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Twilight Zone / The Children Of 5767

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It was a pretty quiet year, relatively speaking. Only 457 Palestinians and 10 Israelis were killed, according to the B'Tselem human rights organization, including the victims of Qassam rockets. Fewer casualties than in many previous years. However, it was still a terrible year: 92 Palestinian children were killed (fortunately, not a single Israeli child was killed by Palestinians, despite the Qassams). One-fifth of the Palestinians killed were children and teens - a disproportionate, almost unprecedented number. The Jewish year of 5767. Almost 100 children, who were alive and playing last New Year, didn't survive to see this one.

One year. Close to 8,000 kilometers were covered in the newspaper's small, armored Rover - not including the hundreds of kilometers in the old yellow Mercedes taxi belonging to Munir and Sa'id, our dedicated drivers in Gaza. This is how we celebrated the 40th anniversary of the occupation. No one can argue anymore that it's only a temporary, passing phenomenon. Israel is the occupation. The occupation is Israel.

We set out each week in the footsteps of the fighters, in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip, trying to document the deeds of Israel Defense Forces soldiers, Border Police officers, Shin Bet security service investigators and Civil Administration personnel - the mighty occupation army that leaves behind in its wake horrific killing and destruction, this year as every year, for four decades.

And this was the year of the children that were killed. We didn't get to all of their homes, only to some; homes of bereavement where parents weep bitterly over their children, who were climbing a fig tree in the yard, or sitting on a bench in the street, or preparing for an exam, or on their way home from school, or sleeping peacefully in the false security of their homes.

A few of them also threw a rock at an armored vehicle or touched a forbidden fence. All came under live fire, some of which was deliberately aimed at them, cutting them down in their

youth. From Mohammed (al-Zakh) to Mahmoud (al-Qarinawi), from the boy who was buried twice in Gaza to the boy who was buried in Israel. These are the stories of the children of 5767.

The first of them was buried twice. Abdullah al-Zakh identified half of the body of his son Mahmoud, in the morgue refrigerator of Shifa Hospital in Gaza, by the boy's belt and the socks on his feet. This was shortly before last Rosh Hashanah. The next day, when the Israel Defense Forces "successfully" completed Operation Locked Kindergarten, as it was called, leaving behind 22 dead and a razed neighborhood, and left Sajiyeh in Gaza, the bereaved father found the remaining parts of the body and brought them for a belated burial.

Mahmoud was 14 when he died. He was killed three days before the start of the school year. Thus we ushered in Rosh Hashanah 5767. In Shifa we saw children whose legs were amputated, who were paralyzed or on respirators. Families were killed in their sleep, or while riding on donkeys, or working in the fields. Operation Locked Kindergarten and Operation Summer Rains. Remember? Five children were killed in the first operation, with the dreadful name. For a week, the people of Sajiyeh lived in fear the likes of which Sderot residents have never experienced - not to belittle their anxiety, that is.

The day after Rosh Hashanah we traveled to Rafah. Dam Hamad, 14, had been killed in her sleep, in her mother's arms, by an Israeli rocket strike that sent a concrete pillar crashing down on her head. She was the only daughter of her paralyzed mother, her whole world. In the family's impoverished home in the Brazil neighborhood, at the edge of Rafah, we met the mother who lay in a heap in bed; everything she had in the world was gone. Outside, I remarked to the reporter from French television who accompanied me that this was one of those moments when I felt ashamed to be an Israeli. The next day he called and said: "They didn't broadcast what you said, for fear of the Jewish viewers in France."

Soon afterward we went back to Jerusalem to visit Maria Aman, the amazing little girl from Gaza, who lost nearly everyone in her life to a missile strike gone awry that wiped out her innocent family, including her mother, while riding in their car. Her devoted father Hamdi remains by her side. For a year and a half, she has been cared for at the wonderful Alyn Hospital, where she has learned to feed a parrot with her mouth and to operate her wheelchair using her chin. All the rest of her limbs are paralyzed. She is connected day and night to a respirator. Still, she is a cheerful and neatly groomed child whose father fears the day they might be sent back to Gaza.

For now, they remain in Israel. Many Israelis have devoted themselves to Maria and come to visit her regularly. A few weeks ago, broadcast journalist Leah Lior took her in her car to see the sea in Tel Aviv. It was a Saturday night, and the area was crowded with people out for a good time, but the girl in the wheelchair attracted attention. Some people recognized her and stopped to say hello and wish her well. Who knows? Maybe the pilot who fired the missile at her car happened to be passing by, too.

