Matti Friedman *: My Phone Says 2023. It Feels Like 1948.

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This mother and her family flee from a square block of Jewish-occupied buildings in the Jewish District of Jerusalem, which were blasted to rubble on February 22, 1948. (Bettmann via Getty Images)

My smartphone says it's October 2023, but in Israel it feels like 1948.

That was the year this country was established as 600,000 Jews fought the combined might of the Arab world three years after the genocide in Europe. You can still feel that war in the air and underbrush of Kibbutz Mishmar Ha'emek in northern Israel, where I traveled this week, passing trucks carrying tanks and armored bulldozers south toward the battle zone around Gaza.

For Israelis, the name Mishmar Ha'emek evokes 1948—an equivalent of Valley Forge, perhaps, or Gettysburg. The kibbutz is famous for holding out against the superior forces of the Arab Liberation Army in April 1948, helping create the fighting ethos of Israel's military and the Zionist principle that Jews will never again abandon their homes. On one edge of the kibbutz is a historic site commemorating the Palmach, the militia that helped decide the battle. Amid the trees and bushes of the peaceful cemetery

here are graves of people like Moshe Formansky, 41, and Rafael Altberg, 21, killed 75 years ago in the war that created a Jewish state, and then never really ended.

I'd come here not to revisit history, but to speak to members of another kibbutz, Nahal Oz, on the Gaza border a few hours' drive to the south—those members, that is, who weren't killed or kidnapped by Hamas in the massacre of October 7. The evacuees have relocated here, and the locals are doing their best to house and entertain them. When I arrived, the children of Nahal Oz were indoors, squealing at a snake show arranged by volunteers. Outside, their hollow-eyed parents walked the paths. Across a lawn, a few dozen people sat shiva for a friend, Ilan Fiorentino, killed in the assault.

At first I thought the historical reference for the current horror in Israel would be the Yom Kippur War, which began 50 years earlier almost to the day, on October 6, 1973. In that war Israel was surprised by Egypt and Syria on a Jewish holiday, as was the case last week. But the year that keeps cropping up is 1948.

The slaughter and arson in Nahal Oz and elsewhere, one evacuee told me, was an attempt to "do to us what they think we did to them in 1948"—a reference to the flight of Palestinian refugees from territories that became our state. Amir Tibon, a colleague from the newspaper *Haaretz*, who was trapped with his wife and children in their home as Hamas soldiers tried to break in and kill them, wrote that the initial defense of the kibbutz by a handful of Border Police troops facing dozens of Hamas fighters was "the few against the many, like 1948."

Many of the Palestinian refugees of the Arab defeat of 1948, known in Arabic as the *Nakba*, or catastrophe, ended up in the Gaza Strip, ruled first by Egypt, then by Israel, and then by Hamas. The Jewish refugees who created Israel built a society worth living in, but nothing similar emerged for the Arab refugees of Gaza, and they became the grandparents and great-grandparents of the murderers and rapists who descended on Nahal Oz and its environs last week. They found our army asleep behind high-tech fences and screens. The Palestinians slaughtered more than 1,200 Jewish civilians in cold blood, killed about 300 soldiers, and took 200 more Israelis hostage, including children, senior citizens, and entire families, recording scenes of medieval barbarism on their GoPros.

The journalist Shimrit Meir, one of Israel's sharpest observers of the Arab world, commented several days ago that the Hamas operation was greeted in Gaza with "unprecedented euphoria" at "the greatest Palestinian breakthrough since 1948." By the end of the week, however, with civilians in Gaza fleeing their homes amid Israeli air strikes and a looming ground invasion, that sentiment was replaced by the dawning fear of "a new *Nakba*"—meaning that 1948 was coming again.

When the Hamas men crossed the border, they removed any lingering pretense about the issue at stake—not a withdrawal to the 1967 borders, not a state alongside Israel, not even the existence of Israel, but the existence of Israelis. This was the "war of extermination and momentous massacre" of which the Arab League secretary-general, Abdul Rahman Azzam, warned in the Arab invasion of 1948, a vision embraced in Hamas's founding charter.

Many moderate Israelis never wanted to see this, but now they have. I've always hoped for a compromise with the Palestinians, and would make any concession if I thought it would bring Israel peace. But if our lives and homes are in danger, I, like the vast majority of citizens of all political stripes, will do anything necessary to remove the threat. Israelis are shocked and grieving, but they're also furious and resolute in a way I've rarely seen. That's the spirit of the army now massing on the Gaza border. In 1948, the Arab side underestimated the Jews and reaped a catastrophe. Hamas seems to think it will be different this time. We'll see.

Jewish soldiers patrol the road to Tel Aviv in 1948. (via Getty Images)

Among the evacuees from Nahal Oz I met Sefi Magen, 54, who told me his story with disbelief and black humor. When the terrorists surged through the fence into the kibbutz, he ran to the second floor of his house and hid in the family's safe room, a unique architectural feature constructed in Israeli homes to withstand rocket fire. He was with his wife and two of their children, ages 19 and 15. The Hamas gunmen were coming up the stairs—he heard their hands scrape on the metal banister, he said, and when they approached the door, he smelled their sweat.

Tragically for many of last Saturday's victims, the doors of safe rooms can't be locked. Magen was lucky. The Palestinians wrestled with the door handle, but he somehow managed to hold it down from inside. Eventually they gave up and went to kill his neighbors.

