

Back from the Abyss — Carried, Not Crowned

The Silent Return of Israel's Daughters

They returned with no medals. Only scars, silence, and the weight of what no one should ever see... or endure.

By Rifka Epstein[©]

There are moments too heavy for language.

The days between October 7 and the fragile flicker of January 2025 were just that.

I could not write. Not because I had nothing to say — but because the pain was louder than words.

As a mother, as a Jew, as someone who has witnessed the price of survival in this land before — I found myself walking through shadows I thought I had already left behind. The war of my youth — Yom Kippur, 1973 — cracked open inside me again.

But this time, I was no longer watching from the edges. This time, I was a mother. This time, I carried the memories of daughters.

The silence of those first weeks was not empty.

It was thick with names, prayers, unspoken fears — and the faces of women we did not yet know would return.

Now, as I look back from early 2025, I write this not only with sorrow, but with reverence.

Reverence for the ones who came home — and for the pieces they left behind. They are not only soldiers. They are daughters of Israel.

Wrapped in the arms of mothers, fathers, and siblings — they were not only soldiers.

They were someone's heartbeat. Someone's child. And now, someone's survivor.

Their faces returned to us — pale, thinner, wounded — but alive. We called them back by name, because to name someone is to say: *You are still ours.*

These were the daughters who came home

... After **471 days in captivity**....

Emily Damari, 28 British-Israeli. Survivor. Fighter.

She was taken from her home in Kibbutz Kfar Aza — shot, injured, dragged into Gaza. She lost two fingers. But she raised her hand in return with the Israeli sign for **“I love you.”**

That gesture — simple and defiant — traveled farther than the bullets that tried to silence her. She came back not whole, but unbroken.

Romi Gonen, 24 Joyful soul. Nova survivor. Stolen from the music.

She was abducted from the **Nova music festival**, where peace turned to massacre.
She had gone to dance. She came back after months of trauma and silence.
Her youth was interrupted by darkness — but not erased.
Romi returned to Israel with her spirit bruised, but her name shining — a symbol of the
thousands who were hunted simply for gathering in joy.

Doron Steinbrecher, 31 Kibbutz resident. Beloved daughter. Brave heart.

She was taken from her home in Kibbutz Kfar Aza, one of the first communities to be overrun
on October 7. For weeks, her family fought for proof of life.
She returned — quiet, fragile, but alive.
Her eyes carried stories we may never hear, and her silence is now part of our collective witness.

Liri Albag 19. Combat soldier. Daughter. Voice of defiance.

She was the first face many of us saw — blindfolded, trembling, forced to speak into a camera
for her captors.
What they tried to break became a symbol of strength.
When Liri came home, her smile was small, but it was real.
Not the mask they gave her — but her own face again.

Karina Ariei Dedicated. Bright-eyed. Torn from duty.

Karina was serving at a border base near Nahal Oz when she was taken.
Photos of her — young, alert, full of life — circulated across Israel as her parents pleaded for
her return.
She spent over several months in Gaza, and when she came back, the nation exhaled.
But the light in her eyes now flickers differently. We see it. And we hold it gently.

... After **477 days in captivity**...

Daniella Gilboa. Resilient. Creative soul. Survivor.

A gifted artist and dreamer, Daniella was one of the longest-held Israeli hostages — nearly **16 months** in captivity.
Her family described it as “477 days in hell.”
And yet, she came home walking. Breathing.
The embrace with her family was not just reunion. It was resurrection.

Naama Levy, 20. Israeli soldier. The image that broke our hearts. The return that stitched us back together.

We saw her dragged by Hamas — hands bound, terrified, her pants bloodied — in one of the most horrifying videos of October 7.

That image burned itself into Israel's soul... But Naama returned.

She walked, she waved, she smiled — a quiet defiance in every step.

She is no longer just the image of what was done to her.

She is now the face of what it means to survive.

Agam Berger, 20 IDF soldier. Violinist. Quiet hero.

Kidnapped from the Nahal Oz military base on October 7, 2023, Agam endured 482 days in Hamas captivity. But she didn't merely survive — she became a quiet source of comfort to others. Fellow survivor Chen Goldstein-Almog recalled how Agam braided the hair of young female hostages before their release — a gesture described as “a silent farewell, a way of holding onto hope.” When she finally returned on January 30, 2025, Agam received a 130-year-old violin that once belonged to a Jewish musician murdered in the Holocaust — a profound bridge between past and present, between sorrow and survival.



Agam was finally released on January 30, 2025 in the same exchange that included Arbel Yehud (29) and Gadi Moses (80), along with five Thai nationals.

Reflection:

In the third phase of releases under the ceasefire, these three Israelis — a young soldier, a young woman, and an elderly man — stepped from Hamas hands into Israel's arms. But this moment was not peaceful. It was chaotic, lived out under the handles of machine guns and amid crowds pressing in — the same weapons that once stole their freedom now shadowed their return.

****This article is written in honor of the women who returned, the ones still waiting, and those whose voices were forever silenced.****

May memory be louder than fear. May testimony outlive terror. May their names never be forgotten.

Every returned soul is a miracle. But every deal has been a devil's bargain. We brought some back wrapped in blankets — and others wrapped in burial shrouds. The cost has been unbearable, yet the silence around that cost even more so.

We are speaking now from between January and March 2025.

The agony felt by every Jewish soul is indescribable. There are no words that can truly express the pain — especially for those with a son, a daughter, a parent, a partner, a grandchild, a close friend still waiting or already gone.

I could not write during those first weeks.

My pen was frozen — by grief, by disbelief, by memory.

These words only came to me when we received the news that the female soldiers will come back home, as families still negotiated for the lives and remains of their loved ones — what was left of these beautiful, stolen human beings, taken for one reason: being Jewish. Yes, a few non-Jews were kidnapped that day too. But the terrorists didn't know — or didn't care.

But I feel compelled to speak of two stories that have carved themselves into the soul of this nation — and into my own:

The Bibas family (February 1, 2025) — whose fate remained uncertain, even months after the ceasefire.

And Eli Sharabi (February 8, 2025) — who, returned from hell with no one left to bring home.