

Is there still a chance to break the cycle of revenge and bloodshed?

By Adam Keller

What made Hamas launch its devastating attack on October 7, precipitating the most terrible episode in this country's century of conflict and bloodshed? The full answer might never be known, but there are at least two obvious answers.

First, Hamas leader Yihya Sinwar, himself released in a previous prisoner exchange, vowed to obtain the release of his fellow prisoners, still held in Israel. An obvious motive for October 7 was to capture Israelis who might be exchanged for the Palestinian prisoners. Secondly, in the months before October, the US oversaw an accelerated diplomatic effort to achieve a peace agreement between Israel and Saudi Arabia – without Israel being required to end its occupation of the Palestinians. This would have been taken – quite correctly – as the Arab World abandoning the Palestinians to a never-ending Israeli oppression. Hamas was obviously motivated to strike a powerful blow and demonstrate that the Palestinians cannot be ignored and passed over, and that if ignored they have the ability to cause very big trouble.

However, Hamas could have easily achieved both aims simply by capturing the Israeli army positions along the border and taking dozens of captive soldiers off to Gaza – without needing to overwhelm Israeli civilian communities and perpetrate a terrible series of massacres and atrocities. In fact, from the pure military point of view Hamas had shown considerable skill – planning and implementing without hitch a complicated operation involving thousands of fighters, utterly deceiving the famed Israeli intelligence and achieving a complete strategic surprise, breaching by simple and cheap means the hi-tech Israeli border defenses in which billions of Dollars had been invested... In other circumstances, Hamas might have won the grudging respect of generals and strategists – except that they had also shown themselves to be major war criminals, particularly brutal and cruel. Why did they?

Here, too, the answer – simple and cruel - is not difficult to find: revenge. Whether or not it was planned in advance, the Hamas fighters which for a day conquered a slice of Israeli territory got carried away into an orgy of rape, torture and massacre. The motive, very clearly, was to get their revenge on Israel and on the Israelis. They had 75 years of grudges against Israel and accounts to settle, starting with the expulsion of 1948 and the destruction of hundreds of Palestinian villages and the construction of beautiful Jewish kibbutzim on their site, and going on to what Israel did to Gaza in the past twenty years, a suffocating siege and bombings and destruction and killings every few years. There were thousands of Gazans (not all of them from Hamas by the way) with very many years of accumulated bitter grudges against Israel and just one single day in which to get their revenge. So they wanted

to make the most of this one day, pack as much cruel revenge into the few hours they had before being expelled from Israeli territory - and they very terribly managed that, all too well. Ironically, Hamas happened to have invaded some of the most left-wing and peace-minded communities in Israel. In the indiscriminate killings, several well known Israeli peace activists perished and others were taken off to captivity in Gaza...

Well, where do we go from here? Obviously, the first stage is Israel's own revenge which is truly terrible. Death and destruction rained down on Gaza, destroying the city more thoroughly than Dresden was destroyed in 1945; 25,000 Palestinians dead so far, nearly half of them children, some twenty times the number of Israelis which Hamas killed on October 7. Nearly two million people uprooted from their homes to live as refugees under the open sky, in terrible hunger and rampant disease. 29,000 bombs were thrown on Gaza in three months – many of them one-ton monsters - while the US had used 4000 bombs in five years of Iraq fighting. Very many Gazans – hungry, destitute, bereaved of dear ones torn to bits by relentless Israeli bombing, knowing that death might descend on them from the sky without warning – must be at this very moment vowing new vows of revenge against Israel. And they will find a way to get this revenge, sooner or later, and then Israel will again take its own revenge, and so this cycle of hatred and bloodshed might roll on and on, for decades or even centuries. Unless we can break this cycle and get peace and reconciliation instead. Can we?

Previous to October 7, Israel was sharply polarized over the Netanyahu Government's plan to implement "judicial reforms" which would have crippled the Supreme Court and allowed the government to rule without restraint. Tens of thousands of protesters filled the streets, determined to block at any price the government's plans. Tensions rose to the point where an Israeli civil war seemed an increasingly plausible scenario. And then – in just a few hours, Hamas totally changed the Israeli public agenda. The Israelis' simple and highly understandable reaction was a very strong and widespread call for National Unity. We have been divided, ferociously confronted each other, and the Enemy used our divisions to attack us and kill us indiscriminately. Let us then forget our quarrels and divisions and unite, Left and Right, to fight and utterly destroy this terrible Enemy!

In the first month after October 7, the whole of Israel was in the grip of a war frenzy such as I have never seen. Walking the streets of Tel Aviv and everywhere the same ever-present slogan: "Together We Will Win!", "Together We Will Win!" , "Together We Will Win!". Victory! Victory! Victory! Victory!!!, very reminiscent of the nightmare atmosphere in Orwell's Nineteen Eighty Four. "Together We Will Win!" in enormous big banners spanning house fronts and in small signs on shop windows and on the doors of private homes and in hand made signs made by very devoted young children who lovingly drew every letter of the slogan in a different color of their crayons.

