

My Journey Since October 7th: As a Person and as a Therapist



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October 7th forced all of us to confront the evil and cruelty inherent in crimes against humanity. This confrontation is an exceedingly difficult journey.

Throughout my years as a therapist, I have heard stories of abuse against the helpless, especially women, which required me to contend with unfathomable cruelty. I discovered that every clinical encounter with man-made atrocities pulls me into a personal journey of processing and grieving. This journey is not merely a process of professional development; it includes an encounter with trauma as a therapist, which inevitably shapes the person I am. Often, this encounter also brings the painful costs associated with trauma, including recurring thoughts, sleep difficulties, lack of concentration, irritability, and more.

After October 7th, I reached a point where the sheer volume of stories from the massacre became unbearable. I questioned what the right thing to do was in such a situation and how I

should act.

After deep consideration, I made a conscious choice to avoid, as much as possible, detailed knowledge of the facts and graphic descriptions of the murderous acts to protect myself. Instead, I filled my days with intensive public activity, a course of action that has helped me greatly and continues to help me to this day in reducing the processes of secondary traumatization.

As one of the leaders of the "No Mental Health Without Democracy" movement, I also contributed to my work as the director of "Otef Lev" (Embracing Heart) – a resilience and mental health initiative within the "Brothers and Sisters for Israel - The Civilian Command Center" association. This association was established by communities and organizations working for the character and future of the State of Israel. In this work, I had the privilege of meeting my partner in this endeavor, Prof. Nurit Yirmiya. Together, we are focusing our professional efforts on advancing mental health support systems alongside many individuals, associations, and humanitarian organizations working for the residents of Israel.

Through my work since October 7th, I have been exposed to the tectonic fractures created in affected communities and to the daunting challenge of rehabilitation when every facet of a person's life has been torn apart. In this context, the immense power of the natural support circles that each of us possesses became sharply highlighted for me. Today, it is clearer to me than ever that we, as therapists, must act systemically to strengthen communities so they can act for themselves and assist in promoting their healing processes. This is in addition to the urgent need to train professionals to work in the public sector and provide tailored, expanded responses to Israeli residents, while upholding professionalism and excellence in public service. These are enormous challenges that still lie ahead.

What has changed in me as a person and as a therapist following this past year?

From my own harrowing experience of the human suffering inflicted upon the residents of the State of Israel, I can imagine differently than before, and understand differently than before, the depth of injury to a person experiencing ongoing helplessness and powerlessness, or living under constant threats to their personal security. The idea that encountering human evil profoundly damages the ethical and moral foundation of our mental health has become tangible. In this case, the damage seems so great that we are compelled to rebuild and reshape these very foundations.

Like many others, the trauma that began on October 7th shook my mental stability. In an attempt to cope with this destabilization, my need for beneficial communication with others increased. There were days when I overflowed emotionally and "poured myself out" into the

mental embrace of those who could be there for me.

I voiced what I could not bear, hoping those around me would be tolerant and patient with my pain and terror—that they could listen as I repeated, sometimes over and over, in different versions, the same words of sorrow and fear, and hear me mourn my feelings of helplessness and loss.

"Unfathomable," "It's unbelievable," "I have no words"—these are common expressions after the loss of good order in reality, also attesting to shock and internal rupture. Although I knew very well what had happened and could identify the emotional process I was undergoing, I needed repeated validation of my feelings, validation of the disaster (Did it happen? Is it happening?), and shared alarm. Dialogue with others connected parts within me and reconnected me to my surroundings. It was especially necessary when I tried to process harm done by those close to me or under the auspices of those supposed to protect us. Despite the lack of words, I recognized an intense need to search, together with others, for words that would help me grasp the "unfathomable." This reliance on significant others—a human, natural, and appropriate dependence—still emerges in me during moments of intense pain.

Parallel to my need for others, I find that my ability to show tolerance and patience towards others who need my presence has greatly improved. The combination of the October 7th events, the abandonment of the residents of the Western Negev and the North, the sacrifice of the hostages abducted to Gaza to torture and death by murderers, and the war exacting a toll in human lives without a political objective—all these elements combine to create an unbearable national trauma that requires generous measures of solidarity and human fraternity to endure. In almost every space I inhabit this past year, there are moments when people inadvertently start talking about themselves—about their worries, their pains, their fears. For many, there is an ongoing and urgent need to receive validation and confirmation of the disaster from another who demonstrates a humane, compassionate, and continuous presence.

