

Search

HAARETZ

LOG IN

SUBSCRIBE NOW



A Massive Database of Evidence, Compiled by a Historian, Documents Israel's War Crimes in Gaza



A woman with a child is shot while waving a white flag ■ Starving girls are crushed to death in line for bread ■ A cuffed 62-year-old man is run over, evidently by a tank ■ An aerial strike targets people trying to help a wounded boy ■ A database of thousands of videos, photos, testimonies, reports and investigations documents the horrors committed by Israel in Gaza



Save



Zen Read



Nir Hasson

Follow

Dec 5, 2024

Footnote No. 379 of the carefully researched, wide-ranging document that historian Lee Mordechai has drawn up contains a link to a video clip. The footage shows a large dog gnawing something amid bushes. "Wai, wai, he took the terrorist, the terrorist is gone – gone in both senses," says the soldier who filmed the dog eating a corpse. After a few seconds the soldier raises the camera and adds, "But what a gorgeous view, a gorgeous sunset. A red sun is setting over the Gaza Strip." Definitely a beautiful sunset.

The report Dr. Mordechai has compiled online – "[Bearing Witness to the Israel-Gaza War](#)" – constitutes the most methodical and detailed documentation in Hebrew (there is also an English translation) of the war crimes that Israel is perpetrating in Gaza. It is a shocking indictment comprised of thousands of entries relating to the war, to the actions of the government, the media, the Israel Defense Forces and Israeli society in general. The English translation of the seventh, and to date latest version of the text, is 124 pages long and contains over 1,400 footnotes referencing thousands of sources, including eyewitness reports, video footage, investigatory materials, articles and photographs.

For example, there are links to texts and other kinds of testimony describing acts attributed to IDF soldiers who were seen "shooting civilians waving white flags, abuse of individuals, captives and corpses, gleefully damaging or destroying houses, various

A Gazan woman cradling a child's body, last week. Credit: Omar El Qattaa/AFP

structures and institutions, religious sites and looting personal belongings, as well as randomly firing their weapons, shooting local animals, destroying private property, burning books within libraries, defacing Palestinian and Islamic symbols (including burning Qurans and turning mosques into dining spaces)."

One link takes readers to a video of a soldier in Gaza waving a large sign taken from a barber shop in the town of Yehud, in central Israel, with bodies strewn around him. Other links are to footage of soldiers deployed in Gaza reading the Book of Esther, as is customary on the festival of Purim, but every time the name of the wicked Haman is uttered, instead of simply shaking traditional noisemakers, they fire a mortar shell. A soldier is seen forcing bound and blindfolded prisoners to send regards to his family and to say they want to be its slaves. Soldiers are photographed holding stacks of money they plundered from Gazan homes. An IDF bulldozer is seen destroying a large pile of food packages from a humanitarian-aid agency. A soldier sings the children's ditty "Next year we'll burn the school" – while a school is seen in flames in the background. And there are plenty of clips of soldiers modeling women's underwear that they looted.

Footnote No. 379 appears in a subsection titled "De-humanization in the IDF" that's included in the chapter called "Israeli discourse and de-humanization of Palestinians." It contains hundreds of examples of the cruel behavior displayed by Israeli society and the state's institutions vis-à-vis Gaza's suffering inhabitants – from a prime minister who talks about Amalek, to the figure of 18,000 calls by Israelis on social media to flatten the Strip, to Israeli physicians who voice support of the bombing of Gazan hospitals, to the stand-up comic joking about the death of Palestinians, and includes a chorus of children sweetly singing, "Within a year, we will annihilate everyone and then we will return to plow our fields," set to the melody of the iconic War of Independence-era song, "Shir Hare'ut" (Song of Camaraderie).

The links in "Bearing Witness to the Israel-Gaza War" also lead to graphic footage of bodies strewn about, in every possible condition; of people crushed under rubble; of puddles of blood; and of the cries of people who lost their entire families in an instant. There are items attesting to the killing of disabled people, humiliation and sexual assaults, the torching of homes, forced starvation, random shooting, looting, abuse of corpses and much more.

