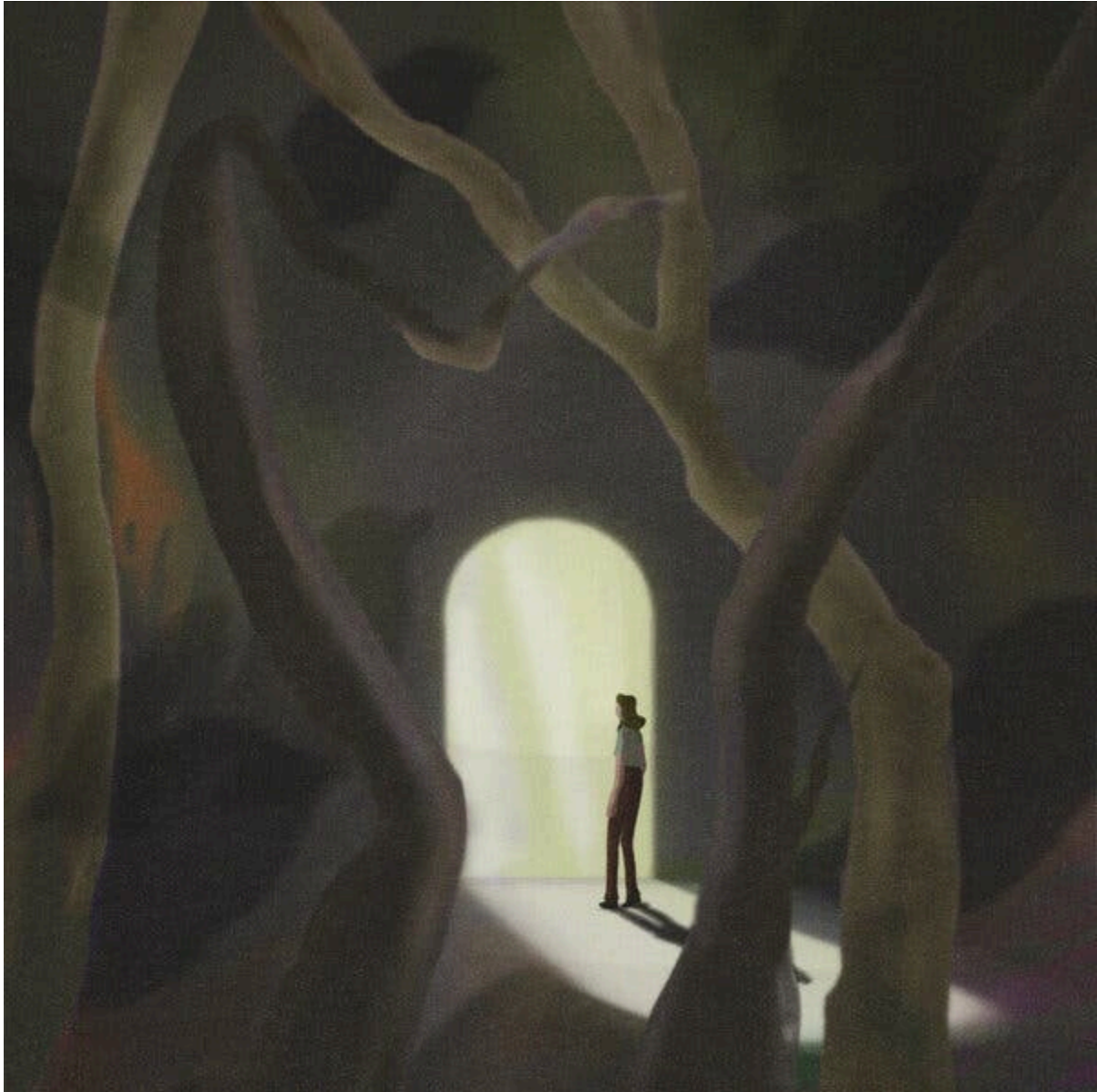


OPINION

GUEST ESSAY

Choosing Rebirth Over Revenge After My Release From Gaza

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Credit...Haley Jiang

By Liat Atzili

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In Israel, the Shoah, or Holocaust, has often been spoken of in recent years alongside tekumah, meaning rebirth, after the survivor generation chose to rebuild a nation rather than lose itself to grief and vengeance. Molded by that spirit, Israel became a refuge for Jews in danger the world over, and has healed its relationships with Germany and other nations that perpetrated or enabled the Holocaust.