Not everyone has been fortunate enough to receive the treatment that Maria has had. In mid-November, a few days after the bombardment of Beit Hanoun - remember that? - we arrived in the battered and bleeding town: 22 killed in a moment, 11 shells dropped on a densely packed town. Islam, 14, sat there dressed in black, grieving for her eight relatives that had been killed, including her mother and grandmother. Those disabled by this bombardment didn't get to go to Alyn.

Two days before the shelling of Beit Hanoun, our forces also fired a missile that hit the minibus transporting children to the Indira Gandhi kindergarten in Beit Lahia. Two kids, passersby, were killed on the spot. The teacher, Najwa Khalif, died a few days later. She was wounded in clear view of her 20 small pupils, who were sitting in the minibus. After her death, the children drew a picture: a row of children lying bleeding, their teacher in the front, and an Israeli plane bombing them. At the Indira Gandhi kindergarten, we had to bid good-bye to Gaza, too: Since then, we haven't been able to cross into the Strip.

But the children have come to us. In November, 31 children were killed in Gaza. One of them, Ayman al-Mahdi, died in Sheba Medical Center at Tel Hashomer, where he had been rushed in grave condition. Only his uncle was permitted to stay with him during his final days. A fifth-grader, Ayman had been sitting with friends on a bench on a street in Jabalya, right by his school. A bullet fired from a tank struck him. He was just 10 years old.

IDF troops killed children in the West Bank, too. Jamil Jabaji, a boy who tended horses in the new Askar refugee camp, was shot in the head. He was 14 when he was killed, last December. He and his friends were throwing rocks at the armored vehicle that passed by the camp, located near Nablus. The driver provoked the children, slowing down and speeding up, slowing down and speeding up, until finally a soldier got out, aimed at the boy's head and fired. Jamil's horses were left in their stable, and his family was left to mourn.

And what did 16-year-old Taha al-Jawi do to get himself killed? The IDF claimed that he tried to sabotage the barbed-wire fence surrounding the abandoned Atarot airport; his friends said he was just playing soccer and had gone to chase after the ball. Whatever the circumstances, the response from the soldiers was quick and decisive: a bullet in the leg that caused him to bleed to death, lying in a muddy ditch by the side of the road. Not a word of regret, not a word of condemnation from the IDF spokesman, when we asked for a comment. Live fire directed at unarmed children who weren't endangering anyone, with no prior warning.

Abir Aramin was even younger; she was just 11. The daughter of an activist in the Combatants for Peace organization, in January she left her school in Anata and was on the way to buy candy in a little shop. She was fired upon from a Border Police vehicle. Bassam, her father, told us back then with bloodshot eyes and in a strangled voice: "I told myself that I don't want to take revenge. Revenge will be for this 'hero,' who was so 'threatened' by my daughter that he shot and killed her, to stand trial for it." But just a few days ago the authorities announced that the case was being closed: The Border Police apparently acted appropriately.

"I'm not going to exploit my daughter's blood for political purposes. This is a human outcry. I'm not going to lose my mind just because I lost my heart," the grieving father, who has many Israeli friends, also told us.

In Nablus, we documented the use of children as human shields - the use of the so-called "neighbor procedure" - involving an 11-year-old girl, a 12-year-old boy and a 15-year-old boy. So what if the High Court of Justice has outlawed it? We also recorded the story of the death of baby Khaled, whose parents, Sana and Daoud Fakhri, tried to rush him to the hospital in the middle of the night, a time when Palestinian babies apparently mustn't get sick: The baby died at the checkpoint.

In Kafr al-Shuhada (the "martyrs' village") south of Jenin, in March, 15-year-old Ahmed Asasa

was fleeing from soldiers who had entered the village. A sniper's bullet caught him in the neck.

Bushra Bargis hadn't even left her home. In late April she was studying for a big test, notebooks in hand, pacing around her room in the Jenin refugee camp in the early evening, when a sniper shot her in the forehead from quite far away. Her bloodstained notebooks bore witness to her final moments.

And what about the unborn babies? They weren't safe either. A bullet in the back of Maha Qatuni, a woman who was seven months pregnant and got up during the night to protect her children in their home, struck her fetus in the womb, shattering its head. The wounded mother lay in the Rafidiya Hospital in Nablus, hooked up to numerous tubes. She was going to name the baby Daoud. Does killing a fetus count as murder? And how "old" was the deceased? He was certainly the youngest of the many children Israel killed in the past year.

Happy New Year.

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