

## Testimony of a resident of Moshav Netiv Ha'asara - Living on the edge

After immigrating to Israel from South Africa in 1978, I have been resident, together with my wife and three sons, on Moshav Netiv Ha'Asara since its re-establishment on Israel sovereign territory in 1983.

The moshav was originally established, together with a string of Jewish communities, in 1973, in the Rafiah Salient of the Northern Sinai Desert, in order to create a physical barrier between Egypt and Israel, after the 1967 war between the two neighboring states.

As a result of the 1982 peace agreement between Israel and Egypt, our moshav, together with all the adjacent communities, was evacuated from the Sinai and we were relocated north of the Gaza Strip, on the Zikim coastal dunelands.

The cohesive, 70-strong farming community was based on advanced agriculture, consisting of high-quality seed production for world-wide export, the growing of various vegetables and cut-flowers, as well as horticultural nurseries, producing both flowers and houseplants for the export and local markets. Over the ensuing years, the community's population ultimately increased to the present 240 families, comprising 830 souls.

Life in the new community flourished, despite a steady deterioration in relations between the Palestinian Authority and Israel. During the early days of the '80s and '90s, residents had the optional choice of shopping in most of Gaza which, was still relatively accessible to Israelis. The jointly-operated Gaza – Israel industrial zone, adjacent to the Erez border-crossing, enjoyed the support of the

re-established moshav, due to the friendly relations with the bi-national trades-people.

We began to suffer the unanticipated phenomenon of cross-border raids and incursions into the precincts of the community by Gazan terror squads and steady, incremental hostilities emanating from the Palestinian entity.

In 2005, with the total evacuation, by the Sharon Administration, of the Jewish *Gush Katif* farming communities and the disengagement and withdrawal of all Israeli civilian and military presence from Gaza, Netiv Ha'Asara suddenly found itself a border community, with all the potential risks and dangers this unfamiliar new status entailed.

We watched with sadness, as thriving Jewish communities located just across the northern Gaza border were reduced by Israeli bulldozers to rubble, their residents reluctantly but forcibly relocated into Israel.

We stood on the border's edge and witnessed with missed emotions of sadness, and relief the erection of a nine-meter concrete protective wall inexorably being built in place of the flimsy, chain-mesh fence between the two irrevocably separated peoples.

This was the same "impenetrable" wall that was soon to be scaled, using grappling irons, by a squad of Gazan terrorists who attempted the first armed incursion into our moshav one foggy night, before being apprehended by our vigilant forces from the Erez border crossing-post, thankfully foiling their intentions.

We stoically endured the attempts by Gazan snipers, staked-out on the high dunes overlooking this new barrier, shooting at civilians within our community,

and the residual bullet scars on the public buildings, including our mini-market, as lasting proof of these assaults.

We all mourned our first fatality, when Dana, the 18-year-old girl-friend of one of our member's sons, quietly sitting on the porch, was blown to bits by a direct hit from a mortar-bomb fired from Gaza, just across the wall.

The over-riding belief, long-stressed by the government, had been that the foundations of a new era of peace and co-existence had finally been laid down as a result of Israel's unilateral withdrawal from all of Gaza.

Sadly, this hopeful dream was thoroughly dashed with the unexpected ascent to power of the extremist Hamas Movement in Gaza in 2006, superseding the previous Fatah regime, which had administered the territory after Israel's complete withdrawal in 2005...

The terror of the greatly-increased frequency of launchings of *Qassam* rockets, with which we would become painfully familiar, was augmented by Hamas declaring publicly that no accommodation with the "Zionist occupier" was now -- or ever.-- remotely feasible...

We faced the horrific new realities of life dominated by these randomly-launched rockets and mortars, attempted terrorist incursions and cross-border sniper fire.

The moshav rapidly organized volunteer emergency response teams, approved by the IDF and manned by our own young community members; first aid personnel and comprehensive social services were mobilized in case of escalating crises; followed by a local control and information center to keep the

residents apprised of any inimical situation arising on our now-volatile Southern border

Our community has suffered - and survived - three major rounds of conflict between Israel and Gaza over the past ten years, named for the defensive operations carried out in response to Hamas terror: 'Cast Lead', 'Pillar of Cloud' and, most recently, 'Protective Edge'.

For the past fourteen years, we have absorbed the effects of literally thousands of rockets, launched from all corners of the Gaza Strip, fired by Hamas, in accord with the goals affirmed in its programming for children on Al-Aqsa TV to intimidate, terrorize and murder all Jews living within range, whether military or civilian.

