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“It was a desolate country – a silent, mournful expanse... Throughout the entire journey, we did not see a single human being... Hardly a tree or a shrub anywhere” – this is how **Mark Twain** described the region of present-day Israel after his travels in 1867.

Around 150 years later, my husband and I travel to Israel. What will we find in this land that was built out of nothing, about which so many contradictory things are reported, and that has existed for only 70 years?

What we experience leaves a deep impression on us. The desolate expanse has become a state with an international airport and some of the best hospitals in the world. Roads and infrastructure are being built at breathtaking speed - what was once arid, unproductive land has become one of the strongest economies in the world. Gardens have emerged in the desert, and soil that lay barren for so long now yields abundant fruit.

Since the founding of the state, the number of Jewish citizens has increased more than tenfold. The country has the highest fertility rate among

industrialized nations and an above-average life expectancy.

With its innovative strength, Israel creates solutions to what seems impossible: it is the only country in the world where the desert is shrinking. Desalination plants along the Mediterranean help address water shortages, and 86 percent of wastewater is recycled and reused in agriculture.

We are surprised to learn that Israel has the second-highest number of start-ups worldwide, the second-highest proportion of academics, and the third-highest rate of patents. We admire the fact that 23% of all Nobel Prize laureates are of Jewish descent. We experience the creativity of the Israelis and their sense for art and beauty. Measured by its population, Israel has the most museums and orchestras, and it ranks second in the number of books published.

The more Israelis we meet personally, the more we appreciate their constructive mindset, their dynamism, and their courage.

From a poor agricultural state, a country with leading technology and a strong currency has emerged. All of this has led to Israel -only 70 years after its founding- being among the ten most influential nations in the world and even reaching 4th place in the World Happiness Report ranking of the happiest countries.

These facts alone are more than impressive - they seem like a miracle. And when one considers who built and achieved all of this, and under what circumstances, it becomes clear: it is a miracle.

Background:

In 1917, the troops of the British Empire conquered the territory of what was then Palestine from the Ottoman Empire, and British Foreign Secretary Lord Balfour promised the Jews “support for the establishment of a national home for the Jewish people”- a declaration later incorporated into the peace treaties of the Allies and the League of Nations mandate.

Nevertheless, an Arab state -Jordan- was established first, on 78% of the total territory. Jews were permitted to settle only west of the Jordan River.

In 1947, only a few hundred thousand Jews lived in this area, about 250,000 of them Holocaust refugees or survivors. Destitute, physically and

emotionally shattered, they arrived here - yet full of hope to build a future for themselves and for generations to come.

But the very first thing they experienced, just hours after the declaration of the state on May 14, 1948, was an attack by Egypt, Syria, Lebanon, Jordan, and Iraq, all of which vehemently rejected the UN partition plan.

650,000 Jews against 160 million Arabs. Israeli soldiers, armed only with submachine guns and grenade launchers -since there had been no state to equip them- faced five Arab armies with tanks, artillery, aircraft, and warships. Despite heavy losses, Israel managed to hold its ground. However, the territory designated by the UN for the new Arab-Palestinian state was occupied by Jordan in the West Bank and by Egypt in the Gaza Strip.

The refusal of the Arab states to accept the partition plan caused the greatest harm to the Palestinians themselves. Around 700,000 became refugees. The tragedy was compounded by the fact that, with the exception of Jordan, neighboring Arab states prevented their integration after the war. Uniquely in world history, all descendants “inherit” refugee status - today numbering over five million people. In contrast, the State of Israel granted citizenship with equal rights to the Arabs who remained within its borders.

Largely unnoticed by the global public, the expulsion of Jews from Arab countries took place after this war. There were pogroms, expropriations, and executions. A total of 850,000 Jews were forced to leave their countries of origin. As a result, Israel’s population rose to two million. The difficult process of building the state continued slowly but steadily.