Why there's no excuse for Israelis not knowing what's happening in Gaza

Rashid Khalidi: 'Israel has created a nightmare scenario for itself. The clock is ticking'

The chilling testimony of a U.S. neurosurgeon who went to Gaza to save lives

Even if not each and every one of the testimonies can be corroborated, the picture that arises from them is of an army that in the best case has lost control of many units, whose soldiers proceeded to do whatever struck their fancy, and in the worst case is allowing its personnel to commit the most atrocious war crimes imaginable.

Mordechai cites evidence of the horrific predicaments the war has forced upon Gazans. A physician who amputates his niece's leg on a kitchen table, without anesthesia, using a kitchen knife. People eating horse flesh and grass, or drinking sea water to ameliorate their hunger. Women compelled to give birth in a classroom crowded with people. Doctors helplessly looking on as wounded people die because there's no way to help them. Starving women being pushed in a chaotic line outside a bakery; according to the report, two girls, 13 and 17, and a 50-year-old woman were crushed to death in the incident.

In the DP camps in the Strip in January, according to "Bearing Witness," there was an average of one toilet cubicle for every 220 people and one shower for every 4,500. A significant number of physicians and health organizations reported that infectious diseases and skin disorders were spreading among a great number of Gazans.



The Shujaiyeh neighborhood of Gaza City, on October 7, 2024. "There don't have to be death camps for it to be considered genocide." Credit: Omar El Qattaa/AFP

More and more children

Lee Mordechai, 42, a former officer in the IDF Combat Engineering Corps, is presently a senior lecturer in history at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, whose expertise is human and natural disasters in the ancient and medieval eras. He has written about the Justinianic plague in the 6th century and the volcanic winter that struck the northern hemisphere in 536 C.E. He approached the subject of the Gaza disaster in an academic-historical way, with dry prose and few adjectives, availing himself of the greatest possible diversity of primary sources; his writing is devoid of interpretation and open to review and revision. Which is precisely why the faces reflected in his text are so utterly appalling.

"I felt that I couldn't go on living in my bubble, that we're talking about capital offenses, and that what's going on is just too large, and contradicts the values I was raised on here," Mordechai says. "I'm not out to confront people or to argue. I wrote the document so it would be out there. So that in another half a year or year or five years or 10 or 100 – people will be able to go back and see that this is what was known, this is what it was possible to know, as early as this past January, or March, and that those among us who didn't know, chose not to know.

"My role as a historian," he continues, "is to give voice to those who cannot sound their own voices, whether they were eunuchs in the 11th century or children in Gaza. I deliberately seek not to appeal to people's emotions, and don't use words that may be controversial or unclear. I don't talk about terrorists or about Zionism or about antisemitism. I'm trying to use as cold and dry a language as possible, and to stick to the facts as I understand them."

Mordechai was on sabbatical in Princeton when the war broke out. When he woke up on [October 7](#), it was already afternoon in Israel. Within hours he grasped that there was a disparity between what the public in Israel was seeing and reality. This understanding stemmed from an alternative system for receiving information that he'd created for himself nine years earlier.

"In 2024, during Operation Protective Edge [in Gaza], I returned from my doctoral studies in the United States and from conducting research in the Balkans. I felt then that there was no open discourse in Israel; everyone was saying the same thing. So I made a conscious effort to access alternative sources of information – [based on] foreign media, blogs, social media. It's also similar to my work as a historian, seeking out primary sources. So I created for myself a kind of personal system in order to understand what was happening in the world. On October 7, I activated the system and realized quite quickly that the public in Israel was

experiencing a delay of hours – Ynet carried a bulletin about the possibility that hostages had been taken, but I'd already seen clips of abductions. It creates a dissonance between what's being said about the reality of the situation and the actual reality, and that feeling intensifies."

The report contains over 1,400 footnotes referencing thousands of sources. It details instances of Israeli troops shooting civilians waving white flags, abusing individuals, captives and corpses, randomly firing their weapons, gleefully destroying houses, burning books and defacing Islamic symbols.

Indeed, the disparity between what Mordechai discovered and the information appearing in both Israeli and foreign media has only grown. "The most prominent story at the beginning of the war was the one about 40 Israeli infants decapitated on October 7. That story generated a lot of headlines in the international media, but when you compare it with [National Insurance's official] list of those killed, you realize very quickly that it didn't happen."

