

## Testimony of October 7<sup>th</sup>, 2023

### Danielle Rubin from Netivot and teacher in Sderot

We woke up on Shabbat, like so many others, at 6:30 – to the sounds of explosions and booms, sounds we are accustomed to every once in a while, unfortunately. My 11 yr old son ran in telling me to close the window in our shelter, and I got up to do it just as the first siren started. My husband and 5 children, ages 15, 13, 11, 7 and 4, and our dog, all got in the shelter and waited. My husband Natan decided to go to the synagogue – it's right around the corner – to hear if anyone knew of any news. I thought that the siren maybe was a one-time occurrence, but pretty soon after my husband left the explosions in the distance continued. I told the kids we wouldn't be going to the synagogue because it's unsafe, and they were disappointed – they really wanted to celebrate simchat torah with our community.

About 10 minutes after my husband left he suddenly came home, locked the door, locked the kitchen windows, went to lock the patio and I asked him what's going on, he told me to come quietly and whispered to me that there had been an infiltration and there were terrorists in the area. He came home to tell me to lock up and make sure no one left, he took his gun and went back out to the synagogue to stand guard.

I told the kids not to leave the house but didn't say why, only that it's dangerous. By 7:30 the sirens started again and went on for 4 hours straight, missiles firing and Iron Dome launching, and two of my kids already started asking when can we leave and go drive to our grandparents who live in the Tel Aviv area..

All of a sudden my daughter says – someone's shooting! –and I hear a sound of shooting – this was a new sound to us, it wasn't missiles or iron dome or airplanes bombing – it was loud rhythmic shots, which sounded like they were coming from right outside our house! I realized it was machine guns but didn't see anyone shooting around our house from the windows. And all the while the sirens continuing and the missiles are landing and airplanes and helicopters flying like crazy. I understood this was something different, something big and scary, but stayed calm, getting the kids breakfast in the shelter and preparing the house.

Natan came home and said we had a visitor – a man had arrived in the synagogue with the craziest story. He came in the house, and was short of breath, had this dazed look in his eyes. We brought him in and he sat down and said he was at a festival near Re'im – a kibutz 15 km west of Netivot. He said that something happened – he wasn't really sure, there were explosions and people shooting and he got in his car and some 10 other people squeezed in also and he just started driving like crazy. He said people started jumping on the roof of his car and he kept driving, not knowing where he was going, all along there's shooting and booms and he drove until he came to some place where there were houses and he suddenly realized that there were still sirens so he stopped his car and ran for shelter and that's when he met Natan outside.

Now we really didn't understand what was happening. Michel – that was his name - came to sit with us in our shelter and started asking if he could stay and maybe play with the little kids a bit – and I told him of course he's not going anywhere and he's our guest for the day, he'll wash up and eat and calm down and we'll let him go only when it's safe to leave. (Of course, nobody managed to eat anything that day.)

By now Natan also let me know that the shooting we heard came from the highway right behind our house – we live on the outskirts of Netivot – and apparently there had been a chase and the local police had managed to neutralize terrorists who tried to enter the city. Michel remembered seeing cars on the side of the highway pierced with bullets and burnt. At this point I turned on my phone, I had to understand what was happening and if there were any instructions from city officials or the Home Front Command as to how we were supposed to act. I turned on my phone and was shocked. It made absolutely no sense at all. I also started piecing together what Michel, our guest had gone through, and realized that he was in such trauma that he didn't fully understand what he saw. All this as the sirens are wailing and we start recognizing huge military transportation helicopters flying over us – and at that point I understand that there are lots of people killed and injured. We could see from our window soldiers flooding the area, and military vehicles started driving past – armoured vehicles and tanks and so many emergency vehicles. It was a mess, it was terrifying, our older kids started understanding the magnitude and our 11 year old was shaking, he wouldn't leave the room, he just wanted the holiday to end and to get out of the area. But I told him we wouldn't be able to leave if there was so much bombing and terrorists running around. There were a few missiles that landed in our area, thank god nobody was injured, but a fire started across the highway from one of the missiles and it took ages till the fire was extinguished – there weren't any available firefighters to take care of it.