Our farmers, unavoidably exposed, along with their foreign workers in the fields and hothouses, have become increasingly exposed to indiscriminate rockets and mortars. This, despite imperatives by the military authorities, for farm-owners to evacuate all their Thai workers from work-places and seek shelter, in every instance of the "Color Red" warnings of a rocket/mortar barrage from Gaza. Over the past 14 years of conflict, two Thai guest-workers have lost their lives in these mindless assaults.

The collateral loss of income, as well as property damage to hothouses and agricultural equipment, has also been significant.

We gradually and fatalistically grew inured to the minimalistic 15-second warning squawks from the automatic radar rocket-detection apparatus, allowing us but little time to seek shelter in the obligatory safe-rooms - now an ubiquitous part of our every-day lives - limiting the freedom of movement of all our residents.

A massive rocket attack, carried out during 2011's Operation Cast Lead, resulted in a Hamas missile slamming into our son's front yard, mere meters from the house where he and his young family were sleeping, spraying it with shrapnel.

Once again, this time during Operation Pillar of Cloud in 2013, a similar Qassam rocket slammed through the tiled roof of their house. Mercifully, the explosive blast was contained by the 30cm concrete ceiling, so sparing the lives of his nuclear family of pregnant wife and two young daughters, who were cowering in their safe-room.

Noga, our six-year-old grand-daughter, is, to this day, two years after this incident, yet unable to sleep in her own bedroom, tearfully pleading every night to be allowed to bunk in the shelter...She continues to receive fear-counselling.

During Operation Protective Edge, r, Hamas introduced all to a previously unknown and terrifying phenomenon in the form of sophisticated, 6 meter deep, subterranean assault tunnels, concrete-lined and supplied with electricity, incredibly stretching under the international border from Gazan territory, into sovereign Israeli border communities, such as ours, constructed for the purpose of hostage-taking – or worse – targets ultimately to be utilized as bargaining chips in Hamas's nefarious intentions.

Members of our community have reported hearing the underground excavating in the dead of night, though without being able to positively identify the source.

No less intimidating and more immediately life-threatening, were the multiplication of short-range, 120mm. mortar attacks on our and other communities directly adjacent to the border fences.

Due to their brief, ballistic flight-time, these dangerous missiles impact suddenly, out of the blue, unmitigated by any warning signals; resulting in the magnified fear of potentially fatal strikes on our unsuspecting moshav communities ...

In July 2014, during Operation 'Protective Edge', we returned from a family visit to South Africa, on the eve of renewed hostilities emanating from Hamas' Gaza, ostensibly as a result of Israel's responses to the kidnapping and subsequent murder of three Israeli youngsters.

We were hustled into our house at 02:00 am. by our eldest son, descending directly into our basement-located bomb-shelter, only to discover that he, our daughter-in-law and their three girls had already been utilizing the facility for the prior few days, ever since the incessant rocket-fire sourced from Gaza (a mere 300 meters from the first houses of our community) had multiplied exponentially!

We squeezed into the inadequate protected space, along with our children and grandchildren, and for the next few days, we vacated the facility only when the all-clear was intermittently sounded.

Our son thereupon decided that this state of affairs could not continue and made arrangements to evacuate his family northwards, to the apartment of his mother-in-law, out of range of the unceasing Qassam barrages. He piled his wife and small daughters into his car and drove, at dangerously high speeds, under constant rocket fire, until they were all out of harm's way.

We grandparents followed our family soon thereafter to lodge with family near Haifa.

Things came to a head when my wife and I returned on a sporadic weekend visit to our temporarily abandoned home, in order that I undergo a stress-related

medical procedure in nearby Ashkelon. I was ordered to bed-rest at home, since hospital beds were in short supply, being reserved only for wounded soldiers from the front and civilians injured by the rocket-fire

Back on the moshav, we endured multiple Color Red warnings, sending both of us scurrying downstairs to the shelter, I trailing a catheter-bag behind me!

We thereupon experienced the shock and terror of witnessing Hamas's rockets score direct hits on the houses of two of our neighbors, only 100 meters from our own home... Deciding that discretion was the better part of valor, we resignedly packed a bag and joined the many other residents who had accepted that we had no choice but to leave.