Mordechai started to follow reports from Gaza on social media and in the international media. "From the start I got a flood of images of destruction and suffering, and you grasp that there are two separate worlds that aren't talking to one another. It took me a few months to figure out what my role was here. In December, South Africa submitted its formal claims of genocide against Israel in 84 detailed pages with multiple references to sources that could be cross-checked.

"I don't think everything has to be accepted as evidence," he adds, "but you have to grapple with it, see what it's based on, consider its implications. Early on in the war, I wanted to return to Israel to do volunteer work on behalf of some sort of civil society organization, but for family reasons I couldn't. I decided to use the free time I had during the sabbatical at Princeton to try to enlighten the public in Israel that consumes only local media."

He published the first version of "Bearing Witness," just eight pages long, on January 9. The number of those killed in the Strip, according to the Gaza Ministry of Health, officially known as the Palestinian Ministry of Health – Gaza, stood at 23,210 then. "I do not believe anything written here will lead to a change of policy, or convince many people," he wrote at the beginning of that document. "Rather, I write this publicly as a historian and an Israeli citizen in order to state for the record my personal position regarding the horrible current situation in Gaza, as events are unfolding. I am writing as an individual, partly because of the disappointing general silence regarding this subject on the part of many local academic institutions, especially those that are well-

positioned to comment on it, even as some of my colleagues have bravely spoken out."

Since then, Mordechai has spent many hundreds of hours collecting information and writing, continuing to update the document that appears on the website he's created. Since embarking on this project, he has improved the way he works: meticulously compiling reports from different sources on an Excel spreadsheet, from which, after further examination, he selects the items that will be mentioned in the text. He uses a wide variety of sources: footage shot by civilians, media articles, reports by the United Nations and other international organizations, social media, blogs, and so on.

While he acknowledges that some of the sources are not committed to proper journalistic or other ethical standards, Mordechai stands by the credibility of his documentation. "It's not like I copy-paste everything that someone else comes up with. On the other hand, it's clear that there is a gap between what exists and what we would actually like to see: We would like every incident in the Strip to be examined properly by two independent and non-dependent international organizations, but that's not going to happen.

"So I examine who's reporting, whether they've been caught lying, if there's some nonprofit or blogger who conveyed information that I can prove is incorrect – and if so, I stop using them and delete them. I give greater weight to neutral sources, like human rights organizations and the UN, and do a sort of a synthesis between sources to see whether it [the information] is consistent. I also work very openly and invite anyone who wants to check me. I will be very happy to see that I was wrong about things I wrote, but that's not the case. Until now I've had to make very few corrections."

A perusal of Mordechai's report helps to disperse the fog that has blanketed Israelis since the war broke out. A case in point is the number of fatalities: The October 7 war is the first war in which Israel is not making any effort at all to tally the number of those killed on the other side. In the absence of any other source, many people around the world – foreign governments, media outlets, international organizations – rely on the reports of the Palestinian Health Ministry – Gaza, which are believed to be quite credible. Israel tries to make a point of denying the ministry's figures. Local media outlets usually note that the source of such data is "Hamas' Ministry of Health."



Palestinian children at a food distribution center in Deir al-Balah, last week. Mordechai says more children have been killed in Gaza than all the children in all the wars in the world, in the three years preceding Oct. 7. Credit: AFP/OMAR AL-QATTAA

However, few Israelis know that not only do the IDF and the government of Israel not have their own, alternative figures regarding the number of fatalities, but that senior Israeli sources, lacking no other data, end up effectively confirming that published by the ministry in Gaza. How senior? Benjamin Netanyahu himself. On March 10, for example, the prime minister stated in an interview that Israel had killed 13,000 armed Hamas militants and estimated that for every one of them, 1.5 civilians had been killed. In other words, up to that point, between 26,000 and 32,500 people had been killed in the Strip. On that day, the Palestinian ministry issued a figure of 31,112 fatalities in Gaza, within the range cited by Netanyahu. At the end of that month, Netanyahu spoke of 28,000 dead – about 4,600 fewer than the official Palestinian figure. In late April, The Wall Street Journal quoted an estimate by high-ranking IDF officers that the number of dead was approximately 36,000 – more than the number published by the Palestinian ministry at the time.

