

The First Silence

Reflections from the First Days of War

◆ Personal testimonies, blocked words, grief before writing.

Upon reading recent messages from Northwestern University President Schill, the UN, and others, I feel compelled to respond. With this letter, I would like to share a few of my thoughts and feelings.

I've been living in Israel for the past few months since retiring from Northwestern University this past summer. Sirens here are automatically activated when a barrage of rockets approaches. Their sound strikes fear into the soul — a visceral reaction, instant and unshakable.

The first memory that came to me was of hearing a siren in Israel during the Yom Kippur War, on October 6, 1973. Back then, I was also celebrating the Jewish holidays, as were Jews across Israel and around the world. But the fear I feel now is far more intense. Then, I was a child. Now, I understand what is truly at stake.

It is very easy to judge others without “walking in their shoes.” Some of the messages I've read — especially from academic institutions — are deeply troubling. They are written by people who are either blind or deliberately misinformed. To understand what is happening here, one must live here. One must witness not only the events, but the emotions — the grief, the resilience, the terror, and the strength. We are fighting not out of hate, but for our land, our people, and our very existence.

The principle of “freedom of speech on campus” must not be twisted to justify barbarism or acts of inhumanity. Doing so is both cowardly and dishonest.

Take, for example, The Rock at Northwestern — a well-known site for student expression. I don't object to its use for political statements. But when I saw “Free Palestine” painted there, I stopped to ask nearby students what it meant to them.

Their answers:

“I don't know. I'm here to support my friends.”

“We want to free Palestine from Israeli aggression.”

Their vague responses echoed a famous phrase from Vladimir Lenin — one I choose not to repeat here. I said nothing and walked away. At that time, I was under contract and had already been threatened for expressing my opinions. I didn't want to risk my job.

But today, as an Associate Professor of Instruction, Emerita, of Northwestern University, I am no longer constrained by silence. I speak freely — and truthfully.

The message should not be “Free Palestine” — it should be:
Free Palestine from Hamas, from Hezbollah, from ISIS, from Islamic Jihad.

These groups exploit the Palestinian people. They use them as political pawns and human shields. The aid sent to help them is diverted — not toward schools, hospitals, or jobs — but toward building weapons, tunnels, and terror.

Some may want to silence me, but you cannot.

Gazans come to Israel for medical care, for education, and for work. Our universities welcome them — not as enemies, but as students. Our cities display street names in Arabic, Hebrew, and English. Israel did not initiate the attack on October 7.

Where are the other Arab countries?
Where are their open borders?
Where are their job offers, healthcare services, or safe havens?

They are silent. Israel is not.

To those who preach “compassion” and “care for one another” — I agree. But compassion does not mean releasing war criminals without justice. Compassion does not mean calling for a ceasefire that leaves victims unprotected and perpetrators unaccountable.

You cannot claim to mourn the dead while empowering their murderers.

To those who pressure us to stop defending ourselves — understand this:
A forced ceasefire under these conditions is not peace.
It is surrender.
And it is a betrayal of the values you claim to uphold.

This is not the silence of peace. This is the silence before the scream.
And I will not be silent.

“There are silences more powerful than screams. And flames that burn without ash — only memory.” — Rifka Epstein

