We Must Learn the Hostages' Names—and Tell Their Stories



The betrayal I felt since October 7, 2023, is distinct from that of my Diaspora counterparts. As an Israeli immigrant who served in the IDF and studied at Israeli universities, I did not have the same outside world to abandon me as they did to my friends outside of Israel. The betrayal I experienced was instead from those within my own world, among my own people.

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A week after October 7, as I scrolled the *Times of Israel*'s "Those We Are Missing List," I saw that two of my colleagues from Yad Vashem, Liat Atzili and Alex Dancyg z"l, had been captured. I particularly looked up to Dancyg as a mentor in the field of Polish-Jewish dialogue, my research topic at university. When I saw that Edan Alexander, who was 19 when taken hostage, grew up in Tenafly, where I took private Hebrew lessons before going to my favorite cafe each Sunday as a kid, it hit home. I felt a personal connection to the hostages from all different aspects of my life. Ever since, I dedicated much of my time to the hostages, by sharing their stories, volunteering for Bring Them Home, and joining the Counting Avera movement for Avera Mengitsu's freedom.

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I always assumed that other committed Jews would feel that the Omer Neutras and Edan Alexanders who had grown up in Long Island and New Jersey could have been just like them. Instead, I have found that many do not know the names of Israeli hostages and feel disconnected from their stories.

On Tisha B'Av this past summer, I ran an event in my minyan. I remember one girl from the Tri-State area casually remarking that she had no idea that one of the hostages—Edan, who is now 21—had grown up a several-minute drive away from her.

"You never heard of this?" I asked, confused because of its extensive coverage in American Jewish media.

"I just never thought to check the list of hostages," she shrugged.

I couldn't help but feel heartbroken seeing how little thought—or research, at least—some of my fellow *Olim* had put into the greatest ongoing tragedy for our people since the Holocaust, one that took place barely two hours away from Jerusalem. By the time that interaction took place, New Jersey-raised Edan was held captive in Gaza for almost a year—tortured and starved as we sat in an air-conditioned shul basement, griping about fasting and salivating over the bagel table set up in the corner for after the fast.

This wasn't the last time that happened.

On a retreat for Jewish leadership in early December, most of the fellows admitted in informal conversations that they could not name more than five hostages. That was less than 5% of the 101 trapped at the time.

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Most recently, at a meeting for young Anglo community leaders in Jerusalem the day after Ohad Ben Ami, Eli Sharabi, and Or Levy were released—so emaciated that experts likened their medical state to Holocaust survivors—I expected people's response to have improved.

When my turn came to talk, I spoke about the emotional pain of seeing the released hostages resemble survivors of Auschwitz or Bergen-Belson. Everyone's eyes dropped to the floor and I was met with silence. Others continued nibbling at their sushi without comment until the next person spoke and changed the subject.

Some people challenge me that I am asking too much from others: What exactly do I expect? My answer goes something like this: I know that every Jew has endured a tumultuous year in addition to the tragedies of war, and that is aside from our busy schedules, responsibilities, and struggles unrelated to October 7. While I do hope that people will show up in solidarity for the hostage families, I know it's not always so simple to get there. But at the very least, I hope that committed Jews would learn the hostages' names and stories. No, not just to feel guilty that it was many of them defending us on October 7, or to feel heartbroken that 19-year-old soldiers were left alone to defend entire communities and that most sacrificed their lives in the process, their bodies abducted to Gaza. It's not only to question humanity momentarily when you think of the elderly civilians abducted from their bedrooms in their pajamas, or of the young partygoers who were kidnapped at a music festival that embraced freedom and acceptance. In short, the best place to start would be learning the hostages' stories.