Yet the Arab League did not give up, and in 1967 Egypt and Syria were once again on the brink of attacking Israel. This time, the small country launched a preemptive strike and achieved an astonishing victory in just six days: the West Bank, Gaza Strip, Golan Heights, and Jerusalem came under Israeli control.

From that point on began the bitter struggle of the Palestinians, who had previously had no issue living under Egyptian and Jordanian rule, for autonomy. The Arab states declared: “No peace with Israel, no negotiations with Israel, no recognition of Israel.”

The next blow came in October 1973, on Yom Kippur, the holiest Jewish day of atonement. Egypt crossed the Suez Canal and attacked from the air, while Syria advanced with tanks. The situation was initially desperate, but in the end, the Israelis succeeded in repelling their enemies. The Arab world had restored its honor through its initial successes, a prerequisite for subsequent negotiations. In 1979, Israel made peace with Egypt, and in 1994 with Jordan - steps toward a better future, moments of hope.

However, after 1980, terrorist organizations were founded around Israel, committed to its destruction - as evidenced by the charters and manifestos of Hamas, Hezbollah, and the Houthis: "God is great, death to America, death to Israel, curse the Jews, victory to Islam."

Those who believe this conflict is merely about land, the regional dispute, do not look deeply enough. It is often used as a pretext and a means of mobilizing the masses.

With the Islamic Revolution in Iran, however, a determined, radical, and relentless enemy emerged - not only for Israel. In 1979, the pro-Western monarchy friendly to Israel was replaced by a religious-authoritarian theocracy. The principle of the state became "pure Sharia"; the Quran defines the law. The religious leader holds ultimate power; all institutions and areas of life are Islamized. Dress codes, media, and culture are ideologically controlled; opposition figures are persecuted, imprisoned, or executed; individual human rights play no role. The Revolutionary Guards enforce this system with violence - and demonstrated once again in early January 2026 the brutal extent to which they are willing to act, when tens of thousands of demonstrators, civilians from their own population, were massacred within just a few days, and in the current war, in which they launch attacks across neighboring countries.

Iran's goal is global Islamic dominance. Enemies to be destroyed in holy war (jihad), with whom there can never be peace, include Israel, the "Christian" West, and all "unbelievers" who hold different values. Zionism is portrayed as a tool of Western powers to weaken the Islamic community.

Iran also seeks to export its Islamic Revolution. One means of doing so is through proxy militias such as Hamas, Hezbollah, and the Houthis. Iran

finances them with billions of US dollars, supplies rockets and weapons, provides military training, and supports the construction of tunnels in Gaza. A so-called “ring of fire” has been drawn around Israel.

Since 2001, members of Hamas have fired thousands of rockets from Gaza into Israel. In 2005, Israel decided to withdraw completely and unilaterally from the territory. Yet this did not bring peace: in 2006, Hamas won the elections in Gaza, with the primary goal of destroying Israel. Billions were invested not in development, but in tunnels and rockets. Israel responded defensively, building barriers, walls, and countless shelters. Nevertheless, attacks increased: suicide bombings, two intifadas, arson attacks, tens of thousands of rockets. Even Israeli military operations in Gaza up to 2021 did not change this.

In 2023, Israel experienced its greatest internal division since its founding. Coalitions collapsed, protests shook the country. Amid these tensions, Israel’s enemies sensed an opportunity and struck on October 7, 2023.

The “Black Sabbath” caught Israel off guard and became the deadliest day for Jews since the Holocaust. Scenes of unimaginable cruelty unfolded: brutality, mutilation, dismemberment, rape. Couples and family members were tied together and burned alive; children were forced to watch their parents being tortured and killed; parents were forced to witness their children being mutilated. Terrorists destroyed communities and carried out a horrific massacre. More than 250 people were abducted to Gaza, around 1,200 murdered, and over 5,000 injured, abused, and tortured in a single day.