Mordechai: "It seems as if, on the Israeli side, they're choosing not to deal with the figures, although Israel could ostensibly do it – the technology exists, and Israel controls the Palestinian Population Registry. The defense establishment also has facial images; they could cross-check them and see that someone who may have been reported dead has gone through a checkpoint. Come on, show me! Give me proof and I will change my approach. It will make my life more complicated, but I will be a lot less upset.

"I think we must ask ourselves what 'bar' of evidence is required in order for us to change our views about the number of Palestinians who have been killed. That's a question that each of us needs to ask themselves – maybe for you the evidence I'm citing isn't sufficient – because there must be some sort of realistic stage in the accumulation of evidence at which we will accept the numbers as reliable.

"For me," he explains, "that point arrived long ago. And after one does the dirty work and understands the numbers a little better, the issue starts to be not one of how many Palestinians died, but why and how the Israeli public continues to doubt these figures after more than a year of hostilities and contrary to all the evidence."

In his report, he quotes Palestinian ministry's figures that cite – among those killed from the time the war broke out, up until this past June – 273 employees of the UN and aid organizations, 100 professors, 243 athletes, 489 health workers (including 55 specialist physicians), 710 children under the age of one year and four preemies who died after the IDF forced the male nurse who was caring for them to leave the hospital. The nurse was caring for five preemies and decided to save the one who looked as if he would have the best chance to survive. The decaying bodies of the other four were found in incubators two weeks later.

The footnote in Mordechai's text dealing with those infants does not reference a tweet by a Gazan or a pro-Palestinian blog, but [an investigation by The Washington Post](#). Israelis who may question "Bearing Witness to the Israel-Gaza War" on the grounds that it relies on social media or on unverified reports must realize that it is also based on dozens of investigations by almost every self-respecting Western media outlet. Numerous outlets have examined incidents in Gaza using rigorous journalistic standards – and came up with evidence of atrocities. A CNN investigation corroborated the Palestinian claim about the "[flour massacre](#)," in which about 150 Palestinians who arrived to collect food from an aid convoy on March 1 were killed. The IDF declared that it was the crowding and stampeding of the Gazans themselves that killed them, not warning shots fired by soldiers in the area. Ultimately, CNN's investigation, based on careful analyses of documentation and 22 interviews with eyewitnesses, found that most of the fatal casualties indeed stemmed from the shooting.

Asked which image has had the greatest impact on him, Mordechai mentions a photo of the body of Jamal Hamdi Hassan Ashour, 62, who was reportedly run over by a tank, his body mangled beyond recognition. The image was posted on an Israeli Telegram channel with the caption, "You're going to love this!"

The New York Times, ABC, CNN, the BBC, international organizations and the Israeli human rights organization B'Tselem published results of their own investigations of incidents of torture, abuse, rape and other atrocities perpetrated against Palestinian detainees in the [IDF's Sde Teiman base](#) in the Negev and other facilities. Amnesty International examined four incidents in which there was no military target or justification for attack, in which IDF forces killed a total of 95 civilians.

An investigation in late March by Yaniv Kubovich in Haaretz showed that the IDF created "kill zones" in which many civilians were shot after crossing an imaginary line demarcated by a field commander; the victims were categorized as terrorists after their death. The BBC has cast doubt on the IDF's estimates of the number of terrorists its forces have killed in general; CNN reported extensively about one incident in which an entire family was wiped out; NBC investigated an attack on civilians in so-called humanitarian zones; The Wall Street Journal verified that the IDF was relying on reports of fatalities in Gaza that were published by the Palestinian Health Ministry; AP claimed in a detailed report that the IDF had presented only one reliable piece of evidence showing that Hamas was operating on the grounds of a hospital – the tunnel that was discovered in the yard of Shifa Hospital; The New Yorker and The Telegraph published the results of extensive investigations of cases involving children whose limbs had to be amputated, and there is much more – all of it mentioned in "Bearing Witness."