While holding space for all of the above is essential, learning the hostages' stories is imperative also because, as Jews whose stories are reflected in the hostages' background, we should be at the forefront of championing the hostage struggle. We should be fighting for our family in captivity out of heartbreak or disgust with the antisemitic world but also—more positively—out of radical love for the Jewish People. While we might initially think that the hostages' stories are unique to specific border communities, their stories are *our* stories, eternal Jewish stories of immigration, multiple dialects, education, and grit. These stories proudly span journeys from Europe and Eastern lands across the Middle East and Africa, to Israel and the Diaspora, whether to Buenos Aires, London, or New York. Ultimately, they are a diverse tapestry of Jewish stories—*our* stories.

This pluralistic Jewish tapestry the hostages tragically represent includes Jewish refugees from Warsaw to Baghdad who built up the state as we know it today, young soldiers who liberated Jerusalem in the Six-Day War, and Beta Israel who came barefoot to fulfill their lifelong dream of making it to Jerusalem.

So I am turning to all of Am Yisrael to *learn their names*.

Shlomo Mansour z”l, for example, survived the 1941 Farhud Massacre as a child in Iraq. Shlomo saw rioters murder his dog and after fleeing to his family’s roof, he witnessed Muslim rioters abuse babies and rape young women. At age 16, Shlomo built Kibbutz Kissufim on the dream of the ingathering of the exiles and shaped a community that defended Israel’s borders. The kibbutz eulogized him as someone who became a maker of Jewish history rather than an observer of it. Ultimately, while the boy who went through a Shoah in Iraq did build a beautiful family and community in a sovereign Jewish state, in his old age Mansour was killed in cold blood by the same anti-Jewish hatred that haunted him in childhood. Shlomo was killed in Kissufim at age 85, and his body was taken to Gaza. He saved his wife of 60 years, Mazal, by distracting the terrorists as she fled to her neighbor’s home. Shlomo’s story is only one of the many stories of Jewish heroism that Jews around must know.

So I am turning to all of Am Yisrael to *learn their names*. We must do this out of a moral duty, yes, and also out of a deep love for our Jewish family, out of the simple understanding that their story will always be our story. And vice versa.

Below are the names of the remaining hostages, as of publication:

Shlomo Mansour z”l

Shiri, Ariel, and Kfir Bibas

Gali and Ziv Berman

Eliya Cohen

Omer Ben Shem Tov

Omer Wenkert

Tal Shoham

Avera Mengistu

Hisham Al-Sayed

Oded Lifschitz

Ohad Yahalomi

Tsahi Idan
Itzik Elgarat
Matan Zangauker
Edan Alexander
David Cunio
Ariel Cunio
Segev Kalfon
Matan Angrest
Bipin Joshi
Pinta Nattapong
Guy Gilboa-Dalal
Rom Braslavski
Tamir Nimrodi
Nimrod Cohen
Alon Ohel
Maxim Herkin
Yosef Haim-Ohana
Omri Miran
Eviatar David
Avinatan Or
Bar Kupershtein
Elkana Bohbot
Eitan Mor
Eitan Horn
Captain Omer Neutra z”l
Captain Daniel Perez z”l
Sgt. Maj. Mhamad El Atrash z”l
Meni Godard z”l
Sergeant Oz Daniel z”l

Sergeant Shay Levinson z”l

Ilan Weiss, z”l

Aviv Atzili, z”l

Tal Haimi, z”l

Eliyahu (Churchill) Margalit, z”l

Colonel Asaf Hamami, z”l

Sonthaya Oakkharasri, z”l

Sudthisak Rinthalak, z”l

Gad Haggai, z”l

Judy Weinstein-Haggai, z”l

Dror Or, z”l

Idan Shtivi, z”l

Inbar Haiman, z”l

Eitan Levy, z”l

Ran Gvili, z”l

Jonatan Mordechai Samerano, z”l

Staff Sgt. Itay Hen, z”l

Uriel Baruch, z”l

Tamir Adar, z”l

Sahar Baruch, z”l

Guy Iluz, z”l

Yair Yaakov, z”l

Arye Zalmanovich, z”l

Ofra Keidar, z”l

Joshua Loitu Mollel, z”l

Amiram Cooper, z”l

Ronen Engel, z”l

May we be worthy.

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