My husband and I had come to know and love Israel years earlier. The events did not leave me untouched. I wanted to understand, to get to the bottom of things. After the Hamas massacre, I returned to Israel repeatedly, experienced attacks firsthand, and formed my own impressions as an eyewitness. Ultimately, this led to my book *“Israel’s Trial by Fire.”*

In it, I take you on a journey to the people of Israel, connecting current events with human faces. Individual destinies open up a deeper level of understanding than conventional media. We visit devastated kibbutzim and witness how affected families attempt to rebuild their lives.

It is also a journey into the past, because a deeper look into Israel's history explains much that would otherwise be overlooked. Within the broader context of historical events, causes and connections become clear.

Today, I have only been able to guide you through this at high speed. In *"Israel's Trial by Fire"*, you will learn much more.

And now, I would like to read you a passage directly from my book - about an encounter during our stay there in April 2024, during the first Iranian attack... and what followed.

You can feel their tears, but you cannot see them

On this final evening, we have a special encounter, one that leaves a lasting imprint on our souls and carries a legacy.

For the first time, we find a moment to sit on our beautiful rooftop terrace at the Bezalel Hotel. We update our website ARC to ISRAEL with images and impressions from the past days, while enjoying the sunset.

Apart from us, there are two other people there, a quiet couple, dressed in black. He has broad shoulders, she is slender and delicate. What strikes me about her is her hair, which has not been dyed for several months. As she appears very well-groomed, I wonder whether this is connected to a particular event.

Because of the beautiful light, we want to take a selfie, and the man offers his help. We introduce ourselves and begin talking. Their names are Smadar and Shlomo. They tell us they have come to Jerusalem to speak with the Chief Rabbi and with President Isaac Herzog - about the body of Smadar's sister-in-law, Maya, who was abducted to Gaza and is being held there.

Suddenly, the atmosphere changes - the idyll shatters. We are standing face to face with raw, unfiltered suffering. Carefully, I ask if they would like to share more, and they sit down with us.

We learn that Smadar Goren's brother Avner lived with his wife Maya and their four children in Nir Oz, just two kilometers from Gaza. They were a joyful family with a great sense of humor.

At the time of the massacre, Maya and Avner were in the village - one of the most devastated places. There are harrowing recordings from that day: the last messages of desperate people who did not understand what was happening, who experienced terrorists breaking into their homes, setting them on fire, turning them into death traps. They pleaded for help that never came.

When the army finally arrived, it found only death, ashes, and unbearable pain. Of the approximately 400 residents, 40 were killed and 79 abducted. The village was destroyed; homes lay in ruins or burned down.

Avner, the father, sought safety in the shelter that morning - in vain. Terrorists broke down the door and killed him. Maya had been at kindergarten, preparing for the next day. She was defenseless and was abducted.

Avner's body could only be identified ten days later. He was buried in Nir Oz, the kibbutz where he had been born and spent his entire life.

Maya's phone was located in Gaza... On December 1, the family was informed by the IDF that she was no longer alive.

A couple, tragically torn from life. Four children left behind as orphans: Assif, Bar, Gal, and Dekel.

The daylight fades as Shlomo and Smadar speak. Their voices are quiet and composed. Deep sorrow resonates - but no accusations, no anger, no hatred. You can feel their tears, but you cannot see them.

I thank them for their openness and ask how they can bear to tell this story again and again. Their answer is clear: "In this way, we keep the memory of our loved ones alive. We see it as our duty to tell this story, because the struggle is not over."

Even seven months later, 36 hostages from Nir Oz are still being held by Hamas. It is known that at least ten of them are no longer alive. For over 200 days, the family has been waiting to at least receive Maya's body.

In Judaism, the treatment of the dead holds great significance. A body must be treated with respect and buried in its entirety (including all body parts and even spilled blood), ideally within 24 hours. Not being buried and being

“left as prey for scavengers” is considered one of the gravest fates. The desecration of bodies is one of the most extreme forms of humiliation and intimidation, as it threatens the very possibility of remembrance.

The inner wounds of the entire family cannot heal as long as they are not given the chance to bury Maya with dignity.

