the nervous system-a bodily confrontation with threat and a persistent sense of danger.

A retrospective reading of our encounters revealed a dense physical and emotional fabric present in every meeting. We arrived equipped with language, only to discover that traumatic memory often takes the form of "silent memory".[1] In the presence of trauma, language was frequently drained of meaning, words became blocked, and the body moved to the foreground. We learned to remain beside people-sometimes without words-attending to gesture, rhythm, gaze, and silence.

Gradually, through the presence of internal and external healing factors and the careful re-establishment of routines and meaning, processes of recovery began to emerge across cognitive, emotional, social, and functional domains. A fragile sense of safety and trust developed, allowing for moments of emotional processing and bodily regulation. Through a slow and non-linear process, raw sensory experience began to organize into mental representations, and narrative traces appeared where language had previously been absent.

Our understanding was guided both by lived experience and by psychoanalytic and neurophysiological frameworks that conceptualize trauma as a collapse not only of individual psychic structures, but of relational and social fields. Freud's (1920) description of trauma as an unprocessed flooding of the psyche, Bion's[2] emphasis on the damage to the group matrix, and Winnicott's[3] notion of a disrupted holding environment all illuminated the conditions we encountered.

Later psychoanalytic formulations[4,5] further articulated how collective trauma generates social silence, gaps in meaning, and ruptures in symbolic continuity.

Within this context, healing appeared to require moments in which the world-I/we-could briefly come to a halt. What emerged as essential was a form of radical presence: a gentle, reliable positioning of oneself as a nurturing space capable of bearing vulnerability. Neurophysiological perspectives, particularly Porges'[6] polyvagal theory, helped us understand how voice, facial expression, and attuned presence function as biological regulators of fear, restoring the possibility of connection within shattered social networks.

Alongside the overwhelming presence of trauma, we came to recognize the importance of weaving together professional knowledge and accumulated clinical experience into a shared reflective space. This space-at times fragile and easily overwhelmed-became a vital source of containment and recovery for us as practitioners, enabling a more stable and expansive therapeutic stance.

Writing as witnessing

This article presents documentation and testimony drawn from fragments of our encounters with survivors, as well as from images that became imprinted within us throughout our work. The act of documentation held a dual significance: professionally, it reflected our commitment to initiating a healing process through the creation of relational spaces in which continuity, identity, and future orientation could begin to be restored; personally, it functioned as a means of self-healing within the chaos of a shared traumatic reality.

Through this dual commitment to writing and witnessing, new connections were formed-for community members and for ourselves-laying the groundwork for meaning-making. The fragments presented in the following sections testify to a healing process that emerged through the meeting of mind and body, language and sensation, experience and narration, and between the traumatized individual and the listening other. Throughout five months of presence alongside the survivors of October 7th-amid silences, pauses, cautious gestures, and delicate encounters-we gathered words, fragments of sentences, and fleeting expressions. Through these, we attempted to weave a testimony to the horror endured by two communities on that black Saturday.

Fragments of encounter: clinical and community vignettes

Evening time. The end of an intense workday. We are standing outside the hotel doors, waiting for the taxi that will pick us up. A small boy approaches the revolving door and sticks one foot forward. "Careful, kid," calls out the hotel doorman, and immediately a thought flashes through me - about the meaning of a guarding, watchful voice for a child who experienced mortal danger and abandonment on that black Saturday in the kibbutz. The boy listens and walks inside.

R. is standing beside us with a baby stroller in which her two-month-old granddaughter lies awake, eyes wide open. R. has a role in the kibbutz that was spared from the disaster, but ever since we met, we have seen her only in passing - moving quickly through the lobby, waving from afar, and continuing on her way.

In this moment, as she stands near us, with the stroller beside her, she draws attention to her granddaughter: "She doesn't sleep at all, I can't calm her down." she goes on to describe the long and exhausting days in which she helps her daughter - whose husband is away on reserve duty - and in their hotel room there is another child, two years old.