There was this horrible horrible sense of doom, as I checked the news there were more and more stories that made no sense – hostages in Beeri and Sderot? I opened my whatsapp shaking – I teach at a Sderot high school – and I start reading messages my students wrote in our group that morning: “They are shooting people in the streets” “they took over the police station” “where is the army??” and I felt so helpless, so far away, so unable to do anything. So I texted them that I'm thinking of them and that I'm here if anyone wants to talk and calm down, and that they should stay safe. A message that will be repeated to countless others over the next 5 days.

As the day wore on, and we were trying to comfort Michel and be with him, pictures and movies from the massacre at the Nova festival started coming in and we heard the first news of abductions, Michel was devastated. He left us that night and made it home safely to his family, but knowing that so many of his friends and people he had danced with hours before – didn't get to theirs.

We decided to stay in Netivot that night and wait till it was safer to travel, though our son Dvir was not well. We had been to therapy with him about three years ago after noticing a change in his behavior because of the security situation and felt that he had made significant progress over time. Though he was clearly on the verge of an anxiety attack, I didn't want to travel at night, when there was so much uncertainty about what was happening. He finally fell asleep.

I was in touch with a good friend from Kibbutz Beeri, texting him every once in a while how are they doing, and he answered that they are in their shelter, waiting for the IDF to evacuate them. Holding up. I had no idea what was going on there and he didn't elaborate. I thought there were terrorists at the entrance to their kibbutz, like we had in Netivot – who could imagine that at that time they were going house by house, burning houses down, shooting at parents, violating bodies, and kidnapping those poor children into trucks? This wasn't something I would think of in my worst nightmares, it couldn't exist.

At a certain point, at 11pm, I asked if he's out yet and I got no answer. I was panicking. My kids were all asleep in the sheltered room, and I was following the news stations frantically and checking with different friends what they heard, and I couldn't sleep and finally at 4:30am he wrote that he was on his way to Netivot. Apparently Home Front Command had decided to transport people from Be'eri and Erez to Netivot as an initial stop to regroup, calm down and plan the next step in a safer environment. I jumped into the car, grabbed a few things and drove to the large sports center where they set up base. When I got there, I couldn't believe what I saw, dozens of people displaced, people in their slippers who ran away with nothing.. families trying to understand who was there, and who was missing. Trying to uncover what happened first, what next... I told the night shift volunteers to go home and with a bunch of new volunteers we started walking around to see what people needed: batteries for a hearing aid, sleeping pills, diapers and wipes and chargers for their phones, but most of all what I kept hearing was people crying that they wanted to go home. When my friend finally arrived safely with his wife and two daughters, he told me there was no more home to go back to. They burned the kibbutz.

As the refugees from Beeri started departing towards their next stop – the Dead Sea – we saw 4 trucks pull into the parking lot, it was early morning and still dark so I didn't realize at first that there were people in these trucks. We ran towards them and I couldn't help but shudder at the reference of seeing loads of people shut up in these military trucks... we helped them down and into the gym where there were mattresses and blankets waiting for them, some refreshments and a place to wash up. And then began the horrible, painful process where they start whispering between them who got out, who not yet.. it was awful. The stories they told, the atrocities they went through.. we sat there listening, we went around getting supplies that people were missing and just trying to make this stop as peaceful and simple for them as possible, as they were trying to figure out where they were going. They knew that the fighting was still going on in the kibbutz and that many families were still there. As I left them once they were on their way to Shefayim, I got in my car to get my family organized for our own departure, and for the first time in those 28 hours, I cried. I let it all out, all the horrors I heard and all the fears and all the magnitude of this event that I just happened to get glimpses of from my patio window, or from meeting Michel, and the refugees from Beeri and Kfar Azza. I cried and I cried, and then I walked into my house to discover that my husband had too been drafted. We packed the kids up and are now waiting, far from our home, for when it will be safe to return there. So grateful to be together, and so grateful that we have a home to return to.