What for many people in other countries is already over and forgotten remains painfully present in Israel. The pain over the hostages -dead or alive- still held in Gaza’s terror tunnels is ever-present. It is as if life can only continue at half capacity without their return. As Smadar puts it: “a tragedy that is still ongoing and breaking so many families.”

In 2024, Passover, the feast of liberation, is celebrated in Israel from April 22 to 30. How are Smadar and Shlomo supposed to celebrate this with the children of the murdered, when Maya’s body is still being held in Gaza?

That is why they went to the Chief Rabbi and have an appointment with the President tomorrow. They want to ensure that the release of both living and deceased hostages remains a priority for the Israeli government. A week later (when we are already back home), Smadar writes to me that “they were listened to with great interest and treated with much empathy.”

Smadar and Shlomo have three children of their own. Nevertheless, it was self-evident for them to take responsibility for their four orphaned nieces and nephews, to bring them into their home and care for them.

It has grown quiet on the rooftop terrace. Just a few hours ago, we were strangers. Now we share their pain and a common legacy. We embrace and agree to stay in touch. We give them a contribution to support the four orphans - it is important to us to show through actions that we share the burden. Not that they had asked for it. On the contrary, it is difficult for them to accept the donation, even though their small family has grown from five to nine members due to the murders by Hamas.

What gives them - and all relatives of the hostages - strength is knowing “that people around the world carry their pain in their hearts, both the personal and the national, understand the magnitude of this tragedy of the Black Sabbath, and are committed to bringing all those abducted back.”

They thank us from the bottom of their hearts for sharing their story. Late at night, we say our goodbyes. What a final encounter - unplanned, yet no coincidence. Powerful like few others. And the beginning of a special friendship.

One year later, in April 2025, we travel together to Kibbutz Nir Oz. We are very grateful that our connection has grown stronger over the past months, and thankful that through them we are given insight into the lives of hostage families and the relatives of victims of terror. Shlomo drives south along Route 232. It is the road that runs parallel to the Gaza border, connecting all the Israeli communities in this region. What a picturesque route! Sand dunes, reminding us that we are on the edge of the Negev Desert, alternate with cultivated green fields on either side. The horizon stretches wide, and the eye can wander freely into the distance. It is a landscape to enjoy.

But on October 7, Route 232 became a road of terror, where hundreds tried in vain to flee from Hamas. Countless videos of this were posted online by the attackers. Festivalgoers trying to escape to nearby communities, as well as residents of the kibbutzim fleeing for their lives, were brutally massacred. Bodies lined the roadside. Many Israeli soldiers were also overpowered by terrorists along this route. Later, when Israel began its fight to free its hostages, Israeli tanks rolled south along this very road, leaving their marks in the asphalt. To this day, life has not returned to the destroyed kibbutzim, and along the deserted road, many yellow flags serve as reminders of the hostages still being held in Gaza. Shlomo deliberately chose this route because it is part of the story.

We arrive at the entrance to the kibbutz, founded in 1955, which had around 450 residents on the eve of the Black Sabbath: men, women, and children who lived from agriculture and were known for their botanical garden. It is the kibbutz whose founders included Smadar's parents, where she was born and raised. The kibbutz where her brother and sister-in-law were brutally murdered. From which her sister-in-law's body was taken to Gaza, and where so many of her childhood friends and acquaintances were killed, tortured, and burned.

The Hamas terrorists knew the place very well. Some of them had worked here as laborers. They first stormed the home of the commander of the

security team and killed him. This not only broke the coordination of the kibbutz's internal defense but also severed communication with the IDF. The security team consisted of seven people, but that morning they stood no chance. In addition to the rocket barrage from Gaza, several hundred terrorists entered the kibbutz. The attackers looted, set homes on fire, and left behind a trail of blood and flames. Every fourth resident was brutally murdered or abducted. There was not a single unaffected family;u only six houses remained undamaged or intact after the brutal attack.

