When Words Fail Us

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"Today the headlines clot in my blood." —Naomi Shihab Nye

THE FIRST REQUEST TO WRITE ABOUT THE WAR LANDS IN MY INBOX ON OCTOBER 8th, 2023. That day, my daughter and I run up and down three flights of stairs to the bomb shelter in my Tel Aviv building. In the south of Israel, some kibbutzim are still terrorized by Hamas, the dead yet to be counted. I am stunned by the magnitude and cruelty of the attack, by the incomprehensible images, the accumulating losses. As the day unfolds, I find out about more people I know who lost family and friends, their homes.

I send a noncommittal reply, feeling a hint of resistance. How could they even think I have words? Am I expected to offer hope when I feel none? To say something wise when I feel stupefied?

But you have to write, my friends say. It's important. We need your voice.

I *hate* being told what to do.

"Who will we be when we rise from the ashes and re-enter our lives?" —David Grossman

The sentiment I see on my various literary social media feeds is that as writers—even writers with no ties to the conflict—we have a responsibility to speak up. But what do we mean by speaking up, exactly? If we post, tweet, or add our name to a letter about this conflict (or any conflict), don't we have a responsibility to know what we're talking about? As one friend says, "are all writers now experts in political science?" Another

asks, "Do people really care what I, a Canadian novelist who has nothing to do with this war and know little about it, have to say?"

So many people are saying so many things online it's a cacophony of biases and slogans and misinformation and hateful vitriol and denial.

I delete social media from my phone.

An editor suggests I be more specific about the hateful vitriol about what is being denied, noting that calling for an end to the war has been deemed hateful. I start writing a response, saying I mean all denial, obviously. All hate. I'm getting defensive, feeling misunderstood and on guard. I can't shake the feeling that what they really want to know is which hate and denial enrage me most. Which side am I on. (As I write that, I quickly glance on Twitter. A former colleague of mine refers to the *New York Times* article about the Hamas rapes on October 7th as a Zionist propaganda. A Palestinian, anti-Hamas peace activist I follow is being asked by followers to prove that his family was actually killed in Gaza.)

"Bombing sounds very different depending on how close one is to the place being bombed, or how far." — Adania Shibli

The emotional labour that writing about the war demands of Palestinians and Israelis, of people whose lives and families are directly affected by this war, is rarely acknowledged. I remember an argument about feminism I once had with my husband. How calm he was while I burst into tears.

"For writing you need to have a bit of a solid ground... you should know up from down, you should know what your name is — if you don't hold that, you cannot do anything." —Etgar Keret

In the first few days, writing seems impossible. The horrors are indescribable, the stuff of nightmares and clichés, and my world is crumbling. Survival comes first. I leave my home and go to my brother. A couple of weeks later we fly to Canada, stay with family. Many Israeli writers report the same numbness. Not just a failure to write, but a distrust in words, in their utility, in their power to promote change. Some say they feel disillusioned, more expressly, with fiction. Everything is so surreal fiction can't compare. A graduate student I supervise tells me he's having doubts about his project. What's the point, he says? I want to encourage him, but I have nothing.

I am reminded by the power of the written word when I decide to refrain from watching graphic videos, but then stumble upon something and read it, thinking, it's just a text, just words. But it's a detailed description from Hamas bodycams involving a child and by the end of it I'm completely undone. The written depiction creates an indelible image in my head.

"What poems can we write from now on, aside from elegies or laments?" —Yaara Shehori

I search for words from writers I admire. I read David Grossman. I read Mahmoud Darwish. I read Ilya Kaminski's writing about Ukraine. Etty Hillesum. Mosab Abu Toha. I email a writer friend whose entire

family lives in war-ravaged Yemen, to ask—plead—for his thoughts. I can't stay away from social media, despite my best efforts. Amongst the noise, the performative posts, there are also firsthand testimonials, astonishing, unfiltered accounts of sorrow and grief and fear and pain and triumph and devastation. It's the flip side of social media's binarism and propaganda: it grants us access to stories previously untold, a borderless space where we can bear witness and grieve.