Ofra asks if she may hold the baby. "Of course," R. replies, and Ofra leans over the stroller, lifting the alert baby girl. We too need to draw some positive energy from the sight and touch of a baby who yields to an embrace.

The taxi hasn't arrived yet, and outside the hotel doors, a slow stream of people come and go. We expect another brief distraction, but R. surprises us and continues speaking:

"I wasn't home that Saturday at all."

"You weren't in the kibbutz?" I ask.

"No. I wasn't home. I was outside the whole time." R. explains that she's a medic with United Hatzalah. "I was outside the whole time." She runs a hand along her arm and says that until just a few days ago there were still marks from the bullet grazes that, by some miracle, did not pierce her body. "There was so much fire all around." She pauses; it's unclear whether the conversation will go on, but in the silence that forms between us she adds softly, "I treated a soldier - he was so beautiful, and he fought so hard to stay alive. He really fought, but he had no chance."

R.'s eyes fill with tears. "Even though there were three of us there - a doctor and two medics - he had no chance. He took all the shrapnel from the mortar." The past and the present wrestle within her, and the glances we exchange signal that the fight for the life of that beautiful soldier has not yet been surrendered. Silence. After another pause, she adds in a whisper, "I thought of going to meet his parents, to tell them about his last moments… but I'm still hesitating."

R. brings us back to the present and obliges us to accept the finality of the verdict - his life ended. For us, life continues: a two-month-old baby is held in a warm embrace, and for one fleeting moment R. - her grandmother - has a pause of a few minutes to speak about herself, about the pain and the memory that will not let go, about her own brush with death, and about parting from a beautiful soldier with whom she fought for his life on that black Saturday in her kibbutz.

October 7th was a terrible day in every sense. At home, the television remained on continuously, and we found ourselves frozen before it. The images were unbearable and inconceivable. Confusion dominated our emotional experience; shock was absolute, and the fragments of information that reached us resisted coherence or meaning.

Anguish followed confusion-a deep and overwhelming pain in the face of unimaginable loss. After several days, remaining passive witnesses was no longer possible. Watching and listening were no longer enough; a need emerged to extend a hand, to be present with those who had been thrust into the nightmare of October 7th-people who had lost family members and friends, whose homes and communities had been destroyed.

In a WhatsApp exchange with a colleague whose family lives near the Gaza border, she wrote: *"There are no words. An indescribable horror. A pogrom. Houses burned. Ruin. So many losses-and still no full picture."* Her words captured the collapse of language that accompanied the catastrophe.

We began seeking ways to join emergency support systems and initial professional response frameworks. We were not strangers to crisis intervention. As educational psychologists, we had been shaped by years of work within systems developed in response to previous waves of terror and disaster, grounded in rapid mobilization, multidisciplinary collaboration, and sustained field presence.

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Our professional orientation had long been built around two interconnected axes: individual and systemic support. From the earliest moments of crisis, responses were constructed through cooperation among psychologists, social workers, educators, counselors, parents, and municipal leadership. Relationships woven during ordinary times became the basis for safety networks in emergencies-holding frameworks aimed at restoring trust and continuity amid chaos.

This accumulated experience, together with our work in areas such as depression and suicide prevention and our collaboration with colleagues in Israel and abroad, strengthened our capacity to function under conditions of prolonged emergency. Professional knowledge, shared language, and the existence of a national framework for educational psychology also served as a psychological safety net for us as practitioners.

Following October 7th, a national call was issued inviting psychologists to join immediate support efforts. Within the first week, the Educational Psychology Service (SHEFI) established a Reinforcement Unit to provide short-term assistance to municipal and community systems, many of which had lost their own local psychologists to injury, displacement, or reserve duty.

Although we were both working independently at the time, we responded to this call. The reinforcement structure offered a familiar professional framework and shared language, making it a natural context for our involvement. On October 23rd, two weeks after the attack, we joined two survivor communities. Our work began in the hotels where they had been evacuated and continued for approximately five months, concluding after their relocation to temporary housing.