It is clearer now, more than ever, that such compassion can help all of us get through this event and stand with an uncompromising presence for the victims, as one human being to another. However, unfortunately, the scope of events in Israel is so vast that there are not enough professionals providing this compassion within a therapeutic hour. All residents of Israel, not just professionals, are called upon these days to cultivate greater patience and tolerance and to offer a supportive presence, recognizing the capacity within each of us for beneficial human interactions.

What has changed in us, the Israeli therapeutic community, following this past year?

In my view, the change in the Israeli therapeutic community began even before October 7th. Following Yariv Levin's speech in January 2023, thousands of mental health professionals left their clinics for the public sphere in the struggle for democracy and for the values of professionalism as the lifeblood of a free society, as a necessary condition for the mental health of Israeli residents, and as a cornerstone of the therapeutic setting. Guided by professional ethics, many therapists demonstrated critical thinking and civic engagement, showing an extraordinary willingness for overt public activity. This included standing in solidarity with others and opposing governmental processes that promoted an authoritarian regime. In fact, in 2023, the professional identity of many among Israel's mental health professionals also became linked to activism and leadership.

This process, in my opinion, contributed to the enormous and rapid mobilization of the professional community after October 7th, and the unprecedented commitment of therapists to volunteer for initial psychological aid out of mutual responsibility. As a continuation of that movement, many of these therapists later returned to work in the public service after having focused for a long period on their work in private clinics. Thus, as I see it, the moral obligation to take an active part in public action has transformed this past year from an idea into a reality—a major change.

Moments that represent for me, as a person and as a therapist, the difficult processes unfolding since October 7th:

This question brings several different moments to mind. The first occurred in June, when one of my colleagues leading the "No Mental Health Without Democracy" movement was pushed by police officers while she stood wearing a purple vest, signifying she was there to provide initial psychological aid as part of the "Purple Patrol" activity, which worked with the medical teams of the White Coats organization. At that time, a doctor working with her who was providing aid to an injured person at a demonstration was attacked. A week later, another volunteer doctor was injured when a water cannon fired a jet of water into her left eye. For me, harm inflicted by those entrusted with upholding the law upon caregivers assisting the injured marks a terrible stage in the moral collapse we have witnessed since the establishment of the current government, and even more so since October 7th. The attack on the Chief Military Advocate General in August was another moment when we witnessed a direct assault on professionals responsible for upholding the law and a surrender to bullying and violence under the auspices of vengeful passions.

Conversely, another terrible moment for me was the funeral of Carmel Gat, which took place at the beginning of September. It was a moment of heart-wrenching pain, where it was no longer possible to escape the understanding that people in the State of Israel had been abandoned. Abandoned time and again to live under a security threat, abandoned to a brutal attack that ended in their abduction, abandoned when they were left as victims of abuse, starvation, and torture, and abandoned when they were murdered. When I left there, I wrote:

Your light, the light within you

Sparkled at the exit from the cemetery in Be'eri

All the words spoken at your grave

Made it clear

You were

A sunrise

And now your needless death

Calls us to gather from all corners of the land

To shine anew as a society that sanctifies life

Acts with mutual responsibility

And cries out: Enough of sacrifice!

We waited for you so long

We did all we could

This is an unbearable farewell

From you

Carmel Gat

Where do I look to find a horizon? What gives me hope and strength in these times?

Amidst the difficult moments we are experiencing in Israeli society and facing this great rupture, I find an anchor in the values of the Declaration of Independence, which serve as a compass guiding my way. Alongside them, I tighten my grip on world history, which demonstrates time and again how democratic countries that became dictatorships rife with war and death returned to being democracies, even after periods of terrible moral decline. I find a horizon and am filled with inspiration by the actions of leading figures dedicated to preserving Israel as a state of law, as well as by intertwining my life in shared endeavors with beloved and esteemed people. I recharge and replenish hope through cultural respites, spending time with my family, and being in nature—spaces that have been important resources for me this past year.

About the Author – Dr. Hadas Shaharabani-Saidon

Dr. Hadas Shaharabani-Saidon is a specialized clinical psychologist with a PhD in clinical psychology from Bar-Ilan University. Since January 2023, she has been one of the leading figures in the "No Mental Health Without Democracy" movement. Additionally, from October 2023, she has served as the Director of the Resilience and Mental Health Program "Otef Lev" at the Achim VeAchayot L'Yisrael – The Civilian Command Center.