Not included is a report published just this week by the Palestinian Health Ministry – Gaza, stating that since October 7, 1,140 families have been totally wiped out of the local population registry – most likely victims of aerial bombings.

Mordechai cites numerous items relating to the IDF's lax rules of engagement in the Gaza Strip. One clip shows a clutch of refugees with a woman in the front, holding her son in one hand and a white flag in the other; she is seen being shot, probably by a sniper, and collapsing as the child drops her hand and flees for his life. Another incident, widely reported in late October, shows 13-year-old Mohammed Salem crying for help after being wounded in an air force attack; when people approach to offer aid, they are targeted by another such attack. Salem and another youngster were killed, and over 20 people were wounded.

Mordechai acknowledges that watching the visual testimony from the war has hardened his heart – today he can view even the most awful scenes. "When the ISIS videos were posted [years ago], I didn't watch them. But here I have felt that it's my obligation, because this is being done in my name, so I must see it in order to convey what I've seen. What's important is the quantity; it's children and again children and once more children."



Mordechai. "I wrote this so that in another half-year or in 100 years, people will go back and see that this is what it was possible to know, as early as January, and that those among us who didn't know, chose not to know." Credit: Olivier Fitoussi

Asked which of the thousands of images, whether videos or stills, of dead, wounded or suffering people have had the greatest impact on him, Mordechai thinks and mentions a photo of the body of a man who was later identified as Jamal Hamdi Hassan Ashour. Ashour, 62, was reportedly run over by a tank in March, his body mangled beyond recognition. A zip tie on one of his hands attested to the fact that he had been detained beforehand, Palestinian sources say. The image was posted on an Israeli Telegram channel with the caption, "You're going to love this!"

"I have never in my life seen anything like that," Mordechai tells Haaretz. "But worse than that was the fact that the image was shared by soldiers in an Israeli Telegram group and got very favorable reactions." Besides the information about Ashour, "Bearing Witness" provides links to images of a number of other bodies whose condition suggests that they were run over by armored vehicles. In one case, according to a Palestinian report, the victims were a mother and her son.

One case mentioned only in a footnote attests to issues relating to Mordechai's methods and to the dilemmas he has faced. At the end of March, Al Jazeera ran an interview with a woman who arrived at Gaza's Shifa Hospital and said that IDF soldiers had raped women. Shortly afterward, the woman's family denied the allegations she had made, and Al Jazeera deleted the report, but many people had lingering doubts.

"According to my methodology, after Al Jazeera's deletion, it's not credible and it didn't happen," Mordechai says. "But I also ask myself: Maybe I'm participating in the silencing of that woman? And the silencing is not for reasons of honoring the truth, but in the name of her and her family's honor. Is it perfect? It's not perfect, but in the end I am a human being and I have to decide. So in a footnote I explained that it was one woman's allegation and I added [that it was] 'almost certainly false' to express my reservations.

"I don't guarantee that each and every testimony is completely reliable. In fact, no one knows exactly what is happening in Gaza – not the international media, certainly not the Israelis and not even the IDF. In 'Bearing Witness,' I argue that the silencing of voices from Gaza – restriction of the information coming out of there – is part of the working method that is making the war possible. I stand behind the synthesis that I am using, and I wish I was wrong. But from the Israeli side there's nothing. I'm talking about proof – bring me proof!"

One case described in the document, even though many Israelis will have a hard time believing it, relates to the IDF's use of a drone that emitted sounds of an infant crying in order to determine where civilians were located and perhaps draw them out of their shelter. In the video referenced by the link Mordechai gives, crying is heard and the lights of a drone can be seen.

"We know there are drones with loudspeakers, maybe some bored soldier decides to do it as a joke and it's perceived by the Palestinians to be horrific," he says. "But is it really so far-fetched that some soldier, instead of being filmed with panties and bras or dedicating the detonation of a street to his wife, would do something like that? It might be made up, but it's compatible with what I am seeing." This week Al Jazeera broadcast an investigative report about the so-called [crying drones](#) and claimed that their use had been confirmed by a number of eyewitnesses who all related the same story.