We accompanied the communities through a slow and tentative process marked by uncertainty, avoidance, and intermittent responsiveness. Meetings were often fragmented or unfinished; plans were made and then dissolved. Each week, we returned for two days of work, repeatedly encountering the sense of beginning again-a sustained test of presence and persistence. Despite doubt and disorientation, our position remained consistent: we intended to stay. Progress was never linear; moments of connection emerged alongside retreat, and every bond carried a sense of fragility and transience. Still, within this instability, the possibility of holding on to humanity and hope remained.

The meeting point

On October 24th we set out to meet the members of the community. Even during the flight, we looked at one another, sharing anticipation and anxiety, knowing we would return changed. A taxi took us to the hotel where, on the night between October 7th and 8th, survivors of two communities had arrived. Through the window we saw sand, sea, and a silent resort city.

The hotel lobby was crowded with bodies in motion, moving without clear direction. On closer look, we saw eyes-exhausted, hollow, wide open-eyes that had witnessed horror. Dogs wandered alongside their owners, survivors who had remained with their families in exposed safe rooms. Seating areas had become places of collapse. Many avoided the quiet of their rooms, choosing instead the lobby's constant murmur, a human hum more bearable than the noise echoing inside.

Around them journalists, professionals, and improvised systems of care bustle about, along with tables for mental health workers, daily notices, funeral information, condolence books, memorial candles beneath screens displaying the names and faces of the murdered. The fragmentation of people, spaces, and tasks mirrored the psychic fragmentation produced by trauma.

It was there that we joined a network of helpers who had come to offer a "living presence"-not to resolve confusion, but to remain within it. Though most were strangers to the community, an unspoken plea was palpable: to be present, to be seen. Some arrived briefly; others stayed. We searched for ways to signal our choice to remain, while also defining our own position-close enough to hold, distant enough to remain intact. We wore name tags, anchoring identity within a space of dissolution.

We were alert to the dangers of the rescue fantasy. The lobby revealed how close many stood to their own psychic fractures, raising the question of how to offer presence without collapsing into knowing or control. As Eliraz writes, "For us to exist, we need words, yet to be alongside that existence, we must erase them. And the distance between these two motions cannot be shortened."[7] Much of our work unfolded within this tension.

A persistent fog accompanied us-questions of meaning, sequence, and coherence. Only in retrospect did we recognize how deeply we ourselves were affected, exposed both to the stories of horror and to the immediacy of their aftermath. The conflict between being fully present and protecting ourselves from overwhelm accompanied us daily. We created small restorative pauses-shared meals, conversations during travel-ways of shoring up our own inner holding.

Amid the chaos, we returned to a familiar understanding: psychological intervention does not always rely on plans or models. Often, what is most required is simply to remain-to listen, to bear pain, and to reach out even when outcomes are uncertain. We recalled earlier experiences of sitting beside families of terror victims, offering little more than presence and a glass of water, learning again that healing emerges through connection rather than language alone.

Our work as part of the Reinforcement Unit provided a vital container. The team structure enabled processing, boundary maintenance, and the holding of a shared professional space-essential when accompanying others through profound disconnection and loss.

Irit's Taxi

Irit became our regular driver. Her taxi turned into a transitional space-a place to breathe, reorganize, and momentarily reconnect with life outside the trauma zone. Each ride marked a passage: extracting ourselves from scenes of devastation and aid, returning to ourselves.

In the taxi, exhaustion surfaced-physical and emotional. The accumulation of what we had witnessed now lived within us. Irit spoke of her shock, of the endless cruelty and uncertainty, of how her city had suddenly become "on the map." Through our conversations, a fragile belief emerged-for her and for us-that survival, meaning, and movement toward life were still possible.The contrast was stark: the blue sea of a resort city beside the devastation carried by evacuees. Irit shared how she worked constantly to avoid the television, how fear had lodged in her body-tremors, breathlessness, restlessness. Driving, she said, was her way of choosing life. Often left without words, we leaned on brief poems circulating publicly-borrowed language that held what we could not yet speak ourselves.