Because there was no clear picture of the situation and reports of fighting were coming in from nearly all border communities, only a few IDF units received direct orders to head toward Nir Oz. On their way, the soldiers themselves were ambushed. By the time the army finally reached the kibbutz, it was too late. They found only flickering flames, smoldering bodies, ruins, and unbearable pain - the ground soaked with the blood of the victims.

Today, one finds here a lost, abandoned paradise, through which the cats of the families who once lived here now roam. The blood has seeped into the earth, but it still cries out to heaven, even if it can no longer be seen or smelled. The smoke has cleared, yet the ashes crunch beneath our feet. We remember how the commander of the ZAKA unit described what they encountered here. Even now, the mind refuses to believe that what our senses take in is real. It is utterly unimaginable what it must have been like in the immediate aftermath of the attack.

We are deeply grateful to Shlomo and Smadar for allowing us this authentic insight from the perspective of those directly affected. We can hardly begin to grasp how much it costs them to confront all this horror, destruction, and loss again.

And yet, thanks to the tireless efforts of volunteers, life is beginning to bloom again between the burned houses, just like before. Flowers give off their fragrance, and birds sing of what has happened here - a painful contrast. Nir Oz was designed like a park, a place of beauty and joy. Today, it feels as though one is standing with one foot in the Garden of Eden and the other in hell.

And Smadar says: “Welcome to my home.”

We see the house where her brother Avner and her sister-in-law Maya lived. We also pass the home of the Bibas family, whose fate may have been the only one to receive appropriate attention from the world after October 7.

At the end of our walk, we look toward Gaza from the roof of a bunker. By the direct road, it is only five minutes away. This was the route the terrorists took, and later countless civilians who looted the place. Along this road, 76 people were taken (dead or alive) into Gaza. And along this very road, before the massacre, peace activists from Nir Oz used to pick up sick people from Gaza to bring them to Israeli hospitals for treatment. Yet whatever they did for peace - it had no effect.

Then we stand with Smadar and Shlomo before the graves of Avner and Maya and think of those whose loved ones are still being held in Gaza, and who therefore cannot even find closure.

Later, over a shared dinner, they tell us about their children and about the children of Maya and Avner. It is encouraging and deeply moving to see how they are working to rebuild their lives. The children are pursuing their education, and Smadar has returned to work. It is wonderful to witness that they are able to smile again - despite the pain that is still ever-present.

Even though their personal story found a form of closure after the IDF located and returned Maya’s body from Hamas’ terror tunnels, they continue to be active in the forum for families of hostages and missing persons. They want to help until the last hostage has been freed.

I would like to conclude with an ancient yet very timely question:

The global situation is unpredictable; Israel and the entire world are facing existential questions. What provides orientation and stability in such a time? What helps us not to lose hope? In my book, I call this chapter “The Hidden Blessing.”

It is the awareness that there is more than probabilities and great powers. Israel was reestablished 2,000 years after its destruction - at a time when 6 million Jews in Europe had been systematically murdered and no longer needed a state. What a moment in history! That this small country has

managed to endure over the past 78 years, despite multiple wars on several fronts and despite what seemed like overwhelming numerical disadvantage, is another paradox.

What lies behind the unbroken hope of this people, despite trauma? What gives them the ability, in the midst of suffering and hopelessness, to hold on to the confidence that something new and wonderful can arise from ruins and ashes?

It is trust in a covenant - and in the One with whom it was made. This promise is thousands of years old and is recorded in the document that is the most widely read book in the world. This book, the Bible, once also formed the foundation of Western civilization - and in part, it still does. One may dismiss it as outdated, but its message remains highly relevant. Within this document, the right of Israel to exist is anchored, and anyone who goes to Israel with open eyes and an open heart will see, through facts and reality, how many statements of the Bible have come to pass.

Allow yourself to be taken by my book "*Israel's Trial by Fire*" into this land and to this people, which, despite its small size, so often stands at the center of global attention. Discover, step by step, the potential that lies there.

Would you like to follow how this journey continues? On our website arc-to-israel.org you will find current content and ways to connect.

Let us stay in touch. Thank you very much.