Israelis - including some normally sane and decent people – were full of blind hatred and indiscriminate thirst for the blood of Gazans. I can't blame them too much, revenge is a very basic aspect of human nature – but it was very difficult to endure. A few weeks ago a nice old lady which I know for a long time, a cultured lady who

likes Classical Music and often shows the photos of her sweet grandchildren, calmly expressed the opinion that, since "Gazan children are brought up to become terrorists" it would be a good idea to kill them already in the cradle, it will save the trouble of killing them as grown terrorists fifteen or twenty years from now.

I did not get up there and then and I did not tell her I did not want to see her ever again, though the thought of doing so did come into my mind. No, I hotly debated with her for about ten minutes and then we moved to more neutral subjects and continued sipping our tea for another two hours and then we parted still as friends. Though I did feel tainted by it, as if I had betrayed the Gazans and became a minor accomplice to war crimes. But cutting myself off from ordinary people and finding refuge in a cocoon of the few people who share my opinions and feelings would not be the right thing to do, either.

This friendly and monstrous old lady was fairly typical. The atrocities of Hamas have totally blinded Israelis to the pain of Gazans. The Israeli media, endlessly reiterating the horrors of October 7, hardly ever showed the terrible destruction and carnage in Gaza. Israelis did not know of it and did not want to know – except for the all too large fraction of the public who did know of it and were deliriously happy with it and wanted ever more death and destruction visited on the Gazans. For the first time which I can remember, there were made specific and explicit public calls for genocide, assertions that there were “no innocents in Gaza”, that all two million Gazans were Hamas supporters and all of them deserved to die – or at the very least, ethnically cleansed and chased off into the Sinai Desert. Indeed, but for General Sisi of Egypt making it crystal clear that he would not tolerate Gazans being forced into Egyptian territory, this ethnic cleansing of Gaza might have already been an accomplished fact.

Calls for killing, for mass killing and ethnic cleansing, even for genocide, can nowadays be made with impunity. It is those who call for compassion who are severely punished. Hundreds of people who dared express sympathy for the innocent victims in Gaza and mourn the dead children were stigmatized as “Hamas supporters” and ostracized, some being arrested by police or losing their jobs. In the early months, anti-war demonstrations were very few and small, and only very courageous people dared attend them. The police, controlled by a notorious extreme right minister, announced that no protests against the war would be allowed, and used extreme violence to enforce this ban.

There was one loophole of which was available to us: demonstrations by the families of the Israelis kidnapped by Hamas. We actively participated in them, though these were not anti-war demonstrations as such. At least to begin with the families reiterated their support for the war and their admiration for “our brave boys fighting in Gaza” and only added that the government must do all it can to bring the captives back. Nevertheless, it was clear to see that there was some contradiction between the call to bring back the captives “at all costs” and the call to utterly destroy Hamas “at all costs”. The contradiction became more and more obvious, especially after a tragic incident in which three Israeli captives in Gaza, who managed to escape their Hamas guards and tried to approach an Israeli army unit, were shot to death by trigger-happy Israeli soldiers.

By now there are explicit anti-war statements by some of the Gaza captives' families, and the protests by the families have gathered enormous momentum and became a true mass movement, drawing crowds in the tens of thousands. There is a growing public debate about whether or not to accept a prisoner exchange deal, which would bring back the Israeli hostages from Gaza but also include a prolonged ceasefire and the release of Palestinian prisoners considered "dangerous terrorists".

The general atmosphere is gradually changing. The war in Gaza seems long and interminable, the crushing of Hamas seems a very faraway goal and the army chief says it would take the whole of 2024 and possibly longer – and every day the names and photos of ever more soldiers killed in Gaza are published. So the “gung-ho” war enthusiasm is increasingly evaporating. Though many “Victory!” signs and placards are still to be seen in the streets, they seem rather tattered, and when one falls down it is often not replaced.

The world – including the US, Israel's big friend - has become aware that there is a very big problem here, which must be treated and cannot be allowed to fester. The statements of President Biden – who initially gave full support to the Gaza war and supplied plenty of ammunition and bombs – are becoming more explicit.

And meanwhile, a true Israeli anti-war movement emerged from the darkness of persecution. After some hesitation by the judges, the Supreme Court in Jerusalem did come down on the side of basic civil rights and militant anti-war demonstrations are now a possibility – though still harassed by police and far smaller than in earlier wars, such as the invasion of Lebanon in 1982.

As I write (second half of January), two heartening anti-war demonstrations have taken place, one in Tel Aviv and the other in Haifa, both drawing thousands of participants. Most touching is that in both, the speakers included people who personally suffered the Hamas attacks on October 7, and saw their dear ones being killed. No one could have blamed such people for being bitter and seeking revenge. But to the contrary, they made very heartwarming and touching speeches, explicitly rejecting revenge and strongly reiterating themes of peace and reconciliation. In two places – Cinematheque Square in Tel Aviv and Paris Square in Haifa – such inspiring and heartening speeches were made, like a cool and refreshing blow of wind after the furnace of blind hatred in which we lived over the past months.

Dare we hope that this is a new beginning? Time will tell.

The above article is due to be published in German in the forthcoming issue of Friedensforum (“Peace Forum”), a magazine of the German peace movement. Christine Schweitzer of Friedensforum graciously gave consent for me to freely spread the English-language text.