"They were us, yet also the absolute other… Split on either side of language, We were bound to them, inseparably." - Dana Amir.[8]

First human contact

"Barefoot, covered in soot, wearing partial clothing - only in the late afternoon of October 7th did the evacuation of the kibbutz members begin, from their burned, blackened homes. They were taken to a kindergarten that served as a gathering point for survivors. It was

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their first encounter with the world outside the safe room, where they received final confirmation of the text messages that had circulated throughout the day and began to understand who had survived and who had not. Only late into the night did buses depart for the host city - a three-hour ride. They arrived near dawn, where at the hotel entrance, the city's social workers and hotel staff awaited them with warm looks and embraces, drinks, food, and basic clothing - to restore, if only a little, their sense of human dignity."

The hotel workers and social services teams of the host city became the first link in the chain of witnessing-the initial holding presence for a displaced and traumatized community. They bore witness to loss, abandonment, and the collapse of basic human trust. Through simple yet essential gestures-warm looks, silence, a clean shirt, a piece of bread-they created the first moments of encounter, laying the groundwork for stabilization and the gradual restoration of trust.[8–10]

These early encounters marked the point of departure for all that followed. During our time in the evacuation center, we met daily with professional teams, volunteers, and devoted hotel staff. If trauma can be understood as an expulsion from the human order, then the continuity of care and presence offered there constituted a counter-message of humanity-an essential condition for recovery and healing.[11]

A retrospective reading of those first moments reveals a delicate movement between immersion in trauma and the initial awakening of other processes: the return of routines, partial sharing of experience, and the earliest phases of mourning. The pain remained an open wound. Alongside burying the dead, searching for the missing, and struggling for the return of hostages-including children whose fate was initially unknown-the community also began to confront its displaced reality.

At the same time, dissociation continued to operate as a vital survival mechanism, shielding the psyche from overwhelming contents. We witnessed the coexistence of two parallel processes: a constant dialectic between survival and mourning, between extreme loss and the first fragile fragments of narrative reconstruction. Recognizing this complexity, we understood the need to build connections with surrounding support figures-professionals, community leadership, social workers, casualty officers, educational coordinators, and youth counselors-focusing especially on creating systemic frameworks to support the community's children.

We initiated group meetings with youth counselors who led daily activities, holding on to the first signs of routine. Divided according to the familiar kibbutz structure-preschools, grades 1–3, 4–6, and adolescents-these spaces became early anchors of continuity. Supporting the counselors was essential. Even in ordinary times, this is a central function of educational psychology: to strengthen those who serve as primary figures in children's lives.

Many of the counselors encountered raw expressions of trauma with limited prior experience, minimal training, and only partial familiarity with the community-while a few were themselves survivors of October 7th. Through ongoing group meetings, we created an initial map of daily reality and a shared language. Anxiety, helplessness, and frustration were common, often overwhelming the sessions.

With their participation, we began to build a holding environment in which personal and communal stories could cautiously emerge, loss could be acknowledged, and elements of belonging, witnessing, partnership, and community strength could be reinforced-foundations essential for recovery and resilience-building.

A story of terror and miracles

We gather in a small room on the second floor of the hotel, late in the evening. It is crowded; chairs are scarce. A group forms—mostly young faces, girls and boys, who are youth leaders. During the opening round, participants speak sparingly, offering brief factual statements about where they were on October 7th and whom they know who was killed, kidnapped, or remains missing. Their emotions remain largely sealed.

R. introduces herself. She is a kindergarten aide and a member of the kibbutz. She begins with the siren and the gunfire, describing how her family gathered in the hidden safe room of their house-her husband facing her, their two teenage children behind her, including a son with special needs. Her speech is dense and rapid, images sharpening and blurring as she recounts the terror of terrorists attempting to break into the house, the fear for a daughter who was elsewhere in the youth residence, and the brief reprieve when soldiers finally arrived.