"We may still argue about anecdotal testimony of that kind, but it's harder to do so when faced with mountains of more substantiated testimony," Mordechai notes. "For example, dozens of American physicians who did volunteer work in Gaza reported that almost every day they saw children who had been shot in the

head – how can that be explained? Are we even trying to explain or to cope with that?"

More children have been killed in Gaza than in all the wars in the world in the three years preceding October 7. In the first month of the war the number of dead children was 10 times the number of those killed in the Ukraine war over the course of a year.

One of the heights of Israeli military brutality in Gaza was evident during the second major [raid on Shifa Hospital](#) in mid-March, the historian adds; indeed, he devotes a separate chapter to it. The IDF claimed that the hospital was a hub of Hamas activity at the time and that there had been exchanges of fire during the raid, after which 90 Hamas personnel had been arrested, some of them high-ranking.

However, the IDF's occupation of Shifa went on for about two weeks. In that period, according to Palestinian sources, the hospital became a zone of murder and torture. Apparently 240 patients and medical staff were locked into one of the buildings for a week with no access to food. Physicians on the premises reported that at least 22 patients died. A number of eyewitnesses, including staffers, described executions. A video shot by a soldier shows bound and blindfolded detainees sitting in a corridor, facing a wall. According to the sources, after the IDF withdrew from the hospital, dozens of bodies were discovered in the yard. There are a number of clips documenting collection of the bodies, some of them mutilated, others buried under rubble or lying in large pools of clotted blood. A rope was tied around the arm of one of the dead men, possibly showing that he was tied up before being killed.

Other heights of brutality have been reached during the past two months in the rolling military operation still underway in the northern part of the Strip. The operation began on October 5. The IDF cut off Jabalya, Beit Lahia and Beit Hanoun from Gaza City, and inhabitants were ordered to leave. Many did, but many thousands have remained in the besieged zone.

At that stage the army launched what former IDF chief of staff and defense minister Moshe Ya'alon this week called "[ethnic cleansing](#)" of the area: Aid groups were banned from entering the area, the last depot of flour was burned down and the last two bakeries shuttered, and even activity by civil defense teams who evacuated casualties was prohibited. The supply of water was disrupted, ambulances were disabled and the hospitals were attacked.

But the army's main effort has centered around aerial raids. Almost every day Palestinians reported dozens killed when residential buildings and schools, which had become DP camps,

were bombed. Mordechai's report cites dozens of well-documented accounts concerning bombing campaigns – families collecting the bodies of loved ones among the ruins, funerals at huge mass graves, wounded people covered in dust, adults and children in shock, people crying out with body parts strewn around them, and so on.



The aftermath of the IDF's two-week operation in Shifa Hospital, in April. Credit: Dawoud Abu Alkas/Reuters

In a video clip from October 20, two children are seen being pulled out of the rubble. The first looks stunned, his eyes bulging, and totally covered in blood and dust. Next to him a lifeless body, apparently of a girl, is removed.

In the past two weeks, Haaretz, for its part, has sent queries to the IDF Spokesperson's Unit concerning some 30 incidents, most of them in Gaza, in which many civilians have been killed. The unit responded that it has classified most of them as unusual events and they have been referred to the General Staff for further investigation.

Mordechai rejects out of hand the commonly heard claim by Israelis that what is happening in Gaza isn't so terrible when compared to other wars. "Bearing Witness" shows, for example, that more children have been killed in Gaza than all the children in all the wars in the world in the three years preceding the October 7 war. Already in the first month of the war the number of dead children was 10 times greater than the number of those killed in the Ukraine war over the course of a year.

More journalists have been killed in Gaza than in all of World War II. According to [an investigation that Yuval Avraham published](#) on the Sicha Mekomit (Local Call) website, about the AI systems used in IDF bombing campaigns in Gaza, authorization was given to kill up to 300 civilians in order to assassinate high-ranking Hamas figures. By comparison, documents reveal that for America's armed forces that figure stood at one-tenth of that number – 30 civilians – in the case of a murderer on a larger scale than Yahya Sinwar: Osama Bin-Laden.



There don't have to be death camps for it to be considered genocide. It's all boils down to the commission of acts and the intent, and the existence of both has to be established.