The homes of Nahal Oz abut the border, but residents were always reassured that they'd be protected by the army's defenses—not just the garrison in a nearby outpost, but the electronic sensors, cameras, drones, and anti-tunnel fortifications of which Israel had been so proud. All of this turned out to be, Magen said, "an illusion." It was 10 hours before troops arrived and fought house-to-house to save them. In other communities it took twice as long. A recurring theme in the accounts from Nahal Oz and elsewhere is that there was no state of Israel that day—as if it were 1948 again.

“Where is the state?” a prominent reporter here inveighed this week, trying to figure out why financial aid wasn’t reaching victims. The Welfare Ministry was responsible, he wrote, but the ministry “had disappeared.” Five days after the attack, a representative of the families of hostages told a radio station that they’d received no official information or communication: “Where the hostages are concerned, there’s no state.”

This is due in part simply to the scale: nothing like this has ever happened here and the government is overwhelmed. But it’s also true that our institutions, civil service, and society have been gravely damaged in the past year by the descent of the prime minister, Benjamin Netanyahu, into an embrace of the far-right and rhetorical war against “elites,” including law enforcement, the air force, intelligence services, and military command.

Just a few weeks ago, the country was embroiled in a debate about the Declaration of Independence of 1948, our society’s founding contract, which commits Israel to democratic values like granting “complete equality of social and political rights to all inhabitants irrespective of religion, race, or sex.” Netanyahu’s people were dismissing the document as one lacking any legal significance, drafted by people “who weren’t elected,” as one of their lawyers argued in court. The fragile consensus constructed here after 1948 was fraying before the war.

Into this leadership vacuum has now come Israel’s energetic civil society—more army volunteers than the quartermasters can equip, civilian armies mobilized on WhatsApp to house and feed the displaced. My sister-in-law has two sons and a daughter now called up to combat units. My neighbor is in uniform as an army psychologist. Two graying friends from my own infantry platoon, which officially aged out of reserve service a few years ago, have volunteered nonetheless and are posted in the south.

The hundreds of videos of the massacre and the constant rocket fire have created a sense that the entire country is the front line, as in 1948, and that we aren’t safe even in our homes. Neighbors have organized armed patrols in urban streets, and many peaceful citizens are requesting gun permits (including me).

In 1948, the war to create Israel cost the lives of 6,000 Jews, a full percentage of the Jewish population. Grief touched nearly every family. The numbers now are smaller, but they happened not in the course of a year but in one day, and were mostly innocent civilians. The sense of pervasive death is like nothing I’ve seen in three decades of living and reporting here. I took my kids to the funeral of someone they knew. I had to explain that another kid they know, Hersh Goldberg-Polin, was at a music festival when terrorists blew off his arm and kidnapped him to Gaza. This is almost every Israeli family right now.

The effect of all this on our future is hard to predict. Our army will prevail in the short term. But after that we’ll need new leadership and ideas—old ones like “land for peace” are now untenable, but so are settler fantasies of eternal occupation of the West Bank, and so is perpetual war. Israel has succeeded against very long odds and can do so again, but this is an existential moment. As in 1948, we’ll either be reborn or fall apart.

The name of Kibbutz Nahal Oz, whose survivors and evacuees I interviewed, is linked in Israeli history with one of the most important texts from the state’s early years—an Israeli ethos delivered by Moshe Dayan, the army’s chief of staff, in the form of a brief, stark eulogy. It’s a chilling read this week.

By the time the 40-year-old general showed up on April 30, 1956, a black patch over the eye he lost fighting Vichy forces in World War II, the kibbutz had existed for three years at a remote and dangerous location on the armistice line with Gaza. The day before, a young farmer named Roi Rothberg had been killed by Palestinians in the fields, his body mutilated. What became known as the Nahal Oz eulogy was given at his grave.

Brigadier General Moshe Dayan, the Israel Army Chief of Staff is shown receiving bread on the noon "chow line" along with other volunteers who answered the Government's appeal to help build up defenses along the Gaza Strip. (via Getty Images)

"Yesterday morning Roi was murdered," Dayan said. "He was blinded by the stillness of the spring morning, and didn't see the killers waiting for him by the furrow." The eulogy is memorable not just for Dayan's literary skill, only partially evident in the English translation, but for the way he portrayed Palestinian nationalism as irreconcilable with Jewish survival—but also morally valid and worthy of empathy.

For eight years since 1948, Dayan said, "they have been sitting in the refugee camps in Gaza, watching us transform the lands and the villages where they and their fathers dwelt into our inheritance." Citizens of the new Jewish state needed to understand this and never forget it.

"It's not from the Arabs of Gaza that we must demand a reckoning for Roi's blood," he said, "but from ourselves. How did we keep from looking honestly at our fate to see, in all its cruelty, the destiny of our generation? Did we forget that this group of young people who live at Nahal Oz bears the heavy gates of Gaza on its shoulders—gates beyond which crowd hundreds of thousands of eyes and hands praying for our hour of weakness so they can tear us to shreds? Have we forgotten?"

“Millions of Jews who were destroyed because they had no land are watching us from the ashes of the history of Israel, commanding us to settle and create a land for our people,” Dayan said that day in 1956. “But beyond the furrow of the border a sea of hate and vengeance is rising, waiting for the day when the quiet dulls our readiness, when we listen to the ambassadors of hypocrisy calling on us to lay down our arms.”

At the time Dayan delivered his eulogy, 1948 was a recent memory. What might he say in 2023 about how much has changed, or how little? The victim, he said in the eulogy’s final line, “was blinded by the light in his heart, and didn’t see the gleam of the knife.” Neither did we.

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