R. speaks of fear and resourcefulness, of cooking in the kitchen while gunfire continued outside, as if life itself demanded to persist. The room grows quiet; it is clear that this is her time. She speaks not only for herself but for "our people," who were left alone inside an annihilating reality. At the same time, her humor and vitality offer the group a fragile anchor of hope.

She describes the morning after-the sight of bodies inside and outside the kibbutz fence-and her disbelief that they survived, so close to total destruction. She ends with an open question about the future: whether she can return, raise her children there, or invite loved ones again. She is grateful that no guests were present that day, spared an added burden of guilt. Almost as an afterthought, she shares another "miracle": her special-needs son's ability to reconstruct the events of the safe room through precise drawings, hour by hour, although there was no clock in the safe room.

The group functions as a container for this telling. R.'s narrative allows shards of overwhelming sensation to become thinkable. For the listeners, she models a way of holding terror without collapsing into it. This meeting becomes the first in a series of dialogue groups aimed at laying the groundwork for a shared, restorative narrative.

Alongside this work, our concern for the children deepened. Preschoolers were not only processing hours spent in safe rooms, but also the kidnapping of classmates and the absence of fathers held hostage. Together with the accompanying psychologist, we created interventions that mediated these realities in the children's own language. As the move to temporary housing approached-a transition filled with apprehension and hope-we used stories, songs, and drawings to help children articulate fear and imagine continuity. A simple narrative about the sun's return became a shared promise.

At the other end of the age spectrum were the adolescents, whose lives had collapsed overnight. Friends were kidnapped or murdered; homes were destroyed. Living for months in an evacuee hotel, far from home and routine, they longed intensely for return. With them, the work was to create a space where pain and life could coexist-to restore small rituals of normalcy alongside mourning. Together with a familiar counselor from their community, we moved between group and individual encounters, gradually supporting expressions of grief, anger, and guilt, and reintroducing elements of agency, creativity, and peer connection.

Engaging parents proved far more difficult. Attendance at groups was sparse, reflecting exhaustion, avoidance, and overwhelming

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uncertainty. One encounter, later referred to as "The Green Box," crystallized these dynamics. On a tense day awaiting news about hostages, only one mother, D., arrived for a parents' meeting. She remained standing, outside the circle of empty chairs, speaking rapidly-about her daughter's withdrawal, about animals she had cared for and lost, about a green box used in her work with children that had been found blackened among the ruins.

D.'s fragmented associations-moving between past and present, loss and compassion-were deposited with us piece by piece. Despite her peer group's absence, she insisted on joining the group, she insisted on the importance of community and on returning the following week. Standing outside the circle, she made her story present. In the space between us, meaning began to take form: a narrative that held both devastation and care, loss and enduring humanity.

Working in this period meant inhabiting a shared traumatic reality, in which the wall separating therapist and patient had collapsed. Both sides were exposed to the same external threat, even as each person's inner world shaped their experience differently. In fleeting moments-through a look, a pause, a tone of voice-something essential could still occur: an interruption of automatic patterns, a moment of emotional truth, a living presence in which repair, or at least survival, became possible.

"Awake Mother"

On contrast, resistance, and standing by

Her gaze is frightened, shifting sideways; her lips tremble slightly. She lowers herself into the armchair, as if dropping her body into it. I try to find my footing in this new space, sensing the gap between her concerned question-half-smile, half-grimace, *"And how are you?"*-her neat clothing and made-up face, and a body that struggles to meet my eyes.

We sit close, each in an armchair, in the new welfare apartment. For the first time since the move-from the cramped hotel room that served as a therapy room-to a well-equipped apartment. A transitional space. Between us, a window opens onto green and clear weather. New armchairs, a light rug, calm pictures, a tidy bookcase, a small flowering plant. Everything appears considered.