Lee Mordechai

An investigative report by [The Wall Street Journal states](#) that Israel rained down more bombs on Gaza in the first three months of the war than were dropped by the United States in Iraq over six years. Forty-eight prisoners died in Israeli detention facilities in the past year, compared to nine in Guantanamo in its entire 20 years of existence. The figures are also telling when it comes to the data concerning fatalities in other countries' wars: Coalition forces in Iraq killed 11,516 civilians in five years, and 46,319 civilians were killed in the 20 years of the war in Afghanistan. According to the most lenient estimates, some 30,000 civilians have been killed in the Strip since October 7, 2023.

Mordechai's report reflects not only the horrors that are occurring in Gaza but also Israel's indifference to them. "At the start there was an attempt to justify the invasion of Shifa Hospital; today there isn't even that pretense – you attack hospitals and there is no public discussion. We are not coping in any way with the implications of these operations. You open up social media and you're flooded by the dehumanization. What is this doing to us? I grew up in a society with a totally different ethos. There were always rotten apples, but look at the No. 300 bus case [an event in 1984, in which Shin Bet agents in the field executed two Arabs who had hijacked a bus] and see where we are now. It's important for me to hold up a mirror, it's important for me for these things to be out there. That's my form of resistance."

A dark secret

In the more recent versions of "Bearing Witness," Mordechai has added an appendix that explains why, in his opinion, Israel's actions in Gaza constitute [genocide](#), a subject he expounds on in our conversation. "We need to disconnect the way we think of genocide as Israelis – gas chambers, death camps and World War II – from the model that appears in the [1948] Convention on the

Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide," he explains. "There don't have to be death camps for it to be considered genocide. It's all boils down to the commission of acts and the intent, and the existence of both has to be established. In regard to committing acts, it's killing, but not only – [there is] also wounding people, abduction of children and even just attempts to prevent births among a particular group of people. What all these acts have in common is the deliberate destruction of a group.

"People I speak to generally don't argue about the actions taken; they argue about the intent. They will say that there is no document showing that Netanyahu or [IDF Chief of Staff] Herzl Halevi ordered genocide. But there are declarations and there are testimonies. Lots and lots of them. South Africa submitted a document of 120 pages that contained a great many testimonies proving intent. The journalist Yunes Tirawi collected declarations about genocide and ethnic cleansing from social media of more than 100 people with connections to the IDF – apparently many reserve officers.

"What are we doing with all this? From my point of view, the facts speak. I see a direct line between those declarations, an absence of trying to grapple with those declarations, and the reality on the ground that corresponds to the declarations."

The English-language version of "Bearing Witness" refers to articles by six leading Israeli authorities, who have already stated that in their view Israel is perpetrating genocide: Holocaust and genocide expert Omer Bartov; Holocaust researcher Daniel Blatman (who wrote that what Israel is doing in Gaza is somewhere between ethnic cleansing and genocide); historian Amos Goldberg; Holocaust scholar Raz Segal; international law expert Itamar Mann; and historian Adam Raz.

"The definition is less important," Mordechai says. "What's important is the actions. Let's say that the International Court of Justice in The Hague declares in another few years that it's not genocide but almost genocide – does that make it better? Does that attest to a moral victory by Israel? Do I want to live in a place that perpetrates 'almost genocide'? The debate over the term draws attention, but the things happen one way or the other, whether they reach the bar or not. In the end we must ask ourselves how we stop this and how we will answer our children when they ask us what we did during the war. We must act."

But the definition is important. You are telling Israelis, "Look, you're living in Berlin 1941." What is the moral imperative for people who lived in Berlin then? What is a citizen supposed to do when his state commits genocide?

"A moral stance always carries a price. If there is no price, it's just an accepted, normative stance. The value of a thing for a person is expressed in the price they are willing to pay for it. On the other hand, I realize that people also have other considerations and needs – to bring food home, to preserve ties with their family – everyone has to make their own decisions. From my point of view, what I do is to talk and to go on talking, whether people listen to me or not. This consumes endless time and mental strength, but I've reached the conclusion that it's the most useful thing I can do."

