

EDITORS' NOTE

Seeing in the Dark

It is hard to draw breath in this historical moment without feeling suffocated by sadness and anger—not to mention helplessness. The heavily armed state of Israel is systematically murdering the unarmed civilians of Gaza and reducing their neighborhoods to rubble. At this writing, conservative estimates of the death toll have reached just under 28,000 dead, two-thirds of them women and children. The Israeli Defense Force has flattened Gaza's medical, cultural, and political infrastructure. Hospitals, schools, and government agencies as well as apartment buildings—all the institutions crucial to civil society as well as to everyday life—have been targeted for demolition. What will become of the surviving Palestinians remains to be seen. Famine and pestilence loom, while Israeli leaders openly plan a massive campaign of ethnic cleansing. Their vision of the future is clear: the erasure of the Palestinians from the Gaza Strip will make way for its transformation into a part of Greater Israel. Meanwhile, the paragons of “Western civilization” parrot Israeli propaganda and fuel the Israeli war machine with billions of US tax dollars. Many Americans are deeply disturbed by this unfolding horror, but their voices are largely unheard in mainstream debate.

Israel's war on Gaza has been underway for years, in the routine bullying and harassment of Palestinian citizens as well as the regular air raids that the Israeli military refers to as “mowing the lawn.” What provoked this latest escalation was the Hamas assault on Israel on 7 October 2023, which left over a thousand Israelis dead. It remains an open question how many were killed by Hamas and how many by the IDF, but there is no doubt Hamas committed murders that terrified and enraged the Israeli population. They were ready for retaliation. But when does retaliation end and vengeful bloodlust take over? Vengeance is not a military strategy, still less a diplomatic one. It is a recipe for unending violence.

In this dark time, we try to spot rays of hope wherever they appear. One such ray flickers from this issue of *Raritan*, in Greg

Conti's translation of Liliana Segre's "Last Public Testimony of the Shoah," which she calls "I Chose Life." It is a powerful repudiation of vengeance by a Holocaust survivor who had every reason to feel drawn toward it. Segre was an Italian Jewish girl who was deported to Auschwitz by the Nazis when they occupied north and central Italy in 1943. Along with the constant terror of being dragged off to the gas chambers, she endured years of humiliation and near starvation as well as physical and emotional abuse. But since she managed, barely, to stay well enough to carry pieces of iron to make cartridges for machine guns, her life was spared.

Her struggle to survive required her to cut herself off from the rest of humanity, including her fellow prisoners. One was a French girl named Janine; when the iron-cutting machine sliced off the tips of two of her fingers, she was pulled off the line, declared unfit to labor, and sent to the gas chambers. Liliana could not even bring herself to turn around and mumble any words of support. Janine remained a central figure in Liliana's memory, who marked the "horrible self" she had become. Liliana did survive, and she did choose life in a larger sense than simply saving her own.

In the spring of 1945, she heard the astonishing news that the Russians were approaching from the east and the Americans from the west, and the Germans were about to surrender. The German officers were hurriedly tearing off their uniforms, changing into civilian clothes. Among them was the commandant of the camp—a tall, elegant, and cruel man who used a bullwhip liberally on prisoners even though they could barely stand. He too threw his revolver to the ground and began to change clothes. Segre, having been "nourished on hate and revenge" in Auschwitz, thought: "Now I'll grab that pistol and shoot him." But she rejected that impulse in "an instant. A crucially important instant, decisive for my life. . . . I did not grab that pistol and from that moment. . . . I became the free woman and the woman of peace that I still am today."

The phrase "woman of peace" is not merely rhetorical. For twenty or more years, Segre has been an active member of the Rondine Association, an Italian organization dedicated to bringing together

young people from countries in conflict (such as Israel and Palestine) for a two-year residence in a setting where they learn peaceful modes of overcoming trauma and resolving conflict.

This may seem weak medicine for the Israel-Gaza conflict. The Israeli settlers in the West Bank and the die-hard Zionists in the government insist there is no turning back from their expansionist project. But for other Israelis, who oppose the settlement movement and the current government, the renunciation of vengeance could reopen broader views of the Palestinian cause that once were common among liberal Israelis. This could only happen if the Palestinians are recognized as human beings rather than mere “terrorists”—a word that is usually meant to stop thought rather than start it.

One example of Palestinian humanity lies in the work and fate of Refaat Alareer, the Palestinian poet and scholar. Alareer’s great gift was his ability to bring the experience of being bombed down to the level of familial intimacy—where it needs to be if we are ever to bring an end to it. In May 2021, during an earlier Israeli bombing campaign, Alareer’s daughter Linah asked him: “Can they destroy our building if the power is out?” He pondered a reply: “I wanted to say: ‘Yes, little Linah, Israel can still destroy the beautiful al-Jawharah building, or any of our buildings, even in the darkness. Each of our homes is full of tales and stories that must be told. Our homes annoy the Israeli war machine, mock it, haunt it, even in the darkness. It can’t abide their existence. And, with American tax dollars and international immunity, Israel presumably will go on destroying our buildings until there is nothing left.’ But I can’t tell Linah any of this. So I lie: ‘No, sweetie. They can’t see us in the dark.’”

On 6 December 2023, Alareer was killed by Israeli bombing. According to the human-rights group Euro-Med Monitor, available evidence indicates he was targeted. When he knew his death was coming soon, he wrote a poem that has become internationally famous—pervading the internet, posted on the windows of falafel shops in Brooklyn. He tells a powerful tale for our time in the form of a dying plea:

If I must die
you must live
to tell my story
to sell my things
to buy a piece of cloth
and some strings,
(make it white with a long tail)
so that a child, somewhere in Gaza
while looking heaven in the eye
awaiting his dad who left in a blaze—
and bid no one farewell
not even to his flesh
not even to himself—
sees the kite, my kite you made, flying up above
and thinks for a moment an angel is there
bringing back love
If I must die
let it bring hope
let it be a tale

Alareer asks his reader to sustain the poet in collective memory by using the humblest materials, cloth and string, to build a kite so simple yet transcendently beautiful that a boy on the ground might mistake it for an angel. The poet evokes a world where a kind of spiritual coherence is embedded in ordinary objects that become stories. The kite tells the story of the dad who died in a blaze; the toy with a tail becomes a tale. It is a world where poetry survives as a source of human connectedness—a world to remember and protect if we want to see beyond the dark time we are in.

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