And yet the gap between us persists-announcing distance. The room feels heavy, like a warm, suffocating blanket, stirring the urge either to throw it off and let in air or to pull it close and wait: until the fury passes, until quiet returns, until the absent-the dead, the kidnapped-return; until, perhaps, this proves to have been a bad dream.

I try again to catch her gaze. For a moment it meets mine, then slips away.

"I can't believe this," she says, choosing her words carefully. "I don't know what to do with myself. Mornings are the hardest. I can't get him out of bed. His best friend is kidnapped. He hardly sleeps-only with me. And then I don't sleep. In the morning I'm exhausted. The battle with him is finishing me."

Silence.

"Everything is on me. A. has been in reserve duty since that black Saturday. I can't find myself here, in this new building. I miss the kibbutz. I want to work but can't. I'm on edge all the time. I worry about him most of all."

I listen. She speaks. We circle the same ground. Her eyes meet mine; for a moment they clear. Her body steadies. Then the worry returns.

"He doesn't really connect with the new kids. His luck is soccer."

Silence.

"There, he can disconnect a little."

"And what I need is time-time, and one full night's sleep."

A small shift occurs, like a light breeze. Her eyes hold mine; the worry recedes, briefly.

Psychoanalytic motherhood[12] may struggle to sustain an illusion of holding when the shared field is saturated with terror and mutual projective identifications. Yet precisely then, facing another person as oneself-human, vulnerable-can create a moment of authentic encounter, a sense of *soul touching soul*. Holding on together, without denial, in the shadow of catastrophe, becomes a central therapeutic act-perhaps psychoanalytic motherhood at its most vital in this time.

Community, leadership, and the struggle for continuity

Another challenge was connecting with community leadership-its presence, and at times its absence, were felt daily. As in all Gaza-envelope communities, the trauma spared no family. Some officeholders withdrew to attend to immediate losses: searching for missing relatives, burying the dead, making room for mourning. Others managed to hold both grief and responsibility, stepping forward to rebuild communal life. Alongside leadership vacuums, a young and assertive leadership emerged early on, growing in the eye of the storm.

Connecting with leadership was essential to understanding the community's specific needs, language, values, and internal dynamics. We arrived as outsiders - "from Tel Aviv, from the center"-and encountered mistrust born of a profound collapse of trust. We acknowledged these gaps openly and chose to work within them, believing collaboration remained possible despite difference.

Community educational psychology in Israel has long emphasized the importance of the community circle in individual development. This perspective recognizes the impact of social, cultural, political, and environmental contexts on mental well-being.[13] In times of emergency, connection with community leadership becomes a central resource-grounded in empowerment and recognition of local strengths, rather than externally imposed interventions. Our task was to build, together with community members, responses that could endure beyond our presence.

A Princess growing in the eye of the storm

Eloquent-her name suited her. Since October 7th, she had stepped decisively into the managerial void in her community. We noticed her in the hotel dining hall: thin gold-framed glasses, a composed presence. She spoke with urgency about the children-about the instability of care, the rapid turnover of staff, and the difficulty of providing holding for traumatized children amid chaos. Her request was clear: to focus on the informal education system, especially for children whose emotional state now resembled that of special-education students.

There was suspicion toward us as "Tel Avivians," and we listened as she articulated the gaps in our understanding of kibbutz life. The exchange was brief but charged. Beneath her efficiency lay guilt, worry, and a deep sense of responsibility. She recognized that the functional continuity of her own life and that of her community had

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been disrupted, while at the same time striving to make meaning out of the suffering; within minutes of conversation, she emerged in her full strength, reconnecting with sustaining inner resources, her sense of agency intensifying as she pressed forward toward goals that mattered deeply to her.

Only when her young daughter appeared did her rigid posture soften. In that moment, another image emerged: a mother whose home had been burned, now living with her family in a single hotel room. Her father and brother were hostages. Two days later, it was confirmed that they had been murdered.