After we parted, Mordechai sent me a last link. This one was not related to testimony of atrocities in Gaza, but to a short story by the late American novelist Ursula K. Le Guin, "The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas." The story is about the city of Omelas, where people are beautiful and happy, and their lives are interesting and joyful. But as adults the citizens of Omelas gradually learn their city's dark secret: Their happiness depends on the suffering of a child who is compelled to remain in a filthy room underground, and they are not allowed to console or assist her/him. "It is the existence of the child, and their knowledge of its existence, that makes possible the nobility of their architecture, the poignancy of their music, the profundity of their science. It is because of the child that they are so gentle with children," Le Guin writes.

The majority of Omelas' residents continue to live with this knowledge, but from time to time one of them visits the child and does not return, but instead keeps walking and abandons the city. The story concludes: "They walk ahead into the darkness, and they do not come back. The place they go toward is a place even less imaginable to most of us than the city of happiness. I cannot describe it at all. It is possible that it does not exist. But they seem to know where they are going."

The IDF Spokesman's Office commented in response that the IDF "operates only against military targets, and takes a variety of precautions in order to avoid harm to noncombatants, including issuing warnings to the citizenry. In regard to arrests, any suspicion of a violation of orders or international law is investigated and addressed. In general, if there is a suspicion of untoward conduct on the part of a soldier, of a possible criminal nature, an investigation is opened by the Military Police Criminal Investigation Division."

Click the alert icon to follow topics:

 Palestinians  Israel war crimes  IDF  Gaza

Comments

SUBSCRIBERS JOIN THE CONVERSATION FIRST
Fast track approval of subscriber comments.

SUBSCRIBE

Already signed up? [LOG IN](#)



In the News



Ahead of His Testimony, Netanyahu's More Determined Than Ever on Taking Revenge



Israeli Father, Son Recruited by Iran to Collect Intelligence on IDF



Five Israelis Killed in Car Accident in Morocco



South African Jews Say New Government Offers More of the Same Hostility Toward Israel



'I'm Anti Being Scared': Israel's Most Fearless Cultural Event



Learn How to Optimize Your Home Solar System

© Paid by Sela Infrastructures LTD

ICYMI



In Lebanon, Residents Know the 'Day After' Is as Important as the Cease-fire With Israel



Ivanka Trump, Jared Kushner Pledge \$1 Million to UAE Chabad in Slain Rabbi's Memory



Review: 'The Bibi Files' Directly Links Netanyahu's Trial and Israel's Descent Into Chaos



Excavations of Early Synagogue by Black Sea Find Whole Jewish Neighborhood

Sheren Falah Saab

Rachel Fink

Etan Nechin

Ruth Schuster

What if Trump's America Actually Withdraws From NATO?

Israel's Fumbling Defense Minister Is the Gift That Keeps on Giving - to Netanyahu

'Inflating the Iranian Threat Is an Israeli Manipulation Meant to Justify the Occupation'

Annex, Baby, Annex: Why Israelis Will Soon Regret Their Glee Over Trump's Triumph

Alon Pinkas

Yossi Verter

Hilo Glazer

Dahlia Scheindlin

As Bedouin Israelis Are Kicked Off Their Land, They Wonder How Jews Can Live There

From Cruz to Rosen, Nine Senate Races Where the Jewish Vote Could Decide Who Wins

Israel's War on Hezbollah's Economic Empire: Human Trafficking to Drug-running Captagon

Thirty-three Orthodox Rabbis Endorse Kamala Harris a Day Before U.S. Presidential Election

Eden Solomon

Ben Samuels

Yossi Melman

Etan Nechin

[Subscribe](#) | [Contact us](#) | [Terms and conditions](#) | [Privacy policy](#) | [Cancellation of digital subscriptions](#) | [Editorial](#) | [Newsletters](#) | [Accessibility](#) | [Advertise on Haaretz.com](#) | [About Haaretz](#) | [Jobs](#)

[Load more](#)

Haaretz.com, the online English edition of Haaretz Newspaper in Israel, gives you breaking news, analyses and opinions about Israel, the Middle East and the Jewish World.
© Haaretz Daily Newspaper Ltd. All Rights Reserved