How to Read During a War



I Read This Over Shabbos is a weekly newsletter from Rivka Bennun Kay about Jewish book culture, book recommendations, and modern ideas. Receive this free newsletter every week in your inbox by subscribing here. Questions, comments, or feedback? Email Rivka at Shabbosreads@18forty.org.

When I was rudely woken up last night by a siren, I scurried dutifully to my bomb shelter—just as Home Front Command instructed me—my body having memorized this routine. At a ripe one o'clock in the morning, I sat in my desk chair, eyes half shut, and waited very impatiently for the all-clear so I could go back to bed.

The *mamad* (bomb shelter) has become symbolic for what the kids today call "brain rot." In one Instagram reel (of which I have watched many in the past two weeks), an Israeli jokingly "explains" to other countries in the region how to handle incoming rocket fire. "You will see some people reading in the *mamad*," he says. "But the *mamad* is not for reading. The *mamad* is for scrolling."

It’s a good joke, and it also reflects a reality many of us here feel. In active war (for example, during the Twelve-Day War last June), my mind shuts down. My intellectual curiosity dims. I’m not so interested in learning new things or reading cool things. I’m interested in not having sirens in the middle of the night, and in feeling safe. So when I get to a *mamad*, or even before I’ve gotten to the *mamad*, the desire to read or do anything remotely intellectually stimulating is gone. I want my comforting short-form content that grants me the instant gratification my mind is craving.

If, when life is normal, reading is a difficult pursuit due to the distractions and busyness of life, then during war, reading is nearly impossible.

When war comes, I work from home—my schedule suddenly strange and open. Why is it so hard to read with all of this free time? I think the answer lies in what reading represents. Reading enables a lot of valuable things that war diminishes—things that are not so important when cast next to the overwhelming prospect of survival.

When a mother of young children is left alone to care for her family while her husband is called to reserve duty, the potential for creativity and curiosity falls away; it is no longer essential. When a family loses their home to missile damage and must temporarily live in a hotel, there is no longer space for learning and development. The goal is to get from one day to the next. To wait and hope that the *ganim* (daycares) will reopen soon. To figure out how to explain to your toddler why you can’t take them to the park.

This point was made to me last year, when a teacher of mine shared that when her son left for his first round of reserves, in the beginning of the war, he brought dozens of books with him. Reserve duty sometimes allows for a good deal of down time, and he planned to make good use of that. By the time his second round of *miluim* came around, a few months later, my teacher recalled seeing all of his books in the basement. He hadn’t brought any with him.

This is an essay called “How to Read During a War,” but truthfully, I haven’t really cracked the code. I did start reading, but not because I used my sheer intellectual will to overcome the brain rot. I started reading because I couldn’t fall asleep, and I swore off using my phone before bed. I wanted to write to you that reading can be an act of defiance, at a time when our very lives are in danger, but that’s not how I landed on reading in between missiles. The book was sort of just … there.

I was reading "A Room of One's Own," the landmark essay by Virginia Woolf that I have been slowly making my way through over the past few weeks. In many ways, it's an essay about the need for mental space, intellectual freedom, freedom from immediate necessity. But when I picked up the essay, nothing about my reading felt extraordinarily powerful. It actually felt pretty normal. As if it were any other day. I found I was able to read for 15 minutes straight without glancing at my phone, or trying to calculate when the next siren might be.

That's one of the absurd things about living in Israel. Life keeps insisting on its own ordinariness even when the context is anything but.

I thought that reading during a war would feel like defiance from the inside, but it felt like any other night. Maybe that's the answer to my question: How do we read during a war? I believe the answer lies not in heroism, but in continuity. It lies in the ordinary act of opening a book and finding that my mind, despite everything, knows what to do with one.

This ordinariness is a gift, and not everyone gets to receive it. I think about my teacher's son, and his books in the basement. He gave up his ordinary so that people like me could keep ours. I try to remember that, at one in the morning, when the all-clear finally sounds and I get to go back to bed.