"What did the dead, the burned man, command us?

What the waters command us:

to be very quiet beside them,

to let them flow."

Yehuda Amichai (1976)

Out of this mutual recognition, we began working together. Two weekly professional forums were established: one addressing individual needs by age group, and another gathering all care providers to discuss communal concerns-hostages' return, educational integration, and preparation for the move to temporary housing.

A Promise

By late December, a new murmur filled the hotel. The communities were preparing to move. Conversations turned toward a future shaped by apprehension, pain, and cautious anticipation. We sensed the closing of a chapter.

On a winter morning in Eilat, we sat by the silent pools, holding disposable cups, watching staff arrange empty lounge chairs. Two worlds coexisted without touching: one marked by loss and exhaustion, the other preserving traces of leisure and normalcy. The pools remained unused, blue and still. "Perhaps it's a different kind of lying down," I thought-collapse versus indulgence.

We returned to planning: a final meeting with the children before the move. Soon they would leave the hotel that had held them through months of displacement and enter apartments with doors that closed and spaces for family life. We knew that there, the images would return with force-of what was lost, of what would never return, and of what might still emerge, new and unfamiliar.

Reflections on Being There

For nearly half a year, we were part of a group of professionals called to serve as a containing and restorative presence in a region saturated with trauma. From the moment we entered the evacuees' hotel, the work of witnessing began—bearing witness to both individual and collective catastrophe. We accompanied two communities through repeated attempts at contact and closeness, encountering persistent uncertainty, helplessness, terror, guilt, mistrust, avoidance, and reluctance to engage. These were expressions of a complex trauma—a physical and emotional weave present in every encounter. Language was often annulled; words emptied of meaning or lost altogether. We learned to remain beside people even without words, absorbing daily experiences of confusion and helplessness, aware that our familiar hold on therapeutic language had loosened.

Gradually, we discovered that writing itself became a stabilizing act. What could not be grasped in the immediacy of experience entered, over time, into movement through language. Writing the vignettes allowed us to build sequences slowly, to trace emotional and mental processes that had initially exceeded thought, and to reflect on what had been missed in the moment of occurrence. As Amir (2013) suggests, language can function as an organizing capacity that enables movement beyond traumatic helplessness toward the ability to think about that very excess. Through sustained mediation between experience and words, we came to recognize the healing potential inherent in witnessing.

In states of trauma, a witness is essential—a community of witnesses. Not only so that the unbearable and the unspeakable may find a place within thought and language, but so that the boundaries of the human domain itself may be redrawn. Each moment in which the witnessing function emerges from catastrophe allows a person to reclaim authorship not only of their disaster, but also of the life that may follow—*and because of*—it.

This article reflects an act of weaving: psycho-educational knowledge, clinical experience, and lived encounters with individuals and communities in states of emergency and routine. This surrounding "envelope" enabled the initial organization of traumatic experience. Within it, D. could recognize her need for community in order to tell her story; R. could speak of her encounter with death while holding her infant granddaughter; and another R. could recall her son's drawings in the safe room, stitching fragments of time into an initial narrative order.

In these painful months, we witnessed a human capacity to gather the shards of trauma and move toward meaning—a story that travels between inner and outer worlds, between past rupture and future possibility.

On a Friday afternoon, September 25th, at the small Tzavta Theater in Tel Aviv, we encountered this process anew. Community members stood on stage, wearing white T-shirts, speaking and writing their experiences—monologues of terror, loss, fear, and the ongoing pain of the present. Among them, we recognized R. As we listened, the distance between then and now collapsed; time folded back onto itself, and the weight of unprocessed pain returned with full force.

And even now, as we complete this article, we continue to witness moments of homecoming. Nearly two years after that black Saturday, hostages return. Hebrew itself seems to search for new forms, weaving a language capable of holding devastation and hope alike—a language that gives shape to survival, return, and the fragile possibility of renewal.

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Conflicts of interest

The authors declare that there are no conflicts of interest.

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