We spent the next six long weeks as refugees, fleeing our home in sovereign Israel, forced to become involuntary nomads, but gratefully accepting the hospitality of distantly-located family and friends, not yet affected by the hostilities. At this stage, our emotions were more of helpless anger than

fear of this amorphous enemy, who was firing projectiles from schoolyards, hospitals and civilian residential areas, knowing that the risk of Israeli retaliation against these launch-sites compromised by Gazan civilians would be unlikely ...

Operation Protective Edge continued for an interminable fifty days, ending inconclusively in a temporary ceasefire that has shakily survived for the past five months.

The potential for major casualties and damage to our citizenry and our homes was mitigated by the efficacy of Israel's advanced anti-missile defense system, the 'Iron Dome', which miraculously succeeded in downing up to 80% of the

randomly-launched Qassam rockets from Gaza, before their impact on Israeli soil.

Zahal, as yet, has no warning-system or answer to the more terrifying short-range mortar-fire, which has tragically accounted for the majority of fatalities within the border communities

By and large, the unanticipated and particularly horrifying threat of the newly-excavated subterranean assault tunnels directed at our border communities has been neutralized for the time being by our forces, though with tragic loss of lives of our young soldiers, who had no recourse but to physically flush the Hamas terrorists out.

Today, we as a vulnerable community hold our collective breath, wondering when the next round – and there will inevitably always be a next round – will erupt in our faces, either from Gaza once again or from the ever-present threat of Lebanon's Hizballah.

**Additional salient points of note affecting our border community:**

- The Hosen Support Center, established in the Ashkelon Coast Regional Council, has provided our children, as well as their frantic parents, much-needed social counselling for PTS syndrome and related disorders arising from the ever-threatening hostilities.
- The songs and nursery rhymes heard in our schools, kindergartens and crèches are now sadly the innovative, pathetically necessary tunes teaching and warning our children of the survival techniques to be adopted during rocket attacks...
- There remains severe limitation of our free movement due to frequent confinement to shelters.



- Children are being denied their summer vacations, school trips, extramural activities and sporting facilities for the duration.
- Schools were closed, interrupting studies.

Our children experience fear and trepidation when exposed in open spaces, seeking the nearest shelter. They also experience terror of loud unnatural noises day and night. For instance: balloon popping caused our 9-year old granddaughter to cower and cover her head with her arms; our 6-year old running with fright each time a rocket alarm sounded.

- Throughout the summer and beforehand we experienced an inability to lead a normal life, as our medical consultations, treatments, shopping, were undertaken with constant fear and an alertness for warning sirens.
- Our friends and neighbors had their properties destroyed/damaged by rocket/mortar fire:
- The Margalit, Shaked, Kucharover, Keidar, Markowitz, Waks, Nitzan, Eilon, Yohanan, Menashe, and Ragolski families
- We lived with the necessity of confinement to darkened, locked homes when faced with suspected terror infiltrations from Gaza, particularly on misty, poor-visibility nights.
- Our completely civilian community remains unnaturally protected night and day by a platoon of soldiers, double-fencing, guarded entrance gate and regular border patrols, none of which contributes to norms of a peaceful society. This is a common subject of conversation with strangers and visitors.
- Our community's children forced to remain within accessible proximity to nearest shelter at all times.
- During the summer the artillery and tank fire of our defending forces above our heads from nearby batteries, through the nights, became unbearable.
- We endured the sounds of gunfire and other explosions, during provocative terror exercises from across the Gaza border
- We endured restrictive roadblocks on all approaches to our community
- The new phenomenon of Hamas terrorist frogmen emerging from the sea off the Zikim coast also caused much angst.

Our civilian community took on the appearance of an armed camp as with increased demand for personal weapon permits by residents and presence of protective forces an armoured patrol vehicle was provided for our use by the army, additional bomb-shelters were necessarily installed for our foreign workers near their work-places, as well as extra shelters in all public spaces, the reinforcement of kindergartens, synagogue in order to rocket-proof them, etc,

➤ and seniors clubroom.

Cultural events are now supplanted by lectures and workshops to build awareness and First-aid response courses.

We remain proud – if non-plussed- that, despite all we have endured over the many years at the hands of our militant neighbors, Israel has provided, and still continues to provide, with commendable humanitarian goodwill, both Gaza and the Palestinian territories with electrical power, drinking and agricultural water, gas and many other goods and services, including drugs and healthcare, regardless of on-going hostilities.

It is significant that, despite all the above-recorded uncertainties of life in a border community such as ours, the determination and will to overcome all adversity and still thrive, with minimal attrition in our numbers, remains - to this day – the prime aspiration for the unflinching members and residents of Moshav Netiv Ha'Asara.