"Whatever I write will not save a single Gazan child." —Anton Shamas

If I tap into who I'd been before this war, (a long time ago, it seems) I'm reminded I have always believed in words. I believed that literature could foster empathy. That books could change lives. That's what inspired me to write about my Yemeni Jewish community who'd been poorly represented in literature, to try and capture the complexity of Israeli existence, to broaden the Jewish story beyond Ashkenazi-normative narratives, to use the Oslo peace process as a background for my upcoming book. War dehumanizes. Literature humanizes. Unlike that reporter on the rooftop with the ruined skyline as their backdrop, the writer illuminates one home, one voice, and in doing so, makes readers view others as less other.

"Everything we write
will be used against us
or against those we love."
—Adrienne Rich

The requests continue. They ask me to write about how my concept of home changed since October 7. They want to know how it felt to leave my mother behind when I flew for Canada. They want me to write about our decision to return to Israel while war is still raging.

Some days I am muted by sorrow, anxiety, and grief. Other days, I feel muzzled. Because saying the wrong thing can release havoc. The venom on social media, which I had encountered more than once and often after posting things I perceived as peaceful and balanced, manifests in my body. My heart races. My skin washes with sweat.

You seem different, my friend says. Like you're making yourself smaller in the world.

"The task of radical empathy is to sit with these questions both for ourselves and for people with less power and agency than us."—Hala Alyan

Is it a failing of mine, as a writer, as a person, that I cannot find words amidst such horrors, such despair, such hatred, such injustice (words that appear more hollow and stale as this war continues)? That, at times, I'm afraid to speak? Wish to silently retreat into grief? Or is my responsibility as a writer dwarfed by my responsibility as a mother: to remain grounded enough to parent her. To not fall apart. To keep her safe. To protect her. (Because I can. Others can't. I'm painfully aware of this).

Days before our flight back to Tel Aviv, my daughter sobs, inconsolable. She hates the war, scared of the missiles, but she misses home. As I hold her, I think of a picture I'd seen earlier: Israeli kids caught by sirens on their way back from school, lying face down on the sidewalk, hands over their heads, backpacks in bright colours strapped on their backs.

Say something to her, I think. Something wise. Something comforting.

An editor suggests juxtaposing this last anecdote with an image of Palestinian children to punctuate my earlier point about Palestinian children being killed. Perhaps one with them seeking shelter (where there isn't one. At least in Israel, most people have shelters, we have Iron Dome). I consider the suggestion, spend a few minutes conjuring some of these heart wrenching images I'd seen in the past weeks. Gazan children running, looking up, fear and anguish frozen on their faces. Then I remember: this is *my* memory. What happened in that moment did not involve Palestinian children. What happened is we were returning to Israel and I was thinking of my daughter going back to school. Do I need to supplement my memory in the name of balance? Can this memory, this image, within the context of this entire piece, stand on its own? Is it still valid? Is fearing for my daughter's safety considered a centering of my pain?

Do people even want to read this?

You are brave for writing at such a fraught time, a friend tells me. But I do not feel brave. I feel broken. Another asks me not to write this. I worry about you, she says.

My daughter asked me to draw with her, "but keep holding the door handle," she said. So I held the handle with my right hand and drew stars with my left hand and then stroked her with one hand as she lay on the bed until she fell asleep, while outside, my house was ravaged by grenades and gunfire and looting. —Almog Holot

I write to a stranger on Facebook to thank her for writing her survival story, which had gone viral. "Can you tell me why people connected to it so much?" she asks, sincerely. I wear the teacher's hat and analyze it. I speak of her simple language, a distancing technique that evokes the horrors so much more powerfully. I mention her use of concrete details, the small details that take on the burden of emotion when the bigger picture is too horrid, too grotesque to grasp.

"Thank you," she says. "That helps me understand."

"I broke the stories down, because I was breaking down and didn't know what else to do." —Carmen Maria Machado

One day I remember a module I had taught on writing through trauma. I dig it out, read my own advice. I write one essay, then another. I write in a way that mirrors the fragmented, broken pieces of myself, that evokes the failure, the questions, the doubts, the disbelief.

Buoyed by feeling momentarily useful, I offer free workshops in Hebrew and English titled "When Words Fail Us." Afterwards, the participants thank me for helping them find words. I thank them, too. The writings they share move me, comfort me. I see fractures of my own experience reflected.

I'm reminded by something I've told students over the years. You don't need to know the answers. Writing is driven by questions. Readers want to see you stumble toward truth. I give them permission to be uncertain, to search, to fail. *Be patient toward all that is unsolved in your heart*, I tell them, quoting Rilke. *Live the questions now.*

This, I think, I can do.