Who Gets to Tell Israel's Story of October 7?

By Rifka Epstein

Memory, narrative, and what remains outside the frame

"Help us to game the algorithm. If you don't do that, the terrorists win."

With that bit of dark humor, Gadi Taub and Michael Doran ended a recent episode of their *Israel Update* podcast, *Standing Ovation.* Their conversation covers much more, but one part stayed with me in particular: their discussion of ***NAZA***, the controversial documentary by Israeli filmmakers Yuval Abraham and Rachel Szor. I am not setting out here to review the film itself. Rather, I want to reflect on the questions Taub and Doran's conversation left me thinking about: narrative, memory, context, and who gets to tell the story of October 7.

But it was not their closing line that stayed with me.

It was the questions their conversation raised.

At first glance, the controversy surrounding *NAZA* is about a documentary: its anonymous testimony, its allegations concerning Israeli conduct in Gaza, the filmmakers' choices, and the international reception the film has received.

But as I listened to Taub and Doran, I found myself thinking about something much larger.

Who gets to tell the story of a war?

Who determines where that story begins?

Whose testimony becomes authoritative?

What context is considered essential—and what is left outside the frame?

And what happens when a film created within Israel travels beyond Israel and becomes, for audiences thousands of miles away, one of the lenses through which they understand what happened here?

Then I Started Remembering

As I listened to Taub and Doran, however, I stopped thinking only about documentaries, politics and competing narratives.

I was remembering.

I remembered the sirens.

I remembered running to the shelter—sometimes having to stop a conversation midway because another siren was sounding.

I remembered making sandwiches for soldiers.

I remembered bringing clothes and food to people, including entire families, who had lost everything after October 7.

I remembered watching Israelis reach out to one another in countless ways—ordinary people suddenly doing extraordinary things because somebody needed them.

And I remember my tears as I watched hostages finally returning home from the unimaginable horror of captivity—their faces carrying experiences that those of us watching could never fully comprehend.

For me, October 7 and everything that followed are not an abstract political discussion.

They are memories.

They have sounds—the sirens.

They have movement—running to a shelter.

They have hands—making sandwiches, packing clothes, carrying food.

They have faces—the families who had lost everything, the soldiers we wanted to help, and the hostages we waited and prayed to see come home.

They contain fear and tears.

But they also contain solidarity, generosity, courage and extraordinary acts of kindness.

And that is where my reaction to *NAZA* becomes deeply personal.

What Does the Camera Leave Outside the Frame?

A documentary can show us something real.

But a documentary is never reality in its entirety.

Someone decides where to point the camera.

Someone decides whom to interview.

Someone decides which testimony to include.

Someone decides which images precede which other images.

Someone decides where the story begins—and where it ends.

A camera has a frame.

And everything outside that frame still exists.

This does not mean that uncomfortable testimony should be ignored. Nor does it mean that criticism should be silenced simply because it is painful. Serious allegations deserve serious examination.

But context matters too.

And this is where the anonymous testimony at the center of *NAZA* raises difficult questions for me. Anonymity can sometimes be necessary to protect a source. At the same time, it makes it harder for an audience to evaluate who is speaking, what that person directly witnessed, how representative the experience was, and what evidence supports the account.

Those questions become especially consequential when a documentary travels internationally and is received by audiences who may know very little about Israeli society or about what Israelis experienced beginning on October 7.

Where Were the Storytellers?

As I listened to *Standing Ovation*, I found myself asking questions not only about the testimony in the film, but about the people behind the camera.

Where were they on October 7?

Did they serve in the IDF?

What did they witness personally?

What did they experience?

In the months that followed, did they encounter the enormous civilian mobilization taking place across Israel?

Did they see people helping displaced families?

Did they encounter volunteers working on farms?

Did they see Israelis preparing food and supplies for soldiers?

Did they spend time with families waiting desperately for news of loved ones held hostage in Gaza?

And I keep returning to one question:

How did those experiences—or their absence—shape the lens through which they chose to tell this story?

These questions do not determine whether the claims made in *NAZA* are true or false. Evidence must be evaluated on its own merits.

But understanding the storyteller matters because **every storyteller has a vantage point—including me.**

I write these words not as a detached observer.

I write them as someone who heard those sirens.

Someone who ran to that shelter.

Someone who made those sandwiches.

Someone who carried clothes and food to families who had lost everything.

Someone who cried watching hostages come home.

That is part of *my* frame.

And recognizing that makes me even more conscious of the frames through which other people tell this story.

When an Israeli Story Travels Abroad

Taub and Doran raise another uncomfortable question: what happens when criticism produced inside Israel enters a very different international environment?

Inside Israel, disagreement is hardly unusual. Israelis argue—passionately, publicly and constantly—about governments, military decisions, responsibility, morality and the future of the country.

But once an Israeli film enters an international festival, newspaper, university or social-media ecosystem, its context can change.

An internal Israeli argument may be received elsewhere not as one voice within a fiercely contested national conversation, but as authoritative testimony about Israel itself.

That difference deserves attention.

Not because Israeli filmmakers should refrain from criticizing their country.

But because audiences should understand **what they are watching, whose perspective it represents, what evidence supports its claims, and what other perspectives may remain outside the frame.**

The Responsibility of Telling a Story

Perhaps this is ultimately what *Standing Ovation* left me thinking about.

Storytelling carries power.

Documentaries carry power.

Images carry power.

And stories about war—especially while wounds remain so painfully open—carry an enormous responsibility.

The responsibility is not to produce a flattering portrait.

Nor is it to protect viewers from uncomfortable facts.

It is something more demanding:

to pursue truth while remembering that no single camera contains the entire landscape.

October 7 has many stories.

The murdered.

The kidnapped.

The survivors.

The soldiers.

The displaced families.

The volunteers.

The farmers.

The people who cooked.

The people who drove supplies across the country.

The families who waited.

The people who protested.

The people who disagreed.

The people who prayed.

The people who ran to shelters when the sirens sounded.

And yes, the Palestinians whose experiences are part of this terrible war as well.

No documentary can contain all of those stories.

But perhaps every documentary should make us ask:

What am I seeing?

Who is showing it to me?

What evidence supports what I am being told?

And—

What might still be outside the frame?

Because sometimes what remains outside the frame is not peripheral to the story.

Sometimes it is part of the story we most need to remember.

