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My Journey Since October 7th, as a Person and as a Therapist (initially published October 2024 in Hebrew and translated and updated January 2025)

As I write these lines in September 2024, I am spending time with my young granddaughters, talking with them about the upcoming Rosh Hashanah holiday. I begin singing traditional holiday songs I remember from my childhood, and started with the song "Shanah Tovah" (lyrics: Levin Kipnis, music: Nahum Nardi). As I sang to them, I found myself, horrified by the realization that with every verse, the absurdity becomes louder—that the blessings embedded in the song, this year, will not reach many of their destinations, and did not come true in the past year for so many fathers and mothers, uncles, soldiers, pilots, sailors, workers in cement and stone, children, and countless other people. Another childhood song for the holiday came to mind: "Next year we'll sit on the porch and count the migrating birds, children on vacation will play tag" (lyrics: Ehud Manor, music: Nurit Hirsch). I continue singing, knowing that this year, since October 7th, 2023, which is ending soon, has been a difficult, painful, frightening, and terrifying year, full of grief, mourning, and compassion for all the residents of the area. Yet, despite the ups and downs, I refuse to give up hope.

Like many people living in Israel, my personal journey with wars began in my childhood, when I lived with my family in Nahariya. A Katyusha rocket that fell right next to my home opened up a whole world of knowledge and emotions about enemies and wars, far too early for my young age. Additionally, my father was called up for reserves, and a close neighbour and family friend was killed in the Six-Day War—events that led me to wonder and ask about soldiers, war, and death. I remember my parents trying to calm me down, saying that I had nothing to worry about and repeatedly promising that by the time I grew up, there would be peace, and soldiers wouldn't be needed anymore, as the song goes: "I promise you, my little girl, that this will be the last war" (lyrics: Chaim Hefer, music: Dov Seltzer). I still remember my fantasy that by the time my children grew up, we wouldn't need soldiers anymore, and the painful disillusionment that followed with the years. I have no doubt that my early engagement with fears, enemies, the military, and death, along with other life events, guided me toward psychology and becoming a therapist from a very young age.

In the days leading up to October 7th, 2023, I was on vacation in London, and from there, I returned directly to the Tamar Festival at the Dead Sea. So, after a long absence from home and routine, I returned home on the evening of October 6th. Early the next morning, we all woke up to the sound of sirens piercing the quietness of Shabbat and the holiday. With the second siren heard in central Israel, a dear friend from Sderot sent a WhatsApp message to a group I am part of, which was the first report I received about what was happening. He shared that Sderot had been taken by terrorists, that he lived across from the police station, and that even the police were no longer functioning. I immediately left the safe room to connect to the news and started to grasp what was going on.

Minutes later, before I knew about the horrors unfolding in kibbutzim and other communities, I wondered what I could do to help, first and foremost for the people of Sderot. Before 8 a.m., I had already posted two Google Forms on Facebook and in various peer groups—one calling for volunteer mental health professionals to offer psychological support, and another for residents of Sderot in the first hours, later extending to people throughout the country,

seeking mental health assistance in the wake of the events. At that time, I didn't yet know the full extent of the disaster or that people would be reaching out for initial mental health support from all over the country. Within hours, hundreds of volunteers had signed up, and within three days, thousands had registered, with the number of requests growing daily. Thus, the initial civil mental health support service was established, which operated until the eve of Passover.

The spontaneous initiative, which began on that Saturday morning, quickly attracted people from my personal and professional circles, and beyond. On that same Saturday, Lihi Cohen, a second-year student in Clinical Psychology at Bar-Ilan University, called to apologize for not being able to provide first aid as she wasn't an expert in the field, but offered her help in any other way. She quickly became a key partner in all the initiatives since then. In the first couple of weeks, friends and my partner helped run the service almost around the clock, and students from the Hebrew University, where I am on the faculty, volunteered to update the database by adding professional licenses and missing data. Other good people used their technical skills to help set up an organized website that matched people in need with volunteers (the site was later fully developed pro bono by Wix). In those early weeks, volunteer therapists assisted families of victims with writing eulogies and accompanied them to funerals, while other volunteers began offering support through phone calls, social media, and in-person meetings, and additional professionals went to organizations to enhance human power and support others.

Soon thereafter, the volunteer database became an asset for governmental and public organizations in recruiting staff and continued to grow along with the number of requests for help from across the country. In the second week of our activities, an article was published on Globes in which I was interviewed, alongside Dr. Hadas Shaharbani-Sidon from the "No Mental Health Without Democracy" initiative, as two of the leading figures in providing immediate primary mental health support to the country's residents (Weinreb, 2023). That evening, we met, and since then, we have continued to collaborate, along with other good people, within the "Otef Lev" organization, which initially operated under the joint sponsorship of "Hi-tech 4 Israel" and "Brothers and Sisters for Israel (BSI)– The Civilian Operations Room" and, after three months, continued under BSI only. Some of the first actions of Otef Lev included mapping all services related to resilience and mental health for evacuees, both by their place of residence before evacuation and by their evacuation site; sending teams to hotels and assisting evacuees independently; creating the portal "Nafshi – Mental Health Support in Israel" in partnership with the Joint; and creating training sessions for volunteers, led by Dr. Sharon Ziv-Baiman, the director of the "Sails of the Soul" project in the Academic College of Tel Aviv – Yaffo.

Throughout this journey, we defined ourselves at Otef Lev as filling a gap until that gap could be filled by the appropriate governmental and public entities. Thus, from the end of the October we started to send newsletters to our volunteers which included close to 6000 mental health professionals, sharing our activities and more importantly advertisements of new paid positions as well as requests for volunteers. As governmental and other public services began to stabilize, we transitioned from being a service that connected people to volunteer therapists to one that connected them with the relevant governmental and public services. After the flow of requests tapered off, the support service was closed after responding to thousands of people from across the country and providing consultations and support to many organizations.

In the course of extensive discussions with senior professionals in the Ministry of Health, Resilience Centers, NATAL, and others, we understood the enormous challenge that Israel faces in providing mental health services. Even before October 7th, the mental health services lacked human capital as well as budget. Therefore, we began to examine what exists globally and what could help us here in Israel in providing services. We learnt about the tiered model of mental health and after examining many evidence based programs and models around the word decided to adopt and adapt the successful "Psychological Wellbeing Practitioner"(PWP) program originally developed in the UK in order to increase the workforce and introduce human innovation in the mental health field in Israel.

During the last year we have met in person with the founders of the program at UCL who generously gifted us the program to be adapted and implemented in Israel. We also visited various clinics and services employing PWPs to learn on site about the program. We have completed the adaptation of the program to the needs in Israel following October 7th and added with the assistance of the UK team, appropriate units dealing with the moderate symptomatology associated with living with long-term trauma, loss, mourning and bereavement.

On a more personal level, in the first few months, I often felt an intense urge to go out to the field myself, to the hotels and kibbutzim which hosted that evacuees, to provide help and treat the endless stream of people seeking assistance. However, each time this urge arose, I reminded myself that good therapists, even better than me, are plentiful, and that given my many years of national and international experience in academics (The Hebrew University of Jerusalem where I served as the Dean of Students among other roes), governmental (Chief Scientist at the Ministry of Science and Technology), and third-sector organizations, my strengths lie in systemic thinking, vision, entrepreneurship, development, organization, and management, and thus my contribution continues to remain in these realms with a focus on contributing to the implementation of the Stepped Care model and the PWP program in Israel.