I work at Israel's national [Holocaust remembrance center, Yad Vashem](#), where I teach Israeli 12th graders about the Shoah and prepare them for school trips to Poland. As the last remaining members of the survivor generation dwindled among us in recent years, my focus has been on how best to teach students about the Shoah when the eyewitnesses are gone.

While preserving the memory of the horrors and losses the Shoah wrought remains important both for young Israelis and for children around the world, the concept of tekumah is also a central component of Holocaust education. Tekumah provides us with the vital life lesson of how to move on with dignity and purpose after experiencing a tragedy, and it is perhaps the most important gift that the survivors gave us.

On Oct. 7, the Jewish people suffered our greatest tragedy since the Holocaust. That tragedy came to my own home in Kibbutz Nir Oz, which was burned down as I was taken to Gaza as a hostage. I was held in a home with Gazans and Hamas fighters, with no news of the outside world. Terrified, alone and unsure of the fate of my family, I kept myself going for nearly two months, promising myself I wouldn't miss the graduation ceremony of the class I teach and imagining reuniting with my husband, Aviv, and our three children. I am a dual citizen of Israel and the United States, and I was released after 54 days thanks in large part to the intervention of President Biden and Secretary of State Antony Blinken. My children, thankfully, survived — one after terrifying hours in hiding, one by sheer luck of having been elsewhere that day, one who staved off the attackers by holding the door of a safe room closed. But my home of 30 years was burned beyond recognition, and the home of my heart — my husband, Aviv — was among the 1,200 killed by Hamas in Israel on that terrible October day. So immense was the destruction, I found that terrorists had even killed my dog, Revi.

When I got out of Gaza, I discovered there was no Kibbutz Nir Oz to return to. I am living in what is called a "temporary arrangement" apartment in the southern city of Kiryat Gat; as of now I can stay here for three years, perhaps longer. My children are of an age when they are leaving the nest, and I am experiencing that bittersweet rite of passage as a new widow, without a home.

Now is the time for the world to demand and secure the release of the remaining hostages in Gaza. I want to be reunited with my neighbors. Then will come the time for mourning what we have lost.

Neither of these missions ends our work. Beyond the horizon of our pain, we must recommit ourselves to tekumah with the same determined optimism of the Holocaust survivor generation.

I see no alternative. Without tekumah, we will only sink further into the cycle of mutual anger and victimhood that has plagued our relationship with the Palestinians for too long. That is not the approach that the survivor generation chose, and in their spirit I do not seek revenge for what I have been through. I am humbled by how my fellow Israelis put their lives at risk to fight my kidnappers, but I do not feel any catharsis in seeing the destruction of Gaza. Instead, I want to focus on building a better future for my three children — and for the children of Gaza.

After the Holocaust, a new generation rose up in Israel, focused not on the past but instead on making the future bloom. Tekumah for Israel after this war will mean rebuilding our national identity and moving past the divisive politics that marked the year leading up to Oct. 7. Our adversaries may be dangerous, but no one has the power to destroy our country more than we do ourselves.

But for me tekumah is not only about Jewish lives, it's also about all those lives that shattered on Oct. 7 and after — including those of my non-Jewish neighbors, Israeli citizens, who have been caught up in the battles ever since. It also means working toward a rebirth for Gaza. While I cannot influence the choices that Gazans will make for themselves, I hope those responsible for launching this war are replaced with people who want a better future alongside Israel. After seeing the investment Hamas made in its underground city, it is easy to understand that so much was squandered in Gaza over the past 18 years. Gazan citizens, too, deserve a rebirth, one that imagines a future not of combat but of shared existence.

One more arena in which tekumah is sorely needed is in the diaspora. Antisemitism, which is as old as Western society, these days seems to seep into much of the public discourse around Judaism, Jewish people and Israel. I am not blind to my country's failings, but it is deeply troubling how this conflict, which was started in the most violent way by Hamas, has contributed to a rise in violent antisemitic acts. Tekumah in the diaspora would allow for the full expression of Jewish life without fear, both in Israel and around the world.

If the young people among the decimated European Jewish population were able to face the future with optimism after the Holocaust, we, too, can find the strength to repair what has been broken.

Liat Atzili is a high school teacher in Kiryat Gat, Israel, and an educator at Yad Vashem, Israel's national Holocaust museum.

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